William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*: The Reason Behind Antony's Downfall

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In *Antony and Cleopatra*, William Shakespeare presents two colliding worlds, Rome and Egypt, both representing opposing ideas and values, embodied by two protagonists. Antony is “the triple pillar of the world” and part of the Roman triumvirate, whilst Cleopatra is a strong female leader of the East whom Antony falls hopelessly in love with (1.1.13). In his relationship with Cleopatra, Antony abandons his old identity and attempts to reconcile living as a Roman and an Egyptian, but he is “lost in dotage” (1.1.22). Antony consistently struggles between his desire for Cleopatra and his will to regain his honor which results in contradictory actions and his uncertain sense of self. Although it is arguable that Cleopatra is the cause of Antony’s downfall, ultimately it is his lack of cohesive identity that leads to his death.

Antony’s identity crisis stems from his struggle between the person he used to be and the person he has become. Caesar describes the “old” Antony as someone who “slew’st Hirsius and Pansa . . . didst drink / The stale of horses” and “then did deign / The roughest berry on the roughest hedge” (1.4.66, 70-3). Shakespeare uses the repetition of “rough” to highlight the manly and brave acts Antony was famous for in Rome, which builds his identity as a traditional Roman soldier. Caesar presents Antony’s previous identity as an extremely masculine, courageous and aggressive war hero who embodied highly valued Roman traits such as valor and honor. Caesar laments that “it wounds [Antony’s] honor” that he must compare the Antony of old to his new self which is shameful in the eyes of the Romans (1.4.79). Caesar says, “he fishes, drinks and wastes / The lamps of night in revel, is not more manlike / Than Cleopatra, nor the queen of Ptolemy / More womanly than he” (1.4.4-7). Shakespeare shows that when living in Egypt, Antony has taken on
stereotypical Egyptian hobbies, abandoning his military duties in favour of sensual pleasures. In Caesar’s mind, as Antony’s honor has been eroded, he has become less masculine. Antony’s new self cares less about his responsibilities than he does about his lover, Cleopatra. This is best exemplified in the exposition of the play when a servant notifies him there is “news, my good lord, from Rome,” but Antony simply replies that this “grates me, the sum” (1.1.20). Antony and the audience see his new self as less Roman and more Egyptian as he abandons duty in favour of personal pleasures. Philo says Antony has been “transformed into a strumpet’s fool” and “his captain’s heart/ . . . reneges all temper / And become[s] the fan to cool a gypsy’s lust” (1.1.6,14). Like Caesar his tone is disdainful and disappointed as he believes Antony is controlled by Cleopatra and has lost himself in his adoration for her. Antony’s new self is decidedly emasculated as he is presented as having been conquered by his love for Cleopatra. Antony himself is dissatisfied with his new identity as he realises “the ten thousand harms . . . the ills I know / My idleness doth hatch” (1.2.144-5). Antony says, “ambition/[is] the soldier’s virtue” and his idleness is a direct contrast to the ambitious soldier he used to be (3.1.24-5). Indeed, Antony believes he has forsaken his responsibilities as he struggles to live in both worlds.

Shakespeare dramatises Antony as being torn between Rome and Egypt and all these places represent, which results in his internal conflict. Rome symbolises duty, reason, structure and responsibility whilst Egypt symbolises passion, excess and pleasure. Antony is emotionally and psychologically torn between the two. As he tells Cleopatra, “the strong necessity of time commands / Our services a while but my heart / Remains in use with you” (1.3.53-5). Shakespeare writes, “a Roman thought hath struck him,” implying Antony’s heart is in Egypt, whilst his mind is in Rome (1.2.88). Here, Shakespeare uses the geographical poles as binary opposites to symbolise the conflict Antony feels between his obligations to the state and his private needs. On the one hand, when in Egypt Antony’s “honor calls [him] hence,” but when in Rome “he will to his Egyptian dish
again” (1.3.118, 2.6.156). Shakespeare starkly contrasts the idea of honor and propriety with the phrase “Egyptian dish,” which contains imagery of food and excess, indicating the differences between the Eastern and Western worlds (2.6.156). Although Antony marries Octavia in order to “make this marriage for my peace,” he cannot leave Cleopatra as “I’ th’ East my pleasure lies” (2.4.45-46). Antony appears Roman when he marries Octavia in order to secure political stability, but he also appears Egyptian when he risks the wrath of Caesar in order to see Cleopatra again. Antony could, like the Roman people, be compared to “a vagabond upon the stream/[that] goes to and back, lackeying the varying tide/to rot itself with motion” (1.4.51-3). The phrase “to rot itself with motion” foreshadows Antony’s moving back and forth between Rome and Egypt that will lead to his eventual downfall (1.4.53). Shakespeare uses the imagery of water to reflect Antony’s lack of stability and demonstrate how, similarly to the tide, Antony’s actions do not have a pattern or a reason instead they are governed by his conflict between the two places. In this way, Shakespeare shows that Antony’s identity crisis stems from his failure to reconcile his Egyptian and Roman desires which leads to a subsequent loss of honor.

Antony’s lack of consistency results in his loss of honor and his armour, symbols for his victories in battle and his masculine strength, and so he further loses the foundations of his character. Antony gives up his honor when in the midst of battle with Caesar he turns his ship around to follow Cleopatra because she has fled. Antony’s soldiers advised him it was a mistake to fight Caesar at sea as he is more likely to win on land, but he goes against their advice in order to fight alongside Cleopatra, but then Antony goes on to humiliate himself by pursuing his lover instead of winning the battle against Caesar. Antony at first blames Cleopatra, arguing that “you did know / How much you were my conqueror,” and he implies she must have known he would follow her. However, after Cleopatra asks for his pardon he immediately says to Cleopatra, “one of them rates / All that is won and lost. Give me a kiss. / Even this repays me” (3.12.76-9). Shakespeare
shows Antony’s inner conflict when in the same sentence Antony moves from a Roman thought to an Egyptian action. This abrupt and rapid change in mindset clearly demonstrates Antony’s lack of consistency. Shakespeare shows that Antony has essentially lost control of the third of the world, and his reputation as a great war hero has been destroyed, but in the face of Cleopatra’s tears he has no choice but to forgive her. Here, Shakespeare demonstrates the power Cleopatra wields over Antony as her strong character combined with their love has overpowered him.

Arguably, Antony and Cleopatra have codependent identities which results in Antony’s lack of a cohesive sense of self. Shakespeare shows that the lovers’ identities are closely connected when a servant says, “hush, here comes Antony” but another tells the audience it is “not he, the queen” (1.2.78-9). Shakespeare includes this interchange to show that Antony and Cleopatra influence each other to such an extent there is ambiguity over who is who. Shakespeare presents the idea their personalities are so compelling that they influence each other. Cleopatra believes that “since my lord / Is Antony again, I will be Cleopatra” (3.13.226-7). In this way their identities are connected. This is best exemplified when the Roman soldiers notice Cleopatra’s influence over Antony as they believe “we are women’s men” and “our leader’s led” (3.7.86-87). Shakespeare uses alliteration here to emphasise how Antony is no longer a strong, independent and stable leader in his relationship with Cleopatra, but instead he has become passive. The Roman soldiers’ reactions reflect the sexism that exists more pervasively in Rome than in Egypt as “it is said in Rome / That Photinus, an eunuch, and [Cleopatra’s] maids / Manage this war” (3.7.15-18). It is believed in Rome that Antony’s decisions are deeply influenced by Cleopatra and that they are no longer two independent rulers. They have become one. This is best exemplified when Antony is called “the Antoniad, the Egyptian admiral,” which implies he is both Roman and Egyptian in battle (3.10.3). His identity as Antony, first and foremost a Roman and war hero, is blurred and ambiguous as he has taken on Egyptian traits. In a world where these two kingdoms are opposing and colliding over
different ideas and values, Antony is unsure of how to reconcile being both an Egyptian and a Roman, which results in his lack of cohesive identity. This leads Antony to make irrational decisions that only further destroy his old reputation as a great and honourable Roman warrior.

It is clear Antony feels he has lost himself when he loses his honor, which only magnifies his identity crisis in the eyes of the audience. After Antony turns away from fighting Caesar because Cleopatra’s ship has run away from battle, he says, “I have fled myself” (3.11.10). He has completely deserted his old identity as a figure of authority on the battle field and in doing so has lost his pride and the respect of his men. This is made clear when Antony says, “I have instructed cowards / To run and show their shoulders . . . I have lost command” (3.11.8-9, 24). That Antony has “lost command” indicates he has lost the power he once held. Without his status as a great leader, Antony is no longer certain who he is. He admits, “if I lose mine honor, / I lose myself,” and here we can see that in Rome a man’s honor and his identity are so intricately connected that without honor a man loses his sense of self (3.4.24-5). Antony tells Cleopatra, “better I were not yours / Than yours so branchless,” which implies that much like a trees’ defining feature are its branches, without Antony’s honor to define him he feels he is not himself and therefore lost (3.4.25-6). He returns to this imagery of the stripped tree after his defeat by Caesar as he laments, “this pine is barked / That overtopped them all” (4.12.25-6). The word “barked” is emasculating, implying that as the tree has been removed of its protective layer, its “bark,” Antony feels he is no longer worthy of wearing his armour.

Antony, without his armour and his reputation as a glorious war hero, does not know who he is. Antony tells Eros in Act 4, “here I am Antony / Yet cannot hold this visible shape” (4.14.17-18). Antony himself recognises that he lacks a cohesive identity as he can not decide between Rome and
Egypt, his honor and his love for Cleopatra. Through Antony's struggle to live in both worlds, Shakespeare critiques the Roman preoccupation with honour as Antony feels he has "lost [his] way forever" because he has abandoned the central characteristic of a Western warrior, whilst showing the sensual freedoms enjoyed in Egypt (3.11.5). Other characters in the play can see Antony's indecision as well. Enobarbus says, "had [Antony] / Been what he knew himself, it had gone well" (3.10.31-2). Here Shakespeare emphasises that if Antony had acted as a glorious and triumphant war hero he would not have lost his honor and by extension his identity. Antony's fall is a result of his internal conflict as he tries to reconcile Rome and Egypt in himself, and this love story indicates a struggle to unify two opposing forces, embodied through the protagonists, with tragic consequences. Shakespeare shows through the lovers' tragic deaths that the Eastern and Western worlds cannot overcome their opposing conflict. Ultimately, Antony's lack of cohesive identity and his resulting death shows that there is "no midway / Twixt these extremes at all" (3.4.20-21).

Works Cited