

Antony and Cleopatra



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare's father was a glove-maker, and Shakespeare received no more than a grammar school education. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582, but left his family behind around 1590 and moved to London, where he became an actor and playwright. He was an immediate success: Shakespeare soon became the most popular playwright of the day as well as a part-owner of the Globe Theater. His theater troupe was adopted by King James as the King's Men in 1603. Shakespeare retired as a rich and prominent man to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1613, and died three years later.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the late 1st century BCE, the republic of Rome was crumbling. In 44 BCE, the dictator Julius Caesar was assassinated, and then his assassins were killed in revenge. Power became divided among Lepidus, Octavius Caesar (Julius Caesar's adoptive son), and Mark Antony in an arrangement known as the second triumvirate. The weak Lepidus was easily squeezed out of the picture, and as Antony and Octavius amassed more and more power they moved toward a civil war against each other. Antony's power was centered in the east and in Egypt (where he was with Cleopatra), while Octavius' power was more centered at Rome. The two fought a climactic battle near Actium in 33 BCE, at which the forces of Antony and Cleopatra were decisively defeated. Soon after, Octavius gained sole control over Rome, and gradually established a form of government called the Principate, commonly known as the Roman Empire. All of these historical events form an important background to Shakespeare's play, but his tragedy creates an inventive, original story from these raw ingredients of historical fact.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Antony and Cleopatra*
- **When Written:** Early 1600s
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1623
- **Literary Period:** The Renaissance (1500-1660)
- **Genre:** Drama, tragedy
- **Setting:** Egypt and Rome, around 31 BCE
- **Climax:** Antony and Cleopatra fight Octavius in a naval battle near Actium. Cleopatra flees and Antony follows her, effectively losing the fight against Octavius.

- **Antagonist:** Octavius Caesar

EXTRA CREDIT

Queen of the Nile. Although she was the queen of Egypt and lived there, Cleopatra actually descended from a family line of Macedonian Greeks, who came to power in Egypt following the death of Alexander the Great (who had conquered Egypt, among many other places).



PLOT SUMMARY

The play begins in Egypt, where one of Antony's soldiers worries that Antony's love for Cleopatra is excessive and has made him a weaker general. Cleopatra and Antony enter, and Cleopatra asks him how much he loves her. He says he cannot quantify his love for her. A messenger comes with news from Rome, but Antony disregards him, saying that he doesn't care about Rome and is only concerned with Cleopatra. Antony and Cleopatra leave, and another of his soldiers notes how disrespectful Antony is toward the young Octavius, who sent the messenger.

Some of Cleopatra's servants consult a soothsayer, who tells two of them that they will outlive Cleopatra herself. Cleopatra enters looking for Antony, but when he arrives, she gets annoyed with him and leaves. A messenger comes and tells Antony that his wife Fulvia has waged war against Octavius and Antony has lost territory in Asia minor, hinting that all this happened while Antony was neglecting his duties in Egypt with Cleopatra. Another messenger informs Antony that Fulvia has died. Antony says that he must "break off" from Cleopatra and his "Egyptian fetters." He decides to leave Egypt for Rome, as he must help deal with Sextus Pompey, a rival of both Antony and Octavius who has been gaining power. He sends his advisor Enobarbus to make preparations for them to leave Egypt. Cleopatra sends a servant named Alexas to find Antony. She tells Alexas that if he seems happy, she should tell him Cleopatra is sad, and if he seems sad that she is happy. Antony tells Cleopatra that he must leave, and she is angry with him. She doubts his love for her and says that he is betraying her, but he tells her it is his duty to go to Rome. He promises her that the distance between them will not affect his love for her.

At Rome, Octavius complains to Lepidus about how Antony wastes time drinking and partying in Egypt. He says that Antony has become womanly because of his relationship with the manly Cleopatra. He wishes Antony would return, as Pompey is gaining power and becoming dangerous. Back in Egypt, Cleopatra passes time at her court with her servants and a eunuch named Mardian. She misses Antony and jokes that

she is jealous of his horse, which gets to “bear the weight of Antony.” Alexas brings her a letter from Antony, along with a pearl. Cleopatra is happy to receive this sign of his affection and resolves to send him a letter every day.

Sextus Pompey discusses strategy with his followers Menas and Menecrates. He is confident that he will do well against Octavius, Lepidus, and Antony, because he thinks that Antony is still enjoying himself in Egypt, under control of “all the charms of love.” He is surprised to learn from a messenger that Antony has actually left Egypt for Rome. He tells Menas that Octavius and Antony, though not fond of each other, will be united as allies by their common enemy in Pompey. Antony arrives in Rome and Octavius chastises him for neglecting his duties and ignoring the messengers he has sent to Egypt. Lepidus tries to mediate between them, and Octavius’ adviser Maecenas urges them to forget their disagreements so that they can deal with Pompey. Agrippa, one of Octavius’ commanders, suggests that, now that Fulvia is dead, Antony could marry Octavius’ sister Octavia as a way of bringing Antony and Octavius closer together. Everyone agrees to the plan, and Octavius and Antony go to find Octavia. Enobarbus tells Agrippa and Maecenas about Antony’s wild times in Egypt and about Cleopatra’s seductive behavior. Octavius introduces Antony to Octavia, and he promises to be faithful to her. Antony talks with the soothsayer, who advises him to go back to Egypt. Antony makes plans to return to Egypt, and sends his man Ventidius to take care of some matters in Parthia. Lepidus, Maecenas, and Agrippa discuss their plans to meet and fight against Pompey. Back in Egypt, Cleopatra receives a messenger from Antony. She keeps interrupting him and hardly lets him speak, but he at last delivers his message, that Antony has married Octavia. Cleopatra is furious and takes out her anger on the messenger. She sends Alexas to go find Octavia and see what she looks like.

In Italy, Pompey meets with Octavius, Antony, and Lepidus to make a truce. The two sides agree upon terms and everyone goes to Pompey’s boat to celebrate with a feast. Menas tells Enobarbus he thinks the marriage between Antony and Octavia will keep Antony and Octavius together, but Enobarbus says he doubts it will. On Pompey’s boat, everyone drinks, and Lepidus gets so drunk he has to be carried off by servants. Menas whispers to Pompey that he could kill all his guests and take control of all of Rome, but Pompey says this would be dishonorable. Menas is annoyed that Pompey is not taking advantage of the situation, and decides to desert him. The feast continues and everyone drinks raucously, until Octavius says he has indulged in enough fun and departs.

Meanwhile, in Parthia, Ventidius wins a military victory for Antony. A soldier encourages him to pursue the fleeing Parthians, but Ventidius says he does not want to achieve too much for his rank and risk rivaling Antony’s authority. Back in Rome, Octavia weeps at having to leave her brother and go with Antony to Athens. Octavius sadly (but without crying) bids

farewell to his sister. In Egypt, Cleopatra angrily hears about Octavia but is pleased to learn that Antony’s new wife does not rival her in beauty or excellence. At Antony’s house in Athens, Antony complains to Octavia about Octavius, who has begun speaking ill of him. Octavia says she will go to Rome to try to mend the rift between Antony and Octavius. Enobarbus talks with Antony’s follower Eros and tells him that Octavius has effectively defeated Pompey and pushed Lepidus out of power. Now, the world is divided between Antony and Octavius. In Rome, Octavius complains to Maecenas and Agrippa about Antony’s pompous behavior—among other things, he has declared Cleopatra the queen of Egypt and several other kingdoms. Octavia arrives and says that she has come to beg Octavius’ pardon on behalf of Antony, but Octavius informs her that Antony has gone back to Cleopatra in Egypt and betrayed her. He says Antony “hath given his empire / Up to a whore.”

Near the city of Actium, in Egypt, Antony and Cleopatra prepare for battle against Octavius. Cleopatra tells Enobarbus that she plans to go into battle with Antony, to Enobarbus’ dismay (he thinks a battle is no place for a woman). Against the advice of his commander Canidius, Antony decides to fight Octavius at sea. A soldier begs him to reconsider, but he remains stubborn. Canidius tells the soldier that Antony is now under Cleopatra’s control and they are nothing but “women’s men.” Elsewhere near Actium, Octavius gives orders to his general Taurus. Antony also prepares his forces for battle. Octavius’ and Antony’s navies fight a battle. They are evenly matched and there is no clear winner, but Cleopatra flees. Antony sees this and follows her, effectively conceding the battle. Canidius decides to desert Antony for Octavius, and Enobarbus remarks on how shameful and cowardly Antony’s behavior was, but Enobarbus decides to stand by his master. At Cleopatra’s palace, Antony is ashamed at having fled the battle. He is frustrated with Cleopatra and thinks that he will surrender to Octavius. He sends an ambassador to Octavius, who tells the ambassador that he will show no mercy to Antony, but will pardon Cleopatra if she will either kill Antony or drive him out of Egypt. Octavius sends a messenger named Thidias to go and promise Cleopatra gifts in an attempt to persuade her to leave Antony for Octavius. Antony is upset when he receives Octavius’ message, and plans to challenge him to a one-on-one duel. Enobarbus thinks this is a ridiculous plan and starts to wonder whether he should remain loyal to Antony. Thidias arrives and tells Cleopatra that Octavius will look kindly on her if she should leave Antony. Cleopatra tells him she will gladly surrender to Octavius. Antony enters and is furious when he sees Thidias kiss Cleopatra’s hand. He has servants beat Thidias and send him back to Octavius. He yells at Cleopatra for betraying him, but she convinces him that she is really faithful to him. Antony begins to recollect his courage and plans to fight back against Octavius. Enobarbus thinks that Antony is behaving very unreasonably and decides to abandon Antony to join Octavius’ forces. At Octavius’ camp, Octavius mocks

Antony's challenge of single-handed combat, and plans to defeat Antony once and for all. Antony learns of Octavius' refusal to duel and plans to fight Octavius' forces. He tells his followers to enjoy one last night of revelry and drinking before their final fight against Octavius.

Several soldiers in Cleopatra's palace anxiously await the battle. They hear music coming from "under the earth," and take this as a sign that Antony's patron deity Hercules is deserting him. The next day, Antony prepares for battle and kisses Cleopatra before leaving. Antony learns from a soldier that Enobarbus has left him and joined Octavius' forces. Antony orders for Enobarbus' things to be sent after him with "gentle adieus and greetings." Octavius prepares his troops for battle, deciding to put those who have deserted Antony's side in the front lines, so that it will seem as if Antony's forces are fighting themselves. Enobarbus receives his things from Antony, and regrets his decision to leave his kind former leader.

The battle begins, and Agrippa is forced to call for his forces to retreat. Antony has gained a victory, and returns to Alexandria to celebrate with Cleopatra. Meanwhile, at Octavius' camp, Enobarbus dies full of regret for having betrayed Antony. The next day, Antony fights Octavius at sea. His soldier Scarus sees that swallows have built nests in Cleopatra's sails, and is unsure of what this omen means. Antony's fleet quickly surrenders to the forces of Octavius, and Antony is furious. He blames Cleopatra for the defeat and says that she has betrayed him. Cleopatra tries to soothe him, but he calls her a witch and sends her away. Charmian suggests to Cleopatra that she should go to her tomb, lock herself inside, pretend to kill herself, and send word of her death to Antony. Cleopatra agrees with the plan. Antony talks with Eros, and describes how sometimes clouds appear to be a particular shape, but then dissolve and change form. He says that he feels like these clouds and "cannot hold this visible shape." He blames his defeat on Cleopatra, who he thinks betrayed him and didn't truly love him. Mardian enters and tells Antony that Cleopatra really did love him. He says she killed herself and her dying word was Antony's name. Antony says that he will follow Cleopatra's example and kill himself. He tells Eros to stab him, but Eros refuses and stabs himself instead. Antony then stabs himself. One of Cleopatra's servants enters and tells Antony that Cleopatra is not really dead. Antony is carried to Cleopatra's tomb.

Antony arrives at Cleopatra's tomb, and Cleopatra is distressed to see him dying. He tells her to seek safety with Octavius, but she refuses and promises to end her own life and not become Octavius' prisoner. Antony dies and Cleopatra orders for him to be buried "after the high Roman fashion." At his camp, Octavius plans to send a messenger to get Antony to surrender, but receives news of Antony's death. He is saddened by the news, as he respected Antony as a strong opponent. Octavius sends his men Proculeius and Gallus to go to Cleopatra and persuade

her that he has no ill intentions toward her, so that she will not commit suicide like Antony and ruin his actual plans to parade her as a prisoner in his triumph at Rome. At her tomb, Cleopatra, resolves to end her own life, but then Proculeius and Gallus arrive and tell her not to worry about her treatment at Octavius' hands. Proculeius and Gallus leave, and Octavius' follower Dolabella enters. Cleopatra tells Dolabella about a dream she had of a gigantic, powerful Antony who ruled the world. Dolabella takes pity on her and admits to her Octavius' actual intentions. Octavius arrives and tells Cleopatra that he will not harm her if she surrenders to him. He leaves, and Cleopatra thinks about how she would become a subject of public ridicule at Rome. She sends Charmian and her servant Iras to get her best clothes and crown, so that she can look her most beautiful when she dies.

A common man arrives, bearing a basket of figs for Cleopatra. Hidden in the basket are asps (poisonous snakes). Cleopatra kisses Charmian and Iras goodbye, and Iras falls dead. Cleopatra takes an asp and lets it bite her breast, then has another one bite her arm. She dies. A guard rushes in and sees what has happened, as Charmian lets an asp bite her and dies, as well. Octavius enters and, while disappointed at what has happened, calls Cleopatra "bravest at the last." He orders for Cleopatra to be buried with Antony and says that his army will attend a funeral for Antony and Cleopatra before returning victorious to Rome.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mark Antony – One of the title characters of the play, Antony is a powerful Roman who is a member of the so-called second triumvirate, the group of three men who controlled Rome in the late first century BCE following the assassination of Julius Caesar. (The other two members are Octavius and Lepidus.) When the play begins, Antony has neglected his duties in Rome (as well as his wife Fulvia) to cavort with Cleopatra in Egypt. He often seems to be under the control of Cleopatra, something his soldiers worry about, and this perhaps contributes to his defeat at the hands of Octavius—it is because he is following Cleopatra, after all, that he flees from the naval battle near Actium. However, he becomes frustrated with Cleopatra after this loss, and even blames it on her. He remains deeply devoted to her, though: when Cleopatra sends word to him that she has killed herself (falsely), he resolves to do the same. Thus, while he is defeated by Octavius in battle, it is Cleopatra who (unwittingly) causes his death.

Cleopatra – The queen of Egypt, Cleopatra is a powerful woman who wears her sexuality on her sleeve. She can be impetuous and capricious, jumping from one emotion to another (especially early in the play), and often manipulates

Antony by calling his love into question or pretending to be dead, for example. Nonetheless, Cleopatra is brave, and, especially later in the play, is presented in a noble, tragic light. After the death of Antony, she faces her death with strong resolve, and chooses to determine her own fate rather than suffering the humiliation of being Octavius' servant, slave, or prisoner.

Octavius Caesar – The adoptive son of Julius Caesar, who would later go on to be called Augustus and establish the Roman Empire. In the play, he is a strong, powerful, self-restrained man. After dealing with Pompey and Lepidus, he wages war against the forces of Antony and Cleopatra and is victorious, gaining sole control over Rome. He tries to persuade Cleopatra not to commit suicide, as he wishes to humiliate her by parading her in his public triumph after defeating Antony. However, after Cleopatra's death, he admits that he respects both Antony and Cleopatra as strong, honorable opponents, ordering for them to be buried together and planning to attend their funerals before returning to Rome with his victorious army.

Lepidus – The third member of the triumvirate, Lepidus is noticeably weaker than both Antony and Octavius. On Pompey's boat, he gets so drunk that he has to be carried off by servants. After the defeat of Pompey, he is quickly ousted from power by Octavius, paving the way for war between Octavius and Antony.

Sextus Pompey – The son of Pompey the Great, and an enemy of Lepidus, Octavius, and Antony. As a common enemy of all three members of the triumvirate, he ensures the continuing alliance between Antony, Octavius, and Lepidus. However, once he is out of the picture, the triumvirate crumbles, and its members turn on each other.

Octavia – The sister of Octavius. After the death of his wife Fulvia, Antony marries Octavia. She does not seem to realize, though, that he has no intentions of leaving Cleopatra, and is only marrying her as part of a political scheme, an attempt to bring him and Octavius closer together. When Antony and Octavius start to feud, she finds herself torn between obedience to her brother and to her new husband. When she goes to Octavius in Rome, she learns that Antony has left her for Cleopatra, and so stays in Rome with her brother.

Enobarbus – One of Antony's advisors and followers, who, over the course of the play, begins to doubt Antony. He finally decides that his own survival is more important than loyalty to Antony, and deserts him for Octavius. He quickly regrets this decision, though, and returns to Antony to repent and then dies.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Menas – One of Pompey's followers. When Octavius, Lepidus, and Antony are all drinking on Pompey's boat, Menas tries to

persuade Pompey to kill all of them, thereby seizing power of Rome. Pompey refuses, and Menas is so frustrated by his master's lack of ambition that he decides to leave Pompey.

Menecrates – One of Pompey's followers.

Varrus – One of Pompey's men, who informs him that Antony has left Egypt for Rome in act two.

Fulvia – Antony's wife, who never appears in the play, but is mentioned as waging battle against Octavius. After her death, Antony marries Octavius' sister Octavia.

Ventidius – One of Antony's commanders, who defeats the Parthians in battle. He decides not to pursue the fleeing Parthians, as he doesn't want to achieve too much and risk rivaling Antony's power.

Eros – One of Antony's loyal men, who attends on Cleopatra and him. Antony asks for Eros to stab him, but Eros can't do this, and instead stabs himself, earning Antony's respect.

Canidius – One of Antony's commanders, who leads his land forces at Actium.

Silius – One of Antony's soldiers, who talks with Ventidius in act three.

Scarus – One of Antony's soldiers, who is present both at Actium and at Antony's later victory in Act 4.

Dercetas – One of Antony's soldiers, who goes to Octavius to tell him of Antony's death and pledges his allegiance to Octavius.

Demetrius – One of Antony's soldiers.

Philo – One of Antony's soldiers, who worries about Antony's excessive love for Cleopatra early in the play.

Ambassador – An ambassador sent by Antony to Octavius, to ask him to let Antony live either in Egypt or Athens if he should surrender.

Charmian – One of Cleopatra's servants, who kills herself with an asp after Cleopatra does so.

Iras – One of Cleopatra's servants, who stays with her until she dies just before Cleopatra commits suicide.

Alexas – One of Cleopatra's servants.

Mardian – A eunuch in Cleopatra's court.

Seleucus – Cleopatra's treasurer, who appears in the final scene of the play.

Diomedes – One of Cleopatra's servants, who comes to Antony after he has stabbed himself, and tells him that Cleopatra is not dead, as Antony thought, but actually alive.

Maecenas – One of Octavius' advisors.

Agrippa – One of Octavius' commanders.

Taurus – One of Octavius' commanders, who leads his forces at the battle of Actium.

Thidias – A messenger that Octavius sends to try to persuade Cleopatra to betray Antony and join him.

Dolabella – One of Octavius’ followers, who takes pity on Cleopatra in Act 5 and admits to her that Octavius actually plans to parade her in his triumph.

Gallus – A commander under Octavius.

Proculeius – One of Octavius’ soldiers, who tries to persuade Cleopatra not to commit suicide, by lying and saying that Octavius has no plans to humiliate her as a prisoner in his triumph.

Messengers – Throughout the play, numerous messengers appear and deliver news to Antony, Cleopatra, and others.

Soothsayer – A fortune-teller, who predicts early in the play that Antony will have a lesser fortune than Octavius, and warns Antony to stay away from Octavius.

play with a decadent, luxurious lifestyle. This fits with long-standing cultural stereotypes by which western art and literature has often caricatured the east as a place of decadence and leisure, and contributes to a conflict between east and west personified by Antony and Octavius (between whom the world is divided politically). The individual dispute between Antony and Octavius can be seen as a conflict between Rome’s western austerity and Egypt’s eastern luxury. Antony is a Roman, but the play follows his transformation as he moves to Egypt and becomes more and more in thrall to his own desires for various forms of pleasure. At the end of the play, Octavius is victorious, suggesting that his practical austerity conquers Antony’s licentious lifestyle of pleasure. But the play is a tragedy: Shakespeare presents the downfall of Antony and Cleopatra sympathetically, bestowing some honor on them even as they lose themselves among the pleasures of the Egyptian court.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



LOVE, PLEASURE, AND DECADENCE

Antony and Cleopatra opens with a scene in which Antony professes his unfathomable love for Cleopatra and, while the play covers much of the

political drama surrounding the crumbling of the Roman republic and creation of the Roman Empire under Octavius, it is also centrally about the romantic relationship between Antony and Cleopatra (after all, it’s not entitled *Antony and Octavius*). Antony tells Cleopatra that his love has no bounds, and often it certainly does seem excessive. It keeps him from important business in Rome, clouds his judgment, and is at the very least a contributing factor to his downfall. This is not to say that Antony’s love is wholly negative or that all love in the play is bad, though. One can view Antony’s love for Cleopatra as (at times) a powerful, genuine devotion to another person. Moreover, the close bond between Octavius and his sister Octavia suggests the positive nature of familial love. Antony’s love is so destructive to himself perhaps because it is mostly a matter of lust and reckless passion.

Enobarbus says that Cleopatra does not satisfy Antony’s appetite for love but rather “makes hungry / Where she most satisfies.” In this, he compares Antony’s desire to other forms of appetite. And indeed it is not merely love that Antony indulges in while in Egypt. He and Cleopatra feast, drink, and carouse decadently. Cleopatra herself seems at times obsessed with beauty and pleasure. All of Egypt becomes associated in the



HONOR, LOYALTY, AND BETRAYAL

Antony and Cleopatra takes place at a time of serious political turmoil and civil strife, with leaders rising and falling, as Fulvia, Pompey, Lepidus,

Octavius, Antony, and Cleopatra all jostle for political power. Thus, ordinary people, advisors, soldiers, and attendants are forced to decide who to follow and be loyal to. The leaders, meanwhile, must rely on the loyalty of their followers. It is when Antony’s soldiers effectively desert that Antony is finally defeated. Beyond political or military loyalty, there is also the issue of marital loyalty and fidelity. Antony basically deserts his wife Fulvia for Cleopatra, and marries Octavia even though he intends to stay with Cleopatra. In addition, he often fears that Cleopatra is betraying him both politically and romantically.

The play is thus very interested in questions of loyalty and betrayal. Many characters face dilemmas, which complicate any simple notions of these ideas. Enobarbus is loyal to Antony for much of the play, but reasons that it is folly to stay loyal to a fool, and so leaves for Octavius’ camp. Menas decides to leave Pompey, because Pompey refuses to seize opportunity. Antony can also be seen as facing a crisis of loyalty: in waging civil war against Octavius, he is in some sense betraying his own country.

When faced with these dilemmas, characters must weigh the importance of loyalty against both self-interest and personal honor, which could be defined as loyalty to one’s own values or ideals. However, Antony loses even personal honor when he flees the battle of Actium. Perhaps no character is wholly innocent of betrayal, though. Octavius is treacherous: not only does he turn on Lepidus, but also, after conquering Antony, he promises Cleopatra not to humiliate her as a prisoner in his military triumph, though he actually does plan to do this. Shakespeare’s play presents a messy series of complicated political, military, civil, and personal matters, in which figuring out the most honorable or loyal thing to do is never easy.

Betrayal is a brutal fact of the real world in the play, and the last person standing—Octavius—does not achieve victory because he is the most honorable or loyal, but merely because he is able to survive all of the betrayals and shifting loyalties of his time.



STRATEGY, MANIPULATION, AND POWER

As various political players struggle for control over the crumbling Roman republic, most of the play's characters attempt to strategize and manipulate their way to safety and power. Alliances shift throughout the play, as Antony and Octavius begin on the same side (against Pompey), before Octavius turns on Lepidus, and Antony and Octavius turn on each other. Lesser commanders must figure out their own strategies, as well. Enobarbus leaves Antony, hoping it will get him a better chance at prospering with Octavius, while Menas hopes to leave Pompey in order to attain more power for himself. And Antony's general Ventidius decides not to pursue the fleeing Parthians so as not to accomplish too much and rival Antony's authority.

All the characters in the play must plan their actions carefully, as any wrong move can result in making the wrong enemy. All this strategy and manipulation trickles down into the personal and domestic spheres, as well. Cleopatra often tries to manipulate Antony (sending him a false message that she is dead, for example, in order to see his reaction), and Antony strategically marries Octavius' sister Octavia. From the battlefield to the bedroom, *Antony and Cleopatra* is full of plotting characters striving against one another. Octavius can be seen as the one character whose plans actually come to fruition, but Cleopatra is able to thwart him with one last stratagem: by ending her own life she takes control over her fate and refuses to be taken as a prisoner of war. Octavius may have defeated her in battle, but Cleopatra's clever plotting allows her to find some form of victory in defeat, some power amid powerlessness.



MESSAGES, WARNINGS, AND OMENS

Shakespeare's tragedy is filled with messages and warnings; messengers and helpers come and go in both Rome and Egypt, bringing important news to major political players like Antony, Cleopatra, and Octavius. The play shows the importance of these intermediary characters who are necessary for the main characters' plans to be carried out (and upon whom the plot of the play relies). But at the same time, the play shows the danger of being in the position of the messenger. Antony and Cleopatra continually disregard messages, and Cleopatra makes a habit of literally blaming the messenger, as with the one who tells her of Antony's marriage to Octavia.

Another form of message often disregarded in the play are the omens and prophecies that recur throughout the tragedy. In Egypt, a soothsayer predicts that Antony will have a lesser fortune than Octavius and should stay away from him. Later in the play, Antony's soldiers think they hear signs of Antony's patron deity, Hercules, abandoning him. These things bode poorly for Antony and Cleopatra, but they ignore such signs, just as they ignore the messenger from Rome in the first scene of the play. In addition to correct, but ignored prophecy, the play also offers an example of a faulty prediction in Cleopatra's dream of a gigantic, powerful Antony. This vision gives her hope for a successful fight against Octavius, but, as she later learns, this turns out to be nothing more than a dream.

All this interpreting of omens and attempting to tell the future is reflective of the Egyptian and Roman context of the play—augury of various sorts was very important to both cultures. It is also, though, an effective device for Shakespeare to create dramatic irony, as the audience knows how the historical events fictionalized in the tragedy actually played out. Various characters' unsuccessful attempts to tell the future thus arouse pathos, an intense form of sympathy crucial to tragedy, in the audience or reader. Antony and Cleopatra desperately try to decipher what their destinies hold in store, but only Shakespeare, his audiences, and his readers know the script that has already been written for them.



GENDER ROLES

Throughout the play, Antony and Cleopatra's relationship transgresses the bounds of traditional gender roles. Cleopatra is powerful and manipulative, and Antony seems to become weaker and less decisive as he spends more time under her sway. His men worry that he is under the control of Cleopatra and his soldier Canidius tells a fellow soldier that because of this they are "women's men." In Act 2, Scene 5, Cleopatra mentions a time that she got Antony drunk and they wore each other's clothes for amusement. This exchange of clothes symbolizes the exchange of traditionally male and female roles that occurs in their relationship. This reversal comes to a disastrous head at the important battle of Actium, where Cleopatra insists on fighting in the battle, like a man, and Antony ends up fleeing in an unmanly way.

The transgression of gender roles in Antony and Cleopatra's relationship is made even clearer by the behavior of other characters, in particular Octavius and his sister Octavia. Octavius is restrained (he doesn't drink too much on Pompey's boat, for example), strong, and brave; he is an exemplar of traditional masculinity and, as such, a foil for Antony. Likewise, Octavia can be seen as a kind of foil for Cleopatra, with her demure obedience to the men in her life. These figures of traditional gender roles are ultimately victorious. As Octavius defeats Antony and Cleopatra, one may see the conclusion of

the play as dramatizing the reestablishment of both political stability and traditional gender roles. However, Cleopatra and Antony have noble deaths, eliciting sympathy and respect even from Octavius himself. While the dangerously powerful Cleopatra is defeated, the play perhaps represents her death less as a necessary return of power into male hands and more as a lamentable consequence of her having power in a world not ready for women to wield it.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in [blue text](#) throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE CHANGING CLOUDS

Late in act four, as Antony prepares to end his own life, he describes to Eros how "sometimes we see a cloud that's dragonish; / A vapour sometime like a bear or lion," and goes on to talk about clouds that appear to look like one thing but then quickly change and dissolve into indistinct shapes. Antony tells Eros that he is like these clouds: he cannot maintain his identity or appearance as a strong leader, and is now dissolving into defeat and death. This is certainly one meaning of the highly symbolic image of the clouds, but they can also be seen as representing Antony's hopes and ambitions, which dissolve before him as he realizes that he has lost the fight against Octavius. Similarly, the clouds could represent the future more generally.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *Antony and Cleopatra* published in 2005.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

☞☞ Nay, but this dotage of our general's
O'erflows the measure: those his goodly eyes,
That o'er the files and musters of the war
Have glow'd like plated Mars, now bend, now turn,
The office and devotion of their view
Upon a tawny front: his captain's heart,
Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst
The buckles on his breast, reneges all temper,
And is become the bellows and the fan
To cool a gipsy's lust.

Related Characters: Philo (speaker), Mark Antony, Cleopatra

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 1.1.1-10

Explanation and Analysis

Two soldiers gossip about Mark Antony's overpowering love for Cleopatra, noting how he has turned away from war and honor, and now seeks only to satisfy his queen. They also demean Cleopatra in distinctly racist and sexist terms, calling her a "tawny" "gipsy" and referring to her "lust," while bemoaning the fact that Antony used to be godlike, yet now has become a slave to passion and a foreign woman.

From the first moments of the play, it becomes clear how the general Roman public views the union of Antony and Cleopatra; they think it a disgrace, disdaining Antony for having turned his back on Rome, and despising Cleopatra for having seduced him.

From these words, it is immediately clear just how much power Cleopatra has over Mark Antony. Although he is known as a great warrior and powerful general, he has now abandoned his "office" in favor of cavorting with Cleopatra. The soldiers' former reverence for Antony makes their current contempt for him all the more striking and dramatic.

☞☞ Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch
Of the ranged empire fall! Here is my space.

Related Characters: Mark Antony (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1.1.38-39

Explanation and Analysis

Interrupted from his time with Cleopatra by a Roman messenger, Antony makes clear his priorities: he doesn't care if the city "melt[s]" into the Tiber River, or if the empire itself "fall[s]." All he cares about is being near his beloved queen.

Antony is known in the play as a great Roman patriot--one who loves his country more than himself, and consistently prioritizes the needs of the state over his own. He has devoted his life to expanding and protecting the empire, and is now one of its three supreme leaders. Thus to hear him suddenly say that he doesn't care whether or not Rome falls is shocking for the characters around him.

This confession is particularly pleasing to Cleopatra, however. As the queen of a nation that could easily be

crushed by the Roman empire, it is extremely advantageous to her to have Antony under her power. The question of how much Cleopatra loves Antony, versus how much she is using him for her own political gain, will remain ambiguous throughout the play.

☝ These strong Egyptian fetters I must break,
Or lose myself in dotage.

Related Characters: Mark Antony (speaker), Mark Antony, Cleopatra

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1.2.128-129

Explanation and Analysis

Having heard a great deal of bad news from Rome, Mark Antony realizes that he must leave Cleopatra in order to attend to his duties and affairs. He refers to his bond with her as "fetters," as if he is his lover's slave or prisoner, and worries that he will "lose" himself if he stays longer.

This comment shows that Mark Antony understands a great deal more about his situation than he initially lets on. First of all, he is fully aware of how much control he has given Cleopatra within their relationship. He is wholly under her influence, but is also aware of that fact. Second, Antony is aware that he is jeopardizing his very identity as a Roman leader and patriot by remaining in Egypt. The longer he neglects his duties, the more his reputation and his place in the world are at risk.

This quote perfectly sets up the conflict between love and duty that will torture and finally destroy Antony throughout the play.

Act 1, Scene 3 Quotes

☝ See where he is, who's with him, what he does:
I did not send you: if you find him sad,
Say I am dancing; if in mirth, report
That I am sudden sick: quick, and return.

Related Characters: Cleopatra (speaker), Mark Antony

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 1.3.3-6

Explanation and Analysis

Unable to find Antony, Cleopatra orders her servants to seek him out, and to fool him when they find him by lying about her own emotional condition.

As is so often the case with Cleopatra, this command is a highly complex one. On one hand, Cleopatra is clearly manipulating Antony, controlling his every move and emotion in order to keep him under her influence. On the other hand, Cleopatra's words are also those of an obsessive lover who feels neglected and jealous.

This mixture of love and strategy sits at the heart of Cleopatra's character. She thinks of the two as interchangeable, and it is often impossible for her (or her audience) to determine which is which. As a female leader in a man's world, she has learned to use every tactic at her disposal in order to retain her power and autonomy.

Act 1, Scene 4 Quotes

☝ This is the news: he fishes, drinks, and wastes
The lamps of night in revel; is not more man-like
Than Cleopatra; nor the queen of Ptolemy
More womanly than he; hardly gave audience, or
Vouchsafed to think he had partners: you shall find there
A man who is the abstract of all faults
That all men follow.

Related Characters: Octavius Caesar (speaker), Mark Antony, Cleopatra

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1.4.4-11

Explanation and Analysis

Back in Rome, Octavius Caesar is furious about Antony's neglect of his duties as a leader. He mocks the older man, noting his "revel[s]" and stating that he acts the woman while Cleopatra plays the part of a man. In short, he believes that Antony has forsaken his partners in Rome, and has given himself over completely to passion and "fault[s]."

Of all Caesar's charges, the implication that Cleopatra has unmanned Antony is by far the most interesting and serious. The world of Rome (and of Elizabethan England, when the play was written and performed) was one of strict gender roles, where men led and women followed. In Antony and Cleopatra's case, however, the positions seem to have reversed, with Cleopatra taking the dominant role in the relationship.

For many of the characters in the play, this fact alone displays the unhealthiness and immorality of the

relationship between Antony and Cleopatra. Rather than seeing Cleopatra as simply a stronger personality, they believe her to be an emasculating witch; and rather than attempt to understand Antony's love for his queen, they condemn him as a foolish weakling.

Act 1, Scene 5 Quotes

☛☛ O Charmian,
Where think'st thou he is now? Stands he, or sits he?
Or does he walk? or is he on his horse?
O happy horse, to bear the weight of Antony!

Related Characters: Cleopatra (speaker), Mark Antony, Charmian

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 1.5.22-25

Explanation and Analysis

With Mark Antony having departed for Rome, Cleopatra longs for him, asking a series of questions about his whereabouts, and wishing to change places with his horse. Like several other passages in the play, this scene helps the audience to understand that Cleopatra does truly love Antony, albeit in a highly obsessive and controlling way.

Her questions also point to Cleopatra's demanding and inquisitive nature. Although passionate and occasionally irrational, Cleopatra is also highly intelligent. She seeks to know about everything around her, even (in this case) minute details about Antony that the messenger cannot possibly know.

Cleopatra's comic double entendre at the end of the passage (she wishes to "bear the weight of Antony," like his horse) also points to the character's honest relationship with her own sexuality, and to her own wit. Unlike the repressed Romans, Cleopatra is comfortable with the idea of passion and sexual appetite. At the same time, she also knows how overwhelming her desire for Antony is, and so gently mocks herself by comparing herself to a horse.

Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

☛☛ My powers are crescent, and my auguring hope
Says it will come to the full. Mark Antony
In Egypt sits at dinner, and will make
No wars without doors: Caesar gets money where
He loses hearts: Lepidus flatters both,
Of both is flatter'd; but he neither loves,
Nor either cares for him.

Related Characters: Sextus Pompey (speaker), Mark Antony, Octavius Caesar, Lepidus

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 2.1.13-19

Explanation and Analysis

Here Pompey, a rebel and the enemy of the co-consuls Mark Antony, Octavius Caesar, and Lepidus, discusses the situation in Rome with his generals. His comments reveal just how tangled and twisted the political reality of the Roman Empire really is right now. Pompey notes how Antony is currently wasting himself in Egypt, how Caesar is greedy and uncharismatic, and how the weak Lepidus attempts to "flatter" both other leaders, even though none of the three actually like each other.

Although Pompey is of course inclined to think of his enemies as disconnected and dysfunctional, his words still paint a troubling picture of the Roman Empire's leaders. Jealous and power-hungry men, they are supposed to rule together, and yet actually are constantly seeking to undermine each other.

In this environment, Antony's love for Cleopatra is a huge handicap. It gives him a weakness for his fellow leaders to exploit, and takes his attention away from the power games that all those around him are playing.

☛☛ To hold you in perpetual amity,
To make you brothers, and to knit your hearts
With an unslipping knot, take Antony
Octavia to his wife; whose beauty claims
No worse a husband than the best of men;
Whose virtue and whose general graces speak
That which none else can utter. By this marriage,
All little jealousies, which now seem great,
And all great fears, which now import their dangers,
Would then be nothing: truths would be tales,
Where now half tales be truths: her love to both
Would, each to other and all loves to both,
Draw after her.

Related Characters: Agrippa (speaker), Mark Antony, Octavius Caesar, Octavia

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 2.2.150-162

Explanation and Analysis

As Mark Antony and Octavius Caesar passive aggressively trade barbs and jibes, Caesar's ally, Agrippa, suggests a solution: Antony should marry Caesar's sister, Octavia. He reminds Antony that Octavia is beautiful and virtuous, and urges both men to go ahead with the union, since it will bind the two of them together, and put to bed rumors of unrest and disunity.

First and foremost, this suggestion shows how Roman women are considered objects in society rather than people. Octavia has no say in the matter; she is Octavius's to offer, and Antony's to accept. The Romans also place little importance on romantic love. Antony should not marry Octavia because she is lovable, but because it will be good for the Empire. Her virtue and beauty are added benefits, rather than reasons for affection.

In this dispassionate and manipulative world, it is easy to see why men like Octavius are so scared of and confused by Cleopatra. Although beautiful, she is certainly not traditionally "virtuous" and meek like Octavia. Ruled by her passions, her thirst for power, and her love of her country, she refuses to be objectified, instead making herself a player in the political sphere by whatever means necessary.

●● 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 perfum'd 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. 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: on each side her
 Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,
 With divers-colour'd fans, whose wind did seem
 To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,
 And what they undid did.

Related Characters: Enobarbus (speaker), Cleopatra

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 2.2.227-242

Explanation and Analysis

Until this moment in time, Enobarbus has been highly critical of Cleopatra, rightly believing her to be distracting

and detrimental to Antony, to whom he is incredibly loyal. When asked to recount how Antony met Cleopatra, however, Enobarbus reveals that while he might be a soldier, he has the soul of a poet. He narrates Cleopatra's grand entrance, describing how she sailed down the Nile in a golden barge with purple sails, looking like "Venus," and was so beautiful that the elements themselves seemed to smile on her.

In this moment, we as audience members/readers fully understand why Antony is so entranced by Cleopatra. So beautiful and captivating is she that even a plainspoken man like Enobarbus is moved to poetry when he speaks about her. And so gorgeous is that poetry that even we, hearing this secondhand account, become completely swept up in its beauty and lyricism.

It is important to remember, though, that this passage also displays Cleopatra's tactics and her cunning. She has made this trip specifically to seduce Antony, whom she believes will protect Egypt and keep her own power secure. Using a combination of theatricality and her own beauty, she has combined romance and politics for her own benefit.

●● Upon her landing, Antony sent to her,
 Invited her to supper: she replied,
 It should be better he became her guest;
 Which she entreated: our courteous Antony,
 Whom ne'er the word of 'No' woman heard speak,
 Being barber'd ten times o'er, goes to the feast,
 And for his ordinary pays his heart
 For what his eyes eat only.

Related Characters: Enobarbus (speaker), Mark Antony, Cleopatra

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 2.2.258-265

Explanation and Analysis

Enobarbus goes on, remembering how Antony "[i]nvited [Cleopatra] to supper" as his guest, only for the queen to reply that he should be her guest instead. Although this may seem like a minor quibble, in Enobarbus's retelling, it is the critical moment in which Cleopatra gains power over Antony. The reason? He has never before heard a woman say "No" to his requests.

This exchange sheds even more light on why Antony has fallen so deeply in love with Cleopatra. A dominant,

powerful, and handsome man, he is used to everyone--especially women--giving him exactly what he wants. In Cleopatra, however, he has found someone who will actually refuse him; a nearly unthinkable concept for the Roman general. In reversing gender roles--making Antony the submissive partner in the relationship and herself the dominant force--Cleopatra essentially wins his heart. Their love is therefore subversive not only in terms of politics, but also in terms of gender and societal expectations.

☛ Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety: other women cloy
The appetites they feed: but she makes hungry
Where most she satisfies.

Related Characters: Enobarbus (speaker), Cleopatra

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 2.2.276-280

Explanation and Analysis

Enobarbus finishes his story of Cleopatra and Mark Antony with a stunning assessment of the queen: he asserts that she will never "wither," no matter how old, and that no man will ever grow weary of her, due to her "infinite variety." She has a paradoxical power, he concludes. Unlike "other women," who make men become sick of them, she makes men hunger for her even more as she simultaneously "satisfies" their desires.

From this passage, it is clear that Cleopatra has also entranced the skeptical Enobarbus, however unwilling he may be to admit it. His words also get to the heart of Cleopatra's power. By appearing unpredictable and passionate, she has ensured that men will always be fascinated by her. Further, by bestowing passion and pain in equal measure, she has created a system in which men like Antony constantly seek to possess her, even in the midst of a relationship with her, and while acknowledging that the impossibility of ever "possessing" her is a large part of her allure.

Act 3, Scene 4 Quotes

☛ A more unhappy lady,
If this division chance, ne'er stood between,
Praying for both parts:
The good gods me presently,
When I shall pray, 'O bless my lord and husband!'
Undo that prayer, by crying out as loud,
'O, bless my brother!' Husband win, win brother,
Prays, and destroys the prayer; no midway
'Twixt these extremes at all.

Related Characters: Octavia (speaker), Mark Antony, Octavius Caesar

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 3.4.13-21

Explanation and Analysis

Learning that Octavius has raised an army and spoken ill of him in public, Antony grows furious, vowing to oppose his brand-new brother-in-law. Octavia begs him to modulate his anger, but her pleas are unsuccessful. After her husband leaves, she laments her fate, realizing that she will have to pray for both her husband and her brother, even though they are fighting against each other.

Octavia is a largely tragic and pathetic character in this drama. Pious, faithful, and kind, she is used as a pawn both by the brother who claims to love her, and the husband who longs to be rid of her. At this moment in time, both men have put her in an impossible situation. Their alliance is all but forgotten but she, a symbol of their former unity, is still caught in the middle.

☛ Octavia:
Where is he now?

Octavia:
My lord, in Athens.

Octavius:
No, my most wronged sister; Cleopatra
Hath nodded him to her. He hath given his empire
Up to a whore; who now are levying
The kings o' the earth for war.

Related Characters: Octavius Caesar, Octavia (speaker), Mark Antony, Cleopatra

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 3.6.73-78

Explanation and Analysis

Octavia arrives at her brother's house, believing that she can make peace between him and Mark Antony. She does not realize, however, that Antony has now returned to Cleopatra--a fact that gives her brother an excuse to go to war with Antony.

This passage reveals the true hypocrisy of Octavius Caesar. In the past, he has condemned both Antony and Cleopatra for mixing personal feelings with politics, saying that it makes them untrustworthy and immoral. In this scene, however, he is all too happy to use his sister's feelings of pain and dishonor to excuse his making war on his supposed ally and brother-in-law.

In fact, Octavius even goes so far as to blame the coming war on Cleopatra--whom he calls a "whore"--saying that she and Antony are stirring up the "kings o' the earth for war." Yet the audience knows the truth: the calculating Octavius wants to stop sharing power with Antony, and has manipulated the situation such that he can justifiably go to war against his former friend.

Act 3, Scene 10 Quotes

☝☝ She once being loof'd,
The noble ruin of her magic, Antony,
Claps on his sea-wing, and, like a doting mallard,
Leaving the fight in height, flies after her:
I never saw an action of such shame;
Experience, manhood, honour, ne'er before
Did violate so itself.

Related Characters: Scarus (speaker), Mark Antony, Cleopatra

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 3.10.22-28

Explanation and Analysis

Antony and Cleopatra have gone to war against Octavius, culminating in the sea battle of Actium; yet at a crucial moment, Cleopatra has fled with her fleet, and Antony has followed her, leading to a huge defeat. One of Antony's soldiers comments on the chain of events, calling Antony a "mallard" (a duck) and asserting, "I never saw an action of such shame." He believes that Antony has destroyed his own "[e]xperience, manhood, [and] honour."

This assessment makes clear the potentially ruinous effects of Antony and Cleopatra's relationship. Although Antony is a seasoned soldier, he has thrown away the battle in order to follow his lover. It makes sense that a Roman soldier like Scarus would view this decision as the height of dishonor and unmanliness. Even the audience members understand just how poor a judgment this was on Antony's part, and how unwisely Cleopatra has used her power over him.

Act 3, Scene 11 Quotes

☝☝ O, whither hast thou led me, Egypt? See,
How I convey my shame out of thine eyes
By looking back what I have left behind
'Stroy'd in dishonour.

Related Characters: Mark Antony (speaker), Cleopatra

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 3.11.53-56

Explanation and Analysis

Horrified that he has retreated from his own battle, Mark Antony now questions his own actions. He realizes that he has unwisely followed where Cleopatra led, asking where she has led him, looking back at the men he has left behind and the lives he has destroyed with his own dishonor.

After his spur-of-the-moment decision, Antony now fully realizes what a terrible mistake he has made. He has not only lost the battle, but has also betrayed the soldiers who were loyal to him. He begs Cleopatra to tell him why she has caused this ruinous turn of events, and insults himself as shameful and dishonorable. In short, Antony believes that he has lost his manhood and his honorable identity by giving Cleopatra too much power over his decisions and his actions.

Act 3, Scene 12 Quotes

☝☝ From Antony win Cleopatra: promise,
And in our name, what she requires; add more,
From thine invention, offers: women are not
In their best fortunes strong; but want will perjure
The ne'er touch'd vestal: try thy cunning, Thidias;
Make thine own edict for thy pains, which we
Will answer as a law.

Related Characters: Octavius Caesar (speaker), Mark Antony, Cleopatra, Ambassador

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 3.12.33-39

Explanation and Analysis

In a strategically advantageous position, Octavius Caesar now schemes to drive a wedge between Cleopatra and Mark Antony. He sends one of his men, Thidias, to "win" Cleopatra from Antony, ordering Thidias to "promise" Cleopatra whatever she wants. Octavius goes on to display his contempt for women, asserting that even the most virtuous woman will betray and lie if she is truly desperate (or is offered something especially appealing).

Octavius's orders make clear his cunning and shifty nature. Antony, by contrast, is a sincere and deeply loyal man. Octavius, though, attempts to exploit others' weaknesses, and believes the worst about human nature.

His statement about women also brings up a crucial plot point: Octavius's constant underestimation of Cleopatra. As we will see as the play continues, Octavius's sexism and arrogance consistently make him think that he has the upper hand over the intelligent and crafty queen. The gravity of his mistake will become fully apparent by the end of the play, even when he is technically "victorious" over her.

Act 3, Scene 13 Quotes

☞ Mine honesty and I begin to square.
The loyalty well held to fools does make
Our faith mere folly: yet he that can endure
To follow with allegiance a fall'n lord
Does conquer him that did his master conquer
And earns a place i' the story.

Related Characters: Enobarbus (speaker), Mark Antony

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 3.13.48-53

Explanation and Analysis

As Antony and Cleopatra continue to make terrible strategic decisions, the unthinkable begins to happen: the utterly loyal Enobarbus begins to question whether or not he should betray Antony. He feels himself at odds with his "honesty," and does not wish to be made a fool out of his own "faith." At the same time, however, Enobarbus wishes

to be remembered for his honesty, and worries about what place he will earn in the "story" of these events.

That Enobarbus would ever consider betraying Antony makes clear the terrible situation that the Roman general and the Egyptian queen have created around themselves. They have made Enobarbus feel foolish for following them, and have ignored his good judgment in favor of their own arrogant and ill-advised decisions.

This statement also illuminates Enobarbus's--and the play's--understanding that all of these characters are living through a time of momentous history. Although they are human beings with human wants and desires, they are also kings, queens, and generals, whose decisions have huge consequences on the "story" of the world and the characters around them.

☞ Most kind messenger,
Say to great Caesar this: in deputation
I kiss his conquering hand: tell him, I am prompt
To lay my crown at 's feet, and there to kneel:
Tell him from his all-obeying breath I hear
The doom of Egypt.

Related Characters: Cleopatra (speaker), Octavius Caesar

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 3.13.90-95

Explanation and Analysis

The deceitful and flattering Thidias comes to Cleopatra, promising her Octavius's favor if she betrays Antony. Cleopatra replies that she acknowledges Caesar as her conqueror, and that she will place her "crown" at his "feet" in order to avert the "doom of Egypt."

This statement is a complicated and troubling one from Cleopatra. On one hand, she is very close to betraying Antony--a terrible action from a woman who claims to be deeply in love with the man who has thrown away his life for her.

On the other hand, Cleopatra must think not only about herself, but also about her country. Despite her love for Antony, her duty to Egypt comes first, and she is prepared to do whatever it takes to protect it from the conquering Octavius.

On the surface, this passage makes it seem like Cleopatra is faithless and calculating. After further reflection, however, it is clear that she is in an impossible position, caught

between her love for Antony and her love for her country, and is attempting to make the choice that will benefit her people rather than herself.

☛ Antony:
To flatter Caesar, would you mingle eyes
With one that ties his points?

Cleopatra:
Not know me yet?

Antony:
Cold-hearted toward me?

Cleopatra:
Ah, dear, if I be so,
From my cold heart let heaven engender hail,
And poison it in the source; and the first stone
Drop in my neck: as it determines, so
Dissolve my life! The next Caesarion smite!
Till by degrees the memory of my womb,
Together with my brave Egyptians all,
By the discandying of this pelleted storm,
Lie graveless, till the flies and gnats of Nile
Have buried them for prey!

Related Characters: Mark Antony, Cleopatra (speaker), Octavius Caesar

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 3.13.191-204

Explanation and Analysis

A furious Antony comes upon Cleopatra with Thidias; Antony beats the other man, threatens him, and throws him out, before furiously turning on Cleopatra. After he demands to know if she will leave him for Caesar, Cleopatra assures him that she never will. If she ever does, she asks for the gods to kill both herself and her children, and for all of Egypt to fall.

Once again, this is a difficult exchange to correctly interpret. Cleopatra may well be manipulating Antony, telling him what he wants to hear in order to keep him from abandoning or even killing her. On the other hand, it seems hard to believe that she does not love him, so passionate, gorgeous, and dramatic are the words of her response.

This passage again makes clear the melding of personal and political that constantly takes place within Cleopatra's world. At this moment in time, she must keep her lover from leaving her, and does so with amazing skill; at the same time, though, it is entirely possible that she means every word she says, and is using her honest emotion in order to fuel her tactical move.

☛ I will be treble-sinew'd, hearted, breathed,
And fight maliciously: for when mine hours
Were nice and lucky, men did ransom lives
Of me for jests; but now I'll set my teeth,
And send to darkness all that stop me. Come,
Let's have one other gaudy night: call to me
All my sad captains; fill our bowls once more;
Let's mock the midnight bell.

Related Characters: Mark Antony (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 3.13.217-224

Explanation and Analysis

Heartened by Cleopatra's vow of love, Antony asserts that he will be braver than ever before. He recalls how he used to show mercy to his enemies, but now promises that he will kill them all. He tells Cleopatra that they will have "one other gaudy night," and summons all of his soldiers to drink with him.

Although this speech might seem foolish and misguided, it also suggests that on some level, Antony knows how doomed he is. He wants another "gaudy night" because he knows it will be his last. His urging to "mock the midnight bell" most obviously means that he will stay up late; yet it can also be interpreted that Antony wishes to "mock" his oncoming death.

This passage illuminates the contradictory and tragic nature of Antony. Although he is brave, sincere, and ruled by emotion rather than logic, Antony is certainly not stupid. He may pretend to think that he can win against Octavius, but in truth, he knows all too well the reality of his situation.

Act 4, Scene 5 Quotes

☞☞ Soldier:

One ever near thee: call for Enobarbus,
He shall not hear thee; or from Caesar's camp
Say 'I am none of thine.'

Antony:
What say'st thou?

Soldier:
Sir, he is with Caesar.

Eros:
Sir, his chests and treasure
He has not with him.

Antony:
Is he gone?

Soldier:
Most certain.

Antony:
Go, Eros, send his treasure after; do it;
Detain no jot, I charge thee: write to him—
I will subscribe—gentle adieus and greetings;
Say that I wish he never find more cause
To change a master. O, my fortunes have
Corrupted honest men! Dispatch.—Enobarbus!

Related Characters: Mark Antony, Eros (speaker), Octavius Caesar, Enobarbus

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 4.5.10-25

Explanation and Analysis

At the eleventh hour, as Antony once again prepares to fight, he learns that Enobarbus has indeed left him, and has defected to Caesar's camp. When Antony hears the news, he immediately tells his servant to send Enobarbus's belongings and wealth along with him, and to also give his former friend "gentle adieus and greetings." Last, he laments that "his fortunes/ Have corrupted honest men."

This passage reveals two crucial characteristics of Antony: his genuine generosity of spirit, and his passionate self-loathing. On one hand, Antony clearly hates himself, believing that his terrible judgment and ill-advised choices have "corrupted" even Enobarbus, the most "honest" and loyal of men. He does not blame Enobarbus for betraying

him, because he knows just how much "cause" there was for his soldier to do so.

At the same time, Antony is still an intensely good and loyal man. Despite having been betrayed by Enobarbus, he still loves his one-time ally, and wishes him only the best. In this dark hour and faced with this huge betrayal, Antony's honesty and love come across as particularly poignant and tragic.

Act 4, Scene 6 Quotes

☞☞ I am alone the villain of the earth,
And feel I am so most. O Antony,
Thou mine of bounty, how wouldst thou have paid
My better service, when my turpitude
Thou dost so crown with gold! This blows my heart:
If swift thought break it not, a swifter mean
Shall outstrike thought: but thought will do't, I feel.
I fight against thee! No: I will go seek
Some ditch wherein to die; the foul'st best fits
My latter part of life.

Related Characters: Enobarbus (speaker), Mark Antony

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 4.6.34-44

Explanation and Analysis

Enobarbus emerges, having just received both his chests and good wishes from Antony. In agony, he calls himself "the villain of the earth," now remembering Antony as the most generous and loyal master who ever lived. So anguished is Enobarbus that he wishes for his heart to literally break. Realizing that he can never fight against Antony, he resolves to "die" in a "ditch," because he now deserves such a foul and dishonorable death.

Antony and Cleopatra's misfortune has spread outward, infecting all who were once loyal to them. Despite making a perfectly rational and even justified choice, Enobarbus is now unable to live with himself, having lost his own identity as a loyal soldier and faithful friend. He has gone from rational and detached to a tragic figure in his own right, unable to deal with the dishonorable action that he has taken. In short, his love for Antony has destroyed him—just as Antony's love for Cleopatra will soon destroy *him*.

Act 4, Scene 15 Quotes

☛ Antony:
Not Caesar's valour hath o'erthrown Antony,
But Antony's hath triumph'd on itself.

Cleopatra:
So it should be, that none but Antony
Should conquer Antony; but woe 'tis so!

Antony:
I am dying, Egypt, dying; only
I here importune death awhile, until
Of many thousand kisses the poor last
I lay up thy lips.

Related Characters: Mark Antony, Cleopatra (speaker), Octavius Caesar

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 4.15.18-25

Explanation and Analysis

Believing Cleopatra to be dead, Antony has killed himself. In fact, however, she is still alive, and the two reunite in her tomb as he takes his last breaths. Antony is glad that at least he has killed himself, rather than Caesar doing so, and Cleopatra agrees. Calling his lover "Egypt," Antony says that he will delay death until he can kiss Cleopatra one last time—the final kiss out of "many thousand kisses."

Literally, Antony has "conquer[ed]" himself, since he has killed himself with his own sword. Metaphorically, however, the statement still remains true: Antony has defeated himself with his own pride, ill-judgment, and passion. At every turn, he has done what he wants rather than what is wise. He has been honest instead of cunning, and emotional rather than logical. Now, he is paying the price.

After all of their squabbling and betrayals, Antony and Cleopatra at last agree, united by tragedy. Antony's words to Cleopatra contain no bitterness, but only heartbreak, as he strives to kiss her one more time before death.

☛ Antony:
One word, sweet queen:
Of Caesar seek your honour, with your safety. O!

Cleopatra:
They do not go together.

Related Characters: Mark Antony, Cleopatra (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 4.15.53-55

Explanation and Analysis

Even in his final moments, Antony has an exchange with Cleopatra that illustrates the radical differences between their worldviews. The honest and idealistic Antony believes that Octavius will give Cleopatra "safety" while also allowing her to retain her "honour." Cleopatra, however, knows that this is not true. If she yields to Caesar and bets for safety, he will not allow her to keep her honor; and if she chooses honor, it will only be retained through her death.

As is always the case, Antony has shown himself to be deeply honorable, but also innocent in the harsher ways of the world. The cunning Cleopatra has a much more clear-eyed view of the reality of the situation, and knows that she will soon be forced to choose between her honor and her life.

Act 5, Scene 1 Quotes

☛ Come hither, Proculeius. Go and say,
We purpose her no shame: give her what comforts
The quality of her passion shall require,
Lest, in her greatness, by some mortal stroke
She do defeat us; for her life in Rome
Would be eternal in our triumph: go,
And with your speediest bring us what she says,
And how you find of her.

Related Characters: Octavius Caesar (speaker), Cleopatra, Proculeius

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5.1.72-79

Explanation and Analysis

The triumphant Caesar instructs one of his men on how to greet Cleopatra. Wishing to parade his triumph over the queen in front of the Roman people, he is worried that she will thwart him by committing suicide. As such, he tells his messenger to say whatever it will take to soothe Cleopatra, reminding him that bringing Cleopatra back to Rome would make his victory "eternal."

In this passage, Caesar is both cunning and mistaken. He has no strong relationship to truth, and is willing to do whatever it takes to ultimately humiliate Cleopatra in front

of the Roman populace (thus reinforcing his own victory and mastery). At the same time, however, he believes that Cleopatra is weaker and less intelligent than he is. In truth, the queen is fully aware of what he intends to do, and cannot be swayed from her ultimate course--committing suicide. In believing that he can deceive her, Octavius is himself deceived.

☛ Sir, I will eat no meat, I'll not drink, sir;
 If idle talk will once be necessary,
 I'll not sleep neither: this mortal house I'll ruin,
 Do Caesar what he can. Know, sir, that I
 Will not wait pinion'd at your master's court;
 Nor once be chastised with the sober eye
 Of dull Octavia. Shall they hoist me up
 And show me to the shouting varletry
 Of censuring Rome? Rather a ditch in Egypt
 Be gentle grave unto me! rather on Nilus' mud
 Lay me stark naked, and let the water-flies
 Blow me into abhorring! rather make
 My country's high pyramides my gibbet,
 And hang me up in chains!

Related Characters: Cleopatra (speaker), Octavius Caesar

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 5.2.59-72

Explanation and Analysis

Cleopatra attempts to kill herself, but is foiled by Octavius's messenger. Thus kept from her goal, she vows not to eat, drink, or sleep until her "mortal house"--her body--is "ruin[ed]." Despite the Roman's attempts to fool her, Cleopatra knows that she will be imprisoned and humiliated in Rome. Rather than live with this dishonor, she instead wishes to die in "a ditch in Egypt," drown in the mud of the Nile, or be hanged from the top of a pyramid.

Having lost both her love and her country, Cleopatra has only one remaining desire: not to be dishonored. She knows, however, that the only way to do so is through death. This speech makes clear Cleopatra's resolve to die rather than be humiliated, and her terrible fear of what Octavius will do to her if she lives. While the Romans may still believe that they will prevail over Cleopatra's weak, womanly willpower, the audience knows all too well that the strong-willed Cleopatra will accomplish what she has set out to do.

☛ Sole sir o' the world,
 I cannot project mine own cause so well
 To make it clear; but do confess I have
 Been laden with like frailties which before
 Have often shamed our sex.

Related Characters: Cleopatra (speaker), Octavius Caesar

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5.2.149-153

Explanation and Analysis

Finally face-to-face with Octavius, Cleopatra kneels before him. In contrast with her formerly passionate speech, she is now subdued and humble. Instead, she hails Octavius as the conqueror of the world, and "confess[es]" that she is a frail woman who has made foolish mistakes.

As audience members and readers, we are aware of the falsity of Cleopatra's speech here. Determined to kill herself, she is brilliantly playing into Octavius's misguided perceptions of her. He is convinced that she is a weak and submissive woman, and so that is what she pretends to be. Just as she once manipulated Antony, she is now manipulating Octavius in a very different way, pretending to be something that she is not in order to achieve her ultimate aim.

☛ Now, Charmian!
 Show me, my women, like a queen: go fetch
 My best attires: I am again for Cydnus,
 To meet Mark Antony: sirrah Iras, go.
 Now, noble Charmian, we'll dispatch indeed;
 And, when thou hast done this chare, I'll give thee leave
 To play till doomsday. Bring our crown and all.

Related Characters: Cleopatra (speaker), Mark Antony, Charmian

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5.2.276-282

Explanation and Analysis

With Octavius gone, Cleopatra's manner now changes completely. She regally commands her women to bring her finest robes and crown, wishing to look just as she did the first time she met Mark Antony.

Of course, Cleopatra wishes to die in part because she does not want to live without Antony; also at play is her fear of humiliation in Rome. In this speech, however, we witness a third cause: her wish to be immortalized as a beautiful, powerful, and tragic queen. Like many other characters in the play, Cleopatra is fully aware of her place in history. She knows that she will be remembered, and wishes to control the narrative that others will one day tell about her. And indeed, she is the ultimate "star" of the play and the legend that surrounds it—Octavius is technically the victor, but he isn't even mentioned in the play's title.

☛ Take up her bed;
 And bear her women from the monument:
 She shall be buried by her Antony:
 No grave upon the earth shall clip in it
 A pair so famous. High events as these
 Strike those that make them; and their story is
 No less in pity than his glory which
 Brought them to be lamented. Our army shall
 In solemn show attend this funeral;
 And then to Rome. Come, Dolabella, see
 High order in this great solemnity.

Related Characters: Octavius Caesar (speaker), Mark Antony, Cleopatra

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 5.2.427-437

Explanation and Analysis

Discovering that Cleopatra is dead, Octavius reacts not with anger, but with respect honor. He orders his soldiers to bury the queen with "her Antony," reflecting that there will never be a "pair" as "famous" as them again. He concludes that he feels moved by these events, even though he caused them, and that he pities the couple. Lastly, he resolves that the whole army shall honor the two with a funeral.

Like Cleopatra and Antony, Octavius here displays that he, too, understands his place in history. Although a crafty and manipulative man, he still feels "pity" and admiration for his fallen foes, even though he has, in many respects, caused their deaths.

Although *Antony and Cleopatra* is tragic in that it ends with the deaths of its title characters, the two are not defeated in death. Instead, they are honored by their most bitter foe, and take their place in the history of the civilizations that they have both served for their entire lives.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

A Roman soldier named Philo tells his fellow soldier Demetrius that Antony's love for Cleopatra "o'erflows the measure." Formerly a strong general, he is now entirely devoted to his love for her. Antony enters with Cleopatra and some attendants, including eunuchs fanning Cleopatra. Philo says that Antony has been made "into a strumpet's fool."

Cleopatra asks Antony how much he loves her, and he says it can't be fathomed. A messenger brings news from Rome. Cleopatra guesses Fulvia, Antony's wife, might be mad, or the young Octavius Caesar might have demands for Antony. Antony is not interested in the news, concerned only with Cleopatra. He says, "Let Rome in Tiber melt and the wide arch / Of the ranged empire fall."

Cleopatra wants Antony to hear the news from Rome, but he says he doesn't want to waste the time, preferring to "wander through the streets" with Cleopatra. Antony and Cleopatra leave without hearing the messenger. Demetrius remarks on how disrespectful Antony seems toward Octavius, and Philo responds that Antony is not himself.

Antony and Cleopatra live a luxurious life, attended by servants. However, Antony's men worry that his intense love for Cleopatra and indulgence in a leisurely life are making him weak.



Antony professes his love for Cleopatra, and is so concerned with her that he neglects his duties in Rome. He even says that he doesn't care if all of Rome should fall, in a sense betraying his own nation for Cleopatra. He also arrogantly refuses to let the messenger deliver his important news.



Antony continues to disregard his duties and ignore the messenger, preferring to luxuriate with Cleopatra. Antony's men worry about his transformation from a disciplined leader to a careless lover, evidenced by his lack of respect for his Roman colleague Octavius.



ACT 1, SCENE 2

Three of Cleopatra's servants, Charmian, Alexas, and Iras, consult a soothsayer. Enobarbus, an advisor to Antony tells them to bring wine for Cleopatra. The soothsayer begins to tell the future of Charmian and Alexas and, among other things, says that they will both outlive the woman they serve, Cleopatra. However, he says that they will have futures that will be worse than the lives they have lived so far.

The soothsayer says that Iras has a similar fortune. Displeased with their fortunes, Charmian and Iras pray to Egyptian gods for bad things to happen to the soothsayer. They get quiet, though, as Cleopatra enters, looking for Antony. She says that he was happy, but suddenly thought of Rome and was in a bad mood. She asks Enobarbus to go find Antony, but just then he enters. Annoyed with him, Cleopatra leaves and takes all her attendants with her.

Given the turbulent and uncertain political world of the play, many characters try to find out what the future holds for them. The soothsayer predicts bad fortunes for Cleopatra's servants—these prophecies are correct, as readers know that in real life Antony and Cleopatra were eventually defeated by Octavius.



The servants discount the soothsayer's prophesying because they don't like what they hear, just as Antony disregards any news from Rome that might disrupt his pleasurable time with Cleopatra. Cleopatra appears capricious and flighty, rapidly changing emotions and toying with Antony.



Antony is now on-stage alone with a messenger, who informs him that his wife Fulvia went to war against his brother Lucius, but then allied with Lucius against Octavius, who defeated both of them. The messenger says that he has more bad news: Antony has lost parts of Asia minor to an enemy. He hints that all this has happened while Antony has been dallying with Cleopatra, and Antony tells him not to mince his words, but to criticize Cleopatra in the very words Fulvia would use. He encourages the messenger to point out his wrongs. The messenger exits.

Another messenger arrives and says that another messenger has news. He leaves to get this other messenger, and Antony reflects that he must break free of his “Egyptian fetters.” The other messenger enters and announces that Fulvia has died. Antony admits that he had often wished for this to happen, but now wishes she were not dead. He resolves that he “must from this enchanting queen break off.”

Enobarbus enters and Antony tells him that he wants to leave Egypt. Enobarbus says this will be like death for their women, but says that “between them and a great cause, they should be esteemed nothing.” Antony tells Enobarbus that Fulvia is dead, and Enobarbus thinks that this is good news, as he can now pursue a new woman freely. Antony says he has business at Rome that “cannot endure my absence.” He says that Sextus Pompey, the son of Pompey the Great, has been gaining power. Enobarbus goes to make preparations for them to leave Egypt.

ACT 1, SCENE 3

Cleopatra and her servants are looking for Antony. She sends Alexas to find Antony and tells her that if he seems sad she should say that Cleopatra is happy, and that if he seems happy, she should say Cleopatra is sad. Charmian cautions Cleopatra that she is not going about things the right way with Antony, and should “cross him in nothing,” in order to elicit his love.

Antony enters and begins to speak to Cleopatra, who is greatly upset. Hardly allowing him to speak, she says she has been betrayed and wishes Antony had never come to Egypt. She asks how he could be true to her, when he was false to Fulvia. Antony tries to talk, but Cleopatra simply tells him to go. She says, “eternity was in our lips and eyes, / Bliss in our brows’ bent,” but now says that Antony has turned from the greatest soldier into the greatest liar.

The messenger delivers important news that will put into motion the plot of the play. The story of Fulvia illustrates the shifting alliances of the unstable political landscape: she fights against her own brother, then allies with him to fight the man her husband is allied with. The messenger hints that by enjoying himself in Egypt, Antony has allowed such things happen.



Again, an important event is only revealed through a second-hand messenger. Despite his love for Cleopatra, Antony decides that he must uphold his duty and loyalty to Rome, and leave Egypt. But his sense of honor and duty will only hold out for so long against his new love.



Enobarbus exemplifies a traditional (sexist) viewpoint on gender, regarding women as of trivial importance when compared with political matters. Antony, by contrast, has recently been spending his time prioritizing pleasure over serious political and military issues, though his basic viewpoint may not be so different from Enobarbus’s, as he now at last decides that he has to leave Egypt and Cleopatra to fulfill his duty to deal with Pompey, as various leaders jostle for power over Rome.



Cleopatra is manipulative toward Antony, lying about her emotions in order to irritate him, because she is upset with him. She is far from the submissive woman that Charmian has in mind when she suggests that Cleopatra should “cross him in nothing.”



Cleopatra feels betrayed by Antony, though by staying with Cleopatra he would himself be betraying Rome. Cleopatra is so angry that she doesn’t allow Antony to speak and deliver his message. Characters allied with Antony and Cleopatra repeatedly let their emotions get in the way of hearing important news or messages.



Antony says that he has to go to Rome because of civil strife, but that his heart remains with Cleopatra. He tells her of Fulvia's death, and Cleopatra is shocked at how calm he seems. She says that now she knows how he will react when she dies. Antony tells her to "quarrel no more," and says that he goes forth as Cleopatra's soldier and servant, "making peace or war / As thou affects."

Cleopatra still doubts Antony's love for her and teases him, but allows him to leave and wishes him success and victory. Antony says that the distance between Cleopatra and him will not affect their relationship.

ACT 1, SCENE 4

At Rome, Octavius complains to Lepidus about Antony, who he says drinks and wastes time "in revel." He says that Antony is as womanly as Cleopatra and Cleopatra is as manly as Antony. Lepidus defends Antony, saying that his faults are like "the spots of heaven," not significant enough to affect his overall goodness.

Octavius, though, is still upset with Antony for indulging in all sorts of merriment while he himself must deal with the difficult situation at Rome. A messenger arrives and tells Octavius that Pompey is "strong at sea," and gaining support from those who are afraid of Octavius. Another messenger enters and tells Octavius that pirates are gaining strength on the sea.

Octavius wishes Antony would return, and remembers how strong and rugged Antony used to be as a soldier. He hopes that Antony's shame will drive him to come to Rome. Octavius and Lepidus part, agreeing to meet the next day to discuss strategy regarding Pompey.

ACT 1, SCENE 5

Back in Egypt, Cleopatra asks Charmian to give her "mandragora," a plant that will make her sleep until Antony returns. Charmian says that Cleopatra thinks about Antony too much. Cleopatra asks a eunuch named Mardian if he still feels "affections" and thinks about lust. He says he does.

Antony tries to explain to Cleopatra the conflict he faces between his love for her and his duty toward Rome. He describes himself as Cleopatra's soldier and servant, placing her in the position of leader and thereby reversing the traditional power dynamic of man and woman.



Cleopatra seems irrational here, and refuses to believe Antony, even as he continues to assert his love for her.



Octavius is fed up with Antony's decadent lifestyle, and he sees Antony's relationship with the powerful (and therefore masculine) Cleopatra as effeminizing him.



Octavius sees Antony's indulgence in a pleasurable lifestyle in Egypt as a kind of betrayal of their alliance, as Octavius has been forced to deal with all of the political difficulties at Rome, while Pompey strives to gain power. The messenger delivers Octavius important news for his military strategizing.



In Octavius' mind, Antony was a strong, traditionally masculine general before his relationship with Cleopatra, who has weakened him with the decadence characteristic of both women and Egypt. Octavius and Lepidus must now plan how to deal strategically with Pompey.



Cleopatra seems obsessed with love and lust. When she is not thinking about Antony, she is inquiring about her eunuch's capacity for erotic feelings.



Cleopatra wonders where Antony is, and even envies his horse for getting to “bear the weight of Antony.” Cleopatra thinks of how she has enraptured former lovers with her beauty: Julius Caesar and one of the sons of Pompey the Great (a brother of Sextus Pompey). Alexas enters, bearing a pearl and a message from Antony.

Alexas delivers Antony’s message: Antony promises to conquer lands for Cleopatra and get “all the East,” under her command. Cleopatra asks how Antony was when Alexas left him, and Alexas says he was neither sad nor happy. Cleopatra decides to send Antony a letter every day and calls for ink and paper. She says she loves Antony more than she loved Julius Caesar.

Charmian remembers Julius Caesar as “that brave Caesar!” but Cleopatra tells her to say “the brave Antony,” instead, and threatens her not to compare Antony to Caesar. She calls for ink and paper again, planning to write something to Antony every day that he is gone.

Cleopatra continues to come across as erotically focused, if not obsessed, with the coarse joke about Antony’s horse. She has used her blunt female sexuality to insinuate herself into relationships with several powerful men, including the late Julius Caesar.



Antony’s profession of love reaches Cleopatra through an intermediary messenger. Antony’s love for Cleopatra now motivates his political aims, which are focused on the east, rather than Rome. Cleopatra finally seems to believe in Antony’s love.



Cleopatra’s affair with Julius Caesar lingers in the background, potentially calling into question her love for Antony (is he merely her latest romantic conquest in an attempt to gain political power?), though Cleopatra appears here genuinely devoted to him.



ACT 2, SCENE 1

Pompey discusses his prospects in Rome’s civil strife with two followers, Menas and Menecrates, thinking that he will do well because, “the people love me, and the sea is mine.” He thinks that Antony is busy carousing in Egypt, and Lepidus merely flatters Octavius and Antony, not having the true loyalty to either. Menas announces that Octavius and Lepidus have raised a strong army.

Pompey says this must be false, as he is sure that they are in Rome waiting for Antony, who is preoccupied in Egypt with “all the charms of love.” He hopes Antony will stay in Egypt, under the control of Cleopatra’s beauty, lust, and witchcraft, as “Epicurean cooks / Sharpen with cloyless sauce his appetite.” But just then, a man named Varrius enters and announces that Antony has left Egypt for Rome.

Pompey worries that Antony’s soldiers are twice as dangerous as those of Octavius and Lepidus, but tells Menas that they should take it as a compliment that their forces have spurred Antony to leave “the lap of Egypt’s widow.” Menas thinks that Antony and Octavius will not easily be allies, since Antony’s wife and brother “did trespasses to Caesar,” and fought against him. Pompey says that he, as a common enemy for both of them, will stop them from feuding amongst themselves.

Pompey and his men are strategizing their way toward political and military power. He thinks that Antony is conveniently distracted by the pleasures of his life in Egypt, and doubts the tenuous loyalties between Octavius, Lepidus, and Antony.



Antony is thinking only of himself by spending time with Cleopatra, but his actions have political consequences for others, as Pompey benefits from Antony’s staying in Egypt. Pompey’s plans are significantly changed by the important news brought by the messenger Varrius.



Menas still doubts the strength of the alliance between Antony and Octavius. Pompey is surprised that Antony has left the seductive pleasures of Egypt, which he has compared to witchcraft. For now, the common enemy of Pompey is enough to maintain the alliance between Octavius and Antony.



ACT 2, SCENE 2

In Rome, Lepidus tells Enobarbus to try to get Antony to speak kindly to Octavius. Enobarbus says Antony will do as he pleases, and Lepidus tells him that, in the face of imminent danger, “small to greater matters must give way.” Enobarbus remains stubborn. Antony enters, and then Octavius enters with two friends, Maecenas and Agrippa.

Lepidus tries to mediate between Antony and Octavius, telling them to put aside their personal differences to deal with Pompey. Octavius is upset with Antony for spending so much time in Egypt and because his wife and brother made war against him. Antony says his brother never consulted him about the war, and that his wife had an impetuous spirit.

Octavius chastises Antony for ignoring the messages he sent to him. Antony says his messenger arrived just after a feast, and he talked to him the next morning. Octavius accuses Antony of violating his oath to lend him “arms and aid” in a time of need. Antony apologizes slightly, and asks for pardon for his wife. Maecenas tells Antony and Octavius to stop arguing so that they can deal with the threat of Pompey.

Enobarbus agrees, noting that they can take up their dispute again once Pompey is dealt with. Antony tells him to be quiet, and Enobarbus says he forgot “that truth should be silent.” Agrippa speaks up and suggests that, since Fulvia is now dead, Octavius’ sister Octavia could be married to Antony, in order to bind Octavius and Antony together as brothers. Octavius and Antony agree to the plan.

Antony, Lepidus, and Octavius now turn their attention to Pompey, who is at Mount Misena, south of Rome. Before preparing their forces, though, Antony and Octavius go to see Octavia, to conclude the business of the marriage. Lepidus leaves with them. Maecenas, Enobarbus, and Agrippa are glad that Octavius and Antony appear to have resolved their dispute. Enobarbus tells them about how he and Antony slept all day and drank all night in Egypt.

Enobarbus tells Agrippa and Maecenas about Cleopatra, who has a huge barge “like a burnished throne,” made of gold with silver oars. He describes Cleopatra’s beauty and says she was surrounded by “pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,” and female attendants like mermaids. He says her boat gives off “a strange invisible perfume.”

Just as generals plan a battle, the various advisors to Antony and Octavius try to strategize for the two leaders’ meeting. They attempt to influence their leaders and get them to focus on the issue of Pompey, rather than getting distracted by their own differences.



Octavius thinks Antony has betrayed him, because Antony’s wife warred against him. Antony insists that he had no part in Fulvia’s war, and has not been dishonorable toward Octavius. He apparently feels little loyalty to his deceased family members.



Octavius continues to accuse Antony of betraying not only him but also Rome more generally, by ignoring the messengers he sent to Egypt. Maecenas encourages both of them to focus on planning for the greater problem of Pompey’s rising power.



Antony is too prideful to heed the good advice of Enobarbus. Agrippa’s suggestion of a strategic marriage between Octavia and Antony is a proposal to create a marriage that has little to do with love (or lust, for that matter). He sees the female Octavia as a pawn in a political game of chess.



Antony, Octavius, and Lepidus approach the matter of marrying Antony and Octavia in the same strategic, manipulative way that they approach fighting Pompey. Enobarbus emphasizes the extreme decadence of Antony’s life in Egypt, highlighting the difference between eastern luxury and the austerity of Rome.



Everything about Cleopatra, from her absurdly extravagant barge to her Cupid-esque servants, suggests an obsession with luxury, pleasure, and decadence.



Enobarbus says that when Antony first saw Cleopatra, he invited her to dinner. She declined, though, and invited him to be her guest at dinner. Enobarbus says they slept together and Cleopatra bore Antony a child. Maecenas praises Octavia's beauty and wisdom, but Enobarbus doubts that Antony will ever really leave Cleopatra. He says that "other women cloy / The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry / Where most she satisfies."

Enobarbus describes Cleopatra's love as addictive and therefore dangerous: it only makes Antony want more of it. Cleopatra is a strong woman, as shown by her first interaction with Antony, when she makes him her dinner guest, rather than vice versa.



ACT 2, SCENE 3

Octavius has introduced Octavia to Antony, and Antony tells her that although his business will take him from her side, he will be faithful to her and will behave "by th' rule," even though he has a reputation for behaving wildly. Octavia and Octavius leave, and a soothsayer enters. The soothsayer tells Antony to return to Egypt.

It is unclear to what degree Antony's promise is a genuine one. He is either being deceptive to Octavia, or to Cleopatra, whom he assured of his enduring love. The soothsayer gives Antony a warning that, given how the historical events actually played out, is a wise one.



Antony asks him whether his or Octavius' fortune will be better, and the soothsayer says Octavius' will be. He warns Antony not to stay with Octavius, and says, "If thou dost play with him at any game, / Thou art sure to lose." Antony sends the soothsayer away and then sends his man Ventidius to Parthia. He says that he thinks the soothsayer is right, and plans to return to Egypt. He says that he is marrying Octavia for peace, though "I' th' East my pleasure lies."

Antony tries to predict the future. In an example of dramatic irony, the audience or reader knows how Antony's future will turn out—just as the soothsayer warns him it will. Antony regards his marriage to Octavia purely as a strategic necessity, suggesting that his promise to her just before was a strategic lie.



ACT 2, SCENE 4

Lepidus speaks with Agrippa and Maecenas as they prepare to fight Pompey. They plan to meet at Mount Misena. Lepidus says that he has business that will delay him, so he will arrive two days after Agrippa and Maecenas do.

Lepidus, Maecenas, and Agrippa plan their military strategy for dealing with Pompey.



ACT 2, SCENE 5

Back in Egypt, Cleopatra passes time with her attendants Charmian, Iras, and Alexas. She asks the eunuch Mardian to play billiards, but then thinks she'll go fishing and pretend that every fish she catches is Antony, so that she can say, "Aha! You're caught."

Cleopatra passes her time in leisure, with games or idle chatter with her servants. Her comment about pretending that she is fishing for Antony suggests that she is manipulating him through their romantic relationship.



A messenger arrives from Italy, and Cleopatra fears that Antony is dead. The messenger tries to speak, but Cleopatra says that he does not look happy enough to be bringing good news, but he also does not look appropriate for announcing bad news. The messenger says that Antony is well and is friends with Octavius. He begins to say, "But yet," and Cleopatra interrupts him, saying that this phrase suggests he will now tell her some bad news.

Cleopatra tries to guess what the messenger is going to say before he can even speak. One way or another, she continually disregards or ignores important messages. Antony's and her disregard for messages and advice will later be one factor leading to their downfall.



The messenger is finally able to deliver his message: Antony has been married to Octavia. Cleopatra is furious, and beats the messenger. She tells him she will give him a province and money if he will say it is not true, but the messenger says it is true. Cleopatra takes out a knife and chases the messenger away.

Charmian tells Cleopatra that it is not the messenger's fault, and she calls for him to return. Cleopatra is still upset, and asks the messenger again if his news is true. He says it is. She sends him away, and says she is being punished for having betrayed Julius Caesar's memory by praising Antony. She orders for Alexas to find out what Octavia looks like and report back to her.

ACT 2, SCENE 6

Pompey, Octavius, Antony, and Lepidus meet to try to come to a truce before fighting. Pompey speaks of the death of Julius Caesar, and says that he is fighting in order to avenge his father, Pompey the Great. Lepidus asks Pompey what he thinks about the terms of peace they have offered.

Pompey accepts their offer: he will have control of the islands of Sicily and Sardinia, provided that he clear the sea of pirates and send some wheat to Rome. The men clasp hands, agreeing to the truce, and Pompey says that they should feast together. Pompey tells Antony about some rumors he has heard of Egypt, and alludes to Cleopatra's relationship with Julius Caesar.

Pompey invites everyone aboard his boat, and everyone but Enobarbus and Menas leaves. The two men compliment each other on their military service, one for Antony and the other for Pompey. They agree that "there is never a fair woman has a true face," and that women "steal hearts." Menas asks if Antony and Cleopatra are married, and Enobarbus says Antony is actually married to Octavia.

Menas says that this marriage will unite Octavius and Antony, but Enobarbus says he is not so sure. He thinks Antony will choose Cleopatra over Octavia, and this will upset Octavius. Menas and Enobarbus leave together to join the feast with Pompey, Lepidus, Antony, and Octavius.

Cleopatra sees Antony's marriage as a betrayal, though she herself has often deceived him. She takes out all her anger on the messenger, who has done nothing wrong himself.



After finally hearing the messenger out, Cleopatra worries that she is being punished for having betrayed the memory of her former lover, Julius Caesar. Given her history of romantic entanglements with powerful Roman men, the sincerity of her love for Antony is somewhat questionable.



The four men are essentially divvying up power over all of the Mediterranean world. Both sides think that they are fighting for honorable causes, Pompey on behalf of his deceased father.



The leaders are able to agree to satisfactory terms that prevent (for now) outright war and divide power over Rome's territories. Having settled their serious business, they now balance work with a luxurious feast, in contrast to Antony's complete indulgence in pleasure in Egypt.



Enobarbus and Menas agree in their misogynistic assumptions about women. At this point in the play, their opinions could be applicable to the character of Cleopatra, but her noble death will later call into question any understanding of her as simply or purely deceptive.



The marriage is regarded purely as a strategic move—one that Menas thinks will work well. Enobarbus, however, knows the seductive power of Cleopatra's attractions for Antony.



ACT 2, SCENE 7

Aboard, Pompey's boat, a great feast is taking place. Servants discuss how drunk everyone is getting, especially Lepidus. Antony tells Lepidus all about Egypt, the Nile, and "strange serpents" there. Pompey raises a toast to Lepidus. Menas whispers in Pompey's ear and wants to speak to him in private, but Pompey ignores him. Antony tells Lepidus about Egyptian crocodiles.

Menas finally gets Pompey to leave the table and they speak privately. Menas tells him that he could kill Antony, Octavius, and Lepidus all on the boat and become "lord of all the world." Pompey says that he wouldn't have minded if Menas had simply done this without his knowing, but now that he knows of the plan, it would be dishonorable. He tells Menas to stop thinking about this plan, then. Menas decides to leave the service of Pompey, since he does not want to work for a man who refuses to take advantage of such an opportunity.

The feast continues, and everyone drinks raucously. A servant carries a drunk Lepidus away. Enobarbus suggests that they dance "the Egyptian bacchanals," and everyone starts dancing as music plays. Octavius then stops and says he has indulged in enough levity. He leaves, while Antony stays the night on the boat. Enobarbus stays with Menas in his cabin.

Now that the serious business of the truce has been dealt with, these powerful men indulge in drinking and feasting. They try to balance work and leisure, in contrast to Antony's decadent lifestyle in Egypt. Menas seems to have an important message for Pompey, which Pompey ignores.



Pompey values honor over power, in this case. Menas, by contrast, values power over honor, and decides that he may have more opportunities for success and power if he leaves the service of Pompey.



Lepidus over-indulges decadently in drinking, and Antony parties all night. In contrast, Octavius shows strong self-restraint in withdrawing from the feast and party.



ACT 3, SCENE 1

Having just won a military victory in Parthia, Ventidius (one of Antony's men) talks with a soldier named Silius, who encourages him to pursue the Parthians through Mesopotamia. Ventidius, though, says he has done enough for his low rank, and tells Silius that he doesn't want to acquire "too high a fame." Silius compliments his intelligence, and the two go to meet Antony in Athens.

Ventidius cleverly decides that it is not worth it to try to achieve too much by pursuing the fleeing enemy. He does not want too much power, and strategizes so as not to put himself in danger of becoming a threat or rival to Antony.



ACT 3, SCENE 2

At Octavius' home in Rome, Enobarbus and Agrippa are discussing Octavia, who is sad to leave Rome and her brother. They discuss Lepidus, and joke about whether he loves Antony or Octavius more. Octavius, Antony, Octavia, and Lepidus enter, and Octavius says how sad he is to see his sister leave him. He asks Antony to make sure this marriage brings them closer together, instead of pushing them further apart.

Octavia is passed from her brother to her new husband like a bargaining token. Antony and Octavius have arranged the marriage as a purely political stratagem, not as a romantic relationship.



Octavia cries at having to leave her brother. She whispers something in his ear, and Enobarbus and Agrippa debate whether Octavius will cry. Enobarbus opines that it would be bad for him to do so, since he is a man. But Agrippa says that Antony cried when he found Julius Caesar killed. Octavius bids farewell to his sister without crying, and Octavia and Antony leave.

Along the lines of stereotypical gender roles, it is appropriate for the female Octavia to cry, but Enobarbus thinks that Octavius crying would be shameful. Agrippa mentions Antony crying at Caesar's death, perhaps meaning to hint to Enobarbus that Antony is less masculine than Octavius.



ACT 3, SCENE 3

Back in Egypt, Cleopatra hears back from the messenger she sent to go see Octavia. The messenger reports on Octavia's physical appearance, telling Cleopatra that Octavia is shorter than she is, has a low voice, has an overly round head, and is inelegant. Cleopatra is pleased, relieved to think that she faces no real competition for Antony's affections. She gives the messenger gold.

The messenger delivers news that Cleopatra is happy to hear. She has no problems with Antony being married to another woman as long as that woman is not attractive, and poses no threat to her claim on Antony's affections.



ACT 3, SCENE 4

At Antony's house in Athens, Antony complains to Octavia that Octavius has "waged / New wars 'gainst Pompey," and "spoke scantily" of Antony. Octavia tries to calm Antony and says she doesn't want to be caught between her allegiance to her brother and her husband. Antony tells her to go to Octavius in Rome to make peace. In the meantime, he will start to raise an army.

Now that Pompey is no longer a real threat, there is nothing to keep Octavius and Antony allied and they are starting to feud for power. Unlike Cleopatra, Octavia is a passive female character, and finds herself caught between her loyalty to two different men.



ACT 3, SCENE 5

In another room of Antony's house, one of his followers named Eros tells Enobarbus that Octavius and Lepidus have defeated Pompey, but that then Octavius did not let Lepidus "partake in the glory of the action," and has effectively pushed Lepidus out of power. Enobarbus reflects that the world is now up for grabs between Antony and Octavius, with both Pompey and Lepidus out of the picture. Enobarbus goes to find Antony.

Eros delivers the important message that Octavius has gotten rid of both Lepidus and Pompey. In order to gain power, Octavius has had to essentially betray Lepidus. He now has only Antony as a rival, creating a highly symbolic conflict between Egypt and Rome, east and west.



ACT 3, SCENE 6

In Rome, at the house of Octavius, Octavius complains to Maecenas and Agrippa about Antony's behavior: he has enthroned Cleopatra and himself in public on a platform of silver with golden chairs, and has declared Cleopatra queen of Egypt, Syria, Cyprus, and Lydia. Moreover, he has declared his sons by Cleopatra "the kings of kings." Antony has also publicly accused Octavius of denying his rightful share of the spoils from recently defeating Pompey (including part of Sicily). Octavius says that he will only give Antony his share if Antony gives him part of the conquered territories of Armenia.

Octavius is furious both at Antony's apparent betrayal of Rome (by establishing a kingdom in Egypt) and his extravagant decadence, exemplified by the golden chairs. The two are squabbling over the division of territories and spoils, but their quarrel will soon turn into an open military conflict.



Octavia arrives and Octavius marvels that she came to Rome secretly, without any entourage. She tells him that she has come to beg pardon for Antony. He asks her if she knows where Antony is, and she says he is in Athens. He informs her that Antony has betrayed her, and is actually in Egypt with Cleopatra. Octavius says that Antony “hath given his empire / Up to a whore,” and has assembled allies for war.

Octavia is shocked, and laments that she has her “heart parted betwixt two friends.” Octavius says that he held off on fighting with Antony for her sake, until he learned that Antony had wronged her. He welcomes her to Rome and encourages her to stay. Maecenas tells her that everyone in Rome loves and pities her.

ACT 3, SCENE 7

Near the town of Actium, Cleopatra tells Enobarbus that she will go into battle with Antony. Enobarbus says to himself that one should not send “horses and mares” together into battle. He tells Cleopatra that there are already rumors that “an eunuch and your maids / Manage this war.” Cleopatra cares little for what people think at Rome, and says that she will go into battle and “appear there for a man.”

Antony enters with his commander Canidius. He says that he will fight Octavius at sea, against the advice of Canidius. Enobarbus warns Antony, “your ships are not well mann’d,” and advises him to fight on land. Antony, though, is stubborn. He says that he will fight Octavius at sea, off the coast of Actium.

A soldier begs Antony not to fight by sea, saying that his army is used to fighting and winning battles “standing on the earth.” Antony ignores him and leaves with Cleopatra and Enobarbus. The soldier tells Canidius Antony should not fight at sea, and Canidius agrees. He says that Antony is being led by Cleopatra, and they are now “women’s men.” A messenger tells Canidius that he is wanted by Antony, and they leave.

ACT 3, SCENE 8

Elsewhere nearby Actium, Octavius gives military orders to his commander Taurus, telling him not to strike by land until “we have done at sea.” He gives Taurus a scroll with precise instructions for the battle.

Octavia has come as a messenger from Antony, but Octavius is the one who has news for her. Antony has betrayed Octavia and his oath of marital fidelity in order to cavort with Cleopatra in Egypt, because he never really loved Octavia and can't keep himself from Cleopatra.



As a foil to the strong, manipulative Cleopatra, Octavia is very passive, and is under the care and control of the men in her life, whether Antony or Octavius.



Enobarbus has traditional ideas about the place for women in battle (namely, that there isn't one). Cleopatra, however, insists on going into battle like a man, giving force to the rumors that she is in control of Antony and his forces, something unthinkable in Roman society.



Antony ignores the advice and warnings of Canidius, just as he ignored the messenger from Rome earlier. His stubborn plan to fight at sea will prove a disastrous strategy.



Antony continues to ignore good advice—his arrogance will lead to his own downfall. Canidius is worried that Antony is being manipulated by Cleopatra, such that it is Cleopatra, not Antony, that is leading his forces, in a manner irreconcilable with normative Roman gender roles.



Octavius gives Taurus particular instructions for their strategy in battle. His plans appear to be governed by reason, not by emotions like Antony's may be.



ACT 3, SCENE 9

In Antony's camp, Antony tells Enobarbus to send some soldiers to a hill, "from which place / We may the number of the ships behold," in Octavius' navy. They leave to prepare for the battle.

Fulfilling his role as military leader, Antony plans to survey Octavius' navy in preparation for this crucial battle.



ACT 3, SCENE 10

Canidius leads Antony's land forces in one direction, and Taurus leads Octavius' in another. Octavius' and Antony's navies fight a sea battle. Enobarbus cries out that Antony is fleeing the fight. An Egyptian named Scarus says, "we have kiss'd away / Kingdoms and provinces." He says that the battle was even, and no one was clearly winning, but then Cleopatra fled. Antony immediately turned and followed her. He remarks on how shameful and dishonorable Antony's behavior is.

Cleopatra's flight reinforces Enobarbus' opinion that she, as a woman, should not have gone into battle. Antony flees after her, caring more for her safety than for his men or the outcome of the battle. This marks him as dishonorable (and unmanly) to his men. Antony is under Cleopatra's control, in the sense that she is his priority above all other things.



Canidius enters and says, "our fortune on the sea is out of breath." Antony's navy has followed his example and fled. He says that he will go surrender himself to Octavius. Enobarbus says that he will keep supporting Antony, even though his better judgment advises him against it.

Antony's strategy to fight by sea has failed, and he seems to have lost his military and political power to Octavius. Enobarbus now faces a dilemma and must decide between loyalty to Antony and his own prospects for safety.



ACT 3, SCENE 11

At Cleopatra's palace in Alexandria, Antony is ashamed of having fled the battle of Actium. He tells his attendants to go and "make your peace with Caesar." He laments his cowardly behavior, and encourages his attendants to go and seek Octavius' mercy. Cleopatra enters with Charmian, Iras, and Eros. The three encourage her to comfort Antony, as he continues to berate himself.

Antony is ashamed of his dishonorable, cowardly, and (stereotypically) unmanly behavior. He has given up on plotting to defeat Octavius and has accepted defeat, encouraging his own followers to leave him.



Eros tries to get Antony to listen to Cleopatra, and he exclaims, "O, whither hast thou led me, Egypt?" Cleopatra asks for his forgiveness and says she didn't think he would follow her ship when she fled the battle. Antony tells her she should have known his heart was "to thy rudder tied by the strings," so that she dragged him after her. He resolves to send "humble treaties" to Octavius and surrender. He says his sword is "made weak by my affection," kisses Cleopatra, and calls for wine and food.

Antony blames his misfortune on Cleopatra, and says that his love for her has led him astray. He relinquishes all thoughts of power and plans to surrender to Octavius. He now agrees with others who worried that he was being made weak by Cleopatra's love, and he resigns himself to indulging pathetically in food and drink.



ACT 3, SCENE 12

At Octavius' camp, his follower Dolabella tells him that Antony has sent an ambassador. The ambassador arrives, and delivers Antony's plea to be left alive, and to be allowed to live either in Egypt or as "a private man in Athens." He says that Cleopatra admits to Octavius' greatness and begs his mercy.

Octavius says that he has "no ears" for Antony's request, but will pardon Cleopatra if she will either kill Antony or drive him out of Egypt. He sends the ambassador to deliver this reply back to Antony. He calls his man Thidias, and tells him to go and "from Antony win Cleopatra," promising her whatever gifts she requires to make her turn against Antony.

The important news of Antony's willingness to surrender and give all power over Rome to Octavius is delivered by an intermediary character, the ambassador. Antony and Octavius do not communicate face-to-face.



Octavius plots to make Cleopatra betray Antony, and sends his own messenger to try to manipulate her into doing as he wishes. He seems to believe that she loves wealth and luxury more than she loves Antony.



ACT 3, SCENE 13

Back at Cleopatra's palace, she asks Enobarbus what they should do, and whether she or Antony is at fault for what has happened. Enobarbus blames Antony for following her in fleeing from Actium. Antony enters with his ambassador, and tells Cleopatra about Octavius' reply. Angry, Antony says he will give Octavius a counter-offer: he will challenge Octavius to a one-on-one duel. He leaves with the ambassador to write this message.

Enobarbus says that there is no way Octavius will discard all of his advantages and enter into a duel with Antony. Thidias arrives from Octavius, and Enobarbus wonders to himself whether he should remain loyal to Antony, saying that "the loyalty well held to fools does make / Our faith mere folly."

Thidias tells Cleopatra that Octavius knows she did not really love Antony, but only "fear'd him," and thus is willing to forgive her. Cleopatra agrees with Thidias, and Enobarbus leaves, thinking that even Cleopatra is deserting Antony now. Cleopatra tells Thidias that she is more than willing to surrender to Octavius, and Thidias tells her this is a wise decision. He kisses her hand, and Cleopatra says that Octavius' father (Julius Caesar) often kissed her hand.

Antony re-enters with Enobarbus and is furious to see Octavius' man Thidias kissing Cleopatra's hand. He calls in servants to take Thidias away and whip him, "till, like a boy, you see him cringe his face, / And whine aloud for mercy." Antony angrily shouts at Cleopatra, saying that she abuses him and that she has "been a boggler ever."

Enobarbus blames Antony for basically letting a woman dictate his military actions. Antony decides to challenge Octavius (via a messenger) to a duel both as a last-ditch strategy and as a potential way of proving his imperiled masculinity, bravery, and honor.



Similar to Menas earlier, Enobarbus faces a dilemma regarding loyalty to his leader. Must he remain loyal to Antony, when Antony appears not to be in his right mind and is being manipulated by a woman?



Thidias, acting on behalf of Octavius, tries to manipulate Cleopatra by convincing her to desert Antony, and Cleopatra appears to be willing to betray her lover. But it is possible that Cleopatra is lying and only playing along with Thidias as part of her own manipulative strategy.



Antony takes Thidias kissing Cleopatra's hand as an affront to his honor, and is furious at Cleopatra for appearing to betray him. Perhaps he is no longer under the spell of her love, so to speak.



Antony reminds Cleopatra of how he found her, “a morsel cold upon / Dead Caesar’s trencher,” and continues to berate her for betraying him. His servants return with Thidias, who has been beaten. Antony sends Thidias back to Octavius to tell him how he has been treated here. Thidias leaves, and Antony laments that “the fall of Antony” is near.

Antony asks Cleopatra if she would really leave him for Octavius, and Cleopatra tells him that she would never do such a thing. She wishes for her and all her children to die, if she should betray him in this way. Antony is convinced of her fidelity to him, and resolves to face Octavius with his land forces. He has regained his courage, and promises to fight bravely.

Antony says he will have “one other gaudy night,” and calls for wine. He plans to drink and enjoy himself tonight, before preparing again for battle against Octavius. Everyone but Enobarbus leaves. Enobarbus reflects that Antony is being unreasonable, like a little dove trying to “peck the ostridge,” i.e. an ostrich. He decides to abandon Antony.

ACT 4, SCENE 1

Speaking with Maecenas and Agrippa, Octavius mocks Antony’s challenge of single-handed combat. He plans to fight “the last of many battles” tomorrow to defeat Antony at last.

ACT 4, SCENE 2

At Cleopatra’s palace, Enobarbus tells Antony that Octavius will not agree to fight with him alone. Antony resolves to fight “by sea and land,” and live or die with honor. Enobarbus assures him that he is behind him, and Antony calls for servants so they can feast before the fateful day. He thanks Enobarbus for his loyalty.

Antony thanks all his followers, and encourages them to “scant not my cups,” as he plans to enjoy one last night of drinking. He tells them they may serve another master by the end of tomorrow. Enobarbus says that Antony is making his men almost cry to think of Antony’s death, and tells him, “transform us not to women.” Antony tells everyone to cheer up and says that he expects victory tomorrow. He says he wants to “drown consideration” with a large, extravagant meal.

Antony continues to insult Cleopatra for betraying him, deliberately referencing Julius Caesar in order to insinuate that Cleopatra has a parasitic habit of hanging onto powerful men. Antony sends the beaten Thidias back to Octavius as a strong message, a seeming reassertion of Antony’s own strength and manliness.



It is unclear whether Cleopatra is entirely deceptive and is lying to Antony, or whether she does love him and was simply pretending to give in to Thidias. Her ultimate loyalties remain ambiguous, but, regardless, Antony believes her.



Before facing Octavius again, Antony decides to indulge in a night of drinking and good cheer. He seems unable to focus on important matters. Enobarbus decides to prioritize his own fortune over loyalty to Antony, having lost faith in his leader.



Octavius discards the idea of playing into Antony’s hands by dueling him, preferring to form his own plan to defeat Antony in battle.



Enobarbus delivers Octavius’ message, and Antony regains his traditionally masculine bravery. He ironically thanks Enobarbus for his steadfast loyalty, unaware that Enobarbus has decided to betray him for Octavius.



Antony seems unable to take one night away from his decadent lifestyle, even on the eve of a crucial fight. Enobarbus again reinforces the stereotypical idea of crying as being unmanly, but it is ironically a woman (Cleopatra) who is in some ways the bravest character in the play.



ACT 4, SCENE 3

Several soldiers talk in Cleopatra's palace, anxiously awaiting tomorrow's battle. One of the soldiers says he thinks they will be victorious on land, "if to-morrow / Our navy thrive." The soldiers hear a strange music that they think is coming from "under the earth," and one of them interprets this as a sign that Hercules (Antony's patron deity) is deserting him. The soldiers leave to see if they can find out more about the strange noise.

Caught in a turbulent time of civil war, the anxious soldiers try to predict what will happen the next day. The negative omen of the strange music contributes to a sense of the tragic inevitability of Antony's defeat.



ACT 4, SCENE 4

The next day, Antony prepares for battle, having Eros put on his armor. Cleopatra tries to help put on his armor, but puts some of it on incorrectly. Antony tells her to stop, calling her "the armourer of my heart." Some captains and soldiers come to report to Antony, and he kisses Cleopatra before departing for the battle with Eros and the soldiers, leaving Charmian and Cleopatra behind. Before retiring to her room, Cleopatra says that Antony "goes forth gallantly," but wishes Octavius had agreed to a duel rather than an open battle.

By telling Cleopatra to stop trying to arm him, Antony encourages her not to try to fulfill a man's role (and she is shown as unsuited for the role, in the mistakes she makes while trying to put on his armor). Antony kisses Cleopatra before leaving, showing the extent to which he is motivated by his love for her. Cleopatra, though, does not predict much success for Antony in battle. She seems now genuinely concerned for Antony's safety.



ACT 4, SCENE 5

At Antony's military camp, a soldier informs him that Enobarbus has deserted him for Octavius, but has left his "chests and treasure" behind. Antony orders for these things to be sent to Enobarbus with "gentle adieus and greetings," lamenting, "O, my fortunes have / Corrupted honest men!"

Antony learns of the disastrous news of Enobarbus' desertion secondhand from a soldier. He responds not by cutting off all ties to Enobarbus, but by honorably remaining kind to him, showing the extent of his own loyalty to his followers.



ACT 4, SCENE 6

At his camp, Octavius orders his commander Agrippa to begin the battle, saying that "the time of universal peace is near." He orders for deserters from Antony's forces to be put in the front lines, so that Antony's men will seem to be fighting themselves.

Octavius orders for the battle to begin, seeking "universal peace" through absolute power over the Mediterranean world. He has designed a clever stratagem in placing Antony's deserters in the front lines.



Enobarbus reflects on his recent change of loyalties, and notes that those who have left Antony for Octavius have not been treated particularly well. He regrets leaving Antony. A soldier enters, bearing Enobarbus' treasure sent from Antony. Seeing Antony's kindness, Enobarbus regrets his decision even more, calling himself "alone the villain of the earth." He resolves not to fight against Antony but to "go seek / Some ditch wherein to die."

Enobarbus quickly regrets betraying Antony and joining the forces of Octavius. His decision to "go seek / Some ditch wherein to die," rather than fighting against Antony is an attempt to salvage at least some of his honor.



ACT 4, SCENE 7

On the field of battle, Agrippa calls for his forces to retreat, and Antony enters with his soldier Scarus, who is wounded. Eros enters and happily tells them that they have gained a victory. Antony tells Scarus he will reward him for his bravery and loyalty.

After his army's unlikely victory, Antony promises to reward Scarus, because he—unlike Enobarbus—remained loyal to him even in a dire situation.



ACT 4, SCENE 8

Back in Alexandria, Antony thanks his soldiers and says that tomorrow they will “spill the blood / That has to-day escaped.” Cleopatra enters, and Antony tells her he has been victorious. He tells her of Scarus’ honorable behavior and then she says she will give him a golden set of armor. Antony tells her that they will “through Alexandria make a jolly march . . . And drink carouses to the next day’s fate.” They leave to celebrate.

Antony thanks his loyal soldiers. Instead of focusing on or planning for the next battle with Octavius, though, he plans to celebrate decadently in the streets of Alexandria. Antony’s obsession with such decadence and luxury seems to be one of the causes of his military and political defeat.



ACT 4, SCENE 9

Two soldiers are keeping guard at Octavius’ camp, when Enobarbus enters, repenting for having deserted Antony. He says that he hopes to die, and begs out loud for Antony to forgive him. He falls over and dies. The soldiers first think he has merely fainted but then realize he has died. They carry his body off.

Enobarbus regains some of his honor through his tragic death and refusal to fight against his former leader. He is ashamed of having betrayed Antony, though there are practically no characters in the play who have not betrayed someone.



ACT 4, SCENE 10

The next day, Antony prepares to fight Octavius at sea. He tells Scarus that he would willingly “fight i’ the fire or i’ the air.” He tells Scarus that he will have his land forces placed on some hills from where they can see the movements of Octavius’ navy.

While he has seemed at times weakened by the luxuries of Egypt, Antony here acts like a brave Roman general, and strategizes for the upcoming battle.



ACT 4, SCENE 11

Elsewhere, Octavius prepares for battle. He tells his army to “be still by land,” and sends his men “to the vales,” to “hold our best advantage,” planning to meet Antony’s forces at sea.

Like Antony, Octavius prepares for battle at sea, strategizing for how he can best defeat his opponent.



ACT 4, SCENE 12

Antony and Scarus look out at the sea, but Antony cannot see the battle. He leaves to get a better vantage point. Scarus notes that swallows have built nests “in Cleopatra’s sails,” and says that the augurers (interpreters of omens) do not know what this means.

The swallows’ nests are yet another omen in the play, but one the augurers cannot interpret. Shakespeare’s audiences and readers, though, know how Antony’s war will ultimately turn out.



Antony returns, upset, and says, “this foul Egyptian hath betrayed me.” Antony’s fleet yielded to Octavius’ forces and they now “cast their caps up and carouse together / Like friends long lost.” He calls Cleopatra a “triple-turn’d whore,” thinking that she has betrayed him. Antony thinks he will die, and again says he has been betrayed by “this false soul of Egypt.”

Cleopatra enters and asks why Antony is so mad. Antony tells her to leave or else he will hit her. He tells her she will be taken as prisoner and humiliated for public display in Octavius’ parade celebrating his triumph. Cleopatra leaves. Antony says it would have been better if Cleopatra had died, as this would have prevented the deaths of his men. He calls her a witch and says she has “sold” him “to the young Roman boy,” i.e. Octavius.

ACT 4, SCENE 13

At her palace, Cleopatra complains to Charmian, Iras, and Mardian that Antony is mad. Charmian suggests that she go to her monumental tomb (which has already been built ahead of time), lock herself inside, and send Antony word that she is dead. Cleopatra agrees with the plan and tells Mardian to tell Antony that she has killed herself and that the last word she spoke was his name.

ACT 4, SCENE 14

Elsewhere in the palace, Antony talks with Eros. He describes how “sometimes we see a cloud that’s dragonish; / A vapour sometime like a bear or lion.” He describes how these **clouds** change shapes “and mock our eyes with air,” and how “that which is now a horse, even with a thought / The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct, / As water is in water.” He tells Eros that he himself is like these **clouds** and that he “cannot hold this visible shape.”

Antony blames his defeat on Cleopatra, who he thinks betrayed him to Octavius and didn’t truly love him. Mardian enters and tells Antony that Cleopatra really did love him. He tells Antony that she killed herself and her dying words were “Antony! Most noble Antony!” Antony sends Mardian and Eros away, and proclaims that his heart is broken.

Antony seems to have been betrayed by not only his close adviser Enobarbus, but almost all of his soldiers, as well, who just give in. Knowing Cleopatra’s manipulative character, Antony assumes she has had something to do with this disastrous defeat. His love for Cleopatra seems to be beyond his control, and he seems to recognize its disastrous effects and to blame her for it rather than himself.



Antony is finally so angry that Cleopatra can no longer persuade, manipulate, or seduce him with her love. He fears the dishonor and humiliation that he and Cleopatra will both face as prisoners at Rome. His insults toward Cleopatra are distinctly gendered, involving terms like witch and whore.



Antony is no longer bewitched by his affection for Cleopatra, and resolutely believes she has betrayed him. So, she resorts to one last act of manipulation, to make Antony think she has died so he will feel how much he misses her. Cleopatra approaches her personal relationships with as much strategizing as generals approach a battle.



The changing clouds can represent a number of things: the mercurial fortunes and unpredictable future of Antony and Cleopatra, the shifting alliances of the political landscape, the deceptiveness of Cleopatra, or (as Antony tells Eros) Antony himself.



Antony is convinced that Cleopatra didn’t really love him and betrayed him, but then quickly changes his mind when he hears the false news of her death from the messenger Mardian. Cleopatra manipulates him easily (which is not to say that she really did betray him, which is unclear).



Alone, Antony says that he will follow her example and end his own life. He says that they will see each other in the afterlife. Antony calls for Eros to come back, and tells him that he has resolved to end his own life, so that he will not “lack the courage of a woman,” as Cleopatra has already done this. He tells Eros to stab him, telling him, “’tis Caesar thou defeat’st.”

Eros does not want to kill his master, but Antony tells him that this would be better than him being humiliated and shamed as a prisoner in Rome. Eros says he will do it reluctantly, and tells Antony to turn around so he doesn’t have to look into his face as he kills him. Antony does so, and Eros says farewell to him. Eros draws his sword and Antony prepares for the blow, but Eros stabs himself instead.

Antony turns around and sees what has happened. He praises Eros’ bravery and loyalty, and says that he will go to his death “as to a lover’s bed.” He stabs himself, but is only wounded. One of his men, Dercetas, enters with a guard. Antony tells them to finish what he has begun, by killing him, but no one will do so.

Diomedes, one of Cleopatra’s servants, enters and tells Antony that Cleopatra has sent him. He says that Cleopatra is alive and “lock’d in her monument.” Antony calls for his guards and asks to be carried to Cleopatra. He tells them not to be too sorrowful at his death, but to “bid that welcome / Which comes to punish us.”

ACT 4, SCENE 15

At her tomb, Cleopatra tells Charmian she will never leave the place. Diomedes enters and tells her that Antony is dying, but not yet dead. Antony is carried in by some guards, and Cleopatra calls out to him. Antony tells her not to worry, because, “Not Caesar’s valour hath o’erthrown Antony, / But Antony’s hath triumph’d on itself.”

Antony tells Cleopatra that he is dying, but that he wants to kiss her one last time. Cleopatra tells him that she will not be taken prisoner by Octavius, but will end her own life, “if knife, drugs, serpents, have / Edge, sting, or operation.” But as Antony is dying, he tells Cleopatra to “seek your honour, with your safety,” at the hands of Octavius. Cleopatra responds, “they do not go together.”

Antony plans to seek a noble death motivated both by love for Cleopatra and by a desire not to be outdone in courage by a woman. Additionally, the plan to kill himself will rob Octavius of the joy of defeating him, as he hints in his comment to Eros.



Being killed here would be more honorable for Antony than suffering the humiliation of being taken to Rome as a prisoner. Eros faces a crisis of loyalty: is it more loyal to obey Antony even in killing him, or would killing his own leader be a betrayal?



Antony is honored by Eros’ loyalty. He does not want to be outdone in courage by his servant and his wife, who he thinks has taken her own life, and so follows Eros’ example in stabbing himself.



Diomedes delivers the crucial message that Cleopatra is actually alive. Antony does not seem to be upset at her deceptive manipulation, and simply wishes to see the woman he loves before he dies.



Having just brought an important message from Cleopatra to Antony, Diomedes now brings one from Antony to Cleopatra. Antony tries to find comfort in his own death by emphasizing his honor, as he has not been killed by his enemy Octavius.



Cleopatra and Antony’s love appears to be genuine in the end, despite all the manipulation and anger between them earlier in the play. Cleopatra vows to match Antony’s manly courage, and refuses to betray Antony. But given her earlier deceptions, how sincere are her promises?



Antony tells Cleopatra not to lament at his death, but to remember him as “the greatest prince o’ the world, / The noblest. . . a Roman by a Roman / Valiantly vanquish’d.” Antony dies, and Cleopatra cries out, “The crown o’ the earth doth melt. My lord!” She faints, and then recollects herself. She orders for Antony to be buried “after the high Roman fashion,” and tells her servants that they “have no friend / But resolution, and the briefest end.”

Antony wants to be remembered as a powerful, honorable Roman man. Cleopatra is moved by her love for Antony and is determined to end her own life now. She seems to have put aside all deception toward Antony.



ACT 5, SCENE 1

At his camp, Octavius sends Dolabella to demand Antony’s surrender. But just then Dercetas comes from Antony, tells Octavius that Antony is dead, and pledges his allegiance to Octavius. Octavius remarks on the significance of this event, and Dercetas tells him that Antony killed himself. Octavius is saddened by the news, even though Antony was his enemy, and Agrippa and Maecenas agree that, while Antony had his faults, he was still an honorable man.

Octavius’ planned message is interrupted by the message of Dercetas. Despite the fact that Antony was his enemy, Octavius respects him as an honorable opponent, as do Maecenas and Agrippa.



An Egyptian enters bearing a message from Cleopatra. He tells Octavius that Cleopatra wishes to know his intentions with her, “that she preparedly may frame herself / To the way she’s forced to.” Octavius says that he will take mercy on Cleopatra, and sends the Egyptian away.

Cleopatra wishes to know Octavius’ intentions, so that she can plan her actions. It is unclear whether she will try to manipulate her way out of the situation, or will live up to her promise to Antony to end her own life as he did his.



Octavius tells his man Proculeius to go to Cleopatra and promise her comforts so that she does not commit suicide in her defeat. He wants to take her alive to Rome and show her in his public triumph (victory parade). He sends Gallus to go with Proculeius, and then tells the rest of his attendants to go with him to his tent, where he will show them his letters to Antony which he says prove “How hardly I was drawn into this war.”

Octavius now schemes to deceive Cleopatra. He wants to show his attendants the letters in order to prove that he was drawn into the war, and prove that he did not act dishonorably in waging civil war against another Roman.



ACT 5, SCENE 2

Back at her tomb, Cleopatra reasons that she will achieve a greater fate than Octavius, because he is at the whims of fortune, whereas she is now taking control of her own destiny (by planning to end her own life). Proculeius and Gallus arrive from Octavius, and Cleopatra tells them she does not want to be deceived. She says she will only surrender to being Octavius’ prisoner if he allows her son to rule over Egypt.

Cleopatra plans to suffer a noble death on her own terms. He may have defeated Antony and her on the battlefield, but she can still outmaneuver him by thwarting his plans to bring her to Rome. Cleopatra appears cooperative with the messengers at first, but she is only trying to deceive those who are deceiving her.



Proculeius tells Cleopatra not to worry, as she has “fall’n into a princely hand.” She says that she will be obedient to Octavius. Gallus comments to Proculeius that Cleopatra is easily tricked, and exits, leaving Proculeius and some guards to watch over Cleopatra until Octavius’ arrival. Iras enters and alerts Cleopatra that the Romans may be tricking her. Cleopatra draws a dagger, but Proculeius takes it from her, telling her not to kill herself. Cleopatra cries out that she desires her own death.

Cleopatra tells Proculeius that she “will not wait pinion’d at your master’s court.” She says she would rather die in “a ditch in Egypt” than be humiliated in Rome as part of Octavius’ triumph. Proculeius tells her she doesn’t have anything to fear from Octavius. Dolabella enters and takes Proculeius’ place guarding Cleopatra. Cleopatra tells Dolabella about a dream she had of “Emperor Antony,” in which he was gigantic, “his legs bestrid the ocean,” and the whole world was under his power.

Dolabella pities Cleopatra, and admits to her that Octavius plans to lead her as a prisoner in his triumph. Just then, Octavius enters with Gallus, Proculeius, Maecenas, and others of his followers. Cleopatra kneels in front of Octavius, but he tells her to stand up. He tells her he will forgive “what injuries you did us,” and Cleopatra apologizes and says she has “been laden with like frailties which before / Have often shamed our sex.”

Octavius tells Cleopatra that if she surrenders to him, she will “find a benefit in this change,” and that if she kills herself, she will be putting her children in harm’s way. Cleopatra surrenders all of her valuable possessions to Octavius, and gives him a list of her money, jewels, and other things. She asks her treasurer Seleucus to tell Octavius that she has left nothing off the list, but Seleucus says that she is lying. Cleopatra is furious at him and calls him “slave, soulless villain, dog!”

Cleopatra tells Octavius all she has held back are “some lady trifles,” which she plans to give to Octavia. She angrily sends Seleucus away. Octavius tells Cleopatra not to worry about the things she has kept from him. He tells her, “our care and pity is so much upon you, / That we remain your friend.” He leaves with his followers.

Gallus thinks he and Proculeius have easily tricked Cleopatra, but she is a master manipulator and is actually tricking them, outsmarting Octavius. It is unclear whether Cleopatra desires her own death because Antony is gone, or because she realizes she has no real hope of political power anymore.



Cleopatra will not be dishonored by becoming a prisoner or slave “pinion’d” at Octavius’ court. She prizes her honor above even her life. Her dream of a gigantic “Emperor Antony” was a false sign of the future, one that she had incorrectly interpreted to mean Antony would become immensely powerful.



Dolabella is yet another character who faces a dilemma of loyalty and honesty. To be obedient to Octavius would be to deceive Cleopatra, but to be honest to her would be to betray his own leader. Cleopatra uses her gender as an excuse to Octavius, cleverly taking advantage of the idea of women’s “frailties”; she doesn’t actually seem to suffer from any.



Cleopatra tries to trick Octavius in withholding some of her wealth from him. She is upset with Seleucus for betraying her, but he is only betraying her by being honest about the truth (and perhaps plotting for his own best interest with Octavius).



Each character tries to manipulate the other. Cleopatra uses her gender to her advantage, playing the part of a trifling lady in order to evade Octavius’ anger, while Octavius continues to act friendly toward her, as part of his scheme to stop her from ending her own life.



Now alone with Charmian and Iras, Cleopatra says that Octavius is trying to persuade her to “not / Be noble to myself.” Dolabella enters and tells Cleopatra that Octavius plans to take her and her children with him in three days. She thanks him, and he leaves. Cleopatra tells Iras that Octavius will take both of them to Rome to be humiliated in public, and comedic actors will present Antony as a drunkard and Cleopatra as a whore.

Cleopatra sends Charmian and Iras to get her “best attires,” and her crown, as she wants to look her best when she meets Antony in death. A “rural fellow” comes in, bringing Cleopatra a basket of figs. Cleopatra says that this man “brings me liberty.” Hidden in the basket of figs are asps, poisonous snakes Cleopatra refers to as “the pretty worm of Nilus. . . That kills and pains not.” The rustic man tells Cleopatra he knows of many men and women who have died from the bite of this kind of snake. She sends him away.

Cleopatra takes an asp and has it bite her breast. She calls it, “my baby at my breast, / That sucks the nurse asleep.” She takes another asp, which bites her arm, and dies. Charmian says that Cleopatra was “a lass unparallel’d.” A guard rushes in and discovers Cleopatra. Charmian picks up an asp and has it bite him. He dies, as Dolabella returns and learns that “the dreaded act” Octavius tried to prevent has occurred.

Octavius enters and, seeing what has happened, calls Cleopatra “bravest at the last.” Octavius asks how Cleopatra died, and Dolabella and a guard notice a bite-mark on Cleopatra’s breast, and “an aspic’s trail” near the fig-leaves in the basket. Octavius concludes she used asps to kill herself. He orders for Cleopatra to be buried “by her Antony,” and says that he pities “a pair so famous.” He says that his army will attend a funeral for Antony and Cleopatra before returning to Rome.

Cleopatra seeks a noble, honorable death, in contrast to the humiliating existence she imagines at Rome. Dolabella again helps the enemy of his master, moved enough by pity to disobey his leader.



Cleopatra wants to look her best when she dies. One could see this as a sign of vanity and decadence, or as evidence of her queenly nobility. Just as messengers and ambassadors have played crucial roles in the play to this point, it is the intermediary character of the rural man who allows Cleopatra to carry out her plan.



Cleopatra’s referring to the asp as a breastfeeding baby alludes ironically to a traditional female maternal role (one Cleopatra does not fulfill). Octavius’ scheme to prevent Cleopatra from killing herself has failed, as Cleopatra has outwitted him with her final strategic action.



Octavius sees that his plan to take Cleopatra to Rome as a prisoner has failed, but he appreciates Cleopatra’s bravery. Even Octavius respects Cleopatra’s sense of personal honor. Antony and Cleopatra are buried together like a husband and wife, suggesting the strength of their love. By attending the funeral before celebrating his victory, Octavius acknowledges the dignity of his opponents.



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