***The Merchant of Venice***

***Act 1 Scene 2***

***Summary and Analysis:***

***Summary:***

Portia enters with her lady-in-waiting, Nerissa. Portia complains that she is tired of the world, because she cannot choose a husband for herself but must follow the rules stipulated in her father's will. Portia has been pursued by a number of wealthy and royal suitors, but none of them interested her, as they had some faults like ego and no sense of humor. One even had too much a fondness for his horse, and another was a drunk. None of them would even attempt the puzzle left by her father, which involved choosing among three caskets, or boxes, based on clues that would lead him to the correct box. There was one casket of gold, another of silver, and the third of lead. Each box had a clue, and the worthy suitor would choose the box that contained Portia's picture, thus earning her hand in marriage. The women's rants about the previous suitors were interrupted by a servant announcing that the Moroccan prince will arrive that night, not that Portia is pleased with the news.

***Analysis:***

In the second scene, we are introduced to the wealthy Christian women of the play. Portia is a wise heiress longing to choose her own husband. However, she is a good daughter honoring her father by allowing his plan to find her a worthy husband to be played out. The audience learns of the scenario by which Portia's husband is to be found, and though it seems a simple puzzle to the reader, we also see Shakespeare pointing fun at the very upper class and royalty by their ego and faults. However, Shakespeare only points fun at those that are not Englishmen, showing some loyalty to his own country. The audience also sees that Portia is an honorable woman, but still bound by the limits her society places on her, as she is not trusted to choose her own husband.

***Detailed Summary:***

At Belmont, Portia complains to her lady-in-waiting, Nerissa, that she is weary of the world because, as her dead father’s will stipulates, she cannot decide for herself whether to take a husband. Instead, Portia’s various suitors must choose between three chests, one of gold, one of silver, and one of lead, in the hopes of selecting the one that contains her portrait. The man who guesses correctly will win Portia’s hand in marriage, but those who guess incorrectly must swear never to marry anyone. Nerissa lists the suitors who have come to guess—a Neapolitan prince, a Palatine count, a French nobleman, an English baron, a Scottish lord, and the nephew of the duke of Saxony—and Portia criticizes their many hilarious faults. For instance, she describes the Neapolitan prince as being too fond of his horse, the Palatine count as being too serious, the Englishman as lacking any knowledge of Italian or any of the other languages Portia speaks, and the German suitor of drunkenness. Each of these suitors has left without even attempting a guess for fear of the penalty for guessing wrong. This fact relieves Portia, and both she and Nerissa remember Bassanio, who has visited once before, as the suitor most deserving and worthy of praise. A servant enters to tell Portia that the prince of Morocco will arrive soon, news that Portia is not at all happy to hear. At Belmont, Portia discusses the terms of her father's will with her confidante, Nerissa. According to the will of her late father, Portia cannot marry a man of her own choosing. Instead, she must make herself available to all suitors and accept the one who chooses "rightly" from among "three chests of gold, silver and lead." Nerissa tries to comfort Portia and tells her that surely her father knew what he was doing; whoever the man might be who finally chooses "rightly," surely he will be "one who shall rightly love." Portia is not so certain. None of her current suitors is the kind of man whom she would choose for herself if she could choose. She cannot, however, for she gave her word that she would be obedient to her father's last wishes.

Nerissa asks her to reconsider the gentlemen who have courted her, and she names the suitors who have come to Belmont — a Neapolitan prince; the County Palatine; a French lord, Monsieur Le Bon; a young English baron, Falconbridge; a Scottish lord; and a young German, the Duke of Saxony's nephew. Portia caustically comments on their individual faults, finding each one of them undesirable as a husband. Fortunately, all of them have decided to return home, unwilling to risk the penalty for choosing the wrong casket — which is, remaining a bachelor for the rest of their lives.

Nerissa then reminds her mistress of a gentleman who came to Belmont while Portia's father was living — his name was Bassanio, a Venetian, a scholar and a soldier. Portia recalls him and praises him highly: "He, of all the men that ever my foolish eyes looked upon, was the best deserving of a fair lady." A servant interrupts the conversation and announces that a new suitor, the Prince of Morocco, will arrive that evening.

***Detailed Analysis:***

First off, the opening of this scene is deliberately reminiscent of the opening of Scene 1. Like Antonio, Portia announces her sadness, but unlike Antonio's, Portia's sadness is clearly due to the conditions imposed on her by her dead father's will: in the matter of her marriage, she must abide by the test of the choice of the three caskets; she can "neither choose who I would nor refuse who dislike [as a husband]."

We had been led to expect that Portia would be a woman who was very beautiful and very rich, but what we have now before us is a woman who is not only fair but quite impressive for her wit, for her agility of mind and for her sharp, satiric intelligence. It is, in fact, Portia's satiric flair that provides this comedy with most of its sparkle; here, it is displayed brilliantly when Nerissa urges Portia to reconsider her various suitors thus far, and Portia offers her wry and droll comments on each one.

It is at this point that Shakespeare is giving his audience the conventional Elizabethan satiric view of the other European nations. Portia's dismissal of each of her suitors corresponds to her age's caricatures of the typical Italian, Frenchman, German, and so on. The Neapolitan prince "does nothing but talk of his horse," a characteristic of only the southern Italian; the "County Palatine" (from the Rhineland) is a pure, unadulterated dullard; he is unable to laugh at anything; "Monsieur Le Bon" is "every man in no man" — that is to say, he has many superficial and changeable characters but no single, substantial one. (To marry him, as Portia says, would be "to marry twenty husbands.") The English suitor, on the other hand, affects European fashions in clothing but gets all of the various national fads — in clothes, music, literature, etc. — completely confused, and refuses to speak any language except his own. And then there is the Scot — defined by his anger at the English; and finally, there is the German who does nothing but drink. Portia sensibly refuses to be married to a "sponge."

Basically, we can say that this scene has three major purposes. First, it outlines the device of the caskets for us, which will provide the dramatic basis for the scenes in which the various suitors "hazard" their choice of the proper casket for Portia's hand in marriage. Second, it introduces us to Portia — not simply as the "fair" object of Bassanio's love, but as a woman of powerful character and wit, perceptive about the people around her and quite able to hold her own in verbal combat with anyone in the play. This is a very important quality, given Portia's subsequent importance in the development of the plot. Her brilliance much later in the play, as a result, will not come as a surprise to the audience, especially when she superbly outwits the crafty Shylock. Finally, there is a minor but significant touch toward the end of the scene, when Nerissa asks Portia whether or not she remembers a certain "Venetian, a scholar and a soldier" who had earlier visited Belmont. First, we hear Portia's immediate recall of Bassanio, indicating her vivid memory of him and implying an interest in him. This scene reminds us that, despite the obstructions to come, this is a comedy, and that because of Bassanio's attempt to win Portia and her affection for him, both of them will be finally rewarded.

Act I, scene ii introduces Portia, the heroine of the play, and establishes the casket test through which she will find a husband. After we see more of Portia, her compliance with her dead father’s instructions may seem odd, as she proves to be an extremely independent and strong-willed character. However, her adherence to her father’s will establishes an important aspect of her character: she plays by the rules. Her strict adherence to laws and other strictures makes her an interesting counterpoint to Shylock, the play’s villain, whom we meet in the next scene.

Because Portia is such a fabulously wealthy heiress, the only men eligible to court her are from the highest end of the social strata. As a result, the competition between her suitors is international, including noblemen from various parts of Europe and even Africa. Portia’s description of her previous suitors serves as a vehicle for Shakespeare to satirize the nobleman of France, Scotland, Germany, and England for the amusement of his English audience. At the end of the scene, the arrival of the prince of Morocco is announced, introducing a suitor who is racially and culturally more distant from Portia than her previous suitors. The casket test seems designed to give an equal chance to all of these different noblemen, so the competition for Portia’s hand and wealth in Belmont parallels the financial community of Venice, which is also organized to include men of many nations, Christian and non-Christian alike. Portia’s remarks about the prince of Morocco’s devilish skin color, however, show that she is rooting for a husband who is culturally and racially similar to her. In fact, she hopes to marry Bassanio, the suitor with the background closest to hers.

Critical Study:

[Portia](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Portia) tells her servant and friend [Nerissa](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Nerissa) of her frustration and weariness at the suitors who have swarmed her home seeking to marry her. She also expresses frustration at her recently deceased father's plan to choose his daughter a husband. Even though her father is dead, Portia feels bound to follow his wishes even though it means she will not be able to choose a husband for herself. Nerissa expresses faith in Portia's father's goodness and reasoning and encourages her friend to trust that her father's plan will work out for the best. Then Nerissa asks what Portia thinks of the suitors she has met so far. Portia describes a prince from Naples who only talks about his horse, a count whose disposition is constantly sour, a French lord whose mood changes drastically minute to minute, an English baron who does not speak Portia's language (nor she his), a quarrelsome Scottish lord, and a drunken German nobleman. None of these options appeals to Portia, but she affirms her oath to follow her father's wishes and hopes the Venetian "scholar and soldier," [Bassanio](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Bassanio), will return to woo her. Then Portia and Nerissa are called away to greet a new arrival, the Prince of Morocco. [Portia](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Portia) is essentially at the mercy of a man's wishes in this section, bound to follow her father's plan, as absurd as it seems to her. Her position reflects a general lack of power in a world run by men, and despite [Nerissa](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Nerissa)'s reassurances, she fears her father's scheme—which leaves so much to chance—may land her with a husband who speaks a different language, who is a drunkard, who is abusive, or worse. Portia's objections to her suitors also fall in line with the play's theme of prejudice and distaste for those who are different. The Neapolitan prince is Italian, but his worst flaw is that he is boring. The English baron speaks only his own language; the French lord is unreliable; the Scot picks fights; the German drinks. While Portia's objections to each of these men as a life partner are understandable, their flaws are rooted in the worst stereotypes associated with their nationalities. Portia's objections to these men are delivered entirely through her description, which means they come to the audience through her perception. Audience members do not see these characters or their behavior firsthand. It is possible she's exaggerating their faults because she wants a suitor like herself in race and nationality, which is borne out by her preference for [Bassanio](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Bassanio), despite having met him only once.

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

***Summary Part 1:***

At her estate in Belmont, near Venice, Portia complains to her servant [Nerissa](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) that she's "aweary of this great world" (1.2.1–2). Nerissa observes that to be rich and have everything, as Portia does, is just as depressing as having nothing: it would be better if she could choose to live a more moderate, ordinary life.

***Analysis Part 1:***

Like Antonio in the first scene, Portia complains to her trusted friend about being sad. Nerissa, like Salerio, first offers a materialistic explanation—Portia is depressed by having too much money and possessions.

***Summary Part 2:***

[Portia](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/portia) replies that in fact she's frustrated by her total lack of control over her romantic situation. Portia and [Nerissa](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) discuss this situation: Portia's dead father specified in his will that she couldn't choose her own husband. Instead, when he died, Portia's father left behind a riddle. Anyone who wants to marry Portia must choose one of three "caskets" (chests), each marked with a clue. One is made of gold, one of silver, and one of lead. Only the man who chooses the correct casket can take Portia as his bride.

***Analysis Part 2:***

Portia has more concrete grounds for being depressed: her father's will has entrapped her in a legal contract that leaves her with no control over her love life. The will gambles her whole fate on the—as yet, mysterious—riddle of the caskets, which her suitors must interpret.

***Summary Part 3:***

[Nerissa](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) asks what Portia thinks of the foreign princes who have come to woo her so far. [Nerissa](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) lists their names, and Portia mocks them one by one. The Neapolitan? He reminds her of a horse. The prince from Palatine? Humorless. The Frenchman? Boring. The British Baron? Too ignorant even to speak to Portia, knowing neither Latin, Italian, nor French—and badly dressed, to boot! The Scottish lord? Didn't even have enough money to come on his own; he had to borrow from the Englishman. The German Duke's nephew? A drunk who is "little better than a beast" (1.2.89). Nerissa observes that, in any case, Portia is safe because none of these suitors has agreed to try his hand at the riddle. Portia resolves, in turn, that, despite her frustration, she will obey her father's decree.

***Analysis Part 3:***

Portia's speeches show that she's witty and self-possessed, but also cruel and prejudiced—as well as materialistic, on occasion (for instance, when she rejects the Scottish lord for not having enough money). Dismissing her German suitor as a "beast," she also makes the first of a number of animal insults that occur throughout the play, usually applied to Shylock and used by the Venetians to question the humanity of Jews. Yet, despite her frustration, Portia will remain within the legal framework willed to her.

***Summary Part 4:***

[Nerissa](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) asks Portia whether she remembers a Venetian man who once came—[Bassanio](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/bassanio). Portia does, fondly. Just then, a servant enters. He informs Portia that the suitors who have been at Belmont are departing and that the Prince of Morocco is coming that night. Portia remarks that she's happy to see the others go, but that she would rather be murdered than marry a man with the "complexion of a devil."

***Analysis Part 4:***

For the first time Nerissa and Portia show some hopefulness about a prospective suitor. But, confronted with the prospect of Morocco, Portia again demonstrates her bleak outlook about her marriage. She also gives a hint of ethnic prejudices she will later reveal more fully.

***Important Quotations:***

***Quotation1:***

You would be [weary], sweet madam if your miseries were in the same abundance as your good fortunes are. And yet, for aught I see, they are as sick that surfeit with too much as they that starve with nothing.

***Explanation 1:***

When Portia claims she is weary with the world, Nerissa reminds her how many good fortunes she has in her life—not the least of which is her wealth. Nerissa does not scold Portia for being ungrateful, but she observes that those who have too much are often as unhappy as those who have too little. This introduction to these two women illustrates how Nerissa, with her common sense and good cheer, is a grounding force for Portia.

***Quotation 2:***

 If I live to be as old as Sibylla, I will die as chaste as Diana unless I be obtained by the manner of my father's will.

***Explanation 2:***

Portia does not like the riddle her dead father has left to choose her husband because she feels it leaves open the chance she may have to marry one of the horrible men who are pursuing her. Still she vows to honor her father's wishes even if it means she must live a long life with no physical contact. She compares herself with the mythological Sibyl of Cumae, a prophet granted exceptionally long life, and the Roman goddess Diana, the patron of virginity. Portia would prefer a life of isolation over disobeying her father's will. Still, given the guys she's looking at, it's no great loss not to marry. Portia is strong-willed and doesn't seem like a romantic; she bravely faces the possibility of dying old and alone.

***Quotation 3:***

NERISSA  
You need not fear, lady, the having any of  
these lords. They have acquainted me with their  
determinations, which is indeed to return to their  
home and to trouble you with no more suit, unless  
you may be won by some other sort than your  
father's imposition depending on the caskets. (1.2.100-105)

***Explanation 3:***

The casket contest for Portia's hand in marriage is a pretty risky undertaking: if a suitor chooses the wrong casket, he can never pursue marriage (with anybody) again. Here we learn that some of the suitors would rather not play this game. They clearly desired marriage (or they wouldn't have shown up), but it isn't worth the risk. This pretty much automatically disqualifies them from being worthy of marrying Portia. It seems her father was looking for someone who'd be willing to risk everything for the girl.

***Quotation 4:***

NERISSA  
Your father was ever virtuous, and holy men  
at their death have good inspirations. Therefore the  
lottery, that he hath devised in these three chests of  
gold, silver and lead, whereof who chooses his  
meaning chooses you, will no doubt never be  
chosen by any rightly but one who shall rightly  
love. (1.2.27-33)

***Explanation 4:***

Nerissa insists that Portia's father had good intentions when he devised the casket contest as a way to determine Portia's husband. (Whoever picks the correct casket gets Portia and all of her dead dad's money.) Yet we can also read the casket contest as a way for Portia's dad to control where his wealth goes. By orchestrating his daughter's marriage from beyond the grave, Portia's father is able to transmit all of his wealth to the man of his choosing, which is why Portia complains that she is a "living daughter curbed by the will / of a dead father" (1.2.3).

***Quotation 5:***

PORTIA  
Yes, yes, it was Bassanio—as I think, so was he  
   called.  
NERISSA  
True, madam. He, of all the men that ever my  
foolish eyes looked upon, was the best deserving a  
fair lady.  
PORTIA  
I remember him well, and I remember him worthy of thy  
praise. (1.2.115-121)

***Explanation 5:***

Portia's first mention of Bassanio is measured and calm. She doesn't seem particularly stricken by love, but then again she might be understating. Also, she doesn't sound like a girl who was admiring Mr. Bassanio all over Belmont.

***Quotation 6:***

PORTIA  
If I could bid the fifth welcome with so good  
heart as I can bid the other four farewell, I should  
be glad of his approach. If he have the condition of  
a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather  
he should shrive me than wive me. (1.2.127-131)

***Explanation 6:***

Characters like Portia are intolerant of anyone who doesn't share her religious, ethnic, and national background. Here she says she'd never want to marry the Prince of Morocco (even if the guy were a "saint") because he's got a dark complexion like "the devil." In Shakespeare's day, black men (like the characters [Othello](https://www.shmoop.com/othello/othello-character.html) and [Aaron the Moor](https://www.shmoop.com/titus-andronicus-shakespeare/aaron.html)) were often associated with the devil and evil in general.

***Quotation 7:***

PORTIA  
But this reasoning is not in the fashion to  
choose me a husband. O me, the word "choose"! I may neither  
choose who I would nor refuse who I dislike; so is the will of a  
living daughter curb'd by the will of a dead father. Is it not  
hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one, nor refuse none? (1.2.3)

***Explanation 7:***

Portia seems to resent the fact that she doesn't have a choice in her marriage. Though she doesn't say she would like to disobey her father's will, she clearly feels limited by the fact that he's snatched her choice away from her from beyond the grave. Again, we see that she's strong-willed enough to dislike her father's choice (so she's not a pushover), but she's generally a good girl. So, even though her father is dead, she won't defy his will.

***Quotation 8:***

PORTIA  
I am glad this parcel of wooers are so reasonable; for there is not  
one among them but I dote on his very absence, and I pray God  
grant them a fair departure. (1.2.15)

***Explanation 8:***

Portia has a ton of choices, but she doesn't like any of them. Her plight is similar to that of Penelope in the Odyssey. Like Portia, Penelope's suitors wanted her for all the wrong reasons. We do wonder, though, at the fact that Portia seems to hate all of the men for their character flaws, when the obvious reason to hate them is that they're trying to use her.