Queenliness is Close to Godliness:

Inciting Affective Responses During Crises in Ancient Egypt

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In ancient Egypt, it was traditional for sovereigns to style themselves as deities, specifically Ra or Osiris (for kings) and Isis (for queens). The former was the sun god and king of the Egyptian pantheon and, by extension, the world; the latter was the mother of all creation and goddess of kingship, magic, and healing. The pharaohs presented themselves as embodiments of Ra or Sons of Ra, elevating themselves to the status of gods and unifying service to the king with religious worship. In all of Egyptian history, there is evidence of only six queens regnant who ruled independently[1]. Two of them, Hatschepsut and Cleopatra both used the tradition of god-kings to their advantage, utilizing the precedent of pharaohs' bodies-becoming-deities to solidify their power in a society used to male rulers. In doing so, they engineered affective reactions from their people by engaging in the way bodies contain information and generate meaning through interactions with spectators; thus, the queens regnant steadied their people during moments of crisis by making the Egyptian populace's beliefs operate in their favor.

Though they lived over one thousand years apart, Hatshepsut and Cleopatra VII dealt similarly with solidifying their power following succession crises: they turned everyday life into a performance of divinity and inscribed their godliness on both the cultural and the physical landscape. In this case, "performance" refers not to productions on a stage but rather to the ways in which the two queens styled and presented themselves to the Egyptian populace through public appearances and commemorative art. Though neither queen would have dealt in affect theory directly, I aim to combine evidence from primary sources with contemporary theories to

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[1] Cooney, Kara. *When Women Ruled the World*: *Six Queens of Egypt*. National Geographic, 2018, 13-15.

analyze the actions of the two queens who secured their power and stabilized their country

through keystone concepts in the discourse of affect theory, thus shedding light on how two

perhaps unlikely leaders attempted to bring Egypt back from the brink of fragmentation and ruin

by using their bodies and cultural histories to make their subjects feel something.

The positioning and presenting of the ruler as god-king was already a centuries-old

tradition by the time Hatshepsut was born. It had accumulated gravity and meaning until it

gained iconographic shorthand that was sticky with affective weight. During her young

adulthood, Hatshepsut's older brothers died unexpectedly, rocketing one of the younger princes

up the line of succession and then onto the throne when their father died shortly thereafter[2]. To

secure his surprise position as king, the young and newly-crowned Thutmose II married

Hatshepsut, but he quickly followed his older brothers to the grave, leaving Hatshepsut with a

succession crisis, threats looming along recently-expanded borders, and a nursery full of

toddlers.

Historically, a similar set of circumstances tended to lead to a coup or civil war, so

Hatshepsut needed to act fast. One of the baby princes was chosen as his father's successor and

Hatshepsut was named as regent despite the fact that she wasn't the boy's mother, a break in

Egyptian political tradition that the new queen regent was quick to legitimize using religious

traditions instead. Thus Hatshepsut engaged with Foucault's regime of truth thousands of years

before he put forth the concept: "'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power

which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A

'regime' of truth[3].'" Hatshepsut's regency and subsequent elevation to full kingship relied on the

feedback loop of truth and power. Her upbringing as princess and priestess gave her the

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[2] Ibid., 107.
[3] Foucault, Michel. "Truth and Power." *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writing, 1972-1977.* Vintage, 12 November 1980, 133.

knowledge-based authority to call and expand upon accepted religious truths to secure her shaky

claim to the throne. Whenever she made a big political move or decision, Hatshepsut deployed

her network of priests to demonstrate that the queen-turned-king-turned-god was exercising the

will of the gods[4]. As both religious and royal insider, Hatsheptsut was able to capitalize on the

truths promulgated by both spheres of influence and combine them in order to strengthen both in

the eyes of the people. She took traditions that were typically highly secret and publicized them,

transforming mysteries into performances of divine authority and introducing the idea of

"political-divine revelation:"

> An ideology fervently believed is an unassailable social power. Hatshepsut's key to
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> authority was her ability to wield this robust ideology and to control the men who
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> administered it[5].

Her blood may have provided Hatshepsut with the opening to take power, but it was her skill at

utilizing societal truths to use the cyclical loop of truth and power to catalyze a positive affective

feedback loop in her people that kept her on her throne.

Hatshepsut invoked those truths not just through religious rituals and the words of priests,

but also through her public appearances and body. Traditionally, Egyptian queens were perceived

as the embodiment of Isis, queen and mother of gods. Hatshepsut both embraced and upended

royal customs by choosing instead to present herself as the manifestation of Ra on earth,

establishing herself as a male ruler would. Facing a lack of capable male heirs, Hatshepsut

assured the Egyptian people that they wouldn't have to fear the fallout of having no king to guide

them and serve as the bridge between humanity and the gods. Hatshepsut adopted the *atef* crown,

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[4] Cooney, Kara. *When Women Ruled the World*: *Six Queens of Egypt*. National Geographic, 2018, 136.
[5] ibid.

a headdress that included symbols associated with pharaonic divine rule[6]. She wouldn't burden her people with the anxiety of waiting for the next male heir to come of age: she used the symbols sticky with patriarchal power to transform herself into the king that could provide her subjects with a sense of security.

In the eyes of her people, Hatshepsut became a god-king by styling her body as one. Ancient Egyptians believed that the crowns of pharaohs were themselves goddesses that imbued the sovereign with power[7], so by donning the *atef* Hatshepsut gained supernatural abilities that would help her keep her people safe and prosperous. The Egyptian populace's belief that it did so granted her the solid authority afforded to generations of god-kings who'd worn the crown before. Hatshepsut grounded her throne in the sticky imagery of the divine pharaoh from the moment she ascended to the throne: in honor of her coronation, there were celebrations in temples throughout the kingdom and she had two tall obelisks erected in Thebes onto which Hatshepsut had her new throne name and images of her in the traditional garb of kings carved[8]. She put both body and signifier on one monument, inscribing into the landscape of her capital Ahmed's theory regarding the accumulation of affective value over time through its circulation between objects and signs[9]. By wearing clothes reserved for kings in public appearances and artistic depictions, Hatshepsut connected her body with imagery that generated confidence in her rule as a result of the power and security attached to them due to centuries of cultural associations and the bodies of past god-kings who'd worn similar garb.

Furthermore, the affective feedback loop of security and loyalty invoked by Hatshepsut's performances of divinity were shored up by the threat of the alternative.

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[6] Greene, John T. "Iron Age Tzer: Preliminary Studies Toward a History of the Religion of the Geshurites Who Resided There." *Folia Archaeologica*, vol. 26, 2009, 68, 74.

[7] Morris, Ellen F. "The Pharaoh and Pharaonic Office." *A Companion to Ancient Egypt: Volume I.* edited by Alan B. Lloyd. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, 207.

[8] Cooney, Kara. *When Women Ruled the World: Six Queens of Egypt.* National Geographic, 2018, 131.

[9] Ahmed, Sara. "Affective Economies." *Social Text* 79 (Volume 22, Number 2), Duke University Press, 2004, 120.

How did one say no when every temple, every priest, every oracle, indeed every divinity, was on board with continuing this queen's power? This was a woman who knew in her bones how to construct and maintain religious authority…no one could turn her away from the kingship without appearing godless or heretical[10].

Fear of heresy was the stick to bolster the carrot of Hatshepsut's reassuring divine kingship. Once again, her strategy relied on the meaning accorded to her performances of godliness by her audience, the Egyptian people. Williams's assertions regarding the derivation of meaning[11] highlight the cleverness of Hatshepsut's playing into the steadfastness of the Egyptians' belief in their gods and the well-established precedent of divine kingship. She made her body into a vessel of sacred information, which meant that disloyalty wasn't just treason, it was blasphemy.

Though Hatshepsut crafted her body into the object of faith rather than of fear, her becoming-god can be further analyzed in relation to Ahmed's points regarding the futurity of fear[12]: rather than worrying about the "passing by" of the object of fear, Hatshepsut's subjects were positioned to fear the turning away of the object of hope, the divine body that stood between them and the wrath of the gods. Hatshepsut made her body sticky with reassurance and power through holy imagery, but that also meant that betrayal of or harm to her body would catalyze destruction and death described in religious myths as the fallout of heresy. Hatshepsut's divine body promised a future of prosperity and stability, but it also threatened a future of grief and ruin for those who did not heed tradition.

The length and stability of Hatshepsut's reign serves as evidence of the success of her strategy. Hatshepsut's performances of divine kingship took her dynasty from the brink of destruction and the loss of popular confidence to one strong enough to survive for approximately

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[10] Cooney, Kara. *When Women Ruled the World: Six Queens of Egypt*. National Geographic, 2018, 134.
[11] Williams, Raymond. "Structures of Feeling." *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford University Press, 1977, 132-133.
[12] Ahmed, Sara. "Affective Economies." *Social Text* 79 (Volume 22, Number 2), Duke University Press, 2004, 125.

150 more years. Records indicate that Hatshepsut died of natural causes after a successful reign and was buried with all of the honors afforded to god-kings, and then power was smoothly passed to her heirs[13].

This wouldn't be the ultimate fate of Cleopatra VII. Cleopatra was raised in the Ptolemy capital of Alexandria, one of several royal siblings groomed to take their father's throne. Cleopatra's father left behind five children, all of whom made a grab at the crown at the expense of the others. By the age of twenty-one, Cleopatra was engaged in a civil war with her surviving brother and sisters while also navigating the fallout of the Roman civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey[14]. Cleopatra needed to secure the loyalty of the Egyptian people and the backing of the new Roman leader, which seemingly called for contradictory courses of action[15].

To circumvent that conflict, Cleopatra employed performed the role of ruler in a way that would inspire confidence and comfort in each demographic watching her[16]. Long before Flatley turned what she practiced into theory, Cleopatra understood the importance of context in regard to affect[17]. Cleopatra not only embraced the longstanding tradition of Egyptian royal divinity[18], she also adapted her embodiment of Isis into a performance that could be perceived to be of Aphrodite or Venus, too. She used her body as a vessel of information that read differently to each audience, navigating affective attachment[19] by finding an embodied performance of divine sovereignty that could be perceived as engaging with a variety of traditions and produce the same feelings of loyalty and respect.

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[13] Cooney, Kara. *When Women Ruled the World*: *Six Queens of Egypt.* National Geographic, 2018, 155.
[14] Ibid., 13.
[15] Ibid., 52.
[16] Ibid., 29.
[17] Flatley, Jonathan. "Glossary: Affect, Emotion, Mood (Stimmung), Structure of Feeling." *Affective Mapping*. Harvard University Press, 2008, 19-20.
[18] Cooney, Kara. *When Women Ruled the World*: *Six Queens of Egypt*. National Geographic, 2018, 268-269.
[19] Flatley, Jonathan. "Glossary: Affect, Emotion, Mood (Stimmung), Structure of Feeling." *Affective Mapping*. Harvard University Press, 2008, 18.

Two thousand years before Amin asserted that what can be called "queer" depends on the resonance between the object of study and the cluster of feelings surrounding the term[20], Cleopatra negotiated the histories and traditions that haunted the title and idea of "divine queen." She adjusted the way she performed leadership based on who would see her, anticipating the centrality of spectators' interpretation in assigning meaning to a given object[21]. Her meeting with Mark Antony is perhaps the best-recorded example of the way Cleopatra performed royal divinity in order to interrupt negative affective feedback loops in her audiences and get them to see what they wanted to see in order to disseminate feelings of faith and awe instead:

> [Cleopatra sailed] up the river Cydnus in a barge with gilded poop…She herself reclined beneath a canopy spangled with gold, adorned like Venus…, while boys like [Cupids]…stood on either side and fanned her…the fairest of her serving-maidens, attired like Nereïds and Graces…at the reefing-ropes…[22].

To the Romans, Cleopatra invoked the image of the goddess Venus, whose worship had been elevated and associated with Cleopatra already by the now-martyred Julius Caesar[23]. Thus Cleopatra aimed to inspire positive feelings in her potential allies twice over, connecting her body to a goddess and reminding the Romans of her relationship with their fallen hero.

Roman poets and historians weren't the only ones to immortalize Cleopatra's divine royalty through artistic expression. Like Hatshepsut, Cleopatra used art and architecture to extend the reach of her material presence. She commissioned temples to Isis wherein the god-queen would be worshiped due to her ongoing performances of herself-becoming-Isis. Cleopatra ruled over a multi-ethnic empire that included native Egyptians and Greek expats, so

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[20] Amin, Kadji. "Haunted by the 1990s: Queer Theory's Affective Histories." *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, Volume 44, Numbers 3 & 4. The Feminist Press, 2016, 173.
[21] Williams, Raymond. "Structures of Feeling." *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford University Press, 1977, 132-133.
[22] Plutarch. "The Life of Antony." *Parallel Lives*. Loeb Classical Library edition, 1920.
[23] Appian. "Book II." *The Histories*. Loeb Classical Library, 1913.

she found methods to become-god in ways that allowed each demographic to project its own

deity onto her, which reunified into the same outcome of national stabilization and faith in the

sovereign. She had her own image used as the model for depictions of mother goddesses in

temples across her territories[24], continuing the conflation of Cleopatra and queen goddesses by

attaching her artistically-rendered body to the act of worship and the emotions associated with it.

Cleopatra struck coins bearing the image of her as Isis nursing her son in the form of the infant

god Horus[25]. Consequently, Cleopatra's embodied performance of divinity could circulate

through every corner of her kingdom, echoed and reinforced through easily transferable objects.

Cleopatra continued her performance with the names of her children. The twins

Alexander Helios and Cleopatra Selene, were given names sticky with meaning that was legible

to all of Cleopatra's subjects. Keeping her divine children in the public eye furthered the

interruption of the negative feedback loop through the use of bodies sticky with affect, assuring

all spectators that this royal family was theirs and would protect their interests. Cleopatra utilized

the way "…emotions work by sticking figures together (adherence), a sticking that creates the

very effect of a collective (coherence)[26]." Rather than dealing in an economy of hate, as Ahmed

discusses, Cleopatra dealt in an economy of faith. She stuck together human and divine figures

with positive associations, and then stuck those figures to the bodies of her and her children,

thereby creating a new collective, a royal family that could inspire confidence in and unify

Hellenistic Egypt and Rome.

Cleopatra mapped the hopes of the country onto their individual bodies, thereby using the

personal to restructure the social. Williams suggests that the emergence of forms and conventions

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[24] Cooney, Kara. *When Women Ruled the World*: *Six Queens of Egypt*. National Geographic, 2018, 255.
[25] Ibid., 281.
[26] Ibid., 119.

indicate the formation of new structures of feeling[27]. In this case, the reemergence and resurgence of conventions related to divine kingship could be viewed as indicators or catalysts of a return to and combination of past structures that could then be used as the starting point for an affective feedback loop that would take the country into a new age of hope and faith. Cleopatra brought Egypt back from the edge of the abyss, not just mollifying but actually inspiring her weary, wary subjects. When Cleopatra took the throne, the Egyptian people had lived through multiple civil wars and were embroiled in another. The citizens were fighting amongst themselves, and faith in the monarchy was abysmal after the betrayals and miscalculations of Cleopatra's father and brother[28]. Alexandria was a city of danger, denizens caught in an affective loop of fear and uncertainty.

Cleopatra's success cannot be judged by the longevity of her reign nor by what happened to Egypt following her death; Octavian's victory was military, not emotional. She inherited a kingdom on the brink of collapse, and the fact that Egypt not only survived but thrived under her rule is proof that her affective intercession succeeded. Under the regime of their god-queen, the Egyptian people embraced the ideals that Isis represented. She instilled in her subjects enough of a feeling of security despite the looming threats on their borders that art and scholarship once again flourished during her reign. Unlike her recent predecessors, Cleopatra was enormously popular with her subjects[29]. Through a loop of associations, the cult of Isis rose to even greater prominence while Cleopatra performed the role of goddess on earth[30]. She was remembered as the "Eastern savior[31]" by Mediterranean nations suffering under the yoke of Roman imperial

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[27] Williams, Raymond. "Structures of Feeling." *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford University Press, 1977, 132.
[28] Schiff, Stacy. *Cleopatra: A Life*. Back Bay Books, 2010, 63.
[29] Ibid., 85.
[30] Ibid., 92.
[31] Ibid., 233.

power. Through her performances, Cleopatra eventually became a figure sticky with positive affect in the eyes of her people.

Perhaps the strongest proof of the efficacy of Cleopatra's affective strategy is the difficulty Octavian faced when he tried to undo the web of positive associations spun by the late queen. Octavian couldn't remake Cleopatra's image with one sweep of his toga-ed arm; her un-sticking had to be built gradually through the twisting of events as they happened and after. The new emperor had to deploy similar tactics to those used by Cleopatra during her lifetime, attaching her to another mythic figure who would be legible to Greeks and Romans alike: the accursed Helen of Sparta[32]. He paraded her surviving children behind an effigy of her dying body through the streets during his Triumph in an attempt to obscure her comforting divinity by associating her with wicked seduction and shameful death while simultaneously using her degradation to deify himself in her place[33]. Octavian needed to interrupt the affective feedback loop Cleopatra had cultivated in order to secure his place as victor and divine emperor. To counter Cleopatra's economy of hope and strength, Octavian had to introduce a new regime of truth scaffolded on old Roman prejudices[34].

When viewed through the lens of Williams, Ahmed, Foucault, and their interlocutors, the successful reigns of the two queens regnant highlight the centrality of affect regarding the rise and fall of political figures and civilizations. Hatshepsut and Cleopatra inherited populaces of anxious people on the brink of fatal fragmentation. Despite the efforts of patriarchal powers that rose to prominence after their deaths, the two queens remain ingrained in the historical narrative. Their accomplishments both material and emotional couldn't be erased because they stuck

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[32] Lucan. "Book X." *The Civil War.*Translated by A. S. Kline, 2014, 53-103.
[33] Cooney, Kara. *When Women Ruled the World*: *Six Queens of Egypt.* National Geographic, 2018, 307.
[34] Foucault, Michel. "Truth and Power." *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writing, 1972-1977.* Vintage, 12 November 1980, 133.

themselves to figures that had already accumulated generations' worth of affective value and

knew how to play into the needs and expectations of their audiences to garner unwavering

support and unshakable loyalty. Their bodies transformed into vessels of information that imbued

their subjects with confidence during their lifetimes and carried their cultural memory with them

after death. The ongoing legacies of Hatshepsut and Cleopatra demonstrate how affect theory can

be used to analyze not just the actions and policies of public figures, but also the personas they

adopt. Their bodily becomings bear weight in terms of how they enter into collective identity and

memory.

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