

Extract from *The Merchant of Venice* 3.2, William Shakespeare (c. 1596-1598)

*According to her father's will, Portia will marry the man who chooses the right one out of three caskets, one of which is made of gold, the second of silver and the last of lead.*

*In this extract from 3.2, Bassanio, Antonio's friend and one of Portia's suitors, takes the test.*

BASSANIO

So may the outward shows be least themselves:  
The world is still deceived with ornament.  
In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt,  
But, being seasoned with a gracious voice,  
5 Obscures the show of evil? In religion,  
What damned error, but some sober brow  
Will bless it and approve it with a text,  
Hiding the grossness with fair ornament?  
There is no vice so simple but assumes  
10 Some mark of virtue on his outward parts:  
How many cowards, whose hearts are all as false  
As stairs of sand, wear yet upon their chins  
The beards of Hercules and frowning Mars;  
Who, inward search'd, have livers white as milk;  
15 And these assume but valour's excrement  
To render them redoubted! Look on beauty,  
And you shall see 'tis purchased by the weight;  
Which therein works a miracle in nature,  
Making them lightest that wear most of it:  
20 So are those crisped snaky golden locks  
Which make such wanton gambols with the wind,  
Upon supposed fairness, often known  
To be the dowry of a second head,  
The skull that bred them in the sepulchre.  
25 Thus ornament is but the guiled shore  
To a most dangerous sea; the beauteous scarf  
Veiling an Indian beauty; in a word,  
The seeming truth which cunning times put on  
To entrap the wisest. Therefore, thou gaudy gold,  
30 Hard food for Midas, I will none of thee;  
Nor none of thee, thou pale and common drudge  
'Tween man and man: but thou, thou meagre lead,  
Which rather threatenest than dost promise aught,  
Thy paleness moves me more than eloquence;  
35 And here choose I; joy be the consequence!

PORTIA

[*Aside*] How all the other passions fleet to air,  
As doubtful thoughts, and rash-embraced despair,  
And shuddering fear, and green-eyed jealousy! O love,  
Be moderate; allay thy ecstasy,

40 In measure rein thy joy; scant this excess.  
I feel too much thy blessing: make it less,  
For fear I surfeit.

BASSANIO

What find I here?

*Opening the leaden casket*

Fair Portia's counterfeit! What demi-god  
45 Hath come so near creation? Move these eyes?  
Or whether, riding on the balls of mine,  
Seem they in motion? Here are sever'd lips,  
Parted with sugar breath: so sweet a bar  
Should sunder such sweet friends. Here in her hairs  
50 The painter plays the spider and hath woven  
A golden mesh to entrap the hearts of men,  
Faster than gnats in cobwebs; but her eyes, –  
How could he see to do them? having made one,  
Methinks it should have power to steal both his  
55 And leave itself unfurnish'd. Yet look, how far  
The substance of my praise doth wrong this shadow  
In underprizing it, so far this shadow  
Doth limp behind the substance. Here's the scroll,  
The continent and summary of my fortune.

*Reads*

60 You that choose not by the view,  
Chance as fair and choose as true!  
Since this fortune falls to you,  
Be content and seek no new,  
If you be well pleased with this  
65 And hold your fortune for your bliss,  
Turn you where your lady is  
And claim her with a loving kiss.  
A gentle scroll. Fair lady, by your leave;  
I come by note, to give and to receive.  
70 Like one of two contending in a prize,  
That thinks he hath done well in people's eyes,  
Hearing applause and universal shout,  
Giddy in spirit, still gazing in a doubt  
Whether these pearls of praise be his or no;  
75 So, thrice fair lady, stand I, even so;  
As doubtful whether what I see be true,  
Until confirm'd, sign'd, ratified by you.