Anne Higgins

Shakespeare's Saint Cleopatra

Shakespeare's version of Cleopatra's death is a scene much discussed by scholars (*Antony and Cleopatra* V.ii). A clown brings in a basket of fruit. In Shakespeare two asps are hidden among figs, a detail from Plutarch that stresses the phallic significance of the asps, since figs had long been understood as a notoriously erotic fruit, the fruit Eve ate in traditional Mediterranean versions of the Fall; only in northern climes is the fatal fruit called an apple.[1] Cleopatra exchanges some ambiguous banter with the man about "the pretty worm of Nilus there / That kills and pains not" (V.ii.243-44).[2] The Clown's playful remarks depend on the notorious Elizabethan ambiguity of the word "die," as in his memorable observation that "those that do die of it do seldom or never recover" (247). He twice wishes Cleopatra "joy o'th'worm" (259, 278). Of course, sometimes a worm is only a worm, but not here.

In preparing to die nobly Cleopatra echoes Antony's suicide: both see death as a kind of sexual climax. Antony says this: "But I will be / A bridegroom in my death, and run into't / As to a lover's bed" (IV.xiv.99-101). Cleopatra sees death much the same way, and her expression is leavened by a similar ironic humor: "Husband, I come. . . . The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch, / Which hurts, and is desired" (V.ii.286, 294-95). Her attention shifts at last to the asps. Here the imagery makes a startling shift from the erotic to the maternal. The asp she applies to her breast is like a nursing baby ("Dost thou not see the baby at my breast, / That sucks the nurse asleep?" 308-9). And so the "lass unparalleled" dies.

Critics have generally agreed with Geoffrey Bullough that Shakespeare's version of the story of Antony and Cleopatra "is close to Plutarch, even in the discussion about the way she died," and most agree that Shakespeare got his Plutarch through North's translation.[3] They have devoted their attention to identifying other classical and Renaissance versions that may have influenced Shakespeare. A fairly typical example of the discussion of sources for this scene worries the question of how Shakespeare got the idea to use two asps instead of Plutarch's one.[4] But the dramatic movement of Cleopatra's death scene depends on much more than one asp or two. The exchange with the Clown and his *double entendre* (especially "joy o'th'worm"), the use of the native English term *worm* instead of North's *Aspicke*, the play of erotic and maternal imagery, all these give the episode its power. Neither Plutarch nor any other putative source or analogue really accounts for the concrete imagery from which Shakespeare's scene derives its great emotional force. But I have found one that does provide all these details, and it is startling because it comes from what may seem a very unlikely tradition: it is from a medieval saint's life, the Middle English life of Saint Christina.

Like many saints' lives, Christina's is a lurid, violent, and voyeuristic story. It is the tale of a young Christian girl who is tortured over two years by three different Roman officials, the first of them her own father. As often happens in hagiography, his incestuous advances begin her torments. In the sequel, she is hung from ropes while her flesh is torn with hooks; she pulls the loose flesh off and pluckily tosses it in her father's face. He throws her into a fire; she is preserved, though some 1500 others die in the flames. Cast into the sea with a great stone tied to her waist, she takes the opportunity to request baptism, and Christ himself obliges her. She is scourged, leaps willingly into a cauldron of boiling pitch, and survives three days in a fiery oven, singing all the while. And then she is assaulted by poisonous snakes. This is where we come in. Here is the passage from the *South English Legendary*:

> Anne enchanteor he hadde þer . þat neddren couþe bisinge
> þe Iustice him het anon . þe neddren forþ bringe
> And caste hom to þis holy maide . þat hi ssolde hure to deþe stinge
> þis neddren were forþ ibroȝt . grislokest of alle þinge
> Hi crope and made ioie inou . þo hi were to hure ido
> Hi biclupte hure holy limes . & lickede hure wonden also
> Hi pleide wiþ hure bresten boþe . hure children as it were

Hi custe hure & likked ek . for kunde þe[ȝ] it nere
Þis maister him gan tice on hure . mid is enchanterie
As me tekþ an hond on man . to cuþe is maistrie
Þis wormes turnde to him anon . & caste him doun to gronde
And enuemined him & stonge uaste . þat he deide on a stonde[5]
(297-308)

An enchanter he had there who knew how to charm adders. The justice ordered him to bring forth the adders and cast them on this holy maiden, so that they should sting her to death. These adders were brought forth, grisliest of all things. They crept and made joy enough when they were put on her. They embraced her holy limbs and licked her wounds also. They played with both her breasts as if they were her children. They kissed her and also licked, though it wasn't their nature to do this. This master began to entice them onto her with his enchantments, as one lays a hand on a man to make known his power. These worms turned on him then and cast him on the ground and envenomed him and stung him severely, so that he died in a moment. [my translation]

After all this, Christina revives the enchanter. Then her breasts are cut off, but (as is typical in saints' lives) they bleed milk, not blood. Her tongue is cut out but she continues to taunt her tormentor; she throws her tongue into his eyes and he is blinded. At long last, to everyone's plain relief, she expires, telling God that her little body is weary. She is fourteen years old.[6]

The scenes from the *South English Legendary* and from Shakespeare agree in six specific details:

1) Both introduce an ambiguous male character to bring the snakes on. The *SEL* enchanter and Shakespeare's Clown are curiously equivalent figures, both peripheral to the main action, both traditionally associated with death. The best known of Shakespeare's characters who is identified as "Clown" is of course the gravedigger in *Hamlet*. Though *clown* may mean no more than a rustic, it is differently burdened than, for example, North's simple *contrieman*. The Clowns of *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Hamlet* are significantly connected with death, as was the theatrical predecessor of this figure, the Vice.[7]

2) Both versions use the native English word *worm*. Though they elsewhere differ about whether these are adders or asps, they agree in the

end that they are worms. North's translation of Plutarch never uses *worm*; his term is *Aspicke*.

3) Both versions discuss the nature of worms, their *kind*, which is to cause people to die of their bite. Christina's ordeal with snakes is obviously different from Cleopatra's in that her snakes make love to her and suck at her breasts without killing her. This is against their *kind* ("for kunde þe[ȝ] it nere"--304). The question of the worms' *kind* is explicitly acknowledged in the Shakespearean version, when the clown warns Cleopatra: "You must think this, look you, that the worm will do his kind" (261-2).

4) Both pun on the word *joy* as a euphemism for sexual intercourse. "Maken joie" in Middle English is a *double entendre* equivalent to the Clown's "joy o'th'worm," constructed just as is Chaucer's ambiguous "maken melodye."[8] A secondary sense of the ME verb *maken* influences the euphemism; *maken* also meant to mate with, or marry. One may well wonder if this ambiguity is not in play when Diomede, in the fifth book of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, considers that "nevere sythen he hire thennes broughte / Ne koude he sen hire laughe or maken joie" (5.780-1).

5) Both versions initially stress erotic imagery in the woman's confrontation with the snakes. Christina's story employs erotic imagery in the worms' actions and embraces; Shakespeare develops this erotic commentary in the clown's euphemistic banter and Cleopatra's equation of death with joining her husband/lover in a tryst.

6) Both shift from erotic to positively presented maternal imagery as the suicide scene ends. The *SEL* Christina shows the snakes as babies that play with their mother's breasts (303); Shakespeare's asp/baby "sucks the nurse asleep" (309).

The closeness and compression of the parallels between the "Life of Saint Christina" and the *Antony and Cleopatra* versions of the scene are striking. All six of these close parallels occur within only twelve lines in Christina's vita. How likely is it that Shakespeare actually knew Christina's story?

The scene occurs as part of the life of Saint Christina in two different Middle English collections of saints' lives, both of them indebted to the *Legenda aurea*. Although there is a Christina story in the *Legenda aurea*, it lacks the crucial details Shakespeare used. So I think we may understand these Middle English treatments as authentically English

versions of Christina's ordeals. One could plausibly argue that Shakespeare had much better access to these stories of saints, in fact, than he had to many of the other sources accepted as directly influencing his work, especially classical ones. In fact, Shakespeare may have come across this saint's life through three different cultural traditions.

The first possibility is the written tradition. Christina's life appears in the *South English Legendary*, which exists in many versions, dated from the late thirteenth to the fifteenth century. Fifty-one manuscripts still exist today, not including those containing single items. This number puts the *South English Legendary* in fourth place in the Browns-Robbins table of Preservation of Texts in Middle English, "outnumbered only by the *Prick of Conscience*, the *Canterbury Tales*, and *Piers Plowman*."[9] Manfred Görlach thinks the *South English Legendary* "must have been one of the most popular vernacular texts of the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as the number of extant manuscripts, the variation in the contents, and the wide geographic distribution over the South of England and parts of the Midlands indicate."[10] In fact, a closely similar version of Christina's story appears in Osbern Bokenham's legendary (c.1447).[11]

The second tradition by which Shakespeare may have met the Christina story is the oral tradition. Because it seems likely that the *South English Legendary* (like Bokenham's legendary) was the work not of monks but of friars, and therefore was in the hands not of contemplatives withdrawn from the world but of mendicant preachers, it was almost certainly intended "for the public instruction of the unlettered laity."[12] In that way its saints' lives doubtless were transmitted orally in a wide area over a long time, through their use as moral exempla in sermons. In the second Prologue to his translation of *The Golden Legende* William Caxton shows us another way saints' lives entered the oral tradition. Caxton says he undertook the work in hope "that it prouffyte to alle them that shal rede or here it redde."[13] A memorable saint's life so diffused could easily enter the popular oral tradition. In a world of residual orality (to use Walter Ong's phrase), this was perhaps the most likely route of transmission.[14]

The third possible means of Shakespeare's acquaintance with Christina is the dramatic tradition. Shakespeare may have met Christina's story indirectly, through a report of a dramatic performance. The town records of Bethersden, in Kent, show a *ludi beatae Christinae* in the sixteenth century. Chambers records the date of this play as 1522; Craig has it as

1552.[15] The wide diffusion of the *South English Legendary* in the South and Midlands of England makes it seem likely that the Kent play would have been based on the *South English Legendary*'s version of Christina's life. Other "St Christian" and "seynt christean" plays are recorded elsewhere; I think it likely these, too, were Christina plays. There is an interesting record in Coventry of a 1528 performance of a "Magnum ludum vocatum seynt christeans play." Another early Coventry record refers to a "Play of St Christian," rehearsed in the little park in 1505.[16] Hardin Craig argues unpersuasively that this last might have been a Katherine play.[17] It is more plausible, I think, to see this as a Christina play. The incipit to Bokenham's vita of Christina says "Vita Sanctae Christianae," a spelling very like the Coventry records, as is Bethersden's "Christiana." The "Christina" or "Christiana" play recorded in Bethersden, Kent, was produced at about the same time as the Coventry plays. Shakespeare, of course, was born in 1564. He grew up in Warwickshire, near Coventry, and worked in London, not far from Bethersden. Perhaps there were other, later, unrecorded performances of a Christina play; perhaps a script survived a few decades; perhaps an actor or spectator at a Christina play told Shakespeare about this arresting and memorable scene.

It seems plausible, then, that Shakespeare read or heard or saw or was told about a native version of Christina's confrontation with her worms, and preserved its dramatic details in his capacious memory until he saw their potential for his Cleopatra. Yet it is hard to imagine a religious work less edifying than the average saint's life. Only with difficulty can one recover a sense of the audience or intention of these largely unpleasant works. In the case of female saints, the genre is indefatigably, disturbingly, obsessed with assaults on the saint's chastity, and with the most depressingly literal-minded of tortures directed against her sexuality.[18] I probably need not say that the typical saint's sexuality is so greatly attenuated, anyhow, that it perhaps can be represented only by violent assault on its external physical facts. If Shakespeare is indebted to Christina's life—and I am convinced he is—then clearly it is primarily for its arresting details. And the most remarkable episode of all Christina's trials is that of the adders. Here only does one find any metaphorical development, any evocative psychological possibilities. And so this, I think, was an arresting scene that Shakespeare remembered, however he encountered it. There can be no hard evidence to confirm my

view of Shakespeare's debt to the Christina legend. To sceptics, I can only say that for very few of the works we commonly accept as sources for Shakespeare can we demonstrate such wide diffusion of the source material, and plausibly propose three different routes of transmission to the sixteenth century.

Emrys Jones, for one, takes seriously Shakespeare's debt to the native and popular medieval tradition as well as to humanism. And Jones understands far better than most the nature of Shakespeare's use of such materials. He points out, for example, the close similarity of the death of Falstaff (reported in *Henry V*) to Plato's account of the death of Socrates. In both cases, an observer feels the foot, then up the leg, of the dying man, commenting on his coldness. But what has Falstaff to do with Socrates? Did Shakespeare simply exploit an arresting physical detail, or is he "implying anything about the wisdom and folly of Falstaff"? It's impossible to say. But it is a characteristic Shakespearean practice to pose such questions:

> What is Shakespearean about such a passage is the freedom and casualness and audacity with which the classical text is put to work in a new vernacular context and then used in such a way as to stimulate the mind into entertaining a number of different possibilities.[19]

In the same way the Christina parallel complicates and widens the potential meaning of Cleopatra's story. Like the cold leg of Socrates, Christina's encounter with the worms is first of all an arresting image, but its real interest for Shakespeare's work lies in its power to tease into play new possibilities for understanding Cleopatra's life and death. Memorable as the specific details of a parallel may be, Jones suggests the image matters less than the ways the passage's "gist and shape and tone" inform and complicate the play's central ideas.[20] In *Antony and Cleopatra*, the gist and shape and tone of the Christina parallel alter its reflections about women, good and bad.

If we accept that the *South English Legendary* version of Saint Christina's life is the source of Cleopatra's death scene, we must confront the question of how our reading of that scene is changed by this idea. First, let me firmly deny that this is yet another attempt to "christianize" Shakespeare's vision. Shakespeare probably was not at all interested in the specifically Christian content of the Christina story; as I've said before, it's hard to say what Christian content this saint's life might teach.

Its interest is entirely other. It seems to me what Shakespeare cares about in this story is its general depiction of Christina as a good woman, and especially its peculiar details. The curious facts of Christina's snake scene seem to provide a strikingly appropriate metaphorical and psychological conclusion to Shakespeare's characterization of Cleopatra. But in more general terms, if his Cleopatra is a saint, then her goodness is not Christian, but rather that of a martyr to transcendent human love in a pagan world. The objection that Cleopatra is not a good woman because she does no penance for her sins may be answered by referring to the native homiletic tradition, and its example of Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene was another "that was a full synneful womman and myche of hure liff lead in lecherye and in the lustes and the lykynge of hur flessh." Though she transgressed by her sexuality, and did no penance, Magdalene was forgiven (the same sermon reports) "for hure loue was grett."[21] Can we see Cleopatra as a woman forgiven "because her love was great" in an era before Christian revelation had asserted a different object for that consuming love? This, of course, is similar to the argument Chaucer had made for Troilus. Lacking Christian models, then, perhaps Cleopatra's sacrifice was a worthy anticipation of what saints do, a pagan yearning for transcendence. It is worth noting that in the liturgical calendar Mary Magdalene's feast day precedes Saint Christina's (July 22 and 24). The two therefore often are treated one after the other in legendaries and sermon books (as they were in the *SEL*).[22] Perhaps the modern anxiety about originality, and even about the political correctness of sources, simply reveals a different cultural discourse about these issues than existed in earlier eras.

Perhaps one would contend that Cleopatra is not a good woman because saints do not commit suicide. An old school would argue that Cleopatra's death is her embracing of and capitulation to Roman values and virtues; like Antony, she comes to regard suicide as her only honorable course. But the old critical chestnut that in her death Cleopatra becomes a Roman matron is far less persuasive, I think, than the view that Cleopatra becomes a kind of figure of feminine goodness on the Christian model, even though lacking explicit Christian moral content. What Roman matrons really do is clear enough in Plutarch. Olivia, sister to Augustus, wife to Antony, and therefore rival to Cleopatra, was an authentic Roman matron. Olivia soldiered on despite Antony's rejection and death. She not only raised all of her own children from marriages to

Marcellus and Antony, she took in Antony's children by both Fulvia and Cleopatra, and apparently finagled advantageous marriages for all of her natural and surrogate children—even Cleopatra's. The Roman matron, then, was no martyr to love, but a stoical, practical, even a generous survivor. Cleopatra, however, is a martyr.

One might view Lucretia's suicide as a more apt Roman example for Cleopatra. Lucretia killed herself after being raped, to avoid the shame she would feel when her violation was known. Cleopatra killed herself, in part, to avoid the humiliation of Caesar's triumph, an ordeal that would have been a kind of violation. Like the sinning woman of N-Town's "Woman Taken in Adultery," Cleopatra would rather die than be made into a public display.[23] But if this makes her a kind of Roman martyr, it seems to exclude Cleopatra from Christian sainthood, if only because Christians specifically rejected suicide. Still, the orthodox Christian view of Lucretia does not completely condemn her. For example, in *The City of God* Augustine explains Lucretia's suicide as her means of expressing her purity of conscience, and for this reason Augustine extenuates her action, even if he does not quite condone it (Bk 1, ch 19).[24] Perhaps we may understand Cleopatra's death as honorable in Augustine's terms. One might also suggest that saints' lives themselves provide endless examples of women and men who embrace death as a demonstration of their devotion. Their quest for the martyr's reward was in some sense suicidal. Like Cleopatra's death, their deaths express not despair, but their conviction of their innocence. Female saints fly from this world to the embrace of a loving Christ (often, in the Middle Ages, viewed explicitly as a husband), very much as Cleopatra flies to the dead Antony's arms.[25]

Still, the fact of the provenance of Shakespeare's version in what may seem such a surprising place as a saint's life does oblige us to reconsider the native tradition concerning Cleopatra. Shakespeare's greatest English predecessor, Chaucer, wrote of Cleopatra in the *Legend of Good Women*. The great "discovery" of twentieth-century Chaucer criticism was Chaucer's irony, and the *Legend of Good Women* has long been held up as the primary example of that irony. The irony of the *Legend of Good Women* was something both Robertsonians and Donaldsonians agreed about, though they understood it differently. But they took it for more than just a characteristic narrative position. Indeed, in the *Legend of Good Women* they invoked "irony" to assert that Chaucer sometimes meant the opposite of what he said. After all, they argued, no one could seriously

think that Cleopatra, Dido, Medea and others were really good women. But the same critics had trouble explaining the inconsistency of an *ironic* hagiography that also included such indisputably good women as Thisbe, Lucretia, and Philomela. Donaldson tried, in fact, to get around this inconsistency by separating Chaucer the poet from the Chaucerian narrator; this persona was itself an ironic fiction of a poet who is naïve, confused, and inconsistent—and so is the poem. But the text itself turns us in another direction. Chaucer begins the *Legend of Good Women*, at the God of Love's explicit behest, with Cleopatra's story. The incipit calls it the "Legenda Cleopatrie, martiris, Egipti regine." The explicit agrees: "Explicit Legenda Cleopatre, martiris." These are the classic formulae that open and close saints' lives. And in the Prologue to the "Man of Law's Tale" the work is called "the Seintes Legende of Cupide" (II.61).[26] So Chaucer says Cleopatra is not only a martyr, but a saint. Clearly Shakespeare did not rely directly on Chaucer's version as the source of his description of Cleopatra's death. Chaucer's Cleopatra dies not by the relatively hygienic (if suggestive) means of applying an asp to her breast, but by leaping into a snake-pit. This would be hard on actors, though Shakespeare does use a snake-pit death in *Titus Andronicus*.) In fact, there is evidence that Chaucer borrowed this unpleasant death in a snake-pit from—what else?—a medieval saint's life.[27] Although Shakespeare found his model for Cleopatra's death elsewhere than in Chaucer, Talbot Donaldson and Ann Thompson have shown us clearly that Shakespeare knew his Chaucer very well, and was influenced by Chaucer in many deeper ways than the mere snitching of details.

If we accept that Shakespeare is generally influenced by his reading of Chaucer, then we must imagine that he had some idea of Cleopatra's story in the *Legend of Good Women*. Shakespeare's use of a saint's life to construct Cleopatra's greatest and most positively presented scene seems to assert a kind of transcendence in Cleopatra's end. It seems to take Chaucer's incipit seriously. Was Shakespeare a good reader of Chaucer? If we believe so, we are obliged to ask in turn whether Chaucer's legend of Saint Cleopatra, martyr, was really ironic after all. Where Shakespeare breaks with a Chaucerian reading, as in his version of *Troilus and Cressida*, he seems anxious to justify taking such a different position from his forebear, and spends great effort to develop his different views. But Shakespeare does not feel it necessary to defend his positive treatment of Cleopatra, and this may mean that Shakespeare

understood Chaucer's view as being similar to his own. Talbot Donaldson pointed out that comparisons of Chaucer and Shakespeare may not sit as still as one might like:

> Shakespeareans are naturally interested in showing how the Chaucerian background can illuminate the plays, but this perfectly proper interest often has the effect of assuming that, although the play is a puzzle requiring answers, the Chaucerian works that may help provide answers have settled—one might almost say static—meanings that are available to any reader. To one who has spent much of his scholarly life trying to unravel Chaucerian meanings this assumption represents a serious misunderstanding of a poet of enormous complexity and subtlety, whose meanings are apt to be as many-faceted and as various as Shakespeare's. . . . Shakespeare himself provides the final indication of the way Shakespeare read Chaucer, and that way is with a full appreciation of his complexity.[28]

Does Shakespeare instruct us that modern criticism has misread Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*? Is it possible to see Shakespeare's and Chaucer's Cleopatras un-ironically, as transcending martyrs? I think there are good reasons to do so. The most important of them is Shakespeare's positive treatment of the suicide itself. Clearly he thought his Cleopatra ennobled by her final act. One of the ways Shakespeare emphatically stresses Cleopatra's nobility in death is by its startling contrast with Antony's suicide (IV.xiv). This great warrior cannot command or even cajole his subordinate to kill him, and left on his own, he botches the attempt. He is brought, seriously wounded, to Cleopatra's monument, and in an embarrassingly awkward scene is hoisted up to make his farewells to Cleopatra. (She is fearful here, and this too contrasts strikingly with her calm resolve in her last scene.) Deferral or frustration of death is a commonplace of saints' lives; it is true, as we've seen, of Saint Christina's. But the difference between Antony's botched and awkward suicide and Cleopatra's controlled, direct, and majestic death seems clearly to present her death as admirable.

Unsympathetic views of Cleopatra found in the scholarly literature on the *Legend of Good Women* and *Antony and Cleopatra* are more difficult to maintain in the face of evidence that both poets regarded Cleopatra as a woman who, through her death modeled after that of a saint, became a good woman.[29] Such evidence also obliges us to revise our

understanding of Shakespeare's creativity. Surely it in no way reduces his greatness to show yet again how brilliantly and unexpectedly he used popular and native materials to construct his plays. Shakespeare's ability to recall and marshall small gestures for extraordinary dramatic moments is what moves us. His use of the old Christina story in surprising ways, for new effects, and his exploitation of dramatic possibilities only dimly glimpsed by the Christina author, are what make Cleopatra's death scene so impressive. That its arresting details are probably not without precedent should disturb none but the reader who refuses to value what Shakespeare clearly did: the ingenuity to make the old fresh and expressive once again. The link between this Middle English saint's life and Cleopatra may also oblige us to reconsider Chaucer's notorious irony, and to propose a consistent reading of his *Legend of Good Women*. The possibility that Shakespeare based this scene on one from a saint's life, and was influenced by Chaucer's defence of Cleopatra, seems to me to render his creativity more interesting, more protean, not less. The models of martyrdom he found in Christina and in Chaucer's Cleopatra aren't literally translated in Shakespeare's version, but they clearly do inform and complicate its meaning. Popular native art has always been part of the discourse that creates great literature. Often the popular is tolerant in ways that elite literature is not. Surely it does not diminish our admiration of Shakespeare's art to suggest that he too participated in a great English discourse about women, good and bad, and didn't just sift and resift the classics to authorize his perspectives.

NOTES

1. There are no apples in Genesis; the fig is mentioned only as the source of the leaves Adam and Eve sewed together to cover their nakedness (Gen. 3.7). The notion that Eve gave Adam an apple (or a fig) is not biblical, but popular.
2. William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, Alfred Harbage, gen. ed. (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969).
3. Geoffrey Bullough, ed., *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (New York: Columbia UP, 1964) v. 5, 247. The account of her death in North's *Plutarch*, however, isn't univocal, as Bullough implies, since it mentions not just one "way she died" but three different possibilities. Still, source critics have generally agreed that Plutarch is the ultimate source of the scene, as surely he is.
4. See Mary Olive Thomas, "Cleopatra and the 'Mortal Wretch'," *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 99 (1963), 174-83. Thomas attributes to Vergil the shift from one snake to two, a change which allows Shakespeare to be true to Plutarch's account (via North) that Cleopatra died of "two litle pretie bitings in her arme," while also providing a second asp for her to put to her breast. One wonders why this variation should seem so original and ingenious that Shakespeare needed authoritative corroboration for it.
5. Charlotte D'Evelyn and Anna Mills, eds., *The South English Legendary*, v. 1, EETS os 236 (London: Oxford UP, 1957) 315-27.
6. I am indebted to Melissa Furrow for showing me the Christina story, and for discussing its interpretation with me.
7. See David Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown: Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987).
8. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., Larry D. Benson, gen. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) CT GP 9.
9. Browns-Robbins Table, 737, cited by Charlotte D'Evelyn, in J. Burke Severs, ed., *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050-1500* (Hamden: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1970) 413.
10. Manfred Görlach, *The Textual Tradition of the South English Legendary* (Leeds: University of Leeds, School of English, 1974) 1.
11. Osbern Bokenham, *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, Mary S. Serjeantson, ed. EETS 206 (London: Oxford UP, 1938). Bokenham's collection exists in only one manuscript. I cite Bokenham mainly to help establish the great popularity and wide diffusion, especially in southern England, of this Christina story. I believe, however, that the *South English Legendary* is most likely the ultimate source of Shakespeare's version, and that Shakespeare contacted the Christina story through oral or dramatic traditions based on the *SEL*.
12. Severs, ed., *Manual*, 416. Mendicant authorship for the *SEL* has been forcefully argued, but Manfred Görlach, for one, doubts that it is as conclusive as Charlotte D'Evelyn thought: "It should be noted that much of the evidence quoted in support of the friars comes from marginal texts, some of which are likely to have been late additions to the *SEL*" (49).

13. William Caxton, *Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton*, W. J. B. Crotch, ed. (New York: Burt Franklin, 1971) [rpt. of 1928 ed.] 73.
14. See Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982).
15. E. K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, v. 2 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1903) 338; Hardin Craig, *English Religious Drama* (London: Oxford UP, 1955) 333.
16. R. W. Ingram, ed., *Records of Early English Drama: Coventry* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1981) 128, 100. There is some suggestion that Rastell may have been connected with this latter play (*REED: Coventry*, 561).
17. Hardin Craig, ed., *Two Coventry Corpus Christi Plays* EETS es 87 (London: Oxford UP, 1957) xxi n 5. Gordon DesBrisay has recently shown me many examples in civic records from Aberdeen where offspring named "Christian" clearly must be daughters.
18. For the conventions of female saints' lives, see Richard Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987); and Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982).
19. Emrys Jones, *The Origins of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977) 21.
20. Jones 24.
21. W. O. Ross, ed., *Middle English Sermons from MS. Roy. 18 B.xxiii* EETS os 209 (London: Oxford UP, 1938) 199-200.
22. The Roman festival of Cleopatra led in triumph was superseded in the Christian era by the great feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Like most syncretic conflations, this one is probably significant. It's not so different from treating Christina and Mary Magdalene as a pair.
23. K. S. Block, ed., *Ludus Coventriae, or The Plaie Called Corpus Christi* EETS es 120 (London: Oxford UP, 1922). I'm grateful to Janet Fox for this and other astute points.
24. Augustine, *The City of God*, Henry Bettenson, tr. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).
25. See Bynum 246-51.
26. "The traditional title derives from the Prologue, where Alceste exhorts Chaucer: 'The moste partye of thy tyme spende / In makyng of a glorious legende / Of goode wymmen, maides, and wyves' (F 482-84)." See *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., "Textual Notes," for "Title" (1179).
27. See *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., "Explanatory Notes" for "The Legend of Cleopatra," *LGW* 678-80, 696-702 (1067).
28. E. Talbot Donaldson, *The Swan at the Well: Shakespeare Reading Chaucer* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985) 2.

29. A survey and criticism of scholars' antipathy and misreading of Shakespeare's Cleopatra is available in L. T. Fitz's "Egyptian Queens and Male Reviewers: Sexist Attitudes in *Antony and Cleopatra* Criticism," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 28 (1977) 297-316. In "The Medieval Cleopatra: The Classical and Medieval Tradition of Chaucer's *Legend of Cleopatra*," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 7 (1977) 249-69, Beverly Taylor reviews the chief versions, though I think her analysis unconvincing.