

The Womanning of Cleopatra's Barge

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Her gentlewomen, like the Nereides,
 So many mermaids, *tended her i' th' 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.

(*Antony and Cleopatra*, II.ii)

The prolonged commentaries in Furness's Variorum edition on the lines emphasized include proposed emendations to almost every word, supporting speculation about whether the 'eyes' and 'bends' suggest the postures of the gentlewomen or the making-up of Cleopatra's eyes and eyebrows. Most recent editors follow Furness's conclusion in awarding the eyes to Cleopatra and the bends to her women, who thus remain in her line of sight in graceful postures, although some editors prefer the cosmetic option. (Some hedge their bets.) Neither reading appears convincing. The first strains the sense to 'in the view of her eyes' (even though she 'did lie / In her pavilion'). The second suggests the women are continually repairing the damage to the Queen's appearance (caused by the 'fans' of the 'pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids' who are either side of her?), and doing so during a royal progress in which she is nevertheless 'O'er-picturing ... Venus'. Both readings overlook the clear detail in Shakespeare's source in North's Plutarch, to which the text is generally close, and overlook too earlier scattered suggestions of nautical terminology which would be appropriate to the diction of the ironic soldier Enobarbus.

It is still common to refer to the narrow area between the bows of a vessel as the eyes of the craft. The usage is recorded in nautical word-books and derives from the custom of painting eyes on the bows to 'see' the course. The royal barges of the Pharaohs had the eye-like device of Horus the sun-god, whose divine embodiment the Pharaohs were held to be. By about the sixth century B.C. the device had become a true *oculus*; there are many examples recorded up to the third century A.D. and later.

A.L. Rowse's *Annotated Shakespeare* reproduces from J.O. Halliwell's 1853-65 edition an engraving from an Egyptian tomb painting which shows the eyes clearly (although the connection is not made).¹

'Bends' means the knots joining ropes to each other or to some other object, and thus 'to bend a sail' is to fasten it to its yard or boom, or fasten the lowermost corners of the sail to the 'sheets'.²

'Tackle', as in block and tackle, includes 'the tackles that keep firme the masts from swaying',³ and could refer to the ropes and pulleys used to hoist and tension the mast, with its large square sail, of an Egyptian barge.

The meaning is, then, that the mermaid-like gentlewomen attended to the sailing of the barge, or to Cleopatra's requirements for its sailing, from the bows (the pronoun in 'tended her' by nearness appears to belong to Cleopatra but may book back to 'The barge she sat in', opening the previous paragraph). Another 'seeming mermaid' worked the steering oar at the stern. Their tasks together made 'the silken tackle / Swell'; that is, the sail (by association) fills as they 'yarely',⁴ skilfully or nimbly, 'frame the office', fulfil their duties. The parts of the rigging have been made beautiful, as befits a state barge bearing Cleopatra, a touch Shakespeare added to his source.

This reading puts the gentlewomen at the bows and at the stern, handling the barge, with Cleopatra reclining amidships shaded beneath the pavilion and flanked by the pretty boys. The

1 See Lionel Casson, *Ships and Seamanship in the Ancient World*, Princeton 2nd edn 1986, pp.63-4 and 385 and plates 16, 64, 90, 124, 125, 135, 191, 192; William Falconer, *New Universal Dictionary of the Marine*, London 1769, rev. edn 1830, s.v. 'eyes'; A.L. Rowse, *The Annotated Shakespeare*, London and New York 1978, III, 489; and OED 'eyes' sb III.14.

2 See Captain John Smith, *A Sea Grammar*, London 1627 (ed. Kermit Goell, London 1970), and Falconer, *op.cit.*, s.v. 'bend'.

3 Smith, *op.cit.*, s.v. 'tackle'.

4 The nautical word is used again by Enobarbus, of Caesar's ships, III.vii, and also occurs in *The Tempest*, I.i.

account in North's Plutarch corresponds, Shakespeare having reduced 'tackle and ropes' to 'tackle':

... she was laid under a pavillion of cloth of gold tissue ... hard by her, on either hand of her, pretie faire boyes apparelled as painters doe set forth god Cupide, with little fanne in their hands, with the which they fanned wind upon her. Her Ladies and gentlewomen also ... like the Graces, some steering the helme, others tending the tackle and ropes of the barge ...⁵

There is then an irony in the account which is characteristic of Enobarbus. The pretty boys produce an artificial breeze; it is the women who make use of the real one.

Smith's near-contemporary *Sea Grammar*, cited above, includes in its prefatory material some useful advice for textual commentators:

Thou which in Sea-learning would'st Clerk commence,
 First learne to reade, and after reade to learne,
 For words to sound, and not to know their sense,
 Is for to saile a Ship without a Sterne.
 By this Sea Grammar thou mayst distinguish
 And understand the Latine by the English.⁶

5 Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, London and New York 1964, V, 274.

6 Smith, *op.cit.*, 'In Authorem', xxvii-iii, attr. Sir Samuel Salstonall.