



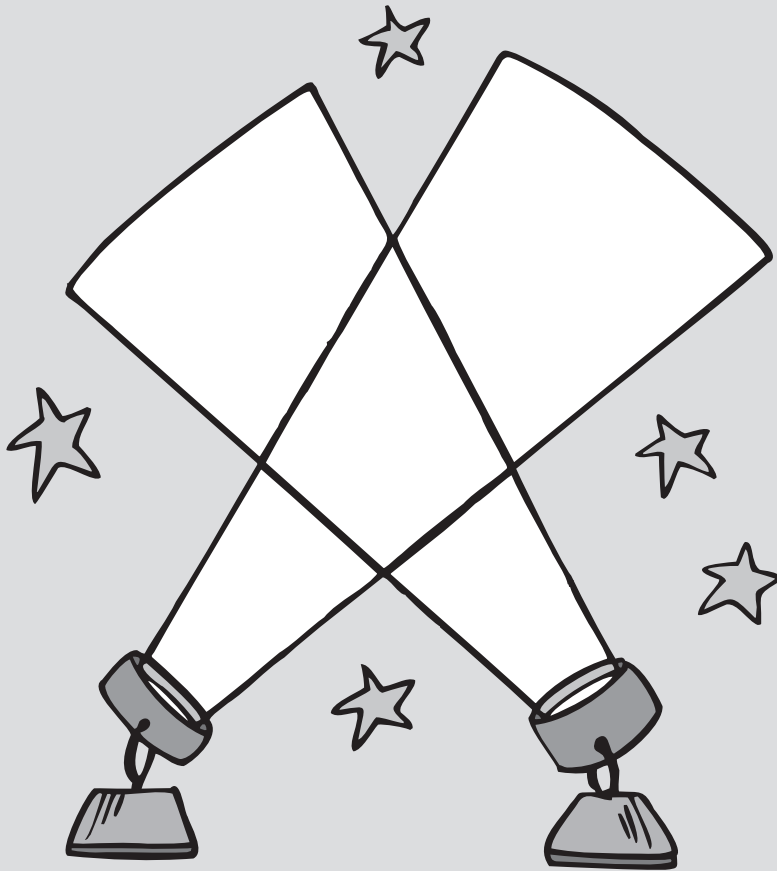
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READERS' THEATER



ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

BACKGROUND: ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

Battle for Rome: Antony and Octavian

The assassination of Julius Caesar plunged Rome into a period of civil war as various factions vied for power. Mark Antony, an experienced Roman politician, was allied with Caesar's 18 year-old heir, Octavian, against Brutus and Cassius, who had conspired to murder Caesar. After the defeat of these forces at Philippi, Antony and Octavian competed for power in Rome. To cement one agreement between the two men, Antony agreed to marry Octavian's sister, Octavia.

Octavian controlled Rome and the western part of the empire, and Antony controlled the Eastern portion, including Egypt which was a semi-independent ally of Rome. When Antony left his wife and later divorced her for Cleopatra, Octavian had even more reason to fight Antony. Octavian convinced the Roman Senate to fund an army and attack Cleopatra in Egypt. The armies and navies of the two factions fought at Actium on the coast of Greece. For reasons that are unclear, Cleopatra withdrew early from the naval conflict and took her 60 ships to Egypt. Antony saw her fleet leave and soon followed, leaving most of his army behind. Octavian's forces were victorious.

Cleopatra

Cleopatra VII was a descendant of the Ptolemy dynasty that had ruled Egypt for more than 300 years. As a teen, Cleopatra was married to her younger brother, a common Egyptian custom among ruling families, but they soon were competing for control of Egypt. In an effort to win control of Egypt, Cleopatra had herself rolled in a rug and delivered to Julius Caesar who was in Alexandria finishing a Roman civil war. He was enchanted by her and found it good policy to support her in her efforts to control Egypt. They had one son, and Caesar took Cleopatra to Rome.

After Caesar's death, Cleopatra tried to seduce Octavian but was rebuffed by him. She then had an affair with Mark Antony, who later joined her in Egypt and divorced his wife, Octavian's sister. This further inflamed the tension between the two men. Octavian declared war on Egypt knowing that Antony would support Cleopatra. Octavian's victory at Actium made it possible for him to conquer Egypt. The dual suicides of Antony and Cleopatra left him without opposition. He had Cleopatra's son by Caesar killed so that there was no possible heir to the throne of Egypt.





SCRIPT SUMMARY: ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

The setting for this script is Alexandria, Egypt in 31 B.C. after Mark Antony and Cleopatra have lost the battle of Actium to Octavian, who now controls a powerful army and navy. He is en route to Egypt ready to inflict the final defeat on Antony and Cleopatra. Each of them has tried to negotiate a deal with Octavian who knows he has won and has no intention of losing his advantage. Antony is still angry at himself for deserting his troops and following Cleopatra's ships which had quickly left Actium soon after the battle began.

Antony decides that all he has left is honor and decides to lead his men into battle where he will probably be killed. He wins a skirmish, but his men desert him. Cleopatra goes to her mausoleum to prepare for death as an Egyptian pharaoh might do. Antony is told that Cleopatra has committed suicide, and he falls on his sword which is considered by Romans to be the honorable response when one is beaten in battle and capture is certain. Antony is wounded but not dead when he receives a second message that she is still living and wishes to see him, Antony has his loyal friends carry him to her mausoleum where he dies in her arms. Cleopatra later commits suicide by allowing a poisonous snake to bite her.

Assignment

Read the readers' theater script "Antony and Cleopatra." Prepare for the performances and share your interpretations of the scripts with the class.

Extensions: Writing and Literature

- Write a script based on one of the events below or another one related to Roman history in the time of Antony and Cleopatra. Use the background section, biographies, textbooks, and Internet sources for help.

The first meeting between Antony and Cleopatra after the death of Julius Caesar

Antony divorces his wife, Octavia, to join Cleopatra in Egypt.

Cleopatra leads her ships away from Actium, and Antony leaves most of his troops and follows Cleopatra to Egypt.

- Read any biography of Cleopatra or Mark Antony. Use one episode or a chapter as the basis for a readers' theater script about their lives.
- Read all or part of *Antony and Cleopatra* by William Shakespeare. Write a script of your own in modern English based on one scene from the play. After practicing your script, share your performance with the rest of the class.



SCRIPT: ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

This script is set in ancient Egypt after Octavian's victory at the battle of Actium. There are three speakers.

Narrator: For almost 14 years after the assassination of Julius Caesar, two men, Mark Antony and Octavian, adopted son of Julius Caesar, contested who would hold ultimate power in Rome. Sometimes they shared power, with Octavian in control of Italy and the western part of the empire and Antony located in the eastern part of the empire. Both men knew that one day they would face each other in a final conflict. The key battle occurred at Actium on the coast of Greece, and Octavian defeated the combined armies and navies of both Antony and his Egyptian ally and lover, Cleopatra. Antony and Cleopatra retreated to Alexandria, Egypt, where they met again.

Cleopatra: Marcus, you did not enjoy the feast or the party tonight.

Antony: Beloved Queen, our time for feasting and drinking is over. Octavian is on the way to Alexandria. He has landed his fleet in Egypt, and his army has begun the march to Alexandria.

Cleopatra: You still have an army to command and I have my fleet, which I saved by leaving during the battle at Actium before they could be destroyed.

Antony: You fled the battle at Actium with your 60 ships, and I left my army. Most of my soldiers went over to Octavian. Your fleet will not fight Octavian's massive armada of ships. I have a small force here, and I intend to face Octavian tomorrow. I do not expect to return.

Cleopatra: Marcus, you remain a Roman to the end. You know that you will be killed. Octavian's army is large, but they are unpaid. Wait until I can raise an army from Egypt and our allies. I have a huge treasury. We will spend it all to defeat Octavian.

Antony: No foreign army has beaten Rome since Hannibal. Octavian has taxed Rome heavily for this assault on us. He knows that the wheat of Egypt and your treasure will pay off the Roman people and his soldiers. I must face Octavian knowing that I will die, but death is preferable to dishonor. I left Actium to follow you. I will not dishonor myself again.





SCRIPT: ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA (cont.)

Cleopatra: Octavian is a ruthless man. I have never been able to reach him. He ignored me after Caesar's death, when I was the most beautiful woman in Rome. I have already offered Octavian huge amounts of money to let us control Egypt or to let me abdicate and leave my children in charge of Egypt, but he kept the money and refused to guarantee our safety.

Antony: How could any man ignore you? I felt the thunderbolt of love the minute I saw you.

Cleopatra: Octavian wants power more than anything. No woman can compete with his desire for power. He hates you because of me. When you divorced his sister Octavia for my love, he saw it as disloyalty and weakness. He will kill our children, and he will march all of us through Rome as prisoners. We must wait and fight when we can win.

Antony: Victory is no longer possible. Death is my only hope.

Narrator: Mark Antony marched his smaller army out to meet Octavian, and he led one brief cavalry charge that pushed back Octavian's mounted soldiers. Then Antony's entire army gradually deserted to the enemy. During the confusion following the battle, Antony received a message that Cleopatra was dead in her mausoleum.

Antony: We are beaten. My last legions have gone over to Octavian. There are rumors that he has already found the great treasure of the Ptolemy kings that Cleopatra intended to use to raise another army. I am beaten on the field of battle. Cleopatra is dead. Life no longer has value.

Narrator: Antony chose to take the Roman way of honor. With a few loyal soldiers in attendance, he fell on his sword, but he did not die immediately. As the blood seeped out of his mortal wound, he received a second message that Cleopatra was still alive and wanted to see him one last time in her mausoleum.



SCRIPT: ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA *(cont.)*

- Antony:** My soldier brothers, please take me to Cleopatra's tomb.
- Narrator:** Loyal aides carried Antony to the queen's tomb. He was lifted through an upper window and lowered to the floor. Cleopatra rushed into his arms.
- Cleopatra:** My beloved warrior, all is lost but our love. That love must be forever.
- Antony:** Octavian is on the way even now. I do not want him to see me die in pain. Your love was worth everything.
- Cleopatra:** I would like to have ruled Egypt like my father before me, but the gods have turned against us. Our love was too wonderful and too sweet.
- Antony:** Beloved, I die with your beauty in my eyes. All men should be so lucky. Hold me in your arms. Let your hair wipe away my pain.
- Narrator:** Antony died and Cleopatra made arrangements for her own death. She prepared her body so that it would be ready for burial. She sent away her servants as she heard Octavian's soldiers surround the mausoleum.
- Cleopatra:** I will not be his slave marched through the streets of Rome for the people to ridicule and spit upon. I will not be the prize shown off to the masses before I am strangled. My beloved Antony, we will be together forever. Neither Octavian nor the gods can deny us.
- Narrator:** Cleopatra took an asp, a small but very poisonous snake, and held it to her chest. Death was instantaneous. Cleopatra was 39 years old. Her child by Caesar was killed. Her three children by Mark Antony were returned to Rome and brought up as Romans in Octavian's family. With her death, all Egypt became a Roman province.



READER'S RESPONSE: ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

Directions

- These discussion activities and questions may be used in small groups or with the entire class. They may also be used by the actors as a part of their preparation for the reading.
- Refer to the script “Antony and Cleopatra” when responding to all questions. You may also find useful facts in the background section, biographies, textbooks, and Internet sources.
- Make notes on the lines provided below each question before your group discussion.

General Discussion

1. Why do you think Cleopatra ran away from the battle at Actium? Was it a wise decision?

2. Why did Antony leave his troops at the battle of Actium? Was it a wise decision?

3. Why do you think Octavian had Cleopatra's son by Julius Caesar killed?

Making It Personal

Would you trade the chance to control an empire for the love of a woman (or man) as Antony did? Explain your answer.

Who did you admire most—Antony, Cleopatra, or Octavian? Give your reasons for your choice.

Do you think Antony and Cleopatra should have committed suicide or kept on fighting until they died? Why?
