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Yet cannot hold this visible shape: Antony's Roman identity crisis in William Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra

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"YET CANNOT HOLD THIS VISIBLE SHAPE": ANTONY’S ROMAN IDENTITY...

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"Yet cannot hold this visible shape": Antony's Roman Identity Crisis in William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*

by

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In my paper I examine how William Shakespeare’s play *Antony and Cleopatra* explores the deconstruction, reconstruction, and ultimate destruction of Mark Antony’s identity, which I argue is the result of Antony’s resistance or attempt to create an untenable alternative “space,” that operates in relation to the imperialist imperatives of Octavius Caesar and prevailing Roman identity discourse. Antony’s “space” is a liminal transcultural space in which he can explore strategies for personal self-hood that are marked by a continual movement between and beyond fixed binary notions such as “Rome” or “Egypt”—a space in which his identity can cohere instead of inevitable dissolution because of his loss of Roman space. I suggest that the play seems to gesture towards the possibility of imagining that there is a real alternative to the fixed binary oppositions of Rome or Egypt that most Roman characters in the play and an endless procession of modern critics seem to imply is the result of totalizing and all-powerful Roman ideology that is impossible to escape. The more Antony attempts to create his “own space” in opposition or resistance to Roman power, the more he appears to be unable to “hold this visible shape.”
“Yet cannot hold this visible shape”: Antony’s Roman Identity Crisis in William Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*

Jonathan Dollimore in *Radical Tragedy* suggests that a study of Renaissance tragedies is “usefully explored in relation to, a central tenet of materialist analysis, namely that the essentialist concept of ‘man’ mystifies and obscures the real historical conditions in which the actual identity of people is rooted” (153). Dollimore points to Foucault’s analysis of “the relation between subject and society in terms of power” and the conception of power as the constitutive force of the individual subject, who is “both the effect of power and the object of power” (154). Foucault says that “The individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation” (Foucault qtd. in Dollimore 154). Dollimore suggests that Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* is an example of a “complex” representation of power in that “we are shown how the ideology in question constitutes not only the authority of those in power but their very identity” (204). Mark Antony, in act 4, scene 14, of the play regrets his inability to “hold” a stable identity by comparing himself to the shape of clouds that are “indistinct / As water is in water” (4.14.11). Antony says to his servant Eros “now thy captain is / Even such a body; here I am Antony, / Yet cannot hold this visible shape” (4.14.12-14). Antony offers in the play shifting, unfixed and fixed self images, alternately describing himself as “a mangled shadow” (4.2.27) and “a man of steel” (4.4.33), and his military aide Scarus depicts him late in the play as “a noble ruin” (3.10.19). At the beginning of the play, Antony reacts to a message from Rome while in Egypt by declaring “Let Rome in Tiber melt and the wide arch / Of the ranged empire fall! Here is my space” (1.1.33-4). Antony’s later
declarations of a shifting identity in the play result from his resistance to Roman power relations and imperial ideology. Much of the play is concerned with Antony’s attempt to create a “space” with Cleopatra that runs in opposition to or threatens the imperialist designs of Octavius Caesar, who plans to create a Roman Empire where “the three-nooked world / Shall bear the olive freely” and “universal peace” reigns under the imperial domination of Rome (4. 5. 5-7). After Antony’s suicide, Cleopatra figures him in a eulogy as a man whose “legs bestrid the ocean”—a figure that suggests a third space in which Antony is in both / neither places (“Rome” and “Egypt”) simultaneously (5.2. 82). Antony’s “space” is a liminal transcultural space in which he can explore strategies for personal self-hood that are marked by a continual movement between and beyond fixed binary notions such as “Rome” or “Egypt.”—a space in which his identity can cohere instead of inevitable dissolution because of his loss of Roman space. In this essay I will examine how Shakespeare’s play explores the deconstruction, reconstruction, and ultimate destruction of Antony’s identity, which I will argue is the result of Antony’s resistance or attempt to create an untenable alternative “space” that operates in relation to the imperialist imperatives of Octavius Cesar and prevailing Roman identity discourse. The play seems to gesture towards the possibility of imagining that there is a real alternative to the fixed binary oppositions of Rome or Egypt that most Roman characters in the play and an endless procession of modern critics seem to imply is the result of totalizing and all-powerful Roman ideology and impossible to escape. My analysis of the deconstruction, attempted reconstruction, and ultimate destruction of Antony’s identity in *Antony and Cleopatra* will be cast in Dollimore’s notion that the power play of dominant Roman ideology in the play “constitutes” Antony’s “very identity” (204). The more
Antony attempts to create his “own space” in opposition or resistance to Roman power, the more he appears to be unable to “hold this visible shape” (1.1.34, 4.14.14).

Antony’s Roman identity is deconstructed at the opening of the play by Philo and Antony himself, and depicted overtly in terms of Antony’s power relations with imperialist Roman ideology. Linda Chames suggests that imperialist and colonialist “ideological justification” in “every historical struggle for power” include “claims of difference (and implicitly of superiority) to native inhabitants” (105). Antony’s identity is discussed in terms of his power relations to the colonizer (Rome) and the colonized (Egypt / Cleopatra). “The real battle of the play,” according to Chames, is “staked out across the terrain of Antony’s identity: the set of representations, images, and narratives he needs to recognize himself as Antony” (112). Chames calls Antony “the displaced or uprooted agent who moves between the locations (and different habitus) of Rome and Egypt” (110). According to Chames, Antony’s inability to hold a “visible shape” consists of being unable to create his own imperialist “space” while at the same time maintaining distinctly Roman attributes that are identifiable in what Chames calls “the discursive terms of Roman narration” (111). In the play, however, Antony explores the possibility of a space with Cleopatra where he can maintain his own identity and not be strictly bound by what the Romans in the play (and most critics) consider attributes of Roman-ness.

In the opening scene of the play, the Roman soldier Philo discusses Antony as a “Roman” individual whose character has been transfigured into a subject position that is antithetical to discursive Roman notions of a colonizer’s identity. Philo, who says that in Egypt Antony is sometimes “not Antony,” and “comes too short of that great property /
Which still should go with Antony," provides a deconstruction of Antony’s identity in the first scene, thus setting a pattern that is repeated throughout the play in various forms (1.1.57-9). Philo offers a commentary on the deconstruction and actual transformation of a stable, martial, devoted Roman to a doting paramour that lives to “cool” Cleopatra’s lust” (1.1.10). Evelyn Gajowski points out that Philo’s opening lines “offers an exposition of the dominant ideology of male Roman superiority” and “an imperialist construction of cultural difference” (86-7). The Roman Antony figured by Philo as formerly martial, temperate, and focused on service to Empire appears in the play in Cleopatra’s presence discussing love, lust, and his tenuous relationship to Rome and Octavius. Philo points out that Antony’s “goodly eyes / that o’er the files and musters of war / Have glowed like plated Mars” are being bent and turned “upon a tawny front [Cleopatra]” (1.1.5). Philo is very specific in his description of not only what Antony is gazing at, but also how his world-view is being transformed into a mode that is distinctly antithetical to a Roman military view. As Dollimore suggests, Antony is “nothing more” than his “reputation” which is “an ideological effect of powers antecedent to and independent” of him (206). But the “nothing more” in this passage is nothing more than the Roman identity discourse of Philo which insists that there Antony’s identity can only be configured as only Roman or not-Roman. Antony’s reputation has been secured by genuine military and political success in the service of Rome, and very specifically in the name of Mark Antony. Clare Kinney writes that Philo’s speech demonstrates that in “Roman manliness” an individual “must enact a single, absolute condition or identity; one cannot supplant it or transform it into something else equally good or better, only relinquish it or perforce represent its vilified opposite” (179). I disagree with Kinney’s
assessment here, because the play demonstrates that Antony's identity is not merely a preoccupation with "a single, absolute condition of identity" that (using Foucault's terms) both is effected and articulates power relations or (in Dollimore's terms) "constitutes not only the authority of those in power but their very identity" (204). As one of the pillars in the Roman triumvirate, Antony's identity is constituted in the minds of the Romans in the play by his relation to that specific power structure (the triumvirate) and his specific power relations with Octavius and his Roman imperialist designs. The Roman view advanced by the play is that Rome is a fixed ideological space that is central to both political and personal identity and deviation from that fixed ideological construction is a cause of displacement or dissolution. Philo says that Antony's eyes "now bend, now turn / the office and devotion of their view" upon Cleopatra (1.1.5). Antony is not only turning and bending his lustful gaze toward Cleopatra, but conversely against and away from the concerns of the nascent Empire in his role as a political and military leader in service to Rome. Both explicit and implicit in Philo's description of Antony is an Antony whose previous service and intensity was focused on Roman military and political activities according to a distinctly Roman imperialist view. This Antony's identity, according to Philo, has been deconstructed to servicing "a gypsy's lust" (1.1.10). Philo says that "you shall see in him [Antony] / The triple pillar of the world transformed / Into a strumpet's fool" (1.1. 11-13). Philo's appropriation of empire building discourse in his description of Antony as "the triple pillar of the world" and mythic figuring of Antony's eyes glowing "like plated Mars" in battle emphasizes what Dollimore calls "jarringly discrepant" descriptors like "strumpet's fool" (Dollimore 212,
1.1.13). Philo’s description emphasizes a jarring reality: Antony the colonizer is transformed into Antony the colonized by a colonized exotic other.

Philo is not only articulating the deconstruction of Antony’s identity, but also offers a commentary on how Antony’s actions have radically shifted from the power relations between a representative of an ideologically dominant culture (Rome) and the marginal, colonized other (Cleopatra / Egypt). The shift in power relations is what directly transforms Antony’s identity in Philo’s eyes. A Roman colonizer in Philo’s mind cannot be colonized, because one who is colonized is by definition not-Roman. Philo is not so much concerned with Antony’s identity per se, but with Antony’s identification with Cleopatra and the shift in power relations that Antony’s relationship to Cleopatra engenders. Coppelia Kahn asserts that “In his [Antony’s] passion for Cleopatra, he “o’erflows the measure,” escapes the mold, and crosses the boundary between Roman and other” (116). Antony in Philo’s view is a Roman with “goodly eyes” and a “captain’s heart” as long as his eyes and hearty are fixed on “the files and musters of war” and “the scuffle of great fights” in political and military service to imperialist Rome (1.1.2,6) It is not merely the use or misuse of women or a woman that concerns Philo. Women in the play, according to Gajowski, “are all objectifications of male desire” (92). Gajowski points out that “women are objects that satisfy men’s sexual desire [Cleopatra]; they are prizes of war [Cleopatra]; they are political pawns to be used as the means of cementing opportunistic alliances [Cleopatra and Octavia]” (92). But, as Gajowski asserts, “no matter how significantly Cleopatra figures in Antony’s life while he indulges in the pleasures of Egypt, her value is miniscule compared to imperial issues” (91).
Antony, in his first appearance in the play, proclaims an identity, a “space,” that he imagines somehow can exist outside or in resistance to the dominant Roman power structure. He re-inscribes a syncretistic Antony / Cleopatra empire, not as merely his consolidation and possession of Roman power and space in the Eastern empire, but in his own hybrid “space” which includes both Roman and Egyptian attributes, but does not necessarily re-affirm the Roman / Egyptian dichotomy. Antony resists the prevailing Roman assumption in the play (articulated by Philo’s observations) that to exist outside of Rome is to be(come) dissolve. Antony reacts to Cleopatra’s mockery of his Roman power relations. Cleopatra says concerning a message from Rome that “who knows / If the scarce-bearded Caesar have not sent / His pow’rful mandate to you, “Do this, or this; / Take in that kingdom, and enfranchise that. / Perform’t, or else we damn thee” (1.1.20-4). Despite her mocking tone, she realizes that it is Antony’s response or reaction to the imperial mandates that figure into their future of their relationship. Nevertheless, Antony proclaims an imagined syncretistic, subversive “space” that somehow can exist outside or transcendent of what Dollimore calls “realpolitick, real power relations” (208). Antony says:

Let Rome in Tiber melt and the wide arch / Of the ranged empire fall! Here is my space. / Kingdoms are clay: our dungy earth alike / Feeds beast as man. The nobleness of life / Is to do thus; when such a mutual pair / And such a twain can do’t, in which I bind, / On such pain of punishment, the world to weet / We stand up peerless. (1.1.33-40)

Charnes notes that Antony in this speech “attempts to replace himself with an Egyptian Antony, one who no longer recognizes the monumentality and endurance of the Roman vision of Empire, but, rather, wants only to see the futility of such narratives” (112). There is no evidence, however, in the text that (as Charnes suggests) Antony is offering a
vision of a replacement of the Roman Antony with an “Egyptian Antony” (112). Antony is instead asserting a “space” that operates simultaneously outside what he declares are figured transient geo-political power structures (“Rome” and “Tiber”). Antony is also only denying or deconstructing the Roman Antony (a “not Antony” in Philo’s words) insofar as he can maintain his identity in both worlds without relinquishing his political power. Antony proclamation of “my space” is a direct challenge to Octavius’s notion of “the three-nooked world” of the Roman Empire (4.6.6). Errol Durbach notes that in the play “Antony vacillates between the Roman and Egyptian selves, even as he knows that Egypt deflects him from his Roman purpose” (8). But, Antony is not merely vacillating between what Durbach terms “Roman and Egyptian selves”. (Durbach 8). Antony may imagine a transcendent type of syncretistic third kingdom with Cleopatra, which he calls “my space,” but proclamations such as this have real political consequences. He imagines a syncretistic Roman / Egyptian “space” or identity in a world that allows no such syncretism in the eyes of the prevailing Roman power structure represented by Octavius. Cleopatra is wise enough to consider Antony’s proclamation as “Excellent falsehood”, but Demetrius in conversation with Philo notes that with such speech Antony “approves the common liar, who / Thus speaks of him at Rome” (1.1.41, 60-1). Antony and Cleopatra’s opening conversation is figured by both of them in terms a degree of resistance or subjection to Roman power relations. Antony realizes that he cannot completely escape negotiation with Roman power relations. Dollimore notes that “far from transcending the power relations which structure this [Roman] society” Antony’s actions and thoughts “are informed by them” (207). Antony, nevertheless, participates in a deconstruction of his own “not Antony” identity at the opening of the play by resisting,
ignoring, or attempting to replace his “Roman-ness” with a reconstruction based on his own desires and plans which according to a Roman associate “comes too short of that great property” who is Mark Antony — “the triple pillar of the world” (1.1.57, 12).

Cynthia Marshall notes that in this play “Antony is always someone else’s version of Antony, never himself” and that “Antony’s identity is the chief preoccupation of the other characters” (387). I contend that Antony’s identity is represented and inscribed by other characters in the play (both Roman and Egyptian) according to their own prevailing notions of his power relations, and that Antony at times struggles with ambivalence as he alternately conforms or resists their attempts at reading him ideologically and re-inscribing his identity, but that Antony is always himself. In the play Antony himself tries to elude the double-bind that Romans (and many critics) have placed him in. Empire building, however, not Antony’s identity is the chief concern of Octavius Caesar. Nevertheless, Antony’s identity in relation to Octavius’s imperialist plans is a major concern for Octavius. Octavius, in his first appearance in the play, castigates Antony’s “lascivious wassails” in Egypt, but only insofar as they interfere with Roman imperialist designs or Roman ideas of honor and military valor that Antony previously demonstrated (1.4.56). Octavius says that it is not his “natural vice to hate / Our great competitor” [Antony] (1.4.2-3). Octavius offers a description of Antony that reveals his contempt for “A man who is the abstract of all faults / that men follow,” because Antony’s actions are undermining his plans for imperial expansion, and Antony’s military inactions prevent the securement of the military alliance needed to thwart the ambitions of Pompey, who threatens the stability of the nascent Roman empire. Octavius says:
Let us grant it is not / Amiss to tumble on the bed of Ptolemy, / To give kingdom for a mirth, to sit / And keep the turn of tippling with a slave, / To reel the streets at noon, and stand the buffet / With knaves that smell of sweat. Say this becomes him / (As his composure must be rare indeed / Whom these things cannot blemish), yet must Antony no way excuse his foils when we do bear / So great weight in his lightness. (1.4. 15-25)

Octavius, whom Charnes calls “the chief executive of a massive discursive empire,” is representative in the play of the main ideological power in the nascent Roman Empire. The play’s power relations are figured “in terms of the subjection, and resistance to the narrative imperative” of Octavius Caesar (Charnes 108). Antony’s self identity and actions in the play operate against, for, or in an attempted alternate mode to the Roman imperialist imperatives of Octavius and the prevailing Roman identity discourse about Roman honor (*virtus*). There is a need on Octavius’s part to appropriate Antony in the service of Empire building. Octavius needs to deconstruct, reconstruct, or destroy Antony’s identity in ultimate subjection to the service of the Roman Empire.

Antony attempts to ostensibly reconstruct or re-inscribe his Roman identity into the political discourse of Roman-ness by leaving Egypt temporarily and entering in a political, marital alliance with Octavius by marrying Octavia which he suggests “will join our kingdoms and our hearts; and never / Fly off our loves again” (2.2.152-53). Antony reestablishes his power relation with Roman imperialist notions in this alliance, after a self - realization in Egypt that “these strong Egyptian fetters I must break / Or lose myself in dotage” (1.2.113-14). Antony, during a time when he needs to negotiate with Octavius to consolidate his political power, entertains the Roman notion that a loss of self-identity is somehow linked to his increasing identification and assimilation with the colonized other Cleopatra. Charnes says that “The more Antony sojourns emotionally,
imaginatively, and literally between Rome and Egypt (and the two subject positions they offer and mutually critique) the more unconstituted his identity becomes" (113). Breaking the “strong Egyptian fetters” is the pre-requisite to re-establishing his bond with Roman imperialism. John Archer suggests that it is when “Antony spurns Cleopatra seemingly once and for all, that he reclaims his identity by reminding himself of his familial and cultural lineage” (11). The position of these critics assumes that Antony has only two options: Rome or Egypt. Antony (who is termed “the noble Antony” by Lepidus on his return to Rome) tells Octavius that he “neglected” his service to Rome because “poisoned hours had bound me up / from mine own knowledge” (2.2.91). Antony implies in this line that his sojourn in Egypt with Cleopatra prevented him providing whole-hearted devotion to the Empire, which he couches in the terms “mine own knowledge” (2.2.9). But there are hints in the play that Antony’s declarations of a return to acting as the “noble” Roman Antony is not as psychically necessary as many critics assert, but a pragmatic, expedient political move designed to assure his hold on “the third o’ the world” (2.2.63). I would suggest that Antony is not completely abandoning the notion of his own “space” with Cleopatra and acquiescing to Roman ideologically inscribed notions of his identity, but is acting out of political and personal expediency. Rome is politically and materially powerful. Antony knows this and acts pragmatically according to that knowledge. He tells Octavius that “As nearly as I may, / I’ll play the penitent with you” and asserts that “mine honesty / Shall not make poor my greatness, nor my power / Work without it” (2.2. 92-3). Enobarus, in a discussion with one of Pompey’s soldiers, declares that he perceives Antony’s Roman return is transient and a matter of expediency. Enobarus says, “He will to his Egyptian dish again” and that “Antony will use his
affection where it is. He is married but his occasion here" (2.6.123, 126-7). Kahn asserts, however, that Antony needs to re-establish his Roman power relations in order to fix his own shifting identity in his own mind. Kahn says that Antony’s “surrender to her [Cleopatra] wily charms, combined with her perceived betrayal, impels him to reassert his masculinity and his Roman identity precisely through his emulous bond with Caesar” (116). But the play only portrays that Antony’s identity is fixed in the political language and re-constitution of power relations with Octavius, not necessarily in his psyche. In a scene with an Egyptian soothsayer immediately after his marital alliance with Octavius, Antony reveals that he is profoundly unsettled by a preoccupation with “whose fortunes will rises higher, Caesar’s or mine” and admits that he made “this marriage for my peace” but that “I’ th’ East my pleasure lies” (2.3.17, 39-40). Antony only appears to reconstitute or reconstruct his identity as he returns to the symbolic locus of power (Rome) and leaves the symbolic locus of identity dissolution (Egypt). Charnes suggests that Antony’s actions indicate a “position of territorial insecurity” and “Antony becomes like the land Roman imperialism seeks to conquer: vulnerable to continual remappings and reappropriations of his own subjective terrain” (113). But Antony himself works strategically as I have noted elsewhere in this essay to dispute this psychic re-mapping on the part of his fellow Romans.

When Antony admits to Octavius that he has spent “poisoned hours” in Egypt with Cleopatra, Octavius reveals that he is not so much concerned with lost time, but the side tracking of the imperial dictum of spatial expansion (Octavius is called “the universal landlord” (3.13.71) by Thidias later in the play). Antony’s actions interfere with the successful implementation of the Roman imperialistic design for conquering
space. Antony’s reconstituted self is set by clear political boundaries based on his conformity to the power relations of empire and Roman hegemony figured by Octavius Caesar. While Antony had earlier in Egypt proclaimed that Rome and Tiber can disappear in his own self appointed “space,” Octavius reminds Antony that Egypt is a location where his imperial self—the Roman Antony—cannot pursue both activities of political expediency and personal pleasure unless they are carried out or subsumed within the boundaries of Roman power relations. Octavius reacts to Antony’s question “My being in Egypt, Caesar, / What was’t to you?” by saying “No more than my residing here at Rome / Might be to you in Egypt; yet if you there / Did practice on my state, your being in Egypt might be my question” (2.2. 36-40). As Octavius considers what policy to take with Antony he posits that “if I knew / What hoops should hold us staunch from edge to edge / O’ th’ world I would pursue it” (2.2.14-16). It is the political alliance and reconstitution of a power relation with Antony (the marriage to Octavia) that reconstructs (temporarily) Antony’s Roman identity and restores Antony positionally back to what he calls “the world and my great office” (2.3.1). When Antony leaves Rome and Octavia for Cleopatra, Octavius counsels her to “Cheer your heart: / Be you not troubled with the time, which drives / O’er your content these strong necessities; / But let determined things to destiny / Hold unbewailed their way” (3.6.81-5). Octavius is again pointing out that time is not his concern, because he believes that it is his imperial Roman “destiny” that will prevail, ultimately as the ruler of the “three nooked world” (4.6.6). What Antony calls “destiny” is really “the shaping power of an ideology materialized and acted out in the Roman political system and the expanding empire it generates” (Cahn 135). Octavius says that Antony’s betrayal of the marital alliance and political bond by returning to
Cleopatra reveals that “He [Antony] hath given up his empire / Up to a whore” (3.6.67). Antony’s loyalty, reputation, and place in the empire are figured as a willing displacement of “empire,” and Roman imperialist imperatives (Octavius’s “destiny”) for a “trull” (3.6.95).

Ironically, while it is a return to imperialist space and place (Rome) that briefly reconstructs Antony’s identity, it is his anxiety about competing space and competing power with Octavius that drives Antony back to Egypt and the ultimate dissolution and destruction of his identity. Antony’s consultation with an Egyptian soothsayer in Rome reveals to him that any creation of “my space” is threatened by Octavius (1.1.34). The soothsayer’s language is couched in mystical terms, but the implications of his speech are inscribed with the possibility of material, political consequences. The soothsayer urges Antony to “stay not by his [Octavius] side” and “hie you to Egypt again” because “near” Octavius Antony’s “Noble, courageous, high, unmatchable” spirit is “being o’erpow’red” (2.3.14-22). Antony allows himself to be manipulated by the soothsayer because he reveals that Caesar’s “fortunes shall rise higher” than Antony (2.3.17). The soothsayer urges Antony to “Make space enough between you” (2.3.23). Antony again splits the notion of political peace and personal pleasure in his mind and says “I will to Egypt; / And though I make this marriage for my peace, / I th’ East my pleasure lies” (2.3.338-40). Kahn says that Antony’s vacillating loyalties here in the play reveal what she calls “the more radical instabilities of his subjectivity” (111). Antony is “never merely the firm Roman of the model constantly before him,” but rather “is yet drawn towards Rome by his investment in the race for power as he is pulled away from it by Cleopatra” (Kahn 111). But Antony is not being drawn back “towards Rome” as Kahn asserts, but towards
his space with Cleopatra that is only in Egypt, not necessarily indicative of some sort of psychic pull away from Roman-ness to Egyptian-ness. Antony, with his reconstructed identity as a “pillar” in Octavius’s “three nooked world” briefly intact in the minds of the Romans, again leaves Rome to again try to create “my space” with Cleopatra in Egypt (1.1.2, 4.6.6, 1.1.34).

Jyotsna Singh believes that the play offers a representation of the “Roman myth of a stable and unified male subject” and that Antony’s relationship with Cleopatra “disrupts such notions of fixity” (108-109). Singh suggests that “the Roman discourse in the play embodies the orthodox impulse to fix identity—or specifically to secure the myth of the male hero against threat of demystification” (911). My argument is that Antony often works against the notion of being “fixed” by anyone; nevertheless, he does not relinquish all of what the play represents as distinctly Roman attributes. A major feature of Antony’s “Roman” identity is the distinctly Roman virtue (virtus) of honor. Antony is unable to keep his identity’s “visible shape” which includes the Roman quality of honor. This is a quality that is linked with Antony or discussed in relation to Antony throughout the play. Octavius says Antony’s Egyptian indulgence “wounds [Antony’s] honor,” while Pompey delights in the fact that Antony’s “sleep and feeding [in Egypt] may prorogue his honor” (1.4.69, 2.1.26). During Antony’s first meeting with Octavius when he returns to Rome, he responds to Octavius’s accusation that he has “broken the article of your oath” by telling Lepidus “The honor is sacred which he talks on now, / Supposing that I lacked it” (2.2.82-6). Antony asks Octavius’s forgiveness by appealing to honor and saying, “So far ask pardon as befits mine honor” (2.2.97). Later in the play when Antony faces the forces of Octavius at Actium he proclaims that he will either
“live, / Or bathe my dying honor in the blood” (4.2.5-6). Charles Barber points out that the concept of honor was an important quality with the Elizabethan gentry of Shakespeare’s time. According to Barber, honor was a quality in sixteenth and seventeenth century England that offered a social distinction “between vulgar people (those below the ranks of gentry), who aim at profit, and persons of better birth, who aim at honor” (7). Barber notes that there were a variety of connotations to the notion of honor from “noble rank and military glory” to “title” (8). Barber suggests that Shakespeare used the notion of honor in *Antony and Cleopatra* as an attribute of “military prowess” and “military duty” (34). In *Antony and Cleopatra* military and political honor is the one essential attribute of Antony’s identity that tragically loses during the course of the play.

Honor is one of the central issues in Antony’s Roman identity discussed in the play and the loss of honor factors into his political undoing and ultimate personal destruction because of the dissolution of his power relations with Octavius and his relationship to the colonized other—Cleopatra. Cleopatra suggests in her mythic lamentation after Antony’s death that Antony’s “legs bestrid the ocean” (5.2.82). Cleopatra offers the key image of Antony simultaneously moving between both (or neither) places—Rome and Egypt. It is Antony’s failure to maintain his imagined “space” in both Egypt and Rome in concord with the Roman imperialistic designs of Octavius Caesar that leads to his final disaster. Octavius clearly measures the loss of honor in Antony, not merely because of his attraction to Cleopatra, but the diminution of his loyalty to the arranged political bond with Octavius, which the arranged marriage with Octavia represented. Octavius (as Antony later explains) harps “on what I am, / Not
what he knew I was" (3.13.141-42). Antony's honor (in the Roman sense) is diminished
as his attraction and identification with Cleopatra usurps or replaces the type of action
and attitude necessary for Empire building and consolidation which is an essential
element in Octavius's imperialist scheme. Octavius and Pompey, who are in a struggle
for regional political and military domination in the expanding empire, both comment on
Antony's inability to maintain a "visible shape" of Roman honor. Octavius suggests that
Antony's "lascivious wassails" in Egypt "wound thine honor" [Antony's] and offers an
exaggerated litany of Antony's former abilities to endure hardship as a Roman soldier
(1.4.56,69). Octavius says that Antony "(Though daintily brought up) with patience more
/ Than savages could suffer" drank "the stale of horses and the gilded puddle / Which
beasts would cough at" (1.4. 60-3). Octavius offers a description of Antony's actions as a
soldier in service to Rome in order to draw a distinction between Antony's service to
Cleopatra and the concomitant loss of honor. Octavius says:

Thy palate then did deign / The roughest berry on the rudest hedge. Yea like the
stag When snow the pasture sheets, / The barks of trees thou browsed. On the
Alps / It is Reported thou didst eat strange flesh, / Which some did die to look on.
And all this / (It wounds thy honor that I speak it now) Was borne so like a soldier
that thy cheek / so much as lanked not. (1.4.63-70)

Pompey likewise measures Antony according to a Roman standard of honor, but
sees Antony's Egyptian revels as a means to undermine the power relations of the
triumvirate. Pompey hopes that the "field of feasts" in Egypt will "tie up the libertine"
and that Antony's "sleep and feeding may prorogue his honor" (2.1.23-6). Pompey,
however, along with Antony is involved in the type of sensual indulgence that Octavius
calls "monstrous labor" and asserts that "our graver business frowns at this levity"
(2.7.98,119). In The Gathering Storm Paul Siegel suggests that at times "Egyptian values
invade Rome” in the play (136). Siegel suggests that Octavius clearly demarcates Egypt as the site of decadence, sensuousness, and self-indulgence. Siegel points out that the “Alexandrian feast” (2.7.97) on Pompey’s galley illustrates “A symbolic picture of the Roman world corrupted by Eastern luxury” (137). The scene which depicts Roman Empire builders as a group of drunken lushes (Octavius excepted) portrays that “the constant expanding movement necessary to maintain the center of the empire” is “collapsing” (137). While Lepidus is totally drunk and Pompey and Antony indulge in decadent merriment, Siegel points out that Octavius is “in full control of himself, strong in his knowledge of his destiny to restore order to the empire” (139). Octavius answers Antony who urges him to be “a child o’ the time” and join the drinking, answers that “I’d rather fast from all four days / Than drink so much in one” (2.7.98-102).

Antony’s final destruction and concomitant loss of honor is linked in the play by Roman observers directly to his relationship with Cleopatra. Antony’s commander Scarus declares that Antony is “the noble ruin of her [Cleopatra’s] magic” (3.10.20). Scarus excoriates Antony, who flees the battle of Actium, as “a doting mallard” (3.10.20). Scarus’s description echoes the earlier description of Antony by Philo who comments on “this dotage of our general’s” (1.1.1). Scarus says that he “never saw an action of such shame; / Experience, manhood, honor, ne’er before / Did so violate itself” (3.10.22-4). At this point in the play Antony’s “dotage” on Cleopatra manifests itself in serious political and military consequences. Antony experiences a self-awareness that his identity is on the road to personal ruin by declaring “I am so lated in the world that I / Have lost my way forever” (3.11.3-4). Antony feels isolated, lost, and estranged from his own Roman identity in a profound declaration of agony. He not only admits to physically
fleeing a battle (ostensibly demonstrating a forfeiture of military and political honor), but also admits, "I have fled myself" (3.11.8). Antony blames Cleopatra for his being "Stroyed in dishonor" (3.11.54). He says to Cleopatra that "you did know / How much you were my conqueror" (3.11.65-66). Antony the conqueror admits that he has been conquered by the conquered. Earlier Antony declares to Octavia that "If I lose mine honor, I lose myself," yet in the next act he leaves Octavia for Cleopatra, while Octavius claims Antony "hath given his empire / Up to a whore" (3.4.22-3, 3.6. 66-7). Antony trades his honor, which in inextricably linked in this play to his power relations to his empire to be (according to Octavius) "a potent regiment to a trull / That noises against us" (3.6. 95-6). Antony seems unable to avoid thinking that absence from "Rome" is a loss, an absence, and a failure. There appears to be no possible place for a transcendent or syncretistic "space" for an alternate identity that can successfully operate outside ideologically inscribed notions of identity based on the prevailing Roman imperialistic empire of Octavius. Rome is still a powerful political and material presence in Antony's mind. At the end Antony gets assimilated back into Roman thinking that stresses that his "space" apart from Rome is nowhere and the cause of his psychic failure.

After Antony's defeat at Actium, he admits that "All is lost" including his own rapidly destructing identity. When Octavius consolidates his military and political power after Actium, he is described as "the full Caesar" and "the fullest man," while the personal qualities of the politically powerless Antony is termed by Enobarus as "emptiness" (3.13. 35-6, 92). Antony recognizes that the dissolution of his identity is marked by dissolution of power as his servants refuse to obey him and he proclaims, "Authority melts from me" but still asserts, "I am Antony yet" (3.13.90,93). Antony
insists that “I and my sword will earn our chronicle / There’s hope in’t yet” (3.13.175-76). Enobarus, however, perceives that Antony as “Antony again” is merely the result of “that mood” in which “the diminution in our captain’s brain / Restores his heart” (3.13.199-200). Enobarus realizes that Antony’s real “diminution” is not only in his foolish thoughts of valor, but also in his genuine loss of power. Caesar has the real power and Antony has a rapidly failing notion of “dying honor” which Caesar scorns. Later in a conversation with Eros Antony compares his self-identity to “a cloud” and discusses the dissolution of his identity in terms of the disrupted power relations between him and Octavius and (or so he imagines) him and Cleopatra. Antony tells Eros:

> My good knave Eros, now thy captain is / Even such a body; here I am Antony, / Yet cannot hold this visible shape, my knave. I made these wars for Egypt and the Queen, / Whose heart I thought I had, for she had mine, Which whilst it was mine, had annexed unto’t a million moe, now lost—she, Eros, has / Packed cards with Caesar, and false played my glory / Unto an enemy’s triumph. (4.14.13-22)

Marshall points out that Antony’s mention of a loss of “visible shape” links “possession of the self with specularity: identity is not constructed prior to image but is determined by the way one is seen” (393). Antony is aware at this point that “fortune and Antony part here”—that his attempt to create his own space has transgressed the Roman virtue of honor, disrupted his bonds with Rome (and thus his Roman identity) and “there is left us / ourselves to end ourselves” (4.14.23). Dollimore notes that Antony “divorced from the power structure” that fixes his identity “has left to it only the assertion of a negative, inverted autonomy” (211). Antony experiences what appears to be a psychic dissolution. He points out to Eros as he discusses his self-dissolution with the shifting cloud metaphor that “even with a thought / the rack dislimns” (4.14.10). Antony suggests here that the demarcation of a fixed shape (which he links specifically to his own identity in the next
passage) can be disrupted or dissolved with even a “thought" by the viewer (4.14.10). From the beginning of the play, spectators, particularly Romans, have noted the ways in which the notion of a fixed identity known and renowned as “Antony" is dislimned by their perceptions of Antony’s action in the relation to the prevailing Roman power structure. The description of the shape-shifting identity of Antony occurs throughout the play. Philo noted the shift from the “triple pillar of the world" to a “strumpet’s fool" and points out that at times Antony is “not Antony" and "comes too short of that great property/ Which should still go with Antony" (1.1.12-13, 58-9). Octavius criticizes Antony and Cleopatra by suggesting a shift in gender roles. He says Antony “is not more manlike / Than Cleopatra, nor the Queen of Ptolemy / More womanly than he" (1.4.5-7). Later in the play Antony himself dismisses his loyal servants by saying that “I wish I could be made so many men, / And all of you clapped up together in / An Antony, that I might do you service / So good as you have done” (4.2.16-19). Antony’s identity is like “the black vesper’s pageant" of the clouds in the evening sky—constantly shifting, constituting, dissolving and reconstituting in a multiplicity of selves rather than a fixed identity. Janet Adelman points out that “Identity in Antony and Cleopatra is not merely a question of Antony’s Romanness or of his manhood: by its merging and blending of all things, the play questions the very concept of identity” and “if there is an answer, it is not in the realm of being at all, it is in the realm of becoming: identity is defined not by static measurement but by flux" (145). Antony’s descriptions of the various shifting cloud shape in act 4 figure the various modes of perceiving his constituting and reconstituting identity:
Sometime we see a cloud that's dragonish; / A vapor sometime like a bear or lion, / A Towered citadel, a pendant rock, / A forked mountain, or blue promontory / with trees / Upon't that nod unto the world / And mock our eyes with air. (4.14.2-7)

The images of "dragon," and "bear or lion" are images of earthly (bear and lion) and mythic power (dragon) and strength, while the "citadel," "rock," and "mountain" are all images of ascendant stability, possibly suggesting the prominence of manhood in Roman notions of identity. Antony recognizes that these qualities are mutable, transient "vapor" and "indistinct as water is in water" (4.14.10-11). Marshall notes that Antony "posits the knowledge or coherence of "Antony" not within himself but within the spectatorial consciousness of a viewer," suggesting that "identity—both physical and psychological" depends "upon a spectator" (393). At the end of the play, even Antony, in his cloud spectator metaphor realizes that he is uncertain of his "visible shape" to his Roman spectators.

Shifting imagery linked to spectatorship is not a problem with Cleopatra, but an important element in her way of dealing with the Roman power structure. The exotic Cleopatra's "infinite variety" may have been enticing to the Romans, but Antony's shifting Roman identity proves to be his undoing in the play. It no longer becomes a matter of only a conscious willingness to create "my space" by dissolving the familiar Roman boundaries in Antony's mind and "Let Rome in Tiber melt and the wide arch / Of the ranged empire fall," but a profound, psychic inability to "hold this visible shape" (1.1.33-34, 4.14.14). Antony has disassociated himself from the power that constituted his identity—Rome—and is disempowered literally and psychically in the process. Antony's "space" ends up being both politically proscribed and psychically untenable.

Antony has tried and failed to control his own identity, not because of his attempt to
create his third space (which for him is often psychically tenable), but because Roman material and political power is so daunting and Roman resistance to him so powerful that it ensured its failure. But Antony and Cleopatra’s “space,” which “bestrid’ the ocean” interrogates Roman hegemony by challenging the imperial narrative that Octavius Caesar would impose on the world. Caesar would keep the Rome/Egypt dichotomy intact, but subsume or re-inscribe his imperialist narrative over the entire space in order to solidify his plans for a Roman Empire building. Antony operates simultaneously within and without of the Rome/Egypt schema by appropriating and thus re-inscribing his own Roman/Egyptian, Antony/Cleopatra syncretistic third space or empire which challenges Octavius. The play seems to suggest that the notion of a hybrid, transcultural, third “space” or empire is politically problematic and personally and psychically dangerous for Antony, but tenuously possible. Dollimore asserts that “power is a function not of the person but of place” and is “relative to one’s placing in the power structure” (209). Antony dissolution seems to be the direct result of his resistance to the place of power (Rome). His declaration that Cleopatra has “robbed me of my sword” indicates (despite the obvious blame-shifting) that he feels emasculated both politically and psychically (4.14.23). As Kinney notes “Antony certainly can’t reconcile the partial versions of Antony reflected back to him by Octavius or emanating from Rome with the competing sense of a transformed self generated by his love for Cleopatra” (182). Antony can only regain his Roman identity by literal self-destruction as “A Roman by a Roman / Valiantly vanquished” (4.14.57). Kinney points out that at Antony’s death he is “victor of his self-dissolution” (183). As he dies he tells Cleopatra that “not Caesar’s valor hath o’er thrown Antony, / But Antony hath triumphed on itself,” and she responds by proclaiming “that
none but Antony / Should conquer Antony” (4.15.15-18). Antony’s triumph and return to the Roman *virtus* of honor is accomplished not by his involvement in the Roman imperialist imperative of colonial spatial expansion, but by a destructive action that results, *because* of his resistance to it. The “visible shape” of Antony the valorous “greatest prince o’ th’ world” and Antony the triumphant is only briefly reconstituted by the self-destruction of Antony (4.14.53).

In the end of the play, after his suicide Cleopatra mythically reconstructs Antony’s identity. Cleopatra says, “I dreamt there was an Emperor Antony,” and Think you there was or might be such a man / As this I dreamt of?” (5.2.75, 94-5). Cleopatra challenges and interrogates the Roman interpretation of Antony’s identity and personal and political legacy. Again Antony *is* what others perceive him to be. Before Antony’s death Octavius simply describes him as “Poor Antony”(4.1.16). After he hears of Antony’s suicide, Octavius shifts his descriptive language to restore Antony’s identity in the minds of his hearers *back* to a direct link with Roman imperial attributes and their mutual power relationship. Octavius valorizes Antony and calls him “my brother, my competitor / In top of all design, my mate in empire, / Friend and companion in the front of war, / the arm of mine own body, and the heart / Where mine his thought did kindle” (5.1.42-6). Octavius rhetorically exalts Antony by suggesting that “the death of Antony / Is not a single doom, in the name lay / A moiety of the world” (5.1.17-19). Octavius is, of course, speaking these words as the *sole* ruler in the Roman Empire, with Pompey, Lepidus, and Antony out of the picture. The “world” for Octavius is the world that he has colonized, consolidated, and conquered, the nascent Roman Empire. In Octavius’s mind Roman ideological formulation and the binary opposition between Roman and not-
Roman are powerfully re-asserted and secure. Octavius subsumes Antony into his own imperialistic spatial narration by describing him in terms of past Roman power relations. In Cleopatra’s case, in her language (and in her own mind) she restores Antony’s identity to mythic proportions:

His legs bestrid the ocean: his reared arm / Crested the world: his voice was propertied / As all the tuned spheres, and that to friends; / But when he meant to quail and to shake the Orb, / He was as rattling thunder. (5.2.82-6)

Charnes points out in a commentary on this passage that “Cleopatra’s rhetoric about her lover encodes an awareness of the incongruity of these postures, figuring even while celebrating the morphological inconsistency that robbed Antony of his “visible shape” (143). Cleopatra is re-imagining the “my space” that Antony imagines earlier in the play. Cleopatra is mystifying Antony’s identity, and, as Dollimore suggests, seems to be obscuring the fact that Antony’s “real nature” is not “an abstraction inherent in each particular individual,” but “the totality of social relations” (153). Antony’s “visible shape”, in the end, does not “bestrid the ocean” (5.2.82). Antony’s identity, which the play deconstructs, reconstructs, and destroys, is only reconstructed briefly at the end in mythic language, which further emphasizes an Antony that “yet cannot hold this visible shape” (4.14.14). Although Antony seems to be effectively trapped in and by the constraints of Roman ideology at the end of the play, the play seems to gesture towards the possibility of imagining (as both Antony and Cleopatra do) that there is a real alternative to the fixed binary oppositions of Rome or Egypt (that most Roman characters in the play and an endless procession of modern critics seem to imply is the result of totalizing and all-powerful Roman ideology and impossible to escape)—a hint of an identity that is multivalent and unending rather than fixed by totalizing power and
completely subject to power structures. Antony's original assertion of his own (with Cleopatra) "space" shows the possibility of resistance (however problematic) in a liminal space of contestation and exchange between (but never completely beyond) prevailing power structures.
Works Cited


About the Author

Paul Anthony Galante was born in Allentown, Pennsylvania on 25 December 1951 to Guido and Reta Galante. He worked in the family dry-cleaning business for nineteen years. He attended Allentown College (DeSales University) in Center Valley, Pennsylvania where he received a B.A. in English and graduated Summa Cum Laude in 1999. Currently, Paul is finishing his M.A. in English at Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania where he teaches composition and will be starting his Ph.D in August 2001.
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