

The Identity Crisis of Lovers in *Antony and Cleopatra*

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Of all Shakespeare's love tragedies *Antony and Cleopatra* presents a unique challenge regarding the real identity of the lovers. In the play both Antony and Cleopatra seem to be confused about who they really are. It is only through a careful analysis of the play that their real identity becomes apparent. Basically, they are simply a man and a woman struggling against the odds and limitations of the world they live in. Of the two, however, Cleopatra provides a greater challenge. Her ungoverned sexuality confronts the preconceived notions concerning the nature of women: if Cleopatra is aggressive, she is a whore; if she is submissive, she is an angel. In this paper I would like to deal with the theme of identity crisis of lovers through an analysis of the plot of the cited play.

From the opening of the play, various opinions are formed about Antony and Cleopatra. While Rome views the lovers in a negative way, Egypt seems almost indifferent to their romance. They are star-crossed lovers, struggling for acceptance in a world that seems to be indifferent and hostile to them. Cleopatra, however, is the sole focus of contempt. She is to blame for Antony's downfall and corruption. The Roman soldier Philo notes:

His captain's heart,
Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst
The buckles on his breast, reneges all temper
And is become the bellows and the fan
To cool a gypsy's lust. (I. i. 6-10)

The great emperor has degraded himself to a slave for his blind love. Antony "may be godlike in excess when serving honor, but not when serving love . . . [t]he brave soldier has become the dotting lover, whose affections, he claims, reach beyond the limits of heaven and earth" (Miola 118). This division of Antony, between the hero and the knave, is also his internal conflict. Antony recognizes that he has

undergone a change. He declares, "These strong Egyptian fetters I must break,/ Or lose myself in dotage" (I. ii. 120-21). But for Rome, he is already doomed. He leaves Egypt, marries Octavia (to prove himself a "Roman"), but then returns to Egypt as soon as he can: "I will to Egypt./ And though I make this marriage for my peace,/ I' the East my pleasure lies" (I. iii. 38-40). According to Kay Gallwey, "Cleopatra's sensuality effectively transforms Antony from a man of reason, honor, and integrity to a man of weakness, irresoluteness, and cowardice" (146-47). Thus, Antony cannot remain in Rome for, he no longer belongs there. He is a man trapped between two worlds.

It is to be noted that both Rome and Egypt continue to confound him. The noble soldier has become a consort to a queen. But once he marries Octavia, he must not only answer to the citizens of Rome, but also to her brother, Octavius Caesar. Antony sets himself up for his own downfall. He goes back to a world where he feels at ease, where he does not have to worry about political debates or war:

Thus whereas Egypt usually portrayed as the place of continual feasting and lovemaking among the people and uncontrollable fertility in the land of the Nile, Rome is preeminently the place of politics and rational order, the intellectual center of the earth, where even sexual relationships are carefully and unemotionally arranged. (Hall 145)

He desires to escape the limitations of one culture (Rome) for another (Egypt), only to find that in this action, he becomes neither a respected emperor nor a desired lover.

Antony's return to Cleopatra does not win him respect for he is perceived as a common adulterer. He not only betrays himself, but also the woman he is involved with. According to Kay Gallwey, "Antony himself does not consistently earn our respect. In Act II, Scene II, he denies that he is married to Cleopatra, and agrees for political reasons - to marry Octavia. This decision can be seen as a betrayal of both women" (53). Antony's return to Egypt is an escape from political duty and responsibility. He may love Cleopatra, but she points out to him: "Why should I think you can be mine and true,/ Though you in swearing shake the throned

gods,/ Who have been false to Fulvia [his deceased wife]?" (I. iii. 27-29). Thus, even Cleopatra questions his motives.

Antony ultimately transcends the boundaries of his dual worlds through death. He finally accepts the responsibilities of his own actions, rather than blaming Cleopatra or Caesar for what has happened in his life. Antony is presented as a character greatly confused, not knowing who he is or why he exists. He simply cannot survive in a world that demands him to choose his real identity. His suicide is a noble act, for it allows him to not only to accept responsibility for his past actions, but also to expose a final definition of who he really is. His death is a great testament to his profound love for Cleopatra. "The ultimate test of love in Antony and Cleopatra is how much one is willing to sacrifice for one's beloved," (Cantor 156) and ultimately Antony's death becomes his true pledge of faith to Cleopatra. He wants to be with her for all eternity, and he dies in her arms.

But what happens to Cleopatra? She also defies the limitations put upon her by Rome and Egypt: "As the play progresses, the questions accumulate around Cleopatra; and they become more urgent" (Adelman 15). Who is the "real" Cleopatra: the whore or the angel? Rome would insist that she is the whore, yet Cleopatra would perhaps view herself closer to the angel. Who she really is becomes the focus of the play. She "shamelessly manipulates others' emotions like clay" (Cantor 150). Thus, when Cleopatra insists that Antony has to define their love, she challenges his belief that in the process of definition they will become limited (I. i. 14-17). Cleopatra seems always to manipulate either Antony or the other characters who surround them. She orders them to "See where he is, who's with him, what he does./ I did not send you. If you find him sad,/ Say that I am dancing; if in mirth, report/ That I am sudden sick" (I. iii. 2-5). This step is not taken out of malice, but out of a sense that this is necessary to keep Antony interested in her. If she behaves like a Roman, then she will lose him, because with her he is denying his "Romanness." It soon becomes clear that her policy is "to sustain the infinite variety which custom cannot stale; it is the guarantee of Antony's return to the East" (Dusinberre 68). Although seemingly conniving, it also shows her insight into Antony's character. She knows that this is the behavior he not only expects of her, but what he desires from her as well.

Cleopatra may be calculating, but there is more to her than just the reports of her actions. Enobarbus, Antony's trusted confidant, acknowledges her ability to transcend the limiting opinions of her:

For her own person,
It beggared all description. She did lie
In her pavilion, cloth of gold of tissue,
O'er picturing that Venus where we see
The fancy outwork nature. (II. ii. 202-206)

Thus, Cleopatra is Venus, just as Antony is Mars. On the basis of this comparison it becomes impossible to limit the opinion of the lovers to mere worldly actions. Therefore, "in a sense, the play is a series of conflicting judgements passed on the protagonists, even by the protagonists themselves" (Adelman 25). Enobarbus recognizes the depth of Cleopatra when he states that "Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale/ Her infinite variety" (II. ii. 240-41). Although Enobarbus' opinion is not unbiased, for he is loyal to Antony, it does present Cleopatra in a new light. Even Cleopatra recognizes that her past is perhaps part of the judgment upon her in the present: "My salad days,/ When I was green in judgment, cold in blood,/ To say as I said then!" (I. v. 73-75). This is the last love episode of her life, and she knows that she must make it convincing, but as Adelman suggests, "we are finally convinced of Cleopatra's love - and I think we are - we have had to develop a faith nearly as difficult as Antony's, a faith in what we cannot know" (24). For this play is a "tragedy of love founded upon the continuous presence and being of the protagonists, beyond any roles they may splendidly or ineptly fill" (Hall 187). Cleopatra's actions, at times misguided, are still a part of the woman that Antony loves. She makes mistakes, pushing too hard and sometimes too far, but ultimately she redeems herself with her suicide.

Antony and Cleopatra go past normal boundaries. They are deeply involved with each other both physically and emotionally, challenging the limitations of role and gender. Cleopatra is at one point mistaken for Antony by Enobarbus. For critic Michael Hall it becomes a matter of types based on literary notions:

The difference between the two is the gender of the person who dominates the relationship. If it is Cleopatra, then Antony is losing both his honor and his manhood and the relationship is Emasculating; if it is Antony, then he is merely emulating Julius Caesar and Pompey the Great and the relationship is Epic. (144)

Therefore if Cleopatra rules, then what is Antony but a consort to the Queen. If Antony rules, then Cleopatra is merely a trophy to the Emperor. If Antony and Cleopatra are limited to this type of gender role rule, then what is their love but a struggle to transcend their identities on earth. Cleopatra acknowledges that they are intertwined: "I drunk him to his bed,/ Then put my tires and mantles on him whilst/ I wore his sword Philippan" (II. V. 21-23). A certain sportiveness of the lovers is established by this action; the lovers are able to become one another in the union of lovemaking. Suddenly both Antony and Cleopatra are more sympathetic; "the elements in the play that may be seen from the Roman point of view as evidence of Antony's loss of manhood may also be seen as the emblem of his procreative union with Cleopatra" (Adelman 95). To be on equal terms in a relationship, an exchange of gender identity must take place. This exchange is an admittance that they are one person, that a marriage of spirit has taken place. They are no longer individuals, but two halves of a whole person, and according to Gallwey, an "[e]xchange of clothing is a paradigm for the emotional union of love" (216). To see the lovers in these terms negates the views of Cleopatra as a "whore." For to lift Antony beyond this mortal realm, Cleopatra must become the "angel."

Ultimately, it is Cleopatra's sexuality that is difficult to suppress or define. She uses her body to ensure her continued success as Egypt's queen. She had two great lovers in the past, Caesar and Pompey, and now she is the "triple-turned whore" with Antony (IV. xiii. 13). Her position as a queen is a threat politically to Octavius Caesar. She has been publicly enthroned with Caesar's legitimate and biological heir by her side (III. vi.). The new Caesar, however, cannot allow the mother and adoptive father to lay claim to the Empire in their son's name. Her sexuality has gotten to this place and Caesar perhaps fears that she may try for more, for ". . . Cleopatra is represented as uniting her body natural and her body politic by literally 'using' her blatant sexuality to ensure her power on the throne" (Jankowski

96). Cleopatra keeps this power by “making her political adversaries – the representative of Rome – her lover and binding them to her by bearing them children” (Jankowski 96). It is likely to believe that Cleopatra’s relationship with Antony may have begun because of this political insight, but they have certainly stepped beyond this initial and political beginning.

Not only does her sexuality help cement her political position, it also causes the male-dominated world that surrounds her to question the role of women in their world. For Juliet Dusinberre, “[T]he woman-ruler is a spur to feminism because her position forces men to ask questions about the relation between femininity and power” (303). Cleopatra threatens this world order. Instead of viewing her in a positive light, Rome negates her. She is more like a man because of her aggressive leadership qualities. Antony is likened to a woman because he allows her to keep power: “He fishes, drinks, and wastes/ The lamps of night in revel, is not more manlike/ Than Cleopatra, nor the Queen of Ptolemy/ More womanly than he” (I. iv. 4-7). This interchange of sexual identity causes their authority to be questioned. Cleopatra cannot win in her new role. In order to maintain power she must be aggressive. To be aggressive is to be called a “witch” or a “whore.” There is no midpoint for Antony and Cleopatra.

Cleopatra as a queen is a leader and when her throne is threatened she goes to battle. This natural reaction to a political situation might have worked out better romantically if she had convinced Antony to defend her beloved. But that is not how Cleopatra acts. Whatever her reasons for leaving the battle at Actium, it has disastrous consequences for both of them. Antony is disgraced because he turns to follow her: “Egypt, thou knew’st too well/ My heart was to thy rudder tied by the strings,/ And thou shouldst tow me after” (III. xii. 56-58). This is perhaps the most climactic action in the play. The obvious question is: Why does Cleopatra leave the battle that she desired? She is the one who decides to fight at sea knowing fully well that Antony is a great warrior on the land. Is it the sudden realization that the battle is to their disadvantage that she escapes? Or is it because she wants Antony to be victorious himself, without her support? Whatever may be Cleopatra’s motives, she has made a terrible mistake. From this point on, humiliated Antony is weary of his queen. When Caesar sends a messenger to manipulate Cleopatra into surrendering,

she indulges in the verbal banter by agreeing that her "honor was not yielded,/But conquered merely" (III. xiii. 61-62). Although Cleopatra believes that she is simply gaining time to bargain, Antony sees it as an act of betrayal. Thus, her best intentions back fire and complicate her relationship with Antony.

Her final manipulation causes her the greatest grief, when she sends word to Antony that she has committed suicide. This test of whether or not Antony truly loves her, proves devastating as Antony commits suicide himself. The knowledge that the report of her death was false comes too late. Antony has died, and Cleopatra must determine what the best course of action is. She refuses to surrender power to Caesar, because she knows his evil designs. Her decision to die with Antony is a clear proof that she loved Antony wholeheartedly.

Apart from that, her suicide is also an ennobling gesture. All her previous machinations and manipulations disappear when we believe that she is going to commit suicide to be with her beloved Antony. It is also true that she does not want to be a trophy to Caesar, but that alone is not the reason for her act. Cleopatra has tried throughout the play to prove that she is more than Rome would like her to be. If she simply was the "strumpet" then she might gracefully escape to Caesar, believing that there might be a chance to regain her power with the help of another lover; but she refuses to be paraded through the streets of Rome like an animal in a cage. She is the Queen of Egypt, and she dies as the Queen of Egypt, not as a slave to the Emperor of Rome.

Ultimately for Cleopatra, death is a marriage ritual. She is going to be wedded to Antony: "Husband, I come" (V. ii. 290). In this case the "lovers have triumphed over the obstacles that repeatedly threatened and delayed their union, and have achieved a form of release from the realities of daily life that would forever impede such a union" (Rozett 162). Antony and Cleopatra have transcended time. They are lovers immortalized. Ultimately their relationship is tragic because the consequences of their love made it tragic. Only in death do they achieve the stature of glorious lovers. Even Caesar recognizes this: "She shall be buried by her Antony./ Nor grave upon this earth shall clip in it/ A pair so famous" (V. ii. 361-63). Ironically, they have to be joined by the man who tried his best to keep them

apart. These lovers did not belong to either the Roman or the Egyptian world, but to an eternal world of love, which transcends all limits of man, woman, and politics.

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