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A Seventeenth-Century Air History in Conversation with Antony and Cleopatra

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A Seventeenth-Century Air History in Conversation with *Antony and Cleopatra*

Abstract

This article works to unpack the recurrences of air-related language utilized in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Throughout this play, the notions of breath, wind, air, and vapor are consistently referenced, demonstrating the way in which atmospheric intangibility was a key point of exploration for contemporary scientists and philosophers. Through this analysis, it is clear that Shakespeare employs breath in three ways: the breath of (public) life, a lack of breath, and, most importantly, breath as a symbol of power and autonomy, which at times overlaps with the breath of life in ways that demonstrate contemporary conceptualizations of living beings. The relation of breath and power is shown to exist in other seventeenth-century texts, which often thought about breath and power in relation to God, spirits, and nature. Ultimately, Shakespeare treats air as transformative, wind as a whimsical means of transportation, and vapor as contagious. These ideas coincide with seventeenth-century understandings of these meteorological concepts found in complex scientific theories, natural philosophy ideas, and cultural constructions accepted by the general public.

Keywords: *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare, breath, wind, air, vapor, natural philosophy

Introduction

During the Renaissance period, air was a crucial point of study in natural philosophy due to its invisibility—it was viewed as a complex scientific phenomenon that had been otherwise ignored in previous scholarship. In the play *Antony and Cleopatra* by William Shakespeare, the prevalence of the notions of breath, wind, air, and vapor reveal how atmospheric intangibility was a key point of exploration for contemporary scientists and philosophers, and the employment of these air-related words in this play reflects common mystical beliefs about these entities at the time. I argue that Shakespeare employs breath in three ways: the breath of (public) life, a lack of breath, and, most importantly, breath as a symbol of power and autonomy. Although these categories are distinguishable in and of themselves, an overlap often exists regarding the notion of containing breath as being filled with life and thus power, which reveals seventeenth-century

conceptualizations of living beings. This relation of breath and power (and often life) exists in other seventeenth-century texts, which often thought about breath and power in relation to God, spirits, and nature. Additionally, through my analysis of air, wind, and vapor—which I keep independent of my investigation of breath due to differences in how these phenomena are handled—I conclude that Shakespeare treats air as transformative, wind as a whimsical means of transportation, and vapor as contagious.

Seventeenth-Century Air History and Scholarship

An array of seventeenth-century sources reveal that the treatment of air in both science and philosophy informed the period when Shakespeare was writing. Although one may not immediately associate Shakespeare's texts with scientific endeavors, the contemporary scholarly climate surrounding Renaissance science permeates his text ("Worlds of Science," p.32). Shakespeare delves into, "the philosophical, psychological, and cultural impact" of many scientific fields, including, "...theories about germs, atoms, matter, falling bodies, [and] planetary motion..." ("Worlds of Science," p.32). During the Renaissance, Greek natural philosophers believed that the Earth was composed of four elements: fire, earth, water and air ("Science of Shakespeare," p.22). This means that, "Earth in *Antony and Cleopatra* is both another name for the 'world' and the name of one of the constitutive elements of Aristotelian science: earth, water, air, and fire" (Roman World, p.4). In addition to this natural, scientific understanding of how the Earth works, people assigned social meaning to the elements as well: "In a world of hierarchies, it is not surprising that the elements themselves were ranked according to their presumed nobility. Fire was the most worthy; next was air" ("Science of Shakespeare," p.22). During this period, people thought that disease was simply caused by "bad air" ("Science of Shakespeare,"

p.262). Additionally, people thought that one's values and emotions could permeate the air: "According to Peter Ackroyd, morality and anxiety were part of the air that the citizens breathed" ("Science of Shakespeare," p.263). Thus, people saw air in the seventeenth century as a perplexing Aristotelian element that could potentially create illness; through these beliefs, one can see how people understood the transmission of illness, and the display of emotions.

Scholars have only thought in passing about early modern theories of air and *Antony and Cleopatra*. In "The Rack Dislimns" by Donald Freeman, Freeman tangentially discusses air in this play; he begins his argument (which focuses on containment, links, and paths as schemas) by defining the theory of cognitive metaphor as the creation of a metaphor from a "schematized representation" of experiences, which in turn creates a series of amalgamated images and plot devices ("The Rack Dislimns," p.443). The patterns within metaphor in *Antony and Cleopatra* allow readers and audience members to see how Shakespeare constructs Cleopatra, in opposition to Antony: "Conversely, we understand Cleopatra at her death as the transcendent queen of "immortal longings" because the container of her mortality can no longer restrain her: unlike Antony, she never melts, but sublimates from her very earthly flesh to ethereal fire and air" ("The Rack Dislimns," p.445). Freeman further supports this distinction by analyzing language adjacent to that of air with regard to Cleopatra's death in Act V, in which she, "...obliterates the solid, containing periphery of her body not by melting, as Antony had sought for Rome and Romanness, but by sublimation, transmuting the 'marble constant' solidity of her physicality from a solid directly into a gas" ("The Rack Dislimns," p.456-457). Antony and Cleopatra symbolizing what Freeman refers to as the "Octavian New World Order" reinforces the concept of dying in an almost vaporizing way: "The lovers' funeral must 'keep the square': fancy must

not outwork nature; Antony's deliquescent Rome, Cleopatra's sublimated fire and air...linked forever—but also contained forever—in the basest of the four classical elements. Rome must never melt again” (“The Rack Dislimns,” p.459). Thus, Freeman contributes to the current state of relevant scholarship regarding air-related, schematic metaphors in *Antony and Cleopatra* by highlighting the “obliteration,” “melting,” “sublimation,” and “vaporization” (“The Rack Dislimns,” p.456-457) of Cleopatra in the text; each of these terms operates in a way that is environmental in background and acts as the beginning of the thread of air-related language that I am arguing reflects both seventeenth-century natural philosophy and common mystical misconceptions at the time.

“The History of Air...” by Carla Mazzio is another piece of crucial scholarship that delves into air-related language in Shakespeare’s texts. According to Mazzio, the imperceptibility of air made it a controversial topic in terms of what people believed about it: “‘Air is strong, though not visible,’ thus only ‘known by its effects and our apprehensions,’ wrote one sixteenth-century physician, who also observed ‘that substance, whether it be air, wind, or blast’ is ‘to be heard or felt, though not to be seen’” (“Deflatibus...” p.3). Mazzio argues that a “psycho-physiological economy” operated in which people thought of air as linked to the humor of blood; Francis Bacon further articulated this confusion regarding the understanding of air, which was one of the biggest gaps in early modern and classical natural philosophy: “[I]n the Inquisition of General winds, men have suffered and been in darkness, so they have been troubled with a Vertigo or giddiness concerning staid and certain Winds. Of the former they say nothing, of the latter, they talk up and down at random.” (“Historia Ventorum”). These confused philosophers created an array of technology, including, “Fans, bellows, windmills, guns, mines,

sails, powder houses, and even dietary regimens for controlling the flow of air in and out of mouths, pores, bodies, and minds” (“The History...” p.158). Seventeenth-century London in particular was a hub of technological creation regarding instruments created to study the natural world, such as windmills, heating devices, and military and navigational instruments (“The History...” p.158). Despite these technologies, people viewed air as mysterious: “[M]oving air is an unconquerable thing...the great force of air cannot be checked...For it loosens any bond and carries every weight away with it and makes a space for itself, pouring through the smallest fissures. By the indomitable force of its nature air frees itself...” (“Naturales...” 2:178-81). The fact that people widely thought air was capable of catalyzing chaos through disease and natural disasters supplemented this viewpoint of air as an unchecked power (“The History...” p.162). Shakespeare appropriated these almost supernatural interpretations of air into his writing, by weaving spirits, apparitions, and cosmology into his plays (“The History...” p.172). Mazzio ultimately argues that, in *Hamlet*, the seventeenth-century understanding of air permeates the text, particularly with regard to ghosts and cosmology, which translated into air in the text being portrayed as a powerful and mysterious force. I am extending this to apply to *Antony and Cleopatra*; however, more specifically, I am arguing that Shakespeare employs breath in three ways: breath as associated with life (and, when referring to Cleopatra, public life), a lack of breath, and breath as symbolic of power. Additionally, I am arguing that seventeenth-century natural philosophy and other contemporary thoughts about air permeate the text with the use of other air-related terms, such as “air” itself, as well as “wind,” and “vapor.”

Breath in *Antony and Cleopatra*

One manner in which Shakespeare discusses breath in *Antony and Cleopatra* lies in the depiction of the breath of life and, in Cleopatra's case, the breath of public life. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, one definition of "breath" directly reflects this notion of the breath of life: "The faculty or action of breathing, respiration. Hence, breathing existence, spirit, life; so *breath of life, breath of the nostrils*" ("Breath, n."). Shakespeare clearly knew this definition, because the Oxford English Dictionary credits him with using it in *The Winter's Tale* in 1623 ("Breath, n."). One textual example of "breath" symbolizing life occurs when Antony says: "I am sorry to give breathing to my purpose" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, I.iii.14). Context-wise, Antony says this before informing Cleopatra that he must return to Rome because of Sextus Pompeius's impending arrival to battle him, and Fulvia has also just died. Here, "breathing" is representative of the fact that Antony apologetically brings the truth "to life" by speaking it aloud, giving it power. Additionally, the Ambassador later says: "He lessens his requests; and to thee sues / To let him breathe between the heavens and earth / A private man in Athens: this for him" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, III.xii.13-15). The Ambassador says this while representing Antony to Caesar after Antony ordered his fleet to return home because he saw Cleopatra's ship fleeing mid-battle; here, Antony requests he be able to live in Egypt, or at least be able to live an impoverished life in Athens. The notion of "letting him [Antony] breathe" acts as a poetic translation of "letting him [Antony] live" in Athens. This serves as an inverse example of the way in which Shakespeare associates Cleopatra with public life when discussing breath, due to the proximity of the word "private" to "breathe" when the Ambassador references Antony. Within the notion of privacy is an implied respectability that Antony contains in this play until engaging with Cleopatra, and that Cleopatra wholly lacks in this play, due to the exoticization and sexualization

of her culture as an Egyptian woman. Although Shakespeare depicts Cleopatra as standing out from the public because of her supernatural generativity, the hypersexualization of Cleopatra and the Roman perspective of Egypt as luxurious and static ultimately makes Cleopatra appear less deserving of respect than Antony. This is because Cleopatra's eroticism and grand lifestyle are what is emphasized about her, as opposed to her political wit or military instincts, which Romans highly value in this play. With regard to breath being both symbolic of life and connected with the public, Enobarbus's description of Cleopatra in Cydnus provides yet another example of this: "I saw her once / Hop forty paces through the public street; / And having lost her breath, she spoke, and panted, / That she did make defect perfection, / And, breathless, power breathe forth" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, II.ii.234-238). Shakespeare depicts Cleopatra as a supernatural, generative being capable of producing breath without actually having any inside of her; here, Shakespeare foregrounds the notion of Cleopatra being capable of altering the natural world, as well as throughout this section. "Breathe" represents the life and vivacity of Cleopatra here; the proximity of "breathe" to the word "public" emphasizes breathing as a natural act, done even by commoners. This implies astonishment that someone as beautiful and exotic as Cleopatra breathes too, just like common people do. Finally, Cleopatra directly mentions "breath" in relation to the public, as she displays class panic through fearing the possibility of the pungent breath of the common people entering her lungs and infecting her: "With greasy aprons, rules, and hammers, shall / Uplift us to the view; in their thick breaths, / Rank of gross diet, shall be enclouded, / And forced to drink their vapour" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, V.ii.206-209). "Breath" therefore only functions as being tied to the notion of the public when Cleopatra speaks or another character references her; this association exists because of her portrayal as a mysterious,

supernatural figure. As previously stated, she has a unique control over the natural process of breathing that all forms of life do. This mastery over respiration differentiates and distances Cleopatra from the public. Thus, one use of “breath” lies in using it as symbolic of life and, for Cleopatra, public life.

Shakespeare also discusses breath in this play when referencing a lack of breath, which equates to a lack of life. The first instance of this in *Antony and Cleopatra* lies in the aforementioned description of Cleopatra by Enobarbus, in which he says, “And having lost her breath, she spoke, and panted, / That she did make defect perfection, / And, breathless, power breathe forth” (“*Antony and Cleopatra...*”, II.ii.234-236). Here, Shakespeare connects the concepts of losing breath and being breathless to the notion of the public due to this passage referencing Cleopatra in a public setting (and how she stands out from said public); Cleopatra is the only character that, as stated, does not have to succumb to breathlessness because of her supernatural generativity. Another example of a lack of breath lies in the Messenger’s description of Octavia: “She creeps: / Her motion and her station are as one, / She shows a body rather than a life, / A statue than a breather” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, III.iii.18-21). The Messenger provides Cleopatra with a description of Octavia per Cleopatra’s request. In this section, the Messenger describes Octavia negatively, as short, low-voiced, and round-faced; these particular lines depict her as a sluggish, lifeless figure. Thus, Shakespeare uses the word “breather” as an emblem of the living; Octavia looking more like a statue suggests that she looks dull, cold, and potentially dead, since statues often commemorate the deceased. Another example of a lack of breath occurs when Camidius says: “Our fortune on the sea is out of breath, / And sinks most lamentably” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, III.x.24-25). In this quotation, Shakespeare conveys a lifeless image in

which their military tactic of fighting via sea has failed them; one could say that their strategy “died” because it failed. A final example of a “lack thereof” breath statement occurs when Maecenas states: “Caesar must think, / When one so great begins to rage, he's hunted / Even to falling. Give him no breath, but now / Make boot of his distraction” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, IV.i.6-8). Here, “give him no breath” functions as a “lack thereof” statement that advises Caesar to not allow Antony the time to cool down from his angry state so that Caesar can take advantage of Antony’s weak state and defeat him. Thus, Shakespeare manipulates air through a lack of breath in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Lastly, the notion of breath appears in the context of power and authority. The first appearance of breath in proximity to the word power lies in the aforementioned description of Cleopatra by Enobarbus: “And, breathless, power breathe forth” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, II.ii.236). This emphasizes Cleopatra’s ability to produce breath without having any, and highlights Cleopatra’s lively, powerful nature, which this quotation suggests comes from her exotic and supernatural qualities. The next demonstration of breath as being connected to power occurs when Cleopatra says: “To great Caesar this: in deputation / I kiss his conquering hand: tell him, I am prompt / To lay my crown at 's feet, and there to kneel: / Tell him from his all-obeying breath I hear / The doom of Egypt” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, III.xiii.75-79). Here, Cleopatra surrenders to Caesar; “breath” refers to Caesar’s authority, which the dictatorial adjective “all-obeying” further emphasizes. This connection operates in Antony’s speech as well: “I will be treble-sinew'd, hearted, breathed, / And fight maliciously” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, III.xiii.184-185). Here, Antony displays extreme confidence about his military-leading abilities, saying that he will fight Caesar relentlessly and defeat him in battle; “breathed” seems to refer to

his determination and willingness to fight Caesar, and certainly can be read as a signal of his power. Finally, Maecenas also expresses this tie between breath and autonomy in the following aforementioned quotation: “Caesar must think, / When one so great begins to rage, he's hunted / Even to falling. Give him no breath, but now / Make boot of his distraction” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, IV.i.6-8). Here, Maecenas advises Caesar to take advantage of Antony’s current state of rage. “Give him no breath” relays the idea that Caesar should not give Antony a chance to calm down from his anger and limit his own distractions; “Give him no breath” can also be read as “Give him no power,” which demonstrates the overlap between breath and power, and their negations in seventeenth-century uses of the word “breath.” Maecenas wants Caesar to take advantage of his position of authority and use it as military leverage to defeat Antony. Thus, Shakespeare associates “breath” with autonomy and power on numerous occasions in this play.

Breath in Other Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Texts

In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature, writers explicitly drew connections between breath and power, which often contained an implication of life, ubiquitously; one common thematic ground often seen within this concept lies in a connection to both one’s spirit, and God. In, “An excellent treatise of the immortalitye of the soule...” (1581) by John Calvin, Calvin establishes a clear connection between breath and power: “Or els if they meane that the spirite, to wit, the soule, returneth to God, after death: and that the breath, to wit, the mouing power, or liuely motion departeth from man...” (“An excellent...” p.65). Calvin creates a distinct parallel between “breath” and “moving power,” which symbolizes one’s soul; the notion of breath can also be understood here as life, revealing how Calvin understood being alive. Additionally, Calvin connects breath with wind and spirits in multiple sections of this piece: “We know also

that this word spirite emongest the Latines, is called breath, & winde: which we may likewise see by the word that the Grecians vse” (“An excellent...” p.65); as previously stated, people thought there was a relation between breath, wind, and apparitions during the period Calvin wrote in. In, “A sermon preached before His Maiestie...” (1610) by Lancelot Andrewes, Andrewes explicitly references breath and power, and ultimately attributes this to God: “*Inde illis potestas, vnde spiritus; Thence haue they their power, whence they haue their breath, saith Tertullian. And that is from neither (I am sure) but from God alone*” (“A sermon...” p.23). The first piece roughly translates to, “This is why their power, which is why the spirit” (“English...”) which reinforces the link between one’s power and spirit. The priest quotes Tertullian, who directly equates power with breath, and the priest says that this claim is directly from God. Thus, writers in the sixteenth and seventeenth century associated breath with power, which often had an implication of life, as well as God and one’s spirit.

Writers around the seventeenth century also linked breath and power, which often was connected to life, with nature. In, “Centrum naturæ concentration” (1696) by Ali Puli, one can see this connection: “The Natural man therefore doth draw the Vital Spirit from the Air, Water and Earth...From above by the attraction of the Air, or his respiration, he enjoyeth the spirit, power and breath of the out-flowing and out-going word; to wit, the gale or out-flowing spirit of the Air...” (“Centrum...” p.76). Here, Puli relates the notions of breath and power to spirits and nature; it is clear that his discussion of “power and breath” is about the experience of being alive. The “Air, Water, and Earth” relates to the aforementioned Aristotelian four-element theory; Puli also mentions gales which act as another example of air-language relating to wind. Another direct connection with breath, power, and the Aristotelian elements exists a bit later in this text:

“Thou, O Man, art he who thro' the Air enjoyest the breath and power of the Water and Earth, and in thy self enjoyest both the Elements and maked them one” (“Centrum...” p.80). Here, Puli mentions the power of three of the four Aristotelian elements, which demonstrates how natural philosophy informed literature. In, “The flower of phisicke” (1590) by William Clever, Clever discusses breath in proximity to power and nature: “...although the loonges giue breath, yet their comfort proceedeth from the heart, giueth heate and strength thereunto... when accidentall effectes in diseases are transferred beyond the power of nature: And as the breath followeth the nature of the loonges, so the bloud onely followeth...” (“The flower...” p.82). Interestingly, this passage suggests that nature acts as the one with power, which Clever relates to breath; the final sentence in this quotation demonstrates how the speaker conceptualizes living. Thus, the connection between breath and power (as well as life, at times) existed in other literary works besides that of Shakespeare’s, and, in these other pieces, this connection often involved nature.

Seventeenth-Century Wind and Vapor History

In addition to there being a complex history about how seventeenth-century scientists and natural philosophers thought about air as a more general concept, an array of fascinating reports on wind also exist from the period; these reports treat wind as a confusing phenomenon that defies logic, which is an idea that pervades *Antony and Cleopatra*. While Shakespeare was writing, the understanding of both wind and vapor directly related to the study of air: “Air—that is, unlike water, earth and fire—could only be approached by indirection or metonymy. It could be gleaned through the movement of wind on leaves, waters, or skin; the liquid condensation of clouds, vapors, and fog; the sounds of moving air; the smell of air, be it foul or fair” (“The History...” p.153). A 1670 scientific question posed by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz to the Royal Society

reveals the general lack of understanding of wind: “Why does not the wind carry off our heads like balloons? Such questions, ridiculous as they are, are difficult to answer. People would think us mad if they should hear of such things being investigated, yet investigated they shall be” (“The Correspondence...” p.167). This question, which may seem absurd to the modern reader due to the vastness of public information regarding anemology, reveals the amount of power that people thought the wind possessed: just because the wind could lift an air-filled orb into the sky, why could it not pluck humans by their heads and lift their masses just the same? Through this insight, one can observe why people viewed wind as confusing, and how wind seemed to defy natural laws of gravity.

Other accounts of wind demonstrate its interconnectedness with vapor and their collective association with carrying apparitions as well as spreading disease. In 1563, William Fluke published a meteorological text that, “recounts various first-, second-, and third-hand accounts of historical persons who witnessed something like the wind, or a combination of liquid, air, and light productive of fog, clouds, steam, or vapors moving, as if of their own accord, in ways that could be petrifying...” (“The History...” p.170). Fluke describes this strange experience by a mass of people as being “very fearefull to loke vpon” (“A goodly...” p.10). Fulke’s association with wind and vapor acts as but one of the many examples in which writers grouped these two distinct phenomena together during this period. According to Thomas Lodge in 1603, these notions relate with regard to the inhalation of toxic air: “[A] man may know the infection of the aire which threatneth vs with Pestilent sicknesses”; he asserts that plague spreads by “thicke, cloudy, moyst, and ill smelling vapours, the Skie vnaccustomed to Northren windes, but sollicitated with Southerly blastes” (“A treatise...”). Mazziio’s interpretation of Lodge’s text

also concludes that Lodge believed plague spread by vermin, corpses, and fluctuations in air pollution and temperature (“The History...” p.176). Thus, people viewed wind (which writers often brought up in connection to vapor) as a potential mode of transportation for apparitions and disease.

A plethora of fascinating accounts of vapor from this period exist, including that of John Donne, who portrays vapor as a deadly carrier of emotions and disease. For example, John Donne acknowledges the power of infectious vapors to enter human lungs and be an agent of death, which could almost lead to a heretic interpretation of the power of Nature: “What will not kill a man if a vapour will?” (“Devotions...” p.77). Mazzio succinctly describes Donne’s application of vapor-related knowledge in terms of how infectious disease spreading operates: “...he quickly internalizes the logic of vaporous production, or rather tests out the possibility that he has somehow infected the air within him” (“The History...” p.167). In reference to how humans “kill ourselves with our own vapors,” Donne demonstrates how people viewed melancholy as a bodily sickness of sorts: “But what have I done, either to breed or to breathe these vapors. They tell me it is my melancholy; did I infuse, did I drink in melancholy into myself? Is it my thoughtfulness; was I not made to think?” (“Devotions...” p.78). This creates, “...blurred domains of inside and outside, body and world, victim and executioner, air and liquid, and intellection and melancholy” (“The History...” p.167). Through this text, Donne sought to “extend this vapour, rarefy it; from so narrow a room as our natural bodies, to any politic body, to a state,” (“Devotions...” p.79). For Donne, it “...becomes evident that the substance of vapors in and around the body so resists sense and material localization that Donne can only gesture toward it through analogy, where it emerges as a form of discourse” (“The History...” p.167).

This argument reflects a contemporary lack of understanding and confusion surrounding vapor, as well as its association with disease and depression.

Donne also discusses vapor by highlighting its powerful nature and commenting on its relation to suffering and sins. Donne first remarks on how vapor can hold negative substances inside of humans and force them to suffer: “That which is fume in us is, in a state, rumour; and these vapours in us, which we consider here pestilent and infections fumes, and therefore, when these vapours, these venomous rumours, are directed against these noble parts, the whole body suffers” (“Devotions...” p.79). Donne even goes as far to say that material agents of disease act in a less powerful manner than vapors produced by humans through sinful acts; he does this after he lists places that people thought the plague could possibly transmit, which he deemed less dangerous than human vapor production: “What ill air that I could have met in the street, what channel, what shambles, what dunghill, what vault, could have hurt me so much as these homebred vapours?” (“Devotions...” p.79). Donne directly correlates human sinful acts to the notion of vapor and toxic air: “For what is sin but a vapour but a smoke, through such a smoke as takes away our sight, and disables us from seeing our danger, and it is just that thou punish us with vapours too?” (“Devotions...” p.81). John Milton also demonstrates associating vapor with sinfulness, as he compares rebellious angels to morning dew in Book V of *Paradise Lost*, which, according to Katherine Cox, functions as a demonstration of condensation production as an “environmental utterance” which innately carries sinful particles: “Because they [dew and condensation] possess clouded or vaporous bodies, the fallen angels are necessarily implicit in natural processes of liquefaction, which transmit their spiritual being into a more corporeal form” (“The Power of the Air...” p.164). Cox later describes condensation in Milton’s texts as both

“devilish articulation” and the embodiment of demonic entities (“The Power of the Air...” p.165). Ultimately, Donne highlights the power of vapor and examines it through the lens of suffering and sin, which is an idea present in the texts of other seventeenth-century writers, including Milton.

Air, Wind, and Vapor in *Antony and Cleopatra*

Shakespeare drew on these ideas about air, wind, and vapor in *Antony and Cleopatra*; one way in which Shakespeare utilizes the word “air” lies in his portrayal of air as magical, which reflects how people thought about air and wind at the time. This utilization therefore works as a sort of nod to both the aforementioned contemporary scientific climate and mystical misconceptions that the general public had about the atmosphere. Thus, the previously referenced understanding of air in the seventeenth century proves relevant. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, one definition of wind includes the phrase, “Air in motion,” which was a definition used throughout the seventeenth century (“wind, n.1.”). The first instance of air used in this way lies in Enobarbus’s depiction of Cleopatra: “The city cast / Her people out upon her; and Antony, / Enthroned i' the market-place, did sit alone, / Whistling to the air; which, but for vacancy, / Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too, / And made a gap in nature” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, II.ii.219-224). The notion of air solely not flocking to Cleopatra because of her beauty due to the inability to create a vacuum so close to Earth’s surface demonstrates a level of power that Shakespeare gives air, since air can gaze at Cleopatra and take in her beauty. Antony’s muse about air also implies that air has a magical element to it: “Sometimes we see a cloud that’s dragonish... And mock our eyes with air: thou hast seen these signs; / They are black vesper’s pageants” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, IV.xiv.2;7-8). The notion of air being able to “mock” the

human eye reveals the ability of air to trick or outsmart human sight. Just before Cleopatra dies, she compares herself to air in death, suggesting that her death causes her reintegration into the environment, which Shakespeare depicts in a poetic, magical way: “I am fire and air; my other elements / I give to baser life?” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, V.ii.281-282). This relates to the aforementioned Aristotelian science regarding air and fire being two crucial elements of the Earth; the fact that Cleopatra states that she turns into air inherently suggests that other people (perhaps only exotic, supernatural beings like herself) must sublimate into the atmosphere after they pass as well. Thus, one consistent trend in Shakespeare’s employment of the word “air” lies in its relation to magic.

Shakespeare also puts the word “air” in conversation with power. One example of this occurs when the First Soldier comments on the “Music i' the air” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, IV.iii.11). Here, air is a mystical backdrop where strange, untraceable music played, which people thought was a bad sign from Hercules; the First Soldier being the character to deliver this line in the context of war innately connects the notion of air with the aforementioned magical aspect of this play, but also power as well. Since this line foreshadows Antony’s failure in battle, this directly relates air to power with regard to war and battle. Shakespeare also relates air to power when Cleopatra compares her poison to air, right before she kills herself: “As sweet as balm, as soft as air” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, V.ii.303). Here, Cleopatra compares the softness and gentleness of air to the poison of the asps she holds; this comparison serves as her penultimate sentence before committing suicide. Since the asps lead to Cleopatra’s downfall, which is the climax slowly developing throughout this play, the use of “air” here is almost ironic—although Cleopatra deems air as “soft” because it is almost imperceptible on human skin, air ultimately

proves powerful enough for Cleopatra to compare to the substance that eventually kills her. Additionally, air also more generally controls whether we live or die, since air allows humans to breathe and exist; air may be “soft” and near undetectable to the human touch, but its impact on human life lacks subtlety or softness. A final example of air discussed in relation to power occurs when Antony suggests that his army would fight in air or fire against Caesar’s army if need be: “I would they'ld fight i' the fire or i' the air” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, IV.x.3). Due to the lack of aerospace technology at the time, the notion of fighting in air has a more whimsical, less aeronautical connotation than can be read now. These depictions of air relate to the aforementioned viewpoint at the time regarding air as a confusing, imperceptible, and noble Aristotelian element (“Science of Shakespeare,” p.22). Thus, Shakespeare often illustrates air in *Antony and Cleopatra* in conversations regarding power.

Shakespeare utilizes the word “wind,” which as aforementioned, has a close connection with air, in a similar, perhaps more tangible way than still air in *Antony and Cleopatra*. In Enobarbus’s depiction of Cleopatra, he states that, “The winds were love-sick” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, II.ii.200); this personification simultaneously depicts the winds as unsteady while describing the wind as figuratively having health-related and emotional capabilities, since Shakespeare compares their behavior to such that demonstrates lovesickness, which is an issue with both biological and emotional implications. The First Servant interestingly describes the wind as being a collective agent of the world, withholding strength and power: “Here they'll be, man. Some o' their plants are / ill-rooted already: the least wind i' the world / will blow them down” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, II.vii.1-3). This again relates to the aforementioned seventeenth-century conceptualization regarding air being mystical and powerful, since people

thought it was capable of carrying visions and transmitting disease through vapor. Finally, Caesar metaphorically states that wind acts as a messenger of sorts: “I have eyes upon him, / And his affairs come to me on the wind. / Where is he now?” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, III.vi.62-64). This example relates to a quote by Enobarbus in which he states that he chooses to remain loyal to Antony despite the way he sent his troops back mid-battle against Caesar because Cleopatra’s ship turned around. Here, Enobarbus states that his reason can physically sit in the wind, and the wind can inherently therefore move it, since wind travels unlike still air, which implies that his reason tells him to be a traitor: “I’ll yet follow / The wounded chance of Antony, though my reason / Sits in the wind against me” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, III.x.34-36). Ultimately, one can see how seventeenth-century thoughts about wind regarding it being powerful, mystical, and confusing exist in Shakespeare’s poetic manipulations of wind. Shakespeare therefore depicts wind as a slightly more sturdy, tangible notion than still air, and treats air as a whimsical means of both figurative (as a carrier of reason) and literal (as a carrier of perceived visions and disease) transportation.

Lastly, Shakespeare associates vapor in *Antony and Cleopatra* with clouds; he depicts vapor as an entity capable of changing shapes that people can interpret, comparable to the way in which people cloud-watch. This idea exists in one of Antony’s statements: “Sometimes we see a cloud that’s dragonish; / A vapour sometime like a bear or lion, / A tower’d citadel, a pendent rock, / A forked mountain, or blue promontory / With trees upon’t, that nod unto the world...” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, IV.xiv.2-6). This serves as the first piece of the aforementioned quote regarding the trickery of air; here, Antony pictures an array of masculine shapes bleeding into one another. Cleopatra also correlates vapor with clouds in an indirect manner; in this instance,

vapor can be infectious: “In Rome, as well as I mechanic slaves / With greasy aprons, rules, and hammers, shall / Uplift us to the view; in their thick breaths, / Rank of gross diet, shall be enclouded, / And forced to drink their vapour” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, V.ii.206-209). This functions as a segment of the aforementioned quote regarding class panic; the previously detailed exploration of vapor as holding infectious disease based on human sin therefore enriches these quotations. Cleopatra refers to the smell of the diets of the lower class as being “enclouded” and transmuted into a contagious vapor; the word “enclouded” relates to the notion of clouds in an adjacent manner. This quote would essentially gain new meaning by applying the previously mentioned idea connecting the air and sins: this logic would therefore assert that poor people commit more or worse sins than the upper class, which could be contagious via their breath. Vapor in this play reflects the previously stated thoughts about vapor during this time, which includes vapor being created by humans, and potentially infectious and lethal (“Devotions...” p.79). This also ties into the previously discussed fear about air potentially being polluted by foreigners, and air as both a creator and carrier of emotions including anxiety (“Science of Shakespeare,” p.262-263); in this instance, this idea takes shape in the form of class panic in Cleopatra’s apprehension regarding the breath of the lower class. Thus, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare portrays vapor as a contagious entity that operates in a malleable, interpretable manner, which he parallels to how people view clouds.

Conclusion

Having an awareness for the complex scientific theories, natural philosophy ideas, and cultural constructions of air as a general concept during the Renaissance period wholly impacts how one would view the repetitive references to breath, wind, air, and vapor in *Antony and Cleopatra*,

which otherwise might seem arbitrary and meaningless. The imperceptibility of air ultimately caused a distinct level of perplexity among both the learned and the general public that led to the exploration as well as the treatment of air in literature to be experimental and playful. My research concludes that, because of this, Shakespeare transforms breath in three ways: the breath of (public) life, a lack of breath, and, most importantly, breath as a symbol of power and autonomy. Within these distinct categories, there is an overlap regarding how seventeenth-century thinkers handled the words “breath” and “power” in relation to “life,” which reveals how these thinkers understood the experience of being alive. This crucial connection of breath and power (and, oftentimes, life) exists in other texts written during this time, which often discussed breath and power in relation to God, spirits, and nature. Additionally, my analysis reveals that Shakespeare depicts air as transformative, wind as a mystical means of both figurative and literal transportation, and vapor as simultaneously transformative and infectious; these ideas completely coincide with seventeenth-century understandings of these meteorological concepts.

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