***Antony and Cleopatra***

Three professional critics

Mark Van Doren, *Shakespeare* (1939):

“[A] world which is ancient yet not stale, and as becoming in its vileness as it is cultivated in its virtues.”

“In one sense [the play] is actionless. A world is lost, but it is so well lost that it seems not to have been lost at all; its immensity was not disturbed.”

“The virtues of Antony cannot be dramatized because they are one virtue and its name is magnanimity.

. . . Great as is the world of Roman thoughts, and Caesar reveals the limits of that greatness, Antony has found a greater world – one whose soft sky is of infinite size, and one where thoughts melt into one another as water does in water.”

John Danby, *Elizabethan and Jacobean Poets* (reprinted in Kernan):

“[T]he tragedy of *Antony and Cleopatra* is, above all, the tragedy of Antony. His human stature is greater than either Cleopatra’s or Caesar’s.”

“The earlier criticism of *Antony and Cleopatra* tended to stress the downfall of the soldier in the middle-aged infatuate. More recent criticism has seen the play as the epiphany of the soldier in the lover, and the reassurance of all concerned that death is not the end. In the view that has been put forward here neither of these is right. . . . [The play] depicts the ‘man of men’ soldiering for a cynical Rome or whoring on furlough in a reckless Egypt. It is the tragedy of the destruction of man, the creative spirit, in perverse war and insensate love – the two complementary and opposed halves of a discreating society.”

Andrew Fichter, in *Shakespeare Survey 33* (1980):

“As Antony and Cleopatra paradoxically assert for themselves a love transcending death and a triumph emerging from defeat, we are meant to recognize an impulse that is completed in Christian miracle; but we are also meant to realize that in the pre-Christian world of Shakespeare’s play the transcendence to which the lovers aspire is tragically impossible. . . . we are seeing a world in which even the most heroic aspirations are ironically delimited.”

“*Antony and Cleopatra* is often described as somehow imperfect within its genre, an episodic, epic drama straining to conform to the norms of tragedy. . . . Our attention is divided between the spectacle of Antony’s failure to measure up to Roman heroic standards and the implication that those standards are inadequate to define his true heroism. This inability of the play and its protagonists to conform to the norms of tragic vision is an invitation to consider another kind of vision, and to go beyond the world of the play to find it.”

[Note that the earlier critics had no respect for Cleopatra, but the most recent one quoted has.]

Biblical Allusions

Andrew Fichter’s article discusses the following places where the text of the play echoes the Bible; these are among his reasons for believing Shakespeare intended his audience to think about Christianity.

* “new heaven, new earth” (I.i.17) – see Isaiah 55.17 and Revelation 21.1
* Antony’s outburst (III.xiii.126-28) – see Psalms 22.12
* Antony’s “Last Supper” speeches (IV.ii.4-7, 16-19, 24-29, 36-38, 44-45, etc.)
* “The time of universal peace” (IV.vi.5) – see Luke 2.14
* Cleopatra’s lament for Antony (V.ii.76-94) – see Revelation 9.1-6
* The Clown’s confused Christian/sexual language when he brings the asps
* Madonna/Eve imagery of Cleopatra’s death scene

Taking Sides

Critics who prefer Rome to Egypt see the play as the tragic downfall of Antony.

Critics who prefer Egypt to Rome see the play as the redemptive conversion of Antony.

Critics who dislike Egypt and Rome see Antony as a hero torn by external and internal conflicts.

Critics who dislike Egypt and Rome – and do not see Antony as a hero – argue that the absence of Christianity is the source of the play’s conflicts.

My own take on the play is that it is inclusive rather than exclusive; everyone regrets every death that occurs, regardless which side either the dead person or the mourners might represent. The tragedy is that Antony tries to be all things to all people and that other characters, plus readers and viewers, want him to choose what to be for them in particular.

Within the play, the alternative to its tragic plot is the glory of its poetry, imagination, wit, and spectacle; the alternative of Christianity is outside the play.

Historicity

As with *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar*, this play’s source is Plutarch’s lives. Modern scholars have some disagreements with Plutarch (and with each other) about the historical accuracy of Plutarch’s accounts, but Shakespeare undoubtedly considered his source to be fairly accurate history.

The actions in the play occurred, in reality, from 40 to 30 BCE. Acceleration of time covered by the plot is characteristic of Shakespeare’s English histories and classical tragedies.