

The History of Antony and Cleopatra

The story of *Antony and Cleopatra* occurs after the death of Julius Caesar. A powerful faction of senators, led by Pompey, Cato, and Cicero believed he was attempting to become dictator of the world. Later on in Caesar's reign, he successfully conquered Gaul in the Gallic wars in 50 BC. This led to Caesar growing immensely rich with a large army in his command with the approval of the Roman people. Cato then claimed Caesar to be a traitor to Rome after Caesar refused to lay down his arms. Believing he had no choice, Caesar crossed the Rubicon River with his troops. While this was happening, Pompey and the Senate fled, along with Brutus, to gather their strength.



Figure 1: A coin depicting the face of Julius Caesar

These events then led to the Great Roman Civil War, also known as Caesar's Civil War. In this four-year campaign, battles were fought in Italy, Albania, Greece, Egypt, Africa, and Hispania. With his army, Caesar was able to defeat the last of the Senate and the Optimates in the Battle of Munda in what is today Southern Spain. The deaths of Titus Labienus and Gnaeus Pompeius gave Julius Caesar to become *Dictator perpetuo*, or the perpetual dictator of Rome.

Caesar's reign ended abruptly with his assassination on the Ides of March on March 15, 44 BC. Caesar was supposed to attend a session of the Senate, but Mark Antony learned the night before about the assassination plot by Servilius Casca and attempted to warn Caesar about the plan. The conspirators then feared that Antony's attempt at aided Caesar would ruin their plans. The conspirators then arranged for Trebonius to intercept Antony as he approaches the Theatre of Pompey. Antony then fled after hearing the cacophony and commotion occurring inside.

Plutarch, a historian who wrote of the assassination of Julius Caesar, said the



Figure 2: A painting by Jean-Léon Gérôme depicting the death of Caesar

senator Tillius Cimber presented Caesar with a petition to recall Cimber's exiled brother. The other conspirators then joined with Cimber, showing their support. Caesar then waved Cimber away, and then Cimber grabbed Caesar and pulled down Caesar's tunic. Casca was the first to attack Caesar, thrusting his knife at the dictator's

neck. Moments later, the conspirators were all attacking Caesar. Blinded by blood, Caesar's attempt to flee failed, resulting in Caesar collapsing to the ground, leaving him defenseless and open to the 23 stabbings he received.

After the assassination, Octavian Caesar was named Caesar's heir. At the time, Octavian was just 19 years old. Although Octavian was named Caesar's heir, debate ensued as to who was to become the next ruler of Rome. Civil war then ensued to fight for control of Rome. Later on, it was decided that Mark Antony, Octavian, and Lepidus then joined together to form the second triumvirate of Rome. With this agreement, Octavian would stay in Rome, Antony would control Egypt and the Middle East, and Lepidus would control the Far East, Persia, and Africa. Another part of this agreement was they were to share all revenues and send them to Rome and they would come to each other's aid if needed, as well as keeping open communication. The play then begins with Mark Antony breaking this agreement.

Synopsis of *Antony and Cleopatra*

Mark Antony has been neglecting his duties to Rome because he has become enamored with Cleopatra, the queen of Egypt. Due to his love of Cleopatra and his fascination with Egyptian culture, he has ignored all matters concerning Rome including the fact his wife Fulvia revolted in Rome due to her jealousy of Cleopatra and died. Octavian then called for Antony to return to Rome to fight against the son of Pompey the Great, Sextus Pompey, who wants revenge on Rome for the death of his father. Pompey has joined forces with Menas and Menecrates, a group of pirates, in the Mediterranean and is now controlling the ports and seas forbidding trade and goods to get in or out of Rome. Against Cleopatra's wishes, Antony decides to leave Alexandria to help Octavian.



Later on, it is suggested to Mark Antony that he should marry Octavia, the younger sister to Octavian, in order to unify Octavian and Mark Antony. Enobarbus, Antony's lieutenant, is aware that Octavia will never satisfy Mark Antony like Cleopatra has. Cleopatra then hears of the marriage between Antony and Octavia, and takes her anger out on one the messenger who tells her what has occurred in Rome. That being said, Cleopatra is comforted by the fact of her great beauty that Octavia could never match.

After a confrontation with Sextus Pompey, the triumvirate agrees to offer him a truce.

Figure 3: A sculpture of Cleopatra

By this truce, he is able to keep Sicily and Sardinia, but must help them get rid of the pirates in the area. After Sextus' agreement, a drunken celebration occurs on Sextus' galley. During this celebration, Menas suggests to Sextus that they kill the triumvirate and take control of the Roman Republic. Sextus refuses, calling the idea dishonorable. Afterwards, Lepida ¹ and Octavian, without the approval of Antony, break their truce and declare war against Sextus. This enrages Antony as he had no say in the matter.

Antony then returns to Alexandria, where he crowns himself and Cleopatra the rulers of Egypt and the part of the Roman Republic he shares with the triumvirs. Octavian angers Antony because not only did Octavian not give Antony a fair share of Sextus' land, but Octavian also imprisoned Lepidus and made it so Lepidus is out of the triumvirate. This leads to anger between Antony and Octavian, resulting in conflict between the two parties.

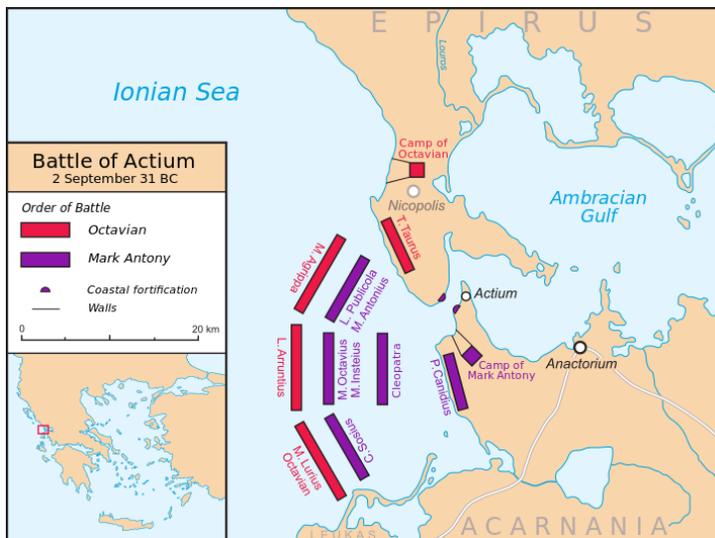


Figure 4: Map showing the Battle of Actium

As Antony prepares to battle against Octavian, Enobarbus urges Antony to fight on land. Enobarbus tells Antony that he has advantage on land and Octavian's naval fleet is lighter and better manned. Antony ignores Enobarbus' suggestion, as Octavian has challenged him by sea. Cleopatra then offers her ships to Antony. At the Battle of Actium, Cleopatra, afraid for her life and people,

flees with her ships. This results in Antony following her, which leaves his forces to fall. He then is angry with Cleopatra for making him look like a coward, but forgives her because of their great love.

Octavian then offers Cleopatra a way out of conflict. He sends his ambassador Mecaenas (in this production) to Cleopatra, offering Cleopatra freedom if she gives him Mark Antony. She refuses but flirts with him hoping to buy time to form a new plan. When Antony sees this, he denounces her behavior and sends him to be whipped, an unforgivable act to the Romans, but he forgives Cleopatra after hearing her declare her loyalty to him and they prepare again to fight on land.

The night before the battle Enobarbus deserted Antony to join with Octavian seeing that Antony has lost control of his power. When he learns of it, Antony decides to

¹ Originally Lepida is called Lepidus, but this production changes Lepidus' gender.

have all of Enobarbus' goods that Enobarbus left to be sent to him. Shocked by Antony's generosity and overwhelmed with guilt, Enobarbus kills himself. The battle the next day is a failure for Antony's army as his own army deserts him and the Egyptian army flees. He then blames Cleopatra for his failure, and plans to kill Cleopatra for what he believes to be her betrayal. In an attempt to win back Antony's love, Cleopatra sends Mardian to tell Antony that Cleopatra has killed herself hoping his grief would bring him back to her. She then waits for Antony in the monument of her ancestors.

Cleopatra's plan fails, when Antony, told by her servant that she has died, stabs himself. Though mortally wounded, he is still alive when Alexas arrives and informs him that Cleopatra in fact still lives. He is carried to the monument and dies in Cleopatra's arms.

Octavian tries to persuade Cleopatra to surrender, through an emissary, Proculeius whom Antony told Cleopatra before he died that she could trust but he treats her with disrespect brutally stopping her from her first suicide attempt. He is relieved of his duty by Mecaenas (in the original play it is a character named Dolabella), who moved by Cleopatra's grief, tells her that Octavian plans to exhibit her to the people of Rome in a triumph. Octavian arrives and Cleopatra gives him what she claims to be all of her wealth. Her treasurer betrays Cleopatra as he claims that Cleopatra is holding some of her treasure and wealth. Octavian then tells Cleopatra that he is not interested in her wealth and assures her that he will not harm her but threatens the life of her children if she should try suicide again. After he leaves Cleopatra orders her trusted servants, Charmian and Iras, to bring in the messenger with the pre-ordered basket of figs that really contained a deadly snake. She applies the snake to her breast and wrist and dies; immediately followed by both her servants. Octavian, fearing this, returns too late. He solemnly orders the funeral services for Antony and Cleopatra declaring that they should lie in state together, then leaves for Rome becoming as the first of many Emperors to come.

The Aftermath

After his victory, Octavian then decided to change his name to Augustus Caesar. During his reign, he changed Rome from a republic to an empire. Augustus was able to have the great control he had over the Roman people because at first he denied having an agenda other than restoring the Republic gaining their support after years of brutal civil war. The Senate attempted to give Augustus several honors, all of which he originally refused. He later accepted supreme power over Rome stating that he would step down when the empire was



Figure 5: Bust of Augustus

stabilized but in fact, he never did; the Senate remained but had no power in governing the Roman Empire. As time progressed, the Senate becomes nothing more than a fake seal to appease the people of Rome. The Senate called him "Pontifex Maximus", or the high priest of Rome, Consul for Life, First Among Equals, and many more titles.

Augustus died in 14 AD, but his legacy would live on in the Roman Empire. Augustus was essential in the development of the Golden Age of Rome, which lasted from the beginning of his rule to the destruction of Pompeii in 79 AD. During this time, poets such as Virgil and Ovid praised the Emperor and the Roman state. Virgil once said, "It is no accident that this small village on the Tiber has come to rule the world. Rome is an eternal idea in the eyes of the Gods." The beginning of Augustus' rule would bring Rome to a new era and revolutionize the western world.

The Importance of *Antony and Cleopatra*

There is a reason why we do not produce medieval theatre in the 21st century. Theatre is used as a reflection on the issues facing the world at a current moment in time. Medieval theatre is not produced today because it lacks the connection we can make in the modern world. Shakespeare's work has been the most produced work of theatre in the Western world not only because of the Bard's skills at writing the most beautiful verse, but because his work is still relevant to the problems in the world today. *Antony and Cleopatra* focuses on the effects of politics on cultures and the imperial conquest while being tied into a political love story.

Director Elizabeth Huffman draws from her Arabic roots and her fascination with Roman history. She also uses her avid interest in today's multicultural world to examine this complex love story. She urges the audience to contemplate several questions: what happens when two rulers from different cultures and agendas fall in love? Is the love between Antony and Cleopatra romantic destiny or political suicide? Is this a question that we have changed the answer to today?

What makes *Antony and Cleopatra* so easy to modernize is the fact that imperialism is still a major part of the world today. Several countries have used the resources of other countries and its people for profit or power. Examples of this in history are the United Kingdom's control of India, Spain's control of Mexico, France's control of Haiti, etc. These events have occurred in the 20th and 21st century, affecting the lives of millions.

The United Kingdom and the United States have both had some control over Iran in the 20th century. Their power over the Shah allowed them to use the country as a great source for oil, a valuable commodity in both of these countries. This anger led to the Iranian Revolution in the 1980s, causing a great disdain of Western culture from the Iranian people.

Another example of imperialism in modern times is the United States' occupation of Iraq, Afghanistan, and as well as there strong political presence throughout the Middle East. The United States invaded Iraq in order to take control away from Saddam Hussein, and led to the American occupation of Iraq for several years. Although the Americans were in Iraq to protect its citizens from Saddam Hussein, many Iraqis resented the presence of Americans in Iraq. The effects of the American occupation can be seen by the destruction of their culture, such as the burning of Iraq's National Library around 2004. The



Figure 6: Burnt pages from the destruction of the National Iraqi Library. Taken by Roger Lemoyne

Americans did not burn the library themselves, the people did that as the result of looting and civil conflict but they stood by and watched the library burn until it was nothing but ashes. The burning of the library was the result of the American's apathy and negligence. The destruction of this library led to the loss of over 5000 years of Iraqi culture, including cuneiform tablets, one of the first forms of written language. This parallels easily to the burning of the library in Alexandria during the time of *Antony and Cleopatra*, and the destruction of other significant parts of Egyptian culture.

Dr. Robert Harrison, a professor of history at Southern Oregon University, once claimed that all countries want to be like the great Roman Empire, from the United Kingdom to Nazi Germany. The United States is not excluded from this claim. The imperialism that has existed in the United States since the days of the Manifest Destiny has greatly influenced the history of the nation. This influence is reflected in this production of *Antony and Cleopatra* in order to present the parallels to Roman society to the United States of America.

Notes on this production

As previously stated, this production of *Antony and Cleopatra* is set in a modernized world. This is done in order to show the significance of imperialism in the world and how the tale of *Antony and Cleopatra* is relevant to current events. That being said, the world created in this play is not like modern Egypt. This production takes influences from other Middle Eastern, Bedouin, and Arabic cultures in order to create a new Egypt we are not aware exists.

This production draws influence from the side of Middle Eastern culture that is not seen. While we see pictures of protests and violence in the Middle East, we do not see the beauty of Middle Eastern music, art, poetry, and clothing. Huffman wants to show a culture that has been misunderstood and presented in an unfair manner in the United States. Many of the costumes in this production, designed by Kate

Shroeder, were made in Egypt. This is done to show the “folk” culture of the Middle East. Shroeder’s costumes are contemporary Egyptian costumes then heightened theatrically but the use of wigs. The ceremonial wigs used in this production are a nod to the ancient custom of wigs.

A main focus of the Bedouin and African culture in this production will be with the Soothsayer. In the original version of *Antony and Cleopatra*, the Soothsayer has a



Figure 7: This photograph was used as influence in creating the costume for the Soothsayer.

very minor part. In this production, the Soothsayer will have great control over the action of the story, serving as the role of a mullah in Arabic culture. A mullah is a woman educated in Islamic theology and sacred law. In some cultures, she also recites tragic poetry and stories to remember the dead. As a mullah, the Soothsayer will be everywhere, knowing the events to come and playing the central role in the story of *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Huffman also creates a great contrast between Egypt and Rome. Rome is a young country during this time. Rome was around 300 years old at the time of the play, similar to the age of the United States today.

Huffman exemplifies this by having Rome ruled by a brilliant young man. The Roman side is a militaristic and ambitious country focused on imperialism and power.

Octavian has formed a triumvirate with his schoolmates Mecaenas and Agrippa in order to become a great empire. Their agenda is to push Lepida and Antony out of the triumvirate to have a greater control of Rome. These young men are different from Antony, Lepida, and Enobarbus, whom Huffman claims to be “old school” and want to enjoy the fruits of their labor. Egypt is different from Rome as Egypt is more influenced by culture. At the time, Egypt was a melting pot of Egyptian, Jewish, Macedonian, Greek, Roman, and Middle Eastern culture. Cultural pursuits play an important role in the life of Egypt, whereas Octavian and the Romans want nothing

more than to build a powerful empire.



Figure 8: Mark Antony before and after his love of Cleopatra and Egypt. Photography by Russel J. Young. Costumes by Kate Shroeder

Antony and Cleopatra’s love represents issues in society today. Even in the 21st century people are not allowed to fall in love with different cultures. The love between Antony and

Cleopatra would still cause problems today, as loving someone of a significantly different culture is still not accepted. As the story progresses, Mark Antony will lose the clothing that represents his Roman culture changing to clothing that represents his love for Cleopatra and Egyptian culture.

This production also uses other texts besides the works of Shakespeare. The Soothsayer recites poetry by Kahlil Gibran, a famous Arabic poet born in the Ottoman Empire. He then moved to the United States, where he studied art and literature and began his artistic career. He is celebrated as a literary hero in Lebanon and known for his Romantic style of writing. Additionally Huffman inserted text from John Dryden's play *All for Love*. This play was written in 1677. It is known today as Dryden's best work, and is his most produced play in the modern era. It is an imitation of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, but focused more on the love and final days of Cleopatra and Antony.

Dramaturgy by Alex Diaz-Hui