

A flakey site sent me this poem about Cleopatra, chopped from the play to fit an editor's whim. I saw HBO's gritty version of ROME streaming on the web, where Cleopatra was reduced to wanton schemer, humping a centurion to father a son and claim it was the Emperor, Caesar's child, and thereby protect her place in Egypt, descended from the Greek Ptolemy who Generalized under Alexander, and then took Egypt when his brutal boss dropped dead. There is a book out now on Cleopatra claiming she was much more, a queen of strategy and sex, a thinker as well as actor on the classic stage of Pharaohs, Hatshepsut incarnate. That was 48 BC. Shakespeare's silver oars suggest the appearance of greatness, wrapped in wealth, like Goldman bankers cruising toward Collapse on brilliant short term gains that undermined a nation and the world in 2008. Her barge's beauty and shine bring to mind Huizinga's version of the Middle Age's waning from the classics of integrity, faded from Socrates' drinking hemlock to his death, a toast to his word and thought, that the human mind, growing into the world, rested for its strength on the pursuit of truth above the power of the state, and above the money Christ later threw from the Temple of his dreams. To Huizinga, in the Middle Ages what remained of the glory that was Greece, and the grandeur that was Rome, was politeness without respect, kisses without affection. These empty gestures were shadows of the classic integrity of human presence in the world, of the human inheritors of life's long rise enabled by dealing with reality, not flaunting moments of success. Is there bias in this view? in Cleopatra, opening goldleafed legs to rutty Antony, in whose past the Roman Republic lay splayed and gutted on the muddy fields of war...

HBO's version: Cleopatra's strategy- get pregnant by another and say it was Caesar's to gain Rome's blessing.



Reliefs of Cleopatra VII and her son by Julius Caesar, Caesarion at the Dendera

The NY Times observes: [<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/07/books/review/Harrison-t.html?pagewanted=all>]

Goaded into exile as a result of a failed attempt to oust her brother and his advisers, Cleopatra, 21, had herself stuffed into a sturdy sack, smuggled back into her own palace, and presented thus to Julius Caesar, who, taking advantage of Egypt's political upheaval, had installed himself in the capital. While even her detractors agree, grudgingly, that Cleopatra was blessed with megawatt charisma as well as a formidable intelligence — she spoke nine languages — there is no record of how she persuaded Caesar to support her hegemony rather than making Egypt a province of Rome, and “no convincing political explanation” for his remaining with her in Alexandria for months while his own empire languished. We do know that when he left, Cleopatra was pregnant. Clearly a seduction had been accomplished, and she had far the most to gain from it.

From Antony & Cleopatra by Shakespeare

The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne,
Burn'd on the water: the poop was beaten gold;
Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
The winds were love-sick with them; the oars were silver,
Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
The water which they beat to follow faster,
As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,
It beggar'd all description: she did lie
In her pavilion--cloth-of-gold of tissue--
O'er-picturing that Venus where we see
The fancy outwork nature: on each side her
Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,
With divers-colour'd fans, whose wind did seem
To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,
And what they undid did. O, rare for Antony!

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

Upon her landing, Antony sent to her,
Invited her to supper: she replied,
It should be better he became her guest;
Which she entreated: our courteous Antony,
Whom ne'er the word of 'No' woman heard speak,
Being barber'd ten times o'er, goes to the feast,
And for his ordinary pays his heart
For what his eyes eat only.

Royal wench!
She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed:
He plough'd her, and she cropp'd.
I saw her once
Hop forty paces through the public street;
And having lost her breath, she spoke, and panted,
That she did make defect perfection,
And, breathless, power breathe forth.
Now Antony must leave her utterly.

Never; he will not:
Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety: other women cloy
The appetites they feed: but she makes hungry
Where most she satisfies; for vilest things
Become themselves in her: that the holy priests
Bless her when she is riggish.