Antony and Cleopatra

Antony and Cleopatra remains one of the most moving and magisterial plays in Shakespeare's canon. An intensely personal tragedy, the play exists in dramatic contrast with Shakespeare's other great tragedies, Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, and King Lear, which are decidedly more classical narratives in which the tragic heroes' inevitable downfalls are contingent upon a series of tragic flaws and fateful circumstances. With Antony and Cleopatra, the sense of tragedy finds its roots in a richly interwoven tapestry that is dependent on a host of complex elements. On the one hand, the play represents an intriguing political subtext in which the divergent sociocultural aspects of Rome and Egypt are brought into brilliant relief. On the other, it traces the trials and tribulations of a love affair for the ages: the unforgettable and highly eroticized union of two of the ancient world's most storied figures.

In many ways, the play offers a living, breathing illustration of humanity's precarious fate when people are forced to exist on the political stage writ large. In this sense, Antony and Cleopatra provides readers with a powerful—and nearly ceaseless—study of the inherent oppositions of our private and public lives. This bifurcation results in heartbreaking clashes among the principal characters' inner selves as they grapple with their emotions in a world that judges them in terms of reason, duty, and responsibility. This notion is brilliantly depicted by the love affair between Antony and Cleopatra, a charged coupling that presages their self-destruction by challenging them to contextualize their romantic urges within the unforgiving political worlds of Rome and Egypt. Overwhelmed by their feelings of erotic love, Antony and Cleopatra attempt to maintain their political hegemony in the face of an all-consuming affair. It is an ultimately human struggle in which they must confront the most personal aspects of their inner natures as well as the inherent limitations of the physical world. In this manner, Antony and Cleopatra illustrates the enduring conflicts of the human self as it rages among the discrepancies between youth and age, past and present, and life and death.

Written about 1606, Antony and Cleopatra is often considered to be Shakespeare's last great tragedy, a narrative rife with a host of dueling subtexts and subnarratives that pit the politics of Rome and Egypt against the lustful and passionate whimsy of a romance for all time. In the play, Shakespeare brilliantly and evocatively counterpoises the political machinations of the triumvirs (members of Rome's Second Triumvirate) and Antony's military rivals with his unbridled infatuation for Cleopatra and her promises of an unfettered love. It is also a play of magnificent language at nearly every turn. As William Hazlitt famously observes, Antony and Cleopatra is "without doubt, one of the finest pieces of poetry in Shakespeare. The splendor of the imagery, the semblance of reality, the lofty range of picturesque objects hanging over the world, their evanescent nature, the total uncertainty of what is left behind, are just like the mouldering schemes of human greatness. Shakespeare's genius has spread over the whole play a richness like the overflowing of the Nile." With Antony and Cleopatra, Shakespeare affords the pure distillation of his talent—and at the height of his aesthetic powers, no less.

Background

Shakespeare's audience was understandably fascinated by the events and history of ancient Rome. When Queen Elizabeth assumed the throne in 1558, England was in the throes of a period of great instability. The nation suffered from widespread economic uncertainty and religious disjunction. Yet, by the end of Elizabeth's reign in 1603, the kingdom had emerged as a formidable military and economic stronghold—quite arguably, the modern world's first great superpower. Shakespeare's Elizabethan audience proved itself, time and again, to be enthralled by dramatic works that explored issues related to national, military, and political power struggles. Indeed, they were interested in nearly any aspect of nationhood associated with a fledgling empire like England. Hence, the majesty of the ancient Roman civilization—and the attendant political, cultural, and social hegemony that it enjoyed during its unprecedented reign—was a subject of natural concern for the playgoers of Shakespeare's day.

Perhaps even more significant, the composition and production of Antony and Cleopatra roughly corresponds with the death of Elizabeth I and the coronation of James VI of Scotland as James I of England. The transfer of power and regime change in England understandably presaged a new period of uncertainty. Underneath the kingdom's Elizabethan-era expansionism and seeming prosperity existed a sense of insecurity about the nation's future—an aspect of English history that clearly parallels the breakup of the Roman Empire, which undergirds the text of Antony and Cleopatra.
Because Shakespeare’s rendering of *Antony and Cleopatra* is an inherently dramatic work, he did not seek to constrain his narrative in terms of its absolute attention to matters of accuracy and historicity. In short, the historical reality of Antony and Cleopatra's story and the sociopolitical forces that propelled it into being are not always represented by the cold light of fact in Shakespeare's play. Nevertheless, the salient historical issues of the couple's romantic and political union are germane to our understanding of the play, as well as to the fervor behind Elizabethan England's fascination with ancient Rome.

The ancient Egypt of Cleopatra's day existed as the eastern Mediterranean Sea's most powerful economic and cultural center. Meanwhile, in ancient Rome, Mark Antony, Octavius Caesar (Octavian, Augustus), and Lepidus assumed joint control over the empire, which they divided into three provinces: Octavian controlled the empire's European holdings, Lepidus ruled its North African territories, and Mark Antony controlled its Asian provinces. Under this scheme, the Roman Empire enjoyed a vast and unprecedented sphere of influence in the ancient world. Despite its military, economic, and cultural power, however, the empire found itself increasingly vulnerable to internal civil unrest, as well as external military threats from Parthia. Antony's political life arrived at a critical juncture as the Parthians prepared to invade Syria.

His efforts to provoke Cleopatra were flummoxed when the Egyptian queen attempted to establish a political alliance of her own design with Antony, as she had done with Julius Caesar in days gone by. Cleopatra succeeded in dazzling Antony by tempting his vanity. His subsequent relocation to Alexandria established a formidable Roman-Egyptian alliance, on the one hand, while leaving his provinces vulnerable to internal and external forces, on the other. It was the cause of his great undoing, as well as the heart of the tragedy of *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Shakespeare drew upon several sources for the play. The chief of these are Sir Thomas North's English version, published in 1579, of Amyot's French translation of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*; Plutarch's *Morals*, translated in 1603; and the 1578 translation of Appian's *Roman Civil Wars*. Shakespeare also drew on Chaucer; Cinthio's Italian tragedy *Cleopatra*, written about 1542, and an Italian life of Cleopatra written by Landi in 1551. Other sources were Robert Garnier's French play *Marc Antoine* (1578), translated into English by Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke (1590); Samuel Daniel's *Tragedy of Cleopatra* (1594, 1599); and the Bible's book of Revelation.

North's translation of Plutarch was used by Shakespeare for his other Roman plays, *Julius Caesar, Coriolanus*, and *Timon of Athens*. The main events and incidents of these dramas are found in North. *Antony and Cleopatra* is not an exception, and the events recorded by North, and used by Shakespeare, are

1. Fulvia and Lucius "jointing their force 'gainst Caesar" (1.2).
2. The activities of "Menecrates and Menas, famous pirates" who "Makes the sea serve them." Shakespeare makes their activities seem more threatening than does Plutarch (1.4).
3. The initial meeting between Antony and Cleopatra on the river Cydnus, magnificently described by Enobarbus (2.2).
4. The political agreement suggested by Agrippa, resulting in the marriage of Antony and Octavia (2.2).
5. Ventidius's activities amongst the Parthians (2.3; 3.1).
6. The meeting between the triumvirs at Misenum (2.7), although Shakespeare places greater emphasis than Plutarch does on the potential political conflicts among Pompey, Antony, and Octavius Caesar.
7. The activities on Pompey's galley (2.7) and Menas's suggested plot. Plutarch comments that "Pompey cast anchors enough into the sea to make his galley fast, and then built a bridge of wood to convey them to his galley, from the head of Mount Misena: and there he welcomed them, and made them great cheer." Shakespeare transforms "great cheer" into a drunken orgy.
8. The Battle of Actium, Cleopatra's flight, and Antony's following her (3.10, 3.11).
9. Enobarbus's desertion (4.6, 4.9). Plutarch places this before the Battle of Actium, but Shakespeare locates Enobarbus's flight afterward.
10. The Egyptian battles (4.7–8).
11. The death of Antony (4.14, 4.15); Cleopatra's retreat to the monument (4.15; 5.2).
12. Octavius Caesar's meeting with Cleopatra (5.2).

North's translation of Plutarch is not merely the source for these events but of various incidents illuminating personality and character. Among these are the following:

**Antony** as a "Herculean Roman" (1.3). In Plutarch, he is "descended from one Anton, the son of Hercules"; he is respected and popular among his soldiers (1.4). Plutarch mentions Antony's endurance and strength of character following his defeat at Modena (1.4); his superstitious character (2.3); his jealousy of Cleopatra (2.5), especially as demonstrated at the fishing incident (3.2), which Shakespeare transforms into a symbolic representation of Cleopatra and the way she has...
entrapped him (Antony tells Cleopatra: "You did know / How much you were my conqueror"); Antony's order that Thidias be whipped (3.13); Antony's jealousy of Octavius Caesar, for example, where he tells Octavia that her brother "hath wag'd / New wars 'gainst Pompey" (3.4), although in this instance, Shakespeare departs slightly from Plutarch, who notes that Octavius is reading Antony's will rather than his own (in Shakespeare, Antony tells Octavia that Caesar "made his will, and read it / To public ear"); Antony's obsession with Cleopatra, for example, as when Caesar tells Lepidus that Antony "fishes, drinks, and wastes / The lamps of night in revel" (1.4); and Antony's consideration for Julius Caesar and Brutus (3.2).

Cleopatra's sensuality. In Shakespeare, Enobarbus describes her on the river Cydnus (2.2): "For her own person, / It beggar'd all description: she did lie / In her pavilion cloth-of-gold, of tissue— / O'er picturing that Venus where we see / The fancy outwork nature." This transforms Plutarch's "And now for the person of herself: she was layed under a pavilion of cloth of gold of tissue, appareled and attired like the goddess Venus, commonly drawn in picture." Plutarch also depicts her vanity; her ability to experience extremes of emotion, such as love and hate; her tricks; and her cowardice, as, for instance, when Shakespeare writes that during the battle "the breeze upon her, like a cow in June, / Hoists sails, and flies and Antony "(like a doting mallard) / Leaving the fight in height," flies after her (3.10).

Octavia's decency, nobility, and patience.

Octavius Caesar's ruthlessness and coldness.

Acts IV and V follow North closely. The Soothsayer's words to Antony, Antony's recognition of Octavius Caesar's better luck at sports (2.3), and the soldier's plea in 3.7 that Antony "not fight by sea, / Trust not to rotten planks: do you misdoubt / This sword, and these my wounds? Let the Egyptians / And the Phoenicians go a-ducking" almost word for word follow Plutarch. In North, a captain notes, "O noble Emperor, how cometh it to pass that you trust to these vile brittle ships? What, do you mistrust these wounds of mine, and this sword? Let the Egyptians and Phoenicians fight by sea, and set us on the main land." Yet, Shakespeare omits Plutarch's account of Cleopatra's political intrigues and her Athenian visit, Antony's negative Asian campaigns, and the detailed description of the treasure Cleopatra took with her to the monument. Octavia is a personality of considerable stature and authority in Plutarch; Shakespeare reduces her role. His focus is clearly upon Antony and Cleopatra.

Shakespeare expands, too; for example, not present in Plutarch are the whole of 1.2; Cleopatra's dream in 5.2; ("I dreamt there was an emperor Antony"); Cleopatra's talk with the Clown (5.2); Lepidus's drunken insensibility on Pompey's galley (2.7); Antony's intense anger with Cleopatra (3.13, 4.12); and Cleopatra's questioning of the messenger (2.5, 3.3).

Shakespeare drew upon Plutarch's Morals (1603) for the comparisons in Antony and Cleopatra of Cleopatra with Venus, Ceres, Juno, and Isis, the Moon Goddess. The 1603 translation of Plutarch describes Isis "as having an infinite number of names, for that she receiveth all forms and shapes, according as it pleaseth that first reason to convert and turn her." In Shakespeare, Enobarbus says of Cleopatra that "Age cannot wither her, not custom stale / Her infinite variety" (2.2).

Appian's Roman Civil Wars is the source for Antony's reply to Octavius Caesar in 2.2 concerning the activities of Lucius, Antony's brother who rebelled of his own volition against the Triumvirate—not on Antony's behalf. Appian is also the source for his comment that Fulvia waged war "To have me out of Egypt" (2.2). Also not in Plutarch but in Appian are Antony's reference to Pompey (Sextus Pompeius) commanding "the empire of the sea" (1.2) and his comment that the Romans "began to throw / Pompey the Great, and all his dignities / Upon his son" (1.2). Pompey's death is in Appian, not in Plutarch, and Appian notes that "There be that say that Plancus, and not Antony, did command him to die," which explains Antony's anger for he "Threats the throat of that his officer that murder'd Pompey" (3.5).

For literary handling of the Antony and Cleopatra tragedy, Shakespeare had as a model Chaucer's treatment in the Legend of Good Women of a highly romanticized Cleopatra and a discreet, hard Antony marrying her. There is no Octavia, and insane with despair after defeat at Actium, Antony kills himself. Cinthio's tragedy Cleopatra begins after Actium and emphasizes the role of Fortune. Landi's Life of Cleopatra is a sympathetic one focusing upon her intelligence.

Garnier's tragedy translated by the countess of Pembroke, Marc Antoine, focuses on Antony, has a moral emphasis and tone, and gives Cleopatra sympathetic consideration: "She is all heav'nlie." There are verbal echoes between Garnier's tragedy and Shakespeare's. In the former, there is "fat slime"; in Shakespeare, "the higher Nilus swells … the slime and ooze scatters" (2.7). In Antoine, Cleopatra's "thousand kisses, thousand thousand more" bid Antony farewell. In Shakespeare, "Of many thousand kisses, the poor last" Antony will "lay upon" Cleopatra's "lips" (4.15).
Daniel's drama *Tragedy of Cleopatra* is the foundation for material in *Antony and Cleopatra* not found in other sources. In 5.2, Cleopatra reflects on being "chastis'd with the sober eye / Of dull Octavia." Daniel also has this detail. Cleopatra's being "wrinkled deep in time" (1.5) echoes Daniel's "beauties waine" and "new-appearing wrinkles of declining." Cleopatra's determination, "My resolution, and my hands" (4.15), to commit suicide; Dolabella's love for Cleopatra (5.2); her memory, "I am again for Cydnus / To meet Mark Antony" (5.2); and the detail of her crown being "awry" (5.2), all have their genesis in Daniel. The *Tragedy of Cleopatra*, however, does not emphasize the causes of Antony's fall, though it does place Antony and Cleopatra's tragedy within a universal framework and contrasts Roman austerity with Egyptian luxuriousness. But, perhaps naively, it suggests that Antony was ignorant of women before meeting Cleopatra.

The New Testament's book of Revelation is the foundation for many verbal images and ideas in the play, whereas the other sources largely provide the framework for the plotting and its details. There are various instances of Shakespeare's use of Revelation. For instance, in the last scene of the play, Cleopatra tells Dolabella:

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I dreamt there was an Emperor Antony …
His face was as the heavens, and therein stuck
A sun and moon, which kept their course, and lighted
The little O, the earth.…
His legs bestrid the ocean, his rear'd arm
Crested the world: his voice was propertied
As all the tuned spheres, and that to friends:
But when he meant to quail, and shake the orb.
He was as rattling thunder.
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Revelation 10: 1–6 reads:
And I saw another mighty angel come down from heaven, clothed with a cloud … and his face was as it were the sun, and his feet as pillars of fire … and he set his right foot upon the sea, and his left foot on the earth, and cried with a loud voice … and when he had cried, seven thunders uttered their voices … And the angel which I saw stand upon these, and the earth, lift up his hand to heaven.

These images of cosmic change, of "His face … as the heavens," of Antony bestriding the universe, and of thunder are apocalyptic in the sense that they literally anticipate change on a large scale. In the play, the old world of Antony and Cleopatra gives way to Octavius Caesar, so in Revelation, there is a vision of the end of the world. References to stars, death, and the falling of stars permeate Shakespeare's play and the biblical text. Caesar says that Antony "hath given his empire / Up to a whore, who now are levying / The Kings of the earth for war" (3.6). In Revelation 17: 1–2, there is "the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication."

In spite of the verbal parallels, the use of plot and character detail, the dependence on Plutarch, and the other sources for basic data, Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* transcends the raw material of its creation. The play centers on both Antony and Cleopatra, their middle-aged passion, and its tragic consequences. It is enacted against the backcloth of the disintegration of an empire and conveyed in unique poetry.

**Date and Text of the Play**

The play is recorded in the Stationers' Register for May 20, 1608, but appears not to have been published until 1623 as one of the plays in the First Folio (the first collected edition of the plays). Scholarly and critical opinions agree that the play is a relatively late one, having been written probably either in 1606 or 1607. It is in a sense a sequel to *Julius Caesar*, which was being performed in London during September 1599. Except for 1.1, neither act nor scene divisions were indicated in the First Folio. Those in modern texts largely follow the divisions into acts and scenes made by Nicholas Rowe (1674–1718), and the text itself contains materials introduced by editors after 1623.

**Synopsis**

**Brief Synopsis**

Following the death of Julius Caesar and the defeat of Brutus and Cassius at the Battle of Philippi, the Roman Empire is controlled by three triumvirs, Octavius Caesar, Mark Antony, and Lepidus. Antony, placed in charge of the eastern
provinces, has neglected his administrative duties in order to pursue a passionate love affair in Alexandria with Cleopatra, the Egyptian queen. Meanwhile, the Roman Empire is being torn apart by internal rebellions. Members of Antony's family are involved in a rebellion in Italy; there have been military defeats on the frontiers; the rebel Pompey (Sextus Pompeius), son of Pompey the Great, in control of the seas "hath given the dare to Caesar"; and Fulvia, the wife of Antony, has died. These events force Antony to return to Rome.

The triumvirs meet in Rome to patch up their differences and to unite against the threat from Pompey. Antony agrees to marry Octavia, the sister of Octavius Caesar. The marriage will cement the bond between them. Pompey and the triumvirs decide to talk and arrive at a peace treaty. To celebrate, Pompey throws a lavish party for them aboard his galley. At the party, Lepidus becomes extremely drunk. Caesar and Pompey battle, and Pompey is killed. Caesar, having used Lepidus to defeat Pompey, then gets rid of him, too. Octavius Caesar and Antony now control the empire. Antony, who is in Athens on political business, sends Octavia to negotiate with her brother on his behalf. However, obsessed with thoughts of Cleopatra, Antony returns to her and to Egypt.

Antony's return to Cleopatra and desertion of Octavia is the signal for the beginning of outright hostilities between him and Caesar. Theirs is a battle for supreme control of the empire. Cleopatra joins forces with Antony, who has control of the land but is lured into a naval battle off the coast at Actium. Cleopatra flees from the battle and is followed by Antony. Caesar pursues Antony and Cleopatra to Alexandria. Antony is defeated in battle. He commits suicide after hearing a false report that Cleopatra is dead.

In triumph, Caesar wants to lead Cleopatra through the streets of Rome. Cleopatra tricks Caesar; she has an asp brought to her in a fig basket and, with her faithful attendants, commits suicide. Caesar discovers her dead body and orders that Antony and Cleopatra be buried together and accorded dignified funeral rites.

Act I, Scene 1

The play opens in Cleopatra's Alexandria Palace. Two friends of Mark Antony, Philo and Demetrius, discuss Cleopatra's power over Antony. Instead of being a ruler, he is ruled and gives up his responsibilities for love. The grand entrance of Antony and Cleopatra serves to emphasize Philo's observations. A messenger with news from Rome is ignored; totally absorbed in each other, Antony and Cleopatra exchange views on love and faithfulness. Alone again, Demetrius and Philo observe that what they have witnessed confirms that Antony is not his former self.

Act I, Scene 2

After some talk between a Soothsayer and Enobarbus and the queen's attendants Charmian and Iras, whose fortunes are told, Cleopatra comes in search of Antony. She has remembered the messenger from Rome and has gone to find him. The messenger brings news of chaos in Italy and military defeats in Syria and Asia. Another messenger has brought news of the death of Fulvia, Antony's wife. Antony becomes aware of his responsibilities and realizes that he must depart at once from Cleopatra and Egypt. Enobarbus, not fully comprehending that Fulvia is dead, or unsure about how Antony takes the news, jests with him and comments on Cleopatra's passion for him. Antony tells Enobarbus about the seriousness of the political situation, of the disintegration of the Roman Empire, and of the urgent necessity for him to return home.

Act I, Scene 3

Cleopatra sends one of her attendants to search for Antony, with instructions that if he finds Antony happy he must say that Cleopatra is sad, and vice versa. Charmian disagrees with Cleopatra's strategy for keeping Antony with her. When Antony appears, Cleopatra continuously interrupts him and varies in her attitude and mood toward him. He tells her that he is to leave Egypt and that his wife, Fulvia, has died. Cleopatra's mood changes to a serious one, and she finds it difficult to express her feelings.

Act I, Scene 4

In his house in Rome, Octavius Caesar reads a letter from Alexandria outlining Antony's activities. Caesar comments on these to Lepidus, who tries in vain to defend Antony from Caesar's accusations. A messenger arrives with news that Pompey, a major threat to the leadership of the Roman Empire, has gained strength at sea. Octavius Caesar contrasts Antony's "lascivious wassails" (1.4.57) with his previous heroic behavior and hopes that "his shames" (1.4.73) will
"quickly / Drive him to Rome" (1.4.73–74). He and Lepidus must gather together what armed forces they can in order to defend themselves against Pompey and his forces.

Act I, Scene 5

Cleopatra's obsession with Antony runs riot in his absence. She sends constant messages to him, indulges in fantasies, comparing him with some of her past lovers, and especially with Julius Caesar, whom she loved when she "was green in judgment" (1.5.76).

Act II, Scene 1

At his house in Messina, Pompey discusses the current situation with the pirates Menas and Menecrates. The main threat to Pompey comes from the experienced soldier Antony, who is languishing in Egypt. Varrius, Pompey's ally, arrives with the unwelcome news that Antony has left Egypt, returned to Rome, and joined with Pompey's enemies, the other triumvirs, Octavius Caesar and Lepidus. Menas tries to reassure Pompey, reminding him the enmity between Caesar and Antony concerning the conflict started by Fulvia, Antony's wife. Ever the realist, Pompey deduces that internal differences will be papered over in order to combat any external threat.

Act II, Scene 2

Set in Lepidus's house, this scene is divided into two sections: the first is dominated by political considerations; the second, by Enobarbus's evocative description of Cleopatra. The triumvirs meet to thrash out their differences and to try to settle old scores amicably. With great difficulty, Caesar and Antony refrain from open hostility. Agrippa suggests that Antony should marry Caesar's sister and thereby cement the bonds between the two. Antony and Caesar agree, shake hands, swear to act as brothers, and plan to defeat Pompey.

After Antony and Caesar have gone to see Octavia to get her approval, Enobarbus, Agrippa, and Maecenas remain on stage. The theme of their conversation is Cleopatra, her personality, and her power over Antony.

Act II, Scene 3

Antony tells Octavia in Caesar's presence that his public duties will take him away from her. She will pray for him at such times. Antony then confronts the Soothsayer, who tells him that in the exchanges with Caesar, Antony's fortunes will be less than Caesar's. Dismissing the Soothsayer, Antony thinks about his words and reverses his previous promises to Caesar. He then decides to return to Egypt where "my pleasure lies" (2.3.39).

Act II, Scene 4

This brief 10-line scene depicts soldiers leaving for battle. Agrippa says that shortly after Antony will kiss his wife, he will also be off to battle. Lepidus says he has things to do before joining up two days later with his allies at the mount.

Act II, Scene 5

Back at Cleopatra's court, where she is restless, displeased, and uncertain, she asks for music, then billiards, then wishes to fish in the Nile. Her mind continually dwells on Antony. The arrival of a messenger from Rome seems to confirm the worst fears that Antony is dead. She threatens the messenger with dire consequences if he brings bad news but hardly gives him a chance to tell his message. She all but faints upon hearing of the marriage between Antony and Octavia. Angrily, she hits the messenger and draws a knife. Persuaded to return if, as Cleopatra hopes, his news has been mistaken, the messenger flees when her fury is once again vented on him. At the end of the scene, Alexas is sent by Cleopatra to find out from the messenger about Octavia's appearance.

Act II, Scene 6

The two warring factions meet at Mount Misenum and exchange hostages. They agree on peace terms and depart to make arrangements to "feast each other ere we part" (2.6.61). Menas and Enobarbus remain on stage, and the banter between
them concerning mutual thievery gives way to serious commentary. Menas is perplexed by Antony's marriage to Caesar's sister, which will "knit" them "together" (2.6.122). Menas regards Antony as unreliable and regrets that Pompey has made peace with the triumvirate. Enobarbus believes that Antony will return to his old Egyptian love, Cleopatra.

Act II, Scene 7

On board Pompey's galley near Misenum, two servants comment on the activities of Caesar, Antony, Pompey, and Lepidus, who have gathered together for a reconciliation banquet. While the others drink and enjoy themselves, Menas attempts to draw Pompey aside. At last, he manages to suggest that Antony, Caesar, and Lepidus are in Pompey's power and should be slaughtered. The idea appeals to Pompey, but he rejects it on the grounds that his honor will be stained if the plan goes ahead; however, if he had not known about it his approval would have been forthcoming. Menas is stung by the reply and vows no longer to serve Pompey. Lepidus is removed in a drunken, insensible state. The revels continue with dancing, music, and a Bacchanalian song. The relatively sober Caesar takes his leave. Pompey reminds Antony of a dispute between them—relating to Antony's occupation of Pompey's father's house—and adds "but what, we are friends" (2.7.137), and the party breaks up.

Act III, Scene 1

On the Syrian plain, the Romans led by Ventidius (dispatched to Parthia at the end of Act II Scene, 3) have defeated the Parthians. Ventidius has killed Pacorus, the son of the Parthian king, and thus revenged the treacherous slaying of the triumvir Marcus Crassus. Ventidius resists Silius's promptings to pursue the fleeing Parthians. Ventidius is tired of fighting and does not wish to steal too much of the limelight and, hence, place his general and commander Antony in the shade.

Act III, Scene 2

At Caesar's house, Agrippa and Enobarbus mock the unity of the triumvirate and express very little faith in Caesar and Antony. Enobarbus's impression of Lepidus is very low. The triumvirate return to the stage with Caesar and Antony expressing mutual trust. Caesar is troubled in parting from his sister and asks Antony to treat her well. Brother and sister talk together, and what she says brings tears to Caesar's eyes. Enobarbus notes that tears are not appropriate to soldiers. Agrippa reminds him that Antony, too, has cried. Caesar and Octavia bid farewell.

Act III, Scene 3

This scene is a continuation of Act II, Scene 5. Cleopatra's messenger returns but is afraid of her. His report on Octavia is unfavorable. She is shorter than Cleopatra, has a lower voice, and walks more like a statue than a live person. Octavia is old enough to be a widow and has a round face and brown hair, with a low forehead. Cleopatra has a message to give to her messenger.

Act III, Scene 4

Antony is at Athens, the headquarters of his eastern command. Antony complains that Caesar has attacked Pompey and spoken disrespectfully of himself. Octavia begs her husband to think well of her brother, otherwise she will be torn between the two. Antony tells her to choose the one she feels will best look after her and takes a rather cool farewell of her.

Act III, Scene 5

Enobarbus and Eros, a slave of Antony, discuss events. Caesar and Lepidus have made war on Pompey; after the victory, Lepidus has been discarded, arrested, and held in prison. Pompey has been murdered by one of Antony's men—an action that has incensed Antony. Enobarbus is wanted by Antony.
The scene returns to the center of Roman imperial power, Caesar's house. Caesar catalogs for Agrippa and Maecenas a detailed list of complaints concerning Antony's behavior in Egypt with Cleopatra. Antony has divided his portion of the Roman Empire between his own sons. Caesar will allow him some of Lepidus's areas but demands in return a say in the way the lands gained from Pompey are to be portioned out. Maecenas has his doubts as to whether Antony will agree to this solution.

Octavia appears without a formal introduction, which provokes Caesar. She is surprised that Antony has returned to Egypt and that he is preparing to fight Caesar, having enlisted the support of many monarchs. Caesar offers his sister what comfort he can, but she is torn by the news, which she finds hard to believe.

**Act III, Scene 7**

This scene takes place in Antony's camp near Actium, where dissension emerges among his followers. Enobarbus tries to discourage Cleopatra from personally entering into the fight with Antony. Her presence will distract and unsettle him. Cleopatra ignores his advice, as does Antony when Enobarbus disagrees with his intentions to engage in a naval battle with Caesar. A soldier also urges Antony not to fight Caesar by sea. Antony will not listen and is determined to keep to his plan of attack, especially as Cleopatra has offered naval assistance. Antony is amazed by the news of Caesar's rapid advances.

**Act III, Scene 8**

Marching with some of his army toward the Battle of Actium, Caesar commands his forces not to fight on land until the naval battle has been decided.

**Act III, Scene 9**

Antony instructs Enobarbus to take the forces to a hillside position from which they can assess Caesar's naval strength and plan accordingly.

**Act III, Scene 10**

Elements of the opposing armies cross and recross the stage. The noise of a sea battle is heard offstage. Enobarbus tells of Antony's naval defeat; of the flight of the *Antoniad*, Cleopatra's flagship, with 60 ships. A fellow general, Scarus, enters to add that Antony has also deserted the battle to follow Cleopatra. Another general, Canidius, has seen Antony's actions and decides to turn his troops over to the opposition. Enobarbus, despite his good sense, will remain with Antony.

**Act III, Scene 11**

Back in Egypt at Cleopatra's palace, Antony broods over his dishonor. He offers his followers gold as payment and incentive to desert him, but they are unwilling to leave. Cleopatra enters. Antony remembers his past glories at Philippi, where he defeated Cassius and Brutus, and compares this time with his present condition. Cleopatra collapses and tries to excuse herself. Antony recognizes that she has had total power over him. Now he has to humble himself to Caesar. However, for one of her tears, the world has been well lost. He has sent their children's tutor to seek peace terms from Caesar.

**Act III, Scene 12**

Caesar and his forces are already in Egypt. The schoolmaster arrives in Caesar's camp to act as Antony's messenger. His presence is taken as a sign of how low Antony's fortunes have now fallen. The schoolmaster as messenger reports that Antony wishes to live in Egypt or else live as "a private man in Athens" (3.12.15). Cleopatra wishes that her heirs may inherit her kingdom. Caesar will not listen to Antony's request but will agree to Cleopatra's provided that she exile Antony from Egypt or kill him. When the schoolmaster has left, Caesar tells Thidias to try to win Cleopatra from Antony and spy on Antony's activities. Thidias is given a free hand as to how he proceeds.

**Act III, Scene 13**

The scene returns to the center of Roman imperial power, Caesar's house. Caesar catalogs for Agrippa and Maecenas a detailed list of complaints concerning Antony's behavior in Egypt with Cleopatra. Antony has divided his portion of the Roman Empire between his own sons. Caesar will allow him some of Lepidus's areas but demands in return a say in the way the lands gained from Pompey are to be portioned out. Maecenas has his doubts as to whether Antony will agree to this solution.

Octavia appears without a formal introduction, which provokes Caesar. She is surprised that Antony has returned to Egypt and that he is preparing to fight Caesar, having enlisted the support of many monarchs. Caesar offers his sister what comfort he can, but she is torn by the news, which she finds hard to believe.
Enobarbus is questioned by Cleopatra about what to do, and she asks if she is to blame. Enobarbus apportions the blame to Antony, who has allowed his reason to be controlled by his emotions. The schoolmaster ambassador has arrived. Antony sends him back to Caesar, challenging him to a duel, which provokes Enobarbus to wonder, in an aside, at Antony's loss of reason. Caesar must be aware that Antony is a skillful swordsman. Thidias, Caesar's ambassador, arrives with a message for Cleopatra from Caesar, saying that he knows she only loves Antony out of fear. She replies that her honor has been conquered, not defeated; she accepts Caesar's victory and places her fate in his hands.

As Thidias is kissing Cleopatra's hand in farewell, Antony and Enobarbus enter. An enraged Antony orders Thidias to be whipped. He loses his self-control and in a jealous rage turns on Cleopatra, accusing her of various infidelities. A whipped Thidias returns, and Antony revels in humiliating him and, implicitly, his master Caesar, to whom Thidias is told to return and report what has happened.

Antony indulges in a bout of self-pity. Cleopatra, realizing that he is not himself, indulges in self-accusations. Antony, passion cooled, is reconciled with Cleopatra and makes preparations for another fight with Caesar's armies. He calls for one final night of mutual revelry. Cleopatra reveals that it is her birthday, which at least she is going to enjoy. Alone on stage, Enobarbus again says that Antony's reason has left him and that he will "seek some way to leave" Antony (3.13.205–206).

Act IV, Scene 1

Caesar reads Antony's letter and is angered by his threats, especially as they lack substance. Maecenas, Caesar's lieutenant, ridicules Antony's challenge to single combat and urges Caesar to take advantage of Antony's distraught condition. Caesar, aware that the forthcoming battle will prove to be a decisive one, intends to satisfy his army. He prepares a feast and refers to the growing numbers of Antony's former soldiers who have come over to his side.

Act IV, Scene 2

Caesar's reply that he will not fight Antony in single combat forces Antony to prepare for the next day's decisive battle. Antony bids a sad farewell to his followers, reminds them of former glories, and suggests that their supper will prove to be their last, for tomorrow they will have another master. Enobarbus warns Antony that he is fostering depression. Antony, in an effort to restore spirits, tells his attendants that he does not mean what he says and that he will join them in supper to "drown considerations" (4.2.45).

Act IV, Scene 3

This scene involves a conversation between three soldiers on duty. Rumors of strange noises are unconfirmed; however, they agree that if the navy succeeds and the army fights well, victory will be theirs. Music is heard. A soldier regards the noise as a good omen, while another sees it as a bad omen as the sounds represent the spirit of Hercules "whom Antony lov'd" (4.3.21) leaving him. The soldiers attempt to track down the source of the music.

Act IV, Scene 4

Cleopatra helps Antony put on his armor. Her assistance is not entirely successful. A soldier arrives to tell Antony that he is expected for the battle. Trumpets sound; he tells his men that the day is a "fair" (4.4.25) one, and as a soldier, he takes leave of Cleopatra. She retires to her chamber with the thought that if only Antony and Caesar "might / Determine this great war in single fight!" (4.4.37) all would be well.

Act IV, Scene 5

A soldier greets Antony, who admits his mistake in not engaging in a land battle at Actium. The soldier tells him that Enobarbus has gone over to Caesar. Antony generously sends Enobarbus his treasures, "gentle adieus, and greetings" (4.5.16) and regrets that his "fortunes have / Corrupted honest men!" (4.5.18–19).

Act IV, Scene 6
At his camp, Caesar gives orders for the battle to commence and demands that Antony be captured alive. He also commands that the deserters from Antony's side be placed in the front lines. Enobarbus, hearing these instructions, regrets his defection. A soldier appears to tell him that Antony has sent over Enobarbus's possessions and added more to them. Enobarbus is overcome with remorse and plans suicide.

Act IV, Scene 7

This scene provides different views of the battle. Agrippa indicates that Caesar's forces are under pressure. Scarus, on the other hand, although wounded, reports that things are going well for Antony's forces.

Act IV, Scene 8

Antony sends a messenger to Cleopatra with victory news. He thanks his troops for their heroic efforts and predicts victory the next day. Cleopatra arrives. They mutually praise each other, and Scarus is personally recommended to Cleopatra for bravery. Together, Antony and Cleopatra will celebrate.

Act IV, Scene 9

A sentry and watchman talk in Caesar's camp. They hear sounds of a man in torment. This man turns out to be Enobarbus, who, heartbroken with guilt and remorse, dies. The drum sounds for the coming battle as his body is taken to the guardroom.

Act IV, Scene 10

Antony confers with Scarus. Caesar has prepared for a naval battle. Antony is prepared on land and sea. He goes to the hills near the city to engage in reconnaissance.

Act IV, Scene 11

Caesar instructs his forces to wait while Antony orders his best men into a naval confrontation. Meanwhile, Caesar's men will hold their ground in the valleys.

Act IV, Scene 12

Antony finds a high observation point to watch the battle. Scarus notes that the fortune-tellers have been negative about Antony's chances. Antony reenters with the news that he has been betrayed. His fleet has surrendered. He assumes that Cleopatra has deserted him, and when she appears, he vents his rage on her and threatens to kill her on the spot. She does not stay. He calls upon Hercules to give him the strength to take his own life and revenge on Cleopatra.

Act IV, Scene 13

Back at her palace, a frantic Cleopatra seeks help. Charmian advises her to lock herself in the tomb and to send word to Antony that she is dead. Cleopatra tells Mardian to give Antony the message and add that his name was on her lips when she died, and to let her know how he received the news.

Act IV, Scene 14

Antony talks with Eros about his impending death, blames Cleopatra for his undoing, and contemplates suicide. Mardian, Cleopatra's messenger, arrives with the false information that she has died. This news hardens Antony's resolution to die. He asks Eros to kill him, but Eros kills himself instead. Antony, full of remorse and a sense of his own cowardice, tries to kill himself by falling on his sword. Lying wounded, he is found by two guards, who refuse his request to kill him. Diomedes appears. Cleopatra has had a premonition concerning the consequences of her false report. She has sent Diomedes to tell Antony the truth. Antony requests that as a final service his guard carry him to Cleopatra.
Act IV, Scene 15

A severely wounded Antony is brought to the monument where Cleopatra is in hiding with her handmaidens. Cleopatra, unable to leave the monument out of fear of capture by Caesar's troops, pulls Antony into the monument, helped by her maidens. She pleads with him to clear her name. Antony advises her to make peace with Caesar, but Cleopatra declares that she will never trust Caesar. Antony tells her to remember his greatness, and Cleopatra faints when he dies, for she feels that her life is no longer worth living. She tells Charmian and Iras that they will bury Antony and then imitate the Romans by committing suicide.

Act V, Scene 1

Dolabella is told by Caesar to insist that Antony makes peace. Decretas arrives carrying his sword, with which Antony had tried to kill himself, and with the news that Antony is dead. Caesar laments the loss of "my mate in empire" and "is touched" (5.1.32–43). An Egyptian messenger from Cleopatra arrives in order to discover what Caesar wants Cleopatra to do. Caesar says that she will soon find out but that he will be generous. Proculeius, the only one of Caesar's circle trusted by Cleopatra, is sent to reassure her. Caesar is worried that she may follow Antony and commit suicide. He wishes to lead her through Rome in his victory triumph. Dolabella is called for, but Caesar remembers he has been sent on another errand.

Act V, Scene 2

Proculeius arrives at the entrance to Cleopatra's monument with Caesar's surrender terms. He emphasizes Caesar's generosity if Cleopatra will submit to his authority. Gallus and his soldiers enter the monument and seize Cleopatra. She tries to kill herself but is disarmed by Proculeius. She tells him that she would rather die than be led in triumph by Caesar. Dolabella enters and takes over from Proculeius. Cleopatra gives Dolabella an account of a dream she has had about Antony and praises him. She discovers from Dolabella the fate Caesar has in store for her. Then for the first time in the play, she and Caesar meet. Cleopatra kneels before him. Caesar reassures her that no harm will come to her. Seleucus, her treasurer, after declaring that he has handed over Cleopatra's wealth, reveals that a portion has been retained, and he is driven from the stage by Cleopatra. Caesar allows her to retain the treasure and departs with reassuring words. When he leaves, Cleopatra expresses skepticism about his intentions: "He words me girls, he words me." (5.2.191)

Dolabella reappears and tells Cleopatra that in three days she will be sent to Rome with her children. Cleopatra depicts a theatrical picture to Iras and Charmian of how they will be led before the Roman crowds. She sends for her "best attires," "crown and all," (5.2.28–32) to prepare for suicide. A guard admits the Clown carrying a fig basket in which are hidden poisonous snakes. He jests with Cleopatra on the word *worm* and explains the painless way in which snake poison operates. Cleopatra puts on her robe and regal costume and is kissed by Iras, who suddenly dies. Cleopatra too takes the poison and dies as a guard rushes in. Charmian dies. Dolabella enters to discover what has happened and is followed by Caesar, who has suspected that something drastic may take place. After examining the bodies, Dolabella finds a bleeding wound on Cleopatra's arm and a guard finds "an aspic's trail" (5.2.349). Caesar promises an honorable burial for Cleopatra and Antony in the same grave, orders his army to attend the funeral, then returns to Rome.

Character List

**Mark Antony**  Along with Octavius Caesar and Lepidus, Mark Antony is ruler of the Roman Empire. Once revered for his prowess as a soldier and fierce leader, Antony eschews his duties in order to live in Egypt with Cleopatra. Their highly passionate and erotic love affair divides his loyalties between the Western and Eastern worlds, leaving him torn asunder between his obligations as a Roman hero and his overwhelming desires for Cleopatra, with whom he has fallen madly, hopelessly in love.

**Cleopatra**  The beautiful and highly volatile queen of Egypt. Cleopatra's emotional nature contrasts with Mark Antony's sense of reason and duty. Seductive and cunning, Cleopatra had carried on a love affair with Julius Caesar, who was instrumental in her ascendency to the throne, before falling in love with Antony.

**Octavius Caesar**  Julius Caesar's nephew and adopted son, Octavius rules the Roman Empire along with Antony and Lepidus. Octavius and Antony enjoy a strained relationship, given the younger triumvir's ambition, as well as Antony's protracted stay in Egypt, for which the practical-minded Octavius accuses him of neglecting his duties.
Domitius Enobarbus  Antony's faithful supporter, the cynical Enobarbus remains loyal to Antony even as he makes the damming political and military mistakes that will seal his doom.

Marcus Aemilius Lepidus  Along with Antony and Octavius Caesar, Lepidus rules the Roman Empire. He is the weakest member of their triumvirate, given his precarious political position.

Pompey (Sextus Pompeius)  The young soldier who enjoys great popularity among the Roman citizenry and poses as a considerable military threat to the triumvirs.

Octavia  Octavius Caesar's sister, who marries Mark Antony in order to establish an alliance between the two triumvirs. Her meek disposition allows her to be easily deceived by Antony and Cleopatra.

Charmian and Iras  Cleopatra's loyal attendants.

Soothsayer  The Egyptian fortune-teller who predicts Antony's tragic downfall and his ill fortune in comparison with Caesar.

Dolabella  One of Octavius Caesar's soldiers, Dolabella guards Cleopatra during her captivity.

Agrippa  One of Octavius Caesar's officers.

Demetrios and Philo  Friends of Antony.

Canidius  A general in Antony's army who later defects to the service of Caesar.

Taurus  A general in Caesar's army.

Silius  An officer in Ventidius's army.

Maecenas and Gallus  Friends of Caesar.

Ventidius  A Roman soldier under Antony's command.

Scarus  A young soldier who serves bravely under Antony's command.

Proculeius  A traitorous soldier under Caesar's command.

Thidias  Messenger and friend of Caesar.

Diomedes  Cleopatra's servant.

Eros  Antony's faithful and steadfast attendant.

Menas  An ambitious young soldier under Pompey's command who masterminds a plan to assassinate Caesar, Antony, and Lepidus, a scheme that would result in his master's ascendancy to power.

Menocrates and Varrius  Friends of Pompey.

Alexas  Attendant to Cleopatra.

Mardian  Attendant to Cleopatra; a eunuch.

Seleucus  Cleopatra's treasurer.

Clown  The Egyptian who brings the basket of figs containing the poisonous asps to Cleopatra.

Decretas  One of Antony's soldiers.

Further Information


**Film and Video Productions**


Foy, Bryan, dir. *Anthony and Cleopatra*. With Ethel Teare and Phil Dunham. 1924.


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