مجلة جامعة تشرين للدراسات والبحوث العلمية _ سلسلة الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية المجلد (26) العدد (2)2004
Tishreen University Journal for Studies and Scientific Research- Arts and Humanities Science Series Vol (26) No (2) 2004

The Symbols of Greek Mythology in Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra

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(Accepted 14/7/2004)

□ ABSTRACT □

This study aims at examining the various cultural and intellectual aspects of the human thinking, which dates years back in history. The human thinking was best embodied in Mythology, where the Greeks incarnated the various aspect of human nature in the characters of Apollo and Dionysus. They found in the character of these two gods a true refection for the instinct and natures inborn in Man; so, they believed that they represent the source of all these natures.

Shakespeare in his **Antony and Cleopatra** embodies all these aspects associated in Greek Mythology with Apollo, like "light", "youth", "sun", "reason", and "culture", in Antony; and he incarnates all these natures associated with Dionysus, like "permissiveness", "vegetation", "instinct", "primitive" nature", and "wine", in the character of Cleopatra. Shakespeare intentionally does not give precedence to either Antony or Cleopatra, striking a balance between their two natures. In doing so, he reassures that human nature is an amalgamation of two different natures inborn in man. None of these natures may be given precedence over the other, as Apollonianism versus Dionysiunism in ways of conduct and course of movement, but it is consonant with it in its predestinations. In this sense, the polarity in the play "becomes perfection" by the lover's devoted love. Thus, Shakespeare justifies the ways of the world to man, rather than denying them the right to exit.

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الرموز الإغريقية في مسرحية شكسبير (أنتوني وكليوباترا)

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(قبل للنشر في 2004/7/14)

□ الملخّص □

يهدف البحث إلى إبراز الأصول الفكرية والإنسانية المتجذرة في التاريخ بأشكال شتى، وخاصة الأسطورة بما فيها من أفكار نسجها الخيال الإنساني لتصبح مرآة تعكس واقع الطبيعة البشرية بخيرها وشرها.

يجسد قدماء الإغريق طبائع البشر المتمثلة "بالضوء"، "والشباب"، "والشمس"، "والعقل"، "والثقافة" "والخمر" بأبوللو ويجسدون عناصر "الغريزة"، "والنمو"، "والطبيعة البدائية"، "والانحلال"، والخمر في شخصية ديونيسوس، ويصنفون البشر على أساس هذه الطبائع والغرائز التي يعتقدون بأن أصولها تعود إلى هاتين الآلهتين.

يجسد شكسبير هذه الأفكار في شخصية أنتوني وكليوباترا، حيث يقدم كليوباترا صورة مصغرة للإله ديونيسيوس، وذلك بتصرفاتها، وحبها للحياة، والخمر، واللهو، والمرح، واتباعها للغريزة والشهوانية، ويصور أنتوني نداً لأبوللو، بحكمته، وعقله، وثقافته، وشبابه، وحبه للحياة والضوء، والقوة، والسلطة والاتزان. وبالتالي يؤكد شكسبير بأن الفكر البشري قديماً وحديثاً شيء متواصل وإن اختلفت المتسميات فإن الأصول الفكرية واحدة، والغرائز والطبائع واحدة، وبالتالي فإن البشر مهما اختلفت مشاربهم فإن أصولهم الفكرية متجانسة.

ينتهي البحث بالوصول إلى نتيجة هامة حول فشل أي من الطبيعيتين المشار إليهما أعلاه في التغلب على الأخرى حيث يفشل أنتوني في تحقيق نصر نهائي على كليوباترا، وتفشل كليوباترا بتحقيق نصر نهائي على أنتوني. ومن هنا تبرز أهمية خلق توازن بين الطبيعيتين، طبيعة حب الحياة من جهة، وغريزة العقل والحكمة من جهة أخرى، لأن الطبيعة البشرية هي خليط من هذه الغرائز جميعاً، وتبقى هذه الطبيعة ناقصة إذا ما سيطر عنصر من هذه العناصر على الآخر وأزاله من الوجود.

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Music and tragic myth are equally expressive of the Dionysiac talent of a

> nation and cannot be divorced from one another. Both have their origin in a realm of art which lies beyond the Apollonian; both shed their transfiguring light on a region in whose rapt harmony dissonance and the honor of existence fade away in enchantment… Thus the Dionysiac element, as against the Apollonian, proves itself to be the eternal and original power of art, since it calls into being the entire world of phenomena. Yet in the midst of that world a new transfiguring light is needed to catch and hold in life the stream of individual forms. If we could imagine an incarnation dissonance – and what is man of not that? - That dissonance in order to endure life, would need a marvelous illusion to cover it with a veil of beauty. This is the proper artistic intention of Apollo, in whose name are gathered together all these countless illusions of fair semblance which at any moment make life worth living and whet our appetite for the next moment. [1]

At the outset of this paper, I like to illuminate the appellations "Dionysiac" and "Apollonian", in terms of the connotative and denotative meanings of both terms. Nietzsche in The Birth of Tragedy relates Apollo to those aspects in nature which may be associated with 'light', 'youth', 'sun', and 'reason', and more so with "culture" and "medicine"; contrariwise, he associates Dionysus with "vegetation", "instinct", "primitive nature", "permissiveness", and "wine".[2]

The Nietzschean perspective establishes rich grounds for our approach to the Shakespearean lyricism in a number of his plays: chief among them is Antony and Cleopatra, among others, as denoted above, including Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth, Midsummer Night's Dream, and to a large extent, Othello. The application of the Nietzschean conceptions to Shakespeare's plays suggests that these plays are polar opposites on one hand, and correlated to each other, on the other: from one perspective the characters which stand for "light", "reason", "youth", "culture", and "restraint" can be said to be "Apollonian", and those characters which enact the elements of "permissiveness", "wine", "instinct", and "vegetation" may be held to be "Dionysiac".

In Antony and Cleopatra we find the polar opposites, namely, Antony and Cleopatra, struggling so hard to inculcate individually and almost separately, each of them, his own cult away from the other, either to over- power or to overrule the other. In the course of the play the world of Cleopatra, which represents the joy-giving powers of the natural Dionysiac world, seems to win Antony over: the powers of human life, namely, powers of blood and flesh, of instinct and natures inborn in us, prove to be more powerful than the Apollonian counter characteristics which emphasize "reason", "culture", and "light". Antony in (Act IV, scene xii) confesses that he was defeated by the lust of Cleopatra's eyes, before he was defeated by his foes' military tactics; he says:

> Betrayed I am
> O this false soul of Egypt! This grave charm,
> Whose eyes becked forth my wars, and called them home,
> Whose bosom was my crownet, my chief end,
> Like a right gipsy hath at fast and loose
> Beguiled me to the very heart of loss.
> What, Eros, Eros! (IV:xii: 23-29)

The Apollonianism of Antony fails to systematize its vision and thereby claim

truth as a course of action throughout the play. On the contrary, it realizes its course of action and validity throughout the play through lyrical exuberance and affluent vivacity, though frailities of Antony evade the Apollonian logic of "determinacy and lucidity", to be found in "the language of the Sophoclean heroes". This reality could be seen clearly in the misbehavior and rash actions of Antony on the one hand, and his leaning towards levity and licentious life on the other. Nietzsche finds in "the Sophoclean heroes" luminous images of Apollonian masks, "necessary productions" of "a deep look into the horror of nature";[3] the same look can be applied to Antony, as having an Apollonian mask "denoting the horror of the human nature, though, here

The mask is depicted in the Sophoclean heroes positively, while in Shakespeare's heroes, except Macbeth, is depicted negatively: in Antony and Cleopatra the horrors of human nature are eminently presented in the

Character of Antony, where the profound human joys for which he desperately thirsts bring about his destruction. Here, the Dionysiac wisdom, Nietzsche's terms, "hurls nature into the abyss of destruction", where 'The edge of wisdom is turned against the wise man"'.[4] Antony's declaration to Cleopatra before his death points clearly to that nature inborn in man, referred to above by Nietzsche, which he believes to have been conquered, though too late:

> Cleopatra: O Sun
> Burn the great sphere thou mov'st in! darkling stand
> The varying shore O th' world! O Antony.
> Antony: Peace!
> Not Caesar's valour hath o 'erthrown Antony
> But Antony's hath triumphed on itself. (IV:xv: 10-15)

The same remarks were emphasized by Agrippa, who has argued that Antony's ruin is perfectly just, brought to pass by two tragic flaws, '"presumptuous pride"' and '"voluptuous care of fonde and foolish love."'[5]

On the other hand, other romantic images in the life of the characters in Shakespearean tragedies carry the Dionysiac and the Apollonian capacious and sustainable metaphysic of human life.

In Antony and Cleopatra the Dionysiac images are incarnated in the lyricism of Egyptian passions best expressed in pining and the festive notes of Cleopatra, almost on all occasions wherever and whenever Antony's memories were recollected. Cleopatra speaks to Maridian and Charmian about her love and passions towards Antony. She says:

> O Charmian!
> Where think'st thou he is now? Stands he, or sits he?
> Or does he walk? Or is he on his horse?
> O happy horse, to bear the weight of Antony!
> Do bravely, horse, for wot'st thou whom thou mov'st
> ….. He's speaking now,
> Or murmuring, where is my serpent of old Nile? (I: V: 19-25)

Act (II) and the greater part of act (III) are built upon this basis where comedy of festivity and playful satire dominates the action in these scenes. Michael Long in his The Unnatural Scene: A Study in Shakespeare's Tragedy describes this Dionysiac lyrical

phenomenon as "the concrete comedy of Egypt where moments of incandescent lyricism rise repeatedly from a fertile chaos of humour, bawdy and animal vitality, all tangled together in a gamesame vision of Dionysos' powers."[6]

Antony throughout the play seeks a wanton flight from the duties which his alliance with Octavius Caesar imposes upon him. Antony, howsoever, his course of action wavers in the play, cannot avoid indulging in the heart of the fiery life of Cleopatra's playful and exuberant wanton love. He gives up his possession and power to Octavius Caesar for the sake of winning Cleopatra's company. In doing so, he abandons the powers of reason and intellect for the powers of wanton, opulent and infinite love. Michael Long again in his The Unnatural Scene describes the melting of Antony's Apollonianism into Cleopatra's Dionysiac world of wine, desire, wantonness, and levity when he emphasizes that:

> It is always against the background of the sweeping lyric life of this Apollonianism that we see the tragic misery and dwarfing of the central figure who has cut himself off from sleep, pleasure, and from the fertility and vastness of multitudinous seas, 'the easing air and the sure and firm-set earth'. He is not only cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in, but cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in while the bright and delightful spaciousness of the earth goes on 'nimbly and sweetly', wooingly, vexing him with 'cherubin' and 'sightless couriers' that image its unstoppable life, and eventually outrunning his reserves of violent resistance.[7]

According to the verities of action in the play we can say that the Roman version of Antony is at once set against the realities of Egyptian life, represented by Cleopatra. To go back to the outset of the first act, we can see how Cleopatra's first notes about "the scene-bearded Caesar", resounds with ribaldry and Dionysiac lyrical song of imperial connotation:

Antony: News, my good Lord, from Rome
Cleopatra: Nay, hear them, Antony.
Fulvia perchance is angry; or who knows
If the scarce-bearded Caesar have not sent
His powerful mandate to you….;
Take in that kingdom, and enfranchise that.
Perform it or else we damn thee.
Antony: How, my love?
Cleopatra: You must not stay here longer, your dismission
Is come from Caesar; therefore hear it, Antony.
Where is fulvia's process
… As I am Egypt's queen,
Thou plushest, Antony, and that blood of thine
Is Caesar's homage:
Antony: Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch
Of the ranged empire fall! Here is my space. (I: I: 17-34)

The Egyptian blood seems always to flow in the mirthful, passionate, and playful language of Cleopatra who takes pleasure in mocking Caesar's Apollonian powers. Caesarism here is subjected to the delightful and voluptuous powers of Cleopatra whose lyricism, bawdy, and animal vitality give rise to, in the first two acts and most of the

third act, incandescent moments of delicate derision of Antony's peevish nature. We note, for instance, in Act I.ii.iii, iv and v how "the Herculean Roman", Antony, has lost his mirth gradually under the derogative attacks of Dionysiac Cleopatra. Throughout these scenes we begin to create the figure of Antony as a "Herculean Roman", who has suffered a great defeat at the hands of the powers of levity, lascivity, licentiousness, and sumptuous extravagance of Cleopatra. This picture of the defeated hero grows bigger and bigger in the course of the action. As he comes to direct confrontation with his wife Fulvia, and rival triumvirs, Caesar, Pompey, and Lepidus, the Apollonian powers in Antony die away in the face of a multitude of hardships and pitfalls which turn up to him unexpectedly, as a result of indulgence in the fastly perishing pleasures of Cleopatra. Shakespeare appears to draw a tragic picture of Antony, who is dragged enforcedly into the heart of degradation and submission; this tragic fall is brought about as a conclusion to Antony's transaction against the Roman law of Apollo, which promotes wisdom against levity, reason against instinct, culture against primitiveness, and medicine against wine.

Richard S. Ide in his "The Heroic Tragedies of Chapman and Shakespeare" comments on Antony's tragic situation, stating that Antony "is and will be the noble Roman and noble lover at the same time, an identity he never could maintain in life and can achieve in death only at the risk of a devastating irony."[8]

Antony: I am dying, Egypt, dying; only
I here importune death awhile, until
Of many thousand kisses, the poor last
I lay upon thy lips.
Cleopatra: I dare not, dear.
Dear my Lord pardon: I dare not.
Lest I be taken. (IV:xv: 18-24).

Antony and Cleopatra go through a great amount of pressure from Rome and from the Dionysian elements which pressurize them into acceptance of humility and isolation of the spirit which was perilously exposed to torture. Without this stabilizing power of Romanticism, however, there would not have been "fire and air" in the play, as Antony and Cleopatra are inevitably driven towards chaos, desperation, spiritual decrescence, and humiliation in the course of action. This is because Shakespeare wants to drive home to the reader the fact that to live in the chaotic world of Dionysos is to live creatively, though this process means that he should keep his door open to all types of hazards and dangers.

The tremendous difficulties to which Antony was exposed are reemphasized in the course of action. At the end of the opening scene, Antony's declaration that he would like to make himself at home in Cleopatra's company by suggesting to "wonder through the streets and note the qualities of people", represents his natural Dionysian tendencies which bring troubles later to him. Such an adventure into Egypt points to Antony's yearning towards the Dionysaic world, though his attempts to "reestablish his psychological ties to Roman ideals and his political ties to the empire"[9] drive him away from the Apollonian world to which he originally belongs. In spite of Antony's deep feelings that he was heading towards self-destruction, he did not show serious intentions to evade the imminent dilemma. All that he does is to reemphasize his Apollonian qualities of soldierly bravery, discreetness, temperateness and decorousness. But his

reassurances remain mere words uttered to pay lip-service to his fellow-triumvirs to alleviate their worries about his continual absence. In this sense he becomes, as Richard S. Ide, puts it, "the empire's fool"[10], as his great, noble, calculated spirit drags him towards Egypt away from the triumvirs with whom he pledges allegiance.The Soothsayer in Act II, Scene iii speaks gently of this fact:

Antony: Say to me, whose fortunes shall rise higher, Caesar's or mine?
Soothsayer: Caesar's
Therefore, O Antony, stay not by his side.
Thy demon, that thy spirit which keeps thee, is
Noble, courageous, high, unmatchable,
where Caesar's is not. But near him, thy angel
Becomes afeared, as being O' erpowered; therefore
Make space enough between you.
Antony: Speak this no more. (15-24)

Antony's grandeur cannot be restored, unless he returns to Egypt. There only exist for Antony the potentials for self assurance. Jan Kott assures in his Shakespeare our Contemporary, that Shakespeare's tragedies are essentially "multifarious", and the world which Shakespeare describes in these tragedies is "varied", though "small for three rulers"; Too small even for two. Either Antony or Caesar must die."[11]

However, it seems that Antony's dreams to achieve triumph over his impassioned sensations towards Cleopatra go astray. The Herculean heroism which had tinged his behavior towards Egypt, as an oriental district, as compared to Rome in its Western glamour, dies away. He fails to maintain an Apollonian grandeur, and self–assurance, besides impassioned chivalric love for Cleopatra. The balance seems to weigh in favor of the Dioniasiac, as the cryptic, sensuous, erotic, and pleasure-giving nature of his world succeeds to overwhelm the rational tendencies of the opposing Apollonian world.

Antony wakes up late from the love-dream into whose abysses he had delved himself. But when he restores his consciousness, he concludes that it was too late. In Act IV, scene fourteen, he announced that Cleopatra is behind his tragical downfall. She simply leads him to self-destruction, though he contends that he is love's martyr, who sacrifices virtue for convenience, pleasure for Herculean Heroism, and devotion to love for devotion to Rome;

Antony: Hence, Saucy eunuch, peace!
She hath betrayed me, and shall die the death.
Maridian: My mistress loved thee. And her fortunes mingled with thine
Entirely.
Antony: I will o' ertake thee, Cleopatra, and
Weep for my pardon. So, it must be, for now
All length is torture. (IV: xiv: 24-26/44-46)

In the above statement we can find the deeply tormented mind of Antony, a mind which is torn between two streams of consciousness: one stream imposes on Antony an Apollonian eagerness to return to Roman chivalric norms and canons, while the other drags him forcibly towards the revelries of Egypt. It seems that the current of love is more powerful than servitude to Roman principles of loyalty to homeland and its noble issues. Cleopatra's feigning of death reveals her deceptive attempts to compel Antony to get himself more involved in the tangles of love she has already laid down for him. Eros

and the Queen together confirm later that the way of Antony is nonetheless the way of love, as Cleopatra has already exhausted all possibilities of maneuvering that Antony has no where to go. He simply devotes himself to love:

Eros: Farewell, great chief. Shall I strike now?
Antony: Now, Eros.
Eros: [Stabbing himself] why, there then! Thus do I escape the sorrow
Of Antony's death.
Antony: Thrice nobler than myself,
Thou teachest me, O valiant Eros, what I should, and thou couldst not.
My queen and Eros
Have by their brave instruction got upon me
A nobleness in record. (IV: xiv: 93-98)

In spite of Antony's arduous attempts to prove himself as a valiant Roman, Cleopatra's mystical powers of love dominate his mind, as he paces slowly towards death. When he is told that Cleopatra is still alive, he immediately returns to his world of Romance, pressing "in a typically blind love vision on improbable claim on reality"[12]. The duality in Antony's character pervades almost the whole action in the play, from the outset of the first act to the last act. Two contradictory worlds, one Apollonian, the other Dionysiac, pull the hero forcibly towards their idiosyncratic peculiarities: The world of principles fails, as the world of frailty, flesh and blood, instincts and desires wins the battle. Wilard Farnham in his Shakespeare's Tragic Frontier contends that "Antony constantly showed nobility, but that his nobility frequently had curiously ignoble aspects."[13] One may excuse or at least sympathize with Antony's actions, as developments within the course of action in the play bend in the interest of Cleopatra; it seems that "fortune rules", in terms of M.C. Bradbrook, as "mutability rules". This represents for Antony "the good and evil aspects of his fortune embodied in Octavia and Cleopatra": two aspects which can also be traced in the character of Antony himself, “the Roman Captain and the lover of the royal Egypt".[14]

Though Antony's death, or precisely speaking, his tragic downfall, had been caused by Cleopatra's mystical nature, he absolves her from the consequences of such a tragic downfall; he simply claims that a Roman valiantly vanquishes a Roman (Iv: xv: 58). In the opinion of Terry Eagleton in his "Value: King Lear, Timon of Athens, and Antony and Cleopatra": "It is this Nietzschean or Yeatsian ethic which informs Antony and Cleopatra, a play which opens with the censorious remark that 'Antony's dotage overflows the measure.'"[15] In other words, Philo's declaration above at the outset of play, combined with his other Sophoclean choral ethic that Antony is "a strumpet's fool", remain the main ethic throughout the play. Antony's chivalric heroism renounced implicitly above by Philo proceeds from a disinterested love, dauntless and great.

Cleopatra's love for Antony is most powerfully emphasized in her last reminiscences of Antony's Apollonian world of valor, principles, and devotion: "her folksy prose, the sexual innuendo, the reminders of the deceit and evil to which women are prone and the emphasis on the finality of death shatter Cleopatra's pretensions and with her dream vision."[16]

Cleopatra at this juncture does her best to redeem her already stained image in the eyes of Antony, after her shameful escape from the naval battle with his rival triumvirs. She simply declares adoration to him that the world would be dull without Antony's company:

Cleopatra: No, let me speak, and let me rail so high
That the false huswife Fortune break her wheel,
provoked by my offence.
…… (42-44)
Antony: The miserable change now at my end
Lament nor sorrow at, … (51-52)
Cleopatra: Noblest of men, woo't die?
Hast there no care of me? Shall I abide
In this dull world, which in thy absence
No better than a sty? O, see, my women.
The crown o 'the' earth doth melt. My Lord! (IV:xv:59-63)

In this scene it is quite reasonable to suggest, as A. C. Bradly puts it, that "the heroine equals the hero in importance"[17], because she uplifts her vile standards to measure against those of Antony. Doing so, the Apollonianism of Nietzsche is placed on equal footing with Dionysianism, as the only difference between the two worlds here lies in the nature of the matter of which each of the two worlds consists, rather than the manner at which both have arrived. Shakespeare concludes, thus, by justifying the ways of the world to man, rather than denying them the right to exist; and this conclusion is what brings us to the major thesis above that Apollonianism is opposite to Dionysianism in ways of conduct and course of movement, but is consonant with it in its predestinations. Robert Onstein in his article on Shakespeare confirms that the poles of this paradox which meet at a certain point in their infinite parallelism cannot be tuned in the play into an allegory of art to see that its final paradox is the final paradox of Donne's "canonization". Rather, the polarity in the play becomes perfection "by the lover's devoted love": their "faults shine like the unchanging stars"[18], and so do the worlds of Apollonianism and Dionysianism, when they converge in an eternal embrace.

NOTES:

1. Golfing, Francis (Trans). **The Birth of Tragedy** by Friedrich Nietzsche. New York: Anchor Books, 1957. P. 145.

2. Ibid., **The Birth of Tragedy,** (1957), Passim.

3. Ibid., **The Birth of Tragedy**, P. 60.

4. Ibid., **The Birth of Tragedy**, P. 61.

5. Quoted in Wilard Farnham's **Shakespeare's Tragic Frontier**. London: Cambridge University Press, 1963, P. 153.

6. Michael Long. **The Unnatural Scene: A Study in Shakespeare's Tragedy**. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1976. P. 246.

7. Ibid., Long, **The Unnatural Scene**, P., 234

8. Richard S. Ide, **Possessed with Greatness: The Heroic Tragedies of Chapman and Shakespeare,** Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1980. P. 122.

9. Ibid., Ide, **Possessed with Greatness**, P. 109.

10. Ibid., P. 111.

11. Roselaw Taborski (Trans.). **Shakespeare Our Contemporary by Jan Kott.** London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1965. P. 136.

12. Ibid., **Possessed with Greatness**, P. 122.

13. Ibid. **Shakespeare's Tragic Frontier**, P. 146.

14. M. C. Bradbrook. **Shakespeare the Craftsman**. London: Cambridge University Press, 1968. P. 117.

15.John Drakakis, Ed. **Shakespearean Tragedy**. London: Longman, 1992. P. 396.

16. Ibid. **Possessed with Greatness**. P. 126.

17. A. C. Bradly. **Shakespearean Tragedy**. London, 1985. P. 49.

18. Leonard F. Din Ed. **Shakespeare Modern Essays in Criticism**. London: Oxford University, Press, 1957. P. 402.

19. Note: Thanks to Mr. M. Hawamdeh for the consultation he provided on Greek tragedy.

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