
The Feminist Play in Antony and Cleopatra

Over decades ago, many empires were built upon a patriarchal system, in which men have control of power over women. Under the patriarchal society, women had no voice and defined as weaker and inferior (....). Even though Shakespeare lived under the male-dominated society, his depiction of women was not influenced by its standard. He portrayed Cleopatra in Antony and Cleopatra as a powerful Queen of Egypt. She did not only rule Egypt but also occupied Antony, one of the members of the triumvirates of Rome in any situation. The author highlights her strong characteristics through her role in the relationship with Antony as well as her death at the end of the play.

Cleopatra was a Queen of Egypt but embraces masculine features. Her characteristics completely against the patriarchal conception of femininity. Throughout the play, the readers could see Cleopatra had power over Antony in their relationship. In the opening line of the play, Antony's soldiers were concerned about Antony, who used to be a great general, but was now being led by Cleopatra. His heart has now 'become the bellows and the fan to cool a gypsy's lust' (1.1.6). In act 3, scene 5, Cleopatra's masculine qualities were clearly displayed when she said, 'Then put my tires and mantles on him, whilst I wore his sword Philippan' (2.5.23). In this scene, it looked like Shakespeare inverted the gender role of two main characters to emphasize the strong characteristic of Cleopatra. Her masculine features were also expressed by her drawing a knife on the innocent messenger to soothe her grief and anger upon the affair of Antony and Octavia. This brutal act should have been linked with men instead of women, especially women under the patriarchal society. This scene proves that the author was successful in portraying Cleopatra as a woman who embodied masculine qualities. Her power continued to be highlighted through the battle with Caesar. She decided to go to the battle with Antony even though Enobarbus tries to dissuade her. She said this war was against her, therefore, she has to be responsible for it (3.7.15).

"Sink Rome! And their tongues rot

That speak against us! A charge we bear i' th' war,

And as the president of my kingdom will

Appear there for a man. Speak not against it.

I will not stay behind."

Even though Cleopatra was a woman, she was not afraid to confront her enemy in brutal battles. Shakespeare not only developed Cleopatra's strong personality but also showed her influences on Antony in making decisions. Even though Enobarbus explained that the army would have more advantages if they fight Caesar on land, Antony ignored Enobarbus's warning. It would later turn out to be a big mistake as Antony followed Cleopatra's idea of fighting by sea. The readers could see that the Queen of Egypt was taking the dominant role by making Antony followed her decisions.

At the end of the play, the death of Cleopatra was used to emphasize her individual identity. She chose to end her own life rather than being controlled by Caesar and humiliated by the Romanians (5.2.215).

Will catch at us like strumpets, and scald rhymers

Ballad us out o' tune. The quick comedians

Extemporally will stage us and present

Our Alexandrian revels. Antony

Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see

Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness

I' th' posture of a whore.

Before she placed the asps on her skin, she ordered her servant, 'give me my robe. Put on my crown' (5.2.277). Her order implied that even when she died, she would still be Cleopatra- the Queen of Egypt. Her death not only proved her love for Antony, but it also attested to her self-control and will to protect her reputation. She was not and would never be controlled by anyone. When it came close to the end of her life, she again declared her qualities of strength and bravery, 'My resolution's placed, and I have nothing Of woman in me. Now from head to foot. I am marble-constant' (5.2.240). Caesar, who represents for the patriarchy society, finally showed his sympathy for Cleopatra's death. This is the first time he showed his respect for Cleopatra throughout the play. He said, 'Bravest at the last, She leveled at our purposes and, being royal, Took her own way' (5.2.333). Through respect from Caesar, Shakespeare expressed his view that any woman who refused to follow the standard set by patriarchal society, should be admired in any circumstances.

In Antony and Cleopatra, Shakespeare successfully portrayed Cleopatra as a historically powerful Queen, who led Egypt and manipulated a relationship with Antony. Besides her love, her social image and reputation were also important to her. She chose to determine her miserable fate rather than letting someone else decides. Cleopatra embodied both feminine and masculine qualities including her passion, power, and self-control. Through the image of Cleopatra, Shakespeare was probably concluded as a feminist. He created Cleopatra in hope for gender equality in the 17th century. However, he made Cleopatra dies at the end of the play to imply that it was hard to change the way the patriarchal society works.