

Antony and Cleopatra Summary

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

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

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

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

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

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

decides to desert him. The feast continues and everyone drinks raucously, until Octavius says he has indulged in enough fun and departs.

Meanwhile, in Parthia, Ventidius wins a military victory for Antony. A soldier encourages him to pursue the fleeing Parthians, but Ventidius says he does not want to achieve too much for his rank and risk rivaling Antony's authority. Back in Rome, Octavia weeps at having to leave her brother and go with Antony to Athens. Octavius sadly (but without crying) bids farewell to his sister. In Egypt, Cleopatra angrily hears about Octavia but is pleased to learn that Antony's new wife does not rival her in beauty or excellence. At Antony's house in Athens, Antony complains to Octavia about Octavius, who has begun speaking ill of him. Octavia says she will go to Rome to try to mend the rift between Antony and Octavius. Enobarbus talks with Antony's follower Eros and tells him that Octavius has effectively defeated Pompey and pushed Lepidus out of power. Now, the world is divided between Antony and Octavius. In Rome, Octavius complains to Maecenas and Agrippa about Antony's pompous behavior—among other things, he has declared Cleopatra the queen of Egypt and several other kingdoms. Octavia arrives and says that she has come to beg Octavius' pardon on behalf of Antony, but Octavius informs her that Antony has gone back to Cleopatra in Egypt and betrayed her. He says Antony "hath given his empire / Up to a whore."

Near the city of Actium, in Egypt, Antony and Cleopatra prepare for battle against Octavius. Cleopatra tells Enobarbus that she plans to go into battle with Antony, to Enobarbus' dismay (he thinks a battle is no place for a woman). Against the advice of his commander **Canidius**, Antony decides to fight Octavius at sea. A soldier begs him to reconsider, but he remains stubborn. Canidius tells the soldier that Antony is now under Cleopatra's control and they are nothing but "women's men." Elsewhere near Actium, Octavius gives orders to his general **Taurus**. Antony also prepares his forces for battle. Octavius' and Antony's navies fight a battle. They are evenly matched and there is no clear winner, but Cleopatra flees. Antony sees this and follows her, effectively conceding the battle. Canidius decides to desert Antony for Octavius, and Enobarbus remarks on how shameful and cowardly Antony's behavior was, but Enobarbus decides to stand by his master. At Cleopatra's palace, Antony is ashamed at having fled the battle. He is frustrated with Cleopatra and thinks that he will surrender to Octavius. He sends an ambassador to Octavius, who tells the

ambassador that he will show no mercy to Antony, but will pardon Cleopatra if she will either kill Antony or drive him out of Egypt. Octavius sends a messenger named **Thidias** to go and promise Cleopatra gifts in an attempt to persuade her to leave Antony for Octavius. Antony is upset when he receives Octavius' message, and plans to challenge him to a one-on-one duel. Enobarbus thinks this is a ridiculous plan and starts to wonder whether he should remain loyal to Antony. Thidias arrives and tells Cleopatra that Octavius will look kindly on her if she should leave Antony. Cleopatra tells him she will gladly surrender to Octavius. Antony enters and is furious when he sees Thidias kiss Cleopatra's hand. He has servants beat Thidias and send him back to Octavius. He yells at Cleopatra for betraying him, but she convinces him that she is really faithful to him. Antony begins to recollect his courage and plans to fight back against Octavius. Enobarbus thinks that Antony is behaving very unreasonably and decides to abandon Antony to join Octavius' forces. At Octavius' camp, Octavius mocks Antony's challenge of single-handed combat, and plans to defeat Antony once and for all. Antony learns of Octavius' refusal to duel and plans to fight Octavius' forces. He tells his followers to enjoy one last night of revelry and drinking before their final fight against Octavius.

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

The battle begins, and Agrippa is forced to call for his forces to retreat. Antony has gained a victory, and returns to Alexandria to celebrate with Cleopatra. Meanwhile, at Octavius' camp, Enobarbus dies full of regret for having betrayed Antony. The next day, Antony fights Octavius at sea. His soldier **Scarus** sees that swallows have built nests in Cleopatra's sails, and is unsure of what this omen means. Antony's fleet quickly surrenders to the forces of Octavius, and Antony is furious. He blames Cleopatra for the defeat and says that she has betrayed him. Cleopatra tries to soothe him, but he calls her a witch and sends her

away. Charmian suggests to Cleopatra that she should go to her tomb, lock herself inside, pretend to kill herself, and send word of her death to Antony. Cleopatra agrees with the plan. Antony talks with Eros, and describes how sometimes **clouds** appear to be a particular shape, but then dissolve and change form. He says that he feels like these **clouds** and “cannot hold this visible shape.” He blames his defeat on Cleopatra, who he thinks betrayed him and didn’t truly love him. Mardian enters and tells Antony that Cleopatra really did love him. He says she killed herself and her dying word was Antony’s name. Antony says that he will follow Cleopatra’s example and kill himself. He tells Eros to stab him, but Eros refuses and stabs himself instead. Antony then stabs himself. One of Cleopatra’s servants enters and tells Antony that Cleopatra is not really dead. Antony is carried to Cleopatra’s tomb.

Antony arrives at Cleopatra’s tomb, and Cleopatra is distressed to see him dying. He tells her to seek safety with Octavius, but she refuses and promises to end her own life and not become Octavius’ prisoner. Antony dies and Cleopatra orders for him to be buried “after the high Roman fashion.” At his camp, Octavius plans to send a messenger to get Antony to surrender, but receives news of Antony’s death. He is saddened by the news, as he respected Antony as a strong opponent. Octavius sends his men **Proculeius** and **Gallus** to go to Cleopatra and persuade her that he has no ill intentions toward her, so that she will not commit suicide like Antony and ruin his actual plans to parade her as a prisoner in his triumph at Rome. At her tomb, Cleopatra, resolves to end her own life, but then Proculeius and Gallus arrive and tell her not to worry about her treatment at Octavius’ hands. Proculeius and Gallus leave, and Octavius’ follower **Dolabella** enters. Cleopatra tells Dolabella about a dream she had of a gigantic, powerful Antony who ruled the world. Dolabella takes pity on her and admits to her Octavius’ actual intentions. Octavius arrives and tells Cleopatra that he will not harm her if she surrenders to him. He leaves, and Cleopatra thinks about how she would become a subject of public ridicule at Rome. She sends Charmian and her servant Iras to get her best clothes and crown, so that she can look her most beautiful when she dies.

A common man arrives, bearing a basket of figs for Cleopatra. Hidden in the basket are asps (poisonous snakes). Cleopatra kisses Charmian and Iras goodbye, and Iras falls dead. Cleopatra takes an asp and lets it bite her breast, then has another one bite her arm. She dies. A guard rushes in and sees what has happened, as Charmian lets an asp bite her and dies, as well.

Octavius enters and, while disappointed at what has happened, calls Cleopatra “bravest at the last.” He orders for Cleopatra to be buried with Antony and says that his army will attend a funeral for Antony and Cleopatra before returning victorious to Rome.

The Tragedy of Love in “Antony and Cleopatra”

Antony and Cleopatra is one of the most mature of William Shakespeare’s tragedies. As such, it is arguably one of his finest and deepest works. Pride, love, and the Fall all factor into the play as much as does the contest between temporal politics and eternal love. Antony and Cleopatra are passionate and energetic and are in full bloom beside each other; Octavius is cold and calculating and works through intermediaries throughout the play. But why is *Antony and Cleopatra* such a tragedy given the vanity that our titular protagonists display? It is, of course, nothing short of the fact that they were lovers in a world that cannot allow love to coexist alongside it.

Shakespeare’s many tragedies have a common theme that is often missed at first glance. From *Julius Caesar* to *King Lear*, from *Hamlet* to *Macbeth*, from *Othello* to *Antony and Cleopatra*; all of Shakespeare’s tragedies are deeply political plays. In fact, all of Shakespeare’s grand tragedies have the political as the foundation of their tragic nature; it is as if Shakespeare is revealing his hand at the tragic nature of politics in having his tragedies be saturated in the muck and mud of politics.

Antony and Cleopatra, in this respect, doesn’t stand out insofar that it is another tragedy set in the hell of the political. On another hand it does stand out—precisely because of its political nature. As stated, *Antony and Cleopatra* is one of Shakespeare’s most mature works. Composed during the latter part of Shakespeare’s life, *Antony and Cleopatra* contain Shakespeare’s deepest thoughts about politics. Shakespeare’s life of the mind, his wrestling with turbulence, change, and political revolution, all come to the fore in this most remarkable and appropriately passionate drama.

Love is natural. Love is pre-political. Love belongs to “Nature’s infinite book of secrecy.” To live in the mystery of nature is to dwell in the timelessness of love. That is the sin of Antony and Cleopatra more than their lust and love for each other.

In fact, their first lines in the play deal with love. “If it be love indeed, tell me how much,” Cleopatra says to Antony in the first scene. “There’s beggary in the love that can be reckoned,” Antony answers. “I’ll set a bourn how far to be beloved,” Cleopatra responds. “Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth,” Antony concludes. In their dialogue on love we also see the prefiguration of love’s timelessness: “new heaven” and “new earth” are the product of love.

Whether Antony and Cleopatra love each other or simply indulge in their fantastical lusts is debatable. Shakespeare may have used Thomas North’s translation of Plutarch’s *Lives* as the basis of the basic historicity of the plot, but the play is not a historical drama as Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote in his laudatory reflection on the play. There is not a shred of cruelty in Shakespeare’s Antony, though the historical Antony—if the primary documents are trustworthy—was something of a brute and callous individual. Likewise,

Cleopatra is not portrayed as a seductive killer and schemer, though she was certainly that in real life. Nay, Shakespeare does what all great artists do—he takes historical characters and brings them to life, but in doing so, also communicates through them timeless truths and reflections which endure long after the death of the artist.

Shakespeare deliberately blurs the line between lust and love between the two eponymous characters. There is thrilling dialogue of sensualism between the two, the type of romantic dialogue that makes the heart flutter. In those dialogues, there are also displays of self-obsessed vanity and pride which make us wonder if the two do love each other or whether Antony is a mere prop for Cleopatra's sexual voraciousness and Cleopatra a mere plaything for Antony's *libido*. That is part of the genius of Shakespeare. He blurs that line to keep us guessing, but in doing so we also come to sympathize with Antony and Cleopatra in the face of the cold and calculating Octavius and his ambitions for "universal peace."

The contrasts between the main characters could not be starker. Antony and Cleopatra are introduced in a grand procession with exotic treasures surrounding them. They are surrounded by maidens and other ladies, along with eunuchs fanning Cleopatra as she sits enthroned on her chair. Their pride and personality, pompousness and pretentiousness, is fully displayed for all the world to see. They enter as king and queen of the world. On stage this would have been a spectacular and sublime entrance. But even in just reading the description of their entry, there can be no mistaking the pride and personality that accompanies the spirits of Antony and Cleopatra.

When Octavius is first introduced, he is a cold bureaucrat reading a letter. Lepidus enters with his train to discuss politics with Caesar's heir. Octavius enters the stage without a grand procession, without giggling girls and servile eunuchs, or without a memorable speech. He banally reads over a letter at a desk as Lepidus enters and they discuss the banality of politics. Octavius is a bureaucratic man through and through. So much so that as the play develops and he thrusts himself into the middle of the battle for the fate of the world, Octavius never gets his hands dirty like Antony (or Cleopatra). Instead, he always commands a lackey, a subordinate, a lieutenant, to execute his will. Whether Dolabella, Proculeius, or—as it often is—Agrippa, someone is always acting as the mediator between the managing manager Octavius and the completion of his will.

Here Shakespeare is revealing something deeply profound as part of this political criticism contained in the work. Politics is cold. Politics is "rational." Politics is empty. There is no life, no passion, no personality to politics. As Cleopatra says to Iras in fullest revelation on the eve of her suicide, to be taken alive as a trophy for Octavius would entail her being a "mechanic slave." Cleopatra, voluptuous and lively Cleopatra, would become a mere lifeless cog, a trophy, a piece of mechanical work in the machinery of the emergent Roman Empire:

Now, Iras, what think'st thou?
Thou, an Egyptian puppet, shall be shown
In Rome as well as I: mechanic slaves
With greasy aprons, rules, and hammers shall
Uplift us to the view. In their thick breaths,
Rank of gross diet, shall we be enclouded,
And forced to drink their vapor.

Iras says it best, “The gods forbid!” Such a life would be unbefitting of Cleopatra. It would be a cruel slavery to the woman who possessed the wealth of Egypt and the heart of Antony. The woman whose playful sex with Antony entranced the great general into becoming like a teenage boy, forever lost in the pleasure of her bedchamber, cannot now become a slave to the chains of the politics of sterility.

But Cleopatra’s statement also reveals a stark truth that Shakespeare has been communicating ever since the introduction of Octavius. Returning to the second act of the play, Antony travels to Rome where he is surrounded by the “triple pillar” that rules over the world: Octavius, Lepidus, and himself. Though Sextus Pompeius is an annoying fourth leg in this three-man battle. Rome, and the politics that Rome embodies in the play, is the center of the passionless world. There is no personality among the men as they talk politics and the pursuit of power. They become serious men, entering the scene “in war-like manner.” They give no passionate or sensual speeches. They say nothing memorable.

Octavius’ anger toward Antony is over a political technicality, the type of technicality that bureaucrats get enraged over. “You have broken the article of your oath, which you shall never have tongue to charge with me,” Octavius blurts out at Antony. Octavius is angry over broken promises in war. Antony responds rather pedantically.

But Antony is not without succumbing to the dry sterility of politics. Amidst Octavius, Lepidus, and Pompey, he too becomes a passionless and pragmatic politico. His marriage to Octavia is not out of any love or desire for her but is purely political. To secure his eastern inheritance and to keep Octavius off his back he marries the sister of the most powerful man in Rome. Yet at the first sign of trouble he rids himself of her.

Antony’s indulgence in the world of sterile and loveless politics does have consequences. Cleopatra hears news of Antony’s actions and frets. She is concerned that Antony is a liar and a traitor. Alas, Antony’s return and his embrace of her soothes her worries and the two fall back into the world of sport and play in each other’s arms.

Shakespeare, however, presents a deep contrast between the world of politics and the world of nature, “Nature’s infinite book of secrecy.” To dwell in the mystery of nature is to dwell in the mystery of love—that is precisely what Antony and Cleopatra do. Waiting for Antony is so agonizing that Cleopatra says that she will “sleep out this great gap of time [while] my Antony is away.” Charmian is aghast at Cleopatra’s antics, especially given her status as queen and ruler of Egypt. “You think of him too much,” Charmian says. Cleopatra snappily responds, “O, ‘tis treason!”

Time only exists for Cleopatra in the presence of Antony. Her bubblyness and vivaciousness are brought out when she bares her sensual personality beside him or talks of him to her servants. Likewise, time only exists for Antony in the presence of Cleopatra. Antony is fully himself beside Cleopatra. Away from her, he becomes a cold, calculative, and robotic man as every bit as callous as the other Romans of the play frozen like a statue outside of time.

Politics, Shakespeare is slowly informing us throughout the course of the play, chases love away. In fact, politics and love cannot coexist. Politics must destroy love. It eradicates passion from the world and destroys “Nature’s infinite book of secrecy.”

Despite the vanity that Antony and Cleopatra display, they are also the only two characters who speak wisdom during the play. As already mentioned, Cleopatra is attuned, pardon the pun, to the mechanical reality of politics when she decides against being taken as a “mechanic slave.” Antony’s first major speech is his most memorable, and it contains some of the greatest wisdom of the play:

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. The nobleness of life
Is to do thus; when such a mutual pair
And such a twain can do’t, in which I bind,
On pain of punishment, the world to weet
We stand up peerless.

In Antony’s passionate and memorable speech, we are rapidly given—in a stroke of Shakespearean genius—so much to feed on. As hitherto stated, the worlds of love and politics cannot coexist. When Antony says “[l]et Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch of the ranged empire fall! Here is my space,” he is prophetically speaking of the temporality of politics and the futility of a life spent in pursuit of an arch that will not stand forever. When he declares that his “space” is beside Cleopatra, he speaks of the eternal space of love. This is followed up by a declaration on the temporality of the world and life therein, “Kingdoms are clay: our dungy earth alike feeds beast as man.” To underscore the tension between love and politics, lovers do not exist in the realm of politics and politicians are incapable of love; this is why Antony and Cleopatra “stand up peerless.” Since Antony and Cleopatra are lovers, Octavius, Lepidus, Agrippa, and Pompey are not their peers.

Antony’s remarkable speech smacks of nihilism because love entails a certain kind of gentle nihilism. Not the nihilism of active destruction, but the forsaking of the world of politics and construction to forever live in the bedchamber of play. The glory of Rome matters not to Antony, for what matters to Antony is his “space” beside Cleopatra. That is what makes Antony, Antony.

With Antony dead, Cleopatra is no longer the girl of sensual play—though she does dream of Antony on the eve of her death. In the fifth act, Cleopatra transforms into Sophia, Wisdom from on High, as she begins to realize the futility of her situation but also the pitiable state that Octavius is in. “My desolation does begin to make a better life,” she says. “’Tis paltry to be Caesar: Not being Fortune, he’s but Fortune’s knave, a minister of her will.”

Here is Cleopatra’s first utterance of wisdom. She asserts that to be hyper-political, as Octavius is, is to be a slave of politics. Octavius is not free. He is but “a minister of [Fortune’s] will.” Fortune, here, is the stand-in for politics. By contrast, it is in love that we are free.

Cleopatra’s wisdom continues to unfold itself when she later says to Proculeius, one of Octavius’ lackeys, “This mortal house I’ll ruin, do Caesar what he can. Know, sir, that I will not wait pinioned at your master’s court.” Cleopatra has come to understand the mortality, the temporality, the “dungy” reality of these empires of “clay.” The prestige and power of Egypt resides in Cleopatra. With Cleopatra gone, the prestige and power of Egypt—the jewel of the Mediterranean—will vanish with her.

That is why Octavius wishes to take Cleopatra captive. To have her as an exotic trophy would bring the wealth of Egypt into Rome and mark the triumph of Octavius. Cleopatra will not allow this to happen. She does bring ruin to the “mortal house” that Octavius foolishly thinks he can capture. And, of course, there is her statement to Iras that to be taken as a slave and stuffed into this new world of dry politics would entail being a “mechanic slave.”

Octavius, Agrippa, and Proculeius are not free men. They are, in fact, slaves to the political as they waste away their labors and energies to build arches and empires that will eventually crumble. They forsake the life of love to do this. They are to be pitied.

Thus, in a grand inversion of vanity, Shakespearean irony comes to the fore yet again. It is true that Antony and Cleopatra are vain creatures of love. But there is something endearing and sympathetic about them. Furthermore, it is vain Antony and prideful Cleopatra who speak the only wisdom detectable in the play. As their hand of wisdom is revealed it makes Octavius, Agrippa, and Proculeius look like the vain men (or, perhaps, the fools).

Octavius is not aware of the “dungy” reality of “kingdoms [of] clay.” Octavius is not aware that his House is mortal and will not last. Octavius is not aware that he is the pitiable slave of Fortune. He too, then, must be filled with vanity in thinking he can bring about universal peace through universal order, “The time of universal peace is near.” Only a man truly vain, or a man truly a fool, could utter such a statement. That it is spoken by Octavius and not Antony or Cleopatra is deeply revealing.

This brings us to the reality of the tragedy that is *Antony and Cleopatra*. The crime of Antony and Cleopatra is that they were lovers in a world that could no longer afford the dangerousness of love. As we’ve mentioned, love threatens the political and must be eradicated from the world.

The world that Antony and Cleopatra find themselves bodily occupying is the realm of politics. Antony is an “emperor.” Cleopatra is Queen of Egypt. But this is not what Antony and Cleopatra truly are. They are, instead, lovers locked in eternal embrace in the world of loving sport and play. It is in bed, in each other’s arms where Antony and Cleopatra become themselves:

That time—O times!—
I laughed him out of patience; and that night
I laughed him into patience; and next morn,
Ere the ninth hour, I drunk him to his bed;
Then put my tires and mantles on him, whilst
I wore his sword Philippan.

In this memorable and sensual aside by Cleopatra, she reveals herself to be the girl of eternal play. It is in bed, dressed up and playing games with Antony, that her personality and spirit is manifested. As she bares herself, breast and all to Antony, Cleopatra comes to life. As Cleopatra comes to life in this world of nature’s play, Antony also comes to life. He forgets the burdens of war and politics and joyfully embraces Cleopatra as the two become one in love. After all, it is when Antony and Cleopatra are separated that Antony becomes a carbon copy of the cold and calculating Octavius and Cleopatra sleeps away time until Antony’s return—

signaling her time to arise back to life in his presence. It is Antony's love for Cleopatra that resurrects her to life.

After being defeated at the Battle of Actium, in which Antony saw his beloved flee to the open sea prompting him to give chase "like a doting mallard," it is beside Cleopatra that he is returned to life (thus pairing the two as each other's resurrecting agent). When he catches up with Cleopatra he tells her, so poetically and poignantly, that she was the only thing that mattered to him. The glory of war, the victory of battle, the grand ships, and all the soldiers under his command meant nothing if Cleopatra was not by his side. Antony's love for Cleopatra, then, is the life-force that moves his blood. "You did know how much you were my conqueror," he tells her after meeting her again in defeat.

Despite having lost his political and military reputation in abandoning his men and material in pursuit of Cleopatra, Antony is Antony in love. Despite having lost everything he finds himself and his joy in Cleopatra's embrace. Despite losing the world he has gained Cleopatra. "Come," he says, "let's have one other gaudy night: call to me all my sad captains; fill our bowls once more; let's mock the midnight bell." Cleopatra answers, "It is my birthday. I had thought t' have held it poor. But since my lord is Antony again, I will be Cleopatra."

As previously mentioned, Antony is Antony and Cleopatra is Cleopatra only in the embrace of love. It is when both are beside each other that the true Antony and true Cleopatra are born. Though the world may be burning and slipping out of their hands, it is in the embrace of their hands that they find the joy and meaning of life on earth.

The battle between Octavius and Antony (and Cleopatra) is not a battle between two men. The battle for the fate of the world that occurred at the mouth of Actium was the battle between the brave new world of cold and sterile politics against the lively and lovely world of Eros—of nature. In this battle between "Nature's book of infinite secrecy" embodied by Antony and Cleopatra and the cold and bureaucratic managerialism of the world of "wide arches" and "universal peace," only one could win. Love lost. Politics won. Hence the tragedy.

It is fitting, then, that as Antony moves closer to his death that his only companion by his side is Eros. This, I think, is deliberate on Shakespeare's part. Eros is one of Antony's trusted lieutenants. By the play's end—at least for Antony, Eros is the only "friend" he has left. As Antony speaks to Eros and pleads for him to kill him, Eros takes the sword and plunges it into himself. With Eros dead, Antony is also dead. For Antony dies soon after Eros' death.

The death of Eros also has consequences for Cleopatra. Because Cleopatra was Cleopatra when Antony was Antony, and with Antony now gone, Cleopatra can no longer be Cleopatra. So with Eros' death we rapidly move toward the death of Cleopatra. She cannot live in this world without Eros either.

As Cleopatra entered the world, she will also leave the world:

Give me my robe, put on my crown, I have
Immortal longings in me. Now no more
The juice of Egypt's grape shall moist this lip.
Yare, yare, good Iras; quick: methinks I hear
Antony's call: I see him rouse himself

To praise my noble act. I hear him mock
The luck of Caesar, which the gods give men
To excuse their after wrath. Husband, I come:
Now to that name my courage prove my title!

The heart surely does flutter as Cleopatra kisses Charmian and Iras and they all fall dead. Just as Cleopatra entered in crown and scepter at Antony's side, so she departs to join with Antony again with crown and scepter. Cleopatra was Queen of the World with Antony as her lover. For one is a queen when one has a lover. So to prove her title she returns to Antony in love as they cross over from this life to the next offered only in, and through, love.

Antony and Cleopatra is Shakespeare's most mature tragedy, dealing with the profound consequences that the politics of conquest have on the natural world—and the natural condition of the world is the world of love. Antony and Cleopatra must die because the world of love that they represent is being superseded by the world of bureaucratic managerial universalism represented by Octavius. After all, it is Octavius who utters those haunting words, "The time of universal peace draws near."

The pursuit of the politics of power under the guise of "universal peace" is nothing but a tragedy. Octavius is a slave in his victory. Antony and Cleopatra become one again and freed in their defeat. They are reunited again in that realm of abundant Love that never ends—Shakespeare reveals the Christian thematic symbolism of the play at the end, at least for those with the eyes to see and the ears to hear.

But the cold world of power politics is something to avoid. To be consumed with temporality of politics is to destroy Love. We can either be like Octavius and kill love in the name of politics and peace. Or we can be like Prospero and bless love, forsaking politics, and walk into an uncertain future—and perhaps, just perhaps, we might find something truly beautiful when the sun rises over the horizon.