

## The Decline & Fall of the Jazz Age

Shakespeare's Roman Plays in  
Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and Damned*

## Classical Tradition and Reception Theory

The classical tradition is the generally accepted view or influence of the Greco-Romans and their culture. For instance, the pleasure-seeking Mark Antony (83-30 BC) was hopelessly in love with the conniving Cleopatra (69-30 BC) who wanted to usurp Roman dominion, according to the propaganda that Octavian (63 BC-AD 14) spun in Rome.

Classical reception theory analyzes ancient references in works that may or may not follow the tradition. For example, modern historians now believe that Mark Antony and Cleopatra joined military forces primarily to achieve mutual geopolitical goals in the east and not necessarily because they were romantically attracted to each other or attempting to challenge Octavian in the west.

Like most artists who appropriate ancient culture, F. Scott Fitzgerald (FSF [1896-1940]) dealt with both tradition and reception theory, whenever either one suited him.

## Literature Review

Ricciardi (1999) only mentions in passing that the protagonists of *The Beautiful and Damned* (*B&D* [1922]) resemble Mark Antony and Cleopatra (29).

Cochoy (2005) opens her article about the setting of *B&D* with an epigraph from William Shakespeare (WS [1564-1616])'s *Antony and Cleopatra* (*A&C* [c. 1607]), but the play is never mentioned again!

An endnote in the Cambridge Edition (2008) of *B&D* points out a loose quotation from WS's *Julius Caesar* (*JC* [c. 1599]), but does not analyze it:

"let loose the carefully starved dogs of war" (*B&D* 256)

"let slip the dogs of war" (*JC* 3.1.273)

Royon (2021) studied the classical tradition in *This Side of Paradise* (1920), *The Great Gatsby* (*GG*, 1925), and *Tender Is the Night* (1934), but not *B&D*, which (ironically) is probably the most classicized of Fitzgerald's four completed novels.

Blazek *et al.* *F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Beautiful and Damned: New Critical Essays* (2022) contains very little mention of any classical or Shakespearean allusions in the novel itself.

## The Education of F. Scott Fitzgerald (FSF)

In his early youth, FSF loved listening to stories from his father about the Civil War (1861-65).

At the age of 6 he was already quoting the opening line of Antony's eulogy from *JC*.

He enjoyed reading historical novels.

At the age of 10, he tried to write a history of the United States!!

His only A in high school was in Ancient History!!!

He studied (the Greco-Latin) Classics and English literature at Princeton University.

## Late Republican Roman Background

58-51 BC	Caesar, with his distant relative Mark Antony as one of his most able generals, conquered Gaul.
49-45 BC	Caesar, again with much help from Mark Antony, wins the civil wars.
44 BC	Caesar was assassinated, but had named his grandnephew Octavian as his heir.
43-32 BC	Mark Antony in the East, Octavian in the West, and Lepidus in Africa created the Second Triumvirate.  Octavian criticized Mark Antony and Cleopatra's decadent lifestyle in Alexandria.
31 BC	Octavian won the battle of Actium.
30 BC	Mark Antony and Cleopatra committed suicide.  Egypt became a Roman province.

## Early 20th Cen. American Background

The U.S. entered WWI (1914-18) in 1917.

The American economy boomed after the end of the war.

Prohibition was introduced in 1919.

The Roaring Twenties is famous for its (relatively) loose morals, including drinking (nevertheless) and more liberated, especially sexually, women known as flappers.

This hedonistic decade, a.k.a. the Jazz Age, came to an abrupt end in 1929 with the crash of the stock market, ushering in the Great Depression until the start of WWII (1939-45).

**Both Roman and American narratives begin with war, which leads to decadence, and end in tragedy.**

## The Theme of Decadence in the West

In his *Works & Days*, the Greek poet Hesiod (fl. c. 700 BC) describes the successive decline of the ages: Gold > Silver > Bronze > Heroes > Iron.

The Roman republican historian Sallust (c. 86-35 BC) blames the conquest of Rome's greatest rival, Carthage, in 146 BC and the riches that were thus introduced to Italy as the beginning of decline via decadence as evinced in his own time by the civil wars.

But the Roman imperial historian Tacitus (c. AD 57 - c. 118) laments how imperial Rome (27 BC - c. AD 118) is a shadow of its former republican self (509-27 BC)!

Yet, the English historian Edward Gibbon (1737-94) begins his famous *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* from the end of the reigns of the five "good" emperors (96-180)!!

In 1981 the French historian Pierre Chaunu (1923-2009) wrote "*la décadence, c'est Rome*" (165).

In 2019 the British classicist Jerry Toner wrote that the Romans invented the concept of decadence (15).

## Egyptomania

Victorians and Edwardians had been very interested in ancient Egypt.

*B&D* was published in March 1922.

Archaeologist Howard Carter discovered the tomb of Tutankhamun in November 1922.

E. M. Forster published *Alexandria: A History & Guide* in December 1922.

## Mark Antony & Cleopatra in the First Films

1	<i>Cleopatra's Tomb</i>	1899
2	<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>	1908
3	<i>Cleopatra's Lover, or A Night of Enchantment</i>	1909
4	<i>Cleopatra</i>	1910
5	<i>Cleopatra</i>	1912
6	<i>Marc'Antonio e Cleopatra</i>	1913
7	<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>	1914
8	<i>Cléopâtre</i>	1914
9	<i>Dranem amoureux de Cléopâtre</i>	1916
10	<i>Cleopatra</i>	1917
11	<i>Die Schlange der Kleopatra</i>	1917
12	<i>Cleopatra</i>	1918
13	<i>Cleopatra</i>	1920
14	<i>Cleopatra, die Herrin des Nils</i>	1921
15	<i>Le perle di Cleopatra</i>	1922

worldwide average of 2 movies about Antony and Cleopatra every 3 years

## Plot Summary of *B&D*

The protagonist Anthony Patch's parents are dead and his grandfather Adam Patch is a morally-strict multi-millionaire.

Anthony Patch is whiling away his time until he inherits his grandfather's estate.

In the meantime, he meets and marries the beautiful but opportunistic Gloria Gilbert.

Together they party until Adam walks unexpectedly into one of their debauched festivities and so disinherits his grandson.

After Adam's death, Anthony Patch fights the disinheritance.

During the years of litigation Anthony Patch and Gloria's downward spiral quickens.

By a stroke of luck, Anthony Patch wins back his inheritance but only after a nervous breakdown has rendered him an invalid.

## Main Characterization

Mark Antony	+ FSF	= Anthony Patch	
Octavius (Octavian) Caesar	+ FSF/Edmund Wilson	= Richard Caramel	
Marcus Lepidus	+ George Jean Nathan	= Maury Noble	
Cato the Elder	+ Julius Caesar	+ Anthony Comstock	= Adam J. Patch
Cleopatra	+ Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald	= Gloria Gibert	
Iras		= Muriel Kane	
Charmian		= Rachael Jerryl	

## FSF's Library

Plutarch. *Plutarch's Lives*. Translated with historical and critical notes by John and William Longhorne. James Crissy, 1830.

Plut. *Plutarch's Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*. Vols. 1, 5, 7, 8, 9. Translated by Thomas North. 1579. Dent, 1898.

[missing vol. 6]

Shakespeare, William. *The Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare*. T. Nelson, 1910.

[spine title: *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*]

### WS's Appropriation of North's Plut.

North's *Antony*. (1009F-1010A) One of the soldiers, seeing her, angrily said unto her: "Is that well done, Charmian?" "Very well," said she again, "and meet for a princess descended from the race of so many noble kings."

Shakespeare: (A&C 5.2.319-21) I Guard: What work is here, Charmian? Is this well done?  
Charmian: It is well done, and fitting for a princess  
Descended of so many royal kings.

### Example of a Plutarchan allusion that does not appear in WS

"His [Anthony Patch's] nose was too sharp" (B&D 16)  
"[Mark] Antony had [...] an aquiline nose" (Plut. *Ant.* IV.1)

### Example of a Shakespearean allusion that does not appear in Plut.

Anthony Patch > Richard: "my beardless boy" (B&D 26)  
Mark Antony > Octavius: "the scarce-bearded Caesar" (A&C 1.1.22)  
"the young man" (3.11.61)  
"the boy Caesar" (3.13.17)

FSF is using both Plut. (history) and WS (literature).

### Allusions to (Shakespearean) Theatre

Two sections written in playscript format:

Book One Chapter I Anthony Patch A Flash-Back in Paradise (B&D 30-32)  
Book Two Chapter III The Broken Lute (B&D 220-31)

Shakespeare mentioned three times by name (B&D 69, 188, 263).

Anthony Patch and Gloria wanting Adam's death, and getting it when the latter interrupts their house party (B&D 220-47) = *Macbeth* (McMullen 64).

One subheading is entitled "The Winter of Discontent" (B&D 247) from *Richard III* 1.1.1

Marriage "can't, shan't be the setting – it's going to be the performance, the live, lovely, glamorous performance, and the world shall be the scenery" (B&D 127).

= "The whole world's a stage" *As You Like It* 2.7.139

"Two weeks later the whole performance over again" (B&D 179).

"Within another year Anthony Patch and Gloria had become like players who had lost their costumes, lacking the pride to continue on the note of tragedy" (B&D 334).

### JC and The Death of Adam Patch

Caesar's will makes Octavian heir (thus snubbing Mark Antony) and donates money to Roman citizens.

Adam's will makes his secretary Edward Shuttleworth heir (thus snubbing Anthony Patch) and donates money to charities.

Both wills introduce plot twists which lead to conflicts, military and legal.

### A&C and Anthony Patch & Gloria

In the classical tradition, including Shakespeare, Mark Antony and Cleopatra often organized lavish feasts with much alcohol in Egypt, neglecting their duties.

Anthony Patch and Gloria often throw house parties with much alcohol in Marietta, Connecticut, and are unemployed.

Both couples are clearly irresponsible and decadent.

## Mark Antony & Anthony Patch

There are many Italian references, especially to (ancient) Rome.

"You look like [Mark] Anthony,' [Gloria] assured [Anthony Patch] seriously – he thought she had scarcely seen him – 'rather majestic,' she continued, 'and solemn'" (*B&D* 54).

Both men are decadent (alcoholics) and neglect their duties.

They are disillusioned with their countries.

They are in love with a *femme fatale*.

They are tragic figures of sorts:

Octavian weeps at the news of Mark Antony's suicide (*A&C* 5.1.27-8);

Anthony Patch wins the case, but has ruined his health, thus creating an ambiguous ending, such as in some of WS's so-called problem plays.

A problem play, roughly speaking, is a tragicomedy; and Schanzer has labelled *JC* and *A&C* as such.

## Conclusions

FSF loved (ancient) history; e.g., Plut.

FSF loved (British) literature; e.g., WS.

FSF wanted to demonstrate his cultural capital by using classical allusions.

FSF wanted to enter the Western canon, as WS did via Plut.

While WS used Plut. to present doomed love of epic proportions, FSF used both to criticize/satirize the Jazz Age.

FSF wanted to create a problem novel, like a Shakespearean problem play, in which a reprobate has won millions of dollars. (FSF himself was a successful alcoholic.)

FSF's motivation for doing so is to create a very realistic portrait of contemporary capitalistic America, where millionaires are degenerates of ancient Roman proportions.

FSF felt that the American republic was falling like the Roman one did.

Many 21st cen. Americans feel similarly; e.g., MAGA.

With this theme of moral degeneration still present and as strong as ever, *B&D* is probably more relevant today than even FSF's widely-acclaimed masterpiece *GG* and so it deserves more attention.

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