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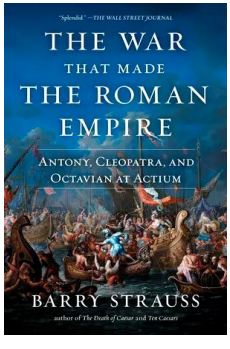
Barry Strauss (2022), *The War that Made the Roman Empire: Antony, Cleopatra, and Octavian at Actium*. USA: Simon & Schuster. 350 pp. ISBN: 978-1-9821-1668-2

Francisco Miguel Ortiz Delgado[1]

Universidad de Guadalajara
Secretaría de Ciencia, Humanidades,
Tecnología e Innovación
Zapopan, Jalisco, México
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1300-1275
fmiguelod@gmail.com



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Barry Strauss is a history and humanities professor at Cornell University and has ample experience in writing books about Greek and Roman Antiquity. He has authored books like

[1] Doctor en Humanidades por la Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Unidad Iztapalapa Licenciado en historia por la Universidad de Guanajuato. Maestro en filosofía de la cultura por la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Profesor de la Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Cuajimalpa. This review is part of a post-doctoral research project named: "La resignificación de la <historia mundial> y la historiografía sobre el imperialismo dentro del estudio de la guerra justa/legítima y del pacifismo" subsidized by the Secretary of Science, Humanities, Innovation and Technology (Mexico).

Ten Caesars (2019), *The Death of Caesar* (2015), *Masters of Command* (2012), and *The Trojan War* (2007). In *The War that Made the Roman Empire*, we can appreciate Strauss´ skill in narrating military planning, military plans, and the strategic ideas that Cleopatra and Antony could have had in mind before, during, and after the War of Actium. This new book is a publication that narrates historical processes in a lyrical and emotional way.

The love relationship between the famous Roman general, Antony, and the even more famous Queen of Egypt, Cleopatra VII, has been narrated in several books for more than two thousand years. Suetonius, Plutarch, Flavius Josephus, Pliny the Elder, Valerius Maximus, Bocaccio, Geoffrey Chaucer, Shakespeare, François Rabelais, Alonso de Castillo, Jacob Abbott, Adrian Goldsworthy, Michael Grant, Patricia Southern, and many more, are the writers that have dwelt with this pair. Then, the book reviewed here is yet another research embedded in a "Western" traditional fixation on such a celebrated couple, but it is a book that differentiates from others: it is an account that concentrates on how Cleopatra and Antony prepared themselves and waged the so-called War of Actium (32-30 BCE), against Gaius Octavian (also known as Octavius or Augustus). In other words, the book focuses on the political and military strategy of the two famous lovers.

Strauss divided his book into four parts, all written with dramatism and vivacity. The first part, "The Seeds of War," delves not only into the personal lives of Cleopatra and Antony but also into the lives of Fulvia and Octavia Minor, third and fourth wives of Antony, respectively. The second part, "A Plan and an Attack," delivers several useful details about the naval wars in ancient times. The third part, "The Battle", thoroughly explains the causes of Octavian's naval victory. The last part, "The End Game," is full

of melancholy and desperation as it presents the last days of Cleopatra and Antony and the tragic end of characters such as Cesarion, the son that Cleopatra supposedly procreated with Julius Caesar. This last section also describes Octavian´s transcendental ascendence to Roman supreme power.

Strauss seems sympathetic towards the Cleopatra-Antony Roman faction. Nevertheless, he makes an effort to narrate with impartiality the deeds of their rival Octavian. Even more, Strauss shows us the political, diplomatic, economic, cultural, and strategic errors committed by both Cleopatra – Anthony and Octavian.

For example, the author makes a great attempt to indicate some personality traits that Cleopatra and Antony had, which were detrimental to their political-military cause. In the case of Antony, it is assured that he was extremely inclined to wine and to women, a characteristic that implied a moral stain among certain Roman conservative sectors and that diminished his political support. It is also assured that one of the probable causes of Antony´s defeat was that this general, before Julius Caesar´s death in 44 BC, had never served as a real military leader anywhere, he had been subordinated to Caesar's leadership with no real experience as a general.

Also, it is emphasized that the political and personal enemies of Antony continuously disseminated the idea that he was totally dominated by Cleopatra, ergo, that he was weak, effeminate, and vicious in a high degree; “Cleopatra supossedly kept Antony amused with a constant round of games and hunts and drinking parties, and sometimes by going slumming together in costume through the streets of town” (p. 42).

But the author´s impartiality is tainted by an excess of speculation. “Octavian might have expressed outrage at Antony´s treatment of Octavia. He might even have *felt* outrage, but sentiment did not push Octavian into war” (p. 98) or “He [Octavian] provoked the war at a time when Antony was fighting for Rome in the eastern front against Parthia. Some might call Octavian´s move less than patriotic, but he hoped it would bring him the ultimate prize: the whole Roman Empire” (p. 99). These phrases evidence a mild partiality against Octavian, describing him as someone very cold, without emotions, egotistical and unpatriotic.

Even more, sometimes, Strauss´ speculations seem unfounded. When the historian asks, “Would Antony have taken a chance [to perform a land-sea attack on Italy in 32 or 31 BCE]?” (p. 117), he answers “One would like to answer yes, for like all great men, Antony did not think small” taking for granted that Antony was a great man and without specifying what a great man is. “Having failed, Antony should have made the painful but necessary decision to withdraw from Actium. Had he done so in May […], he could have moved the army into central Greece and waited for the enemy […]. Alternatively, he could have pulled back both army and navy to a defensible perimeter in the Aegean, […] [doing this] he would have lived to fight again another day” (p. 164). These are more examples of long series of speculations. Strauss puts, with partiality and without solid pieces of evidence, the blame on Antony´s inactivity and incompetence for not recovering from his defeat in Actium and does not consider that the fatal blow on Antony and Cleopatra´s fleet was a consequence of the strategic skills of Octavian and Agrippa.

In a demonstration of historiographical equity, Strauss´s pen is critical towards Octavian´s critics. For example, he refutes the arguments against Octavian´s actions after the Perusine War (41-40 BCE): his "forces won. [But] If the report is true and not just propaganda, Octavian then massacred a large number of enemy leaders on the altar of the deified Julius and on the Ides of March. Octavian supposedly met every request for mercy with a cold <It´s time to die.> [But] If so, it was out of character. Octavian seems to have been an old man´s young man, all craft and deliberateness" (p. 43) The book exhibits that the historian´s labor as a critical narrator and communicator is not in confrontation with the creation of an eloquent and entertaining tale about a much-studied couple.

In *The War that Made the Roman Empire*, the lives of Cleopatra, Antony, and Octavian are narrated with renovated intensity. An example of these narrations is when Strauss explains the causes that led Octavian to militarily triumph over Sextus Pompeius, the bastard son of Pompey the Great: "Although Sextus failed, his bold strategy might have succeeded against a lesser man than Octavian. Sextus had thought that he could bring his rival to his knees by cutting off Rome´s food supply and demonstrating Octavian´s impotence. [...] But in Octavian, Sextus faced a man of iron will and determination, with great political talent, few principles, and infinite cunning" (p. 64).

The descriptions of Cleopatra and Antony's actions exude passion and realism but also transmit a pathetic aura. This is the case of the description of the impressive characteristics of the great military camp where the couple prepared their army to fight the battle that we readers know they will lose. Strauss narrates the paradoxes of a military camp that aims to fight the epic Battle of

Actium of September 31 BCE. The following fragment is a compelling example of a narration with passionate actions, realism and pathetism at the same time:

> Roman military camps were austere, masculine places, famous for their order and regularity. This one was different. Not that it lacked discipline, but it was certainly colorful […]. And then there was Cleopatra, with her retinue and her royal wars. […] We can imagine the imperator and the queen dining on the local delicacies: sardines, succulent shrimp, and other tasty fish from the Ambracian Gulf and the duck of the Louros River marshes. (p. 148)

I outline two critical observations made by the author about the immediate years after the War of Actium. First, Strauss doubts the affirmation that states that Antony suffered depression after his defeat in the Battle of Actium. And second, Strauss emphasizes the political meaning of the end of Egypt´s autonomy after the death of Antony and Cleopatra.

Regarding the first observation, the author provides a notably interesting historiographical reflection as he questions the declarations of a "first source" author, Plutarch. Strauss declares that this historian "is full of talk of Antony´s depression in the year after Actium. It´s hard to know how seriously to take it. Antony had good reason for melancholy, as the ancients called it. He also had good reason to project a public image of melancholy, for it was a useful mask to put on if he wanted to ask Octavian for a pardon—which he did, because how dangerous could a depressed man be?" (p. 231). And, if Antony simulated his depression and melancholy, then this means he was already planning to betray Cleopatra. He would give her to Octavian to reconcile with his ex-brother-in-law, or at least, this seems to suggest Strauss. Furthermore, the author struggles to reinterpret

even the most known historiographical declarations. Strauss says that Plutarch is not wrong in declaring that Antony seemed to be depressed but that he (Plutarch) fell in the error of not recognizing that such depression was very probably false.

Regarding the second observation, Strauss made a summary about the importance of Egypt´s lost of independence: “On August 29 [30 BC] Octavian announced the annexation of Egypt”, “Octavian´s annexation of Egypt was the end of the three hundred-hundred-year-old Ptolemaic dynasty. It was also the end of something even grander: the three-thousand-year-old history of Egyptian kings. It was the beginning of the Imperial Rome and, with it, the foundations of the modern West. Roman provinces were traditionally governed by senators, but Egypt was different. To keep the Senate´s hand off, Octavian put Egypt under the control of a Roman knight.” (p. 271). What Strauss explains here seconds the reader to acquire a more global panorama of the War of Actium.

Ergo, the book is a balanced descriptive analysis of the Octavian and Cleopatra - Antony dialectic, in which we can observe details on military and propagandistic wars. Of course, in real life, neither Cleopatra, nor Antony, nor Octavian were mono-dimensional heroes or villains but very human leaders instead, and this reality is transmitted by Strauss. The three characters are human characters, which in their time were, politically, considered real gods, and this without any irony. We must remember that the majority of the Greco-Roman gods were very fallible, passionate, and vicious, but simultaneously and contradictorily, hence the richness of the characters, moderated and virtuous.

The “contradictory” nature of being a virtuous and vicious person is particularly palpable in the description of Octavian´s personality and actions. Octavian´s double nature, by the way, has not been depicted in detail by the audiovisual media productions, such as 1965´s *Cleopatra*, 1976’s BBC´s *I Claudius*, HBO´s *Rome* (2005-2007), or in the more recent series *Domina* (2021-2023).

In contrast, Strauss depicts an Octavian that is “cold” (p. 98) and bloody but simultaneously a moral reformer (p. 279) and civically indefatigable (p. 64); nevertheless, ambitious in extreme. After Actium, Octavian, Strauss dixit, showed moderation when he respected the life of the sons of Antony with Antonia (Octavian´s sister) and the life of the offspring that Antony had with Cleopatra, and even accepted that all those children were raised inside his family (whatever the hidden political reason for this) and commanded that they were educated as pertaining to the Roman ruling class. The pardon given to all those children contrasts and contradicts Octavian's ruthless and bloodthirsty attitude with almost all of his enemies. However, it is said that his ruthless and cold-blooded orders included the assassination of one kid, Caesarion.

In conclusion, Strauss leads us on a journey through which we see how, during several episodes of their lives, all three main characters of the book “dropped the demi-godlike mask and become mortal again” (p. 286) and again and again.