Self-Love in *Antony and Cleopatra*

Philo’s opening remarks suggest that deep attachments are incompatible with self-love, since they demand humble “devotion”: whereas Antony’s focus has previously been on maintaining his position as the “triple pillar of the world,” he is now “a strumpet’s fool” (1.1.1-15). The erotic hierarchy which the play outlines is designed to expose this incompatibility. Of the four main characters of the play, Enobarbus is ultimately humbled by his devotion; Cleopatra and Caesar reap the rewards and endure the consequences of being almost purely self-regarding; while Antony occupies an uneasy middle ground. The terms self-regard and self-love are used interchangeably in this essay to refer to the natural demands of the ego, including what Shakespeare would call pride or ambition, which is essentially a concern to distinguish oneself in the eyes of others, and the instinct for self-preservation. Both are contrasted to the paradoxical form of self-interest which recognises that the desire to establish a perfectly harmonious intimacy with a beloved may only be satisfied through self-denying service.

# Enobarbus

Enobarbus’ attitude to Cleopatra is typically ambivalent: although he comments sardonically on Antony’s subjugation to the queen during his initial appearance, his first act is to drink to her health (1.2.79, 1.2.12-13). When Antony informs him of his decision to return to Rome, he declares that women should “be esteem’d nothing” compared to “a great cause,” and implies that the queen is a temporary distraction encountered in the course of his master’s “travel,” while at the same time warning him ironically that “Cleopatra, catching but the least noise of this, dies instantly,” as she has done “twenty times” before (1.2.137-55). Later in the play, however, Enobarbus gives a much more passionate account of this “wonderful piece of work,” despite his clear understanding that her first encounter with Antony was as carefully planned as her multiple ‘deaths’ (1.2.153-55): her servants “made their bends adornings;” her ship was “burnish’d” and “perfum’d;” while her own beauty was artificially enhanced, like a painting in which “the fancy outwork[s] nature” (2.2.191-218). Overall, despite his characteristic sardonicism, which emerges again when he concludes that his master has in fact been induced to “pay his heart for what his eyes eat only” (2.2.225-26), Enobarbus clearly feels the full power of Cleopatra’s charm, which he declares “age cannot wither…nor custom stale” (2.2.232-39). He is much more intensely erotic than his Roman interlocutors, as is underlined by the contrast between his poetic evocation of the queen’s beauty and Agrippa’s prosaically expressed account, which concentrates entirely on her political influence: “She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed; he ploughed her, and she cropp’d” (2.2.297-98).

Just as Enobarbus gives a partial view of Cleopatra in his opening conversation with Antony, he also controls his shock at Fulvia’s death, which is so intense that the news has to be repeated to him twice before he can collect himself sufficiently to declare dismissively that “the tears live in an onion that should water this sorrow,” since his master’s “old smock brings forth a new petticoat” (1.2.156-70). Taken together, Enobarbus’ layered reactions both to Cleopatra’s attractions and Fulvia’s death suggest that he habitually detaches himself from his own emotions, adopting a hard-bitten persona, but that he is in fact much more passionate than he wishes to acknowledge. The jauntily cynical tone of his advice to Antony disguises the seriousness of his attempt both to arm him against Cleopatra’s wiles, which he knows might otherwise easily thwart his attempt to return to Rome, and to soothe any sadness or guilt that he might feel over Fulvia’s death.

The frankness with which Antony discusses his feelings about Cleopatra with Enobarbus in their opening conversation shows the depth of the intimacy between the two men (1.2.145-52). Cleopatra acknowledges this when she twice assumes that Enobarbus can interpret her own lover’s behaviour better than she is able to (4.2.13, 4.2.23). This long-standing friendship has been sustained not only by serious, or semi-serious strategic discussions such as the one analysed above, and no doubt by the two friends’ reliance on each other’s support during numerous military campaigns, but partly by their shared taste for revelry: on Pompey’s galley a drunken Enobarbus enthusiastically invites his “brave emperor [to] dance now the Egyptian bacchanals and celebrate our drink,” as he has no doubt done countless times before (2.7.103-05). This exuberant love of drinking, dining, singing and dancing is indicative of the underlying warm-heartedness which has enabled Antony and Enobarbus to form a truly passionate attachment (1.2.12-13, 1.2.45-46, 2.2.177-83, 2.6.72-74, 2.6.132-36, 2.7.94-118). Whereas Caesar refuses to humble himself, like “strong Enobarb [who] is weaker than the wine,” because he does not value the spontaneous rapport which wine can encourage, but sees the loosening of his “tongue,” which “spleets what it speaks,” merely as a handicap, Enobarbus’ drunkenness is a sign that joyous camaraderie matters more to him than his dignity (2.7.121-24).

Although Enobarbus broadly supports Antony’s decision to leave Cleopatra, as we have seen, not only is he much more deeply affected by her charm than the unerotic Philo, but his attitude to his political ambitions is much more ambivalent (1.1.1-15). He endeavours to hold himself aloof from the political world as far as is possible, even though he is often required to become involved as one of Antony’s chief commanders. His refusal to “entreat” Antony to moderate his language in his meeting with Caesar not only shows his fierce loyalty, but implies that he prioritises “private stomaching” and individual “passion” over political ambitions: “I shall entreat him to answer like himself” (2.2.1-13). Taken together, his undiplomatic insistence that Caesar and Antony are merely “borrow[ing] one another’s love” temporarily, in order to see off the threat of Pompey, and his mockery of Lepidus’ professed affection for the other members of the triumvirate point to an underlying frustration with the pervasive fickleness of political life, and conversely, one might assume, to a nature which is itself distinguished by its passionate constancy (2.2.103-06, 3.2.6-20).

Generally, however, Enobarbus is sardonically resigned, rather than passionately opposed, to this fickleness: after learning that Lepidus has been imprisoned by Caesar, he comments sardonically that the world now has just “a pair of chaps,” who will “grind th’ one the other” (3.5.7-15). His exposure to the brutal logic of power politics, in which Antony is seemingly as willing as Caesar to “borrow…love” temporarily for reasons of expediency, and then to attempt to “grind” his rival to pieces, seems to be gradually corroding Enobarbus’ personal loyalty to his commander even before the disastrous naval battle: shortly after making this latter comment he is summoned to Antony’s presence, but, despite the fact that there will clearly be much to talk about, since “the poor third is up,” and Pompey has just been murdered by one of his master’s own officers, he merely remarks dismissively, “’Twill be naught, but let it be. Bring me to Antony” (3.5.12, 3.5.23-24). Moreover, there is evidence that Enobarbus too has become habituated to the pursuit of profit and prestige during a lengthy succession of campaigns, even though his underlying motive may all along have been to support Antony’s cause: he tells Pompey, “I have prais’d ye when you have well deserv’d ten times as much as I said you did,” and agrees with Menas that they have both behaved like organised “thieves” (2.6.75-78, 2.6.88-96). The very fact that he admits to his vanity and injustice, however, albeit in his characteristic tone of detached flippancy, implies that his passionate heart has by no means been completely desensitised.

Enobarbus has also been hardened by the intrinsic harshness of war, as is shown by his criticism of Caesar for weeping when bidding farewell to his sister. The comparison which he draws between the emperor’s tears and the dark markings on a horse’s face, traditionally considered a sign of unreliability, implicitly reflects his view–born out of course by the events leading up to his master’s downfall–that sympathetic concern is incompatible with the ruthless determination of a true warrior, as does his insistence that, by contrast with Octavius, Antony himself did not weep either at the death of Brutus or Julius Caesar, but was merely “troubled with a rheum” (3.2.50-59). Later, he makes this point more clearly when he rebukes Antony for expressing his gratitude to his followers in such a maudlin manner: “they weep, and I, an ass, am onion-eyed. For shame, transform us not to women” (4.2.15-33, 4.2.34-36). Both men agree at this moment that the speech might have an enervating effect on men who are preparing for a major battle on the following day (4.2.37-45).

Enobarbus’ intervention in this speech also illustrates the conflict between his cynical self-regard and his fundamentally passionate nature (3.13.199-200). Even taken purely at face value, his concern for the army’s morale implies that he is still attached to a cause which he has in fact already decided to desert -similarly he fetched Antony to witness Cleopatra’s perfidious flirtation with Thidias even after apparently determining to “leave [him] to his sinking” (3.13.55-85). On a deeper level, what he presents as prudent military advice could be seen simply as a desperate attempt to prevent Antony’s sad speech from further aggravating the grief and guilt that he is already feeling at the prospect of leaving his master. Although, he tries to dismiss the speech, rightly or wrongly (see below), as a self-indulgent effort on Antony’s part to relish his popularity by “mak[ing] his followers weep,” he clearly cannot repress his own tears entirely, even though he brands himself an “ass” for having apparently been manipulated into crying. As with Fulvia’s death, he uses his favourite onion metaphor to distance himself from his own tears (4.2.9-24; compare 4.2.35 and 1.2.169-70).

Enobarbus has supported his master’s cause energetically while it has a fair chance of success, and is without doubt deeply affected by his defeat, but, after remaining loyal for a while thereafter, “though [his] reason sits in the wind against [him],” he decides that he cannot, like Antony, allow his “valor” to “prey…on reason” (3.7.1-48, 3.10.15-23, 3.10.34-36, 3.13.3-12, 3.13.194-200). However, the “reason[able]” calculations which lead to him deserting are entirely self-regarding and take no account of his affection for Antony: he has nothing to counterbalance his worry that his master’s probable defeat will deprive him of status, fortune, or indeed life itself except the reflection that “to follow with allegiance a fall’n lord” is to “earn…a place i’ th’ story,” and the rueful acknowledgement that Caesar generally offers deserters “entertainment, but no honourable trust” (3.12.43-46, 4.6.10-19). What follows shows Enobarbus and the reader that “reason” only deserves the name if it takes its bearings by the substantial satisfactions of constant intimacy.

It is the generosity which Antony shows in returning the faithless Enobarbus’ “treasure, with bounty overplus,” which finally dismantles the latter’s cynical assumption that the world revolves around status and profit (4.6.19-21). Precisely because Enobarbus has now deserted Antony’s cause, he cannot assume that this magnanimous act is motivated by self-love, as he did earlier with his master’s valedictory speech, but must see it simply as a tender acknowledgement of a long-standing friendship (4.2.22-23). His case now resembles that of a recently orphaned child, who suddenly realises that his proudest victories in the games that he used to play were really only ever truly enjoyable because of the unobtrusive presence of his loving parents. Although he phrases his first response in habitually materialistic terms, declaring, “O Antony, thou mine of bounty, how wouldst thou have paid my better service,” he knows that the profit which he has forfeited is the trusting intimacy which he could have enjoyed if he had reciprocated his master’s sympathetic care (4.6.30-33). This generosity “blows [his] heart,” both in the sense of striking or exploding it and of causing it to expand or bloom, since he feels the bitterness of his loss at the same instant as he acknowledges the intensity of his love (4.6.33).

Enobarbus now understands that the only true “nobleness of life,” to use Antony’s phrase, consists in uniting with a beloved in constant friendship (1.1.33-37). The bitterness of his revulsion against the self-regard which has deprived him of this good is as unlimited as the devotion in which it is rooted. He now discards not only his desire for profit and honour, but even his instinct for self-preservation, that most deeply rooted manifestation of self-love: not only does he attempt to give away his treasure to the messenger, but he prays to be disgraced in the world’s “register” as a “master leaver,” after dying in the most shameful manner, in “some ditch…; the foul’st best fits my latter part of life” (4.9.18-22, 4.6.36-38). There is no need even to engineer his own death in any material way, for mere “thought will do’t” (4.6.35). His heart, already “dried with grief,” continuously confronts the fact that he has forfeited Antony’s love as a result of his pride, “throw[ing]” itself against the flint and hardness of [his] fault”–until it eventually “break[s] to powder” purely under the pressure of these “foul thoughts” (4.9.15-18).

Enobarbus’ folly is to have disrupted the interchange of trust and gratitude on which deep attachments are founded. As he now realises, these can only be sustained by an equitable exchange of self-denying care: “how wouldst thou have paid my better service” (4.6.30-33). However, the penance by which Enobarbus attempts to restore this balance after his egregious perfidy shows that what one might call the transactions of love take a highly paradoxical form in the deepest attachments, since the *summum bonum* of a perfectly harmonious intimacy demands a devotion which is intransigently self-effacing. The unobtrusive manner of Eros’ and Enobarbus’ suicides implies that both men ultimately prioritise their devotion to Antony over their desire for a reciprocal care: Eros asks his master to turn his head away before unexpectedly stabbing himself rather than his master, while Enobarbus’ last two desperate speeches are both soliloquies -there is in fact no evidence that Antony even hears about his death (4.6.29-38, 4.9.1-33).

Enobarbus knows that to reduce the penance by which he atones for disrupting the intimacy to a transaction aimed at satisfying his own needs would further divide him from his beloved. It is for this reason that Enobarbus can do no more than simply hope against hope that Antony might be “noble…” enough to “forgive” him thoroughly of his own accord (4.9.18-20). Enobarbus’ guilt is typical of the transactions of deep love, which, paradoxically, impel lovers to foreground their unconditional service rather than the sense of intimate connection with their beloved which is in fact their ultimate objective. Thus, although the loyal “precedent services” of Eros requite his master for emancipating him from slavery and are in their turn rewarded by Antony’s absolute trust, while it is the latter’s generosity, itself a reward for Enobarbus’ previous “honest[y],” which finally secures the latter’s complete devotion, it is a measure of the truly passionate nature of these services precisely that they are not conceived of as transactional by either party, but as unstintingly generous (4.14.77-84, 4.5.16-17).

However, Enobarbus’ uncommunicated hope for forgiveness shows that the self-denying service of passionate lovers does ultimately serve their interests, since the purpose of eliminating all divisive desires is to unite with their beloved -although Enobarbus hopes only to go some way towards restoring his internal sense of connectedness with his friend. Since the self-denial of lovers is therefore a means to an end, even though it may present itself as an end in itself, it is not necessarily limitless. Shakespeare uses Eros’ refusal to extend his service to killing his master, which is motivated by a need to “escape the sorrow of Antony’s death,” rather than by compassion for his master, to show that even the most intransigently passionate lover’s apparently entirely self-effacing care does in fact have a limit, since it is rooted in the pursuit of a fulfilment which depends on prioritising the relationship with the beloved above all other considerations (4.14-89-95). This incident indicates that this is not quite the same thing as prioritising sympathetic care for the beloved themselves at all times, although admittedly these two aims almost always coincide.

In this way, Shakespeare uses Enobarbus to expose the essential nature of love. If, as the above argument suggests, humble, self-denying devotion represents the ultimate expression of intense passion, then, paradoxically, the very abjectness and obscurity of Enobarbus’ repentance and death are signs that he has reached the apex of the erotic hierarchy which the play implicitly outlines. He is sharply contrasted with the more self-loving characters in the play, since, far from exploiting Antony to fuel his self-regard, as both Caesar and Cleopatra do in their different ways (see below), he implies that the world’s “rank” and “register” would only be of substantial use to him if they could somehow reflect his passionate guilt at having forfeited his connection with his beloved “in particular” (4.9.18-22). Enobarbus’ abject humility is thus implicitly offered as the standard by which all the other, more self-regarding characters in the play may be judged: ironically, the titanic ambitions that dominate this proto-imperial world pursue a much less valuable return than the passion which leads to Enobarbus’ abject self-annihilation, since, as we shall see, these ambitions offer no intrinsic gratification, but depend entirely upon external validation. The corollary of Enobarbus’ epiphany is that those who devote themselves to such ambitions are, despite appearances, bound to live starved, stunted lives, since their only substantial reward will be “clay [and] dungy earth” (1.1.35). By contrast with Caesar, Enobarbus understands in the end that the only truly fulfilling form of “possess[ion]” is the sense of unity with his beloved which he could have gained by sacrificing his desire for status and remaining loyal to Antony (2.7.101).

This is not to deny that Enobarbus’ previous characteristic scepticism may be a prudent stance to adopt in the fickle world of power politics, which, as we shall see, is dominated by ambitious characters whose calculating self-love is by no means subordinated to their passionate attachments. Quite apart from the naivety of Antony’s trust in Cleopatra (see below), the passionate, but undiscriminating Eros, whose name implies that he encapsulates the strengths and weaknesses of intransigent passion, pities the queen deeply when she is merely staging one of her many ‘deaths,’ while Dolabella assumes that she is mourning for Antony, when, as we shall see, her real concern is to find out from him whether she will be led in triumph (3.11.46-48, 5.2.71-110). By contrast, as we have seen, Enobarbus never allows his own fascination with the queen to soften his sardonic attitude to her “becomings” (1.2.140-51). On the other hand, Dolabella is prepared to risk incurring Caesar’s wrath to help Cleopatra, while Eros’ suicide shows that, unlike Enobarbus, his self-love has always been regulated by his passionate attachments. The contrasting strengths and weaknesses displayed by Eros and Enobarbus point to the inherent tension between prudence and erotic constancy, and imply that, in political situations at least, passionate characters need to acquire a capacity for discrimination, while ensuring that their ardent desires are not stunted, as could be said of Enobarbus himself prior to his desertion, by the acquisition of a quality which is so antithetical to their underlying nature. Although we do not see Enobarbus live to combine an Eros-like constancy with his habitual shrewdness, the play could be seen as pointing towards such a synthesis.

# Caesar

Caesar’s disapproval of drunkenness, and indeed any form of levity, is a sign that he engages in relationships only when they might help him to “possess” the time, rather than as an end in themselves (2.7.101). At the party hosted by Pompey, Caesar is too concerned with maintaining his dignity to become involved in the spontaneous camaraderie which the wine encourages, whereas Enobarbus, whom he sees only as “weaker” as a result of his inebriation, becomes “a child o’ th’ time,” as he dances with his “brave emperor” (2.7.94-125). If we take our bearings by the dying Enobarbus, who realises that such intimate moments with Antony are worth far more than his pride, we can infer that it is in fact the dignified Caesar who is in a sense the “weaker” character in this scene rather than those who have allowed themselves to be “antick’d” by “the wild disguise” of drink -although of course he would be the one best able to defend himself, if Menas has his way (2.7.124-125, 2.7.66-73). His criticism of the revellers exposes the disjunction between the demands of the erotic and the political sphere.

Ultimately, Caesar wishes to “possess” the “time” in order to gain both prestige in his own life-time and posthumous fame: he invites his followers to see “in all [his] writings” how “hardly he was drawn into this war” and how “calm and gentle [he] proceeded” (2.7.101, 5.1.73-77). He plans a “solemn show” for Antony and Cleopatra’s funeral, because “their story is no less in pity than his glory which brought them to be lamented” (5.2.361-66). Caesar is thus contrasted to Enobarbus in an almost schematic way: whereas Enobarbus wants to die abjectly to punish himself for prioritising prestige over a truly fulfilling friendship, Caesar consistently prioritises fame over personal attachments. Shakespeare obliquely indicates the insubstantiality of “glory” by reminding us that it depends on evoking the admiration of others: Caesar, who does not normally waste words, invites “all” his followers twice to “go with [him],” and see what he has written in the episode quoted above (5.1.73-77). As the archetypal politician, he is entirely reliant on the affirmation of others, whereas the dying Enobarbus knows that friendship has provided him with a solid, intrinsic joy, which exists regardless of the world’s “register” (4.9.22). As we have seen, Enobarbus does not even need Antony to know that he has died for his death to play a meaningful role in his relationship with his friend.

Caesar speaks more truly than he knows when he declares that it is not his “natural vice to hate” Antony (1.4.2-3). He seems angry with Antony at the start of the play, but in fact his criticism is purely a way of establishing a public justification for the war which he plans to wage against his rival: “You may see, Lepidus, and henceforth know…” (1.4.1-33). As soon he realises that he needs Antony to help him to defeat Pompey, he launches into an extended eulogy of his legendary toughness, in which he shamelessly contradicts his previous excoriation of his rival’s decadence (1.4.3-71). Indeed, neither his love nor his hate is “natural,” since he views almost all his relationships purely as instruments to further his ambitions: as we have seen, he cannot understand why Antony should “give a kingdom for a mirth,” or “tippl[e] with a slave,” or “stand the buffet with knaves” (1.4.18-21; see also 2.7.98-125). Whereas Antony allows Enobarbus to interrupt in a passionate and unruly manner with no more than a mild reprimand, Caesar has clearly primed Agrippa to propose the arranged marriage with Octavia as soon as he has been given his cue, so that he himself can avoid losing face were Antony to refuse his offer (2.2.103-38). He offers his sister, whom he claims “no brother did ever love so dearly,” in marriage to a man who loves another woman, and who will, as Enobarbus says, inevitably “wrangle” with him in the end, purely in order to cement the alliance which is needed to defeat Pompey (2.2.148-52). Although he weeps as he is bidding farewell to her, partly no doubt because he knows how her marriage is likely to end, he shamelessly uses her return to Rome, despite all her protests, to represent her as “abus’d” and his army as “ministers” of the gods, appointed “to do [her] justice” (3.6.39-90).

Whereas both Antony and Pompey are temporarily distracted from their prudent understanding that the treaty which they ultimately sign is in their own political interest by their noble and passionate constancy, which leads the latter to express anger over both the death of his father and the end of the republic, and the former to respond in an equally defiant manner, Caesar simply ignores this heated exchange, safe in the knowledge that the logic of power politics is on his side (2.6.8-42). He also ignores the two men’s efforts to patch up an old friendship, in which Pompey’s ongoing generosity has clearly earned Antony’s gratitude (2.6.42-52; see also 2.2.153-57, 2.7.126-28). Whereas Pompey is sincere when he insists that “Fortune” will never make his “heart her vassal,” Caesar may use the language of honourable constancy when it is useful–as when he announces to Antony that he has never “broken the article of [his] oath” (2.2.81-83)–but in practice he simply pursues power and profit in the most prudent and efficient manner possible (2.5.53-56, 2.1.13-14). Although the portrayal of Pompey shows that politicians and their supporters may certainly be moved by patriotism and piety to work for the public good–especially, it is implied in republics–Shakespeare’s decision to set his play during the chaotic, transitional period between the republic and the Roman empire allows him to demonstrate that in this political state of nature, those who pursue power with a clear-sighted, wily prudence will inevitably come to dominate.

The contrasting fortunes of Caesar and Pompey expose the remorseless logic of the political world. Pompey’s passionate and noble effort to restore the “beauteous freedom” of the republic and to avenge his father’s death wins him public support, as we have seen, but his belief that he will prevail simply through this groundswell of patriotism, and because the “great gods…shall assist the deeds of justest men,” is ultimately shown to be naïve (2.6.8-23, 2.1.1-2, 2.1.50, 2.1.8-10). Despite his noble rhetoric, he knows that Caesar’s prudent rapprochement with Antony has enabled the allies to rival him at sea and “o’ercount” him by land, and so in the end tamely submits to an agreement which leaves him controlling only Sicily and Sardinia, in return for sending tribute to Rome (2.6.8-39).

Caesar’s willingness to subordinate both passion and honour to the pursuit of power gives him the advantage over all his rivals. Whereas Caesar promptly betrays Lepidus after using him to defeat Pompey, and has him executed, all the while disguising this ruthlessness under a show of legality in characteristic fashion, Pompey’s fate is ultimately sealed by his noble decision to reject Menas’ plan to murder his political rivals all at once after trapping them on his ship: Pompey declares, “’tis not my profit that doth lead mine honor; mine honor, it,” and sees Antony as a“friend…,” while admitting that, “being done unknown, I should have found it afterwards well done, but must condemn it now” (3.5.7-12, 2.7.70-84). The even more passionate Antony goes further, and “threats the throat of that his officer that murd’red Pompey,” even though the deed was indeed “done unknown” to him -although the implication is that, despite his genuine anger, he will not in the end carry out these “threats,” since the murder has undoubtedly benefited him politically (3.5.18-19). Overall, we can infer from these intricate parallels and contrasts that both passionate attachments and the code of honour represent a major handicap in the political world, since they prevent Caesar’s rivals from matching his single-minded ruthlessness.

Whereas Antony takes up Caesar’s challenge to fight by sea–which the latter delivers purely because this is where his strength lies–partly because he “dares us to’t,” but mainly because this is Cleopatra’s will (3.7.7-69), Caesar himself is prudent rather than nobly or passionately courageous, and would not dream of allowing himself to be goaded into single combat “against a sworder” by Antony’s taunts of cowardice (3.11.35-40, 3.13.20-37). This prudent disregard for honour and passion is in reality what allows Caesar to “o’erpow’r” Antony’s “noble, courageous, high unmatchable” spirit, just in the way that the soothsayer predicts (2.3.20-24). Caesar’s wiliness is shown by the unexpected speed of his advance, which was achieved through “such distractions as beguil’d all spies;” by his efforts to induce Cleopatra to betray or kill Antony; by his decision to “plant those that have revolted in the van,” so as to dishearten Antony’s troops; and by his attempt, albeit abortive, to use Dolabella, Proculeius, who has fooled Antony into believing that he is an ally, and finally his own calming words, to manipulate the queen into being led in triumph (3.7.20-23, 3.7.75-77, 3.12.20-24, 4.6.7-9, 4.15.47-48, 5.1.61-68, 5.2.117-91).

However, although Caesar is easily the most successful political leader in the play, his coolly prudential approach has its disadvantages, as he “gets money where he loses hearts” (2.1.13-14). By contrast, Pompey’s naval strength stems from the fact that “he is belov’d of those that only have fear’d Caesar;” a love that is in part clearly an expression of patriotism and a desire to restore Rome’s “beauteous freedom” (1.4.36-38, 2.1.8-11, 2.6.17). Where constant attachments are not degraded by the political world, they can often be used to advance a political cause, precisely because, as Enobarbus’ death shows, they are ultimately stronger than self-love. Just after Enobarbus has decided to desert, we are led to believe that “the god Hercules, whom Antony lov’d, now leaves him” (4.3.16-17; see 1.3.84 and 4.12.43-45 for the parallels between Antony himself and Hercules, from whom the former claimed descent). Before his desertion Enobarbus was indeed Herculean in his loyalty: he strove vigorously to prevent Cleopatra from becoming involved in the war and to oppose Antony fighting by sea, and, despite being a hardened soldier, is so “sicken[ed] at the sight” of his master’s subsequent defeat that he admits twice that he cannot bear to watch (3.7.1-19, 3.7.34-40, 3.10.1-4, 3.10.15-17). He resembles the anonymous soldier, who swears “by Hercules” after failing to persuade his “noble Emperor” to fight by land (3.7.61-67).

The genuine personal affection which Antony feels for many of his followers has inspired a corresponding loyalty which allows him to retain much of his army even after his initial defeat: after shaking five of them by the hand, he declares a wish that “all of you [were] clapp’d up together in an Antony, that I might do you service so good as you have done,” and, as we have seen, they weep in response, no doubt while vowing eternal loyalty to their master (4.2.10-19, 4.2.33-36). The next battle is won against the odds, precisely through the personal devotion of Antony’s followers: “you…have fought not as you serv’d the cause, but as’t had been each man’s like mine” (4.8.5-7). As with the Hercules image, Shakespeare hints at the transcendent force of this devotion by figuring it as divine: Scarus has “fought to-day as if a god…had destroyed in such a shape” (4.8.24-26). By contrast, Dolabella sees no pressing reason to help Caesar to lead Cleopatra in triumph, after feeling the queen’s grief in a way that “smites [his] very heart at root” (5.2.100-10). Dolabella’s successful deception of Caesar hints that the ruthless ambition which characterises the political world, especially in this proto-imperial age, will always be undermined by an unobtrusive residue of passionate feeling: he remains in his master’s confidence at the end of the play, and even allows himself to gloat surreptitiously over the fact that he gave Cleopatra the information which drives her to “perform…the dreaded act which [Caesar] so sought…to hinder” (5.2.329-32). Having said all this, although a charismatic ability to inspire passionate loyalty may confer enormous power, Caesar’s ultimate annihilation of both Pompey and Antony implies that, in the political sphere at least, cool, fickle prudence will tend ultimately to dominate -which is not to deny that the most powerful leaders of all might possibly be able to combine these two contrasting qualities.

From the broadest point of view, however, Caesar is a pitiable figure, since the prestige that he pursues is not of intrinsic benefit, but depends on his sense of his own superiority, as affirmed by the adulation of his subjects. Moreover, in order to “possess” the world, he must cease to “be a child o’ th’ time,” detaching himself from the intimate exchanges which could offer him a truly substantial satisfaction.

# Cleopatra

Cleopatra’s attachment to Antony is stunted by her self-regard: her opening question shows that she is focusing on the devotion which she receives from him– “If it be love indeed, tell me how much” (1.1.13)–whereas lovers who wish to establish a deep rapport with their beloveds naturally concentrate on offering, rather than demanding, self-denying care, as is suggested by Antony’s determination to prioritise his love over his political power: “Here is my space, kingdoms are clay” (1.1.33-37). Moreover, the shallowness of Cleopatra’s affection is exposed by her very desire to “set a bourn how far to be belov’d,” as Antony inadvertently acknowledges when he declares that “there’s beggary in the love that can be reckon’d” (1.1.14-17). By contrast, Antony’s own great vow of loyalty suggests that the intimacy which devoted lovers experience is literally beyond comparison because it constitutes the ultimate good, the only true “nobleness of life”:

Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch

Of the rang’d empire fall! Here is my space,

Kingdoms are clay; our dungy earth alike

Feeds beast as man; the nobleness of life

Is to do thus [embracing].

(1.1.33-37)

Whereas Antony makes a sharp distinction between the substantial joy which he derives from his attachment and the illusory benefits of political status, Cleopatra implicitly assumes that the two are comparable. (By drawing an extended contrast between the two in the speech quoted above, Antony seemingly acknowledges that this is indeed her assumption, even as he rejects it out of hand.) This suggests that the queen values Antony’s love simply because it provides her with a more intense version of the adulation which she receives from her subjects (see for instance 2.2.211-14). She is gratified, not by the intimacy that she might share with her lover in itself, but by the distinction which Antony confers on her by valuing her above his grander concerns. As in the case of political status, however, this distinction is not intrinsically pleasurable, since it may only be savoured by contemplating the value which Antony places on his love relative to these other concerns, precisely as the queen is endeavouring to do in the conversation under discussion. Moreover, not only does Cleopatra’s self-regard provide her with no substantial benefits, while preventing her from offering the self-denying care which could generate a lasting intimacy, but, as her repeated questions also imply, it also leaves her uncertain as to the extent of Antony’s loyalty: she has no more trust in her lover’s willingness to subordinate his self-love to the attachment than she has a capacity to do so herself.

Cleopatra has certainly become famous through her relationship with Antony: Maecenas and Agrippa are eager to pump Enobarbus for an account of her beauty, her extravagant hospitality and the couple’s initial meeting, and prompt him with details which suggest that the romance has been widely discussed in Rome (2.2.176-89). Cleopatra evidently courts such notoriety: her initial encounter with Antony is designed to be a spectacular event– “the city cast her people out upon her”–and she sometimes hops in the most charming manner “through the public street” (2.213-18, 2.2.228-32). It is clearly important to her that Alexas has noticed the unnecessarily “thick” stream of “twenty several messengers” which she has sent to Antony (1.5.61-65). Similarly, Cleopatra and her sons are “publicly enthron’d” in “th’ common show-place, where they exercise,” with the queen dressed as “the goddess Isis,” in which costume she “oft before gave audience” (3.6.3-19). There is no doubt that she is attracted to Antony partly because of the political power which he delegates to her and her children– “realms and islands were as plates dropp’d from his pocket”–which allows her to execute kings at will and to insist on fighting at Actium “as the president of [the] kingdom” (1.5.43-61, 3.3.4-6, 3.7.15-19).

However, there is much evidence to suggest that it is Antony himself who is the primary source of the adulation which Cleopatra craves, rather than the power that he invests in her. Thus, she is too concerned to establish the loyalty of her errant lover as he travels to Rome even to respond to Alexas’ declaration that his master intends to make her queen of “all the East” (1.5.43-61). She undoubtedly relishes the numerous secondary benefits which he provides, but, as we shall see, she understands that her lover can offer a much more intense and consistent level of adoration than could be supplied by public acclaim. It is for this reason, rather than because of any sense of sympathetic intimacy, that she misses him so desperately after his departure for Rome: she “think[s] of him too much” according to Charmian, and simply wishes to “sleep out this great gap of time my Antony is away” (1.5.1-6). She values above all her sense that she is “mov[ing]” a great ruler when they embrace, just as she imagines that her lover’s horse is distinguished by the fact that it “bear[s] the…demi-Atlas of this earth, the arm and burgonet of men” (1.5.21-24). After his death she claims that she is driven by “such poor passion as the maid that milks,” but then proceeds to eulogise Antony as the “noblest of men…the crown o’ th’ earth…the garland of the war…the soldier’s pole” (5.1.63-75). His awesome power– “his legs bestrid the ocean, his rear’d arm crested the world”–is significant to her primarily because of the gratifying distinction he made between his enemies, whom he addressed in a voice of “thunder,” and his friends–in other words, herself–to whom he spoke as mellifluously as the “tuned spheres” (5.2.82-86). Similarly, she does not celebrate “his delights” just for themselves, but because they distinguished him in relation to his companions: they “were dolphin-like, they show’d his back above the element they liv’d in” (5.2.88-90).

Cleopatra’s musings on her previous conquests support Charmian’s bantering insistence that she has desired other political leaders as intensely as her current lover (1.5.29-34, 1.5.66-73). Antony is only the latest of a series of “demi-Atlas[es]” whom she has captivated: the queen recalls being “a morsel” for Julius Caesar and then an object of intense desire for old Pompey, who “would stand and make his eyes grow in my brow…and die with looking on his life” (1.5.23-34). Cleopatra’s love is indeed generic, since she wishes above all to be distinguished by the adoring attentions of the most powerful lover possible: the greater his power, the greater the distinction of being valued above his political ambitions. Having no conception of the intimacy that can be generated through mutual sympathy and care, Cleopatra is concerned with Antony’s real feelings only insofar as they seem to facilitate or thwart the gratification of this desire. She would clearly prefer her lover to be “sad” after his departure for Rome, but nevertheless takes his reported calmness as evidence that he is concealing his “remembrance” of her in order to boost his followers’ morale, thus reassuring herself as to her own continuing influence over such a charismatic leader (1.5.49-61). This forced interpretation of Antony’s impassive behaviour provides a strong hint that she tends to reduce the people around her to ciphers onto which she projects her intransigent pride. All the implications are that Cleopatra’s capacity to form sympathetic attachments has been degraded by her royal status: surrounded by servants and slaves ministering to her every whim, she has been encouraged to give free rein to her self-regard (2.2.201-08).

Cleopatra’s habitually domineering approach frequently forces her interlocutors to conceal their real views. Her semi-serious threats to “chok[e]” even Charmian, who is her most intimate and outspoken confidante, and to give her “bloody teeth” for playfully reminding her that she used to speak of Julius Caesar so admiringly, can easily give way to direct commands for her to remain silent: “pity me, but do not speak to me” (1.5.68-72, 2.5.18-19). The messenger whom she beats, and then threatens with death for informing her of Antony’s marriage, initially flees from her and is not only “afeard to come” back, but is, understandably, both nervous and resentful when he finally agrees to do so (2.5.57-101). His reaction illustrates Charmian’s warning, that “in time we hate that which we often fear” (1.3.12; see below). When the messenger reappears, he is too “afeard” to tell the truth, and thus needs only a little prompting to tell his “dread queen” that Octavia “creeps,” and further, as he warms to his task, that she is more like “a statue, than a breather” that her face is “round, even to faultiness,” and “her forehead [is] as low as she would wish it” (3.3.1-34). The suggestion that the queen might reward him sexually for these flattering lies and half-truths–she demands to see him privately in order to ask him “one” unspecified “thing more”–underlines the implicit parallel between this “proper man,” who has shown that he appreciates Cleopatra’s true “majesty” by appeasing her so carefully, and Antony himself (3.3.38-48). Antony too habitually conciliates the queen, but, as we shall see, at the expense of repressing his underlying distrust and resentment, which he subsequently vents in spasms of savage anger, just in the way that Charmian predicted he would.

Early on in the play, Charmian’s advice to her mistress indicates the standpoint from which Cleopatra’s habitual motives and tactics should be judged. When the queen learns that Antony is intending to go to Rome, she orders Charmian to tell him that she is “dancing” if he is “sad,” but “sudden sick” if he is “in mirth”: presumably, if he is “sad,” she will know that he cares about her and so can pretend to be indifferent, which would carry an implicit threat that he might lose her if he were to depart, but conversely, if he is glad to be going, her principal effort would be to disarm him by appealing to his pity and guilt (1.3.2-5). As we have seen, however, Charmian warns her at this point that “in time we hate that which we often fear,” declaring that if she “did love him dearly, she should “give him way, cross him in nothing,” rather than attempting to “enforce the like from him” (1.3.6-12). Her implication is that a true lover would strive to sympathise with the concerns which are driving Antony back to Rome, since trust can only be won through generous, self-denying service.

Cleopatra’s blunt rejection of this advice– “Thou teachest like a fool: the way to lose him” (1.3.10)–reflects her belief that Antony’s love is bound to be inconstant, unless sustained by her manipulations, since, judging him by her own standards, she assumes that it is rooted in self-love. As we shall see, instead of showing him sympathetic care by restraining her possessiveness and prioritising his security–which clearly requires a “quick remove” to Rome (1.2.99-111, 1.2.179-94)– she tries to manipulate him into staying by playing on his fears in a variety of cunning ways. Ironically, considering her overweening sense of her own dignity, the queen’s overall aim is therefore from one point of view pitiably unambitious compared to that of a truly erotic lover: she cannot yet appreciate Antony’s desire to enshrine his devotion as a ruling passion, or reciprocate in a manner that might facilitate a trusting intimacy, which would in fact be far more fulfilling than the distinction of being adored by him. Such an intimacy would render her manipulations redundant, as Charmian seems to realise, and would sustain itself naturally, regardless of her lover’s physical location.

The two opening conversations between the eponymous lovers illustrate Cleopatra’s priorities and tactics in detail, especially when considered in conjunction with Charmian’s advice. At first, the queen manages to goad Antony into making the passionate vow of loyalty quoted above by insisting vehemently that he obey Caesar’s “dismission” and “Fulvia’s scolds” (1.1.55-85). When he subsequently reneges on this vow, she declares that she is “sick”–presumably, according to the rule outlined above, on the basis that he seems more content to leave than “sad”–and attempts to shame him both for his uxorious obedience and, in a shamelessly contradictory manner, for his fickleness and insincerity (1.3.13-85). When, however, Antony proves merely to be angered by this onslaught, and abruptly declares that he will “leave,” Cleopatra is unexpectedly forced to shift her ground. Partly no doubt to give herself time to think, she then presents herself as feeling so stunned by a blow which, despite her lover’s assurances, she pretends to view as irreversible, that she loses her thread: “my oblivion is a very Antony, and I am all forgotten” (1.3.86-91). This quickly improvised appeal is cunningly multi-levelled: not only does she portray herself as too wretched to assemble her thoughts, and simultaneously reproach her lover for his hard-heartedness in forgetting her, but, just as Enobarbus predicted, she begins to hint darkly that she might herself soon seek a permanent “oblivion” if she were to be abandoned (1.3.90-93, 1.2.140-44).

Cleopatra’s reference to being “all forgotten” signals a change in tack: from now on her main effort is to appeal to her lover’s sense of pity. However, armed by Enobarbus’ advice, Antony finally manages to resist a tactic which his friend implies has been successful many times in the past (1.2.140-51). Thus, the queen is finally driven by Antony’s obduracy to adopt the desperate course of actually confessing to her “becomings” –to use her own insouciant term for her machinations–and promising to discard them, since they do not “eye well with” him (1.3.91-97). She now claims to be speaking sincerely for the first time to a lover who, she announces, with a fair approximation to passion, occupies a place “near [her] heart.” What follows, however, is precisely the sort of emotional blackmail which Enobarbus predicted: she declares that he “kill[s]” her when he is displeased with her, and goes on to urge him histrionically to “be deaf to [her] unpitied folly” as he departs (1.3.96-98). Thus, this final moment of ‘sincerity’ turns out simply to be the most disarming of the “becomings” through which she still hopes ultimately to impose her will. Overall, although Cleopatra can imitate passionate sincerity, her early speeches are invariably power moves, since she is not actually aiming to establish an intimate rapport, which, as we have seen, must be founded on sympathetic care, but to reinforce her self-regard by securing Antony’s continuing adulation. As Charmian realises, she plays on a variety of fears, the most effective of which is her lover’s fear of losing her.

Insofar as Cleopatra is attracted to Antony, rather than simply concerned to gratify her self-regard, her needs are primarily sensual: after admitting that she envies the “happy horse [which] bear[s] the weight of Antony,” she declares that she “take[s] no pleasure in aught an eunuch has,” thus inadvertently admitting that she is a stranger to “fierce affections” such as Mardian feels, which cannot be satisfied sexually (1.5.21, 1.5.9-18). However, even her sensual desire is subordinated to her cool determination to exploit her desirability. Enobarbus, who is himself by no means immune to her charm, verifies how forcefully and determinedly she “hits the sense[s]” of taste, smell, touch, hearing and sight through a “monstrous matter of feast,” “strange, invisible perfume,” “the touches of…flower-soft hands,” “the tune of flutes,” and, most crucially, “her own person,” which “o’er-picture[s]…Venus” (2.2.212, 2.2.182, 2.2.191-212). Although her only weapon is her sexual attraction, she resembles Caesar in that she has marshalled her powers over the years with military efficiency.

Cleopatra inadvertently admits that she was “cold in blood” even in her “salad days,” when passions are usually at their most intense (1.5.25-28). She is regularly associated with creatures that are “cold in blood”: immediately after recalling that Antony calls her his “serpent of old Nile,” she “feed[s] [her]self with most delicious poison”–as she savours the influence which she has exerted over a series of great rulers–in a manner that associates her with the asps which eventually kill her (1.5.25-34). According to Cleopatra’s own conceit, which Charmian unwittingly develops, she has in effect “betray[ed],” or tricked Antony into desiring her, just as “tawny-finn’d fishes” are “pierce[d]” with a baited, “bended hook,” while offering him in return only a “salt-fish,” which he is fooled into retrieving “with fervency” (2.5.10-18). The implicit comparison of the queen to a dead “salt-fish” places her at three removes from warm-bloodedness: she is not only a fish, but lifeless, and not only lifeless, but artificially preserved over a long period. Significantly, rather than herself submitting to the passionate effects of music, “moody food of us who trade in love,” as she is for a moment tempted to do, she orders it to be played at a distance while she fishes, in order to disarm the prey that she hopes to “betray” (2.5.1-12). All of this suggests that Enobarbus is correct to declare that Antony “pays his heart for what his eyes eat only,” since Cleopatra is indeed incapable of returning his “fervency” (2.2.225-26).

Cleopatra worries that Antony’s love will be fleeting because, judging by her own standards, she assumes at first, not only that it is fundamentally self-regarding, but that it is primarily a physical appetite. For this reason, she fears the inevitable decline of her beauty, as is reflected in the contrast between her voluble criticisms of Octavia’s “height,” “gait,” “years,” “face,” “hair” and voice and her silence when informed that her rival is thirty (3.3.11-34). She is concerned that Antony might be repelled by the knowledge that she is “wrinkled deep in time” and “black” with the “amorous pinches” of her multiple ardent lovers as well as those of Phoebus -the sun is frequently associated by Shakespeare with sexual desire (1.5.27-29). This is no doubt why she uses so much perfume and employs artificial aids to make her cheeks “glow” (2.2.193, 2.2.203-04, 2.2.212). Antony knows her well enough to attack her where she is most vulnerable: in his two great rages he reminds her of her long sexual history and prays that Octavia might “plough [her] visage up with her prepared nails” (3.13.116-22, 4.12.37-39)

Cleopatra also knows that even the most vigorous physical desire is necessarily diminished by the very consummation which it pursues. As well as enabling her to control her lovers in a general way, Cleopatra’s systematic contrariness therefore serves a very specific purpose: by repeatedly thwarting the very desire which she provokes, she ensures that, whereas “other women cloy the appetites they feed… she makes hungry where most she satisfies” (2.2.335-37). When, at the start of the play, Antony, “stirr’d” by “the love of Love, and her soft hours,” asks, “What sport tonight!” Cleopatra quickly assures him that there may be none at all unless he “hear[s] the ambassadors” (1.1.43-48). Although in this case, she is practising reverse psychology, since she really wants him to dismiss the messengers, this implicit threat shows that she is in the habit of frustrating his sexual desire. It is significant that her first impulse after learning of Antony’s decision to depart is to withhold her body, telling him to “stand further from” her (1.3.18). She recalls at one point how she “laugh’d him out of patience; and that night…laugh’d him into patience,” but then the next morning again rendered him powerless, symbolically emasculating him by dressing him in her own “tires and mantles,” while herself wearing his sword (2.5.19-23). Thus, Antony finds himself serving in rapid succession as both “the bellows and the fan to cool a gipsy’s lust,” as Cleopatra alternates between apparent ardour and frigidity (1.1.9). Her characteristic combination of apparent warmth and inner coolness in her dealings with the opposite sex is foreshadowed in her initial encounter with Antony, at which she has arranged to be fanned by “pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,” who “seem to glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool, and what they undid did” (2.2.201-05).

Although the queen is no doubt correct in her belief that intense sexual desire will gradually fade unless it is sporadically frustrated, she is, however, mistaken in her minor premise; namely that her lover’s desire for her is primarily physical and ultimately subordinated to his pride. As we have seen, she cannot understand at first that Antony is deeply attached to her as well as physically attracted, or that his devotion is therefore inherently constant, just as he maintains in the great oath of loyalty quoted above (1.1.33-37; see below for a fuller analysis of Antony’s love). Ironically, the queen’s programme of provocative frustration inevitably thwarts her lover’s staunch devotion along with his lust: he wants to “wander through the streets” companionably with her before they go to bed together, but is, as always, uncertain of her response - “Come my queen, last night you did desire it” (1.1.53-55). The slightly plaintive tone of this plea suggests that, although Cleopatra’s unpredictability is designed to prolong the relationship, it actually weakens the trust on which an enduring intimacy must be founded; a trust which, as Charmian points out, can only be cemented by unstinting sympathetic care (1.3.11-12).

Cleopatra’s response to Antony’s decline and death allows the reader to gauge the extent and nature of her constancy. At first her involvement in the battle of Actium seems designed purely to show how her self-love prevents her from offering her lover reliable support: her proud determination to be involved in the battle, “as the president of my kingdom,” forces Antony to fight by sea, even though his “ships are not well mann’d,” while her subsequent flight shows that she instinctively prioritises self-preservation over her lover’s best interests (3.7.1-48, 3.10.9-23). There is evidence that Antony is in fact mistaken when he declares, “thou knew’st too well my heart was to thy rudder tied by th’ strings,” and “o’er my spirit thy full supremacy thou knew’st,” for Cleopatra effectively acknowledges that she does not actually understand the self-denying devotion which drove him to accompany her as she fled: “I little thought you would have followed” (3.11.55-61). It is typical of her, moreover, that she does not “go to him” and “comfort him” after his defeat, as her attendants entreat her to do, but rather manipulates him into kissing and forgiving her by fainting as she “approaches” him, as if “death will seize her” (3.11.1-48). Moreover, even her repeated apologies seem to be a calculated tactic, designed to confirm that she is completely “forgive[n]” for her “fearful sails,” since she attempts to justify her behaviour as soon as she is away from her lover: “Is Antony or we in fault for this?” (3.13.2, 3.11.55, 3.11.61, 3.11.68). By contrast with Enobarbus, Cleopatra is content with what I will argue is a superficial forgiveness on Antony’s part, since she does not understand trusting intimacy, but merely longs to be distinguished by her lover’s care. Despite the couple’s facile reconciliation, this episode, combined with Cleopatra’s history of manipulative “wrangling,” prepares the way for Antony’s great rages, which ultimately destroy the relationship.

However, there is also evidence that Antony’s patent willingness to give up half the world for love finally compels Cleopatra to recognise the extent of his devotion, and ultimately to abandon her “becomings” and “wrangling,” since these were always predicated on the assumption that his primary motives were pride and sexual desire. Not only are her repeated apologies for fleeing the battle uncharacteristically humble, even if they are self-regarding in the manner described above, but from now on her approach is consistently much more conciliatory than at the start of the play. As we shall see, she moderates her self-assertion and generally presents a fair approximation of passionate, self-denying constancy in an effort to encourage her lover to sustain his unexpectedly extreme devotion. This is not to deny that she only changes strategy because she now realises that the depth of Antony’s love is such that it could gratify her self-love even more deeply than she had previously imagined: it is clear from the elegiac speech quoted above that she is still primarily concerned with the distinction which Antony’s adoration afforded her even at the end of the play (5.2.76-92). Nevertheless, after the battle of Actium the queen could be said to move up a level in the erotic hierarchy which the play implicitly outlines, since she remains loyal until she knows that he is dying (see below).

Thus, Cleopatra is not tempted when Caesar offers her “principalities” in return for Antony’s “grizzled head” (3.13.17-19; see also 3.12.16-24). If she were seriously thinking of betraying Antony, she certainly would not insist so decisively that not only her own attendants, but the apparently robustly loyal Enobarbus remain present while she declares to Thidias that her “honor was not yielded, but conquer’d merely” (3.13.46-52). She assumes that Charmian, Iras and Enobarbus, all of whom of course know her intimately, will understand that in flirting with Caesar’s emissary she is simply reverting to a reliable strategy, which has so often in the past enabled her to manipulate situations to the best advantage. (She uses a similar strategy later in the play when, with a misleading meekness, she “desires instruction” from Caesar, “that she preparedly may frame herself to th’ way she’s forc’d to” -5.1.54-56). Enobarbus, however, is too intently focused on his own internal debates over deserting Antony to make any such allowances: by taking Cleopatra’s dalliance with Thidias as a sign that his master’s “dearest” friends are “quit[ting]” he attempts to dilute the enormity of the perfidy which he himself is contemplating, while at the same time, in typically ambivalent fashion, satisfying his urge to serve Antony for a little while longer by informing him of his mistress’s apparent fickleness (3.13.62-65). Antony’s prompt acceptance of Cleopatra’s protestations of loyalty suggests that he is aware that he has overreacted, while Enobarbus’ failure even to mention the matter in his subsequent soliloquy provides a strong hint that even he does not really credit his own suspicions (3.13.105-31, 3.13.156-67, 3.13.194-200).

A character who was purely concerned with self-preservation would undoubtedly have deserted her lover after his first defeat, as many of Antony’s followers do (3.12.3-6, 4.1.12-14, 4.6.15-16). However, Cleopatra never colludes with the enemy in the way that Antony comes to suspect, as is evident from the fact that Caesar has to send messengers in order to discover her state of mind at the end of the play (4.12.10-29, 5.1.67-68). Instead, she helps her lover on with his armour before his next battle–her first visible act of care in the play–while fantasising about him overcoming Caesar in single combat, and even remains faithful when he has finally been decisively beaten (4.4.5-18, 4.4.36-38, 4.12.30-31). Moreover, as the play goes on, there is increasing evidence that Cleopatra has finally accepted Charmian’s advice that the best way to elicit her lover’s devotion is to attempt to please him: not only does she apologise repeatedly after the battle of Actium, as noted above, but she responds to Antony’s accusations of fickleness and promiscuity in the wake of the Thidias incident simply with a great vow of loyalty, rather than the proud self-assertion which one might have expected (3.11.54-68, 3.13.2, 3.13.105-67). After his final defeat she initially attempts to placate her lover– “Why is my lord enraged against his love?”–and then, rather than reacting indignantly to his spiteful prayer that she should be led in triumph while being tormented by Octavia, merely exits in genuine confusion (4.12.10-39, 4.13.1-3).

We can infer that it is by this time no longer Cleopatra’s first impulse to manipulate Antony from the fact that it is Charmian who has to suggest that she adopt her habitual strategy of pretending to be dead in order to soften her lover’s anger (4.13.3-6). Although Cleopatra agrees to this deception and even embellishes it with her own pathetic detail, her subsequent “prophesying fear” that Antony might commit suicide out of grief, which leads her to send messengers urgently to tell him the truth, demonstrates not only her need for him, but also a new-found, if partial, capacity to appreciate the passionate devotion which his recriminations mask (4.14.120-27). Thus, during the second half of the play, Cleopatra not only shows some courage and a degree of humble restraint, but even a modicum of care and sympathetic understanding. She is shrewd enough to recognise that she can only gain the intense admiration that she craves if she is prepared to reciprocate her lover’s care. Overall, her behaviour in the second half of the play therefore provides evidence that the most considered versions of self-love may eventually generate a form of loyalty.

However, even the great oath of constancy which Cleopatra delivers after the Thidias incident, in which she vows she is not “cold-hearted” toward Antony, could actually be seen precisely as illustrating her coldness, as well as her determination to remain loyal (3.13.158-62. The contrast with Enobarbus underlines the fact that it is beyond the queen to feel the desperate guilt which is the inevitable corollary of a failure to provide the self-denying care that truly constant attachments entail: whereas Cleopatra invites heaven to “dissolve” her instantly, it is Enobarbus’ own “melancholy,” personified by the moon, which punishes him for his cold-heartedness, and moreover does so slowly and painfully, by repeatedly “throw[ing] [his] heart against the flint and hardness of [his] fault” in a manner that generates insistent “foul thoughts” which he knows could only “finish” with his death (4.9.7-18). In addition, the queen’s oath is typically high-handed, in that she offers both her subjects and her children as well as her own life as guarantees of her loyalty. Moreover, it is not her own person–which is simply “dissolve[d]”–but “the memory of [her] womb, together with [her] brave Egyptians all,” whom she pictures, not exactly dying in “some ditch,” like Enobarbus, but lying “graveless,” exposed to the “flies and gnats of Nile” (3.13.159-67, 4.6.36-38). One may infer that she could dispense with her subjects and even her children more easily than Antony, because their adulation is likely to be less all-encompassing. (Perhaps the most startling illustration of the queen’s lack of care for her children is her seeming indifference to Caesar’s threat to put them to “destruction” if she commits suicide to avoid being led in triumph -5.2.131-33). Thus overall, her oath hints at her self-love rather than demonstrating her devoted care in the manner that she intends.

Although the queen eventually learns to restrain her “wrangling” and begins to demonstrate humble loyalty, her response to the loss, or putative loss, of Antony exposes her underlying self-regard. When the eponymous lovers both issue suits to Caesar after the defeat at Actium, which they initially assume to be final, Antony simply “requires to live in Egypt,” or, failing that, as “a private man in Athens,” presumably with the hope of continuing his relationship with Cleopatra, whereas the queen, who has already used her lover’s power to ensure that her sons are “proclaim’d the kings of kings,” “craves the circle of the Ptolomies for her heirs” (3.12.11-14, 3.6.3-16). Again, we can see that Cleopatra relishes her political status, albeit only as a secondary consideration -she is no doubt astutely aware that Caesar would never allow Antony’s request.

Whereas Cleopatra ignores Antony’s spiteful prediction that she will be led in triumph while her priority is still to save the relationship, as soon as she knows that her lover is dying, this concern gives way to her fear of being displayed in “th’ imperious show of the full fortun’d Caesar”: it is this fear that prompts her to haul the dying Antony laboriously up to join her on her monument, rather than venturing down to kiss him (4.12.32-39, 4.14.18-40). Although after his death Cleopatra figures herself as no different in her mourning from any humble “maid that milks and does the meanest chares,” and apparently wishes to “throw [her] sceptre at the injurious gods,” since “all’s but naught” now that they have “stol’n our jewel,” all the evidence is that her primary concern is actually to preserve her dignity, and avoid being exhibited to “the shouting varletry of censuring Rome” and “mechanic slaves with greasy aprons” (4.15.73-91, 5.2.53-62, 5.2.208-13, 5.2.354-56). Indeed, one may infer that even her most fervently grief-stricken eulogy of Antony is in fact shrewdly calculated to manipulate Dolabella into telling her whether Caesar “will lead [her] then in triumph,” since she raises this issue with unceremonious abruptness as soon as she is assured that he is feeling “by the rebound” a sympathetic “grief that smites [his] very heart at root” (5.2.76-110). Far from dying for love, like Eros and Enobarbus, because her intimacy with Antony is her ruling passion, she commits suicide only when she has obtained proof from Dolabella that her “honor” does “not go together” with her “safety” (4.15.46-47).

Thus, in contrast to Eros and Enobarbus, whose deaths are both designed, paradoxically, to preserve their sympathetic connection with their master, Cleopatra ruthlessly prioritises her self-regard over her loyalty to Antony at the end of the play. She is entirely consistent in this, for a dead or dying Antony can no longer fulfil her craving to be admired. The cool, self-regarding prudence which ultimately regulates Cleopatra’s behaviour is illustrated at the end of the play by her refusal to trust Proculeius, despite being advised to do so by the relatively naïve Antony; by her covert attempt to reserve some of her wealth; and by the fact that she has “pursu’d conclusions infinite of easy ways to die” (4.15.47-50, 5.2.13-15, 5.2.134-71, 5.2.355-56). Cleopatra’s concern for her dignity necessarily imposes its own sacrifices, but she performs these in the most expedient manner possible.

As a result of her underlying self-regard, however, Cleopatra ultimately fails to gain from her lover the consistent admiration which she craves, despite her best efforts. Antony’s two great rages confirm that her earlier attempts to “enforce” love have led him partly to “hate” what he often “fear[s],” just as Charmian predicted, an animosity which was no doubt compounded by her flight from the battle of Actium (1.3.6-12). The disproportionate nature of these excoriations–there is only superficial evidence for the first accusation of betrayal, as we have seen, and apparently none at all for the second–suggests that they are symptomatic of a pervasive, underlying distrust which Antony is unable to repress in times of stress (3.13.105-31, 4.12.10-29). Cleopatra could only hope to dispel his impression that she is a fickle “boggler,” who plays “fast and loose” through a devoted sacrifice of Enobarbus-like proportions (3.13.110, 4.12.28). Antony’s tirades demonstrate that there is no half way house in matters of the heart: only those who practise unconditional, self-effacing devotion can generate it in others. The paradoxical demands of the transactions which underpin deep attachments far outstrip Cleopatra’s crude and limited attempts to earn Antony’s devoted care. Her misfortune–tragedy is perhaps too strong a word–is that she is just passionate enough to appreciate the depth of her lover’s devotion, but not sufficiently so to experience a need for a truly intimate union, which would involve responding with her own absolutely self-effacing service.

To sum up: Cleopatra adopts Antony as the primary source of the adulation which she craves, because, unlike Caesar, she appreciates that a lover’s adoration can provide a much more intense and concentrated form of gratification than public acclaim, although in fact neither are intrinsic pleasures, but require a ceaseless measuring of her relative distinction. At first, she uses tyrannical strategies in her effort to maintain what she assumes to be a fleeting infatuation on Antony’s part, rooted in sexual desire and limited by self-regard. After the battle of Actium, however, she is forced to recognise that these strategies are actually detrimental to a devotion which is intrinsically generous and self-denying, and finally starts to heed Charmian’s warning that she needs to reciprocate Antony’s humble loyalty if she hopes to recover his trust and so retain his sympathetic care. Cleopatra is loyal because she understands that only a devoted lover such as Antony has proved himself to be could supply her with the unremitting care and admiration which she craves. In this way, Shakespeare shows that self-love in its most ambitious and intelligent form may ultimately sublimate itself into self-denial in a manner that mimics passionate devotion.

However, Antony’s vicious attacks on Cleopatra suggest that characters who are fundamentally self-regarding could never earn sufficient trust to inspire an absolutely sympathetic devotion, even where they strive to restrain their self-love. Such devotion is in fact the province of characters like Eros and the dying Enobarbus, who prioritise their sense of unity with their beloved even over the most instinctive demands of the ego. Although Antony seems to forgive her repeatedly, it is beyond Cleopatra’s scope to regain the trust which she has forfeited by her earlier “wrangling[s]” and her flight from the battle of Actium. Thus, Shakespeare demonstrates that even the one-sided care that Cleopatra craves, let alone the merging of interests which truly passionate lovers pursue, may only be earnt by obeying the austere imperatives which deep attachments inevitably impose.

Cleopatra’s response to her lover’s death confirms that his instinct not to trust her fully was correct all along: as soon as the dying Antony can no longer provide her with care, she retrenches, and focuses her efforts on preserving the prestige which supplies her with a secondary source of fuel for her self-regard. This pragmatic approach contrasts with Eros’ and Enobarbus’ desperate grief and guilt respectively, since it shows that her attachment is not in the end her ruling passion, even if she had persuaded herself that it was. In reality, Cleopatra’s story is therefore much less tragic than that of Enobarbus, who, as we have seen, manages to frustrate his own deepest needs, even though her inability to pursue the ultimate good may be pitiable. It is from one point of view comic that even as Antony is dying and trying to protect his beloved from further harm, she interrupts him with a clichéd rant: “No, let me speak, and let me rail so high, that the false huswife Fortune break her wheel” (4.15.41-46). Although her self-love prevents her from securing Antony’s sympathetic care in the way that she was hoping to do, this failure is the inevitable consequence of the fact that, at the deepest level, her well-being never depended on doing so in the first place. While the manner of Antony’s death may resemble that of Romeo in some respects, Cleopatra’s suicide is therefore nothing like that of Juliet, or even Thisbe.

# Antony

Antony’s decision to return to Rome shows that he has not in fact shed his political ambitions, despite his fervent protestations to the contrary (1.1.1-10, 1.1.18-55), but is as concerned to protect his section of the empire as Caesar (1.2.99-117, 1.2.129-30, 1.2.183-96, 1.3.44-54). Once in Rome he seems to slot back easily into a world where characters may “borrow one another’s love” for a while, but only when it is more advantageous to do so than to “wrangle” (2.2.103-06). His ongoing concern to maintain his power and prestige is shown when he insists that Caesar sits first at their meeting in an attempt to demonstrate his control over the proceedings, and by his insistence that his “honesty shall not make poor [his] greatness,” even as he “play[s] the penitent” (2.2.28, 2.2.92-93). He not only marries Octavia in order to cement his rapprochement with Caesar, but assures her at first, apparently in all sincerity, that, despite his previous “blemishes,” “that to come shall all be done by th’ rule,” presumably understanding that “the band that seems to tie” him to Caesar could become “the very strangler of their amity,” if he were to be unfaithful (2.2.124-52, 2.3.1-7, 2.7.120-22).

Antony’s effort to “break” the “fetters” of this “enchanting queen,” whom he sometimes wishes he “had never seen,” is driven not only by his political ambition, but by his distrust of Cleopatra: he knows from the start that she “is cunning past man’s thought,” and implicitly agrees with Enobarbus’ sardonic hint that her passions are by no means composed of “the finest part of pure love” (1.2.116, 1.2.128, 1.2.152, 1.2.42-43, 1.2.145-51). This is not, however, to question the sincerity of his great vow analysed above, or to deny that his “dotage” has the potential to “o’erflow…the measure” and “renege…all temper” (1.1.33-40, 1.1.1-10): he subsequently assures Cleopatra that his “full heart remains in use with [her]” after his departure; that as her “soldier, servant,” his “purposes…are, or cease, as [she] shall give th’ advice” (a point which he reiterates towards the end of the play -4.12.26); that his love “stands honorable trial;” and that he will “remain with” her in spirit during their separation (1.3.43-44, 1.3.66-71, 1.3.73-75, 1.3.102-04). On his way to Rome, he sends his beloved pearls, “doubled kisses” and promises of “kingdoms,” all of which he later fulfils (1.5.43-47, 3.6.3-16). All this supports Enobarbus’ view that he will “never” leave his beloved, however much it is within his political interests to remain faithful to Octavia (2.2.232-39). Antony’s is a divided soul, however: although his devotion to the queen ultimately runs deeper than either his concerns about her character or his own political position, we shall see that these worries are nevertheless substantial and recurring.

The process by which Antony rationalises his return to Egypt shows that, although his determination to reunite with his beloved is overriding, he cannot simply ignore his proud ambition. He consults a soothsayer who he already knows “wish[es] [him]self in Egypt,” and who is cunning enough to offer him a justification for returning to Cleopatra which takes account of his pride, albeit in a paradoxical manner, since it involves admitting Caesar’s superiority (2.3.11-12). The soothsayer’s warning that his master should “stay not by [Caesar’s] side,” since his “noble, courageous, high unmatchable” soul is “o’erpow’r’d” and “afraid to govern him” in his rival’s presence, enables Antony to interpret what is in reality simply a desire to resume his relationship with Cleopatra as a determination to preserve his “noble” dignity, even though the only evidence which he can adduce for this “o’erpow’r[ing]” is the inferior performance of his cocks and quails (2.3.12-41). These rationalisations allow him to substitute a lesser humiliation for the greater indignity of his willing submission to “strong Egyptian fetters,” and to reduce what is in fact an ardent attachment to a sensual desire: “i’ th’ East my pleasure lies” (1.2.116, 2.3.39-41). Thus, although his return to Egypt undoubtedly shows that his love runs deeper than his pride in the end, he is at the same time too proud to acknowledge his true priorities, even to himself. As we shall see, Antony’s attempt to pursue both his attachment to Cleopatra and his political ambitions inevitably involves him in similar contradictions and rationalisations throughout the play.

These contradictions are illustrated by Antony’s relationships with his followers. In contrast to Cleopatra, his passionate nature allows him to moderate his pride sufficiently to engage directly with his servants: he encourages his messengers to “speak to me home, mince not the general tongue,” since “who tells me true, though in his tale lie death, I hear him as he flatter’d” (1.2.88-112). As we have seen, Antony is generally loved, not just by Eros and Enobarbus, but by all his “good fellows,” because he is capable of demonstrating sympathetic care (4.2.10-36). Nevertheless, the prudent Ventidius knows that, far from being rewarded with “triumphant chariots” and “garlands,” he would actually lose the “favor” which he has previously gained through his loyal service in Parthia, if his military campaign were to win him higher “fame” and “renown” than his master: he “could do more to do Antonius good, but ‘twould offend him” (3.1.5-27). This apparently incidental reflection is designed to explain why proud ambition exercises such a chilling effect on attachments. As Enobarbus’ rueful comment on the grudging nature of his former praise for Pompey suggests, the mutual service and gratitude on which lasting intimacies are based demands a radical humility (2.7.75-78).

With the best will in the world it is of course impossible for a political leader to establish an intimacy with all his subordinates: Antony’s wish that his men were “clapp’d up together” in a single individual, so that he could do them “service so good” as they have delivered, and that his palace had “the capacity to camp this host,” so that they “all would sup together,” may remind us that he could never reward his army in kind -though he does make a typically passionate effort to thank them all personally for their sacrifices (4.2.10-19, 4.8.32-35). This imbalance of care suggests that his motive for courting devotion on such a broad scale is likely to be self-regarding rather than genuinely passionate: as Enobarbus implies, the speech which he delivers to his “sad captains” is designed purely to allow him to savour their sympathetic devotion (4.2.20-36, 3.13.183). On the other hand, his decision to return Enobarbus’ treasure–via the significantly named Eros–shows that he is capable of offering his most intimate friends the genuinely self-denying service upon which constant relationships are founded: rather than thinking about his own needs or responding indignantly, Antony pities his “honest” lieutenant for having been “corrupted” by his master’s “fortunes,” since he has had such great “cause to change a master” (4.5.12-17). The contrast between Enobarbus’ stunned reaction to this generosity and his sardonic comment on his master’s speech to his captains highlights Antony’s oscillations between self-indulgent manipulation and passionate generosity, and at the same time reminds the reader of the paradox that lovers fulfil their deepest needs by providing, rather than demanding, care.

Shakespeare uses the battle of Actium and its aftermath to deepen his exploration of Antony’s divided soul. Antony’s underlying priorities are revealed as he effectively gives away “the greater cantle of the world” in an effort to protect the fleeing Cleopatra (3.10.6-23). This episode demonstrates in the clearest way possible that the humble service required by passionate devotion is incompatible with ambition. At this point Antony resembles Eros and the dying Enobarbus, since he acknowledges for a moment that nothing matters more to him than his attachment to his beloved. Subsequently, however, his pride reasserts itself in characteristic fashion, and, “blush[ing]” to think of his “fear and doting,” he rebukes his beloved because he must now “send humble treaties, dodge and palter in the shifts of lowness” (3.11.61-65). His fury over the Thidias affair has more to do with his anger with Caesar for “harping on what I am, not what he knew I was” in a “proud and disdainful manner” than with the queen’s flirtation, which, as we have seen, is a much more trivial affair than either he or Enobarbus are initially prepared to allow (2.13.140-43). This proud rage temporarily alienates him not only from his beloved, but from all human ties, as is implied by his brutal invitation to Caesar to “whip, or hang, or torture” one of his servants in return for his own whipping of Thidias (3.13.147-51).

In this mood Antony sees Cleopatra entirely through the prism of his self-regard, describing the hand which she has given Thidias to kiss, not simply as the object of his affection, but as “this kingly seal and plighter of high hearts” (3.13.125-26). Although Antony is primarily pursuing the simple satisfaction of a constant intimacy in his romance, he has always relished his own and the queen’s status as celebrities as a subordinate incentive: even in the opening scene when he is declaring his indifference to ambition, he dignifies his love as “nobleness” and calls upon “the world to weet we stand up peerless,” when “such a mutual pair and such a twain” embrace (1.1.36-40). Similarly, he soothes his anguish over Cleopatra’s supposed death by conjuring up a gratifying vision of “the ghosts gaz[ing]” at the lovers’ “sprightly port” in the afterlife: “Dido and Aeneas shall want troops, and all the haunt be ours” (4.14.44-54).

Subsequently, Antony’s attitude to Cleopatra varies for a while according to whether his pride is gratified or abashed by his oscillating military fortunes: he first praises “this great fairy” extravagantly after winning a temporary victory, which clearly satisfies his desire both to demonstrate his undiminished vigour and to win public “applaus[e],” and then relieves the humiliation of his final defeat– “the hearts that spanell’d [him] at heels” now “discandy, melt their sweets on blossoming Caesar”–by castigating the queen, although there is absolutely no evidence that she has betrayed him (4.8.1-39, 4.12.20-24). Thus, the eponymous lovers’ attachment is blighted by self-love on both sides: Antony’s anger with Cleopatra, which drives her to feign death with all the disastrous consequences that follow, is certainly rooted in the distrust which her former manipulations have engendered, just in the way that Charmian predicted, but the immediate trigger is his own thwarted ambition (1.3.11-12).

Before being informed of Cleopatra’s death, Antony’s reasons for contemplating suicide–he does no more than this–are primarily self-regarding. He feels “dislimn[ed], and…indistinct” when stripped of his proud ambition (4.14.1-14):

I made these wars for Egypt, and the Queen,

Whose heart I thought I had, for she had mine–

Which whilst it was mine had annex’d to unto’t

A million moe (now lost)–she, Eros, has

Pack’d cards with Caesar’s, and false-played my glory

Unto an enemy’s triumph.

(4.14.15-20)

Far from making “these wars for Egypt,” as he claims, Antony has savoured the “glory” which he has derived from “annex[ing]” a “million” hearts, and is now relieving his bitterness at the loss of his status by tormenting the queen. However, Cleopatra’s apparent death immediately recalls Antony to his deepest needs: he abruptly breaks off from his self-pitying recriminations, and for a moment it seems that his heart will “crack” with grief and guilt in the same way as Enobarbus’ (4.14.38-41). It is significant that his one soliloquy in this scene makes no references to his military defeats, but is entirely focused on the prospect of overtaking Cleopatra in the afterlife and “weep[ing] for [his] pardon” (4.14.44-54). He does not now think of blaming her even when he discovers her deceit, but simply requests a kiss (4.14.127-132, 4.15.18-21). As he is dying, Antony shows a humble concern that she should take refuge with Caesar, thus valuing his beloved’s “safety” both over her “honour” and his own proud rancour against his rival (4.14.15-50). In sum, Antony is eventually forced to recognise that he cannot truly be “dislimn[ed]” even by the most abject humiliation, but only by the loss of his beloved.

However, although Antony certainly aligns himself more closely with his deeper needs in response to the apparent loss of his queen, he is still distracted by self-regard. Unlike Enobarbus, Antony not only imagines himself continuing to pursue public acclaim in the afterlife, even in his anguished soliloquy, but is willing to “weep for [his] pardon” without any attempt to atone for his failure to deliver the self-denying care on which a truly trusting intimacy must be based (4.14.44-54). Moreover, when Eros returns, Antony takes care to preserve his dignity by presenting himself as committing suicide for noble reasons, as in the high Roman tradition: his death will allow him to avoid “baseness” and “dishonor” and enable him to “defeat…” Caesar, since it ensures that he avoids the “shame” of being led in triumph (4.14.55-77).

The manner of Antony’s death suggests that his self-regard is too engrained to allow him to destroy himself instantly like Eros, purely as a passionate response to his grief: far from relying only on “thought [to] do’t,” like Enobarbus, whose passion is perhaps of an even greater order of intensity than Eros’, he first attempts to delegate the task to his trusted lieutenant and then botches it when he is forced to undertake it himself (4.14.55-62, 4.14.95-101, 4.6.33-35). Although there is no doubt that Antony is primarily bent on receiving one last kiss as he is dying, he nevertheless introduces himself dramatically to Cleopatras and her attendants in the monument as a man whose “valor…has triumph’d on itself,” rather than allowing itself to be “o’erthrown” by Caesar, and reminds them that he has “liv’d the greatest prince o’ th’ world, the noblest” (4.15.14-21, 4.15.51-57). By contrast, Cleopatra reverses these priorities, as is indicated by her decision to haul her lover up to her monument rather than run any risk of being humiliated by Caesar (4.15.21-37). Whereas Enobarbus, Eros and Antony all end their lives painfully, albeit perhaps with varying degrees of stern resolve, Cleopatra’s suicide is both the easiest and the most hesitant of the four: “she hath pursued conclusions infinite of easy ways to die” (5.2.355-56). Thus, the four deaths which are portrayed in the play illustrate the erotic hierarchy which Shakespeare implicitly outlines. Whereas, with the exception of Eros, the capacity of all the characters to form devoted attachments is to a greater or lesser extent diminished by their self-regard, Cleopatra’s is degraded beyond recognition.

The characters’ various reactions to loss also reflect their position in this hierarchy. At the apex are Eros and the dying Enobarbus, who cannot live without Antony and are in the end completely indifferent to the world’s “register”: Eros not only dies quickly and unobtrusively himself, but clearly remains unmoved by Antony’s argument that he could help him avoid the “baseness” of a triumph; just as Antony himself cannot in the end bear the thought of his beloved dying, even if it is to avoid such a humiliation (4.9.19-22, 4.14.67-77, 4.15.45-47). By contrast, the ambivalent Antony “desire[d]” Fulvia’s death because her political and military ambitions had so frequently conflicted with his own– “what our contempts doth often hurl from us, we wish it ours again”–but is as shocked as Enobarbus when it actually occurs (1.2.122-27, 2.2.156-60; see also 2.2.61-71), and moreover, wept at finding “Brutus slain,” even though the two men had been deadly enemies on the battle-field (3.2.55-56). These examples show that Antony is able to detach himself from his shallower attachments until he has secured his strategic aims. Thus, he does no more than “threat…the throat of that his officer that murd’red Pompey” so conveniently, even though he has counted the latter as his friend (3.5.18-19) -just as Pompey himself admits frankly that he would have found Menas’ murderous plot “afterwards well done,” if “done unknown,” even though he now feels obliged to “condemn” it, partly no doubt because Antony and he “are friends” (2.7.73-80, 2.7.126-29; see above). However, Antony’s pursuit of Cleopatra at Actium and his magnanimous response to Enobarbus’ desertion show that he has always aligned himself with those he truly loves in extremis. In the end, as we have seen, he comes to resemble the dying Enobarbus more than he differs from him, since he finally sheds his pride sufficiently to attempt to enshrine his devotion as his ruling passion: as we have seen, not only does he refrain from blaming his beloved for his death, but he implores her in the most abject fashion to avoid thoughts of suicide and instead seek the protection of his hated rival (4.15.45-47).

By contrast with the ambivalent Antony and Pompey, who are restrained by their attachments from pursuing their ambitions whole-heartedly, the apparently single-minded Caesar has Lepidus killed without compunction, although even he weeps at the departure of Octavia, despite the fact that he himself engineered it (3.1.50-5). Although Caesar responds coolly to Antony’s death, breaking off smoothly from an elaborate lament when he is interrupted by important “business” related to his current project of leading Cleopatra in triumph (5.1.13-51), there is a hint that the demise of his rival has actually led him to contemplate the ephemerality of his own power, in however fleeting a manner: “When such a spacious mirror’s set before him, he needs must see himself” (5.1.34-35). Thus, loss and bereavement not only remind most of the characters forcefully of their underlying attachments, but expose the ultimate futility of their ambition. Cleopatra is the great exception here, since, if the above argument is correct, her response to Antony’s death confirms that she is entirely “cold in blood” (1.5.74).

Thus, the relationship between the eponymous lovers is based on fragile foundations on both sides, since they are each too proud to offer their respective beloveds the consistently self-denying, sympathetic service which is required to build up a robust fund of mutual trust and gratitude.