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# **“As Water is in Water”: The Roman Perception of Egypt in Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra**

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## CONTENTS

<b>0. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1. The Flow of the Tide.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1.1 The Luring Waters of the Nile.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1.2 Roman Antagonism against Water.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1.3 Antony's last Attempt to Turn the Tide.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>2. Tidal Equipoise.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>3.The Ebb of the Tide.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>3.1 Tragic Dilemmas.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>3.2 Recognition.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>3.3 From Matter to Spirit.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>4. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Works Cited.....</b>	<b>27</b>



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## **Abstract**

Antony and Cleopatra live in a world of impending dissolution where things are evaporating and disintegrating into a new universe and where boundaries are nothing else than a nebulous blur. Water in all its forms and dynamics has a lead role in this new cosmos where personal identities and beliefs are shaken, foundations liquefied and fortunes lost. Blending, melting and dissolution become a leitmotiv of the play. The amalgam of the four natural elements is the background to the characters' entire magnificence journey from the mundane into the celestial. Human and cosmic events intertwine in this world of transcendental metamorphosis. Drawing on the grandeur of cosmic language, mythological imagery and symbolism, Shakespeare manages to fathom the depths of the psychology of his characters. By a strong sense of destiny, as if they were caught up in a restless tidal cycle, Antony and Cleopatra's characters' hopes and fears ebb and flow until they reach their final port of call.

This TFG aims to demonstrate that water is in the heart of Shakespeare's tragedy not only for its constant appearances but also for its capacity of metamorphosis, which is after all, the crux point of his magnificent work.

**Keywords:** Antony, Cleopatra, Shakespeare, water, blending, melting, dissolving, transmigration, metamorphosis.





*Shakespeare “compares the movement of the waters to the emotions and passions of men”. “He is interested in the life of the current itself, its course and movement, how violently, and like a living thing, it resents impediment, “chafes” and is “provoked”, swells, rages, overflows its bounds, drowns his shores and floods the neighbouring meadows”*  
Caroline Spurgeon

## **0. Introduction:**

The role of water in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* would seem to confirm Thales of Miletus’s belief that water is the origin of all things. Its metamorphotic capacity is certainly behind all the historical, cultural and scientific changes that affect both characters and author. While the action of the play is shaped by the events unfolded between the crumbling Republic of Rome and the birth of Christianity, Shakespeare’s 17<sup>th</sup> century England is about to bid farewell to Aristotle’s empirical biology in favour of the scientific revolution. Periods of change are always marked by transformation, transition or substitution. Hence, the relevance that melting, blending and dissolution assume in a play where water finds its way to undermine and even erode the foundations of one the most strongly cemented civilizations, proving that Rome is not as non-porous or impervious as Romans like to think.

Water is exalted throughout the play. Heavily associated with Cleopatra and its “infinite variety”, it is the sovereignty whose supreme power governs all the action. Not only the characters but the whole universe is under its rule. *Antony and Cleopatra* emphasises the idea of metamorphosis, of “becoming”. Everything seems to be blending; art and nature, verse and prose, past and future, decadence and splendour, strengths and weaknesses, optimism and negation, hope and fear, love and war, eroticism and temperance, loyalty and treachery, dreams and reality, the material and the spiritual, humans and gods, life and death, the finite and infinite. The elements bound, genders bend. Nature is transformed; cosmic events go hand in hand with human action, the sun

mates with the earth, land with water; armours, crowns and cities melt, Antony's men's bravery melts, his honour melts, the most amazing creatures breed and flourish from the Nile's manure. Transmutations abound, the aquatic world blends with the aerial, affecting both the animal world and humans' souls.

This mixture of luxuriant fecundity and liquidity is also present in the language used by Shakespeare. It runs parallel with what G.Wilson Knight considers a feminization of the language: "There is a pre-eminence of thin or feminine vowel sounds, "e" and "i"; and a certain lightness and underemphasis of passion, which yet robs it of no intrinsic power" (Knight, 1965: 201-202).

It can be argued that Knight's description of the vowels character has lots of connotations that cannot only be applied to Cleopatra but to water itself. Language and the way they speak is also one of the many things that separate Romans from Egyptians and that best describe their personalities. While the vocalisation of the first is plain, curt and restrained, the latter is ornate, hyperbolic and excessive. Hence the fact that "O'er" (over) is the most commonly used preposition and prefix. In Egypt, everything is "o'erflowing", "o'erbriming", "o'erpowering", "o'ertaking", "o'erpicturing", "o'erthrowing", which denotes the upper-hand properties of water and buoyancy. Antony's melting process is also marked by his abandonment of dry prose and acquisition of egyptianised rhetoric: "Let Rome in Tiber melt" (1.1.35). Since his arrival in Egypt, he opts in favour of water over land.

The fact that the Mediterranean is the main setting of the play cannot be overlooked as it is what geographically and culturally comes between Rome and Egypt. John Gillies talks about the dualism of the sea in the play. While "the sea is a liberating and festive element (Pompey's feast is held afloat), it is also fatal. Thus Antony twice makes war by sea with disastrous consequences. An interesting polarity exists between

sea and land, as between an element of instability and “exorbitance”, and one of solidity and limits” (Gillies, 1994:116). There is no denying that the character who is more badly hit by this polarity is Antony to whom Gillies calls the “voyager” comparing him with the “historical” Antonius: “Master of an insidiously “Asiatic” rhetorical style, admirer of Alexander, proponent of a subversively “cosmopolitan” model of empire as against a hallowed Romanocentric model, spurner of his Roman wife and Roman mores, lover of a foreign queen. (...) The classic example of a conqueror who “went too far”” (Gillies: 113). There is nobody better than Antony to embody the play’s main theme of blending and dissolution of character and culture. He is the Roman who chooses the dark horse pulling Plato’s chariot in *Phaedrus* successfully riding him to heaven. Moved by Eros’s desire to merge, Antony ignores the boundary lines drawn by Thumos.

My essay seeks to show how the relentless action of water lies behind the culture-shock the Romans experience on Egyptian soil and how its far-reaching effects lead to the Augustan peace and consequent Roman-Christian Empire. Mainly focussing on Antony, I establish parallelisms between his progress and the cycle of tides. Not only because of Antony’s constant wavering and varying throughout the story, but also for the resemblances I find between the three phases of tidal cycles and what can be considered the three parts of the play. I match the flow of the tide, the first phase of the cycle, with the Roman’s arrival in Egypt and Antony and Cleopatra’s first meeting as the triggering of their perplexity and his infatuation with Egypt. Although the currents dragging Antony are fast-flowing, there is a moment of pause incited by a “Roman thought” (1.2.82) and his efforts to stop the tide, which coincides with the tidal equipoise, or second phase. This takes place before the ebb of the flow in which water reverses and begins to recede in synch with Antony’s loss of vitality and ignominious defeat.

## **1. The Flow of the Tide**

### **1.1. The luring waters of the Nile**

When Herodotus described Egypt as “the gift of the Nile”, he was celebrating the supremacy of its waters and the vital dependency of the Egyptians on them. Overflowing every year, the Nile brings new life to people who view water as both a divine blessing and their emotional backbone. The people on its banks flow in concert with its tides. In the same way, Shakespeare’s characters’ lives are ruled by the moods and colours of its waters turning them into alluring, steamy creatures. It is a society without taboos, where women speak eloquently about physical love and derive great pleasure from taking irreverent attitudes: “If an oily palm be not a fruitful prognostication” (1.2.51), “Our worser thoughts heavens mend!” (1.2.61) or even from “heating their livers with drinking” (1.2.24). Presiding over this frenzy of unabashed sensuality, there is their divinized queen Cleopatra who is exalted and worshiped as Isis, the Egyptian moon, earth and fertility goddess. Created in their image, she is the embodiment of Egypt and the Nile. Her furious and passionate outbursts of temper match the melting, gushing and swelling of the Nile waters where she teems with magnificent splendour.

Physical and spiritual reality blends with the forces of nature to give shape to this idealized eastern world. As Northrop Frye puts it: “The Egypt of the play includes the Biblical Egypt, the land of bondage and the Egypt of legend in which serpents and crocodiles spawn from the mud of the Nile” (Frye, 1967:71). As the paradigm of dual expression, Cleopatra herself is often associated with snakes: “Where’s my serpent of the Old Nile? /For so he calls me. Now I feed myself /with most delicious poison” (1.5.25-27). Egyptians are interconnected with the natural world and worship the forces of nature as something much superior to the human power. They consider themselves individuals left at nature’s indomitable own devices. Exemplifying Aristotelian science, they are

closely connected to the four elements: earth, water, air, and fire that constitute the world. They take the view that it is nature that shapes people, not the other way round; hence Cleopatra's personification of Egypt, The Nile and its water. Unlike Rome, Egypt is not ruled by imperialistic and moralistic ideals. Egyptians are free from such manmade constraints.

For people who considered rivers merely as “defining geographic *termini*” (Gillies, 1994: 116), no wonder about the Romans' perplexity at this unfamiliar environment of spontaneous generation and misty intangibility. Staunch believers in a human-fashioned world, they are overwhelmed by this compendium of oddities and mysterious exoticism that surrounds Egypt and her queen. Alien to indulgent, watery environments, they are plunged into a state of confusion between captivation and repulsion. Although Antony is the most fervent Nilephile, there are others like Enobarbus who are unable to suppress their fascination. Evidence of this can be found in his sensational account of Antony and Cleopatra's first meeting on the River Cydnus. It is such a grandiose spectacle that Enobarbus knows thereupon that Antony will never be able to raise the anchor from the bewitching waters of Egypt. Raising to mythical status, mirroring Isis, the goddess of the moon and the sea, Cleopatra emerges like the queen of waters, a *Stella Maris* escorted by cupids and sea-nymphs:

The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne  
Burnt on the water; the poop was beaten gold,  
Purple the sails, and so perfumèd 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. For her own person,  
It beggared all description: she did lie  
In her pavilion – cloth-of-gold of tissue-  
O'er-picturing that Venus where we see  
the fancy out-work nature (2.2.198-208)

From that moment, unable to resist the Egyptian siren's call, Antony begins his inexorable, transforming journey to the unknown, with his life taking a course parallel to the cycle of water. As Gaston Bachelard argues in his indispensable study *L'Eau et les Rêves: Essai sur l'Imagination de la Matière* "Pour certains rêveurs, l'eau est le mouvement nouveau qui nous invite au voyage jamais fait. Ce départ matérialisé nous enlève à la matière de la terre." (Bachelard, 1991 :103). His Herculean strength, colossal endurance and supreme authority will be readily absorbed by the divine power of Venus. From the moment he dips his feet in Cleopatra's waters "he is moving towards 'indistinctness'- he, the man of the greatest 'distinction' in the world" (Tanner, 2010:625). His identity and honour will start to evaporate until he sees himself as a cloud that changes from one form into another that is, until it loses all substance and is then dissolved into nothingness: "As water is in water" (4.15.11). Resigned to his fate, he sees his ending as a punishment for having been a man possessed by passion and lust. However, his judgement is also clouded. His transformation does not imply any moral line as his misfortunes are not caused by viciousness or depravation. This Aristotelian *hamartia* or tragic flaw simply lies in his imperfections as a human being. He is neither vile nor saintly. Antony is, above all, a man with virtues and faults whose mistakes lead him to a tragic fall. However, as in one of Ovid's saving tales, Antony will be rescued and released from his unbearable human emotions. Antony and Cleopatra are able to conclude their SYNAPOTHANUMENON agreement of dying together and transcend all limitations.

## **1.2. Roman antagonism against water.**

According to the Romans, their tragedy is not a question of ill fortune. It has to do with the weakness of a man. Contrary to the Greek idea that it was the gods who

meddled with the proceedings of human beings, stoic philosophy maintains that the control of things is within human's power. Hence the Romans' resentment about Antony's loss of self-control. They lay the blame of all their ills on Cleopatra, the temptress whose powers as the moon goddess have started to exert a tidal effect on their lives. She has sapped all the strength of their greatest soldier. Antony, the powerful leader and warrior who had defeated Brutus and Cassius at the battle of Philippi, is now seen by his counterparts as a sinking ship dragged by the currents of his passion for the eastern queen. We can feel the waters bulging from the very first lines of the play as we get to know Rome's frustration and resentment against Antony's infatuation with Cleopatra: "Nay, but this dotage of our General's/ O'erflows the measure" (1.1.1-2). The Roman soldiers are used to limitations and containment. Consequently, this new disorderly watery environment of exceeding is making them lose their sense of purpose. Due to their trans-mediterranean expansion, Rome's rocky foundations are being undermined. Life is taking new dimensions as stoic reason is being vanquished by epicurean sensual desire. Blinding, fierce passions are anathema to the Romans who do not hide their contempt towards Cleopatra. For them she is a "gypsy" or a "strumpet" with a "tawny front". A strong whiff of misogyny and an aversion to miscegenation by the Romans can be detected throughout the play.

It stands to reason that such a blending of cultures results in a state of chaos for both sides. However, due to the ultimate transforming power of water, it is the Romans who end up being the most disturbed. The Romanization of Egypt is hardly perceived in the play. Only at the very end, Cleopatra adopts a Roman stand when with the purpose of defeating Caesar, she does what the stoic Romans consider a noble act, and commits suicide. A deed that takes special relevance if we take into account that Caesar is the strongest Roman diehard.

He cannot avoid wallowing in nostalgia when comparing Antony's past and present. Antony is no longer the all-powered man who had challenged nature in Modena: "Thou didst drink/ The stale of horses, and the gilded puddle/ Which beasts would cough at", "the roughest berry on the rudest hedge" (1.4.61-66). He has been enslaved and emasculated since the tides of Egypt started to flow: "he fishes, drinks, and wastes/ The lamps of night in revel; is not more manlike/ Than Cleopatra" (1.4.4-6). Caesar is distinctly hostile to water. For a man who proclaims stability, structure and national identity, establishing contact with this new world of fluctuations and continuous fluidity is at best harrowing. However, even though his misgivings are still based on the menace of water and disintegration, his uneasiness at approaching calamity is not only instilled by Cleopatra's exploits. On pondering about the imminent dangers posed by Pompey's naval achievements, Caesar laments the weakness of popular favour by comparing them with a drifting reed on a varying tide. Kenneth Muir states that: "Caesar's speech about the fickleness of the common people was a subject often touched on by Shakespeare, for example in *Coriolanus*, written soon after *Antony and Cleopatra*, and it was a favourite illustration of the dangers of democracy" (Muir, 1988:73).

Pompey's approach to the port of Rome also has a strong effect on Antony, who since his arrival in Alexandria had obstinately refused to hear anything about Rome. Having been completely charmed by the soft life and sensual delights of Cleopatra, he is not eager to abandon the place: "Here is my space" (1.1.35-36). He wants to remain in Egypt, where the land blends with the fertilising Nile breeding the most amazing creatures: "Our dungy earth alike/ Feeds beast as man" (1.1.37-38). It is this debauchery of mingling elements and mutations that make Antony think of the dangers implied by Pompey's arrival and the possible collapse of the empire. Antony compares Pompey with a horsehair that once has fallen into water, it turns into a breeding snake whose ensuing



poison can prove fatal. Contrary to Caesar's non-porousness, Antony has little difficulty adapting to the notion of *Panta rhei* (all things are in flux) or to Anaximander's ideas of transition and animals springing out of sea. Antony has become the outlandish Roman to commune with Egypt's theme of a wheeling, metaphysical universe.

### **1.3. Antony's last attempt to turn the tide**

Although the tide has been rising since Antony and Cleopatra's first encounter, there are some fluctuations of intensity. Antony's loss of self-control in favour of Cleopatra's charms is indisputable. Her powers of attraction are uninterrupted but they are sometimes smoothed by the circumstances. Together with Pompey's threats and the Parthians conquering Roman territory, comes the news of Antony's wife, Fulvia's death. Haunted by guilt at having neglected his principles and his people, Antony has "a Roman thought" (1.2.82). Choosing virtue over pleasure, he returns to Italy like Aeneas, who famously deserted his beloved Dido to fulfil his duty to found Rome. Despite the fact that Antony's intentions may have been honourable, they are doomed to fail from the start. As emphasised by Tanner: "Antony tries to make a return to his Roman world, but no matter what, "bonds" he enters into, no matter how much he intends to try to live "by the rule", it is for him, not possible" (Tanner,2010: 626).

Nobody is more elated with Antony's enervation than Pompey. He is well aware of Antony's strengths and weaknesses. Without the help of the forgetful waters of the river Lethe, Antony is his major contender. Thus knowing Antony's penchant for watery environments, Pompey hopes the general quenches his thirst in Hades: "That sleep and feeding may prorogue his honour, / Even till a Lethe'd dullness" (2.1.26-27). However, as if he were able to weather any storm, Antony does not avoid the meeting held between the triumvirs and Pompey. At this point, Antony is unafraid of water and is still convinced

of his strength by land. He does not hesitate before challenging Pompey: “Thou canst not fear us Pompey, with thy sails. / We’ll speak with thee at sea. At land though know’st/ How much we do o’ercount thee” (2.6.24-26)

Their conference at Mount Misenum turns out to be very Egyptomized. It takes the form of an Alexandrian bacchanal where drinks galore mix with fantastic stories of pyramids and the mysterious powers of nature, transmigrating snakes and crocodiles oozing freely on the slime of the Nile. Aboard Pompey’s galley, water makes its way into both hosts and guests. The purity of principles quickly dissolves. Pompey does not only accept bribes to keep Sardinia and Sicily, but he pretends to be outraged at Menas’s suggestion to kill the three triumvirs while they are still inebriated. Lepidus, the less “Roman” of the three triumvirs, contents himself with the remains of liquor and charity from the others: “They have made him drink alms-drink” (2.7.5). Even the aloof, dispassionate Caesar succumbs to temptations and lifts his glass before giving a regretful, slurred speech about the dangers of feasting: “mine own tongue/ Splits what it speaks. The wild disguise hath almost/ Anticked us all” (2.7.122-123). Enobarbus and Antony, who are much more familiarized with Egyptian debaucheries, want the wassail to go on. This time it is Antony who calls upon the Lethe before they burst into song to honour Bacchus and Neptune: “Here Antony’s free-hearted and thriftless pleasures win a victory over Caesar’s icy policy” (Knight, 1965:221).

## **2. Tidal Equipoise**

Comparable to a tidal equipoise, there is a moment in the play when the level of water is almost stationary with the currents weakening before reversing. This period of inactivity coincides with Antony’s return to Rome and his wedding to Octavia. Their gloom is deepening, but the Romans have the faint hope that with Antony back, they will

be able to halt the currents from the east and stay afloat. Although Octavia is not one of the main characters in the play, Shakespeare chooses her to depict this exceptional moment of quiescence where the persistent loquacity and fervour succumb to soft whispers. Octavia is lost for words and plagued by conflicting loyalties: “The swan’s-down feather/ That stands upon the swell at the full of tide, / And neither way inclines” (3.2.49-50). Antony’s evocation does not only echo Octavia’s wavering but also his own. In fact, his words express feelings that can be linked to all the Romans due to the pervasive indecisiveness that haunts them throughout the play.

Moments of grief and melancholy with quiet tears also start to appear in this moment of pause. However, they take very different shapes depending on who sheds them. Tears are like the waters in rivers which flow due to gravity and the difference in area levels. Bachelard calls it “la tristesse des eaux”, “quand le Coeur est triste, toute l’eau du monde se transforme en larmes” (Bachelard, 1991:124). Not without exhibiting his always present misogyny, even Enobarbus’s apparent hard-heartedness melts on hearing Antony’s desperate words: “I, an ass, am onion-eyed-for shame, / Transform us not to women!” (4.2.35-36). Antony does not want his soldiers to weep as he knows their tears are an expression of the melancholy they feel for him. The more they cry the thicker the bitter-tasting herb of pity will grow: “Grace grow where those drops fall!” (4.2.38). He much prefers the tears shed by the proud soldiers’ wives on their return from winning the battle: “Tell them your feasts, whilst they with joyful tears/ Wash the congealment from your wounds” (4.9.9-11). As the embodiment of water, though, nobody cries like Cleopatra: “We cannot call/ her winds and waters sighs and tears: they are greater/ storms and tempests than almanacs can report” (1.2.146-148). Caesar, on the other hand, as a self-respected Roman and as he did with his drink, only cries once: “With tears as sovereign as the blood of hearts” (5.1.41). He is afraid “the gods rebuke him” (5.1.27) for

such moral turpitude. Still, he does weep and he does it for the death of Antony, to whom he calls: “My mate in empire, / Friend and companion in the front war” (5.1.44-45).

Meanwhile in Alexandria, Cleopatra wails like a soul in torment torturing and inquiring her messengers about Octavia’s womanly virtues, with open curiosity about her adversary’s hair. For the Egyptian nothing would be worse than having to compete with a flowing mane streaming in the wind like sea waves. She is reassured: “This creature’s no such thing” (3.3.39). Octavia is not an aquatic animal nor is she anything like the majestic Seraphita’s angels whose hair looks like waves of light illuminating a billowing sea.

Interestingly enough, it is also in this transient standstill where Cleopatra most clearly presents her human qualities. For a moment, she abandons her goddess figure to be a woman who feels threatened by the news of a rival. Her jealousy of Octavia makes her doubt her own charms and qualities of attraction. She needs the messenger’s assurance that the other woman – she cannot even bring herself to call her Octavia– should not be a matter of concern. These human traits make her much more vulnerable. Not being young herself, even a tinge of embarrassment can be noticed when she wonders about the Roman’s age. Not much in common with the godlike woman described by Enobarbus: “Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale/ Her infinite variety; other women cloy” (2.2.242-243).

The Romans never see Cleopatra purely as a woman. They see her as a watery incongruity able to share Hippocrates’s four bodily fluids all in one. Cleopatra is *sanguine*, *choleric*, *melancholic* and *phlegmatic* according to the circumstances and surroundings she finds herself in. Her dispositions and desires make her act like water; she splashes, swirls, drips and scalds. She can be brackish, choppy, icy, slippery, tidal and sometimes even sweet. These abrupt emotional changes are well depicted in the second

act of the play. Cleopatra's elation about having caught Antony like a fish: "Ah, ha! You're caught" (2.5.14), is immediately transformed by the fear of the messenger's unwelcome news. Once she knows that Antony is not dead but he is married, fury overcomes her. Intense joy, dread and rage fleetly blend before the moment of calmness brought about by the messenger's comparison of Octavia to "a statue" (3.3.21). Never has stone constituted a serious impediment to water.

### **3. The Ebb of the Tide**

#### **3.1. Tragic dilemmas.**

Agrippa and Enobarbus are right in being suspicious of Antony and Caesar's expressions of harmony after Antony's wedding because their peace treatment begins to disintegrate soon after signing it. Antony feels insulted and betrayed by Caesar who has singly waged war on Pompey and imprisoned Lepidus. Antony wants to fight back: "If I lose mine honour, / I lose myself" (3.4.22 ) But despite his determination to uphold his pride and dignity, Antony is swept away by the powerful currents that drag him back to Cleopatra. The truce is over; Isis is back in action. She is exerting her gravitational pull on the earth's water again.

With Pompey and Lepidus out of the equation, Antony and Caesar are now the sole contenders for absolute power. Caesar is not prepared to see how territories that are part to the Roman Empire go to a blasphemous queen who masqueraded as Isis, arm in arm with Antony, publicly proclaim that their sons are "the kings of kings" (3.6.13). Antony's desertion of his sister is the last straw to prompt Caesar to lead his army down the coasts of Italy and Greece to an inevitable war.

Never in the play have waters thundered louder than in Actium. Neither is Antony's submission and blind infatuation with Cleopatra more evident. The Roman soldiers try to reverse the flow; they appeal to Antony's senses to fight on land where they are strongest. They know Cleopatra's presence in the battle and their inexperience at sea can only lead to an inevitable failure. Enobarbus insists: "Your ships are not well manned/ Your mariners are muleteers, reapers, people/ Engrossed by swift impress" (3.7.34-36). Scarrus pleads: "O noble Emperor, do not fight by sea;/ Trust not rotten planks... Let th'Egyptians/ And the Phoenicians go a-ducking-we/ Have used to conquer standing on the earth, / And fighting foot to foot" (3.7.61-66). However, their calls for rationality are of no avail. "Aucune utilité ne peut légitimer le risque immense de partir sur les flots. Pour affronter la navigation, il faut des intérêts chimériques. Ce sont les intérêts qu'on rêve, ce ne sont pas ceux qu'on calcule" (Bachelard, 1991 : 101). Cleopatra wants Rome to sink and their "tongues rot" (3.7.15) and she is very skilled in the art of persuasion. "Antony fights beside Cleopatra by sea, strongly as he is warned against it: it thus becomes almost a symbol of his love, opposing the solid prudence of his soldiery". (Knight, 1965: 235) Thus, taking his Thetis with him, Antony starts his way to his doomed, inevitably tragic fall.

Neither Cleopatra's mannish language before battle, nor her sixty sails prove to be enough to avoid their ignominious withdrawal and consequent defeat. Caesar, on the other hand, uses his knowledge on Rome's strengths and weaknesses: "Strike not by land, keep whole, / provoke not battle till we have done at sea" (3.8.1-2) to win a battle that will not only affect the government of Rome but that of the whole world. According to John Wilders, "the political element in the drama is therefore not simply a background against which the love tragedy is played out but an inseparable part of it. Antony and Cleopatra seem to us larger than life because the future of the known world appears to

depend on their relationship". (Wilders, 1995: 3) Undoubtedly, if they had been the victors, and the centre of power moved from Rome to Alexandria, the history of the Western World would have been very different. Caesar's is not a hollow victory as he wants this battle to be the last of many. As he explicitly claims, "The time of universal peace is near". "It was thought by the Church Fathers that the general peace in the Roman world, which preceded the nativity of Christ, was a sign from heaven." (Muir,1987:95). Milton famously described this anticipation in his "Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity":

No war or battle's sound  
Was heard the world around,  
The idle spear and shield were high up-hung:  
The hooked chariot stood  
Unstained with hostile blood,  
The trumpet spake not the armed throng;  
And kings sate still with awful eye,  
As if they surely knew their Sovran Lord was by. (Milton, 1891: 5).

Milton's peace-loving, harmonious words are reminiscent of the tidal equipoise seen in the play. They evoke the feeling that things have just been put in hold, waiting for something hefty to happen. Before the stirring of restless souls start waking again.

The same sea where Caesar had visualized the feelings of loss and the perverted fickleness of people is now a witness to other Romans' great torment caused by their general's infidelity and letdown. Gloomily, after the battle, they see how their fortunes are drowning in the same waters that have washed away Antony's virtues: "Our fortune on the sea is out of breath/ And sinks most lamentably. Had our general/ Been what he knew -himself- it had gone well" (3.10.24-28). Canidius, the man who uttered these words of nostalgia and regret, decides to follow the example of the six kings and abandon Antony in favour of Caesar.

The fact that before battle Antony was repeatedly called "Emperor" by his subjects makes his declivity look even more precipitous. They want him to react, to act like the

formidable warrior he once was, not like a boat adrift, behind the Antoniad. Cleopatra's wicked power of metamorphoses has sapped his strength turning him into a coward wild duck flying at her rear. Scarrus cannot hide his sheer frustration at his general's ignominy: "I never saw an action of such shame/ Experience, manhood, honour, ne'er before/ Did violate so itself" (3.10.21-23). They have lost kingdoms and sovereignty to become defeated men at the mercy of the "ribanded nag of Egypt" (3.10.10).

Except for Antony, nobody like Enobarbus better personifies the internal conflict incited by the new context. "Cette impression de dissolution atteint, à certaines heures, les âmes les plus solides, les plus optimistes" (Bachelard, 1991:125). His unsettled wavering makes him an obvious example of the blurring between two worlds that are no longer apart. Jane Adelman says that, "Enobarbus is a figure of moderation who attempts to live in a world of excess. He is unable to commit himself to either measure or overflow. He attempts to maintain equilibrium between the two worlds; and for this attempt, he suffers the fate of Antony in little and in reverse" (Adelman, 1973:131). His swimming between two streams is even made more evident at the moment of his death. After Antony's selfless act of recognition and gratitude towards him, Enobarbus feels terribly ashamed of himself for having abandoned his general. But while his decision to die is brought about by a deep sense of treachery and loss of honourable Romanhood: "I am alone the villain of the earth" (4.6.28), his death exudes Egyptian influences. In his dying speech Enobarbus:

...apostrophises the moon and begs her to bear witness to his repentance for having left his master. It is drawn entirely from a vivid realisation of the qualities of substance and their impact on each other, moist, hard, soft, dried and powdered; yet could anything more poignantly convey hopeless grief, abject remorse and the end of life and being? (Spurgeon, 1971: 83).

Whereas it is true that the moon is often associated with mental disorders, Enobarbus speech might just prove his preference for an Egyptian death. The points of resemblance



between his death and Cleopatra's are not only emphasised by their searching for a ditch in which to rest in peace: "I will go seek/ Some ditch wherein to die" (4.6.36-37), "Rather a ditch in Egypt/ Be gentle grave unto me" (5.2.57-58), they also want to escape the final catastrophe, humiliation and abashment in front of an imperious Caesar. Like Antony, they both know that Romans are not charitable with defeated enemies.

### 3.2. Recognition

The reversal of the tide coincides with what Aristotle calls *peripeteia*, a change of the situation into the opposite, which includes Antony's pitiful self-knowledge and the terrible realization of what he has done dawning on him. According to the Greek philosopher, in the best tragedies, the *reversal* occurs simultaneously with understanding, a moment that he calls "*recognition*" or "*discovery*" (*anagnorisis*). "As the term itself implies, it is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing either friendship or hatred in those who are destined for good fortune or ill" (Aristotle, 1982:41). This element of recognition is the most important as the tragic hero becomes conscious of his place in the universe. He acknowledges the errors that have led to his ruin and accepts his responsibility.

Antony admits that he made the wrong decision fighting at sea. He is ashamed and dejected as he recognizes his enslavement to Cleopatra: "Egypt, though knew'st too well/ My heart was to thy rudder tied by th'strings" (3.11.55-56). He has forsaken his manhood and honour. He had to be towed at sea, which "is usually a sign of being disabled and a mark of great ignominy". (Bevington: 1990:181). It is his convincing of Cleopatra's betrayal that makes him burst. He is like a thunderous Jupiter gushing against Cleopatra's inconsistency and impurity, blaspheming the gods for scoffing and blinding him like a falcon. Darkness did not allow him to see the gems he was leaving behind in Rome and

instead picked the rancid leftovers ditched by Julius Caesar and Gnaeus Pompey. What he believes to be Cleopatra's treachery results in nagging doubts about the consistency of their love for which he has sacrificed himself and half the world. In his frenzy, his thoughts turn into Roman mode and he can only belittle himself blaming his own love as purely vicious lust. Therefore, Cleopatra is "This false soul of Egypt" (4.13.25) and a "Triple-turned whore" (4.13.12). The light of his world has been dimming towards the eclipse of his earthly moon, as an omen of his final plunge.

The atmosphere is overclouded. Everything seems to be bidding a final farewell. There is a strong whiff of disappointment, a feeling of enforced closure, of overwhelming lastness surrounding Antony and his men on that night before the final battle. In what has been compared to Jesus's Last Supper, Antony also predicts his betrayal by those closest to him. In addressing Enobarbus by his first name, Domitius, Antony does not only demonstrate their true intimacy but a lingering suspicion that like Peter did with Jesus, Enobarbus will deny him before the next morning. The desertion takes divine supremacy when Antony's soldiers, startled by the eerie sound of hautboys, relate the supernatural blare to Hercules relinquishing Antony's spirit. No matter how heavy his suit of armour is, the man who before meeting Cleopatra had been hero-worshipped, is now drowning in offshore waters.

The Roman augurs were right in interpreting the bad omen by the swallows' nests in Cleopatra's sails. Antony's final battle is lost and the little resistance left in him is melting: "Fortune and Antony part here" (4.12.19). The waters that had valiantly entered his soul are now receding leaving him completely barren. They have dragged him to his final ruin. Without his honour he feels like a "branchless tree" (3.4.24), the pine that had once "overtopped them all" (4.13.23) has been barked by his men, who like dogs are now "discandyng and melting their sweets/ On blossoming Caesar" (4.13.22-23). They have

all run to Caesar since he “wears the rose of youth upon him” (3.13.20). Nobody, not even Cleopatra, wants to stay near a tree that once it is barked and without water is only doomed to die.

Like water, Antony is unable to resist change of shape but until the moment of his death, he manages to keep his size. He loses the form but not his matter. The fact that Antony decides on a heroic suicide to avoid his shame of being part of Caesar’s triumph, alongside Eros refusal to kill his master out of respect: “My dear master, / My captain, and my emperor” (4.15.89-91) prove that his capacity to inspire affection and his Roman nobility are still instilled in him: “Not cowardly put off my helmet” (4.16.58). However, he plays with the shifting shapes of clouds to show that he has lost all sense of identity. He has been reduced to a shadow of what he had been because of Cleopatra’s betrayal: “Sometime we see a cloud that’s dragonish, / A vapour sometime like a bear or lion” (4.15.3-4), he is only able to see that: “the rack dislimns” (4.15.10). Neil points out that:

Like the mass of clouds moved by the wind, he has been dragged and “dislimbed” by water, he sees himself “as a creature of mutable “becoming” rather than absolute “being”, a theory “depending on a sceptical understanding of human subjectivity popularised by the *Essays* of Montaigne at the beginning of the seventeenth century” (Neil, 2008:283).

When Antony is told that Cleopatra is dead, he decides to weigh anchor and follow her “O mort, vieux capitaine, il est temps! Levons l ancle!” (Baudelaire, 2014:270). In sacrificing his world power for love he loses his elevated superhuman status. However, he is still able to feel like a Roman in that he is filled with shame for being less noble and courageous than a woman: “condemn myself to lack/ The courage of a woman, less noble mind” (4.15.59-60). His lack of reproach when he learns that Cleopatra’s suicide is a lie shows the upper nobility as a human being that has been visible throughout the play: “I will overtake thee, Cleopatra, and/ Weep for my pardon” (4.15.44-45). One of the most graphic illustrations of the enormous influence Cleopatra wields over Antony is when he

is taken to her monument to die in her presence. It is the second time she has refused to come down to him. The first was at the Cydnus when she declined to leave her barge to join him. Now, allegedly for her fear to be seized by Caesar's men, Antony is once more hauled up to her "absolute queen" (3.6.11). Only that this time, they will remain together forever: "Welcome, welcome! Die when thou hast lived!" (4.16.40). As Bachelard says "L'eau est ainsi une invitation à mourir; elle est une invitation à une mort spéciale qui nous permet de rejoindre un des refuges matériels élémentaires" (Bachelard, 1991: 77).

### **3.3. From Matter to Spirit**

It must be noted that the man who is summoned to kill Antony and bring the two lovers together is called Eros, like the Greek god of sexual attraction and companion of Aphrodite, the Olympian goddess of love, beauty and sexual pleasure. Nevertheless, unlike his mischievous namesake whose flaming arrows lit the hearts of men, Antony's servant refuses to push his sword in his master's heart: "The gods withhold me! / Shall I do that which all the Parthians darts/ Though enemy, lost aim and could not?" (4.15.69-71). A heart that had already found "new earth" and is now about to find "new heaven" (1.1.17).

It is in act 5 where Cleopatra's supremacy reaches the summit. Not only because she is the only heroine in Shakespeare's tragedies to be given solitary paramountcy in her death, but also because it is in this final part of the play where all her redeeming features as a woman and divinity are chiselled. After Antony's death "the crown o'th'earth, oth melt" (4.16.64), and she only sees emptiness. She echoes his words: "the torch is out" (4.15.46), "our lamp is spent" (4.16.86). They were each other's light and now there is only darkness. Like Antony, she considers death her only way out: "My desolation does begin to make/ A better life" (5.2.1) but not before rejoicing in her last dream where she

sees him not like the blemished man who died at her feet, but as a demi-god, as the real Emperor. Cleopatra no longer sees his human frailties; she transforms Antony's best qualities into cosmic powers and phenomena. She praises his abundant, inexhaustible generosity: "For his bounty, / There was no winter in't; - an autumn 'twas" (5.2.86-87), for his exceptional tallness and strength, he was like the Colossus who was able to stand astride the harbour of Rhodes: "His legs bestrid the ocean; his reared arm/ Crested the world" (5.2.82-83). His eyes compared to heavenly bodies: "His face was as the heavens, and therein stuck/ A sun and the moon" (5.2.79.80). Antony is no longer the fish she caught; he is now a playful, friendly dolphin. He was a man whose pleasures did not belittle his greatness "His delights/ Were dolphin-like: they showed his back above/ The element they live in" (5.2.89-90). Cleopatra sees Antony's change of element from earth to water as liberation of his constraints. According to Muir "it is worth noting that Virgil's account of the battle of Actium –it is represented on the shield presented to Aeneas by Venus, along with other scenes from Roman history – dolphins accompany Caesar's fleet. (...) It is possible that Shakespeare remembered Virgil's lines and transferred the dolphins from Caesar to Antony" (Muir, 1987:110). Apart from the fact that as Muir (1987) suggests, Virgil may have been biased in favour of Caesar, there is no doubt that of the two men, it is only Antony who can bear comparison to the joyful liveliness of dolphins. Not only for Antony's hydromania or Caesar's hydrophobia but mainly by the human qualities each man possesses.

Never do the Romans understand Cleopatra. As an embodiment of water, she has an endless capacity to amaze and outplay them; never can they find a way to contain her, to hold her back. Not even in death. After receiving Caesar, Cleopatra decides to frustrate his plans and go back to his beloved Antony: "Of the full-fortuned Caesar ever shall/ Be brooch'd with me, in knife, drugs, serpents have/ Edge, siting, or operation. I am safe"

(4.16.26-28). She is unwilling to be seen as Rome's triumph, she knows their eagerness to shame her and her servants in front of the crowds: "With greasy aprons, rules, and hammer shall/ Uplift us to the view. In their thick breaths, / Rank of gross diet, shall we be enclouded, / And forced to drink their vapour" (5.2.210-213). She knows what Roman officers would do to them: "Saucy lictors/ Will catch at us like strumpets, and scald rhymers/ Ballad us out o'tune" (5.2.214-15). But water has never been humiliated or outwitted by stone. Nor is Cleopatra deceived by Caesar's promise to be magnanimous.

Like streams flowing to the Grand River, Cleopatra's "girls" show absolute love and loyalty to her. They are both determined to share her suicide. It is Iras who after Caesar's departure announces: "Finish, good lady; the bright day is done, / And we are for the dark" (5.2.193). Cleopatra calls Charmian "noble" (5.2.230) and asks them to dress her like a queen: "bring our crown and all" (5.2.232), "I am again for Cydnus/ To meet Mark Antony" (5.2.228-229). There is a strong link between her suicide and their first meeting. She wants to re-enact that moment because the love they felt for each other was pure and unadulterated by ripples of disloyalties or betrayals. Their love and cycle of water started in Cydnus and finishes with the freedom brought in by a countryman's basket. The Egyptian earth's bounty that had given life to Cleopatra is what lends her death by means of some asps hidden in a bunch of figs. The "immortal" biting of the "pretty worm of Nilus" (5.2.242) will take her to eternity. Cleopatra has nothing of woman or Isis left in her. She has metamorphosed into what Antony was before meeting her: "I am marble constant; now the fleeting moon/ No planet is of mine" (5.2.240-241). With her suicide "a very Roman deed" she becomes deserving of him. With only one regret: "Now no more/ The juice of Egypt's grape shall moist this lip" (5.2.280). Cleopatra puts on her crown and follows Antony's cry: "Husband, I come" (5.2.286) to

join him in their trip to immortality where together will “mock/ The luck of Caesar” (5.2.284-285).

Cleopatra, who had been the driving force behind Antony’s dissolution, is now melting and dissolving herself: “L’eau fermée prend la mort en son sein. L’eau rend la mort élémentaire. L’eau meurt avec le mort dans sa substance. L’eau est alors un néant substantiel” (Bachelard, 1991 :125). With Cleopatra’s soft death the higher, more spiritual elements conquer earth and water: “I am fire and air –my other elements/ I give to baser life” (5.2.288-289). As Antony did, bartering power for love, Cleopatra bequeaths her earthly primacy to obtain ethereal realm.

Tanner claims that “in Hegel’s terms: Cleopatra’s actions, like her temperament are impossible to “read” in any alphabetical way. She is, from Caesar’s point of view, illegible; hardly to be “read” in his Roman language. She is an ultimate opacity –from Rome’s point of view– confounding all customary alphabetic descriptions and decodings. She is no way ‘prescribed’ or prescribable, and can no more be held within Caesar’s ‘scroll’ than she can be trapped by his plots and policies” (Tanner, 20010: 623). Caesar’s inability to grasp water implies his inability to control it. Only when he watches Cleopatra lying dead does Caesar seem to realize the unflinching constancy of water: “O noble weakness! / If they had swallowed poison, ‘twould appear/ By external swelling; but she looks like sleep, / As she would catch another Antony/ In her strong toil of grace” (5.2.343-346). He conquers the world but he is conquered by Cleopatra. No doubt that he wanted to keep Antony and Cleopatra alive as their suicides minor his triumph. However, he takes his defeat stoically and demands Antony and Cleopatra to be buried together in the solemn funeral state they deserve.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Unlike other tragedies by Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra* does not leave us with the sensation of loss and catastrophe, which is probably induced by the optimistic ideas that “losing is victory” or that “death turns into life”. Although the context of death cannot be avoided, Antony and Cleopatra’s have a tinge of anticipation. Neither of them will perish. He is a dolphin symbolising birth or rebirth and she (despite claiming the abandonment of the lower elements) is water, and water never dies. However, it cannot be denied that the play has a strong sense of ending. As I said in the introduction, both characters and author live in a time marked by irreversible change. This leads, together with the need of adjustment, to a mixture of feelings between nostalgia and hope.

Many critics of *Antony and Cleopatra* have related Shakespeare’s inclination towards Egypt to yearning for a heroic past. Mary Thomas Crane contradicts this idea stating that what dispirits the author is his longing for a declining Aristotelianism in favour of the incipient new science. According to her:

The nostalgia that seems to attend the final scenes of the play may, in fact, reflect the passing of a world that lent itself more readily to the Shakespearean imagination in all its abundance and ambivalence. The play seems to acknowledge the greater efficiency of the Roman mode, and its greater potential for domination of the world and its inhabitants, even as it acknowledges what the theatre will lose as a result (Crane:2009:15).

Change always implies a shaking of foundations. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, the impact is even stronger because it is provoked by the filtering of water into a society that considered them as impervious. However, no matter how firm the Roman Republic ideas might have been, there was no way they could have avoided melting. Their maritime expansion, alongside their overseas establishing of settlements, made it unavoidable for them to resist political and personal turmoil.



Evidently, what may vary is the affection at an individual level. As it is the case of Antony and Caesar. While the first is completely swept off his feet by the enchantments of Egypt and Cleopatra, the latter offers fierce resistance to the new waves. Antony is obviously much more permeable, open to modification and novelty. Caesar, on the other hand, is extremely hostile to diversity. What really stands between them is their capacity to wonder. As Gillies puts it: “Just as Rome is never more ‘Roman’ than when viewed from Egypt, so Cleopatra is never more ‘exotic’ than when viewed from Rome”. (...) The exotic is less a fact than a trick of perspective. There can only be an Orient if there is an Occident” (Gillies, 1994: 119).

Much as Cesar abhors porousness, he does not score victory without hindrance. Antony and Cleopatra’s death obviously dilute his triumph as it proves that the pursuit of love is in no way inferior to the pursuit of power. Probably induced by Shakespeare’s fascination with oriental lands there is an evident bias for the mysticism and femininity of Egypt and against the opaqueness and masculinity of Rome. He captures the very essence and allure of all her womanhood. Despite her royalty, he does not idealize her or hide her weaknesses. She is Isis, the moon goddess who governs the water’s ebb and flow and in consequence all the people’s movements. Unlike the Romans, Shakespeare is not afraid of female rulers, neither despises he the forces of nature. That might be the reason why he makes water the crux point of the play where its power is never ignored or disregarded. It never leaves the characters’ thoughts or their actions. Like Cleopatra, water is unconstrained. It is the origin of all things: the fountain of the most passionate love and hatred. The Roman world “cleaves” because water has penetrated its “pillars”. They may be only moistened, sprinkled or soaked, but whatever their degree of affection there is no immunity.

When two cultures as different as Egypt and Rome meet, nobody can escape melting or dissolution. While it is true that it is easier to notice how hard things soften by water, soft things can also turn to ice, stone or marble. In what looks like a paradox or the irony of fate, this can be exemplified by 16th century England's reluctance to colonization before becoming the hungriest colonists. Similarly, the Roman Empire does not take long to indulge in all the vices and flaws that they attributed to Egypt. It is a fact that Caesar Augustus initiated the Pax Romana, but it is also true that neither he nor the emperors that followed him were as noble as Antony. And after all, nobleness is what remains. It is the only thing that is distinct. Not "as water is in water".

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