***Act III Scene IV***

***Analysis:***

***Synopsis:***

Lorenzo praises Portia for being so patient with her husband and letting him leave to repay his debt. Portia tells him that she will be dutiful in prayer and contemplation until his return. Portia leaves Lorenzo and Jessica in charge of the house, as she tells them that she will be going to the monastery to pray. In the meantime, she sends her servant with a letter to her cousin, who is a lawyer in Padua. Portia tells Nerissa that they will see their husbands sooner than they thought, for they are going to Venice dressed as men. Nerissa asks why they will be dressed as men, and Portia vows to explain everything on the ferry.

Portia's intelligence and determination come to the forefront, as she is about to confront the villain of the play. Portia plots to assist her husband in Venice by dressing as a boy. It was not an uncommon ploy of Shakespeare to have women dress as men to move a plot, and it is also a way of Shakespeare to exhibit a woman's intelligence in comparison to men.

***Summary:***

* At Belmont, Lorenzo is practicing his flattery on the ladies as usual, except this time it's with Bassanio's new wife—in front of Jessica! He compliments her for bearing the absence of her new husband so graciously and nobly. Still, he says, if Portia knew what a great guy Antonio is, *and* how good he is to her husband Bassanio, then she'd be even happier to do her wifely duty.
* Portia says, "Shucks, it's nothing." Basically, if Antonio is such a great friend to her lord Bassanio, then Antonio might as well be her lord, too. Bassanio's absence is a small price to pay to get Antonio (and by proxy, herself) out of hellish cruelty.
* Portia cuts to the chase and tells Lorenzo that she's going to go off to a nearby monastery with Nerissa to pray and contemplate for two days while the men are gone. In the meantime, Portia asks Lorenzo, "Will you house-sit my sweet mansion with all its servants and stuff, and basically be the lord of the house while Bassanio and I are out?"
* Lorenzo generously says yes, and well wishes are made to Nerissa and Portia all-around from Jessica and Lorenzo. As Jessica and Lorenzo leave, Portia is left alone with her attendant Balthazar and Nerissa. She sends Balthazar on his way with some instructions: he's to take these letters to Padua and deliver them to Portia's cousin, a Doctor Bellario. The Doctor will likely give Balthazar some letters and clothes in return, and he is to take them and rush over to the ferry that goes to trade with Venice. She promises she'll be there waiting to meet him and then promptly rushes him off.
* None of this has actually sounded like a plan to go to a monastery, and Portia announces cryptically to Nerissa that the two women will see their husbands sooner than they think.
* Portia explains further: their husbands will indeed see them, but they won't recognize them. The women will be dressed convincingly as men. The other men (including their husbands) will think the disguised girls are accomplished men.
* Portia is clearly going to have some fun with this one—she promises to be a prettier, daintier-looking boy than Nerissa.
* Portia says she's studied many young fools and can mimic their foolish mannerisms quite convincingly. Such foolish mannerisms include boasting of the fights they've been in, bragging of the women they've spurned, and several other idiotic behaviors. She'll work convincingly to portray a recently graduated man who's a pompous idiot—as all young men tend to be.
* Nerissa wonders what all the fuss is about and why they need to dress up like men anyway. Portia says there's a naughty way to answer this question, but it won't come from her. She says she'll explain everything in the coach, which is waiting for them. They have no time to lose, as they've got twenty miles and two drag king costumes to throw together in a jiffy.

***Critical Study:***

Lorenzo assures [Portia](https://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/merchant/character/portia/) that Antonio is worthy of all the help she is sending him, and that if Portia only knew the depths of Antonio’s love and goodness, she would be proud of her efforts to save him. Portia replies that she has never regretted doing a good deed, and goes on to say that she could never deny help to anyone so close to her dear Bassanio. Indeed, Antonio and Bassanio are so inseparable that Portia believes saving her husband’s friend is no different than saving her own husband. She has sworn to live in prayer and contemplation until Bassanio returns to her, and announces that she and Nerissa will retire to a nearby monastery. Lorenzo and [Jessica](https://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/merchant/character/jessica/), she declares, will rule the estate in her absence.

Portia then sends her servant, Balthasar, to Padua, where he is to meet her cousin, Doctor Bellario, who will provide Balthasar with certain documents and clothing. From there, Balthasar will take the ferry to Venice, where Portia will await him. After Balthasar departs, Portia informs Nerissa that the two of them, dressed as young men, are going to pay an incognito visit to their new husbands. When Nerissa asks why, Portia dismisses the question, but promises to disclose the whole of her purpose on the coach ride to Venice.

***Critical Analysis:***

At Belmont, following the departure of Bassanio, Lorenzo commends Portia for her perfect understanding of the friendship between her husband and Antonio. Portia says that she feels that if Antonio is worthy of Bassanio's friendship, he is well worth rescuing from "hellish cruelty" at any cost. Leaving the management of her affairs to Lorenzo, she announces that she and Nerissa will go to "a monastery two miles off" until their husbands return. She asks Lorenzo not to deny them this "imposition" and thanks him for agreeing to manage her household until she and Bassanio return. Lorenzo agrees not to interfere, and he and Jessica wish her "all heart's content" and withdraw.

Portia then sends her servant Balthasar "in speed" with a letter to her cousin, the lawyer Doctor Bellario, in Padua, with instructions to bring her "what notes and garments he doth give thee." She tells Nerissa that they will "see [their] husbands / Before they think of [them]." She then explains her plan for both of them to disguise themselves as young men and follow Bassanio and Gratiano to Venice. Moreover, Portia is so sure that her plan will work that she is willing to bet that she will act the part more convincingly — with "manly stride" and "bragging" — than Nerissa. Her plan *must*succeed; if Bassanio has weighty troubles, then she shares them. Their "souls do bear the equal yoke of love."

Lorenzo's praise of Portia, of her nobility and "godlike amity," is introduced here so that she can be associated with Antonio, who is termed the "bosom lover" of Bassanio. Both people are very alike, and both of them are very dear to Bassanio. Earlier in the play, it had been Antonio who exemplified the principle of selfless generosity in his treatment of Bassanio. Now Portia takes over this role. Her material generosity to Bassanio symbolizes her loving generosity to him. In contrast to this generosity of both Portia and Antonio is, of course, the character of Shylock. His love has turned inward on himself and on his possessions.

The concepts of friendship and love provided many of the central themes for many Elizabethan plays. For the Elizabethans, friendship was as precious and important a relationship as love. Shakespeare has Portia make it plain that she understands the depth of friendship between Antonio and her husband, and that she is "purchasing the semblance of my soul" in saving Antonio, who is valuable to her because of his friendship with Bassanio. In this scene, Shakespeare also prepares us for Portia's appearance in the court. Under cover of living "in prayer and contemplation," she and Nerissa plan to go to Venice, but this must be kept secret from the other characters of the play.

Again we recognize the capable and audacious woman who is combined with the romantic heroine. She and Nerissa will be "accoutered like young men." This "disguise theme" adds to the comedy, and throughout the trial scene of the play, when Antonio's life hangs in the balance, Shakespeare needs to remind the audience again that what they are watching is, finally, a comedy. We anticipate seeing how well disguised they will be and how well they pull this bit of mischief off. We have seen Portia as the romantic lover and as the wise and witty well-bred woman; now we see her as a woman of the world.

***Significance:***

With [Bassanio](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Bassanio) and [Gratiano](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Gratiano) on their way to Venice, [Portia](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Portia) makes her own preparations to depart Belmont. Lorenzo thanks her for offering such generous assistance to [Antonio](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Antonio) and praises her goodness, but Portia says she is only doing what is right. She asks Lorenzo and [Jessica](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Jessica) to watch over her estate while she and [Nerissa](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Nerissa) go to a monastery while their husbands are away. She then sends her servant Balthazar to her cousin, a Doctor Bellario in Padua. She tells him to return quickly with the papers and clothing he provides.

After Balthazar leaves, Portia tells Nerissa of her plan: The two women will disguise themselves as men and follow their husbands to Venice. But she will not reveal more about her reasons until they are on the way.

[Portia](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Portia) shows modesty in response to Lorenzo's praise of her generosity toward [Antonio](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Antonio). She expresses her sympathy for Antonio's predicament and her happiness at being able to assist, but she stops short in the middle of her speech, saying, "This comes too near the praising of myself." In this respect she reflects the modesty expected of a woman in her station.

In [Act 4, Scene 1](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/act-4-scene-1-summary/) her plan to assist in Antonio's defense will become clear, which makes her modesty here a practical matter as well. She is compelled to conceal her intended involvement in Antonio's defense. Showmanship also becomes a key component in this scene. For performance purposes her reluctance to reveal the full plan to [Nerissa](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Nerissa) here sets up the surprise of the big reveal when she appears in court. The reference to Doctor Bellario—whose name will come up in the court scene—sets up the audience to recognize the young legal scholar as Portia when she appears before the duke in the next scene. For now Portia's vague request for "clothing" sets up suspense for the tense scenes to come.

***Summary and Analysis Part by Part***

***Summary Part 1:***

Back at Belmont, after [**Bassanio**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/bassanio)'s hasty departure, [**Lorenzo**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) and [**Portia**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/portia) are chatting. Lorenzo reassures Portia that if she knew what a "true gentleman" (3.4.6) [**Antonio**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/antonio) is, she would only be more proud of her good deed. Portia replies that she never regrets doing good. She adds that if Bassanio loves Antonio so much, they must be alike. If so, 3000 ducats is a small sum for the purchase of his life.

***Analysis Part 1:***

Out of love, Portia sets a price of 3000 ducats on Antonio's life, much as Shylock did earlier, out of hate. Lorenzo recalls the strong character of friendship that many Venetians seem to feel toward Antonio.

***Summary Part 2:***

[Portia](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/portia) then asks [Lorenzo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) whether he and [Jessica](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) will manage her estate, as she has vowed to live in prayer and contemplation in a monastery outside Belmont for as long as Bassanio is gone. Lorenzo agrees. He and Jessica exit. Portia then asks her servant, [Balthazar](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters), to take a letter to her cousin, [Doctor Bellario](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/portia), in Padua. She tells Balthazar that Bellario will give him some documents and clothing, and that Balthazar should bring these with all possible speed to Venice. Balthazar exits. Next, Portia tells [Nerissa](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) that they will dress up as young men and see their future husbands while they are in disguise. Nerissa is confused. Portia promises to reveal the entirety of her plan in the coach that is already waiting outside to take them to Venice.

***Analysis Part 2:***

In 2.6, Lorenzo and his friends dressed up in order to help Jessica escape Shylock's house so that she could marry Lorenzo. Now, out of love for Bassanio and Bassanio's friends, Portia and Nerissa will also dress up in an effort to outwit Shylock.