

AA306: Shakespeare : text and performance
AA306/VCR7: Critical interventions

Producer: Jenny Bardwell

Contributor(s) in the clip:

Ania Loomba

John Drakakis

Clip transcript: AA306 Cleopatra

Ania Loomba:

I think for a feminist it is important to see how Shakespeare's play allows us to look at gender relations in the 16th century and to look at gender relations in our own time, and it allows us to be feminist in a very, very, I think productive way. It's a play that allows us to critique what relationships between men and women are like or should be like.

John Drakakis:

The traditional view of Cleopatra is that she is a femme fatale. Every middle aged male academic's dream of what a woman should be. You know age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety. Now if we think of that particular play in terms of the opposition between Rome and Egypt, then immediately there is a political tension in the play. If we think of Cleopatra as black, then black and white, we have a racial tension in the play; we've got a gender tension in the play. We have a political tension between Rome and Egypt, and of course this is cast in the framework of a tragedy.

Ania Loomba:

A feminist perspective for me in Anthony and Cleopatra actually involved looking at Cleopatra as constructed as a prototype of the Orient, this lascivious wanton unruly woman, but then the stereotype why was Shakespeare constructing it or why did it have any meaning for people in Shakespeare's time, and it had meaning not simply because people were going to the East because there was colonial travel, because people had certain ideas about women overseas or women and men overseas but also because there was Elizabeth ruling on the throne, and she was she was a powerful queen, and there was a whole sort of discourse about unruly women, and a very very lively and intense debate about what a woman in power should do or could do or whether a woman should be in power at all.

John Drakakis:

If we look at Egypt carefully we find that Egypt is gendered. Rome is male, Egypt is female. The female undermines the male. I mean this is why we like to keep women in their place of course because they're very dangerous to a patriarchal society.

Ania Loomba:

One of the things I always like to point out to my students is that Cleopatra refuses to call her Anthony 'husband' until after he is dead. Then he does not threaten her any more now. Throughout the play she's sort of resisting becoming Anthony's wife, resisting being a Roman matron, you know, establishing an alternative style of sexual politics an alternative style of being, and as soon as he's dead she says you know whatever's good, what's brave, what's noble let's do it in the high Roman fashion and husband I come and, of course this is Cleopatra at her supreme actress-like best.

John Drakakis:

What Cleopatra does she gets hold of a Roman, and she, well I was going to say castrates them but not quite that. Yes, she made proud Caesar lay his sword to bed, he ploughed her, and she cropped. And in fact of course she then produces Caesar's bastard son. Now if you think of a patriarchal society in which continuity is dependent upon the legitimacy of offspring, you can begin to see what kind of threat Cleopatra poses. Where Rome is rather anally retentive, Egypt of course is anarchic and carnivalesque. And this is the basis of an interesting conflict I think, between two radically opposed ways of looking at the world. Now that in itself of course produces a politics. Cleopatra's whimsicality, her strategies in dealing with Rome, are part of a politics which have to do with first of all experiencing colonisation, and then finding a way of surviving in the face of it.