

Cleopatra as a Complex Character

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Abstract

Shakespeare's characters and the way he presents them indicate significant difference from his contemporaries. He creates diverse and multi-dimensional characters. Even the types he creates take attention with various human qualities. Antony and Cleopatra are two of Shakespeare's major heroes and heroines. The audiences are given freedom to evaluate Antonius and Cleopatra from the perspectives of different characters in the play. This diverse and complex technique of presentation makes Shakespeare's dramatic characters more humane. They are not purely good or evil; rather they have both qualities, though one supersedes over the other. In the present paper we aim to discuss and excavate Shakespeare's technique of complex characterization with reference to two characters; Antonius and Cleopatra.

Keywords: Character, characterization, Shakespeare, drama

Özet

Shakespeare'in kişileştirmeleri ve bunların sahnede kendini göstermesi, kendi dönemindeki yazarlarından önemli ölçüde farklılık göstermektedir. çeşitli ve çok yönlü karakterler oluşturmakta ustadır. Eserlerindeki tipler bile birçok insani özellikler taşımaktadır. Antonius ve Kloptra Shakespeare'in iki önemli karakteridir. Bu karakterlerin sahnede izleyen seyirciler, oyundaki diğer karakterlerin bakış açısından da bunları değerlendirme özgürlüğüne sahiptir. Bu çok boyutlu ve karmaşık anlatı tekniği Shakespeare'in kişileştirmelerini daha fazla insanlaştırmaktadır. Antonius ve Kloptra ne tamamen kötü ne de tamamen iyi kişileştirmelerdir; her ne kadar baskın bir tarafı olsa da, bu iki kişileştirme iyi ve kötü özelliklere sahip kişileştirmelerdir. Bu çalışmada Shakespeare'in karmaşık kişileştirme tekniklerini nasıl ustaca kullandığını Antonius ve Kloptra örneğini kullanarak tartışacağız.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Karakter, kişileştirme, Shakespeare, tiyatro

Introduction

In literary course books there are two basic approaches to character and characterization. The first mimetic/external assumes that a character is a

reflection/representation of a human being from the slice of life. Verisimilitude is the criterion for evaluation. For instance, *Oliver Twist* embodies many qualities and experience of Charles Dickens. *Hamlet* reflects the Elizabethan man of thought. Bradley's evaluation of Shakespeare's characters as if they are real people is an extreme example for the mimetic tendency. The second approach, also known as modern, shows little interest in verisimilitude. Instead, the modern theory assumes that character is an invention of the author's imagination and part of the whole in a fiction. Thus, characters are fictitious contributing to and completing, the wholeness of a work of art. In the second theory character is the persona in the dramatic work with certain moral, dispositional and emotional qualities, which become apparent in what s/he says and does. A character may remain essentially unchanged in outlook and disposition throughout a work, or may undergo radical changes either through a gradual process of motivation and development or as a result of crisis. The stability or change in character may be examined through comparing his/her actions and statements to the statements of the other characters in the play. That is, the process of change in the character can best be evaluated with the process of change in the actions and speeches of the character, and in the change of the attitudes of other characters: "An affective study of the nature of character, then, involves ... precise, specific analysis of the most telling traits, behavior and motives of the character" (Dietrich and Sundell, 1983:78). Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* may provide an interesting case-study in terms of characterization. There are stable characters, and changing characters. In particular, the relation among the minor and major characters, their actions and statements, and sentiments and behavior to one another are interesting. *Cleopatra*, for instance, is a very complex and difficult character to analyze and evaluate, since she has controversial relation with other characters. In addition, it is difficult

to argue whether she is stable and consistent or changing and inconsistent. Using the second approach, the present paper aims to analyze the characterization of Cleopatra in Shakespeare's play, Anthony and Cleopatra. Cleopatra's actions, statements and other characters' view will be used to explain her qualities.

I.

In the play Cleopatra first appears as a character with opposite qualities. On the one hand, she is charming, beautiful and adorable; on the other hand, she is seductress, tricky, and destructive. Her hyperbolic speech -'As I am Egypt's Queen' (1,1,23)- her tricky questions - 'If it be love indeed tell me how much' (1,1,17)-, her behavior together with what other people say and think about her, justify the combination of complex and conflicting qualities in her nature. Boyce also states that Cleopatra first appears as a complex and inconsistent character. He says:

Throughout the acts 1-4 in the play Cleopatra displays the powerful charms of an experienced and thoroughly professional courtesan. She attempts to control her lover with a strategy of alternate taunts and insults and seductive sexuality (1998: 111)

Cleopatra combines enjoyment, playfulness, sensuality and passion in her character. She is a queen, but she does not seem to have a control over her passion. She is more like a woman who plays acts (improvises), who is under the influence of her emotions and who enjoys love affairs more than politics. For her victory, war and conquering whole kingdoms are no more than a merely daily errand. The very first statement she utters reveals this aspect of her character. Although she knows that love cannot be compared to anything she teases Antony, and asks him 'If it be love indeed, tell me how much' (1,1,17). She is a sensual

woman who likes compliments and wants to feel that she is beloved. Therefore, she delights in playing with passions and in teasing Antony. She also uses exaggerated language to express her love, which she thinks is greater than any other love in the world. Yet this ironic greatness of love and sensuality will be the cause of her death. In the first scene she seems to be a coquette, on the one hand, who manipulates Antony so skillfully that he does what she wants. On the other hand, she is an insecure, sensual, charming and emotional woman who needs to have someone to support her belief that nothing is so important as much as love.

Cleopatra is portrayed as a beautiful, seductress character whose power to charm men is derived from her beauty and beguiling craft. However, beneath Cleopatra's whims and her overstated love and sensuality there is a hint that the strength of her affection determines the way she behaves (Corey, 1991:8). In the last scene of the first act we see the impact of her sensuality upon her behaviour. For instance, after Antony leaves Egypt for Rome she is at loss for something to occupy her time, but she cannot help thinking of him, worrying about what he is doing, how he looks and what he is thinking. She questions Alexas about Antony and tries to be happy:

He was not sad, -for he would shine on those
That makes their looks by his; he was not merry, -
Which seem'd to tell them his remembrance lay
In Egypt with his joy; but between both (1,5,80-5).

Although she is happy to hear about Antony, she does not want to hear that Antony is happy without her.

As the play progresses we see that Cleopatra is a character of opposite qualities to extreme. She is dramatic and emotional to excess but she is also warm and vulnerable. She first suspects about Antony, but her suspicion and passion, though strong and destructive,

frightens her. It can be seen when she realizes that she is wrong to blame the messenger for telling her that Antony had married to Octavia. In this case her passion becomes vulnerable. She is a queen and has responsibility as a ruler; therefore, she does not have the right to punish a messenger for a distressing message. If one knows about her, then s/he can be secure. For instance, the messenger in Act 3, scenes 3 knows that Cleopatra may be destructive when one talks against her wishes, thus he is very careful not to arouse her ire. The messenger, here, describes Octavia with neutral terms so that Cleopatra may infer whatever she likes:

She creeps,-
Her motion and her station are as one;
She shows a body rather than a life,
A statue than a breather (3,3,20-45).

She wants to be reassured; therefore, she interprets the messenger's word to suit her. She is pleased by this description. She admires the messenger for his good judgment and apologizes (admits) for her 'sharpness' (3, 3, 48). Cleopatra's dilemma is that she wants a man totally devoted to her, yet she also seeks a man strong enough to control the world (Cahn, 1991:5). Her conflicting desires together with her inconsistent character causes her potential damage. This is apparent in the scene just before the war. Enobarbus chides Cleopatra for being present in the battlefield but she insists to take part in the war, though the armies are not happy with her presence and complain that they become 'women's men' (3,7,69). Antony is eager to fight Caesar at sea, but due to Cleopatra and for the foolish reason that Caesar has challenged him at sea he insists to fight at sea (3, 7, 29). She encourages Antony and causes the defeat.

According to Antony, Cleopatra is an inconsistent but charming woman. He knows that she combines opposite qualities in her. For instance, he knows that she is sensual and insecure; hence, to secure her, he uses exaggerated language and says that he does not value kingdoms and Rome when he is with her (1,1,32). In addition, her beauty and charms are worth noting for Antony:

Fie wrangling queen!
Whom everything becomes, -to chide, to laugh,
To weep; whose every passion fully strives
To make itself, in thee, fair and admired (1,1,49-53)

In other words, Cleopatra, according to Antony, is a charming woman but she is also destructive and seductress. Antony knows the fact that one cannot easily leave her and get rid of her after one is involved in love affair with Cleopatra. He wants ‘from this enchanting queen break off’ (1,2,129), but even after he gets married to Octavia he cannot forget his strong passion for Cleopatra. He gives up peace between him and Caesar; he decides to go to Cleopatra. Cleopatra is a woman who leads Antony to duplicity and causes disaster, and occupies his mind consistently; this is the reason why Antony has not been able to leave Egypt for Rome. Antony also admits that Cleopatra is not only enchanting but also tricky. Therefore, he does not fear that Cleopatra will die -as she claims- after he leaves Egypt. Antony says that she is ‘cunning’ echoing Enobarbus statement ‘I saw her die twenty times upon far poorer moment moments?’ (1,2, 44-8). After he loses the battle he seems to be more critical of Cleopatra. He is frustrated, confused and defeated. However, this is temporary, and he again admits his devotion and his love to Cleopatra. It seems that Antony may conquer the world and defeat Caesar ten times but he cannot leave Cleopatra. He admits that she is his

‘conqueror’ (3,11,65) and berates her for what she did (Cahn, 1991:18). This is clear when he says to her ‘not to fall a tear since one of them rates all that is won and lost’ (3,11,69-70). Although he knows that she did ‘ten thousand harms’ and makes him ‘idle’ (1,2,129-31) it is difficult for Antony to break off with ‘enchanted’ Cleopatra. Antony is not much different from Cleopatra in the sense that they both have complex and conflicting traits. Play-acting, self-indulgency, and love determine the way they speak and act during the play.

Philo and Demetrius, unlike Antony who thinks that Cleopatra combines opposite qualities in her, argue that Cleopatra is a seductress and immoral character. They condemn her sensuality and think that she is no more than a ‘whore’. Philo is the first character to speak and comment on Cleopatra in the play. He has a negative attitude to Cleopatra. He argues that she is a ‘tawny front’ and ‘lusty gypsy’ that makes men forgets his ‘office’ and ‘devotion’ (1,1, 6-11). Philo also states that Cleopatra has changed Antony to such an extent that he sometimes remembers that he is Antony (1,1,60). Although Philo and Demetrius accuse her of being whore and coquette, they know that one cannot easily leave such an enchanting woman. Pompey is a character who clearly argues this point. He claims that Cleopatra’s wile and her ‘Epicurean cooks sauce (Antony’s) appetite’ (2,1,20) and makes him forget where his duty lies, therefore, Antony will, most probably, be seduced by luxury and will either forget about politics all together or else will be unable to defeat his enemies. According to Scarus, another minor character in the play, Cleopatra is a woman who brings disaster. He admits that her presence killed the chance to win and rule the whole world (3,10,15-21) when Antony fleet after her and defeated in the battle against Caesar.

Cleopatra, according to Enobarbus, is a beautiful, charming, precious, and honorable queen. Philo, Demetrius, Scarus and Pompey admit that Cleopatra’s diverse and conflicting

qualities are destructive, but Enobarbus, like Antony, thinks that such qualities are part of her beauty. He has a tribute about her charm and beauty. He thinks that ‘age cannot wither her/ nor custom stale/ Her infinite variety and even ‘vilest things / Become themselves in her’ (2,2,235-39). Enobarbus, when telling about Egypt to Maecenas and Agrippa who heard about Cleopatra as ‘triumphant’ and ‘rare’ who makes ‘great Caesar lay his sword to bed’ (2,2,275-305), describes Cleopatra while she was sailing on Nile from which one can see how much entrancing she is (2,2,260-75). He also argues that Antony will never be able to leave her since no other woman seems to match her charm and beauty. Cleopatra is not a simple character that can be easily defined and evaluated. She is multi-dimensional; each character in the play has differing view of her. Enobarbus admires and praises her liveliness and diverse qualities whereas Philo, Demetrius, Scarus and Pompey condemn her. Caesar is another character who thinks that Cleopatra is destructive and seductress. Her beauty and charm are enrapturing and she has in abundance the intoxicating sexuality essential to the successful courtesan (Boyce, 1998:111). Caesar is angry at Antony for appointing Cleopatra as a queen of Egypt, lower Syria, Cyprus and Lydia. Antony, according to Caesar, ‘hath given his empire up to a whore’ (3,6,66). Here again there is the image of Cleopatra as a seductress and enchanting woman, but strong enough to make a man do whatever she wants. There is consistency in her inconsistent character. Almost all characters realize this and their response to the queen confirms this. Yet Cleopatra begins to change after the defeat and she becomes more consistent and brave.

II.

Cleopatra’s character begins to reveal less complex nature and more mature mood after she is defeated, though Antony and other characters give her less credit than she deserves. In

the earlier scene we see the spirit of fire and air within her; therefore, she refuses to be trammled or extinguished (Spevack, 1978:689). In particular, her statement to Antony ‘not know me yet’ (3,13,157) also refers to the coming change in her mood. She becomes brave, real lover and mature. Now she is like an earth, careful and consistent. According to Spevack, the change of her mood and the combinations of contrasted elements in her nature are justifiable and correspond to the essential diversity of the tragic character. She says:

Cleopatra, though the creature of the world which surrounds her, can at times emerge from it impose upon her surroundings a vitality which is not the less astonishing. The combination of nature with artifice, vitality with corruption, in a single infinitely complex creation, is at once the essence of her personality and key to the conflicting estimates which her relation to Antony inspire in the course of tragedy (1978:693)

Cleopatra is still a tricky and unstable character but she undergoes the process of change and becomes less controversial. The reactions of other characters in the play also change. When she is taken out of political context she acquires different personality. In love context, for instance, she becomes the image of bravery. She begins to understand the agony of Antony and wants to show that she is loyal and devoted to him; therefore, she challenges Caesar by committing suicide. She also admits that she is no longer a queen. She is an ordinary woman now whose ‘desolation begins to make better life’ realizing that being a minister of will and fortune is what makes life worthy (5,2,80-85). This scene also displays that her early naïve character disappears and Cleopatra has a characteristic manner to face difficult situations. She is brave, consistent, and honorable. She condemns Caesar’s victory and prefers death to be a means for Caesar’s victory. She justifies her love for Antony and refuses to live.

The defeat becomes a kind of test to manifest the strength of Cleopatra and weakness of men. After the defeat Cleopatra achieves spiritual maturity and becomes a consistent

character. However, male characters, including Antony, Enobarbus and soldiers, display weakness. Antony's adoration for Cleopatra seems as changeable and unpredictable. Bitter doubts arouse in his mind regarding Cleopatra's loyalty and love; therefore, he accuses Cleopatra of being a 'Triple turned whore' (4,12, 16), and believes that she betrayed him and changed his destiny. She is 'like the greatest spot' of women sex and deserves to be shown for poor'st diminutives' where is the beginning of this quote? (4,12 39-43). Yet it is difficult for Cleopatra to understand why he is so much 'enraged'. Antony is more like the person (Cleopatra) he accuses. He is weak, passionate, violated and in conflict. His early judgment of Cleopatra disappears and he cannot see that Cleopatra is becoming more consistent and mature.

Antony is not the only character that does not realize the change in Cleopatra. Enobarbus, the trusted advisor who previously admired Cleopatra for her beauty and charm, like Antony cannot judge Cleopatra fairly and suspects that she will leave Antony. However, before Cleopatra, Enobarbus leaves Antony. Seleucus, his minister, is another character in the last scene that acts against Cleopatra. Mardian, a servant and eunuch, realizes and admits that Cleopatra really loved Antony. Dolabella, a rival character, most probably realizes that Cleopatra is a real queen, therefore, he truly states what will Caesar do her and indirectly imply her not to leave her honour to him. Caesar also realizes her loyalty and bravery in the manner of her death (5,2,336-38). Female characters in the play are more sensible and reasonable in the time of the conflict. They are stronger and have a better judgment of Cleopatra. Chairman, for instance, is a female character that sees what is going on in Cleopatra. She is loyal and devoted and claims that Cleopatra has incomparable royalty and 'unparallel'd lass' (5,2,315-20).

Consequently, Shakespeare does not allow any single character in this play to speak as an all-knowing mouthpiece; rather, he gives a variety of viewpoints and lets the audience discern where the truth of drama lies and what the decisive motivations are for the actions (Carey, 1981:44). Cleopatra up to the last act of the play survives as a complex, unstable and difficult character. Antony and other characters do not realize the difference between illusion and reality, and that her manner does not affect her integrity. One sees the combination of conflicting forces in her character like corruption and life, politics and love, war and peace. In addition, her moral defects concur with the general defects of mankind, since almost every person in real life has a complex character. She displays the idea that victory and defeat, good and evil are 'fortune's knave' (5,2,3). In this respect, she is as complex as everyone and combines in her character opposite qualities like every ordinary human kind. Shakespeare let other characters and audiences know this through Cleopatra. Then, one can say that what she says and does and what Antony and other characters say about her do not contradict one another. Rather each of them contributes to the general plot and conform the integrity of Cleopatra's character.

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