

Western versus eastern values in antony and cleopatra



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In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare constructs conflicts between world empire and human passion. The sensual and wasteful opulence of the East, where 'the the beds are softer' is juxtaposed to the cold, bare efficiency of the West. Egypt stands for passion, sensuality, and decadence, Rome for duty, politics, and austerity: the world of pleasure against the world of reason. The play in its totality embraces a paradox, the two dualities of opposing world views are affirmed, boundaries of binaries dissolved and the political at once is rendered transient through the lyrical flights of verse. It is a play fraught with conflicts and contrasts—or, perhaps more accurately, of contrasts leading to conflicts between individuals, but against a larger background. That background pits West against East, opposing Rome (symbolized by Octavius Caesar) and Egypt (embodied by Cleopatra), with Antony caught in the middle, as it were.

Cleopatra, referring to herself often as "Egypt," is the emblem of the fertile, rich, and fluid country. Her first appearance is monumentalizing in its essence; she enters in a 'flourish,' with ladies holding her 'train' and 'eunuchs fanning her.' The imagery of gender inversion, as the males are subservient and emasculated in her presence, compels the audience to be in awe of her stature, and also to sympathize with Antony's folly of falling in love with this lascivious and grand character. In her world, males come and go at her disposal. The lines "She looks like sleep, as she would catch another Antony/In her strong toil of grace" assert the magnificence of Cleopatra once more, exalting her position and stature in the play.

The stage directions 'Enter Demetrius and Philo' are then rendered utterly colorless in comparison, making apparent of the differences between Roman

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and Egyptian culture. The challenge Cleopatra poses as a cultural other is obvious from the beginning through Philo's description of her bearing a 'tawny front,' implying the difficulty Romans experience in trying to understand her character. Philo further attempts to limit and quantify Cleopatra in a manner that the Romans can easily delineate by referring to her as a 'strumpet' and 'gypsy'; such descriptions succumb to the Roman patriarchal archetype, which, limited in its very nature, scathingly dismisses Cleopatra's complexity with a term that reduces her to an object of masculine desire. Thus, the folly and sinfulnesses of Antony's infatuation with such a character is rendered palpable to the audience.

The dignity and the powerful, purposeful drive of Octavius Caesar and the Roman values he represents emerge as a source of dominating influence. The language of Caesar is short, sharp and overpowering—"declare," "speak," "bring"—and his speeches are articulated with absolute authority and confidence as he pursues that unswerving, single drive towards supremacy. In Caesar's first speech of the play, he refers to Antony as "not more manlike /Than Cleopatra', 'nor the queen of Ptolemy/More womanly than he'. On the surface, this speech prompts the audience to denounce Antony as he forgoes the notions of Roman valor and discipline. However, the language itself breaks down and dissolves the gender binaries, suggesting that man and woman, the Roman soldier and the Egyptian Queen, have become one. More importantly, the martial pre-eminence of Antony ("his captain's heart...burst the buckles on his breast") and the incorporeal, entrancing nature of Cleopatra (who is 'enough to make the winds sick') have become one.

Thus, the resolution to the conflict in Antony, who is constantly confronted with the choice between his infatuation with Cleopatra and his loyalty to the political and moral dignity of Rome, becomes clear. Enobarbus' lilted description of Cleopatra, "Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale/Her infinite variety" restores the audience's sense of Antony's grandeur and magnanimity, as falling in love with such a woman seems inevitable. The sinfulness and folly of betraying his duties as a Roman general ("let Rome in Tiber melt") is diminished by the absolute lyricism and enticing impression that is associated with Cleopatra— at their first meeting he 'barabered three times o'er'.

Of course, the opening from Philo sets up reason as the victor over passion. Yet the flights of lyrical, transcendent verse in the final death scene undermine the power and triumph of Roman rationality, instead favoring passion and Egyptian values as the ultimate liberation. Thus, the tension in Antony and Cleopatra is ultimately between two views of the world, the Roman and the Egyptian, the cold Machiavellianism of those who deal in lieutenantship and the unfixed, pulsating, undignified voluptuousness of those to whom passion has become a world. However, there is never any doubt about the impending victory of reason.