

How does Shakespeare present the character of Cleopatra in the first act of the play?

Shakespeare uses a well-known historical figure, Cleopatra, as a lead character in this play, and while this is not unusual for this playwright to do, an extra level of complexity is added; the audience must reconsider their preconceptions of Cleopatra, and in doing so, may reconsider also the reputations of their contemporary monarchs.

Cleopatra's actions and opinions alienated the Elizabethan audience, and they initially rejected the play due to its disquieting yet realistic complexity, but with time and consideration it became one of the most popular plays of the era.

Cleopatra is in many ways the protagonist of the play, with an overwhelming stage presence and allocation of dialogue ever in her favour.

Opening with a conversation regarding Cleopatra's morals and her ability to influence a great leader, Shakespeare is both allowing Cleopatra to take centerstage and admitting her constant presence, but simultaneously insulting and degrading her, with two soldiers appearing fit/worthy to judge her.

This is not in keeping with the Great Chain of Being, and instantly lets the audience know that the play shall continue in this fashion, challenging and, in time, showing the virtues of their belief system.

The Elizabethan audience, with their already unsteady leaders, feel jolted by this remove from their ideals; if a monarch's name is subjected to criticism from even lowly subjects, can they truly be the strong leader their country requires?

In discussing private matters with her servants, and allowing her opinions to influence her, Cleopatra is obviously oblivious of the Great Chain of Being, most likely to her detriment. A remove from the Great Chain of Being is again shown later, when Cleopatra strikes a messenger, supposedly reducing herself to his status. This is in a moment of hysteria on Cleopatra's part, once again demonstrating she does not have the levelheadedness required of a lone monarch.

She does, however, prove to have a camouflaged intelligence, quietly forming strong political allegiances with Rome through her numerous relations with important Roman political figures, and manipulating Antony easily.

Shakespeare makes use of caesura in scene 3 as Cleopatra cuts off Antony at every opportunity, disempowering him further. Her boundless cunning is further demonstrated in her numerous melodramatic faked deaths, aimed simply at acquiring her that which she desires. She is nonetheless shown in a more forgiving light when she displays her insecurities, "*I am all forgotten.*" While this is a typically self-absorbed comment, we are reminded that she is not without self-doubt.

Shakespeare repeatedly shows Cleopatra's obsession with the self; she is concerned only with her own happiness and success, and in doing this Shakespeare asks the Elizabethan audience to consider their good fortune in being ruled by a monarch whose thoughts lie only with her country, and never with herself.

Her other obsession is of course with Antony, as she demonstrates in her corymbantic dialogue with her servants when she demands "*Stands he, sits he?*"

She perceives Antony as enormously powerful, seeing him no longer as a triumvir, but a "*demi-atlas*", one of the two important figures to Rome, alongside Caesar.

We are given a clear view into Cleopatra's psyche, as she articulates her thoughts and opinions freely, with little thought of the consequences of her outbursts.