

**A Guide to  
ANTONY & CLEOPATRA**

*by William Shakespeare*



Alistair McCallum

*“The Shakespeare Handbooks open the plays up admirably. Excellent for all levels of reader – everybody will get something from them.” Simon Callow*

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## **Setting the scene**

Shakespeare wrote *Antony and Cleopatra* in or around 1607. He was in his early forties, and was the principal playwright for the King's Men, widely regarded as the best theatre company in London. At this period in his life, Shakespeare was at the peak of his creative powers. In the past few years alone, he had produced the titanic tragic masterpieces of *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*.

*Antony and Cleopatra* is very different in tone from the great tragedies that preceded it. As opposed to their heavy, sometimes bleak vision of humanity, with its terrifying capacity for evil, *Antony and Cleopatra* is marked by lightness, sympathy, balance, and humour. The conflicting worlds of Rome – solid, conformist and disciplined – and Egypt – sultry, luxurious and hedonistic – are presented in a mass of lively, vivid detail, and the play swarms with characters, images and movement.

Nothing is known of the first performances of *Antony and Cleopatra*; in fact, the earliest recorded production of the play took place more than a hundred years after Shakespeare's death. A more solemn, sentimental version of the story, *All for Love*, written by Dryden in 1677, was popular for many years, and it was not until the 19th century that *Antony and Cleopatra* was rediscovered as a major work of drama. At this time, lavish productions were favoured, with spectacular pageants, sea-battles and marching armies.

More recent productions have tried to explore the depth and richness of the text as well as the variety of the action. What strikes us now about *Antony and Cleopatra* is the effortless beauty of its language. Shakespeare was clearly fascinated by the story, which is rendered with considerable historical accuracy, and to see or read the play is to witness one of the world's great poets in his element.

*"... over these bare facts Shakespeare throws a great mound of flowers. Never before or afterwards did he lavish the resources of his poetry as he lavishes them here. Page after page of utterly unforgettable verse, perfect in cadence, perfect in metaphor – it is the most dazzling display of the world's most dazzling poet."*

John Wain, *The Living World of Shakespeare*

## Rome, 40 B.C.

Julius Caesar has been dead for four years. His death has led to civil war, anarchy and a murderous struggle for power in the vast, ever-expanding Roman Empire.

Caesar's assassins have themselves been killed, and an uneasy peace has finally been established. Three men, each commanding immense resources of wealth, land and arms, have come out on top:

- **Octavius Caesar:** adopted son of Julius Caesar; a strategist; young, determined, self-disciplined.
- **Antony:** formerly one of Julius Caesar's generals; a warrior; impulsive, gregarious, generous.
- **Lepidus:** an aristocrat and statesman; peaceable, mild, ineffectual.

These three men – the Triumvirate – now rule the Empire jointly.

## Trouble brewing

The civil war, lawlessness and bloodshed have come to a halt for the time being, but the Empire is far from safe. A series of events, both within the Empire and outside it, is threatening its stability:

- Unknown to Antony, **Fulvia**, his wife, has been stirring up rebellion in Rome against Octavius Caesar. Antony's brother is also involved. The two of them have been driven out of Italy, but are still intent on causing trouble.
- At the eastern border of the Empire, in Syria, the Parthians, led by **Labienus**, are making inroads into Roman territory.
- **Sextus Pompeius**, based in Sicily, has taken control of the sea around the south of Italy. He has the support of the mass of disaffected Romans who remember the rule of his father, Pompey the Great, with respect and affection.

Meanwhile, Antony is in Egypt. Infatuated with the Egyptian queen, Cleopatra, he is neglecting the urgent business of the Empire.

**Curtain up**

## Antony puts pleasure before business I, i

In Cleopatra's palace in Alexandria, two of Antony's followers are talking, disapprovingly, of the change that has come over their leader. Since becoming entangled with Cleopatra, they believe, he is no longer the valiant, disciplined warrior that he once was: he has become nothing more than the plaything of the Egyptian queen.

As they talk, Antony and Cleopatra enter, attended by the handmaidens and eunuchs of Cleopatra's court.

A messenger arrives from Antony's co-ruler, Octavius Caesar in Rome. Against Cleopatra's advice, Antony ignores him. He is lost in the immediacy of his own passion, and is only interested in the enjoyment of the moment:

*Antony:*                   ... for the love of Love, and her soft hours,  
Let's not confound the time with conference harsh:  
There's not a minute of our lives should stretch  
Without some pleasure now.

Antony's followers watch helplessly as the two lovers and their attendants sweep out again, disregarding Caesar's messenger. He is no longer his own man, they feel; what's more, his reputation has become the subject of gossip and rumour back in Rome.

*"Shakespeare divined, long before England became an imperial power, one of the most difficult problems of imperialism: how to stop your personnel from going native."*

John Wain, *The Living World of Shakespeare*, 1964



## The soothsayer speaks

I, ii

Charmian and Iras, Cleopatra's attendants – who are also her closest companions and confidantes – have decided to have their fortunes told. The soothsayer is brought in to read their palms.

In contrast to the others, the soothsayer is thoughtful and serious, and his utterances are brief and enigmatic. His first prediction for Charmian is promising:

*Charmian:* Good sir, give me good fortune.

*Soothsayer:* I make not, but foresee.

*Charmian:* Pray then, foresee me one.

*Soothsayer:* You shall be yet far fairer than you are.

He also predicts that she will live longer than Cleopatra. Some of his other comments are more ominous:

*Soothsayer:* You have seen and prov'd a fairer former fortune  
Than that which is to approach.

However, in the noisy banter of the company, his prophecies are treated as nothing more than a bit of fun. Enobarbus, Antony's right-hand man, who has already called out for wine to be provided, makes a more down-to-earth prediction:

*Enobarbus:* Mine, and most of our fortunes to-night, shall  
be – drunk to bed.

## Antony makes a decision

Antony finally listens to the messenger from Rome. He learns that his wife, Fulvia, has been stirring up a revolt against Caesar in Italy, and that Labienus has occupied a wide area of Roman territory in the eastern part of the Empire.

Antony realises that his obsession with Cleopatra has distracted him from his duty, and left him oblivious of events in the Empire. Although he finds it painful to be reminded of his negligence, he realises that it is necessary for him to hear the truth:

*Antony:* O then we bring forth weeds,  
When our quick<sup>1</sup> minds lie still, and our ills told us  
Is as our earing.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *vital, energetic*

<sup>2</sup> *ploughing, harrowing*

Suddenly, another messenger arrives with news of Fulvia's death. Antony knows he should be pleased; it is exactly what he wanted, as it means the end of the rebellion in Italy as well as freedom for him to pursue his relationship with Cleopatra. Instead, to his surprise, he feels a deep sense of loss, and the pleasures of his life in Egypt suddenly seem hollow.

Sensing that he is losing control over events, Antony is jolted into making a decision. He resolves to return to Rome immediately.

## Enobarbus takes a cynical view

Antony informs Enobarbus that they must prepare to leave at once. Enobarbus predicts, with amusement, what the reaction to the news will be:

*Enobarbus:* Cleopatra catching but the least noise of this, dies instantly. I have seen her die twenty times upon far poorer moment: I do think there is mettle<sup>1</sup> in death, which commits some loving act upon her, she hath such a celerity<sup>2</sup> in dying.

<sup>1</sup> *vigour*

<sup>2</sup> *speed, willingness*

When Antony tells him that Fulvia has died, Enobarbus remains unmoved, and continues to tease his master about his love-affair:

*Enobarbus:* When it pleaseth their deities to take the wife of a man from him, it shows to man the tailors of the earth ... this grief is crown'd with consolation, your old smock brings forth a new petticoat, and indeed the tears live in an onion, that should water this sorrow.

*Antony:* The business she hath broached in the state  
Cannot endure my absence.

*Enobarbus:* And the business you have broach'd here cannot be without you, especially that of Cleopatra's, which wholly depends on your abode.

Antony becomes impatient with Enobarbus's flippant comments. There is serious business to attend to in Rome, he explains: Fulvia's rebellion may be over, but the son of Pompey the Great, Sextus Pompeius, is challenging the Triumvirate, and is gathering the support of discontented Roman citizens. It is time to take action.

## Parting

I, iii

Cleopatra's passion for Antony is as wholehearted as Antony's for her: but, unlike him, she is able to stand back from her emotions, to calculate and manipulate. She already suspects that Antony intends to return to Rome and – she assumes – to his wife, Fulvia.

When Antony comes to break the news to her, she deliberately becomes changeable and difficult, teasing him about Fulvia's control over him, and reminding him of his earlier willingness to stay in Egypt:

*Cleopatra:* ... pray you, seek no colour<sup>1</sup> for your going,  
But bid farewell, and go: when you sued<sup>2</sup> staying,  
Then was the time for words; no going then;  
Eternity was in our lips, and eyes,  
Bliss in our brows' bent<sup>3</sup> ...

<sup>1</sup> *excuse*

<sup>2</sup> *were intent on*

<sup>3</sup> *arch*

Antony tells Cleopatra of the problems in Rome that require his presence. He also tells her of Fulvia's death, a fact which Cleopatra immediately seizes upon to add to his discomfort:

*Cleopatra:* O most false love!  
Where be the sacred vials thou should'st fill  
With sorrowful water? Now I see, I see,  
In Fulvia's death, how mine receiv'd shall be.

As she continues to tease him, Antony becomes embarrassed and angry. All he can do in his defence is insist, repeatedly, on his faithful, loving devotion to her: and it is on this note of renewed affection that they part.

*“You may observe that amongst all the great and worthy Persons ... there is not One that hath beene transported to the mad degree of Love; which shewes that great Spirits and great Businesse doe keepe out of this weake Passion. You must except, never the lesse, Marcus Antonius the halfe partner of the Empire of Rome.”*

Francis Bacon, *Of Love*, 1597

## Meanwhile, back in Rome ...

I, iv

Octavius Caesar is holding forth to Lepidus on the subject of Antony's faults. Antony's debauchery is bad enough, he says: but his failure to give his support to the Empire, at this time of crisis, is unforgivable. Lepidus attempts to present Antony's negligence in a favourable light, but Caesar has no time for excuses.

Caesar is monitoring the situation in Italy closely, and has ordered a constant flow of information through a network of spies and messengers across the country. One messenger arrives to tell him that Pompey is gaining popular support: he is followed by another who tells him that Pompey has joined forces with two notorious pirates, Menecrates and Menas, and is taking control of the sea around Italy.

The situation in the ports is particularly dangerous, as Pompey's forces are carrying out raids, causing the general population to flee inland:

*Messenger:*

Many hot inroads

They make in Italy, the borders maritime

Lack blood to think on't ...

No vessel can peep forth, but 'tis as soon

Taken as seen ...

The news makes Caesar even more impatient with Antony. He recalls Antony's resilience after the battle of Modena, where Caesar had defeated him, in the days of the civil war, before their partnership. Then, Antony had endured hunger and cold with fortitude; now, in contrast, he has softened and given himself up to luxury and self-indulgence.

Whatever Antony does, Caesar realises that he and Lepidus must respond to Pompey's threat. The two men set off to prepare their armed forces for action.

## A gift for Cleopatra

I, v

Cleopatra is whiling away the time with sleep and languid conversation. Her greatest pleasure is to luxuriate in thoughts and memories of Antony:

*Cleopatra:* He's speaking now,  
Or murmuring, 'Where's my serpent of old Nile?'  
For so he calls me. Now I feed myself  
With most delicious poison. Think on me,  
That am with Phoebus'<sup>1</sup> amorous pinches black ...

<sup>1</sup> *the sun god*

*"Cleopatra's sense of self is very acute; she is a constant manipulator of illusion and reality, herself the embodiment of the irrational, the ultimate exception to all rules ..."*

Marjorie B. Garber, *Dream in Shakespeare: From Metaphor to Metamorphosis*, 1974

She is shaken out of her dreamy state by the arrival of a messenger from Antony. He brings a pearl, and reports Antony's promise that he will make up for his absence with gifts of kingdoms.

Cleopatra, excited to hear from Antony, decides to write him one of her frequent letters. Teased by her attendant Charmian, she insists that in comparison to her love for Antony, her earlier feelings for Julius Caesar – who had been both her lover and political protector – were just youthful infatuation:

*Charmian:* The valiant Caesar!

*Cleopatra:* By Isis, I will give thee bloody teeth,  
If thou with Caesar paragon<sup>1</sup> again  
My man of men.

*Charmian:* By your most gracious pardon,  
I sing but after you.<sup>2</sup>

*Cleopatra:* My salad days,  
When I was green in judgment, cold in blood,  
To say as I said then.

<sup>1</sup> *compare*

<sup>2</sup> *I'm only singing his praises as you used to*

## Conspiracy in Sicily

II, i

Pompey is plotting a full-scale assault on the Empire, with the help of the pirates Menecrates and Menas. He is taken aback to hear that Caesar and Lepidus are mobilising against him; he had been banking on continuing disunity within the Triumvirate.

He consoles himself with the thought that Antony, entangled as he is with Cleopatra, does not present a problem. However, this illusion too is shattered when news arrives that Antony is already on his way to Rome. This is a major setback, but Pompey puts a brave face on it:

*Pompey:* ... I did not think  
This amorous surfeiter<sup>1</sup> would have donn'd his helm  
For such a petty war: his soldiership  
Is twice the other twain: but let us rear  
The higher our opinion, that our stirring  
Can from the lap of Egypt's widow pluck  
The ne'er-lust-wearied Antony.

<sup>1</sup> *over-indulger*

... *the lap of Egypt's widow* ...

Technically speaking, Cleopatra was, as Pompey says, a widow. She was the last of the Ptolemies, the dynasty that had ruled Egypt for nearly three centuries, and she had inherited the throne while still in her teens. Incestuous marriages were not unusual among the Ptolemies, and at eighteen she was married to her younger brother, as co-ruler of Egypt.

A few years after coming to power, Cleopatra was briefly deposed in a coup carried out by her brother's supporters. With the help of Julius Caesar, she regained the throne of Egypt, and her brother was killed while retreating from the Roman troops. A second brother then became co-ruler; however, he soon died in suspicious circumstances – almost certainly poisoned by Cleopatra – and she became once again sole ruler of the kingdom.



It remains to be seen whether the three leaders can set aside their differences and unite against the planned offensive. Either way, Pompey is convinced that justice, and the gods, are on his side.

## The Triumvirate pulls together

II, ii

The three rulers have arranged to meet in order to consider the threats facing the Empire.

While waiting for the others to arrive, Lepidus is trying to persuade Enobarbus that this is a time for calmness and diplomacy; personal differences between Caesar and Antony should be set aside. The blunt, belligerent Enobarbus is having none of it:

*Lepidus:* Good Enobarbus, 'tis a worthy deed,  
And shall become you well, to entreat your captain  
To soft and gentle speech.

*Enobarbus:* I shall entreat him  
To answer like himself: if Caesar move<sup>1</sup> him,  
Let Antony look over Caesar's head,  
And speak as loud as Mars ...

*Lepidus:* 'Tis not a time  
For private stomaching.

*Enobarbus:* Every time  
Serves for the matter that is then born in't.

*Lepidus:* But small to greater matters must give way.

*Enobarbus:* Not if the small come first.

<sup>1</sup> *angers*

Antony and Caesar now arrive, separately, and conspicuously ignore one another. After a plea for friendship and unity from Lepidus, the two men coolly exchange greetings. Their disagreements immediately come to the surface, and their manner becomes less formal and more heated as the argument proceeds.

Caesar criticises Antony for remaining in Egypt while his wife and brother were causing trouble in Rome, and for ignoring his messenger. Antony jokes and blusters defensively. His wife was beyond any man's control, he claims: and as for Caesar's messenger, Antony had been entertaining three kings the night before his arrival, and hardly knew what time of day it was.

Caesar then comes to a more important point: that Antony had not provided arms and aid when Caesar required them in the fight against Fulvia. This directly contravened the pact of mutual assistance to which all three leaders have solemnly sworn. Antony knows he is in the wrong. Keen to emphasise his honour, he nevertheless gives something approaching an apology:

*Antony:* Truth is, that Fulvia,  
To have me out of Egypt, made wars here,  
For which myself, the ignorant motive, do  
So far ask pardon, as befits mine honour  
To stoop in such a case.

It is enough. A temporary unity is established. Lepidus is delighted; Enobarbus remains cynical.

## **A wedding is announced**

Caesar expresses his concern that, whatever agreement he and Antony might come to, it will always be difficult for the two of them to get on together on a personal level.

At this point Caesar's adviser Agrippa puts forward an idea. He proposes that Antony – a widower now that Fulvia is dead – should marry Caesar's sister Octavia. This, suggests Agrippa, will make stable and permanent the goodwill that has now been created between the two leaders. The idea meets with the approval of both men, and Caesar immediately promises Antony the hand of the absent Octavia.

The three leaders depart together. First, the marriage of Antony to Octavia is to take place: as soon as that is done, the three will deal with the threats facing the Empire. The most urgent is presented by Pompey, who has advanced from his base in Sicily and is now firmly established in Misena, in the south of Italy.

## Tales of Egypt

When the leaders have left, the air of formality quickly evaporates as Caesar's men urge Enobarbus to tell them about life in Alexandria. He is only too ready to confirm his listeners' image of Egypt as a playground of luxury and debauchery. When he comes to the subject of Cleopatra, he reaches soaring heights of poetry as he describes how she first appeared to Antony, in her royal barge, in the burning heat of the day:

*Enobarbus:* The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne  
Burn'd on the water: the poop was beaten gold;  
Purple the sails, and so perfumed that  
The winds were love-sick with them; the oars were  
silver,  
Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made  
The water which they beat to follow faster,  
As amorous of their strokes.

Nature itself seemed to be in love with her; and Antony, invited to dine with her, was immediately captivated.

*A conspiracy theory:* the marriage idea was planned in advance by Caesar, who instructed Agrippa to put forward the suggestion at this conference. The impulsive Antony was sure to accept, but is equally sure to go back to Cleopatra. If he does so, Caesar will be able to take the moral high ground and win the support of all right-minded Romans in any future conflict. In this way, Caesar uses his sister as a pawn in his long-term strategy to defeat Antony.