
Antony and Cleopatra: Tension

In his play *Antony and Cleopatra*, William Shakespeare develops a constant theme of clashing duty and desire that can be seen throughout the entirety of the work; this theme is most potently exemplified through the actions of the main characters, and the overall characterization of said characters. Shakespeare wastes no time establishing this theme, as it is seen in the very first line of the play. The play opens on a monologue from Philo, a character who is critical of the actions of Mark Antony, referring to him as “a strumpet's fool.” Through this monologue, Shakespeare introduces to the audience that Antony’s “heart which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst” has now “ become the bellows and the fan to cool a gypsy’s lust.” With this statement, Shakespeare reveals to the audience that Antony used to be fond of war, but is now more fond of Cleopatra. Philo’s criticism of Mark Antony establishes a precedent that is seen throughout the entirety of the play and through this, the audience is made aware that the clash between duty and desire is most prevalent in the character of Mark Antony. Shakespeare’s presentation of this feud is more concerned with the tension itself, rather than one aspect winning over another.

The first act of *Antony and Cleopatra* plays a crucial role in developing this tension between duty and desire. This is most prevalent through the character of Mark Antony, as he is torn between these tensions in a multitude of ways. This is first introduced when news “from Rome” arrives. While conversing about this news from Rome with Cleopatra, Antony proclaims that Egypt is “my [his] place.” Because of this scene, the audience is also given insight that Mark Antony has a wife, and due to his status in Egypt, Antony is unable to uphold his duties as a husband, therefore succumbing to his desires with Cleopatra. In doing this, Shakespeare presents Antony as being an disloyal character. Soon after this, Antony exclaims that he wishes “Rome in Tiber melt” and that the “empire fall.” The reason that this is significant is because Antony rules over one third of the Roman Empire. Through this, the audience is made aware that Antony is so consumed by this pursuit, that he is willing to watch his fortune “melt.”

The presentation of duty and desire in *Antony and Cleopatra* ultimately provides the basis for the major conflict of this play. This is first noted in Act 1 Scene 4, when Octavius Caesar is having a conversation with Lepidus. In this conversation, Caesar reveals that he feels “hate” in the fact that Mark Antony “hardly gave audience, or vouchsafed to think he had partners.” In this sense, Caesar feels betrayed in Antony’s prolonged stay in Egypt. In doing this, Shakespeare is able to quickly lay the foundation for the main conflict of the play. Moreover, Caesar continues that Mark Antony chooses “to confound such time” in a manner that it jeopardizes “his [Mark Antony’s] state and ours.” Through this, Caesar reveals that he is upset by the fact that Mark Antony is wasting time and resources vital to their cause, therefore

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endangering the position of Rome. This further develops main conflict of the play, and thus adds to the omnipresent feud between duty and desire in the play.

In an attempt to restore his authority in Rome, make amends with his fellow triumvirate members, and begin to pursue duty as opposed to desire, Mark Antony decides to return to Rome and marry Octavia Caesar, the sister of Octavius. The motivating factor behind this undeniably diplomatic move was to unite Caesar and Antony, as “brothers,” with Antony claiming that their “their heart of brothers govern in our [their] loves, and sway our [their] great designs.” The marriage occurred primarily for Antony to solidify his responsibilities to Rome. With this, Shakespeare is able to temporarily restore the friendship of Antony and Caesar, and demonstrate Antony’s choice to place duty above desire. Soon afterwards however, Antony wrongs Caesar by returning back to Egypt. Thus abandoning his duty in two manners: to his new wife, and to his country. Because of this intentional decision, Caesar goes to war with Antony and Egypt. The battles of this war are another example of Shakespeare presenting duty and desire in this play. Shakespeare makes both Cleopatra and Caesar present in the battles, therefore placing duty and desire in direct conflict. The play makes several mentions of Antony’s superiority as a soldier over Caesar. Once Antony’s forces begin to take an advantage over Caesar’s navy, all sixty of the Egyptian ships began to “fly and turn the rudder.” Here, Antony chooses to follow Cleopatra into retreat, again symbolizing his choice to pursue desire over duty. The two countries being representative of Antony’s two choices Egypt being desire, and Rome representing duty. At this point, even Enobarbus who is Antony’s most loyal soldier begins to blame Antony for this defeat. Claiming that the defeat was the fault of “Antony only”, due to his decision to “make his will lord of his reason.” Through this, Shakespeare is able to make it evident that even the people who are most close to Antony see that he continually chooses desire over duty.

Although Shakespeare makes it evident that the tension between duty and desire is most prevalent in the character of Mark Antony, it is not limited to his character alone. The suicide of Enobarbus is a direct consequence of Antony’s lack of self-control, and serves to augur the suicide of Antony himself. As the war wages between the two forces, the odds do not appear to fare in the favor of the favor of Mark Antony, Enobarbus deserts Antony and goes to the side of Caesar. By doing this, Enobarbus betrays his duty to Antony. After Enobarbus realizes his fault, he decides to kill himself. At this point, Shakespeare makes it clear that Enobarbus has realized his sense of duty, and ultimately chooses this sense over his desire to flee. Shakespeare also uses the character of Pompey to convey duty and desire. Although Pompey is presented with an opportunity to be “lord over the whole world,” he declines because he feels that it “tis not my profit that does not lead mine honor.” In this case, Pompey’s inclination to be true to his honor indicates that he has chosen duty over desire. Cleopatra is another example of Shakespeare’s presentation of duty over desire. Throughout the play, Cleopatra puts her country at risk in an attempt to follow Mark Antony into battle. Furthermore, she is willing to watch her soldiers die so

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that she may be with Antony. Ultimately by ending her own life, Cleopatra is choosing her desire to be with Antony, and to not be a war trophy over her duty to her country.

In these ways, William Shakespeare develops a constant theme of clashing duty and desire in his play Antony and Cleopatra; these instances are a few of the manners that Shakespeare is able to accomplish creating this theme. Through the utilization of characterization, along with the deliberate actions of the characters, Shakespeare is able to effectively establish a continual pattern of clashing duty and desire that is seen throughout the entirety of the play.

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