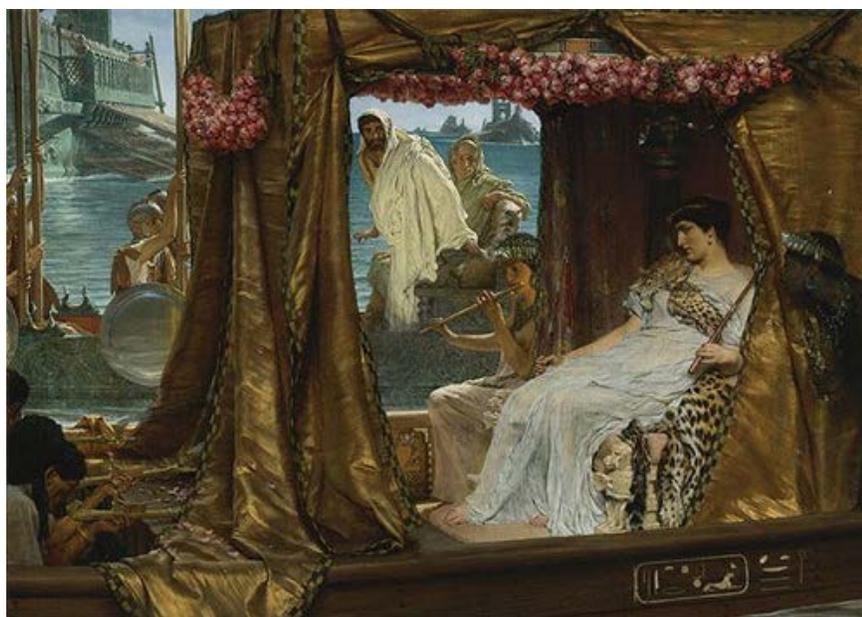


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cleopatra

By Philippe Sollers, translated by Armine Kotin Mortimer.



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Cleopatra's nose made a lot of people dream. Pascal thinks that the face of the world would have changed if her nose had been shorter (and thus unable to completely seduce Antony). Lautréamont imitates him like this: "If Cleopatra's morality had been less short, the face of the world would have changed. Her nose would not have become longer."

Cleopatra? Are you alluding to the Technicolor movie? Elizabeth Taylor in her struggle with Richard Burton? The accursed couple of Egypt?

No, no, only Shakespeare. As soon as I read *Antony and Cleopatra*, very young, I looked for Cleopatra everywhere. She appeared in the gardens in Bordeaux, I followed her to Spain and Italy, I pursued her in the streets of Paris, she always escaped me, like Egypt itself, its Isis mysteries... Its pyramids, tombs, magical paintings, secret chambers, ruses,



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philtres, drugs, immemorial art of sex, royal marriages between brothers and sisters, copper skin, culture, caprices, charm. No doubt about it, I am Antony, "amorous surfeiter", "whom ne'er the word of 'No' woman heard speak".

Every woman is a potential Cleopatra. She is asleep, simply wake her. Have a good look at this nose, and again this nose. Absolute seduction, that is Cleopatra, much more than Carmen, Phaedra, or the marquise de Merteuil. She wants you, she finds you, she fools you, she retains you, she possesses you, she betrays you, she loves you, she dies if you die, it's perfect.

Here she is in a barge on the river to meet Antony, she is sitting on a burnished throne like flames poised on the water. The poop of the ship is beaten gold, the perfumed sails purple, the oars of silver follow the rhythm of flutes. Showing her figure, she is softly stretched under a dais of cloth-of-gold with silk. Never have the dice of a dais been thrown in such eternal circumstances. Chance is abolished. Here is better than Venus, better than Aphrodite. Two Cupids, bearing multicoloured fans, cool her. She is surrounded by her gentlewomen, Nereids, Sirens, each more gracious than the next, with hands more sweet than flowers. A seeming mermaid holds the tiller, while an impalpable perfume embalms the banks.

Here is Cleopatra, act II, scene 5, angling for her chosen man:

Give me mine angle; we'll to the river: there—
My music playing far off—I will betray
Tawny-finn'd fishes; my bended hook shall pierce
Their slimy jaws; and, as I draw them up,
I'll think them everyone an Antony,
And say, "Ah, ha!" you're caught.

There you have the original fisherwoman. What follows is fast:

That time—O times!—
I laugh'd him out of patience; and that night
I laugh'd him into patience: and next morn,
Ere the ninth hour, I drunk him to his bed;
Then put my tires and mantles on him, whilst
I wore his sword Philippan.

This passage still has a thunderous effect on me. All the same I should alert the reader, male or female, that Philippan refers to Philippes (with an s), a city in Macedonia near Thrace. There in 42 BCE, Antony and Octavian defeated Brutus and Cassius (Caesar's assassins). Saint Paul stayed there in the year 50 of our era, an odd connection. Anyway, my first name is there letter for letter, *in the plural*. I am a participant in the scene, I am Antony feminised and Cleopatra with the sword.

They are both going to die after the defeat of Actium (31 BCE). She is thirty-nine, he is fifty-three. Because she betrays him, he makes furious scenes, before repenting: "You were half blasted ere I knew you... You have been a boggler ever... I found you as a morsel, cold upon dead Caesar's trencher... Besides what hotter hours . . . you have luxuriously pick'd out; for, I am sure, though you can guess what temperance should be, you know not what it is."

This Antony is an idiot, he knows it; his mistress is a "great fairy", a magician queen, a dazzling sorceress, an irresistible child. She was seen quite young hopping in a public street, and having lost her breath, but speaking with grace, she panted "that she did make defect perfection". She never lacks for air, Cleopatra, she knows that the best defence is to attack, it is out of the question to abandon her Antony whom she pushes to his death, to die with him in an unsurpassable suicide. It will be the little serpents of the Nile, hidden in a basket of figs, whose mortal, painless bite she has tested on lots of victims.

She is the only woman in the world, she defies the Roman Empire, she takes the best of

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its generals (Shakespeare himself). Octavia, Antony's wife? A widow, already old at thirty, a dwarf with a muted and mournful voice (he cannot like her long), a statue without life and without music, who creeps instead of walking, an idiot with a face round even to faultiness, a forehead as low as she would wish it, covered with hair too heavy. No voice, no music, no movement, she is the absurd Occidental whereas Cleopatra is the entire Orient herself alone. Antony, returning constantly to her as to a light, calls her "my nightingale". What can one do against a nightingale?

She loves her Antony, and when he is dead she loves him even more:

"His face was as the heavens, and therein stuck
A sun and moon, which kept their course, and lighted
The little O, the earth."

The earth is a "globule", a zero, a negative point with respect to the two stars of day and night. At the instant of applying the little venomous serpent on her breast, Cleopatra has lost all humanity like Lady Macbeth, but in contrast to her, she achieves her freedom in a metamorphosis:

"My resolution's plac'd, and I have nothing
Of woman in me; now from head to foot
I am marble-constant, now the fleeting moon
No planet is of mine."

There it is: Isis in person speaks to you. She will rejoin her human, all too human, spouse:

"...husband, I come
I am fire, and air; my other elements
I give to baser life."

In disappearing like this, one can "so gently part" from nature, which proves that "the stroke of death is as a lover's pinch, which hurts, and is desir'd".

She is lying down, then, and at peace. She speaks of one of her servants:

"If thus thou vanishest, thou tell'st the world
It is not worth leave-taking."

This would all be simple if there were not present in this overwhelming scene (I'm in it! I'm in it! I feel everything! I see everything!) the two ladies in waiting of Cleopatra, Iras and Charmian. Before dying Cleopatra kisses them and gives them "the last warmth of [her] lips". And suddenly a base thought of jealousy (which proves that she is not made of marble): suppose Iras, who has just died, meets "the curled Antony" in the afterworld. He will want her, he will cover her with kisses (as in life?). To be deceived in death? Out of the question. She commands the serpent, therefore:

"Come, thou mortal wretch,
With thy sharp teeth this knot intricate
Of life at once untie; poor venomous fool,
Be angry, and dispatch. O! could'st thou speak,
That I might hear thee call great Caesar ass
Unpoliced."

No, no, we don't want it to be over. It is late afternoon in Alexandria, it is very hot, just as it is very hot in Venice when Othello strangles Desdemona, and also in London in Shakespeare's black ink. Charmian (what a name!), has just cried out, naming Cleopatra:

"O eastern star!"

She replies:

"Peace, peace!
Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,

That sucks the nurse asleep?"

A nurse of serpents, peculiar milk transformed into blood. Charmian can't take it, she cries out:

"O, break! O, break!"

And the queen:

"As sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle,—
O Antony!"

Come, there is another little serpent hidden in the figs. She puts it not on her breast but on her arm:

"Nay, I will take thee too.
What should I stay—"

Charmian continues her sentence:

"In this vile world? So, fare thee well.
Now boast thee, death, in thy possession lies
A lass unparallel'd. Downy windows, close;
And golden Phoebus never be beheld
Of eyes again so royal! Your crown's awry;
I'll mend it, and then play."

Charmian will play at dying. The only traces of this hecatomb that Caesar will find are trails of slime from the asps in the figs (no blood, three sleeping women). Before poisonously biting delicious flesh, the serpents made *slime*. As always, Shakespeare is crude and precise, like no author before him. As for "golden Phoebus", the sun, it is obviously Apollo in his overarching royalty. This invocation is of interest. With the death of Cleopatra come the last moments of Hellenistic Egypt. The Romans are there, they have already trafficked in Greek gods, changed the names to insipid replacements, turned Zeus into Jupiter (help!) and Athena into Minerva (good god!). Only Isis and Cleopatra have understood this catastrophe. Antony also, heroic deserter of a world that might have been altogether different, and which was different, at least for the time this wild passion lasted.

Cleopatra, Eastern star, star of lovers, appears between Iras and Charmian, anger and charm. Don't count on movies to show you Antony with his three women of the Orient, and don't count on them either to give you the slightest idea about the improbable conjunction of the sun and the moon, Apollo and Isis. Censorship is at watch everywhere, and the witches of Macbeth have become true prophets. From now on, the beautiful is ugly, the ugly beautiful, the false is true, the true false. What, then? The Devil?

The Romans won, they are soon going to collapse as well, long centuries separate us from the Renaissance, which is to say the return of the Greeks, which is to say Italy. A few centuries more, and I rediscover Cleopatra, in secret, in Venice. She figured out how to get a passport, secret and safe. She thinks I look like Antony, the two of us make this city come alive as never before.

According to Shakespeare's research (great poetry is always very well informed), the magician is also called Jessica, the ravishing girl who betrayed her father, stubborn Shylock. She stole his jewels to join a Venetian patrician who, like her, loves music. Scandalous Jessica, whom people are still talking about (not enough). She too has come into my life, I hear her voice, I see her green eyes, her neck, her arms, her smile.

It is evening now, the embankments are more and more luminous, more red. No doubt about it, the gods are present, the masts on the boats are aflame. Love is present, takes cover, survives. Cleopatra, saddened at abandoning me but forced to pursue her celestial course, leaves me her last message, in a breath: "Goodbye, little darling!"



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Philippe Sollers, born near Bordeaux in 1936, is the founder of *Tel Quel* and of *L'Infini*, a powerful and influential editor and the author of scores of novels, essays, and art criticism, a public intellectual and media “bad boy”. As Philip Roth says: “Anybody out for a good time should read Philippe Sollers. He’s the sort of intellectual clown we don’t breed in America—urbane, bestial, candid, effervescent, an irrepressible ejaculator of farcical wisdom, a master of good-natured malice, a kind of happy, lively, benign Céline.” The nonfiction *Portraits de femmes* complements his best-selling 1983 novel *Femmes*.



ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Armine Kotin Mortimer has published Sollers’s *Mysterious Mozart* (Illinois 2010) as well as several shorter translations, one forthcoming in *The Brooklyn Rail*. Upon receiving the Mozart book, Sollers wrote: “Many thanks for your very fine *Mysterious Mozart*, which is far and away my favorite translation and introduction.” Her translation of Sollers’s *Casanova the Irresistible* appears in March 2016 with the University of Illinois Press.

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