

Pain, power and folly



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The title characters of Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra are difficult to fully understand due to their seemingly illogical actions towards one another. At times, they seem to be in direct opposition to each other's causes, yet still fully and passionately in love with one another. Their story is one unique to Shakespeare's canon of works; while parallels can be drawn to the likes of Macbeth, Antony and Cleopatra stands alone in its portrayal of the pleasures and pitfalls of love. Antony and Cleopatra's love is the catalyst that propels them both into and out of power. Their allowance of the relationship to overwhelm and rule their lives eventually leads to their downfall. Antony and Cleopatra's relationship is at once passionate and fractious because of the weight it carries with the two lovers. It is symbiotic; each relies on the other to further their cause. Antony boasts of his ability to bring assorted kings and despots under his and Cleopatra's banner. Such a feat would require vigilant attention to ensure loyalty and solidarity in command. The effects of Antony and Cleopatra's lax leadership are evident towards the close of the play, as their forces fracture and capitulate. The very driving force behind Antony's alliances and political maneuvering is the love and pleasures of Cleopatra, and yet they are the distractions that prevent him from ruling effectively. For her own part, Cleopatra's haughty nature demands that her sovereignty from Rome is maintained and her power is not curtailed. She pours her love, her own particular brand of it, on Antony, both as a means of securing such independence and as a mark of her own power to obtain such a high placed consort. Her abilities as a ruler, though, are lacking and require the knowledge of Antony for her to function properly. As such, the two find themselves downward the longer their relationship is maintained. Cleopatra obtains Antony's loyalty by means of her love, yet it distracts him from his

duties. Only by performing his duties, however, are the ever hungry forces of Rome kept at bay, and furthermore draw their ire when Antony abandons their common cause. The two lovers neutralize each other and their goals. They find in one another the ability to rekindle for a time the power and vitality of youth. As such, concerns that rouse them from their fantasy serve to momentarily break the power of their bond, as seen in Antony's belief of betrayal by Cleopatra's naval forces. He is a man who exists for the temporary pleasure, and such an event interrupts his revelry and forces him to become a commander of men once again. It can be said that Antony would remove himself from all worldly affairs if he could ensure the continued quality of life that his position as a triumvir and hers as a queen provide. This combination of forces propels their passion as a couple; the higher they rise politically, the more they desire to be removed from the power struggles such a position requires to retain it. Antony follows Cleopatra to the dismay of his captains because his judgment is clouded by his preference for the easy and unconcerned life. It is not that his skills as a commander are weak. Rather, his resolve to put them into action is instead weakened by his absence of willpower in denying himself the pleasures of Cleopatra and concentrating on what must be done. For example, Antony wishes to pursue a sea battle against the superior naval forces of Caesar because of the goading of Cleopatra. He feels compelled to face the challenge Caesar proffers to prove to her the power he still exudes, imagining his own naval forces combined with Cleopatra's to be invincible, a clear symbol of their relationship. When he sees her forces surrender, it is as if his own fears about her nature have come true; he feels that she would sell his love and throw her lot in with whoever she thought would be victorious.

Antony damns her perceived betrayal in a moment of mental clarity, yet it is safe to say that he prefers the occlusion. Shortly thereafter, upon learning of Cleopatra's supposed suicide, he attempts to kill himself, proving that his prodigal nature and her hold over him lead him to the easiest solution to end his pain. Antony's main drive is to end all conflict and issues as soon as possible with as little pain or effort as possible. His marriage to Octavia is agreed to almost at once, with little regard for the consequences either for her or his own wellbeing. He is a man adept at the instant strategy required in battle, but one crippled by shortsightedness in long term goals that are not directly related to his continued enjoyment of the finer things in life. The comparison can be easily drawn to the hasty and opportunistic plans of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. They ultimately fail due to an underestimation about the willpower necessary to avoid succumbing to the guilt of the murder of King Duncan. In the same vein, Antony and Cleopatra underestimate the amount of effort their status requires. In the case of Antony, he must be on guard against both outside enemies and the allure of Cleopatra herself. This failure to recognize character flaws does not come from a false sense of superiority, but from a lack of perception to the world around them and its impact on them. Like it or not, the couple is a force to be reckoned with, and such a force comes with responsibilities they seem reticent or unable to fulfill. Cleopatra relies on Antony for more of a political reason than he. Her connection to him, and ultimately her dominance over him, provides her once again the power and security in ruling that she possessed while with Caesar. Her admonition of Charmian for declaring the greatness of the now deceased leader aside, Cleopatra appreciates the lofty status such a match grants her. This is partly why the news of Antony's

marriage to Octavia hurts her so; it once again makes illegitimate her relationship to Antony. It is not as if Cleopatra expected Antony to have stopped loving her and fallen for Octavia. She is aware of the allure, if not power, she possesses in her relationship. Instead, the marriage signifies a perceived loss on her part to become a recognized part of his life, not his lover to languish in Egypt while he deals with affairs of state. Cleopatra enjoys power; she plays with it and wants to exhibit it, even if the results are disastrous. Antony and Cleopatra's relationship is one that became too powerful and important for those involved in it. Their love ultimately became too all-consuming and replaced the very things they were searching for in life. This is said not to cast criticism on their love itself, for in its own way, it was as valid as any to be found. Neither lover, though, understood nor exhibited the capacity for the maturity required to make such a relationship function as more than a temporary aligning of two very different people.