Summary and Analyses Antony & Cleopatra

Summary: Act I, scene i

In Egypt, Philo and Demetrius, two Roman soldiers, discuss how their general, Mark Antony, has fallen in love with the Egyptian queen, Cleopatra, and has lost interest in his proper role as one of the three leaders (or triumvirs) of the Roman Empire. Cleopatra and Antony enter, the queen imploring Antony to describe just how much he loves her, when a messenger from Rome greets them. Antony says that he has little interest in hearing Roman news, but Cleopatra tells him that he must listen. She teases Antony for possibly turning away a command from young Octavius Caesar or a rebuke from Antony’s wife, Fulvia. When she urges him to return to Rome, Antony claims that Rome means nothing to him. He says that his duty requires him to stay in Alexandria and love Cleopatra. Although the queen doubts the sincerity of his sentiment, her suggestions that Antony hear the news from Rome go unheeded, and the couple exits together. After the lovers have gone, Philo and Demetrius express shock and despair at their general’s disrespect for Caesar and the concerns of the empire.

Summary: Act I, scene ii

Cleopatra’s attendants ask a soothsayer, or fortune-teller, to reveal their futures. The Soothsayer tells Charmian and Iras, the queen’s maids, that their fortunes are the same: their pasts will prove better than their futures, and they shall outlive the queen whom they serve. Cleopatra joins them, complaining that Antony has suddenly turned his mind toward Rome again. She sends Antony’s follower Enobarbus to fetch his master, but changes her mind, and as Antony approaches, she leaves to avoid seeing him. A messenger reports to Antony that Fulvia and Lucius, Antony’s brother, have mounted an army against Caesar but have lost their battle. When the messenger hesitantly suggests that this event would not have happened had Antony been in Rome, Antony invites the man to speak openly, to “taunt [his] faults / With such full licence as both truth and malice / Have power to utter” (I.ii.96–98). Another messenger arrives to report that Fulvia is dead. Antony comments that he long desired his wife’s death but now wishes her alive again. Enobarbus arrives and tries to comfort Antony with the thought that Fulvia’s death was an event that should be welcomed rather than mourned. Worried that his idleness and devotion to Cleopatra are responsible for these events, as well as a battle being waged by Sextus Pompeius, who is currently attempting to take control of the seas from the triumvirs, Antony decides to break away from Cleopatra and return to Rome.

Summary: Act I, scene iii

Cleopatra orders her servant Alexas to fetch Antony. When Antony enters, Cleopatra feigns a fainting spell, lamenting that Fulvia ever gave Antony leave to come to Egypt. She asks how she can have believed the vows of a man so willing to break his vows to his wife. Antony tells her of the volatile political situation in Rome and of Fulvia’s death. Cleopatra notes how little he mourns and predicts that he will grieve as little after her own death. They argue about the depth and truth of his feelings, until Antony finally departs, promising that distance will not threaten their love.
Analysis: Act I, scenes i–iii

Shakespeare organizes the plot of *Antony and Cleopatra* around the conflict between East and West, Egypt and Rome. He immediately establishes this opposition in the opening scene, when two Roman soldiers pass judgment on their commander, Mark Antony, for surrendering his martial duties to the exotic pleasures of Cleopatra’s Egypt. The battle is not merely between two geographically distinct empires but also between two diametrically opposed worldviews. As Philo and Demetrius lament Antony’s decline, claiming that his “captain’s heart” now serves as “the bellows and the fan / To cool a gipsy’s lust,” they illustrate a divide between a world that is governed by reason, discipline, and prudence, and another ruled by passion, pleasure, and love (I.i.6–10).

Cleopatra, however, is much more than the high-class prostitute that the Romans believe her to be. Often considered Shakespeare’s strongest female character, Cleopatra is a consummate actress. As her first scene with Antony shows, she conducts her affair with the Roman general in a highly theatrical fashion, her actions fueled as much by the need to create a public spectacle as by the desire to satisfy a private passion. Later, upon learning of Antony’s plan to return to Rome, the queen shifts from grief to anger with astonishing speed. No sooner does she recover from a fainting spell than she rails at Antony for his inability to mourn his dead wife adequately. As he prepares to leave, Cleopatra says, “But sir, forgive me, / Since my becomings kill me when they do not / Eye well to you” (I.iii.96–98). Here, “becomings” refers not only to the graces that become or suit the queen but also to her fluid transformations, her many moods, and the many different versions of herself she presents. In Act I, scene i, Antony points to this mutability when he notes that Cleopatra is a woman “[w]hom everything becomes—to chide, to laugh, / To weep” (I.i.51–52). This talent for perpetual change lends Cleopatra her characteristic sense of drama as well as her complexity.

Act I, scenes i–iii

Antony, meanwhile, seems to enjoy indulging in hyperbole as much as Cleopatra. When she tells him that his duties call him home, he declares:

*Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch*  
*Of the ranged empire fall. Here is my space.*  
*Kingdoms are clay. Our dungy earth alike*  
*Feeds beast as man.*  
(I.i.35–36)

His speech stands in contrast to the measured, unadorned speech of Philo and Demetrius and, later, Octavius Caesar. Antony delights in depicting himself in heroic terms—indeed, he occupies himself with thoughts of winning nobleness and honour—but already we detect the sharp tension between his rhetoric and his action.

From the beginning of the play, Antony is strongly attracted to both Rome and Egypt, and his loyalty vacillates from one to the other. In these first scenes, he goes from letting “Rome in Tiber melt” to deciding that he “must from this enchanting queen break off” (I.ii.117). His infatuation with the queen is not strong enough to overcome his sense of responsibility to Rome, and while Octavius Caesar, his efficient antagonist, has yet to appear onstage, the lengthy discussion of the strife between Fulvia, Caesar, and young Pompey reminds us of the political context of this love affair. Antony governs a third of the Roman Empire, which has endured decades of civil strife, and he and Caesar, though allies, are not true friends. Such an unstable situation does not bode well for the future of Antony’s romance with the Egyptian queen, Cleopatra.

Here, as throughout the play, Enobarbus, Antony’s most loyal supporter, serves as the voice of reason; he speaks plainly, in prose rather than verse. His estrangement from Antony increases as Antony’s
power wanes; for the moment, however, he represents Antony’s connection to the West and his political duties. Enobarbus’s blunt honesty contrasts sharply with Cleopatra’s theatricality.

**Act I, scenes iv–v; Act II, scenes i**

... yet must Antony  
*No way excuse his foils when we do bear  
*So great weight in his lightness.*

**Summary: Act I, scene iv**

In Rome, young Octavius Caesar complains to Lepidus, the third triumvir, that Antony has abandoned his responsibilities as a statesman and, in doing so, has also abandoned the better part of his manhood. Lepidus attempts to defend Antony, suggesting that Antony’s weaknesses for fishing, drinking, and revelling are traits he inherited rather than ones he has chosen. Caesar remains unconvinced, declaring that Antony has no business enjoying himself in Egypt during a time of crisis. A messenger arrives with news that Pompey’s forces are both gathering strength and finding support among those whose prior allegiance to Caesar arose from fear, not duty. Remembering Antony’s valiant and unparalleled performance as a soldier, Caesar laments that Antony is not with them. He and Lepidus agree to raise an army against Pompey.

**Summary: Act I, scene v**

Cleopatra complains to Charmian that she misses Antony. She wonders what he is doing and whether he, in turn, is thinking of her. Alexas enters and presents her with a gift from Antony: a pearl. He tells the queen that Antony kissed the gemstone upon leaving Egypt and ordered it be delivered to Cleopatra as a token of his love. Cleopatra asks if he appeared sad or happy, and she rejoices when Alexas responds that Antony seemed neither: to appear sad, Cleopatra says, might have contaminated the moods of his followers, while a happy countenance could have jeopardized his followers’ belief in his resolve. Cleopatra orders Alexas to prepare twenty messengers, so that she can write to Antony on each day of his absence. She promises, if need be, to “unpeople Egypt” by turning all of its citizens into messengers (I.v.77).

**Summary: Act II, scene i**

Pompey discusses the military situation with his lieutenants, Menocrates and Menas. He feels confident of victory against the triumvirs not only because he controls the sea and is popular with the Roman people, but also because he believes that Antony, the greatest threat to his power, is still in Egypt. Menas reports that Caesar and Lepidus have raised an army, and another soldier, Varrius, arrives to tell them that Antony has come to Rome. Menas expresses his hope that Caesar and Antony’s mutual enmity will give rise to a battle between the two triumvirs, but Pompey predicts that the two will come together in order to fend off a common enemy.

**Summary: Act II, scene ii**

Lepidus tells Enobarbus that Antony should use “soft and gentle speech” when speaking to Caesar (II.ii.3). Enobarbus answers that Antony will speak as plainly and honestly as any great man should.
Antony and Caesar enter with their attendants and sit down to talk. Caesar complains of the rebellion that Fulvia and Antony’s brother raised against him. He asks why Antony dismissed his messengers in Alexandria and accuses Antony of failing in his obligation to provide military aid to the other triumvirs. Antony defends himself, and Maecenas, one of Caesar’s companions, suggests that they put aside their bickering in order to face Pompey. Agrippa, another of Caesar’s men, suggests that Antony marry Caesar’s sister, Octavia. This bond, he claims, would cement the men’s affection for and alliance with one another. Antony consents. Caesar and Antony shake hands, promising brotherly love, and they agree to march together toward Pompey’s stronghold on Mount Misenum.

When the triumvirs disperse, Enobarbus tells Agrippa of the good life they lived in Egypt. He describes how Cleopatra first came to meet Antony, comparing the queen to Venus, the goddess of love. Antony, he maintains, will never be able to leave her, despite his marriage to Octavia.

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.

Analysis: Act I, scenes iv–v; Act II, scenes i–ii

Unlike Shakespeare’s other great tragedies, Antony and Cleopatra is not confined to a single geographical location. Whereas Macbeth unfolds in Scotland and Hamlet in Denmark’s Elsinore castle, Antony and Cleopatra takes the audience from one end of the Mediterranean Sea to the other in the course of a scene change. This technique is noteworthy for several reasons. First, it shows the global concerns of the play: traveling from Alexandria to Athens to Rome to Syria demonstrates the scope of the empire for which Antony, Cleopatra, and Caesar struggle. Second, the use of rapidly shifting locales shows that Shakespeare has become less interested in the deep psychological recesses that he examines in his greatest tragedies and is now addressing more public concerns. A stylistic result of Shakespeare’s interest in the broader world is that Antony and Cleopatra lacks soliloquies, a device that Shakespeare elsewhere uses to reveal his characters’ hidden thoughts to the audience.

As he shuttles the audience from Egypt to Rome, Shakespeare introduces the other members of the triumvirate who, with Antony, have ruled the Roman Empire since Julius Caesar’s death. Octavius Caesar, Julius’s nephew, stands in stark contrast to Antony. His first lines establish him as a man ruled by reason rather than passion, duty rather than desire. He complains that Antony neglects affairs of state in order to fish, drink, and waste the night away in revelry. Even though he lacks the military prowess that he praises in Antony, Caesar is, politically speaking, ever practical and efficient. That he disapproves so strongly of Antony’s relationship with Cleopatra foreshadows the collapse of the triumvirate and forecasts Caesar’s role as a worthy adversary.

Although he speaks little in Act I, scene iv, Lepidus emerges as the weakest of the three Roman leaders. Neither heroic like Antony nor politically astute like Caesar, Lepidus lacks the power and command of his fellow triumvirs. Lepidus works desperately to maintain a balance of power by keeping Caesar and Antony on amiable terms. When Caesar criticizes Antony, Lepidus urges him not to condemn their fellow triumvir so harshly, and later entreats Antony to speak gently when speaking to Caesar. The triumvirate is a triangular form of government, and it is little wonder, given the extreme weakness of one of its sides, that it soon collapses.
The focus on Roman politics and the rising threat of war in Act I, scene iv and Act II, scene i threatens to overshadow the romantic interests of the title characters. To prevent this eclipse, Shakespeare returns the audience to Egypt, in the brief interlude of Act I, scene v. This interlude reminds the audience of Cleopatra’s passion and the threat it poses to the stability of the empire.

Enobarbus’s lengthy description of Cleopatra in Act II, scene ii testifies to Cleopatra’s power. Her beauty is so incomparable, her charms so strong that the “vilest things / Become themselves in her, that the holy priests / Bless her when she is riggish [sluttish]” (II.ii.243–245). Her talent for transforming the “vilest things” into things of beauty, and for overturning entire systems of morality so that priests alter their understanding of what is holy and what is sinful, is Cleopatra’s greatest strength.

Summary: Act II, scene iii

Antony promises Octavia that although his duties will often force him to be away from her, he will avoid the sexual indiscretions of his past. Octavia and Caesar depart, and Antony is joined by the Egyptian soothsayer, who predicts Antony’s return to Egypt. Antony asks whether he or Caesar has the brighter future, and the Soothsayer answers that Caesar’s fortune will rise higher. As long as Antony remains in Rome, the Soothsayer predicts, he will be overshadowed by Caesar. He advises Antony to leave plenty of space between himself and Caesar. Antony dismisses the fortune-teller but agrees with his assessment, and he resigns himself to returning to the East, where his “pleasure lies” (II.iii.38). Antony summons Ventidius, a soldier and friend, and commissions him to go east to make war against the kingdom of Parthia.

Summary: Act II, scene iv

Meanwhile, Lepidus orders Maecenas and Agrippa to gather their soldiers and meet at Mount Misenum, where they shall confront Pompey’s army.

Summary: Act II, scene v

In Egypt, Cleopatra amuses herself with her servants Charmian and Mardian, a eunuch. As she reminisces about Antony, likening him to a fish that she has caught, a messenger arrives from Italy. Noting his unhappy expression, Cleopatra fears that Antony is dead and threatens the messenger should he deliver such unwelcome news. The messenger assures the queen that her lover is alive and well, but admits that Antony has married Octavia. Cleopatra strikes the messenger furiously, but he insists that he must tell her the truth. Cleopatra admits that it is beneath her station to treat a menial servant so viciously, but she cannot help upbraiding the man as she forces him to repeat that Antony belongs to another. She finally dismisses the messenger, then sends him orders to go and see Octavia so that he may report her features—how old she is, how she acts, even the colour of her hair.

Summary: Act II, scene vi

Before waging a war, Pompey and the triumvirs hold a meeting. Pompey tells Caesar, Lepidus, and Antony that he is fighting to avenge his father, whose defeat by Julius Caesar led him into Egypt, where he was killed. Antony informs Pompey that despite the latter’s strength at sea, the triumvirs’ army will prevail. The three offer Pompey rule over Sicily and Sardinia should he agree to rid the sea of pirates and
to send payments of wheat to Rome as a tax. Pompey admits that he was ready to accept this offer until Antony offended him by refusing to acknowledge the hospitality he showed Antony’s mother on her recent visit to Sicily. Antony assures Pompey that he intended to offer a gracious thanks, at which the men shake hands and make peace.

Pompey invites the Romans aboard his ship for dinner, and the triumvirs join him. Enobarbus and Menas stay behind discussing their military careers, the current political situation, and Antony’s marriage to Octavia. Enobarbus repeats that he is sure Antony will inevitably return to Egypt. After the talk, the two go to dinner.

**Analysis: Act II, scenes iii–vi**

Although the contradictory impressions we are given of the major characters may be confusing, they allow us to gain a more complex understanding of each character by seeing him or her from a variety of viewpoints. For example, in the opening scenes of the play, Demetrius and Philo complain that their general has sacrificed his better self for the sake of a gypsy’s lust. Three scenes later, Caesar describes Antony’s incomparable prowess in battle, confirming the audience’s impression of the general’s military might. When Antony appears in Act II, scene iii, however, he seems less interested in maintaining this heroic reputation than in pursuing his own pleasure. We may find it difficult to decide whether the Antony we see is the celebrated war hero or a man corrupted by his desires for fame and romance. The play does not offer simple answers to such questions, because it declines to privilege one point of view over another. Throughout, we must balance Caesar’s impressions with Enobarbus’s in order to reconcile Cleopatra’s understanding of Antony with Antony’s understanding of himself. Antony, like each character in the play, is the product of three distinct elements: what other characters think of him, what he thinks of himself, and what he does.

Although in other plays Shakespeare often limits the number of lenses through which the audience views his characters, he refrains from doing so in Antony and Cleopatra. Antony is not simply a hero, nor is he simply a fool who has thrown away reason and duty for love. An accurate picture of his character must incorporate both of these traits. Similarly, Cleopatra is both the regal, incomparably beautiful seductress of Enobarbus’s speech and the spoiled, petty tyrant who beats her servant for delivering unwelcome news. More than any other character in the play—and perhaps in all of Shakespeare—Cleopatra assumes each of these contradictory roles with unmatched passion and flair. She is, above all else, a consummate actress, a woman whose grief over Antony’s marriage to Octavia can be soothed only by the theatrics of drawing a knife on her innocent messenger. Cleopatra’s over-the-top behavior may cause us to doubt the authenticity of her emotions and question whether her grief is more performance than actual feeling. But to entertain such doubts about her may be to look at the play too much from the Roman point of view. We should remember that Cleopatra is more than the harlot the Romans see when they look at her. As Enobarbus says in Act II, scene ii, Cleopatra is a woman of “infinite variety”: there is room in her for both theatrical emotions and genuine love, for both stately grandeur and for girlish insecurity (II.ii.241).

The Roman characters repeatedly remark that Cleopatra’s beauty is sufficient to undo otherwise indestructible men. In general, Antony and Cleopatra exhibits a great deal of anxiety about the power of women over men. The Romans constantly chastise Cleopatra for her ability to topple Antony’s sense of reason and duty, while they expect Octavia to quell the animosity between Antony and Caesar by serving to “knit [their] hearts / With an unslipping knot” (II.ii.132–133). Notably, both the blame for men’s downfalls and the hope for their recovery are burdens placed on women.
Act II, scene vii; Act III, scenes i–iii

_Most noble Antony,_
_Let not the piece of virtue which is set_
_Betwixt us as the cement of our love_
_To keep it builded, be the ram to batter_
_The fortress of it . . . ._

**Summary: Act II, scene vii**

A group of servants discusses Pompey’s dinner party, commenting on Lepidus’s drunkenness in particular. Pompey enters with his guests as Antony discusses the Nile River. Lepidus babbles on about crocodiles, which, according to popular belief, formed spontaneously out of the river mud. Lepidus asks Antony to describe the crocodile, and Antony responds with a humorously circular and meaningless definition: “It is shaped, sir, like itself, and is as broad as it hath breadth” (II.vii.39–40). Menas pulls Pompey aside to suggest that they set sail and kill the three triumvirs while they are still drunk and onboard the boat, thus delivering control of the Western world into Pompey’s hands. Pompey rails against Menas for sharing this plan with him. Were the deed done without his knowledge, Pompey says, he would have praised it, but now that he knows, it would violate his honour. In an angry aside, Menas expresses his disappointment with Pompey and swears that he will leave his master’s service. Meanwhile, the triumvirs and their host continue their drunken revelry, eventually joining hands, dancing, and singing before they leave the ship and stumble off to bed.

**Summary: Act III, scene i**

Ventidius, fighting for Antony, defeats the Parthians, killing their king’s son. One of Ventidius’s soldiers urges him to push on into Parthia and win more glory, but Ventidius says he should not. If he were too successful in war, he explains, he would fall out of Antony’s favour and not be able to advance as a member of Antony’s forces. Instead, Ventidius halts his army and writes to Antony, informing him of his victory.

**Summary: Act III, scene ii**

Agrippa and Enobarbus discuss the current state of affairs: Pompey has gone, Octavia and Caesar are saddened by their nearing separation, and Lepidus is still sick from his night of heavy drinking. Agrippa and Enobarbus mock Lepidus, the weakest of the three triumvirs, who trips over himself in order to stay on good terms with both Antony and Caesar. A trumpet blares, and Lepidus, Antony, and Caesar enter. Caesar bids farewell to Antony and his sister, urging his new brother-in-law never to mistreat Octavia and thereby drive a wedge between himself and Antony. Antony implores Caesar not to offend him, making assurances that he will not justify Caesar’s fears. Antony and Octavia depart, leaving Lepidus and Caesar in Rome.

**Summary: Act III, scene iii**

Cleopatra’s messenger returns to report on Antony’s bride. He tells Cleopatra that Octavia is shorter than she and that Octavia has a low voice and is rather lifeless. This news pleases Cleopatra, who delights in thinking that Antony’s bride is stupid and short. She decides that, given Octavia’s lack of positive attributes, Antony cannot possibly enjoy being with her for long. She promises to reward the
messenger for his good service, showers him with gold, and asks him not to think of her too harshly for her past treatment of him. She then tells Charmian that Antony will almost certainly return to her.

**Analysis: Act II, scene vii; Act III, scenes i–iii**

Both Ventidius’s speech after the victory over Parthia and the events of the party challenge and complicate our understanding of honour. Ventidius’s contemplation of his performance in battle in Act II, scene i offers a definition of honour based on prowess in battle. Ventidius explains that it would not be honourable to conquer too extensively, since eclipsing his captain’s fame would reflect poorly on himself. Whereas Pompey’s definition of honour has to do with appearance, Ventidius’s has to do with ambition. Ultimately, it is clear that Ventidius contemplates his honourable leading of the army as a way of achieving greater status; he ends his speech describing the perils of overachievement with the words, “I could do more to do Antonius good, / But ‘twould offend him, and in his offence / Should my performance perish” (III.i.25–27). Ventidius seems to care at least as much about Antony’s opinion of his performance in war as about his sense of honour.

Pompey’s sense of honour, however, is based on surface appearances. His desire that the triumvirate be deposed might easily be seen as dishonorable, since he appears to be making peace with them. However, he believes that he retains his honour by not acting on his dishonourable feelings. When Menas suggests that he be allowed to assassinate the triumvirs in order to deliver world power into Pompey’s hands, Pompey’s reasoning for condemning Menas’s plan shows that it is not the act itself that would challenge Pompey’s public honour, but rather its appearance:

> Ah, this thou shouldst have done  
> And not have spoke on’t. In me ‘tis villainy,  
> In thee ‘t had been good service. Thou must know  
> ‘Tis not my profit that does lead mine honour;  
> Mine honour it. Repent that e’er thy tongue  
> Hath so betrayed thine act. Being done unknown,  
> I should have found it afterwards well done,  
> But must condemn it now.  
> (II.vii.70–77)

Pompey does not condemn the assassination of his unsuspecting—indeed, helplessly drunken—guests as treacherous or morally irresponsible. Instead, he complains that Menas shared the plan with him, a divulgence that, if discovered, would affect the way that the world sees him. Pompey would no longer be looked upon as an honourable man if he murdered his guests. In a play that invests so much in surface, even qualities such as honour and nobility have more to do with spectacle than with deeper human emotions.

Lepidus’s drunkenness symbolizes his physical and political weakness: indeed, he makes only one more appearance before being eliminated by Caesar, fulfilling the servants’ prophesy that even world leaders can be easily overthrown. That Caesar proves the wind that blows Lepidus (and eventually Antony) down should not come as any surprise, given his behaviour aboard Pompey’s ship. Caesar alone manages to elevate duty above pleasure; he alone interrupts the night’s carousing to remind Antony that their more serious business conflicts with the extended revelry. Perhaps the most telling phrase Antony utters in this scene comes as he tries to persuade Caesar to forget duty for the night. While urging his men to drink until “the conquering wine hath steeped our sense / In soft and delicate Lethe,”
he bids Caesar to “[b]e a child o’th’ time”—to live, in other words, strictly for the moment, for the pleasure of the present (II.vii.94–103). Antony’s propensity to live according to the moment, with little regard for the future or the consequences of his actions, is one of the greatest factors in his demise.

Summary: Act III, scene iv

Antony complains to Octavia that since departing Rome, Caesar has not only waged war against Pompey but has also belittled Antony in public. Octavia urges Antony not to believe everything he hears, and she pleads with him to keep the peace with her brother. Were Antony and Caesar to fight, Octavia laments, she would not know whether to support her brother or her husband. Antony tells her that he must do what needs to be done to preserve his honour, without which he would be nothing. Nevertheless, he sends her to Rome to make peace again between Caesar and himself. Meanwhile, he prepares for war against Pompey.

Summary: Act III, scene v

Enobarbus converses with Eros, another friend of Antony. The two discuss Caesar’s defeat of Pompey’s army and the murder of Pompey. Eros reports that Caesar made use of Lepidus’s forces, but then, after their victory, denied Lepidus his share of the spoils. In fact, Caesar has accused the triumvir of plotting against him and has thrown him into prison. Enobarbus reports that Antony’s navy is ready to sail for Italy and Caesar.

Summary: Act III, scene vi

Back in Rome, Caesar rails against Antony. He tells Agrippa and Maecenas that Antony has gone to Egypt to sit alongside Cleopatra as her king. He has given her rule over much of the Middle East, making her absolute queen of lower Syria, Cyprus, and Lydia. Caesar reports that Antony is displeased that he has not yet been allotted a fair portion of the lands that Caesar wrested from Pompey and Lepidus. He will divide his lot, he says, if Antony responds in kind and grants him part of Armenia and other kingdoms that Antony conquered. No sooner does Maecenas predict that Antony will never concede to those terms than Octavia enters. Caesar laments that the woman travels so plainly, without the fanfare that should attend the wife of Antony. Caesar reveals to her that Antony has joined Cleopatra in Egypt, where he has assembled a large alliance to fight Rome. Octavia is heartbroken, and Maecenas assures her that she has the sympathy of every Roman citizen.

Summary: Act III, scene vii

Cleopatra plans to go into battle alongside Antony and responds angrily to Enobarbus’s suggestion that her presence will be a distraction. Enobarbus tries to dissuade her, but she dismisses his objections. Antony tells his general, Camidius, that he will meet Caesar at sea. Camidius and Enobarbus object, pointing out that while they have superiority on land, Caesar’s naval fleet is much stronger. Antony, however, refuses to listen. Cleopatra maintains that her fleet of sixty ships will win the battle. Antony leaves to prepare the navy, despite the protests of a soldier who begs him to forgo a doomed sea battle and advocates fighting on foot. After the general and the queen exit, Camidius complains that they are all “women’s men,” ruled by Cleopatra (III.vii.70). He comments on the speed of Caesar’s approach, then goes to prepare the land defences.
Analysis: Act III, scenes iv–vii

Caesar’s description of Antony and Cleopatra in Act III, scene vi shows the play’s preoccupation with the sexualized East. The scene recalls an earlier speech by Enobarbus in which he states that the Egyptian queen floats down the Nile on a glittering throne. Just as Cleopatra and her barge are a vision of decadent beauty in the earlier speech, so is the image of the queen and her lover in the marketplace of Alexandria. Caesar’s exchange with Maecenas underscores the spectacular nature of Antony and Cleopatra’s appearance:

CAESAR: Contemning Rome, he has done all this and more
In Alexandria. Here’s the manner of’t:
I’ th’ market place on a tribunal silvered,
Cleopatra and himself in chairs of gold
Were publicly enthroned. . . .
MAECENAS: This in the public eye?
CAESAR: I’ th’ common showplace, where they exercise.
. . .
She
In th’ habiliments of the goddess Isis
That day appeared, and oft before gave audience
(III.vi.2–19)

Antony and Cleopatra draws distinctions between the West and the East by illustrating the West as sober, military, and masculine, and the East as exotic, pleasure-loving, and sexual. In this scene, it is not only the public appearance of Antony with a woman not his wife that shocks Maecenas, Caesar, and Agrippa, but also the decadence with which they appear. While the military men confer in the West regarding the machinations of war, Antony’s life in the East is represented as focused on sensual pleasures, both with Cleopatra and within the wealth and splendour of her kingdom.

This passage also confirms Cleopatra’s theatricality and the world’s preoccupation with spectacle. Spectacle is of supreme importance throughout the play, as Caesar again makes clear when he complains to Octavia about her lack of it. Bent on keeping the peace between her husband and brother, Octavia arrives in Rome without any of the fanfare or trappings that would indicate her station. Caesar insists that the

wife of Antony
Should have an army for an usher, and
The neighs of horse to tell of her approach
Long ere she did appear.
(III.vi.43–46)

Caesar likens Octavia’s appearance to that of a common maid going to market. Caesar links spectacle with power: the greater the display, the more substantial and genuine the power behind it. Caesar returns to this line of thinking at the play’s end when he plans to display Cleopatra on the streets of Rome as a testament to the indomitable strength of his empire. Here we see the equation between spectacle and power in reverse: Octavia’s unheralded arrival in Rome betrays what Caesar knows too well—his sister has little, if any, power over a husband whose heart visibly belongs to Egypt.
The romance between Antony and Cleopatra is different from the romance between some of Shakespeare’s other major characters because it focuses on how the two mesh with larger historical and social dramas. Whereas Romeo and Juliet, for instance, largely chronicles the private moments of its teenaged protagonists, following the couple as they steal moments together at a crowded party or on a moonlit balcony, Antony and Cleopatra’s concerns are public rather than private. Antony’s return to and reconciliation with Cleopatra take place offstage, as do all of the more private moments of their relationship. What earns stage time in this play are not the muted whispers of discreet lovers but the grand performances of lovers who live in, and play for, the public eye. Love, in Antony and Cleopatra, seems less a product of the bedroom than of political alliance, for we are always aware of the public consequences of the couple’s affair. When Caesar laments that Antony has given up his empire for a whore, we understand the enormous impact—both civic and geographic—that the lovers’ affair will have on the world. Kingdoms stand to be built on the foundation of Antony and Cleopatra’s love or crumble under its weight.

Summary: Act III, scene viii

Caesar orders his army to hold off its attack until the sea battle ends.

Summary: Act III, scene ix

Antony instructs Enobarbus to set their squadrons on a hillside, which will allow them to view the battle at sea.

Summary: Act III, scene x

Enobarbus describes the sea fight he has just witnessed: Antony’s forces were winning the battle until Cleopatra’s ship fled without warning and Antony followed her. The fleet was thrown into confusion, and the victory went to Caesar. Antony’s soldiers are sickened by the sight, one of them declaring that he has never seen anything so shameful. Camidius defects to Caesar’s side, bringing his army and following the lead of six of Antony’s royal allies, but Enobarbus, against his better judgment, remains loyal to his general.

Summary: Act III, scene xi

Deeply ashamed of his performance in battle, Antony berates himself, ordering his servants to leave the service of such an unworthy master. He urges them to abandon Antony as Antony has abandoned his nobler self. When Cleopatra enters, she finds her lover distraught and alone. She tries to comfort him, but Antony can remind her only of his valiant past: it was he who won fierce battles, who dealt with the treacheries of Cassius and Brutus. But now, he determines, such events do not matter. He asks Cleopatra why she has led him into infamy, and she begs his forgiveness, saying that she never dreamed that he would follow her retreat. He asks her how she could doubt that he would follow her, when his heart was tied to her rudder. Antony complains that he must now seek young Caesar’s pardon, but unable to bear the sight of the queen’s sorrow, he forgives her. As Antony kisses Cleopatra, he remarks that even her mere kiss repays him for his shame.
Summary: Act III, scene xii

Caesar is with Dolabella and Thidias, two of his supporters, when Antony’s ambassador arrives with his master’s request: Antony asks to be allowed to live in Egypt or, barring that, to “breathe between the heavens and earth, / A private man in Athens” (III.xii.14–15). The ambassador further delivers Cleopatra’s request that Egypt be passed on to her heirs. Caesar dismisses Antony’s requests but declares that Cleopatra will have a fair hearing so long as she expels Antony from Egypt or executes him. He sends Thidias to lure Cleopatra to accept these terms, hoping that she will betray her lover.

Summary: Act III, scene xiii

Enobarbus tells Cleopatra that the defeat was not her fault since Antony could have chosen to follow reason rather than lust. The ambassador returns with Caesar’s message: Antony declares that he will challenge his rival to one-on-one combat. Enobarbus meditates on such a course of action, but decides that if he remains loyal to Antony he might be able to attack Caesar, if Caesar kills Antony. Meanwhile, Thidias arrives to tell Cleopatra that Caesar will show her mercy if she will relinquish Antony. The queen concedes that she embraced Antony more out of fear than love and declares Caesar a god to whom she will bow down. Just then, Antony enters in a fury and demands that Thidias be whipped. He then turns to Cleopatra and rails at her for betraying him. The queen protests that she would never betray him, which satisfies Antony. Antony’s fleet has reassembled, and much of his land forces remain intact, ready to attack Caesar again. Enobarbus, who has observed this scene, decides that he has been faithful to Antony long enough. He feels that Antony’s mind is slipping and that he must abandon his master.

Analysis: Act III, scenes viii–xiii

Act III, scenes viii–x show that narrative time and chronological time occur at much different paces in *Antony and Cleopatra*. In the space of three scenes, we witness the full battle of Actium. We see Caesar, then Antony, prepare for battle and know the outcome of their meeting within the first four lines of Act III, scene x. In other sections of the play, the same number of scenes conveys less information and covers much less time. The rapid progression of these scenes attests to the ease with which time can be compressed onstage: in a matter of minutes, an entire naval battle is waged and won. What Enobarbus witnesses certainly complicates our perception of Antony, demonstrating that his failures take place not just in his private affiliations but in his public life as well. Although by Caesar’s and even by his own account he has neglected his duties to Rome, Antony has remained a fierce and respected soldier: his quietly threatening presence, as much as any offer of Sicily and Sardinia, persuades young Pompey to accept the triumvir’s offer of peace. Indeed, until this point, the blemishes on Antony’s character have been of a more personal nature: although he is twice an adulterer, although he has risked the security of the empire in order to partake in the pleasures of Egypt, his military prowess has never been in question. His retreat, however, conflicts with his values, as he is a man whose honour rests almost exclusively in his performance as a soldier.

A number of critics have attacked this moment in the play, asserting that such a retreat by an experienced general is unbelievable. To condemn or dismiss this scene for its lack of realism, however, misses the point for several reasons. First, by failing to allow Antony to be both the famed soldier and the distracted lover, to be both noble and irresponsible, one simplifies and diminishes his character. Second, the lost navy battle is more crucial on a symbolic than a literal level, for Antony’s decision to flee encapsulates the climactic neglect of duty that haunts him throughout the play.

The aftermath of the battle shows that Antony is struggling with divided, competing identities. His lament that he has fled from himself shows that his character has developed beyond his own
understanding. The self he believes he has fled is the military hero; the self he now confronts is a man whose heart can lead him into defeat as surely as his reason has led him into victory. The play, however, refuses to side with Antony in his argument against himself. We may share in Enobarbus’s disapproval of his commander’s performance, but surely we still view Antony as a worthy and sympathetic character. Indeed, the fallen general’s plea to Cleopatra makes it impossible to respond to him with simple contempt:

_Egypt, thou knew’st too well_
_My heart was to thy rudder tied by th’strings,_
_And thou shouldst tow me after. 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.56–61)_

Antony’s willingness to accept defeat out of his great love for Cleopatra does not make him a two-dimensional character, nor does it make him reprehensible to us. In fact, his flaws may be exactly what we respond to, since they highlight that he is human, riddled with weaknesses despite his famous strengths.

**Summary: Act IV, scene i**

Caesar, encamped near the Egyptian capital of Alexandria, receives Antony’s challenge and laughs at it. Maecenas counsels him to take advantage of Antony’s rage, for “[n]ever anger / Made good guard for itself” (IV.i.9–10). Caesar prepares his army—swelled by deserters from his enemy’s troops—and plans to crush Antony for good.

**Summary: Act IV, scene ii**

Enobarbus brings word to Antony that Caesar has refused to fight him. Antony asks why, and Enobarbus suggests that Caesar is so sure of success that one-on-one combat seems unfair. Antony declares that he will fight the next day, whether it brings him victory or death. He thanks his servants for their faithful service and warns them that this night might be his last night with them. They begin to weep, and Enobarbus, with tears in his eyes, rebukes Antony for such a morbid speech. Antony says that he did not mean to cause sorrow, and, as he leads them off toward a bountiful feast, urges them to enjoy their evening together.

**Summary: Act IV, scene iii**

That night, Antony’s soldiers hear strange music resounding from somewhere underground. They whisper that it is the music of Hercules, the god after whom Antony modeled himself and who they believe now abandons him.

**Summary: Act IV, scene iv**

The following day, Eros arms Antony for battle, and Cleopatra insists on helping. Antony feels confident about the coming fight, promising Cleopatra that anyone who attempts to undo his armor before he is ready to remove it and rest will confront his rage. An armed soldier enters and reports that a thousand
others stand ready for Antony’s command. Antony bids Cleopatra adieu, kisses her, and leads his men into battle.

Summary: Act IV, scene v

Preparing for battle, Antony admits he wishes he had taken the earlier opportunity to oppose Caesar on land. A soldier comments that had he done so, he would still count Enobarbus as an ally. This report is the first Antony has heard of his most trusted friend’s desertion, and the news shocks him. At first he does not believe it, but Eros then points to the “chests and treasure” Enobarbus left behind (IV.v.10). Antony orders soldiers to deliver Enobarbus’s possessions to him, along with “gentle adieus and greetings,” and laments that his “fortunes have / Corrupted honest men” (IV.v.14–17).

Summary: Act IV, scene vi

Caesar, feeling certain of his victory, orders Agrippa to begin the battle. Caesar orders that the front lines be fitted with soldiers who have deserted Antony, so that Antony will feel like he is wasting his efforts fighting himself. Enobarbus receives the treasure and is overcome by guilt, realizing that he has become a common traitor. Deciding that he would rather die than fight against Antony, he declares himself a villain and goes to seek out a ditch in which to die.

Summary: Act IV, scene vii

Agrippa calls for his troops to retreat, declaring that the power of Antony’s forces has exceeded his expectations.

Summary: Act IV, scene viii

Antony’s men win the battle and retake Alexandria with a fierce display of force. Scarus receives a fantastic wound but will not relent, begging Antony for the chance to chase after the retreating army.

Analysis: Act IV, scenes i–viii

Because the play’s dramatic structure suggests that the battle in Act IV will be climactic and probably result in Antony’s death, Antony’s victory in these scenes is surprising and makes the plot much less predictable. After Antony’s flight from battle in Act III, and after Cleopatra’s apparent willingness to betray her lover, all seems lost for the lovers. Indeed, the opening scenes of Act IV confirm and build upon this impression. Caesar rejects Antony’s proposal for hand-to-hand combat with such assurance that we feel that there is something prophetic in the line “Know that tomorrow the last of many battles / We mean to fight” (IV.i.11–12). Antony, seemingly undone by the treachery of his own behaviour, manages to burden his men with sadness rather than rouse them for battle, while several soldiers hear an otherworldly music they believe portends the destruction of the once great general and his forces.

Not only do these scenes redirect our expectations, they also suggest different interpretations of Antony’s and Cleopatra’s characters. Up to this point in the play, the two lovers seem to have been so absorbed in their own romance that they have allowed nations to go to war. A decidedly Roman perspective has dominated the presentation of Cleopatra as a wanton gypsy and Antony as her fool. The day of battle, however, brings victory to Antony and, at least for a moment, restores him to good fortune. Fighting a vicious and bloody fight, Antony displays the martial abilities that have forged his
reputation, and he wins the battle. In these scenes both Antony and Cleopatra display depths of character that cannot be reduced to the respective fool and strumpet. The boldest, most incontrovertible display of the honour for which Antony is famed comes not in battle but in his decision to return to Enobarbus his abandoned treasures.

Enobarbus’s defection to Caesar’s side underscores one of the play’s main concerns: the mutability of human character. Once one of Antony’s most confident and self-assured comrades, Enobarbus becomes a man ruined by guilt over his disloyalty. The completeness of his change of heart is called into question, however, when he declares that he will go off to die in a ditch, because the latter part of his life has been foul. Although he has changed sides, he refuses to fight against Antony. Enobarbus lacks the distance necessary to see his life as a whole, and to understand the honorability of his past actions. He concentrates only on recent dishonourable actions, and so determines to die. But our understanding of Enobarbus must incorporate his former and present selves, the best and the foulest.

Act IV, scenes ix–xv

*Nay, weep not, gentle Eros. There is left us Ourselves to end ourselves.*

**Summary: Act IV, scene ix**

Antony returns from war, vowing to destroy Caesar’s army completely on the following day. He praises his soldiers for their valour and commands them to regale their families with tales of the day’s battle. When Cleopatra enters, Antony declares his love for her. He announces that she is the only thing that can pierce his armor and reach his heart. Antony asks Cleopatra to commend Scarus, one of his bravest soldiers. The queen promises the man a suit of golden armor that once belonged to a king. Antony leads his troops and his lover in a triumphant march through the streets of Alexandria to mark the joyous occasion.

**Summary: Act IV, scene x**

Caesar’s sentries discuss the coming battle as Enobarbus berates himself nearby. Unaware that he is being watched, Enobarbus rails against his life, wishing for its end and hoping that history will mark him as a traitor and a fugitive. After he collapses, the sentries decide to rouse him but discover that he has died. Because he is an important man, they bear his body to their camp.

**Summary: Act IV, scene xi**

Antony determines that Caesar means to attack him by sea and declares himself ready. He wishes his enemy were equipped to fight in fire or air, swearing he would meet him in those places if he could.

**Summary: Act IV, scene xii**

Caesar holds his armies back, preparing to attack Antony at sea.
Summary: Act IV, scene xiii

Anthony has gone with Scarus to watch the naval battle. Scarus, in an aside, condemns Cleopatra’s fleet as weak, and laments that the soothsayers refuse to share their knowledge regarding the battle’s outcome. Antony watches as the Egyptian fleet betrays him and defects to Caesar. Realizing his predicament, Antony commands Scarus to order his army to flee. Alone, the general blames Cleopatra as a deadly enchantress who has beguiled him to a state of absolute loss. When the queen enters, Antony drives her away, threatening to kill her for her betrayal.

Summary: Act IV, scene xiv

Cleopatra returns to her maids with tales of Antony’s murderous rage. Charmian suggests that her mistress lock herself in a monument and send Antony word that she has killed herself, to quell his anger. Abiding by the plan, she bids Mardian deliver the news to Antony and asks him to return with word of her lover’s reaction.

Summary: Act IV, scene xv

Antony arms himself to kill his lover, telling Eros that he no longer knows who he is now that Cleopatra’s love has proven false. Mardian arrives with his false report of the queen’s death, adding that her last words were “‘Antony! most noble Antony!’” (IV.xv.30). Antony tells Eros to unarm. Overcome with remorse, he declares that he will join Cleopatra in death and beg her forgiveness for thinking him false. He asks Eros to kill him. Horrified, Eros refuses, but Antony reminds him of the pledge he made long ago to follow even Antony’s most extreme wishes. Eros relents. He prepares to stab Antony but stabs himself instead. Antony praises his soldier’s honor and says he must learn from this example. He falls on his own sword but fails to kill himself. A group of guardsmen refuses to finish the task, and Diomedes, a servant of Cleopatra, reports that the queen is alive and well. It is too late, however, to save Antony’s life. Dying, Antony commands his guards to bear his body to Cleopatra.

Analysis: Act IV, scenes ix–xv

In Act IV, scene xv, Antony, who has been betrayed by his lover and has lost the war to Caesar, offers one of the play’s most profound reflections on the connection between character and circumstance: “Here I am Antony, / Yet cannot hold this visible shape, my knave” (IV.xv.13–14). As his fortune changes from good to bad, so, he believes, his character slips from honourable to dishonourable. He likens himself to a cloud that shifts from one shape into another. Given the play’s investment in spectacle—neither love nor war truly matters unless one has something to show for them—Antony’s disturbance at being unable to hold a “visible shape” is particularly interesting. His honour, it seems, is primarily a function of whether the world sees him as honourable. When it fails to do so, Antony no longer fits into it. His rigid definition of himself as a victorious general and as Cleopatra’s lover betrays his Roman sensibilities, which cannot and will not allow him to assume the contradictory roles of the conqueror and the conquered. He will, he decides, either be the hero or cease to exist at all by killing himself. His statement “Here I am Antony” reflects his search for a glimpse of his former, simpler self: the indomitable hero who will put an end to his life. Thus, he thankfully notes to Eros, all that remains to him is suicide.
Once the second sea battle is lost, the play belongs to Antony until his death—Cleopatra recedes, as does Caesar. In the scenes leading up to his death, Antony’s feelings of betrayal, regret, and, ultimately, love give way to some of the finest language in the play.

Oh, sun, thy uprise shall I see no more:
Fortune and Antony part here; even here
Do we shake hands. All come to this? The hearts
That spanieled me at heels, to whom I gave
Their wishes, do discandy, melt their sweets
On blossoming Caesar, and this pine is barked
That over topped them all.

(IV.xiii.18–24)

Here, as Antony bids goodbye to “Fortune,” he comes to an important realization from which he cannot recover. Comparing himself to a tree that once towered above all others, he now feels that Cleopatra’s inconstant love, which once “spanieled” at his heels, has stripped him of his bark. This metaphor expresses that he feels raw, unprotected, and doomed to die. Cleopatra enters soon after Antony delivers these lines, and he scares her away with vicious threats. More than anger, however, Antony feels a keen sense of loss. He laments, “I made these wars for . . . the Queen— / Whose heart I thought I had, for she had mine, / Which . . . had annexed unto’t / A million more, now lost” (IV.xv.15–18). This utterance of regret confirms Antony’s lost sense of self: he no longer possesses either of the identities—military giant or lover of Cleopatra—that have defined him so well.

The news of Cleopatra’s suicide suffices to cool Antony’s temper and returns him to thoughts of reconciliation. By killing himself, Antony envisions joining his love in the afterlife: “I come, my queen . . . / Where souls do couch on flowers we’ll hand in hand, / And with our sprightly port make the ghosts gaze” (IV.xv.50–52). This consummation in death of their love moves the couple toward its ultimate victory over Caesar and the Roman Empire.

Summary: Act IV, scene xvi

From atop the monument with her maids, Charmian and Iras, Cleopatra declares that she will never leave her hiding place. Diomedes appears below and calls up to her that Antony’s guard has brought the wounded Antony. The lovers call to one another. Antony says that he is dying and wishes to embrace her one last time. She replies that she dares not come down from her monument, lest she be captured by Caesar and paraded through the streets as a prisoner of war. Instead, Cleopatra asks the soldiers to heave Antony up to her. As they do so, Cleopatra notes that the strength of Antony’s body has turned to heaviness. She pulls him to her and kisses him, the onlookers declaring this intimacy “a heavy sight” (IV.xvi.42). Antony advises the queen to cast herself upon Caesar’s mercy, trusting in the honesty of Caesar’s friend Proculeius. He then recalls his own greatness and says that he will die gloriously, “a Roman by a Roman / Valiantly vanquished” (IV.xvi.59–60). He dies, and Cleopatra curses the world as a suddenly very dull place. Without Antony, she feels that neither life nor she herself is the least bit remarkable: she might as well be a “maid that milks / And does the meanest chores” (IV.xvi.76–77). After her maids revive her from a fainting spell, Cleopatra decides that they must bury Antony in Roman fashion and then help her seek her own death.
Summary: Act V, scene i

Caesar orders Dolabella to deliver to Antony a command for his surrender. After Dolabella leaves, Decretas, one of Antony’s men, enters carrying Antony’s sword. When Caesar asks why the man would dare appear before him in such a way, Decretas explains that he was a loyal follower of Antony’s and now wishes to serve Caesar as faithfully. Caesar questions the meaning of this reversal, and Decretas explains that his master is dead, taken from this world by the same noble hands that committed the brave deeds for which Antony is so renowned. Caesar remarks that the passing of such a great man ought to be marked by great tumult and mourning—after all, the death of Antony, as one of the two triumvirs, “is not a single doom” but the end of one-half of the world (V.i.18). Agrippa notes the irony of their mourning Antony’s death after having fought him so fiercely. Caesar and his men agree that Antony was a great man, and Caesar declares it proper to mourn him.

A messenger arrives from Cleopatra to ask what Caesar intends for the queen. Caesar promises to be honourable and kind to her, and dispatches Cleopatra’s messenger with assurances, bidding her to be of good heart. Although Caesar tells Cleopatra that he intends to cause her no shame, he plans to force her to live in Rome, where she will be his eternal triumph. Toward this end, he orders some of his men, led by Proculeius, to prevent Cleopatra from committing suicide and thus robbing him of renown.

Analysis: Act IV, scene xvi–Act V, scene i

Antony’s understanding of himself cannot incorporate military defeat or romantic betrayal: he would rather die thinking of himself as a hero and conqueror than live a life of shifting (and potentially ignoble) identities. Thus, Antony’s suicide is his last—and most lasting—triumph. In dying, Antony not only understands himself as a victor but also convinces the world of his honour and might. Cleopatra agrees with her lover that no one but he is worthy to conquer Antony, and even Caesar musters awe for his vanquished foe, remarking that Antony’s death represents a calamity for half the world. Whether we share Caesar’s awe, we cannot help but feel sympathy for the dying Antony. His love for Cleopatra has led him to destroy himself, but his love does not wane. Antony’s steadfastness contributes to the depth of his tragedy. He spends his dying breath advising Cleopatra to trust in Caesar’s mercy and Proculeius’s care. Antony is a Roman nobly vanquished by a Roman, but he is still a misguided politician and Proculeius’s care. Antony is a Roman nobly vanquished by a Roman, but he is still a misguided politician and lover (IV.xvi.59–60). The sword on which he falls does not excise the blemish of his soldier’s opening remark: he remains both a fool and a hero. Just as any complete understanding of the play must take into account the competing forces of East and West, reason and passion, discussion of Antony’s character must account for both his glory and his baseness.

Even in the face of her lover’s death, Cleopatra is unable to stop performing. For Cleopatra, the public display of emotions corresponds directly to their genuineness; preparing to meet Antony’s death, the queen resolves that “[o]ur size of sorrow, / Proportioned to our cause, must be as great / As that which makes it” (IV.xvi.4–6). These words echo her opening lines, in which she begs Antony to outdo himself and all others with professions of love. The importance of performance becomes clear as Antony begins to speak his dying words:

Antony: I am dying, Egypt, dying. Give me some wine, and let me speak a little.
Cleopatra: No, let me speak, and let me rail so high That the false hussy Fortune break her wheel, Provoked by my offence.
Here, Cleopatra’s self-awareness in her role as grief-stricken lover rises to a near comedic level when she interrupts Antony as he tries to deliver his last words.

Act V, scene ii

Antony

*Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see*

*Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness*

*I’ th’ posture of a whore.*

Summary: Act V, scene ii

Proculeius arrives at the queen’s monument and asks Cleopatra’s terms for giving herself up to Caesar. Cleopatra remembers that Antony told her to trust Proculeius and tells the Roman she hopes the emperor will allow her son to rule Egypt. Proculeius assures her that Caesar will be generous and says that Caesar will soon repay her supplication with kindness. Meanwhile, his soldiers, having slipped into the monument, move to seize Cleopatra. The queen draws a dagger, hoping to kill herself before being taken captive, but Proculeius disarms her. He orders the soldiers to guard the queen until Caesar arrives, and Cleopatra cries that she will never allow herself to be carried through Rome as a trophy of the empire’s triumph.

Dolabella arrives and takes over for Proculeius. The queen converses with him, discussing her dreams (in which she sees a heroic vision of Antony), and then persuades Dolabella to admit that Caesar plans to display her as a prisoner of war. Caesar arrives and promises to spare Cleopatra’s children and treat her well if she does not kill herself. She gives him a scroll that hands over all her treasure to him—or so she says. When Cleopatra asks her treasurer, Seleucus, to confirm that she has given Caesar everything, Seleucus contradicts her. Cleopatra rails against the treachery of her servant, but Caesar comforts her. He assures her that he does not desire her wealth, since he is far greater than a mere merchant. When Caesar leaves, Cleopatra admits to her maids that she doubts his intentions, remarking to her companions that he is charming her with words, and Iras and Charmian encourage her to follow her plan toward death. Confirming Cleopatra’s doubts, Dolabella admits that Caesar means to convey the queen to Rome and encourages the queen to respond to this news as she sees fit.

Rather than succumb to the infamy of being a spectacle for the entertainment of filthy Roman crowds, Cleopatra resolves to kill herself. She would rather die than see herself imitated by a boy actor, who would portray her as a common whore. She orders Charmian and Iras to dress her in her most queenly robes. When they have done so, she admits into her presence a clown, who brings her a basket of figs that contains asps—poisonous snakes.

Dressed in her finest royal garments, Cleopatra kisses her maids goodbye. Iras falls dead, and Cleopatra takes a snake from the basket and presses it to her breast. She applies another asp to her arm, and dies. As the guards rush in to discover the dead queen, Charmian presses the snake to herself and joins her mistress in death. Dolabella enters, followed by Caesar. They realize the manner of the suicide, and Caesar orders Cleopatra to be buried next to Antony in a public funeral.
Analysis

If the Roman Empire represents reason and order, then it is possible to view Antony’s suicide as a result of his Western sensibilities, which prevent him from understanding himself as anything other than a typical Roman hero. Cleopatra’s death follows her lover’s, and though her suicide might, as she hopes, bring about her reunion with Antony, her reasons for killing herself are decidedly non-Western. In the play’s simplified, romanticized conception of East and West, Cleopatra’s application of the deadly snakes is a product of her Eastern sensibilities. Whereas Antony’s Roman mind cannot conceive of Antony as a vanquished general or jilted lover, Cleopatra will not allow her multifaceted identity to be stripped to one of its simplest, basest components. Throughout the course of the play, her character has been as shifting as the clouds that Antony describes in Act IV, scene xv. Her love and her grief are, at turns, convincing and suspiciously theatrical. She gives her heart to Antony and then, with no warning, her political allegiance to his enemy. She treats her servants with surpassing kindness and then, moments later, beats them ruthlessly. Cleopatra is decidedly inconstant; yet, she is never anything less than herself: passionate, grand, and over the top. Thus, she refuses to allow the Romans to reduce her to their understanding of her, to parade her through their filthy streets as some prepubescent boy mimics her greatness: “I’ th’ posture of a whore” (V.ii.217). By killing herself, Cleopatra remains Cleopatra.

Of the many performances Cleopatra stages throughout the play, her triumph over the Romans in Act V, scene ii is, without doubt, her greatest. Here, her complex character seems to have secret longings and undisclosed motivations. For instance, she seems resigned to joining Antony in death at the end of Act IV, scene xvi, concurring with him that suicide and resolve are their only friends. We may wonder, then, why Cleopatra bothers convincing Dolabella to reveal Caesar’s desire to turn her into the empire’s trophy. Caesar’s intentions wouldn’t matter to someone as committed to dying as Cleopatra says she is. Similarly, her motivations for trying to preserve her possessions from Caesar are unclear. Perhaps she entertains a hope of starting a new life in spite of Antony’s death. If so, she may only be pretending to court death until Dolabella’s admission of Caesar’s plans makes her death a necessity.

These doubts and questions testify to the complexity and the contradictions inherent in the queen’s character. There are depths to Cleopatra that we glimpse but to which we never gain total access. She is beyond neat categories and tidy synopses. Indeed, as she prepares to make her final exit, she dons a role that, like her previous incarnations of hussy, enchantress, queen, and shrew, reflects only one aspect of her character. Ironically, she now strikes a pose as wife and nursing mother. As she applies the poison snakes to her skin, Cleopatra fulfills her desire to effect the quickest death in proper Roman fashion. In her quest to win a kind of Roman nobility worthy of Antony, she brags of becoming as constant as marble, herself no longer ruled by “the fleeting moon” (V.ii.236). But to understand Cleopatra in her final moments as a mere domestic, as an uncompromised lover and dutiful wife, is to reduce her to a single aspect of her character. She may claim to be as solid as marble, but before dying she reminds the audience (and herself) that she is made of something much less constant than stone: “I am fire and air; my other elements / I give to baser life” (V.ii.280–281).