

HOW CLEOPATRA CHARMED ANTONY

about A.D. 100

Plutarch

In 42 B.C., the Roman general Mark Antony was preparing for a military campaign in southwest Asia when he arranged a meeting with a 28-year-old Egyptian queen. Antony wanted Queen Cleopatra to explain her refusal to back the Roman government in the current civil war; Cleopatra saw an opportunity to strengthen Egypt and her own power. According to legend, the meeting was love at first sight. Antony returned with her to Egypt where the two spent months in riotous splendor. Their love story is told here by the Greek biographer Plutarch, one of many writers who have described the famous couple.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Forming and Supporting Opinions

Based on Plutarch's story, what is your impression of Queen Cleopatra?

When making preparation for the Parthian war,¹ Antony sent to command [Cleopatra] to make her personal appearance in Cilicia,² to answer an accusation, that she had given great assistance, in the late wars, to Cassius.³ Dellius, who was sent on this message, had no sooner seen her face, and remarked her adroitness and subtlety in speech, but he felt convinced that Antony would not so much as think of giving any molestation to a woman like this; on the contrary, she would be the first in favor with him. So he set himself at once to pay his court to the Egyptian, and gave her his advice, "to go," in the Homeric style,⁴ to Cilicia, "in her best attire," and bade her fear nothing from Antony, the gentlest and kindest of soldiers.

She had some faith in the words of Dellius, but more in her own attractions, which, having formerly recommended her to Cæsar and the young Cnæus Pompey, she did not doubt might prove yet more successful with Antony. Their acquaintance was with her when a girl, young, and ignorant of the world, but she was to meet Antony in the time of life when women's beauty is most splendid, and their intellects are in full maturity. (She was then about twenty-eight years old.) She made great preparations for her journey, of money, gifts, and ornaments of value, such as so wealthy a kingdom might afford, but she brought with her her surest hopes in her own magic arts and charms.

She received several letters, both from Antony and from his friends, to summon her, but she took no account of these orders; and at last, as if in mockery of them, she came sailing up the river Cydnus, in a barge with gilded stern and outspread

1. **Parthian war:** war between the empires of Parthia, in southwest Asia, and Rome

2. **Cilicia:** Roman province in Asia Minor

3. **in the late wars, to Cassius:** The civil wars that erupted in Rome between two factions, those for Julius Cæsar and those against; the wars continued after Cæsar's assassination. Cassius was a leader of an anti-Cæsar army and one of Cæsar's assassins.

4. **in the Homeric style:** heroically

sails of purple, while oars of silver beat time to the music of flutes and fifes and harps. She herself lay all along, under a canopy of cloth of gold, dressed as Venus in a picture, and beautiful young boys, like painted Cupids, stood on each side to fan her. Her maids were dressed like Sea Nymphs and Graces, some steering at the rudder, some working at the ropes. The perfumes diffused themselves from the vessel to the shore, which was covered with multitudes, part following the galley up the river on either bank, part running out of the city to see the sight. The market place was quite emptied, and Antony at last was left alone sitting upon the tribunal; while the word went through all the multitude, that Venus was come to feast with Bacchus⁵ for the common good of Asia.

On her arrival, Antony sent to invite her to supper. She thought it fitter he should come to her; so, willing to show his good humor and courtesy, he complied, and went. He found the preparations to receive him magnificent beyond expression, but nothing so admirable as the great number of lights; for on a sudden there was let down altogether so great a number of branches with lights in them so ingeniously disposed, some in squares, and some in circles, that the whole thing was a spectacle that has seldom been equaled for beauty.

The next day, Antony invited her to supper, and was very desirous to outdo her as well in magnificence as contrivance; but he found he was altogether beaten in both, and was so well convinced of it, that he was himself the first to jest and mock at his poverty of wit, and his rustic awkwardness. She, perceiving that his raillery was broad and gross, and savored more of the soldier than the courtier, rejoined in the same taste, and fell into it at once, without any sort of reluctance or reserve.

For her actual beauty, it is said, was not in itself so remarkable that none could be compared with her, or that no one could see her without being struck by it, but the contact of her presence, if you lived with her, was irresistible; the attraction of her person, joining with the charm of her conversation, and the character that attended all she said or did, was something bewitching. It was a pleasure merely to hear the sound of her voice, with which, like an instrument of many strings, she could pass from one language to another; so that there were few of the barbarian nations that she answered by an interpreter; to most of them she spoke herself, as to the Æthiopians, Troglodytes, Hebrews, Arabians, Syrians, Medes, Parthians, and many others, whose language she had learnt; which was all the more surprising, because most of the kings, her predecessors, scarcely gave themselves the trouble to acquire the Egyptian tongue, and several of them quite abandoned the Macedonian.

Antony was so captivated by her, that while Fulvia his wife maintained his quarrels in Rome against Cæsar by actual force of arms, and the Parthian troops, commanded by Labienus (the king's generals having made him commander-in-chief), were assembled in Mesopotamia, and ready to enter Syria, he could yet suffer himself to be carried away by her to Alexandria,⁶ there to keep holiday, like a boy, in play and diversion, squandering and fooling away in enjoyment that most costly, as Antiphon⁷ says, of all valuables, time. They had a sort of company, to which they gave a particular

5. **Venus was come to feast with Bacchus:** Venus was the Roman goddess of love and beauty, and Bacchus, the god of wine

6. **Alexandria:** capital of Egypt, originally founded by Alexander the Great

7. **Antiphon:** Greek orator

name, calling it that of the “Inimitable Livers.” The members entertained one another daily in turn, with an extravagance of expenditure beyond measure or belief.

Philotas, a physician of Amphisssa, who was at that time a student of medicine in Alexandria, used to tell my [Plutarch’s] grandfather Lamprias, that, having some acquaintance with one of the royal cooks, he was invited by him, being a young man, to come and see the sumptuous preparations for supper. So he was taken into the kitchen, where he admired the prodigious variety of all things; but particularly, seeing eight wild boars roasting whole, says he, “Surely you have a great number of guests.” The cook laughed at his simplicity, and told him there were not above twelve to sup, but that every dish was to be served up just roasted to a turn, and if any thing was but one minute ill timed, it was spoiled; “And,” said he, “maybe Antony will sup just now, maybe not this hour, maybe he will call for wine, or begin to talk, and will put it off. So that,” he continued, “it is not one, but many suppers must be had in readiness, as it is impossible to guess at his hour.”

To return to Cleopatra; Plato admits four sorts of flattery, but she had a thousand. Were Antony serious or disposed to mirth, she had at any moment some new delight or charm to meet his wishes; at every turn she was upon him, and let him escape her neither by day nor by night. She played at dice with him, drank with him, hunted with him; and when he exercised in arms, she was there to see. At night she would go rambling with him to disturb and torment people at their doors and windows, dressed like a servant woman, for Antony also went in servant’s disguise, and from these expeditions he often came home very scurvily answered, and sometimes even beaten severely, though most people guessed who it was. However, the Alexandrians in general liked it all well enough, and joined good humoredly and kindly in his frolic and play, saying they were much obliged to Antony for acting his tragic parts at Rome, and keeping his comedy for them.

It would be trifling without end to be particular in his follies, but his fishing must not be forgotten. He went out one day to angle with Cleopatra, and, being so unfortunate as to catch nothing in the presence of his mistress, he gave secret orders to the fishermen to dive under water, and put fishes that had been already taken upon his hooks; and these he drew so fast that the Egyptian perceived it. But, feigning great admiration, she told everybody how dexterous Antony was, and invited them next day to come and see him again. So, when a number of them had come on board the fishing boats, as soon as he had let down his hook, one of her servants was beforehand with his divers, and fixed upon his hook a salted fish from Pontus. Antony, feeling his line give, drew up the prey, and when, as may be imagined, great laughter ensued, “Leave,” said Cleopatra, “the fishing-rod, general, to us poor sovereigns of Pharos and Canopus⁸; your game is cities, provinces, and kingdoms.”

Source: Excerpt from “Life of Mark Antony” by Plutarch, in *Plutarch: The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, translated by John Dryden and revised by Arthur Hugh Clough (New York: The Modern Library, 1932).

8. **Pharos and Canopus:** Cleopatra means “people of the sea.” Pharos is an island and Canopus a star in a constellation shaped like a ship.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER

Answers will vary. Plutarch's portrayal of Cleopatra is mainly positive. She has great beauty, style, and charm. She can speak several languages. On the other hand, some students may see Cleopatra as manipulative and interested only in her own goals.