

The Merchant of Venice: Act 1 Scene 2

“So is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father.”

We now meet Portia, who complains to her woman-in-waiting, Nerissa, that she's tired of the world. Nerissa points out that being rich doesn't exempt one from problems. It turns out that Portia can neither choose nor refuse a husband, but must instead follow her dead father's will. It seems that he set up a lottery to determine whom Portia would marry. Regardless, Nerissa promises she isn't worried for Portia; each of the suitors have told her that they intend to leave soon enough.

However, there is one man, Nerissa points out, who wasn't all that bad. Bassanio, a scholar and a soldier who once visited Portia's court, seemed like the marrying type. Before she can comment much further, Portia readies Nerissa to greet a Moroccan prince and complains that as soon as one suitor leaves, another follows quickly to take his place...

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. Why does Portia tell her lady in waiting she is tired of the world?

- (a) War and tyranny are frustrating her.
- (b) She is shackled by her fortune.
- (c) Her father and friend died.
- (d) She cannot make her own choices.

2. Who is meant to pick a husband for Portia?

- (a) Her godfather.
- (b) Her uncle.
- (c) Herself.
- (d) Her father.

3. Which of these is NOT one of Portia's suitors?

- (a) Monsieur Le Bon.
- (b) Desogry, Prince of Sudan.
- (c) Falconbridge, Baron of England.
- (d) Nephew of the Duke of Saxony.

4. What did one of Portia's suitors have too much fondness for?

- (a) His looks.
- (b) His horse.
- (c) His money.
- (d) Nerissa.

5. Which material is NOT used in the lottery?

- (a) Lead.
- (b) Silver.
- (c) Gold.
- (d) Brass.

6. What will the correct suitor find inside the correct chest?

- (a) The key to the master bedroom.
- (b) Wedding rings.
- (c) Portia's picture.
- (d) A marriage certificate.

7. Whose arrival is announced at the end of the second scene?

- (a) Portia's father.
- (b) A merchant.
- (c) Another suitor.
- (d) Portia's godfather.

8. Where is this person coming from?

- (a) Venice.
- (b) Morocco.
- (c) France.
- (d) Britain.

9. Where are the rules for Portia's suitors listed?

- (a) The deed of inheritance.
- (b) A royal decree.
- (c) A book of decorum.
- (d) Her father's will.

10. Complete this line: 'While we shut the gate upon one wooer another...'

- (a) Takes the floor.
- (b) Knocks at the door.
- (c) Opens up more.
- (d) Makes my head sore.

Understanding and Interpretation

1. How does Portia feel at the beginning of the play, and why?
2. What is Nerissa's role in this scene?
3. How and why might Portia's comments about her various suitors be funny to an audience – and how might they contribute to the serious themes of the play as well?
4. What is the role of Portia's father in this scene?
5. In what ways is this scene similar to the opening scene? Have you noticed any examples of 'symmetry' in the play so far?

Important Character: *Portia*

"O me, the word 'choose'! I may neither choose who I would or refuse who I dislike."



The heiress to her dead father's fortune, Portia's wealth makes her valuable in the eyes of Bassanio, who sees Portia as the answer to all his financial woes—if he can marry her. As Bassanio points out, he's not the only guy who'd like to land the heiress: *"Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth, / For the four winds blow in from every coast / Renowned suitors"* willing to risk everything for a chance to marry Portia.

Not only is every potential suitor out to get his hands on Portia's wealth, but Portia doesn't even get to choose her husband, because her (dead) dad set up a little contest ("lottery") involving three caskets to ensure Portia married the "right" man. Portia's dad knew how attractive Portia would be as a rich, single girl, so he did what any wealthy 16th-century Shakespearean father would and made sure his only daughter would marry the man of *his* choosing.

Throughout the play Portia is limited by her circumstances as a woman; she has to obey the wishes of her father and navigate relationships with men (like Bassanio) who want her for her money. While she is intended to be a sympathetic figure, to modern audiences some of her dialogue sounds crass and racist. In this scene, she not only makes plenty of fun out of national stereotypes, but also comments on the colour of the Duke of Morocco's skin and presents this as the reason she hopes he will fail her father's test. It's clear she cannot look past appearances; yet we must remember that Portia herself is oppressed and deprived of autonomy by her deceased father's plan. Women are afforded so few rights in her society so, trapped by a patriarchal scheme, perhaps it's natural for her to exercise what power she does have over other marginalized people? While her racism was as common in 16th century Europe as anti-Semitism, in the present day we might more easily see how the cycle of dehumanization emerges over the course of the play.

Discussion Point: *Portia's character*

Consider this scene and your first impressions of Portia's character. Think about what you've read of her dialogue, and whether the play's context influences your response. Does it matter that people in Shakespeare's time held very different views about, for instance, love and marriage, or race? Is Portia able to marry for love? Is there anything wrong with marrying for reasons other than love?

Quotation Bank

If you only remember three lines, remember these...

<p>PORTIA 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 curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one, nor refuse none? (1.2.22-26)</p>	<p><i>The repetition of the word 'choose' is a key feature of this quotation and the implication of Portia's point is made clear by the irony that, even after his death, she is neither independent of her father's control nor free of the obligation to obey his desires.</i></p>
<p>PORTIA If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches, and poor men's cottages princes' palaces. (1.2.12 -13)</p>	<p><i>Or, 'words are easier than actions.' Hearing these lines allows the audience to contrast Portia's careful, thoughtful approach to problem solving with the 'throw good money after bad' approach adopted by Bassanio in the previous scene.</i></p>
<p>PORTIA Come Nerissa; sirrah, go before: Whiles we shut the gate upon one wooer, another knocks at the door. (1.2.121-122)</p>	<p><i>You may have noticed how Portia and Nerissa spoke in prose throughout this scene. This may be to differentiate them from other characters in the opening act – notably they are women who have to live under curbed circumstances, despite the privileged wealth Portia enjoys. However, in this final line, Portia reverts to rhyme. The couplet reinforces the sense that her life is boring and repetitive, devoted as she must be to receiving endless suitors. The image of 'shut the gate' leaves her trapped inside the house, just as she is trapped by a culture that expects her to honour her father's wishes and marry someone of his choosing.</i></p>
<p>Based on your own reading of Act 1, Scene 2 and / or your classroom discussion, add two more memorable lines to this table, and provide analysis comments for each:</p>	