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## Antony And Cleopatra Act 2 Analysis: Character Development

With six of its seven scenes set in the West, Act Two of 'Antony and Cleopatra' by William Shakespeare largely concerns the politics of Rome. Act Two is important in further developing the characters of Antony, Octavius, Cleopatra and Enobarbus. Within this Act, we find, overall, a more negative portrayal of the eponymous characters through their own words and actions. We find similar pictures of Octavius and Enobarbus to Act One: of men characterised by their stoicism and wisdom respectively.

The change in setting from Egypt to Rome brings with it a change in Antony: we witness more clearly his 'Roman' side. From Antony's perspective, this Act is one dominated by the concerns of power. Shakespeare places him in a political context and allows the audience to determine in greater depth his political identity and status through his interaction with the fellow triumvirates.

The most interesting and, ultimately, crucial portrayal in these scenes is that of his relationship with Octavius. It is through this relationship that Shakespeare explores Antony's thirst for power, with the friction between the two men indicating that they both desire the same thing: supremacy.

It has been argued that the following words subtly imply this underlying tension, spoken as the two men meet once more in Act 2 Scene 2:

Octavius: "Sit."

Antony: "Sit, Sir."

These lines depict the struggle between the two men as petty and egotistical - their quarrels do not concern Rome, but have the potential to harm it. This potential is recognized by Enobarbus later in the scene, when he urges them to momentarily forget their differences in order to tackle Pompey. This indicates that the true source of the struggle between Octavius and Antony is not differing opinion on Roman politics, but personal pride.

It is through Antony's interaction with Octavius, and the political hunger that it betrays, that Shakespeare suggests the true reason for his return to Rome, and, in turn, his reluctance to permanently yield to Egyptian hedonism. Where Egypt provides him with pleasure, it does not provide him with the reputation he values; ultimately, he seems to prefer the Roman side of

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himself. The importance of reputation to Antony is emphasised in the following words, where he feels grateful to Pompey for forcing him to return to Rome:

"...I must thank him, only

Lest my remembrance suffer ill report"

These lines indicate that, while he wants Egypt, he want the image of Rome. It seems, then, that it is not Rome or its people that Antony returns for - he does not relish the responsibility, but, rather, the name and status it grants him.

Indeed, this is an Act which presents Antony as a character who does not care much for responsibility. This can be seen most evidently when he agrees to marry Octavia in an attempt to solidify his relationship with Octavius, a pledge rendered illogical and irresponsible when we learn of his plans to return to Egypt at the end of Scene 4.

"...I will to Egypt;

And though I make this marriage for my peace,

I'th' East my pleasure lies."

Here, Antony makes no attempt - or pretence - at upholding any kind of fidelity. To the audience, Antony's lack of foresight is astonishing. It is clear that the marriage to Octavia is designed to repair his weak relationship with Octavius, but that being unfaithful to Octavius' sister would only damage it further; Antony does not seem to realise that in returning to Egypt, he completely undermines his 'peace'. However, where these lines serve to seriously question Antony's judgement, the audience cannot help but recognize the sheer adoration that underlies his actions: he simply cannot resist the pull of Egypt.

Antony's marriage to Octavia is also fundamental in exploring the character of Octavius in Act 2. Octavius' account of the function of the marriage and Octavia herself in Act 2 Scene 2 is particularly indicative:

"...Let her live

To join our kingdom and our hearts; and never

Fly off our loves again!"

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Here, Octavius clearly uses his sister as a political tool, an intention which seriously challenges his assertion that she is a sister 'whom no brother/Did ever love so dearly'. Octavius uses these words in an attempt to convey the depth of his investment in the political relationship, but the investment only serves to challenge the validity of the words. Octavia's role as pawn within the play is supported by her distinct lack of physical description - she seems faceless and characterless in comparison Cleopatra, on whom Shakespeare expends great speeches and soliloquies. The role of Octavia within the play helps to illustrate the all-encompassing nature of the Roman political game in the lives of its players, with public life bleeding into the personal and vice versa.

Octavius is a character, more than all others within the play, fixated by this game. Politics is his primary and singular concern, contrasting starkly with Antony's duality. This allows him the authority to criticize Antony regarding his neglect of state duty, something which he tells him 'you shall never /Have tongue to charge me with.'

Octavius lacks the inclination for hedonistic pleasure of many of his fellow characters, shown most clearly in Act 2 Scene 7 when he refuses to partake in the drunken festivities of his peers. When Antony encourages him to 'Be a child o'th' time', he replies that he would rather 'Possess it', illustrating Octavius' need for control. The graceless formality to Octavius' language throughout the Act helps to further convey his rigid, rational nature.

In direct contrast with the rigidity of Octavius, our impression of Cleopatra as a character who embodies pure emotion and passion is only strengthened. Through her actions in this Act, however, we view these traits from a more consistently negative angle, particularly in Scene 5, where her emotion seems to overpower any sense of reason or nobility.

This lack of rationality, which sets her distinctly apart from the Roman characters, is exposed on the arrival of a messenger. Rather than rewarding him for telling her the honest truth, Cleopatra vows that should he give her good news she will 'set thee in a shower of gold and hail' and should he give her bad news she shall 'strike thee ere thou speak'st'. This contrasts starkly to Antony's insistence upon truth in Act One; where Cleopatra wants to hear only that which will fulfil her emotional desires, Antony tells his messenger to 'mince not the general tongue' when he is told of Fulvia's death. This illustrates the great, irresolvable divergence and conflict of the rationality of Rome and the emotion of Egypt, and both explains and ensures the play's tragic end.

It is in Cleopatra's response to truth in this scene that Shakespeare paints his most damning portrait of her thus far, climaxing when she declares 'Rogue, thou hast lived too long!' and 'draws a knife'. Here, her lack of self-control is inexcusable; where in certain circumstances Cleopatra's emotion can seem a refreshing change to the stiffness of Rome, in this scene it

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renders her merely spoilt and out of touch.

Her immediate regret at her tempestuous actions, shown through her assertion that 'These hands do lack nobility that they strike/A meaner than myself', indicates that passion is not so much a character trait, as a force which drives and consumes her. However, her declaration that she would rather 'half my Egypt were submerg'd' than her lover be married to another suggests that it is not merely her temper, but her attitude which is objectionable. In line with many other characters, including Antony, Cleopatra seems to have little regard for the well-being of her people, presenting once more a certain political cynicism and scepticism within the play.

Where Act 2 casts many of the central characters in a negative light, Enobarbus continues to come across as a man of wisdom and foresight, traits which render him an important commentator on events. In particular, within Act 2 Enobarbus demonstrates a deep understanding of the people around him, especially of the two eponymous characters.

Where his speech in the latter half of Act 2 Scene 2 is renowned for its primary function of depicting Cleopatra's exceptional nature, it also reflects favourably upon the speaker. The following words prove that Enobarbus recognizes the extent of the language necessary to describe her:

"...For her own person,/It beggar'd all description: she did lie

/In her pavillion, cloth-of-gold of tissue,/O'erpicturing that Venus..."

In the words 'beggard'd all description', Enobarbus appreciates the difficult, near impossible nature of his own task: a character who tends to speak in prose, the illustrative, colourful verse he employs marks a stark change, showing his recognition of Cleopatra's sheer rarity. In this way, Enobarbus is essential in presenting and reminding the audience of a Cleopatra whom her own actions and words in this Act do not do justice.

However, Enobarbus' wisdom is most clearly demonstrated in discussion of the character he knows best: Antony. In conversation with Menas, he predicts the following of Antony's marriage to Octavia:

"If I were bound to divine of this unity, I would not prophesy so."

Where Antony fails to recognize the damage his marriage to Octavia could have, Enobarbus' foresight means he is fully aware of its potentially disastrous consequences. This suggests that Enobarbus knows Antony as well as, if not better than, himself.

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To conclude, within Act Two, Shakespeare further develops the characters of Antony, Cleopatra, Octavius and Enobarbus. Most of the Act is dominated by the political posturing of the Roman characters, with Scenes exploring the power balance and fractious relationship of Antony and Octavius and depicting them as men absorbed in a battle for supremacy. Conversely, the scene set in Egypt is dominated by emotion, with Cleopatra losing any sense of self-control and rationality. Where the audience undoubtedly views the protagonists from a more negative perspective in this Act, we are still forced to recognize the role of love as motive; Cleopatra's undignified attack on her messenger and the irresponsibility of Antony's resolve to return to Egypt are both undeniably fuelled by their adoration of one another. Indeed, it may be the purity of their love which redeems the eponymous characters in the eyes of the audience.

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