The ACTOR SPEAKS ESSAY COMPETITION
1st Place Submission
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Shakespeare's characters may wear farthingales and speak in iambic pentameter, but their emotions are as raw and real as any modern character. In history, one can find two recorded types of women. There's the 'Proverbs 31' woman, the 'Virgin Mary's', if you will; and then there's the 'Helen of Troy' -the temptresses. I was drawn to the character of Cleopatra from Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra because he recognized a real woman to be neither one nor the other, but a beautifully complicated blend of both.

Cleopatra's monologue, Act 4 Scene 15, takes place as she awakens on the cold, hard ground after sleeping beside her husband's dead body. My English Speaking Union Advisor helped me shape both pieces, especially this one. After losing her partner several years ago, she allowed a space for me to relate to the loss and try to comprehend the emotional baggage that comes alongside the grief. As a junior, I can feel myself coming into my own and developing a sense of self. Portraying Cleopatra was reaching toward the woman I want to one day be, with raw emotions, a worldly view, and an appearance that remains poised, polished, professional, yet deeply emotional and personally connected to the world around me.

As a young woman in Southern 'ol North Carolina, I've felt pressure to keep up appearances and meet the standards of well-mannered femininity, where grace is expected, opinions are measured, and every smile hides expectations. Going into high school, my needs for acceptance, attention, and approval peaked as my biological father, who had been nothing short of inconsistent throughout my life, decided that "the memories from the past 14 years would sustain us." As my instinct was to only show my grief to my close relatives and friends, I was constantly reminded that "no one else needs to know." I learned to care about what others think, instead of how they make me feel. Performing this monologue as a freshman versus a junior shows how Cleopatra and I have grown through loss. Playing her now on the side that can hold on to her own, while still healing, allows me to begin to be a woman who is poised, but bears her loss in a way that might help others. This woman has standards, but also will lay everything down to be a true leader.

You build a connection on mutual understanding. I knew that if I had a deep understanding of my character, I'd be able to form a connection with my audience, even if I'm speaking in an unfamiliar, Elizabethan language. Deeply resonating with characters on stage isn't just seen but felt. I aimed to have a connection that the audience can feel, despite my shot nerves and clammy hands. I found universal feelings that we all relate to: rejection, fear, and grief, yet I also found ways to connect these feelings to others: acceptance, hope, and liveliness. Speaking

from the head is easy, but speaking from the soul takes awareness and depth. While I'm just approaching adulthood and there are still gaps in the fuses of my frontal lobe, I had to channel all of my maturity and sense of self before I could touch the lines. I focused on speaking the lines with their natural rhythm and intention, so that even if the words or phrases were unfamiliar, the emotion behind them would speak volumes.

For me, Cleopatra has been more than just a character; she's been a mirror, and she's been a guide as both an artist and a young woman. Shakespeare didn't write her to be easily understood; he wrote her to be real. Through personal grief, Southern societal expectations, and the journey toward self-acceptance, I found parts of myself in her complexity. I approached the character not by imitating the past, but by translating her emotions of loss, love, pride, and power into something human and relatable. Historical context gave me the foundation, but it was personal experience that helped me give Cleopatra her voice. By taking on Cleopatra's strength, resilience, and grief, I'm inspired in my journey to find my own.