

From tragedy to
reality: shakespeare,
samuel johnson, and
"antony and
cleopatra"



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William Shakespeare's play *Antony and Cleopatra* and Samuel Johnson's exploration of Shakespeare's techniques and his verity within theatre in 'The Plays of William Shakespeare' both engage the topic of the representation of reality. The play itself follows the destructive nature of the Roman general Antony and Egyptian empress Cleopatra's relationship, eventually leading to the tragic suicide, marking the play within the tragic genre. Yet Shakespeare's historical appreciation allows full reflection of reality itself, with a multitude of theatrical references to historical texts and events within his play, giving it a 'Roman' history genre, just as much as it is a tragedy. Johnson's appraisal of Shakespeare's verisimilitude in character creation, and the natural complexities that mirror both contemporary society, and the society of its respective era. The exploration of universal themes of; love, power and loyalty through the successful 'dialogue of the author' [1] also permits full replication of authenticity, and the examination of the Shakespeare devising a new perspective on moral realism. [2]

Johnson's critical appreciation begins to explore Shakespeare's ability to accurately reflect a sense of reality beyond all modern writer's capabilities. [3] He argues that '[Shakespeare's characters] are the genuine progeny of common humanity.' [4] foregrounding the capacity, and abilities of Shakespeare's characterization - most prominently, in the protagonists Antony and Cleopatra, and their hubris, eventually leading to their mutual suicide. Johnson doesn't specifically reference to this play in this extract, perhaps arguing that Shakespeare's theatrical talent runs through his entire collection of plays. Despite women supposedly lacking societal purpose, and being subject to historical sexism during the time of writing his plays,

Shakespeare always creates prominent female characters, and a sense of equality with man and wife, rarely seen in theatre prior, and after him. From Lady Macbeth's eventual corruption of Macbeth through a hunger for power, to Cleopatra being the catalyst for Antony's abandonment of his Roman empire. All for a love unintentionally forged by the Roman empire's financial exploitation on Egypt's overflowing wealth lead by an empress, whose beauty manipulates powerful leaders like Antony and Julius Caesar. One could argue that Shakespeare was fully aware of female influence, and purpose that was systemically ignored by society. This is shown when Cleopatra advises Anthony to fight at sea, despite having low chances of being successful, highlighting her unprecedented influence of Antony, emotionally and physically – she can control him with no hesitation. However, both have passion beyond lust, an unconditional love that is universal to all. While Antony's passion is both his drive, and the hubris leading to his hamartia: Cleopatra's passion induces more compassion from the audience, as she is truly in love with Antony. The general is unfaithful to his wife Fulvia, and destroys the relationship with Caesar, by going back to Cleopatra after marrying Octavia for political peace, even though Cleopatra simply waits while '[Her] Antony is away'. [5] Subsequently, Johnson's acknowledgement of Shakespeare's verity of character, and exemplification of passion that is not hyperbolized, and is entirely obtainable by anyone who seeks it. He is also aware of the increasing influence of women in the male sphere, making Shakespeare a social commentator: who can reflect a reality that isn't documented or even recognized during his period. Though with regards to reality, Young foregrounds ' Literature is thus consumed by the ideological preoccupations of the critic's perceptions of current reality.'

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[6] Meaning that Johnson's critical comprehension of his Shakespeare's work is entirely subjective to his own values and beliefs. Young raises the importance of reality as a difficult concept to define, and ultimately, the difficulty in being able to label Shakespeare's play as representative of reality, as Johnson does.

Irrespective of the criticisms of Shakespeare's plays being challenging to define as truthful, one cannot ignore his credit to historical text, and fact. One of the most influential is 'Plutarch's Lives' by Plutarch. Shakespeare directly refers to Cleopatra's godlike beauty, intelligence and wit as there are parallels in Plutarch's description of the empress, and Shakespeare's description of her. In the play the fictional character Enobarbus, who acts as the chorus in Greek tragedy, describes Cleopatra as 'Purple the sails, and so perfumed that The winds were love-sick with them; the oars were silver'[7], mirroring the exact description in 'Plutarch's lives' depicted as 'outspread sails of purple, while oars of silver beat time to the music of flutes and fifes and harps.'[8] The imagery used in Shakespeare's play paints Cleopatra as a Goddess, whose beauty is intoxicated and corrosive around her, but appears to be representative of love and passion. In juxtaposition, the Cleopatra depicted in 'Plutarch's Lives' is a puppeteer for Antony, who she can engineer Antony into a disloyal, promiscuous and immoral general ready to give up his empire for love. [9] By using the technique of reinvention, rather than straight plagiarism[10], Shakespeare produces a character which can be empathize with, through her compassion. Importantly, an argument can be made about the significance of the play's years of history being condensed into three month of theatre – as a spectator, their decisions of

multiple wars, Enobarbus' abandonment of Antony, Caesar's last chance of political peace and fixture of their empire – all seem impulsive, and not reflective of a notorious army general, whose intelligence and eye for war earned him that role. Instead, all the characters are portrayed as reckless, and all have a lack of presence with their authority in their actions. Notably, Johnson states that ' But love is only one of many passions, and has no great influence of upon the sum of life.' [11] Which directly contradicts the entire plot of the play, as almost all decisions taken, or made from passion and love: leaving little to no agencies to influence their rationality. Signifying the passions are present in all our lives are reflected in the character's judgments can all be empathized, and comprehended by any audience – simply due the fact that Antony and Cleopatra are simply two people in love. Of course, one is a general of the Roman Empire, the other is an empress of country, but that unconditional love transcends into all of lives: regardless of your class, demographic background or beliefs. This summarizes Shakespeare's reflections of reality, and societal understanding more than Johnson can achieve, as he takes a biased approach due to his perhaps overwhelming admiration of Shakespeare. To further this, Virginia Woolf's ' A Room of One's Own' where she begins to talk about androgyny writing that Shakespeare can write in both sexes. By having a mutual understanding of both, allows there to be creation of excellent works that is also representative of reality. [12]

Definitively, Shakespeare's discussion of universal themes in this play allow for a greater reflection of realism for the spectators. The principal motifs are love and loyalty – all of which synergize and react with one another to

create the basis of the plot. Clearly, Anthony and Cleopatra's love is poisonous, with many character transformations, and reversal of attitudes and opinions. For example, Cleopatra toys with Anthony ' if you find him sad, say I am dancing; if in mirth, report that I am sudden sick: quick, and return.' [13] Arguably, this mirrors a simple argument, and pettiness that exists within any relationship. Shakespeare uses humor in this scene to underline the childishness of Cleopatra's reaction to her husband. Johnson expands on this idea by stating that Shakespeare mirrors a reality ' by reading human sentiments in human language; by scenes with a hermit may estimate the transactions of the world.' [14] To paraphrase, Shakespeare is making human sentiment, exploration of loyalty and love more accessible, and available to his audience. Johnson explains that even a hermit can achieve this, by using the amalgamation of tragic and roman genre. To criticize, David Hillman points out that Cleopatra opens with ' If it be love indeed, tell me how much' perhaps asking ' is this love? If not, then what is?' Cleopatra quite controversially is asking what the definition of love is, but there is still an element of reliance and dependence on love. [15]

Nevertheless, Johnson still maintains the idea of reality and representation beyond other canonical writings, and the stating that ' Shakespeare has no heroes' [16] meaning that there are no hyperbolized characters for dramatic effect – Henrik Ibsen also takes a similar approach ' there are no villains, just complex characters' [17] which strongly reflects a reality beyond realism. As a society, the population cannot simply be categorized into ' good' and ' bad' just like in the play. The audience can empathize with certain actions, good and bad, not because they fit into one label or the other – but, simply being able to find a part of themselves manifested in the characters on stage. Yet, <https://assignbuster.com/from-tragedy-to-reality-shakespeare-samuel-johnson-and-antony-and-cleopatra/>

the argument remains that the character's actions are subjected to them, either them having an empire, or ruling a country. Even still, the pursuit of unconditional love will always be present in our existent, and seeing our flaws on stage might be the only way we can fully understand ourselves, and society - possibly to ask, does society need to change? This is the most successful part of Shakespeare's realism, as we can reach ' verstehen' only through literature and art.

Johnson's critical appreciation of the plays of Shakespeare allows there to be a fuller understanding of the techniques that Shakespeare uses in the creation of reality. One of the most successful and effective is Shakespeare's reliance on the historical text ' Plutarch's lives' in the creation of his characters. Notwithstanding Johnson's lack of acknowledgement of this, he raises two important features in Shakespeare's work. His ability to reflect reality in a way that other writers are unable to do so through his character creation, and, the exploration of universal themes that an audience can relate, and empathize with - perhaps marking it as ' epic' or didactic theatre through its reflection of women in society. Johnson remains overly laudatory regardign Shakespeare's work, begging the question, ' how significant is his criticism? Much of It. however, hardly does more than voice approval or disapproval.'[18] The complexities surrounding the definition of reality, and its reception also makes it difficult to accurately, and with conclusive evidence, argue that both extracts and play are fully successful at representing reality.

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