

THE  
CONNELL GUIDE  
TO SHAKESPEARE'S



ANTONY &  
CLEOPATRA

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ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE  
PLAY IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

*by Adrian Poole*

*The  
Connell Guide  
to  
Shakespeare's*

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# Antony and Cleopatra

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*by  
Adrian Poole*

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# Introduction

Shakespeare's plays have not enjoyed uniform popularity over the past 400 years – the Victorians had much more time than we do for *Henry VIII* and no time at all for *Troilus and Cressida* – and *Antony and Cleopatra* is an interesting case in point. There is no record of it being performed in Shakespeare's lifetime. This does not mean that it wasn't, but if it had been a big hit we would surely have known it. From the Restoration onwards John Dryden's highly sanitised version held the stage, or as time went on, shared it with Shakespeare's. From Samuel Phelps's landmark production at Sadler's Wells in 1849 onwards Shakespeare's play gained more currency, mainly for comparatively shallow reasons to do with the opportunity for spectacle provided by the play's material and one of the title-characters.

Outside the theatre, in the hands of critics, readers and other artists, it was of course mainly Cleopatra and Egypt that caught the attention. Victorian writers, both male and female, eagerly debated the merits, virtues and lessons to be learned from the array of Shakespeare's women, from Rosalind, Portia, Imogen, Ophelia, Cordelia, and Lady Macbeth. The last named was linked by John Ruskin in an unholy trinity with Regan and Goneril, "frightful exceptions to the ordinary laws of life". Cleopatra was one of three notable

women about whom he had nothing to say (the others were Gertrude and Cressida); she left him speechless. When Dickens wants to mock an ageing woman trying to exert her failing charms on Mr Dombey, it is the serpent of old Nile to whom he compares her. Other writers, including women writers, could be more appreciative. Anna Jameson admired Cleopatra's contradictions, "fused into one brilliant impersonation of classical elegance, Oriental voluptuousness, and gipsy sorcery". George Eliot chose as a chapter epigraph bearing on the chastened female protagonist of *Daniel Deronda*, Gwendolen Harleth, Cleopatra's words, "My desolation does begin to make a better life". When John Keats wanted to describe the attraction he felt for a handsome young woman he called her a "Charmian", carefully distinguishing her from a "Cleopatra". When Henry James sought to suggest the charm cast over an impressionable but repressed American by a glamorous Parisian countess, it was Cleopatra's "infinite variety" to which he had recourse.

There are two obvious reasons why the play has enjoyed a great leap in popularity and interest since the early decades of the 20th century. One is to do with changing attitudes to gender and sexuality, already at work in the later 19th century, relaxing some (though certainly not all) of the taboos impeding the liberation of women from the confinements and distinctions in force at least

since the Restoration. The other is to do with changing conceptions of theatre. The advent of cinema liberated theatre from the responsibility of providing mass popular and spectacular entertainment, and permitted the return to lighter, swifter and more flexible forms of staging. One can scarcely think of a Shakespeare play that benefits more from such a liberation in so far as it is required to wield a great bulk (of material, events, characters) at varying degrees of speed, some of them very swift.

But there are other less obvious reasons. One involves the opposition between love and romance on the one hand and politics and war on the other – the play’s complex re-working of some age-old myths about Venus and Mars. The play received a new lease of life early in the 19th century, the so-called “Romantic” period, when it became possible to view it as more than the moral fable it had seemed, from the Restoration onwards, about the catastrophic effects of passion, and the incompatibility of Pleasure and Virtue – the Roman reading. Linda Charnes puts it like this:

The increasing popularity of the play has been inseparable from a critical revisionism that has transformed it from what it was in Shakespeare’s time – a notorious story about politics on every level – to what it is now: a “legendary” love story about Great Individuals in Love. (*Notorious*

*Identity: Materializing the Subject in Shakespeare*, Harvard University Press, 1993)

This story begins with the Romantics and still to some extent holds sway today. But it has also become contested – not least by critics like Charnes – by interpretations that see the politics and the love affair as inextricably combined. As our own media daily insist, at least in the anglo-phone world, the love-affairs of the top dogs *are* matters of public interest. The fate of all those men and women sacrificed “to solder up the rift” between Antony and Caesar does hang on what happens, or fails to happen, behind the scenes.



*Charlton Heston and Hildegarde Neil during the filming of the 1972 film of Antony and Cleopatra. Heston directed the film as well as playing Antony.*

## THE WORLD OF ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

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**82-30BC** Mark Antony (Marcus Antonius)

**69-30BC** Cleopatra VII

**63 BC – AD 14**

Octavius Caesar (born Gaius Octavius; on adoption by Julius Caesar, he took the name Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus; on becoming the first Emperor, known as Augustus)

**BC**

**51** Cleopatra succeeds her father Ptolemy XII as joint ruler of Egypt, with her younger brother Ptolemy XIII, to whom she is nominally married

**48** Julius Caesar defeats Pompey the Great at the Battle of Pharsalus; Pompey is murdered. Cleopatra ousted in civil war with her brother but reinstated by Caesar and becomes effectively sole ruler of Egypt

**47** Cleopatra gives birth to a son, Caesarion, supposedly fathered by Caesar

**47-44** Julius Caesar dictator

**46-44** Cleopatra in Rome

**44** Julius Caesar is murdered

**43** The triumvirate of Mark Antony, Lepidus and Octavius Caesar is appointed for five years

**42** Mark Antony and Octavius Caesar defeat the republicans Brutus and Cassius at the battle of Philippi; Julius Caesar deified

**41** Antony and Cleopatra meet on the river Cydnus at Tarsus in Cilicia

**41-40** Antony in Alexandria; Cleopatra gives birth to twins

**40** Death of Antony's wife, Fulvia. Hostilities between Antony and Octavius Caesar settled by the Treaty of Brundisium; Antony marries the latter's widowed half-sister, Octavia

**39** Meeting of Sextus Pompeius and the Triumvirs at Misenum

**37** Triumvirate renewed for a further five years; Antony leaves Rome and resumes his relationship with Cleopatra

**36** Antony's unsuccessful campaign in Parthia. Lepidus ousted from the triumvirate.

**34** Antony subdues Armenia and returns to Cleopatra. In the Donations of Alexandria, lands and titles are distributed to Cleopatra and her children

**33** Preparations for war between Antony and Octavius Caesar

**32** Antony divorces Octavia; Rome declares war on Cleopatra

**31** Octavius Caesar defeats Antony and Cleopatra at the sea-battle of Actium

**30** Battle of Alexandria; Mark Antony and Cleopatra commit suicide

**27** Octavius Caesar receives the title of Augustus, together with 'Imperator' (literally, 'general') and 'Princeps' (literally, 'first citizen').

**AD**

**14** Augustus, the first Roman 'Emperor', dies

# A summary of the plot

## *Before the play*

In *Julius Caesar* Shakespeare dramatised the key events in Roman history that precede this play: the murder of Julius Caesar by a group of conspirators led by Brutus and Cassius, and their defeat at the battle of Philippi by the joint forces of the “triumvirate”, the coalition of Mark Antony, Lepidus and Caesar’s great-nephew and adopted heir, Octavius. The stage is poised for a battle of power between the two dominant triumvirs, Antony and the young Octavius Caesar.

## *Act I*

The play opens in Egypt, where Queen Cleopatra has been royally entertaining the great Roman general, Mark Antony, with all the sensual delights dreamed of by a war-weary veteran. We will in due course learn of previous Roman generals who have fallen under her charms – Julius Caesar and “great Pompey”. Messengers arrive from Rome with news that Antony cannot afford to ignore: the troubles stirred up by his wife, Fulvia, and then her death, but also the threat posed by a new rising star, Sextus Pompeius, another son of Pompey the Great, vanquished rival of Julius Caesar. A first glimpse of Octavius Caesar – known in this play simply as “Caesar” – confirms the abhorrence but also the fascination that Antony’s dalliance with

Cleopatra excites back in Rome. Antony prepares to leave Egypt. Cleopatra and her entourage will entertain themselves as best they can in his absence.

## *Act II*

At a summit-meeting in Rome, Antony and Caesar give vent to their mutual grievances. In a bid to reconcile the two men, one of Caesar’s henchmen proposes a political marriage between Antony and Caesar’s half-sister, Octavia, which Antony accepts. Preparations are made to deal with young Pompey. Antony’s right-hand man, Enobarbus, regales his open-mouthed comrades with tales of Egypt, above all the meeting of Antony and Cleopatra on the river Cydnus. Provoked by his Soothsayer, Antony is already being drawn back to Cleopatra: “I’th’East my pleasure lies”. Meanwhile news of his marriage to Octavia reaches Cleopatra, who takes out her fury on the messenger. In another tense political encounter at Mount Misena the triumvirs and Pompey negotiate a deal, and celebrate aboard the latter’s galley. One of the pirates who have joined up with Pompey offers to murder the triumvirs but Pompey demurs. Everyone gets drunk, even Caesar.

## *Act III*

In a brief but incisive scene the action is transported to Syria where Antony’s lieutenant,