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## **“Listening in Silence”: The Roles of Captain Wentworth and Cleopatra in Jane Austen’s Persuasion and Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra**

Placing Jane Austen’s novel *Persuasion* and William Shakespeare’s play *Antony and Cleopatra* side by side, one observes an interesting parallelism in the manner in which the protagonists are portrayed. Though the views and opinions of Austen’s Anne Elliot and Shakespeare’s Antony are expressed directly and repeatedly, these steadfast expressions of feeling in their romantic counterparts appear vacant. Readers are left to characterize Austen’s Captain Wentworth and Shakespeare’s Cleopatra in an indirect way. Purposely left without a lens into these characters’ internal thoughts and feelings, readers reserve character judgment until the conclusion of both works. This method that Austen and Shakespeare utilize by withholding a definitive view of a character until the end of a work ultimately creates an immense amount of success—it allows for varied interpretations amongst readers and simultaneously builds a sense of suspense as well, allowing for intense feelings of anticipation until an eventual catharsis in which these inner feelings of Captain Wentworth and Cleopatra, originally hidden, “burst” open, solving character discrepancies and providing readers a shared experience in this cathartic feeling as well.

By viewing this analogous effect that *Persuasion* and *Antony and Cleopatra* have on readers, readers can also make better sense of Virginia Woolf’s claims about the connection between Austen and Shakespeare in her essay “A Room of One’s Own.” In that essay, Woolf expresses the “incandescence” that both authors possess, and highlights the shared ability of Austen and Shakespeare to write with “no impediment,” or to write in a manner which does not reflect the authors’ inherent opinions, biases, or prejudices. It is this talent, according to Woolf, that makes both authors’ writing have such a brilliant effect on its readers. Woolf states, “. . . the mind of an artist, in order to achieve the prodigious effort of freeing whole and entire the work that is in him, must be incandescent. . . there must be no obstacle in it. . . “ (Woolf 56). Because readers of *Persuasion* and *Antony and Cleopatra* are left to their own devices to interpret two of the works’ protagonists, it ultimately adds to the overall successes of the works, creating a sense of drama and anxiety until the climax—a reader becomes directly involved in the anticipation of which feelings will be affirmed or denied—until each author offers a final expression of the “silent” inner voices of Captain Wentworth and Cleopatra that remained latent throughout the entirety of both works. This, says Woolf, is a forte of both Austen and Shakespeare: each does not speak through their characters, but by simultaneously allowing for a varied interpretation that leads up to final statement of a character’s once hidden voice, each work attains literary success in its conclusion—readers see characters in relation to the direct

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shape of the work at hand, rather than the shape an author wants to push or endorse.

To begin to show this difference between how the feelings of one lover are expressed in contrast with the “withheld” internal feelings of another, readers must first recognize the clear statements of feeling that Anne Elliot and Mark Antony express. For example, throughout the course of Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, readers are offered definitive views of how Antony feels about his lover. There is no doubt as to his internal feelings, and he makes his love for Cleopatra, a woman he believes is the “armourer of [his] heart” (Shakespeare IV.iv. 10) known through various short speeches throughout the play. Lamenting his love and desire to follow Cleopatra regardless of the circumstances, Antony states, “Egypt, thou knew’st too well / My heart was to thy rudder tied by th’ strings, / And thou shouldst tow me after” (Shakespeare II.xii 60-63). Through statements like this, Antony makes his internal feelings known through the course of the play. Antony’s clear descriptive statements of his love for Cleopatra assist in giving readers an interpretation of his inner feelings for her. His language of love for Cleopatra consumes all doubts, as his emotions regarding his queen remain steadfast over the course of the play.

Readers see these same expressions of the inner feelings of Anne Elliot throughout *Persuasion*. Though the genre of *Persuasion* is obviously different from *Antony and Cleopatra*, Austen uses supplementary techniques to ensure that her readers are offered a glimpse into the internal thoughts and emotions of her characters through the use of free indirect discourse. Through this method, readers can have an “inside look” at how Anne feels about Captain Wentworth as expressed through the narrator. For example, readers can immediately understand Anne’s ongoing romantic feelings for Captain Wentworth when the narrator states at the beginning of the novel, “No one had ever come within the Kellynch circle, who could bear a comparison with Frederick Wentworth as he stood in her memory. . .” (Austen 28). Through Austen’s use of free indirect discourse here, readers learn that Anne still has feelings for Wentworth even after the end of their engagement seven years prior. The narrator leaves no doubts as to how Anne is feeling, as this method allows for a clear expression of her internal feelings. Readers are thus constantly aware of her feelings and emotions, especially regarding her ex-lover. This is significant insight, as the novel centers around the ongoing chain of events that eventually leads to the reunion of the two at the novel’s conclusion.

Through the clear expressions of love portrayed by Antony and Anne Elliot, a contrast begins to emerge in the characterization of their romantic counterparts: readers are not given these similar statements of feeling or allowed into the inner thought patterns of Captain Wentworth and Cleopatra, which makes their true emotions hard to decipher for both readers and characters alike. Throughout *Persuasion*, Austen’s use of free indirect discourse allows for her readers to “get into the heads” of a multitude of characters. Strikingly, however, she does not apply this method to her protagonist, Captain Wentworth. Rather than viewing passages that

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allow readers to see what Wentworth is feeling or thinking, Wentworth's inner voice remains hidden from readers until the end of the novel. By doing this, Austen allows for a build-up of emotions throughout the novel, driving readers to decipher Wentworth through other means: either through Anne's opinions on what he may be feeling or through his outward words and actions. This ultimately allows a reader-based interpretation of what Wentworth may be feeling to drive the novel, ending with an ultimate achievement of catharsis when Austen finally permits Wentworth's actual inner feelings to be definitively revealed at the end of the book.

Without an inner look into Wentworth's feelings, readers are additionally left to judge what he may be thinking or feeling based on interpretations through Anne's eyes. For example, when Anne finds out Wentworth is in Bath, readers already know, via the narrator, that she is interested in seeing him. However, one is left with only her own opinion as to whether or not Wentworth shares this sentiment. The narrator speculates:

She would have liked to know how he felt as to a meeting. Perhaps indifferent, if indifference could exist under such circumstances. He must be either indifferent or unwilling. Had he wished to ever see her again, he need not have waited till this time; he would have done what she would not believe that in his place she should have done long ago... (Austen 51).

Again, readers are left in the dark about Wentworth's opinion on a meeting and have to make their own judgments based on Anne's opinion on the topic. "He seemed [emphasis added] to have interest in her," (Austen 155), the narrator states at one point. However, nothing is definitive. Captain Wentworth seems to appear in a variety of ways, and without a glimpse into his own mind, all doorways and interpretations must remain open. Readers can see examples of this throughout the entire text of the book, as there is a constant tone of uncertainty regarding the interpretation of Wentworth's true feelings or motivations. "Now how were his sentiments to be read?" (Austen 53) Anne asks herself. Because of Austen's strategic "hiding" of Wentworth's voice, readers are also left asking the same question.

Captain Wentworth's lack of a distinct "inner voice," allows readers to do their own ground work in determining his character, thus producing feelings of great anticipation and suspense until Austen strategically chooses to reveal his true feelings in her insertion of a letter composed by Captain Wentworth addressed to Anne. This letter, placed at the conclusion of the novel, expels all additional speculative opinions on what he "might" be thinking or feeling, including the reader's. Wentworth states:

I can listen no longer in silence. I must speak to you by such means as you are in my reach.

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You pierce my soul. I am half agony, half hope. . . . I offer myself to you again with a heart even more your own. . . I have loved none but you. . . . You alone have brought me to Bath. For you alone I think and plan. —Have you not seen this? Can you fail to have understood my wishes?—I had not waited even these ten days, could I have read your feelings, as I think you have penetrated mine. . . (Austen 191)

Through this letter readers receive the only blatant statement of Wentworth's inner feelings throughout the entire novel. No longer do readers have to make inferences from other characters' opinions or Wentworth's ambiguous actions; his inner-voice, finally, is spoken. Wentworth's lines, "I can no longer sit in silence," are significant in highlighting the fact that throughout the course of the novel his own feelings were indeed silent, merely objects of speculation for outside characters or the narrator to engage in discussion over. Austen allows for readers to also experience catharsis through this letter, as the build-up and tension over what Wentworth is truly feeling has finally been released. This final release of this build-up of Wentworth's internal feelings helps demonstrate the "incandescence" that Woolf claims Austen possesses. Austen shows through this passage that she knows the desires of her audience. By giving readers only small glimpses of Wentworth's feelings until the end of the novel, she both reserves judgment for the reader and produces a brilliant shared catharsis of both character and reader through the final expression of feeling in Wentworth's letter, achieving a successful complex connection in her work—a moment in which readers, like Anne, can breathe a shared sigh of relief in the expression that one cannot help but feel as if "I knew it so!"

This effect runs parallel in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, as he too has the authorial capability to deflect character judgment to readers, and thus create a similar build-up before providing one last authorial revelation of the true voice of the character of Cleopatra. Like Anne, Antony's love for the Egyptian princess Cleopatra is expressed fully and often, leaving readers little doubt regarding his feelings and motivations in the play. However, as Austen does in *Persuasion*, Shakespeare also leaves the "true" voice of his protagonist, Cleopatra, somewhat absent over the course of the play. Though he must do this through a separate method because of the difference in genre, Shakespeare utilizes contradictory words and actions of Cleopatra to "hide" her inner feelings—making it difficult for readers to make a definitive judgment about how she truly feels until the end of the play.

As Austen executes through her character of Anne, Shakespeare also allows for the feelings of one character to be expressed through the opinion of another. For instance, with Cleopatra's true feelings and motivations unknown, Antony makes a statement of what he believes Cleopatra is feeling stating, "I made these wars for Egypt, and the Queen, / Whose heart I thought I had, for she had mine-- / Which whilst it was mine had annexed unto't / A million more, now lost..." (Shakespeare IV.xiv. 18-22). These lines indicate Antony's belief in Cleopatra's love for him; however, readers, as they do in *Persuasion*, must carefully balance

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these words because they are coming from Antony's mouth and are not an actual glimpse into the feelings of Cleopatra—it is only Antony who "thinks" he had Cleopatra's heart.

In addition, readers must also look to balance contradictory words and actions of Cleopatra throughout the play in order to form an accurate description of her character. Alternating between statements of love for Antony, at various points in the play, Cleopatra issues lines that reflect Antony as a mere object to her, at one point stating:

"My music playing far off, I will betray

Tawny-finned fish. My bended hook shall pierce

Their slimy jaws, and as I draw them up

I'll think them every one an Antony

And say "Aha! You're caught" (Shakespeare II.v. 13-17).

Cleopatra, a woman who, on the outside, is Antony's lover, appears to be referring to him as a mere object she can chase and retrieve. These lines give rise to a question in Cleopatra's true feelings regarding her relationship with Antony, as her words and actions are constantly shifting. Again, though through a different method than Austen, readers of Antony and Cleopatra are to decipher the true inner voice of Cleopatra through a careful balancing of her contradictory words and actions.

With this back-and-forth balancing of Cleopatra's words, readers are left at a cross-roads at the play's conclusion, and just as Austen employs this tactic in her novel, Shakespeare makes a final conclusive statement to illuminate Cleopatra's true internal feelings. Through Cleopatra's suicide, Shakespeare also gives readers a sense of catharsis in finally knowing her true feelings. Cleopatra, like Captain Wentworth, makes a final sensationalized statement of her feelings at the play's conclusion, stating:

Methinks I hear

Antony call. I see him rouse himself

To praise my noble act.

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Husband, I come!

Now to that name my courage prove my title.

The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch,

Which hurts and is desired

.....

As sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle--

O Antony!—Nay, I will take thee too

(Shakespeare V.ii. 338-372).

Cleopatra's final speech before her death—a death which she believes is the ultimate mark of loyalty and love to Antony—clarify her feelings, which appear latent and contradictory throughout the play. This decision by Shakespeare to wait until the play's final scene to make Cleopatra's voice distinct, like Austen, is a testament to the incandescence of his writing power. Readers experience the character uncertainty just as the characters in the work do, and in turn, similarly experience the release of emotions at the end when a character's voice is finally made clear. Readers are not left to follow the authors' viewpoints, but rather follow their own interpretations until the characters' final words during each work eventually speak to clarify a feeling that readers cannot help but feel as if they "knew" and desired all along. Readers do not get a sense of what Shakespeare or Austen wanted to happen, again a testament to the fact that these authors expelled all impediments. It is the voice of Wentworth and Cleopatra that the reader is to decipher, not the voice of Shakespeare or Austen—who remain tactfully hidden in their work.

This ability to express characters without expressing a personal "world-view" or prejudice, allowing characters to be judged by their own words and actions unique to the plot of the work, is ultimately a success by which Austen and Shakespeare are linked, says Woolf. As she states in her essay:

Here is a woman [Austen] about the year 1800 writing without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching. That is the way Shakespeare wrote, I thought, looking at Antony and Cleopatra; and when people compare Shakespeare and Jane Austen, they mean that the minds of both had consumed all impediments; and for that reason we do not know Jane Austen and we do not know Shakespeare, and for that reason Jane Austen pervades every

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word that she ever wrote, and so does Shakespeare (Woolf, 67).

Though Austen and Shakespeare wrote within different genres and in different time periods, the effect their works have on readers is undeniable. The strategic withholding of the inner voice of Austen's Captain Wentworth and Shakespeare's Cleopatra until the conclusion of both works ultimately allows readers to form a personal interpretation of a character and his feelings based on plot and narrative techniques and the overall shape of the work itself, not based off of the author's view on who he believes a character should be. This, in effect, is a prime example of the sheer brilliance that both authors possess in their ability to grant an ultimate catharsis, a release of these built-up feelings of characters and readers alike at the conclusion of both works

The ability to mold characters in a manner that allows for a reader's direct involvement with a text, yet to maintain an authorial voice without allowing a personal view or agenda to interfere with the work is a rare feat for an author to complete. Though Austen and Shakespeare were not contemporaries and additionally utilize very different writing styles, the two are, as Woolf says, inextricably linked in their successes. The love stories of Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth and Antony and Cleopatra, though worlds and generations apart, serve as physical testaments to the incandescence of Jane Austen and William Shakespeare. The tactical withholding and releasing of a character's feelings at a particular time demonstrates this unique connection that Austen and Shakespeare provide readers to their work—not to their authorial viewpoints—and according to Woolf, a connection between the authors themselves.

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