SHAKESPEARE'S
ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

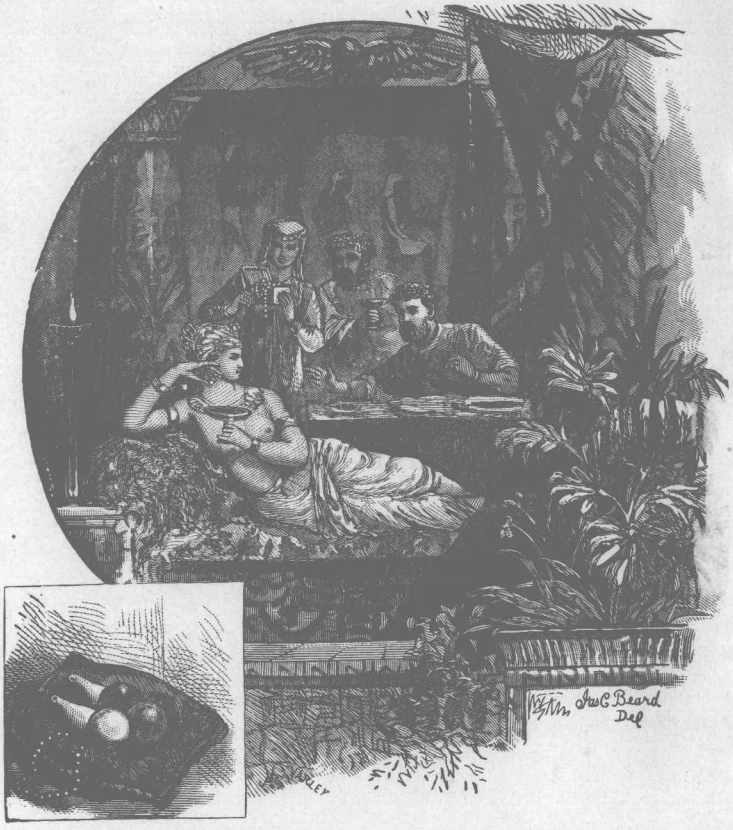
EDITED BY

WILLIAM J. ROLFE.

SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDY

OF

ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA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SHAKESPEARE'S

TRAGEDY OF

ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA.

EDITED, WITH NOTES,

BY

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Antony and Cleopatra.

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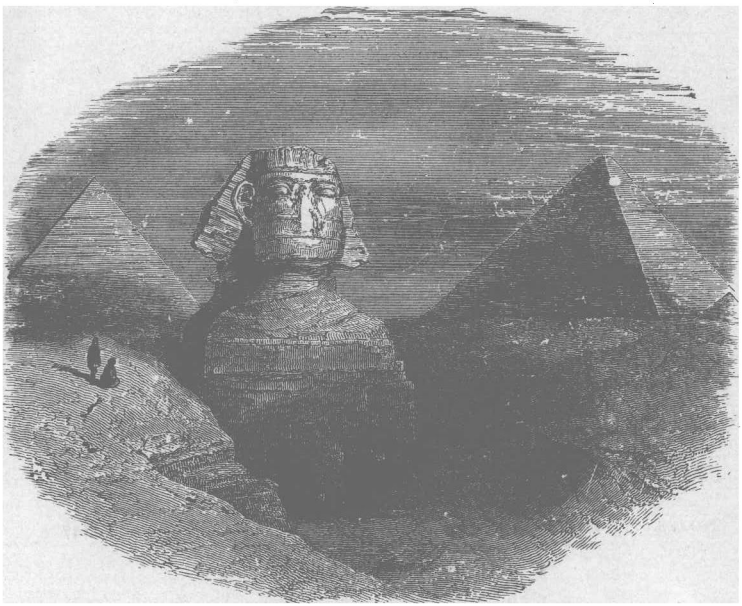
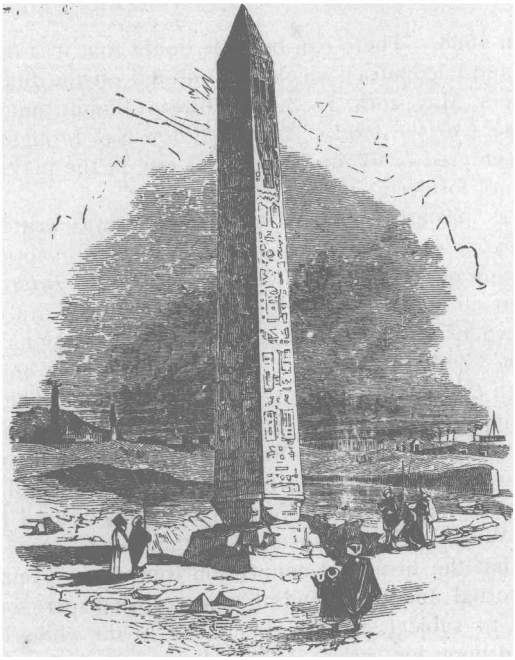


Subtle as Sphinx (*L. L. L.* iv. 3. 342).



CLEOPATRA'S NEEDLE.

INTRODUCTION

TO

ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA.

I. THE HISTORY OF THE PLAY.

Antony and Cleopatra was first printed in the folio of 1623, where it occupies pages 340–368 in the division of "Tragedies;" but it was probably written in 1607 or very

early in 1608. There can be little doubt that it is the "Anthony and Cleopatra" which was entered on the Stationers' Registers, May 20th, 1608, by Edward Blount, one of the publishers of the folio. As no edition was brought out, it was re-entered by Blount in 1623 as one of the plays in the folio "not formerly entered to other men."

It was formerly supposed that this play was written soon after *Julius Cæsar*, with which it is connected historically in the person of its hero; but we now know that *Julius Cæsar* (see our ed. p. 8) was produced some seven years earlier. As Dowden* has well shown, the "ethical" relations of *Antony and Cleopatra* connect it with *Macbeth* on the one hand, and with *Coriolanus* on the other. He remarks: "The events of Roman history connect *Antony and Cleopatra* immediately with *Julius Cæsar;* yet Shakspere allowed a number of years to pass, during which he was actively engaged as author, before he seems to have thought of his second Roman play. What is the significance of this fact? Does it not mean that the historical connection was now a connection too external and too material to carry Shakspere on from subject to subject, as it had sufficed to do while he was engaged upon his series of English historical plays? The profoundest concerns of the individual soul were now pressing upon the imagination of the poet. Dramas now written upon subjects taken from history became not chronicles, but tragedies. The moral interest was supreme. The spiritual material dealt with by Shakspere's imagination in the play of *Julius Cæsar* lay wide apart from that which forms the centre of the *Antony and Cleopatra*. Therefore the poet was not carried directly forward from one to the other.

"But having in Macbeth (about 1606) studied the ruin of a nature which gave fair promise in men's eyes of greatness and nobility, Shakspere, it may be, proceeded directly to a

* *Shakspere: His Mind and Art*, American ed. p. 247 fol.

similar study in the case of Antony. In the nature of Antony, as in the nature of Macbeth, there is a moral fault or flaw, which circumstances discover, and which in the end works his destruction. In each play the pathos is of the same kind—it lies in the gradual severing of a man, through the lust of power or through the lust of pleasure, from his better self. By the side of Antony, as by Macbeth's side, there stood a terrible force, in the form of a woman, whose function it was to realize and ripen the unorganized and undeveloped evil of his soul. Antony's sin was an inordinate passion for enjoyment at the expense of Roman virtue and manly energy; a prodigality of heart, a superb egoism of pleasure. After a brief interval, Shakspere went on to apply his imagination to the investigating of another form of egoism—not the egoism of self-diffusion, but of self-concentration. As Antony betrays himself and his cause through his sin of indulgence and laxity, so Coriolanus does violence to his own soul and to his country through his sin of haughtiness, rigidity, and inordinate pride. Thus an ethical tendency connects these two plays, which are also connected in point of time; while *Antony and Cleopatra*, although historically a continuation of *Julius Cæsar*, stands separated from it, both in the chronological order of Shakspere's plays and in the logical order assigned by successive developments of the conscience, the intellect, and the imagination of the dramatist."

Antony and Cleopatra is well printed in the folio, and the textual difficulties are comparatively few and slight.

II. THE HISTORICAL SOURCES OF THE PLOT.

For this, as for the other Roman plays (cf. *Julius Cæsar*, p. 9, and *Coriolanus*, p. 10) the poet drew his materials from Sir Thomas North's translation of Amyot's *Plutarch*. How closely he followed his authority the illustrative extracts from North in the *Notes* will show. To earlier plays on the sub-

ject (Daniel's *Cleopatra*, the Countess of Pembroke's *Tragedie of Antonie*, etc.) it is evident that he owed nothing.

III. CRITICAL COMMENTS ON THE PLAY.

[*From Coleridge's "Notes and Lectures on Shakspeare."* *]

Shakspeare can be complimented only by comparison with himself: all other eulogies are either heterogeneous, as when they are in reference to Spenser or Milton; or they are flat truisms, as when he is gravely preferred to Corneille, Racine, or even his own immediate successors, Beaumont and Fletcher, Massinger, and the rest. The highest praise, or rather form of praise, of this play, which I can offer in my own mind, is the doubt which the perusal always occasions in me, whether the *Antony and Cleopatra* is not, in all exhibitions of a giant power in its strength and vigor of maturity, a formidable rival of *Macbeth*, *Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello*. *Feliciter audax* is the motto for its style comparatively with that of Shakspeare's other works, even as it is the general motto of all his works compared with those of other poets. Be it remembered, too, that this happy valiancy of style is but the representative and result of all the material excellences so expressed.

This play should be perused in mental contrast with *Romeo and Juliet*—as the love of passion and appetite opposed to the love of affection and instinct. But the art displayed in the character of Cleopatra is profound; in this, especially, that the sense of criminality in her passion is lessened by our insight into its depth and energy, at the very moment that we cannot but perceive that the passion itself springs out of the habitual craving of a licentious nature, and that it is supported and reinforced by voluntary stimulus and sought-for associations, instead of blossoming out of spontaneous emotion.

Of all Shakspeare's historical plays, *Antony and Cleo-*

* Coleridge's Works (Harper's ed.), vol. iv. p. 105 fol.

patra is by far the most wonderful. There is not one in which he has followed history so minutely, and yet there are few in which he impresses the notion of angelic strength so much—perhaps none in which he impresses it more strongly. This is greatly owing to the manner in which the fiery force is sustained throughout, and to the numerous momentary flashes of nature counteracting the historic abstraction. As a wonderful specimen of the way in which Shakspeare lives up to the very end of this play, read the last part of the concluding scene. And if you would feel the judgment as well as the genius of Shakspeare in your heart's core, compare this astonishing drama with Dryden's *All for Love.*

NOTE.—Compare what Campbell the poet says of the play, and particularly the comparison with Dryden:

"If I were to select any historical play of Shakespeare in which he has combined an almost literal fidelity to history with an equal faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and in which he superinduces the merit of skilful dramatic management, it would be the above play. In his portraiture of Antony there is, perhaps, a flattered likeness of the original by Plutarch; but the similitude loses little of its strength by Shakespeare's softening and keeping in the shade his traits of cruelty. In Cleopatra we can discern nothing materially different from the vouched historical sorceress; she nevertheless has a more vivid meteoric and versatile play of enchantment in Shakespeare's likeness of her than in a dozen of other poetical copies in which the artists took much greater liberties with historical truth: he paints her as if the gypsy herself had cast her spell over him, and given her own witchcraft to his pencil.

"At the same time, playfully interesting to our fancy as he makes this enchantress, he keeps us far from a vicious sympathy. The asp at her bosom, that lulls its nurse asleep, has no poison for our morality. A single glance at the devoted and dignified Octavia recalls our homage to virtue; but with delicate skill he withholds the purer woman from prominent contact with the wanton queen, and does not, like Dryden, bring the two to a scolding-match. The latter poet's *All for Love* was regarded by himself as his masterpiece, and is by no means devoid of merit; but so inferior is it to the prior drama, as to make it disgraceful to British taste for one hundred years that the former absolutely banished the latter from the stage. A French critic calls Great Britain the island of Shakespeare's idolaters; yet so it happens, in this same island,

that Dryden's *All for Love* has been acted ten times oftener than Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*.

"Dryden's *Marc Antony* is a weak voluptuary from first to last. Not a sentence of manly virtue is ever uttered by him that seems to come from himself; and whenever he expresses a moral feeling, it appears not to have grown up in his own nature, but to have been planted there by the influence of his friend Ventidius, like a flower in a child's garden, only to wither and take no root. Shakespeare's Antony is a very different being. When he hears of the death of his first wife, Fulvia, his exclamation, 'There 's a great spirit gone!' and his reflections on his own enthralment by Cleopatra mark the residue of a noble mind. A queen, a siren, a Shakespeare's Cleopatra alone could have entangled Mark Antony, while an ordinary wanton could have enslaved Dryden's hero."

[*From Mrs. Jameson's "Characteristics of Women."* *]

Of all Shakspeare's female characters, Miranda and Cleopatra appear to me the most wonderful: the first, unequalled as a poetic conception; the latter, miraculous as a work of art. If we could make a regular classification of his characters, these would form the two extremes of simplicity and complexity; and all his other characters would be found to fill up some shade or gradation between these two.

Great crimes, springing from high passions, grafted on high qualities, are the legitimate source of tragic poetry. But to make the extreme of littleness produce an effect like grandeur—to make the excess of frailty produce an effect like power—to heap up together all that is most unsubstantial, frivolous, vain, contemptible, and variable, till the worthlessness be lost in the magnitude, and a sense of the sublime spring from the very elements of littleness—to do this, belonged only to Shakspeare, that worker of miracles. Cleopatra is a brilliant antithesis, a compound of contradictions, of all that we most hate, with what we most admire. The whole character is the triumph of the external over the innate; and yet like one of her country's hieroglyphics, though she present at first view a splendid and perplexing anomaly,

* American ed. (Boston, 1857), p. 304 fol.

there is deep meaning and wondrous skill in the apparent enigma, when we come to analyze and decipher it. But how are we to arrive at the solution of this glorious riddle, whose dazzling complexity continually mocks and eludes us? What is most astonishing in the character of Cleopatra is its antithetical construction—its *consistent inconsistency*, if I may use such an expression—which renders it quite impossible to reduce it to any elementary principles. It will, perhaps, be found, on the whole, that vanity and the love of power predominate; but I dare not say it *is* so, for these qualities and a hundred others mingle into each other, and shift and change, and glance away, like the colours in a peacock's train.

In some others of Shakspeare's female characters, also remarkable for their complexity (Portia and Juliet, for instance), we are struck with the delightful sense of harmony in the midst of contrast, so that the idea of unity and simplicity of effect is produced in the midst of variety; but in Cleopatra it is the absence of unity and simplicity which strikes us; the impression is that of perpetual and irreconcilable contrast. The continual approximation of whatever is most opposite in character, in situation, in sentiment, would be fatiguing were it not so perfectly natural: the woman herself would be distracting if she were not so enchanting.

I have not the slightest doubt that Shakspeare's Cleopatra is the real historical Cleopatra—the "Rare Egyptian"—individualized and placed before us. Her mental accomplishments, her unequalled grace, her woman's wit and woman's wiles, her irresistible allurements, her starts of irregular grandeur, her bursts of ungovernable temper, her vivacity of imagination, her petulant caprice, her fickleness and her falsehood, her tenderness and her truth, her childish susceptibility to flattery, her magnificent spirit, her royal pride, the gorgeous Eastern colouring of the character; all these con-

tradictory elements has Shakspeare seized, mingled them in their extremes, and fused them into one brilliant impersonation of classical elegance, Oriental voluptuousness, and gypsy sorcery.

What better proof can we have of the individual truth of the character than the admission that Shakspeare's Cleopatra produces exactly the same effect on us that is recorded of the real Cleopatra? She dazzles our faculties, perplexes our judgment, bewilders and bewitches our fancy; from the beginning to the end of the drama, we are conscious of a kind of fascination against which our moral sense rebels, from which there is no escape. The epithets applied to her perpetually by Antony and others confirm this impression: "enchanting queen!"—"witch"—"spell"—"great fairy"—"cockatrice"—"serpent of old Nile"—"thou grave charm"—are only a few of them; and who does not know by heart the famous quotations in which this Egyptian Circe is described with all her infinite seductions?

> "Fie! wrangling queen!
> Whom every thing becomes—to chide, to laugh,
> To weep; whose every passion fully strives
> To make itself, in thee, fair and admir'd."

> "Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
> Her infinite variety: . . .
> for vilest things
> Become themselves in her."

And the pungent irony of Enobarbus has well exposed her feminine arts, when he says, on the occasion of Antony's intended departure,

> "Cleopatra, catching but the least noise of this, dies instantly: I have seen her die twenty times upon far poorer moment.
>
> *Antony.* She is cunning past man's thought.
>
> *Enobarbus.* Alack, sir, no! her passions are made of nothing but the finest part of pure love. We cannot call her winds and waters, sighs and tears; they are greater storms and tempests than almanacs can

* *Grave*, in the sense of mighty or potent.