

## Politicizing the Body and Sexualizing the Text: A Feminist Study of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*

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Feminism is a serious attempt to formulate the issues and find solutions to gender problems. It was started by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) and gained momentum in the 1960s. Feminist Literary Criticism primarily is the way woman is represented in literature or that literature which focuses on the position of woman in society past and present. The pioneering and most significant work in this respect is John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) where he spoke of women's freedom as an essential condition of the development of any society. He criticized in strong terms the corrupting influence of the family structure that rendered the female inferior and thereby miserable while the man was encouraged to be selfish and naturally superior. Another pioneering voice was Mary Wollstonecraft whose *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) revealed the utter injustice in keeping women oppressed by advancing arguments that were essentially biased and exposed the pretentious nature of social constructions. The third significant work is Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* where the deprivation of women is highlighted.

Elaine Showalter argues that Feminist queries can be divided into distinct varieties: Feminist Critique (which deals with how the hypothesis of a female reader changes our apprehension of the text) and Gynocriticism (which deals with the history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women) which in the recent times have gained lots of insight through the Lacanian re-readings of Freudian psychology. Defining gynocritics and the woman's text introduces the central concept of 'woman as critics'.

To really understand the fact whether Shakespeare has measured up to feminist standards we shall begin with Brian Vickers' "Appropriating Shakespeare: Contemporary Critical Quarrels". Vickers gives us a thorough grounding because he puts forth the arguments in detail to point out their a-historicity. He shows for example, the loopholes in Stanley Cavil's psycho-feminist analysis of *Othello* where Othello is rendered impotent and murderous due to the female sexuality he has aroused. Vickers' criticism of Lynda Booze's 'use' of Shakespeare's text as 'applied politics', a tool to change both the academy and society, further illuminates this subject.

Shakespeare probably wrote *Antony and Cleopatra* during the reign of King James I. Moreover, James I had ascended the throne of England directly after a female monarch. There probably might have been an intention to assure the monarch that a male ruler always proved superior to a female sovereign (here presented as the Egyptian queen). However, this does not mean that Shakespeare equated the White, virginal Queen with the eastern temptress. Imtiaz Habib in "Cleopatra and the Sexualization of Race" (2000) shows how Shakespeare contrasted noble England and angelic Elizabeth I with the black and wanton ruler, Cleopatra.

Moreover, at this juncture of British history there was perceived a conscious attempt to relegate to the periphery of social existence the female population of the nation. The age was

witnessing the first wave of colonialism and under its effect the protestant work ethic (which marginalized women) became dominant. Society became fearful of women who dared to break norms and challenged male supremacy. Shakespeare's Cleopatra became a burning example of such an 'other' and the fate reserved for them.

Yet Cleopatra is her true self. When Antony asks, "What sport tonight?", she answers, "Hear the ambassadors" to get a truly Antonian, Roman rebuke, "Fie, wrangling queen!" She knows she is "queen/so mightily betrayed" (33). Of being Antony's plaything cannot contain her variety. Significantly, Shakespeare allots her one entire act-Act V wherein we meet the real Cleopatra in search of her true self. Here she outshines Caesar, the all-powerful, mighty manipulator. Here, she is not a besotted lover of the earlier four acts as she is represented by layers of her interpretations within the text and by critics. Here, she is a mother who feels manipulated by Caesar's threat to ill-treat her children. Here is a queen who feels responsible to the war-ravaged Egypt. Here is a noble lady who is aware of her mis-representation as a token of Roman Victory. Yet she would not sigh "Alas!" Now would she be a mere "a lass", like every other milkmaid, thirsting after male acceptance. She knows she is "a lass unparalleled". So, here in this act, we meet a Cleopatra who identifies herself with the Egyptian deity Isis. Similarly, she mocks the stagey, grand Roman death. She has an ironic laugh up her sleeve even in her death. She dies an Egyptian the Egyptian way. Similarly, she retains her identity as a beloved too. She is no longer the much misunderstood and misinterpreted mistress. She says, "Husband, here I come!" Every inch she is truly the equal of Antony.

In describing Cleopatra, Plutarch's admiration is real enough but the moral conclusion is no less firm and Roman in perspective. Cleopatra's many effects is to 'stir up many vices' as yet hidden in Antony, if any spark of goodness or hope of rising were left him, Cleopatra quenched it straight and made it worse than before. Plutarch is mainly distressed to see this great general made s subject to a woman's will. Horace condemns Cleopatra for her wantonness, he does admire her queenly suicide and her proud resolve not to grace Caesar's triumph. When Enobarbus says of Cleopatra that ' vilest things/ become themselves in her', that the holy priests/bless her when she is priggish...(69) Plutarch identifies Cleopatra with the goddess Iris of Egyptian mythology. Caesar complains for example of reports that Cleopatra has appeared in the market place at Alexandria and has given audience." In the habitants of the goddess Iris Cleopatra's mythic heritage is well summed up by Northrop Frye:

Cleopatra, the serpent of the Nile, is a Venus rising from the sea, an  
Iris, a Stella Marisa goddess of the moon and the sea, she has  
Affinities with a kind of goodness figure that both Hebraic and  
Classical religions kept trying to subdue by abuse: she is a whore and  
Her children are all bastards; she is a snare to men and destroys their  
Masculinity, making them degenerate slaves like Circe; she is an  
Omphale dressing her Hercules in women's clothes; she has many

### Characteristics of her sister whore of Babylon. (11)

If the male critics often betray their own unease by characterizing her as typically, they are saying no more than what the men in the play say about her. Antony sees her, intermittently, to be sure, as an 'enchanted queen', Enobarbus jests that their departure from Egypt will kill all our women', but is ready 'under a compelling occasion to let women die; Cleopatra, chief among them, can 'die twenty times', in such circumstances and turn of the water works as ably as Jones himself. The sexual double meaning of 'die' adds piquancy to Enobarbus's wryly misogynistic portrait of Cleopatra as the quintessential temptress.

She is intensely conscious of and pre-occupied with her reputation as she goes about making a religion of erotic passion; her rhetoric combining the imagery of feeding with that of theatre is calculated to deify her and Antony. Cleopatra shows an indifferent attitude towards her children. She can laugh at her own perjuries in overcommitted in 'my salad days,/when I was green in judgement.' She enjoys being feared by her messengers and subjects. The remembrance of fooling Antony at fishing is dear to her because it reminds her of her skill in landing Antony himself: 'You're caught'. The modern historian sees Cleopatra as a greater queen than Shakespeare or Plutarch realized, a woman whose supreme ambition is to rule in Rome to which Julius Caesar had once brought her.

The continual approximation of whatever is most opposite in character, in situation, in sentiment would be fatiguing were it not so perfectly natural; the woman herself would be distracting if she were not so enchanting. Shakespeare's Cleopatra is the real historical Cleopatra the 'rare Egyptian' the individualized and placed before us. Her mental accomplishments, her unequalled grace, her woman's wit and woman's wiles, her irresistible allurements, her star of irregular grandeur, her bursts of ungovernable temper, her bivocity of imagination, her petulant caprice, her fickleness and her falsehood, her tenderness and her truth, her childish susceptibility to flattery, her magnificent spirit, her royal pride the gorgeous eastern colouring of the character; all these contradictory elements has Shakespeare seized, mingled them in their extremes and fused them into one brilliant impersonation of classical elegance, oriental voluptuousness and gipsy sorcery.

Psychological studies and feminist criticisms have expanded our knowledge. The title of late Fitz's article in Shakespeare's "Quarterly" for 1977 alerts readers to important distinctions: 'Egyptian queens and male leviars: sexiest attitude in Antony and Cleopatra criticism.' Fitz commented:

I do not think it would be going too far to suggest that many male critics feel personally threatened by Cleopatra and what she represents to them. (298)

Shakespeare's Cleopatra dazzles our faculties, perplexes our judgement, bewilders and bewitches our fancy; from the beginning to the end of the drama. We are conscious of a kind of fascination against which our moral sense rebels, but from which there is no escape. The epithets applied to her perpetually by Antony and others confirm this impression; 'enchanted queen!', 'witch', 'spell', 'great fairy', 'cockatrice', 'serpent of the old Nile', 'thou grave charm' are only a few of them.

Although Cleopatra talks of dying ‘after the high Roman fashion’, she fears what she most desires, and cannot perform with simplicity what costs her such an effort. That extreme physical cowardice which was so strong a trait in her historical character, which led to the defeat of Actium, which made her delay the execution of a fatal resolve till she had tried conclusions infinite of easy ways to die. Timed by nature, she is courageous by the mere force of will and she lashes herself up with high sounding words in a kind of false daring. Her lively imaginations suggests every incentive which can spur her on to the deed she has resolved, yet trembles to contemplate, she pictures to herself all the degradations which must attend her captivity and let it be observed, that those which she anticipates are precisely such as a vain, luxurious and haughty woman would be especially dread, and which only true virtue and magnanimity could despise. Cleopatra could have endured the loss of freedom; but ‘to be chastised’ by the scornful or glance of the injured Octavia ‘rather a ditch in Egypt!’

“Cleopatra: . . . if knife, drugs, serpents have edge sting or operation, I am safe:

Your wife Octavia, with her modest eyes

And still conclusion, shall acquire no honour

Demurring upon me.

Now Iras, what think’st thou?

Thou, an Egyptian puppet, shall be shown in Rome, as well as I. Mechanic slaves,

With greasy aprons, rules and hammers small uplift us to the view; in thin thick

Breaths, rank of gross diet, shall we be unclouded and forced to drink their vapour...

Iras: gods forbid

Cleopatra: nay, ‘tis most certain,

Iras: saucy lecturers will catch us, like strumpets; and scald rhymers

Ballad us out o’ tune. The quick comedians extemporal will stage us,

And present our Alexandrian revels; Antony shall be brought drunken

Forth, and I shall see

Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness. (173)

She then calls for her diadem, her robes of state and attires herself, as if again for Cydnus, to meet Mark Antony, ‘coquette to the last, she must make death proud to take her’, and die, ‘phoenix-like’, as she had lived, with all the pomp of preparation luxurious in her despair.

Many unpleasant things can be said of Cleopatra; and the more that are said, the more wonderful she appears. If she is dark, it is because the sun himself has been amorous of her.

Even when death is close at hand she imagines his touch as a lover's. She embraces him that she may overtake Iras and gain Antony's first kiss in the other world. She announces to her women that she is pale or sick or sullen, they must lead her to her chamber but must not speak to her. She is as strong and supple as a leopard, can drink down a master of revelry, can raise her lover's helpless body from the ground into her tower with the aid of only two women. She is a mother, but the threat of Octavius to destroy her children if she takes her own life passes by her like the wind. At this point Shakespeare contradicts Plutarch.

She is willing also to survive her lover. Her first thought to follow him after the high Roman fashion, is too great for her. She would live on if she could and would cheat her victor too of the best part of her fortune. The thing that drives her to die is the certainty that she will be carried to Rome to grace his triumph. That alone decides her. It seems to us perfectly natural in a sense perfectly right that her lover should be her slave, that her women should adore her and die with her, that Enobarbus, who foresaw what must happen and who opposes her wishes and braves her anger, should talk of her with rapture and feel no bitterness against her and when Octavius shows himself proof against her fascination, instead of admiring him, we turn from him with disgust and think him a disgrace of his species: why? It is not that we consider him bound to fall in love with her, Enobarbus did not, Dolabella did not, we ourselves do not. The feeling she inspires was felt then, and is felt now, by women no less than men, and would have been shared by Octavia herself. Doubtless she wrought magic on the senses, but she had not extraordinary beauty, like Helen's such beauty as seems divine. But Enobarbus in his very mockery, calls her 'most sovereign creature', and we echo it. And yet Octavius' face to face with her and listening to her voice, can think only how best to trap her and drag her to public dishonour in the streets of Rome. We forgive him only for his words when he sees her:

She looks like sleep

As she would catch another Antony

In her strong toil of grace. (179)

The contest between Caesar and Cleopatra, Rome and Egypt is in part a contest between 'male scarcity' and 'female bounty' as the defining site of Antony's 'heroic masculinity'. For Caesar as for Cariliolus, 'manliness' entails 'the repression of all that is female', for Cleopatra Antony is visualized as like herself, 'feeding and renewing the appetite in an endless cycle of gratification and desire, making hungry where she most satisfies'. Erickson puts it, Octavius finds in Antony a heightened image of his own abstemiousness, Cleopatra's declaration of the bountiful Antony projects a model in which she discovers her own beauty.

Pratima Agnihotri's feminist reading "Lass Unparalleled: Understanding Cleopatra" offers a systematic and lucid scrutiny of the twentieth century and tells us how it restores women's perspective in the literary world. Feminism makes us see Shakespeare differently. Shakespeare's play being open-ended illuminates with fine subtlety the menu between 'inferiorization' and 'misrepresentation of women' and the prevalent patriarchal ideology of the Renaissance. The analysis makes the hypocritical moralistic and chauvinistic male judgements on Cleopatra within and without. The feminist logic in a series of compelling argument in

defense of Cleopatra could also drive home the recognition in the readers of the vested interests of a male-dominated culture in misinterpreting women.

Cleopatra is cast into two contradictory roles which are closely connected to the structure of the play. She is at once the victim of male domination and conqueror of male territory. As victim, she shares a range of masks, tricks and entertainments with the other kinds of suppressed and oppressed people—jews, Blacks, Dalits. She is made to confirm to the popular image of a woman as constructed by the Shakespearean age. For the sake of her love and protection of her kingdom, she must devise various means to keep Antony in Egypt and to guard him by providing entertainment, feasting, drinking and amusing escapades. She uses the so-called ‘feminine’ tricks or *tirya charita* as in the following dialogues:

Cleopatra: Where is he?

Charmian: I did not see him since.

Cleopatra: See where he is? Who is with him, what he does?

I did not send you: if you find him sad,

Say I am dancing; if in mirth, report

I am sudden sick. (43)

On the obverse side of her character, Cleopatra is a rebel to the male dispensation in every sphere: politics, sexual freedom, war. We have already glanced at her daring in some of the above fields. She rejected the racial and colonial discriminations set up by the Romans and demanded equality in all respects. If Antony loved her she had a right to be his beloved wife; all her energies were bent to this purpose and just before her self-sacrifice she is able to declare:

Husband I come.....

Now to that name my courage prove my title! (102)

She comes out of her lady’s chamber to which women are symbolically confined by the conventions of the male dominated society and sallies forth to conquer patriarchal territories. In Roman times, it is true, women were allowed to share some activities of a public nature with their men, they could take charge of their estates during their husband’s absence; they could raise an army and even wage a war as Fulvia did. But during the Feudal period, the concept of a domestic enclosure for women was created. And in the Renaissance conduct books, women were required “to remain modest and not to frequent public place and show themselves outdoor”.

Men in every age have been afraid of the women who step outside the “lakshman rekha” of her enclosure defined and delimited by man-made ethos. Cleopatra ranges far and wide; she pulls down the partition between the private and the public, physically beats the messenger who brings bad news, overrules Enobarbus and other advisors of Antony and uses her charm and beauty as weapons of persuasion and power. No wonder the whole of Rome is bristling with gossip and the Roman power is out to hunt her down or chase her back to the fold. Shakespeare



must have used the folk image of Cleopatra as found in his time. Cleopatra does finally drive back to her private spaces which is ironically enough in the monument firmly secured against male invasion, but she is already a finished woman; as if she had a sense of her transgression, the first words she speaks to Charmian, 'O Charmian, I will never go from hence'; But her most glorious act of defiance is still ahead. On this point Tennenhouse's summing up of the denouement in his book *Antony and Cleopatra and the Theatre of Punishment*, will surely be read with interest if not with conviction:

“In destroying Antony and Cleopatra, Shakespeare accomplishes two things. First he relocates the sources of legitimate authority in Rome. Secondly, he establishes the figure of uncompromising male power over that of autonomous female. Shakespeare not only legitimizes this figure by linking it to the grotesque body, and he also subjects the body to another ritual purification. Shakespeare gives Cleopatra the entire last act to gather up the features associated with illegitimate authority.”

Given such a self of Cleopatra, we realize that Shakespeare has indeed made her a presence. She has a language which is sheer witchery and poetry to express this magical self which is neither sensuous nor redolent. She is a person who “feels” on her nerves all the events of her life and hence she remains a lass indeed unparalleled!

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