

THIS IS AN ONLINE SAMPLE
OF THE FIRST TEN PAGES OF

SOFONISBA
By Callie Kimball

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PRODUCTION HISTORY

SOFONISBA is currently unproduced.

It is supported by a grant from the Ludwig Vogelstein Foundation.

The first 40 pages were read in August 2008 at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts as part of its Page-to-Stage Festival. It then had a reading at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, sponsored by Washington Shakespeare Company, in May 2009. In both readings, Isabel was played by Heather Haney, Sofonisba was played by Sunshine Cappelletti, and the male characters were played by Joseph Thornhill. Both readings were directed by Dorothy Neumann.

The play was also workshopped at Electric Pear Productions in the spring of 2009.

In November 2009, Project Y did a reading of it at Lily O'Brien's in NYC. It was directed by Michole Biancosino, and featured Lisa Velten Smith, Teresa Stephenson, and Eric Sutton.

SETTING

PROLOGUE A ship from Italy to Spain, December 1559

ACT I The Spanish Court of King Philip II, 1560-1565

ACT II Same, 1567-1571

EPILOGUE A ship from Spain to Italy, May 1579

CHARACTERS

SOFONISBA ANGUISSOLA

Italian. 27 when the play starts.

Court painter to King Philip II of Spain.

QUEEN ISABEL

French. 14 when the play starts.

Queen of Spain, Philip's second wife.

BISHOP/KING PHILIP/DON FRANCISCO/THE FOOL/ORAZIO.

Orazio is Italian; the Fool, Scottish; the rest, Spanish.

Played by the same actor.

Bishop is any age above 43. Philip is 32 when the play starts. Don Francisco is around 40, and never laughs. The Fool is ageless, with a Scottish accent. Orazio is in his 30s.

SOFONISBA

PROLOGUE

Night. The play begins with SOFONISBA, 27, on a ship that is taking her from Cremona, Italy, to Barcelona, Spain.

SOFONISBA

O Mamma the fish the fish they shine in the sea like stars that blind the moon, and they are so big, and if I tried to paint them for you I would surely lose them and if you were here Mamma, if you were here I...

The whole town, all of Cremona, came out to watch me go, even your dear friend La Signora Tasfina. I can see them all, their pink faces all in rows like soft stones on the banks, their hands poking up, shaking in the wind.

Will they welcome me like that in Spain.

The fire in my chest has returned. I miss home already.

ACT ONE

Scene 1: THE CATECHISM

SOFONISBA before a Bishop.

BISHOP

Sofonisba, dejeme ver sus manos.¹

SOFONISBA holds out her hands and he inspects them.

Mas una pregunta.²

SOFONISBA

Si.³

BISHOP

Observavi vos plena firmaque fide credentes in Dominum nostrum vere oriundum ex genere David secundum carnem, Filium Dei secundum voluntatem et potentiam Dei, natum vere ex virgine, vere sub Pontio Pilato, clavis confixum pro obis in carne. Vere passus est, ut et vere resuscitavit.

SOFONISBA

Si il mio signore.⁴

BISHOP

You understood?

SOFONISBA

Yes Your Grace.

BISHOP

All?

¹ Spanish: Let me see your hands.

² Spanish: One more question.

³ Spanish and Italian: Yes.

⁴ Italian: Yes, my lord.

SOFONISBA

My we⁵ had a Latin tutor. “You are firmly convinced about our Lord, who is of the race of David according to the flesh, Son of God according to the will and power of God, born of a virgin, he was nailed to a tree for us under Pontius Pilate, he truly suffered, as he is also truly risen.”

BISHOP

.

And you are a virgin.

SOFONISBA

Yes.

BISHOP

That was not a question. The physician reported it. I would not take the word of an Italian girl. Not even a nobleman’s daughter. *Especially* not a nobleman’s daughter.

SOFONISBA

.

BISHOP

The physician reports your teeth are exceptionally fine. Open. [*She opens and he inspects it.*] The breath sweet. You seem healthy, your temperament mild.

The queen is young. Fourteen.

SOFONISBA

.

BISHOP

The women who wait on her must be chaste. You are chaste.

SOFONISBA

Yes my lord.

⁵ “My we” is intentional. She’s finding her words.

BISHOP

That was not a question. Her women must also be modest.

You make yourself plain.

SOFONISBA

I am plain in my purpose.

BISHOP

A plain veneer. To serve your ambition.

SOFONISBA

My ambition is to serve. If I were ambitious purely for self, I would I would flatter and simper and curl my hair like an ordinary courtier. I've chosen my dress as it reflects the seriousness of my heart in serving God through my art.

BISHOP

A woman in a man's work is unseemly.

SOFONISBA

I cannot help my sex. Is it only a man's work to present the truth?

BISHOP

Truth? Truth is a weapon. Dangerous in inexperienced hands.

Truth...I see. This serious show is a tool for climbing into men's brains. You unsettle.

SOFONISBA

You give me more credit than I deserve.

BISHOP

What do you hope to achieve?

SOFONISBA

To serve God, the King and Queen, to honor my father and the memory of my mother.

BISHOP

And you believe this is done by austere dress.

SOFONISBA

I believe it is done by austere purpose.

BISHOP

And the softness of women's lives doesn't draw you?

SOFONISBA

Women may be soft but their lives are hard.

[QUEEN ISABEL, 14, comes on stage and sits as if for a portrait.]

BISHOP

Because you will spend so much time with her, you will have influence over the queen.

SOFONISBA

That is not my wish.

BISHOP

She must flatter and please. Do you flatter and please?

SOFONISBA

As little as possible do I flatter. As much as possible do I please.

BISHOP

But you flatter in your art.

SOFONISBA

I paint only what I see. The truth.

BISHOP

You believe you are wise enough to see the truth? To understand it?

SOFONISBA

I believe I am foolish enough to see it.

BISHOP

You do not strike me as foolish, young lady. You are a clever cat.

Do you wish to be a man?

SOFONISBA

I do not.

BISHOP

Do you wish to please a man?

SOFONISBA

I wish to please God.

BISHOP

Are you obedient?

SOFONISBA

Yes Your Grace.

BISHOP

I am glad to hear it.

What have you been told of the courtiers?

SOFONISBA

I only know what I what I have heard, that their ideal behavior often does not reflect their real behavior.

BISHOP

Often things are not as they seem. But I suppose you know this.

SOFONISBA

I suppose I do.

BISHOP

The courtiers, they buy one indulgence to absolve another.

[He takes her hands. Smells them. Thinks.]

Yes...Not As They Seem. For example, your hands smell sweet but look filthy.

Have you ever seen...a severed finger, Sofonisba Anguissola?

SOFONISBA

No.

No Your Grace. I am not allowed to study the natural body.

BISHOP

Is that a joke?

SOFONISBA

No your Grace.

BISHOP

There is nothing natural about a severed finger. In my chosen work stamping out heresy, I have seen All Manner of bodily disintegration. Perhaps, Senorita, if you had seen what I have seen, you might not joke so. And you would take more care of your personal self.

You will scrub these stains from your hands.

SOFONISBA

The stains will not come / out—

BISHOP

Then you will wear gloves.

SOFONISBA

I cannot paint with gloves / on—

BISHOP

This is not a request. I have been charged with many responsibilities, but few are greater than ensuring the spiritual and physical fitness of those closest to the young queen. You will remove the stains or wear gloves, your paintings will be inspected, and each month when it is your time you will be confined to your rooms and will not work.

SOFONISBA

Of course.

BISHOP

You are to begin work right away. His Holiness the Pope has requested a portrait of the new queen, and he asks that you paint it.

SOFONISBA

Oh Your Grace I am I am honored to fulfill such a request. A tremendous honor—

BISHOP

Yes it is. I hope you prove suited to it. You will request your supplies in writing through my secretary.

SOFONISBA

Yes.

BISHOP

Your earnings as Court Painter will go to your father, except for a small amount that will be set aside for your personal use. This arrangement is for your own convenience.

SOFONISBA

Si.

BISHOP

Young lady, that you are a noblewoman does not make this arrangement any less dangerous. To cultivate a natural gift is one thing, but to use such a gift for personal gain...it can break a woman's constitution and poison her heart.

SOFONISBA

Ambition will poison not only a woman's heart, but her art as well. We are in agreement, Bishop.

BISHOP

You misunderstand me. I do not require your agreement.

SOFONISBA

Of course. I am humble before your Grace. You are so kind. And wise.

BISHOP

And you say you do not flatter. I see. I see now.

SOFONISBA

?

BISHOP

I see why Alba recommended you to the king. Your talent and cleverness mixed with such a pretty sternness proved irresistible. You exploited Alba's weakness to gain this appointment.

SOFONISBA

Duke Alba treated me with honor, and I him. If you mean to say —

BISHOP

Alba is not known for his discretion. An easy mark for such a clever cat.

SOFONISBA

I simply painted his portrait as commissioned. I knew nothing of his plan for me. I did not ask for anything, and I did not offer anything.

Forgive me, Your Grace, but if I if I may say so, I am respected in my country, and only traveled here to Spain because I assumed I would be so here.

BISHOP

Si I have heard of you, the famous maiden painter, a curiosity. But tell me, how long can you be a maiden?

You have no wish to marry?

SOFONISBA

My father educated my sisters and I so that we might provide for ourselves. The dowries for so many daughters would ruin him. So I am a bride of my work.

BISHOP

A bride of your work. Such cleverness is a form of vanity. Your success has made you proud.

SOFONISBA

I work to serve, not succeed.

BISHOP

It is unwise to have you at court, a foreigner, unmarried, masculine. I was against it from the start. There is something unnatural in your heart that must be watched. I will help you.

You must come to me when you have troubles. And you will.

SOFONISBA

I-I will. Thank you Your Grace.

BISHOP

These men, I know them. They will be challenged by you. They will wish to place you where they want you, and ply your...naivete with their subtle ways. Therefore you are to be pitied and looked after. I can tell you believe. I can tell that you believe yourself, that God has granted you a strength of mind uncommon in the female sex. It is a heavy burden, and you must not bear it alone.

You will confess daily. You must come to me when you feel the strain of anything, for I will guide you through your troubles and keep your soul safe. I will help you keep a fixed course.

SOFONISBA

Thank you Your Grace.

BISHOP

Go. Serve the queen well.

SOFONISBA

I will.