

On the Differing Deaths of Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra

by [Evelyn Hooven](#) (July 2023)



Death of Marc Antony, Pompeo Batoni, 1763

When Antony receives word that Cleopatra has died, he stabs himself. He does not know that the report of her death is false, a ruse to regain favor. When he finds out she is alive, there is no recrimination. Cleopatra's stratagem may open as apt an occasion as any for the end of his own life. Although a mighty and valiant soldier (and partial emperor), Antony is no

longer concerned with campaigns and battles against Caesar and not solely because the single-minded Caesar always wins. The *thought* of Cleopatra's death, even conveyed by false report, brings him still further, more definitively towards the end of his connection to life. He does not declare this but lives it. Protective advice to Cleopatra, warning about whom to trust or not in the face of Caesar's triumphal victory, prevails throughout his last constricted moments. And he hopes that death may accord him a final embrace— "Of many thousand kisses, this poor last." Far from the pageantry and fanfare he has known, this modest nobility speaks to what his love (and he, himself) have become.

Though Cleopatra well understands the suicide, she pseudo-scolds Antony for leaving her to a world that, bereft of his presence, is no better than a sty. "Hast thou no care of me?" Her own dying (act V) will be as measured and ceremonial as Antony's (at the close of act IV), mental readiness notwithstanding, was painful and abrupt. A wry social dimension occurs when she speaks to the man who brings her the asp and wishes her "joy of the worm." The pretty worm of the Nile "that kills and hurts not." She is attended by her devoted ladies who see her as "a lass unparalleled." Cleopatra intends in the afterlife to meet Mark Antony and must do so majestically arrayed. "Give me my robe, put on my crown ..." She expects to kiss him as a salutation, not as a farewell.

Cleopatra is willing to give up her life, but not all her personal treasures. The Queen of Egypt has omitted from obligatory declaration "enough to purchase all the rest." Why, when her distinct intent is suicide?

I tend to think that she makes this striking effort to protect her treasure from an afterlife among the cold Roman ladies. One is Octavia. Though a strictly political arrangement, Octavia is Antony's official wife. Cleopatra refuses to bequeath any posterity her own lovely and royal Egyptian jewels.

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Evelyn Hooven graduated from Mount Holyoke College and received her M.A. from Yale University, where she also studied at The Yale School of Drama. A member of the Dramatists' Guild, she has had presentations of her verse dramas at several theatrical venues, including *The Maxwell Anderson Playwrights Series* in Greenwich, CT (after a state-wide competition) and *The Poet's Theatre* in Cambridge, MA (result of a national competition). Her poems and translations from the French and Spanish have appeared in *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, *ART TIMES*, *Chelsea*, *The Literary Review*, *THE SHOp: A Magazine of Poetry* (in Ireland), *The Tribeca Poetry Review*, *Vallum* (in Montreal), and other journals, and her literary criticism in Oxford University's *Essays in Criticism*.

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