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Antony and Cleopatra

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**ANYTHING TRUTH CAN DO, WE CAN DO BETTER:
THE CLEOPATRA LEGEND**

1. *Enobarbus.* I will tell you.
The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne,
Burned on the water: the poop was beaten gold;
Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
The winds were lovesick with them; the oars were silver,
Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke and made
The water which they beat to follow faster,
As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,
It beggared all description: she did lie
In her pavilion, cloth-of-gold of tissue,
O'erpicturing that Venus where we see
The fancy outwork nature: on each side her
Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,
With divers-coloured fans, whose wind did seem
To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,
And what they undid did.

Agrippa. O, rare for Antony!
Enobarbus. Her gentlewomen, like the Nereides,
So many mermaids, tended her i' th' eyes,
And made their bends adornings. At the helm
A seeming mermaid steers: the silken tackle
Swell with the touches of those flower-soft hands,
That yarely frame the office. From the barge
A strange invisible perfume hits the sense
Of the adjacent wharfs. The city cast
Her people out upon her; and Antony,
Enthroned i' th' marketplace, did sit alone,
Whistling to th' air; which, but for vacancy,
Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too,
And made a gap in nature.

Agrippa. Rare Egyptian!
(A. & C. II.ii.196-224, based on Plut. Ant. 26).

2. When Cleopatra met Antony in Cilicia, she arranged a royal dinner for him. All the vessels were gold and jewelled, carved with exquisite beauty, and even the walls (they say) were hung with purple and gold tapestries. Cleopatra prepared twelve couches, and invited Antony and some friends of his choice. Antony was quite overwhelmed by the lavishness of the sight, but Cleopatra quietly smiled: all this, she said, was her present to him. She invited him to come again to dine on the following day, together with his friends and captains, and this second feast was so much grander that it made the first one seem small. All the vessels she again presented to Antony, and the captains were invited to take away the couches on which they had reclined; the sideboards too were shared among them. As they left she even provided litters and

bearers for the men of rank, while the others were given finely caparisoned horses with silver harnesses; all were accompanied by Ethiopian slaves to carry the torches. On the fourth day she distributed sums amounting to a talent, all for the purchase of roses, and the floors of the dining-room were strewn with them to a cubit's depth and covered over with net-like festoons.

(Socrates of Rhodes *FGrH* 192 fr. 1)

3. Antony sent a message inviting Cleopatra to dine with him, but she thought it more appropriate that he should come to her, and so, as he wished to show his courtesy and goodwill, he accepted and went. He found the preparations made to receive him magnificent beyond words, but what astonished him most of all was the extraordinary number of lights. So many of these, it is said, were let down from the roof and displayed on all sides at once, and they were arranged and grouped in such ingenious patterns in relation to each other, some in squares and some in circles, that they created as brilliant a spectacle as can ever have been devised to delight the eye.

[Cf. Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.723-7.]

On the following day Antony returned her hospitality with another banquet, but although he had hoped to surpass her in splendour and elegance he was hopelessly outdone in both, and was the first to make fun of the crude, and meagre quality of his entertainment. Cleopatra saw that Antony's humour was broad and gross and belonged to the soldier rather than the courtier, and she quickly adopted the same manner towards him and treated him without the least reserve.

(Plutarch, *Antony* 26-7.)

4. Romanus, eheu, - posteri negabitis -
emancipatus feminae
fert uallum et arma miles et spadonibus
seruire rugosis potest,
interque signa turpe militaria
sol aspicit conopium.

Future generations will not believe it - a Roman soldier,
bought and sold, bears stakes and arms for a woman,
serves under withered eunuchs! Amid the standards
the sun gains sight of a shameful mosquito net!

(Horace, *Epode* 9.11-16.)

5. Quid te mutauit? quod reginam in eo? uxor mea est? nunc coepi, an abhinc annos nouem? to deinde solam Drusillam inis? ... an refert, ubi et in qua arrigas?

(Suet. *Aug.* 69.)

What has changed your view towards me? Because I am screwing the queen? Is she my wife? [Of course not!] And I've been doing it for nine years anyway. And what about you? Is Livia the only woman you screw? Does it matter where and in whom you have your erections?

6.

... accipiter uelut
mollis columbas aut leporem citus
uenator in campis niualis
Haemoniae, daret ut catenis

fatale monstrum; quae generosius
perire quaerens nec muliebriter
expauit ensem nec latentis
classe cita reparauit oras;

ausa et iacentem uisere regiam
uultu sereno, fortis et asperas
tractare serpentis, ut atrum
corpore combiberet uenenum,

deliberata morte ferocior,
saeuis Liburnis scilicet inuidens
priuata deduci superbo
non humilis mulier triumpho.

(Horace, *Odes* i.37.)

As swiftly as the hawk follows the feeble
Dove, or in snowy Thessaly the hunter
The hare, so he [Octavian] sailed forth
To bind this fatal prodigy in chains,

Yet she preferred a finer style of dying:
She did not, like a woman, shirk the dagger
Or seek by speed at sea
To change her Egypt for obscurer shores,

But, gazing on her desolated palace
With a calm smile, unflinchingly laid hands on
The angry asps until
Her veins had drunk the deadly poison deep,

And, death-determined, fiercer than ever,
Perished. Was she to grace a haughty triumph,
Dethroned, paraded by
The rude Liburnians? Not Cleopatra!

7. 'Why be surprised, if a woman tosses my life about, and drags me as slave to her judgement...?': Propertius 3.11. The company it keeps: Propertius 3.12 on Aelia Galla as 'more faithful than Penelope' - 'Postumus, how *could* you leave her?'... (but 'there are no Penelopes in Rome any more', 3.13.24); 3.13 on decay of morals and cost of girls; 3.14 on the delights of Spartan nudity.

8. illam [i.e. Cleopatra] inter caedes **pallentem morte futura**
 fecerat ignipotens undis et Iapyge ferri,
 contra autem magno maerentem corpore Nilum
 pandentemque sinus et tota ueste uocantem
 caeruleum in gremium latebrosaue flumina uictos.
 (Virgil, *Aeneid* viii.709-13.)

The God whose Might is Fire had portrayed Cleopatra amid the massacre, **pale with the pallor of impending death**, as she sped over the waves before a north-west gale. Before her the River Nile, with sorrow expressed throughout his great length, opened his full robe, and with all his raiment invited the vanquished to the bosom of his blue waters and the refuge of his streams.

9. [Dido] sanguineam uoluens aciem, maculisque trementis
 interfusa genas et **pallida morte futura ...**
 (Virgil, *Aeneid* iv.643-4.)

Her eyes were reddened and rolling, her cheeks quivered under a flush, and she was **pale with the pallor of imminent death**.

10. (After Cleopatra's persuasive speech)...
 uoltus adest precibus faciesque incesta perorat.
 exigit infandam corrupto iudice noctem.
 (Lucan 10.105-6)

... Cleopatra's face and her evil beauty helped her prayers; she spent an unspeakable night with this judge she had bribed.

11. discubere illic reges maiorque potestas
 Caesar; et inmodice formam fucata nocentem,
 nec sceptris contenta suis nec fratre marito,
 plena maris rubri spoliis, colloque comisque
 diuitias Cleopatra gerit cultuque laborat.
 candida Sidonio perlucent pectora filo,
 quod Nilotis acus compressum pectine Serum
 soluit et extenso laxauit stamina uelo....
 ... pro caecus et amens
 ambitione furor, ciuilia bella gerenti
 diuitias aperire suas, incendere mentem
 hospitis armati!
 (Lucan 10.136-49)

The kings reclined there together with Caesar, the greatest power of all, and Cleopatra too. Neither her sceptre nor the marriage with her brother now contented her, and she had added cosmetic extravagance to her already villainous beauty by putting on Red Sea pearls, carrying so many riches on her neck and hair that she struggled under

their weight. Her white breasts showed through the Tyrian silk which, though closely woven when imported from the East, had been teased out by some Egyptian needle until it became diaphanous. What blindness, what crazed ambition to parade such riches before a man who was waging civil war, to inflame the mind of a guest who bore arms!

12. postquam epulis Bacchoque modum lassata uoluptas
 inposuit, longis Caesar producere noctem
 inchoat adloquiis ...

(Lucan 10.172-4)

When the languorous pleasures had brought the feasting and drinking to an end, Caesar began to prolong the lengthy night with conversation ...

13. Cleopatra's flatterers told Antony that he must be an insensitive brute with a heart of stone, for here was a mistress who was utterly devoted to him alone, and he was killing her. Octavia, they made out, had married him as a matter of political convenience to suit her brother's interests, and she enjoyed the title of his wife: but Cleopatra, who was the sovereign of many nations, had been content to be called his mistress, and she did not shun this name nor think it unworthy of her so long as she could see him and spend her life with him; but if he drove her away it would be the death of her.

(Plutarch, *Antony* 53.)

14. There at the tomb she clasped the urn which contained his ashes and said, 'My beloved Antony, it is only a little while ago that I buried you with these hands. Then they were free, but now, when I come to pour libations for you, I am a prisoner, guarded so that I shall not disfigure this body of mine by beating it or even by weeping. It has become a slave's body, and they watch over it only to make me adorn their triumph over you . . . But if there is any help or power in the gods of Rome, for mine have betrayed us, do not abandon your wife while she lives, and do not let me be led in triumph to your shame. Hide me and let me be buried here with you, for I know now that the thousand griefs I have suffered are as nothing beside the few days that I have lived without you.

(Plutarch, *Antony* 84.)

15. Is it that, when the glow has faded, Cleopatra's ecstasy comes to appear, I would not say factitious, but an effort strained and prodigious as well as glorious, not, like Othello's last speech, the final expression of a character, of thoughts and emotions which have dominated a whole life?

(A.C. Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* [1909], 304)

16. After giving a faithful picture of the soldier broken down by debauchery, and the typical wanton in whose arms such men perish, Shakespear finally strains all his huge command of rhetoric and stage pathos to give a theatrical sublimity to the wretched end of the business, and to persuade foolish spectators that the world was well lost by the twain.

(George Bernard Shaw, Preface to *Three Plays for Puritans* [1900])

17. *Antony.* These strong Egyptian fetters I must break
Or lose myself in dotage ...
I must from this enchanting queen break off:
Ten thousand harms, more than the ills I know,
My idleness doth hatch.

(A. & C. I.ii.117-31.)

18. *Antony.* Be it art or hap,
He [the soothsayer] hath spoken true. The very dice obey him,
And in our sports my better cunning faints
Under his chance; if we draw lots, he speeds;
His cocks do win the battle still of mine
When it is all to naught, and his quails ever
Beat mine, inhooped, at odds. I will to Egypt:
And though I make this marriage for my peace,
I' th' East my pleasure lies.

(A. & C. II.iii.26-41.)

19. *Cleopatra.* Where is he?
Charmian. I did not see him since.
Cleopatra. See where he is, who's with him, what he does:
I did not send you. If you find him sad,
Say I am dancing; if in mirth, report
That I am sudden sick. Quick, and return.

(A. & C. I.iii.1-5.)

20. She pretended to be consumed by the most passionate love for Antony, adopted a rigorous diet, and succeeded in making her body waste away. Whenever Antony came near her she would fix her eyes on him with a look of rapture, and whenever he left she would appear to languish and be on the verge of collapse. She took great pains to arrange that he should often see her in tears, and then she would quickly wipe them away and try to hide them as if she did not wish him to notice.

(Plutarch, *Antony* 53.)

21. The master impressed on us that Antony for this woman spoiled his public career, involved himself in domestic unpleasantness, and at last plunged himself in ruin. In truth my old master was right, and it is extremely dangerous to establish intimate relations with a person like Cleopatra. It may be the destruction of a hero; but only of a hero. Here as everywhere there is no danger for worthy mediocrity.

(Heine, *Sämtliche Werke* iii. 227-8.)