

Original Paper

# Shame and Betrayal in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to look at how William Shakespeare took the historical information available to him in the story of Mark Antony, Triumvir of Rome, and Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, and turned it into his tragic play *Antony and Cleopatra*. Four parts of the play are analyzed: The Battle of Actium, negotiations with Caesar Octavian, the Alexandrian War and Cleopatra's Suicide. Did Antony know beforehand that Cleopatra and her navy would abandon the Battle of Actium and return to Egypt? In the aftermath of Actium both Cleopatra and Antony negotiated separately with Octavian. What is known about Cleopatra's willingness to give up on Antony and defect to Octavian's side? Was Antony really so surprised to see Cleopatra's navy defect to Octavian? Or was he blindsided and right to feel betrayed by Cleopatra? And why did Cleopatra have a messenger inform Antony that she was dead? Was she afraid of Antony after her navy's defection? Was she looking for sympathy? Trying to curtail his anger? Or was she hoping that Antony would kill himself and thus give her free reign to negotiate with Octavian as Queen of Egypt and not as Antony's mistress? All of these questions will be looked at from the point of view of Shakespeare's tragedy and how he manipulated the historical sources to write his own version of this world famous tragic love story.

## 1. Introduction

Act I of William Shakespeare's tragedy *Antony and Cleopatra* opens with the couple in Alexandria and already lovers. A lot had already occurred, however, so some background to the tragedy is needed before delving into the play. Cleopatra, as Queen of Egypt, was a patron of Julius Caesar's. In fact, they were lovers and Cleopatra had born a son (Caesarion) from the relationship<sup>1)</sup>. When Caesar was murdered by Roman Senators on the Ides of March in 44 B.C. Cleopatra was also in Rome at that time<sup>1)</sup>. She went back to Egypt and had to re-assess her situation in light of Caesar's death. Antony had served and fought with Caesar on numerous occasions and in 44 B.C. was consul of Rome. Soon after Caesar's murder a political alliance was formed against his assassins. Called the 2nd Triumvirate (the 1st had included Caesar himself), it was made up of Caesar's adopted nephew and heir Octavian, Mark Antony and Lepidus (who supported Antony in his opposition to Caesar's assassins<sup>1)</sup>). This triumvirate defeated Caesar's assassins in battle and together the three ruled the Roman Empire. Mark Antony traveled to Tarsus in Cilicia and called for Cleopatra to visit

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him there<sup>1)</sup>. This was an important meeting for both of them. Cleopatra needed a new patron and Antony needed her money for his war with Octavian. She made a royal entrance into the city via the river Cydnus in her sumptuous royal yacht and dazzled Antony with her wealth and how she utilized it to entertain the triumvir<sup>1)</sup>. Antony and she soon became lovers and he followed her back to Alexandria and spent the winter of 41-40 B.C. there<sup>1)</sup>.

By the time of the Battle of Actium Lepidus had been sidelined (he had attempted to oppose Octavian but his soldiers wouldn't fight for him and defected to Octavian) and sent into exile<sup>2)</sup>. Octavian had attempted to remain allies with Antony through a marriage alliance between Antony and Octavian's sister Octavia. But this fell apart after Antony's affair with Cleopatra became public. And instead of denying the relationship, Antony and Cleopatra openly displayed their love match to all, embarrassing Octavian. It was now clear that only one man was going to rule Rome and both sides amassed their armies and met at Actium in 31 B.C.

The play follows many of these historical events, but the tragedy also focuses on two important psychological points: betrayal and shame. In the play, Cleopatra betrays Antony in battle at Actium and Alexandria and also in her negotiations with Octavian. Yet for all of this, Antony's love for Cleopatra supersedes her betrayal of him. Cleopatra's allegiance is to herself, but Antony can't stop his love for her. On the other hand, Cleopatra is always flexible, looking to preserve first power in Egypt for herself and her children and then just for herself alone<sup>3)</sup>. Shame manifests itself cataclysmically for both characters in Octavian's triumph. Antony and Cleopatra are never alone in any scene of the play. They enjoy the performative aspect of power and need the affirmation of their followers in whatever they do. But they will not be in control of their performances in Octavian's triumph. Octavian will direct them and the humiliation, the shame of this kind of public spectacle will force Antony and Cleopatra to make desperate decisions about their own, and each other's, lives<sup>4)</sup>.

## 2. The Battle of Actium

The historical naval Battle of Actium turned out terribly for Mark Antony. His strength was his army but Octavian refused to engage him on land. In the sea battle, the Antonian strategy was to engage with Octavian's navy and for Cleopatra's ships to act as a reserve force. During the battle the center opened up for Cleopatra. But instead of supporting Antony she used the gap to sail away back to Egypt. Mark Antony broke off his own fight with Octavian's navy and followed, leaving his navy without its leader. About a third of Antony's navy managed to follow Antony. The rest were casualties of the battle and Antony's army also went over to Octavian without a fight<sup>1)</sup>.

According to the historical sources, however, the escape plan was pre-meditated. Plutarch even writes that during deployment Cleopatra made sure to position her war ships for easy escape in the event of defeat, as opposed to placing them in areas where they would enhance the chances of victory<sup>5)</sup>. The only question for historians was whether or not Antony's navy was to stop fighting and follow Cleopatra, or whether only Cleopatra's naval forces were to flee. Cleopatra had brought much of her treasure to Actium in order to help Antony fund his campaign. However, once preparations were under way it must have become clear to both of them that their chances of defeating Octavian were slim. As an example of this, Plutarch has Antony ordering his ships' captains to place sails on board. Sails are not used for battle, but are used for escaping during a defeat or route or as the victor to run down the remnants of the losing side (Plutarch makes it clear that he was writing about the former.)<sup>5)</sup>. And many on both sides at Actium also thought that Antony and Cleopatra were actively trying to break the blockade formation set up by Octavian, rather than fight the battle and try to win<sup>5)</sup>.

However it was planned, the propaganda coup for Octavian was utilized quickly. He was able to say that the rumors were true. Antony was in thrall to his mistress, and more of an Egyptian than a Roman. The value of his love for Cleopatra overpowered his desire to be Rome's superior leader<sup>1</sup>.

In Shakespeare, the Battle of Actium takes place in Act III. In scene vii Cleopatra is portrayed distracting Antony from his personal war plans and leading the strategizing herself. As in the historical record, Antony's navy is seen as weak yet he will fight Octavian at sea not on land. His top adviser Enobarbus and the leader of his land force, Canidius, voice their displeasure at these decisions.

In scene x, Enobarbus watches Cleopatra's navy sail through the center opening created by Antony's navy and head for Egypt. Scarus, one of Antony's officers, says of Cleopatra that, "The breeze upon her, like a cow in June / Hoists sails and flies (III, x, 14-15). She had fled when the advantage had been with Antony. Then, during the heaviest of the fighting, Antony follows her. Canidius, the leader of Antony's army, says that while Antony was fighting he was a Roman, but that in retreat he was now under Cleopatra's spell:

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. (III, x, 18-20)

And, after saying this, Canidius takes his army over to Octavian. "O he has given example for our flight, / Most grossly, by his own! (III, x, 27-28)

In scene xi, in Alexandria, Antony realizes what he has done and laments the dishonor that he has brought upon himself. Cleopatra tells him of her surprise when she saw that Antony was following her. But Antony responds that she must know that he cannot live without her:

O'er my spirit  
Thy full supremacy thou knew'st, and that  
Thy beck might from the bidding of the gods  
Command me. (III, xi, 59-62)

This is a break from the historical record where it is intimated that the escape was pre-meditated and that both Antony and Cleopatra had planned for it. Shakespeare may have discarded this for dramatic effect as again later in the scene he has Antony say that Cleopatra has control over him:

You did know  
How much you were my conqueror, and that  
My sword, made weak by my affection, would  
Obey it on all cause. (III, xi, 66-69)

It made for better drama to have Antony destroy himself for the love of a woman.

### 3. Negotiations with Octavian

In the historical record it is made clear that Cleopatra sent letters and messengers to Octavian independent of Mark Antony. In her first attempt, she asked that her children be allowed to follow her as rulers of Egypt<sup>5</sup>. Dio writes that Octavian stated that if Cleopatra would kill off Antony she would keep her throne and remain Queen of Egypt<sup>2</sup>. Plutarch, however, doesn't write about the throne and adds that if Cleopatra will throw Antony out of Egypt or kill him that Octavian will treat her well<sup>5</sup>. Cleopatra also

assured Octavian of her loyalty to him. Octavian, however, made no public offer or proposal to Cleopatra; the negotiations were secret. Octavian's personal messenger to Cleopatra was called Thyrstus<sup>1)</sup>. He spent long hours negotiating with her. In fact, Antony barged in on them once and in a jealous rage had him whipped and sent back to Octavian<sup>1)</sup>. Octavian needed Egypt's wealth to pay for the upkeep and maintenance of his army and upon their discharge from service after the wars with Antony were over. Cleopatra had presciently gathered up what treasure that she had and had placed it in her unfinished mausoleum in Alexandria. She also let it be known that she could set fire to it at a moment's notice.

In Shakespeare, the initial parley between Cleopatra and Octavian takes place in Act III, scene xii through Octavian's negotiator Euphronius. Euphronius makes it clear to Octavian that Cleopatra's negotiating strategy with Octavian is to secure her children's safety and their place in Egypt:

Cleopatra does confess thy greatness,  
Submits her to thy might, and of the craves  
The circle of the Ptolemies for her heirs,  
Now hazarded to thy grace. (III, xii, 16-19)

Initially, Shakespeare has Cleopatra place her children above herself at the outset of negotiations with Octavian.

In scene xiii, Shakespeare has Cleopatra tell Octavian's second negotiator Thidias (not Thyrstus) that she recognizes Octavian as holding the same position as his father Julius Caesar. Thidias proposes that Cleopatra had never loved Antony but was only with him because she feared him. Cleopatra sees this opinion as advantageous and agrees, "Mine honor was not yielded, / But conquered merely." (III, xiii, 61-62) Cleopatra also admits to Octavian's control over her and Egypt and that she will wait for his instructions:

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. (III, xiii, 75-78)

Shakespeare then has Antony walk in on the two as Thidias kisses Cleopatra's hand goodbye. Enraged, "Favors? By Jove that thunders! / What art thou, fellow?" (III, xiii, 85-86) Antony has Thidias whipped before he sends him back to Octavian. Cleopatra, however, is able to conceal from Antony what the two had been talking about at the time Antony barged in and interrupted them. Such a public humiliation of Octavian's messenger will do Antony no favors later. Antony realizes that he must defeat Octavian in battle or die in the attempt. That is the only road to victory left to him. It also works to move the plot and focus the play on Shakespeare's themes of betrayal and shame.

#### 4. The Alexandrian War

In the Alexandrian War, the historical record states that Octavian attacks Antony by land from both East (Syria) and West (Cyrenaica). Antony attacks to the West 1st and is defeated. In the East, Octavian takes the fortress town of Pelusium in Egypt, putting Octavian within striking distance of Alexandria. Two narratives emerge over the fall of Pelusium. In the 1st, Cleopatra's fortress commander Seleucas gives up the city with Cleopatra's blessing. In the 2nd, she lets Antony kill the wife and children of Seleucas as punishment for surrendering so easily to Octavian<sup>9)</sup>. Although neither narrative is certain some conjecture has emerged for the 2nd narrative being a cover for what Cleopatra did in the 1st narrative. Later, as Octavian's cavalry advanced toward Alexandria it lost a skirmish to Antony's mounted troops<sup>5)</sup>. This would

be his last victory. And while this was going on Octavian's navy made for the harbor of Alexandria and trapped Antony's navy there.

On the second day, Antony watched first his navy and then his cavalry go over to Octavian. Antony's infantry does attack Octavian's, but they are quickly defeated. Most of the navy is Cleopatra's. Plutarch has Antony yelling to anyone who will listen that Cleopatra has betrayed him<sup>5</sup>. Dio says Cleopatra ordered the navy's commanders to defect<sup>2</sup>. Surrendering Pelusium and her navy may have been good faith gestures done to speed the secret negotiations along. It appears that securing her childrens' futures trumped her love and support for the lost cause that was Antony.

In Shakespeare, the Alexandrian War is in Act IV. In scene iii Shakespeare has an oboe playing. The soldiers see it as an omen that means Hercules is leaving Alexandria; Antony has always claimed that he is a descendant of Hercules. "'Tis the god Hercules, whom Antony loved, / Now leaves him. (IV, iii, 15-16) In scene iv Cleopatra remarks with knowing words on Antony's attempt to end the war in single combat with Octavian:

He goes forth gallantly. That he and Caesar might  
Determine this great war in single fight!  
Then Antony - but now - well, on. (IV, iv, 36-38)

As the last line makes clear single combat is only a dream and that, partly through Cleopatra's own negotiations with Octavian, Antony will fail in battle with his troops as well.

In scene xii Shakespeare has Antony say of Cleopatra that she has betrayed him at three different times:

All is lost.  
This foul Egyptian hath betrayed me.  
My fleet hath yielded to the foe. (IV, xii, 9-11)

"Betrayed I am. / O this false soul of Egypt! (IV, xii, 24-25) "The witch shall die, / To the young Roman boy hath sold me ... (IV, xii, 47-48)

He states this as he watches his navy sail away without a fight into Octavian's possession.

And so the theme of betrayal is hammered home again and again for Shakespeare's audience. When Cleopatra appears, Antony physically threatens her, "I shall give thee thy deserving." (IV, xii, 32), and almost simultaneously wishes for her to be in Octavian's triumph, "Let him take thee / And hoist thee up to the shouting plebeians!" (IV, xii, 33-34)

However, the end of the scene has Antony saying that he will kill Cleopatra, "The witch shall die, / To the young Roman boy she hath sold me." (IV, xii, 47-48)

## 5. Suicide

The historical record has Cleopatra enter her mausoleum and have word sent to Antony that she is dead. Antony believes the report, loses all his anger for Cleopatra and stabs himself in the stomach so that he can die and join her. Antony, however, does not die. Dio says that one of Antony's servants sees Cleopatra in the window of her mausoleum, alive. So Antony, still not angry, has himself brought to her and dies by her side in the mausoleum<sup>2</sup>.

The historical record shows that Cleopatra lived for a whole week after the death of Antony. She clearly used this time to bargain and seek any opportunity to prolong her reign and secure the future of her children.

After Antony's death Octavian occupied Alexandria and sent his envoy Proculeius to Cleopatra. Cleopatra refused to leave her mausoleum and talk with him. Octavian tries a 2nd envoy, Gallus, and while he is trying to meet with her Proculeius and others manage to enter the mausoleum from another route and capture Cleopatra. They prevent Cleopatra from stabbing herself. And this is the first time that she actually tries to commit suicide<sup>9</sup>.

Octavian allows Cleopatra to bury Antony in Alexandria. Afterwards she contracted a fever and used this as a means to stop eating and try to starve herself to death. This is the second recorded time in Plutarch that she tries to kill herself<sup>5</sup>. Octavian hears of this second attempt, threatens Cleopatra and lets her know that he will harm her children. So Cleopatra meets Octavian and the two discuss her wealth, but the meeting ends without any agreement as Octavian makes clear that none of her children will rule after her. She was, however, able to convince Octavian that she would not take her life.

It was also at this time that a member of Octavian's entourage (Dolabella in Shakespeare) let her know about Octavian's plans for her. Octavian wanted her to be a part of his triumph in Rome that would celebrate his victory over Antony<sup>2</sup>. Cleopatra had feared this possibility over all others. In a triumph she would be openly displayed to the citizens of Rome as booty, a humiliation that she could not contemplate. It was this information that may have led her to finally take her own life.

As for her suicide, Plutarch says that she bathed and ate a gorgeous meal. Then poisonous snakes were smuggled to her in a basket of figs. Dio says that they were in a basket of flowers. Both historians report on another possible method: One of Cleopatra's hair pins was hollowed out and filled with poison, which she used to prick her skin and bring on her death. After her bath and meal, Cleopatra sent a letter to Octavian pleading with him to let her be buried with Antony. Octavian took the letter to mean that she was going to be dead by the time he read the letter. Puncture wounds were found on Cleopatra's dead body as it lied on her couch dressed as the queen. Whether from snake bite or hairpins no one will ever know, but Plutarch gives various stories about the asp(s). One asp bit her without her being aware of it before she removed another one from the basket and had it bite her arm. Another story has an asp in a water jar and it lunging out at her and biting her arm. There was also said to be no visible evidence of snakes having been in the room, which brings the hairpin story back into the picture. Others, however, do say that two faint puncture wounds marks were found on her arm and Octavian seems to have believed this story<sup>9</sup>.

In Shakespeare, Antony's suicide is toward the end of Act IV. Like in the historical record, Antony is still raging at Cleopatra's betrayal in scene xiv, "She hath betrayed me, and shall die the death." (IV, xiv, 26), when her courtier Mardian enters and informs Antony that Cleopatra is dead. "Death to one person can be paid but once, / And that she has discharged." (IV, xiv, 27-28) Also like the historical record, Antony instantly bemoans her death, stabs himself, doesn't die, and in scene xv is carried to Cleopatra's mausoleum so that he can die by her side.

In Act V, Octavian sends Proculeius to negotiate with Cleopatra. In Shakespeare, Octavian makes it clear to Proculeius before he goes that he wants Cleopatra to be in his triumph. "For her life in Rome / Would be eternal in our triumph." (V, i, 65-66)

Scene ii opens with Cleopatra leaning toward taking her own life. She requests that Octavian promise

Egypt to her son and when Proculeius doesn't reject the request outright, she agrees to meet with Octavian (Proculeius says nothing about a triumph). It is at this point that Cleopatra is seized, but by another of Octavian's men Gallus. Cleopatra promises Proculeius that she will never be a part of any triumph:

Know sir, that I  
Will not wait pinioned 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 (V, ii, 51-56)

Later in scene ii Shakespeare has Dolabella appear and confirm to Cleopatra that she will be a showpiece in Octavian's triumph. Later, after a meeting with Octavian where he warns Cleopatra to not follow Antony or Octavian will destroy all of her children:

by taking  
Antony's course, you shall bereave yourself  
Of my good purposes, and put your children  
To that destruction which I'll guard them from (V, ii, 127-130)

Shakespeare has Dolabella appear again with news that once Octavian has reached Syria he will call for her and her children and bring them all to Rome.

For her suicide, Shakespeare has the asp brought to her in a basket of figs. Cleopatra takes two of the asps and puts one to her breast and one to her arm and dies. Shakespeare has Dolabella comment on Octavian's complicity in the suicide: "Caesar thy thoughts / Touch their effects in this." (V, ii, 324-325) To understand the meaning of what Dolabella is saying take 'thoughts' as 'triumph' and 'effects' as 'suicide'.

## 6. Conclusion

Cleopatra's relationship with Antony was ambivalent and her children were used as bargaining chips. She may have loved the triumvir and her children but keeping her position as Queen of Egypt was more important than her private relationships. Once Antony could no longer secure her position as queen she was willing to jettison him and take her chances with Octavian.

The historical record and Shakespeare differ in a number of areas. At Actium, the historical record claims that both Cleopatra and Antony had worked out her escape together while in Shakespeare Antony is portrayed as fleeing the naval battle once he sees Cleopatra's ships escaping to Egypt. Being master of Rome takes second place to his love for Cleopatra. In the negotiations with Octavian the historical record has Cleopatra being concerned with securing her children's future positions while Shakespeare focuses more on Cleopatra's concern for *herself* as well as her children. In Shakespeare, remaining the Queen of Egypt is the priority. Only after this is secured will her children's status be important to her. In the Alexandrian War Shakespeare emphasizes the downfall of Antony. He foreshadows it with the oboe and later with Antony still talking about the hope of single combat with Octavian to decide everything. Cleopatra is the one being political here, urging Antony on but at the same time knowing that he has no chance of success. Only her suicide is personal in Shakespeare. Antony, all consumed with emotions toward Cleopatra, both good and bad, could only commit suicide with Cleopatra's own death confirmed. Dolabella's appearance reinforces this. More so than in the historical record the focus is on her, as it should be in a tragic play. Cleopatra will not appear in Octavian's triumph. The shame of such a public display is inconceivable for

someone who in public is only seen as a ruler, a queen. Once Dolabella has re-affirmed Octavian's intention to display her in Rome, Cleopatra, waiting a week after Antony's death hoping against hope that a way for her to stay on the throne of Egypt can be found and concluding finally, that Octavian means to have her as the climax of his triumph over Antony, has the asps smuggled to her.

#### Note

All quotes from the play come from the 2007 Yale University Press edition of *The Annotated Shakespeare, Antony & Cleopatra*, written by William Shakespeare and edited by Burton Raffel.

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