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Cleopatra and Her Problems: T.S. Eliot and the Fetishization of Shakespeare's Queen of the Nile

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This essay traces the evolution of T.S. Eliot's poetic allusions to Shakespeare's Cleopatra and the ways in which the Egyptian queen—as a racial and colonial Other—may be related to Eliot's own shifting sense of national identity. Rather than follow other scholars and read Eliot's use of the imperial splendor of Shakespeare's Cleopatra as an ironic counterpoint to the shabby and degraded life of modern London, my research suggests that, for Eliot, Cleopatra is no wielder of imperial power. Rather, Eliot casts Cleopatra in a subject position within an early-twentieth-century Orientalist discourse. In such a system, Cleopatra possesses a devouring sexuality that must be contained through a discourse that "knows" her and thus diminishes her power. Such a colonizing move links Eliot's Cleopatra references—in both his poems and essays—to contemporary English political discourses surrounding the "problem" of Egypt and allows the expatriate American to position himself more securely in the center of a literary and cultural tradition at a time when he often viewed himself as a foreigner or "metic."

Keywords: Eliot / Shakespeare / postcolonialism / Cleopatra / Englishness

But remember that I am a *metic*—a foreigner, and that I *want* to understand you, and all the background and tradition of you. I shall try to be frank—because the attempt is so very much worthwhile with you—it is very difficult with me—both by inheritance and because of my very suspicious and cowardly disposition. But I may simply prove to be a savage.—Eliot, *Letters Volume One* 318

This excerpt from a 1919 letter to his friend Mary Hutchinson conveys T.S. Eliot's keen, albeit temporary, anxiety as an outsider to London literary culture. Eliot feared that he might be viewed as a "savage," a notion confirmed by the epigraphs borrowed from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) in both "The Hollow Men" (1925) and in the original manuscript of *The Waste Land* (1922).¹ Nevertheless, Eliot was not always the Kurtzian outsider driven mad by a realization of "the horror" of modern civilization. In essays such as "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) and "Hamlet and His Problems" (1919), Eliot

knew exactly what was wrong with (literary) culture and how best to remedy it. In the latter essay, the expatriate American's confidence remains staggering to readers today. He declares *Hamlet* to be an "artistic failure" and, instead, advocates a critical reappraisal of Shakespeare's too-oft forgotten, although "most assured," artistic successes, *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. His polemical critique in the "Hamlet" essay serves as both an American's intervention into the English literary canon and a signpost for Eliot's readers to sift for the traces of these later Shakespeare plays in Eliot's poetry.²

But what can we say about the specific means by which Eliot asserts his position within the English cultural mainstream? How do Eliot's criticism and verse appropriation of less canonical Shakespeare plays help him to move from a position as a metic to the cultural center? Jean-Michel Rabaté's "Tradition and T.S. Eliot" (1994) first drew my attention to Eliot's use of the term "metic," but in the present essay I want to build a case for Eliot's attempts to redress his purported savagery via one specific text, Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. A metic is a special breed of resident alien, one who possesses only some of the privileges of citizenship. Although the metic pays taxes and assumes some of the burden of the privileges of the native-born population, he is, as Rabaté indicates, "rarely admitted fully into the communal mysteries" (212).³ Eliot's response to Shakespeare, generally speaking, seems to be an attempt to reassess Shakespearean drama, one of England's great communal bodies of myth. And his interest in Cleopatra seems particularly crucial to Eliot's burgeoning sense of his own (adopted) national identity; Cleopatra is one example of the Other by which Eliot assumes a more English national identity.

Typically, critics have described Eliot's response to *Antony and Cleopatra* as a way of ironically juxtaposing the imperial splendor of the Roman and Egyptian past with his own more cynical take on the degradation of life in modern London. However, this essay will read Eliot's reception of the play from a different perspective: that the character of Cleopatra can be construed as a "problem woman" for Eliot in a number of his poems. I read the allusions to *Antony and Cleopatra* in poems such as "The Burnt Dancer" (1914), *The Waste Land* (1922), and "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar" (1920), not in terms of the ironic distance between Cleopatra and her modern-day equivalents, but in terms of similarity. Much like Eliot's numerous other female characters with whom the Egyptian queen is compared, Cleopatra is a problem insofar as she is artificial, even inanimate, and she represents the antithesis of the "life" and "rebirth" that are so central to Eliot's poetics. In all of the poet's depictions of his Cleopatra surrogates, the "problem woman" represents darkness, a devouring sexuality, and she is treated in a manner consistent with the discursive practices of imperialism: the Cleopatra figure is embedded in a discourse that recognizes her as an object of desire, but one which can be contained through discourse. Through representation, it is possible to "know" her and thus diminish her power.

Like Princess Volupine (of "Burbank") or the unnamed woman (also known as "Belladonna") at the heart of the "A Game of Chess" section of *The Waste Land*, Cleopatra occupies a position that seems to threaten the poems' speakers.⁴ She

ostensibly possesses a beauty beyond language, but it is nevertheless subject to a series of objective descriptions to which Eliot returns again and again in his criticism and verse. Eliot highlights how Shakespeare's Cleopatra—a purely sensual Orientalized body—figures as a form of contagion capable of causing Mark Antony to “go native” and indulge in carnal pleasures. Because Antony thus neglects his duties as one-third of Rome's governing triumvirate, Cleopatra becomes symptomatic of a more general (and non-Western) societal decay. What we thus have in Eliot's allusions to Cleopatra is an outsider's (*i.e.*, expatriate American's) reading of the ultimate outsider (female, dark-skinned, North African), an interpretation in which the metic uses the figure of the racialized Other as a means to admit himself more fully into those English “communal mysteries.”

I. ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA IN ELIOT'S CRITICISM

Before examining the fetishization of Cleopatra in verse, one should first consider the roots of Eliot's interest in her character in his criticism. In an *Egoist* essay entitled “Studies in Contemporary Criticism” (1918), Eliot first turns his attention to Caesar's description of the Queen on her deathbed, a scene which would preoccupy Eliot throughout his career: “She looks like sleep, / As she would catch another Antony / In her strong toil of grace” (5.2.336–38). Eliot praises the description for two reasons: first, because of its aptness for Cleopatra's characterization, since even in death Cleopatra's beauty was a potential “toil,” or snare, in which Antony could be entrapped. Second, Eliot admired these lines because Shakespeare's figurative language blurs the distinction between the literal and metaphorical. “Grace” could be ambiguously secular and spiritual: as both a form of physical allure and the state of one who has been unconditionally blessed. In addition, “toil” could be both a physical effort and the aforementioned snare. For Eliot, this tension within the metaphor was the reason for its success: “the healthy metaphor adds to the strength of the language [and] makes available some of that physical source of energy upon which the life of language depends” (“Studies” 114). At this early stage in his career as a critic—like many before and after him—Eliot views Shakespeare as a poet (one who just happens to be a dramatist as well), and Eliot's admiration for *Antony and Cleopatra* is intimately tied to the play's strengths as verse.

No other example of Shakespeare's mastery of the language so delighted Eliot as did Cleopatra's “strong toil of grace.” In “Philip Massinger” (1920), Eliot documents how Massinger's “feeling for language had outstripped his feeling for things” (*Essays* 185) and provides a contrast with those familiar lines describing Cleopatra. Shakespeare provides a poetic *fusion* (Eliot's term) which Massinger's dramatic verse does not. Shakespeare has a gift for combining into a single phrase two or more diverse impressions so that, in Eliot's words, “the metaphor identifies itself with what suggests it” (*Essays* 185). Without mentioning the phrase, Eliot here suggests that *Antony and Cleopatra* does indeed possess the so-called “objective correlative” (first discussed in “Hamlet and His Problems”), since there is a clear relationship between the metaphor and the specific conditions that provoke

it. Unlike *Hamlet*, in which the emotions are “in excess of the facts as they appear” (*Essays* 125), the emotions of *Antony and Cleopatra* seem to correlate better with the events that inspire those emotions.

In the seeming contradiction between two ostensible oppositions (toil/grace), Eliot detects a physical energy that enhances the audience’s sense of involvement in the metaphor. In his second “Andrew Marvell” essay (1923)—a review of a new edition of Marvell’s poems—Eliot resumes the thread of his analysis of the “grace” metaphor by expanding the sense of diverse impressions being successfully fused in these lines from Caesar’s eulogy. In addition to the aforementioned tension between “grace” and “toil,” Eliot now detects a fusion between the seemingly separate ideas of “how she looks” to Caesar and how Cleopatra looks to the reader. Once again, in the resultant fusion, there is a sense of “closeness” for Eliot between the language used to describe these things and the things themselves, or, as Eliot puts it, “a restoration of language to contact with things” (“Marvell” 809). Curiously, throughout the analysis, Cleopatra constitutes an object to Eliot, as the repeated use of the word “thing” suggests. Surely, Eliot speaks of her in this context as a material presence, but nevertheless, the use of the word is highly charged from a postcolonial perspective. As the work of Edward Said and many others reminds us, frequently the “Oriental” is less a human subject than a body of traits to be studied, codified, and known. As part of the process of maintaining power through discourse, the colonizer must insist that the colonial body be a known and predictable quantity and “formulate the Orient, to give it shape, identity, definition with full recognition of its place in memory, its importance to imperial strategy, and its *natural* role as an appendage to Europe” (Said, *Orientalism* 86). Ironically, in this passage, Said is discussing the Orientalist “engulfment” of Egypt by the instruments of knowledge and power as disseminated by Napoleonic France during its early nineteenth-century occupation of North Africa. From the fall of the Roman empire, to the Renaissance publication of the volumes of Plutarch consulted by Shakespeare as he wrote *Antony and Cleopatra*, through the continued colonial exploitation of Egypt by Britain in Eliot’s own day, the figure of the Egyptian frequently exists as a European projection entirely realized through discourse: Egypt’s identity is inseparable from what Europe knows about Egypt. In other words, the material body becomes reduced to a body of materials; the divide between “us” (Europeans) and “them” (Africans) becomes, more accurately, a divide between “us” and “it” (what we know *about* African cultures). All of this carries a special resonance when considering the historical context in which Eliot demonstrates such a keen interest in Egyptian “things.” In pre-World War II Britain, newspaper headlines were filled with discussions about “the problem” of Egypt, particularly through a series of lectures to the House of Commons delivered by Arthur James Balfour. This was a time during which Egyptian nationalism was on the rise, and the continuing British presence in Egypt was becoming increasingly tenuous.⁵ Eliot thus participates in this colonialist discourse, an action that possesses even more resonance given Eliot’s tenuous status as the “metic.” Cleopatra, as an objectified colonial subject within the play, functions as a means of strengthening Eliot’s own identification with a national culture, a process culminating in his eventual naturalization in 1927.

Despite his frequent engagement with *Antony and Cleopatra* in his earliest criticism, Eliot was apparently unsatisfied with his analysis of the play because he returned to the same passage from *Antony and Cleopatra* at least twice more in the 1920s. In the 1926 Clark lectures on the metaphysical poets, Eliot suggests that Shakespeare's metaphors are superior to most other seventeenth-century poetry (and thereby similar to the verse of the metaphysical poets whom he admired so much) because the imagery of the bard's figurative language is "absolutely woven into the fabric of the thought" (*Varieties* 123). To understand his argument more completely, we can turn to the "strong toil of grace" passage, again cited in Eliot's "Dante" essay of 1929, in which he argues that most similes and metaphors (including Dante's) are merely designed to make the reader see more clearly, whereas the metaphor in Shakespeare,

. . . is expansive rather than intensive; its purpose is to *add* to what you see (either on the stage or in your imagination) a reminder of that fascination of Cleopatra which shaped her history and that of the world, and of that fascination being so strong that it prevails even in death. It is more elusive, and it is less possible to convey without close knowledge of the English language. (*Essays* 205)

Although the emphasis is once again placed on the poetic description of Cleopatra, Eliot now alludes to Cleopatra's role within the narrative of the play as an object of sexual "fascination," one that helped to shape a larger narrative: the history of the post-classical world, or the very civilization which Eliot's criticism has been trying to restore since "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Cleopatra's body is a disruption for both the forces of Roman law and order within the play, as well as to Eliot as a reader outside the play. Eliot's perception of Cleopatra's "danger" clearly surfaces in the 1926 Clark Lectures, in which Cleopatra's "toil of grace" evokes "Cleopatra's disastrous power over men and empires" (*Varieties* 123). However much Eliot had wanted to deal strictly with the formal properties of Shakespeare's tragedy in his earlier essays—including the operation of the Shakespearean metaphor—he inevitably turns toward the links among the poetic language, character, and empire in these later essays. By the late twenties, Caesar's description of Cleopatra is superior verse not only because it engages the reader in a metaphor bursting with energy, but because it captures the essence of a woman who is dangerously sexual, even in death. This fascination with Cleopatra's body is really the key to our understanding of Eliot's overall response to the play and is confirmed in a number of early poems to which I now turn.

II. THE CLEOPATRA OBSESSION IN VERSE

I begin this section with a lengthy passage from *Antony and Cleopatra* because the nature of Enobarbus's rhetoric is so crucial. Act Two, Scene Two concludes with the extended description of Cleopatra enthroned. Enobarbus's words suggest why Antony's loyalties have been divided between Rome and Egypt. Enobarbus implies that, given the splendor in which Cleopatra first appeared to Antony, it is

unimaginable that Antony could not have strayed both from his wife Fulvia and from his position at the head of the triumvirate:

The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne
 Burned on the water. The poop was beaten gold;
 Purple the sails, and so perfumèd that
 The winds were love-sick 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 outwork nature. On each side her
 Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,
 With divers-coloured fans whose wind did seem
 To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,
 And what they undid did. (2.2.196–211)

Broken up by brief interjections from his audience (“O, rare for Antony!”), Enobarbus continues his verse narrative for another thirty-two lines, lines to which Eliot will repeatedly return in both his poetry and prose.⁶ But what is most significant about Enobarbus’s description of Cleopatra is that its echoes throughout Eliot’s verse reveal so much about Eliot’s own preoccupation with the figure of the racialized Other.

“Echo” is the best way to describe Eliot’s appropriation of Enobarbus’s rhetoric in his earliest poetry. *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917* (1997) allows us to trace Eliot’s interest in Cleopatra back to poems which preceded his first great success with “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1917).⁷ The editor of *March Hare*, Christopher Ricks, provides a wealth of parallel passages that connect Eliot’s work to what the poet once referred to as “the mind of Europe,” or, in other words, the great Western tradition from Homer to Dante and Shakespeare to Eliot himself. Although many of Ricks’s “literary parallels” seem highly tenuous, he has limited himself to works which Eliot is known to have read (or is likely to have read) and also makes the editorial decision to describe his suggested parallels using the words “compare to,” a choice which “declines to direct a reader as to what to deduce from the comparison” (xxvi). This semantic hedging on Ricks’s part seems entirely appropriate and points to one of the most conspicuous aspects of Eliot’s use of allusions in this early stage of his poetics: unlike the phrases consciously borrowed from Dante or Shakespeare in *The Waste Land* (numerous examples to follow), the *March Hare* poems “allude” in the most strict sense of the word. It seems as if Eliot does not yet possess the confidence to place, quite directly, the voices of his poetic predecessors within his own.⁸ An excellent illustration appears in the use of *Antony and Cleopatra* in one of the collection’s more accomplished verses, “The Burnt Dancer.”

In the original manuscript, "The Burnt Dancer" is dated June 1914 and is described by Ricks as "Dantesque." Indeed, the epigraph is borrowed from the *Inferno* XV.6, and the "circle of desire" to which Eliot refers in his opening stanza suggests the circle in which Paolo and Francesca are trapped in the fifth canto of the *Inferno*. Such echoes of Dante seem fairly explicit, but there are also subtextual shades of *Antony and Cleopatra*. Blackness and desire are central to Eliot's poem, as the "black moth" which is caught in that "circle of desire" is shared by the unnamed "him" who "Expiates his heedless flight / With beat of wings that do not tire" (lines 4–5). This is an echo of the oars of the bargemen transporting the "black" Cleopatra, oars "which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made / The water which they beat to follow faster / as amorous of their strokes" (2.200–02). In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra with her "tawny front" (1.1.6) and self-described "amorous pinches black" (1.5.28) has distracted Antony and rendered him a "strumpet's fool" (1.1.13), while in "The Burnt Dancer," the black body has "Distracted [him] from *more vital values* / To golden values of the flame" (lines 6–7; emphasis mine) and he has come "from a distant star / For mirthless dance and silent revel" (12–13). The parallels with *Antony and Cleopatra* (to which Ricks does not make connections) gradually come into focus: Antony has traveled to Egypt from his native Rome and been "distracted" by his passion for Cleopatra, much to the regret of the Romans, who wish Antony to "Leave thy lascivious wassails" (1.5.56); indeed, Caesar hopes that Antony will "Let his shames quickly / Drive him to Rome" (1.5.73–74). However, even the death of his first wife Fulvia and his re-marriage to Caesar's sister Octavia cannot permanently extricate Antony from Cleopatra's "circle of desire"; Antony describes himself as being "stirred by Cleopatra / Now, for the love of Love and her soft hours" (1.1.45–46).

As in *Antony and Cleopatra*, race and desire figure prominently in "The Burnt Dancer," since the "black moth" of stanza one is again invoked in the poem's refrain, "O danse mon papillon noir!" (14, 29, 41). Like Cleopatra, the "papillon noir" is an exoticized, Oriental body geographically linked to both Africa and the Bay of Bengal, waters on the eastern coast of India:

The tropic odours of your name
 From Mozambique to Nicobar
 Fall on the ragged teeth of flame
 Like perfumed oil upon the waters
 What is the secret you have brought us . . . (15–19)

Such a passage resembles the standard exoticized description of "Oriental" sexuality, of the kind that populated numerous nineteenth-century literary fantasies (*Madame Bovary* comes to mind), and later the works of Gide, Conrad, and Maugham at the turn of the twentieth century. As Edward Said makes clear, the Orient becomes suggestive of a more mysterious and less guilt-ridden sexuality that is unattainable in the lives of the bourgeois who resort to "daydreams packed inside Oriental clichés: harems, princesses, princes, slaves, veils, dancing girls and boys, sherbets, ointments, and so on" (190). But in "The Burnt Dancer," Eliot is drawing on the

language of a very specific example of a much earlier Orientalist discourse, and this time the editor of *March Hare* does indicate the source of the literary parallel. The linkage of the “flame—perfumed—waters” imagery derives directly from the first lines of Enobarbus’s description of Cleopatra with her throne “burning” on the waters and her “perfumed” sails which made the winds “love-sick.”

Considering the ways in which Eliot draws on the Shakespearean text, “The Burnt Dancer” is representative of Eliot’s poetics at this early stage of his career, in that the echoes from Shakespeare are just that: echoes of another’s voice, rather than the lines more explicitly borrowed from *Antony and Cleopatra* in *The Waste Land*. Comparing the *March Hare* poem with the later, more mature work reveals a great leap in the poet’s development; the former reads as an amalgam of hazy connections between Shakespeare and Eliot, with no truly distinctive poetic voice. The copiousness of Ricks’s annotations suggests a young poet sifting through a litany of his poetic predecessors, but struggling to speak with his own voice. Eliot would indeed find that voice (or voices, more precisely) with the publication of *The Waste Land* in 1922, and it is instructive to consider how Eliot’s appropriation of *Antony and Cleopatra* in *The Waste Land* becomes more overt, while his attitude toward the Othered figure of Cleopatra is similar to what we observe in “The Burnt Dancer.”⁹

As I mentioned in my introduction, generations of commentators on *The Waste Land* have suggested that the “distortions” of Enobarbus’s speech are intended to be ironic. Readers have assumed that the irony concerns the juxtaposition of the Queen of the Nile with the “Belladonna” figure in “A Game of Chess,” the unnamed female character who sits before a glass, surrounded by material splendor:

... the glass
 Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines
 From which a golden Cupidon peeped out
 (Another hid his eyes behind his wing)
 Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra
 Reflecting the light upon the table as
 The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,
 From satin cases poured in rich profusion.
 In vials of ivory and covered glass
 Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes,
 Unguent, powdered, or liquid—troubled, confused
 And drowned the sense in odors ... (78–89)

After the near-direct borrowing of the “the Chair she sat in”—lines that clearly signal the Shakespeare allusion to the reader—Eliot here returns to a network of “echoes” like those observed in “The Burnt Dancer.” The reason that some critics have suggested an ironic contrast between Cleopatra and Eliot’s “Belladonna” is that Shakespeare’s “pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids” have become a “golden Cupidon” and the “perfumed sails” have been transformed into “strange synthetic perfumes” that trouble and confuse and “[drown] the sense in odours.” The prevailing

critical assessment is that such “distortions,” as Sukhbir Singh, for one, contends, “display an analogue/antithesis between the antiquity and contemporaneity” (60), with the analogue existing in the parallel texts and the antithesis arising from Eliot’s idealization of antiquity and consequent disparagement of his own contemporary age.¹⁰ It is certainly true that in Eliot’s description the scene is presented as far more vulgar; the lavish material possessions on display cannot conceal the perfumes which vex the senses. However, both scenarios — Shakespeare’s Queen in her flotilla of rhetorical hyperbole and Eliot’s Belladonna in her surfeit of conspicuous consumption — display an equal submersion in an ocean of lust and excess. Could either Shakespeare’s or Eliot’s respective female figures be held up as any sort of ideal? Certainly not — both are “problem women” and are treated in the manner in which the colonized female body has been repeatedly represented in colonial discourse.

What is most striking about an analysis of the passages in question is how both female characters are an absence: in Enobarbus’s description, Cleopatra’s own person “beggared all description,” which suggests a beauty somehow outside of language, but which also suggests an obstacle in representation similar to Belladonna’s absence in “A Game of Chess.” In *Antony and Cleopatra*, even though the audience learns that Cleopatra has been the lover of at least two other Romans in addition to Antony — “great Pompey” and “broad-fronted [a.k.a. Julius] Caesar” — we are never led to understand what they actually see in her. Returning to the earlier citation of Enobarbus’s description of the Queen enthroned, after the meticulous detail of the barge and its exotic trappings, all that we know about the female body is that “she did lie in her pavilion,” certainly a semantically-loaded description given Cleopatra’s propensity for deceit. On one hand we are led to infer the sexual power of the African *femme fatale* from the litany of her Roman lovers, but the simultaneous absence of her body directs us away from any inherent attractiveness of Cleopatra. Although Cleopatra is infinitely more appealing to the audience than she appeared in Plutarch (Shakespeare’s likely source), what most strikes this reader is the tension between the testimonials to her beauty which coexist rather uneasily with the character we see who, more than anything, appears maddeningly self-absorbed and self-destructive.

A similar measure of self-absorption and female absence lies at the heart of Belladonna in “A Game of Chess.” The catalogue of things that surround her is extensive: the fruited vines, sevenbranched candelabra, ivory, coffered ceiling, and colored glass completely obscure the figure of female desire; the reader of *The Waste Land* is unable to see Belladonna for all of the finery that surrounds her. The same profusion of jewels and fragrances which should ostensibly stir the senses of those who gaze upon her instead “drowns” those same senses. Instead of directing his reader’s gaze at the female figure who is consciously analogous to Cleopatra, Eliot instead limits the gaze to Belladonna’s immersion in her own reflection in the mirror. And because Eliot consciously juxtaposes Cleopatra with his own Belladonna character, we must consider the body here not only as female, but as the racialized Other, again affording a unique opportunity for reading Eliot as part of a much larger Orientalist discourse.

III. THE COLONIAL FETISH

Homi Bhabha theorizes how the visibility of the racial/colonial Other constitutes a “problem” for the colonizer’s identity. In describing the conflicted nature of this desire for the Other, Bhabha suggests that in instances of scopical pleasure, two issues are at play:

The visibility of the racial/colonial Other is at once a *point* of identity (“Look, a Negro”) and at the same time a *problem* for the attempted closure within discourse. . . . In the objectification of the scopical drive there is always the threatened return of the look; in the identification of the Imaginary relation there is always the alienating other (or mirror) which crucially returns its image to the subject. (81)

In other words (and without digressing into a lengthy discussion of the Lacanian psychoanalytic theory which underpins Bhabha’s argument), the gaze at the body of the colonized can be reassuring in that it reinforces racial difference, thus reinscribing the colonizer’s own self-identity. But the gaze is also problematic insofar as the colonizer can see a bit too much of himself in the gaze which is returned by the colonial subject. We see this conflict at work in Eliot’s representation of Cleopatra/Belladonna. As long as the gaze is unreturned, the scopical pleasure is a form of surveillance (in itself a form of power), but once that gaze is returned, there is a threat that the Other can function as the mirror (in the Lacanian sense)—the point at which identity is first conferred. As a result, the power of the female Other’s own gaze must be diffused somehow; to be completely enthralled by this female body and to exchange glances and allow the text to immerse itself in the riches of that body too much would undermine both the identity of the colonialist writer/observer and the sense of power wielded over the literary subject. Eliot has thus created what Bhabha refers to as an “impossible object,” one whose power must be contained through discourse. Thus, the Orientalist fantasy (which operates in “The Burnt Dancer,” as well) is invoked. Within this discourse, the body of the racialized Other becomes secondary to what surrounds it:

Not itself the object of desire but its setting, not an ascription of prior identities but their production in the syntax of racist discourse, colonial fantasy plays a crucial part in those everyday scenes of subjectification in a colonial society which [Frantz] Fanon refers to repeatedly. Like fantasies of the origins of sexuality, the productions of “colonial desire” mark the discourse as “a favoured spot for the most primitive defense reactions such as turning against oneself, into an opposite, projection negation.” (Bhabha 81)

What surrounds the potentially unsettling figure of the African female body are all of the trappings of the Oriental sexual fantasy—such as the surfeit of perfumes and oils—in both Enobarbus’s description of Cleopatra and in Eliot’s analogous update of Belladonna and “the chair she sat in like a burnished throne.” What Bhabha helps us to see is that Eliot’s recasting of the barge scene from *Antony and Cleopatra* is conspicuous in its reliance upon the fetish object, whether inanimate

objects (*e.g.*, ivory vials) or of the body (*e.g.*, Belladonna's "hair spread out in fiery points"). Such a practice positions Eliot within a colonial discourse in which the isolated artifact, whether in the form of a body part or as commodity (such as home decoration or personal fashion), is severed from its cultural context and depends upon the absence of the colonized people represented by such objects. Racial representation thus becomes elided; the Other disappears from the text and is either reduced to a fetishized body part or completely replaced by commodities.

Enobarbus's words filter into yet another much-discussed Eliot poem, and this notion of Cleopatra as an anxiety-ridden sexual presence to be contained is perhaps even closer to the surface. In "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar," we have not only a verse charged with anti-Semitism, but one in which the whole economy of the poem is built upon a foundation of anxiety over the loss of empire.¹¹ Even more explicitly than in "A Game of Chess," "Burbank" invites a comparison between the corrupted present age and an idealized empire of the past. However, this time, the past is not located in classical antiquity, but in the Venetian Renaissance. Eliot's most potent symbol of the majesty of Venice is the emblem of the city—the lion of San Marco—whose wings have been "clipped" by the combined force of three characters: first, Burbank, a representative of crass American consumerism with Baedeker tour book in tow; second, Bleistein, the worldly, Jewish entrepreneur whom Eliot condemns for his rapacity in the fur trade; and finally, Princess Volupine, who like Belladonna is consciously conflated with Cleopatra; she is yet another "problem woman" for Eliot.

Although the poem is a fraction of the length of *The Waste Land*, Shakespearean fragments fill its eight stanzas. In an epigraph that manages to juxtapose the nineteenth-century French poet Théophile Gautier, Eliot's fellow expatriate Henry James, and Robert Browning, Shakespeare appears as well in the form of the allusion to "goats and monkeys" which derives from Othello's crazed outburst following Desdemona's purported infidelity (4.1.260). As in "A Game of Chess," there is again a distillation of the themes of obsessive sexual desire and the racialized Other via Shakespeare, this time in a Venetian setting (one shared by *Othello*). Surprisingly however, *Othello* does not occupy a central position in the poem after its epigraph; instead, one of the central characters of "Burbank," Princess Volupine, becomes twinned with Cleopatra: "Her shuttered barge / Burned on the water all the day" (lines 11–12). Since "Burbank" was drafted sometime between 1918 and 1919, it is tempting to view the work as an intermediate stage in the use of that particular Shakespearean fragment between the composition of "The Burnt Dancer" and "A Game of Chess." The allusion is not as merely suggestive as in the former poem, but it is not the annotated "theft" that we see in the latter. Nevertheless, the centrality of *Antony and Cleopatra* is confirmed early in the previous stanza, as Eliot again invokes Shakespeare's play. In Act Four, Scene Three, just before the Egyptian forces are crushed by Caesar, a group of Cleopatra's soldiers hears mysterious "Music i' th' air" and we learn that, "'Tis the god Hercules, whom Antony loved / Now leaves him" (4.3.13–14). The soldiers recognize the song as an omen of the defeat to come, since Antony—once a supremely active and decisive warrior—has

abandoned his battles for the sake of sensual pleasures with Cleopatra. Similarly, in Eliot's poem, after Burbank's relationship with Volupine, "the God Hercules / Had left him, that had loved him well" (lines 7–8). Both Antony and Burbank experience a "fall," and both Shakespeare and Eliot *cherchent la femme*. Thus, Eliot first hints at the analogy between Cleopatra and Volupine, as the latter contributes to the decline of an imperial majesty, represented by the "pared claws" and "clipped wings" of the lion of San Marco, the patron saint of Venice.

Like Cleopatra, Volupine is a sexual predator (as confirmed by a name which has more than a hint of the "vulpine"), who weakens the men she encounters. Venice has become a travesty of its former splendor because of the influx of characters such as Bleistein (an anti-Semitic symbol of the nation's decay) and Volupine, who possesses a "meagre, blue-nailed, phthisic hand / To climb the waterstair" (lines 25–26). The blue nails may suggest consumption, whose physical ravages are a parallel to the city's moral decay; such decay is significant because again, as in *Antony and Cleopatra*, the female becomes a form of contagion, yet one which is simultaneously an object of desire. Although that "shuttered barge" that "burned on the water" is what lures men like Burbank, the Cleopatra-like Volupine weakens, feminizes, and ultimately destroys them. And again, the body itself, despite the intimations of sexuality and allure, is never presented to us in full. At best, we get the exoticized surroundings—in the case of "Burbank," there is the barge, as well as the horses that also transport Volupine's coach "under the axletree" and "Beat up the dawn from Istria." The locale which is invoked here, Istria, is a peninsula near the head of the Adriatic, and most significantly, located to the east of Venice. And when the body *is* represented—which it is to an extent we have not yet seen in other Eliot/Shakespeare parallels—there is only the fetishized (and "blue-nailed") hand. Like the colonial landscape itself, which is often represented as unknowable and unrepresentable (*e.g.*, the dark continent), the feminine is an unrepresentable absence which can be, as Anne McClintock suggests, "the *objects* of fetishism but never the *subjects*" (193; her emphasis). The sexuality of both Cleopatra and Volupine is potentially empowering; it shows clear signs of the ability to overwhelm or at least effeminize the male. While the Orientalized Cleopatra claims in Shakespeare's play that, "I . . . put my tires and mantles on [Antony] whilst / I wore his sword Philippan" (2.5.21–23), the similarly Othered Volupine possesses perhaps even more transgressive power, working to emasculate both her male suitors and the aforementioned lion of San Marco. As a result, the female figure must be treated as either a complete absence ("For her own person, it beggared all description") or reduced to a fetish object ("A meagre, blue-nailed, phthisic hand"), which is far more manageable in the economy of male desire.

IV. MOVING TO THE CENTER

As Eliot's career progressed, he eventually revised his earlier assessment of the Shakespearean canon: *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus* were eventually subordinated to the "romances." These late plays—which include *The Tempest*, *Cymbeline*,

and *Pericles*—blend aspects of tragedy and comedy, and occupied a privileged position in both Eliot's criticism and verse, with the most conspicuous poetic appearance being the allusions to *Pericles* in "Marina" (1930). Not surprisingly, Eliot appeared to abandon his earlier fascination with "Cleopatra and her problems" at a time when his own position within the national culture had become more secure. Earlier in his career, Eliot's *Hamlet* criticism, in particular, was considered typical of his faults in that, as Terence Hawkes suggests, "[Eliot] seems unable to grasp the play's links with a native English tradition" (*Shakespearean* 79).¹² However, in the period after Eliot became a British subject in 1927, not to mention one of the most influential critical voices of the century, his desire to wrestle with the Shakespeare plays in which the racialized, gendered, or ethnic Other is prominent seems to become less imperative. As Charles Warren's study *T.S. Eliot on Shakespeare* (1987) makes clear, beginning in the 1930s, Eliot seems less interested in analyzing individual plays and more concerned with tracing Shakespeare's development as a dramatist as a whole. In fact, one of the turning points for Warren is Eliot's essay "The Music of Poetry" (1942); here, Eliot contends that *Antony and Cleopatra* marks the transition from an earlier emphasis on producing a complete harmony between the verse and the speaker's character toward an increasingly elaborate "music," which was simultaneously more elaborate and complex, yet retained contact with colloquial speech. Instead of a formalist attention to the workings of individual metaphors within the play, or a fascination with the destructive power of Cleopatra's sexuality, Eliot now considers the relationship of *Antony and Cleopatra* to the entire body of Shakespeare's plays.

There is a clear discursive shift here which must be related to Eliot's further assimilation into the national culture. No longer playing the role of the metic, who needs to enter a discourse which constantly foregrounds the representation of the Other as a means of inscribing his own opposition to that Other's most conspicuous attributes (and hence, confirming that Eliot is not really an outsider), the Eliot of the 1930s and beyond is a sort of naturalized version of Matthew Arnold, commenting on the national culture from within and able to see Shakespeare's development writ large. For the Eliot of the 1930s, Shakespeare becomes a sort of neo-classicist who predated the eighteenth-century revival of classical forms. Eliot reacted against writers such as Herbert Read and John Middleton Murry, who considered Shakespeare to have mocked "conventional morality." Such critics viewed Shakespeare as a sort of precursor to the Romantic movement which, in Murry's eyes, "is the English cultural tradition" (Ellis 41). For Read, Shakespeare was *the* great anti-classical rebel, but Eliot was now secure enough in his position inside English culture to formulate his own (alternate) great tradition, with the metaphysical poets supplanting even Shakespeare in importance. I would argue that Eliot's interest in the Shakespearean canon displaced his interest in the individual plays, works which are no longer fetishistic fragments to be dispersed about Eliot's own poetry and criticism. In this way, *Antony and Cleopatra* is no longer a "fragment shored against [Eliot's] ruins," but rather a part of the entire Shakespearean oeuvre that Eliot feels secure enough to reassess. As a result, one might even claim that Cleopatra is a problem no more.

Notes

1. The published epigraph to “The Hollow Men” (“Mistah Kurtz—he dead”) consists of the words spoken to Marlow by the “manager’s boy” after Kurtz’s death. After the profundity of Kurtz’s final words (“The horror! The horror”), the “insolent” tone of the manager’s boy possesses unmistakable traces of “scathing contempt” to the devastated Marlow. See Conrad, 112. The original epigraph to *The Waste Land*—prior to the revisions of Eliot and Ezra Pound—was again borrowed from *Heart of Darkness*, drawn from Marlow’s description of Kurtz’s deathbed ruminations and Kurtz’s final words cited above. See Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts*, 3.
2. For example, Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* surfaces in a number of works. There is an early allusion in “A Cooking Egg” (1920): “For I shall meet Sir Philip Sidney / And have talk with Coriolanus / And other heroes of that kidney” (*Collected Poems* 36) and again in the “What the Thunder Said” section of *The Waste Land* (“Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus” [line 416]). In addition, there is Eliot’s more extended treatment in the unfinished “Coriolan” (1931). For an intriguing discussion of the links between Shakespeare’s haughty tragic hero and Eliot’s evolving poetic persona, see Terence Hawkes’s *Meaning By Shakespeare*, 106–12.
3. One anecdotal illustration of Eliot’s metic status during the war years appears in Gordon. During a war in which various maladies prevented Eliot from joining the armed forces, the poet worked on the home front as a schoolmaster. But as Gordon suggests, “his days were spent with schoolboys to whom he was a foreigner, ‘the American master’ and Eliot “felt no interest in them, and looked upon teaching not as a means of expression but as a barrier to it” (138). As a result, the journey from the margins to the center of the English literary world would have to be accomplished through Eliot’s own writing, rather than his teaching career.
4. For the remainder of the essay I will refer to the anonymous woman at the beginning of “A Game of Chess” as Belladonna, although critics are far from unified in the manner in which they refer to her. Scofield uses “Belladonna” since “the picture of the grand lady in the lavish classical or renaissance setting [is] possibly anticipated by ‘Belladonna’ at line 49” (113). Similarly, Williamson also refers to “Belladonna”: because of her “strange synthetic perfumes,” we are here “in the presence of Belladonna, no less narcotic than cosmetic, herself presently in need of an anodyne” (135–36).
5. Said begins *Orientalism* by examining the nature of Balfour’s logic and rhetoric pertaining to the “crisis in Egypt” and considers the degree to which it is typical of the Orientalist discourse which *Orientalism* will analyze in detail. See Said, 31–46.
6. The citation of Enobarbus’s lines from Act 2, Scene 2 often appears in surprising contexts. For example, in an essay in praise of Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens and the melodrama (evidence of the “populist” Eliot perhaps, the same Eliot who championed the popular musical hall entertainer Marie Lloyd), Eliot praises Collins’s “life-like” characters, but contrasts them with the equally effective characterizations of Dante, Shakespeare, and Dickens, who could by virtue of “a single phrase, either by [the characters] or about them, set these characters wholly before us.” The illustrative example drawn from Shakespeare is a phrase from Enobarbus which Eliot believes to set Cleopatra before us instantly and which follows the passage cited above: “I saw her once/ Hop forty paces through the public street” (*Essays* 411). In Eliot’s eyes, Collins, who lacked a poet’s sensibility, could never crystallize into a single phrase an image of a character with almost “super-natural” clarity (to use Eliot’s own term), insofar as it sets before us a character, a life to be seen in relation to the reader’s own life, no matter whether the method of presentation is a play, novel or poem.
7. Eliot never intended to publish the *March Hare* poems, but instead offered them to his American publisher John Quinn for a price of \$140 in 1923 (Ricks xi), a token of gratitude for helping Eliot secure the American publication which was so important to his sense of vindication over his decision to remain in London. Many of these poems—works bound in a notebook—were early drafts of published work (like “Prufrock”) but forty “new” poems eventually came to, including four sets of obscene verses added to the collection by its editor, Christopher Ricks. To some extent, Ricks’s editorial apparatus overwhelms the collection, which consists of roughly eighty pages of Eliot’s verse and more than three hundred pages of annotations. Nevertheless, Ricks’s scholarship is laudable, and he outlines his approach to Eliot’s poetry, in which he eschews interpretation in favor of tracing textual allusions: “This edition is

based on the conviction that, subordinate to the establishing of the text and its textual variants (which are given at the foot of a poem's page), the important thing is evidence of where the poems came from, and of where they went to in Eliot's other work" (xxii).

8. In one of his most famous critical formulations, Eliot once asserted that "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different" (*Essays* 182). Seemingly fearful during the period of composing the *March Hare* poems to "deface" what he cannot yet weave into the fabric of his own poems, Eliot merely "imitates," which is why many of the *March Hare* poems lack the distinctive voice of the more mature Eliot of *The Waste Land*.

9. According to Peter Ackroyd, Eliot included *The Waste Land's* annotations only with the December 1922 book-length edition published by Horace Liveright. When the poem first appeared in the Autumn of 1922 (in *The Dial* and *The Criterion*), Eliot had not included the notes, but did so for the book publication "to avoid the charges of plagiarism which had been leveled at his earlier poetry" (Ackroyd 127). Apparently, even after the original draft of annotations was complete, the book was still not long enough to be printed, so Eliot expanded them in a classic instance of the intersection of commerce and scholarship. Eliot's own annotations to *The Waste Land* ensure that readers could not fail to see a different poetics at work. What were once veiled echoes of Shakespeare and others were now conscious borrowings. For the opening of "A Game of Chess," Eliot reminds his readers that his opening lines, "The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne," derive from *Antony and Cleopatra* (2.2.190). Eliot's great advance is the notion that a poem could be constructed out of such overt references. Ironically, this practice is what endows him with an original voice of his own; Eliot's conscious thievery is what first provided him with true originality. At times the references are verbatim, but at others there are deliberate, yet slight modifications, such as the substitution of "Chair" for Cleopatra's barge. As Eliot would later explain in "What Dante Means to Me" (1950): "I gave the references in my notes, in order to make the reader who recognized the allusion, know that I meant him to recognize it, and know that he would have missed the point if he did not recognize it" (*To Criticize* 128). Even though *The Waste Land* was the only poem for which Eliot provided such notations, such recognitions of allusions are not relevant only to his best-known poem. I merely suggest that Eliot is more direct there about the method of incorporating his literary influence. The allusions are obviously easier to trace in *The Waste Land*, although the "problem" of Cleopatra remains consistent throughout Eliot's poetry.

10. In his essay, Singh is clearly referencing Eliot's own assessment of the great formal achievement of Joyce's *Ulysses*, as expressed in Eliot's "Ulysses, Order, and Myth": "In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him" (123).

11. Although my focus in the present essay is on the "problem" of the analogous figures of Cleopatra and Princess Volupine, there has been much critical discussion of Eliot's Bleistein and his anti-Semitic depiction, much of it prompted by Anthony Julius's *T.S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form*. For a specific discussion of "Burbank" in this context, see pages 92–110.

12. Hawkes suggests that Eliot's failure to connect *Hamlet* to a "native, English tradition" is evidence of an insufficient grounding in English criticism (*Shakespearean* 79). In making this claim, Hawkes expands on an earlier argument by F.R. Leavis that had Eliot been familiar, for example, with Thomas Rymer's late seventeenth-century rhetorical analysis of *Othello*, Prince Hamlet's linguistic "excesses" might not have seemed so distinctive or objectionable to the author of "Hamlet and His Problems" (Leavis 149–54).

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