

Rome vs. egypt in shakespeare's antony and cleopatra



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How and why does Shakespeare create two distinct worlds of Rome and Egypt in the first two acts of the play?

Antony and Cleopatra is set predominantly in Egypt and Rome and Shakespeare organises the plot around the conflict between East and West. However, it is not only plot that contrasts the two places but also language and structure. Rome is portrayed as masculine, rational and political, and Roman characters' lines are measured and calculated. Egypt is depicted in a more feminine light, based around emotion, passion and physical sensation. The lines of Egyptians flow and are more poetic in content. It is these two distinct worlds between which Antony crosses, and in forming more Egyptian ideals and neglecting his Roman values he brings about his downfall. This essay aims to examine how Shakespeare creates two separate worlds and his reasons for doing so.

The primary method Shakespeare uses to distinguish between the two worlds is his crafting of language, with stark differences in the speech of Romans and Egyptians. As Philo and Demetrius talk of their captain's decline they immediately establish the opposition between the two worlds. They talk of Antony serving as "the bellows and the fan/ To cool a gipsy's lust," indicating a divide between a world that is governed by reason, discipline, and militaristic ideals, and another ruled by passion, pleasure, and love. They see lust and passion as a negative attribute and think of Antony as weak to have succumbed to the allure of Cleopatra. The measure of a man is based on his "soldiership" and Antony is viewed as weaker due to his neglect of political matters in favor of sex.

Militarism and honor are of utmost importance to the Romans. They frequently use military and cosmic imagery in their speech, such as “masters of the war” and “like plated Mars.” Pompey’s comments that his “powers are crescent” and “will come to th’ full” reveal the typical fixation on power and control. His resistance to Menas’ desire to kill the inebriated Triumvir demonstrates the Romans’ high esteem for honor and moral duty.

The Egyptian world is more concerned with leisure and sex than war and might. Lines such as “Give me some music” and “Let’s to billiards” show how the Egyptian women indulge themselves. They dine luxuriously on “moody food” and “Egyptian dish” brought on demand, as with “Give me to drink mandragora,” whereas the Roman men never demanded food and did not dine lavishly while at war.

The Egyptian women seek sexual gratification and enjoy holding power over men. Charmian and Iras joke about an “inch of fortune” “not on my husband’s nose.” Their phrase “Must charge his horns with garlands” references a man who has been betrayed by his wife and stripped of his masculinity. Cleopatra uses the image of fishing to talk of her power over men: “My bended hook shall pierce their slimy jaws.” She teases the highly masculine Antony when she talks of wearing his “sword Philippan,” a phallic symbol of his strength, and mocks the Eunuchs by saying she “take(s) no pleasure in aught a eunuch has.” Also, whereas Romans use cosmic imagery to depict military power, Egyptians use it to connote sex and passion in lines such as “What Venus did with Mars.”

A passage that exemplifies Shakespeare's use of language to distinguish Rome from Egypt occurs in Act 1, Scene 4. Caesar talks of Antony mixing militaristic language such as, "judgement", "noble", "strong", "fear'd", "flag", "serve" and "blood" with language associated with Egypt such as "too indulgent", "voluptuousness", "pleasure", "daintily", "patience" and "idleness." These words demonstrate the contrast between Rome and Egypt, men and women, and how the two different views cannot comfortably coexist.

Another way in which Shakespeare creates the two worlds is through line structure. Lines spoken in Egypt or by Egyptians are often long, drawn out and flowing, such as: "Lord Alexas, sweet Alexas, most anything Alexas, almost most absolute Alexas". This repetition is needless and indulgent. By contrast, Antony talks quickly and in a strict tone: "Against my brother Lucius?", "Ay." The Romans' lines are sharp and to the point, based on relevant information and not glorified in any way. Their lines create tension, while the relaxed Egyptians' words create a very different feel.

The worlds are also symbolised by the characters within them. Caesar embodies the militaristic duty of the West, while Cleopatra, in all her theatrical grandeur, represents the free-flowing passions of the East. Caesar is strict and practical, as when he realises the drunken state of his soldiers on the barge: "Let me request you off. Our graver business frowns at this levity." Using powerful, direct language he chooses duty over pleasure. Cleopatra, on the other hand, is dramatic, extravagant and passionate, as in: "Help me away, dear Charmian! I shall fall!" Unlike Caesar, she gains her power and controls the situation via drama, grandeur, and sexual allure.

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Throughout the play Antony tries to strike a balance between the two worlds, but the effort leads to his downfall. Shakespeare needed to create the distinct worlds in order to conclude the play in this way. We clearly see Antony becoming more Egyptian in his ways as time goes on. He is seduced by the Egyptian lifestyle and queen, which leads him to start changing his language and ideals. "I'th' East my pleasure lies" shows that he has lost the key Roman value of control. With "The beds i'th' East are soft" he reveals that Egyptian sexuality has begun to tear him away from his duties, though he reverts to his Roman self when Ventidius enters with a sharp, "O come Ventidius." He had not yet entirely neglected his Roman ideals or duties. When Antony is talking with Cleopatra he is more Egyptian, using grand gestures and hyperbole to declare his love: "Let Rome in Tiber melt." He mirrors Cleopatra's drama and moves further away from Caesar's judgment, neglecting martial duties in favor of self-indulgence.

In conclusion, Shakespeare creates two distinct worlds through his use of language, line structure, and character. The differences between Rome and Egypt are very clear to the reader and audience. Shakespeare needed to polarize the worlds both to highlight the conflict of opinions between the two and to show how Antony declines from one clear set of beliefs to another.