

Shakespeare's Theatrical Cleopatra and Cleopatra, the Politician in History

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In this paper the researcher attempts to analyze the character of Cleopatra as presented by William Shakespeare in his play Antony and Cleopatra and as presented in historical documents. In the process, this paper tries and examines Shakespeare's attitude towards Cleopatra and look into the socio-political conditions of the time which might have influenced his imagination in creating Cleopatra's character.

Key words: Femininity, Theatricality, Historical document, Political strategies, Oriental Images.

In the Elizabethan age many dramatists wrote for a period fascinated by the question of women's political capability. Sixteenth century Europe saw many female sovereigns including Bloody Mary Tudor, Mary Queen of Scots and Elizabeth herself. But none of the dramatists ventured to write about the female as ruler in their writings except Shakespeare who wrote Antony and Cleopatra, though a bit late, to comment upon many dominant social ideologies of the time concerning gender-relations and identities. But even he avoids the political aspect of Cleopatra's story. In Antony and Cleopatra Shakespeare seems to focus more on the personal relationship of the lovers to develop the character of Cleopatra than on her political ambitions, which, as is indicated in the historical documents, influenced her relationships both with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. Cleopatra in history is remembered more for her shrewd political manoeuvres, which Shakespeare completely misses out, may be for certain political reasons. On the contrary he presents her as an insecure ageing woman who manoeuvres only to get the attentions of her lover. He makes her a sort of actor cum stage manager and celebrates her theatricality and sensuality which seems to subvert the existing cultural orthodoxies of his own time which saw woman as outside the political domain. And Shakespeare also shows a similarity between the attitude of the Romans towards Egypt and the English attitude towards the Orient, for the ancient Rome and Jacobean England shared the same expansionist political strategies. At the same time Shakespeare also presents the resemblance between the masculine ideology of Renaissance England and Roman attitude to Cleopatra. In this connection, Jyotsyna Singh in her essay "Renaissance Anti-theatricality, Anti-feminism, and Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra", writes:

Implicit to the Roman ideology of exclusion is a fear of the loss of male identity through an attraction to the female. The picture of a threatened masculinity the Romanms construct seems to give validity to the anti-theatrical and anti-feminist polemic... The Egyptian queen's "infinite variety", as they portray it, applies interchangeably to her sexual appeal and to her role playing, and is clearly antithetical to the Roman myth of a stable and unified male subject.

It is this 'stable and unified' male identity which Shakespeare challenges in his play when he creates the famous cross-dressing scene. But as one goes through the play, one notices that after combining theatricality and femininity in such positive and powerful terms in the character of Cleopatra, Shakespeare, in the end, makes her a more conventional figure who calls Antony her husband and dies to be with him in the other world. Does it mean that Shakespeare wanted to rouse audience's sympathy and respect for her?

Cleopatra is unique among Shakespeare's female characters in her use of feminine vile like her deliberate attempt at remaining an enigma and her manipulative use of mood changes for the purpose of being fascinating to Antony. Shakespeare's Cleopatra is more concerned about love and sexual gratification than about public issues like proper governance. There is a clear undercurrent of fear and insecurity due to ageing for now she "wrinkled deep in time". She adopts desperate measures to compensate, by being fascinating, for the ravages of age. When Antony is not with her, she sends her attendants to find about his whereabouts and tell them:

See where he is, who's with him, what he does:
I did not send you. If you find him sad,
Say I am dancing; if in mirth, report

That I am sudden sick.

Such frivolous maneuvering is shown throughout the play. When Antony is with her, she passes her time by asking him; "If it be love indeed, tell me how much." And if he is away, she thinks only of him. It seems that Cleopatra holds importance for Shakespeare, only as the lover or mistress of Antony, for he hardly dwells upon her political life as the Queen of Egypt. For Shakespeare, she is the consort of Antony whom Antony lovingly calls "the serpent of old Nile". But if one goes through historical documents, one will see that she was highly educated, interested in literary studies, conversant with many languages, and a skilled organizer and a woman of business. In this context S.A. Cook, F. E. Adcock and M. P. Charlesworth, in the tenth volume of The Cambridge Ancient History: The Augustan Empire write:

The moral code had little meaning to her; she was her own law. But she was to be a loyal wife to Antony, though certainly she did not love him; perhaps she never loved any man; her two love affairs were undertaken quite deliberately, with the same purpose as all her actions. For the key-note of her character was not sex at all, but ambition-an ambition surpassing that of any other princess of her ambitious Macedonian race and the essence of her nature was the combination of the charm of a woman with the brain of a man, both remorselessly bent to the pursuit of that one object, power.

This description shows her to be a very shrewd politician whose sole aim was to gain independent control over her country Egypt, for she was a "client-queen" who ruled over Egypt under the directions from Rome. Her relations, as the historical account points out, with both Caesar and Antony had some reason other than her susceptibility towards promiscuity as the legend has it. For, S.A.Cook and others, in their book, write about her relations with Antony, they write:

She intended now to make use of him; as to his personality she had no choice, for if she wanted power she could only get it through the Roman governor of the East, whoever he might be. Had Antony been a different character, we might have seen a different Cleopatra.

She got what she wanted, for Antony made her an independent monarch. She was a man in a woman's body who had power and the brains to employ it to her purpose and the supreme ambition of her life was to rule the Roman world which would have been fulfilled had Julius Caesar not died, and which she later tried to fulfill through Antony. But Shakespeare does not even allude to this aspect of her character in his play. Here one can say that there could have been certain political motivations which influenced Shakespeare's imagination in subtly sidestepping history. For if he had presented Cleopatra as a hard core politician who can employ any and all means to secure her position, who knows that there would have been comparisons with the late monarch of England, Queen Elizabeth, who died in 1603. And though Cleopatra was a perfect match to Elizabeth in her political intentions and motivations, her promiscuous character would have been seen as an insult to the untarnished character of the virgin Queen. Elizabeth reign was called the golden age and she was still revered by the people. Shakespeare could not have dared to play with the emotions of the people, so he creates Cleopatra the mistress of Antony and not the monarch of Egypt.

Though Shakespeare's interest in her is mainly due to her relationship with Antony still he lifts her from the level of caricature, as she was seen earlier to the level of a fully developed individual and celebrates femininity in its completeness in her character. In Cleopatra's character Shakespeare seems to associate femininity with theatricality in positive terms. But in Renaissance England and ancient Rome, theatricality was associated with disorder and disruptions in the traditional social hierarchies and gender roles, for theatricality gives power to the female, as it gives an upper hand to Cleopatra over all the males especially Romans in Antony and Cleopatra. Whenever Cleopatra is in the scene, she is play-acting. Her exaggerated gestures of love towards Antony are always acted out in front of an audience like her attendants. She does everything for an effect - her language, actions, emotions are all exaggerated. It is this theatricality which Romans, in the play, detest and are afraid of, for only with the power of this art Cleopatra has Antony firmly smitten and is also able to fool Octavius Caesar of her real intentions in the end.

Even as Romans devalue her performance, they sometimes recognize its appeal to their senses as Enobarbus does when he describes her first meeting with Antony, he says:
For her own person,

It beggar'd all description; she did lie
In her pavilion, - cloth of gold, of tissue
O'er - picturing that Venus where we see
The fancy outwork nature.....

Here Cleopatra seems to be acting the role of Venus to capture Antony in "her strong toil of grace". It is this very showmanship of hers, which saves her from humiliation at the

hands of Caesar. She calls him her lord and master and in the end stages her own suicide, she even changes costume for it. 'Show me, my women, like a queen', she says, 'go fetch my best attires'. She assumes the maternal role to the asps and says:
Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,
That sucks the nurse asleep?

And Charmian's dying gesture to straighten her dead queen's crown is a befitting end to the show of "a princess descended of so many royal kings" . Though Shakespeare here celebrates her theatrical power he also condemns it in some other instances like it is her playacting which leads to Antony's death. So here one can say that Shakespeare maintains an ambivalent attitude towards this aspect of Cleopatra's character. But apart from this incident of Antony's death, one does see him celebrating the theatrical performances of Cleopatra throughout the play. He also shows that her subjects (Egyptians) do appreciate her public appearances as Isis or Aphrodite. Cleopatra had created a cult of her own as Queen Elizabeth had initiated the cult of the Virgin Queen. So, even if the patriarchal order in Renaissance England disapproved "the conflation of the feminine and theatrical" as Singh writes in her essay, Shakespeare celebrates it in a manner which makes one doubt that he might be commenting upon the theatrical aspect of Queen Elizabeth's court itself where the courtly love tradition originated. Court poets like Raleigh and Essex equated Elizabeth I to Daina/Cynthia, the virginal Moon-Goddess. As Rina Ramdev in her "Introduction" to the Sidney, Spenser and Donne: A Critical Introduction writes:

Behaviour at Elizabeth's court was consciously artistic, seen in the importance attached to pageants and queen's public appearances. The art of self fashioning was central to Elizabethan court culture, with the monarch herself showing the way.

This statement presents a parallel to the purpose behind Cleopatra's theatrical gestures in the play. So here one can say that in celebrating Cleopatra's theatricality, Shakespeare might also be reviving the memory of the Elizabethan Court.

In Antony and Cleopatra, Romans see Cleopatra as primitive and the racial other. She is Antony's mistress and not a lawful wedded wife in the play, so she is seen as a gypsy, a strumpet, even Antony calls her "triple-turn'd whore". She is seen as the emasculating force by both the Romans and the Renaissance audience. For both the ancient Rome and the Elizabethan and Jacobean England glorified the masculine virtues of courage, honour and patriotism and women had no role to play in this male world. It is Caesar who articulates the fear of the Romans about the loss of male identity through female attraction when he says:
.... 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.

Such a scenario even Renaissance people detested but Shakespeare seems to acknowledge the power of the female in this play when he shows how Enobarbus mistakes her to be Antony, this shows that Cleopatra has no fixed identity; she can be all feminine and coquettish and at the same time can also assume the role of masculine authority. He also shows how Cleopatra delights in her memory of the cross-dressing with Antony. Here Shakespeare seems to show her disrupt "the sexual hierarchy of the Romans whereby Rome is perceived as a heroic and masculine empire and Egypt a kingdom of women and eunuchs" as Singh writes in her essay. Here one can also say that the images that the Romans use for describing Cleopatra are classically oriental images which bring in focus their attitude towards the orient which is very colonialist. She is marginalized as the temptress, witch and adulteress. Though Shakespeare does not seem to share this view, for he uses images that denote "pictures of the fabulous orient" as Naqi Husain Jafri writes in his article "Image of the Orient in Shakespeare". But still he does inherit certain prejudices of his age when he shows Cleopatra's violence against the messenger who brings the news of Antony's marriage with Octavia. So one can say that even if Shakespeare gives better treatment to Cleopatra and Egypt than the Romans, still he does not seem to get over the oriental attitude of his age.

After celebrating her theatricality and her power over the male, in the last act, it looks as if Shakespeare tries to conform her to the conventional ideal of the wife and the mother. For throughout the play she is presented as the mistress of Antony, who thinks more of her own self but in the end she is suddenly transformed into a loving wife who is "marble-constant; now the fleeting moon/ No planet is of mine" as she says. Is it because Shakespeare wanted to generate sympathy and respect for her in the minds of the Renaissance audience that he does so? As people could only sympathize with her if she dies as the loyal wife of Antony. Even if this was his motive, he could have achieved it much before, for as the historical accounts prove that when Antony returned to Egypt after

marrying Octavia he also married Cleopatra in the form the Ptolemies used. And to everyone in the east she was his legitimate wife but this marriage was not acknowledged by the Roman law, as Antony could not have two wives at once. It looks as if even Shakespeare does not acknowledge this marriage or he simply ignores it, for he could celebrate her 'infinite variety' only as a mistress and not as a wife, since wives, like Octavia, offer no variety of emotions to Shakespeare. So, one can say here that Shakespeare celebrates the independence of Cleopatra from marital bondage and tries to make her conventional at the climax, may be only to silence the misogynists of his time. But one is not so sure of his success.

In the end, one may conclude that Shakespeare in his presentation of the character of Cleopatra in Antony and Cleopatra does maintain an ambivalent attitude and avoids commenting upon her political ambitions, which might have given rise to an inevitable comparison with Elizabeth I. But he does immortalize and celebrates her through her theatrical performances and her free sexuality. But here one can add that though Shakespeare shows a positive understanding of the East, still he maintains certain racial prejudices of his time. On the whole Shakespeare's Cleopatra is still remembered and will always be remembered - even if the real one is forgotten.

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