
Controversy and Parallelism of Antony and Cleopatra

To its original audience, experiencing political change as the new rule of James led to the expansion of the British Empire, Antony and Cleopatra resonates with the “infinite variety” they were experiencing and the vast changeability of the modern world. While the water imagery that courses through the play illustrates the concept of paradox, Shakespeare then subverts his own assertion that wild contradictions are innate by lending a shared humanity to all of the play’s characters.

Cleopatra’s constantly fluctuating personality, along with the antithetical imagery associated with her, create a character of exceptional complexity. Her mood swings wildly, as in Act One when she has a moment of introspective regret when speaking wistfully of her “salad days.” Moments later, thinking of Antony and her longing for him, she hyperbolically declares she will “unpeople Egypt,” rapidly moving from self-reflection to irrational threats and displaying her capacity to present a myriad of greatly differing emotions. Later in the play, the audience discovers that the paradox within her is not restricted to merely her emotion when she expresses her view that Antony is “painted one way a gorgon/The other way’s a Mars.” She views others in similar contradictory terms to the ones she herself displays, reflecting the extent to which she cannot be neatly defined; the Romans, who prefer clear definition, label her no more than a “gypsy whore.” Cleopatra is perpetually engaged in a histrionic performance, indicated in Act Two by the “cloth” and “tissue” that adorned her “barge” and the “pretty dimpled boys” that fanned her. This creates a contradiction in the way she is viewed by the audience, as they struggle to highlight her moments of authenticity while simultaneously being ushered into believing her convincing displays.

Much imagery is associated with Cleopatra that varies violently in its nature, further illustrating the paradox engrained within her. Both serpents and food follow her through the play, with the “strange serpent” reflecting her capacity to be sly and cunning and the “moody food” implying her sensuous decadence, the images lying in stark contrast to one another in their connotations. However, each image can be viewed in multiple ways. The “odd worm(s)” can also represent her ability as an actress of formidable range as they both shed skin and are adaptable to land and water, while images of “feeding” could act to emphasise the ultimately perishable relationship between Antony and Cleopatra despite its seemingly cosmic grandeur. Cleopatra herself possesses an antiquity – a fixed, immortal quality that is both juxtaposed and accentuated by her suicide. She is the “serpent of old Nile”, this image accompanying a multitude of associations throughout the play between herself and the unstoppable forces of nature - her barge “burned on the water” and she declares that she is “fire and air” moments before her death. The dash ending her final words, “What should I stay-“, carries a suggestion

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of the heavenly and transcendent virtue that exists within Cleopatra, even while the act of dying proves her ultimate mortality and jarring humanity.

One significant image flowing consistently through the play is that of water, with the “ebbs” and “flows” of human nature being encapsulated seamlessly by this essential element. “Water” is unpredictable with the capacity to both provide life and fertility but equally as likely to harm through drowning or flooding. “The sea” fluctuates in an endless variety of patterns and can assume a multitude of different forms, consequently acting as a powerful symbol of humanities ability to mimic such qualities in personality. Water permeates a number of paradoxical events, the primary one being Antony and Egypt’s battle at sea. Antony appears both doting and valiant, assertively insisting they fight “at sea, at sea” at Caesar’s request, his bravery indicated by the monosyllabic repetition. Moments later the conflicted ruler “kiss(es) away/Kingdoms and provinces” when he directs his fleet away from battle, following the lead of the Egyptians. Cleopatra’s motives in this instance could be said to be similarly contradictory, as the proud, cunning queen first asserts her love for Antony by pooling her countries resources together for him, then deserts him mid-battle and hinders his political livelihood.

Antony’s inner turmoil, as he struggles to balance his valiant, politically orientated Roman side and indulgent Egyptian side, reflects the power that antitheses can exert over an individual’s personality. In Act Two, moments after he “clasp(s) hands” with Caesar, a direction that indicates that the two are bound together politically by the “fair” Octavia, he declares he “will to Egypt” where his “pleasure lies,” his sense of political responsibility “melting” rapidly. His language is also polar in its nature – when a “Roman thought hath struck him” iambic pentameter dominates his dialogue, but when he is conversing with his “Egyptian dish” he switches to prose, as in his first line: “There’s beggary in the love that can be reckoned”. The fact that his first line is unstructured and languid in its language perhaps foreshadows that the “East” will eventually consume him. Similarly to Cleopatra, the imagery associated with Antony is paradoxical in its nature. He is likened to a multitude of gods throughout the play, the primary one being Mars, who portrays his mythological status and the power he possesses over the world. In ironic contrast to this are the words relating to “melting” that litter his dialogue, this image reflecting the instability of both his relationship with Cleopatra and the political sphere he resides in as well as suggesting that his power will eventually erode and evaporate.

Caesar is far more consistent in his carefully considered movements than most of his counterparts, positing that while contrasts always exist in human nature they are occasionally miniscule in their nature. He sees Octavia as the "hoop" encircling himself and Antony in a state of political stability, and it does often appear that his relationships with others are purely based on his strategically maneuvering. He attends Pompey's feast to secure their alliance and alleviate any traces of threat he presents, these motives reflected in his disapproving tone when he reminds the other heavily intoxicated triumvirates that there is "graver business" they must

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attend to. When describing Antony's "lascivious wassails" to Lepidus in Act 1, he laments that while it is not his "natural vice to hate/Our great competitor," Lepidus is being "too indulgent." The constant usage of full stops suggests the downward intonations at the end of his sentences and the blunt nature of his speech. His language is strict iambic pentameter for the majority of the play, emphasising his rigidity and narrow focus on political gain, a trait reiterated by the fact that his dialogue is composed of a series of statements. However, he displays a glimpse of warmth in Act Three when he "farewell"s his sister three times in quick succession, implying he possesses genuine care and worry for her. He strays from the cold, stiff structure characteristic of his dialogue towards the plays end when he mourns Antony's death, using imagery for a brief moment when describing the "tears" that will be shed by many over his passing. His human side emerges again in the final lines of the play when he valiantly declares that Cleopatra "shall be buried by her Antony," acknowledging the monumental nature of their love and the tragedy of their falling. While these examples suggest that Caesar has a contrasting personality, they could also be perceived as part of an ambitious, calculated ploy to achieve absolute rule as he recognises that he must maintain a façade of compassion in order to appeal to the general public.

The array of symbolic contrasts in the play illustrates the vast changeability and contrasts of humanity. The languid haze of Egypt at the end of Act One, as Cleopatra indulges in "mandragora" to while away lonely hours, melts swiftly into Roman anxiety when Scene Two opens with soldiers in "battledress," an indication of rigid urgency. The onrush of events creates a sense of chaotic confusion that reflects the contradictions that are constantly interchanging in a person's mind. A similar representation of this exists in the very fact that the play's two settings differ immensely in their core ideals. The censorious Romans condemn anything that "o'verflows the measure", this phrase on its own suggesting their ordered constructing of political concepts and fear of water's unpredictable nature. By contrast, Egypt's focus is on hedonism, sensuality and gaudy extravagance as indicated by the prose dominating their dialogue, mentions of "moody food" and "music," and the sexual innuendo littering their speech, seen when Cleopatra mocks the eunuch Mardian in Act One by coyly suggesting that his affections are inadequate "in deed". This instance of comedy is not isolated – comedy and tragedy are often one in Antony and Cleopatra, a further representation of humanities contradictions as they respond to the "ebb and flows" of both internal and external pressures. Seconds after Demetrius and Philo scathingly label Antony "the common liar," the scene shifts to Charmian and Iras mocking the soothsayers attempt to reveal to them "nature's infinite book of secrecy," establishing a fluctuating pattern of drama and comedy as they intertwine to create a play that effectively echoes human nature and the realities of everyday life.

Whilst the play is characterised by polar opposites, often found within individual characters themselves, defining traits bind them together and demonstrate that although contradictions are inevitable, humanity is fundamentally the same – even if their sameness stems from the very

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fact that they are paradoxical. Despite the decadent Cleopatra's and the curt, unlovely Caesar's surface antitheses, their political strategies are remarkably similar. Both are actors of formidable range, Cleopatra in that she can move from threatening to "melt and pour" gold down an unsuspecting messenger's "ill-uttering throat" to moments later wailing that she "is pale" with weakness at that same messenger's news. In Act Five, Caesar goes from mourning his "friend and companion" to fervently plotting the capture and exploitation of Cleopatra within seconds. Both use such mechanisms as means to further their political ambitions, carefully constructing their interactions with others.

Antony and Cleopatra are similar in that both view their love in exaggerated, cosmic terms; both compare their relationship to that of "Venus and Mars" at different points in the play. Similarly, both blur the traditional lines of masculinity and femininity. The conflicted, flustered Antony often finds himself at the mercy of Cleopatra's domineering manipulation, as seen in Act One when Antony must struggle to grasp words to satisfy Cleopatra's authoritative demand that he must "tell (her) how much" he loves her. Both characters also intertwine characteristics usually associated purely with the East or West. Antony revels in the exotic, hedonistic lifestyle of the East but when "a Roman thought hath struck him" he returns to striving for military success. Cleopatra presents a facade of carefree decadence but is subtly formidable in her political strategizing seen in scene one when she insists Antony "hear them" when Roman messengers appear while twisting him into willing them to leave, fully aware that she mustn't appear to the surrounding Romans to be hindering Antony's political career.

Egypt and Rome are also presented as paradoxical in Antony and Cleopatra, and although they do possess many differences, several parallels can also be drawn. Neither Egypt nor Rome are singular in their defining features, with both having comedy and tragedy constantly interwoven throughout them. The clown's innuendo in the midst of Cleopatra's dying moments when he wishes her "the joy of the worm" is similar to the awkward exchange between Caesar and Antony as they order each other to "sit" in Act Two in that both instances are examples of comedic interludes interrupting moments of high drama. The east and west also possess elements of both business and pleasure – although the east is often engaged in languid indulgence, Cleopatra assembles a significant army to help Antony battle at sea while in Rome the festivities on Pompey's galley are "high-coloured" despite the rigid interactions in which they often engage. Both regions also contain a strict hierarchy. Antony and Cleopatra each have an array of servants to attend to their every need, and in both countries hierarchy is definitive and unable to be altered – the witty, satirical Enobarbus will remain merely a "soldier" despite his astute observations, and the capricious Cleopatra's messenger will continue to be passive when she "strikes him."

Ultimately, Shakespeare challenges the misconception that humanity is able to be neatly categorised. He explores the myriad paradoxes accompanying a set of similarities that

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intertwine to create a complex world unable to be defined by a singular feature – an exploration as relevant to modern audiences as to those in Shakespeare's time.

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