Antony And Cleopatra: The Theme Of Fate Versus Free Will

The play Antony and Cleopatra by William Shakespeare has many important themes that are uncovered throughout the play. One of the main themes that is argued is the theme of fate versus free will. Some argue that Antony and Cleopatra had free will to decide their future, while others believe that their tragic and harsh lives were determined to happen because it was written in their destiny. I am expanding on my first reading response arguing that the story of Antony and Cleopatra is more fate than free will. Throughout Antony and Cleopatra, William Shakespeare demonstrates that life runs its course by means of fate and not by the free will of human beings.

The Soothsayer has many quotes throughout the play that allude to the fate and destiny involving Antony's defeat to Octavius Caesar. Antony is talking to the Soothsayer, or fortuneteller, about his fortune and fate when he is around Caesar and the Soothsayer says, "O Antony, stay not by his side. Thy dæmon—that thy spirit which keeps thee—is noble, courageous, high, unmatchable where Caesar's is not. But near him, thy angel becomes afeard, as being o'erpowered." (2.3.18-22) The Soothsayer is trying to tell Antony that he will not be able to overcome his destiny of losing the battle to Caesar and to warn him of the dangers ahead if he continues with the war. The Soothsayer also tells Antony, "If thou dost play with him at any game thou art sure to lose; and of that natural luck he beats thee 'gaisnt the odds." (2.3.25-26) The Soothsayer is continually warning Antony to stay away from Caesar, and that is very interesting because it shows that the Soothsayer believes that fate is a huge factor in the outcomes of people's lives. Antony then becomes a victim of his own fate and loses the battle against Caesar and says, "Hark! The land bids me tread no more upon't. It is ashamed to bear me" (3.11.1-2). It is implied that he accepts his fate and realizes too late that there was no way to change his destiny. The tone of the quote seems quite sad showing Antony was disappointed when he realized that the Soothsayer was right. The events that happen in this play are historical, so the audience already knows these events are imminent; however, the Soothsayer's presence adds an eerie inevitability to the events that have already played out and adds the element that everything is out of control of man.

Enobarbus, Antony's most devoted friend, also shows characteristics that prove his strong belief in fate. Enobarbus gives the sense that Antony's actions are inevitable and there is nothing Antony can do to change his future. Enobarbus is talking to Eros about the war when he says, "Then, world, thou hast a pair of chaps, no more. And throw between them all the food thou hast. They'll grind the one the other." (3.5.12-14) Enobarbus correctly predicted that there will be further war after the triumvirate defeats Lepidus. Enobarbus also predicts the failure of the marriage between Antony and Octavia, which will ultimately lead to Antony's tragic fate. When talking to Menas, Enobarbus says, "He will to his Egyptian dish again. Then shall the sighs of Octavia blow the fire up in Caesar, and, as I said before, that which is the strength of their amity shall prove the immediate author of their variance" (2.7.123-127) Enobarbus's role as Antony's most loyal servant and friend proves that fate is the only motivating power for people and when people try to change their fate, things happen for the worst. Enobarbus is similar to the Soothsayer because he adds this sinister tone when he knows something inevitable is about to happen. Enobarbus's prediction further argues that the theme of fate is more powerful than free will.

Overall, Shakespeare cleverly depicted the theme of fate versus free will and argued that fate is the only controlling factor in a person’s life and not free will. Shakespeare does this through the Soothsayer and his fortunes of Antony being defeated and through Enobarbus and his predictions of Antony which always come true, even when Antony tries to go against them. Throughout Antony and Cleopatra, William Shakespeare demonstrates that life runs its course by means of fate, and not by the free will of human beings.