On the Sidelines

In a number of Shakespeare’s great tragedies—like Hamlet, King Lear, Romeo and Juliet—besides the main characters who drive the action of the play we sometimes see an observer: a figure who watches the actions of their beloved friend, king, cousin, and is unable to stop the terrible fate they see barreling down. (Look at Horatio, Kent and Benvolio, among others.) In Antony and Cleopatra, Enobarbus observes his master’s decline—“The triple pillar of the world transform’d / Into a strumpet’s fool”—as the world Antony once ruled gradually leaves him behind.

Enobarbus has been watching since the beginning of Antony and Cleopatra’s relationship; he describes their meeting in one of the most poetic and famed passages of the play, an attempt to explain to the Romans her impossible appeal and Antony’s unbreakable fascination. He acts as a chorus, pointing out the flaws in Antony’s reasoning, attempting multiple times to persuade him to a wiser course.

Cleopatra, too, has her own shadows—her servants Charmian and Iras. Charmian takes on the futile task of trying to persuade her mistress, a queen long-practiced in the arts of seduction, to leave off her love games and toying with Antony by her false messages—which directly cause her lover’s tragic ending.

The fate of the observer-character is often not a happy one. While Hamlet’s Horatio survives to somberly describe the bloody final scene, Kent makes it clear that he will soon join his beloved king in death in King Lear. Enobarbus makes the fatal error of leaving his master and going to the Romans on the eve of the final battle, an action he immediately regrets. Antony’s ensuing generosity—sending “gentle adieus” and his captain’s abandoned treasure after him—seals Enobarbus’ grief. He repents his choice before his gods and simply dies, crying Antony’s name aloud. Similarly, Iras meets her end much as Enobarbus did: an apparently causeless death shortly before Cleopatra’s, almost as if she can’t stand to live, knowing her mistress will be gone.—Kate McConnell

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