

An analysis of a henobarbus from shakespeare's antony and cleopatra

[Literature](#)



Enobarbus essay

' A sturdy Roman, not far past the prime of life, wills his heart to break, and it does.' What In your opinion, is the significance of Enobarbus in the play.'

Enobarbus is a multi-functional character in the play of ' Antony and Cleopatra'. Apart from being a ultimately loyal and learned companion to Antony, he also demonstrates his political ability and descriptive passion throughout the majority of the play. But it is he " clarity of judgment" as Richard Melaine describes, that is his most important characteristic. His ability to read and interpret characters in an impartial manner, guides the audiences opinion in a play that " No one interpretation can describe the experience of ' Antony and Cleopatra'", as described by Michael Neill.

Shakespeare took Enobarbus name from a contemporary ally of Antony's named ' Gnaeus Domitius Athenobarbus' who famously switched allegiances to Octavius, prior to the battle of Actium, which echoes Enobarbus's greatest mistake in the play.

The significance of Enobarbus's death is his most influential moment in the play, as his earlier attempts to sway Antony's actions are often ignored.

Michael Neill reminds us that " Death by broken heart was a psychological fact in the 17th century". This is a justification of Enobarbus death, but also emulates his ' Roman morals', as in contemporary Roman era, suicide was considered an honorable death, especially if it is by the sword. But his death has a great importance in the play, as the character of Antony is presented as a tragic character whos downfall is deeply flawed. But the intense guilt that Enobarbus goes through, that forces him into suicide, reminds the

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audience of Antony's once great military prowess and abilities as a leader that are implied, but not shown in the play. Enobarbus death serves as an important reminder of the once great Antony, to re-imply sympathy for Antony in the audience. Richard Melaine told that " Several 19th century productions avoid the plausibility of Enobarbus death by omitting the scene completely". This may have been due to contemporary 19th century political issues, however these productions will lack a certain ' heart' to the play, the atmosphere we be colder without the intensity of Enobarbus's final act of loyalty and the play's characters will lack a certain admiration.

Asides from tempting an emotional response from the audience through his suicide, Enobarbus has much influence on the attitudes and political outcome of Antony's role as a Roman triumvirate. In the first act of the play, in the first meeting of the triumvirates, Lepidus asks Enobarbus to contain Antony's attitude so that discussions with Caesar can be productive, in a biased manner, " Small matters must give way to greater things" he says. But seeing through Lepidus's persuasion, Enobarbus reinstates Antonys's priority in affairs and says " not of the small come first", showing loyalty to Antony's priorities. Shakesperes repetition of " small" in Enobarbus's reply, has a playful implication, implying confidence in Enobarus, but the meaning of his reply is severe, reminding of his duty to Antony. In the penultimate act of the play, Enobarbus continues to try to enforce the best on Antony, he begs him to stay in control and fight on land, reminding Antony that Caesar is " strong by sea". This is a demonstration of Enobarbus's military intelligence and his skill as a political advisor, Antony's to greatest requirements. In the middle of the play Enobarbus converses with Pompey,

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attempting to negotiate the political entities of Rome. But before true negotiations, he tells Pompey “ I never loved thee much, but ha’ praised thee”. This demonstrates Enobarbus political ability, but showing honesty, which reflects his clarity in judgment “ I never loved thee much”, which in turn allows the audience to follow his opinion. And then reflects his artful manipulation through compliment, “ but ha’ praised thee” which again shows honesty, but will allow negotiations to flow easily, as Pompey reacts so well to compliments. This statement shows Enobarbus’s honesty in his opinions, which allows us as an audience to trust him, but also is a representation of Pompey’s character. Enobarbus’s character judgement is important to the reader, especially in the middle of the play when clarity becomes clouded by dishonesty and manipulation through Antony and Cleopatra.

Enobarbus “ provides a break from the dishonesty and unpleasantness of the primary characters through his elegant descriptions” said critic Margery Garber. As he describes the “ purple sails” of Cleopatra’s famous barge scene, we are blessed by variety in Shakespeare’s writing. Again Enobarbus’s fairly impartial part between the fierce relationship of Antony and Cleopatra allows for a speech that is not loaded with subtle insults or seductive compliments, like Antony and Cleopatra. But he is functionally able to describe Cleopatra’s barge as an observer of the beauty of the scenery and of Cleopatra. Perhaps this is why he is so trustworthy to Antony, as he knows that Enobarbus’s recognition of Cleopatra’s beauty on “ the barge she sits on, like a burnished throne” will not create sexual temptation towards his queen. However the “ flame” imagery in describing the waves that the barge

creates does have strong seductive implications, but these are being emitted from Cleopatra, and are not from Enobarbus's personal opinion. ' Gnaeus Domitius Athenobarbus' was known to have been charged with incest with his sister ' Lepidium', (perhaps a namesake of the character Lepidus). However Shakespere ignores this reputation so that he can create a character who the audience can trust, leaving behind the original Enobarbus's sexual bias. Shakespere " as usual suppresses historical context for dramatic effect", as reminded by Michael Neill.

Finally the character of Enobarbus serves as more subtle significance in the play. Firstly his death " by the sword", has a functional purpose in the play. He proves that death is easy, essentially softening the blow for the audience when Cleopatra's death scene arrives. Caesar confirms this, as he stands over Cleopatra's body in the final act and talks about " the ease of death". He also forebodes Cleopatra's death, again softening the blow for the audience, when after the battle of Actium, he says he is to " take off to be buried", about himself, in a tragically suicidal manner. This is an echo of Cleopatra's hyperbolic, yet patriotic plea to Antony, telling of being " buried in the Nail". Enobarbus's death is not at all easy, but is emotionally less intense as he has the sense of security that knowing his death by the sword is of honor in the eyes of a fellow Roman. This compliments the death of Cleopatra, who's death is " bite" induced, which is a reflection of the hedonistic attitude of her Egyptian people.

Enobarbus serves the role of a loyal warrior who's mistakes are fatal. His death is one that serves a moral purpose in the play, and is pure in

comparison. His political abilities attempt to guide Antony, but Shakespere uses the advice of Enobarbus as an opportunity to reflect Antony's ignorance by ignoring them. Shakespere also uses Enobarbus as a functional tool in the play, as his "clarity of judgment" helps guide the views of an audience, which in a play of complex morals, is a neccacery device by Shakespeare.