

the link between the material and the immaterial. Time is an immaterial phenomenon that manifests itself only in material guises. One passage from the many must suffice: "Was ist Zeit? Ein Geheimnis, —wesenlos und allmächtig. Eine Bedingung der Erscheinungswelt, eine Bewegung, verkoppelt und vermenget dem Dasein der Körper im Raum und ihrer Bewegung. Wäre aber keine Zeit, wenn keine Bewegung wäre? Keine Bewegung wenn keine Zeit? Frage nur!" (p. 479).

And yet, in spite of all the speculations about the nature of the link between the noumenal and the phenomenal, the mind and the spirit, it cannot be said that the novel comes to a conclusion about the matter: neither the Incarnation represented by Peepkorn, nor the physiological explanation put forth by Behrens, neither the scientific investigation carried out by Hans Castorp, nor the occultist experiments inspired by Dr. Krokowski, neither the cabalistic "numbers game," nor the reflections about the nature of time lead to definite answers. Each of these probings is marked by the appearance of words like "mysteriös" and "Mysterium" (often used, as Seidlin has pointed out, in connection with Peepkorn), "Rätsel" and "rätselhaft," "Geheimnis" and "geheimnisvoll," and we have no indication that the question was any less enigmatic to Thomas Mann himself than to his characters. In the last paragraph of the novel, in a characteristic reversal situation analyzed so well by Seidlin, the entire development of the novel is, in fact, reversed; the paragraph calls into question the very notion that the secret can ever be solved, the link between body and spirit, *eros* and *caritas*, ever be discovered. The fact that carnal indulgence once gave rise to a dream of love is no guarantee that this can ever happen again: "Abenteuer im Fleische und Geist . . . ließen dich im Geist überleben, was du im Fleische wohl kaum überleben sollst. Augenblicke kamen, wo dir aus Tod und Körperunzucht ahnungsvoll und regierenderweise ein Traum von Liebe erwuchs. Wird aus diesem Weltfest des Todes, auch aus der schlimmen Fieberbrunst, die rings den regnerischen Abendhimmel entzündet, einmal die Liebe steigen?" (p. 994).

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Note

¹ All quotations are taken from *Gesammelte Werke in zwölf Bänden*, III (*Der Zauberberg*), (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1960).

The Case of *The Merchant of Venice* Reopened

To the Editor:

Sylvan Barnet's "Prodigality and Time in *The Merchant of Venice*" (87, Jan. 1972, 26-30) attempts to

argue a case with a lawyer's persuasiveness rather than with a scholar's judiciousness. As the jury who are asked to render judgment, we are entitled to some cross-examination; unless our questions are answered convincingly, then we as jurors must adjudge Barnet's case as *non probata*.

1. Is there any convincing proof that Shakespeare was aware of the existence of those medieval and Renaissance writers who argued that "profitable activities must—if they are to be lawful—involve a risk, or, to put it a little differently, be at God's disposal; second, that unlike living creatures, which indeed grow in the course of nature if God wills, metal cannot grow merely by the passage of time" (p. 29)? After all, the existence of nondramatic literature and philosophy does not automatically mean that playwrights are either aware of or influenced by the intellectual and moral directions of their philosophical predecessors or contemporaries.

2. Granting for the sake of argument that Shakespeare was aware of such writings as Thomas Wilson's *A Discourse upon Usury*, are we to assume that Shakespeare was more influenced by that work than he was by the dictates of Elizabethan conventions? Didn't these conventions dictate that the hero (Bassanio) would happily resolve whatever problems he faced—or, more accurate, that these problems would be resolved for him without his having to lift his gentlemanly finger? Didn't convention also dictate that the villain—in this case, the Jew—had either to get his comeuppance or be converted to a way of life acceptable to the majority of Elizabethans? Here, of course, Shylock gets both his comeuppance and is also forced to convert to Christianity. In other words, can Barnet convince us that it was the moral superiority of Bassanio's way of life that brought felicity to him, and that it was Shylock's immoral selling of time, "which belongs to God" (p. 29) (I thought that everything belonged to God, not just time; I am relieved to learn that God's monopoly has finally been challenged), that brought grief to Shylock.

3. If indeed, as Barnet argues, profitable activities must involve risk to be morally acceptable, what precisely does Bassanio risk when he "elects to 'hazard all' upon an impulse" (p. 28)? After all, it is Antonio's money that he uses to finance his journey to Belmont to woo Portia and it is Antonio's pound of flesh that prompts Shylock to lend the 3,000 ducats. Is Shakespeare being ironic when he has Bassanio "hazard all" on the lead casket—or is Barnet being ironic when he argues that Bassanio was molded in the image of the courageous adventurer?

4. Did Bassanio really win his blessings because he had implicit faith in the "ripping of time" and did not rely on reasoning (p. 28)? Barnet claims that "The

trick is to know one's destiny at the right time" (p. 27), but how does one master this "trick"? And are we to equate a "trick" with moral superiority? Furthermore, if one indeed does rely upon the benign justice of time, how account for Bassanio's original loss of Antonio's first loan? Again, are we to attribute Portia's winning the trial case to benign casualness or to a well-reasoned plan of attack in which she outwits Shylock *legally*? She first appeals to Shylock's sense of mercy; when this fails, she then tempts him by appealing to his reputed greed for money; when this fails, she then succeeds by rigorously applying the legal implications of the "merry bond." It is the scrupulous application of legal reasoning which undoes Shylock, not the fortuitous benignity of chance.

5. Finally, Barnet sums up his case by concluding that "the man [Shylock] who hoards wealth which he acquires through the immoral sale of time continually destroys his own happiness and is—with the passage of time—hoist with his own petard" (p. 30). This may be perfectly true—as a generalization; but, within the context of the play, it is not true. In the bond that Shylock draws up, he does not stipulate any interest rate to be paid—usurious or otherwise.¹ He wants Antonio's pound of flesh if the loan is not paid in time. Furthermore, at the court trial, Shylock is offered many times the original 3,000 ducats if he were to spare Antonio's life, but he refuses. He wants only the pound of flesh. Why?

Although Shakespeare followed the conventions of his time, he was by no means merely a conventional playwright. Imbedded in his conventions are not only the proprieties of *his* time but a morality not subject to the caprices of any time. And this implied morality suggests that Shakespeare is not concerned here with the immorality of usury or the blessings of a prodigal generosity or a reliance on a *carpe diem* philosophy. It is not Shylock's usury which is being attacked but rather the niggardliness of spirit which spits upon a man because he is of a different religion. *The Merchant of Venice* is Shakespeare's denunciation of a culture which is so inhumane that it forces a man of feeling to demand a pound of flesh as a salve to his mangled dignity as a human being. And thus the story of the three caskets assumes a meaning which goes far beyond offering guidelines on how to choose a marriage partner: Antonio, Bassanio, Gratiano, with their golden generosity and silver sociability, pale into obliquity next to the seemingly lead casket of Shylock's buried humanity.

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Note

¹ Is Professor Barnet aware of the fact that it was legally

permissible to charge up to ten percent interest rates in Elizabethan England? See Bernard Grebanier, *The Truth about Shylock* (New York: Random, 1962), p. 86.

Mr. Barnet replies:

Let me begin with a sentence from Mr. Birnbaum's last paragraph: "It is not Shylock's usury which is being attacked but rather the niggardliness of spirit which spits upon a man because he is of a different religion." Although readers as diverse as Harold Goddard and Harry Golden have argued along these lines, I can only say that I believe there are sounder critics (e.g., C. L. Barber, John Russell Brown, and Barbara Lewalski) who assist a reader to see that Shylock's religion is a way of life, and that this way of life is contrasted unfavorably with the gentile-gentle way.

I don't want to argue my case over again, or to try to summarize those portions of earlier criticism that seem valid and helpful, but I will offer very brief comments on each of Birnbaum's numbered points. (1) See, in i.iii.130-31, the reference to barren metal breeding, and in i.iii.88 the reference to "venture" or risk. (2) Of course the play follows the conventions of comedy. That is not in question; the question is, What is Shakespeare saying by means of the conventions? My article tried to set forth some of what I think he was saying. (3) True, Bassanio apparently has very little to risk; but he is willing to risk it all. (4) Perhaps I should regret my use of "trick," in "The trick is to know one's own destiny at the right time," but I thought the context indicated that by trick I meant "difficult and delicate matter." And indeed I meant—in the context—to say that an apt response implied moral superiority, a superiority rooted in right instincts. (5) Commenting on my statement that "the man who hoards wealth which he acquires through the immoral sale of time continually destroys his own happiness and is—with the passage of time—hoist with his own petard," Birnbaum says, "This may be perfectly true—as a generalization; but, within the context of the play, it is not true." I am not concerned with the possible truth of the statement "as a generalization"; the statement was meant to describe one motif of the play, and I can only leave it to other readers to decide whether or not it accurately does so. Finally, let me add that in the Introduction to *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Merchant of Venice* I try to discuss complementary motifs.

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Huck Finn, Tom Sawyer, and Samuel Clemens

To the Editor:

Judith Fetterley's observation that Mark Twain's attitude toward Tom Sawyer had changed between *The*