

Octavius ceasar and  
mark antony –  
character sketches  
essay sample



In Julius Caesar's will, his grand-nephew, Octavius, was named as his heir and adoptive son. Octavius was related to Caesar through his grandfather, who married a sister of the Roman dictator. As one of the three triumvirs, Octavius is the youngest and the most ambitious of the three. He began his career with little — except the name of his grand-uncle Julius Caesar, his father by adoption, and he naturally wanted more — all that was possible. Having been named heir in Caesar's will, Octavius comes to Rome to claim his fortune. Nothing exists for young Caesar except the single goal of acquiring and maintaining power. As such, he is the antithesis of Antony, who becomes involved in a love affair that ultimately outweighs his own quest for mastery of the world. Because of the limited range of Octavius's vision and interests, he often appears cold and calculating, and many of his actions are indeed calculated ones. In betrothing his beloved sister to Antony, his long-time rival, he shows that he is capable of placing political expediency above family loyalty. Conversely, when Antony abandons Octavia, Octavius acts like the outraged brother who wishes to avenge his sister's honor.

While his pride is understandably piqued, his anger also hints of opportunism, for here is the perfect pretext for attacking his rival. Octavius struggles for supremacy within the Triumvirate, but interestingly, his contest is only with Antony, for neither he nor Antony considers Lepidus an equal. Throughout the drama, neither Antony nor Octavius trusts the other. Nor does Octavius's sister, Octavia, wholly trust Antony. She is well aware of his greater experience in battle and statesmanship, as well as his popularity with his soldiers and with the public, compared to her brother's inexperience.

Quite naturally, Octavius is insecure about his ability to succeed in an arena where Antony has been active for close to twenty years. But he gains confidence as he observes Antony's dissipated life in Egypt, and he takes advantage of every situation he can. Octavius has few devoted friends, and Shakespeare seemingly uses him to illustrate the lot of the ruler who must sacrifice everything to stay in power. He trusts no one, and he fears to let himself be close to few, if any, of his men. His treatment of Lepidus is one example of how he can cast aside presumed friends in order to achieve even more power.

It is possible, of course, that Antony might have treated Lepidus unfairly, but in fact, it was Octavius who imprisoned the third member of the Triumvirate and confiscated his lands. Octavius, at times, seems almost without principle. For example, one of Octavius's closest friends, his officer Dolabella, surreptitiously helps Cleopatra by warning her that Octavius plans to take her to Rome in disgrace if she is captured. Cleopatra is thus able to thwart Octavius's devious schemes. She takes her own life and thus deprives him of parading her through the streets of Rome in disgrace — all for the glory of Octavius, the conqueror. Basically, then, we can say that Octavius symbolizes the world of power, politics, and war. The Rome of this play is the Rome of the waning Republic. It is a masculine, taciturn, and seemingly pleasureless place: fittingly, it is the seat of Octavius's realm. While Octavius's character often seems pale in comparison with Shakespeare's portraits of Antony and Cleopatra, he is vital to the play, for he functions both as Antony's antagonist and as his foil. Without the dour young Octavius

as a rival and as a contrast, Antony's virtues, as well as his faults, would not be so vividly apparent for the audience— or for Cleopatra, for that matter.

## Antony

Antony, like Julius Caesar, is descended from an ancient Roman family, though lately the family has fallen into disfavor. Antony seems to have been a rather worthless person in his youth; he liked to drink too much, and he tended to be a spendthrift. He continued to exhibit these qualities for the rest of his life. But he also has a generous nature and a good-humored personality, and eventually he becomes a lieutenant to Julius Caesar in Gaul. His troops like him, and he is courageous on the battlefield. He becomes a chief deputy to Caesar, and eventually he is a partner with him as consul in Rome. Antony makes his "second home" in the mysterious East, in Egypt, the civilization of the Ptolemies, in the play. Rome seems cold and grey, whereas Alexandria shimmers with heat and sparkles with color and sensuality. Antony's personality is much like the land where he makes his home in his middle years. Antony seems to have acquired a new interest in the pleasures of living because of his residing in Egypt and because of his love for Cleopatra. Finally, however, he becomes a very troubled man because he found himself torn between a desire to be with Cleopatra and an equally strong desire to seek and maintain power in Rome. His impulsiveness and his inability to make decisions make him appear weak, but he is not as weak as he appears, as the play illustrates.

He is sensual, but he is also brave, and he withstands adversity well. He is insecure about his age, to some extent, for he worries about Cleopatra's fidelity, since he is older than she is. But in spite of his insecurities, Antony

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more often than not is overconfident. He seriously underestimates his youthful opponent, Octavius Caesar; he believes that his own vast experience and courage on the field can make up for Octavius's inexperienced determination. He finds ultimately that they do not. Antony is finally driven to make a choice between his allegiance to Egypt and Cleopatra — or to Rome; he must declare his allegiance to one world or the other. He cannot have both, and it becomes clear early in the play that Rome's problems demand his full loyalty, rather than half. Antony's failure to see the nature of his problem causes him to endlessly vacillate, avoiding making a final decision until it is too late. Much of Antony's apparent impulsiveness, first deciding to give up all for Cleopatra, then deciding to return to Rome, etc., is a direct result of his basic underlying indecision. Because he cannot come to a conclusion about what values take precedence in his life, he loses everything.

One of his first mistakes is letting himself be drawn into the world of Egypt and its delights. He forgets that not all Romans conceive of Egypt as he does. He loses much popular support, due in large part to Octavius Caesar's criticism; thus, ultimately, his devotion to Cleopatra seems like disloyalty to Rome. Yet, despite all his mistakes, Antony is a heroic figure, drawn larger than life by Shakespeare's poetry. His ever-increasing indecision is the mirror of his inner struggle to find a balance between two worlds and two sets of values. If he fails, it isn't because he doesn't try to achieve all that he can. His adventurous attitude suggests that he attempts to enlarge his awareness of what life can be. By contrast, Octavius is not heroic simply because he never questions his ideals nor deeply weighs his loyalties.

Audiences, readers, and critics have always disagreed as to whether or not Antony made the right choice. Perceptions of the meaning of his actions will differ, but the end result is the same: Antony and Cleopatra is a powerful play because it has powerful characters who catch the imagination and never release it. They are lovers who are more mature than Romeo and Juliet and, for that reason, they are not easily forgotten.