

Portrait of a Nude Woman as Cleopatra

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PLUTARCH



... Antonius also leaving his wife Octavia and little children begotten of her, and his other children which he had by Fulvia: he went directlie into Asia. Then beganne this pestilent plague and mischief of Cleopatraes love (which had slept a longe tyme, and seemed to have bene utterlie forgotten, and that Antonius had geven place to better counsell) againe to kindle, and to be in force, so soone as Antonius came neere unto Syria. And in the ende, the horse of the minde as Plato termeth it, that is so hard of rayne (I meane the unreyned lust of concupis- cence) did put out of Antonius heade, all honest and commendable thoughtes: for he sent Fonteius Capito to bring Cleopatra into Syria. Unto whome, to welcome her, he gave no trifling things. ...



XXIII



CLEOPATRA

My jealousy is a deep Niger-brown slow-moving stilt,
Under the surface of life's dare, unsneaking renegade
At unexpected moments, it uncoils under my left eye,
Against the water and wind that touch your face
Against the interminable bombardment
Of random words spoken by strangers and soldiers
Infringing greetings and friendly obligations
Against the *Before Me*, strewn with wives and children.
Yet I bore you twins, Alexander & Cleopatra
The sun is one, the moon the other, they are the shape of
Our love double-imaged unchallengeable as honor:
Which is only a brush with memory; since you *married*.
The first draft of adrenaline leaves me a trembling
Carcass faint with the felony of your unfaithfulness.

XLIX



CLEOPATRA

O friendly enemy, we have loved,
Loin and haunch, limb and flank, truth and lies,
Tressed like a pair of ancient Armenian vines
Grown together root and branch in stunted
Commingling without End or Beginning.
If we part, you will leave with half of me,
Or I with half of you, and nothing will kill
The pain of dismembering.
That ache like some rare jewel
Will hang round our necks to touch,
In tender tremulance, an old wound of amputation
That burns and groans in limbs no longer existent
But splintered and crushed
In some long-forgotten and useless War.

... Her death was very sodaine.
For those whom Caesar sent into her ran thither in all haste
possible... But when they had opened the dores, they
founde Cleopatra starke dead, layed upon a bed of gold, at-
tired and araid in her royall robes, and one of her two
women, which was called Iras, dead at her feet: her other
woman called Charmion half-dead, and trembling, trim-
ming the diademe which Cleopatra ware upon her head...
yet there was no marke seene of her bodie, neither also did
they finde this serpent in her tombe. But it was reported
onely, that there were seene certeine fresh steppes or trackes
where it had gone, on the tomb side, toward the sea...

LVII



PLUTARCH

And so love passed through a Nude Woman,
Shrieking through the celestial equator,
A tail-less comet, morally obligated to conjunct,
Leaving traces to be discovered later by our progeny.
For this, too, was trothed.
Like Gods, they coupled to form a new race,
Destined to love more than we ever loved.
Predicted by Erastosthenes of Cyrene, I say,
It was not like anything we ever heard of,
And those who knew them say there will never be
A parallel for that pair's brilliant pilgrimage,
A prodigy of gravitational force
Traveling itinerant and transcendent, intercrossing
With the ferocious, refractory fame of deathless Life.