***Act II Scene IX***

***Analysis:***

***Synopsis:***

The prince of Arragon is at Belmont and is about to make his choice. The prince is brusque and insulting to Portia. The man tells her that she would have to be more beautiful to him in order for him to pick the gold box. The prince dismisses the lead box, and so chooses the silver box since it contains what he deserves. However, he finds a portrait of an idiot inside with a poem describing him as a fool. The prince leaves quietly in his own anger. A servant enters telling Portia that a young Venetian has arrived looking like he is the perfect suitor. Portia and Nerissa go to see what man is worthy of such high praise from the servant, and Nerissa hopes it is Bassanio coming to win Portia's hand.

Again we see another suitor very unworthy of Portia's hand in marriage. This suitor is not only arrogant, but he is also insulting to her. The audience feels little sympathy for his loss and also realizes which box is the right casket, and wait now for Bassanio's choice.

***Summary:***

* At Portia's house in Belmont, yet another suitor, the Prince of Arragon (not [Aragorn](http://cdn.playbuzz.com/cdn/bfd63fcd-718d-44eb-b6d7-b4709bfeb612/d7299fb7-937e-4fa4-8129-b9d64df6627d.jpg), sadly), has come to try his hand at the casket game. Portia welcomes the man half-heartedly, and all are reminded that this particular recreation has some rules.
* The Prince of Arragon lists the rules so we all know what's up: first, he can never tell anyone which casket he chose; second, if he picks the wrong casket, he can never woo a woman in the way of marriage; and third, if he picks the wrong casket, he has to go away immediately. No sticking around to cry about it—and no stalking either!
* The Prince then goes through a line of reasoning like the Prince of Morocco's. Arragon says the lead casket needs to be better-looking before he'd risk anything for it. Arragon then rules out the gold casket as something that would only appeal to those deceived into valuing appearances more than actual value.
* Arragon then hems and haws about the silver casket's inscription about getting what he deserves. He says if people were better at judging what was deserved, some great men would be knocked down, and some poor men raised up. Still, he's weighed it and decided he deserves Portia—so he picks the silver casket.
* He's wrong. 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 man she'd like to see come.
* Apparently, a man full of sweet manners has shown up in Belmont. He says he's here to announce that his lord, another Venetian, is soon to follow. Until the lord gets there, however, the man brings his apologies, courtesies, and gifts of great value.
* The messenger who saw the guy (who we can guess is Graziano) comments that the visiting Venetian is awfully sweet and generally makes a good showing in preparation for the lord who's on his way.
* Portia teases the messenger for being full of such high praise, but she rushes Nerissa out to take a look at the man playing Cupid for the Venetian gentleman. Nerissa hopes that the soon-to-arrive Venetian will be Bassanio, the guy she and Portia like more than any other.

***Critical Study:***

The prince of Arragon is in Belmont to try his luck at winning Portia’s hand in marriage. When brought to the caskets, he selects the silver one, confident that he “shall get as much as he deserves” (II.ix.35). Inside, he finds a portrait of a blinking idiot, and a poem that condemns him as a fool. Soon after he departs, a messenger arrives to tell Portia that a promising young Venetian, who seems like the perfect suitor, has come to Belmont to try his luck at the casket game. Hoping that it is Bassanio, Portia and Nerissa go out to greet the new suitor.

***Critical Analysis:***

At Belmont, the Prince of Arragon has arrived to try his luck at choosing the correct casket, and before he decides on one, he promises Portia that he will abide by her father's rules. First, if he fails to choose the casket containing her portrait, he will never reveal which casket he chose; second, he promises never to court another woman; and last, he will leave Belmont immediately.

Reviewing the inscriptions, he rejects the lead casket immediately because he thinks that it is not beautiful enough to give and risk all his possessions for. He also rejects the gold casket because "what many men desire" may place him on the same level with "the barbarous multitudes." He thus chooses the silver casket, which bears the inscription, "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves." Arragon reviews his worth and decides that he "will assume desert" — that is, he feels that he rightfully deserves Portia. When he opens the silver casket, he finds within "the portrait of a blinking idiot" — a picture of a fool's head. He protests the contents; he chose according to what he felt that he deserved: "Did I deserve no more than a fool's head?" Portia reminds him that no man is permitted to judge his own cause. The scroll in the silver casket reads, "There be fools alive, I wis [know], / Silver'd o'er; and so was this." Arragon departs then with his followers, promising to keep his oath.

Portia is dearly relieved and sums up the reason for the prince's failure: "O, these deliberate fools! When they do choose, / They have their wisdom by their wit to lose." In other words, even fools choose deliberately and believe that they are wise to deliberate; in fact, it is their excessive deliberation which ultimately defeats them.

A servant announces the arrival of a Venetian ambassador from another suitor and adds that he brings gifts; in fact, in the messenger's estimation, the man who accompanies this latest suitor is "so likely an ambassador of love" that "a day in April never came so sweet." Portia is neither impressed nor optimistic, yet she urges Nerissa to bring the man to her so that she can see for herself this "quick Cupid's post [messenger] that comes so mannerly." Nerissa sighs; "Lord Love," she prays, "if thy will it be," let this suitor be Bassanio!

This scene focuses on the Prince of Arragon's choice of the three caskets. The Prince of Morocco's choice was straightforward and simple. He chose the gold casket; it seemed to be the most obvious, most desirable choice. In contrast, the Prince of Arragon's choice is done with more prudence. The prince is a proud man; he seems older than Morocco and almost bloodless, compared to Morocco's fiery charismatic bearing. Often, Shakespeare makes his characters' names suggest their primary qualities; here, "Arragon" was probably chosen for its resemblance to "arrogant." At any rate, Arragon is arrogant, a temperament befitting a Spanish grandee of noble blood, a familiar and conventional figure on the Elizabethan stage.

Once again, we hear the ambiguous inscriptions read for us, and we ourselves puzzle over the enigma of the metals and their relationship to the inscriptions. Arragon considers the caskets, but he does not make Morocco's obvious choice. If gold represents "what many men desire," then Arragon's powerful belief in his own superiority to "the fool multitude that choose by show" makes him reject it. We can agree with that logic, but we have to reject his reasoning ultimately because it is based on his absolute assumption of his own superiority to the multitude.

The silver inscription, "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves," has an immediate appeal for Arragon. It prompts his observations on "merit" (35-48), in which he laments the fact that there is so much "undeserved dignity" in the world; he means those who are given honor without coming by it legitimately, through the "true seed" of noble inheritance. The man is a snob; he has absolutely no doubts about what he deserves, and since his nobility is inherited nobility, he can safely (he thinks) choose the silver casket and "assume desert."

A factor that we should be aware of in this entire scene is an absence of any evidence that Arragon has any love, or even any affection, for Portia. Portia is "deserved." Nowhere can we discern even an inkling of any craving for her. As was noted, the prince is rather bloodless.

In the suitors' choice of the caskets, we have yet another variation of the illusion-reality theme: Gold and silver appear to be the obvious choices to the first two suitors, whose motives for choosing are in some way flawed; neither of them is truly in love with Portia, for example. Yet Bassanio, who does love Portia, will choose the casket which appears to be the least valuable; in reality, it will turn out to be the most valuable. Thus the ability to choose and to distinguish between what appears to be valuable and what really is valuable depends not so much on intelligence — Shylock is far more intelligent than Antonio or Bassanio — but on something deeper and more intangible. In this play, that certain intangible something is love; it is not glory (Morocco), nor nobility of social position (Arragon), nor wealth (Shylock), but love for another human being, which Bassanio and Portia clearly offer to one another.

At this point, the love plot in the play becomes very much like a fairy tale — the beautiful princess is won by love, not by wealth or rank or by calculation; we are reminded of Nerissa's comment in Act I, Scene 2: The proper casket will "Never be chosen by any rightly but one who you shall rightly love." We now know which casket is the right one, and thus we can relax and enjoy the drama of Bassanio's momentous choice. His approach (preceded by "an ambassador of love") is now announced by a messenger, and the fulfillment of the play's love story is clearly anticipated in Nerissa's comment: "A day in April never came so sweet / To show how costly summer was at hand."

***Significance:***

The Prince of Arragon attempts the challenge of choosing between the three caskets to find [Portia](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Portia)'s portrait and win her hand. He reiterates the conditions of accepting the challenge: If he loses, he can never reveal which casket he chose, and he may never seek to marry another woman. He considers the inscription on the lead casket, "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath," and dismisses the lead casket right away because it is not beautiful. He looks at the gold casket, "what many men desire" and decides it is foolish to follow the "multitude that choose by show." He does not want to be associated with the common man. He looks at the silver casket that promises "as much as he deserves" and decides he deserves the wealth and privilege he has, so he chooses the casket he deserves as well. Inside is a portrait of a fool and a message telling him his judgment is foolish. The Prince of Arragon departs unhappily as a messenger arrives to announce the approach of "a young Venetian." Portia is excited, hoping it is [Bassanio](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Bassanio), and [Nerissa](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Nerissa) prays for the same thing.

The Prince of Arragon does not deliberate over the caskets as long as the Prince of Morocco does in [Act 2, Scene 7](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/act-2-scene-7-summary/). Like the Prince of Morocco he dismisses the lead casket almost immediately, and at the end of the scene the audience knows by the process of elimination that the lead casket is the correct one. Also like the Prince of Morocco, the Prince of Arragon is driven by a sense of ego and entitlement. He chooses the casket that appeals most directly to his ego, the one that promises what he deserves. Even though he avoids the Prince of Morocco's mistake by acknowledging the folly of "choosing by show," this wisdom comes from a haughty desire to separate himself from other men because he feels superior to them.

[Bassanio](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Bassanio)'s approach at the end of the scene foreshadows his success at the challenge and creates dramatic irony. Now [Portia](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Portia) knows the answer to her father's riddle if she did not before, and the audience knows the answer as well. It makes sense that Bassanio will choose the casket not yet chosen. Even though the characters do not know the outcome of Bassanio's suit yet, the audience has a good idea.

***Summary and Analysis Part by Part***

***Summary Part 1:***

The [Prince of Aragon](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) has arrived at Belmont to try his hand at the riddle of the caskets. [Portia](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/portia) tells the Prince the rules of the riddle: if he chooses the casket that contains her portrait, they will be married immediately; if he fails, he must depart without another word. Aragon adds that he is bound by oath to three further conditions: (1) never to tell anyone which casket he chose; (2) never to seek the hand of any other woman in marriage, if he fails; and (3) to leave immediately, if he fails. Portia confirms that anyone who wants to woo her must agree, in advance, to each of these terms.

***Analysis Part 1:***

One again, Shakespeare goes to great length to emphasize the legal ramifications of the riddle. If he should "interpret" incorrectly, the Prince will be unable to produce an heir. He will forfeit his future.

***Summary Part 2:***

[Aragon](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) puzzles over the inscriptions on the three chests. He rejects the lead one ("Who chooseth me, must give and hazard all he hath") because he refuses to give or hazard anything for something so ugly and plain. He also rejects the gold one ("Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire") because he thinks only someone who looks skin deep would take that one and he refuses to be like "many men." Finally, he turns to the silver one: "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves" (36). He notes how much better the world would be if every man only took what he deserved, and asks for the key.

***Analysis Part 2:***

As was the case in 2.7, Shakespeare extends the actual scene of interpretation, making it suspenseful and dramatic. And once again, the struggle to determine whether gold, silver, or lead will lead to love explicitly links love and greed (or commerce), which also appeared together in the course of Jessica's elopement.

***Summary Part 3:***

[Portia](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/portia) gives it to him. But when [Aragon](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) unlocks the casket, inside he finds a "portrait of a blinking idiot" and a rhyme that mocks him as a fool and instructs him to leave Belmont. Embarrassed and disappointed, Aragon departs, remarking that he will keep his oath and patiently bear the fate that he has earned. He exits with his entourage.

***Analysis Part 3:***

While the scene has much the same effect as Morocco's disappointment in 2.7, there is an important difference: now Portia—and the audience—know which casket is the correct one: the lead.

***Summary Part 4:***

As [Portia](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/portia) and [Nerissa](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) draw a curtain in front of the caskets, a messenger enters with the news that a young Venetian has arrived at the gate to announce the arrival of a lord who has come bearing "gifts of rich value" and is a "likely ambassador of love." Portia is very excited. Nerissa sighs that she hopes the Venetian is Bassanio.

***Analysis Part 4:***

Having echoed the frustration and sense of powerlessness that she expressed in 1.2, Portia shows her first real glimpse of excitement with Bassanio's arrival.