Love and Political Ambition in *Antony and Cleopatra*

Philo’s opening remarks suggest that deep attachments and the pursuit of political power are incompatible, since the one demands humble “devotion,” while the other is driven primarily by proud ambition: 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 are almost purely ambitious; while Antony occupies an uneasy middle ground.

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 sardonically 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 Cleopatra: although he understands that her first encounter with Antony was as carefully planned as her multiple ‘deaths’–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”–he can still declare that the end result is “a wonderful piece of work” (1.2.140-55, 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 (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 prosaic concern with the way in which she uses it to gain 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 can (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 dignity (2.7.121-24).

Although Enobarbus broadly supports Antony’s decision to leave Cleopatra, as we have seen, his attitude to Antony’s political ambitions is much more ambivalent than Philo’s (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).

However, Enobarbus’ characteristic response to this fickleness could best be described as resigned mockery: 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’ own loyalty 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).

There are, moreover, implications that Enobarbus too has become habituated to the pursuit of profit and prestige during a 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). If Enobarbus’ typically flippant admission of guilt can be taken seriously, however, it suggests not only that he has indeed been tainted by the pervasive fickleness and injustice of this fragmented world, but that his passionate heart has not yet 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 Enobarbus 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 Augustus, 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 what his master clearly presents as a valedictory speech: “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 Antony’s sad 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 tears entirely, even though he brands himself an “ass” for having potentially been manipulated into crying. As with Fulvia’s death, he uses his favourite onion metaphor to distance himself from his own feelings (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, his “reason” is rooted in his proud self-regard. Enobarbus does not even mention his affection for his master as he considers deserting him, but frames his dilemma purely in terms of the prestige which would be won or lost by doing so: he has nothing to counterbalance the loss of status which would follow Antony’s probable defeat 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).

It is the generosity which Antony shows in returning the faithless Enobarbus’ “treasure, with bounty overplus,” which finally shatters 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 act is motivated by self-love, as he did with his master’s valedictory speech, but must see it simply as a tender acknowledgement of a long-standing friendship (4.2.22-23). He phrases his first response in habitually materialistic terms, declaring, “O Antony, thou mine of bounty, how wouldst thou have paid my better service,” but his focus is now on his master’s sympathetic generosity, and he knows that the profit which he has forfeited is the sense of intimacy which could have been generated, if he had reciprocated his 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 it unleashes a rush of affection which in turn immediately triggers an overwhelming guilt (4.6.33). By yoking two opposite meanings together in a single image in this way Shakespeare shows us that Enobarbus’ guilt is rooted in the very nature of constant attachments, since it represents the inevitable reaction to the recognition that he has failed to deliver the self-denying service which a deep intimacy demands.

Enobarbus now realises that the true “nobleness of life,” to use Antony’s phrase, consists in constant friendship, and that this can only be generated through self-denying “service” of the sort that his master seems to have modelled (1.1.33-37). Enobarbus’ self-punishment is not arbitrary, nor even from one point of view entirely destructive, but is itself a kind of service, since it involves purging the self-regard which has prevented him from imitating his master’s humble care: 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 (4.9.18). 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” (4.9.20-22, 4.6.36-38). The intransigent austerity of Enobarbus’ self-denial is a sign of his recognition that there is no higher good than the intimate friendship which he has spurned, and his revulsion against his own self-love is as unlimited as the devotion in which it is rooted: there is no need even to engineer his own death in any material way, for “thought will do’t, I feel” (4.6.35). By this he means that he will deliberately and repeatedly force his heart, which is already “dried with grief,” to confront the fact that he has valued his pride above his love– “throw my heart against the flint and hardness of my fault”–in the expectation that it will eventually “break to powder” under the pressure of these “foul thoughts” (4.9.15-18).

Passionate guilt of the sort that Enobarbus shows can be seen as a particular form of the self-denying care through which lovers strive to preserve an intimate connection: thus, Enobarbus prays that his beloved will “forgive” [him] in [his] own particular” after he has done his penance (4.9.18). However, his sacrifices expose the paradoxical nature of intense devotion, since he renounces all hope of an actual reunion, while, far from pretending to die only in order to provoke Antony’s pity and guilt, as Cleopatra does (see below), his prayers for oblivion and forgiveness are conveyed–almost uniquely in this play–through soliloquies, the second of which is overheard only by accident, and then merely by Caesar’s guards, who have no reason to inform Antony of his death (4.6.29-38, 4.9.1-33). This paradox arises because the sense of unity with the beloved for which truly devoted lovers long can only be achieved by prioritising the delivery of absolutely unstinting sympathetic care over all other considerations, including even in the end the desire for this care to be returned. Thus, in a deep attachment the yearning of lovers to merge their interests with those of their beloveds may float free of the interactions by which it was originally stimulated and promoted. At this point, love can become self-effacing in the most literal sense: thus, the appropriately named Eros kills himself promptly and in the least ostentatious manner possible–especially in contrast to the drawn-out suicides of the central protagonists–purely in order to “escape the sorrow of Antony’s death” (4.14.89-95). Enobarbus’ case reflects what one might call the dark corollary of this point: a fierce desire to atone for his previous self-regarding calculations leads him to eschew anything that smacks of the transactional in his penitence. Ironically, it is only by deliberately forfeiting any hope of resuming his intimacy with Antony in return for his repentance that Enobarbus can assuage his need to regain his internal sense of alignment with his beloved.

Thus, Shakespeare uses Enobarbus to expose the essential nature of passionate devotion. If, as the above argument suggests, selfless care, performed without a hint of calculation as to the effect it might have on the beloved, represents the ultimate expression of intense passion, then the very obscurity of Enobarbus’ repentance and death is a sign that he has reached the apex of the erotic hierarchy which the play implicitly outlines. Enobarbus is thus sharply contrasted with the more self-regarding characters in the play, since, far from attempting to control Antony, as both Caesar and Cleopatra do in their different ways (see below), he aims to merge his interests with his beloved through a radical self-denial. Indeed, he is even contrasted to the magnanimous Antony himself, if the purpose of the latter’s valedictory speech was indeed partly “to make his followers weep,” as Enobarbus divined (4.2.22-23; see below for a fuller analysis of Antony’s motives). Shakespeare makes the ultimate incompatibility between deep attachments and self-love as clear as he cares to do by having Enobarbus demand to be despised in the world’s “register,” while begging Antony for his forgiveness “in thine own particular” (4.9.18-22).

Enobarbus’ abject humility is thus implicitly offered as the standard by which all the other, more ambitious characters in the play can be judged: ironically, the titanic ambitions that dominate this proto-imperial world pursue a much less valuable return than the abject self-annihilation through which Enobarbus attempts to atone for his offence, since, as we shall see, these offer no intrinsic reward, 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,” in Antony’s own phrase (1.1.35). By contrast with Caesar, Enobarbus ultimately understands that the only truly fulfilling form of ‘possession’ is the sense of unity with his beloved which he can achieve through his austere self-denial (2.7.101).

Nevertheless, Enobarbus’ habitual 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 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). On the other hand, Dolabella is prepared to risk incurring Caesar’s wrath to help Cleopatra, while Eros’ intransigently loyal devotion shows that, in contrast to Enobarbus, his self-love has always been regulated by his deeper needs. 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 (see above), 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 as a whole 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 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,” although he adds, “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 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 more attenuated form of constancy dictated by the code of honour both 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 diluted 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.

Cleopatra

Antony’s opening declaration that “there’s beggary in the love that can be reckon’d,” and that one would need to “find out new heaven, new earth” in order to “set a bourn how far to be belov’d,” suggests that mutual devotion provides an ultimate good, the only “nobleness of life” (1.1.36); a joy which is beyond measure because no higher standard exists by which it could be judged or regulated (1.1.13-17). Antony knows that he can only hope to achieve the ultimate “nobleness” of a perfectly harmonious intimacy with his beloved through the provision of unlimited care and service, which means that he must prioritise his devotion over any potentially divisive passion, including his political ambitions: “Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch of the rang’d empire fall” (1.1.33-37). By contrast, Cleopatra herself does not understand that truly passionate lovers offer care rather than demanding it, because she has little conception of the intimacy which is their ultimate object. Her very attempt to gauge the level of Antony’s affection indicates that her love is distorted by her pride: whereas Cleopatra assumes that Antony could readily measure his attachment, presumably by comparing it to his political power, because she herself experiences love primarily as a more intense version of the adulation which she receives in her role as queen, her lover declares emphatically that there is literally no comparison between the two: “Here is my space, kingdoms are clay” (1.1.34-35). Whereas Antony is pursuing a deep intimacy purely for its own sake, the queen’s self-regard can only be gratified by establishing her status in relation to her lover’s other priorities, just as the popular adulation which is the reward of political power is pleasurable only because of the distinction that it bestows.

Cleopatra’s love is bound up with her sense that she is “mov[ing]” a great ruler when they embrace: she envies the horse that “bear[s] the…demi-Atlas of this earth, the arm and burgonet of men” (1.5.21-24). Although she later claims that she is driven by “such poor passion as the maid that milks,” she mourns him as the “noblest of men…the crown o’ th’ earth…the garland of the war…the soldier’s pole” (5.1.63-75). She tells Dolabella that “his legs bestrid the ocean, his rear’d arm crested the world,” while his voice was either like “thunder” or “the tuned spheres” (5.2.82-86). “His delights” are not celebrated just for themselves, but because they distinguished him from his companions: they “were dolphin-like, they show’d his back above the element they liv’d in” (5.2.88-90). His “bounty” is inseparable from his political power: “realms and islands were as plates dropp’d from his pocket” (5.2.86-92). Quite apart from the political power which Antony invests in her (3.3.4-6, 3.6.3-19, 3.6.66-67), Cleopatra gains fame, or notoriety, through the relationship. The couple’s initial meeting was clearly conducted very much in the public eye, while Enobarbus describes her as hopping in the most charming manner “through the public street” (2.2.176-232). Cleopatra does nothing to discourage the Romans’ patent fascination with the relationship, since she sends a continual stream of messages to Antony after his departure in a very public display of affection (1.5.61-65).

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). Thus, Cleopatra’s love is generic insofar as it is self-regarding, since she relishes the distinction which the attentions of any powerful man provide, rather than the intimacy which is generated through mutual sympathy and care.

Cleopatra is concerned with Antony’s feelings only insofar as they seem to facilitate or thwart her wish to be desired and cared for. She would prefer her lover to be “sad” after his departure, but takes his 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 behaviour implies that she often tends not so much to interact with the people around her as reduce them to ciphers onto which she projects her intransigent pride. Her 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 to remain silent: “pity me, but do not speak to me” (1.5.68-72, 22.5.18-19). All this implies that Cleopatra’s capacity to form sympathetic attachments has been impoverished by her royal status: constantly 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).

The messenger whom she beats and threatens with death for bringing her the news of Antony’s marriage, initially runs 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 exemplifies 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 then, 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, in one of her bewildering shifts of mood, 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 thing more,” which she leaves unspecified–underlines the implicit parallel between this “proper man,” who has shown that he understands Cleopatra’s true “majesty” by appeasing her so carefully, and Antony himself (3.3.38-48). Antony too usually strives to placate her, but, as we shall see, this repression creates an underlying distrust, which bursts out sporadically in spasms of savage anger.

Early on in the play, Shakespeare gives his audiences and readers an unusually explicit account, not only of Cleopatra’s habitual motives and tactics, but of the standpoint from which they might be judged. When she 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). In response, Charmian advises her 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,” for “in time we hate that which we often fear” (1.3.6-12). Charmian understands that a true lover would strive to sympathise with the concerns which are driving Antony back to Rome, since she could only win his trust through self-denying, generous service. By contrast, Cleopatra’s blunt rejection of her advice– “Thou teachest like a fool: the way to lose him” (1.3.10)–suggests that, at least at the start of the play, she can only attempt to gain the care which she craves through intimidation, whether direct or indirect, since her self-regard prevents her from humbling herself in the way that her maid recommends (2.7.101). Ironically, the queen’s overall aim is thus in a crucial sense less ambitious than that of a truly erotic lover, since she clearly has little conception of the delightful sense of unity which can be gained through an exchange of sympathetic care.

The opening conversations between the eponymous lovers illustrate Cleopatra’s priorities and tactics in detail, especially when considered in conjunction with Charmian’s advice, by which they are immediately preceded. At first, she manages to goad Antony into making a passionate vow of loyalty by insisting vehemently that he obey Caesar’s “dismission” and “Fulvia’s scolds” (1.1.55-85). When he reneges on this vow, she declares that she is “sick”–presumably, if she is following 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 way, for his fickleness and insincerity (1.3.13-85). When Antony proves merely to be angered by this onslaught, rather as Charmian predicted, 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 Antony’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). To the extent that she is genuinely thrown into confusion at this point, it is not, however, by her own sense of impending loss, as she implies, but by Antony’s unexpected obduracy.

Cleopatra’s main effort from now on is to appeal to Antony’s desire to protect her: the primary implication of the lines quoted above is that her forgetfulness is a reflection of her abject, overwhelming love, although, even as she shifts to this new tactic, she manages to deliver a final, veiled dig at her lover’s own “oblivion,” which has led her to be “all forgotten.” Although it is perhaps this latter implication which leads Antony to condemn this speech as “idleness,” the appeal to his pity and protectiveness is in fact even more cunning: not only does she portray herself as feeling too wretched to speak, but, just as Enobarbus predicted, she begins to hint that she might soon seek a deeper “oblivion” if she is abandoned (1.3.90-93, 1.2.140-44). It is in fact more powerful to invoke guilt and pity than to inflict shame, which was Cleopatra’s initial effort, since these are natural responses to the demands of a deep attachment -although one may deduce from the fact that she resorts to this appeal only after failing to shame Antony into obedience that she may not fully appreciate the effectiveness of her own gambit, for, as we have seen, she does not really understand her lover’s sympathetic devotion. Both approaches are ultimately intimidatory, as Charmian noted, but, despite his anger, Antony still fears losing his beloved far more than losing face.

Cleopatra is finally driven by Antony’s obstinate resistance 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 claims to be speaking sincerely for the first time to a lover who, she now 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 warned Antony against: 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 by provoking pity and guilt. In sum, although Cleopatra can imitate passionate sincerity, her early speeches are in reality 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 adulation.

Insofar as Cleopatra is attached to Antony, rather than concerned to gratify her self-regard, her attachment is primarily sensual: she envies the “happy horse [which] bear[s] the weight of Antony,” and declares that she “take[s] no pleasure in aught an eunuch has” -although Shakespeare uses Mardian at this moment to remind us that it is possible to have “fierce affections” without pursuing a sexual consummation (1.5.21, 1.5.9-18). This sensuality is, however, subordinated to Cleopatra’s cool determination to exploit her own desirability. Enobarbus describes how forcefully and carefully 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, unlike Caesar, her only weapon is her sensual charm, she too has marshalled her powers over the years with military efficiency.

Although Cleopatra may be “black” with the “amorous pinches” of her many ardent lovers as well as those of Phoebus–frequently associated by Shakespeare with sexual desire–she tells us that she was “cold in blood” even in her “salad days,” when passions are usually at their most intense (1.5.25-28). To use her own conceit, which Charmian unwittingly develops, she has “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” (1.5.28, 2.5.10-18). (Significantly, rather than herself submitting to the passionate effects of music, “moody food of us who trade in love,” she orders it to be played at a distance while she fishes, perhaps in order to confuse or lull her prey -2.5.1-12). Cleopatra is frequently associated with creatures that are “cold in blood”: not only does she both fish and perhaps herself resemble a dead “salt-fish”–which places her at two removes from warm-bloodedness–but Antony addresses her as his “serpent of old Nile,” while her description of herself as “feed[ing] [her]self with most delicious poison,” when she is musing on this and other similarly delightful memories, implicitly associates her cool sensuality with the “lovers’ pinch” of the asps that eventually kill her (5.2.295, 1.5.25-28). Thus overall, one could well argue, as Enobarbus does, that Antony “pays his heart for what his eyes eat only,” since Cleopatra is incapable of returning his ardent devotion (2.2.225-26).

Cleopatra is convinced that Antony’s love is also primarily a physical appetite–which is perhaps the only form of eroticism that she thoroughly understands–and is therefore bound to fade: her greatest fear–reflected in the contrast between her voluble criticisms of Octavia’s “height,” “gait,” “years,” “face,” “hair” and voice and, on the other hand, her silence when informed that her rival is thirty (3.3.11-34)–is of the eventual decline of her own beauty, which is of course inevitable whatever cosmetic devices she uses: “Think on me, that am with Phoebus’ amorous pinches black, and wrinkled deep in time?” (1.5.27-29). Quite apart from the problem of ageing, however, she 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 by constantly wrongfooting them, Cleopatra’s systematic contrariness therefore serves a specific purpose, since, 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 indicates that there may be none unless he “hear[s] the ambassadors” (1.1.43-48). Although in this case, she really wants him to dismiss the messengers, and might well eventually reward him for doing so, this implicit threat shows that she is in the habit of frustrating his sexual desire. She evidently assumes that her most powerful strategy is to withhold her body, for her first impulse after learning of Antony’s decision to depart is to tell him to “stand further from” her (1.3.18). 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). One day, she boasts, 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).

Although the queen is correct in her belief that sexual desire can only be prolonged indefinitely if it is sporadically frustrated, her minor premise, that her lover’s desire for her is primarily physical, is mistaken. Antony is attached to Cleopatra as well as physically attracted, and his devotion is therefore inherently constant, as is implied by his great oath of loyalty at the start of the play: “Here is my space, kingdoms are clay” (1.1.34-35; see below for a fuller analysis of Antony’s love). However, the queen’s programme of provocative frustration thwarts this constant aspect of her lover’s desire as much as 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). Ironically, although her unpredictability is designed to prolong the relationship, it actually weakens the trust that fosters an enduring intimacy, which, as Charmian advises, can only be nurtured through unstinting sympathetic care (1.3.11-12).

Cleopatra’s flight from the battle of Actium not only shows that she prioritises self-preservation over loyal devotion to Antony, but that she actually does not comprehend such devotion: she is honest when she declares that she “little thought [he] would have followed” out of concern for her, for she herself could not imagine giving up half the world for love in this way (3.10.9-23, 3.3.11.55-56). Antony is thus in fact mistaken when he declares, “thou knew’st too well my heart was to thy rudder tied by th’ strings,” adding that “o’er my spirit thy full supremacy thou knew’st” (3.11.56-61). Whereas Antony has enshrined his love as a ruling passion, Cleopatra’s mixed priorities are reflected in her proud determination to be involved in this battle in the first place, “as the president of my kingdom;” a determination which forces Antony to fight by sea, even though his “ships are not well mann’d” (3.7.1-48).

The irony is that although Cleopatra has exceeded her aim of captivating Antony and gained “full supremacy” over his “spirit,” she cannot relish her success, since such a “supremacy” can only be appreciated by those who are capable of surrendering their own “spirit” to their beloved in return and experiencing the deep intimacy which results. It is significant that even at such a calamitous moment, after the defeat at Actium, Cleopatra baulks at showing her lover humble, sympathetic care, despite being urged to repeatedly by her attendants, since this would render her vulnerable: rather than going “to him [to] comfort him,” she seems again to faint as she “approaches,” as if “death will seize her,” which means that in the end it is Antony’s “comfort [that] makes the rescue,” for it is he who goes and kisses her when he sees her weeping, even though it is she who has broken faith (3.11.1-48). Similarly, although her guilt is sincere, she apologises for her flight in the hope that he will “forgive [her] fearful sails,” and then looks for a way to exonerate herself: “Is Antony or we in fault for this” (3.11.55, 3.11.61, 3.13.2). The relative fleetingness and superficiality of her penitence are measures of the extent to which she holds herself aloof from the humble exchange of care on which the true “nobleness of life” is founded, just as Enobarbus’ intransigent guilt reflects the extent to which he has immersed himself in this process, even though, ironically, it is Cleopatra who is focused on continuing the relationship and Enobarbus who is determined to die.

All of this is not to argue that Cleopatra entirely lacks constancy. After Antony’s departure for Rome, she undoubtedly misses both his care and his sexual attentions desperately: she “think[s] of him too much” according to Charmian, and wants to “sleep out this great gap of time my Antony is away” (1.5.1-6). Although, Antony invests political power in her, which she certainly appreciates (3.6.3-19, 3.6.66-67, 3.3.4-6), she is too concerned to establish whether her lover misses her even to respond to his promise that he will make her queen of “all the East” (1.5.43-61). This suggests that it is Antony himself who is the primary source of the adulation which she craves, rather than the power and status which he provides (3.6.3-19, 3.6.66-67). Cleopatra is passionate enough to recognise that she could receive a much more intense and consistent form of adulation from a devoted lover than she ever could from her subjects. It is this recognition which is at the root of her need to think of herself as in love with Antony.

Thus, she is not tempted to send Caesar Antony’s “grizzled head” in return for “principalities,” whereas we have seen that Caesar himself is quite ready to sacrifice both friends–if one can use that term with Caesar–and family in order to advance his political ambitions (3.13.17-19; see also 3.12.16-24). If Cleopatra were seriously thinking of betraying Antony, she would not insist that Enobarbus and her own attendants remain present as she declares to Thidias that her “honor was not yielded, but conquer’d merely” (3.13.46-62). She assumes that her attendants will understand that, in flirting with Thidias, she is simply using a reliable strategy, which in the past has so often enabled her to manipulate situations to her best advantage. Enobarbus, however, is too intently focused on his own internal debate as to whether to desert Antony to make any such allowances: he takes Cleopatra’s apparently conciliatory response to Thidias as a sign that his master’s “dearest” friends are “quit[ting]” him because this allows him to justify his own desire to “leave [him] to [his] sinking,” but then tries to appease his conscience by alerting him to her apparent infidelity (3.13.62-65). Antony’s prompt acceptance of her vow of loyalty represents a tacit acknowledgement that his own condemnation of her flirtation with Thidias was equally unfair (3.13.105-31, 3.13.156-67).

Similarly, there is no evidence that Cleopatra’s treachery caused Antony’s second naval defeat, as he maintains (4.12.10-30). The very fact that Caesar eventually has to send Proculeius with instructions to discover her state of mind after Antony’s death seems to rule out the possibility of any secret understanding existing between the two characters (5.1.67-68). A character who was purely concerned with self-preservation would undoubtedly have deserted her lover by the end of the play, but Cleopatra helps him on with his armour before the battle, while fantasising about him overcoming Caesar in single combat, and remains loyal after he has been decisively beaten (4.4.5-18, 4.4.36-38, 4.12.30-31).

In the second half of the play, Cleopatra shows clearly that she prioritises the care which she hopes to elicit from Antony over her dignity, since she controls her characteristic assertiveness and responds humbly to the tirades which her lover frequently directs at her: she apologises repeatedly after the battle of Actium, only attempting to palliate her guilt when she is conversing with Enobarbus (see above); simply makes a great vow of loyalty even after being accused of being “a boggler ever;” and, rather than defending herself after her lover has prayed that she should suffer the most demeaning fate imaginable–to be led in triumph while having her beauty destroyed by Octavia–attempts to soften his anger by informing him that she has died with his name on her lips (3.11.54-68, 3.13.2, 3.13.105-67,14.12.32-39, 4.13.6-10). This latter deception is not like her earlier “becomings,” although it resembles them outwardly, for it is Charmian rather than the queen who suggests that the only way to change Antony’s feelings is by pretending to be dead, and, although, in doing so, Cleopatra again underestimates the strength of his love, her sudden “prophesying fear” that he might commit suicide is nevertheless a sign of a new-found sensitivity (4.13.3-6, 4.14.120-27). Thus, towards the end of the play, as Cleopatra strains to avoid losing Antony, she not only shows some courage and a degree of humility, but even, however belatedly, a modicum of sympathetic understanding. She changes course because Antony’s three great rages finally persuade her that she cannot “enforce” love through “fear,” but must rather “give him way, cross him in nothing,” for, as Charmian advised, “in time we hate that which we often fear” (1.3.6-12).

The self-regard to which Cleopatra has become habituated as a result of her royal status allows her to demand care from Antony, just as she assumes that her maids will minister to her, and encourages her to relish the distinction of being served humbly by someone so powerful, but it prevents her from responding in kind.

Cleopatra ignores Antony’s graphic description of the humiliation of being led in triumph, because she is concerned with saving the relationship, but, as soon as she knows that he 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 drives her to haul her lover laboriously up to join her on her monument, rather than venturing down to kiss him (4.14.18-40). Immediately after Antony’s death, she speaks as if her suicide will be simply a passionate response to her loss, figuring herself as no different in her mourning from any humble “maid that milks and does the meanest chares,” and apparently wishing to “throw [her] sceptre at the injurious gods,” since “all’s but naught,” now that they have “stol’n our jewel” (4.15.73-91), but in fact her primary concern from this point on is to avoid being exhibited to “the shouting varletry of censuring Rome” and “mechanic slaves with greasy aprons” (5.2.53-62, 5.2.208-13, 5.2.354-56). Indeed, even her most admiring eulogy of Antony seems calculated to manipulate Dolabella into telling her whether Caesar “will lead [her] then in triumph,” since she abruptly raises this question as soon as she has ensured that he is feeling “by the rebound” a sympathetic “grief that smites [his] very heart at root” (5.2.76-110). Rather than dying for love, she sets herself to defend her dignity in a cool and prudent manner: she refuses to trust Proculeius, despite Antony’s naïve advice, since she suspects, correctly, that he has been given the task of preserving her for precisely such a display, and “pursu[es] conclusions infinite of easy ways to die” (4.15.47-50, 5.1.61-66, 5.2.12-62, 5.2.355-56).

All of this allows a careful reader to understand Cleopatra’s priorities: while Antony is alive, she focuses her efforts on preserving the relationship, because he is the primary source of the adulation which she craves. She is more passionate than Caesar, and is therefore not content merely with ‘possessing the world’, but longs for the single-minded praise and care that only a lover can give. This longing now comes to resemble passionate devotion, since, as we have seen, it requires her to show a modicum of humility, courage and sympathy in an effort to establish the trusting rapport which will allow her to garnish this care and praise. Even as he is dying, however, she is retrenching; refocusing her efforts on preserving the royal dignity which provides her with a secondary source of the prestige that fuels her self-love.

Prestige and status are clearly of crucial importance to her, since she humbles herself in order to keep Antony and kills herself to avoid being led in triumph.

It falls short, however, precisely because it is entirely needy rather than caring: immediately after Antony’s death Cleopatra focuses on her own loss of “care,” rather than her lover’s pain ( ).

By contrast, Antony himself reassures his own hesitant messenger that “who tells me true, though in his tale lie death, I hear him as he flatter’d” (1.2.88-112). Just as it is Cleopatra’s brittle pride which prevents her from engaging with the real thoughts of her interlocutors, so Antony’s moderation facilitates a sincere interchange: he encourages the messenger to “speak to me home, mince not the general tongue; name Cleopatra as she is call’d in Rome” (1.205-06). Whereas Antony is generally trusted precisely because he is not too proud to recognise and reward the efforts of his followers, Cleopatra is feared even where she is desired.

Enobarbus’ final situation now resembles that of an orphaned child, who comes to realise that the plaudits which he gained from excelling at his various games were in reality always less substantial, even if more obtrusive, than the quiet, ongoing security of knowing that his beloved parents were in close attendance.

At the same time, Eros’ refusal to kill Antony shows that the true lover’s apparently entirely self-effacing care does in fact have a limit, since it is ultimately rooted in that paradoxical form of desire which recognises that fulfilment depends on prioritising the relationship with the beloved over all other considerations.

By contrast with Enobarbus, who in the end prioritises his sympathetic connection with Antony over any form of pride, Cleopatra’s passions are always coloured by self-regard (1.5.73-74).

Antony’s decision to return the treasure comes closer than Enobarbus’ sacrifices to fulfilling the normal purpose of lovers’ generosity, since he “blows” his friend’s heart with love for him precisely because his devotion appears so self-effacing, but the very fact that it has this impact may be a sign that this devotion is less pure than it seems. He certainly does not focus entirely on his own need for his departed friend, as Cleopatra does when he returns to Rome (see below), and undeniably shows sympathy and gratitude– “O, my fortunes have corrupted honest men”–but since, in contrast with Enobarbus’ sacrifices, Antony knows that his “bounty” will be received, there is a possibility that alongside his undeniable sympathy and gratitude, his aim, perhaps sub- or semi-consciously, is once again “to make his followers weep,” just as he may have designed his valedictory speech to elicit a public display of affection: significantly, he sends Enobarbus not only “gentle adieus,” but then “greetings,” as if he thinks that their friendship will continue (4.5.13-17).

More passionate lovers, like Antony and the dying Enobarbus focus primarily on delivering self-denying service in an attempt to establish this perfect harmony of interests, but Cleopatra’s focus on Antony’s devotion rather than her own hints that such a radical self-denial is beyond her scope. Whereas the capacity of all three of these characters to form devoted attachments is to a greater or lesser extent diminished by the self-regard which is encouraged by their elevated status, Cleopatra’s is degraded almost beyond recognition.