

Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra"

Teaching Notes by Monica Spreitzer

PLOT

In 40 BC (two years after the death of Julius Caesar), Mark Antony, Octavius Caesar and Lepidus have formed a triumvirate ruling the Roman Empire. Unity is threatened by Mark Antony's love affair with Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt. Antony leaves Cleopatra to return to Rome upon his wife's death and the news of impending civil war. Antony marries Octavius' sister, Octavia, to repair relationships. The three triumvirs agree with Pompey to avert civil war. It is not long, however, before Antony's love causes him to leave Octavia for Cleopatra, and Octavius announces his intentions to war with the couple. Cleopatra convinces Antony to fight an unequal sea battle. Cleopatra's fleet withdraws and Antony follows her. Eventually Octavius wins the battle. Antony believes Cleopatra has betrayed him but Cleopatra sends a messenger saying she is dead, hoping to soften Antony's heart towards her. Antony attempts suicide, is brought to Cleopatra, and dies in her arms. Sad, defeated, and unwilling to be paraded throughout Rome as a "spoil" of war, Cleopatra suicides by allowing snakes to bite her.

THEMES AND ISSUES

- Suicide as a 'noble alternative' to shame or meaninglessness
- Power and public accountability
- The divided self: public duty and personal desire
- Passion or Reason / Love or Duty
- Women in power: Cleopatra as "trull", "whore", "gypsy", "serpent", leader, queen
- Social and cultural ideals, eg Duty and Reason in the Roman society
- Racism (Cleopatra as a lusty "gypsy", Cleopatra's face as a "tawny front")
- Opposing philosophies (eg Rome values prudence, discipline, conquest. Egypt values pleasure and love)

LANGUAGE AND STRUCTURE

- Symbols – serpents/asps, fleeting ships, gaming (billiards/fishing)
- Biblical Literary Allusions: Garden of Eden – The Serpent, Adam and Eve
- Mythological Literary Allusions: Mars, Venus, Jupiter, Isis (Egyptian goddess), Hercules, Dido and Aeneas
- Hyperbole: in descriptions and declarations of love
- Polarization: Contrast between Rome and Egypt, masculine and feminine, passion and duty, East and West, law & order and sensual extravagance
- Symbolism of water and land: contrasting imagery of land and sea, solid and liquid. Increasing imagery of melting as the play progresses – "Let Rome in Tiber melt" "Melt Egypt into Nile".
- Setting: Dualistic structure – constantly shifting between Rome and Egypt
- Truncation of time. (Historical events in this play actually took place over roughly ten years)

EXTENDED RESOURCES

- Plutarch's Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans (1579). (Shakespeare's main source)
- Northrop Frye on Shakespeare (edited by Robert Sandler).
- Robin Lee's Shakespeare: Anthony and Cleopatra (Studies in English Literature).
- Film: Cleopatra, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton version.
- Film: Antony and Cleopatra, BBC and Time-Life films. (Ambrose video)
- Website: www.humanities.ualberta.ca/mmorris/239/antony_&_cleopatra.htm
- Two operas: 1. Samuel Barber with libretto by Zeffirelli (1966) and 2. Malipiero (1938)
- Children's Picture Book: The Tin-Pot Foreign General and the Old Iron Woman. Raymond Briggs, 1984.
- Film: Mrs. Brown, directed by John Madden, 1997

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

- ✓ (Theme: Women in/with Power): Cleopatra is disparaged by many Roman men of "reason" in this play. She is most often alluded to in sexual/sensual terms, and looked on with suspicion by the Romans. Working in small groups, choose a powerful woman of more recent history (Golda Meier, Indira Ghandi, Benezir Bhuto, Madam Mao, recent Turkish ex pm, Hilary Clinton, Margaret Thatcher, Oprah Winfrey, etc.) and gather information showing how powerful women are depicted today. Use as many sources as you desire. Can you establish any similarities/differences between your findings and this play? Share your findings with the whole group. (READ/SPEAK/LISTEN)
- ✓ (Theme: The Divided Self): "The Roman governance ideal, and largely the late Renaissance view, was that interests of the state must come before personal passions" (quoted from website listed under extended resources). Rulers were responsible to ensure that their personal lives did not affect their ability to rule responsibly. How does this compare with our modern day Canadian and American views of politicians? Do we still expect this of our leaders? Discuss in your groups and write a brief outline of your findings/opinions. (SPEAK/WRITE)
- ✓ (Themes: The Divided Self / Love vs. Duty): After viewing the movie "Mrs. Brown" about the friendship (intimate relationship?) between Queen Victoria and a Scottish manservant and the resulting scandal, write a formal response to the issues surrounding the public and private lives of politicians/rulers. Be sure to include your ideas on how the issues in this movie are similar to/different from those in Antony and Cleopatra. (VIEW/WRITE)
- ✓ (Theme: Suicide as a noble alternative): Cleopatra's suicide has often been viewed as a noble act in light of her impending humiliation as a Roman war trophy. Consider modern-day, North American opinions about suicide. In your opinion, does the *reason* for committing suicide affect our judgment of the act? Are there any 'noble' reasons for committing suicide in our culture? Write your own, formal response, supporting your ideas with specific examples from recent history if you wish (eg Kurt Cobain, Michael Hutchence). (WRITE)
- ✓ (Theme: Overarching ideals of various societies): The Romans valued Duty and Reason very highly. This is evident in the way they "ran" their society. Judging from what you see in our own society, what do you think Canadians, at this point in history, value most highly? Why? Write a personal response (informal) and be prepared to share your ideas with the whole group. (WRITE/SPEAK)

- ✓ (Structure: Symbolism / Imagery) Shakespeare has used a number of symbols in Antony and Cleopatra, along with some vivid imagery. In your small group, brainstorm a list of all the symbols and images that you can recall/find in the play, and then develop a corresponding list of what the symbols might represent. Why do you think Shakespeare chose these particular symbols? Would there be modern symbols that would communicate better to a present-day audience? Present your findings to the whole group. Be prepared to defend your arguments with textual evidence. (READ/WRITE/SPEAK/LISTEN)
- ✓ (Structure: Mythological Allusion) Read one of the myths or read about a mythological character who is alluded to in the play (Dido and Aeneas, Venus and Mars, Isis, Hercules, Jupiter). In your group, discuss the myth/character and be prepared to share with the whole group how your research has helped to clarify references in the play or how it relates to the plot/themes. Write a personal response to the myth. (READ/WRITE/SPEAK/LISTEN)
- ✓ (Structure: Contrast/Polarization) In your groups, list as many opposites as you can find/remember from your reading of the play. Be sure not to limit your thinking to only concrete items. Discuss why you think these opposites are relevant/important to the play in terms of structure and/or theme. (SPEAK/LISTEN/READ/WRITE)
- ✓ (Theme: Suicide as a noble alternative) In your group, prepare to formally debate another group about the suicides in Antony and Cleopatra. Your group will defend the position that each suicide is a noble and honorable act. Be sure that you are prepared to support your arguments with evidence from the text!! Your opponents will be arguing that the suicides of Antony and Cleopatra were selfish acts and /or a refusal to accept consequences for their actions. As always, you are required to respect the rules of debating, and to avoid any personal insults! (SPEAK/LISTEN)
- ✓ (Theme: General) Individually, choose a piece of music that you think is relevant to either a theme or a main character in Antony and Cleopatra. Provide written lyrics to the music, a tape or CD of it, and a brief piece of writing outlining why you feel the piece is appropriate to your chosen theme. (LISTEN/WRITE)
- ✓ (Structure: Hyperbole) In groups, create a love poem using hyperbole. When you have finished, consider Shakespeare's use of hyperbole in the love declarations between Antony and Cleopatra. What is the difference between the effectiveness of your poem and Shakespeare's declarations of love? Do you think hyperbole serves to effectively enhance the emotional fervor of the couple in the play, or do you find it "cheesy" and "over the top"? Be prepared to share your thoughts with the whole group. (READ/WRITE/SPEAK/LISTEN)
- ✓ (Theme: Racism / Women in Power) Compare and contrast the depiction of the character of Cleopatra in the BBC production and the Elizabeth Taylor film. Do you detect any notes of racism or sexism in either version of the production? Do you think one or both portrayals of Cleopatra are fair to the portrayal of her in Shakespeare's text? Write a formal response to explain your reasoning for this opinion. (VIEW/WRITE)
- ✓ (Theme: Power and Public Accountability) In groups, brainstorm current events that relate to the topic of power and public accountability for those in power. Make a list of powerful people in modern society and decide if they are, and if they should be, accountable to the public for their behavior / decisions. Include movie stars, politicians, rock stars, or anyone else you can think of. Be prepared to share with the whole group. (SPEAK/LISTEN)
- ✓ (Theme: Women in Power) After examining the picture book The Tin-Pot Foreign General..., in your groups discuss the portrayal of Margaret Thatcher (The Old Iron Lady) through pictures and/or words. Consider how this portrayal compares to the

portrayal of Cleopatra in the movie versions we have seen. Be prepared to share with the whole group. (LISTEN/SPEAK/VIEW)

- ✓ (Theme: Choosing between opposing philosophies) Some people feel that the ending of Antony and Cleopatra represents a choice for each of the main characters between one of the two opposing philosophies that have been in conflict throughout the play. Others feel that the ending represents a refusal to choose at all. What is your personal opinion? Write your response formally, including supporting evidence from the text. You may wish to focus on a particular film translation of the playtext. (READ/WRITE/VIEW)