

Shakespeare's elusive cleopatra



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Of Shakespearean representations of women, it is perhaps the inexhaustible character of Cleopatra that is the most elusive of classification, which seems fitting given Antony and Cleopatra's own defiance of dramatic genre with its tragic, comedic and historical elements. Shakespeare explores the paradoxical and constantly mutable world in which we live through this play and through the quicksilver Cleopatra herself, a woman of "infinite variety". While she appears for much of the first act as an archetypal enchantress, politically astute and manipulative of Antony, forays into a more human Cleopatra hinder the ability to label her character as a mere wanton whore or harlot queen of the East. "My salad days / When I was green in judgement, cold in blood" may seem an uncharacteristic utterance of Cleopatra given its air of wistful regret. Cleopatra appears to be mourning her loss of innocence in becoming a leader and bewitcher of men, yet such introspection is infrequent in Antony and Cleopatra. Furthermore, the lack of asides and soliloquies makes this play stand out from the oeuvre of Shakespeare, and is perhaps indicative of the playwright's shift towards realism in his later years. As part of this increasing inclination to more realistic literature, Shakespeare uses a greater focus on the interconnectedness of the political and domestic lives of Egypt and Rome. Rapid scene transitions between the extravagance of the sensual Egyptian court and the militaristic Rome shows the audience exactly how vast the story of Antony and Cleopatra is, suggesting that, just like in reality, people do not have time to soliloquise. It is in this rapidly shifting world that Cleopatra is at home. Adapted to the ebb and flow of life, Cleopatra's mutability and versatility means that she can readily change between affectionate, shrewd and lascivious. This is evident in the final lines of act one. "He shall have every day a several greeting / Or I'll unpeopled

Egypt", while in itself antithetical, closes a scene of playful and erotic banter and introduces a scene at Pompey's headquarters involving men "in battledress" discussing military affairs. The following exchange between Antony and Caesar remains in Rome and in the domain of politics. Caesar, using rigid Roman language resembling iambic pentameter, takes an accusing tone, utilising often second person pronoun "you" to accuse Antony of abandoning his duty to the Empire – "Yet if you there / Did practise on my state, your being in ..." and "you were the word of the war", for example. This cut and parry of political machinations in a play of aggrandised love and the constant, unnatural juxtaposition of realpolitik with the erotic is used by Shakespeare to show how interconnected the political and domestic spheres are, thereby reminding contemporary English audiences of the effect of politics on everyday lives across the country. The aforementioned speed in moving across the Mediterranean sea between Rome and Egypt between scenes also shows that this play, unlike many of Shakespeare's other works that explore the human in a tragic hero, has a primarily public concern and thus Antony and Cleopatra may be a far more obvious criticism of contemporary English politics. Although herself manipulative and often mocking, as seen in her goading of Antony two scenes previously – "play one scene / Of excellent dissembling", upon being playfully mocked by Charmian, Cleopatra displays her volatility and capriciousness by threatening her "good" (as Cleopatra endearingly says) servant to "give thee bloody teeth." The deliverance of this line with a tone of grave severity, in contrasting to a more amorously and admiringly delivered "O heavenly mingle!" provides the audience with a glimpse into the mutability and complexity of Cleopatra's character. It is Enobarbus who

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is able to provide the audience with the greatest picture of the vast character of Cleopatra. His lengthy explanation of Cleopatra (Act II, Scene II) testifies to Cleopatra's bewitching powers, alluding to her ability to turn "the vilest things" into things of beauty. Recurring throughout this description of Cleopatra are the transcendent beauty and almost supernatural powers of the Egyptian queen. Cleopatra exists on such a cosmic scale that the natural elements are at her mercy – "so perfumèd that / The winds were lovesick with them" and "the water...amorous of their strokes". This defiance of nature is followed by "O'er picturing that Venus", likening Cleopatra to the goddess of love. Only by such allusions to her almost supernatural, cosmic nature could Enobarbus explain such paradoxes as "age cannot wither her" and "make defect perfection". Thus the conception of the character of Cleopatra is grounded upon a paradoxical union of opposites. Mingling of opposing elements "Burned on the water" also suggests Cleopatra's control over the natural world. Agrippa's own interruptions of oxymoronic nature – "Rare Egyptian!", "Royal Wench!" – serve to add a further appreciative dimension; given Agrippa's background as a hard-bitten soldier, the effects Cleopatra's magnetism across all men are made evident. Moreover, Enobarbus uses subtle eroticism in "silken tackle / Swell with the touches of those flower-soft hands" and "perfume hits the...wharfs" draw the audience's attention to her magnetism and bewitching allure. Enobarbus' account, having begun with mysterious allusions to water – "The barge she sat in...burned on the water" – and spanning across all the classical elements, finally ends with the word "ruggish", an earthy and connotative word, further indicating the vastness and bewitching power of Cleopatra. Depiction of a Cleopatra of "infinite variety", with a multitude of contrasting

characteristics and an antithetical and paradoxical nature serving to be exemplary of a world in which political affairs directly affect personal, has been well cemented as one of the greatest of Shakespearean characters.