

Antony and Cleopatra

INTRODUCTION

FIRST printed in the 1623 Folio, *Antony and Cleopatra* had been entered on the Stationers' Register on 20 May 1608. Echoes of it in Barnabe Barnes's tragedy *The Devil's Charter*, acted by Shakespeare's company in February 1607, suggest that Shakespeare wrote his play no later than 1606, and stylistic evidence supports that date.

The Life of Marcus Antonius in Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (1579) was one of the sources for *Julius Caesar*; it also provided Shakespeare with most of his material for *Antony and Cleopatra*, in which he draws upon its language to a remarkable extent even in some of the play's most poetic passages. For example, Enobarbus' famous description of Cleopatra in her barge (2.2.197±±224) incorporates phrase after phrase of North's prose. And the play's action stays close to North's account, though with significant adjustments, particularly compressions of the time-scheme. It opens in 40 bc, two years after the end of *Julius Caesar*, and portrays events that took place over a period of ten years. Mark Antony has become an older man, though Octavius is still 'scarce-bearded'. Plutarch, who was a connoisseur of human behaviour, also afforded many hints for the characterization; but some characters, particularly Antony's comrade Domitius Enobarbus and Cleopatra's women, Charmian and Iras, are largely created by Shakespeare.

In the earlier play, Mark Antony had formed a triumvirate with Octavius Caesar and Lepidus. In *Antony and Cleopatra* the triumvirate is in a state of disintegration, partly because Mark Antony±±married at the play's opening to Fulvia, who is rebelling against Octavius Caesar±±is infatuated with Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt (and the former mistress of Julius Caesar). The play's action swings between Rome and Alexandria as Antony is torn between the claims of Rome±±strengthened for a while by his marriage, after Fulvia's death, to Octavius Caesar's sister Octavia±±and the temptations of Egypt. Gradually opposition between Antony and Octavius

increases, until they engage in a sea-fight near Actium (in Greece), in which Antony follows Cleopatra's navy in ignominious retreat. The closing stages of the double tragedy portray Antony's shame, humiliation, and suicide after Cleopatra falsely causes him to believe that she has killed herself; faced with the threat that Caesar will take her captive to Rome, Cleopatra too commits suicide. According to Plutarch, she was thirty-eight years old; as for Antony, 'some say that he lived three-and-fifty years, and others say, six-and-fifty'.

In *Antony and Cleopatra* the classical restraint of *Julius Caesar* gives way to a fine excess of language, of dramatic action, and of individual behaviour. The style is hyperbolical, overflowing the measure of the iambic pentameter. The action is amazingly fluid, shifting with an ease and rapidity that caused bewilderment to ages unfamiliar with the conventions of Shakespeare's theatre. And the characterization is correspondingly extravagant, delighting in the quirks of individual behaviour, above all in the paradoxes and inconsistencies of the Egyptian queen who contains within herself the capacity for every extreme of feminine behaviour, from vanity, meanness, and frivolity to the sublime self-transcendence with which she faces and embraces death.