

Antony and Cleopatra

W.Shakespeare

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The story is well-known and needs hardly to be repeated here. Antony a successful general under Caesar as well as one of his favorites did seize power along with the adopted son of Caesar - Octavianous - and Lepidus after the assassination of Caesar, the arrangement known as the second triumvirate. Such a sharing of power is intrinsically very unstable and inevitably it will lead to mutual suspicion followed by strife and the eventual usurpation of all power by one of the players, although it can work well initially when there is a common enemy and a sharing of a common motive and interest. Antony, under the spell of the attraction of the Egyptian Queen Cleopatra, tended to shy away from his responsibilities to the resentment of his two partners, the situation not being improved by the rebellion lead by Fulvia, the neglected and deserted wife of Antony. A temporary truce is formed under the threat of Sextus Pompey who ravages the sea routes by his acts of piracy, a truce cemented by the marriage of Antony to the sister Octavia of Octavianus. Eventually it comes to a show-down between Antony and his rival, in which the latter gets the best of the former, leading to the botched suicide of Antony who dying in the arms of his beloved makes her commit her own act of desperation to escape the humiliations to await her as the captive of victorious Octavianous now the sole master on the scene. In the play the story by Plutarch and recently translated into English is shortened for dramatic effect, in particular the extended sojourn with Octavia, resulting in two children, is cut out.

The dramatic center of the play is the love story between Antony and Cleopatra with its inevitable ups and down, which in a dramatic play achieves a grandeur normally denied in real life. Antony is a mature man in his early fifties while Cleopatra is in her late thirties being past her youthful bloom yet at the height of her sexual attraction. The nature of her attraction is a bit subtle. It is definitely not the case of unsullied goods and virginal freshness. Prior to her encounter with Antony she had had an affair, while still young, with Caesar, resulting in an issue affectionately known as Ceasarion. Caesar had been charmed enough to relinquish his ambition of conquering Egypt and instead leaving her in charge. The combination of power and experience must have provided a potent aphrodisiac to spice up jaded appetites. By enjoying the favors of a lady who had consorted with his old mentor he also, if vicariously, engaged intimately with the latter, be it in sharing or competition, subjugation or submission. One is free to speculate as the play gives plenty of material for such game. Clear is, that the nature of her attractions is not one usually displayed in the plays by Shakespeare, and it has been discussed how it would be possible for young boys to convincingly perform the role of a mature and formidable woman, the image of which has throughout the ages inspired such lascivious depictions. But this is artistic license as well as unbridled imagination, quite another thing is the underlying reality to which Art, once spawned has no further obligation.

The Plotematic Dynasty, which was instigated by Alexander and meant to continue

the reign of the Pharaohs, was of Greek, more specifically Macedonian origin, and thus brought Egypt squarely under Hellenistic sovereignty, as testified by the blossoming of Alexandria. It was also the last stronghold of independent Greek culture and civilization, the heartland of which had already been annexed by the Romans, be it a tenuous one. It was not only the custom of the dynasty to assign to all of its male rulers the name of Ptolemy (while the names of the women varied slightly more) but also to marry brother to sister to keep the line pure, which quickly led to serious inbreeding and the customary consequences of hereditary diseases. The Ptolemaians were supposedly seriously obese, with protruding eyes, and later medical expertise has concocted a variety of syndromes to account for it. Antony was a well-known debaucher, who from tender youth had enjoyed women along a wide spectrum of respectability, and no doubt he conspired to keep up the game, because even if lust may wane, the desire for it may not abate but become just more insistent as it increasingly evades capture. Could the historical Cleopatra have been grossly fat and even ugly and repellent, and the dallying with her intended to serve other aims than carnal pleasure? Was it a matter of pure politics and power play? Carnal satisfaction to be sought elsewhere, maybe with the blessings of the queen. But forget history, myth may not be strictly accurate but is more exciting and instructive.

The moral is that mainly Antony has forgotten his martial obligations for the sweet pleasures of the marital ones. That his sword formerly so hard, strong and potent had been weakened and softened by intercourse with her, a phallic image if any, of the spent member being withdrawn flaccid and useless. Thus the Queen, the woman is stronger than the man, the spell she casts on him not only tames but subjugates him. As this is supposed to be the prerogative of the man, it is really she that wears the pants. This is not really brought up in the play, at least not in any explicit way, but merely one train of thought among others that meet with no obstructions. The story that follows is conventional enough. When Antony for reasons of expediency marries Octavia, Cleopatra attacks the messenger who is forced to flee when he brings her the tidings. Only when she is assured that the bride is ugly, neither tall, nor with an elongated face, but round and squat, is her sexual jealousy cooled. Later on, when Antony has lost the ill-advised sea-battle against Octavianus, in fact he followed like a love-sick mallard the fleeing Queen who had provided her, as it would turn out, ineffective naval support; she flirts with the messenger as he conveys amorous invitations from the victor. Antony is incensed, both at his performance at the battle, as well as her inconstancy. However, like true lovers, they soon make up. One single kiss being enough to undo catastrophic damage.

Having been vanquished at sea, Antony nevertheless intends to continue the fight on land, something he had been strongly advised to do in the first place, when the conditions for victory had been far more auspicious than they were now with a large part of his army and entourage defecting to the enemy, a natural reaction of those who have been paid to fight and thus look for the strongest patron. It smacks of desperation, or as his erstwhile loyal friend E. remarks, it is the fury that follows from having been frightened out of fear. But Antony persists in his hopeless quest, it is as if he feels the need to prove himself once again to Cleopatra, that he need to dispense with the sweet games of love and don the armor to prove that he is again the man, with his sword once again hard and potent. His determination in face of adversity impresses his old friend E who has deserted him, and

Antony's gesture to forward the riches he had left behind makes him so regret his act that he simply fades away and dies out of shame.

But of course this last stand by Antony is hopeless, and when he learns, falsely as it turns out as it is but a ruse on her part, that she has committed suicide he sees no other way himself. Cleopatra has not, but she wanted to test his love again, to get a reaction out of him, to have him come to her bed. But he asks his companion Eros to kill him, the latter refuses but kills himself, and thus Antony has no option to follow suit. He botches it up nevertheless, and what can be more humiliating than not even being able to kill yourself, a most accommodating victim? He begs others to finish the job, but he meets nothing but scorn. Finally he finds himself in the arms of Cleopatra and is afforded the pleasure to die in those.

Cleopatra is now the charge of the triumphant victor who promises her that she will be dealt with most generously. She does not believe such promises and instead envisions what he will be capable of being the absolute ruler of her fate. In an unguarded moment she has some asps brought in hidden in a basket, they bite her and kills her, as well as her closest maids of attendance and thereby depriving Octavianous of his prize.

And so this story of love concludes, bearing more than one feature common with Romeo and Juliet. The latter one of innocent bloom, the former one of old age, depravity and momentous political consequences. Octavianous in the play recognizes the tragedy and grandeur of their fate and arranges a splendid funeral out of guilt, regret and respect. This so in the play, what happened in reality may have been very different, but who cares, all actors of history eventually turn into fictions in a fairy tale.

Still the triumphant Octavianous, later to be elevated to Augustus, acted rather magnimonously, he spared the issue of Antony, but Ceasarion, the last ruler of the Ptolemaian dynasty, albeit never effectively, was ordered to be killed, by virtue of being a real threat to the legitimacy of the coming emperor as the only son and inheritor of Caesar.