“And Mine a Sad One”: Antonio’s Static Part in The Merchant of Venice

Who is Antonio? Even he doesn’t know. Antonio states in the beginning of the play that “a want-wit sadness makes of me, / That I have much ado to know myself” (1.1.6-7). Usually, Antonio isn’t the only one having trouble knowing himself because readers generally don’t quite understand him either. Cynthia Lewis comments on the vagueness of Antonio’s character, saying, “—the long-standing critical debate over the attractiveness or distastefulness of Antonio’s character implies his ambiguity, an ambiguity which, I think, may prevent us from liking Antonio very much and hence from considering at length his relevance to the play” (19). As readers, what are we supposed to make of this “ambiguity” concerning Antonio, particularly when he is the title character of the play? What exactly is Antonio’s part in the play that he alludes to when he tells Gratiano, “I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano / A stage, where every man must play a part, / And mine a sad one” (1.1.77-79)?

Some critics have argued that Antonio’s character exhibits purpose in its relation with Shylock. One critic claims, “The main-spring of the action in ‘Merchant of Venice’ is the contest between Antonio and Shylock. Every means culminates in this end, every incident contributes either to call forth their struggle, or to harmonize it after it has arisen” (Snider 130). Though I agree that the characters of Shylock and Antonio are intertwined, I feel that Antonio’s “ambiguity” suggests that his character is not meant to be developed as fully as the character of Shylock. By looking at how Shakespeare’s does not provide insight into Antonio’s characteristics and by examining Shakespeare’s naming pattern of plays, we can determine that Antonio, though the title character, is a static character whom Shakespeare uses as a plot device to portray the complexities of Shylock.
Every characteristic Shakespeare shares about Antonio provides plot significance rather than the deepening of his own character. When we first meet Antonio in Act 1, we learn that he is sad. He says, “In sooth, I know not why I am so sad; / It wearies me…” (1.1.1-2). The very first lines of the play state that Antonio is sad and weary without stating why, which leaves readers without insight into his character.

Other characters in the play suggest reasons why Antonio might be sad. They inquire whether he is worried about his fortunes out at sea or in love, but Antonio claims that those are not the reasons for his weariness. As this is the first information presented in the play about the title character, readers are left wondering the reason behind Antonio’s sadness throughout the play. However, the answer never comes. Shakespeare’s noted attention to detail and character development defies the notion that he could have forgotten about this key aspect of Antonio’s character. So, why did Shakespeare decide not to tell readers the cause behind Antonio’s sadness? Because it doesn’t matter. Shakespeare does not introduce the sorrow of Antonio to further any character development but rather to further the plot.

The next time we get a sense of Antonio’s sorrow and weariness are at the events leading up to and at the trial, where his sadness complements the conducting of the crucial courtroom scene. We know Antonio is weary and sad in his life, which makes it more believable when he willingly submits to his punishment and allows the necessary trial scene to occur. Before the trial, Antonio speaks of how the added sorrow of losing his ships has weakened him. “Therefore, go: / These griefs and losses have so bated me, / That I shall hardly spare a pound of flesh / To-morrow to my bloody creditor— / Well, gaoler, on. —Pray God, Bassanio come / To see me pay his debt, —and then I care not” (3.3.31-36)! Antonio’s weariness contributes to his acceptance of his fate; he never tries to run away from it. We see this weary acceptance of death again at the
trial scene after Bassanio urges Antonio to have courage, and Antonio responds, “I am a tainted wether of the flock, / Meetest for death: the weakest kind of fruit / Drops earliest to the ground; and so let me:” (4.1.114-116). Hence, Shakespeare never gives us cause for Antonio’s sadness because it does not play a role for Antonio’s character but merely for the plot, particularly the pivotal trial scene.

The other information we learn about Antonio merely drives the plot as well. Throughout the play, we gather that he is respected, wealthy, and a good friend. In contrast to these worthy characteristics, we also learn that he can be cruel. For driving the plot, Antonio’s wealth and firm friendship with Bassanio reveal why he lends him such a great deal of money and enters into a bond for him. Also, the given information that Antonio is respected later plays a role in explaining why Antonio has such overwhelming support at the trial scene. Lastly, Shakespeare only mentions cruelty in relation to Antonio when the cruelty is connected to Shylock, a characteristic that becomes a major reason for the act of revenge in the play. All of the things we learn about Antonio purposefully propel necessary events in the plot.

Now, one could make the argument that all characters’ characteristics are intended to drive the plot, which is valid. However, Antonio’s characteristics only provide plot device, not character complexity. We can see this, especially when comparing information given about Antonio versus information given about Shylock. Shakespeare shows that one characteristic of Shylock is his hatred towards Antonio and Christians. Then Shakespeare provides insight into this hatred by revealing why, which is because Antonio and Christians have reviled Shylock in the past. This combination of characteristic and insight provides complexity and depth to Shylock’s character. Shakespeare does not, however, give insight into why Antonio is referred to as such a respected person from the beginning of the play, why Antonio despises Shylock (so we
are left to presume it is on account of common prejudice), nor why Antonio is particularly so willing to help Bassanio. Just as it was not revealed why Antonio was so sad, the reasons for these characteristics do not matter because Antonio functions as a static plot device instead of a full, complex character.

Some could argue that Antonio is not a static character by claiming that he changes from showing enmity towards Shylock to showing him mercy at the end of the play. One critic contends that Antonio does change from despising Shylock to forgiving him, stating, “—Antonio in the trial scene suffers hatred and injury but foregoes revenge and rancor, manifesting a genuine spirit of forgiveness—for Shylock’s forced conversion is not revenge…. Thus, his chief deficiency [of reviling Shylock] surmounted, Antonio becomes finally a perfect embodiment of Christian love” (Lewalski 331). If this interpretation were correct, then Antonio would indeed be a dynamic character that shows development throughout the play. However, when we study Antonio’s verdict for Shylock closely, we see that Antonio’s change to kindness doesn’t actually take place, which leaves Antonio as a static character.

In his article, Richard H. Weisberg argues that Antonio “proceeds to fail every test of moderation, mercy, and forgiveness…” in his sentencing of Shylock (14). Weisberg goes on to examine Antonio’s lines at that part in the trial, saying that Antonio “merely reiterates the Duke’s disposition of the half of Shylock’s goods that are to go to the state! Antonio has no power over, nor any interest in, that half. Thus he is in fact forgiving the ‘fine’ that only the state has a right to get. So Antonio begins his speech by winning the hearts of his listeners through a gracious disposition of that which he does not own” (15). Weisberg continues to condemn Antonio’s supposed kindness to Shylock by pointing out that Antonio’s terms significantly hurt Shylock financially, even with the command to become Christian. Weisberg states about
Shylock’s condition, “—if really forced to convert to Christianity, he may not be able to pursue his work as a moneylender” (17). Shylock himself could be referring to this when he mourns, “—you take my life, / When you do take the means whereby I live” (4.1.373-374). In seeing that Antonio’s edict is not merciful, we understand that his character has not changed and still remains a static character.

Understanding Antonio’s basic function as a plot device is supported by his position as the title character, which fits the pattern of Shakespeare’s other play titles. Shakespeare’s tragedies tend to be titled after a character that is deeply developed, such as Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear, and Othello. On the other hand, Shakespeare’s comedies tend to be titled after more plot-based themes, such as The Taming of the Shrew, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Much Ado about Nothing, and The Tempest. If The Merchant of Venice follows the pattern of these other comedies, then it only makes sense that Antonio, the character of the title, is a plot device rather than a character to be developed himself.

Though Antonio’s character mainly serves as a way to propel the plot, he does specifically become a component of the plot that develops the complexity of Shylock. By looking at Antonio’s characteristics that do not in fact deepen his character, we can see how those characteristics directly influence the plot in ways that reveal Shylock’s character. For instance, the sadness that Antonio experiences leads him to accept his fate at the trial scene. The fact that Antonio shows such submissiveness without reviling Shylock in the moments before he is to be cut open creates such a moving scene for Shylock’s character. If Antonio were cursing him and spitting on him the way he was said to have done before, then readers would perhaps more readily look past Shylock’s eagerness to receive his pound of flesh. But Antonio’s
willingness to submit to Shylock’s knife portrays a more poignant view of Shylock’s desire to exact revenge.

Antonio’s characteristics of wealthy merchant and good friend also lead to plot events where the complexity of Shylock’s character is shown. Antonio’s wealth and friendship with Bassanio are the driving forces for Antonio entering into the bond with Shylock, the central plot event of the play. This bond reveals more of Shylock’s character than Antonio’s, for Shylock is the one who must decide how to act when Antonio is not able to pay the debt.

Lastly, Antonio’s characteristics of respected citizen and tormentor of Shylock add to the plot and complexity of Shylock, particularly in the courtroom scene. Both of these characteristics come into play in the courtroom scene, showing reasons to sympathize with Shylock. When Antonio’s friends and the court of Venice show blatant favoring of Antonio, readers can see a representation of the way Shylock has been treated by the Christian majority throughout his life. Even in a court of law, Shylock experiences insults regarding his religion, such as when Gratiano exclaims, “A second Daniel, a Daniel, Jew! / Now, infidel, I have you on the hip” (4.1.330-331). In addition to this, readers also feel a sense of sympathy for Shylock when remembering Antonio’s characteristic of cruelty towards him. Shylock reminds readers of this when he asks, “What, would’st thou have a serpent sting thee twice” (4.1.69)?

These characteristics of Antonio lead to plot events that show the complexity of Shylock’s character. On one hand, readers feel antagonistic towards Shylock because of his attack on a weary and submissive Antonio. On the other hand, readers feel sympathetic to the torment Shylock has endured in his life and is even enduring throughout the trial itself. So, though Antonio’s character is not a complex character intended to be developed, the plot events that are driven by his character reveal complexities about Shylock’s character. Though static, the
character of Antonio is a central force throughout a play of thought-provoking characters and themes, leaving us to conclude that his is not such a sad part after all.
Works Cited


