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Queen of Hearts; A rousing fictional account of the ancient monarch's life and loves.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Hand

CLEOPATRA DISMOUNTS

*By Carmen Boullosa. Translated from the Spanish by Geoff Hargreave
Grove. 224 pp. \$22*

Pity the great Cleopatra! Last of Egypt's pharaohs, the "enchanted queen" styled by Shakespeare as "cunning past men's thought" has in these latter days been reduced to a vague cinematic memory of Elizabeth Taylor in too much eye makeup and bad Theda Bara headgear. In her phantasmagoric new novel, *Cleopatra Dismounts*, the Mexican writer Carmen Boullosa attempts to reclaim for modern readers the Ptolemaic ruler who claimed descent from Alexander the Great. (Cleopatra was not, in fact, Egyptian by blood, but Macedonian.)

Boullosa draws liberally from diverse classical sources -- Cicero, Sophocles, Theocritus, to name a few -- and takes her title from Virgil: "At a bound the queen slips from the saddle. All her company does the same. They glide to the ground, abandoning their mounts." But the heroine of Boullosa's antic work bears more resemblance to Xena, Warrior Princess, than she does to the woman maligned by many of her male contemporaries or to the clever stage vixen immortalized by Shakespeare and George Bernard Shaw.

Boullosa backgrounds the dizzyingly complex politics of Rome in the first century C.E., keeping her focus on Cleopatra the lover and adventurer. She weaves three narrative strands, each dictated by the queen to her scribe, Diomedes.

The first, and least successful, tale is of Cleopatra's affair with Mark Antony, triumvir of Rome and, in Boullosa's account, the queen's greatest love. Mark Antony -- god manqué, Dionysus to Cleopatra's Isis, "a successful general but an ineffectual king" -- has been abandoned by his troops and humiliated by his rival, Octavius (Caesar Augustus). Returning in disgrace to his lover, he misreads a letter from her and fears she has killed herself -- understandably, as the missive begins "I am dead, my king." In despair, Mark Antony stabs himself in the stomach, just moments before Cleopatra summons him to her mausoleum in the Temple of Isis. Diomedes then bears the general, bleeding to death, to join his queen.

What follows is Cleopatra's extended aria of grief and longing for her lover, though her grief has not blinded her to the disastrous consequences of their affair. Whatever the historical Mark Antony might have been like, in Boullosa's

account he comes across as a colossal jerk: weak, capricious, prone to rages. Or, as Cleopatra puts it, "Antony, you were riddled with rottenness. As rotten as a woman who was once queen but today is forced to share a bed with the friends of her master. Rotten with the rottenness of a man who fails his city in time of war." Lest the reader not get the point, the queen's roster of rottenness goes on for an entire page, followed by her admission that "Only when love was satisfied, reciprocated, and rendered happy, could I feel complete." Cue Oprah.

Fortunately, in the second strand of the tale, the dying Cleopatra quickly moves on to recalling an earlier, happier self, the ambitious and canny 12-year-old who flees Rome with a band of cheerfully accommodating gladiators. The future queen journeys along the Appian Way in an ox-cart then boards a ship, which is soon overtaken by pirates. Dressed as Isis, the plucky princess charms and amazes the marauders, who bring her to their ruler, the governor of Tarsus. "I arrived at a court where there was not a single woman . . . composed of adventurers and desperadoes from all nations. . . . I should never have left that place."

Here Cleopatra's tale shifts for the third and last time, to an exhilarating and lubricious account of her sojourn among the Amazons. Up until this point, Boullosa's incantatory prose seems to struggle against the bonds of historical necessity; but in this final section she leaves behind more mundane matters and finds a subject worthy of her lyric style.

Cleopatra, now a young woman, is visiting the port of Pelisium when, like Europa before her, she is kidnapped by a divine bull. The supernatural beast carries her into the sea, invoking the Nereids as it does so; the sea-nymphs emerge, along with Neptune and numerous Tritons, all of whom proceed to act out some of the more adult-themed rites of the ancient world.

The bull then deposits her upon the shores of an eerie country where the sun hangs, unmoving, upon the horizon. In this sunset land Cleopatra is greeted by the Amazons, led by their queen, Hippolyta. She witnesses more arcane rituals, reminiscent of those detailed by Apuleius at the end of *The Golden Ass* and here rendered powerfully in Boullosa's hallucinatory prose, then at last ventures on to Alexandria, where she will have her fateful meeting with Caesar, after being smuggled into his chambers in a carpet.

Boullosa's epic, while uneven, is still wildly entertaining, as befits its subject -- one of history's "inimitable party-goers," as Boullosa styles her. Our last glimpse of the great queen is of a half-mad woman robed in her lover's blood, mourning a lost world that "beat to the rhythm of the souls of various gods who were something more than statues and paintings!" It's a tribute to Carmen Boullosa's gifts that she leaves her reader feeling that loss as well, and yearning for more of this talented author's work. *

Elizabeth Hand is the author of "Bibliomancy: Four Novellas," just published, and the forthcoming novel "Mortal Love."