

# Intriguing character of enobarbus in william shakespeare's play

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Upon a first reading of Antony and Cleopatra, the character of Enobarbus is considered a very likeable character. He is Antony's most devoted friend, however he does not let any bias come between him and his true feelings, as he comments freely, even when he feels critical of Antony. Enobarbus often serves the function of the commentator, "observing the behavior of those around him." However, can one argue that being a supporting role, is all Shakespeare used Enobarbus for? Or does he earn his own "place i'the story"?

To begin with a comparison between Enobarbus and Antony, a character who undoubtedly holds a major place in the story, Enobarbus as he is in the play isn't a real historical figure like Mark Antony and he is only loosely based off Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus, a general and politician of ancient Rome in the 1st century BC. He is not a general nor a politician in the story, however in some ways he serves the same function as a Shakespearean fool, a kind of character Shakespeare used in his stories to deliver the unprejudiced truth about the circumstances of the more principle characters in a comedic way. This is exactly what Enobarbus does in a great many of the scenes that he is in. A character who is a fool may be consider unimportant to a story, but on the contrary, "They [the fools] are these strange characters that show up and make witty observations and very often become very central to the action." While Enobarbus does not completely fit the requirements of being a Shakespearean fool, there is no doubt that he "earns a place i'th'story."

A theme that Shakespeare explores within Antony and Cleopatra is the binary opposition between Egypt and Rome, a part of the story which

Enobarbus plays a significant role in. For example, Enobarbus is the first  
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Roman under Antony to not be critical of Cleopatra and of Egypt in general. The very first Roman we meet, Philo, in Act 1 Scene 1, is only disparaging of Cleopatra, introducing the audience to the negative language the Romans use for Cleopatra as he comments on her “ tawny front” and calls her a “ gipsy” and a “ strumpet”. Now, to a Jacobean audience, these kinds of racist comments would have been considered normal, but contrastingly, a modern audience would find them harsh and disconcerting. However, when Enobarbus is first introduced interacting with Cleopatra, he is courteous to the Queen, calling her “ Lady” and “ Madam” and when he speaks about her and Antony’s first meeting in Act 2, his monologue contains many language techniques that show his admiration, such as colour imagery, “ The poop was beaten gold...” and that the sails were “ Purple...” which highlights her royalty and opulence. He also uses personification of the sails, saying they were “ so perfumèd that / The winds were lovesick with them.” And he uses mythological imagery as well, referring to Cleopatra as “ Venus”, the beautiful Roman goddess of love and then using a simile to say that “ Her gentlewomen...” were “ like the Nereides”, which are equally beautiful goddesses of the sea. Therefore, for both a modern and a Jacobean audience, Enobarbus is immediately set apart from other Romans because of his, what a modern audience would consider, open-mindedness and for, what a Jacobean audience would consider, his perplexing behavior that contrasts with the established “ Roman attitude”. These distinct characteristics in themselves earn Enobarbus a key place in the story.

What is also important to look at it is his initial interaction with Antony, his general. In this day and age, there are thought to be seven core values that

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are shared by all soldiers: Loyalty, duty, honour, respect, selfless service, integrity and personal courage. It is clear that Enobarbus is both loyal and serves Antony selflessly – the fact he has stayed in Egypt with him without questioning or criticizing his conduct shows this – but do their interactions imply a lack of respect? When Antony has a new resolve to “break off” from his “enchanted queen.” He calls Enobarbus, who goes on to very freely speak his mind, making such statements such as “...give the gods a thankful sacrifice.” about the death of Fulvia because he believes that with her now dead, Antony could happily focus all of his attention on “the business [he] [had] broached” in Egypt with Cleopatra. His language shows a lack of formality between himself and Antony. Enobarbus is shown to speak in prose, regular speech, and not in traditional iambic pentameter, implying that he is more than a secondary character and thus, earns more of a place in this story; Both a Jacobean audience and a modern audience would find it easier to listen and be attentive to what he has to say, as he seems like a much more “human” character in the story.

In Act 2 Scene 2, we see Enobarbus’ place in the Roman setting of this story. The scene begins with him entering with Lepidus. Lepidus insists that despite this time of tension, “’Tis not a time for private stomaching.”, but Enobarbus retaliates sternly, believing that “Every time serves for the matter that is then born in ’t.”, that all matters should be dealt with as soon as they arise. Before that, he claimed that “If Caesar should move him...” that Antony should “...speak as loud as Mars.” And that if he were “...the wearer of Antonio’s beard, / I would not shave ’t today.” In Roman times, tugging of a man’s beard, was a challenge to a fight, so we see here that Enobarbus

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believes that Antony should rightfully fight Caesar and we also see the use of mythological imagery of Mars, the Roman God of War. This simile further expresses how he believes that Antony is strong. Lepidus announces that his "speech is passion." and a Jacobean audience at the time would have agreed, given that in most Jacobean plays, the "superior position of men in society was ... reflected" and this stereotypically masculine image of war would heighten also their respect for Enobarbus for speaking sincerely of his superior, highlighting his place in the story as an honest, and in this case respectful, commentator.

The scene continues, Antony and Caesar entering separately and Enobarbus has a suggestion as to how the tension between Caesar and Antony could be solved during this time of war. He suggests that they can "borrow one another's love for the instant, / you may, when you hear no more words of Pompey, return it / again." Antony reprimands him, his tone brusque as he tells Enobarbus that he is "...a soldier only." And that he should "Speak no more." Enobarbus replies, "That truth should be silent I had almost forgot." A sarcastic retort in "...this presence." of noblemen, which Antony claims he has "wrong[ed]". Enobarbus yields, but he does so with a sarcastic remark of saying he will become Antony's "considerate stone." This metaphor holds more meaning to it than Enobarbus simply being sardonic. To be like a stone for someone, someone's "rock", is to be someone who "support[s]... and listen[s]..." to them. Perhaps Shakespeare is alluding to another way in which Enobarbus earns a place in the story: by being Antony's support.

There are two ways of interpreting possible reactions of a Jacobean audience from context. Enobarbus has interrupted a meeting of men superior to him and the reaction of contempt from Antony would be expected. They could be shocked at the previously respectful Enobarbus talking so out of turn, particularly because of their respect for a patriarchy, as the society they lived in was one. However, it is important to remember that the English Army wasn't established as a standing military force until 1660, so Jacobean had no traditional soldiers who they could see appealing "soldier-like" values in. However, the naval defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 was fresh on the people's minds and very interestingly, "the naval bases, because England had no standing army, were crewed by sailors alone." Ordinary English men were able to defeat a whole fleet "under the command of the Duke of Medina-Sidonia, a respected nobleman." So perhaps, seeing Enobarbus, an individual man with integrity, would ignite a sense of pride in the character for a Jacobean audience as it would remind them of the strength of those individual sailors. This blatant honesty that Enobarbus stands for and that Antony conceals would allow a modern audience to admire the character of Enobarbus too. Shakespeare has depicted him as the truth teller in this scene, establishing one of the important roles he earns in this story.

But later, in Act 3 Scene 13, when he questions the reason behind following "with allegiance a fall'n lord" and wishes to "seek/ Some way to leave him." We see Enobarbus earn another place in this story: a tragic hero, believing he is no better than "the villain of the earth" and deserves to "go seek/ Some ditch wherein to die." At this moment, Enobarbus has done something that is almost immoral for a Roman soldier: breaking *sacramentum militare*,

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an oath that a soldier would “ never desert the service...” under threat of execution. “ Without the sacramentum... the Roman could not be a soldier. It was unthinkable.” It would be hard for both a Jacobean and a modern audience to not feel sympathy for Enobarbus, having witnessed the defeat of Antony in a previous scene.

There is a huge juxtaposition between Act 4 Scene 8 and Scene 9, in that Scene 8 contains the celebration of Antony’s victory over Caesar’s retreating forces and then in Scene 9, the atmosphere changes to that of tragedy as we watch Enobarbus die. He calls out to the night sky, “ Be witness to me, O thou blessed moon...” This pathetic fallacy encourages a sense of cold and darkness, adding to the misery Enobarbus’ is experiencing. A Jacobean audience would have found this very troubling, as they believed the night air and moonlight caused depression and madness . It would have been tragic to watch this once comedic, but strong character succumb to such tragic symptoms and this would be hard to watch for a modern audience as well, given how likable a character Enobarbus is. It is clear his time in the story is near, but his place in the story as a tragic hero who gave into doubt and fear is undeniable for audiences, both modern and Jacobean.

In his last few words, in which the language has become more hyperbolic, adding to the soliloquy’s poignancy, he claims that Antony is “ Nobler than [his] revolt is infamous.” And he begs Antony to “ Forgive [him] in thine own particular/But let the world rank [him] in register/A master-leaver and a fugitive.” He wishes to redeem himself in Antony’s eyes, but his remaining honour does not permit him to ask for more than that. With the exclamation

of “ O Antony! O Antony!” the sympathy both a modern audience and a Jacobean audience would feel for him is heightened.

To conclude, I believe Shakespeare created this intriguing and human character of Enobarbus earn his own place in this story and in fact, one could go so far as to say he has a story of his own, a “...tragedy of a cynical mind coupled with a soft heart.” He has his own independent voice that can support both the protagonists, Antony and Cleopatra, but this same voice allows him to earn, and rightfully so, his own “ place i'the story.”