

# Infinite virtue: a close reading of antony and cleopatra, iv.viii.12-18



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IV. viii of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* is a short scene, less than 40 lines, and an entirely unexpected one. The preceding scenes of Act IV, such as Hercules' departure and Enobarbus' desertion, heavily foreshadow Antony's defeat. When Antony wins his battle against Caesar and returns to Cleopatra in IV. viii, the joy of their reunion contrasts with the despair of Act IV. Antony's victory is a strike against fate and a tribute, albeit short-lived, to the power of Egypt. The association of royalty and divinity was a common tradition not limited to the Elizabethans' world picture. In this scene, Antony portrays Cleopatra as a goddess, revealing her connection not only to the macrocosm but also to the more specific functions of the love goddess Isis. Cleopatra is a "great fairy" (IV. viii. 12), able to "bless" (IV. viii. 13) soldiers with her speech. As the "day o'th'world" (IV. viii. 13) who will "ride" (IV. viii. 16) in Antony's heart, she more particularly resembles a sun deity, pictured by the Egyptians as riding in a barge and by the Romans as in a chariot. Cleopatra's association with the day continues up until her death; Charmian recognizes that "the bright day is done/and we are for the dark" (V. ii. 192-3) and Cleopatra sees that her "lamp is spent" (IV. xv. 89). In Act V, the connection is morbid, but here it is vibrant and positive. Yet in both death and life, the close relationship of Cleopatra and Egypt to fire and the higher elements is omnipresent; Antony swears "by the fire/that quickens Nilus' slime" (I. iii. 69-70); Cleopatra before her death is "fire and air" (V. 2. 288); "your serpent of Egypt is bred...by the operation of your sun" (II. vii. 26-7) That fire should so often be linked to life is unsurprising, given the common connection between heat and sex, just as the heart where Cleopatra will ride has long been a "bellows" (I. i. 9). Also present is an idea of "vital heat", as when Cleopatra invites Iras to "take the last warmth" (V. ii. 290) of her lips

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before her suicide. Whether fortunate or not, Cleopatra is a spirit of vitality. Even Antony gets a taste of residual divinity, perhaps from Cleopatra's having dressed him; he is "infinite virtue" (IV. viii. 17) and "lord of lords" (IV. viii. 16), echoing the prophecy that "the Lamb shall overcome [the ten kings], for he is Lord of lords and King of kings" (Revelation 17: 14). In fighting for Egypt Antony momentarily wrests conquering fate from Octavius, whose statement that "the time of universal peace is near./Prove this a prosp'rous day, the three-nook'd world/shall bear the olive freely" (IV. vi. 5-7) pins the future of empires upon the outcome of the battle Antony wins. Caesar also bears the charge of a weightier fate; he speaks not only of the Pax Romana but also of the Prince of Peace, who during Octavius' reign will begin to overthrow Cleopatra's religion. Both Christ's death and Cleopatra's are forms of transcendence, but at this moment in the play Cleopatra's divinity, though fated to loose, is triumphant. Despite its light tone, however, the scene anticipates Cleopatra's fall. The Queen's leaping to Antony "attire and all" (IV. viii. 14) is reminiscent of her dressing "i'th'habiliments of the goddess Isis" (III. vi. 17) in the public square; both are ostentations of love in which Cleopatra is accompanied by Antony. Here she jumps "through proof of harness" (IV. viii. 15) to her lord, an impossible feat, but one that prepares her for her final journey "to meet Mark Antony" (V. ii. 228) in her "best attires" (V. ii. 227). In more luxurious hours, Cleopatra has dressed Antony in her "tires and mantles" (II. v. 22), but now he wins battles in "proof" she has dressed him with, and Cleopatra herself becomes an ornament to him, "chain[ing] [his] arm'd neck" (IV. viii. 14). Antony is worthy of such rhetoric. After the fall of Lepidus, he is indeed the "demi-Atlas of the earth" (I. v. 24), and when he fights against Caesar, both halves of the world are clashing,

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literally and metaphorically. Cleopatra is the “ day o’th’world”, and Antony is “ infinite” in his return from “ the world’s great snare” (IV. viii. 18). The words imply that Antony’s victory and Cleopatra’s magic have changed the fate of the world; they have merely managed to preserve it for a few moments longer. In the following scene, harshly juxtaposed to this, Enobarbus dies of grief during the night, and on the following morning, upon losing the battle, Antony turns on Cleopatra, thinking that she has betrayed him. But though the lovers must fall to Rome, they do not go without struggling, nor completely defeated. Caesar’s luck and virtue may be powerful, but they are neither “ infinite” nor “ great”; the doomed greatness of Antony and Cleopatra is a thing unparalleled.