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John Dryden's *All for Love*: Conflict of Authority, Freedom, Power, and Passion

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Abstract

This paper examines the conflict-ridden love story of Antony and Cleopatra as depicted in John Dryden's *All for Love*; (1677). As an imitation of William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, Dryden's play functions as a tightly focused personal drama unfolding in the last hours of the two lead characters. Their passionate romance is infused by jealousy, rivalry and contemporary politics. Moving beyond the basic comparison with Shakespeare, this study analyzes how contemporary Restoration political upheavals shaped Dryden's narrative. It investigates the circumstances behind the death of the two passionate lovers. Finally, it explores Dryden's conviction that lasting social and political stability requires a strong, centralized empire rather than a fractured republic. This study also explores how the text mirrors the political upheavals of late seventeenth-century England, specifically the trauma of the English Civil War, the Interregnum, and the anxieties surrounding the Stuart Restoration. Ultimately, the paper argues that the tragic suicide of the lovers is not merely a romantic climax, but a calculated ideological resolution.

Keywords: revisit, imitation, Bard, sequel, tragedy, empire, resolution

Introduction

John Dryden (1631–1700) lived through the trauma of the English Civil War (1642–1646) and the execution of Charles I in 1649. The consequential Interregnum left England without a monarch for over a decade. Following the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, Dryden emerged as a staunch supporter of the crown. Dryden considered a centralized monarchy as the true safeguard against civil chaos. The theaters, which were closed by Puritans in 1642, "were reopened at the restoration in 1660" (Dryden, *Introduction*, 3). Dryden's serious plays diverged sharply from the standard Restoration comedies of manners. While popular restoration comedies focused on infidelity, witty deception, and domestic scandals, Dryden sought an elevated style. He studied French neoclassical models, specifically Jean Racine's *Phèdre* (1677), to craft high-stakes heroic drama. By blending French model with the rich characterization of William Shakespeare, Dryden created a distinct tragic form known as heroic tragedy. Dryden's *All for Love* represents the peak of this synthesis, using a classical framework to deliver a significant political message.

Dryden's Strategic Deviations from the Shakespearean Model

While *All for Love* is explicitly sub-titled *The World Well Lost* and framed as an imitation of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, Dryden's text is a radical reinterpretation rather than a passive adaptation. Dryden introduced major structural changes in his heroic tragedy. He deviated from Shakespeare's tragedy which focused on the Roman triumvirate. Instead, Dryden confined his entire five-act drama to ancient Alexandria only. By narrowing his perspective, Dryden confines the lovers from external distractions, transforming a sprawling historical epic into an intimate psychological drama.

Dryden's *All for Love* introduced the role of Ventidius, a fiercely loyal Roman general who embodied ideal Roman virtue and military duty. Ventidius stands in stark opposition to Alexas, Cleopatra's calculating eunuch advisor, who represents the manipulative survival strategies of the Egyptian court. Additionally, Dryden arranged a famous face-to-face confrontation between Antony's legal wife, Octavia, and his mistress Cleopatra. Octavia brings with her the moral weight of Roman law, religious sanction, and the physical presence of Antony's young daughters. Cleopatra counters with the claim of absolute passion and the sacrifice of her kingdom for Antony's sake. In his preface, Dryden justifies this encounter by appealing a universal human psychology by observing that "after all, though the one were a Roman, and the other a queen, they were both women" (Dryden, *Preface* 10).

Power and Passion

The plot is built on the foundations of the collapsing Roman triumvirate. Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, and Lepidus had aggressively expanded Rome's borders, considering Egypt as their ultimate prize. Following Julius Caesar's assassination, Antony and Octavius took control over Rome, and Antony got married with Octavius's sister, Octavia. However, Antony abandoned Octavia and their children and his Roman responsibilities, and fell in love with Cleopatra, the Egyptian queen. Antony's decision to stay with Cleopatra brought devastating political consequences. Octavius took it as the personal insult, and invaded Alexandria, forcing a direct clash between imperial authority and individual passion.

Mark Antony's tragic downfall begins after his devastating defeat at the Battle of Actium. When the play opens, a desperate Antony, broken by guilt and military failure, has isolated himself in Alexandria. The political drama peaks when the Egyptian navy surrenders to Octavius without giving a tough fight. This military betrayal convinces Antony that Cleopatra has deserted him, and has submitted herself to his Roman rival. Antony's understanding of the Egyptian surrender reflects the central conflict of the play: conflict between his duty as a Roman General and his absolute devotion to the Egyptian queen

Ventidius and the Call to Duty

Ventidius serves as Antony's political conscience, offering a clear path back to Roman honor. He promises to bring a loyal army to support Antony, but adds a strict condition that Antony must abandon Cleopatra. Antony, initially, resolves to break himself free from the emotional grip of Cleopatra, however, his resolve was highly fragile.

Meanwhile, Cleopatra's advisor, the eunuch Alexas, orchestrates a counter-strategy designed to reignite Antony's buried passions. The turning point occurs when Cleopatra presents Antony with a parting gift—a gold bracelet. This physical token completely shatters Antony's military resolve. Cleopatra herself appears to tie the bracelet on the arms of Antony. Cleopatra's female touch reignites Antony's desire, blinding him to the political realities outside the palace walls. Later, when Antony receives the news of Cleopatra's suicide, he feels shattered, and abandons all his political ambition. He declares, "What should I fight for now? ----- my queen is dead" (Act IV, 102). With those words, Mark Antony, the erstwhile powerful Roman General forsook the power struggle entirely, choosing romantic martyrdom over imperial survival.

Cleopatra refuses to survive Antony. She dresses herself in her coronation robes, assumes her full majestic presence, and applies the venomous asps to her breast. Cleopatra dies on the Egyptian throne as a queen with Antony in her arms. Her death is a calculated political act, a refusal to allow her body to be used to legitimize Octavius's triumph. As she prepares to die, she claims a union with Antony that transcends the laws and boundaries of the Roman world:

"I'll prove it and die with you.
... Caesar, thy worst! Now find us if thou canst.
We're gone beyond thy power." (Act V, 106)

The Political Resolution: The Birth of Empire

Antony's death represents the complete surrender of individual passion against the relentless march of state power. Recognizing that his moment has passed, he surrenders the world stage to Octavius, exclaiming, "Let Caesar take the world" (Act IV, 102). After Ventidius commits suicide, Antony falls on his own sword, choosing an honourable death over the humiliation of a Roman triumph. Antony, ultimately, dies in Cleopatra's arms. She follows Antony and dies alongside him, declaring, "I'll prove it and die with you" (All for Love, 106).

For Dryden, the tragic suicide of the lovers carries an explicit ideological message. The death of the lovers paves way for Octavius to establish absolute control over the Mediterranean. Dryden insists this political shift with the line, "'Tis time the world should have a lord and know whom to obey" (All For Love, 104). Written during the anxieties of the Restoration, Dryden's statement reflects his deep skepticism of divided governance. The death of Antony and Cleopatra does not simply mark the end of a tragic romance, rather, it symbolizes the inevitable birth of an empire under a single, unchallenged ruler.

Mark Antony: The Fragmented Hero

Mark Antony stands at the center of the play as a deeply fragmented protagonist, torn between two irreconcilable identities he was a Roman General, and, simultaneously, the passionate lover of Cleopatra, the Egyptian Queen. To the Roman world, Antony is a peerless military asset, a man whose very name strikes terror into his enemies. Ventidius reminds Antony of his lost glory, invoking the memory of past campaigns where Antony lived as a disciplined soldier, indifferent to luxury and focused solely on the expansion of Roman empire.

However, Antony's encounter with Egypt fundamentally altered his approach towards military glory. He, no longer, views military conquest as an end in itself, but rather as a vehicle to have the emotional fulfillment he finds in the arms of Cleopatra. This internal conflict in Antony's character is further complicated by his deep insecurity about Cleopatra's fidelity. Antony's anxiety is further compounded by political realities of the Egyptian court, where survival often requires strategic shift in allegiance.

When the Egyptian navy surrenders to the forces of Octavius without engaging in combat, Antony's fragile psychological equilibrium shatters. He interprets this military capitulation as a personal betrayal orchestrated by Cleopatra to secure her own safety with the new master of the Roman world. Antony cries out in agony:

Cleopatra!

Oh, thou bewitching ruin! From thy fields
 I've cleared my arms! ...
 My navy has betrayed me! They shook hands
 With those that should have beaten them!" (Act IV, 101)

This moment of perceived betrayal strips Antony of his remaining dignity. His fury against Cleopatra is born of a profound vulnerability leaving him entirely dependent on Cleopatra's love for validation. When that love is called into question, Antony is left without an emotional anchor, reduced to a state of desperate rage that threatens to destroy both himself and the queen.

Ventidius, Octavia, and the Reclamation of Roman Identity

The Roman military ethics comes with a strict ideological condition. Ventidius explicitly states that the army will refuse to fight for Antony, if he remains entangled with Cleopatra. Antony announces his intention to lead against Octavius, declaring that he will reclaim his identity as a soldier of the Republic. Antony's reclamation effort reaches its climax with the entrance of Octavia and her children. If Ventidius represents the military arm of Rome, Octavia represents its legal, domestic, and moral core. Octavia's presence in Alexandria is a calculated political move designed to expose the illegitimacy of Antony's Egyptian endeavour.

Cleopatra: The Sovereign Paradox

Cleopatra is a queen tasked with the responsibility of preserving the sovereignty of her kingdom against an aggressive imperial power. However, her political survival is entirely dependent on her personal relationship with a Roman general. She is framed primarily as a tragic lover whose political decisions are driven by her absolute devotion to Antony.

Cleopatra is constantly forced to defend her integrity with Antony. To Ventidius and Octavia, she is a calculating seductress who uses her sexuality to dismantle Roman authority and protect her kingdom from Roman occupation. To her advisor Alexas, she is a political asset whose emotional attachment must be bargained to secure the survival and autonomy of the Egyptian state.

Cleopatra, however, insists that her passion is pure, transcendent, and entirely divorced from political pragmatism. When Octavia accuses her of ruining Antony and destroying his historical legacy, Cleopatra counters by asserting that her love is a sovereign force that equals, if not exceeds, any legal or domestic claim Rome can offer :

"Yet she who loves him best is Cleopatra.
 If you have suffered for him, I have more.
 You bore the loss of an unkindly husband,
 But I have lost my fame, my crown, my liberty,
 And all for him!" (Act III, 76)

This declaration highlights the high stakes of Cleopatra's position. For Antony, the relationship requires a surrender of his public duties; for Cleopatra, it involves a total dismantling of her sovereign structure. Cleopatra is a queen who has renounced the protective mechanism of statecraft in favor of an absolute emotional commitment, leaving her defenseless when the Roman army arrives to her doorstep to grab her kingdom.

The Relapse of Passion: The Bracelet and the Failure of Reason

The fragile resolution achieved by Ventidius and Octavia collapses in Act IV, demonstrating the inability of Roman reason and civic duty to permanently suppress Antony's passion. The instrument of this collapse is a gold bracelet, a parting gift sent by Cleopatra through her advisor Alexas. The bracelet is a physical manifestation of Cleopatra's emotional hold over Antony's heart. When she appears in person to fasten the bracelet onto his arm, the physical contact shatters Antony's intellectual framework of duty that Ventidius had built.

Upon hearing that the queen is dead, Antony's remaining desire for life and political struggle vanishes instantly. The news strips the material world of its value, leaving Antony with no reason to maintain his resistance against the Roman advance. He turns to Ventidius and utters the line that signals his final withdrawal from the historical stage:

"What should I fight for now? ----- my queen is dead.
 The world proves nothing without her ...
 Let Caesar take the world." (Act IV, 102)

With these words, Antony abdicates his role as a historical actor. The phrase "Let Caesar take the world" is a direct acceptance that the struggle for political authority is over. By relinquishing his claim over Rome, Antony paves way for dissolution of the Roman Triumvirate and the consolidation of a single, centralized imperial power. His suicide is not an act of despairing defeat, but a deliberate choice to exit a political framework that no longer has space for individual freedom.

Conclusion

Dryden's *All for Love* is an enduring masterpiece that served as an ideological defense of the restored English crown. Dryden's interest in the story of Antony and Cleopatra is fundamentally driven by a desire to validate the necessity of a centralized, unchallenged political authority. The phrase "know whom to obey" speaks directly to the anxieties of a Restoration audience that had experienced the consequences of divided governance, institutional experimentation, and popular rebellion during the Interregnum. The deep and passionate love of Antony and Cleopatra for each other challenged the cold logic of imperial expansion. The death of Antony and Cleopatra validates the historical necessity of a consolidated, singular empire under Octavius Caesar, necessitating Dryden's conviction that social stability depends on the authority of a competent monarch rather than the liberty of a divided republic.

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