

The Relevance of the Casket Scene in The Merchant of Venice

The Casket Scene revolves around the prominent character Portia, a lady of Belmont. She is "fair and fairer than the word", and a lady of wonderful virtues. Bassanio puts her in the way that she is no way inferior to the wife of the famous ancient Roman Senator, Brutus, and the daughter of the famous Roman Cato.

The lottery of the Caskets may not appeal to the modern intellectual, since chance and luck are its main ingredients. Marriage too is a lottery, and to subject life to double chance is to enhance the uncertainty manifold. For some so beautiful, wealthy, noble and intelligent as Portia, we find her dead father's will of the Caskets as a choice of husband for her, truly heartless. Her earlier suitors fill us with alarm. What if the vain and egoistic Morocco were to choose correctly, or the equally unsuited Prince of Arragon were to succeed? Portia would have been stuck with a vain and arrogant husband, incapable of her love. That they fail is a tremendous relief to us.

Portia's Marriage through the Lottery System:

Portia's father had laid down in his will, a condition that Portia would only marry a man who would choose, from amongst three caskets. The caskets are made of three metals-gold, silver and lead. Certain mottos are inscribed on each of the Caskets. One of these caskets holds the portraits of Portia. It is laid down in the will of Portia's deceased father that whoever happens to choose the casket in which Portia's portrait is concealed will win Portia for his bride. On the gold casket, it is written "who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire. On the silver casket it is written, "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves." In the leaden casket, it is written, who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath."

Interpretation of the Caskets:

The inscription on the gold casket means that most people are attracted by gold or wealth but we know that Goldsmith has said where wealth accumulates men decay; not only that but when people become wealthy they become corrupt with many vices. So to be attracted by gold or wealth means inviting ruin. The significance of the motto on the silver casket is that everybody should get what he deserves; but the question is how one can judge how much one deserves because everybody has got in him some amount of vanity or self-conceit, and therefore, everybody is likely to overrate himself, and naturally everybody thinks that he deserves everything. So, it is risky on one's part to judge what one really deserves. The motto on the leaden casket says that whoever will risk his all will get the thing for which he will risk his all, which means, in other words, no gain without risk or unless one works hard and puts in his best energy one cannot expect to succeed in anything.

Approaching of the Three Suitors:

Many suitors come to Belmont but go back without trying their luck because of the hard condition that the unsuccessful suitor would never marry all his life. However, three suitors do come forward to enter

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the context. The first to do so is the Prince of Morocco the second is the Prince of Arragon, and the third is Bassanio. Portia had, on a previous occasion seen Bassanio and had liked him; but at that time there was no question of Bassanio's wanting to marry Portia or of Portia's encouraging Bassanio in this respect because the subject of Portia's encouraging Bassanio in this respect because the subject of Portia's marriage Was not yet under consideration.

The Selection of Gold Casket made by Morocco Prince and His Failure:

Before selecting the casket, the first suitor, the Prince of Morocco asks Portia not to despise him because of his black complexion. He also says that he has won many battles and praises his own blood which he considers redder and healthier than that of any white man. Then he examines the motto which is inscribed on each casket. He tries to understand the implications of all inscriptions. He rejects the lead casket, because it offers only a threat, and because a golden mind must not degrade itself by showing a preference for something ugly and worthless which demands that the chooser should hazard all for its sake. He then rejects the silver casket on the ground that although he deserves much by virtue of his birth his fortunes, his graces and his qualities of breeding, his deserving might not extend so far as the lady. Then he looks at the gold casket and says that the whole world desires Portia and that suitors come from all four corners of the earth to kiss this shrine. Having thus commented on the caskets, the Prince of Morocco asks himself which of the three caskets is likely to contain Portia's heavenly picture. And his answer is "Never so rich a gem was set in worse than gold." And so he puts his hand on the gold casket which on being opened, is found to contain a human skull holding a written message to the effect that everything which glitters is not gold.

Selection of the Silver Casket made by the Prince of Arragon and His Being Unsuccessful:

Next comes the turn of the Prince of Arragon. He also examines the inscription on each casket. Turning to the silver casket he says that nobody in this world should get what he does not deserve. High positions and high offices should go only to those persons who possess the necessary qualification and the required ability. This idea appeals to him so much that he puts his hand on the silver casket, thinking himself fully deserving of the hand of the beautiful Portia. On being opened, this casket is found to contain the picture of a blinking idiot. In this way, he also tastes the fruit of unsuccess and feels highly disappointed.

Bassanio's Making the Right Selection of the Casket:

Bassanio the third suitor reads through the inscription on the gold casket and says the world is always deceived with ornament or outward shows. In the sphere of law, even the most untruthful case can be made in appear genuine by a persuasive tongue. In the sphere of religion even the greatest evil can be made to appear something proper and desirable with the support of some plausible case from a scripture, hiding the evil with a decorative veil over it. A coward acquires the look of a warrior by growing a beard on his chin like Hercules and by wearing a frown on his face like Mars (the god of war). Arguing thus, Bassanio rejects the gold casket. He also rejects the silver casket, his reason in this case being that silver is only a "common drudge between man and mass." The lead casket seems to Bassanio to have a greater appeal. The very paleness of this casket, which threatens rather than promises

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anything, moves him more than any kind of eloquence could move him. And so he chooses the lead casket which on being opened, is found to contain Portia's Picture. Thus Bassanio succeeds in the test which had been laid down by Portia's father for the choice of a husband for her.

Significance of the Song Sung in Order to Create Romantic Atmosphere:

A song is sung when Bassanio is selecting the casket. The purpose of this song is primarily to create a romantic atmosphere and thereby to make Bassanio forget the suspense and anxiety which is involved in the selection of the casket. Portia herself explains the significance of the song to Nerissa:

"Let music sound while he doth make his choice;

Then if he love, he makes a swan-like end,

Fading in music, that the comparison.

May sound more proper, my eye shall be the stream

And waterly death-bed for him he may win;

And what is music then? Then music is

Even as the flourish when true subjects bow

To a new crowned monarch."

Apart from Portia's explanation, there is another significance of the song, namely, to convey a hint to Bassanio for selecting the right casket, although such a hint would be most unfair of Portia who wants to honour the conditions of her father's will, The song throws the hint that false love or fancy is born in the eye and not in the heart, i.e., when people are guided by outward appearances of things they miss real love; or in other words, of Bassanio is tempted by the glittering outside of either gold or silver, he will miss the right casket and also Portia along with it. That is why Bassanio in the very beginning argues against gold and silver while examining the mottos on the various caskets, and that is why also he succeeds in choosing the leaden casket without much difficulty.

Dramatic Purpose of the Music:

Shakespeare has introduced also music while the Prince of Morocco and the Prince of Arragon are selecting the caskets, and also when Lorenzo and Jessica are enjoying the moonlight in the gardens of Portia's house. All this music and song are intended chiefly to serve the dramatic purpose to lend a romantic atmosphere, to reduce the tragic tension of the anxiety and suspense of the suitors while selecting the caskets, to prepare further for the tragic Trial-scene which is yet to come in the fourth act. The song actually helps Bassanio to choose the right casket. No credit should go to Bassanio for selecting the right casket, because Bassanio is a person who believes in shows, extravagance, in Princely styles in order to capture the imagination of others and also to win the heart of Portia. Besides he does not give

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any proof of his unusual intelligence in any part of the play that we can be sure of his right choice of the casket.

The revelation of Portia's Character Immeasurably through the Casket Scenes:

The casket scenes reveal Portia's character immeasurably. She playfully and wittily criticises her suitors. Though the dread of marrying the wrong husband haunts her, she is never bitter. When Bassanio makes his choice, we have firsthand insight into her character. Prior to that, she had only been in conversation with Nerissa. With Bassanio about to hazard his fortune, it is very different. In conversation with Nerissa, Portia merely accepts the former's praise for Bassanio, A true maiden, she will not reveal the secrets of her heart, though she cannot refuse him Nerissa's gracious praise. But now that the moment of truth has arrived, and Bassanio has decided to "win or lose it all", the struggle in her heart cannot hide. After Bassanio is successful, she confesses her doubts, despairs, fears and jealousy. And now her one thought is to surrender herself completely. To put the exquisiteness of the moments into prose would be a desecration; to attempt to sum them up, but futile vanity. We agree with Bassanio's words:

"Madam, you have bereft me of all words,

Only my blood speaks to you in my veins. "

Another Insight of Contrasting the Character of Portia and Jessica:

The episode gives us another insight. It contrasts the character of Portia and Jessica. Portia obeys the will of even her dead father, and lets the caskets decide the choice of her husband. She is prepared to forgo her love for Bassanio and enter into a loveless marriage if luck and destiny have that in store for her. She would rather have that than betray her already a dead father. Jessica in contrast robs her father Shylock after he had bestowed his complete trust in her by handing over the keys of the house to her. She runs away with Lorenzo, while her father is away to dinner, and marries him after relinquishing her religion and converting to Christianity. During the choice made by her suitors, we get an insight into Portia's wit, perception and intelligence. Jessica in comparison is shallow. She elopes with Lorenzo and later exchanges her mother's ring for a monkey.

Crucial Importance of the Play of Bassanio's Choice of the Casket:

Bassanio's choice of the casket is of crucial importance in the play. Antonio has already lost his fortune and is bankrupt. If Bassanio were to choose incorrectly, the play would not be a romantic comedy, for Portia's and Bassanio's love would have been lost too. Moreover, Antonio would have to lose his life. He has no money and Bassanio too has none. Only Portia has it and Bassanio can legally use it to save Antonio, only after he marries Portia.

The song to many critics, while Bassanio makes his choice, is a definite giveaway. Firstly no song is played while other suitors make their choice. Secondly, the words -bred, head, engend'red, fed, in the song all rhyme with lead. Portia too uses the word "hazard" which is on the lead casket when she requests Bassanio:

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"I pray you, tarry: pause a day or two

Before you hazard; for, in choosing wrong,

I lose your company: therefore, forbear awhile". [III. ii. 1-3]

So Portia wasn't after all entirely uprighteous; but then who can blame a woman so much in love, for a little cheating? After all "love has its reasons, which reasons do not know."

If the caskets are a test of character, they fail in one aspect and succeed in another. Bassanio is no match for Portia and has nothing heroic in him. Yet Portia loves him and is eager to marry him. He is an adequate, if not an exquisite, husband for her. To that extent, the caskets are a success. The caskets are a complete success because they let love win in the end, and Portia's father would not have been happier in his grave.