RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Cleopatra

Stacy Schiff

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Cleopatra’s palace shimmered with onyx and gold but was richer still in political and sexual intrigue. Though her life spanned fewer than forty years, it reshaped the contours of the ancient world.

Famous long before she was notorious, Cleopatra has gone down in history for all the wrong reasons. Stacy Schiff boldly separates fact from fiction to rescue the magnetic queen whose death ushered in a new world order a generation before the birth of Christ. Rich in detail, epic in scope, Schiff’s biography is a luminous reconstruction of a dazzling life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stacy Schiff is the author of *Véra (Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov),* winner of the Pulitzer Prize; *Saint-Exupéry,* a Pulitzer Prize finalist; and *A Great Improvisation: Franklin, France, and the Birth of America,* winner of the George Washington Book Prize and the Ambassador Book Award. Schiff has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library. The recipient of an Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Schiff has contributed to *The New Yorker,* the *New York Times,* and the *Washington Post*, as well as many other publications. She lives in New York City.

ALSO BY STACY SCHIFF

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A Life

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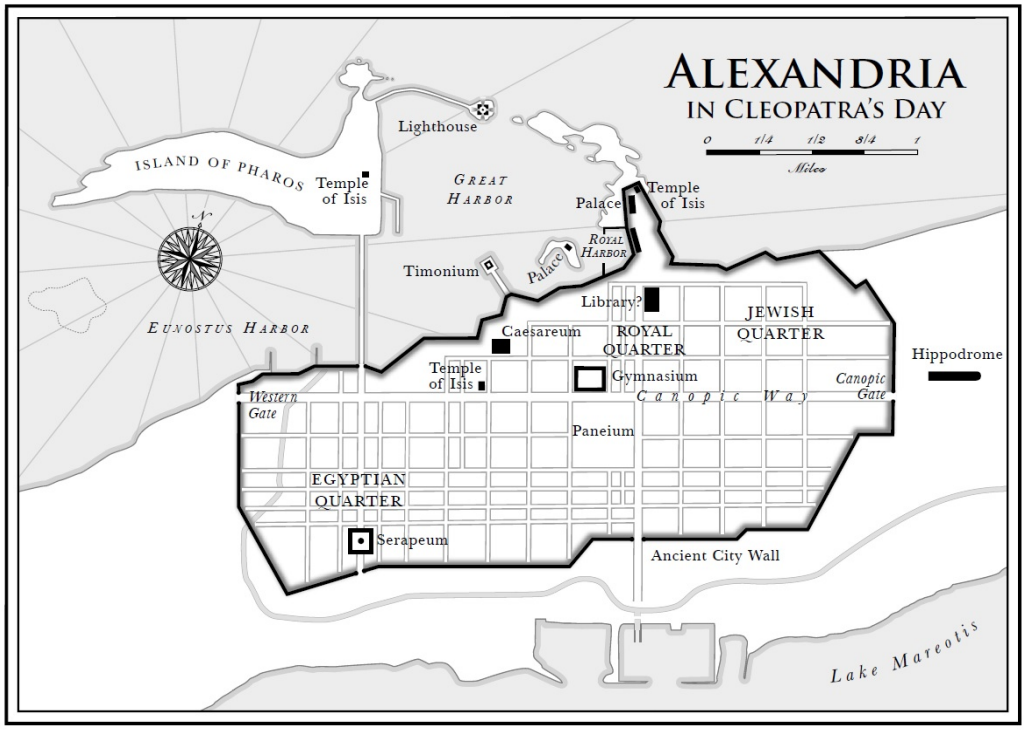
Finally, for Max, Millie, and Jo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0 250 500
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I

THAT EGYPTIAN WOMAN

“Man’s most valuable trait is a judicious sense of what not to believe.”
—EURIPIDES

AMONG THE MOST famous women to have lived, Cleopatra VII ruled Egypt for twenty-two years. She lost a kingdom once, regained it, nearly lost it again, amassed an empire, lost it all. A goddess as a child, a queen at eighteen, a celebrity soon thereafter, she was an object of speculation and veneration, gossip and legend, even in her own time. At the height of her power she controlled virtually the entire eastern Mediterranean coast, the last great kingdom of any Egyptian ruler. For a fleeting moment she held the fate of the Western world in her hands. She had a child with a married man, three more with another. She died at thirty-nine, a generation before the birth of Christ. Catastrophe reliably cements a reputation, and Cleopatra’s end was sudden and sensational. She has lodged herself in our imaginations ever since. Many people have spoken for her, including the greatest playwrights and poets; we have been putting words in her mouth for two thousand years. In one of the busiest afterlives in history she has gone on to become an asteroid, a video game, a cliché, a cigarette, a slot machine, a strip club, a synonym for Elizabeth Taylor. Shakespeare attested to Cleopatra’s infinite variety. He had no idea.

If the name is indelible, the image is blurry. Cleopatra may be one of the most recognizable figures in history but we have little idea of what she actually looked like. Only her coin portraits—issued in her lifetime, and which she likely approved—can be accepted as authentic. We remember her too for the wrong reasons. A capable, clear-eyed sovereign, she knew how to build a fleet, suppress an insurrection, control a currency, alleviate a famine. An eminent Roman general vouched for her grasp of military affairs. Even at a time when women rulers were no rarity she stood out, the sole female of the ancient world to rule alone and to play a role in Western affairs. She was incomparably richer than anyone else in the Mediterranean. And she enjoyed greater prestige than any other woman of her age, as an excitable rival king was reminded when he called, during her stay at his court, for her assassination. (In light of her stature, it could not be done.) Cleopatra descended from a long line of murderers and faithfully upheld the family tradition but was, for her time and place, remarkably well behaved. She nonetheless survives as a wanton temptress, not the last time a genuinely powerful woman has been transmuted into a shamelessly seductive one.

Like all lives that lend themselves to poetry, Cleopatra's was one of dislocations and disappointments. She grew up amid unsurpassed luxury, to inherit a kingdom in decline. For ten generations her family had styled themselves pharaohs. The Ptolemies were in fact Macedonian Greek, which makes Cleopatra approximately as Egyptian as Elizabeth Taylor. At eighteen Cleopatra and her ten-year-old brother assumed control of a country with a weighty past and a wobbly future. Thirteen hundred years separate Cleopatra from Nefertiti. The pyramids—to which Cleopatra almost certainly introduced Julius Caesar—already sported graffiti. The Sphinx had undergone a major restoration, a thousand years earlier. And the glory of the once great Ptolemaic Empire had dimmed. Cleopatra came of age in a

world shadowed by Rome, which in the course of her childhood extended its rule to Egypt's borders. When Cleopatra was eleven, Caesar reminded his officers that if they did not make war, if they did not obtain riches and rule others, they were not Romans. An Eastern sovereign who waged an epic battle of his own against Rome articulated what would become Cleopatra's predicament differently: The Romans had the temperament of wolves. They hated the great kings. Everything they possessed they had plundered. They intended to seize all, and would "either destroy everything or perish in the attempt." The implications for the last remaining wealthy country in Rome's sphere of influence were clear. Egypt had distinguished itself for its nimble negotiating; for the most part, it retained its autonomy. It had also already embroiled itself in Roman affairs.

For a staggering sum of money, Cleopatra's father had secured the official designation "friend and ally of the Roman people." His daughter would discover that it was not sufficient to be a friend to that people and their Senate; it was essential to befriend the most powerful Roman of the day. That made for a bewildering assignment in the late Republic, wracked by civil wars. They flared up regularly throughout Cleopatra's lifetime, pitting a succession of Roman commanders against one another in what was essentially a hot-tempered contest of personal ambition, twice unexpectedly decided on Egyptian soil. Each convulsion left the Mediterranean world shuddering, scrambling to correct its loyalties and redirect its tributes. Cleopatra's father had thrown in his lot with Pompey the Great, the brilliant Roman general on whom good fortune seemed eternally to shine. He became the family patron. He also entered into a civil war against Julius Caesar just as, across the Mediterranean, Cleopatra ascended to the throne. In the summer of 48 BC Caesar dealt Pompey a crushing defeat in central Greece; Pompey fled to Egypt, to

be stabbed and decapitated on an Egyptian beach. Cleopatra was twenty-one. She had no choice but to ingratiate herself with the new master of the Roman world. She did so differently from most other client kings, whose names, not incidentally, are forgotten today. For the next years she struggled to turn the implacable Roman tide to her advantage, changing patrons again after Caesar's murder, ultimately to wind up with his protégé, Mark Antony. From a distance her reign amounts to a reprieve. Her story was essentially over before it began, although that is of course not the way she would have seen it. With her death Egypt became a Roman province. It would not recover its autonomy until the twentieth century.

Can anything good be said of a woman who slept with the two most powerful men of her time? Possibly, but not in an age when Rome controlled the narrative. Cleopatra stood at one of the most dangerous intersections in history: that of women and power. Clever women, Euripides had warned hundreds of years earlier, were dangerous. A Roman historian was perfectly happy to write off a Judaean queen as a mere figurehead and—six pages later—to condemn her for her reckless ambition, her indecent embrace of authority. A more disarming brand of power made itself felt as well. In a first-century BC marriage contract, a bride promised to be faithful and affectionate. She further vowed not to add love potions to her husband's food or drink. We do not know if Cleopatra loved either Antony or Caesar, but we do know that she got each to do her bidding. From the Roman point of view she "enslaved" them both. Already it was a zero-sum game: a woman's authority spelled a man's deception. Asked how she had obtained her influence over Augustus, the first Roman emperor, his wife purportedly replied that she had done so "by being scrupulously chaste herself, doing gladly whatever pleased him, not meddling with any of his affairs, and, in particular, by pretending neither to hear of nor to notice the favorites that were the objects of

his passion.” There is no reason to accept that formula at face value. On the other hand, Cleopatra was cut from very different cloth. In the course of a leisurely fishing trip, under a languid Alexandrian sun, she had no trouble suggesting that the most celebrated Roman general of the day tend to his responsibilities.

To a Roman, license and lawlessness were Greek preserves. Cleopatra was twice suspect, once for hailing from a culture known for its “natural talent for deception,” again for her Alexandrian address. A Roman could not pry apart the exotic and the erotic; Cleopatra was a stand-in for the occult, alchemical East, for her sinuous, sensuous land, as perverse and original as its astonishment of a river. Men who came in contact with her seem to have lost their heads, or at least to have rethought their agendas. She runs away even with Plutarch’s biography of Mark Antony. She works the same effect on a nineteenth-century historian, who describes her, on meeting Caesar, as “a loose girl of sixteen.” (She was rather an intensely focused woman of twenty-one.) The siren call of the East long predated Cleopatra, but no matter; she hailed from the intoxicating land of sex and excess. It is not difficult to understand why Caesar became history, Cleopatra a legend.

Our view is further obscured by the fact that the Romans who told Cleopatra’s story very nearly knew their ancient history too well. Repeatedly it seeps into their accounts. Like Mark Twain in the overwhelming, overstuffed Vatican, we sometimes prefer the copies to the original. So did the classical authors. They conflated accounts, refurbishing old tales. They saddled Cleopatra with the vices of other miscreants. History existed to be retold, with more panache but not necessarily greater accuracy. In the ancient texts the villains always wear a particularly vulgar purple, eat too much roasted peacock, douse themselves in rare unguents, melt down pearls. Whether you were a transgressive, power-hungry Egyptian queen or a ruthless pirate, you were known

for the “odious extravagance” of your accessories. Iniquity and opulence went hand in hand; your world blazed purple and gold. Nor did it help that history bled into mythology, the human into the divine. Cleopatra’s was a world in which you could visit the relics of Orpheus’s lyre, or view the egg from which Helen of Troy had hatched. (It was in Sparta.)

History is written not only by posterity, but for posterity as well. Our most comprehensive sources never met Cleopatra. Plutarch was born seventy-six years after she died. (He was working at the same time as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.) Appian wrote at a remove of more than a century; Dio of well over two. Cleopatra’s story differs from most women’s stories in that the men who shaped it—for their own reasons—enlarged rather than erased her role. Her relationship with Mark Antony was the longest of her life, but her relationship with his rival, Augustus, was the most enduring. He would defeat Antony and Cleopatra. To Rome, to enhance the glory, he delivered up the tabloid version of an Egyptian queen, insatiable, treacherous, bloodthirsty, power-crazed. He magnified Cleopatra to hyperbolic proportions so as to do the same with his victory—and so as to smuggle his real enemy, his former brother-in-law, out of the picture. The end result is a nineteenth-century British life of Napoleon or a twentieth-century history of America, were it to have been written by Chairman Mao.

To the team of extraordinarily tendentious historians, add an extraordinarily spotty record. No papyri from Alexandria survive. Almost nothing of the ancient city survives aboveground. We have, perhaps and at most, one written word of Cleopatra’s. (In 33 BC either she or a scribe signed off on a royal decree with the Greek word *ginesthoi,* meaning, “Let it be done.”) Classical authors were indifferent to statistics and occasionally even to logic; their accounts contradict one another and themselves. Appian is careless with details, Josephus hopeless with chronology. Dio preferred rhetoric to exactitude. The lacunae are so regular

as to seem deliberate; there is very nearly a conspiracy of silences. How is it possible that we do not have an authoritative bust of Cleopatra from an age of accomplished, realistic portraiture? Cicero's letters of the first months of 44 BC—when Caesar and Cleopatra were together in Rome—were never published. The longest Greek history of the era glosses over the tumultuous period at hand. It is difficult to say what we miss most. Appian promises more of Caesar and Cleopatra in his four books of Egyptian history, which do not survive. Livy's account breaks off a century before Cleopatra. We know the detailed work of her personal physician only from Plutarch's references. Dellius's chronicle has vanished, along with the raunchy letters Cleopatra was said to have written him. Even Lucan comes to an abrupt, infuriating halt partway through his epic poem, leaving Caesar trapped in Cleopatra's palace at the outset of the Alexandrian War. And in the absence of facts, myth rushes in, the kudzu of history.

The holes in the record present one hazard, what we have constructed around them another. Affairs of state have fallen away, leaving us with affairs of the heart. A commanding woman versed in politics, diplomacy, and governance; fluent in nine languages; silver-tongued and charismatic, Cleopatra nonetheless seems the joint creation of Roman propagandists and Hollywood directors. She is left to put a vintage label on something we have always known existed: potent female sexuality. And her timing was lousy. Not only was her history written by her enemies, but it was her misfortune to have been on everyone's minds just as Latin poetry came into its own. She survives literarily in a language hostile to her. The fictions have only proliferated. George Bernard Shaw lists among his sources for *Caesar and Cleopatra* his own imagination. Plenty of historians have deferred to Shakespeare, which is understandable but a little like taking George C. Scott's word for Patton's.

To restore Cleopatra is as much to salvage the few facts as to peel away the encrusted myth and the hoary propaganda. She was a Greek woman whose history fell to men whose futures lay with Rome, the majority of them officials of the empire. Their historical methods are opaque to us. They seldom named their sources. They relied to a great extent on memory. They are by modern standards polemicists, apologists, moralists, fabulists, recyclers, cut-and-pasters, hacks. For all its erudition, Cleopatra's Egypt produced no fine historian. One can only read accordingly. The sources may be flawed, but they are the only sources we have. There is no universal agreement on most of the basic details of her life, no consensus on who her mother was, how long Cleopatra lived in Rome, how often she was pregnant, whether she and Antony married, what transpired at the battle that sealed her fate, how she died.[1] I have tried here to bear in mind who was a former librarian and who a Page Sixer, who had actually set eyes on Egypt, who despised the place and who was born there, who had a problem with women, who wrote with the zeal of a Roman convert, who meant to settle a score, please his emperor, perfect his hexameter. (I have relied little on Lucan. He was early on the scene, before Plutarch, Appian, or Dio. He was also a poet, and a sensationalist.) Even when they are neither tendentious nor tangled, the accounts are often overblown. As has been noted, there were no plain, unvarnished stories in antiquity. The point was to dazzle. I have not attempted to fill in the blanks, though on occasion I have corralled the possibilities. What looks merely probable remains here merely probable—though opinions differ radically even on the probabilities. The irreconcilable remains unreconciled. Mostly I have restored context. Indeed Cleopatra murdered her siblings, but Herod murdered his children. (He afterward wailed that he was "the most unfortunate of fathers.") And as Plutarch reminds us, such behavior was axiomatic among sovereigns.

Cleopatra was not necessarily beautiful, but her wealth—and her palace—left a Roman gasping. All read very differently on one side of the Mediterranean from the other. The last decades of research on women in antiquity and on Hellenistic Egypt substantially illuminate the picture. I have tried to pluck the gauze of melodrama from the final scenes of the life, which reduce even sober chroniclers to soap opera. Sometimes high drama prevails for a reason, however. Cleopatra's was an era of outsize, intriguing personalities. At its end the greatest actors of the age exit abruptly. A world comes crashing down after them.

While there is a great deal we do not know about Cleopatra, there is a great deal she did not know either. She knew neither that she was living in the first century BC nor in the Hellenistic Age, both of them later constructs. (The Hellenistic Age begins with the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC and ends in 30 BC, with the death of Cleopatra. It has been perhaps best defined as a Greek era in which the Greeks played no role.) She did not know she was Cleopatra VII for several reasons, one of which is that she was actually the sixth Cleopatra. She never knew anyone named Octavian. The man who vanquished and deposed her, prompted her suicide, and largely packaged her for posterity was born Gaius Octavius. By the time he entered Cleopatra's life in a meaningful way he called himself Gaius Julius Caesar, after his illustrious great-uncle, her lover, who adopted him in his will. We know him today as Augustus, a title he assumed only three years after Cleopatra's death. He appears here as Octavian, two Caesars remaining, as ever, one too many.

Most place names have changed since antiquity. I have followed Lionel Casson's sensible lead in opting for familiarity over consistency. Hence Berytus is here Beirut, while Pelusium—which no longer exists, but would today be just east of Port Said, at the entrance to the Suez Canal—

remains Pelusium. Similarly I have opted for English spellings over transliterations. Caesar's rival appears as Pompey rather than Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, Caesar's deputy as Mark Antony rather than Marcus Antonius. In many respects geography has changed, shorelines have sunk, marshes dried, hills crumbled. Alexandria is flatter today than it was in Cleopatra's lifetime. It is oblivious to its ancient street plan; it no longer gleams white. The Nile is nearly two miles farther east. The dust, the sultry sea air, Alexandria's melting purple sunsets, are unchanged. Human nature remains remarkably consistent, the physics of history immutable. Firsthand accounts continue to diverge wildly.[2] For well over two thousand years, a myth has been able to outrun and outlive a fact. Except where noted, all dates are BC.

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[1] Even the fiction writers cannot agree about Caesar and Cleopatra. He loves her (Handel); he loves her not (Shaw); he loves her (Thornton Wilder).

[2] As they have done since time immemorial. "And the endeavor to ascertain these facts was a laborious task, because those who were eyewitnesses of the several events did not give the same reports about the same things, but reports varying according to their championship of one side or the other, or according to their recollection," grumbled Thucydides, nearly four hundred years before Cleopatra.

II

DEAD MEN DON’T BITE

“It’s a godsend, really lucky, when one has so few relations.”

—MENANDER

THAT SUMMER SHE rallied a band of mercenaries, at a desert camp, under the glassy heat of the Syrian sun. She was twenty-one, an orphan and an exile. Already she had known both excessive good fortune and its flamboyant consort, calamity. Accustomed to the greatest luxury of the day, she held court two hundred miles from the ebony doors and onyx floors of home. Her tent amid the scrub of the desert was the closest she had come in a year. Over those months she had scrambled for her life, fleeing through Middle Egypt, Palestine, and southern Syria. She had spent a dusty summer raising an army.

The women in her family were good at this and so clearly was she, accomplished enough anyway for the enemy to have marched out to meet her. Dangerously close at hand, not far from the seaside fortress of Pelusium, on the eastern frontier of Egypt, were 20,000 veteran soldiers, an army about half the size of that with which Alexander the Great had crossed into Asia three centuries earlier. This one was a formidable assembly of pirates and bandits, outlaws, exiles, and fugitive slaves, under the titular command of her thirteen-year-old brother. With him she had inherited the throne of Egypt. She had shunted him aside; in return he had banished her from the kingdom over which they were

meant to rule jointly, as husband and wife. Her brother's army controlled Pelusium's redbrick walls, its massive twenty-foot, semicircular towers. She camped farther east, along the desolate coast, in a smoldering sea of amber sand. A battle loomed. Her position was hopeless at best. For the last time in two thousand years Cleopatra VII stands offstage. In a matter of days she will launch herself into history, which is to say that faced with the inevitable, she will counter with the improbable. It is 48 BC.

Throughout the Mediterranean a "strange madness" hung in the air, ripe with omens and portents and extravagant rumors. The mood was one of nervous exasperation. It was possible to be anxious and elated, empowered and afraid, all in the course of a single afternoon. Some rumors even proved true. Early in July Cleopatra heard that the Roman civil war—a contest that pitted the invincible Julius Caesar against the indomitable Pompey the Great—was about to collide with her own. This was alarming news. For as long as Cleopatra could remember, the Romans had served as protectors of the Egyptian monarchs. They owed their throne to that disruptive power, which in a few generations had conquered most of the Mediterranean world. Also as long as she could remember, Pompey had been a particular friend of her father's. A brilliant general, Pompey had for decades piled up victories, on land and sea, subduing nation after nation, in Africa, Asia, and Europe. Both Cleopatra and her estranged brother, Ptolemy XIII, were in his debt.

Days later Cleopatra discovered that the chances of being murdered by someone who owed you a favor were every bit as good as the chances of being murdered by a member of your immediate family. On September 28, Pompey appeared off the coast of Pelusium. He had been routed by Caesar. Desperate, he cast about for a refuge. He thought logically enough of the young king whose family he had supported and who was deeply beholden to him. No request he might make could in good faith be denied. The three regents who

essentially ruled for young Ptolemy—Theodotus, his rhetoric master; Achillas, the bold commander of the royal guard; and Pothinus, the eunuch who had nimbly parlayed his role as childhood tutor into that of prime minister—disagreed. The unexpected arrival presented them with a difficult decision, which they hotly debated. Opinions differed. To cast off Pompey was to make an enemy of him. To receive him was to make an enemy of Caesar. Were they to eliminate Pompey, he could offer no assistance to Cleopatra, to whom he was well disposed. Nor could he install himself on the throne of Egypt. “Dead men don’t bite” was the irrefutable counsel of Theodotus, the rhetoric teacher, who —having proved by simple syllogism that they could afford neither to befriend nor offend Pompey—delivered the line with a smile. He dispatched a welcoming message and a “wretched little boat” for the Roman. Pompey had not yet set foot on shore when, in the shallow waters off Pelusium, in full view of Ptolemy’s army and of the miniature king in his purple robes, he was stabbed to death, his head severed from his body.[1]

Caesar would try later to make sense of that savagery. Friends often turn into enemies in time of disaster, he conceded. He might equally well have noted that at times of disaster enemies reinvent themselves as friends. Ptolemy’s advisers beheaded Pompey most of all to curry favor with Caesar. What better way to endear themselves to the undisputed master of the Mediterranean world? By the same logic the three had simplified matters for Cleopatra. In the Roman civil war—a contest of such searing intensity that it seemed less an armed conflict than a plague, a flood, a fire —she now appeared to have backed the losing side.

Three days later Julius Caesar ventured ashore in the Egyptian capital, in pursuit of his rival. He arrived in advance of the bulk of his troops. A great metropolis, Alexandria was home to malicious wit, dubious morals, grand larceny. Its residents talked fast, in many languages

and at once; theirs was an excitable city of short tempers and taut, vibrating minds. Already it was in ferment, unrest this second flash of imperial red exacerbated. Caesar had been careful to modulate his joy in his victory and continued to do so. When Theodotus presented him with Pompey's three-day-old severed head, Caesar turned away in horror. He then burst into tears. A few may even have been genuine; at one time Pompey had been not only his ally but his son-in-law. If Ptolemy's advisers felt the gruesome welcome would hold Caesar off, they were wrong. If Caesar thought that Pompey's murder constituted a vote in his favor, he too was mistaken, at least so far as the Alexandrians were concerned. Riots greeted him onshore, where no one was less welcome than a Roman, especially one bearing the official trappings of power. At best Caesar would interfere with their affairs. At worst he had conquest in mind. Already Rome had restored an unpopular king who—to make matters worse—taxed his people to pay off the debt for that restoration. The Alexandrians did not care to pay the price for a king they had not wanted in the first place. Nor did they care to become Roman subjects.

Caesar installed himself securely in a pavilion on the grounds of the Ptolemies' palace, adjoining the royal dockyards, in the eastern part of the city. The skirmishing continued—roars and scuffles echoed loudly down the colonnaded streets—but in the palace he was safe from all disturbance. He sent hastily for reinforcements. And having done so, he summoned the feuding siblings. Caesar felt it incumbent upon him to arbitrate their dispute, as a decade earlier he and Pompey had together lobbied for their father. A stable Egypt was in Rome's best interest, the more so when there were substantial debts to be paid. As Caesar had himself recently suggested to his rival, it was time for the warring parties "to put an end to their obstinate behavior, abandon armed struggle, and not risk their luck

any further.” Cleopatra and her brother should have mercy on themselves and on their country.

The summons left Cleopatra with some explaining to do, as well as some calculating. She had every reason to plead her case promptly, before her brother’s advisers could undermine her. His army effectively blocked her from Egypt. Although Caesar had requested he disband it, Ptolemy made no effort to do so. To move her own men west, through the golden sand, toward the border and the high towers at Pelusium, was to risk an engagement. By one account she made contact with Caesar through an intermediary, then, convinced she had been betrayed (she was unpopular with the palace courtiers), she determined to plead her case herself. Which left her to puzzle out how to slip past enemy lines, across a well-patrolled frontier, and into a blockaded palace, covertly and alive. Cleopatra’s reputation would come to rest on her gift for pageantry, but in her first and greatest political gamble the challenge was to make herself inconspicuous. By modern standards too hers was a curious predicament. To make her mark, for her story to begin, this woman had to smuggle herself back into the house.

Clearly there was some deliberation. Plutarch tells us that “she was at a loss how to get in undiscovered” until she—or someone in her entourage; she, too, had confidants—hit on a brilliant ruse. It would have required a dress rehearsal. And it called for several exceedingly skilled accomplices, one of whom was a loyal Sicilian retainer named Apollodorus. Between the Sinai peninsula, where Cleopatra was camped, and the palace of Alexandria, where she had grown up, lay a treacherous marshland, thick with mites and mosquitoes. That swampy flat protected Egypt from eastern invasions. It took its name from its ability to devour whole armies, which the heavy sands did with “malevolent cunning.” Ptolemy’s forces controlled the coast, where Pompey’s body rotted in a makeshift grave. The surest and

simplest route west was then neither through the muddy pools of Pelusium nor along the Mediterranean, where Cleopatra would have been exposed to view and to a strong opposing current. It made more sense to detour south, up the Nile to Memphis, afterward to sail back to the coast, a trip of at least eight days. The river route was not without its dangers either; it was heavily trafficked and carefully surveyed by customs agents. Along the turbid Nile Cleopatra presumably sailed, with a strong wind and a host of mosquitoes, in mid-October. Ptolemy's advisers meanwhile balked at Caesar's request. How dare a Roman general summon a king? The lower-ranking party should call on the higher, as Caesar well knew.

So it was that Apollodorus silently maneuvered a tiny two-oared boat into Alexandria's eastern harbor and under the palace wall just after dusk. Close to shore all was dark, while from a distance the city's low-lying coast was illuminated by its magnificent, four-hundred-foot-tall lighthouse, a wonder of the ancient world. That blazing pillar stood a half mile from Cleopatra, at the end of a man-made causeway, on the island of Pharos. Even in its glow she was nowhere to be seen, however. At some point before Apollodorus docked his boat, she crawled into an oversize sack of hemp or leather, in which she arranged herself lengthwise. Apollodorus rolled up the bundle and secured it with a leather cord, slinging it over his shoulder, the only clue we have as to Cleopatra's size. To the gentle lap of the waves he set out across the palace grounds, a complex of gardens and multicolored villas and colonnaded walkways that spread over nearly a mile, or a quarter of the city. It was an area that Apollodorus —who certainly had not rowed from the desert alone but may have masterminded his queen's return—knew well. On his shoulder, Cleopatra rode through the palace gates and directly into Caesar's quarters, rooms that properly belonged to her. It was one of the more unusual homecomings in history. Many queens have risen from

obscurity, but Cleopatra is the only one to have emerged on the world stage from inside a sturdy sack, the kind of bag into which one customarily stuffed rolls of papyrus or transported a small fortune in gold. Ruses and disguises came readily to her. On a later occasion she would conspire with another woman in peril to make her escape in a coffin.

We do not know if the unveiling took place before Caesar. Either way it is unlikely that Cleopatra appeared “majestic” (as one source has it) or laden with gems and gold (as another purports) or even marginally well coiffed. In defiance of the male imagination, five centuries of art history, and two of the greatest plays in English literature, she would have been fully clothed, in a formfitting, sleeveless, long linen tunic. The only accessory she needed was one she alone among Egyptian women was entitled to wear: the diadem, or broad white ribbon, that denoted a Hellenistic ruler. It is unlikely she appeared before Julius Caesar without one tied around her forehead and knotted at the back. Of Cleopatra’s “knowledge of how to make herself agreeable to everyone,” we have, on the other hand, abundant evidence. Generally it was known to be impossible to converse with her without being instantly captivated by her. For this audience, the boldness of the maneuver—the surprise appearance of the young queen in the sumptuously painted halls of her own home, which Caesar himself could barely penetrate—proved in itself an enchantment. Retrospectively, the shock appears to have been as much political as personal. The jolt was that generated when, in a singular, shuddering moment, two civilizations, passing in different directions, unexpectedly and momentously touch.

Celebrated as much for his speed as for his intuition, Julius Caesar was not an easy man to surprise. He was forever arriving before expected and in advance of the messengers sent to announce him. (He was that fall paying the price for having preceded his legions to Egypt.) If the greatest part of his success could be explained “by his rapidity and by the

unexpectedness of his movements," he was for the rest rarely disconcerted, armed for all contingencies, a precise and lucid strategist. His impatience survives him: What is *Veni, vidi, vici*—the claim was still a year in the future—if not a paean to efficiency? So firm was his grasp of human nature that he had at their decisive battle that summer instructed his men not to hurl their javelins but to thrust them into the faces of Pompey's men. Their vanity, he promised, would prove greater than their courage. He was correct: the Pompeians had covered their faces and run. Over the previous decade Caesar had overcome the most improbable obstacles and performed the most astonishing feats. Never one to offend fortune, he felt all the same that it could stand to be nudged along; he was the kind of opportunist who makes a great show of marveling at his sheer good luck. At least in terms of ingenuity and bold decision-making, he had before him a kindred spirit.

In another realm the young Egyptian queen had little in common with the "love-sated man already past his prime." (Caesar was fifty-two.) His amorous conquests were as legendary and as varied as his military feats. On the street the elegant, angular-faced man with the flashing black eyes and the prominent cheekbones was hailed—there was overstatement only on the second count—as "every woman's man and every man's woman." Cleopatra had been married for three years to a brother who was by all accounts "a mere boy" and who—even if he had by thirteen attained puberty, which by ancient standards was unlikely—had been trying for most of that time to dispose of her. Later commentators would write off Cleopatra as "Ptolemy's impure daughter," a "matchless siren," the "painted whore" whose "unchastity cost Rome dear." What that "harlot queen" was unlikely to have had when she materialized before Caesar in October 48 was any sexual experience whatever.

Insofar as the two can be pried apart, survival rather than seduction was first on her mind. As her brother's advisers had amply demonstrated, the prize was Caesar's favor. It was imperative that Cleopatra align herelf with him instead of with the family benefactor, whose campaign she had supported and whose headless body lay decomposing on a Mediterranean beach. Under the circumstances, there was no reason to assume Caesar favorably disposed toward her. From his point of view, a young king with an army at his command and the confidence of the Alexandrians was the better bet. Ptolemy had the blood of Pompey on his hands, however; Caesar may have calculated that the price to pay in Rome for allying himself with his countryman's murderers would be greater than the price to pay for assisting a deposed and helpless queen. He had long before grasped that "all men work more zealously against their enemies than they cooperate with their friends." At least initially, Cleopatra may have owed her life more to Caesar's censure of her brother and his distaste for Ptolemy's advisers—they hardly seemed the kind of men with whom one settled frank financial matters—than to any charms of her own. She was also lucky. As one chronicler pointed out, a different man might have traded her life for Pompey's. Caesar could equally well have lopped off her head.

Generally the Roman commander was of a mild disposition. He was perfectly capable of killing tens of thousands of men, equally famous for his displays of clemency, even toward bitter enemies, sometimes toward the same ones twice. "Nothing was dearer to his heart," one of his generals asserts, "than pardoning suppliants." A plucky, royal, well-spoken suppliant doubtless topped that list. Caesar had further reason to take to this one: As a young man, he too had been a fugitive. He too had made costly political mistakes. While the decision to welcome Cleopatra may have been logical at the time, it led to one of the closest calls of Caesar's career. When he met Cleopatra

she was struggling for her life. By late fall they both were. For the next months Caesar found himself under siege, pummeled by an ingenious enemy keen to offer him his first taste of guerrilla warfare, in a city with which he was unfamiliar and in which he was vastly outnumbered. Surely Ptolemy and the people of Alexandria deserve some credit for seeing to it that—closeted together for six nerve-wracking months behind hastily constructed barricades—the balding veteran general and the agile young queen emerged as close allies, so close that by early November, Cleopatra realized she was pregnant.

Behind every great fortune, it has been noted, is a crime; the Ptolemies were fabulously rich. They were descended not from the Egyptian pharaohs whose place they assumed but from the scrappy, hard-living Macedonians (tough terrain breeds tough men, Herodotus had already warned) who produced Alexander the Great. Within months of Alexander's death, Ptolemy—the most enterprising of his generals, his official taster, a childhood intimate, and by some accounts a distant relative—had laid claim to Egypt. In an early display of the family gift for stagecraft, Ptolemy kidnapped Alexander the Great's body. It had been headed for Macedonia. Would it not be far more useful, reasoned young Ptolemy, intercepting the funeral cortege, in Egypt, ultimately in Alexandria, a city the great man had founded only decades earlier? There it was rerouted, to be displayed in a gold sarcophagus at the center of the city, a relic, a talisman, a recruiting aid, an insurance policy. (By Cleopatra's childhood, the sarcophagus was alabaster or glass. Strapped for funds, her great-uncle had traded the original for an army. He paid for the substitution with his life.)

The legitimacy of the Ptolemaic dynasty would rest on this tenuous connection to the most storied figure in the ancient world, the one against whom all aspirants measured

themselves, in whose mantle Pompey had wrapped himself, whose feats were said to reduce Caesar to tears of inadequacy. The cult was universal. Alexander played as active a role in the Ptolemaic imagination as in the Roman one. Many Egyptian homes displayed statues of him. So strong was his romance—and so fungible was first-century history—that it would come to include a version in which Alexander descended from an Egyptian wizard. Soon enough he was said to have been related to the royal family; like all self-respecting arrivistes, the Ptolemies had a gift for reconfiguring history.[2] Without renouncing their Macedonian heritage, the dynasty's founders bought themselves a legitimacy-conferring past, the ancient-world equivalent of the mail-order coat of arms. What was true was that Ptolemy descended from the Macedonian aristocracy, a synonym for high drama. As a consequence, no one in Egypt considered Cleopatra to be Egyptian. She hailed instead from a line of rancorous, meddlesome, shrewd, occasionally unhinged Macedonian queens, a line that included the fourth-century Olympias, whose greatest contribution to the world was her son, Alexander the Great. The rest were atrocities.

If outside Egypt the Ptolemies held to the Alexander the Great narrative, within the country their legitimacy derived from a fabricated link with the pharaohs. This justified the practice of sibling marriage, understood to be an Egyptian custom. Amid the Macedonian aristocracy there was ample precedent for murdering your sibling, none for marrying her. Nor was there a Greek word for "incest." The Ptolemies carried the practice to an extreme. Of the fifteen or so family marriages, at least ten were full brother-sister unions. Two other Ptolemies married nieces or cousins. They may have done so for simplicity's sake; intermarriage minimized both claimants to the throne and pesky in-laws. It eliminated the problem of finding an appropriate spouse in a foreign land. It also neatly reinforced the family cult, along with the