



She has lately withdrawn in large part from her public's eager gaze, but she can well afford it. Elizabeth Taylor's image needs no refreshing, it's indelible, a vital and beloved part of American visual history. Our eyes

were first dazzled by her beauty when she was still a child, and its later power over our senses has been due to its unchanging innocence. Taylor's two best child parts were quite different -- a saintly and dying little schoolgirl in *Jane Eyre*, a spunky little jockey in *National Velvet* -- but her wonderful face glowed for the camera with the same unselfconscious intensity in each. She could let her beauty alone conjure sweet goodness in the first and active zeal in the second, so that we could feel its creative power. She wasn't trying to force it on us, the way some child actors put over their rebelliousness, cuteness or wistfulness.

Throughout Taylor's career, she kept the unself-conscious look we saw in the child actress -- she never seemed to be making political use of her beauty, wielding it as a weapon against the other characters. She knew how to let unguarded feeling glow through her perfect dark looks; and it made her ideal for such parts as the devoted but spurned Rebecca in *Ivanhoe*, the hapless Helen of Troy, or the tragic Cleopatra. She would have been a terrible Scarlett O'Hara -- too much natural dignity, not enough guile and shameless calculation -- and no good as Carmen, not enough raunchiness and caprice, too much breathtaking perfection. But she would have been a tremendous Medea, the dark enchantress helplessly in love, finally stirred to murderous jealousy when prudence required her lover's marriage to another, or Dido, the powerful queen of Carthage, left to die a suicide when her lover Aeneas sailed away to found Rome and marry a suitable princess.

Along with the oval face and rounded chin, Taylor's sculptural body and its classical language fitted her for roles from history and legend, and she wore a whole range of period costumes with a straight-backed, high-headed carriage not common on our present screens. She has always worn the look of the legendary Dark Lady, the one who loves and helps the hero -- Antony, *Ivanhoe*, Jason,

Aeneas -- but whom he abandons out of a duty to ambition, finally winning a prize Blonde to crown his success. Taylor seems to have the Dark Lady's warm soul, too -- loving and giving, never wary of possible traps, never maneuvering for advantage, always following her feelings and playing it straight, and too often finding the abyss opening before her.

She was like this again and again in films, from *A Place in the Sun* to *Butterfield 8* -- her first Oscar -- from *Raintree County* to *The Sandpiper* to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*; and her personal life seemed to have the same flavor. She appeared to let her passion lead her in the true Romantic mode, never stirring up trouble for its own sake, wholeheartedly taking the risks and paying the costs, facing disasters and afflictions with straightforward courage. And then her beauty, already in full bloom before she was seventeen, began to ripen further. We began to see future threats to that physical perfection that had looked like an unchanging divine gift. And while that went on, we grew able to see her sense of humor, her comic gifts, and her incontestable intelligence.

All these informed her inspired performance as Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and her equally inspired, funny and heart-breaking Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, where she deliberately dimmed the beauty and won another Oscar. As she went on playing the part of a Fading Beauty after that, her public became more and more fascinated and sympathetic -- her problems, and those of her characters, began to seem less like those of legendary queens and more like those facing the mature, fleshy brunettes of real life. Although her recent public image has not been linked to recent movies, she always remains the compelling film actress she has been for more than half a century. We forever see her by the light of the screen -- always unguarded, hopeful and impassioned, or bitterly angry with never a trace of cynicism, consistently playing her beautiful self.

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