

# CLEOPATRA

The image features two ancient Egyptian reliefs of Cleopatra. The relief on the left shows her in profile, facing right, wearing a long, dark, pleated dress. She holds a large, circular object, possibly a mirror or a ceremonial disk, above her head with her right hand. The relief on the right shows her in profile, facing right, wearing a shorter, more ornate dress. She holds a similar circular object above her head with her right hand. Both figures have their left arms raised in a gesture of adoration or prayer. The background is a textured, reddish-brown stone with hieroglyphs visible in rectangular columns.

a play by colin j. holcombe

ocaso press 2012

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by

Colin John Holcombe

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by Colin John Holcombe

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## HISTORICAL NOTE

The play opens in 41 BC, when Antony and Octavian shared the rulership of the Roman world with the third triumvir, the inoffensive Lepidus. Antony was tasked with bringing order to the eastern provinces, and creating some defence against marauding Parthian horsemen who regularly invaded Syria. Octavian was in Rome, consolidating his hold on Italian politics and finding land and money to pay his troops. Octavian was Julius Caesar's adopted son, but much Antony's junior partner in years and military experience. His pressing difficulty was Sextus Pompey, Pompey the Great's son, who had turned pirate and withheld the grain supplies from Egypt so necessary to Rome's survival. Peace between the parties was made in Brundisium (40 BC), and the pact strengthened by Anthony agreeing to marry Octavia, Octavian's long-suffering sister and another pawn in his political manoeuvring.

Cleopatra was in Egypt, to which she fled when Julia Caesar was assassinated in 45 BC. She had taken no new lover, but ruled her country competently, knowing there were always new claimants to the throne, especially her half-sister Arsinoë, then residing in Greece. Cleopatra VII was a Ptolemy, the Macedonian rulers of the last and richest Hellenic kingdom to remain outside Rome's clutches. Cleopatra had to balance the unruly passions of her polyglot subjects, who urged a recovery of the former territories of Judea and Syria, with the iron reality of the times, the aggressive expansion of the Roman state.

Cleopatra and Antony's passion was real, but it was political considerations that brought them together and forged their common destiny. Antony was impetuous by nature, and saw in the 36 BC Parthian adventure a way of becoming the undisputed leader of the Rome world, outdistancing the claims of Octavian, a consummate politician but poor soldier. The adventure failed. Antony could not take the Persian city of Phraaspa, lost his baggage train and was forced to retreat, his army being further reduced by Parthian hostilities, thirst, hunger and disease. Octavian launched a propaganda war against Anthony, who was obliged to return hostilities by transporting a combined Roman and Egyptian army to Greece, protecting the coast with a string of forts but keeping his fleet safe from attack in the Ambracian Gulf,

where the village of Actium marked its entry to the Ionian Sea. Agrippa, Octavian's talented admiral, who had outwitted Sextus Pompey, first seized Anthony's Greek forts and then blockaded Anthony's fleet and army at Actium. The armies saw only minor engagements, but the skirmishes did not favour Antony, who suffered continual desertions as the hot summer wore on. He was forced to break the blockade, securing the escape of Cleopatra and a few of his own galleys but leaving the main part of the fleet to be captured or surrender. His army under Canidius at Actium was instructed to march to Macedonia, but yielded to inducements from Octavian, who then had Canidius executed.

The end came a year later, in 30 BC, when the combined forces of Octavian converged on Alexandria. After several one-sided engagements, Anthony committed suicide to avoid further bloodshed, as did Cleopatra a few days later. By tradition her death was by snakebite, but poison seems more likely. The son of Caesar by Cleopatra (Caesarion) and Antony by Fulvia (Antyllus) were quietly murdered, but Cleopatra's daughter with Antony (Selene) survived to make a marriage with the learned Juba II of Mauretania, and the royal couple also took in Selene's brothers (Alexander Helios and Ptolemy Philadelphus), who then disappear from history. The play's ending looks on to the vision of Anthony and Cleopatra, which was to create an eastern Roman state, an aim achieved with the foundation of Constantinople in AD 330 and the Byzantine Empire, which lasted to AD 1453.

Many books and Internet articles cover Roman history adequately, but especially useful for Cleopatra are Michael Grant's *Cleopatra* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1978 / Phoenix Press 2000) and Diana Preston's *Cleopatra and Antony* (Walker Publishing, 2009).

The verse is written in received British English. The diction is much more formal than American, and there are many phrasing and pronunciation differences: 'shone' is pronounced *shŏn* and not *shōn*, and so on.

The cover comes from a painted sunk relief at the Ptolemaic Temple of Hathor at Deir el-Medina. The figure on the right is Hathor, goddess of love and dance. The figure on the left is probably Isis, a representation of the pharaoh's power, and the patron of wives, nature and magic.



# CHARACTERS

**Antony:** Marcus Antonius: consul and descendent of a noble but impoverished Roman family: served as general under Caesar and became his main supporter after the latter's death.

**Ahenobarbus:** Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus: Republican admiral, later Antony's friend but defected to Octavian before Actium, where he probably died of dysentery.

**Dellius:** Quintus Dellius: aristocratic friend to Antony who delivered his summons to Cleopatra, but defected to Octavian at Actium.

**Demetrius:** servant to Antony.

**Arius:** attendant to Antony.

**Centurion** in Antony's army.

**Soldier** in Antony's army.

**Servant** to Antony in Athens.

**Octavian:** Gaius Julius Caesar Octavius: Caesar's great-nephew: adopted by Caesar, and became Augustus, sole ruler of the Roman Empire on the death of Antony. Octavian is the name historians give him to avoid confusion with his great-uncle. Prior to his becoming Augustus, contemporaries would have known him as Gaius Julius or simply Caesar.

**Gallus:** Cornelius Gallus: Poet and friend to Octavian. Led his invading fleet from Cyrenaica, becoming governor of Egypt, until vanity caused his downfall and suicide.

**Ammonius:** philosopher and adviser to Octavian.

**Octavia:** sister to Octavian and sometime wife to Antony.

**Dolabella:** Publius Cornelius Dolabella: an aristocratic member of Octavian's retinue.

**Cleopatra:** Cleopatra VII of Egypt, sometime co-ruler with Ptolemy IX, her younger brother.

**Charmian:** lady-in-waiting to Cleopatra.

**Iras:** Cleopatra's hairdresser and confidant.

**Hermogenes:** court singer.

**Sosigenes:** secretary and astrologer to Cleopatra.

**Mardion:** Alexandrian governor to Cleopatra.

**Nerva:** Marcus Cocceius Nerva: a senator friendly to all parties.

**Sextus:** Sextus Pompeius: Pompey the Great's son and scourge of Mediterranean shipping as the play opens. Defeated by Agrippa in 36 BC and executed a year later for collusion with the Parthians.

References (Off-stage)

**Hannibal:** Carthaginian general and Rome's great adversary in the Second Punic War.

**Caesar:** Gaius Julius Caesar: triumvir and dictator of Rome, whose murder initiated the last phase of Republican civil wars.

**Lepidus:** Marcus Aemilius Lepidus: third but junior triumvir: survived everything and died peacefully.

**Agrippa:** Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa: Octavian's admiral and the real victor at Actium. Later married Julia, Octavian's libertine daughter.

**Crassus:** Marcus Licinius Crassus: Caesar's colleague who was killed by the Parthians at the disastrous battle of Carrhae in 53 BC.

**Canidius:** Crassus Publius Canidius: Antony's general at Actium, subsequently executed by Octavian.

# ACT ONE

## Scene I

Gallus and Ammonius: Rome

GALLUS

What has it come to, that this braggart vies  
with once-high Hannibal to stem supplies?  
The Senate orders but it's Sextus rules  
the crossways of our scattered world, and schools  
a simpering prudence in us lest we rue  
more depredations when our grain falls due.  
Where is the old command that arms had won,  
when we but wished it and the thing were done?

AMMONIUS

We stand upon a troubled world that finds  
10. Olympus even in its several minds.

GALLUS

So grows survival in the ravening jaws  
of Roman justice bent on private cause.

AMMONIUS

Choose Antony beneath an eastern sky  
or have our Gaius Julius bleed us dry.  
Soon comes that worst of things, a civil war.

GALLUS

It's Antony who lacks good conscience more,  
what with his wildness and his drinking bouts

more given to openness and inner doubts.

AMMONIUS

Except that roisterer is never strong  
20. enough to choose a course or hold it long.  
His path's quixotic and can only fare  
as some rich costume that an actor wear  
for one scene only. Now a king, and then  
most ruffianly of blood-besplattered men.

GALLUS

Such is the heritage of dragon teeth,  
those ruinous conflicts Caesar sowed beneath  
the ordered running of the state. Our wives  
are sullied, properties, our very lives  
are put at hazard by ambitious men  
30. that we shall serve, and have to, and again,  
for all Ammonius steer his quiet course.

AMMONIUS

My views are heard, perhaps, but have no force.  
No threat to anyone, nor is my life  
a pledge to party or a loving wife.  
My wants are simple, and my one small room  
is apt as fortress or eventual tomb.  
Sweet is the morning's sunlight, bliss that falls  
the same on hovels and on proud men's halls,  
but all we cherish, this bright world of mind,  
40. is winnowed far from us, and hard to find.

GALLUS

You'd know a lack of victuals soon enough.

AMMONIUS

Undoubtedly, but still of no real stuff

are man's pretensions, such that pass  
as light winds ruffle the untidy grass.

GALLUS

To him?

AMMONIUS

Gaius Julius? To that ascent  
I am a small star only, one who's sent  
to try opinion out, to say what's thought  
in stall and wayside and in foreign court.

GALLUS

Yes, our leader is not known for trust.

AMMONIUS

50. He hears, says nothing, as a wise man must.

GALLUS

But where's the man behind that cautious mask?

AMMONIUS

Who knows? But both have set themselves the task  
of serving destiny, and would be great  
by ruling more than acting out their fate.

GALLUS

What would you have our triumvirs do?

AMMONIUS

Why be  
themselves, of course, be great in honesty.  
Pursue their frank ambitions in the way

that candlelight is part of larger day.

GALLUS

*(Testily)* Thought is for philosophers: our Rome was made  
60. by Senate and the seasoned soldier's trade.

AMMONIUS

*(Smiling.)* And words are breath, of course, which soon is gone.

GALLUS

A salutary humility, but on  
that thought I leave you to attend our lord,  
to give him facts and counsel and afford  
some measure of our present plight and power  
and so rapprochement even at this hour.

Scene II

Octavian, Gallus: Rome

GALLUS

This peace we strive for still exerts its cost  
with yet another shipment stopped or lost.

OCTAVIAN

If stopped, I trust that someone knows which port?

GALLUS

70. Illyricum or somewhere, so it's thought.

OCTAVIAN

Then have it privately conveyed at night  
by local ships that keep the shore in sight.

What's next?

GALLUS

Two thousand veterans await the land  
that was apportioned to them, by your hand.

OCTAVIAN

All parties have had time to find accord,  
so carve out grants, if need be, by the sword.  
And next?

GALLUS

More rumour from the Syrian coast  
of cities burnt and plundered by the Parthian host.

OCTAVIAN

What does our consul there, our Antony?

GALLUS

80. He moves its kings about, but it will be  
at best illusory and not to last.

OCTAVIAN

So tell me how you'd bind our allies fast  
in pledged obedience and lasting peace?

GALLUS

Such is the consul's task, that side of Greece.

OCTAVIAN

True, friend Gallus, but to hold off war  
he'll need sound policies and something more.

GALLUS

Such is Antony, an all-in-haste,  
as sudden tempests flood the desert waste.

OCTAVIAN

Then tell us why the Alexandrian queen  
90. would add her doubtful lustre to the scene.

GALLUS

Our consul called and she must go, at least  
as tardy debtors will attend a feast.

OCTAVIAN

Reluctantly, you think? Suppose there stay  
lascivious longings in that foreign clay?

GALLUS

She'll form alliances in which her heart  
will add to polity an equal part?  
It's true her army's large but hardly used.  
She asked King Herod lead it. He refused,  
and wisely, since the gift would overwhelm  
100. his hold upon that fractious Jewish realm.  
Not all the wealth that Egypt owns would force  
him take that beckoning but dangerous course.

OCTAVIAN

Then what of granaries she rules, that gold  
for armies everywhere she can withhold?

GALLUS

You see a threat should Cleopatra meet  
his power at Tarsus, where with sumptuous fleet,  
we'll see the glittering Ptolemaic queen



assume the mystery she's always been?

OCTAVIAN

Why would great Caesar's queen who fled these shores  
110. deceive our hopes unless we give her cause?

GALLUS

She is a Ptolemy, whose race is sprung,  
like crocodiles, from those who eat their young.  
She'll go to Antony but keep him hence  
with wit and station or with common sense.  
A mix of bloodshed, sorcery and lies  
will keep her country settled if she's wise.

Scene III

Cleopatra, Iras, Charmian: Alexandria.

CHARMIAN

Has not your youthful majesty intent  
to answer him: this war-like summons sent  
by one called Antony to Egypt's lands,  
120. if only dilatory, by tardy hands?

CLEOPATRA

We know these Roman soldiers, and can bait  
their hungry self-importance. We shall wait.

IRAS

They say he is a well-made man, acclaimed  
by state and commons, and for courage famed.  
Does your majesty not think that his rough arms  
might yet succumb to youthful empire's charms  
as did the father of Caesarion

when Rome's adventures here were first begun?

CLEOPATRA

That was a world ago, which now assumes  
130. the air of funerals and dusty rooms.  
Each day more splendid than the last, we found  
new festivals to fete this ancient ground.  
I rule all Egypt now, and that is what?  
A flat and tiresome, sand-filled, dreary spot  
embalmed in monuments where time decays  
into more cavernous and solemn ways.  
I would be walking as I did before,  
with sun behind me on that Latin shore,  
the torch and cradle of the teeming mind:  
140. the world I'm promised to but never find.

IRAS

There are some other solaces in men.

CLEOPATRA

A court that's always quarrelling, but then  
submissive to my slightest word. I say  
that something is, and so it is: nay,  
could not be otherwise, unless the queen  
refute it, when of course the truth has been  
but always otherwise. A sound physique  
is one to act as boldly as it speak.

CHARMIAN

Then aim yet higher, Queen, and charm the head  
150. by which this barbarous soldiery is led.

CLEOPATRA

You'd have us, Charmian, redress the tone

of what's becoming round our ancient throne?

IRAS

Such are the pains and tempest we employ  
to take our pleasure of that little boy.

CLEOPATRA

Then many a night did Egypt's new-throned queen,  
apparelled in her silk and damascene,  
go walking with her high-bred haunch and breast  
towards the melodies that lyre expressed.  
Yet not, through all its listening, did the ear  
160. received the protestations love would hear,  
but only rough, hard words from one who snored  
his way to supertime and could afford  
between his planning and war's stirring deeds  
to give scarce competence to woman's needs.

IRAS

There's many a one would serve you for a night  
and gladly afterwards would quit the light.

CLEOPATRA

No drab or serving maid or courtesan  
but takes to concourse royally with her man:  
only Egypt, seeming, must forego  
170. those joys the meanest of her subjects know.  
No yeasty tossings, breathless, mouth on mouth,  
but vain imaginings, an endless drouth  
as when the Nile withholds and does not bring  
her rich effluvia to bless the spring,  
that flood of foully suffocating mud  
that breeds the summer glory of our blood.

CHARMIAN

What is your majesty inclined to do?

CLEOPATRA

Nothing, dear Charmian, but wait and view  
what our new sovereignties of stars may give.

IRAS

180. (*Aside.*) In this poor warp of life through which we live?

CLEOPATRA

How mutinous we are that all our strength  
is bound up in this little dappled length  
of breath, a ragtag nothing where we play  
till parents call us at the close of day.

CHARMIAN

Madam?

CLEOPATRA

We are recovered now and turn  
to what the craft of statehood has to earn.

Scene IV

Cleopatra, Sosigenes: Alexandria.

CLEOPATRA

Such sophistries can only hurt our state:  
I ask for honesty, that you relate  
just how we lease our presence out to him  
190. as though it were a sudden pressing whim,  
to Antony, whose sodden breath has sighed

across a dozen matrons, and has lied  
repeatedly, and has no more to claim  
than soldier's bravery and honest name.

SOSIGENES

What would you ask of me, my sovereign queen?  
The stars are cold and passing and have been  
as enigmatic still. Why seek the spark  
when even meteors gutter into dark?  
But if your son's to have his rightful place  
200. it's not by Egypt but by Rome's far grace.  
Rule both but through some other's heart  
and all our blessings from that union start.  
For know that one month from this present hour  
your Mars and Venus mate and have the power  
to join fresh realms of giving to the crown.

CLEOPATRA

And if those teeming hopes come tumbling down?  
For what's so certain that the future hold  
that time in deviousness will not unfold?

SOSIGENES

I speak of Venus, Madam, that still rules the moon  
210. of golden Egypt: always, late or soon.

CLEOPATRA

What did I know of love those days, save what  
it sometimes gave and yet more often not.

SOSIGENES

When that half-balding one first sang to you?

CLEOPATRA

That different world perhaps we may renew,  
Sosigenes, at least must try to. Send  
our governor in. (*Exit Sosigenes. Enter Mardion*)

MARDION

My lady, I attend.

CLEOPATRA

Have our flagship fitted out with cloth of gold  
and let the overarching sails unfold  
an air of sumptuousness and musky scent.  
220. And on the galleys have each action bent  
to making wonders that each sight may whet  
an appetite for greater wonders yet.  
Charmian shall be fully clothed, and Iras too,  
but for the others Antony shall view  
our youthful miracles of comeliness.  
The boys shall bare their amber skins and dress  
their small limbs out with mocking looks and eyes.  
The girls shall line the deck, and in a guise  
of tired indifference to our Roman guests  
230. coquettishly disclose their swelling breasts.  
Such I will do for Antony, that this  
may show the sovereignty in Egypt's kiss.  
Let's loose him as a chariot race is run  
with horses foaming and their yokes undone.

Scene V

Cleopatra, Iras, Charmian, Hermogenes: Alexandria

CLEOPATRA

We hear a dark-eyed mischief from the south,  
a flounce of eyelid or a dimpled mouth

do much to subjugate this Antony.  
No doubt it is a stupid man we'll see,  
but one that loves the theatre, so they say,  
240. with merriment about him all the day.  
Perhaps such changing quarters of the mind  
are like the moon and vulnerable. We'll find  
what queen's magnificence can flood his veins:  
sweet words he'll beg from us in golden chains,  
that, with a headpiece hewn from alder log,  
he'll come when called to like a puppy dog

IRAS

*(Aside.)* How much does Egypt's boastful novice yearn  
for things a new-betrothed has yet to learn.

CLEOPATRA

Pout, roll over, it is all the way.  
250. Come, my ladies, I feel blessed today.  
Let's call Hermogenes and with his news  
hear something of our wretched subjects' views.

*(Enter Hermogenes)*

HERMOGENES

I ask my voice and its poor tuneless lute  
will meet indulgence as it would transmute  
to rapturous harmony for Egypt's queen  
the lies and gossip of our Nile-wrapped scene.

CLEOPATRA

Proceed.

HERMOGENES

Our mistress has been bid abroad,  
to Tarsus summoned on some Roman task

concerning what the present times afford,  
260. for peace within her grain-rich realms. We ask  
that should her royalty incline to Rome,  
she think what obligations bind her throne.  
For here the mind refurbished Egypt's home  
and pharaoh's memories became her own.  
So where the glistening, heat-tormented Nile  
will throw its prodigal, vast riches out,  
it does for gods above, that shimmering mile  
on mile of rich fertility be not in doubt.  
We ask our beautiful and astute queen  
270. remember what her ancestry has been.

CLEOPATRA

So tell us, singer of such pretty things,  
do slaves unburden wisdom to their kings?

Scene VI

Octavian and Octavia: Rome

OCTAVIAN

You've heard the news just come from Asian shores?  
That Egypt goes to Antony.

OCTAVIA

No cause  
for idle speculation there. She goes  
advisedly, for our good consul throws  
war's threatening gaze at her should she refuse.

OCTAVIAN

Good consul, sister, is it now? You choose  
a chilly word with which to call a friend.



OCTAVIA

280. Such thoughts in my betrothal had an end.  
Besides, to Antony these are but flowers  
that fade as fitfully as passing showers.

OCTAVIAN

Suppose that altered and some formal bond  
could fasten justice where the hearts were fond.

OCTAVIA

I'd ask that no such scandal blight my name.

OCTAVIAN

Then more, my virtuous sister, seems the shame.

## ACT TWO

### Scene I

Cleopatra, Antony: Tarsus

ANTONY

I trust the queen is rested and will say  
what circumstances made for this delay?  
When Rome requires a thing she does not wait  
290. for foreigners to smile and throng her state.

CLEOPATRA

Queens are not bound by water-pouring hours,  
nor do they sequester their sovereign powers,  
but come as seasons on the grateful earth  
with pomp and majesty that's theirs from birth.  
Good, brave, ruffianly Antony  
who acts as captain on the promontory  
of Rome that gazes on these ancient lands,  
take pause a moment, rest, for here there stands  
the greatest promissory the future pays  
300. to thoughtful inventories of works and days.  
Come visit us tonight, carouse and feast  
and we shall see if it be man or beast  
survives the morrow as the wakening day  
emerges painfully in sober grey.

ANTONY

I seem to recall the sorceress was left  
at last sore weeping and of love bereft.  
Besides, I bid you come as guest of mine  
and, if plain food will suit you, sit and dine.

CLEOPATRA

Good soldier, Egypt bids you, and her powers  
310. are such to make right merry midnight hours.  
Dancers, mummers, clowns and plays in Greek:  
for anything your soldiers need but speak.

ANTONY

I fear you do not know my troops too well.

CLEOPATRA

All will be catered for. I need not dwell  
on arts our women have acquired to please.  
Good soldier, come tonight and take your ease.

Scene II

Demetrius, Dellius: Tarsus.

DELLIUS

Bravest of the brave, our Antony,  
but, being generous, would only see  
munificence where cooler minds would pause.

DEMETRIUS

320. All calculated: those high banks of oars,  
the glittering ornament as sails drew near,  
the group on group of citizens we saw appear  
on cliff and harbour wall, that near contrived  
to drown out trumpets when the ships arrived.

DELLIUS

The prow that held her like a triple throne  
laid gold on water and in fire alone  
flashed incantations of reflections till

it seemed the winds themselves would work her will.

## DEMETRIUS

Men gaped at marvels, knowing that their gaze  
330. would not the like behold in later days,  
and saw their Antony, great Antony,  
the ruler of the eastern world, could be  
a struck-dumb schoolboy, watching, gauche and shy,  
the queen's magnificence pass slowly by.

## DELLIUS

She anchored off, and with attendants came,  
each boat ablaze with bobbing gold and flame.

## DEMETRIUS

A vast, thick odour fell on us and drew  
a deep compulsion, where each soul would sue  
for all its sweethearts lost long years ago —  
340. when life ran naturally, and none need know  
the daily harassment and injury  
that keep us from the better selves we'd be.  
All this the perfume in an instant brought,  
and then the customs of another court:  
one dark, demonic, and half wild to us.  
At first restrained it seemed, and decorous,  
each piping lost in cymbal-softened sound,  
but then it deepened, sharpened: all around  
we heard cacophonies as though from hell  
350. their howling, snout-nosed gods bestrode the swell.  
Then through it quietly came the flute and pause  
where we could see the dip of jewelled oars  
and hear the silver-twinkled movement cause  
a stir, a murmur, then such wild applause,  
as glittering beneath her cobra crown  
and more revealed within her veiling gown,  
the queen appeared and with a swarthy grace

showed great imperiousness in that strong face.  
I do not know I ever saw such eyes  
360. look quite so lambent, dark and otherwise.  
It was as though beneath each gilded lid  
as much was offered as was also hid.  
Our Antony, now ruffled and confused,  
produced his orders but was then refused.

DELLIUS

And so to Egypt Antony went first  
to mark a day auspicious or accursed.

Scene III

Antony, Cleopatra: evening on Cleopatra's galley.

CLEOPATRA

How like you this? My captain brave enough  
in arms and warfare and such tedious stuff  
by which you'd make a bloodbath of a place  
370. of peace and learning and enchanted grace.  
What would you conquer? Tell me. Life is short.  
Across the inland plains the town and fort  
are burned and levelled and the heart of men  
must go unclothed by swelling hopes again.  
Have some sense, good soldier, stop and play  
while fortune dallies with you: you may stay  
forever in those silent lands of death  
when chance- or well- loosed arrow ends your breath.

ANTONY

It might.

CLEOPATRA

Good captain, walk with me and hear

380. how far is destiny and yet how near.  
Listen to the soft shores roll again  
and think how endlessly the race of men  
goes out and is returned with shipwrecked  
hopes and purposes new-balked or checked.

ANTONY

And so?

CLEOPATRA

The life we know but passes on,  
the which to sense the moment says it's gone.  
But yet come intervals where stars incline  
to favour us and with a brightness shine  
on all our brief endeavours. Such a time  
390. is this, good soldier, where our two paths climb  
toward that bright ascendancy where we  
may rule the lands we now but oversee.

ANTONY

Why do I think, great queen, that I am led  
beyond the confines of a royal bed  
to place at hazard only and neglect  
the eastern territories I should protect?

CLEOPATRA

What do you have but some provisional stake  
in these rich fiefdoms round a Roman lake.  
Beyond is Asia, vast, to you unknown,  
400. for us the cradle of our royal throne.  
Our gift to Antony, who could be god  
and fill the footprints Alexander trod.  
For what's young Julius but a scheming boy?  
Or Lepidus, a sometime useful ploy?  
Only Antony, a soldier, may,

like us, transgress the bounds of mortal clay.

ANTONY

You'd put your armies into Roman hands?

CLEOPATRA

Because your wars encroach on our old lands.  
You will annex us, conquer and subdue  
410. our kings to clients that belong to you.  
Our lands, our customs, peoples—all too soon  
will dance to some barbarian, ragged tune.  
What are the Parthians but an ill-clad horde  
of trousered warriors who know no sword  
but fight by arrows, skirmishing and lies?  
In each incursion, though, a small part dies  
of Alexander's kingdoms of the past,  
and we, the Ptolemies, are now the last:  
great Egypt's kingdom is the one oppressed  
420. by rude barbarians both east and west.

ANTONY

It may be so, no doubt, but now be led  
by just those conquests to our grateful bed.

CLEOPATRA

Not yet, good soldier, for what I've said  
requires a thoughtful, long and sober head.  
Our stars, that scatter of celestial dice,  
say Egypt's not obtained at common price.

ANTONY

Nay, good lady, now we need not wait.

## CLEOPATRA

My friend, the wine and midnight make this state,  
but in the morning you will rue the cost  
430. if our two continents were darkly crossed.  
But here's my promise with the slightest kiss  
that you may think of me and ever miss  
my scented warmth upon this galley scene,  
for I am Egypt always and a queen.

*(Kisses him and exits.)*

## ANTONY

What is Antony but a blundering fool,  
a knit of passions that these women rule  
to act upon the greater stage of life,  
the which as mistress, courtesan or wife  
they are debarred from, yet by slow degrees  
440. of wit, and coquetry and scheming sees  
convert to that great empire of their legs?  
Would brief incursion in that hungry sex  
were bound to sweetness or to bearing child,  
and all the protestations and the wild  
demands reduce to nightcaps for their sleep,  
that afterwards, contented, they may keep  
to proper licenses. And yet I feel  
that largeness when the Grecian world was real,  
and gods and goddesses enjoyed their play  
450. as candidly as sunlight fills the day.  
What do I mean? Enough, let's now to bed  
and give some respite to this muddled head.



## Scene IV

Iras, Charmian: Alexandria.

IRAS

So now the mothering duck has found its drake  
and those interminable ceremonies take  
on raw magnificence with Antony  
to guard her throne.

CHARMIAN

Perhaps the two will be  
the royal counterpart each other missed  
in marriages before that briefly kissed  
and said goodnight. Who knows? They both seem blest  
460. with childlike innocence and such true zest  
for life's abundance that the minutes race  
and we poor confidants seem out of place.

IRAS

Let's hope it may be so, dear Charmian,  
and I, at least, since this affair began  
feel happier, younger somehow, and more prone  
to see love's kindness about the throne.

CHARMIAN

Then pray that these two worlds will join at last  
as lovers in true ecstasy are cast.  
Here comes the queen and singing ... things that we  
470. had better leave to wine and Antony.

*(Exeunt as Cleopatra enters.)*

## CLEOPATRA

*(Sings.)* Nightly, in thin garments dressed,  
sails the moon: adulteress.  
Who beneath her silver light  
has not felt her body flood  
with appetites of happy men.  
Which she will not give again  
or give too fleetingly unless  
all her loving be confessed.

Believe the nightly pageants of the moon  
480. are not to hurt us or inflame  
the soft enthronement of the blood,  
but to give us long delight.  
Little cupid lifts the hair  
to your sweet and hidden lair.  
We will give a holy name,  
lady, to that heady swoon.

With days of radiance light the bed  
on which your suitors' lips are blessed.  
Limbs untouched are like the wood  
490. which no passion can ignite,  
nor will come that joyful hue  
if no courtliness ensue.  
Lady with the quiver dressed,  
walk apart from us, unwed.

In that breathy land we'd find  
nothing frowned on or forbid.  
Coax the blossoms from the bud,  
show what's fragrant, what is right,  
that whatever hearts desire  
500. in their brutish, hungry fire,  
lie beneath each smiling lid,  
ever to its love confined.

## Scene V

Cleopatra, Antony: tavern in Alexandria

CLEOPATRA

Well, brave soldier, let us walk these streets  
as conquerors, and large in lover's feats,  
for in the satiety that love bestows  
we'll find more gaming houses, bars and shows.

ANTONY

Shall majesty's bright orb be soiled with dust?

CLEOPATRA

Aye, that and more, and, with a noble lust,  
we'll find the cozeners and all the rest.

ANTONY

510. To live at hazard and the soldier's jest?

CLEOPATRA

I am as pharaoh, and the stars above,  
by which are made both bright and dimmed our love,  
exalt the world to one aspiring whole.

We drive the bull to mate, the mare to foal,  
the fish to frolic through the swirling deeps  
in countless multitudes where duty keeps  
no careful inventory of he with who.

So let us spend this night as lovers do  
who pour and recklessly their bounty out.

520. Tomorrow comes our shifting cares and doubt,  
the empty promises of prince's courts,  
the gaunt philosophers and shaded thoughts.

But let tonight be simply as we lovers are

entrammelled by that brief-enchanting star.  
Let's drink our love down to the very lees  
of what the fathomless deep ocean sees.  
For life's a passing and a little breath  
but all the conjuring we'll have till death.

## SINGER

Let not the pretty mignonette  
530. turn her blushing face aside,  
and no more let the gourd forget  
the man that's in her swelling pride.  
Let me have what words will speak,  
today, tomorrow, all this week  
Let hands upon me delve and find  
the inner chambers of the mind  
that make us common humankind.  
if so I was, then so I stay,  
admirable and blessed today.

540. Love is brief; it is not kind,  
a thousand errors fret its bloom:  
after favours who shall find  
sufficient is the empty room?  
Let me have what words will speak,  
today, tomorrow, all this week  
Let my two arms long impound  
his melting pleasure as around  
sings the body's joyful sound:  
if so I was, then so I stay,  
550. admirable and blessed today.

If in giving we grow old  
pleasures past repay the cost,  
the green of springtime turns to gold  
then the autumn into frost.  
Let me have what words will speak,  
today, tomorrow, all this week  
His breath on me, on breast and cheek,

what the urgent soul must seek  
in the happy body's reek:  
560. if so I was, then so I stay,  
admirable and blessed today.

Otherwise, what bitter lees  
recollection has to drink:  
things untasted cannot please  
but on absence still we think.  
Let me have what words will speak,  
today, tomorrow, all this week  
His love, his fervour, happiness,  
all his gentle words profess  
570. in their smiling tenderness:  
if so I was, then so I stay,  
admirable and blessed today.

## Scene VI

Arius, Dellius: Alexandria

ARIUS

Sometimes I think I would be better back  
at Rome where fears and discontents attack  
these present and uncertain times

DELLIUS

No nights  
of love and women and their sweet delights?

ARIUS

Too long a soldier I was kept. It stamps  
on one a preference for moving camps  
on wind-clean uplands, for the wounds we feel  
580. beneath the cuirass that must slowly heal.  
Besides our Roman fatherland moves on

and what was faithful service soon is gone  
into some mischief for our rival's cause.

DELLIUS

He is a boy who has no heart for wars.

ARIUS

Boy or not, he's summoned Antony.  
Who'll go, I think. Reluctantly.

DELLIUS

Not him.

ARIUS

In Antony you'll always find  
the imprint lingering from a stronger mind.  
We sail for Italy within the week  
590. whatever furious words a queen may speak.

## Scene VII

Nerva, Sextus Pompeius, Antony, Octavian: Brundisium

NERVA

And so we make a pact upon the time  
that what was error, negligence or crime,  
we take, good Antony, but as men are,  
with frank intentions, which events can mar.  
The world of learning let our Marcus take,  
the west, our Julius, for whose sake  
great Caesar with his legions soldiered on  
till Roman purple on the Rhene shone.  
Young Pompey here, who rules our Roman seas  
600. shall have rich Sicily with olive trees

and vineyards and its hidden sulphur wealth.

ANTONY

To Lepidus?

SEXTUS

We give a goodly health.

OCTAVIAN

Long life to one that never lifted sword!

ANTONY

Obedience should merit some reward.

SEXTUS

Then give him Africa . .

ANTONY

. . . lest we appear  
to favour only we three seated here.

SEXTUS

I'll drink to that.

NERVA

And I.

OCTAVIAN

Let's find  
some further celebration where we bind  
our words and intent to this signal day.  
610. Let Antony, upon the short delay

that's necessary, take my sister's hand.

NERVA

Remarriage is for some months banned  
her husband having all too lately died.

OCTAVIAN

For triumvirs the law is set aside.  
or will be when the Senate meets. What thinks  
our Antony?

ANTONY

No soldier ever shrinks—

SEXTUS

I don't like this—

ANTONY

From such a glorious prize:  
one beautiful and virtuous, as she's wise . . .

NERVA

Good man—

SEXTUS

Yes, take her lest the offer's dropped.

ANTONY

620. There are formalities we should adopt.



NERVA

What's that?

SEXTUS

The man prevaricates.

ANTONY

Who knows  
what hurt behind those steps of duty goes?

OCTAVIAN

Brave Antony, forbear those gloomy thoughts.  
'Unless this world be wholly out of sorts,  
there is no man I'd sooner have', she said.  
And I should tell you that her thoughtful head  
was lifted instantly to smiling realms.

ANTONY

Well, then, of course the prospect overwhelms  
all other . . .

NERVA

Ties, no doubt, but think of Rome:  
630. your birthplace, patrimony, still your home.

ANTONY

For peace and safety in our own fraught land  
I willing would seek Octavia's hand.

Scene VIII

Cleopatra, Iras, Charmian: Alexandria.

CLEOPATRA

Some shrinking virgin, not in love acts skilled?

IRAS

It is, good Madam as the gods have willed.

CLEOPATRA

A shrew, a harridan, a grating voice?

CHARMIAN

Madam, assuredly, he had no choice.

CLEOPATRA

You lie, the lot of you. I feel her so  
about me everywhere. At night I go  
across the bitter waters of the Styx  
640. and leave this world of vile and hurtful tricks.  
What dark uncertainty must we embrace,  
to give up now that hot and manly face.  
How cursed are women, and repugnant turned  
the looks and pleasantries for which we yearned,  
and bitter, bitter, are the lives we earn.

IRAS

Be done, good lady, for the years will turn  
to understanding and a peace of mind.

CLEOPATRA

Years! Each moment pains me and I find  
new terrors haunt me and attack the sense.  
650. For all I ever held of past events,  
the laughs, the kisses and the tenderness  
are now to me a vitriol unless  
I purge my mind of every stray remark.

Without love's alchemy—the day, how dark  
it is, and wayward, spent and spiritless.  
To earthly lovers comes there no redress,  
for men, divinely built to do our will:  
how weak they are and prompt to serve us ill.

## ACT THREE

### Scene I

Octavia, Antony: Athens.

OCTAVIA

I ask my lord permit his wife to grow  
660. accustomed to his burly ways. She'd show  
to him submissiveness and would not fight  
a tendency to be abroad at night.

ANTONY

Nay, gentle pet, we'll live a virtuous life  
that citizens may call us man and wife.

OCTAVIA

However Antony would act, I act the same  
and be as equally to praise or blame.

ANTONY

Besides, this brute has had his madcap days  
and needs but understanding, the words that raise  
his spirits when the furies drag him down:  
670. far better that you laugh at him than frown.

OCTAVIA

Then both are constituted, Antony,  
to move above the present days, and be  
a model for consent and moderation  
in this our war-torn and distracted nation.  
So let us wander as our free steps will  
to school and temple and the hallowed hill.

It is the ancient world we breathe, the air  
of proud nobility, when no man's care  
was for his courts and palaces as these.  
680. Here Plato walked and sour Diogenes  
told us to ponder life itself. Was this  
not ample prospect of fulfilling bliss  
as when on evening hills the fading light  
still promises a dayspring pure and bright,  
not soiled by men's connivings, schemes and pose  
but things eternal that the spirit knows.

ANTONY

In faith there's wisdom in that pretty head:  
what young philosopher is it I've wed?

OCTAVIA

Good Antony, my husband, I am bound  
690. to you in service as is hare to hound.  
For where you go, I go, and my first care  
is act supposing you stood boldly there.

ANTONY

How much you turn men's inner eyes  
in sweet, courageous and your apt replies.  
Me, I am a great, bluff soldiering man  
who sanctions commonsense but never can  
into the inner peace of things proceed,  
nor think beyond immediate want or need.  
But such are soldiers who must show their heart  
700. to gain the loyalty where all things start.  
And now, before our welcome ends,  
let's hear the song that Athens sends.

SINGER

You bring the springtime to the peopled earth,

Octavia, Octavia,  
with orange blossoms and the singing birds,  
the warmth to fields and lowing herds.

Lady,  
in your faithful thoughts abide  
as our counsel and our guide.  
710. Beside philosophers who talk  
we would walk  
a party to your gentle cause.

In kindness is truer worth,  
Octavia, Octavia,  
than ever was in careless beauty.  
Athens loves such simple duty.  
Lady,  
may you join the ancient names  
and lull to peace their strident claims.  
720. May the parties through your mind  
ever find  
an end to enmity and bitter wars.

What glorious deity has given birth,  
Octavia, Octavia,  
to such embodiment of woman's grace,  
that here is not a human place?  
Lady,  
as a rainbow in the air  
may you stand both high and fair.  
730. Then to you will discord fall  
and all  
the embassies of peace be yours.

ANTONY

God's faith, how much good counsel's in the air!

OCTAVIA

Agreed. Good singer, let us leave it there.

## Scene II

Octavia, Antony: Athens.

OCTAVIA

There's not a villa here that hasn't sought  
to have great Antony lay out his court  
around their terraces or cedared shades,  
or bid him through the leafy, upland glades  
hunt up the stag, or as long days incline  
740. beneath their canvas with his rod and line.  
These all are citizens we should not shun.

ANTONY

I know more dangerous straits I'd choose to run,  
what breasts and tangled hair to lie among.

OCTAVIA

Forego, good man, you have a soldier's tongue.

ANTONY

Sometimes, beneath soft looks I seem to find  
your brother's probing and astringent mind.  
Octavia, dear pet, for once let be  
and love your well-intentioned Antony.  
His blood boils quickly in his thickset veins  
750. without his fighting or the long campaigns.

## Scene III

Octavia, Antony, Dellius, Ahenobarbus, Servant: Athens.

OCTAVIA

Appearances here matter, Antony:  
and what they think of us is what they see.

For Rome is ruler of these eastern shores,  
the representative of wealth and laws,  
and so is circumspect and ever keen  
to royally complement the local scene.

ANTONY

My little pet, my sweet, my turtle dove,  
I say — no, promise by the gods above —  
that you will have no cause to think more ill  
760. of me. I am a soldier, drinks his fill,  
the good wine and the lees, who knows his friends,  
what tardy fortune holds and rarely sends.  
But can that be an end to it? No more  
plays, talks, debating parties for  
the best contributors to Athen's name,  
those wise philosophers of grey-haired fame.

OCTAVIA

If Antony won't go, Octavia must  
and condescend to earn a little trust. (*Exits.*)

ANTONY

Call Dellius

SERVANT

I will, my lord.

(*Enter Dellius and Ahenobarbus.*)

ANTONY

You find  
770. me, Dellius, hardly in my proper mind.



DELLIUS

What would you do this thirsty summer day?

ANTONY

Why, what would you think? Go out and play.

AHENOBARBUS

My lord, this is the cultivated east  
requiring some decorum at the least.

ANTONY

A fig for that. Let's go at once and be  
a part of Rome's great spoiling soldiery  
that every drinking shop and dubious street  
resound as pullulating dogs on heat.

DELLIUS

A troop of players maybe? Actors who  
780. will turn their somersaults for none but you:  
silly, boisterous fellows with their fun  
to make the dullest evening laugh and run.

ANTONY

Anything, Dellius, I am grown half mad  
with all the moralizing words I've had.

DELLIUS

Perhaps great Antony would have for choice  
some singing girl whose limbs and voice  
I hear are recommended, and will count  
herself as fortunate on that account.

AHENOBARBUS

That can be done, at once, but is it wise?  
790. You are Rome's flagship under foreign eyes.  
Besides, you have a wife beloved of all,  
whose reputation tainted would be gall  
to citizens.

DELLIUS

Indeed that's true, my lord.  
These reputations that we can't afford  
will do no favours to your friends at home  
for with Octavia comes the love of Rome.

ANTONY

No warm magnificence of Egypt's queen,  
her wanton laughter and that wit, you mean?

AHENOBARBUS

I mean but nothing in that matter, would  
800. not dream of counselling, suppose I could.  
But at the fulcrum now you stand, the still  
point of the turning world, and all you will  
achieve depends on well-considered acts.  
Some faint conjecture stands for certain facts  
in this most disputatious city. Do  
as they do, quietly. Be discrete. Their view  
will be the rough, great-hearted soldier they  
may laugh and parlay with, and disobey.

ANTONY

What is it Delliuss thinks or feigns,  
810. who's no companion of my long campaigns.

DELLIUS

Politics is always one of show  
against a changing and elusive foe,  
where reputation is a bubble blown  
of vain imaginings and words on loan.

ANTONY

Need I more conquests and a glorious name?

AHENOBARBUS

A taste for statecraft more, and steady fame.  
Rome follows those who build a simple view  
of best in statecraft and in virtue too.  
But for the rest she's like a pampered child  
820. at one time fretful and another wild.

DELLIUS

Against this Gaius Julius you cannot win  
except you hurt what he indulges in:  
that thoughtful, selfless servant of the state  
who bows to none but Rome and Roman fate.

AHENOBARBUS

My lord, it's not a simple shepherdess  
you've wed, but intellect and faithfulness.  
All look to her, and hope the bond will be  
enough to hold and guide great Antony.

ANTONY

How well I know it, and the part I play  
830. in good behaviour entered day on day.  
But was I built to add disarming smile  
to what is falsehood, feint and guile?  
No, let me to the east where men are men

and we of fortune drink great draughts again.

## Scene IV

Octavian, Octavia: Rome.

OCTAVIAN

So tell me, how is Antony, the spouse  
affiliated to our noble house?  
The wind is full of rumours, and you come  
as bride returned: admonished, shamed and dumb.

OCTAVIA

My lord is ever as the times require,  
840. with hopes of conquest that will never tire.

OCTAVIAN

He stays a credit to our double clans?

OCTAVIA

As I have said, good brother. Now he plans  
some new adventure into Parthian lands.  
Or so my steward heard, or understands.

OCTAVIAN

But you, my sister, who are close allied:  
will have his thoughts on this, and will confide?

OCTAVIA

He wrote to you, I heard, and so must cope  
with those fine promises of which you spoke,  
with fair conditions set between you two.

OCTAVIAN

850. Why should he not? We simply think of you,  
that you are honoured, happy, and reflect  
the bride's contentment that we could expect.

OCTAVIA

His every hope and act is to that end.  
I have a worthy husband who will send  
for me when once his battle plans are clear.  
At present he needs but have his soldiers near.

OCTAVIAN

Indeed. My sister has a virtue which  
the lures and snares of Egypt can't bewitch.  
The talk that comes to us is baseless lies.

OCTAVIA

860. He needs the men and galleys Egypt buys.

OCTAVIAN

He only has to ask of Rome, for all  
we have is wholly at his beck and call.

OCTAVIA

You owe him armies, brother, ships and men  
but he's too lordly proud to ask again.

OCTAVIAN

You do me wrong, good sister. There's a pact,  
that's true, and we shall one day, shortly, act  
to put good substance to our honest word.  
At present we have need of them.

OCTAVIA

I've heard  
both parties to that argument, and pray  
870. its resolution's speedy, so we may  
observe an end to warfare, Roman wives  
be no more be paid with mutilated lives  
but, children slowly blossoming, at last  
be buried by them when full life is past.

OCTAVIAN

As usual, my wise sister speaks good sense  
and we shall hope that day is not far hence.

Scene V

Antony, Cleopatra: Antioch.

ANTONY

Well met in Antioch, a sovereign port  
that greets his two great rulers as it ought.

CLEOPATRA

What nonsense sprouts inside that bovine head?  
880. You come as spouse ejected from another's bed,  
with reputation soiled, besmirched and made  
the jest of common peddler's tongues and trade.

ANTONY

There have been some developments, I own,  
which make me less than welcome to your throne.

CLEOPATRA

Good man, have done. You're not the diplomat

nor have the mind to make it, come to that:  
a brawling soldier who must force a way  
890. that wit nor commonsense can't long withstay.

ANTONY

Your majesty forgives this needful lapse  
890. to home and Roman politics?

CLEOPATRA

Perhaps,  
in part, but not entirely. We shall see  
what this discarded baggage proves to be.

ANTONY

No more the unrepentant, roistering fool  
but one more circumspect and made to rule  
our joint dominions in these golden realms.

CLEOPATRA

You've found a tongue, I see, that overwhelms  
the rough, plain-speaking man you were before.  
Whence comes this eloquence? Or was it for  
your long excursion into enforced peace  
900. that was Octavia and your time in Greece?

ANTONY

That I've not always plumbed the reasons why,  
been rough and reckless, I will not deny.  
But let us wipe all clean, begin anew  
remembering the tasks we were to do.  
A common destiny means common aims  
within what's worthy of our royal names.

CLEOPATRA

Why should great Egypt stoop to perjured lies?

ANTONY

So many matrons with their downcast eyes  
have listened to my words or worse — that's true,  
910. I freely own it, but this love for you  
is one compelled from me, and not my choice  
for all the warmth and laughter in that voice.

CLEOPATRA

Then tell us how the plain Octavia was.

ANTONY

She is not plain but principled: because  
of that most upright, wise and hard to match  
in any conversation's swift dispatch.

CLEOPATRA

It's not the mind concerns us, but the rest.

ANTONY

You were in all accomplishments the best,  
are all-surpassing, made as day to night,  
920. that this entrancing shape before my sight  
is ever such as men for Helen yearned.

CLEOPATRA

And has the Antony of old returned,  
you think?

ANTONY

Let all our yesterdays be cast



as long foundations for our forms to last  
a thousand years, that each of us in one  
is wholly fashioned so, both lost and won.  
It is instinctive nature, given whole  
that finds our destiny and binds the soul.

CLEOPATRA

Let's hope, good Antony, it may be so.

ANTONY

930. It will be so. I ask the queen to know  
whatever's needful shall be promptly done.

CLEOPATRA

By new beginnings are new prospects won.

ANTONY

And so is failure carried in the train  
of new adventures and a great campaign

CLEOPATRA

But not, I think, or yet, the Parthian lands  
where much is hazarded for empty sands.

ANTONY

Your Antony is careful, takes a town or two  
to show barbarians what they may not do —  
what permanence has that? The world must know  
940. when Rome delivers its all-levelling blow.

CLEOPATRA

But think of those great reputations bought  
and grim determinations come to naught.

ANTONY

And think how many kingdoms promise aid,  
which Parthia harried or has made afraid.

CLEOPATRA

Best buy them off, I think, in lands around,  
and when all Syria's secure and sound,  
await the opportunity, and make  
disaster follow on some grave mistake.

ANTONY

Where is the majesty of Roman arms  
950. in guarding olive grove or fields and farms?  
The spouse of Antony should hear her name  
emblazoned equally with Caesar's fame.  
Across the worlds her sceptre should extend  
from new day dawning to its dusky end,  
and all that Alexander conquered, lands  
and fame, be rendered into Egypt's hands

Scene VI

Antony, Dellius, Ahenobarbus, soldiers: Alexandria.

ANTONY

Come, my soldiers: let us march the ways  
that saw the Macedonian gain his praise,  
a glory won of glittering Persian hordes  
960. when high plumes fell to sturdy hoplite swords.  
The gods will favour those whose martial tread  
puts all their coward thoughts and qualms to bed.  
Beyond the plunder, though, and women's eyes,  
that are our recompense, there yet shall rise  
a greater name your sons, and theirs in turn  
across the ages of the earth shall earn,

Rome's fresh acknowledgement that here were won  
the last of conquests that were left undone.

DELLIUS

March on for Antony, until we stand  
970. acknowledged ruler of that greater land!

AHENOBARBUS

And let the great adventure of these days  
but add new glory to the eagle's blaze!

SOLDIERS

For Rome and Antony we are as one  
till battle's over and the conquest won.

## ACT FOUR

### Scene I

Charmian, Iras: Alexandria.

IRAS

So homeward limps Rome's glorious Mars, no trace  
of honour even in that ageing face.

CHARMIAN

These jibes don't help us, Iras, for the queen  
now rules a country that at best has been  
a slow impediment against the tide  
980. of Rome's aggrandizement on every side.  
So is that ruinous policy, which sold  
our need for safety to that far-off fold—  
to Roman senators, indeed, who force  
us ever further on this shameful course.

IRAS

We'd have more scope if girt with victory's palms  
but this abortive conquest only harms  
his rights to stand as consort and portray  
a living mystery, where each one may  
through Antony approach the gods. They see  
990. no hand of fate or stirring destiny,  
but only one large-talking soldiering man  
who at the threat of Parthia broke and ran.

CHARMIAN

It is his way. He cannot plot or wait,  
but rears Colossus on his present state.

IRAS

Is that the basis for the queen to build  
an empire, on the blood of thousands killed?

CHARMIAN

She will dissimulate and place her trust  
in other courts and kingdoms, as she must.

IRAS

But what of Antony? She has him fill  
1000. her nightly appetite for passion still,  
though as a woman she will doubtless build  
new dreams of empires on the hopes he killed.

CHARMIAN

Against that Julius? That man's not won  
by charm or flattery, and he has run  
a close-rigged, calculating course from first,  
by no one trusted but by nothing cursed.

IRAS

She'll send out messages as on a whim  
and study carefully each word from him.

CHARMIAN

A watching viper is that man more like:  
1010. coiled and lidless, not afraid to strike.  
But give up Antony and Egypt's throne  
to that inscrutable, smooth lump of stone?

IRAS

She is a queen and does what rulers do  
who act on policies and take their cue  
from time's dispensing, those vast shifting sands

that she must regulate through weaker hands.

## Scene II

Cleopatra, Dellius, Ahenobarbus: Alexandria.

DELLIUS

No man was braver than our Antony.

CLEOPATRA

I ever knew it so, with certainty.

AHENOBARBUS

At that defeat, when not a face mistook  
1020. the fear that stared in every straightened look,  
remembering Crassus and the thousands killed,  
adventure's fortune now abruptly stilled.  
But to him a baggage train dispersed  
was just a small manoeuvre, one rehearsed  
long times ago.

CLEOPATRA

Fine soldier.

DELLIUS

So the men  
grew strong by this and picked up shields again.  
True, thousands we had lost, and would as well  
when day to night the arrows round us fell.  
A dreary and unending march ensued  
1030. across a blood-soaked landscape, leaden-hued,  
and yet we persevered, till, Parthians gone,  
we entered Syria at last and on  
the far-off, cool blue sea we gazed and came

to be ourselves, an army just the same.  
Your majesty says nothing?

CLEOPATRA

We don't complain  
but that is hardly profit from a long campaign.

DELLIUS

There will be other days of glory when  
1040. the name of Antony will shine again.

CLEOPATRA

And soon we hope.

DELLIUS

In faith we'll pledge it so.

CLEOPATRA

Gentlemen, I take my leave and go  
to Antony who needs my counsel now.  
*(Exit Cleopatra.)*

DELLIUS

Thank gods above I did not tell her how  
our prospects dangled by a single thread,  
and still it is a thin connection wed  
to Egypt's granaries and splendid court.

AHENOBARBUS

That's very much the matter of my thought.

DELLIUS

So yet more dangerous are these present days

where death approaches by such sudden ways.

AHENOBARBUS

There were so many of them: thousands dropped  
1050. behind or didn't join us when we stopped  
at dawn or at some crossing place, where each  
would take his own short journey out of reach.  
Some drank such stinks and puddles as there were  
and from those putrid sources would not stir.  
Some begged us make an end of them, some left  
all dignitas behind, as though bereft  
of Roman fortitude, an empty space  
that even now we struggle hard to place  
within the echoing hallways of the mind.

DELLIUS

1060. It is an echo I can always find,  
and with the lightest wind will hear again  
the long dry rattle of expiring men.  
For one more battle like the last, and I,  
if sensible, would put adventure by.

AHENOBARBUS

Such are the destinies that soldiers serve  
who live by stiffening up their faith and nerve.

DELLIUS

For what, my friend? Again we stand upon  
the seesaw of the world. One thought that's gone  
beyond the reasonable and all falls down:  
1070. we serve a conqueror or love-sick clown.

AHENOBARBUS

Who else is there? A spiteful, scheming boy,  
and how could Lepidus bring hope or joy?



For so is conquest on such hazards built  
and all true soldiers forfeit to the hilt.

### Scene III

Cleopatra, Antony

CLEOPATRA

I do not think we need a war this year.

ANTONY

There is no other course. Each day we hear  
how Rome becalls us: its vindictiveness  
has named great Caesar's spouse a sorceress.  
Indeed the city seems one gambling den  
1080. with odds against us as to how and when.

CLEOPATRA

There is Octavia, that good wife of yours,  
who yet says nothing, though she has true cause.

ANTONY

My wife's a paragon. I know.

CLEOPATRA

She's wise,  
and in humility adapts her guise  
to move reluctantly or not at all.

ANTONY

What can we do?

CLEOPATRA

Why, wait and see how fall  
events. Train. Build ships, but be no threat  
to Rome's far interests, as least not yet.

ANTONY

Too late. The horse is loosed. With Sextus dead,  
1090. Agrippa rules the ocean in his stead.  
He is the new diviner of the seas  
or will be soon if we don't act.

CLEOPATRA

Then he's  
exactly why it's time to think, and wait  
until those depredations of the state  
become intolerable, and Romans know  
there is no safety till their leader go.

ANTONY

What is it Egypt hides and will not say  
inside this talk of caution and delay?

CLEOPATRA

Our twin, aspiring, sovereign stars  
1100. hang in their detriment: now Moon and Mars  
must hoard their riches and not hope on sea  
for two long years to reap a victory.

ANTONY

Who steers his policy by old wives' tales?  
In war men frame their future. Nothing fails  
so much as fear and hesitation, what  
the enemy may do to us or not.

CLEOPATRA

We need, the two of us, to be both strong  
and wise, to think forever hard and long.  
Parthia I warned you of, but on you went,  
1110. with fortune, like your troops, half spent.  
People the sea with spies, and have each fort  
and outpost, listening city gather aught  
on what Agrippa does, and how, and why,  
for there, my Antony, our dangers lie.  
Rome will grow restive soon enough, and force  
that faceless hypocrite to change his course.

ANTONY

And must great Antony be seen to cower  
behind a woman's counsel and her power?

CLEOPATRA

We want life's substance, not its empty shows.  
1120. What can it matter what these fools suppose?  
Learn from Julius and match his guile  
and grow the stronger, quietly, all the while.

ANTONY

Armies must be quartered, trained and fed,  
and are by ready plunder always led.

## Scene IV

Ahenobarbus, Dellius: Actium.

DELLIUS

How hard it's been to even get this far  
against a queen who only seems to bar  
our common venture, keep our troops hemmed in.

AHENOBARBUS

I do not think she even hopes to win.  
'Moon and Jupiter with Saturn crossed:  
1130. all battles fought on water will be lost'

DELLIUS

This hesitation is what foes will use  
to mock our courage, bait us and abuse  
our service to a most un-Roman queen.  
It is her influence that clouds this scene.  
Well, does it not?

AHENOBARBUS

So if Canidius  
support and speak for her, that's naught to us?

DELLIUS

A large part of the fleet is hers, and then  
the army also, stiffened by our men.

AHENOBARBUS

Common actions need a common heart,  
1140. or will by changing nature come apart.

DELLIUS

True, my friend, but where's the close rapport  
with which the two of them urge on this war?

AHENOBARBUS

What would you say? That Cleopatra's right:  
the tide's against us and we should not fight?

DELLIUS

Only armies can't be kept in idleness,  
which, like the tides, then ebb to less and less.

AHENOBARBUS

Two differing counsels: that's what's wrong.  
For he's impetuous and she is long  
in weighing up each prudent point of view,  
1150. the what it would be wise or not to do.  
But headlong now the enterprise is launched  
and wounds of consequence can't now be staunch'd.

DELLIUS

Our course is obvious. It serves no use  
to talk or skirmish here. We must break loose.

Scene V

Antony, Cleopatra, Ahenobarbus, Dellius.

AHENOBARBUS

Our fleets should go out boldly, try to win  
some space to battle or manoeuvre in.  
Here in this Ambracian Gulf our fleet  
grows day by day more stifled by the heat.

DELLIUS

Increasingly we have more threatening news  
1160. and take disasters that we can't refuse.  
Methone's fallen and from this base of sorts  
young Julius can harass all our far-flung forts.  
Supplies are threatened and even Egypt's grain  
in time may be.

AHENOBARBUS

How long can we sustain  
this policy of doing nothing? Week  
by week the blockade only tightens.

CLEOPATRA

Speak  
less of dangers, admiral. We possess  
the finer army, royally led.

DELLIUS

Speak less  
of oracles, great queen, but look for ways  
1170. that don't compound these long-enforced delays.  
*(Exit an angry Cleopatra.)*

ANTONY

Enough. If this poor spot is all we've gained,  
we'll not stay idle and be further chained.

DELLIUS

But the plan, my lord? Each month we show  
a face more keen for battle as they grow  
the more in jeering ranks that do not fight.  
Our force is now disheartened. Every night  
deserters leave us, or are soldiers found

at morning sick or prostrate on the ground.

ANTONY

I've said we army leaders will confer,  
1180. and now, good soldiers, I must go to her. (*Exit Antony.*)

DELLIUS

He is a man hallucinating, cursed  
with weakening fears and follies from the first.

AHENOBARBUS

No drink or womanizing would allay  
the spectres haunting him from day to day.  
And yet great Caesar had his fainting fits,  
young Julius too has dazzled wits  
if anyone approach or threaten him,  
and Lepidus can shake from limb to limb.

DELLIUS

Behold the world's great leaders! Each of them  
1190. conceals much dross within the sparkling gem,  
and only Egypt's swarthy sorceress  
gains power on knowing her as others less.  
With Antony enquiry only finds  
him more perplexed and mixed in several minds.  
One moment stoutly kitted out to fight,  
next gibbering at shadows in the night.

AHENOBARBUS

Yet, whether Antony agree or not,  
we have to leave this empty, sun-cursed spot,  
these seashore marshes and their brooding sense  
1200. of failure, hopelessness: a pestilence  
becalms the spirit in these barren hills.

DELLIUS

It's rather more as sovereign Egypt wills  
who holds his future in and has his ear.  
There's no persuading him while she is near.

AHENOBARBUS

It is a losing hand the future deals  
and he a puppy dog dragged close to heels.

DELLIUS

Well, I am not, nor need I say, good friend,  
how more obedience to her will send  
me over to the other camp. In short—

AHENOBARBUS

1210. Our long-tried faith will be the first thing fought.



## ACT FIVE

### SCENE I

Cleopatra, Antony: Actium.

CLEOPATRA

First Dellius gone and now the admiral too.  
With gifts!

ANTONY

Ahenobarbus has what's due.

CLEOPATRA

Dear gods alive, whatever for?

ANTONY

Because  
I would commemorate the way it was.

CLEOPATRA

You should deter these traitors, make them pay,  
and not let memories of some rich day  
withhold chastisement when real danger nears.

ANTONY

The recompense is for the golden years  
of faith and comradeship. I can't do less.

CLEOPATRA

1220. Antony, you will not win unless

you curb that bountiful and boyish heart  
in which our present need plays little part.

ANTONY

There is no winning here, as you have said  
when first you cautioned me to wait instead  
in friendly territories, on eastern shores  
where Rome's old enemies support our cause.  
This Greece is all between, a dangerous ground,  
as great, all-conquering Pompey also found  
who had his prospects scattered in a day.

CLEOPATRA

1230. These we have not lost, but must delay  
the final battle to some other place.

ANTONY

Where, when all we held is not our base?

CLEOPATRA

Agrippa, as I warned you, has outflanked  
our forts, outwitted all the things we banked  
on most. We need to leave and try again  
with new battalions of fighting men.

ANTONY

Armies are not grown like crops, but wrought  
of trial and hardship in their battles fought.

CLEOPATRA

So they will, but first we need to loose  
1240. our enterprise from this enclosing noose.

ANTONY

But how?

CLEOPATRA

We must, great Antony. And you will lead.

ANTONY

Then this, my queen, is what we do.  
You'll go ahead of me and hoist your sails  
the moment that the evening wind prevails.  
Canidias will fight his way to Thrace while I,  
stout battering Agrippa's ships, will try  
to force a passage through and in disgrace,  
long sorrowing after you, will homeward trace  
a course where everyone can read defeat.

CLEOPATRA

1250. Am I this future that we cannot meet?

ANTONY

You are, and worse. For plainly we had lost  
before our weapons were in anger crossed.

Scene II

Demetrius, Arius: Alexandria.

DEMETRIUS

We know what Rome will make of it, and must,  
but for a narrative that one might trust  
say how you saw it: your immediate view.

ARIUS

Well, as you wish, but there is nothing new.

DEMETRIUS

I understand, but still a planned retreat  
may seem a turning point if called defeat.

ARIUS

Well, suddenly, and from the threatened rout,  
1260. with sails broad-spread, came issuing out  
a Cleopatra with her five-tiered fleet.

Impetuously the billowed sails brow-beat  
the waves, and then by galleys and the breeze  
propelled, she breaks the cordon, onward flees  
while Antony, close-grappled, all sides pressed,  
his courage flashing as his golden breast,  
was here and there until we struggled free  
and sailed, although pursued, far out to sea.  
So, thankfully, he left and never saw  
1270. the sad surrender of each ship of war.

DEMETRIUS

So that's the victory, is it, we must mind,  
and what of that great army left behind?

ARIUS

Canidius, abandoned on the shore  
engaged the enemy but only saw  
his troops disperse and parley: sorely tried  
by gifts and threats, they joined the other side.  
Canidius refused and met his end  
as Romans should, or so the rumours send,  
perhaps untruthfully, to undeceive  
1280. what Alexandrians here had best believe.

DEMETRIUS

As Antony: all day he lies among  
the wild conjectures of that woman's tongue,  
but facts are nothings when she waves her fan  
and by her mockery remakes him man.

Scene III

Antony, Cleopatra: Alexandria

CLEOPATRA

Men who sit about and drink their thoughts  
must soon grow quarrelsome and out of sorts.

ANTONY

A good commander does not leave his men  
but shares their hardship with them, and again  
in urging them to hold, advance and fight,  
1290. must always stand as foremost in their sight

CLEOPATRA

And did that Julius show half that care  
that in the forefront he was ever there?

ANTONY

The man's a politician, a two-faced soul  
whose ends are not to be uncovered whole,  
but like the changeful wind does not belong  
to friends or honesty, or not for long.

CLEOPATRA

Then men will note that. And for what we've lost  
there's Egypt's rich fertility to bear the cost.

ANTONY

It's not the army only but the fame,  
1300. and what is worse to lose, a shining name.

CLEOPATRA

You've lost a battle, as young Julius did,  
how many times on land he ran and hid  
and that still that trembling, all-too-mortal clay  
held out for combat on some later day.

ANTONY

You mock me, queen. With all I know,  
he comes apace for us, will not be slow.  
For him there cannot be a long delay  
with bills to settle and good soldiers pay.  
Yours is the last great store of glittering plate  
1310. that stands between him and a bankrupt state.

CLEOPATRA

The power of Egypt is not quickly harmed  
nor does it bow but to the queen's command.

ANTONY

You speak of years to mobilize, defend  
and build, but such the gods will never send.  
A month or two, perhaps a year at most,  
and we shall see the vanguard of his host  
invest the seas, the inland lake, the port,  
and when that battle's joined it will be short.

CLEOPATRA

Young Julius may not come, or should he come  
1320. how unexpected often too is fortune's sum:  
a single thrust, an unmarked shaft that flies

and heaven's high victor's dead before your eyes.

ANTONY

The man is cautious and will never let  
his person enter on an even bet.  
I've challenged him to combat, sword on sword,  
a brief, conclusive outcome to afford  
and end to bloodshed and this war:  
but, no, he weighs in when the outcome's sure.

Scene IV

Charmian, Iras: Alexandria

CHARMIAN

At last they have to go their separate ways,  
you think?

IRAS

1330. What's made in gladness often stays  
to wreak its troubles on the later days.  
Besides, her prospects show a Sphinx-like gaze.

CHARMIAN

Defiantly, it's true, she will be queen.  
To quell whatever unrest there has been  
she's executed all within her court  
whose praise of victory could not be bought.

IRAS

As wounded bite whatever fortune send,  
so states grow treacherous when near their end.

CHARMIAN

Best to hold your tongue, although it's said  
1340. a hundred thoughts pass daily through that cobra'd head.  
She plans to move her court and soldiers on  
to lands far eastward where the sunlight shone  
on Alexander all those years ago.

IRAS

In narrowed straights, the waves fret to and fro.  
A flight to India, in the desert sands,  
or rock-hewn city, she will make new lands.  
That furious temper and her fabled wealth  
confound our expectations, and by stealth  
her plans are built like armies moved at night  
1350. that in the dawning will astonish sight.

CHARMIAN

Such are the Ptolemies, an ancient claim  
to wealth and fortune in a troubled name.

IRAS

All opposition she has sought to quell  
by trickery, or that hypnotic spell  
she casts on Romans and their conquering power,  
will now await us and exact their hour.

CHARMIAN

If Antony's unmanned and cast in stone  
why not just leave the doubter and go on alone?

IRAS

It was a spear each launched into the heart,  
1360. and they must leave them there or blood will start.



## Scene V

Antony, Legionary, Soldier: outside Alexandria.

ANTONY

I ask that on the morrow you will fight  
for Antony but also Rome's old right  
to rule and conquer by her weight of arms.  
I need not tell you any faintness harms  
your chance of victory at the furious wall  
of warriors with weapons. You'll recall  
the soldiers' pledge you made, how fearlessly  
you strode to danger with your Antony,  
that thick of danger where bright faith and sword  
abundantly were tested, their reward—

LEGIONARY

Why all this wheedling lawyers' rigmarole?  
A soldier's pledge is fixed and given whole.

SOLDIER

My lord, we ask but to be led today,  
tomorrow, all times, boldly to the fray.

ANTONY

Then think, my veterans, but a brief delay  
divides us from our forward hopes today.  
That at this hour tomorrow we shall stand  
upon the threshold of a kindlier land,  
that some great victory we shall celebrate  
or rest forever in death's easeful state.  
The choice is for the gods, and we poor men  
nor know our port of leaving or the when.

## Scene VI

Cleopatra, Mardion, Charmian, Demetrius: Alexandria.

CLEOPATRA

How goes the war for Antony?

MARDION

His cause  
is darkly overshadowed now and draws  
down hatred on his purposes and scorn.

CLEOPATRA

Say why.

MARDION

Soldiers are to Rome forsworn  
if they but follow where a woman's led.  
They see no landfall in the royal head  
that looks for victory where there can be none.

CLEOPATRA

1390. Could not some pact or compromise be won?

MARDION

The world is wildly overfed by wars  
and for an ending takes up any cause.  
The one hope common to them all is peace.

CLEOPATRA

Is that the hope that stood by Rome or Greece?

MARDION

Great queen: you are a Ptolemy: we rest  
but men, befuddled creatures meanly blest.  
For that our ships surrender, put up oars,  
and last night's hero joins the other's cause.

CLEOPATRA

The wretch we gave a breast-piece to, of gold,  
1400. that bright-flushed youth?

MARDION

The same. If truth be told  
he fled at dawn before our ships put out.

CLEOPATRA

You think he heard that midnight Bacchic rout,  
that sound of music flowing though the ground;  
that rose and left our city, foe-ward bound?

MARDION

I do not know, my queen. A strange malaise  
has fallen on our streets and city ways.  
It's thought, though no one yet has good as said,  
that mighty soul, our Antony is dead.

CLEOPATRA

That cannot be. No, no, I should have heard.  
1410. No great ones go before the stars concurred  
in their divinities to close their birth  
across this phosphorescing, transient earth.  
The ground would tremble, sea give up its dead  
and sun glower dark on darker overhead.

*(Charmian and Demetrius enter, latter with Antony's sword.)*

CHARMIAN

I beg your leave, great queen, but by his hand. . .

CLEOPATRA

What?

DEMETRIUS

I beg your majesty to understand.  
He leaves you free to find some new accord.

CLEOPATRA

It cannot be.

CHARMIAN

This is his bloodstained sword.

CLEOPATRA

Show me, fellow. Yes, looks very like.  
1420. How well they're timed, disasters, when they strike.

DEMETRIUS

No, not ill timing, lady, but resolve,  
that with his death the quarrel might dissolve  
to pacts, accommodations, still to live  
in some quiet corner that a peace may give.

CLEOPATRA

What peace?

DEMETRIUS

In all his acts he thought of you  
and asked his serving lad to run him through,

but when the man, one Arius, refused  
and straightway killed himself, with that abused,  
he took the sword as every soldier must  
1430. and, with a benediction, inward thrust.

CLEOPATRA

What benediction? Say. Why not restrained?

DEMETRIUS

His truth and earnestness could not be feigned.  
He goes to Hades and the realms of dead,  
but bids you, lady, in this world instead  
be glad, forgive his leaving, no more heed  
the gathering shadows as you onward speed  
his soul with offerings, nor now idly cast  
your raillery on all his rough words past.  
His heart is yours, and in its loving's spate  
1440. will quietly in that endless night await  
your coming to him, but, if not awhile,  
continually will think of you and smile  
on that rich happiness that once was his.  
The import of his words. No more than this.

CLEOPATRA

And those, precisely, were the words he said?

DEMETRIUS

*(Embarrassed.)* He heard, as you know well, the queen was dead,  
but still—

CLEOPATRA

Now all make plans as best they may,  
seek out what priests or oracles may say  
and so and honourably attain their rest.

CHARMIAN

1450. Propitiate our conqueror would be best.

CLEOPATRA

What with, dear Charmian? With what has been?  
The fading beauty of great Egypt's queen  
that has no bounty in it, days that shone  
with dew-fresh innocence, which now is gone  
to corpulence betrayed by gossamers.  
So much for middling age, which but confers  
a need for outrage or averted eyes.  
Not age's pithiness with sage replies,  
but feints, false hopes, another year when we  
1460. must counterfeit the gifts we had.

IRAS

I see  
great Egypt's sunk to such a forlorn state  
that she must, pitying, accept her fate  
as dust that soils the conquering soldier's heel.

CLEOPATRA

When I am gone, cruel Iras, you will feel  
how harsh this world is, and our best of days  
but shadows leant upon remembering haze.

IRAS

Not long, my lady, will you leave my sight  
for I shall follow through the thickest night.

## Scene VII

Cleopatra, Sosigenes, Iras: Mausoleum at Alexandria.

SOSIGENES

I think it better, Madam, that you do not know  
1470. what fate provides for you, but in the flow  
of great events you take your passage out  
with songs and incense and your friends about  
across the endless silences and oar-  
dipped waters of the darkening Nile. Of more  
I cannot and I should not say. But fame  
is yours forever in remembered name.

CLEOPATRA

Do not bandy words with me, my friend:  
I planned my zenith and will know my end.

SOSIGENES

There is no certainty on earth but dreams,  
1480. a prescient nothingness and hope that seems  
to put us safely on foundations, yet  
is only as the sun and moon will set  
relentlessly and through their proper seasons,  
beyond our reach of arms, and any reasons  
we could hope to find. For, though you fought  
and valiantly your fate, these realms were wrought  
of strange perplexities, and men you wed  
had courage certainly but not your head.

CLEOPATRA

Give me better news, or I will say  
1490. how long in grievous errors you'll delay.

SOSIGENES

That I know already, and too well,  
my queen: it's even as the stars foretell.

CLEOPATRA

Then is our conqueror's passage sown with doubt,  
and will his star, ascending, yet go out?  
So tell me when I lie in wrongful death  
that spiteful fate has also stopped his breath.

SOSIGENES

Madam, that I cannot do, but know  
an empire waits for him: it will be so.

CLEOPATRA

How fare the offerings of our royal bed?  
1500. If these are taken from us all is fled.

SOSIGENES

There are no happy lives in this drenched place  
of tears and anguish and of fitful grace.

CLEOPATRA

I go too early from these realms of light  
when all beyond is like a sleepless night:  
some dreams, some sharp awakenings, toss and turn  
as though for some hid certainty we yearn.  
We are but children crying in the night  
when looming shadows catch us and afright.

SOSIGENES

Each life moves on and has its path blot out  
1510. the other prospects that were strewn about,  
and dusky fortune narrows to a pin-



point pointing to the straitened life we're in.

CLEOPATRA

Then why?

SOSIGENES

It is the great who have the scope  
to spread their wings beyond what mortals hope,  
for life, my lady, is as die are tossed  
to catch the light but once before they're lost.

CLEOPATRA

Say how, Sosigenes, I've played my hand.

SOSIGENES

Oh, royally, lady. In a dangerous land  
alive to threat and falsehood you have thrown  
1520. a last great radiance on Egypt's throne.

CLEOPATRA

A final one, you think, my learned friend?

SOSIGENES

All gorgeous pomp days of the sun must end.

CLEOPATRA

Caesarion will live, my little son?

SOSIGENES

Peace, my lady, for the bright day's done.  
The wings that beat upon the listening air  
are distant from us and they do not care.  
Treachery, poison, the assassin's knife:

a brief end, lady, to a blameless life.

CLEOPATRA

Young Julius is that?

SOSIGENES

Or others, who will claim  
1530. a potent mischief lurks in Caesar's name.  
But you have others that in time may know  
all the munificence that Rome can show.

IRAS

Enough, good madam, from that poison's well.

CLEOPATRA

Enough? I go out on a last farewell  
from all that's goodly in the sun. Who knows  
what carries from these worldly fetes and shows  
to that far kingdom of the soul? It's said  
a howling punishment awaits the dead.  
There all our sins are weighed and measured, cast  
1540. against the good accomplished in their past.  
That past is not much blessed in mine I fear.  
Too well with fiends around me I shall hear  
the wailing doom of wretches I dispatched:  
young Ptolemy with whom I was mismatched,  
My sister Arsenoë, monstrous grown  
that she would take from me my queenly throne,  
that traitor Herod, who will burn in hell  
for those rank treacheries he planned so well.

IRAS

Have done, good lady, for the world fares on  
1550. in all its treacheries when we are gone.  
You leave as queen, the greatest, were and are

so still. For Nubia and the realms as far  
as Cappadocia and the Jewish lands  
by you were gathered into rightful hands.

## CLEOPATRA

And will be so again. I've sent our sons  
on speedy passage to the warlike Huns  
and thence to Khurasania where our name  
rekindles glories of our regal claim  
to endless territories our forebears won  
1560. beneath that energetic, far-off sun.  
They bring intelligence, they bring a fire  
a true, authentic part of that desire  
to know the uttermost of human will,  
and be, both Greek and Roman, conquerors still.

## ACT SIX

### Scene I

Octavian, Dolabella: Alexandria

OCTAVIAN

He's dead?

DOLABELLA

Acknowledged by the queen.

OCTAVIAN

You're sure?

DOLABELLA

No, Antony won't trouble us the more,  
he's lifeless in the mausoleum—

OCTAVIAN

Which is  
secured by now, I hope, with all its riches  
packed and labelled for their shipment hence.

DOLABELLA

1570. Our men assess it with a growing sense  
that none has known a treasure like to this.  
Such gold, such jewels and pearls were his  
but there he lay, a thing of battered clay.

OCTAVIAN

And that's not gossip, what our soldiers say?

DOLABELLA,

My lord, you'd know at once that noble head,  
or I could have it brought to you instead.

OCTAVIAN

That won't be necessary. Fortune sends  
us wayward purposes to serve her ends.  
And so we ask again: how did he die?

DOLABELLA

1580. He heard the queen was dead: perhaps a lie  
or just confusions of the war, for who  
could say? But came his hour, our consul knew,  
and yet the deed miscarried, and his claim  
to rightful dignity was mired in shame.

OCTAVIAN

That will not do. He was a Latin first  
that thence by sorcery was led and cursed.  
So let us pin that notion on his head.  
What then?

DOLABELLA

When Egypt learned he was not sped  
she had him carried to her hiding place  
1590. and sadly cared for him until the face  
she loved was softened by approaching death,  
and speech there guttering into gestured breath.  
The queen intended then to kill herself  
but we have parted her from that and wealth.

She's far from injury in that regard  
but frets and fights us under careful guard.

## Scene II

Cleopatra, Charmian, Iras: Alexandria

CHARMIAN

Would not an interview, my queen, afford  
some means of treating with our Roman lord?

CLEOPATRA

All audience — yes, note the word — has been  
1600. refused. Nor will our citizen demean  
himself by meeting one of royal blood  
but, like the reptile, courts the common mud.

IRAS

We still have friends of Alexander's line  
and latterly perhaps will stars incline—

CHARMIAN

To give us refuge and your sons a place  
such as their lineage and looks would grace.

IRAS

He is a small man, delicately made  
but handsome in his way, or so portrayed,  
above all cautious, libidinous and shrewd,  
1610. that could, if at a venture, still be wooed.

CLEOPATRA

Dear god, no. He'll rule as does a spouse  
with threat and stratagem and counting house.

But those first hearts — I hear you quarrelling,  
for who's to sport with me, and who be king?  
I'll be a simple girl again and plight my troth  
to one or other of them, or to both.  
We'll talk the whole night through again, as did  
we ever on our palace nights and bid  
the stars hold congress with our outstretched arms  
1620. for mine were full with never-ending charms.  
Why am I chattering? For soon they'll set  
my name in hieroglyphics and beget  
more coloured sculptures on the palm-thick Nile  
where temples deepen into evening's smile.  
Yet while I stay the first in Egypt's land  
I'll keep these matters in my careful hand.  
Across the land and sea, without delays  
our sons haste on their separate ways.  
Julius is not safe while these yet live,  
1630. for he must stop and parley, and will give.

IRAS

But will he so, you think? What gift is ours  
to check the prospect of these foreign powers.

CHARMIAN

And we would have to take his word on trust.

CLEOPATRA

You'll find he grants us Egypt, as he must.

IRAS

He must?

CLEOPATRA

He needs in eastern lands perpetual peace  
and more than shifting policies will lease:

a time to build, consolidate his hold  
on all the territories within the fold  
of his new power.

IRAS

The which your sons will not  
allow?

CLEOPATRA

1640. In their very names is got  
the old authority that hems Rome in.  
Some Indian, Hun or Parthian will win  
enough of victories to spite a claim  
of peace refurbished in his Roman name.  
So send for our new master, say the throne  
has pressing matters for his ear alone. (*Exit Cleopatra.*)

IRAS

All bluster, make-believe, as though the queen  
could still make mischief out of what has been.  
Day by day her overtures go out  
1650. to all and sundry kingdoms hereabout,  
but are ignored, or smiled at, or refused  
by those same people whom she once ill-used.

CHARMIAN

By narrow waterways our ships were sent  
and, treasure laden, were on India bent.  
Our Arab friends, for some small favour earned  
of our new masters, had the whole lot burned.

IRAS

So what remains of Egypt's power?



CHARMIAN

But what  
the queen's intelligence can spin or plot.

Scene III

Cleopatra, Dolabella: Alexandria

DOLABELLA

I come as emissary, queen, and pray  
1660. you treat as generous what I convey.

CLEOPATRA

He will not meet me then, this citizen?

DOLABELLA

The first of citizens, he is. Again  
I'd ask your majesty would hear the offer made.

CLEOPATRA

Some threat of triumphs, doubtless, wild parade  
before the unwashed masses, jeering crowd—

DOLABELLA

Worse than that, great queen: you will be bowed  
beneath gold fetters on the path of shame,  
with tears and lamentation—

CLEOPATRA

What's your name?

DOLABELLA

Dolabella.

CLEOPATRA

Dolabella: tell

1670. your youthful prince that Egypt need not dwell  
on dismal images that cannot be.

I am of Rome, and was, and so this me  
he cannot execute or claim I died.

I was the queen arrayed at Caesar's side.

My statue stood in Venus—

DOLABELLA

or you make

with Antony a grand farewell and take  
the power of Egypt to a fitting grave.

CLEOPATRA

Tell young Julius if he would wave

farewell to peace and safety in the east,

1680. and make of Egypt some lascivious beast  
that should be whipped and goaded on in chains  
before a jeering populace, it gains

but one more stain upon his suspect name.

He knows all that, but tell him just the same

that Cleopatra waits him. Be assured

that what we offer him he can afford.

Scene IV

Octavian, Dolabella: Alexandria

DOLABELLA

You have no answer for the queen? She acts  
a long way distant to the present facts.

OCTAVIAN

Except to fill up now her waking nights  
1690. with terrors, fevers and with howling sights:  
her spirit humbled by a constant force  
as by a thousand curbs we tame a horse.

DOLABELLA

Still have her watched and guarded night and day?

OCTAVIAN

Better she should make her stumbling way  
through all the miseries her actions cost  
for crowns and empires she has gained and lost,  
and rule the Hades she has filled with dead.

DOLABELLA

Which she may follow on as dreams have led?

OCTAVIAN

She may, if dream-possessed, not knowing why.  
1700. As for funeral we won't deny  
attendance for her. It is Egypt's end,  
and even conquerors to pity bend.

DOLABELLA

Well, then our watch shall only be as such  
as would be reasonable, but not too much.

Scene V

Dolabella, Gallus: Alexandria

DOLABELLA

How went the funeral? How did the queen

relinquish what her following has been?

GALLUS

But with a modesty and unfeigned grief  
that all the milling populace was lief  
to follow her and as the incense flared  
1710. to think her Antony was one they shared.

DOLABELLA

To him she now has paid her last respects  
and neither hopes of Rome or much expects.  
She is resigned, I think, to going out  
the last and greatest of her race.

GALLUS

I doubt  
she even thinks of that. I saw her stare  
as though her royalty saw no one there,  
and mounting slowly those high steps of stone  
she paused as settling on a splendid throne.  
A listening silence rose; no word was said  
1720. and even our rough soldiery but watched that head  
absorb the fealty of the sovereign east,  
that golden patrimony, which has ceased.

DOLABELLA

Her sons, and Antony's? What news of them?

GALLUS

Vague rumours only, but their names condemn  
them to the futures that their bloodlines give.  
Our Julius is thorough: they will not live.

DOLABELLA

In that he'll starve her last resistance out  
as trees die slowly through a summer drought.

GALLUS

Perhaps as triumphs in the spoils of war  
1730. young Julius may choose to keep her for.

DOLABELLA

No, he will not meet her, fears to find  
her eloquence outdo his cautious mind.  
Indeed it might, and if she spoke in Rome  
might in the Senate find a second home.  
A game of cat and mouse, and none can say  
which one of them has now the run of play.  
Both are ruthless, calculating, she  
the more possessing outright bravery.  
She means to rule and if she must through men  
1740. it's not unlikely she would choose again  
some rich, young senator of noble house  
who'd serve ostensibly as rightful spouse,  
but focus more, by opposition bent,  
on harnessing the Senate's discontent.  
No, she'll die and promptly by her hand  
or some clear way the world will understand

GALLUS

It must be poison then, and such that she  
will know, refuse, and take reluctantly.

DOLABELLA

If such an action could be quietly done.

GALLUS

1750. When subtlety is foremost, there is none  
to match our Gaius Julius. Who knows?  
The city swells with fractious, silent foes.  
Some wretch for gold will take his brief rewards  
and for his part read silence afterwards.

Scene VI

Cleopatra, Dolabella: Alexandria.

CLEOPATRA

What answer from our citizen?

DOLABELLA

He bids  
you sleep forever under restless lids.

CLEOPATRA

What cryptic foolishness is that?

DOLABELLA

He means  
that calm, refreshing sleep is not the queen's.  
No, nighttime's shadows and vague poison's threat,  
1760. make your captivity an endless fret.  
Without your servants, friends or mark of rank  
how rapidly you'll fade and come to thank  
some final enterprise that brings on death:  
how sought and longed for will be that last breath.

CLEOPATRA

Such phantoms do not frighten Egypt's queen  
who is, and always as the east has been

the barrier that makes invasions cease:  
young Julius knows that: for he must have peace.

DOLABELLA

What gifts or treasures has the queen to sell  
1770. beyond the confines of her narrow cell?  
What power or reputation shapes events  
within her far-off, dwindled, future tense?

CLEOPATRA

Am I to plume the daylight, make it plain?  
Without my helping him he cannot reign.  
Always there are sons of mine or ours  
that raid his territories or mock his powers.  
In short, our peace comes all too cheap to him:  
an act of clemency or simple whim.

DOLABELLA

What sons are these that can escape our force,  
1780. outstroke our galleys or outrun our horse?  
Antyllus is taken, that most wretched thing,  
who wept, and begged of us, who would be king.

CLEOPATRA

The son of Antony is leagues away  
beyond what even puffed-up Romans say.

DOLABELLA

You'll recognize the bauble that he kept  
about his person always? (*Shows her.*)

CLEOPATRA

No.

DOLABELLA

He crept  
into some temple precinct, hid and cried—  
this child of Antony and future pride.  
Do I see the queen now turn a paler shade  
1790. at all the enemies her rule has made?  
You ruled by sorcery and stole by force  
and now these outraged parties take their course.

CLEOPATRA

Great Isis rules the Nile and what's to be.  
Be slow to enter her dark territory.

DOLABELLA

I serve the first of gods, and no false spells  
impede the passage to our draughty hells.  
I speak today of simply what will be  
across our Roman territory and Roman sea.  
Antyllus is dead, and soon Caesarion  
will be.

CLEOPATRA

1800. I think you'll find that quarry's gone.

DOLABELLA

How sadly I must tell you he returns  
obediently as day by day he learns  
that ports are closed to him and cities bar  
an onward progress to him all that far.  
I see you don't believe me: here's the writ  
and his compliance, with his name to it.  
So rule all Hades, queen, but make an end  
of it as even now these moments send.  
This is the offer to you. Die a queen  
1810. and end as Antony in his last scene,



or go out painfully, by fears oppressed,  
by sores and sicknesses, be meanly dressed,  
hemmed in, confined, deprived all privacy  
to die mysteriously, alone, at sea.

CLEOPATRA

True queens, with parts and entrances, are seen  
to rule all others till their final scene.

Scene VII

Cleopatra, Iras, Charmian, Dolabella: Alexandria.

CLEOPATRA

So must the lordliest in their season go  
beneath the earth or as salt waters flow  
across the Corinths of the world, to end  
1820. in strange misfortunes that the high gods send.  
Where is Priam and those stalwart towers,  
or Menelaus with his manly powers?  
Where is Helen's ever dreamt-on face,  
her world of moving in that mournful grace  
for man with his thin, paltry forms to fill  
that we poor followers must turn to ill?  
Ah, what wealth of ravings this has been  
though I, who smile and leave you, still am queen.  
Again I'll see my rams-horned ancestors  
1820. who ruled the Caspian and Caucasus,  
at Ctesiphon and on the plain of Fars  
have worn the coronet of circling stars.  
But that was passing nothing, no, for I'll  
assume the temperament that all the while  
we women cherish in our stormy hearts  
before we wake and play our tawdry parts.  
With Caesar or with Antony I'll take  
my place in sovereignties such soldiers make.

Ah me, ah me, what is this solid earth  
1830. but fume and endless fretting from our birth.  
We are as life will make us, all our joys  
but cheap bordellos where the feckless boys  
will try us on for pleasure. I have gained  
a moment only where the Pharaohs reigned  
as thought forever and have built their might  
in monuments that grazed the topmost pole of night.

*(Drinks the poison cup.)*

Let all remember how I made my end.  
Whatever time and circumstances send,  
through howling distances I hasten on  
1840. to where great queens before me all have gone.

CHARMIAN

Catch her, for the lady dies.

*(Dolabella bursts in.)*

IRAS

Too late.

The queen is dead, and all that golden state  
of realms that took their royalty from the east  
are in a breath surrendering what has ceased.  
Give me the poison, Charmian. I,  
who only lived for her, will with her die. *(Drinks.)*

DOLABELLA

Wretch! Is this the care you owe a queen?

CHARMIAN

Most royally so, for ever she has been  
example to us and to her end she brings  
1850. the blood descended from so many kings. *(Drinks.)*

## Scene VIII

Ammonius, Sosigenes: Alexandria.

AMMONIUS

The vexing bubble of our lives moves on,  
and shun or glory in it, soon it's gone.  
Never again, perhaps, will such a pair  
extend the loveliness of summer air:  
for in extravagance was weighed the cost  
of all they hazarded and now have lost.

SOSIGENES

How profitless is made the world today,  
which cuts its livery from somber grey.  
Beneath our Gaius Julius Caesar's gaze  
1860. there'll come an end to warfare and its ways:  
that haemorrhage is staunch and men will lease  
their lives out willingly to leisured peace.

AMMONIUS

Indeed they should. There comes an end at last:  
from warfare's gluttony will wise men fast.  
And yet some boundary to our world is crossed  
that speaks to us of something further lost  
as day rolls downhill to the evening fold  
and no new-fashioned name will fill the mould.  
Caesar or Pompey, the truly great  
1870. need mint no currency to claim their state.

SOSIGENES

So pass the ancient lands, and in our bones  
lie scripts of dynasties and tangled thrones.  
Some hieroglyphic, mark, some drop of ink  
invites conjecture and makes millions think.  
The mind's intuiting no words express,

a well-bred beauty in a sumptuous dress  
the potter sensing through the swell of clay  
where loose voluptuousness will hold and stay —  
all in their instinctiveness exact  
acknowledgements beyond mere rule and fact.  
1880. Perhaps—for who can know?—some centuries hence  
there'll come a city made with this good sense  
to honour learning and the rule of law,  
eschew the wastefulness and pomp of war.  
Some golden city to commemorate  
the lavishness that made these two souls great.

### AMMONIUS

Much dust is in that looking: our poor sight  
is half occluded by so deep a light.  
We saw, we marvelled and have gone our way  
1890. transformed and wondering for their brief stay  
within our dowered consciousness. The rest  
is silence only, nothing more.

### SOSIGENES

Then best  
we now will bid them both a long goodnight  
that they may never leave our inward sight:  
and through our memories may yet have won,  
as radiance lingers when warm day is done.

### AMMONIUS

We'll call their loving part of that far mind  
which we by utmost giving yet may find  
above, beyond us, through the uphill years  
1900. that make this unreal world a place of tears  
till we are reconciled to it and cease.

SOSIGENES

We part on that, my friend. But go in peace.

*(End of Play)*