

The Merchant of Venice

2.9

Enter Nerissa and a servitor

NERISSA

Quick, quick, I pray thee, draw the curtain straight.
The Prince of Aragon hath ta'en his oath,
And comes to his election presently.

*The servitor draws aside the curtain, revealing the
three caskets. [Flourish of cornetts.] Enter Aragon,
his train, and Portia*

PORTIA

Behold, there stand the caskets, noble Prince.
If you choose that wherein I am contained, 5
Straight shall our nuptial rites be solemnized.
But if you fail, without more speech, my lord,
You must be gone from hence immediately.

ARAGON

I am enjoined by oath to observe three things:
First, never to unfold to anyone 10
Which casket 'twas I chose. Next, if I fail
Of the right casket, never in my life
To woo a maid in way of marriage.
Lastly, if I do fail in fortune of my choice,
Immediately to leave you and be gone. 15

PORTIA

To these injunctions everyone doth swear
That comes to hazard for my worthless self.

ARAGON

And so have I addressed me. Fortune now
To my heart's hope! Gold, silver, and base lead.

He reads the leaden casket

`Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath.' 20
You shall look fairer ere I give or hazard.
What says the golden chest? Ha, let me see.
`Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire.'
`What many men desire'±±that `many' may be meant
By the fool multitude, that choose by show, 25
Not learning more than the fond eye doth teach,

Which pries not to th'interior but, like the martlet,
 Builds in the weather on the outward wall
 Even in the force and road of casualty.
 I will not choose what many men desire, 30
 Because I will not jump with common spirits
 And rank me with the barbarous multitudes.
 Why then, to thee, thou silver treasure-house.
 Tell me once more what title thou dost bear.
 'Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves'±± 35
 And well said too, for who shall go about
 To cozen fortune, and be honourable
 Without the stamp of merit? Let none presume
 To wear an undeserveÁd dignity.
 O, that estates, degrees, and offices 40
 Were not derived corruptly, and that clear honour
 Were purchased by the merit of the wearer!
 How many then should cover that stand bare,
 How many be commanded that command?
 How much low peasantry would then be gleaned 45
 From the true seed of honour, and how much honour
 Picked from the chaff and ruin of the times
 To be new varnished? Well; but to my choice.
 'Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves.'
 I will assume desert. Give me a key for this, 50
 And instantly unlock my fortunes here.

He is given a key. [He] opens the silver casket

PORTIA

Too long a pause for that which you find there.

ARAGON

What's here? The portrait of a blinking idiot
 Presenting me a schedule. I will read it.
 How much unlike art thou to Portia! 55
 How much unlike my hopes and my deservings!
 'Who chooseth me shall have as much as he deserves.'
 Did I deserve no more than a fool's head?
 Is that my prize? Are my deserts no better?

PORTIA

To offend and judge are distinct offices, 60
 And of opposeÁd natures.

ARAGON

What is here?

He reads the schedule

`The fire seven times tried this;
Seven times tried that judgement is
That did never choose amiss.
Some there be that shadows kiss; 65
Such have but a shadow's bliss.
There be fools alive, iwis,
Silvered o'er; and so was this.
Take what wife you will to bed,
I will ever be your head. 70
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. 75
Sweet, adieu. I'll keep my oath
Patiently to bear my wroth.

[Flourish of cornetts.] Exit with his train

PORTIA

Thus hath the candle singed the moth.
O, these deliberate fools! When they do choose
They have the wisdom by their wit to lose. 80

NERISSA

The ancient saying is no heresy:
Hanging and wiving goes by destiny.

PORTIA

Come, draw the curtain, Nerissa.

Nerissa draws the curtain.

Enter a Messenger

MESSENGER

Where is my lady?

PORTIA Here. What would my lord?

MESSENGER

Madam, there is alighted at your gate 85
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. Yet I have not seen 90
So likely an ambassador of love.

A day in April never came so sweet
To show how costly summer was at hand
As this fore-spurrer comes before his lord.

PORTIA

No more, I pray thee, I am half afeard
Thou wilt say anon he is some kin to thee,
Thou spend'st such high-day wit in praising him.
Come, come, Nerissa, for I long to see
Quick Cupid's post that comes so mannerly.

95

NERISSA

Bassanio, Lord Love, if thy will it be!
Exeunt

100