



**Understanding Shakespeare:
Antony and Cleopatra**

Robert A. Albano

UNDERSTANDING

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Los Angeles

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NOTE: All act and scene divisions and lines numbers referred to in this text are consistent with those found in *The Norton Shakespeare* (Stephen Greenblatt, editor).

INTRODUCTION

Antony and Cleopatra is – only superficially – a sequel to *Julius Caesar*. On the one hand, *Antony* covers approximately the same time period in Roman history as *Caesar*; and several of the characters that appear in *Caesar* do reappear in *Antony*. Both plays also involve Roman politics and the craving for power and rule. Moreover, the strong dramatic presence of Antony provides a focal point for both plays.

But the reader should also keep in mind that Shakespeare wrote *Antony and Cleopatra* in 1606, whereas *Julius Caesar* was written in 1599. More than seven years separates the two plays. *Antony* is not, then, a natural follow-up to *Caesar*. Shakespeare never intended, apparently, that the two plays should be performed as companion pieces. Between the time when the two plays were composed, Shakespeare had written several other truly great tragedies: *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Lear*. Since Shakespeare was never one to repeat themes or ideas in exactly the same way, the reader should be more concerned with how *Antony* is different from – and not similar to – *Caesar*.

Antony, although a strong presence in the earlier play, is not the **protagonist** in *Julius Caesar*. And, in many ways, the character of Antony in

Antony and Cleopatra is much different from the Antony that appears in *Caesar*. This does not occur because Shakespeare was inconsistent or wished to recreate the figure of Antony. Rather, the two Antonys are the same; but the circumstances surrounding the character of Antony have changed. **Antony is in love!** Antony is in the midst of a passion so strong and so deep that it overwhelms him. It changes him. It turns him into a different man.

In a sense, a reader could view *Antony and Cleopatra* as a sequel to *Romeo and Juliet*. Both plays are tragedies, and the tragic falls in both plays are due to the intense feelings of the couples who are involved. But, of course, there are also differences. Romeo and Juliet are young, where Antony and Cleopatra are not. Shakespeare is thus addressing two different kinds of love: **mature love** in *Antony and Cleopatra* versus **immature love** in *Romeo and Juliet*. Yet, in both plays, love is a force so strong and so overwhelming that it affects and changes all of the characters involved in both plays. The God of Love cares not whom he shoots with his magical arrow: rich or poor, clever or foolish, aristocrat or commoner, young or old. And that arrow of love always has practically the same effect. The passion it causes becomes too strong to resist.

Antony, more so than Cleopatra, is the protagonist of *Antony and Cleopatra*; and he is embroiled in more than one **conflict**. As in *Julius Caesar*, Antony is one of the leaders of the Roman

Empire, and affairs of state and its conflicts involve him directly. Moreover, he is in conflict with Octavius (the **man vs. man** conflict). Antony neglects affairs of Rome because of his relationship with Cleopatra, and Octavius no longer views Antony as a fit ruler for the empire. Moreover, Antony occasionally appears to be in conflict with Cleopatra. This is due to their passions, and the conflicts occur because they cannot be together and still competently rule the empire (for Antony) or Egypt (for Cleopatra). So, they must separate on many occasions. But when Antony is away, Cleopatra pines for him and becomes jealous. As for Antony, he is in conflict with himself, an internal conflict (**man vs. himself**). He realizes that his passion for Cleopatra is destroying his career and, more importantly, is causing him to lose his position of honor and dignity. His passion is leading to his own tragic fall. And, yet, Antony cannot stop himself. When he is with Cleopatra, his passions consume him. When he is away from Cleopatra, he cannot stop thinking about her. This struggle can also be described as the **reason versus emotion** conflict that appears again and again in Shakespeare's works. Antony knows all too well that his relationship with Cleopatra is causing his own destruction. His reason tells him so. But his emotions are stronger than his reason.

The reader may not only see a connection between *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony Cleopatra*, but another early work by the bard may also provide

insight into this play: the **Dark Lady Sonnets**. In these poems, the speaker Will is an older man who is driven by his desire, his passion, and his lust for the Dark Lady. He knows that this relationship is wrong, and that it is harmful to another relationship that he has – a relationship of true or spiritual love. But the speaker, Will, cannot control himself. In the conflict between emotion and reason, his emotion proves the stronger. Reason loses the battle.

One additional **conflict** is worth noting in this play: the conflict involving fate (**man versus fate**). As with many of his plays, Shakespeare constantly refers to the presence of fate, fortune, destiny, or chance. Fate is a higher power to which even the mightiest of men and those with the noblest of virtues must yield. Antony is a creature of destiny; and his fall becomes all the more tragic because, as Shakespeare reveals it, Antony has no other option. He must fall.

Antony and Cleopatra is a more complex play than is *Romeo and Juliet*. As some critics suggest, the play operates on three levels: (1) a Chronicle History Play, (2) a Tragedy, and (3) a Love Story. As a history play, the subject matter concerns a critical political situation. The battles by land and sea are extensive and occur over a period of many years in many locales throughout the Roman Empire (not following, then, the **unities** of time and place as established by **Aristotle**). As a tragedy, the play involves really the falls of two tragic individuals:

Antony and Cleopatra. It is, then, a double-tragedy. And as a love story, the play becomes a counterpart to the tragic *Romeo and Juliet*, telling the tale of middle-aged lovers as opposed to the youthful ones of the earlier play.

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