

THE CASKET SCENES FROM THE MERCHANT OF VENICE:  
SYMBOLISM OR LIFE STYLE

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Shakespeare's play, *The Merchant of Venice*, centers around the character of Portia, a rich young heiress of Belmont in northern Italy. She had been courted by many suitors since her father's death, but was free to marry only the man who passed the test her father had devised. This test consisted of choosing one of three metal caskets—golden, silver, and lead—bearing, respectively, the following inscriptions:

"Who chooseth me, shall gain what many men desire."

"Who chooseth me, shall get as much as he deserves."

"Who chooseth me, must give and hazard all he hath." (II. 7. 5-9)

The leaden casket was the correct choice and inside it was a likeness of Portia. In each of the other two were taunting verses. Portia was to show the three caskets to her suitor and ask him to decide which contained her portrait. If he chose correctly, he could marry her.

Of all her many wooers, only three submitted to the test. They were the Prince of Morocco, the Prince of Arragon, and Bassanio, "a scholar and a soldier" from Venice. Three of the scenes in the play (II. 7, 9, and III. 2) describe the differing ways in which these suitors make their choices. Each comes to a decision at the end of a short soliloquy, in which he comments upon the caskets and their inscriptions. It was Bassanio who made the correct choice.

Freud became attracted to this story because he felt that Bassanio's explanation of why he chose the leaden instead of the golden or silver casket was quite unconvincing. It had for him "a forced ring" about it. "If in psychoanalytic practice we were confronted with such a speech, we should suspect concealed motives behind the unsatisfying argument" (5, p. 291).

In the present paper we shall show Freud's approach to the problem and continue with an Adlerian interpretation of the casket scenes. In doing so we hope to offer another illuminating example of the fundamental differences between Freudian and Adlerian literary criticism, which are due to the basic differences in the two psychologies.

Freud, very significantly, sought the answer to the problem of Bassanio's motivation not in the personality of Bassanio but in the theme of the three caskets itself. Consequently he searched for other, similar stories in mythology, fairy tales and elsewhere and tried to discern what essential features they had in common. These then would furnish the clue to Bassanio's motivation.

In the Adlerian approach, to begin with, the problem itself is different. Bassanio's correct choice and his explanation do not seem particularly problematic. The Adlerian would rather stake out the problem to include all three choices, the incorrect as well as the correct, and then examine to what extent the dramatist has made the choices consistent with the other information he has given us about the three suitors and their larger contexts.

Freud's interest in the theme of the caskets itself and in its universality corresponds to his general interest in "objective" stimulus conditions as the underlying "causes" of behavior. In the Adlerian approach the objective stimulus conditions are accepted, while the interest is focused on the different responses made by the three suitors in accordance with their respective styles of life, which includes their values, self-concepts, and their own phenomenology altogether.

The comparison also reveals the following interesting paradox. Freud, ostensibly looking for "objective" causes, actually goes far beyond the concrete data furnished by Shakespeare. Whereas the Adlerian phenomenological, "subjective" approach not only works essentially with what is given, but also makes a determined attempt to include *all* the information that is given. We thus feel that the Adlerian interpretation attempts to do justice to the dramatist's creation as he presented it. Freud on the other hand, merely uses one element in the drama as the starting-point in a search for similar elements in other quite irrelevant stories. He then uses the common elements in these stories to support his theory of unconscious motivation, as an explanation of Bassanio's choice.

#### FREUD'S APPROACH

Freud begins his essay on the three caskets by citing some previous explanation that the three suitors for the hand of Portia actually represent: Morocco, the sun; Arragon, the moon; and Bassanio, the star youth. For this explanation some support is found in an Estonian folk tale. While this account sets the tone so to speak for

the direction in which Freud is exploring, he does not find this "astral myth" very helpful, since such myths were projected onto the heavens by human minds. Thus he looks for an earthly origin for these heavenly heroes, since, after all, it is in the "human content that our interest lies" (5, p. 292).

Freud then expresses the belief that Shakespeare used a story from the *Gesta Romanorum*, a famous collection of short tales in Latin, as a basis for the casket scenes, although in this story a *girl* chooses between three lovers, whereas in the *Merchant*, of course, a *man* chooses between three caskets. To establish the similarity between the two stories we are asked to accept, in accordance with psychoanalytic dream theory, a casket as symbolizing woman. Then Shakespeare's story can be taken as an inversion of the original story (5, p. 292).

The substitution and inversion would be more intelligible if in Shakespeare's account a choice were made between three women. But actually only one woman, Portia, is the object of the choice, without reference to any rival. The choice is made between the caskets and their inscriptions, which incidentally are completely ignored by Freud. And regarding the caskets as sexual symbols, we may point out that in the three inscriptions only one word, "desire," can be interpreted as having a sexual meaning (8, p. 92).

Freud then searches for stories of other sets of three women. He finds them in King Lear's three daughters, the three goddesses in the judgment of Paris, Cinderella and her two ugly sisters, and Psyche and her two sisters.

Next, by a series of assumptions and simple associations, Freud concludes that lead = paleness = plainness = dumbness, and he sets out to show that the third woman in the stories is always dumb. Lear's daughter Cordelia and Cinderella are characterized in their stories by dumbness and so may be equated with the leaden casket. But this is not the case with Aphrodite, the third goddess, whom Paris judged to be the fairest. Here then Freud finds, "curiously enough, in a quite modern handling of the same scene" (5, p. 294) that the third goddess, Aphrodite is indeed dumb. He finds this version in the libretto of Offenbach's operetta, *La belle Hélène*, from which he quotes with obvious satisfaction, "La troisième, ah! la troisième! la troisième ne dit rien" (5, p. 294). Thus Aphrodite, too, meets the requirement of dumbness and may be equated with the other two women and the leaden casket. As to Psyche, there is no further mention.

But what is the significance of dumbness? Here we learn that "In dreams dumbness is a common representation of death" (5, p. 295). Bassanio's choice, however, was not made in a dream, but in waking life. So we must "make it seem probable that dumbness must be interpreted as a sign of being dead in productions other than dreams" (5, p. 295). Fortunately, two of Grimm's fairy tales contain a girl who saves her brothers through becoming dumb at the risk of her own life. Hence, the lead casket becomes the symbol of a dead woman.

But "thanks to a displacement that is far from infrequent, the qualities that a deity imparts to men are ascribed to the deity himself" (5, p. 296). Hence, "death" may stand for the Goddess of Death, who is then identified with the "third woman." Yet, as Freud points out, the chosen woman in the various stories, is, except for Lear's choice, always fair, loving, and beautiful—the very antithesis of death. Altogether, since no man would *choose* death, there is a contradiction in Bassanio's choice.

This contradiction is overcome by invoking the mechanism of reaction-formation. Hence, Bassanio's choice is motivated by the hidden forces of his mental life. In choosing Portia he has replaced the grim Goddess of Death by a "wistful opposite." Not only is his choice of the beautiful woman a wish fulfilment on his part, but the necessity of making this choice, actually the choice of death, is hidden from him. He imagines that he is exercising his freedom in choosing between the three feminine objects. But in Freud's view, his choice is determined. Atropos, the inexorable Goddess of Death, *compels* him to choose her in the form of "the fairest and most desirable of women" (5, p. 299).

Freud's short essay contains a wealth of ideas, but would seem to lack logical consistency. A number of assumptions and simple associations are used to give a plausible connection to the quite disparate events that he links together with regard to a certain goal he has apparently in view. Admittedly, his explanation rests upon "conjecture," "inversion," "bold symbolic substitutions," and "a wave of the wand" (5, pp. 291-292). In this way the leaden casket is eventually made to symbolize the Goddess of Death, and by ignoring certain discrepancies Freud finally arrives, via reaction-formation, at the conclusion that Bassanio's choice is really a disguised compulsion, and the figure of beauty that he chooses is man's last enemy—death.

According to the Freudian literary critics, the Manheims, this essay "is Freud at his best" (7, p. 12). Ernest Jones finds it "one of the two most charming things Freud ever wrote, the other being the *Gradiva* book." And he continues, praising "its delicacy, combined with the gentle way in which Freud leads the reader from one layer of the mind to a deeper one until he reaches the deepest of all" (6, p. 361). It should therefore represent a good example of the method which psychoanalysis applies to literary criticism.

#### ADLERIAN APPROACH

We shall now attempt an Adlerian interpretation of the casket scenes, showing, in accordance with our initial statement, how the choices of the three suitors correspond to their respective life styles. In doing this we shall be guided by what they actually say as well as by what they do. We shall also take into account the ways in which they interpret their attitudes towards the caskets and how they react to the inscriptions upon them. We should then be able to arrive at some understanding of why Bassanio was the successful suitor.

#### *Prince of Morocco*

First to arrive is the Prince of Morocco. Portia is not very impressed with him; he is too full of his own importance and proud of his achievements, although, it is true, he has some grounds for a good opinion of himself. He "slew the Sophy and a Persian prince that won three fields of Sultan Solyman" (II. 1. 25). To gain his ends he would "o'er stare the sternest eyes that look, outbrave the heart most daring on the earth" (II. 1. 27).

These words suggest a person centered on himself, for not only his physical prowess, but his physical beauty is unparalleled in his own eyes. The "fairest creature northward born" cannot have redder blood than he. Narcissus-like he admires his own "aspect" reflected in the eyes of "the best-regarded virgins of our clime," who "have lov'd it too" (II. 1. 10).

He is accustomed to bending others to his will, an attitude entirely consistent with the promises to "gain" and "get" inscribed upon the gold and silver caskets. Gaining and getting suggest an I-It relationship (4) in which the other person is treated as an object to be acquired, or manipulated. To gain his ends Morocco would even "change his hue," but only "to steal your thoughts my gentle queen" (II. 1. 11).

Honeyed words do not disguise the fact that "stealing" implies an object-relationship between him and his hoped-for bride. One cannot "steal" within a truly personal, I—Thou relationship. There, one "must give" (II. 7. 17), but "giving" is not characteristic of Morocco. He appears unable to think in genuinely interpersonal terms; with such a good opinion of himself as he has, he simply hopes for "fair advantages" (II. 7. 19) and genuinely believes that he "deserves" to win the lady. Thus Morocco dismisses the leaden casket because it demands that he "must give and hazard all he hath" (II. 7. 16). Also he considers lead as "base," a metal quite unworthy of either Portia, or Morocco. "... 'twere damnation to think so base a thought" (II. 7. 49).

The silver casket makes him pause a little, because it promises the suitor "as much as he deserves." Having a good opinion of himself, his vanity matches him with "all the world." His vivid imagination sees the suitors streaming "from the four corners of the earth, to kiss this shrine, this mortal breathing saint" (II. 7. 39). Since he regards himself as equal to any of them, why should not the golden casket give *him* "what many men desire"?

His self-regarding sentiment has brought him almost to the point of decision. Then, by a process of associative thinking, similar to that employed by Freud, he finally makes his choice.

Never so rich a gem  
Was set in worse than gold. They have in England  
A coin that bears the figure of an angel  
Stamp'd in gold, but that's insculp'd upon:  
But here an angel in a golden bed  
Lies all within. (II. 7. 54)

For Morocco a woman is an object to be *won*, not a partner to be wooed. To gain his end he would, he says, "pluck the young sucking cubs from the she-bear, yea, mock the lion when a roars for prey, to win thee lady" (II. 1. 28).

But nowhere in his five speeches is there any wooing note, or any sign of that ardent love which makes Bassanio exclaim, "O happy torment, when my torturer doth teach me answers for deliverance" (III. 2. 37). Morocco certainly "desires" the lady, but in this context the word means "to desire sexually" (8, p. 93). Such a meaning is in line with Morocco's aggressive style of life full of conquest and self-importance.

Morocco's character, as disclosed in his speeches, seems to agree with Adler's description of persons with a pampered style of life who seek their "chances of success in a more active way." Like the less active, they live "under the pressure of a conception of the world in which they expect to receive everything from others." But owing to their greater activity, they may "take everything from them" (2, p. 241).

*Prince of Arragon*

The Prince of Arragon makes no claim to military prowess or physical beauty, but is just as self-centered as Morocco. He quickly dismisses the leaden casket with the words: "You shall look fairer, ere I give or hazard" (II. 9. 22). He is in no mood to "give" and is misled by the appearance of the casket, in spite of his strictures on "the fool multitude that choose by show" (II. 9. 26).

He also dismisses the golden casket because that symbolizes "what many men desire." He regards himself as superior to other men; he "will not jump with common spirits," nor rank himself "with the barbarous multitudes" (II. 9. 32). His words are reminiscent of the neurotic assertion, "I know quite well that I am superior to the people around me" (2, p. 260).

Because he considers himself superior to others, he naturally expects his superior status to be rewarded. Hence he is attracted to the silver casket, which promises him "as much as he deserves." The word "deserves" is quickly associated with "merit," which leads him to soliloquize upon the fact that honors and titles are often "derived corruptly." Not all who deserve merit, receive it, and vice versa. But he believes that he himself *will* get what "he deserves." Exclaiming, "I will assume desert" (II. 9. 51), he unlocks the silver casket.

Although Arragon recognizes that men do not always get what they deserve, his judgment is so distorted by his desire for personal gratification, that he pays no heed to his own advice. His surprise and disappointment are apparent when he opens the "silver treasure house" and exclaims, "How much unlike my hopes and my deservings" (II. 9. 57). He can hardly bear to think that his wish has not been realized, "Are my deserts no better?" (II. 9. 60). His attitude is not unlike that of "children who have been pampered [and] cannot stand the denial of a wish" (3, p. 196).

*Bassanio*

Bassanio is an impulsive spendthrift, fond of social life and short of cash. But he has a devoted wealthy friend in his "most noble kinsman," Antonio. To him he confesses, "I have disabled mine estate, by something showing a more swelling port than my faint means would grant continuance" (I. 1. 122).

In order "to get clear of all the debts," he, too, plans to go to Belmont to woo the Lady Portia, and he asks his friend Antonio to lend him sufficient money for the visit. Since he is already greatly in debt to Antonio, there is an element of irresponsibility in the argument he uses to wheedle more money from him (I. 1. 140-152). But Antonio needs no persuasion; all he has is at Bassanio's disposal. "My purse, my person, my extremest means lie all unlock'd to your occasions" (I. 1. 139).

At the moment, however, Antonio has no ready cash and therefore says to Bassanio, "Try what my credit can in Venice do" (I. 1. 180). Full of enthusiasm Bassanio sets out to raise the money and encounters Shylock, the money lender. But when Bassanio learns the terms upon which Shylock will lend the money, his enthusiasm falters. Antonio is "in a merry sport" to sign a bond to forfeit a pound of his "fair flesh" if he is unable to repay the loan upon a specified date. But Bassanio senses danger for his friend. "You shall not seal to such a bond for me: I'll rather dwell in my necessity" (I. 3. 150).

Antonio's reassurance does not convince Bassanio that there is nothing to fear. In spite of his eagerness and financial irresponsibility, Bassanio shows that he is reasonable and has social responsibility. Also, he is sceptical about "much kindness in the Jew" (I. 3. 149), saying, "I like not fair terms, and a villain's mind" (I. 3. 175).

Bassanio shows a similar scepticism when confronted by the caskets. He is wary of being influenced by their appearances. "So may the outward shows be least themselves: The world is still deceived with ornament" (III. 2. 73). This scepticism is reminiscent of Arragon's reluctance to "choose by show." Bassanio however, makes a more detailed survey of deceptive appearances than his predecessor. In law, religion, vice, and valor "ornament is but the guiled shore to a most dangerous sea" (III. 2. 97). Even the "crisped snaky golden locks" like Portia's (I. 1. 169) are "often known to be the dowry of a second head" (III. 2. 95).



Thus Bassanio rejects the gold and silver caskets; their appearances make them suspect. By analogy, the "meagre lead" which has an unattractive exterior should conceal something valuable within it. Although Bassanio does not mention the inscriptions, he must have read them, and dramatically, there is no need to repeat them yet again. The combination of metal and inscription suggests that the leaden casket stands in logical contrast to the other two.

The lead is pale and "meagre" in contrast to "gaudy gold." It "threatens" and demands, whilst the other two caskets hold out promises of "getting" and "gaining." Also, according to one authority (9, p. 82), "to threaten" means "to speak plainly." The leaden casket then avoids "ornament" and "seeming truth;" it makes no promises, but challenges the suitor "to give and hazard all he hath." Giving is in line with Bassanio's generous, spendthrift nature. His willingness to take a chance was shown by his method of finding a lost arrow (I. I. 140) and his adventurous spirit which sent him hopefully to Belmont.

Unlike the other suitors, he makes no reference to himself at all during his soliloquy, and so his judgment is not distorted by a sense of his own importance. He is oriented towards reality rather than toward appearances. He is motivated to give, as well as to gain, or get. By responding to the challenge to "give" and "hazard" he shows "a better understanding of human relationships, does not mind contributing, and has the courage to take a chance. . . . He does not mind *giving* so much, as he is wary of *gaining* or *getting* something that is not genuine. We are also reminded here of the concern he expressed for his friend Antonio when he learned of Shylock's terms for Antonio."<sup>1</sup>

After Bassanio makes his choice, Portia is overwhelmed with emotion.

Happiest of all, is that her gentle spirit  
Commits itself to yours to be directed,  
As from her lord, her governor, her king. (III. 2. 164)

There had been a genuine love relationship between Portia and Bassanio who first met her in her father's time (I. 2. 110). Then he "sometimes from her eyes" received "fair speechless messages" (I. 1. 164). Now Bassanio makes no attempt to take advantage of Portia's "ecstasy." Eager as he is to gain both Portia and her wealth, he does

<sup>1</sup>H. L. Ansbacher, personal communication, October 26, 1968.

not press his claim until Portia herself has recognized that he is successful.

So, thrice-fair lady, stand I even so,  
 As doubtful whether what I see be true  
 Until confirm'd, sign'd, ratified by you. (III. 2. 146)

Thus each lover shows a genuine concern for the other. Such mutual love augurs well for their impending marriage, for, in Adler's words, "in love there is no room to play the conqueror" (as cited in 10, p. 200); rather, "each partner must be more interested in the other than in himself" (1, p. 266).

### CONCLUSION

We chose the story of the three caskets in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* to illustrate the difference in approach between Freud and Adlerian psychology to literary criticism.

We have shown that in the very formulation of the problem there is a basic difference, Freud exploring the stimulus situation, while the Adlerian approach centered on the individuality of the responses of the various characters to this situation which was held constant for them as in a test situation.

Freud pursued his problem by taking an isolated element of the scenes and searching for the same element in other stories and myths, in the hope of deducing from such generalization what the "deepest" unconscious motivation of the winning suitor, Bassanio, might have been. Freud saw no need for verifying his inference in any of Bassanio's statements or behavior, and it would indeed have been difficult to do. Nor was he concerned with the quite obvious question, why the same universal motivation did not apply to the other two suitors.

The Adlerian approach, on the other hand, was concerned with the consistency of the individual life styles of the three suitors. We could show that Morocco and Arragon, each in his own way, were concerned with their own importance. Their egocentric attitudes naturally influenced their thinking and their associations. For Morocco, gold, the most precious metal, could alone be worthy of comparison with Portia. Both Morocco and Arragon viewed the symbolic lead with disfavor because it "threatens." But it moved Bassanio with "more than eloquence." So the same object perceived by different people leads to quite different conclusions, the meaning

depending upon what the person sees in it. "One individual's symbols are never the same as another's" (1, p. 108).

Bassanio's life style stands in marked contrast to those of the other two. He is prepared to give rather than to get; to woo rather than to win; and to be as interested in the "other" as he is in himself. He concentrates upon the difficult task of making a choice between the caskets without being distracted by autistic flights of fancy. By his willingness to "give and hazard" he displays a potential capacity for human relationships which is lacking in the "gaining" and "getting" attitudes of the other two. Thus poetic justice is done, and we are persuaded that the best man did win.

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