
Romance and Racial Politics intertwined in Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra

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Abstract:

Recent studies on Shakespeare have examined the early modern world from the perspective of race, and most scholars today agree on its (race) presence since the Renaissance period. Apart from what the New Historicists have to say about the absence of racial undercurrents flowing in 16th-century Europe, studies on race show its strong presence as reflected by the existing literature from that period. The influx of the 'foreign' population in the European land due to growing trade and the practice of slavery resulted in terming the non-Europeans as the 'other'. The scope of this paper is limited to the discussion of race in Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra, and I will be using this play to portray how race and gender are intertwined together for the political and cultural capture of the Egyptian 'other' – Queen Cleopatra by the Roman forces. Moreover, this parallels the English men's desire and detest for the African 'other'. This paper will use textual evidence from the play to discuss how Queen Cleopatra, made analogous to the land of Egypt, is portrayed sensually to justify the feminine traits of the land, thus a wandering body that needs to be brought under control. This contrasts a land that

had already experienced a female ruler's (Queen Elizabeth I) reign.

Keywords: Race, Gender, Imperialism, Foreign, Sexuality.

The main thrust of the action in Antony and Cleopatra is not just the romance or a study of how politics and conflict affect interpersonal relationships. Instead, the drama is focused on more significant political and moral themes surrounding Antony's downfall as a general and politician i.e., 'the triple pillar of the world', Octavius's ultimate victory, and the conclusion of the protracted war for global dominance, constituting the whole tragedy. The power struggle between Caesar and Antony in the political strife between Rome and Egypt is analogous to the discord in Antony between the competing claims of legitimate duty and those of spontaneous passions, which will be discussed further in the paper. As a motif, Cleopatra comes to be closely linked to the retention and

the prospect of eternity, where Shakespeare reimagines and turns more sympathetic towards her character than Plutarch is, combining elements of both contemporary household life and ancient tradition to create a figure of and for expenditure. The instance of Cleopatra shows that this particular retention is both dynamic and natural rather than a process toward permanence, necessitating the power of the "foreign" combined with the domestic to reconsider what it is to be persistent in the face of change. This paper aims to find the inherent 'agnos' created against a cross-cultural backdrop and investigate the notions of nationality and foreignness in the Early Modern World through the characters from the play.

The 'Otherness' of Egypt has been highlighted in current postcolonial studies of Antony and Cleopatra's representation of Egypt. While conceding the uncertainties of the posited Rome/Egypt dichotomy, analyses of otherness tend to see the play as cautionary against the exotic as excess. Gluttonous overindulgence, extravagant banquets, and feasting, as Enobarbus recounted, are all portrayed as characteristics of Egypt's exoticism. However, Shakespeare's overall aim is not just to create Egyptian exoticism; instead, he wants to remark on Roman and English consumption by couching the exotic Egyptian queen in English domestic society. This creates an unsettling tension between the domestic and the foreign/exotic within the image of

the other woman. The Romans envision their legacy being carried out in the legendary conquest of Egypt, Cleopatra symbolizing her country and absorbing its virtues. The play shows how Roman republicanism creates space for a culture obsessed with catastrophic consumption; meanwhile, denouncing Egypt as a place of overabundance and lavishness, the Romans themselves are the ones who consume or seek to consume. The play suggests the irony in the Roman facade of a moral, monumental coherency indicative of republican ideals of duty and ascetics.

All of the accouterments of the Oriental sexual ideal, such as the excess of perfumes and oils, in Enobarbus's account of Cleopatra, surround the potentially uncomfortable form of the African female 'body', which is often presented as a commodity where the boundaries between the racial and the gendered areas begin to blur. However, Shakespeare's depiction of Cleopatra demonstrates how the English sought to adopt some of her characteristics, including her place in history and her guarantee of consistency. It is challenging to see Antony this way, but Shakespeare's Cleopatra is a role model and an example of continued existence that resists or challenges Roman notions of indestructibility. As John Gillies has argued, "the Orientalism of Cleopatra's court—with its luxury, decadence, splendor, sensuality, appetite, effeminacy and eunuchs—seems a systematic inversion of the legendary Roman values

of temperance, manliness, courage, and pietas" (Gillies 118). The contrast between the two, as these critics typically recognize, fades upon closer scrutiny because, as Gillies (qt by Crane) once more puts it, Rome only indeed appears Roman "from the vantage point of Egypt" (Crane 1). Even Cleopatra is shown to use her sexuality as a weapon charged up against the 'manly Roman world'. This kind of agency seems to be absent from Roman women such as Octavia, who is also intelligent, but her presence is not that assertive. The confluence of Cleopatra and her nation implies the subtle fusion of her seductions as a woman and of the power over the territory she rules.

Romans in the play refer to their surroundings as the "world," and they essentially experience and comprehend them visually. Their "world" is mainly made of stiff, impenetrable, human-made elements, and its topography is bifurcated into towns and nations that are almost compulsively named and conquered. For example, the briefly Romanized Antony warns Octavia that "the world and my great office will sometimes / Divide me from your bosom" (Shakespeare 2.3.1-2). Egyptians, on the other hand, live on "earth," which they experience and comprehend with all of their senses and in which they feel themselves to be submerged. A defeated Antony begs Caesar to allow him to "breathe between the heavens and earth, / A private man in Athens," expressing how the "earth" is yielding, enveloping, generative, and

resistant to human division and mastery (3.12.14-15). Also, when Cleopatra cries after Antony's death, "The crown o' th' earth doth melt" (4.15.63). The Roman "world" seems to be stretching out toward the logical subject who can take advantage of it, as well as toward something akin to what Shankar Raman in his Framing "India": The Colonial Imaginary in Early Modern Culture (2002) has called "colonialist space." Egyptian earthiness alludes to nature's elusiveness and intractability in the face of the human urge for authority.

In his *The World Transformed: Multiple Worlds in Antony and Cleopatra*, Brent Dawson stresses the presence of this multiplicity of imagining the world. He argues that the Early Modern Period had a troubling sense of this 'multiplicity' of worlds "where there were either no more worlds or more than one" because of the continuous explorations and voyages done by the European explorers (Dawson 178). People were doubtful of religion when it came to their knowledge that there were civilizations existing beyond Christianity whose origin was not related to Noah. Quoting John Donne, the author explains the term 'Imperial worldhood', which reacts to globalization as if it were a wound, a division of the Christian world that needs to be repaired. When Christianity itself is in question, the nation-state replaces the organized church as the arbiter of the single, unquestionable truth and culture that ought to be shared by everyone in the

world. Also, Dawson stresses "how the imperial idea of worldhood cannot be separated from race and gender" (179) so that Europe can gather back the metaphorically disjointed 'female body' and own it.

The rhetoric of 'Imperial worldhood' is actively working in Antony and Cleopatra to further the establishment of the empire. The barbaric disorder outside of the Roman world is brought about by imperial conquest in areas lacking natural cosmic order. Rome's sense of worldhood plots itself along gendered lines, as Antony's masculine title, "pillar of the world," suggests (1.5.23). In addition to upholding the globe and enforcing the order, the male imperial sovereign raises himself above the earth, free from the diversity and mutability of a living planet. The contrast between Rome's 'other' as a dangerous and disorganized chaos is essential to the Roman presentation of its empire as a stable Mundus. However, when we look at Enobarbus's description of Cleopatra (2.2.41) when her barge arrives at Cilicia, it seems less chaotic and more organized and desirable. The barge's organization is saturated with "crossings and metamorphosis: boys who are also cupids, women who are "Nereids" (212), and a Cleopatra who is 'like Venus, like a painting of Venus', but distinct from both."

(Dawson 181). Still, we see the unfavorable perception of Cleopatra arising from the text itself. This magnificent description by Enobarbus

also does not make much of a difference because we find textual evidence where Octavius and his retinue, Antony's officers, and occasionally even Antony himself refer to Cleopatra as a seductress, "Triple-turned whore! 'Tis thou/ Hast sold me to this novice" (4.12.13). Even Cleopatra herself makes this difficult for us to believe her lamentations over the dying Antony and her final resolve of suicide to unite with the dead husband when she shows interest in the bargain with Caesar in Act 5. Instead, it appears that she uses her suicide to validate the reckoning of love with Antony (asserted in the early parts of the play), and the self-dramatization is a strategy to avoid defamation arising from the political failure.

Cleopatra serves as a depiction of Egypt for both the Romans in the play and the audience, who imagines the journeys and the foreignness of that nation. There are numerous instances in the play where she (and others too) calls herself 'Egypt'. For example, at the death of Fulvia, Cleopatra says, "I prythee turn aside and weep for her/ Then bid adieu to me, and say the tears/ Belong to Egypt" (1.3.92-94). The play's setting is thus dominated by feminine authority, which was familiar to the English (due to Queen Elizabeth's rule). However, her failure as a queen to protect her land and metaphorically herself too would have brought great shame, and thus, suicide must have appeared as the best escape possible. When we look at her suicide as an escape, there is again textual evidence

found where Cleopatra is unwilling to be portrayed as anything but a whore, "see/ Some Cleopatra boy my greatness/ I' the posture of a whore" (5.2.219-21). These lines open a broad discussion over Shakespeare's intention for the construction of his heroine. Unlike his other heroines, Cleopatra is conscious of the political usage Romans (or Europeans) intend to make; that is why according to Dawson, she chooses suicide over subjugation. Also, this patriotic façade of sacrifice for one's honor and land is complemented by taking up roles as martyrs in love. Cleopatra, before her suicide, yells, 'Husband, I come,' posing as the dutiful Roman wife, which she was not for the four Acts of the play (5.2.286). Ania Loomba (as quoted by Espinosa) makes an observation on how Cleopatra becomes "both the goddess Isis...[and] Antony's Roman Wife" during the self-dramatization of her suicide embraced by the command she gives to her attendants, "Give me my robe. Put on my crown" (280). It becomes challenging to say whether this self-dramatization is the most authentic expression of Cleopatra's regality and splendor or is a way of masking up her failure as a queen, as 'Egypt'.

Moreover, equally significant in this play is Antony and Cleopatra's impact on one another. Antony's desire for Cleopatra is almost a metaphor for his propensity for the kind of life he lives in the play, the virtues he chooses, for which a foreign woman or the 'other' is not always held responsible, mentioning

how the "holy, cold" Octavia, "a gem of women," and "the getting of a lawful race" were denied by Antony, who was capable of both excessive self-gratification and self-delusion. His conversation with Cleopatra resembles a self-mocking mannerism, 'Cleo. I will set a bourn how far to be beloved/Ant. Then must thou needs to find out new Heaven, new earth' (1.1.16-17). Moreover, the most important thing he initially seeks from his exploitation of Cleopatra and Egypt is 'pleasure'- 'there is not a minute of our lives should stretch/ Without some pleasure now.' (1.1.47) The atmosphere of the play brings us into a sense of belatedness which implies the lost good old days, which both of them are trying to retrieve. For Antony, Shakespeare emphasizes his flaws to explain how slowly he changes. The egocentric propensity in Antony must give way even before his first setback, the Rational. This is demonstrated by his decision to battle near the sea and by permitting Cleopatra to participate in the conflict. He says, "I have fled myself." Indeed, he has changed; he is no longer the same person. He goes to the final battle not to showcase his courage but to servitude of his beloved. When dying, he metaphorically presents the appropriate and inappropriate ways to do it. He says, "Unarm, Eros. The long day's task is done, / And we must sleep." (4.14.35) The Roman death he yearns for goes to Eros and leaves him hanging between the two realms of life and death. The supposed heroic act of Roman death is

now turned into an uncomfortable departure, causing the real 'agnos' to the character.

The foreign woman brings the tragic downfall of a brave Roman warrior, as the audience should hold Cleopatra responsible for the same. Because this is not a romance between two lovers for whom the rest of the world is a backdrop (like Romeo and Juliet); they have and represent their worlds and carry responsibilities of their own. So their love is embedded in a cross-cultural background which is always to be avoided by the racial notions of the Shakespearean audience. Examining the nature of their love again raises questions due to its ironic and mockery-like conduct. It urges the audience to see the respective suicides of Antony and Cleopatra as an excuse to deny failure in terms of their responsibilities as a warrior and a queen. Both were aware of the dangers associated with mingling these two worlds but still played their parts ignorantly.

Moreover, Cleopatra being 'cunning past man's thought' is not a novice in these terms. The essential pathos in the play is this fallacy of the characters longing for a world that does not exist now and thus indulging incessantly in 'pleasure' with a gritty and realistic mid-aged romance and finally dying. The sensations of 'agnos' and catharsis are less prevalent than in other Shakespearean tragedies that end in ambivalence.

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