***Act II Scene VII***

***Analysis***

***Synopsis:***

Back at Belmont, the Moroccan prince is choosing between the caskets. The prince comes upon the gold casket with the inscription telling him that the box contains what many men want. The silver box has an inscription stating that the casket contains what he deserves. Meanwhile, the dull, lead box's inscription warns that the man who chooses the box risks all that he has. After much analysis, the prince chooses the gold casket, for he knows that many men come to woo Portia, and she is what they desire. However, upon opening the casket, he finds a skull with a poem explaining why he has chosen incorrectly. With few words, he takes his leave of the scene. Portia is glad to see him go and hopes that any others like him choose incorrectly, too. Portia, though frustrated in not being able to choose her own husband, is glad when the Moroccan chooses incorrectly. Despite his ego, we can understand why he logically chose the gold box, and sympathize as he leaves quickly. In this scene we glimpse a cool Portia that cares little for the Moroccan's lonely future, but instead hopes that none of his kind chooses the right casket.

***Summary:***

* At Portia's place in Belmont, we again find Portia with the Prince of Morocco. We finally get the details of her father's scheme for picking her suitor. There are three chests, made of gold, silver, and lead respectively, each with an inscription. The gold chest says, "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire." The silver reads, "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves." The lead casket reads, "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath." Inside one chest is a picture of Portia; if a suitor chooses (oh, sorry, if a suitor choos*eth*) the chest with the picture, he can have the girl. Otherwise, he dies old and alone.
* Now that he knows all the rules, the Prince of Morocco sets about choosing a chest. He goes over each of the inscriptions and reasons to himself. The lead chest asks the man who choos es it to risk everything; the Prince decides he wouldn't risk everything, or anything really, for plain old lead.
* Then he decides the silver chest has better promise, as it says he'll get what he deserves in choosing it. The Prince declares that he has to weigh what he deserves carefully, and he determines that in birth, fortunes, grace, and stature, he deserves Portia. Oh, and because of how much he loves her. He says he could be happy with the silver chest, but he checks out the gold one anyway, as it promises what many men desire. It seems all men desire Portia, as they're coming from every corner of the earth to woo her.
* 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." Essentially, the chiding inscription is saying that what's golden outside isn't always golden inside, and the chooser would've known that had he been as wise as was bold.
* So...Morocco is condemned to a life of solitude. He takes his leave quickly and quietly, and Portia says that she hopes every suitor with Morocco's complexion makes the same choice.
* Mm hm. We've got anti-Semitism and racism in this play.

***Brief Notes:***

Back in Belmont, Portia shows the prince of Morocco to the caskets, where he will attempt to win her hand by guessing which chest contains her portrait. The first casket, made of gold, is inscribed with the words, “Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire” (II.vii.37). The second, made of silver, reads, “Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves” (II.vii.23). The third, a heavy leaden casket, declares, “Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath” (II.vii.16). After much pondering, the prince chooses the gold casket, reasoning that only the most precious metal could house the picture of such a beautiful woman. He opens the chest to reveal a skull with a scroll in its eye socket. After reading a short poem chastising him for the folly of his choice, the prince makes a hasty departure. Portia is glad to see him go and hopes that “[a]ll of his complexion choose me so” (II.viii.79).

***Critical Study:***

At Belmont, in a room in Portia's house, the Prince of Morocco surveys the three caskets — one of gold, one of silver, and one of lead. He must choose one, and if he chooses the correct one, his reward will be the "fair Portia." As he reads the words engraved on the top of each casket, he ponders each of the cryptic inscriptions. On the leaden casket, he reads, "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath"; on the silver casket, he reads, "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves"; and on the golden casket, he reads, "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire." Portia informs him that the correct casket contains her picture.

Morocco reviews the inscriptions again and rejects the lead casket as being not worth the high stakes for which he gambles. He ponders a long time over the silver casket. The words "get as much as he deserves" intrigue him. He is quite sure that he deserves Portia; he deserves her "in birth," "in fortune," "in grace," "in qualities of breeding," and most of all, "in love." Yet, ultimately, he rejects the silver casket because he refuses to believe that Portia's father would "immure" a portrait of his treasured daughter in a metal "ten times undervalued [as] tried gold." The prince reasons that a portrait of Portia — a "mortal, breathing saint," a woman whom "all the world desires" — could be only within the golden casket. He chooses, therefore, the golden casket, hoping to find "an angel in a golden bed."

When he unlocks the casket and looks inside, he discovers only a skull ("carrion Death") and a scroll rolled up and inserted within the skull's "empty eye." He takes it out and reads the message: "All that glisters is not gold; . . . Gilded tombs do worms infold." Defeated and grieving, he makes a hasty exit with his entourage. "A gentle riddance," comments Portia.

In contrast to the scene preceding this one, now we have another colorful and theatrical spectacle of yet another rich suitor who has come to try and outwit fortune and claim Portia for his bride.

As Morocco inspects the caskets, Shakespeare is able to inform the audience more fully of the details of the casket competition for Portia's hand. The casket that will win her contains a miniature portrait of her, and all of the caskets have inscriptions upon them, which Morocco reads for us. These inscriptions are important; each succeeding suitor will reflect upon them, and as he does so, he will reveal the truth about his own character. The inscriptions are, of course, intentionally ambiguous; they can be interpreted in more than one way. Remembering that this is a romantic comedy, we expect that Morocco will misinterpret them, as will Arragon later, and that finally Bassanio will read the inscriptions and interpret them correctly.

We should remember as we read this scene that Portia herself, at this point, does not know which of the caskets will win her. As Morocco moves from one to the next, Portia will be reacting on stage, silently revealing her thoughts, for she cannot guide Morocco, and we have some evidence for believing that Portia is not usually a quiet woman.

Morocco's long speech, beginning at line 13, was no doubt inserted by Shakespeare to allow the actor plenty of time to move back and forth with much hesitation between the caskets. Talking to himself, he says, "Pause there, Morocco. . . . What if I strayed no further, but chose here?" He is postponing the moment of choice and prolonging the suspense of this dramatic moment. We have already seen Morocco and know that he is a proud and powerful prince, rich in his dress and in his language, and therefore it is no surprise to watch him move from the least beautiful and outwardly appealing of the caskets to the most beautiful; he has, he says, "a golden mind." Thus he makes the most straightforward and obvious choice — for him: the golden casket, for "Never so rich a gem / Was set in worse than gold." When he opens it and finds the skull and the scroll, Shakespeare's moral is clear — that is, wealth and sensory beauty, symbolized here by gold, are merely transitory: "Many a man his life hath sold / But my outside to behold." We shall see later that the test of the caskets contains a theme that occurs elsewhere in the play: the difference between what merely seems and what really is — that is, the difference between appearance and reality. The caskets also suggest another element in the play — namely, the illusion that material wealth (gold and silver) is of value, when, in reality, it is of ultimately little value. Yet material wealth is Shylock's obsession; gold is his real god, and therein is his tragic flaw.

***Critical Analysis:***

The Prince of Morocco undertakes the challenge left by [Portia](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Portia)'s father. He is to choose between three "caskets" or chests. One made of gold, one of silver, one of lead. One of the chests contains a portrait of Portia, and if the suitor chooses that chest, he can marry Portia. If he chooses the wrong chest, he goes home in shame. Each chest is inscribed with a hint. The gold one reads "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire." The silver one reads "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves." The lead one reads "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he has."

The Prince of Morocco deliberates over the chests and their inscriptions. He finds the lead casket threatening and eliminates it right away. Then he thinks of what he may deserve, but he questions whether that extends to Portia, even though he believes he deserves much. He settles on the golden casket because he believes Portia is the thing many men desire. He also thinks the golden casket is the only one worthy to contain her image, so he chooses gold. When he unlocks the casket he finds a skull and a message cautioning against being seduced by outward appearances—"All that glisters is not gold." He leaves quickly, and Portia expresses relief at his failure.

With the inscriptions on the caskets, it becomes apparent that [Portia](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Portia)'s father has not entrusted his daughter's fate to a game of pure chance. The inscriptions provide clues to the location of her portrait, and the man who can figure out the clues correctly will be the one worthy of Portia's hand. The Prince of Morocco is not that man. He is seduced by the outward appearance of the gold casket, which is an ironic turn of events for a man whose first words in the play are "Mislike me not for my complexion." Even though he met Portia with an entreaty that she not judge him by his outward appearance, the statement also indicates his own preoccupation with outward appearances as evidenced by his choice of casket.

Portia has judged the Prince of Morocco by his appearance as well. When he departs, she says, "Let all his complexion choose me so." Unlike the other suitors she dislikes, the Prince of Morocco is not actually as repellent as the drunken, fighting, inconstant lot that occupies her house. He has no evident character flaws beyond his ego, which is a sufficient reason for Portia to dislike him, but she never notices this. She has been unable to look beyond his complexion from the moment she met him, which is evident from the way her last line mirrors his first. Her prejudice has made her blind to any good points or flaws the prince may actually possess.

***Summary and analysis Part by Part:***

***Summary Part 1:***

Back in Venice, Bassanio is trying to convince [Shylock](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/shylock), a Jewish moneylender, to lend him 3,000 ducats for three months, with [Antonio](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/antonio) bound to repay the debt. Frustrated by Shylock's stalling, Bassanio demands an answer. Shylock concedes that Antonio is a "good man" (1.3.16)—that is, Shylock believes Antonio will be good for the money that Bassanio wants to borrow. Therefore, after a little more waffling, he accepts the terms that Bassanio has proposed.

***Analysis Part 1:***

Even in this brief exchange, Shylock shows that he interprets the world through a different framework than Bassanio: he understands "good" as meaning "having enough money" whereas Bassanio, in theory, values other "good" qualities in his old friend. (Though Bassanio also, clearly, appreciates Antonio's money.)

***Summary Part 2:***

[Shylock](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/shylock) then asks whether he can speak with [Antonio](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/antonio) himself. [Bassanio](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/bassanio) invites Shylock to dine with them both that night, but Shylock declines. Although he will do business with Christians, he explains, it would go against his religious principles to eat or drink or pray with them.

***Analysis Part 2:***

By distinguishing between business activities and his private life, and by refusing Bassanio's offer to share a meal, Shylock shows that he has religious differences that set him apart from the Christian Venetians.

***Summary Part 3:***

By coincidence, at this moment, [Antonio](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/antonio) appears. Although [Shylock](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/shylock) notices Antonio at once, at first he ignores him, remarking privately that he harbors an "ancient grudge" (1.3.47) towards the "Christian" (1.3.42). Shylock explains to the audience that he hates Antonio because he "lends out money gratis" (1.3.44), or free of interest, thereby bringing down interest rates for professional moneylenders such as himself (who are almost all Jews). More importantly, Antonio has repeatedly insulted the Jewish people in general and Shylock in particular. Shylock is determined to get revenge on Antonio not only for himself, but also for his "tribe" (1.3.51).

***Analysis Part 3:***

Shylock reveals his prejudice against Christians and explains the way in which he has experienced anti-Semitic prejudice himself. Notably, both groups' ideas of the other revolve around ideas of commerce: the Christians believe it is wrong to practice usury (lending money for interest), whereas the Jews—who were forbidden by law from engaging in most other professions—often resorted to usury as a way to make a living. Being treated badly has given Shylock a desire for revenge.

***Summary Part 4:***

[Antonio](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/antonio) approaches [Shylock](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/shylock), saying that he ordinarily would not take part in a transaction involving interest but that, this one time, he will break his personal principle in order to help his friend. Shylock agrees to lend [Bassanio](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/bassanio) the money.

***Analysis Part 4:***

After stating his "Christian" business principles (and denigrating the Jews' principles), Antonio publicly declares that there are no limits to what he will do for Bassanio.

***Summary Part 5:***

[Shylock](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/shylock) then defends his practice of charging interest by citing the Biblical story of Jacob. When Jacob was working as a shepherd for his uncle Laban, Shylock reminds [Antonio](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/antonio), he found a clever way to earn interest for his efforts. He cut a deal with Laban in which he got to keep any sheep that were born with a "streaked" color. Then he employed a magic trick to get all the sheep to breed streaked lambs, which he was, by contract, entitled to keep for himself. Shylock defends this kind of behavior, similar to his own, as representing "thrift" (1.3.90) rather than theft.

***Analysis Part 5:***

Citing the Book of Genesis, Shylock shows how different interpretations are the basis of his religious and personal differences with the Christians. The Christians believe that usury is immoral because it is unnatural to breed money from money. But Shylock interprets the Bible to say that charging interest is no different than Jacob's breeding of animals, which Christian law would permit as totally natural.

***Summary Part 6:***

Outraged that [Shylock](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/shylock) would cite the Bible in order to defend what Venetian Christians consider to be the sin of usury, [Antonio](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/antonio) insults Shylock. Shylock, in turn, cites Antonio's previous mistreatment of him: Antonio has publicly abused him many times and even spat upon his clothing. Why, Shylock asks, should he lend to Antonio as freely as he would to a relative or friend? Enraged, Antonio begins to insult Shylock again. There is no need to pretend to be friends, he says: lend money to him as to an enemy.

***Analysis Part 6:***

Shylock reveals the years of abuse he has received from Antonio and other Venetian Christians as the source of his desire for revenge. By noting that Antonio is not his friend, he shows that this abuse has made it clear to him that he is an outsider to the polite society of Venetian friends on display in 1.1. Antonio, for his part, openly declares Shylock to be an enemy.

***Summary Part 7:***

Teasing [Antonio](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/antonio) for getting so worked up, [Shylock](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/shylock) then goes on to propose an unusual compromise. He says that, this time, he will not charge interest on his loan. However, if Antonio defaults on the loan and is unable to pay, Shylock will be entitled to cut one pound of Antonio's flesh from any part of Antonio's body that Shylock chooses.

***Analysis Part 7:***

The contract Shylock proposes is hard for the Christians, and a modern audience or reader, to understand. By trading in flesh, rather than making money "breed" by usury, Shylock is actually adopting the Christians' stated business principles but directing them toward a monstrous end, which mocks those Christian principles in turn.

***Summary Part 8:***

[Antonio](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/antonio) agrees, despite [Bassanio](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/bassanio)'s nervousness about binding his friend to such a potentially dangerous contract. Talking to himself, [Shylock](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/shylock) gleefully hints at the fact that he has achieved the first step in his still-mysterious plan for revenge. But Antonio remains unconcerned: he is sure his ships will return, with three times 3000 ducats, at least one month before Shylock's deadline.

***Analysis Part 8:***

For the first time, Bassanio shows some scruples about putting his greed before his friend—who, by agreeing to put a price on his pound of flesh (and his life) has become like an animal headed to slaughter. Antonio will not be held back in his generosity, and by signing the contract agrees to be bound by law. So Shylock's revenge plot starts moving into action.