Text

Cleopatra

Antony and Cleopatra



I am fire and air
(ACT 5, SCENE 2)



I was Queen of all Egypt. I ruled my lands, a woman alone. I commanded men at war and ships at sea. I stole Rome's greatest general from them, and I commanded him, too. They said I was a temptress, a danger to the mighty Republic of Rome. They were right.

Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, is renowned for her power and beauty. She is passionately in love with the great Roman general, Antony, but their relationship is uneasy. The Romans and Egyptians are troubled allies, so despite the strength of their feelings, the lovers cannot fully trust each other.

Cleopatra knows she can fascinate the men who wish to control her, and she ruthlessly protects her independence. She can be jealous and unpredictable, playing games with those who are captivated by her. When Antony falls under her spell, he is mocked by his fellow Romans for neglecting his duty as a soldier and turning his back on Roman values.

The lovers fall out, mistrusting each other's intentions and loyalty. Finally they pledge to fight together against Octavius, Antony's rival in Rome, but Cleopatra abandons Antony in the middle of the battle at sea. He follows her back to Egypt, dishonouring himself as a soldier by deserting his troops. Antony blames Cleopatra for his behaviour and threatens to kill her over her betrayal. To win back her lover's affection, Cleopatra fakes her own death – but Antony is so devastated by the news that he turns his sword on himself. Antony dies in her arms and Cleopatra is captured by the Romans – but, her own woman to the last, she refuses to become Rome's slave. Dressing in her royal garments, she brings a poisonous snake to her breast and chooses to join Antony in a love beyond death. Her story of passion, power and politics has become immortal.

SHAKESPEARE WEEK
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Beatrice

Much Ado About Nothing

My dear Lady Disdain
(ACT I, SCENE I)

My Lady Tongue, they say of me; Beatrice the scold – quick to scorn, slow to love. I talk up a merry storm, words flying fast, and no man can stem the flow of my wits. My uncle would "fit me with a husband". I say, show me the man who would fit Beatrice.

Beatrice, an orphan who lives with her uncle and beloved cousin, Hero, in Sicily, is a young woman with a fearsome reputation for being sharp-tongued and strong-willed. Scornful of men and marriage, she laughs at the absurdity of life and vows to keep her independence.

She engages in a war of verbal wits with the soldier Benedick, who has hurt Beatrice in the past and has also renounced marriage. They exchange clever and funny insults as if they would talk themselves mad. In a fit of mischief, their friends plot to trick the two into falling in love through a game of overheard conversations. Despite her initial refusal to be overmastered by any man, Beatrice talks herself into loving Benedick back. But she is cautious about falling in love, not wanting to make herself vulnerable.

Beatrice's cousin, Hero, is falsely accused of being unfaithful by her lover, Claudio, who is Benedick's best friend. A vengeful Beatrice demands that Benedick prove his love for her by killing Claudio. Crisis is averted and the two couples are reunited, but Beatrice will only marry Benedick on her own terms. They quarrel their way to the altar, and Beatrice makes a reluctant, wisecracking bride, whose unstoppable mouth Benedick attempts to stop with a kiss.

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