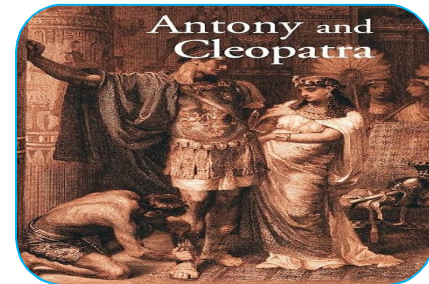




ELIZABETHAN CONSCIOUSNESS IN SHAKESPEARE'S *ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA* AND *1 HENRY IV***Richa Bajaj****Associate Professor, Hindu College, Delhi University.**

Shakespeare remained deeply attuned to the spirit of his age, engaging directly with the specific issues and concerns of his time. Yet, he also took a firm stance on the broader cultural and political questions that shaped his world. Critics such as Jonathan Dollimore have described him as a “political” writer to underscore the active role he played within his cultural milieu. Whether in the history plays, Roman plays, tragedies, or comedies, Shakespeare consistently maintained a dynamic dialogue with his audience.



This paper argues that *Antony and Cleopatra* (1608), though set in ancient Rome, is profoundly informed by an Elizabethan consciousness and temperament. The play reflects values and tensions characteristic of late sixteenth-century England—a nation experiencing economic growth, geographical expansion, the consolidation of a nascent nation-state, evolving market relations, and the migration of rural populations to urban centers. England, at this juncture, was undergoing a crucial phase of transformation.¹ As Rebecca Bushnell observes, “In this feverish time, a new tragic art was generated from the energy of a culture and society on the move, painfully conscious of the weight of the past but also with a growing confidence in the future of England.” The tragic mode for which Shakespeare is best known thus became, in Bushnell’s words, “one of the arts of the new age that at once expressed its deepest anxieties and recorded its greatness.”²

The pain associated with the “weight of the past” is particularly evident in Shakespeare’s history plays (*Richard II*, *Henry IV*, Parts 1 and 2), where the old order is not wholly rejected but rather portrayed with tragic resonance. The anxieties and aspirations depicted in these works belong to the collective entity of the *nation*—a country coming to terms with its capabilities and forging its identity at the dawn of a new epoch.

Antony and Cleopatra may thus be read as a play about an integrating society expanding its power and extending its imperial ambitions across the globe. The Roman Empire under the triumvirate had, metaphorically speaking, the world in its grasp. Similarly, England in the late sixteenth and early

¹Notes

A.L. Morton tells us: “To the growth of the cloth trade, the establishment of new factory industries and the geographical discoveries as features of the economic life of the Sixteenth Century England we must add a fourth, no less important, and having an even greater immediate effect on the lives of the people. This was the revolution in agriculture, leading to the creation of large scale unemployment and the beginning of a modern proletarian class”. *A People’s History of England*, Lawrence & Wishart: London, 1945, p.165.

² Rebecca Bushnell, “The Fall of Princes: The Classical and Medieval Roots of English Renaissance Tragedy”, *A Companion to Tragedy*, ed. Rebecca Bushnell, Wiley-Blackwell: U.K., 2009, p. 304.

seventeenth centuries sought to enlarge its military reach and political influence through colonial enterprise. Viewed in this light, Rome in Shakespeare's play can be seen as a symbolic equivalent of England. The critical question, then, is to what extent this parallel can be sustained and how far it can be extended to illuminate the complexities of the Elizabethan world.

Critical discourse often positions Rome as an analogue for England and Egypt as its colonial counterpart. Rome embodies the norm—the disciplined, rational, and expansionist state—while Egypt, ruled by a queen who struggles to maintain order and balance, represents deviation and excess. Consequently, England inherits Rome's positive associations as a progressive imperial power, while Egypt is relegated to the status of the "Other," marked by exoticism and decline.

However, the contrast between Rome and Egypt can also be viewed differently vis-à-vis England. One may choose to look at them as two contrasting streams of life and not as two countries with specific concerns and preferences. John W. Mahon would have the opposition between the private space of love and the public space of war as the central issue, not the conflicting policies of the two countries. He suggests that the Monument that gains significance in the Fourth and the Fifth Acts of the play constitutes the sphere of love away from the outside world and that Cleopatra and Antony use this to project their love for one another.³ For Mahon, the Monument (the place where Cleopatra and Antony die) is the location where love between the two characters assumes particular significance. Even as this argument mystifies love in the play, it lets Rome and Egypt have appearance of distinct formations.

Was Shakespeare talking about England in exclusive terms, considering Rome as a period and place far away from the homeland? In *Antony and Cleopatra*, the political (Rome), call it the rational world aiming and pursuing well-defined goals if you like, and the popular (Egypt), the ordinary masses realizing their instincts and day-to-day perceptions together constitute the England of the time. Alexandria itself is an imaginative extension of the common people's world in the English society of sixteenth-seventeenth century. The problems of the Roman nation state that the political figures in their respective areas had to deal with are closely related to problems of political stability in England.⁴

Can we not look at descriptions of Egypt as those that actually belong to English society at the turn of the century? Rome as represented in the play "is a world of measure, Egypt of excess; Rome of Pragmatism, Egypt of passion; Rome of political ambition, Egypt of emotional desire. Even stylistically the differences are marked: Roman speech is 'Attic', spare and direct; Egyptian speech is 'Asiatic', ornate and sensuous".⁵ The poetic manner in which Enobarbus describes Egyptian exuberance through the image of Cleopatra – "Her gentlewomen, like the Nereides, / So many mermaids, tended her i' th' eyes, / And made their bends adornings. At the helm / A seeming mermaid steers. The silken tackle / swell with the touches of those flower-soft hands, / that yarely frame the office" (2.2.216-21) – sharply contrasts Octavius's wry-crude style—"You may see, Lepidus, and henceforth know, / it is not Caesar's natural vice to hate / our great competitor. From Alexandria / this is the news: 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" (1.4.1-7)

Let's turn to the other play to consider contrasts and their inter-connection in a class-divided environment that formed itself in the wake of Renaissance. A distinction similar to the one in *Antony and Cleopatra* can be noted in *1 Henry IV* (1598). When Hal in the 'Egyptian fashion' chides Falstaff for hindering their sport by asking the time of day, he straightaway reminds of Enobarbus in the above quote. Says Hal,

³ Mahon p.86

⁴ Commenting on the historical significance of imperial power Catherine Belsey argues that "the primary imperative of Elizabethan foreign policy was not imperialist at all in the obvious sense of the term. Elizabeth's main interest was nearer home—in protecting the Channel against both France and Spain". *Shakespeare in Theory and Practice*, Edinburgh UP: Edinburgh, 2008, p. 113.

⁵ *The Arden Shakespeare: Complete works*, ed. Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson et al., 1998, Thomson: Delhi, 2007.

...What a devil hast thou to do with time of the day?
 Unless hours were cups of sack, and minutes capons,
 And clocks the tongues of bawds, and dials the signs of
 Leaping-houses, and the blessed sun himself a fair hot
 Wench in flame-coloured taffeta, I see no reason why
 Thou shouldst be so superfluous to demand the time of
 The day. (1.2.6-12)

Here the descriptions are picturesque, not indicating any specific thought but a whole series of images that reflect day-to-day occurrences. This is in clear contrast to the following exchange between two other characters. See the way in which the rebel group consisting of Hotspur, Glendower and Mortimer discuss the situation they are caught in:

Mortimer: Come, come, no more of this unprofitable chat.
 Glendower: Three times hath Henry Bolingbroke made head
 Against my power, thrice from the banks of Wye
 And sandy-bottom'd Severn have I sent him
 Bootless home and weather-beaten back.
 Hotspur: Home without boots, and in foul weather too!
 How scapes he agues, in the devil's name?
 Glendower: Come, here is the map. Shall we divide our right
 According to our threefold order ta'en? (3.1.59-67)

Here matters of territory are in focus; the manner is formal, direct and matter-of-fact. Without mincing words Mortimer, Hotspur and Glendower go in to the question of dividing resources as competitors in a deal. Isn't it cynical that nowhere in their mind is the interest of ordinary peasants and serfs? The concerns of the three are closely linked to the privileges, "power" and "right" that they seek. The terminology of "unprofitable", "made head," "map" and "threefold order" is exclusive to the upper layer to which the three belong. That they coexist with Hal and Falstaff, much like Enobarbus with the Roman generals in *Antony and Cleopatra*, only proves that Rome is not a smooth and unproblematic formation. In this sense, the Egyptian way of life as projected in *Antony and Cleopatra* and the English street/tavern life represented in *1 Henry IV* seem to bring to the fore the vibrant world of England's masses during Shakespeare's time, a world that symbolised the laity as distinctly opposed to the elites. This particular group of professional soldiers with roots in common life, wastrels and idlers, petty criminals and hangers-on enjoys as much importance in English society as the well-to-do section – the court officials, political schemers and the monarchs. One witnesses a kind of antagonism between these two sections overlooked by those who consider England to be a homogeneous entity.

Shakespeare's history plays have two kinds of English life projected in them: one that belongs to the court and deals with issues of political turmoil and war and the other that is found in day-to-day life where the lower rungs involve themselves in affairs of the community. It may be useful to note in some detail traits of common life evident in *1 Henry IV*. We observe the way in which members of this community enjoy one another's company. "Come, sing me a bawdy song; make me merry" is accompanied by sharing a bond and having food and drink together. (3.3.13) "Walking with thee in the night betwixt tavern and tavern" is the usual pattern informing the code. (3.3.43) Commoners depicted in the play have no qualms in robbing travelers – they have their own way of interpreting and justifying the practice: "Being governed as the sea is, by our noble and chaste mistress the moon, under whose countenance we steal." (1.2.28-29). For them stealing is a game that shows their inventiveness and creativity. They also exaggerate and abuse, a characteristic going well with evocative phrasing and picturesque usage: "You starveling, you eel-skin, you dried neat's-tongue" (2.4.241). Likewise, their view of women has the element of the raw and earthy as they flirt with them: "Is not my hostess of the tavern a most sweet wench?" (1.2.40). Add to this the fact that stretch this habit to downright lechery:

"A foolish hanging of thy nether lip" (2.4.400). Shakespeare has been witness to such an England and he captures these distinct facets with urgency.

Is *Antony and Cleopatra* any different with respect to the environment captured in History Plays? Doesn't the play present two stark worlds and the constant clash between them, as suggested earlier? If the triumvirs in the play in Rome are networked in political enterprise and are concerned to maintain their sovereignty over the world, then the soothsayer and attendants,

Lord Alexas, sweet Alexas, most anything/ Alexas, Almost most absolute Alexas, where's the / soothsayer That you praised so to th' Queen? O that I / knew this husband, which you say, must charge his / horns with garlands! (1.2.1-5)

the clown, the revelers and the eunuch-singer,

For I can do nothing / but what indeed is honest to be done/ Yet have I fierce affections, and think / What Venus did with Mars. (1.5.16-19)

in Egypt project a life of simple curiosities and pleasures emphasizing community living. It comes to mind that the location of the common people was the taverns, alehouses, streets and public squares. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra's palace in Egypt becomes an extension of these locales and is in fact viewed as a pleasure dome. Note for instance, Enobarbus's comment, "Bring in the banquet quickly; wine enough, / Cleopatra's health to drink," (1.2.13-14) or Antony's urgings to Cleopatra: "Now for the love of love, and her soft hours, / Let's not confound the time with conference harsh: / There's not a minute of our lives should stretch / Without some pleasure now". (1.1.45-48)

We may call *Antony and Cleopatra* a history play that captures the structures and patterns of Elizabethan-Jacobean period in a mode characterizing *I Henry IV*. Hal and Antony in the two plays are strongly linked to the world of the ordinary England in certain respects. It is observed that in the event of entering the Court, they are obliged to get delinked from what can be termed their human roots. The two characters have in them to merge with the crowd and participate in their revelry, yet they are left with no choice but to get back to the ties of their birth. Hal returns to the world of politics with changed priorities, he must shed his earlier self, whereas Antony perishes in the tussle of disowning and asserting his natural ways. In both cases the protagonists drew the strength from the commonness of life they had initially adopted. The question is whether the said strength will be put to use for promoting the interest of Falstaff and his associates and Enobarbus and his friends or for becoming effective in the corridors of privilege and power.

We find that Hal has for long remained one with his tavern friends Falstaff, Poins, Bardolf and Peto, in their mischief and idling, as has Antony in Egypt with Enobarbus and other soldiers. What Falstaff is to Hal, Enobarbus is to Antony. There is a comic vitality in both Falstaff and Enobarbus which gets transferred to Hal and Antony. Enobarbus's free humorous comment on hearing the death of Fulvia comes to mind in the context:

Why, sir, give the gods a thankful sacrifice. When
It pleaseth their deities to take the wife of a man
From him, it shows to man the tailors of the earth;
Comforting therein, that when old robes are worn
Out, there are members to make new. If there were
No more women but Fulvia, then had you indeed
A cut, and the case to be lamented: this grief is
crown'd with consolation, your old smock brings forth
A new petticoat, and indeed the tears live in an onion,
That should water this sorrow. (1.2.166-75)

Compare this with Falstaff's comic sense revealed in the scene he enacts with Hal of the King and the Prince and speaks for the former thus:

A goodly, portly man, i'faith, and a corpulent;
Of a cheerful look, a pleasing eye and a most noble
carriage; and, as I think, his age some fifty, or by'r lady,
inclining to threescore; and now I remember me, his
name is Falstaff. If that man should be lewdly given,
he deceiveth me; for Harry, I see virtue in his looks. If
then, the tree may be known by the fruit, as the fruit by
the tree, then peremptorily I speak it: there is virtue in
that Falstaff; him keep with; the rest banish. And tell
me now, thou naughty varlet, tell me, where hast thou
been this month? (2.4. 416-26)

The gaiety of both Falstaff and Enobarbus is infectious; the others in the scene join them energetically, as the natural vigour of the two characters affects them greatly. In the process, they get converted into likes of Falstaff/ Enobarbus, so to say. Falstaff himself claims "indeed you come near me now, Hal" (1.2.13), even as he is called "that villainous, abominable misleader of youth, Falstaff, that old white-bearded Satan" (2.4.456-7). Enobarbus' presence at Pompey's galley brings to life the feast with "Drink thou; increase the reels" and initiates Antony into celebration, "Ha, my brave emperor, / Shall we dance now the Egyptian Bacchanals and celebrate our drink?" (2.7. 102-3)

We note that the influence that Falstaff has on Hal is real and palpable in *1 Henry IV* whereas in *Antony and Cleopatra* Enobarbus's hold on Antony has a rational aspect to it. Enobarbus has a stand to take and a quality to assert, because of which he establishes an independent equation with Antony. See how this is worked out in the play. It begins with Lepidus asking Enobarbus to mend his ties with Octavius: "Good Enobarbus, 'tis a worthy deed, / And shall become you well, to entreat your captain / To soft and gentle speech" and the latter standing his ground tenaciously (2.2.1-3). We are struck that Enobarbus has his own mind and opinion on the matter. Even as he may be inferior in status to Lepidus, in the following response to him Enobarbus speaks as one on par: "I shall entreat him (Antony)/ to answer like himself. If Caesar move him, / Let Antony look over Caesar's head, / and speak as loud as Mars" (2.2.4-7). Enobarbus's fearlessness in rejecting Lepidus's proposal and in fact arguing against it points towards his high credentials vis-à-vis Antony and the freedom he enjoys to speak his mind with Antony.

On another scale, however, Falstaff and Enobarbus are easily swayed by emotion. Enobarbus repents having left Antony's camp thus, "O sovereign mistress of true melancholy/ The poisonous damp of night disponge upon me" (4.9.15-16) and Falstaff affectionately urges Hal, "Marry then, sweet wag, when thou art king, let / not us that are squires of the night's body be called / thieves of the day's beauty" (1.2.23-5) It is also interesting that the two in their witticism offer a light-hearted satirical view of the two friends from the privileged class as soon as the latter turn to the affairs of the state. When Prince Hal has decided to take to arms and orders Peto and Bardoll to act fast and appears almost great in his new avatar, Falstaff punctures it to offer a critical view of the chosen endeavour:

Prince: Go, Peto, to horse, to horse, for thou and I
Have thirty miles to ride yet ere dinner time.
Jack meet me tomorrow in the Temple hall
At two o'clock in the afternoon:
There shalt thou know thy charge and there receive
Money and order for their furniture.
The land is burning, Percy stands on high,
And either we or they must lower lie.

Falstaff: Rare words! Brave world! Hostess, my breakfast,
come!
O, I could wish this tavern were my drum! (3.3.198-207)

Note how Falstaff parodies the Prince's rousing couplet in the preceding lines. As the Prince thinks of war and commitment to one's land Falstaff mentions his breakfast and the tavern as his sphere of activity. Falstaff's words "Rare words" undercuts Prince's high objective and his launching into the new world of rule under him. We also see the growing distance between the two friends who in the changed circumstance have turned into conflicting perceptions. Whereas the Prince's couplet has aligned him with Hotspur at the level of language and elected mission, Falstaff's stance has brought into focus the mundane side of eating and drinking. His wishing of "this tavern" to become "my drum" suggests a slogan that the distressed English people of the fifteen nineties would accept as a voice of their own. The critical edge lent by Falstaff to his apparently comic stance helps us appreciate the play as realist theatre in the closing years of Elizabethan Age.

On his part, Enobarbus acts in a similar vein in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Antony's attempt at rebuilding ties with Octavius as a political necessity and giving justification for the wrongs: "As for my wife, I would you had her spirit in another; / The third o' the world is yours, which with a snaffle / You may pace easy, but not such a wife", makes Enobarbus quip: "Would we had all such wives, that the men might go to wars with the women!" (2.2. 66-71). It's not just that Enobarbus stands tall as a professional soldier but also that he has seen through the veracity and choice of Antony for what it is. Even if it's an act of self-deception by Antony, Enobarbus has the courage to steer clear of Antony's narrow pragmatism. Thus the two characters do not lack a sense of prudence – they have a mind of their own and the capacity to put forth logic that is inherent in their instincts to live and persist.

Still, we have to take Enobarbus and Falstaff as characters symbolizing problematic behaviour. This means that their lapses and limitations should be kept in mind while underlining their significance. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Enobarbus deceives Antony. In *I Henry IV*, on the other hand, Falstaff is deceived by Prince Hal. Enobarbus is able to think rationally about his prospects in the event of his staying longer with Antony. As far as Falstaff is concerned, he never understands the real motive of Prince Hal. Hal thinks politically and declares that it was a conscious attempt on his part to idle away his time with 'rotters' in order to shine bright later against his supposed incompetence in the past:

I know you all and will awhile uphold
The unyok'd humour of your idleness
Yet herein will I imitate the Sun,
Who doth permit the base contagious clouds
To smother up his beauty from the world,
That when he please again to be himself
Being wanted he may be more wonder'd at
By breaking through the foul and ugly mists
Of vapours that did seem to strangle him" (1.2. 190-8).

It seems that both Antony and Hal have in them capacity to traverse the two opposed spheres of life in England. In fact they act as an essential link between the two spheres. Could Shakespeare be imagining such an amalgam of the popular and the stately in the leader as an ideal to be sought for? Perhaps he does. But he also sees complexities involved in the search for such an ideal. Neither Antony nor Hal come across as flawless heroes. Their sense of leadership and heroic behaviour is brought into question by their narrow motives even as they have in them that can be seen as desirable in a ruler.

It is also worth considering if Antony and Hal could be compared at all – which in a way means that *Antony and Cleopatra* and *I Henry IV* can't be linked or equated. The latter is evidently an English history play, the events of which would embody collective memory of people at the time. *Antony and Cleopatra* on the other hand works as a distant symbol about the state and its functioning, and has much

less to do with details of English history. Still, would it be incorrect to say that *Antony and Cleopatra* with its advantage of being distant from the English world makes it even more pertinent to the immediate context in English life? The play provides a deeper insight into the mechanism of power – something that cannot be achieved in an immediate historical narrative closer to the period in which the play is written. In this sense *Antony and Cleopatra* like “*1 Henry IV* is concerned as much (perhaps more) with the complex social formation of England as it is with the complex moral formation of the king who will one day rule”⁶.

Finally, consider how the privileged operate in a world that they have themselves constructed. In *Antony and Cleopatra* the rulers and generals remain cloistered in their council chambers in Rome. In the arena of politics we confront a scene where friends are conspirators, and enemies are ever pitched to launch a war for gains of territory. Pompey is on the verge of using the moment of the feast to kill Lepidius, Antony and Caesar and usurp their kingdoms (2.7). This is when both groups, Pompey on one side and the three generals of Rome on another, have agreed on a settlement and the triumvirs least suspect danger. Even though Pompey and the three emperors join hands, they are no well-wishers of one another. In the course of the play we find that Caesar puts Lepidius under house arrest and sends his army to fight Antony. In this sense the political domain in Shakespeare is ever plagued with danger and distrust, it is a place where nationalistic goals are pursued at the behest of the dictator; his own acts are detrimental to the interests of the populace. Indeed, “Roman history encouraged dramatists” during the Renaissance “to explore the workings of power, the concept of freedom” which directly concerned them and “the bearings of history itself upon the fortunes of the individual.” The Elizabethans recognized it “as the period of maximum tension, the years which marked the rise of Caesar and the civil wars leading to the replacement of the republic by the empire”⁷.

Likewise, Shakespeare’s ‘history’ play *1 Henry IV* begins on a note of political instability where the King remarks: “So shaken as we are, so wan with care, / Find we a time for frightened peace to pant / And breathe short-winded accents of new broils / To be commenced in strands afar remote”. The political domain with its emphasis on “broils” and “frighted peace” has apocalyptic undertones. Both historical periods – the Roman, as projected in *Antony and Cleopatra*, and the English, as presented in *1 Henry IV* – brought to the fore a gamut of political/social issues that were of immense significance to Shakespeare’s world. These issues helped the playwright grasp his own surroundings vis-à-vis these narratives of the past. Shakespeare’s constant play with these histories (in not being completely faithful to them) suggests that he wished to invent a new world out of past records.⁸

If politics is manipulative and conspiratorial in Shakespeare, human potential is a matter of celebration. The way in which the two paradigms get posed vis-à-vis each other, they highlight the need to take a position on the existing tensions. The human potential projected in Shakespeare resides in the domain of ordinary people and their mundane world. Shakespeare consciously built a bridge between the subtle and the popular through his plays. In Francois Laroque’s words,

The epithet ‘popular’ which the Elizabethan elite and educated classes often associated with the somewhat vague idea of vulgarity and ignorance, on the contrary betokened a very specific and living culture which flourished ‘at the meeting point of art and life’ as Bakhtin aptly puts it: a culture that was rooted in a basic fund of primitive religion and that expressed an indefatigable curiosity in the material side of everyday life and an insatiable appetite for it. Such a culture is a

⁶ David Scott Kastan, ed., *King Henry IV Part 1*, The Arden Shakespeare, 2002, p. 7.

⁷ J.W. Lever, qtd. in Mathew H. Wikander, “Something is Rotten: English Tragedies of State”, *A Companion to Tragedy*, ed. Rebecca Bushnell, Wiley-Blackwell: U.K., 2009, p.323.

⁸ “Though it (*1 Henry IV*) concerns the reign of a historical English King and is largely based upon Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, it is hardly faithful to the historical record. Not only does it select, restructure, and change that history...but it mixes in completely invented material, that very tavern world that threatens to keep the Prince from his fate”. *The Arden Shakespeare: Complete Works*, ed. Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson et.al, 1998, Thomson: Delhi, 2007, p. 361.

complex, contradictory and virtually unclassifiable mixture, at once an art of living and a world vision, incorrigibly down-to-earth and materialistic yet, at another level, haunted by superstition.⁹

Thus, Falstaff in *1Henry IV* would tell us: "If sack and sugar be a fault, God help the wicked! / If to be old and merry be a sin, then many an old host / that I know is damned: If to be fat be to be hated, then / Pharaoh's lean kine are to be loved" (2.4.464-7).

⁹ Francois Laroque, *Shakespeare's Festive World: Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage*, tr., Janet Lloyd, Cambridge UP: Cambridge, 1991, pp. 49-50.