

THE SEMIOTICS OF ANTONIO AND SHYLOCK

GRANT SMITH

Eastern Washington University, USA

Abstract: Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* pivots on the ironies of two characters and names, *Antonio* and *Shylock*, both of which illustrate the semiotic meanings of names. They refer to secondary referents that point out comic deficiencies in the essential elements of love. *Antonio* would have been easily associated with Christian monasticism and brotherly love, which academic philosophers placed above romantic love. Shakespeare affirms the value of brotherly love but only as it facilitates romantic love. The character is ironic insofar as he has mistreated Shylock in Christian terms and remains outside the cycle of romantic love. Shylock, by contrast, is portrayed as an exemplar of justice and marital loyalty but is sadly lacking in mercy and forgiveness. His name has no etymological roots in Hebrew sources but is quite simply a coinage referring to a popular hair style symbolic of one's dedication to the idea of love. The deficiencies and strengths of each character show their humanity and are typical of Shakespearean comedy.

Keywords: iconic, indexical, symbolic, immediate referent, secondary referent.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the *semiotic* functions of names as described in a forthcoming chapter, "Theoretical Foundations of Literary Onomastics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming*. My intent here is to analyze the names of *Antonio* and *Shylock* in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* (hereafter *MV*) to show in a specific way how names can acquire *symbolic* meaning. The "ancient grudge" (1.3.47; all Shakespeare citations are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, edited by G. Blakemore Evans) between these two characters propels much of the action in the play, and the meanings of their names reflect the comic deficiencies of each character relative to basic principles of Christian love, which I believe to be the central theme of the play. I shall also argue that these names had different meanings for Shakespeare's audience than they do for us today and that this difference is a natural consequence of how references are interpreted *symbolically*.

Indexical references

To understand the *symbolic* potential of any name, we need to understand the way meaning functions in terms of *semiotic* theory. C. S. Peirce describes three types of reference, *iconic* (which I shall not explain here), *indexical*, and *symbolic* (Peirce 1955:

98–119). The usual reference of names is *indexical*, in which a *sign* is interpreted as designating its referent in a simple one-to-one relationship. For example, my family name is *Smith*, but that name says nothing about me insofar as it is interpreted as just a fixed designation of me as the referent. It is meaningless insofar as it is a mere label to distinguish me from others within a group of people, and that certainly is the way my name is usually interpreted.

Symbolic meaning

Symbolic meaning arises when a *sign* evokes two or more *indexical* referents in the mind of an interpreter. Regarding the example, we may hypothesize that the name *Smith* originally referred to two things: 1) one of my ancestors, and 2) his occupation. When the name was actually used to refer to my ancestor (which I shall call the *immediate referent*), it also evoked a reference to the occupation (which I shall call the *secondary referent*). The meaning was *symbolic* insofar as the *sign* pointed to attributes that were presumably shared between the two referents. Of course, the sharing of attributes was only partial for each individual interpreter, and it is the attributes of the *secondary referent* that are more clearly carried over in terms of meaning to the *immediate referent*. However, both referents, my ancestor and the occupation, were made more meaningful than one thing referred to by the *sign* interpreted as a single *indexical* reference, i.e., as a simple label.

Themes and references in literature

Symbolic meaning is a very imperfect mechanism, but it is the way in which our minds store and sort many attributes of disparate cognitive images, indeed vast amounts of information, into general categories. It is imperfect and sometimes outlandish because humans can associate any *sign* with any number of referents or entities. Literary themes are a linking of images and therefore a reflection of *symbolic* thinking, and a name in literature has *symbolic* meaning insofar as it reflects a thematic interpretation of that literature. That is to say, any name in literature will have greater importance insofar as it is seen to have relevance to other *symbolic* references. To the extent that a work of literature has a unified meaning, we should expect that its names evoke thematically related references. In fact, a literary theme may be often seen as a cluster of *symbolically* related references.

Platonic love

Of course, theorizing by itself is not very convincing, so let me proceed with my example. *MV* is a comedy, but it is also a very serious exploration of *love*. I believe that *love* is the central theme of the play, as it is in most comedies, and is here illustrated in serious terms that are both Christian and Neo-Platonic. Before Shakespeare's time, Neo-Platonic philosophy had become very popular, drawing especially on Plato's *Symposium* (Plato, Jowett translation, 1892), which is a serious discussion of love in its

different forms and their hierarchy. Supposedly, true love begins only at the stage of brotherly love, followed by philosophy and other forms that are progressively abstract and intellectual, to which enlightened people should naturally aspire. Romantic love, by contrast, is viewed as a lower form of love because it was presumed to be mainly physical. It is from this philosophical tradition that we have the phrase “Platonic love,” referring to a love without intimate contact. Shakespeare does not always buy into the Neo-Platonic hierarchy, although he seems to do so in his first 126 sonnets. In fact, he ridicules the creation of Platonic academies in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and the pursuit of academic philosophy in many of his plays.

Romantic love

In contrast to the Neo-Platonic philosophers, traditional theologians emphasized marriage as a sacrament, a measure of God’s grace, and a part of the social order designed by God. Romantic love takes precedence in this approach over brotherly love because it is, or should be, the basis of marriage, which is essential to social and civic order and to the continuance of the creation. Shakespeare consistently emphasizes the value of social order, and as Benedick declares in *Much Ado About Nothing*, “the world must be peopled” (2.3.242).

The Christian ideal

It is important to recognize the role of brotherly love in *MV*, beginning, as it does, with Antonio’s pledge of his “extremest means” (1.1.138) to help his friend Bassanio. However, the purpose of this help is Bassanio’s successful courtship of Portia. Shakespeare thereby gives brotherly love a supporting role to romantic love and by inference gives traditional Christian ideals the higher importance. Portia is the exemplar of virtue in following the rules of her father’s will in choosing a husband, and she demonstrates surprising wisdom in interpreting the law, thereby saving Antonio’s life. She also gives the defining speech that states the essence of Christian love, which transcends romantic as well as brotherly love. In all its forms, it is that which entails mercy and forgiveness:

The quality of mercy is not strained:
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself (4.1.180–183, 194–195)

Comic deficiencies

It is important to recognize the deficiencies of comic characters. The audience needs to see the weaknesses of the characters so that they themselves may feel superior

and more empowered. In comedy, these weaknesses are foolish but not ultimately destructive. So it is that Antonio and Shylock fall short, comically, of the Christian ideal enunciated in Portia's famous speech in terms of both their actions and the symbolic meanings of their names.

Antonio's hypocrisy

Because of his *unselfishness* in helping his closest friend, Bassanio, Antonio is usually portrayed as a thoroughly good man. However, the references to him as "the Christian" (e.g., 1.3.38, 2.5.15, 3.1.62, 4.1.319) resonate with irony relative to his other actions. He is certainly bigotted and spiteful toward Shylock. As Shylock notes, Antonio "did void your rheum upon my beard / And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur" (1.3.113–114). If this action seems merely to be the victim's opinion, Antonio affirms his unrepentant malice: "I am as like to call thee so again, / To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too" (1.3.125–126). Although he stands as a friend to Bassanio, he actually wants to see Shylock as an enemy. He rants that Shylock should lend his money "rather to thine enemy / Who, if he break, thou mayst with better face / Exact the penalty," to which Shylock observes "Why, look you, how you storm" (1.3.130–133). In most productions Antonio remains calm and decorous, but the text shows his obvious condescension and quick temper.

The narrowness of Antonio's character

Christian love finds its best expression in mercy and forgiveness, but Antonio is only partially merciful and, even at that, only when prompted. As the court proceedings come to their conclusion, Portia asks Antonio what mercy he can show Shylock in addition to the Duke's pardon. Antonio rises to the prompt and offers to hold half of Shylock's wealth in trust for Shylock's daughter and her husband, but he adds a condition that should be seen as profoundly offensive to anyone who values a personal conscience – that Shylock must become a Christian. More than anything else, this shows Antonio's essential vindictiveness by trying to control Shylock's most basic convictions and sense of identity. Antonio's egocentricity is also illustrated after the trial when he urges Bassanio to surrender his wedding ring to the young judge who has just saved his life – the ring that Bassanio recently received from his new wife, Portia, pledging, "when this ring / Parts from this finger, then parts life from hence" (3.2.183–184). With Antonio's repeated urging, Bassanio finally gives up his ring, a gesture that says friendship transcends romantic commitment. It is a comic mistake that illustrates Bassanio's momentary lapse and Antonio's narrow focus on the bonds of brotherly love. Of course, Portia is the young judge in disguise and later forgives her new husband to exemplify, thereby, the higher significance of their wedding vows.

Antonio's name

Antonio's exclusive focus on brotherly love is reinforced by a *secondary* reference to an old, but commonly read book in medieval and Renaissance times by St.

Athanasius. Virtually unknown to audiences of our own time, St Athanasius was the bishop of Alexandria from 328–373 and was lauded as the “Father of Orthodoxy” for his leadership at the Council of Nicea and his opposition to Arianism. He wrote much but was best known for his biography, “The Life of St. Anthony,” describing the life of an admirable ascetic. Athanasius praises Anthony as a friend and counselor to his fellow Christians, and wherever Anthony went, people “welcomed him as a son, others as a brother” (Athanasius 1998: 196.4). This biography was the most widely read of all Christian biographies in Renaissance times and undoubtedly contributed to the widespread use of the name *Antonio* and to a *symbolic* association of the name with the idea of brotherhood.

Outside the magic circle

Shakespeare himself uses the name *Antonio* more frequently than any other name for different characters in his plays (distinctive characters in *TGV*, *MV*, *Ado*, *TN*, and *Tmp*, plus references in *Shr* and *AWW*), and all these characters function as friends or brothers or as advocates of friendship. Also, in all cases the characters named Antonio are unmarried and remain outside the happy circle of lovers with which Shakespeare’s comedies end. And they are not uniformly virtuous. In *The Tempest* Antonio is a “perfidious” (1.2.68) brother who has even “Expelled remorse and nature” (5.1.76).

Something short of joy

At least some in Shakespeare’s audience could not read and may have missed the specificity of this *secondary* reference. However, Athanasius’s description of his friend’s dedication to brotherhood and celibacy finds a very close analog in the title character of this play, which is the largest role Shakespeare gives to any Antonio. This “Merchant of Venice” is absolutely loyal to his friends but wonders “why I am so sad. It wearies me” (1.1.1–2). The source of his sadness is never articulated, but he stands aside in the final scene as the three young couples hurry off to the joys of wedded life. Similarly, the *secondary* reference lends *symbolic* meaning to Antonio’s name because it too excludes the ultimate goals of romantic love.

Shylock’s deficiency

Of course, Shylock also has a deficit of love in terms of the Christian ideal. He actually scoffs at the idea of mercy. He wants justice for the ills and insults heaped upon him by the hypocritical Christians, especially Antonio. Shylock rails, “He has disgraced me and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated my enemies, and what’s his reason? I am a Jew” (3.1.49–53). Antonio’s obvious bigotry is, of course, mirrored by Shylock’s; as he says, “I hate him for he is a Christian” (1.3.36), and vows, “If I can catch him once upon the hip, / I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him” (1.3.42–43). Shylock is clearly *more* injured, and so *less* forgiving than Antonio.

Jewish stereotypes

However, Shakespeare offers a far more progressive view of Jewish character than anyone in English literature before his time. After Jews were expelled from England (Edward I) in 1290, absurd legends grew about Jewish practices, including cannibalism. Morality plays stereotyped Jews as grotesque villains dressed in black cloaks and horned hats and were assumed to be guilty of all unsolved crimes. The best known Jewish character before Shylock is Barabas, the central character in Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (1594). Barabas poisons a convent of nuns and murders his own daughter in his pursuit of revenge.

A foolish “comic block”

Shakespeare distinguishes Shylock from these stereotypes in two ways. First, Shylock is a much reduced type of threat. Shakespeare places his Jewish character in the center of comedy, a story that must have a happy ending. Shylock tricks Antonio into pledging a pound of his own flesh as the bond for his loan and demands forfeiture when the loan expires. The other characters are much alarmed, as they always are in comedy, but the audience knows that Portia is the judge in disguise. Unlike the characters, the audience is assured of a happy ending because of Portia's demonstrated wisdom and because her counter-trick of a pound of flesh but “no jot of blood” (4.1.302) exists in earlier literature. Thus, Shylock is not an obvious demon, as Antonio claims, but a foolish “comic block,” a passing hinderance to good fortune, such as we find in all comedies. By making his Jewish character harmless in fact, Shakespeare reduces the social stigma on all Jews.

The evocation of empathy

Secondly, Shakespeare makes Shylock the first believably human Jew in English literature. “I am a Jew,” he asserts, and asks, “Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?” (3.1.53–54). Shakespeare also makes him an exemplar of marital loyalty. He is greatly grieved by the loss of his wedding ring, and when Basanio and Gratiano exclaim, “my wife and all the world / Are not with me esteemed above thy [Antonio's] life” (4.1.280–281), Shylock mocks their Neo-Platonic sentiments, “These be the Christian husbands!” (4.1.291). A little later, the Christians give away their wedding rings as tokens of friendship. By comparison, Shylock commands our empathy as a genuine human being and stands for at least one positive value, i.e., the sanctity of marriage.

The rejection of mercy

Although Shylock is depicted more positively than any previous Jewish character, his faults are obvious, and his name points to his central flaw. Portia *repeatedly* asks him, “Be merciful: / Take thrice thy money; bid me tear the bond” (4.1.229–230). Yet,

he refuses to grant Antonio the least measure of forgiveness, which Christians see as the essence of love.

The meaning of *shy*

The simplest analysis of this name shows a meaning clearly relevant to Shylock's obstinancy and most readily understood by Shakespeare's audience. It is a simple compound of two common words, *shy* and *lock*. *Shy* [from OE *sceóh*] had the meaning then, much like now, of 'averse to encountering' (OED cites Hakulyt, *Voyages*, 3 in 1600), and that part of the name functions in a literal sense as an adjectival modifier.

The secondary reference

The word *lock* evokes the *secondary* reference of the name and very likely refers to a very popular hair style of the time. As described by Barfield and Fuller, men went to "great extremes to change their hairstyles when fads came and went." Cost was not an obstacle for "the wealthy people of the time," and men "would spend whole days sitting in the barber shop" and "went through great extremes to change their hairstyles when fads came and went." One particular fad were locks of "hair worn shoulder length and curled with hot irons, which were then called 'love locks'" to represent the individual's dedication to the idea of love. Such "love locks" are referred to in Lyly's 1592 play *Midas* (3.2.18–20), and in the 1599 satire, *2nd Part, Return from Parnassus* (Anonymous 3.2.20). It was a phrase in common usage and previously cited on stage. Thus, prefacing a reference to "love locks" with the word *shy* Shakespeare calls attention to Shylock as someone who is 'averse to the idea of love.' It is phrased as a satiric deficiency of the character but not an absolute depravity.

The salience of *Antonio*

I would like to conclude this presentation with a few comments on the importance and the variability of *symbolic* interpretations. The thematic importance of the name *Antonio* may be arguable because it was a part of the general onomasticon since classical times, and therefore may have many possible *secondary* references to many different people. However, a *symbolically* relevant reference is simply that which offers a significant structural fit with other references and with the artistic themes of the work at hand. Athanasius's "Life of St Antony," as I have argued here, was culturally salient and fits well as a *secondary* reference even if some members of the audience might not interpret it as such.

The novelty of *Shylock*

By contrast, the vagaries of popular culture make the name of *Shylock* a puzzling novelty. Many scholars have tried to point out biblical or Hebrew roots of the name. Israel Gollancz, for example, argues that the name came from a reference to *Schiloch the Babylonian* in "Peter Morwyng's translation of the the pseudo-Josephus, 'A

compedious and most marveylous History of the latter Times of the Jewes Commune Weale” (Gollancz 1916:172). Similarly, S. J. Schönfeld argues for a biblical derivation from a shortening of *Ariokh* combined with the consonants in the name *Saul* (1979: 122–123). Other scholars have suggested some English surnames and words as possible antecedents based on doubtful phonological similarities (e.g., as listed below, Fleissner, Hitchin-Kemp, Lower, Nathan, Roth, and Shaaber). However, such arguments assume that *symbolic* meaning is private, lurking in the depths of the artist’s soul and awaiting discovery by brilliant scholars. I am arguing instead that *symbolic* meaning needs to be seen as an interpretive issue, as a way in which a *sign* can be readily understood by an *addressee*, not just by the *addresser* (as Jakobson, 1960, would say). That is to say, we should always start by assuming that an author, or any other namer, is trying to communicate an idea to an audience, that Shakespeare sought to portray a character who scoffs at mercy, and that the name *Shylock* was a witty coinage, like many of his coinages, referring somewhat flippantly to a popular fashion, something easily understood in that time but forgotten as the fashion fades.

***Shylock* now**

Of course, the name *Shylock* has a different meaning now than it did for Shakespeare’s audience. In coining the name, Shakespeare focused on a character trait, and it is important to note, as demonstrated recently by Emma Smith (Smith 2013), that attributes Shakespeare associates with *Shylock* are not authentically Jewish. Shakespeare was in pursuit of narrative themes but knew very little about Jewish culture. Today, however, the word *Shylock* refers to a character in Shakespeare’s play who is usually portrayed negatively, more negatively, I believe, than he should be. The Jewish identity is an unmistakable part of the meaning, and so the name becomes an ethnic slur when used to refer to anything outside the play.

For example, in September 2014 Vice President Joe Biden criticized lenders who specialize in high interest loans to soldiers overseas with temporary cash-flow problems, saying “these shylocks . . . took advantage of these women and men while overseas.” Biden drew an immediate rebuke from the director of the Anti-Defamation League and quickly apologized (Sullivan, *Washington Post*). Similarly, this past February (2015) John Kowalko, a representative in the Delaware state house criticized their governor for threatening the funding of low performing schools, referring to the governor and his administrators as “them shylocks that . . . are trying to sell you a bill of goods” (Starkey, *Delaware Online*). Rabbi Yair Robinson, of the Congregation Beth Emeth in Wilmington, DE, jumped to the governor’s defense saying, “Whether it was intended as such or not, it was hate speech, and hate speech must always be combated in public” (Associated Press, *The Washington Times*). Rep. Kowalko quickly issued a public apology. Such incidents, and there are many, show that the word *Shylock* no longer has a *secondary* reference outside the play related to the theme of love. When used to refer to something outside the play, the play itself is the *secondary* reference.

Summary

In summary I would like to say that names in literature almost always carry *symbolic meaning* of some sort, that *symbolic meaning* is an interpretive function, that a *secondary reference* or thematic purpose is a necessary element of *symbolic meaning*, and that identifying *secondary references* deserves serious scholarly effort.

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