

## THE BARGE SPEECH FROM *ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA*

Near the end of *Antony and Cleopatra* 2.2, Enobarbus delivers a speech describing Cleopatra on her barge. The speech closely parallels Shakespeare's primary source for the play: Thomas North's 1579 translation of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*. In fact, critics often describe the speech as "just" a blank-verse version of North's translation. But Shakespeare's language does a lot more than add rhythm to his source.

(A fuller excerpt from North's translation appears in *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare*, pages 186–87.)

North's translation of Plutarch's <i>Lives</i>	<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i> (2.2.201–28)
... her barge in the river of Cydnus, the poop whereof was of gold, the sales of purple	The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne, 201 Burnt on the water. The poop was beaten gold; 202 Purple the sails, and so perfumèd that 203 The winds were love-sick with them. 204
and the oars of silver, which kept stroke in rowing after the sound of the music of flutes, oboes, citherns, viols, and such other instruments as they played upon in the barge.	The oars were silver, 204 Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made 205 The water which they beat to follow faster, 206 As amorous of their strokes. 207
And now for the person of herself: she was laid under a pavilion of cloth of gold of tissue, appareled and attired like the goddess Venus, commonly drawn in picture;	For her own person, 207 It beggared all description. She did lie 208 In her pavilion, cloth-of-gold of tissue, 209 O'erpicturing that Venus where we see 210 The fancy outwork nature. 211
and hard by her, on either hand of her, pretty fair boys appareled as painters do set forth god Cupid, with little fans in their hands, with the which they fanned wind upon her.	On each side her 211 Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids, 212 With divers-colored fans, whose wind did seem 213 To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool, 214 And what they undid did. 215
Her Ladies and gentlewomen also, the fairest of them were appareled like the nymphs Nereides (which are the mermaids of the waters) and like the Graces, some steering the helm, others tending the tackle and ropes of the barge,	Her gentlewomen, like the Nereides, 216 So many mermaids, tended her i'th'eyes, 217 And made their bends adornings. At the helm 218 A seeming mermaid steers; the silken tackle 219 Swell with the touches of those flower-soft hands, 220 That yarely frame the office. 221
out of the which there came a wonderful passing sweet savor of perfumes, that perfumed the wharf's side, pestered with innumerable multitudes of people.	From the barge 221 A strange invisible perfume hits the sense 222 Of the adjacent wharfs. 223
Some of them followed the barge all alongst the river's side: others also ran out of the city to see her coming in. So that in the end, there ran such multitudes of people one after another to see her, that Antonius was left post alone in the market place, in his Imperial seat to give audience ...	The city cast 223 Her people out upon her; and Antony 224 Enthroned i'th'marketplace, did sit alone, 225 Whistling to th'air; which, but for vacancy, 226 Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too, 227 And made a gap in nature. 228