

Stoic constancy in antony and cleopatra



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Antony and Cleopatra is a play of conflicting values and paradoxical ideologies. Its central dynamic is the Roman/ Egyptian dichotomy, with each pole representing a web of associated values and attributes. Egypt is variously associated with “ the passions,” fertility, flux and change, whilst Rome represents reason, heroism, endurance and the political sphere. Shakespeare’s singular presentation of Roman history in Antony and Cleopatra is informed by his knowledge of Roman and Greek philosophy and is influenced by the Renaissance revival of such material. Stoicism is one such strain of ancient philosophy which excited renewed interest during the Renaissance, and which clearly influenced Shakespeare’s conception of Roman civilisation. Amongst the main proponents of Stoicism were Zeno, Seneca, Cicero and Epictetus. It was a philosophy advocating virtuous moral conduct, detachment from the passions and indifference to the changeability of fortune. As Geoffrey Miles proposes in his book *Shakespeare and the Constant Romans* the concept of constancy was an integral aspect to the Stoic philosophy . Constancy had two main definitions according to the Stoics: consistency, especially to one’s true nature, and steadfastness. The following study will investigate the treatment of this philosophical concept in Antony and Cleopatra. It will be concerned primarily with the contrast between Ciceronian and Senecan varieties of Stoicism as well as Montaigne’s affirmation of the inconstancy of humanity and nature. The Roman philosopher and orator, Cicero, was somewhat of an ambivalent Stoic, as he was dubious of its most extreme manifestations. Nevertheless, his ideas contributed much to the canonized tradition of Stoicism. Cicero’s Stoicism developed out of Roman morality and the Greek Stoic tradition and proposed moderation, civic virtue, temperance and bravery in the name of Rome. His

<https://assignbuster.com/stoic-constancy-in-antony-and-cleopatra/>

emphasis on the public sphere as the proper place to exercise such morality was not intended to encourage his followers to ostentatious gestures of virtue for the sake of public approval or glory. However, he does concede that glory can be an agreeable consequence of virtue even though virtue should be its own reward. One of Cicero's main preoccupations was the notion of constancy. His main interest was in constancy as denoting self-consistency or decorum. This is the virtue of acting only in ways appropriate to one's true nature, both in the general sense as a human being, and as an individual with a specific role and set of duties within society. Cicero's insistence on being true to oneself above all could be seen to encourage a kind of moral relativism or egotistical individualism as one's own nature may not necessarily be intrinsically virtuous. However, he continually asserts that one's actions should always be directed towards the good of society as a whole and that steadfastness is the most becoming virtue. The Ciceronian theme of constancy as self-consistency or decorum is prominent in Antony and Cleopatra even if these precise terms are scarcely used in the play. In fact, in the opening scene Shakespeare uses a framing device which highlights the Roman concern with this virtue. The first scene opens and closes with a conversation between two minor characters, Philo and Demetrius, who articulate the Roman attitude to Antony's negligence of duty and infatuation with Cleopatra. The implication is that his behaviour is inconstant and indecorous because it is so far removed from his former glory as a Roman warrior. The inconsistency in his behaviour is dramatised by the hyperbolic comparison between Antony the soldier and "plated Mars" endowing him with godlike qualities of superhuman courage and honour. This is juxtaposed against his current subordination to Cleopatra and

<https://assignbuster.com/stoic-constancy-in-antony-and-cleopatra/>

vulnerability to the passions evoked by the image of Antony as “...the bellows and the fan/ To cool a gipsy’s lust”. The violence of the contrast between what he once was and the lowliness of his present state, results from the comparison of Antony first to the superhuman Mars and then to the inanimate and subhuman objects “ the bellows and the fan”. The inconsistency of his character is expressed by the verbs “ bend” and “ turn” whilst his indulgence in the passions is shown by a lexicon associated with uncontrollable excess, for example “[o]’erflows” and “ burst”. Such passionate excesses are clearly in opposition to the Stoic ideal of moderation epitomised by the term “ measure”, and distract him from his true “...office and devotion...”, which ought to be Rome. In the very first passage of the play Antony is therefore shown to be indecorous in his inconstancy to his role as a Roman soldier and “ triple pillar of the world” and even to his dignity as a man, by becoming a “ strumpet’s fool”. In the passage which follows Antony seems at least to show consistency and sincerity in his devotion to Cleopatra if not to Rome. This suggests he may show Ciceronian decorum in being true to his own nature, even if it means neglecting his public role and does not benefit society as a whole. Antony hyperbolically claims that to contain his love, Cleopatra must seek out a “...new heaven, new earth” echoing the Book of Revelation. Furthermore, he refutes his devotion to the Roman Empire: Antony: Let Rome in Tiber melt and the wide archOf the ranged empire fall! Here is my space. Kingdoms are clay; our dungy earth alikeFeeds beast as man. The nobleness of lifels to do thus...With his use of apocalyptic imagery, Antony shows the transformative power of his love, which is iconoclastic in its destruction of the concept of empire and redefinition of values such as nobleness. He redefines the term against the

<https://assignbuster.com/stoic-constancy-in-antony-and-cleopatra/>

Roman model by claiming it is noble to destroy empires rather than to build them and likewise that it is noble to choose love over political life. After the indignity and subordination ascribed to Antony in Philo's scathing critique, this speech seems to offer the audience an alternative value system in which Antony can once again be endowed with godlike omnipotence. However, Cleopatra is wary of his grand proclamations of love and suspects he is inconstant by nature. She makes a mockery of Antony's role as 'triumvir' by implying he is Caesar's lackey: Cleopatra: ...who knows/ If the scarce-bearded Caesar have not sent/ His powerful mandate to you, ' Do this, or this/ Take in that kingdom and enfranchise that;/ Perform't or else we damn thee' Cleopatra undermines Antony's high estimations of love by noting that he blushes at the mention of Caesar just as she imagines he would when his wife Fulvia scolds him. The mention of Antony's wife Fulvia alerts the audience to his adultery as his relationship with Cleopatra is therefore extra-marital. This inspires little confidence in his constancy to Cleopatra as there is no reason he should be constant to his mistress any more than he is to his wife. Furthermore, the fact that he blushes at the mention of Octavius Caesar shows that his civic duties lay a greater claim to his attentions than he acknowledges, as his negligence of such duties is clearly weighing heavily on his conscience. Shakespeare problematizes the notion of decorum through Cleopatra's apostrophe which addresses Antony in the third person: Cleopatra: Excellent falsehood! Why did he marry Fulvia and not love her?/I'll seem the fool I am not. Antony/ Will be himself. She suggests that Antony will act in a way appropriate to his nature and therefore decorously because he will be himself. However, she also implies that his very nature is inconstant. Her suspicions in this first scene prove to be correct as Antony

<https://assignbuster.com/stoic-constancy-in-antony-and-cleopatra/>

fluctuates between his devotion to her and the rival clutches of his political conscience whenever he finds that “ a Roman thought hath struck him”. The paradoxical concept of being constant in inconstancy is recurrent throughout the play in relation to the lovers. In *Shakespeare and the Constant Romans*, Geoffrey Miles asserts: *Antony and Cleopatra*...explores an alternative concept of decorum in which truth to oneself is divorced from consistency; *Antony and Cleopatra*, abandoning the principle that ‘stedfastnes... becommeth most of all,’ claim instead that ‘everything becomes’ them (1. 1. 51) Cleopatra herself epitomizes mutability and inconstancy as Enobarbus famously admires her “infinite variety” which, sexual connotations aside, reflects the synthesis of opposites which she embodies. However, in *Shakespeare and the uses of Antiquity*, Charles and Michelle Martindale make the highly paradoxical suggestion that Cleopatra is the only Stoic “worth the candle” in the play. It is certainly true that in the latter part of the play she demonstrates consistency to her own principles and contempt for fortune. The strength of her inner resolution ultimately leads her to suicide and one could argue that her idiosyncratic model of Stoicism combines both Roman self-assurance and unwavering principles with Egyptian femininity, mutability and an affirmation of the passions. The masculine realm of Rome, rationality, steadfastness and decorum seems to fuse with its binary opposition, which is Egyptian fertility, variety and excess in the character of Cleopatra. Her Stoicism is therefore highly paradoxical and seems to redefine the Stoic ideal rather more than it emulates it, as we shall see when we look at her suicide in greater depth. Enobarbus claims that the “vilest things/Become themselves in [Cleopatra]” suggesting an almost supernatural metamorphosis. Geoffrey Miles expands this notion of

<https://assignbuster.com/stoic-constancy-in-antony-and-cleopatra/>

metamorphosis, claiming that in the play we find ourselves in a “...Daliesque or Ovidian world in which things undergo perpetual, grotesque transformations, climaxing in Antony’s comparison of himself to shapes which form and dissolve in clouds (4. 15. 1-14).” In Shakespeare’s image of Antony and the clouds, macrocosm and microcosm are united in chaos and mutation. The instability inherent in Shakespeare’s world vision is similar to that of Stoicism. The Stoics believed in indifference to this external chaos and to good or bad fortune, through inner constancy, steadfastness and decorum. However, in Antony and Cleopatra none of Shakespeare’s characters are entirely successful in combining all these elements to achieve Stoic inner harmony. Octavius Caesar appears to have the most Stoic moral outlook, but the superficiality of his virtues is exposed through comments like “ love... left unshown,/ Is often left unloved”. In the same way Caesar believes that virtue is only virtuous if it is seen, the Stoic’s believed steadfastness must be tested by adversity to be proven. In this way Cleopatra is correct to call him “ Fortune’s knave” because it is Antony’s demise which facilitates Caesar’s triumph. Paradoxically, it is the inconstant lovers who come closest to achieving the stoic ideal through their suicide. Cleopatra realises it is the “ thing that ends all other deeds,/Which shackles accidents and bolts up change...”. It is the only thing they can do to maintain dignity and decorum by refusing to put themselves at the mercy of Caesar or fortune. It is the only way they can achieve constant and eternal inconstancy by capturing the true essence of themselves for posterity. The lovers’ heroic suicide corresponds closely with Seneca’s notion of “ the posture of dying.” Seneca’s Stoicism emphasised the necessity of steadfastness above all else, as the demonstration of indifference to fortune. He advocated a particularly

<https://assignbuster.com/stoic-constancy-in-antony-and-cleopatra/>

heroic endurance of adversity similar to that described by Caesar in his recognition of Antony's former achievements:" Antony... [t]hou didst drink/ The stale of horses and the gilded puddle/ Which beasts would cough at. Thy palate then did deign/ The roughest berry on the rudest hedge." But Seneca believed the ultimate way to show disdain for fortune was to take one's life and therefore to choose one's own destiny. He believed this to represent true invulnerability, but also in the staging of this definitive act, it is possible to define how one would like to be remembered. If Stoic constancy is defined according to Seneca, it is Cleopatra who is most successful in attaining the ideal suicide through her elaborate and dignified performance. In fact the aesthetic tableau of her death scene is far more successful than that of Antony. Cleopatra has chosen her props wisely, the asp symbolising her native Egypt and ensuring a graceful and painless death, while Antony's unsuccessful first attempt mars the dramatic impact he strove to achieve. However, the ultimate result of the joint suicide is effective. They succeed in immortalizing their memory like the mythic heroes to whom they aspire in numerous textual references, such as Dido and Aeneas, Venus and Mars. Through death their identities are fixed and dignified so that ultimately they have succeeded in attaining decorum. However, Montaigne's affirmation of the inconstancy of human nature seems to bear the closest resemblance to Shakespeare's world vision in Antony and Cleopatra, as Geoffrey Miles suggests. Montaigne believed that: Our chiefest sufficiency is, to apply our selves to divers fashions. It is a being, but not a life, to bee tied and bound by necessity to one onely course Shakespeare seems to assent to Montaigne's diagnosis that constancy is a " profitable desire...likewise absurd." The absence of exemplary Stoic characters in Antony and Cleopatra <https://assignbuster.com/stoic-constancy-in-antony-and-cleopatra/>

seems to support this opinion. Shakespeare's characters seem to draw attention to the paradoxes and conflicts of the Stoic ideology more than they support it: the character of Octavius Caesar shows that there is a danger that Cicero's conception of public life as the proper arena for morality can lead to purely ostentatious displays of virtue. He is also depicted as an unappealing example of Stoic restraint of the passions. Antony and Cleopatra demonstrate that it is possible to be decorous whilst being inconstant, which could be seen to endorse Montaigne's acceptance of inconstancy. However, the lovers' death is ambiguous depending on whether we consider Shakespeare to be advocating the Senecan model of heroic suicide or whether we consider the lovers to be indecorously driven to their deaths for lack of any other alternative. They are successful in evading their fate as Caesar's prisoners but in so doing they allow him to attain exclusive power over the empire. Furthermore, the obvious theatricality of Cleopatra's suicide seems too morbidly self-conscious to suggest Shakespeare genuinely approved of the Senecan ideal. Perhaps Shakespeare's explicit references to the Senecan tradition, for example Cleopatra's ironic desire to stage her death "after the high Roman fashion" could be read as a parody of similar Roman suicides. Whether the lovers' death is perceived as cowardly or courageous, noble or vain, will depend on the audience as it is not entirely clear what Shakespeare intended. Antony and Cleopatra reads more like a critique than a vindication of Stoic constancy. This in no way excludes the possibility that Shakespeare saw certain elements of the ideal as appealing, but he certainly highlights the conflicts and paradoxes inherent in the Stoic ideology. As the play itself demonstrates, ideology is an inadequate term to describe Stoicism because it is not a unified philosophy but a configuration of

<https://assignbuster.com/stoic-constancy-in-antony-and-cleopatra/>

disparate ethical standpoints on the issue of constancy and what it means to be constant.