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A Reading of the Imperial Theme in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*

Abstract I: The following paper tries to prove the value and relevance of the critical-methodological discourse of Said's *Culture and Imperialism* for the early modern period. The chronological focus of Said's theoretical framework has been widened to include Renaissance Literature and applied to the analysis of the representations of political power in Stuart's England through a close-reading of William's Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Abstract II: Il saggio si propone di far emergere l'importanza che il discorso critico-metodologico di Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* potrebbe assumere nell'ambito degli studi sul Rinascimento inglese. I limiti cronologici adottati nell'analisi di Said sono stati estesi per dimostrare come la sua teoria critica, traslata nell'Inghilterra degli Stuart, sia efficace strumento per analizzare le modalità di rappresentazione del potere politico del tempo attraverso una *close-reading* di *Antony and Cleopatra* di William Shakespeare.

Understanding Shakespeare in the light of Cultural and Postcolonial Studies is the aim of this paper, taking into consideration that, for most of the last century, and with increasing importance and insistence, Shakespeare has become the subject/object of this kind of critical enquiry. As a result, Shakespeare's *corpus* has undergone critical investigation as a product of, and a commentary upon, the cultural context of his own times. Harold Bloom, in his characteristically thought-provoking, challenging style, has stated that Shakespeare was primarily and solely responsible for culture itself – inventing, as he did, ways of being 'human' (Bloom: 1998). This "early-modern cultural turn" (1) has provided a new

model of analysis that has helped the reader understand and interpret Shakespearian texts through a multidisciplinary approach. And being multifaceted and polyphonic, this approach is capable of giving consideration and importance to different cultural influences and perspectives that had been neglected or altogether ignored before. Due to the broader cultural scope added to literary critical methodology, there is still much more to be seen and interpreted in Early-Modern texts and, in this perspective, one must give pride of place to the analysis of Shakespeare's *opus*. If, following this new pathway, one combines the Cultural Studies' analytical model with a Postcolonial theoretical approach, one can envisage a completely new mode of perception and understanding of what Shakespearean texts signify.

The central aim of this paper is to re-contextualize Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* from both a theoretical and practical point-of-view in the light of Said's discourse as he proposed in his seminal book *Culture and Imperialism* (Said 1994). His perspective offers a useful method for extracting cultural content from the literary texts and allows the reader to focus on the political and cultural representation of colonialism and imperialism present in *Antony and Cleopatra*. At the same time, he shows how to understand cultural representations of beliefs, practices and symbols that mark colonial thought and descriptive mode in Shakespeare and other early-modern texts.

Might one read *Antony and Cleopatra* in this theoretical perspective while remaining aware of Shakespeare's England with all its cultural and political implications?

In fact, in opposition to the present reading, *Antony and Cleopatra* has been mostly considered as a Renaissance version of a modern romance where the sexual relationship between the two lovers obscures the political struggles within the Roman Empire – so much so that sexuality appears to transcend politics in the play (2). In colonial discourse, the powerful male sexuality of the conqueror is one of the most important *traits* of dominance of both new territory

and its subjects. From this viewpoint, it becomes difficult to see and understand the tragedy's relations to other Jacobean texts and to the poetics of political display which inform them and shape their structure and content.

In contrast to long-established interpretations, the present reading of the play is focused on the display of politics as a form of reciprocal seduction between the two protagonists. Shakespeare makes his contemporary audience feel the seduction of a world free of patriarchal power. An early-seventeenth-century theatre-goer would have perceived and immediately rejected the very idea because of the undesirable and fearsome political crisis inherent in such a utopia. Shakespeare's drama sets up the idea of detaching sexuality from politics, only to demonstrate the impossibility of doing so and to show his audience the disruption, destruction and death if such a course should ever be taken.

The spatial changes define different aspects of power both at a concrete level – land, empire – and at an abstract one – emotions, ideology and sexuality; the issues of imperial expansion, political power and sexual domination are dramatically compressed into spatial and geographical shifts and metaphors. Such metaphors are designed to reveal the complexity of the land and its dwellers to set boundaries between centre and periphery, inner and outer spaces and, above all, they epitomize the subalternity of the conquered land and the colonized body. Suffice here to remind the reader of the geographical metaphor of discovery used by John Donne in his *Elegy XIX: To his Mistress Going to Bed* which connects and combines discoveries and conquest of Newfoundland to the erotic appropriation and possession of the female body (3).

The powerful picture of the new political and cultural ambitions of Jacobean England, or rather Britannia, which were emerging with the public image of James I, foreshadows England's role as agent of civilization strongly highlighted by England's colonial pursuit at the time – the scramble for land

clearly shown, for instance, in Walter Raleigh's Second Voyage to Guyana. This expedition made clear the all-pervasive colonial rapacity that looked forward to British colonial rule of the first empire. Contemporary insistence on the parallel between the Roman Empire and Stuart England was a reflection of the Jacobean political representation of the new monarch's ideals and practices, which Shakespeare precisely portrays in *Antony and Cleopatra*. The Jacobean imperialist rhetoric of power and politics will emerge fully in the representation of the public role of King James I in a cultural and literary show. Re-reading the parallel depicted by Shakespeare through Said's methods of inquiry offers an invaluable framework for shedding light on some aspects of current critical debates on subalternity, both cultural and geographical, as well as on the challenging problem of mapping the subject.

In the first chapter of *Culture and Imperialism* entitled "Overlapping Territories, Intertwined Histories" (Said 1994: 1-50), discussing the race for territories of colonial politics, Edward Said stresses the importance of the relationship between colonized and colonizers seen as exchanges of cultural power since the once colonized, in the course of history, become, at times, future colonizers themselves thus creating a perennial shift of boundaries in politics, race and culture. This overlapping of cultures and geographies, as well as the intertwining of histories, is at the core of the tragedy under scrutiny –the unequal *rapport* between unequal interlocutors is represented by the dichotomy existing by Western and Eastern empires and rulers in the texts. A second dichotomy pervading the text is reflected in the cultural clash of civilizations between Rome and Egypt epitomized in the opposition between Octavius and Cleopatra and between Octavius and Antony. A third dichotomy stands in the resistance and opposition to the Roman colonial rule played out at different levels and by different *dramatis personae* who frequently change sides and make boundaries overlap in the play. A fourth dichotomy is displayed by the character of Antony always shown as struggling to find a balance between

two cultures, East and West. He is torn between diverse histories, diverse geographies, and diverse women – Fulvia, Cleopatra and Octavia. He tries to remain true to Roman culture and loyal to Octavius in spite of his obsession for mapping new geographies and new subjects as he struggles to maintain his imperial power in the East.

What is most striking in the text from the very beginning, and this deserves new critical attention since it prefigures British colonial thought, is the parallel drawn between the intertwining histories of the former Roman Empire and Jacobean England, proposing the analogy of Octavius and James I. In fact, when James I came to the throne in 1603, poets and dramatists invented pageants for James's coronation, translating into icons the theory which was to support and enforce the role of new King. Their iconography declared that the King was the new 'England's Caesar'. Writing of James's coronation pageant, Jonathan Goldberg (4) has suggested that the major trope of this pageant – indeed of James's entire reign – was that of 'revival' since James encouraged and welcomed a representation of himself as the British equivalent and embodiment of a Roman Emperor – and literary and cultural practices were meant to emphasize this connection. James I enjoyed being hailed with the title of 'Rex Pacificus' and being presented as the new 'Augustus Novus' – James wanted to be an imperial peace-maker, which is a wish voiced by Octavius in the play "The time of universal peace is near./Prove this a prosperous day, the three-nooked world/Shall bear the olive freely" (Shakespeare 1954: 4.6.4-6).

In a Roman setting, James claimed for himself a role of deity as Roman and Byzantine emperors had done before him. In this context, poets, playwrights, members of court and parliament, along with subjects would have been aware of a new insistence on the iconic nature of the king's body. James maintained not only that he had the only body whose blood united all of Britain but also that he existed in unbroken continuity in the tradition of monarchy. This was precisely the image of Stuart mythology that was extended and projected

beyond the first public pageant for the new king in 1605. Anthony Munday's lord mayor pageant, *The Triumphes of Re-United Britannia*, included an account of the myth of Brutus and his founding of England in which the new monarch was celebrated as "second Brute, Royall King James". Munday's text is prefaced by a survey of 'British' history (5) that supplies perspectives for *Antony and Cleopatra*, stating that James, the "second Brute", had put to rights the disastrous error made by the first one – that of dividing the realm in three states – restoring in Britain unity and peace, i.e. the same role that Shakespeare attributes to Octavius/James in the play. In Stuart historiography, Octavius' qualities of noble, well-intentioned and just ruler of his Empire are emphasized so as to gain unequivocal support for and endorsement of James/Caesar's political views. In Shakespeare's version, there are features of Octavius which reveal, at moments, the ambiguity of the future emperor of universal peace in contrast even with Shakespeare's main source for the play: Plutarch's *Parallel Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans*. Another important historical-mythical source that Shakespeare used was, of course, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, in which the historian had already found a mythic genealogy for the monarchs of Britain in Brutus who was related to Aeneas and the founding of Rome. In doing this, Geoffrey of Monmouth, in his chronicle, was creating a fusion of historical and mythological narratives that ensured the monarchs of England a direct lineage from the Roman emperors, regarded at all times as the paragons of kingship, which continued unchallenged up to Shakespeare's times. This specific literary and historical frame helped to assure Shakespeare and his contemporaries of a double ascendancy for the Stuart king and dynasty, one that is linked directly to Aeneas through Brutus and the other which derives from Augustus, the iconic emperor figure that James felt compelled to compare himself with in order to give proof of legitimacy for his rule (6).

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare introduces Antony to the audience as a Roman general doting “upon a tawny front”, a captive of the Egyptian queen. His profession of love for Cleopatra threatens the most basic law of Jacobean culture and politics – Antony should represent the rightful, powerful Roman Emperor of the East and, instead, he degrades himself to the point of being dominated by the ‘Other’, which he was supposed to conquer, subjugate and civilize in order to maintain power. He fails as an agent of Roman civilization; he betrays the Roman political *ethos* and he loses his moral, military and imperial values. He subverts the relationship between colonizer and colonized and, in doing so, he proves himself inadequate, inferior to Julius Caesar, who had once dominated Egypt, and to Cleopatra, who represents both the exotic woman-subject and her conquered land. Antony should, like Julius Caesar before him, impersonate and perform his role as the embodiment of imperial power. It is Agrippa, who, recalling Julius Caesar’s *affair* with Cleopatra does not suggest any loss of authority by ‘great Caesar’ and talks about Cleopatra using a geographical metaphor of fertile, colonized land.

[...] Royal wench!

She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed;

He plough’d her, and she cropp’d (Shakespeare 1954: 2.2.225-227)

On the contrary, Antony, rejecting the Roman cultural values, debases himself, positioning himself at the same level as the conquered Egyptian queen. He is no longer the virile male conqueror that possesses the conquered ‘feminized’ land and rules according to patriarchal laws. In politically submitting himself to the Egyptian Queen, publicly affirming her superiority, he also abdicates to his masculinity, to his virile dominant role of colonizer, a fundamental aspect of the imperial. Female Egypt robs Antony and his soldiers of their manhood and, just like a barbarian, slave Antony is now slave of the gypsies. He goes native and becomes a slave to his passions, a *trait* to be found among uncivilized men, but

it is certainly not his lust that dooms him. The danger for him is to embrace Egypt/Cleopatra's political ambition thus betraying the politics of imperialism. Defiantly Anthony affirms "Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch / Of the rang'd empire fall!" (Shakespeare 1954: 1.1.33-34). In making this statement, Antony calls for a complete separation of love from nationalism but his claim for the legitimacy of this relationship implies a complete subversion of cultural and political ideology of the time and this must, in new-historical terms, be 'contained'. Any Jacobean audience would have recognized instantly the delusional dream of Antony's politics. The desire to have sovereignty over one's sexual relations and therefore to construct a private world within the public is an inherently political act. The play clearly demonstrates that by desiring Cleopatra/Egypt rather than a Fulvia or an Octavia/Rome, Antony does not remove himself from political history, rather the consequences of his desire, embracing Cleopatra's political ambitions as well, change the course of Roman history itself. Cleopatra is Egypt and as such she embodies everything that is not imperial, be it Imperial Rome or imperial England, an exotic female with the power to pollute the civilized Roman world. It is perhaps difficult for a modern audience to see Cleopatra as such a threat to the political body but she embodies Egyptian fecundity, luxury and hedonism in sharp contrast to Rome's penury, harshness and self-denial marks of the just rulers of the world to be pursued for the common weal. Shakespeare endows Cleopatra's body with all the features, in Bakhtinian terms, of the 'carnevolesque' and defines her as the ultimate subject and object of illicit desire as Enobarbus's description suggests:

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety. Other women cloy
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry
Where most she satisfies; for vilest things
Become themselves in her, that the holy priests
Bless her when she is riggish (Shakespeare 1954: 2.2.34-39).

The sexual threat that Cleopatra represents to the political body is repeated in several different variations in the text. His sexual bond to Cleopatra strips Antony of his military judgment, deprives him of prowess in battle, and ultimately makes him commit suicide and Shakespeare, in this respect, follows faithfully Plutarch's description of the fall of Antony unlike other Elizabethan and Jacobean versions of the Antony and Cleopatra story – e.g. Daniel's *The Tragedie of Cleopatra* (Daniel 1599) just to name a text well-known to Shakespeare.

While leaving for Rome, Antony tells Cleopatra: “thou, residing here, goes yet with me, /And I, hence fleeting, here remain with thee” (Shakespeare 1954: 1.3.104-105). This common and rather stale lovers' exchange serves to remind the reader that in addition to the purely geographical shifts of place, there are also those of conceptual and ideological settings – the lovers' private world is constantly contrasted to the political space. Antony identifies the former with Egypt, and in preferring it to Rome is trying to privatize love, to locate his relationship with Cleopatra in a domestic arena, ignoring the fact that this territory is even more charged than that of Western Roman Empire with political and colonial ideology. When he is identified by Enobarbus with Egypt and metaphorically with “the old serpent Nile” in opposition to Octavius/James's identification with the Tiber/Thames, it is a definition of his degradation both cultural and political and it defines his new *status* as colonial subject. Becoming the ‘Other’ Antony voices his rejection of *Romanitas* as well as overtly manifesting his intention of opposing the imperial power embodied in his antagonist. When, at the play's beginning, Antony also attempts to expand his private Egyptian space so that it excludes the other, threatening world of masculine and imperial politics, he brings out the political threat to the established patriarchal ideology (7) and so signs, among other things, his own death warrant:

Cleopatra I'll set a bourn how far to be belov'd

Antony Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth (Shakespeare 1954: 1.1.16-17).

From the perspective of Roman patriarchy, and Jacobean political thought, Cleopatra has to be demonized and this can be achieved by defining her world as private while Antony, entering it and becoming a part of it, proves himself to be no longer a serious Roman general with all the superior virtues pertaining to *Romanitas*. Both inner and outer spaces are always invested with political connotations and can pose serious threat to the established and recognized political order, as Caesar makes clear indicating Egypt as place from which subversion can be practiced and as such it can never be merely a lovers' retreat.

Moreover, Antony courts Cleopatra with territorial and political gifts: he will “piece / Her opulent throne with kingdoms; all the East / shall call her mistress” (Shakespeare 1954: 3.6.8-11). He has been subdued by the “Egyptian gypsy” forsaking, for her sake, his duty as Roman Emperor with the transgression of political imperial laws and accepting to be unmanned by her. This representation of the debased colonizer could not have been made clearer by Shakespeare than when Antony affirms:

[...] here is my space,
 Kingdoms are clay; our dungy earth alike
 Feeds beast as man; the nobleness of life
 Is to do thus – when such a mutual pair
 And such a twain can do't, in which I bind,
 [...] pain of punishment, the world to weet
 We stand up peerless (Shakespeare 1954: 1.1.34-40).

Both Antony and Caesar are aware that Egypt is not merely a private space and that its female, non-European nature only intensifies its challenge to imperial Rome:

Antony [...]My being in Egypt, Ceasar
 [...]What was't to you?
 Caesar No more than my residing here at Rome
 Might be to you in Egypt. Yet, if you there
 Did practice on my state, your being in Egypt
 Might be my question (Shakespeare 1954: 2.2.40-44).

Patriarchal Rome contests Egyptian Cleopatra for the political threat she poses to the stability of the Empire and Antony's association with her means Rome is besieged because Antony, in Caesar's words, has been 'rioting in Alexandria'. As Caesar explains to his-friends Maecenas and Agrippa, Antony's misalliance with Egypt will contend for legitimacy authority over Rome. Octavius Caesar states that:

I'th'market-place, on a tribunal silver'd,
 Cleopatra and himself in chairs of gold
 Were publicly enthron'd.
 [...] Unto her
 He gave the establishment of Egypt; made her
 Of lower Syria, Cyprus, Lydia,
 Absolute queen [...] (Shakespeare 1954: 3.6.3-11).

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, alongside the overlapping of territories and the incessant geographical shifts (8) and not only does the setting constantly shift but in each change of scene the audience is reminded of another one – in Egypt, Rome is evoked and vice versa – there is also the problem of mapping and defining the identity of the subjects and the rulers since different characters

strive to rise above their station – the Elizabethan *degree* – like Cleopatra or sink below it like Antony. They struggle to assert an inner unity of being. In the beginning, despite being described as a “doting general”, Antony thinks he is in control of what he regards as the opposition between politics and pleasure. He attempts to possess Octavia trying to bond himself legally to imperial patriarchy while still having the oriental seductress Cleopatra through an ‘illicit’ relationship. He alternatively views Egypt as his retreat from Roman politics and a place to consolidate his bid for power. He oscillates between Cleopatra’s territory and Caesar’s. As the play proceeds he is no longer in command of such geographical division. His position in Rome and Egypt becomes unstable and manifests itself as a dislocation of personality “I / Have lost my way forever”, “I have fled myself I have lost command” (Shakespeare 1954: 3.11.3-4, 24). He also says: “Authority melts from me”; he cries “Have you no ears? I am / Antony yet” (Shakespeare 1954: 3.13.92-93). He is sadly aware of the change in himself: without power, without space, without Rome and without Cleopatra, Antony disintegrates and deliquescence becomes a late theme of the dramatic verse.

It is important to note that Cleopatra’s transformation into whore and the witch occurs precisely at this point: what Antony perceives as a betrayal reduces Cleopatra’s “infinite variety” to patriarchal and racist stereotype of the deviant woman, the outsider. At this point the real conflict and struggle for power is between Cleopatra and Caesar. Her resistance and opposition ignite the conflict latent between the two lovers. The three-way struggle marks shifts of places and boundaries by land and by sea. Antony perceives his own marginality and Cleopatra’s refusal to share her space affirms yet again her subversion of roles between colonizer and colonized, centre and periphery, and inner and outer dimensions. With the collapse of Antony’s role, both at a private and political level, with the world, as he conceived it, lost, the structural shifts of scene of the play and the geographical movement cease. The boundary is set. Such a development is dependent on the treatment of Cleopatra at this point in

the play: she gradually loses command of her own space: as a ruler of Egypt her space is now threatened by the expansionist's designs of Octavius. Her fear of invasion now includes her as a woman threatened also by her lover and this is shown by her stasis, her reluctance to move from her territory. The inconstant and variable Cleopatra may still threaten the boundaries between male and female, political and private worlds, subvert the roles of dominance and subalternity but now she remains geographically stationary, denoting, clearly, her 'Otherness'. She still fluctuates between establishing her emotional and political space. She progressively finds it harder and harder to fix the boundaries of her own territory in relation to Antony. This shift is now fully displayed at an emotional level: she can accept to be part of Antony's life as the female subject or she can enter politics impersonating the chaste woman as Elizabeth I had done so as to rule England before her. She will always stand outside Roman society as 'foul Egyptian' the very personification of the deviant woman – exotic, coloured and racially inferior, the sexually deviant colonized.

The last act appears to resolve the various dichotomies, tensions, oppositions of the play; Shakespeare's style turns into that of classical tragedy. It appears that Cleopatra is tamed, the wanton gypsy embodies the qualities of a good Roman wife, the queen is stripped of any authority, deprived of imperial signs, reduced tamed femininity "no more but e'en a woman, and commanded / By such poor passion as the maid that milks" (Shakespeare 1954: 4.16.74-75).

The variable woman is now marble constant. The witch gives way to the penitent woman as she tries to do "what's brave, /what's noble [...] after the high Roman fashion" (Shakespeare 1954: 4.16.88-89). Cleopatra also lets her own forceful identification slip for the first time. She does not accept Caesar's Rome, which remains a threat:

Shall they hoist me up

And show me to the shouting varletry

Of censuring Rome? Rather a ditch in Egypt
 Be gentle grave unto me! (Shakespeare 1954: 5.2.54-57).

At this stage, Cleopatra performs her last defiant unruly woman act. Having lost power she cancels her political defeat with her suicide – a last act of rebellion and resistance to imperial power as well as show of independence. Her own body, at once the body of the colonised and the body politic of Egypt, is not conquered: it is the last space to be withdrawn from Roman patriarchal control. Her liberty is possible in the absence of real territory, in the absence of maps of geographical and historical power, in the absence of conflict between clashes of civilization and empires.

Cleopatra acknowledges Caesar as “the sole sir o’th’ world” (Shakespeare 1954: 5.2.116) but powerless, she also states “What should I stay -/ In this vile world?” (Shakespeare 1954: 5.2.303-305). The narrative of masculinity and imperialism regains control but Cleopatra’s final performance not only defies patriarchal power and cheats Caesar of his triumph in Rome but also denies any complete subjugation to colonization while showing a way of opposition and resistance to the political power of invaders.

NOTES

1. The term ‘early modern’, which came into widespread use in literary criticism only during and after the 1980s, is preferred here to the term ‘Renaissance’. ‘Early modern’ is more precise in describing a period of English linguistic history. This has proved useful in the different disciplines of history and literary criticism which see the past as a forebear of the present.
2. Regarding the study of sexuality in Shakespeare’s period and its relationship with cultural modes of that time, see Dollimore 1994.
3. This use of the geographical metaphor of discovery had already become a literary *topos* by the end of the 16th century.

4. Regarding the importance of the endorsement of James's reign by poets of Stuart England see the work of Jonathan Goldberg 1983.
5. Antony Munday uses Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* as main source to write his own *History of 'British' Kings*.
6. Kevin Sharpe devoted his life and career to historical scholarship on Elizabethan and early Stuart period producing the 'authoritative' text on the reign of Charles I. His greatest merit was to introduce, in the historiography of the period, revisionism and debates about revisionism applying the same approach to the histories of politics, religion and society. He devoted critical attention also to cultural practices and texts advocating that they were not mere reflections but constructions of political attitudes and arrangements. Sadly, he died in 2012 leaving his work unfinished.
7. In the first three acts of the play, there are 23 changes of scene and shifts of location between the two empires whereas in Act 4 there are 15 changes of locale but all within Egypt. In Act 5, changes of places are confined to the area of Cleopatra's monument.
8. This quotation from the Bible bears so many implications for Jacobean England, including theological ones alongside the self-evident political ones, that an entire article should be devoted to its analysis. Suffice to say that it is highest expression of Stuart propaganda implying the peaceful political and religious re-union of the British Isles under the only legitimate monarch, James I, who had been endowed with Divine Right.

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