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"Master-Mistress of My Passion": Egg Theory and the Trans-Eunuch Continuum from Shakespearean Oeuvre to South Asian *Hijra* Culture

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Abstract

The paper examines the ideological continuity between Shakespearean eunuch imaginaries and British colonial constructions of the South Asian *Hijra*. Although *Antony and Cleopatra* never stages a eunuch explicitly, Egypt is mediated through a discourse of excess, sensuality, and courtly intimacy that depends on the implied presence of eunuchs as markers of feminization and political decadence. The first part of the paper traces Shakespeare's multiple eunuch figures through Grace Lavery's 'Egg Theory' to show how the playwright encodes trans-coded and feminized bodies as unstable sites of desire, and affective excess. The second part undertakes a close reading of *Antony and Cleopatra* to analyse how both Egyptian and South Asian eunuch imaginaries circulate within the play through Orientalist difference. The study asks: How does the shift from the eunuch's discursive absence in early modern Egypt to the Hijra's hypervisibility in colonial India reveal changing imperial strategies for regulating gender-variant bodies?

Keywords: egg theory, eunuch, *Hijra*, Shakespeare, trans history

Introduction

Although Christian thinkers often praised asceticism, they explicitly prohibited self-castration and opposed its practice. Thus, at times contradictory, cultural currents operated simultaneously in shaping sexuality during the Greco-Roman period. On one side were the learned pagan elites who, as Foucault notes, advocated moderation and restraint in sexual life for reasons of bodily health, condemning eunuchs for what they perceived as excessive desire. On another side were the Christians who rejected sexual activity and procreation altogether, but who

nevertheless repudiated the eunuch as a model of chastity. Alongside these forces existed the cult of Cybele, which elevated a limited group of eunuchs to priestly status, and, beyond all of this, the broader populace who continued to seek both pleasure and procreation, often regarding eunuchs as spectacles of novelty and amusement, as in the famous case of Favorinus.

If this dissonance seems ancient, history proves otherwise. Across history and geography, the figure of the Eunuch has elicited an intensity of cultural, political, and erotic anxiety disproportionate to their demographic presence. What unites radically different world-systems, from the Greco-Roman world to colonial and postcolonial South Asia, is the recurring impulse to regulate, discipline, and symbolically contain bodies that resist the binaries of gender and sexuality. If the Greco-Roman archive staged the eunuch as an object of fascination, sacred authority, abjection, and sexual suspicion simultaneously, contemporary India demonstrates an uncannily similar structure of ambivalence embedded in the law itself. In 2011, the Karnataka Police Act introduced "Section 36A Power to Regulate Eunuchs", authorising police to register persons "reasonably suspected of kidnapping, castration and 'unnatural offences'" and to restrict them from activities labelled "undesirable". Crucially, Section 36A "has its roots in the colonial-era Criminal Tribes Act" and is directly derived from "the Hyderabad Eunuch Act of 1919", revealing how colonial regulatory templates continue to structure postcolonial governance (Hinchy 255). And yet, this legal continuation unfolds alongside a seemingly contradictory discourse in which Hijras are framed as "citizens entitled to rights, legal recognition of their gender identity and welfare measures" while simultaneously remaining positioned as "a criminal population". As Hinchy cautions, "we cannot draw a straight line between the colonial and the postcolonial in explaining recent government programmes of policing, categorisation and welfare"; rather, the echoes of earlier regimes persist—"some strong, others faint or muted" (Hinchy 255).

Section I

The Subject That Cannot Hatch: Egg Theory and the Eunuch's Suspended Becoming in Shakespeare's Works

To (re)read "Sonnet 20" through the historical and cultural figure of the eunuch is to recognise that Shakespeare is theorising not gender ambiguity but the structural production of dispossessed desirability. The beloved is not androgynous in a fluid way; he is loved precisely because he cannot sexually reciprocate. The line

"master mistress of my passion"(Shakespeare 75) stages this paradox of sovereignty without sexual agency: master installs the beloved as the ruler of emotion, while mistress invokes a feminised position emptied of possession. Nature, the poem suggests, has "prick[ed] thee out for women's pleasure" (Shakespeare 75), redirecting the beloved's erotic value away from the speaker and toward a wider economy of desire. In this configuration, the young man's beauty is not for himself, nor for the speaker, but for others — women become the intended beneficiaries of his "use." Confronted with this displacement, the speaker reconfigures possession: if he cannot claim the beloved's body, he can at least claim affection. Thus he asserts, "mine be thy love" (Shakespeare 75), staking an emotional entitlement while resigning the physical dimension of intimacy to those for whom Nature has supposedly fashioned him — "and thy love's use their treasure" (Shakespeare 75). The beloved becomes a circuit where desire flows, while his own access to jouissance is confiscated.

Aligning with Lacanian psychoanalysis, where castration is not literal but structural, Dr. Mandal writes, "The castration of the subject is directly related to the renunciation of jouissance." (Mandal 87). The eunuch figure is thus not biologically deficient but dispossessed of the right to pleasure. Lacan questions Freud's insistence that feminisation must imply latent homosexuality: "First, is the connection between latent homosexuality and feminisation qua the fantasy of 'fertilising impregnation' self-evident and absolute? … Second, 'Freud's theory', Lacan states, 'is that the only way for Schreber to avoid what results from the fear of castration is Entmannung, unmanning, or simply emasculation, transformation into a woman" (Mandal 138). The beloved of "Sonnet 20" occupies precisely this position: safety from castration purchased by already being symbolically castrated. He is central because he is barred. Grace Lavery's articulation of 'Egg Theory' foregrounds an interval of subjectivity in which one cannot yet occupy the position of the object one desires to become. It is a theory of a life held in suspension — of a person who senses a becoming but is not yet socially or psychically allowed to actualize it. As Lavery describes, the problem concerns how to imagine "alternatives "before" is not simply chronological; it is a structural force that traps the subject in a love that cannot arrive. Lavery calls this suspended attachment the "unlovely shadow of an unchosen object" (Lavery 384), and captures with uncanny precision the erotic position of Shakespeare's eunuch figures: loved for what they cannot yet be, and because they cannot be it. Lavery diagnoses the larger ideological stakes when she writes that egg theory must be defended "without exposing the dialectical negative of that contradictory image"

(Lavery 385) — the fascination depends on not allowing the egg to hatch, not allowing desire to resolve. This blocked transformation becomes political: Lavery describes how "'gender critical' ministers" (Lavery 385) work to enforce this suspended condition, producing "desire with no object" (Lavery 385) as a socially managed libido. Under patriarchy, the egg condition is retroactive rather than developmental: "cast back in time from a hatched present, rather than simply propaganda: under the conditions of patriarchy, to be a woman is to desire not to be, so the transsexual desire oscillates around a gravitational center that can never be inhabited until the abolition of patriarchy in general." (Lavery 385–86). Sonnet 20's beloved embodies this oscillating gravitational centre — the figure everyone wants, but who is structurally prevented from becoming what he means. The violence of this structure is literalised in *Titus Andronicus*. Lavinia does not suffer only rape and mutilation; she is transformed into the perfect eunuchised subject , a body full of meaning, yet emptied of agency. Marcus's lament turns Lavinia's suffering into spectacle: her "lily hands" that "tremble like aspen leaves upon a lute" (Shakespeare 2.4.44–45) aestheticise the violence rather than confront it. Later, when he notes she "hath no tongue to call, nor hands to wash; / And so let's leave her to her silent walks" (Shakespeare 2.4.7–8), Lavinia is fixed as a symbol — mute, pure, and legible to others, but denied erotic, expressive, or subjective agency. Her function is to be desired, pitied, interpreted as 'never to desire'.

The comedic register of *Twelfth Night* retains this logic under the sign of pleasure. Orsino, trapped within a fear of erotic impotence, deputises Cesario to seduce Olivia in his stead. Cesario becomes Orsino's sexual prosthesis — the eunuch-like intermediary who performs the labour of desire without claiming erotic ownership. Orsino's erotic fixation crystallises in the line "Thy small pipe is as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound, and all is semblative a woman's part" (Shakespeare 1.5.31–33), collapsing sex, voice, and fetish. Cesario is beloved because he does not belong to his own desire. Malvolio's figurative biology completes the diagnosis: neither boy nor man, always in 'standing water' — the egg that must not hatch. The egg theory clarifies why this figure is so culturally magnetic: for "the femininity of the difficult woman" that can always be based on a "compensatory pleasure to the subject that fails to transform itself into the object of its own desire"(Lavery 391). The beloved of Sonnet 20, Lavinia, and Cesario all generate compensatory pleasure for others because they cannot transform themselves into the objects of their own

desire. The eunuch ,literal, symbolic, or theatrical , is the egg that culture cannot allow to hatch.

Section II

Beyond the Binary: Transnational Link between the South Asian *Hijra* and the Egyptian Eunuch

Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* constructs its erotic–political world through bodies that dismantle stable categories of gender and sexuality, and no figure renders this more efficiently than Mardian. During pre-modern time, eunuchs were imagined as paradoxical beings: "guarding of the harem as a bed-guard" (Stevenson 495), legally categorised as "sterile men" (Stevenson 496), and meticulously divided under inheritance law into "spadones, thlibiae, thladiae and castrati," where "thlibiae means pressed, thladiae means crushed and castrati means whose gonads are surgically detached from the body" (Stevenson 497), the law distinguishing between "the moderately emasculated and those surgically emasculated" (Stevenson 498). Castration did not eliminate sexuality; classical belief asserted that "a eunuch, if castrated before puberty, would lose fertility but retain sexual desire and the capability to gain erection. Stevenson notes that eunuchs were not imagined as incapable of arousal or genital pleasure; on the contrary, they were frequently represented as men whose sexual appetites were intensified to an excessive degree (Stevenson 499). Because they could desire without reproducing, they were seen as dangerously seductive — "these sterile men represented the married woman's best control, therefore eunuchs must have been enjoyed sex with married women" (Stevenson 500).

Yet the same culture repudiated them: "eunuchs were effeminate" (Stevenson 502) and, as Philosopher Diocles said of Bagoas, "is neither a woman nor a man, being a eunuch, rather synthesised, mixed, monstrous, outside of human nature" (Stevenson 502). Paradoxically, they were also idealised as harmless: "eunuchs are good teachers since they cannot corrupt the students" (Stevenson 502) and could even "consummate the marriage" symbolically (Stevenson 503). They were both licentious and virtuous "a eunuch was an ardent lover and yet physically incapable of adultery" (Stevenson 504) and simultaneously comic and dangerous "embraced as a great entertainer" while empires were forced to "flatter the most infamous and degraded members of the imperial court" (Stevenson 505).Society relegated them to the margins: "Eunuchs were stuck at the bottom as not even sharing in humanity" because

"asexual men were perceived as threatening or repulsive to the existing values" (Stevenson 508). Sexual meaning, for the eunuch, became constructed rather than natural: "sexuality from vocations of 'nature' and 'the use' that frame versatile concept of 'construction' of 'sexuality'" (Stevenson 509). They embodied fusion of maleness and femaleness as they "perceived androgyny of eunuchs" (Stevenson 509).

This ambivalent myth was trans-imperial. In East Asia, "eunuchs eroded the foundations of dynasties" (Sun and Park 1), often "captured enemies to be castrated and forced into service as eunuchs in the conquering states' palaces" (Sun and Park 2), their "unique position in the Court" enabling them to advance "creative ideas" (Sun and Park 5). The South Asian hijra tradition repeats the same contradictions: hijras performed at "auspicious occasions" and their constructed gender identity as a woman rested on "sexual impotence due to an ascribed physical condition of intersexuality" (Nanda xx), their performances a "sexually suggestive parody of feminine behaviour" and a "ritual of reversal" (Nanda 5). Their legitimacy depends on modification where "emasculation distinguishes real *hijras* from the fakes" (Nanda 11). Even linguistically, "English translation of *hijra*… is either 'eunuch' or 'hermaphrodite'" and "Born *hijras* (hermaphrodites) make *hijra* (eunuchs)" (Nanda 13). Their identity is hybrid: "Eunuchs are man minus maleness, in their outward appearance man plus woman" (Nanda 17).

Shakespeare positions Mardian precisely where desire intersects with sovereign power. Cleopatra does not call him in the manner one calls a domestic attendant; she summons him as a body already overloaded with erotic meaning. Her vocative — "Thou, eunuch Mardian!"(Shakespeare 1.5.8)does not simply identify him but inscribes him within the paradox of castration: a subject legally stripped of sexuality yet continuously read through an eroticized fantasy of excess. When she questions further if she has "affections", she replies "Indeed"(Shakespeare 1.5.13)the questioning works less as inquiry and more as enforcement. Cleopatra obliges Mardian to articulate the impossible logic that structures his existence. His response — that he is filled with intense desire but able to enact nothing beyond what is "honest" crystallizes the nightmare that ancient sexual regimes projected onto the eunuch: a body driven by longing yet severed from the reproductive order that legitimates heterosexual desire. The horror is not impotence; it is desire detached from utility.

Charmian's "Best play with Mardian" (Shakespeare 2.5.3) and Cleopatra's assertion that "as well a woman with an eunuch played as with a woman" (Shakespeare 1.5.5-6) the comedy functions only because the erotic threat is real and simultaneously policed. Mardian is admitted into Cleopatra's erotic perimeter precisely because he cannot impregnate, yet his presence multiplies and sustains the erotic energy that Cleopatra mobilises as sovereign. His sexlessness is not lack, but surplus desire stripped of genealogy, desire that circulates without producing heirs. Caesar's feminisation of Antony and Antony's willingness to disown "the courage of a woman" unravel the gender binary as a political fiction rather than a natural order. Cleopatra's final renunciation — "I have nothing of women in me… I am marble-constant" (Shakespeare 5.2.238-39) stages gender as performative armour rather than essence. In this world, sexuality is legible only within structures of power: the clown's misogynistic maxim and Cleopatra's self-mythologising "salad days" (Shakespeare 1.5.78) testify that erotic identity is always already mediated by ideology rather than biology. Mardian becomes indispensable at the threshold of death, where Cleopatra demands a bearer of erotic meaning without erotic competition.The eunuch becomes the alibi for Cleopatra's erotic totality: the last conduit of her power, yet structurally barred from appropriation.

Conclusion

The cultural and dramatic afterlife of the eunuch reveals not only marginal curiosity but a structuring contradiction at the heart of early modern fantasies of gender, sexuality, and power. Historically, eunuchs bore an intimate proximity to sovereign and erotic authority, being responsible for "supervising the women in the harem, mediating between the sultan and his family members, guarding access to the interiors of the palace and to the sultan's private chamber" (Arvas 118). Their bodies occupied thresholds that defied categorisation—inside and outside, potent and impotent, indispensable yet permanently unacknowledged. In Shakespeare's world this figure does not appear accidentally; rather, "Shakespeare's ubiquitous deployment of the eunuch is typical: he often mentions eunuchs alongside other oriental curiosities and in contexts that stress gender inversion/ambiguity and racial 'otherness'" (Arvas 127). If the stage repeatedly invoked the eunuch alongside images of exoticised alterity, does this not indicate that the stability of English masculinity and heterosexuality required the very body it claimed to exclude? Eunuchs, whose bodies defied stable gender categorization, were marked as culturally foreign and allowed access to spaces reserved for both men and women. They played

a double role: they unsettled prevailing social boundaries while also helping to sustain what Valerie Traub terms the emerging fantasy of a 'global body'—a model of humanity that sorts people by racial and ethnic difference but ultimately upholds normative expectations of gender and erotic conduct. To what extent, then, does the eunuch ironically make normative gender legible by representing the impossibility of belonging to it? And if desire is organised around futurity and reproduction, what alternative model of desire emerges from a body structurally barred from reproductive destiny? The challenge, then, is to reconcile these conflicting ideological pressures in order to form a coherent understanding of Greco-Roman sexuality—one capable of accounting for the paradoxical and unsettling figure of the eunuch within this cultural landscape.

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