

The Parallel Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans

Englished by Sir Thomas North • 1579

“Life of Marcus Antonius”

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There is a striking passage in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* that is so similar to the original source material, yet different enough to see how Shakespeare could take an original piece of writing and make it leap from lovely to divine. The paragraph below is from Thomas North’s translation:

She disdained to set forward otherwise, but to take her barge in the river of Cydnus, the poepe whereof was of gold, the sailes of purple, and the owers of silver, which kept stroke in rowing after the sounde of the musicke of flutes, howboyes, citherns, violls, and such other instruments as they played upon in the barge. And now for the person of her selfe: she was layed under a pavillion of cloth of gold of tissue, apparelled and attired like the goddesse Venus, commonly drawn in picture: and hard by her, on either hand of her, pretie faire boyes apparelled as painters doe set forth god Cupide, with litle fannes in their hands, with the which they fanned wind upon her. Her Ladies and gentlewomen also, the fairest of them were apparelled like the nymphes Nereides (which are the mermaides of the waters) and like the Graces, some stearing the helme, others tending the tackle and ropes of the barge, out of the which there came a wonderfull passing sweete savor of perfumes, that perfumed the wharfes side

Compare this to Shakespeare’s version, Act 2.2:

I will tell you,
The barge she sat in, like a burnish’d throne
Burnt on the water: the poop was beaten gold,
Purple the sails: and so perfumèd 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 pavillion, cloth of gold of tissue,
O’er-picturing that Venus, where we see
The fancy out-work Nature. On each side her,
Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,
With divers coulour’d fans whose wind did seem

To glove the delicate cheeks which they did cool,
And what they undid, did.
Her gentlewoman, like the Nereides,
So many mer-maids tended her i’ th’ eyes,
And made their bends adornings. At the helm
A seeming mer-maid 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 Anthony
Enthron’d i’ th’ market-place, did sit alone,
Whistling t’ th’ air, which, but for vacancy,
Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too,
And made a gap in Nature.