

Understanding Shakespeare's idioms

Activity 1: Read the short plot summary of a scene from *The Merchant of Venice*, a play by William Shakespeare. Continue with reading the short passage from the play. Look closely at the highlighted language. Which words make you pause or strike you as interesting or strange? Discuss your findings with a partner and write your own first draft of a definition for the term "idiom".

The plot: In Act II, Scene 7 of *The Merchant of Venice*, we are in the midst of the casket test. Portia, a wealthy heiress, must marry the man who chooses the correct casket out of three options: gold, silver, or lead. Each casket has an inscription hinting at its contents, and only one contains a portrait of Portia, indicating the correct choice. The Prince of Morocco, one of Portia's suitors, arrives to make his choice. He is confident in his reasoning and begins to evaluate the inscriptions. The Prince assumes that gold, being the most precious and appealing, must represent Portia's worth. He chooses the gold casket.

Act II, Scene 7:

Morocco [*opening the golden casket*]:

Oh hell! What have we here?

A carrion death, within whose empty eye

There is a written scroll. I'll read the writing:

"All that glisters is not gold.

Often have you heard that told.

Many a man his life hath sold

But my outside to behold.

Gilded timber do worms enfold.

Had you been as wise as bold,

Young in limbs, in judgment old,

Your answer had not been inscrolled,

Fare you well; your suit is cold."

Cold indeed and labor lost.

Then farewell, heat, and welcome, frost.

Portia, adieu; I have too grieved a heart

To take a tedious leave. Thus losers part.

Exit [with his train].

carrion death – a decaying corpse; used metaphorically here to describe the skull in the casket

scroll – a rolled-up piece of parchment or paper for writing

glisters – an old-fashioned variant of "glitters"

gilded timber – wood covered with a thin layer of gold; symbolizes outward beauty hiding decay

worms enfold – surrounded by worms; a reference to decay or death

inscrolled – "enscrolled"; written on a scroll

your suit is cold. – your attempt has failed.

labor lost – efforts wasted

Thus losers part. – This is how those who lose leave or depart.



My first working definition of the term "idiom":
