

---

## The Portrayal Of The Relationship Between Antony And Cleopatra By Shakespeare

Antony and Cleopatra's love for one another is the prominent theme throughout the play, and although both characters profess to an incomparable "peerless" love, they encourage doubt in the audience by acting in a manner that appears to contradict this. This is demonstrated by Cleopatra's bullying, manipulative manner and also with the ease with which Antony dismisses their relationship in front of Caesar and his marriage to Octavia. Ultimately, Shakespeare intended for the audience to question the genuineness of Antony and Cleopatra's feelings, to explore what really makes a loving relationship, and where the lines between love and desire (whether this be for power, sex or adoration) blur.

One of the themes that Shakespeare uses to promote suspicion within the audience as to the genuineness of Cleopatra's feelings, is the controlling, belittling way in which she treats Antony. This is presented immediately with the introduction of the protagonists onto the stage, as Cleopatra asks Antony "If it be love indeed, tell me how much". With such an early indication of Cleopatra's demanding attitude, the audience quickly learns of the dynamics of their relationship, and Cleopatra's selfish role within this. Shakespeare further prepares the audience for this, by presenting her as egotistical and dominant, "I'll set a bourn how far to be belov'd". Bold statements such as this mean that she is likely to be perceived by the audience as an authoritarian figure in a relationship that surely should be equal. A belief that is further supported by her often insulting Antony, "the greatest soldier in the world, art turn'd the greatest liar", her ability to be so discourteous to her "man of men" perhaps suggests insincerity as to her alleged "love", and that the attention, adulation and control she gains from their relationship is of greater importance to her than he is. Cleopatra's manipulative and often game-playing approach to their relationship, allows Shakespeare to demonstrate her total power over Antony, and how she exploits this for her own benefit and entertainment, "If you find him sad, Say I am dancing." Cleopatra is aware of how her moods dictate Antony's happiness and appears to take only pleasure in this control, "I laughed him out of patience; and that night I laughed him into patience". By demonstrating Cleopatra's understanding of the power she has, Shakespeare makes it obvious to the audience that she is not ignorant of her authority over Antony, but instead exploits it, thus presenting her character as cunning and calculating. It is likely that, in contrast to her proclamations of love, "I might sleep out this great gap of time my Antony is away", the audience would view her as simply in love with the power that his love brings her.

Another theme that Shakespeare uses to explore the motivation behind Antony and Cleopatra's

---

### Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)

---

relationship is the submissive, passive manner in which Antony reacts to her bullying behavior. Even before he appears on the stage, the audience is forewarned of his weak, emasculated conduct through the exchange between Philo and Demetrius, where Antony is described as a “strumpets fool”. This early portrayal of his weak role within the relationship, emphasizes its importance as a permanent theme throughout the play, as it is the first description the audience hears of him. Their account of the situation is immediately confirmed by Antony’s introduction onto the stage, where he responds to Cleopatra’s demands with simpering devotion, “there’s not a moment of our lives should stretch without some pleasure now.” Even despite Cleopatra’s bullying treatment, Antony appears for the most part totally absorbed in his love for her that he can only respond with a meek, “most sweet queen.” Indeed, he appears to even love Cleopatra’s bad moods, “Every passion fully strives to make itself in thee, fair and admired!” Perhaps a device by Shakespeare to fully demonstrate his adoration for Cleopatra, that even the most unpleasant of qualities, he finds lovable in her.

Shakespeare’s presentation of Antony as the weaker of the couple, is also exemplified when he attempts to inform Cleopatra of Fulvia’s death, and is interrupted in doing so seven times before he finally manages to tell her. At no point during Cleopatra’s constant interjecting does Antony express any annoyance or frustration, perhaps verification of the respect and adoration he has for her. This pattern of behavior continues almost constantly throughout the play, where Cleopatra’s obvious power leaves Antony emasculated and in the shadow of her control, as seen when he acquiescently says “The purposes I bear; which are, or cease, As you shall give the advice”. Through this presentation of Antony, Shakespeare provides support for the suggestion that his feelings for Cleopatra are honest and genuine, and without hidden incentive as there appears to be nothing that Antony could gain that would act as motivation from allowing her to treat him in this disrespectful manner.

Another theme used by Shakespeare to explore the authenticity behind Antony and Cleopatra’s feelings for one another, is the hyperbolic, lavishly complimentary way in which they speak of each other. The audience is made aware of their habit for exaggerated, amorous declarations when Antony rejects his responsibilities in favor of Cleopatra and claims he would rather, “Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch of the rang’d empire fall!” This not only demonstrates his dedication to Cleopatra above all others, but also his dismissal of the typically restricting and inhibiting Roman attitude, as he adopts adorned language typical of the fluidity of Egypt, as seen in the use of the word “melt”. Cleopatra makes similarly histrionic statements when describing Antony’s absence, and professes that she would rather “unpeople Egypt” than have him not receive “every day a several greeting”.

The theme of hyperbolic, exaggerated statements is further developed through Antony and Cleopatra’s complimentary comparisons of one another to gods or cosmological beings. Cleopatra describes a dream where she saw Antony and “his face was as the heavens, and

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

**GET HELP**

---

therein stuck a sun and moon.” In this imagery his very appearance is presented as God-like, and he is depicted as bigger and more powerful than both the sun and moon. She continues to describe how he lit “the little O, the earth”, thereby presenting Antony as actually being the cosmos, and the earth as a small, trivial orb in comparison. Shakespeare again presents their relationship as of, at least in their opinions, epic proportions when Cleopatra describes Antony as “the demi-Atlas of this earth”, again presenting him as a superior figure to the Earth.

Their powerfully hyperbolic affirmations of love could serve to convince the audience that their feelings for one another are genuine. Antony’s exaggerated claim that his and Cleopatra’s love is “peerless”, could demonstrate the passionate enthusiasm of one very much in love. The same can be said for Cleopatra’s romanticized, admiring portrayal of her “man of men”. However, it could also be interpreted that Cleopatra’s elaborate descriptions of Antony are not confirmation of love but simply an example of the extravagant, lavish Egyptian lifestyle spilling over into her language. Shakespeare also perhaps attempted to highlight the possible political motivation behind Cleopatra’s role in the relationship, as by presenting Antony as an important, influential figure, she may hope to enhance her status, even though the audience is aware that, as a result of their relationship, Antony is more mocked than respected.

The willingness Antony shows to sacrifice his military career, as Cleopatra becomes his main priority is a theme that Shakespeare uses to present his feelings for her as sincere and not governed by any other motivation. The opening scene shows Philo and Demetrius discussing Antony’s failings as a soldier, and the juxtaposition of “his goodly eyes...have glow’d like plated Mars” with “you shall see in him the triple pillar of the world transform’d into a strumpets fool”, accentuates the change in Antony’s priorities, as he favors Cleopatra over his responsibilities in Rome. The audience is frequently reminded throughout the play of Antony’s once great role as a powerful soldier, demonstrated by Caesar’s description of his gallant, heroic acts, “It is reported thou didst eat strange flesh, which some did die to look on”. The huge change in Antony’s fighting spirit since meeting Cleopatra is made apparent when the previous description is compared with the accusation that he “did pocket up [Caesar’s] letters; and with taunts did gibe my missive out of audience”. By the frequent juxtaposition of such contrasting judgments, Shakespeare makes the audience aware of the huge role that war played in Antony’s life before Cleopatra, and how he has dismissed this in preference of being in love. He also demonstrates the strength of desire and passion over all other responsibilities, and is likely to convince the audience of Antony’s love, as there appears to be no other explanation for why he would voluntarily sacrifice his authoritative position within Rome to be mocked and scorned.

Antony’s visit to Rome, and his unexpected marriage to Octavia is the only obvious example in the play where Shakespeare demonstrates Antony’s awareness of the connection between politics and love, and how it can be used as a tool to satisfy one’s desires. When asked to

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)

---

explain why he had “broken the article of [his] oath” by ignoring letters and calls for aid from Caesar, Antony attempts to alleviate the blame by answering that his time with Cleopatra, was “poisoned”. Shakespeare demonstrates Antony’s attempts to distance himself from Egypt by his use of less evocative, poetic language, as he converses in a much more straightforward, uncomplicated manner. He also reverts back to using distinctively Roman language, when he describes how he had been “bound up from mine own knowledge”. The use of the word “bound” is typical of the constricting, hindering nature associated with Rome.

By presenting Antony as prepared to lay the entire blame for his lack of interest in Rome on Cleopatra, (even though in the opening scene, it is she that encourages him to “hear the messengers”), Shakespeare portrays Antony as cowardly and deceitful. He would rather attribute the blame to Cleopatra than admit to his own mistakes, therefore making his feelings for her seem insincere and he, uncaring. However, it is likely that Shakespeare intended the audience to conclude that Antony is aware that he has more to lose than Cleopatra from confessing to his behavior, as she is already a hated figure in Rome, and that he understands the importance of reconciling matters with Caesar, which would be less likely if he were to know the truth of his anti-Rome attitude whilst in Egypt. Therefore, Shakespeare perhaps intended Antony’s condemnation of Cleopatra to be viewed as a political move to protect their relationship from the battle that would be (and later is) inevitable if Antony and Caesar were not able to set aside their differences.

Shakespeare makes it clear that the marriage proposed by Agrippa between Antony and Octavia was intended purely to resolve the differences between Antony and Caesar and “to knit your hearts with an unslipping knot.” This demonstrates the political motivation and unromantic approach to marriage that so typifies the Romans, and indeed Antony’s response, “The heart of brothers govern in our loves” mirrors this attitude as he makes no mention of either Octavia or Cleopatra, cementing the belief that theirs is purely a marriage of political convenience.

When Antony leaves for Egypt almost as soon as is feasibly possible, Shakespeare again presents the audience with an overlap between politics and love. Although Antony admits that “though I make this marriage for my peace, I’ the east my pleasure lies”, giving weight to the belief that he truly loves Cleopatra as he is prepared to offend and annoy Caesar just to see her, there is also the suggestion that his decision to be with her is politically motivated as he is influenced by the soothsayer’s suggestion that he should “make space enough between you”, when he forewarns of Caesar’s good fortune. Shakespeare does not offer a clear or comfortable answer to Antony’s actions in Rome; he does however continue to raise the question as to how the distinction between love and desire, (which in this case is for Antony salvaging his alliance with Caesar) can become ambiguous.

When Antony and Cleopatra are parted, a previously unseen side of her character is revealed

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

**GET HELP**

---

as she begs her servant for “mandragora”, so that she “might sleep out this great gap of time my Antony is away”, showing her utter despair at being apart from him, that she would rather sleep than have to live through it. However romantic her complimentary talk of Antony appears, it is, on a literary level, a device by Shakespeare to juxtapose her devoted yearning for him with his thoughtless behavior in Rome in the next following act. Cleopatra muses over Antony at length, and her restless behavior as she flits between wanting music, billiards and fishing in the hope that this will distract her from missing him is perhaps an example of Cleopatra’s “infinite variety”, and also demonstrates the melodrama and passion associated with Egypt. Although her behavior could be argued as proof of love for Antony, I believe that her reputation as self-gratifying and over-the-top, and also that she has never been presented as so openly in love before, may go against her in the audience’s eyes, and her behavior viewed as an indication of her loving the attention and excitement of the situation.

Shakespeare offers the audience clues as to how genuine Cleopatra’s feelings are when she learns of Antony’s marriage to Octavia. Tellingly, her first request is to hear reports of the details of Octavia’s appearance; “her years, her inclination”, even “the colour of her hair”. It is peculiar, but very revealing, that Cleopatra barely mentions Antony in the aftermath of learning he’s married, but instead focuses on Octavia, perhaps the suggestion by Shakespeare that it is not ‘losing’ Antony that upsets her, but ‘losing’ him to another woman, and with this the loss of authority and control that she once enjoyed. When the messengers return, Cleopatra takes great comfort in learning Octavia is “dull of tongue, and dwarfish!” but again makes no reference to the man she is supposed to love. The anger she expresses when she learns that Antony is married could be viewed as proof of the strength of her feelings, though it is more likely that the audience will construe her behavior as shallow and trivial, and in support of the idea that she is upset over another woman having any sort of sway over Antony.

The most powerful and emotionally charged section of the play, and which demonstrate the strongest evidence for their love shows Antony and Cleopatra’s suicides. After Antony accuses her of betraying him and threatens to “let patient Octavia plough thy visage up with her prepared nails”, Cleopatra orders Mardian to “tell him I have slain myself”, in a plot to ensure he still loves her. In a manner that typifies Antony’s rash and thoughtless attitude he naively trusts her and his mood shifts immediately from anger to heartbreak, “all length is torture, since the torch is out”. Shakespeare presents Antony as loyal and devoted, although it is an uncomfortable scene for the audience as dramatic irony is rife as Antony condemns himself to lacking “the courage of a woman”, yet the audience is aware that Cleopatra is still alive, and through her characteristically tactical and plotting approach to their relationship she has caused tragic consequences. When Antony learns that Cleopatra has lied in a bid to protect herself from his anger, his reaction is typically forgiving and docile and he demonstrates his love for her as he begs death to delay, “until of many thousand kisses the poor last I lay upon thy lips.” Shakespeare also promotes support for Cleopatra’s love for Antony as she is presented as

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

**GET HELP**

---

equally heartbroken and without hope when faced with her dying lover, "Shall I abide in this dull world, which in thy absence is no better than a sty?" Indeed, even the emotion of the situation is so great as to cause Cleopatra to faint with grief. It is a deeply moving scene, which Shakespeare prevents from becoming absurd as Antony is hoisted to meet her through the use of such poetic and emotionally charged language that lends the sequence dignity and power. Through this Shakespeare provides strong evidence that Antony and Cleopatra are truly dedicated to one another, a belief that is further supported through Cleopatra's subsequent suicide.

Although the motivation behind Cleopatra's death varies from Antony's as she ends act four vowing to defy Caesar's plans to be his captive, she does die with Antony at the forefront of her thoughts, "I am again for Cydnus, to meet Mark Antony." Throughout this scene, Shakespeare presents her as open, in control of her fate yet pitifully wretched at her loss as illustrated when she pleads, "Where art thou, death? Come hither, come; come, come".

Shakespeare's presentation of Antony and Cleopatra's relationship, and whether their feelings for one another are genuine is ambivalent. There is no certain answer by which to trust or discredit what one or the other claims, but I believe Shakespeare's ambiguous presentation of them was intentionally used to allow the audience to reach their own conclusions as to the sincerity of their affection. I think it is likely that Antony, by Shakespeare's portrayal of him as weak and desperate to please Cleopatra, will have his marriage to Octavia excused by the audience as a political move and be deemed as entirely genuine in his love for Cleopatra. However, I believe that Cleopatra is unlikely to be so well trusted by the audience. Although she makes very bold statements as apparent proof of her feelings, I think her changeable moods and game playing attitude, will make the audience more likely to reason that it is the drama, passion and conflict of the relationship that she loves, and not Antony himself. Like the hazy, mysterious nature of Egypt, Shakespeare's exploration of Cleopatra's true feelings is ambiguous, and without definite conclusion, though he does furnish the audience with enough information to allow them to come to an informed decision themselves, and one that is likely to see Antony viewed as sincere in his love, and an uncertainty surrounding Cleopatra's declarations.

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)