

Instances where
stagecraft has been
employed in antony
and cleopatra



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Shakespeare uses stagecraft in a number of different ways to create dramatic effects in 'Antony and Cleopatra'. Jacobean stages were very simple, not much more than an empty wooden platform thrust into the middle of spectators with no scenery to raise or lower. The sheer emptiness of Shakespeare's stage and the absence of scenery focused the audience's attention on the actors. This creates dramatic effect as the audience is focused on the dialogue of the play without being distracted, which allows the play to be concentrated on entirely.

The actors were presumably dressed in a combination of contemporary and 'classical' costumes, which helps the audience to visualize the nationality, rank and gender of the characters. Although Cleopatra's command to Charmian, 'cut my lace', indicates that she wore the kind of tight bodice favoured by Queen Elizabeth, there was some attempt to provide her and her entourage with 'Egyptian' clothes as well as the 'divers coloured fans' held by the eunuchs who attend her on her first entrance.

Antony and Cleopatra's exchange of clothing, which she recalls with amusement during his absence in Rome, in Act 2 Scene 5, is, to Caesar, a sign of their degeneracy. Dress conveys information as well as creating spectacle and it is important that Philo and Demetrius, with whose conversation the tragedy begins, should be identifiable as Roman soldiers commenting on their leader's enslavement by an Egyptian queen.

Though there were no visual impressions created by the scenery, the play is full of expressive groupings of characters on which the audience could concentrate on without distraction, most notably when Cleopatra and her

gentlewomen raise Antony aloft into the temporarily private haven of her monument. Shakespeare is, moreover, quite specific in his stage directions, as when Pompey and Menas enter ‘ at one door with drum and trumpet’ and the triumvirs and their supporters come on ‘ at another... with Soldiers marching’, in Act 2 Scene 6. The sounds and sights of war thus accompany this first encounter between the opposing sides. In their next, and last, meeting, Act 2 Scene 7, the representatives of both sides, placed ‘ hand in hand’, join in the singing of a drunken song before helping one another to stagger off Pompey’s galley. This portrays the unity between the characters as they rejoice.

Again, the entry direction in Act 2 Scene 3 specifically instructs Antony and Caesar to come on with Octavia ‘ between them’, a visual expression of divided loyalties, which are to trouble her more deeply as the action develops. Eugene M. Waith argues that the Longleat manuscript, which appears to depict a performance of Titus Andronicus, “ gives us a more vivid impression of the visual impact of Elizabethan acting”. The illustration shows the two Roman soldiers to the left and the two captive sons to the right of the principal characters, which suggests that the stage groupings were kept symmetrical as much as possible. Such normally symmetrical arrangements would have highlighted occasional asymmetries, as at the end of Pompey’s feast when a conference, which has begun formally, concludes in disorder.

To be present at a performance of this tragedy is an aural as well as a visual experience created not simply by the counterpointing of the various voices but by the musical accompaniment, which Shakespeare’s stage directions require. The initial entrance of ‘ Antony and Cleopatra’ is heralded by a ‘
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Flourish”, which ironically in its context proclaims the imperial theme; as does the exit of the triumvirs at the end of their conference in Act 2 Scene 2. Drums and trumpets are brought playing onto the stage after the initial flourish, which signals the arrival of Pompey, Menas and the triumvirs in Act 2 Scene 6.

The music not only creates a suitably martial impression but also provides bridges, which link these short, swiftly moving episodes together. Hence, although the resources of the Shakespearean playhouse were limited, Shakespeare used them with an expressive variety, which nevertheless did not prevent the performance from moving quickly and without interruption.

The dramatic construction of ‘Antony and Cleopatra’, with its constant shifts of location, is one, which Shakespeare as already used in the two parts of ‘Henry IV’ with their oscillations between the court, the tavern, and the battlefield and their excursions into Wales and Gloucestershire. In ‘Antony and Cleopatra’ Shakespeare created a similar kind of structure but used it with greater complexity and carried its implications further. Throughout the play, Roman attitudes and principles, expressed mainly by Octavius Caesar, are placed in opposition to the Egyptian, represented chiefly by Cleopatra. As Maurice Charney says, Rome and Egypt ‘represent crucial moral choices and they function as symbolic locales in a manner not unlike Henry James’ Europe and America’.

With the closing of the theatres by Act of Parliament in 1642 the kinds of playhouses for which Shakespeare wrote were obliterated. The Globe was demolished in 1644 and the Blackfriars was pulled down eleven years later in

order to make way for 'tenements'. When, after the restoration of Charles II new theatres were built, they were of a different design and served audiences of different tastes.

After the Restoration, criticism of the drama, and especially of the tragedy, was still dominated by respect for the 'rules' or 'unities', often attributed to Aristotle but fully formulated in the late sixteenth century by the Italian scholar Castelvetro. The drama, he declared, 'cannot represent places very far apart, while the narrative method joins together places which are widely separated'. With its constant shifting from one part of the Mediterranean to another and its time-span of ten year, 'Antony and Cleopatra' clearly violated these principles and thereby offended contemporary educated tastes.

Furthermore, critics in the twentieth century continued to say that the play lacked unity. Bradley singles out Antony and Cleopatra as the first of Shakespeare's 'real defects', with his tendency to 'string together a number of scenes in which the dramatis personae are frequently changed'. Like Castelvetro he finds such a method acceptable in a narrative but not in a play, and particularly 'where the historical material [is] undramatic, as in the middle part of 'Antony and Cleopatra'. While admitting that the play might create a different effect on the Jacobean stage, he still seems to visualize it in terms of the realistic theatre of the late nineteenth century where 'Antony and Cleopatra', 'the most faultily constructed of all the tragedies', 'imposes the necessity of taking frequent and fatiguing journeys over thousands of miles'.

In conclusion, Shakespeare uses stagecraft in a number of ways to create dramatic effect. The most criticized of this stagecraft is the shifts in location as critics view it as violating the principles of a play, after the restoration. I believe Shakespeare to be successful in his dramatic use of stagecraft, especially through his use of groupings, which can either show unity or opposition between the characters. Finally, the use of stagecraft portrays the trajectory ending of the play as it shows the love that Antony feels to Cleopatra, through grouping and stage directions, as well as his disregard for Rome.