

Examrace

Competitive Exams: William Shakespeare Antony and Cleopatra Overview

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The most influential writer in all of English literature, William Shakespeare was born in 1564 to a successful middle-class glove maker in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. Shakespeare attended grammar school, but his formal education proceeded no further. In 1582 he married an older woman, Anne Hathaway, and had three children with her. Around 1590 he left his family behind and traveled to London to work as an actor and playwright. Public and critical acclaim quickly followed, and Shakespeare eventually became the most popular playwright in England and part-owner of the Globe Theater. His career bridged the reigns of Elizabeth I (ruled 1558-1603) and James I (ruled 1603-1625), and he was a favorite of both monarchs. Indeed, James granted Shakespeare's company the greatest possible compliment by bestowing upon its members the title of King's Men. Wealthy and renowned, Shakespeare retired to Stratford and died in 1616 at the age of fifty-two. At the time of Shakespeare's death, literary luminaries such as Ben Jonson hailed his works as timeless.

Shakespeare's works were collected and printed in various editions in the century following his death, and by the early eighteenth century his reputation as the greatest poet ever to write in English was well established. The unprecedented admiration garnered by his works led to a fierce curiosity about Shakespeare's life, but the dearth of biographical information has left many details of Shakespeare's personal history shrouded in mystery. Some people have concluded from this fact and from Shakespeare's modest education that Shakespeare's plays were actually written by someone else. Francis Bacon and the Earl of Oxford are the two most popular-candidates but the support for this claim is overwhelmingly circumstantial, and the theory is not taken seriously by many scholars.

In the absence of credible evidence to the contrary, Shakespeare must be viewed as the author of the thirty-seven plays and 154 sonnets that bear his name. The legacy of this body of work is immense. A number of Shakespeare's plays seem to have transcended even the category of brilliance, becoming so influential as to affect profoundly the course of Western literature and culture ever after:

Scholars believe that Shakespeare wrote Antony and Cleopatra in 1606, immediately after Macbeth, and it is one of the last great tragedies that Shakespeare produced. The most geographically sweeping of Shakespeare's plays, Antony and Cleopatra's setting is the entire Roman Empire, its backdrop the well-documented history of Octavius Caesar, Marc Antony, and Cleopatra. Shakespeare's primary source for Antony and Cleopatra was the Life of Marcus Antonius contained in Plutarch's Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans,

which was translated into English by Sir Thomas North in 1579. North's language was so rich that Shakespeare incorporated large, relatively unchanged excerpts of it into his text. The plot of the play also remains close to North's history, although characters like Enobarbus and Cleopatra's attendants are largely Shakespearean creations.

The action of the story takes place roughly two years after the events of Shakespeare's earlier play about the Roman Empire, Julius Caesar. At the beginning of that tragedy, Caesar has triumphed over his rival Pompey the Great, the father of young Pompey in Antony and Cleopatra, and aspires to kingship. Caesar is then assassinated by Cassius and Brutus, who hope to preserve the Roman Republic. Instead, Cassius and Brutus are defeated by Mark Antony and Octavius Caesar, Julius's nephew, who then join Marcus Aemilius Lepidus to create a three-man government, or triumvirate, over the empire.

Historically, the action of Antony and Cleopatra takes place over a ten-year span, whereas in the play the story is compressed to fit the needs of the stage. Antony is clearly much older than he was in Julius Caesar, and his political instincts seem to be waning. Octavius Caesar was only a minor character in the earlier play, but here he comes into his own as the man who will rise to become the first Roman emperor. Most of the political battles and machinations depicted are historically accurate, as is the romance of the title characters.

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