The Tragedie of Antonie, and Cleopatra

Antony and Cleopatra was written after 1579 (the publication of North’s translation of Plutarch and before 1608, when the play was registered.

Publication Date

The play was recorded in the Stationers’ Register on 20 May 1608 immediately after Pericles:


No author’s name is given and there were no quarto versions of the play. Antony & Cleopatra was entered again in the Stationers’ Register on 8 November 1623 together with other plays as “not formerly entred to other men”:


It is one of eighteen plays in the First Folio (F1) which had not previously been published and commentators generally accept that the entries in the SR in 1608 and in 1623 refer to the same play.

Performance Dates

According to a note in the Lord Chamberlain’s records for 1669, Thomas Killigrew secured the rights to the play, which had been “formerly acted at the Blackfriars”. It is uncertain whether this was in Shakespeare’s lifetime (before 1616), before the closing of the theatres in 1642 or after the restoration in 1660. Neill notes that the lack of allusion to any performance need not imply theatrical failure. He suggests that Fletcher and Massinger’s The False One (1626), dramatising Caesar’s affair with Cleopatra, was written as a prequel. Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra may have been performed in 1677 but the first recorded performance was David Garrick’s in 1759.

Sources

Bullough observes that the primary source was Parallel Lives of the Greeks and Romans by Plutarch, written in Greek in the first century AD. In 1579, Sir Thomas North’s English translation appeared as Lives of the Noble Romans and Grecians Compared Together. It was reprinted in 1595 and the third edition of 1603 included an addition by Simon Goulart, Life of Augustus.

It is widely accepted that North’s Plutarch was used by Shakespeare (as argued by MacCallum and Spencer) although North’s English version was itself a translation of Jacques Amyot’s French version of 1559. According to Bullough, Shakespeare could have developed all his plot and characterisation from the ‘Life of Marcus

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Antonius’ and the ‘Comparison of Demetrius and Marcus Antonius’. The dramatist also seems to have consulted Appian’s Civil Wars (translated in 1578 by W.B.) and Samuel Daniel’s The Tragedy of Cleopatra (1594). Both Daniel and Shakespeare emphasise the roles of Seleucus and of Dolabella.

Goulart’s Life of Augustus (1603) emphasises Octavius’s aloof efficiency, which some have taken to be adopted by Shakespeare in Antony but Bullough notes that this trait is in North’s Plutarch. Aloof efficiency is also in Shakespeare’s own depiction of Octavius in Julius Caesar where he crosses Antony in taking the right wing and later gives the closing speech, making orders for the due treatment of Brutus’s corpse (in contrast to Antony’s extravagant praise of Brutus). Since Julius Caesar is usually dated to 1599, it is unlikely that Shakespeare needed to consult Goulart for his depiction of Octavius in Antony.

Bevington lists a wide range of ‘sources’ which would usually be considered allusions or analogues, including classical and Renaissance treatments of the stories of Dido and Aeneas, Mars and Venus and Hercules and Omphale. Wilders says that Shakespeare appears also to have read the Countess of Pembroke’s The Tragedy of Antony (1592), a translation of the 1578 French play Marc-Antoine by Robert Garnier. However, Wilder believes the influence of Daniel or Mary Sidney was only very slight at most: “Had Shakespeare not read Daniel or the Countess of Pembroke, Antony and Cleopatra would probably have been much as it is.” Neill sees strong echoes of Virgil’s Aeneid and asserts (1993: 3) that the play is “an outstanding example of the Renaissance art of paragone, that mode of emulous imitation which sought to match or outstrip its original”. Most importantly, Neill argues for a strong link between Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar (usually dated 1599) and Antony and Cleopatra. The implication seems to be that Shakespeare envisaged a sequel to Julius Caesar even if he did not actually compose one at the same time.

Bullough further notes the popularity of classical plays in the early Jacobean period: Alexander’s Darius (published 1603) and Croesus (pub. 1604), Jonson’s Sejanus (pub. 1605), Daniel’s Philotas (pub. 1605), Marston’s Sophonisba (pub. 1606) and the anonymous Caesar’s Revenge (pub. 1606). Bullough accepts the suggestion of Chambers and Ridley that Shakespeare’s treatment of Cleopatra influenced Samuel Daniel, who consequently “remodelled” his tragedy Cleopatra (1594) in Certain Small Works (1607).

Orthodox Date

Chambers accepted the date 1606–7, on the basis of the 1608 entry in the Stationers’ Register and this has been followed by almost all scholars, e.g. Neill. Bevington is more circumspect, accepting a date after 1594, but tending towards 1607. Alfred Harbage prefers 1603–4. Wiggins dates this play to ???

Internal Orthodox Evidence

The only internal evidence for a date c. 1607 comes from verse and style. Chambers (WS, I, 478) states: “The metrical character of Antony and Cleopatra forbids us to put it before Macbeth or Lear.” Yet closer examination of Chambers’s own tables show that such a conclusion cannot be established: Antony has a relatively small amount of prose at 9%, placing it early, 12 out of 38 plays; Antony has the same small proportion of rhyme as Julius Caesar (usually dated 1599) perhaps because both are tragedies or Roman plays, but then Merry Wives (usually dated 1597) has the same proportion; Antony shares a similar proportion of feminine line endings (22%) with Richard III (usually dated 1594) which has (18%), unlike Pericles (usually dated 1607–8) which has only 8%. Wells & Taylor’s study of the frequencies of ‘colloquialisms’ also produces unexpected results. Antony has 34 elisions of ‘the’ (as th”) in 3059 lines, which is similar to Hamlet’s 42 in 3929 lines. Antony has three elisions of ‘them (as em) apparently linking it with Taming of the Shrew which has two whereas Coriolanus has twelve. Overall, studies of metrical and linguistic preferences are not helpful in dating Antony.

Miola has argued for a strong link between Octavius, who sets up the Pax Romana with his defeat of Antony, and James I who was anxious to promote the idea of a Pax Britannica. Neville Davies describes James I’s triumphal entry through seven arches and Ben Jonson’s prophecy that the lasting glory of James would parallel that of “Augustus’ state”. Yachnin has drawn similar parallels with the reign of James and dates the play c. 1606.
External Orthodox Evidence

The earliest possible date would appear to be set by the publication of North’s Plutarch in 1579. If the play definitely showed strong evidence of the influence of either the Countess of Pembroke’s play or Daniel’s Cleopatra, then the earliest date would be 1592 or 1594. However, the influence of these texts is not established.

Most commentators, from Chambers to Wilders, automatically assume that the date of writing of the play was shortly before the first entry in the Stationers’ Register in 1608 on the assumption that this was Shakespeare’s play. Bullough comments on “verbal resemblances” in the anonymous Nobody and Somebody (entered 1606), and Barnabe Barnes’s The Devil’s Charter, which was first performed on 2 February 1607. Bullough therefore suggests Antony and Cleopatra was written in 1606. As always, the direction of influence is difficult to gauge. It is possible that Antony was performed in 1606, from which the authors of Nobody and Somebody, and The Devil’s Charter used some lines. This would not mean that Antony had just been composed in 1606.

Oxfordian Date

Clark offers 1579. Mark Anderson has developed a detailed argument which would date Oxford’s authorship of the play to 1588–9.

Internal Oxfordian Evidence

In favour of the earlier dating, Clark quotes from the speech of Enobarbus (2.2):

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety; other women cloy
The appetites they feed; but she makes hungry
Where most she satisfies; for vilest things
Become themselves in her. (2.2.241–5)

Clark argues that these lines seem “peculiarly applicable” to Queen Elizabeth in her earlier years, as are other characteristics and scenes described elsewhere in the play. Queen Elizabeth of course had a royal barge in which she travelled and which was, on occasion, used to transport herself and her important guests. For her coronation on 15 January, 1559, she was escorted from Whitehall to the Tower, and then back to Westminster by a large number of the city guilds’ barges “decked and trimmed with the banners of their mysteries” which reminded a Venetian envoy of Ascension Day in Venice when the Doge and Signory were symbolically wedded to the sea. It seems unlikely that a speech about age could have been recited in front of Elizabeth after 1590, when Elizabeth was in her late fifties and the effects of age could no longer be disguised.

There are also parallels with Cleopatra’s questions about Octavia in Act 3.3:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Line</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cleopatra</td>
<td>Didst thou behold Octavia?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messenger</td>
<td>Ay, dread queen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleopatra</td>
<td>Where?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messenger</td>
<td>Madam, in Rome; I look’d her in the face, and saw her led Between her brother and Mark Antony.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleopatra</td>
<td>Is she as tall as me?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messenger</td>
<td>She is not, madam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleopatra</td>
<td>Didst hear her speak? is she shrill-tongued or low?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messenger</td>
<td>Madam, I heard her speak; she is low-voiced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleopatra</td>
<td>That’s not so good: he cannot like her long.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charmian</td>
<td>Like her! O Isis! ’tis impossible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleopatra</td>
<td>I think so, Charmian: dull of tongue, and dwarfish! What majesty is in her gait? Remember, If e’er thou look’dst on majesty.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This passage recalls Elizabeth’s enquiries about Mary Queen of Scots recorded in The Memoirs of Sir James Melvil of Hal-Hill. On a visit to England in 1564, he was questioned by Elizabeth about Mary Queen of Scots (Scott, 50–51):

[Elizabeth] desired to know of me, what colour hair was reputed best, and whether my Queen’s hair or hers was best, and which of them two was fairest. I answered the fairness of them was not their worst faults…She inquired which of them was of highest stature? I said, My Queen. Then, saith she, she is too high, for I myself am neither too high or too low…She inquired whether my Queen or she danced best? In that I found myself obliged to give the praise…she inquired of me whether she or my Queen danced best? I answered, the Queen danced not so high and disposedly as she did.
It seems unlikely that an interchange expressing curiosity could have been recited in front of Elizabeth after Mary’s execution in 1587. One might argue then for a date either pre 1587, or post Elizabeth’s death in 1603.

Furthermore, if Cleopatra shadowed the Queen, surely Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, must have been shadowed in Antony, who is depicted at 1.1.13 as:

The triple pillar of the world transformed
Into a strumpet’s fool

To utter these words in front of the court with Elizabeth and Dudley present would have been somewhat rash, and the same applies if the play was performed to entertain Alençon when the ‘French marriage’ was being negotiated, another suggestion Clark makes.

Against the earlier dating of the Oxfordians is the fact that this is one of the most mature of all Shakespeare’s plays in terms of style and structure. To reconcile these considerations, one would have to posit an early version dating from 1579–80, which was considerably re-written late in the dramatist’s career. It is quite possible, as Frances Yates remarked, that the so-called late dramas were “an archaising revival, a deliberate return to the past by an old Elizabethan living in the Jacobean age”. Theodora Jankowski has investigated many similarities between Cleopatra and Elizabeth. She notes (180) that “Shakespeare’s representation of Cleopatra becomes an examination of the means by which a female monarch can secure regal power.” Again, this suggests composition in the Elizabethan period.

**External Oxfordian Evidence**

Clark points out that Cleopatra was the ‘Ptolemy’ of her day, since she was the daughter of Ptolemy Auletes. The Bull was located in Bishopsgate Street, and was chosen shortly afterwards by the Queen’s Men for their first winter season in 1582–3 (Chambers, ES, ii 380–1). When the Queen’s Men had formed in 1582, they had taken a leading player, John Dutton, from Oxford’s Men (Nelson, 246). Clark also proposes that the record of a play at court in February 1580 called *The History of Serpedon* may have been a misreading by the clerk of the Revels of the title ‘Cleopatra’.3

Anderson sees considerable links between events in the late 1580s and the action of the play. He sees the relationship between Cleopatra and Antony as a satire on the relationship between Elizabeth and Leicester. He sees links between the play’s depiction of the Battle of Actium and the defeat of the Spanish Armada. Anderson notes that in the victory celebrations held on 24 November 1588, Oxford’s boy players performed before the queen, which he hints may have included a version of *Antony and Cleopatra*.

**Conclusion**

There is very little evidence to date this play. All we can say is that *Antony and Cleopatra* was written after 1579 (the publication of North’s translation of Plutarch) and probably before 1608, when the play was registered by Blunt. If one accepts Daniel’s *Cleopatra* as an influence on Shakespeare’s play, *Antony* must be dated after 1594. Orthodox scholars date the play firmly in the seventeenth century, whereas Oxfordians see it as an Elizabethan play of the sixteenth century.

**Notes**

1. The resemblances are noted by Ridley (introduction, xxvii). In *Nobody and Somebody*, King Archigallo is described in terms which resemble Antony. A longer passage in *The Divil’s Charter* deals with the death of Cleopatra. *The Divil’s Charter* was registered and published in 1607, but as the author, Barnabe Barnes lived c. 1569–1609, there have been some attempts to date it to 1604 and even 1598.
2. Widely quoted by modern historians, e.g. Alison Weir, *Elizabeth the Queen*, Pimlico, 1999 (page 34).
3. An alternative explanation of the mysterious
`Serpeden’ is that it should have read ‘Sarpedon’, a son of Jupiter who fought with Priam in the Trojan Wars, and who was eventually slain by Patroclus (Iliad XVI). Although this is a possible subject for a play, there is no other reference to any play on this topic.

Other Cited Works

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