

# Metaphors of Gods in *Antony and Cleopatra*

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Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* is the tragic love story of the Roman general Mark Antony and the Egyptian Queen Cleopatra. Their feelings fluctuate intensely like a roller coaster by various incidents. When Shakespeare describes their characters or feelings, they are often compared to Greek or Roman gods from classical mythology: Antony is like Mars, the god of war; and Cleopatra is like Venus, the goddess of love and beauty. These two gods also fell in love like Antony and Cleopatra, but that love was also not always happy. This paper discusses the connections between the two historical lovers and their archetypal divinities, and to illustrate these comparisons I will use some paintings that show the influence of Shakespeare's vision. First we will turn our attention to Cleopatra and Venus.

## Cleopatra and Venus

Cleopatra and Venus not only have some common points; Venus is directly referred to in this play. In the scene where Enobarbus (Antony's dearest friend) recounts the first meeting between Antony and Cleopatra, Enobarbus refers to Cleopatra as being like Venus:

The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne  
Burnt on the water. The poop was beaten gold,  
Purple the sails, and so perfumed that  
The winds were love-sick with them; the oars were silver,  
Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made  
The water which they beat to follow faster,  
As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,  
It beggar'd all description: she did lie  
In her pavilion—cloth of gold, of tissue—

O'er-picturing that Venus where we see  
The fancy outwork nature. On each side her  
Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,  
With divers-color'd fans, whose wind did seem  
To [glow] the delicate cheeks which they did cool,  
And what they undid did. (II.ii.191-204)

To better understand Cleopatra and her character, and this scene, let us look at how the British artist William Etty painted this scene in 1821.



William Etty, *The Triumph of Cleopatra* (1821)

This painting shows the scene that Enobarbus references above, the scene of Cleopatra arriving at Tarsus in Cilicia, where she first met Antony upon the river Cygnus. First, Enobarbus refers to the barge she sat in: it was luxurious, shining and good-smelling. Second, he refers to Cleopatra: she lay in her pavilion and looked like Venus. Third, he refers to children who stand on each side of Cleopatra: they were fanning Cleopatra, and their figures looked like smiling Cupids. These points remind us of Venus, the goddess of love and beauty; she was very beautiful, and a lot of gods were enslaved by her beauty at a glance. Cupid is associated with Venus in classical mythology (often as a son), so Venus and Cupid are often drawn in a set. These points are shared qualities between Cleopatra and Venus, and they are shown in this painting.

While Cleopatra is painted brilliantly in the center, in front of the jubilant people, Antony, wearing a gold helmet, is painted quietly in the lower right-hand corner. It seems that Etty emphasizes her beauty and gorgeousness, and Antony's powerlessness to resist them. When Antony and Cleopatra meet for the first time, her beauty already enslaved him as Venus enslaved a lot of gods by her beauty.

We see that Cleopatra apparently pretends to despise and mock Antony, but she is playing hard to get. She received a lot of invitations from him and his friends, and she displays confidence in her beauty and position. She was clever, because she could get him while keeping Egypt as her kingdom, and he responded immediately to her wish.

## Beauty

Both Venus and Cleopatra were beautiful, and their beauty affected a lot of people and also triggered important events. Venus won the famous beauty contest in classical antiquity known as "The Judgment of Paris." In this story, three goddesses contend for a golden apple inscribed "to the most beautiful in the world." Zeus left the decision up to Paris, a shepherd, who expected each goddess to offer something in return as a kind of bribe. Hera offered the reins, Athena offered skill in war, and Venus (Aphrodite in Greek) offered the most beautiful woman in the world. He chose Venus, and she got the golden apple (Sugimata 114). She knew that what a man really wanted was neither the reins nor skill in war, but the most beautiful wife. Thus, she won the title of beauty using her insight into man's desire.

Cleopatra also controls men through her beauty. Enobarbus insists that Antony could never give up Cleopatra, despite Antony's pending political marriage to Octavia, the sister of his Roman rival, Caesar Octavius. Cleopatra's beauty attracts every man, and desire for her is

insatiable. Actually, when Antony saw her for the first time, he fell in love in an instant. He deserted his country, and he was really madly in love with her.

Both Venus and Cleopatra attracted men and gods using their beauty and intelligence. They were beautiful and clever goddess and woman, but when the feelings of jealousy budded, they become anything but beautiful and intelligent. Having looked at Venus and Cleopatra's physical, visual power, let's next consider similarities between their personalities. Among them, we will focus on two key points: jealousy and confidence.

## Jealousy

Both Venus and Cleopatra have strong jealousy, and they can become like a devil when it is provoked. Venus was jealous of the beauty of Psyche, who was reputed to be more beautiful than the goddess of beauty. Venus bullies Psyche into doing seemingly impossible tasks: she ordered her to sort a lot of grains before sunset, and to get the golden fleece of a ferocious sheep (Sugimata 59-62). It seems that Venus' jealousy occurred from the feeling that she was—or should be—more beautiful than Psyche.

Cleopatra is even more jealous, and violently so, when she learns from a messenger that her lover Antony has married another woman. Cleopatra at first talked gently to the messenger who brought long-sought news of Antony. Having confirmed his health and well-being, the messenger delivers the heart-breaking news, and Cleopatra becomes violently angry and strikes him repeatedly: "Hence, / Horrible villain, I'll spurn thine eyes / Like balls before me; I'll unhair thy head, / Thou shalt be whipt with wire, and stew'd in brine, / Smarting in ling'ring pickle" (II. v.62-65). Moreover, she dragged the messenger, and she pulled out a dagger. Cleopatra is justly angry at Antony's betrayal, but she takes her anger out on innocent others.

## Confidence

Venus and Cleopatra often repeat confident actions and words about their beauty, intelligence and power. Perhaps because Venus had these qualities, she wasn't satisfied with her ugly husband, Vulcan, the god of blacksmiths and fire. She didn't like him, so she began to have an affair with Mars, the god of war. In the different position as wronged lover, Cleopatra—after she got violently angry with the messenger—asks him about Octavia's figure, height, pitch of voice, age, hair color, and face. She then compares herself favorably against the reports of Octavia and grew confident that she was better, and her mood improved. Venus and Cleopatra's words and actions seem to calm their mind. Venus calms her mind by proving to herself that she is the most

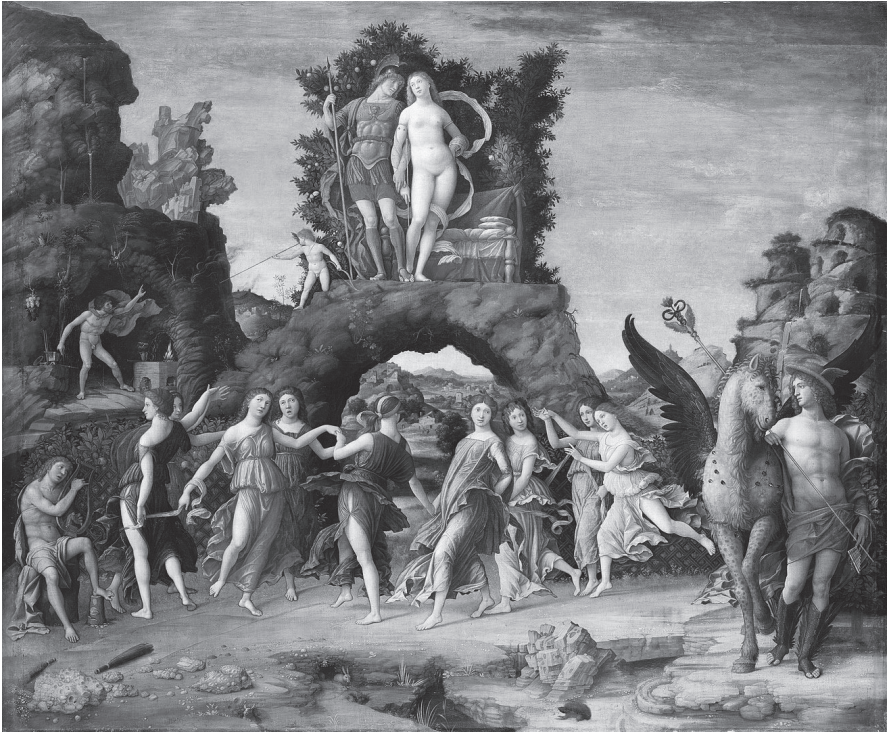
beautiful and that everyone adored her. Cleopatra calms her mind by confirming that Octavia is inferior to her and Antony doesn't really favor her. It seems that these signs of confidence are hidden in strong words and actions. However, would a person who was truly confident get so jealous and become so unrestrained?

### Antony and Mars

Like Cleopatra and Venus, Antony and Mars also share some common points. Indeed, Mars is directly referred to in this play, and we will focus on three scenes in which references to Mars appear.

First, at the beginning of the play, Philo likens Antony's former character to Mars against Antony's current, embarrassing obsession with Cleopatra: "Those his goodly eyes, / That o'er the files and musters of the war / Have glow'd like plated Mars, now bend, now turn / The office and devotion of their view / Upon a tawny front" (I.i.2-6). Antony used to command a large battlefield and shine like armored Mars, but he has become the exclusive fool of a prostitute, Cleopatra. In the earlier-cited painting of William Etty, *The Triumph of Cleopatra*, we found Antony. Looking at the picture, we see that he has something in his hand, a *fasces*, an axe head tied to a bunch of rods as a handle. It is a symbol of the official power of ancient Rome and a consul's sign of authority. The presence of this *fasces* in Antony's hand shows he still has his Roman identity, allegiance, fighting power, and authority as he meets Cleopatra for the first time.

Second, after Antony went back to Rome, Cleopatra and her attendants Charmian, Iras and Mardian are talking at the palace of Cleopatra. Cleopatra muses upon Antony, wants distraction, and teases the eunuch Mardian about his ability to "play" with her. She asks if he can love "indeed," and he responds with his own linguistic joke or pun: "Not in deed, madam, for I can do nothing / But what indeed is honest to be done; / Yet have I fierce affections, and think / What Venus did with Mars" (I.v.15-18). One painting in which Venus, Mars and Vulcan appears was painted by the Italian Renaissance painter Andrea Mantegna in 1497.



Andrea Mantegna *Parnassus* (1497)

In this painting, the armored Mars stands together with a naked Venus goddess atop a rock; behind them is a bed, symbolizing their intimate relationship. In a grotto at the left of this painting is the wronged husband, Vulcan. He is working with the tools of his blacksmith trade, and he looks at Venus and Mars with expressions of sorrow and anger.

Third, when Cleopatra was told that Antony got married to Octavia from a messenger, she referred to his personality using classical mythology: “Though he be painted one way like a Gorgon, / The other way’s a Mars” (II.v.116-117). A Gorgon is an ugly monster, with Medusa being the most famous one. Their hair is a tussle of snakes, and they have golden wings, bronze hands, and fangs like a wild boar. They can turn a person who looks upon them into stone. Cleopatra usually thinks of Antony as a Mars, but sometimes she doesn’t understand and even fears him. Antony really loved Cleopatra, and was staying with her in Egypt even though he was

already married to the Roman Fulvia. After Fulvia dies, Roman civil war with Caesar Octavius is brewing, and Antony has no choice but to go back to Rome. Once there, he tries to smooth things over with Octavius by marrying his sister, Octavia. While politically necessary, these actions understandably cause Cleopatra to see Antony as a horrible monster.

As mentioned above, Antony and Mars' personality gradually became highlighted, so next, we will refer to their similarities closely. Among their similar points, we will focus on two: militarism and changeability.

## Militarism

Both Mars and Antony like to fight, and their way of fighting was feared by many people and gods. As the god of war, Mars naturally liked fighting. He was a crude and unfaithful god, and people and gods didn't feel comfortable with him. Although he liked to fight, he famously lost an important battle to Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Compared with him, she was calm and intelligent, so they were constantly in confrontation. One day, Mars declared to Athena that he would defeat her on a hill of Troy. He attacked with a terrible spear that wouldn't be broken even by Zeus' thunder. Athena dodged it, took up a huge black, ragged stone, and threw it at his neck. Mars was knocked over and fell down, and his body covered seven acres of ground. His hair was covered with mud, and the armor that he was wearing rang violently. Athena smiled and said, "You idiot, you didn't even know how much my power is superior to your power" (Guilland 120). Despite Mars' love of fighting, his way of fighting was unplanned and forcible, so he often repeatedly fought and lost.

Antony also enjoyed fighting, and he was often likened to Mars. At the beginning of the play Philo refers to his militarism: "His caption's heart, / Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst / The buckles on his breast, reneges all temper" (I.i.6-8). He was constantly fighting at the head of everyone bravely, and everyone followed him. He was also confident in his position and honor. When Antony and Octavia later talk about his conflict with her brother, Caesar Octavius, Antony states, "If I lose mine honor, / I lose myself" (III.iv.22-23). Fighting and winning the battle is to keep honor, and if he loses his honor, he loses his very essence and identity.

While Mars and Antony were strong and feared by almost everyone, they had weak points that mislead them and change their character.

## Changeability

Mars and Antony used to be manly when they fought in war. They change, however, when

they fall in love. Mars eagerly looked for the opportunity to be with Venus when her husband, Vulcan, was absent. The deservedly jealous Vulcan discovers this, and made a fine, strong and unbreakable net. He laid this net on the bed that they always used, and pretended to go out. When Mars saw that Vulcan went out, he went to her, took her hands, and said “Now, let’s get into his bed, he went out.” She was pleased at hearing this, and when they went to sleep, the net that Vulcan had made caught them in their adultery. He lifted them up, and loudly shouted about their infidelity to the gods. The gods laughed at the sight of the trapped Mars and Venus. Mars promised him compensation, Vulcan released them, and they quickly hurried away in shame (Guilland 120-121).

Mars and Venus’ flying off and escaping reminds us of Antony and Cleopatra’s escape from the sea battle at Actium.

Like Mars, Antony was strong and manly, and everyone was afraid of him in war. However, when he met Cleopatra he changed and became absorbed in her more than anything else. His change was clear even from the surroundings. At the beginning of the play, Philo refers to his change: “The triple pillar of the world transform’d / Into a strumpet’s fool” (I.i.12-13). The strumpet refers to Cleopatra, and Antony was obsessed with her enough to amaze those around him. Several obvious changes in him appear in this play, so we will focus on the two scenes that clearly show this.

First is the scene where Antony and Cleopatra share words of love at the beginning of the play. Antony dismisses the significance of his own country: “Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch / Of the rang’d empire fall! Here is my space, / Kingdoms are clay” (I.i.33-35). He fell in love with Cleopatra, and he immediately lost interest in his own country. He told her that he would not care if Rome collapsed, which he was supposed to be responsible for and to. He changed to give her priority over his country and his family. Where she existed became the center of his world.

The second relevant scene is where Antony and Caesar battle at sea. Antony was good at battle on land, and Caesar didn’t yield a battle at sea. Cleopatra advises Antony to battle at sea, and he accepted. That unprecedented and impulsive fighting style was like Mars in classical mythology, and it was a wrong decision. In battle, Cleopatra flees away, and Antony flies after her ship, leaving the battle. He watched her retreat, and he chases after her. Scarus (friend to Antony) refers to the situation at that time: “She once being loof’d, / The noble ruin of her magic, Antony, / Claps on his sea-wing, and (like a doting mallard), / Leaving the fight in heighth, flies after her” (III.x.17-20). Scarus refers to Antony as a doting mallard, or duck. It seems he looked



like a mindless, bird-brained male. It was embarrassing for him to escape from the battle, and it causes him to lose honor. Rome's foremost soldier, who was fighting bravely at the beginning, changes to a stupid man who runs after a woman.

Antony is later ashamed of his behavior and becomes depressed. When he returns, he criticizes himself: "I have offended reputation, / A most unnoble swerving" (III.xi.48-49). He hurt his honor by himself. For him who cherished honor above all, this was shameful behavior. In response to this, Cleopatra cries and wishes forgiveness. Antony sees that she is truly sorry, so he forgives her and asks for a kiss. A man who cherished honor above all gave priority to love, and he willfully loses his majesty and honor.

### Conclusion

In this paper we analyzed metaphors of gods in *Antony and Cleopatra*, focusing on the pairings of Mars / Antony and Venus / Cleopatra. Venus and Cleopatra had beauty, jealousy and confidence in common. Cleopatra's emotions become exposed by being in love, and this is in common with Venus as written in classical mythology. Mars and Antony also have common traits: militarism and changeability. Antony's emotions become changed by being in love, and this is similar to Mars as written in classical mythology. We mentioned both of them as symbols of what it means to be a man or a woman. As planets, Mars symbolizes man, and Venus symbolizes woman. It also applies to their characters, and focusing on allusions and connections like this leads to more interest in and better understanding of the story and ourselves. In this essay, we focused on classical mythology, and we could find that keys to understand the character's personalities, feelings or thinking. It seems that Shakespeare helped his audience to enjoy the story more deeply and with more interest by using classical mythology. Mars and Antony changed because of love: they were swayed by Venus and Cleopatra, and they lost their majesty and honor. On the other hand, Venus and Cleopatra became infatuated in love, but they didn't change much in personality. Sometimes it seems that a man tends to be swayed by love more than a woman: in other words, Antony and Mars may be seen as symbols of foolish male desire.

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