The Role Of Women In Society Through The Lens Of Cleopatra: Antony And Cleopatra Versus All For Love

Women, be warned: Men can despise you and simultaneously lose their minds over you.

In Antony and Cleopatra (1623), Shakespeare criticizes the role of women in society through the lens of Cleopatra, who is a woman fully aware of her social status as both weak and powerful. Weak in how she is objectified as the inferior sex, and powerful in her contradicting ability to seduce men. Cleopatra is indeed defined by her relationship to other men, but she is also defined by her awareness of the events surrounding her. She is a multi-dimensional, flawed being who understands her negative reputation, her reputation of being an instrument of revenge, paving the path to the demise of men.

Even while she is reduced to a beautiful lifeless sculpture, often dismissed politically by men, she understands the authority she holds over them, and how she may engross them. Shakespeare casts her in a light where she knows how to use this to her advantage.

She refers to herself as a “serpent of old Nile” (1.5 26) – the evil within her country’s main source of overall health. She even says that Ceasar allows her to “hourly learn the “doctrine of obedience” (5.2 30-31). We see her awareness when she says that she is no more than “a woman, and commanded by such poor passion as the maid that milks and does the meanest chares” (4.15 76-78). She uses the social status of a servant to highlight the continuous erasure of women in society. While she admits that she’s not used to being so subservient she still submits “gladly” (5.2 31). She accepts and uses her inferiority to flatter Ceaser and boost his ego, saying that she confesses his “greatness and submit to his might.” She carries on, “He is a god and knows what is the most right. Mine honor was not yielded, but conquered merely” (3.13 62-64). She is expressing a sarcastic tone, especially considering she just agreed with Ceaser’s statement that there were “scars upon [her] honor” (3.13 50). Cleopatra plays the game, but doesn’t play around.

In both plays, Antony and Cleopatra (1623), and All for Love (1677), Cleopatra acts as a symbol of what the male powers want and fight over, to be used for political gain. Dryden’s Cleopatra, however, is more passive than Shakespeare’s, illustrated clearly in the quality of language and the use of her dialogue. In Dryden’s All for Love, a semi-successful attempt to reinvigorate serious drama which had been absent for the last thirty years, Cleopatra plays a more one-dimensional role - simply put, a faithful lover. While Shakespeare uses drama, humor, wit, madness, and all the concentrated emotional ingredients to get each of his characters across, Dryden ends up restrained and falling short by making his lovers talk in a sober way. Dryden instead focuses his story on Antony, a man torn between love and law, fueled by fear of betrayal, which becomes the point of anxiety in all his relationships. He is a passionate man, eventually willing to give up power for the sake of love. It does not appear, however, that Dryden’s Cleopatra has any feelings toward how she is being treated and seen.

Dryden makes Antony and Cleopatra’s relationship seemingly perfect, which is generally not

realistic. When Antony tries to reassure his lover as he attempts to leave her, he says, “I saw you ev'ry day, and all the day; And ev'ry day was still but as the first: So eager was I still to see you more.” (II.i.289-9 1). Cleopatra is Go; leave me, Soldier; (For you're no more a Lover:) leave me dying: Push me all pale and panting from your bosome, And, when your March begins, let one run after, Breathless almost for Joy, and cry, She's dead! The Souldiers shout; you then perhaps may sigh, And muster all your Roman Gravity: Ventidius chides; and strait your Brow cleares up, As I had never been. (II.i.41 1-19)

When Shakespeare’s Cleopatra plans to go into battle with Antony, Enobarbus stops her by making the odd analogy of male and female horses fighting together, where the male horses would be distracted by the female horses and rendered useless. This emphasizes the sexuality of the female by showing it is so overpowering that it would prevent victory. Shakespeare is clearly critiquing on his society’s sexualisation of the female. Shakespeare is aware of women’s unfair treatment and place in society and explores it, while Dryden doesn’t delve as deep into the female characters of his play as he does on the psychology of Antony and his passion for her. Even in her very last hours, Shakespeare’s Cleopatra seems to have a clear view of how the world will perceive her and the events she’s witnessed. So while Shakespeare blatantly portrays the character of Cleopatra negatively, he uses it to emphasize the power of the reigning queen regent of the time, Elizabeth I, also known as the Virgin Queen.

Shakespeare expands and complicates the universe of the story, while Dryden treats the story of Antony and Cleopatra as a moral tragedy. Dryden wrote in his essay that the goal of any play is “to delight and to instruct;” therefore what he considered important was attaching a clear moral universe and lesson to the play. For Shakespeare, his characters may have been a little too consumed by madness for that.

Contextually, it is interesting that All for Love staged real women actors, instead of Shakespeare’s use of men playing all the female roles. Perhaps Shakespeare had a stronger understanding of women because he came from the perspective that a woman was just as complex as a man, also allowing the audience empathize with the women being played through the mouth of someone more attainable in society.

Tis true, I have a heart that disdains your coldness… but a wife’s virtues surmounts that pride: I come to claim you as my own … to ask, nay beg, for your kindness.’