

The Merchant of Venice: Act 2 Scenes 7 – 9

At Portia's place in Belmont, we again find Portia with the Prince of Morocco. There are three chests, made of gold, silver, and lead respectively, each with an inscription. It's time for the Prince to choose. He decides lead is too worthless, and silver is of less worth than gold, so gold is the only thing worthy enough to hold Portia's picture. When the Prince opens the golden casket, he finds a picture of a Death's head (a skull and crossbones) and a scroll beginning with the famous words, "All that glisters [glitters] is not gold." Thus the Prince is condemned to a life of solitude and takes his leave quickly and quietly. Portia gladly lets him go.

Salerio and Solanio are, gossiping about the latest news: Bassanio's ship has sailed with Graziano but not Lorenzo. Shylock found his daughter and gold had disappeared and raised the Duke of Venice from his sleep to find her. They didn't locate Jessica, but the Duke did find out that she was last seen with Lorenzo in a gondola – Shylock is convinced that if they find Jessica they will find the money.

At Portia's house in Belmont, yet another suitor, the Prince of Arragon, has come to try his hand at the lottery. Arragon concentrates on the silver casket, wondering about its inscription: unfortunately for him, there's a picture of a fool's head inside. Portia and Nerissa are, again, glad to see him go, but Portia then gets news from a messenger about a third suitor – this time, a man she might like to see.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. What does the inscription on the gold casket say it holds?

- (a) A risky investment.
- (b) What many men want.
- (c) What he deserves.
- (d) A joy beyond all measure.

2. What does the inscription on the silver casket say it holds?

- (a) What he deserves.
- (b) A risky investment.
- (c) What many men want.
- (d) A joy beyond all measure.

3. What does the inscription on the lead casket say it holds?

- (a) What he deserves.
- (b) A joy beyond all measure.
- (c) A risky investment.
- (d) What many men want.

4. What reason does Morocco give for his choice of caskets?

- (a) He feels he deserves Portia's hand in marriage.
- (b) He knows many men have wooed Portia.
- (c) He wants joy more than money.
- (d) He is willing to risk all to have Portia.

5. Who does Shylock petition for help when he sees that his daughter is gone?

- (a) The prince.
- (b) The governor.
- (c) The king.
- (d) The duke.

6. Why is Antonio sad when Shylock has realized his daughter is gone?

- (a) He misses Bassanio.
- (b) He is in love with Jessica.
- (c) He is sad for Shylock's loss.
- (d) He heard about his wrecked ships.

7. Why does the second suitor choose to forgo the gold casket?

- (a) Portia is not smart enough.
- (b) Portia is not rich enough.
- (c) Portia is not beautiful enough.
- (d) Portia is not kind enough.

8. What is found inside the casket chosen by the second suitor to Portia while Bassanio is sailing there?

- (a) A picture of a fool and a poem.
- (b) A sack of jewels.
- (c) A picture of Portia.
- (d) A skull and a poem.

Understanding and Interpretation

These questions require a little more thought. Skim and scan to find the relevant information, and try to express your ideas in short answers.

1. What is the character of the Prince of Morocco? What values does he profess?

• **Significance:**

2. How is Antonio described in Act 2 Scene 8? Does Salarino shed any light on the mystery of his sadness?

• **Significance:**

3. Compare the Princes of Morocco and Aragon? Do they fail the lottery by chance, or is there a reason for their both failing?

• **Significance:**

4. How does Act 2 Scene 9 end?

• **Significance:**

Discussion Point: *prejudice*

How has Portia behaved towards her two esteemed guests? Did any elements of her behaviour surprise you? Why did both Princes fail the casket test? Is there any evidence that many of the characters hold certain prejudices? Is there any evidence that Shakespeare shares these prejudices, or is there irony at play?

Note down your ideas:

Important Symbolism: *the caskets*

The gold, silver, and lead caskets are major symbols in the play. Each of them is inscribed with a message on the outside and also contains a note on the inside. The outside of the rich gold chest promises, "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire." This sounds enticing, but it's a trick, because the inside contains a skull with a message: "All that glisters [glitters] is not gold [...]" (2.7.73). In other words, appearances are often deceiving, and human desire for things like wealth and beauty can be dangerous.

The inscription on the outside of the silver chest reads, "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves." The inside contains a picture of a "fool's head" with a nasty little note: "So be gone: you are sped. / Still more fool I shall appear / By the time I linger here / With one fool's head I came to woo, / But I go away with two" (2.9.78-82). In other words, whoever chooses the silver casket is a fool who'll get what he deserves.

Finally, the lead chest is made of a very humble metal, the exact opposite of the shiny gold casket, and contains a picture of Portia. The inscription is also significant: "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath" (2.7.11-12). This can be read as a figurative description of marriage: a risk that requires sacrifice.

Portia's caskets are not the only significant caskets in the play. Can you find references to other caskets or vessels? Do these references also suggest that appearances can be deceiving?

"All that glisters [glitters] is not gold [...]" (2.7.73).	

Quotation Bank

If you only remember three lines, remember these...

MOROCCO

Is't like that lead contains her?
'Twere damnation to think so base a thought; it were too gross to rib her cerecloth in the obscure grave...O sinful thought! Never so rich a gem was set in worse than gold.
(2.7.49 - 55)

Morocco uses logical reasoning to help decide which of the caskets contains Portia's portrait – but his own sense of values about what is worthy and worthless are what causes him to fail. In this section his language is suffused with contrasts between what he considers valuable (gold, gems) and their opposites ("gross; base; lead"). These contrasts are framed by references to heaven and hell, especially "damnation" and "sin."

SOLANIO

"My daughter, O my ducats, O my daughter! Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats! Justice, the law, my ducats, and my daughter,"
(2.8.15-17)

Solanio relates Shylock's distress upon finding out his daughter has run away, taking his gold with her, in a very mocking way. Whether or not this gossip is true, is it really any different to the way Bassanio, for example, chases after Portia for her money. Solanio's mockery is amplified by the alliterative 'D' sounds of ducats and daughter, the repetition of "O my" and the way he blends the sounds and words together. It is difficult to know which is more important to Shylock from the way Solanio tells the story.

SERVANT

Madam, there is alighted at your gate, a young Venetian, one that comes before to signify th' approaching of his lord, From whom he bringeth sensible regreets; To wit, besides commends and courteous breath, Gifts of rich value. (2.6.85-90)

Bassanio approaches Belmont and sends an emissary (presumably Gratiano) to announce him. Notice that, along with compliments and courtesies he brings "gifts of rich value" – gifts he could not have afforded to buy without Antonio's loan. These gifts also suggest his real motivations for pursuing Portia are not romantic but financial! The alliteration of "C" in "commends and courteous," combined with the choice of word form "bringeth" and "regreets" accentuates the formality of his approach.

Based on your own reading of Act 2, Scenes 7 - 9 and / or your classroom discussion, add two more memorable lines to this table, and provide analysis comments for each:

