Influence Of Ancient Rome On Shakespeare’s Famous Plays: Antony and Cleopatra

In this essay, I will write about how the ancient world, specifically ancient Rome, influenced Shakespeare’s famous plays.

Historians date the Renaissance as starting in Italy in the 1400s, where there was a newfound interest in the fields of science, the arts, and the classics. While it started in southern Europe, this “rebirth” found itself creeping slowly northwards, until it eventually reached England during the reign famed Queen Elizabeth I. Writers, artists, and craftsmen were all inspired by these new ideas, and William Shakespeare, arguably the most famous writer from this time period, was no exception.

Due to the Renaissance, he would have had access to more information and classical texts than ever before, and as one can see, a lot of those classical influences can be found in his plays. His comedies and dramas are steeping with references to the ancient world.

A couple of Shakespeare’s plays are even set in ancient Rome, which might have seemed like a far and distant place of the past to a play-watcher in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. The gory Titus Andronicus, the grand Julius Caesar, Coriolanus, and Antony and Cleopatra are either completely set or partially set in Rome, use Plutarch as their resource, and include the stories of true historical figures and fictional characters all the same. Shakespeare’s Roman plays take place in either the time of the Republic or the Empire, which were a source of fascination and study by the people of Europe. The Roman Empire and the Republic were a point of fascination in the Italian peninsula at the time as “humanists” debated the two periods. Many newly translated primary sources would have helped Shakespeare combine politics and theatre into one.

The theme of triumph plays a major part in the beginning of two of Shakespeare’s four Roman plays. In Titus Andronicus, the play begins with the titular character having triumphantly returned home from war, and Julius Caesar starts with his triumph after he defeated Pompey. After this opening, they both lead into politics. Titus Andronicus deals with the struggle for power between many men, similar to Julius Caesar, which begins with Cassius, concerned about Caesar’s desire to gain power.`

Antony and Cleopatra is a tale of Marc Antony’s personal journey and his romance with the queen of Egypt. The setting of the play isn’t always in Rome; scenes jump from place to place in the Mediterranean region, showing the dying Republic’s control over the area before it became the Roman Empire.

Coriolanus is set in an earlier Rome, when it was struggling to dominate the neighboring regions in Italy, not the Mediterranean Sea. Throughout the whole play, Coriolanus struggles with the values of what a military man needs, versus that of a politician. These conflicting values are a recurring theme during the span of the Roman Republic.

In all of Shakespeare’s Roman plays, he takes his information directly from Plutarch, who was

Greek. Beyond just his writings, Plutarch’s formative ideas about “tragedies of character” contributed much to theatre and to the works of Shakespeare. Some scholars say there is much evidence that Plutarch is Shakespeare’s only source for his Roman plays, but there is quite a bit of information that isn’t in Plutarch’s writings, and is likely to be found in other sources.

There is even more classical influence in Shakespeare’s body of work than just his Roman Plays. Famed and exiled poet, Ovid, has great influence in Shakespeare’s plays, ranging from The Tempest to A Midsummer Night’s Dream. One of the most famous works of Ovid's is Metamorphoses, which portrays many tales of transformation in Greek mythology.

William Shakespeare’s most famous play is that of Romeo and Juliet, but the story of two lovers from two families at odds, is hardly unique. This story has been told for hundreds of years, and “Pyramus and Thisbe,” recorded in Ovid’s Metamorphoses is very much the predecessor to Romeo and Juliet. The basic plot points are extremely similar - two teenagers from different families fall in love, and in a turn of miscommunication, both end up dying. The stories are extremely similar with Babylon becoming fair Verona, Pyramus becoming Romeo, and Thisbe becoming Juliet.

There are also many classical references in Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream, and a version of Pyramus and Thisbe is even performed within the play itself. Additional classical influence can be found in the play. Some of the characters in the play were directly influenced by that in Greek mythology. Titania, Queen of the Fairies, is jealous of her husband and upset by his many affairs, like Juno; her husband, the king, Oberon, is always mischievous and trying to hide something, like Jupiter, king of the gods; his jester, Puck, or Robin Goodfellow, is working for him, like Mercury.

The Tempest also takes inspiration from Ovid’s Metamorphoses. Prospero, the true Duke of Milan, gives a speech that lifts much from Medea’s speech in Metamorphoses. Prospero, however, is giving up his use of magic, Medea, on the other hand, is embracing it.

The Renaissance reintroduced Europe to the classics, and in turn, influenced William Shakespeare’s works as a playwright and wordsmith. His plays would not have been the same without the poems and stories of antiquity. His four Roman plays, Titus Andronicus, Julius Caesar, Coriolanus, and Antony and Cleopatra reflect two different time periods of Roman history, under much scrutiny by the people of Europe, and Ovid’s Metamorphoses gives much to Shakespeare’s tales. The Classics have greatly influenced the Western World, and Shakespeare’s stories wouldn’t be the same without the culture and stories of the ancient world.