

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***Antony and Cleopatra*** 1607

Shakespeare

### OVERVIEW

**History.** The plot of the play is based on Thomas North's translation, in 1579, of Plutarch's *Lives*. It centers around the relationship between Mark Antony and Cleopatra, from the time of the Sicilian Revolt, to the suicide of Cleopatra, during the First War of the Roman Republic. (Background facts which on the whole matter, to the plot and testify to Shakespeare's genuine interest in the events which marked the first century B.C., in Rome, as one of western history's formative turning points.

**Politics.** While the love affairs between Antony and Cleopatra is the most gripping audience-tug, in the play, there is a fascinating cultural contrast, between stark and pragmatic Roman politics and the abundant sensuous life of Egypt, where Cleopatra is queen, and from which Antony cannot separate himself. That inability to separate himself follows from the depth of Antony's own political engagement in Rome. From the time of his defence of Caesar, after the assassination of that 'hero'-- the theme of *Julius Caesar* (1599)—Antony has been immersed in global political infighting, in Rome, with other members of the triumvirate of political rivals eager to fill the vacuum being left by the draining away of the Republic spirit. We see, in the present play, that his struggles both with Octavius, who will be the first Roman Emperor, and with Pompei, will be as defining, for his future as will be his luscious Nile queen.

### CHARACTERS

*Triumvirs* (Marc Antony, Octavius Caesar, M. Aemilius Lepidus)

*Antony's friends* (an, Scarus, Decretas)

*Caesar's friends* (Dolabella, Agrippa)

*Pompey's friends* (Menas, Menecrates)

*Attendants on Cleopatra* (Alexas, Mardian)

A soothsayer

A clown

*Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt* (Octavia, Sister to Caesar, wife to Antony)

*Attendants on Cleopatra* (Charmian, )Iras

## STORY

At the outset of the story, Antony is hanging out with Cleopatra, in Egypt, and forgetting his soldierly duties in Rome, as well as the fact that his third wife, Fulvia, has recently died, after having rebelled against Octavius. Octavius now calls Antony back to Rome, to help in the fight against the piratical Pompei, who is threatening the present triumvirate. Antony, though under pressure from Cleopatra to go ultimately gives in, and returns to Rome.

For the time being Antony and Octavius compromise their differences; Agrippa, Octavius's close friend, suggests Antony should marry Octavius' sister, Octavia. The marriage, intended to consolidate the relationship between Octavius and Antony, begins to work, but then the tug of Egypt on Antony becomes too great, and we start to realize how forcefully this play interrelates power and romantic love. Antony and Cleopatra—like Romeo and Juliette—cannot get along without one another. How true this is we will learn soon enough, when Cleopatra, in Egypt, gets the news of Antony's marriage to Octavia. After generally brutalizing the messenger, who has brought her this news, Cleopatra accepts the new reality, only after being assured that Octavia is thoroughly ugly and unattractive.

Back in Rome again, Antony finds himself under pressure to join with Lepidus and Octavius, in the fight to get Pompey off of the high seas, but disapproving of the plans of the other two, he heads back to Hellenistic Egypt, where he makes himself and Cleopatra rulers of the Eastern third of the Roman Republic. In the resulting disputes with Octavius, about the best way to develop the triumvirate, Octavius and Antony fall out, and declare war on one another.

In the ensuing naval battle Antony finds his forces being outfought; at the site of Actium, where Antony is fully engaged, the tide turns against him, and before his eyes Cleopatra's fleet of six ships flees. Still undefeated, Antony nonetheless breaks off the naval engagement, and follows Cleopatra's forces, in an expression of love above all. This is in fact the point at which Shakespeare's play becomes a tribute to the power of love, even of love over shame, for Antony must hereafter endure the taunt of coward. Stung by this reproach, Antony agrees to fight one more battle for Cleopatra, but his land forces are thoroughly routed, and he decides that Cleopatra has been the source of all his woe. This is the beginning of the complex melodrama, for which the play is most famed.

After having heard that Antony has denounced her, Cleopatra decides there is one way to win back his love, a fake suicide. In the meantime, however, Antony has decided his own life is not worth living: he attempts suicide, fails quite to kill himself, and at the very last is hoisted into Cleopatra's arms, where he dies. Octavius turns to Cleopatra, offering her honorable terms, to return to Rome as a captive, but she refuses, unwilling to see herself paraded through the streets, and mocked as Antony's lover. On the sly she has a couple of asp's imported into her quarters, and gives them the pleasure of completing her life for her.

## THEMES

**Power.** There are several kinds of power at the center of this play. The power exercised by Cleopatra is in part powerfully sensuous and sexual, but extends beyond that point. She is, after all, Queen of Egypt, commander of a naval fleet, and a domineering personal figure, ready to whip Antony and his fellow triumvirs, with whom he is in pretty constant conflict, is deeply involved in the Roman male gender power struggle, although he pales compared to Octavius, when it comes to devotion to military mission.

**Passion.** Antony and Cleopatra, in the end, sacrifice all for love; that is give up their lives for one another, in a gesture which profits no one, but illustrates the incandescent hold sexual passion can exercise over two people who catch fire from one another.

**Jealousy.** Cleopatra is the ultimate in female jealousy, a fact which has led readers of Shakespeare to feel that he has a unique understanding of the far regions of the female mind. Her vicious resume of the physical faults of Octavia is, however, sufficient to calm her jealousy of Antony, and her resentment even toward Octavia declines when she is reassured of the ugliness of her rival.

**Self-destruction** In the end, neither Antony nor Cleopatra can see beyond the boundaries of their passion for the other. Suicide was a deep cultural resource throughout Roman cultural history, and both of these characters lived their lives in terms of the availability of a way out.

**Betrayal** The great betrayal, in the present drama, was Antony's, as he accepted the offer of Octavius, to marry the latter's sister, and to leave Cleopatra alone in Egypt. Antony had been emotionally committed to Cleopatra, and here he abandoned her, in a move to shore up the triumvirate. In the end, of course, Antony and Cleopatra forgave one another everything.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### Antony

**Character** The play evolves around two main themes, each of which deeply involves Antony. First come Antony's struggles within the Roman political establishment, to establish the triumvirate of Octavius, Lepidus, and Antony, and to create a new power center for the Rome from which the force of Julius Caesar had been subtracted. Antony is continually moving in the orbit of the Roman domain, jockeying for position and power. Antony's other life, however, is all Cleopatra. He has been married three times, but nothing holds a candle to the passion he feels for this exotic woman. Death is a small price to pay for the moments of Cleopatra's love.

**Parallels** Perhaps unfairly to Antony—for who else has known Cleopatra?—one tends to class him with the pretty boys—Vronsky (in *Anna Karenina*), Achilles in the *Iliad*, or even Aegisthus, the lover of Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Pretty boys sacrifice too much for womanly (or Patroclean, in Achilles' case) love, get drunk on their passion, and yet wallow in that love, are not able to lead, through it, to further destinies and organizations of life. The anti-Antony, in the present play, is Octavius, goal oriented and dry, the one participant, in the all night drink fest on Pompey's galleon, who comes off the ship dead sober.

### Illustrative moments

**Inseparable.** In many versions of Antony's love talk, he explains to Cleopatra that the two of them cannot be separated. 'thou residing here, goes yet with me,' just as my departing from you is a way of remaining with you.

**Resolved.** 'I must from this enchanting queen break off,' expostulates Antony in regard to Cleopatra, when he hears the news of the death of his wife, Fulvia. He is unable to maintain this resolution, but it continues to be his determination.

**Subtle.** 'And I hence fleeting here remain with thee,' says Antony to Cleopatra, as he leaves her to return to Rome, and reengage in military operations.

**Addicted.** 'I'th'East my pleasure lies...' says Antony, explaining that although he has wedded Octavia, he is quite aware that Cleopatra, not Octavia, is his passion.

**Furious.** ‘All is lost! This foul Egyptian hath betrayed me,’ cries Antony, as he realizes that Cleopatra’s fleet has been disengaged from the battle of Actium, and that he, Antony, has been hung out to dry.

### Cleopatra

**Character** Cleopatra is a passionate lover of Marc Antony, her co ruler of the land of Egypt, as well as a woman of state, commander of a fleet, and brutal task master, to those who bring her bad news—like the messenger who brings the news of Antony’s marriage to Octavia. She is capable of extravagant jealousy, when she insists that the messenger, describing Octavia, paint her in the ugliest possible terms. Her tenderness, as far as we can see, is reserved for Antony alone.

**Parallels** From the goddess Hera to Clytemnestra, the killer of her husband Agamemnon, to the shrewish Metricha in a Mime of Herondas, the ancient Greeks excelled in the portrayal of masterful women. Rarely, though, are those power figures sensuous beauties, like Cleopatra. Shakespeare himself tends to divorce power from seductiveness in Lady Macbeth or Gertrude (in *Hamlet*). Is Molly Bloom seductive, as well as erotic and domineering? Is Dido, who has been compared to Cleopatra? Dido is a charmer, with lovers surrounding her, and she is a Queen, like Cleopatra. In the end she is a suicide, like Cleopatra, but she never exercises her magic seduction on Aeneas, and in the end she loses her guy.

### Illustrative moments

**Self-pity** ‘... ‘be deaf to my unpitied folly,’ says Cleopatra to Antony, as he leaves her to return to Rome. She spares nothing, to attract pity.

**Resolve.** ‘He shall have every day a separate greeting...’ says Cleopatra, as Antony returns to the battlefield, and she guarantees him that she will remain in close touch! Fortunately, she didn’t have text messaging

**Fury.** ‘Horrible villain!’ cries Cleopatra to the messenger who has brought the news of Antony’s marriage in Rome. The messenger suffers mightily for having told the truth.

**Assuring.** ‘I have sixty sails. Caesar none better.’ Cleopatra guarantees Antony the naval support he feels he needs, to the fight at Actium—at which he is a big loser.’

**Lament.** ‘Ah women, women! Come, we have no friend but resolution, and the briefest end.’ Cleopatra’s final comments, as she sees off the corpse of Antony.

### Discussion questions

Why did Antony agree to wed Octavia? Was it that he truly accepted Octavius’ suggestion, that this move would lead to a firmer political bond within the triumvirate? Or was he playing games with Cleopatra, as part of their sexual-games interpersonal psychology? Was Cleopatra’s faked suicide death part of those games with Antony?

What marks Octavius as the man to beat, when it comes to the tussle over the upcoming power struggles for Rome? What weaknesses hold back Pompey and Lepidus, from playing power roles in the struggle for the final prize?

Is Antony truly shamed by the loss of his forces at the battle of Actium? Is shame the reason behind his suicide, and if so, before whom is he shamed? Cleopatra? The world at large? Is true shame compatible with the kind of absolute passion that is rooted in Antony?

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