

Filling a “Gap of Nature”: Cleopatra and the Elements

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She is the earth because they call her Egypt; she is as fertile and unpredictable as the water of the Nile. She fires with fury when angered and dissolves into thin air, leaving only traces of her scent behind. In William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra VII Philopator embodies the four elements and is therefore overwhelmingly present throughout the play. While "characters associated with Egypt perceive the world as composed of the four elements," the Romans perceive her and Egypt as unfamiliar, which spurs their desire for the exotic.¹ As Mark Antony and his Roman companions reside in Egypt, Cleopatra has them under her spell to such great extent that they cannot conceive of her presence. Jonathan Gil Harris explains how Cleopatra frequently disappears throughout the play, which intensifies the Roman desire; Romans crave the things that they cannot have.² He goes further to explain how her absence creates a "fantastic 'gap in nature'" and an "intolerable vacuum" that reinforces the Romans' attraction to Cleopatra.³ Cleopatra often seems to physically disappear in scenes where she is vividly present. Mary Thomas Crane offers an explanation that suggests the phenomenon of Cleopatra's absences: "[Romans] don't seem to perceive, or imagine themselves as part of the natural cycles that so shape Egypt" because they believe in the visual and material world that only changes according to mankind.⁴ The Romans' lack of perception of the immaterial does not allow for them to recognize their surroundings beyond the material. According to the Egyptian belief in nature and Cleopatra's role as the head of Egypt, she embodies the elements, and the

¹ Mary Thomas Crane, "Roman World, Egyptian Earth: Cognitive Difference and Empire in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*," *Comparative Drama*, vol. 43, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 5, accessed April 19, 2018, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23038035>.

² Jonathan Gil Harris, "'Narcissus in thy Face': Roman Desire and the Difference it Fakes in *Antony and Cleopatra*," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 4 (Winter, 1994): 415, accessed April 22, 2018, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2870964>.

³ *Ibid*, 416.

⁴ Crane, "Roman World, Egyptian Earth: Cognitive Difference and Empire in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*," 9.

Romans cannot recognize these intangible qualities. She “disappears” as a consequence. Instead of approaching the immaterial earth like Cleopatra who “imagines herself as the embodiment of Egypt because she has been shaped by its environment,” they reduce Cleopatra to a “gap of nature.”⁵ But Cleopatra does not disappear; she is present in an immaterial form where the elements that shape the earth substitute for her presence.

Antony often speaks of Cleopatra’s absence in terms of the elements, but the unfamiliarity of the natural forces does not bring him closer to appreciating her immaterial presence. Crane explains how the play indicates that “the elemental Egyptian earth and transcendent fire and air” put forward the “idea that they are a powerful fantasy,” reflecting the Roman mindset.⁶ The Romans appreciate the natural forces in terms of the visual, but do not embrace their immaterial characteristics. Antony tells Cleopatra “By the fire / That quickens Nilus’ slime, I go from hence / Thy soldier, servant, making peace of war.”⁷ Antony suggests his awareness of the elements as a powerful force, but does not recognize Cleopatra’s presence in his own imagery because she is not physically present when he leaves. Still, he explains how the “fire” makes the water of the Nile race as if referring to his own blood pumping out of passion for Cleopatra to demonstrate his desire for her. Antony exhibits his love for her by translating his emotions in terms of nature. Nevertheless, he perceives the elements constituting part of Cleopatra’s identity as foreign, and he cannot perceive her immaterial form. He could use the language of nature that would evoke Cleopatra’s presence to fill his gap of desire, but cannot construct that link.

⁵ Crane, “Roman World, Egyptian Earth: Cognitive Difference and Empire in Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra,” 7.

⁶ *Ibid*, 13.

⁷ William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. David Bevington (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1, 3, 70-78.

Invoking similar themes later in the play, the Romans lose their battle at sea, which implies their unfamiliarity with the unpredictable elements. They have won many battles on the hard-surfaced land, yet suffer defeat when fighting in water. The Romans believe that the world only changes according to human agency. As Crane explains “If Egypt can’t be seen or firmly touched, it seems difficult to know or conquer it with any certainty,” which indicates how the understanding of the elements is key to succeed in battle at sea.⁸ The same issue arises in Cleopatra’s case: to experience her immaterial presence, the Romans need to understand the elements. Before the battle, Antony proclaims he “would they’d fight i’th’fire or i’th’air; / We’d gith there too” and blames Cleopatra for their defeat afterwards.⁹ His rage for Cleopatra’s suggestion to fight at sea indicates the nature of her presence in Antony’s mind; in this moment, he does not long for Cleopatra, which eliminates the vacuum of desire, yet the reference to the elements proposes her presence throughout his defeat. As soon as Antony fails at sea, he does not desire Cleopatra and blames her even though she is not physically present. He even calls her a “Triple-turned whore!” contrasting his usual passionate and tender language.¹⁰ Antony ultimately pairs water with the Egyptian ruler and irrationally faults her as a consequence. The lack of understanding and knowledge of the elements cause this reversal of perception. The example is one of the very few instances where a Roman equates Cleopatra to the embodiment of the elements because desire is *not* trying to fill Cleopatra’s physical absence. In other words, Romans are more open-minded to their immaterial surroundings when desire does not determine

⁸ Crane, “Roman World, Egyptian Earth: Cognitive Difference and Empire in Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra,” 12.

⁹ Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, 4, 10, 36-37.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 4, 12, 13.

their perception. This consideration allows them to contemplate the possibility of Cleopatra's immaterial presence.

As a rule, the Romans believe in the "hard-surfaced, impervious world," and the Egyptians in the earth.¹¹ Given that Cleopatra is the ruler of Egypt, and her servants and even the Romans call her "Egypt," she becomes the earth that the land touches. Cleopatra recognizes her identity as Egypt as well as nature, and refers to her complexities as she bids Antony farewell: "I prithee, turn aside and weep for her [Fulvia], / Then bid adieu to me, and say the tears / Belong to Egypt."¹² The departing is emotional for both Cleopatra and Antony, but her Egyptian identity hints at her immaterial presence that accompanies her lover; whenever he sheds tears for Cleopatra, she is vividly present in the water running down his cheeks. Cleopatra recognizes how crying for a person evokes an immaterial presence, while Antony's Roman identity, which believes in the material, cannot fathom the concept. Instead the Romans experience Enobarbus' "gap in nature," and perceive Cleopatra as wholly absent.

Enobarbus describes Cleopatra as having an "infinite variety."¹³ Given that the Romans see the world in very simple terms, they have trouble conceiving of Cleopatra's unpredictable qualities. L. T. Fitz explains that "her deliberate unpredictability and her manipulative use of mood changes for the purpose of remaining fascinating to Antony" and the other Roman men.¹⁴ Therefore, her unpredictable nature retains Roman interest. While Cleopatra's "infinite variety" represents her actual behavior, Shakespeare's description also refers to the unpredictable and

¹¹ Crane, "Roman World, Egyptian Earth: Cognitive Difference and Empire in Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra," 7.

¹² Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, 1, 3, 76-77.

¹³ *Ibid*, 2, 2, 246.

¹⁴ L. T. Fitz, "Egyptian Queens and Male Reviewers: Sexist Attitudes in Antony and Cleopatra Criticism," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 3 (Summer 1977): 299, accessed April 25, 2018, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2869080>.

ever-changing nature of the elements because they are part of her identity. Enobarbus converses with Antony about leaving Cleopatra to focus on political conflicts. Enobarbus agrees that “her passions are made of nothing but the finest part of pure love” to reassure Antony of her feelings; he continues to compare her to the elements: “We cannot call her winds and waters / sighs and tears; they are greater storms and tempests than / almanacs can report.”¹⁵ In the first line, Enobarbus allocates the statement to a woman’s overreaction to her man’s departure, but the references to water and air bring an immediacy to Cleopatra’s immaterial presence. The elements exemplify Cleopatra’s passion for Antony as the quotation indicates that losing Antony will evoke the “infinite variety” of the elements: on Antony’s journey at sea, the strong winds represent the air, while the sea signifies tears and water. Cleopatra accompanies Antony in form of the elements, but the Romans cannot perceive the abstract sensuality.

Throughout the play, Enobarbus barely describes Cleopatra in terms of the physical, which contradicts the Roman understanding of physicality, but indicates why they do not experience the Egyptian ruler as present. Harris describes how Enobarbus’ rhetoric “produces Cleopatra as desirable only according to the Roman logic of desire; that is, she exerts a seductive power by virtue of her paradoxical absence within Enobarbus’ depiction of her.”¹⁶ Cleopatra’s absence increases the desire for the Romans, indicating why Enobarbus omits her physical details. His infamous barge speech, describing the moment of Cleopatra and Antony meeting, presents the best example to the lack of Cleopatra’s physical presence:

The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne
Burned on the water. The poop was beaten gold;

¹⁵ Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, 1, 2, 143-45.

¹⁶ Harris, “‘Narcissus in thy Face’: Roman Desire and the Difference it Fakes in Antony and Cleopatra,” 418.

Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
 The winds were lovesick with them. The oars were silver,
 Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
 The water which they beat to follow faster,
 As amorous of their strokes.¹⁷

Contrasting the Roman ideology, Enobarbus describes Cleopatra in terms of the elements. She is so powerful that her fire “burned” her other element water, while the air is “perfumed” and “lovesick.” Though she is lacking a physical form, Enobarbus’ lyrical verse contrasts his usual cold language, which emphasizes the response that Cleopatra evokes even in the most disciplined of Romans. Enobarbus describes her in terms of the immaterial, but the Romans do not recognize that the elements represent Cleopatra. Even though he alludes to perceiving her presence as “A strange invisible perfume hits the sense,” which directly references the sensory perception of the immaterial, his Roman awareness of the world redirects his focus to the hard-surfaced and material.¹⁸ Enobarbus continues his speech about Antony sitting alone on the throne “Whistling to th’air, which, but for vacancy, / Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too, / And made a gap in nature.”¹⁹ According to Shakespeare’s barge speech, the Romans conclude Cleopatra to be absent, thereby creating a “gap in nature” even though Antony is whistling in “th’air.” The air represents Cleopatra given the Egyptian trope that the elements compose the environment and therefore mankind, which the Romans cannot appreciate. The Romans miss the opportunity to fill their desire for Cleopatra because of the lack of sensual perception. They speak of the elements but cannot perceive them.

¹⁷ Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, 2, 2, 200-06.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 2, 2, 222.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 2, 2, 226-28.

Cleopatra signifies water, which intimately links her to the Nile. For Egypt, the Nile signifies the physical state of Alexandria and the rest of the land; the water is responsible for the harvest that feeds the land and “the flooding of the Nile – and the fertility that it engenders – is the central Egyptian trope.”²⁰ Therefore, the river represents the fruitfulness of Egypt and shapes the identity of Cleopatra’s people. Harris strikes beyond the notion of fertility by describing Egypt “as a female domain, embodied by a Cleopatra who is seen to be as abundant, leaky, and changeable as the Nile,” which underlines the unpredictability of the cycles of nature and the Egyptian ruler.²¹ Cleopatra is furious with the messenger who brings the news of Antony’s marriage to Octavia, and she consequently exclaims, “Melt Egypt into Nile,” reinforcing the interchangeable relationship between the character and the river.²² The water imagery of the Nile embodies Cleopatra; Antony speaks of the water in lyrical verse even though the Romans do not directly acknowledge the link between the Egyptian ruler and the river. As Antony explains to Caesar the significance of the Nile, he says

The higher Nilus swells,
The more it promises; as it ebbs, the seedsman
Upon the slime and ooze scatters his grain,
And shortly comes to harvest.²³

While the Romans do not directly attribute the conversation about the Nile to Cleopatra, the sensual imagery of the water carries sexual undertones. Given Cleopatra’s intimate relationship to nature, she also symbolizes fertility, which is synonymous with her vivacious

²⁰ Crane, “Roman World, Egyptian Earth: Cognitive Difference and Empire in Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra,” 8.

²¹ Harris, “‘Narcissus in thy Face’: Roman Desire and the Difference it Fakes in Antony and Cleopatra,” 409.

²² Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, 2, 5, 79.

²³ *Ibid*, 2, 1, 19-22.

sexuality. The description of how the water of the Nile “swells” and the sensual connotation of “slime and ooze” imply Cleopatra’s bodily fluids and sexual lust. Therefore, the desire of the Romans is present given the hypothesis that the elements substitute for the Egyptian ruler in her physical absence. However, Cleopatra’s presence in the river cannot completely satisfy their lust because they do not recognize her immaterial form.

Cleopatra returns to the comfort of nature as she prepares for her suicide. Knowing she will die, Shakespeare employs imagery to emphasize the transition from the material to the immaterial; though Cleopatra acknowledges that she will not cease to exist, she will live on embodied in different forms of nature. After Antony dies, she exclaims, “The crown o’th’earth doth melt,” foreshadowing her own death.²⁴ The crown serves as a metaphor for her rule over Egypt, which will “melt” and dissolve when she ends her own life. Cleopatra acknowledges her physical absence, but the “melt[ing]” of her rule, suggests her immaterial presence. Before her physical death, “Cleopatra creates an Antony out of her imagination, a lover and hero not bound by his physical limitation or by nature.”²⁵ While the Romans do not believe in an immaterial presence, Cleopatra describes Antony to be “sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle–,” thereby experiencing her lover through the air.²⁶ She uses sensual and tender terms for Antony, but returns to the reality of the natural course of decay to explain her transition from the material to the immaterial. She commands that she should be laid on Nile’s mud “stark nak’d and let the water-flies / Blow me into abhorring!” which implies how she will dissolve into the earth after the flies feed on her.²⁷ Thereafter, the characters in Shakespeare’s play will only experience her

²⁴ Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, 4, 15, 65.

²⁵ Fitz, “Egyptian Queens and Male Reviewers: Sexist Attitudes in Antony and Cleopatra Criticism,” 334.

²⁶ Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, 5, 2, 305.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 5, 2, 57-58.

through the immaterial states of nature. Cleopatra not only acknowledges her transition from a physical being to an immaterial one, but returns to her awareness of her embodiment of the elements; just before her death, she exclaims, “I am fire and air; my other elements / I give to baser life.”²⁸ Her fire represents her passion and fierceness as an Egyptian ruler, while the air refers to her immaterial presence that the Romans can never fathom. With her statement, she prepares to fully dissolve into the elements, leaving her physical form behind. According to the Egyptian belief that the environment shapes humanity, she does not disappear but takes on the immaterial state of the elements.

Shakespeare’s Cleopatra knows that a physical existence of a person is not necessary to evoke her presence. Her own imagination and senses allow her to experience Antony even though he has died, because she knows that he will dissolve into the elements and take on an immaterial shape. The Romans, on the other hand, cannot substitute the elements for Cleopatra’s identity. Their belief in the concrete, hard-surfaced, and visual world does not allow them to conceive of their surroundings beyond the factual. They recognize Cleopatra’s beauty and sexuality, which is why her physical absence creates the “gap of nature” that the Romans experience throughout the play. Even though characters such as Antony and Enobarbus speak of Cleopatra in terms of the elements or other immaterial constructs, they do not have the ability for imagination and sensuality to substitute for the Egyptian ruler. In the eyes of the Romans, her mysterious physical disappearances add to her allure and reinforce their desire for her. Embracing the elements as part of Cleopatra’s identity is the closest way of experiencing her “infinite variety,” and eliminates her absences; the Egyptian ruler has such overwhelming

²⁸ Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, 5, 2, 282-83.

qualities impossible to describe in physical terms, which suggests Shakespeare's choice to portray her in elemental forms.

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