

I.B. Extended Essay

Subject: Group 1 – Language A: English, Category 1

To what extent do Middle Eastern portrayals in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* adhere to Edward Said's concept of Orientalism?

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Abstract

This essay critically examines how Middle Eastern depictions in a Shakespearean tragedy, *Antony and Cleopatra*, pertain to Edward Said's concept of Orientalism. Orientalism is a postcolonial construct, yet the criticism Said directs at Western representations of the Middle East following the period of European colonization are applicable to portrayals in Early Modern literature – especially in the Elizabethan and Jacobean depictions of the Orient as a land of uncivilized, morally-dubious exoticism. A prominent Early Modern playwright, Shakespeare expressed interest in the Orient and thus incorporates Oriental elements in his play *Antony and Cleopatra*, where he makes distinct and often unflattering comparisons between the noble West (the Roman Empire) and the exotic East (the Egyptian Empire). In order to draw valid parallels between *Antony and Cleopatra* and Orientalism, context on Said's definition of the concept was crucial, and his book, *Orientalism*, was an invaluable resource in my investigation. In addition to the play *Antony and Cleopatra*, other Shakespearean plays were also examined, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, and *Titus Andronicus*, in order to confirm if the portrayals were truly Orientalist or merely unique to Shakespeare's style.

The conclusion drawn from the research is that, fundamentally, representations of the Middle East in *Antony and Cleopatra* are Orientalist, as the Orient is inaccurately feminized and exoticized. Furthermore, the notion of othering is also prominent throughout the play; Shakespeare intends for Rome and Romans to embody masculinity and nobility by showcasing the opulence and immorality of Egypt and Egyptians. The dramatic foils, such as Antony and Caesar, as well as Cleopatra and Octavia, further solidify this concept. Orientalism is a postcolonial construct, so I concluded that Shakespeare does not have the same intentions as European colonizers — his inaccurate portrayals are a result of ignorance and distance, typical of the era he wrote in.

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I. Introduction

i. The History of Orientalist Portrayals

In a post-9/11 world, the cause of negative misconceptions revolving around Middle Easterners is regularly traced back to misrepresentations in Western media, in which they are portrayed to be violent and barbaric. In the digital age, where mainstream media and news outlets are easily accessible, the aforementioned platforms are mainly blamed for projecting such false depictions. However, these inaccurate portrayals of the Middle East have long existed in the Western world. In his seminal book *Orientalism*, published in 1978, Edward Said presents his groundbreaking theory on the root cause of this phenomena – colonization. He explains that during the Age of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, Europeans needed a justification for colonizing the Arab world. Subsequently, they created an artificial cultural boundary between the “West” and the “East”, which they perceived as “us” and “them” and inevitably, the “civilized” and “uncivilized”. Said describes this ideology as “othering”, which allowed Europeans to automatically believe they were sophisticated, active, and rational merely by labeling Orientals as primitive, lazy, and senseless. Due to this self-proclaimed superiority, they found a reason to colonize the Middle East, affirming it was their duty to enlighten the people of the Orient.

Consequently, Orientalists, who were the European scholars studying the Orient, allowed this prejudice to seep into their research. This bred imaginative and romanticized knowledge on the Middle East which portrayed it as a mystical and faraway land, thus inviting Europeans to generalize its inhabitants based on false assumptions. Thus, by fabricating the image of the Arab world, European colonizers set the foundation for other mediums, besides academic research, to do the same. These depictions were perpetuated up until the twenty-first century, and have even

evolved as a result of events such as 9/11. To summarize this construct, Said redefines the term ‘Orientalism’ and employs it to describe the West’s acceptance of “the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind,’ destiny and so on” (Said 20).

However, despite Said’s claim that it is a postcolonial construct, negative depictions of the Orient were prevalent centuries before the era of European Enlightenment — especially in Early Modern literature. In fact, due to the intensification of exchanges between England and Eastern countries through trade, travel, and diplomacy, there was a particular interest in the “other” during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. This was manifested in several ways such as the publication of books on Oriental history, the translation of Oriental books, and, most notably, the production of plays involving subjects and settings from the Orient (Bayouli 2-5). Playwrights such as Marlowe, Ford, Dekker, Greene, Marston, Kyd, and Webster were evidently influenced by the Orient, with *The Jew of Malta* and *Tamburlaine* by Christopher Marlowe, *Selimus* by Robert Greene, and *Soliman and Perseda* by Thomas Kyd serving as products of their interest (Bayouli 8). Although these plays are of the fifteenth and sixteenth century, whereby they were performed prior to the period of Western colonization, it does not eliminate the possibility of romanticized portrayals, negative stereotyping, and baseless generalizations of the Orient; this is especially the case since their fascination is not rooted in a genuine desire to learn about the Middle East, but rather stimulated to serve a European audience through exotic settings, racist caricatures, and convenient plotlines showing barbaric lands in need of Western intervention. Although originally applicable to postcolonial portrayals, the concept of Orientalism, or at least its fundamentals, such as the approach to othering, may be present in

these earlier publications. Yet it should be recognized that, unlike colonizers, these faulty representations may not have stemmed from a desire to take power of the Orient and purposely depict them as the uncivilized “other”, but were rather born out of ignorance or inaccessibility. Thus, it is inaccurate to assume those playwrights intentionally and maliciously portrayed the Orient negatively.

ii. Shakespeare and *Antony and Cleopatra*

William Shakespeare is amongst those Early Modern playwrights who developed an interest in the Orient and thus incorporated it in some of his work. Amongst the pantheon of English literature, he often escapes criticism for content in his plays that by modern standards would be deemed racist, likely because his work has resonated with many generations of readers. Although his plays have been subject to considerable academic scrutiny (as they have become an integral part of most literary curricula), it is still rare to find criticism of Shakespeare in the context of Orientalism and how he portrays the Orient in his texts. Since his plays were written for a European audience in a time and place of general inaccessibility to the East, it is probable that he incorporated false depictions of the Orient – yet, due to the geographical distance between the two regions, this would not have affected Middle Easterners during his time. However, in the modern age where the world has become interconnected and globalized, these consequences have intensified. Thus, it is still significant to evaluate inaccuracies in Middle Eastern portrayals and especially in works that are widely acclaimed and taught, such as the plays of Shakespeare and others who have become staples in the world of academia.

Antony and Cleopatra, first performed in 1607 (Quint 204), is a Shakespearean tragedy that heavily exemplifies Oriental elements through a narration of Mark Antony’s interactions with Cleopatra, the pharaoh of Egypt. Out of all the Shakespearean plays that took place in the

Middle East, *Antony and Cleopatra* particularly emphasizes on the distinction between Western and Eastern cultures and their inhabitants, which makes it comparable to the mindset of Orientalists. The play will be examined through Said's lens, whereby its Oriental depictions, from settings to personal morals and characters, will be compared to Orientalist constructs, including the notion of othering. Additionally, the play will be compared to Shakespeare's other plays – if similarities between them do arise – in order to truly judge if the depictions in *Antony and Cleopatra* are Orientalist or if they are simply recurring Shakespearean tropes. Since this is a precolonial play, whereby it does not exactly fit Said's definition of Orientalism, the extent to which it pertains to it will be analyzed and evaluated.

II. Oriental Portrayals in Antony and Cleopatra

Through interactions between characters in the tragedy of *Antony and Cleopatra*, the audience is engrossed in an exchange of two distinct cultures: the Egyptian Empire as the East, and the Roman Empire as the West. In the play, Egypt is portrayed as a land of pleasure, wealth, and material opulence. It is a place of luxurious feasts, parties, and drinks, where eight wild bears are served as breakfast for twelve people (II.ii.188-89). From the first Act, the audience observes how the characteristics of the East appeal to the Romans in the play, who find themselves indulged in the goods and riches of Egypt. In a moment of self-confrontation, Antony murmurs that he is uncontrollably drawn to the lavishness of the Empire, proclaiming, “these strong Egyptian fetters I must break/ Or lose myself in dotage” (I.ii.18-19). Similarly, after enjoying an extravagant meal with Antony, Domitius Enobarbus, in an attempt to convince Antony to stay in Egypt, exclaims “If they suffer our/ departure, death’s the word” (I.ii.137-38), a reference to all the “lovers” whose company they enjoyed in the Empire. It is apparent that from the beginning of the play, Egypt is minimized to a “theatrical stage affixed to Europe” (Said 71) — a mystical, opulent place whose wealth and luxury not only exists to be preyed upon by the eager eyes of the Romans, but also to be basked in and savoured by them. This is akin to the colonial attitudes expressed by Said in *Orientalism*, whereby European colonizers imagine the East as a novel, exotic place for them to rightfully exploit.

This image is further intensified by Egypt’s representation as a feminized empire, as if it is an open virgin land awaiting the infiltration of a masculine power, which the Romans conveniently happen to embody. From their female ruler to their female court attendants and eunuchs, the presence of womanhood is strong in Egypt. Yet again, the Romans find themselves

drawn to the Empire; Enobarbus, upon seeing Cleopatra for the first time, is captivated by the scene of her in a boat sailing with mermaids across the Nile:

ENOBARBUS

Her gentlewomen, like the Nereides,
 So many mermaids, tended her i' th' eyes,
 And made their bends adornings. At the helm
 A seeming mermaid steers. The silken tackle
 Swell with the touches of those flower-soft hands
 That yarely frame the office. From the barge
 A strange invisible perfume hits the sense
 Of the adjacent wharfs. (I.i.215-221)

This observation adds a component of magic and surrealism to Egypt's portrayal, especially by employing the image of mermaids as symbols of alluring movements, enchanting scents, and sexual appeal, and this further adheres to the concept of Orientalism. Shakespeare's theatrical depiction of a faraway, supernatural sphere perfumed with the fragrance of feminine, mythical creatures is what Said would classify as Orientalism had it been released in a postcolonial publication. Said says, "the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said 1-2) — which is how Shakespeare depicts Egypt in order to please the Roman onlookers in the play, and the European audiences watching it. Moreover, Orientalists use inaccurate representations, based on European fanatical knowledge of the East, for their own purposes, which includes the production of "elaborate theories, epics, [and] novels" (Said 20). In Shakespeare's case, his purpose is to exaggerate the setting in his play by depicting Egypt as the feminine "other". By doing so, he creates the need for male dominance in Egypt, or more specifically, a Roman ploughman's masculine hands – a reference to Marcus Agrippa who says "he [Julius Caesar] plough'd her [Cleopatra], and she cropp'd" (II.ii.237). This portrayal of Egypt as a dreamland of virginal, feminine presence that Romans believe should be entered,

“plough’d,” and “cropp’d” is characteristic of sexist Orientalist colonial attitudes, through which they envisioned the East as a mysterious place for them to discover and take pleasure in conquering – this of course extended to “conquering” the women as well. This is why Antony confesses “I the East my pleasure lies” (II.iii.40). By emphasizing the prevalence of the feminine aesthetic in Egypt, the Romans, in contrast, appear more masculine:

CAESAR

You may see, Lepidus, and henceforth know,
 It is not Caesar’s natural vice to hate
 Our great competitor. From Alexandria
 This is the news: 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.1-7)

Just by attending parties, drinking, fishing, and engaging with the lavish Alexandrian lifestyle, Antony is automatically effeminized by Octavius Caesar, who implies he is only masculine when he embodies the attributes he obtained growing up in Rome. Thus, Caesar emphasizes the femininity of the Egyptian “other” by contrasting it with the more masculine Rome. He also scoffs at the former, furtively echoing European colonizers and their idea of othering – a mindset they used to justify why they believed they were deserving of sovereignty. Said clarifies that “the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures” (Said 24) is what bred the concept of Orientalism, and in the same way that Shakespeare depicts Rome as masculine through feminizing Egypt, his comparisons are Orientalist.

The personal morals and values fostered in Egypt and Rome are revealed in the play. Similar to the way European colonizers used the concept of othering, Shakespeare intends to

showcase a negative portrayal of the “other” to prove that Roman ideals are superior to those of Egyptians:

CAESAR

Let's grant, it is not
 Amiss to tumble on the bed of Ptolemy,
 To give a kingdom for a mirth, to sit
 And keep the turn of tippling with a slave,
 To reel the streets at noon, and stand the buffet
 With knaves that smell of sweat. Say this becomes him—
 As his composure must be rare indeed
 Whom these things cannot blemish—yet must Antony
 No way excuse his foils when we do bear
 So great weight in his lightness. If he filled
 His vacancy with his voluptuousness,
 Full surfeits and the dryness of his bones
 Call on him for 't. But to confound such time
 That drums him from his sport and speaks as loud
 As his own state and ours, 'tis to be chid
 As we rate boys who, being mature in knowledge,
 Pawn their experience to their present pleasure
 And so rebel to judgment. (I.iv.16-33)

Throughout the play, Antony is continuously criticized by many Romans for abandoning his noble, Roman qualities and replacing them with those of the senseless Egyptians. One of the three rulers of Rome, Caesar specifically chastises him for indulging in the pleasures of Egypt while neglecting his duties to the state. He reaffirms the West's sensibility over the East's foolishness, and how virtuous it is for Romans to prioritize duty and reason over pleasure and emotion – unlike the passionate Egyptians. This direct contrast between Rome and Egypt is, once again, akin to Said's concept of othering, through which Shakespeare uses it to not only showcase the moral flaws of living a glamorous Egyptian lifestyle, but also to elevate the political image of Romans and their values. The audience concludes that the Romans in the play are reasonable, intelligent, and pragmatic, whereas the Egyptians are careless, materialistic, and irresponsible — mimicking the exact pattern of thinking that European colonizers had, which

Said criticized centuries later. Additionally, adopting Oriental attributes in the play is not only deemed disgraceful, but also threatening to oneself, as many Romans express concern towards the vulnerable, neglectful Antony whose “heart,/ Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst/ The buckles on his breast, [now] reneges all temper” (I.i.6-8). This has not only weakened his image in Rome, but also his relationship with Caesar:

ANTONY

If you'll patch a quarrel,
As matter whole you have to make it with,
It must not be with this.

CAESAR

You praise yourself
By laying defects of judgment to me, but
You patched up your excuses. (II.ii.57-61)

With Rome under the threat of Pompey's advancing army, audiences understand how inconvenient and untimely it is that Antony's negligence, entirely a result of him engaging with the Egyptian lifestyle, has caused a strain on his and Caesar's relationship. Although Antony attempts to mend their deteriorated bond by marrying Caesar's sister, Octavia, his attraction to Cleopatra and the Orient is still the root of emerging conflicts between them – causing them to eventually battle each other. Thus the Orient, besides appearing exoticized, is also seen as a threat to the Romans, pertaining to the stereotypical “fear of the other” that led Orientalists to depict distorted images of the Middle East. This phenomenon is explained by Said when he says “the Orient at large, therefore, vacillates between the West's contempt for what is familiar and its shivers of delight in – or fear of – novelty” (Said 68). Furthermore, Caesar's character in particular reaffirms the nobility of Romans:

CAESAR

Let his shames quickly
Drive him to Rome. 'Tis time we twain

Did show ourselves i' th' field, and to that end
 Assemble we immediate council. Pompey
 Thrives in our idleness. (I.iv.73-77)

As a foil to Antony, Caesar is not only stoic and reasonable – which appear to be exclusively Roman attributes in the play – but he also has a strong military presence. Since he is the true symbol of the West, while Antony is swayed by the pleasures of the Orient, this intensifies Shakespeare's use of othering. In fact, it is made very clear that Antony is not a true Roman and that men should not admire him, as Caesar says he is “a man who is th' abstract of all faults/ That all men follow” (I.iv.10-11). Thus, the element of Orientalism is very prominent in the way that “true” Roman attributes are depicted, as they are honorable traits that cannot be weakened by the pleasures and opulence of the Orient.

Moreover, the contrast between Egypt and Rome extends beyond personal values, as their physical characteristics are portrayed differently. Through depicting Egypt as a land of luxury, pleasure, and entertainment, Shakespeare most notably uses the notion of othering to characterize Rome as a place of austerity, discipline, and duty. Throughout the play, images of Egypt are as abundant as the visual depictions of the Roman Empire. However, illustrations of Rome are far less sensual, as they are mainly limited to displays of power and arms:

ANTONY
 Set we our squadrons on yond side o' th' hill,
 In eye of Caesar's battle, from which place
 We may the number of the ships behold
 And so proceed accordingly. (III.ix.1-4)

The Roman Empire appears to be a place of political and intellectual landscapes, which, in comparison to the sensual portrayal of Egypt, evokes a sense of heroism and nobility. This division is akin to Said's criticism of European colonizers whom he accused of dividing the East

and West. Moreover, the implication of Rome being superior to Egypt is re-established by the end of the play; while the Romans appear to be victorious, both Antony and Cleopatra, who are inextricably tied to Egypt, fall to their demise. It may be argued that their death is not Orientalist and instead just a Shakespearean trope, due to its parallels with the lovers in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. That is because, similar to Antony, Romeo commits suicide after being falsely told that Juliet had died and who, just like Cleopatra, ends up following her lover's same destiny. Yet, it is arguably Orientalist because while Romeo and Juliet belong to each side of the two feuding families in the play, Antony and Cleopatra are strictly associated with the East, so their demise ultimately elevates the already-infallible image of the West.

The most prominent Orientalist stereotype in the play is the depiction of Cleopatra, since she is mainly employed as a symbol of Egyptian culture rooted in femininity and sexuality. Historically, Cleopatra was a pharaoh of Ancient Egypt with an elevated political status equal to that of Octavius Caesar. Yet she is not praised in her introduction in the play, but rather degraded:

PHILO

Nay, but this dotage of our general's
 O'erflows the measure. Those his goodly eyes,
 That o'er the files and musters of the war
 Have glowed like plated Mars, now bend, now turn
 The office and devotion of their view
 Upon a tawny front. 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.1-10)

Cleopatra is immediately othered; described as exotic and dark, she is blamed for being a seductress who has enchanted Antony, the wise and heroic Roman. As a result, her virtuousness and morality are questioned throughout the play, as she is seen as a "ribaudred nag of Egypt"

(III.x.10). Cleopatra pertains to the Orientalist stereotype of an exotic, alluring female, inviting Romans – such as the likes of Julius Caesar and Antony – to sexually and romantically engage with her. She is praised by modern readers for her sexual liberation, yet it is worth noting that in the sixteenth century, and in a play with an all-male cast that heavily emphasizes Roman morals, she is deemed a “strumpet” (I.i.14). In fact, Shakespeare uses this word several times in his other plays, one of which is *Hamlet*, where Hamlet uses the word to insult his mother, Queen Gertrude, for marrying his father’s brother which he deems incestuous and sexually-weak (II.ii.235). In *Titus Andronicus*, the word is used by Titu to humiliate Tamora, the Queen of the Goths, who is detested for sexually engaging with another man whilst still married to her husband (V.ii.189). Thus, it is evident that Cleopatra’s sexual freedom was not celebrated in the sixteenth century, and she is viewed as nothing but a weak female waiting to be penetrated by the Romans. This parallels the highly sexualized Orientalist portrayals of the East, in which Europeans thought they had “a certain freedom of intercourse” over (Said 159). Moreover, Cleopatra is also othered, as she serves as a foil to the “triumphant lady” (II.ii.193) and rival for Antony’s love, Octavia:

MAECENAS

If beauty, wisdom, modesty, can settle
 The heart of Antony, Octavia is
 A blessed lottery to him. (II.iii.250-252)

Beauty, wisdom, and modesty are attributes exclusive to Roman women, which once again otherizes Cleopatra and re-emphasizes her promiscuity. Furthermore, throughout the entire play, Cleopatra appears to be an unsuited leader with her hasty decisions, emotional outbursts, and violent overreactions. Yet Octavia is the exact opposite; level-headed, selfless and devoted, she sets the ideal that every women should strive for – once again mimicking colonial attitudes about the civilized West and primitive East. One may argue that Shakespeare portrays Cleopatra positively, as she is a powerful female figure who controls men and gives them orders. However,

this depiction did not elevate her image in Shakespeare's England, where the expectation for females was to be submissive to patriarchal authorities. Octavia once again appears to be a foil to Cleopatra, as the audience would undoubtedly favor the dignified women over the unchaste, bossy enchantress. Considering that Cleopatra and Octavia are the only two major female roles in the play, and each are representative of their respective regions, Cleopatra – although a notable figure in history – is relegated by Shakespeare's pages to a victim of Orientalist depictions and othering by the West.

III. Conclusion

In conclusion, Middle Eastern portrayals in *Antony and Cleopatra* adhere to the fundamentals of Orientalism despite the fact it is a postcolonial construct. In order to advance the plot, Shakespeare employs Anthony's dilemma of choosing between the West – where his duties lie – and the East – where his lover and pleasures reside – as the root of the conflicts in the play. Thus, in order for Antony to feel torn, it is crucial that the two areas have distinct differences. As a result, while Shakespeare preserves the Romans' reputation of being wise and courageous, it inevitably leads to an exaggerated image of East, hence why it is similar to many Orientalist depictions that followed years after colonization.

Additionally, the foils and contrasting elements in the play are very akin to the European colonizers' notion of othering. By repeatedly elevating the Roman's noble, masculine, and honorable reputation through a comparison to the immoral, feminine, and careless lifestyle of Egypt, the Orient has been depicted as the weaker "other," which corresponds favorably with colonial justifications and attitudes. Furthermore, the distinct foils in the play, such as Caesar and Octavia in the West, and Antony and Cleopatra in the East, are each representative of their homelands and thus become complete embodiments of the values of their nations – which, unfavorable for Cleopatra, illustrate her as the immoral, promiscuous, exotic "other", thus creating a negative portrayal of the East in general to the European audience.

However, although embodying some elements of Orientalism, it is also important to recognize that *Antony and Cleopatra* does not fully comply with the concept. While Orientalists make a conscious effort to depict the West as the saviors of the uncivilized East, it is not the case with Shakespeare, or any playwrights in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. Their inaccurate

portrayals of the Orient are more innocuous and unintentional, and are instead the result of their ignorance of and inaccessibility to the East. Thus, although Shakespeare may not have understood the East and how to portray its true image, it is not necessarily because he thought the West was more superior. He is guilty, however, of purposely creating a dichotomy between the East and West that unanimously favored the traits of the latter, while stereotyping the traits of the former, to pander to his audience's fascination with a supposedly barbaric, exotic, and mystical civilization.

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