

The Story of Antony and Cleopatra

The play opens in Alexandria, Egypt, some time after the death of Julius Caesar. Mark Antony, who now rules Rome with Octavius Caesar and Lepidus, has abandoned his political responsibilities in Rome, in order to live with the beautiful Egyptian queen Cleopatra. He is so wrapped up in the affair that when a soldier arrives with news from Rome, Antony can hardly be bothered to listen to it.

Cleopatra's ladies Charmian and Iras playfully consult a Soothsayer, who foresees their future will not be as pleasant as their past. Cleopatra is unhappy that Antony is distracted by events in Rome. Eros tells Antony that his wife, Fulvia, and his brother, Lucius, have mounted an army against Caesar, implying this would not have happened if Antony had been in Rome. Scarus then brings news that Fulvia is dead. Antony must leave Egypt immediately. Enobarbus, Antony's closest supporter, predicts Cleopatra will die of heartbreak but Antony decides to depart, despite Cleopatra's objections.

Back in Rome, Octavius and Lepidus discuss Antony's irresponsibility. Proculeius brings news that Pompey is gathering an army and gaining popular support. While Cleopatra longs for Antony, Pompey expects to conquer the Triumvirate because he controls the seas and Antony is gone in Egypt. However, Varius brings the news that Antony has returned to Rome.

Meeting, Antony, Octavius, and Lepidus bicker, but plan a strategy against Pompey. Proculeius suggests they could bury their discord and strengthen their bonds if the newly-widowed Antony was to marry Octavius' sister Octavia. Antony agrees. Left alone, Mecaenas asks Enobarbus about Egypt, and Enobarbus opines that Antony will always be in love with Cleopatra, despite this new marriage. Antony promises Octavia he will be faithful, but his Soothsayer says Antony should stay away from Octavius and predicts he will return to Egypt.

When a messenger arrives in Egypt and tells Cleopatra the news of Antony's marriage, she flies into a rage, then sends for more news from Rome.

Pompey meets with the three Roman leaders before battle. After boasting of their military prowess, the Triumvirs offer Pompey Sicily and Sardinia in exchange for peace. Pompey and Antony discuss old insults, and the men make peace. A drunken revelry ensues on Pompey's ship. Menas calls Pompey aside and offers to kill the Triumvirs while it would be so easy. Pompey's honor forces him to decline. Pompey and Antony challenge each other to see who can drink the most. As Antony prepares to depart with Octavia, Octavius pleads with him to take care of his sister, and Antony promises he will.

Isis



In Egypt, Cleopatra's messenger reports that Octavia does not seem formidable, and Cleopatra rewards him, asking forgiveness for beating him earlier. In Athens, Antony complains to his new bride that Octavius has waged war on Pompey, and spoken ill of Antony in public. Octavia begs Antony to maintain the peace with Octavius. Antony sends Octavia to mend fences with Octavius.

Later, in Rome, Octavius learns that Antony has returned to Egypt, and given rule of Egypt and other lands to Cleopatra and her sons. Antony has accused Octavius of not fairly dividing the spoils of conquered lands, and of deposing Lepidus. When Octavia arrives and is told Antony has returned to Cleopatra, her heartbreak gives Octavius further reason to attack Antony.

Near Actium, Cleopatra prepared to fight alongside Antony, and urges him to engage battle at sea. Alexas and Enobarbus object, noting Antony's navy is not strong. Antony ignores them. The sea battle of Actium ensues. Antony's generals Scarus and Enobarbus are horrified. Antony's forces were winning until, without warning, Cleopatra's ships abandoned the battle. Antony followed her, causing chaos and confusion. Caesar's troops have won the battle. Alexas, like many others, decides to defect to Caesar's side. Enobarbus will remain loyal to Antony.

Antony is ashamed at this loss. He names his past glories, but suggests they no longer matter. Cleopatra is distraught that he followed her ships and begs pardon.

At Octavius' camp, Antony's Schoolmaster is sent to beg for Antony and Cleopatra's lives. Octavius declares he will hear Cleopatra's case if she will drive Antony from Egypt or have him killed. Antony challenges Octavius to one-on-one combat, but Enobarbus knows Octavius will not accept. When Octavius' man Mecaenas comes to convince Cleopatra to surrender, Antony orders him to be whipped, and accuses Cleopatra of betrayal, before reconciling with her. As Octavius laughs off Antony's challenge, Antony prepares for war, knowing it might bring victory or death. In the wee hours of the night, Antony's followers hear strange music, like the sound of Antony's guardian spirits leaving him.

As Eros and Cleopatra help Antony into his armor, the troops assemble and Antony learns that Enobarbus, his most trusted ally, has deserted. Touchingly, Antony orders that Enobarbus' treasure be taken to him, with "gentle adieus and greetings." A confident Octavius orders that Antony's deserters be placed on the front lines, to further dishearten Antony. Enobarbus, receiving his treasure, is overcome with guilt.

Antony and Scarrus have had success on the battlefield, and march in triumph with Cleopatra through the streets of Alexandria. Back in Caesar's camp, two soldiers overhear Enobarbus muttering; when they check on him they find he has died of a broken heart.

When battle resumes the next day at sea, Antony's ships are defeated and he accuses Cleopatra of betraying him. A terrified Cleopatra decides to hide in her monument and send word to Antony that she is dead. As Antony talks with Eros about the transitory nature of life and fortune, Cleopatra's eunuch Mardian announces her death. In despair, Antony orders Eros to kill him. Instead, Eros kills himself. Antony is touched by Eros' loyalty, and falls on his own sword, but does not die. When Antony then learns Cleopatra is alive, he orders to be brought to her. In the monument, the lovers say their goodbyes, and Antony dies. Cleopatra, too, prepares for death.

When the soldier Decretas bring Antony's sword to Octavius, Octavius mourns, then quickly sends word to Cleopatra offering mercy while secretly planning to display her in triumph through Rome. As Caesar's men surround Cleopatra, she draws a dagger, but is quickly disarmed. Dolabella, sympathetic to Cleopatra, tells her of Octavius' true intents. Octavius arrives and promises Cleopatra she will be treated well. She calls her Treasurer to attest she has given Octavius all her gold, but the Treasurer reveals she has kept some fortune from the conqueror. When Octavius withdraws, Cleopatra orders her ladies to dress her like a queen, and admits a rural fellow with a basket of figs. When Octavius' men return, they learn Cleopatra is indeed invincible.



The Battle of Actium