

Symbolism in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*: The Riddle of a Woman

In his essay, "The Theme of the Three Caskets," Sigmund Freud looks at the three caskets from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, noting, "caskets are also women, symbols of what is essential in woman, and therefore of a woman herself...the theme is a human one, a man's choice between three women" (396). However, within *The Merchant of Venice*, there are three men and only one woman. These men, suitors to the wealthy heiress Portia, must choose among the three caskets which holds Portia's portrait—if any of them fail, they must swear to leave and never marry anyone. This lottery of sorts set up by Portia's now-deceased father ensures that Portia will be married to a man that is worthy of her. This casket system symbolizes Portia as a woman and herself and each individual casket symbolizes each suitor and what his choice means about him.

As a whole, these caskets symbolize Portia herself. She is a riddle that the men must solve in order to win her hand. If they cannot solve the riddle of the caskets, they are unable to solve the riddle of Portia and are, therefore, unworthy of her hand in marriage. Inscribed upon each casket is a riddle of sorts: upon the gold, "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire"; upon the silver, "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves"; upon the lead, "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath" (2.7.5-12). From these riddles the suitors must decide which is the correct casket holding Portia's picture, consequently solving the riddle of Portia.

Individually, these caskets represent each of the three suitors. The choices each suitor makes delineates the truth of each man. The first suitor is the Prince of Morocco. As the first to choose from the three caskets, he chooses gold. Reading the gold inscription, he says, "Why, that's the lady! All the world desires her" (2.7.44). After further debate, he settles on the gold casket for certain: "But here an angel in a golden bed/ Lies all within.—Deliver me the key./Here

do I choose, and thrive I as I may” (2.7. 64-66). He has chosen. In doing so, he fails to solve the riddle of the caskets and, in turn, the riddle of Portia. This choice of the gold casket symbolizes greed. From this, it stands to reason that the Prince of Morocco is a materialistic and shallow man who values only the surface of a substance. He is unable to look through the front façade and determine what is underneath the outward appearance. Because he fails to recognize this, he is unable to see the truth and inner treasure that is within Portia.

The second to pursue Portia’s hand in marriage is the prince of Arragon. As the second suitor, he chooses the silver casket. Lighting upon the silver inscription, he says, “And well said too—for who shall go about/To cozen fortune and be honorable/Without the stamp of merit? Let none presume/To wear an undeservèd dignity” (2.9.40-43). He believes only the man who deserves Portia would choose the silver casket and none should have the honor of her hand if he does not deserve her. However, like the Prince of Morocco, the Prince of Arragon does some further debating of the caskets, but he settles upon the silver, stating, “I will assume desert.— Give me a key for this,/And instantly unlock my fortunes here” (2.9.55-56). The Prince of Arragon assumes that he is the man who deserves Portia’s hand. In doing so, he, too, fails to solve the riddle of the caskets and Portia herself. The choice of the silver casket symbolizes a more cautious greed and foolishness. The silver is still a precious and valuable metal, though not as showy or bold as the gold. It represents a compromise. The Prince of Arragon feels the gold is too ostentatious—too many men will flock to the gold, making it a common desire, while the lead is too dull—he barely takes notice of it, only stating it is too unattractive for him to give any thought to it. By choosing the silver casket, and disregarding the lead, he, too, is failing to look deep inside Portia, foolishly failing to notice her inner beauty and worth.

Too concerned with the outward appearance, beauty, and value, the Princes of Morocco and Arragon are not worthy of Portia. They failed to solve her father's riddles and they failed to understand her and her true value. In time, when Portia grows to look more like the lead casket—plain—these first two suitors will fail to appreciate her.

The third suitor come to woo Portia is Bassanio, who has no wealth of his own. As the third (and final) suitor, Bassanio chooses the lead casket. Coming to the inscription upon the lead casket, he says, “Thy paleness moves me more than eloquence,/And here choose I. Joy be the consequence!” (3.2.109-110). In doing so, he finds the portrait of Portia and has solved the riddle of the caskets—he has solved the riddle of Portia as a woman. Therefore, he is deemed worthy to take her hand in marriage. **The lead casket symbolizes and inner treasure, despite outward plainness. Portia will eventually grow old and plain, but she will continue to be beautiful inside, which is a greater treasure than any pronounced outward value.**

In his very insightful speech, Bassanio notes the deception of two precious metals that flaunt all of their value outwardly, but hold nothing worth anything on the inside: “So may the outward shows be least themselves./The world is still deceived with ornament” (3.2.75-76). Drawn to the meagerness of the lead, Bassanio says, “The seeming truth which cunning times put on/To entrap the wisest. Therefore then, thou gaudy gold,/Hard food for Midas, I will none of thee./Nor none of thee, thou pale and common drudge/’Tween man and man. But thou, thou meagre lead,/Which rather threaten’st than dost promise aught” (3.2.103-108). **Bassanio sees through the deception of the ornateness of the gold and the silver. Though he hazarded all to choose the lead casket, it was not in vain—for he gained fair Portia’s hand.**

Using symbolism in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare causes his readers to question not just what they value, but *how* they value it. This is not a story of one man choosing between

three women, but three men choosing between three riddles for the chance to have and to understand one woman. Each casket represents the suitors and the relationship they have with Portia and how they value her. By solving the riddle of the caskets, Bassanio has solved the riddle of Portia; he has understood the truth of her beauty; he has won Portia.

Works Cited

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