

# Antony and Cleopatra

by Paul Dean



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## *Antony and Cleopatra*

by  
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*Antony and Cleopatra* was written in 1606 or 1607 but remained unprinted until the First Folio (1623). There is no record of early performances but it could have been staged at the open-air Globe or the indoor Blackfriars Theatre. Shakespeare drew heavily on the *Life of Antony*, translated by Sir Thomas North in 1579 from a French text which, in turn, translated the Greek historian Plutarch. Other plays about Antony and Cleopatra, which Shakespeare probably knew, had been written in the 1590s. They all adopt a restricted treatment of the subject-matter which concentrates on the defeat and death of the lovers, towards whom they adopt clear moral positions, whereas Shakespeare takes a longer-term view of the relationship and views it much more ambiguously. Antony and Cleopatra may sometimes remind us of Romeo and Juliet, as two lovers who defy the conventions of their society, but what seemed acceptable idealism and attractive boldness in the younger pair looks more like self-indulgent irresponsibility in their older counterparts. Characteristically, however, Shakespeare will not allow us to take a simple-minded approach to their situation or behaviour. This is a play in which kneejerk moral judgements are made virtually impossible.

If we come to *Antony and Cleopatra* with a knowledge of *Julius Caesar* (1599), we may expect a kind of sequel; after all, Antony, Octavius and Lepidus all feature in both plays, and both depend on Plutarch. However, the writing of Shakespeare's major tragedies had intervened between the composition of these two plays, and we quickly discover that *Antony* is markedly different in its range, its amplitude (forty-two scenes, compared to eighteen in *Caesar*), the greater poetic richness of its language, above all in the greater complexity with which it investigates the psychology of political behaviour. In *Caesar*, the influence of private life, including sexual relationships, on public life was minimal; in *Antony and Cleopatra* they are inextricable. Like *Caesar*, the play focuses our attention on two major characters (Brutus and Cassius/Antony and Cleopatra), but the degree of our identification and sympathy with them is controlled by a detachment to which *Caesar* has no parallel. (There is, for instance, virtually no use of the soliloquy, thus keeping us at a distance from the inner lives of the protagonists.) There was a sense of idealism and honour in *Caesar*, albeit shown to be somewhat naïve in the character of Brutus; but in the later play the concept of honour itself is interrogated. Octavius's admiring recollection of Antony's earlier career as an archetypal embodiment of Roman virtues (1.4.55-71)<sup>1</sup> serves only to underline the contrast with the Antony we now see. There is one scene (2.2) in which Antony conforms to this statesmanlike self-control, but it is significantly located in Rome and the tension between him and Octavius is all too clear. Later, Octavius will admit that the world is not big enough for himself and Antony (5.1.35-40); his eulogy to his defeated rival (5.1.40-48) may well be felt to come easily to the victor, and is abruptly broken off when political affairs intervene. In *Julius Caesar* the warring parties' struggle for domination did not preclude a sense of the tragic waste of individual lives, but the jockeying for power which controls the trajectory of *Antony and Cleopatra* is brutally imaged as 'a pair of chops' which 'grind the one the other' (3.4.12, 14). The toadying of Lepidus, brilliantly caricatured by Agrippa and Enobarbus in 3.2.4-20, is merely a debased version of an attitude more subtly practised by other characters.

Moreover, whereas *Julius Caesar* is remarkable for its truly classical economy, and steadiness of focus upon a small group of characters, the plot of *Antony and Cleopatra* sprawls across geographical space and historical time — the events it dramatizes actually covered ten years,

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<sup>1</sup> References to *Antony and Cleopatra* are to Michael Neill's edition (Oxford, 1994). For reasons he gives on pp. 134-5, he adopts the spelling 'Anthony' throughout; I have retained the traditional form.

from 40 to 30 BCE — and oscillates between contrasting Roman and Egyptian value systems. Put simply, Rome stands for duty, military service, and the constraints upon individual freedom imposed by public office, while Egypt stands for hedonism, indulgence, revelry and the free play of imagination, in which the cares of state can be temporarily forgotten. Rome has the clarity of daylight and reason, Egypt the poetry of the night; Shakespeare may be remembering the opposition between Athens and the wood in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The bacchanalian scene on Pompey's galley, which to Octavius is merely 'levity' unworthy of 'our graver business' (2.7.119-120), pinpoints this. More abstractly, behind the interplay of characters and values lies a philosophical opposition between being and becoming, which I shall return to later in this essay.

One of the most striking changes from *Julius Caesar* to *Antony and Cleopatra* is in terms of genre. In this connection a remark by Plutarch seems particularly significant. He writes (in North's translation) that the Alexandrians appreciated Antony's informality and merry-making, 'saying very gallantly and widely that Antonius showed them a comical face — to wit, a merry countenance; and the Romans a tragical face — to say, a grim look'.<sup>2</sup> This corresponds to the distinction Cleopatra makes in the play between 'mirth' and 'a Roman thought' (1.2.81-82). Even though both *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* are conventionally classed as tragedies, that seems a limiting description for the later play, whose expansiveness resists the single-mindedness and economy often associated with tragedy. Shakespeare developed the story in ways which would modify or even frustrate a response appropriate to tragedy from spectators or readers. In its focus on an older generation, its emotional temperature, and its technical daring — notably its 'divided catastrophe' in which the lovers die separately rather than together, and in very different ways — *Antony and Cleopatra* is more like the late romances that Shakespeare would go on to write than it is like his major tragedies (*King Lear* comes nearest to it). Moreover, there are moments of genuine comedy, especially in Cleopatra's scenes with the messenger (2.5, 3.3), and even her conversation with the countryman who brings her the asp (5.2.242-278), although there the jokes are grim indeed.

Always an intensely self-conscious artist, Shakespeare controls our response by exploring the nature of imaginative fiction, the activity he himself was engaged in. Towards the end of the play, Cleopatra depicts an extraordinary dream-vision of Antony as a superhuman figure, another Colossus, whose voice was like the music of the spheres, whose munificence and magnificence were fabled. 'Think you', she asks Dolabella, 'there was, or might be such a man/As this I dreamt of?' 'Gentle madam,' Dolabella answers, 'no'. Cleopatra explodes:

You lie up to the hearing of the gods!  
But if there be, or ever were one such,  
It's past the size of dreaming. Nature wants stuff  
To vie strange forms with Fancy, yet t' imagine  
An Antony were nature's piece 'gainst Fancy,  
Condemning shadows quite. (5.2.93-100)

'To imagine an Antony' is Shakespeare's task — and ours — as well as Cleopatra's. Inevitably, what we are told cannot be shown by a mere actor; indeed, Cleopatra admits as much. The same applies to Enobarbus's celebrated description of Cleopatra in her barge (2.2.197-225). The power of such visions is that of the imagination, the larger-than-life figures which the lovers create of each other. The much-admired verbal gorgeousness of this play is a means to this end of constantly trumping 'nature' by 'fancy', suggesting what cannot be staged. A high proportion of such effects depend upon exaggeration and opulence (see, e.g., 3.13.90-92). The lovers' self-images are also crucial to this process. Antony imagines himself in abject thrall to Octavius (4.15.71-77), while Cleopatra recoils from the humiliation of being 'an Egyptian puppet' (5.2.208), put on show to the mob, made the subject of lewd ballads and plays:

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<sup>2</sup>Quoted from Neill, p. 334.

The quick comedians  
 Extemporally will stage us, and present  
 Our Alexandrian revels — Antony  
 Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see  
 Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness  
 I'th' posture of a whore.

(5.2.216-221)<sup>3</sup>

Again, those familiar with *Julius Caesar* will recall a comparable moment in Act 3, Scene 1, when Brutus and Cassius imagine the assassination re-enacted for future generations. There, however, the talk is of a 'lofty scene' immortalising 'the men that gave their country liberty'. Cleopatra imagines something very different from Shakespeare's play about herself and Antony. Her version would deny the lovers any nobility or admiration, reducing them to a vulgar caricature — which is, in fact, more or less how their relationship is viewed by the Romans, for whom Cleopatra is a 'gypsy', a 'strumpet' (1.1.10, 13), and finally, in Caesar's word, a whore (3.6.67) — a name even Antony gives her in a fit of rage (4.1.13). Rather than submit to this, she stages her own death in a quite different mode as a 'noble act' (5.2.284) donning her 'best attires' (5.2.228) like an actress dressing for the part. Instead of capitulating before the stock tragic 'Fury crowned with snakes' (2.5.41) she determines the time of her own death with the asp, 'the pretty worm of Nilus ... that kills and pains not' (5.2.242-3). Far from being the prelude to extinction, death becomes the route to a reunion with Antony, imagined in explicitly erotic terms (5.2.282-295). Once more, our reactions are manipulated; we can hardly feel regret or condemnation. Antony's death, to be examined in detail later, is almost farcically bungled; his own description of it as 'a Roman, by a Roman/Valiantly vanquished' (4.16.59-60) hardly corresponds to what we have seen. It is Cleopatra who succeeds in dying 'after the high Roman fashion' (4.16.88), and her death is a triumph.

Looking back, we realise that much of the lovers' relationship has been presented in theatrical terms, as game-playing, dressing up, and striking attitudes. Mythologically, they are associated with Venus and Mars (1.1.4, 1.5.18, 2.2.6, 207), and, more darkly in Cleopatra's case, Isis, goddess of the underworld, whose emblem was a snake (3.6.16—19). A series of references associates Antony with the god Hercules from whom he was supposedly descended (1.3.84, 2.5.22-3, 4.3.14, 4.13.43). Yet these roles can be reversed too; Cleopatra appropriates the conventional trappings of masculinity in wearing Antony's sword while he lies, dressed in her 'tires and mantles', drunk in bed (2.5.22-3), and she declares her intention to 'appear ... for a man' (3.7.18) in the war against Octavius. One way in which Cleopatra retains power over Antony is by her unpredictability, her suitability for 'every passion' (1.2.52), and her refusal to conform to conventions. To 'cross him in nothing', she tells Charmian, is 'the way to lose him' (1.3.9-10). Eventually, in her false report of her own death, this strategy backfires.

This process of role-playing is one aspect of a larger enquiry Shakespeare conducts, not confined to the lovers alone, into the stability or otherwise of the self, the difficulty of finding coherence or consistency in a world of ceaseless change. Shakespeare's reading of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a series of narratives about transformation, was important here. Like Antony, the play presents a 'heavenly mingle', and like Cleopatra, an 'infinite variety' (1.5.59, 2.2.243). The emotional extremes experienced by the lovers are a product of a universe in a state of flux, in which Rome can be imagined as melting into the Tiber (1.1.35) and Egypt into the Nile (2.5.79). Antony sees himself as no more solid than a cloud; 'here I am Antony, / Yet cannot hold this visible shape' (4.15.13-14); his death is also described as a melting (4.16.65). Gender roles are equally unstable. Octavius comments witheringly on the

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<sup>3</sup> This speech should not be taken, as it sometimes is, to imply that the boy actor playing Cleopatra might be 'squeaking', i.e. twelve or thirteen. The emotional demands of the role suggest someone in his mid to late teens, whose voice had broken upwards, as it were, rather than downwards.

effeminacy of Antony and the mannishness of Cleopatra (1.4.5-7). 'I am fire and air', Cleopatra declares as she prepares to die (5.2.288); fire and air were conventionally 'masculine' elements, earth and water 'feminine' ones (such as compound to make the mud of the Nile). Her ship, however, flies from the battle, followed by that of Antony who has thereby 'lost command' (3.11.23) both of his troops and of himself. When he calls for his symbolically-named follower Eros to 'unarm' him (4.15.35), he is acknowledging that he has already been 'disarmed' by the erotic power of Cleopatra ('She has robbed me of my sword!', 4.15.23; 'My sword, made weak by my affection', 3.12.66). Once again, we can contrast this with *Julius Caesar*, where the virility of the Romans was never called into question and was shown in their military prowess and heroic resolve. This was once true of Antony himself, as he recalls (3.11.35-40). Now, however, things are different. Antony's reference to Dido and Aeneas (4.15.53) only reminds us that Aeneas, in Virgil's *Aeneid*, preferred the call of duty to that of love in rejecting Dido, who subsequently committed suicide. Shakespeare presents Antony as having been contaminated and weakened by the Egyptian emphasis on indolence and pleasure. 'I must from this enchanting queen break off', he resolves (1.2.128), but does nothing of the sort. His early description of himself as her 'soldier-servant' (1.3.70) turns out to be a contradiction in terms: he cannot be both.

I referred earlier to the difficulty of pigeon-holing the play as a tragedy, and one of its most intriguing features is its manipulation of tone. There is no moment of self-knowledge and illuminated understanding for the protagonists; on the contrary, Shakespeare takes extraordinary risks in his presentation of Antony's death. We know his belief that Cleopatra has died is wrong, and might be prepared to find his decision to follow her tragically mistaken, but is that what Shakespeare gives us? In *Julius Caesar*, Brutus and Cassius had both committed suicide in traditional fashion by running on their swords, held by loyal servants; Cassius's servant also killed himself. By contrast, after a lengthy rhetorical build-up, Eros turns the sword on himself rather than see his master dead, and is hailed by Antony as 'thrice nobler than myself' (4.15.95). (Eros's symbolic name is relevant here, of course.) Antony's subsequent attempt to kill himself is botched, and the faithless Dercetus steals his sword in order to find favour with Octavius (4.15.113-115, 5.1.4-26). As Antony lies bleeding, Diomedes comes with the news that Cleopatra is, after all, alive. There is a potential disparity between the high rhetoric of Antony's exchanges with her, and the stage business of hauling him up to the monument, which actors and directors could interpret as solemn or absurd.<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare ensures that no such disturbance of decorum will undermine the death of Cleopatra, which is 'well done, and fitting' (5.2.324).

In keeping with this swerve away from tragedy, *Antony and Cleopatra* is oblique in its treatment of the metaphysical. *Julius Caesar* contained frequent references to omens, portents and the control of human affairs by destiny. *Antony and Cleopatra* has less of this — one has only to contrast it with *Macbeth* — although what it does have is striking. The soothsayer's predictions to Iras and Charmian (1.2.6-56) prove less comforting than they assume, and his warning that Octavius's 'daemon' is stronger than Antony's (2.3.9-36) only confirms what Antony already suspects. Most remarkable is the scene in which Hercules, Antony's reputed ancestor, deserts him on the eve of his military defeat (4.3 — Shakespeare substitutes Hercules for Plutarch's Bacchus). There is, then, a supernatural dimension, yet also a powerful sense of human decisions shaping events. These characters are no mere puppets of Fate, trapped by determinism. Cleopatra may describe Octavius as 'Fortune's knave,/A minister of her will' (5.2.3-4), but she still manages to outwit him and thwart his intentions by taking 'her own way' (5.2.335). In one place Shakespeare hints at a wider historical perspective. 'The time of universal peace is near', Octavius proclaims (4.6.4), evoking the *pax Romana*, the exceptionally long period of political stability during the reign of Augustus (Octavius's imperial title). An ancient tradition of Christian writing held that this had been brought about by God in order to secure the conditions in which Christ should be born. Accordingly, both Roman and Egyptian worlds are suddenly far removed from our minds and

<sup>4</sup> For a useful discussion of the staging of the monument scenes see Neill, pp. 363-7.

seen as stages in a process of historical change. Both sets of values belong to worlds which are on the brink of being superseded.

Antony and Cleopatra are not, of course, the only characters in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Shakespeare brilliantly catches the clinical calculation of Octavius, the grovelling of Lepidus, the hypocrisy of Pompey. Iras and Charmian are distinct personalities. Even minor roles have something in them for the actor to make the most of. Enobarbus is perhaps the most interesting creation after the main protagonists. His ironic choric commentaries provide a refreshing deflation of the high-flown political and amorous rhetoric, and his judgements, for example that Antony has made 'his will/Lord of his reason (3.13.3-4), often seem right.<sup>5</sup> Initially resolved to follow Antony to the end (3.13.41-6), he finally decides to desert him when it appears that the fight is irredeemably lost (3.13.195-201). Yet, having joined the opposing army, and seen Octavius's ruthlessness at close quarters, he realises that Antony had more honour, and the news that Antony has magnanimously sent all his spoils of war after him shames him so much that he seeks to die. The scene in which he does so, apparently of a broken heart (4.10), is beautifully quiet and sad. Like us, perhaps, he has done his best to make sense of the lovers, and finds there are too many contradictions to cope with.

*Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus* (1608) are traditionally classed as 'Roman plays'. However, this should not be taken to mean that they can be added up, so to speak, and a highest common factor of 'Roman-ness' deduced from them. Shakespeare is an inveterate borrower from his own earlier work, but he never repeats himself. As I have suggested, *Antony's* differences from *Julius Caesar* are considerable, whilst *Coriolanus* will mark a return to a more unalloyed tragic mode. This ambitious, innovative play, with its symphonic range and its glittering linguistic display, reveals an astonishing intellectual power and historical imagination as Shakespeare recreates the world that gave birth to his own.

## SUGGESTED READING

Besides Michael Neill's edition, used in this essay, there are excellent ones by David Bevington for the New Cambridge series (1990) and John Wilders for the New Arden (1995). All have detailed critical introductions and bibliographies.

Janet Adelman, *The Common Liar: An Essay on 'Antony and Cleopatra'* (1973), is an important book-length study.

H. A. Mason, *Shakespeare's Tragedies of Love* (1970) is a challenging 'minority report' on the play, judging it to be an artistic failure.

Charles and Michelle Martindale, *Shakespeare and the Uses of Antiquity* (1990), is a good general account of Shakespeare's use of classical literature. More recent, more brilliant, but more difficult, is Colin Burrow's *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity* (2013).

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Paul Dean is Head of English at Summer Fields, Oxford, and a Founding Fellow of the English Association.

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<sup>5</sup> Neill writes perceptively about Enobarbus as a variant on the character of the Fool in *King Lear* (pp. 89-94). The roles may have been played by the same actor.

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The English Association  
University of Leicester  
Leicester LE1 7RH  
UK

Tel: 0116 229 7622  
Fax: 0116 229 7623  
Email: [engassoc@le.ac.uk](mailto:engassoc@le.ac.uk)

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