

The Merchant of Venice

Act I, Scene 2

CHARACTERS

Portia — a fair young woman possessing a sharp satiric wit

Nerissa — her closest friend

This scene allows us to truly see the intelligence and wit of Portia. Here is her dilemma: according to the will of her late father, she cannot marry a man of her own choosing. Instead, she must make herself available to all young men and accept the one who chooses “rightly” from among “three chests of gold, silver, and lead.” Nerissa, her closest friend, comforts her by trying to convince her that her father’s plan must be foolproof; whoever the man might be who finally chooses “rightly” will surely be the “one who shall rightly love.”

Nerissa asks Portia about the men who have come to woo her. With sarcastic humor, Portia replies on the faults of each, for none of her suitors interest her; they are either dull, superficial, or drunk. Furthermore, none of the men court her for any length of time because the penalty for choosing the wrong casket condemns each to remain a bachelor for the rest of his life.

Basically, there are three purposes to this scene: 1) to establish the powerful character and wit of Portia; 2) to provide Portia’s dilemma, i.e., her father’s plan of having her suitors choose from the caskets of gold, silver, or lead; and 3) to introduce (at the end of the scene) Bassanio, the “Venetian scholar and soldier” who will, later in the play, win her heart.

1 **SETTING:** Portia's house at Belmont.
2 **AT RISE:** Enter Portia with her waiting woman, Nerissa.
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4 **PORTIA:** By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of
5 this great world.
6 **NERISSA:** You would be, sweet madam, if your miseries were
7 in the same abundance as your good fortunes are; and
8 yet, for aught I see, they are as sick that surfeit with too
9 much as they that starve with nothing. It is no mean
10 happiness, therefore, to be seated in the mean. Superfluity
11 comes sooner by white hairs, but competency lives longer.
12 **PORTIA:** Good sentences, and well pronounced.
13 **NERISSA:** They would be better if well followed.
14 **PORTIA:** If to do were as easy as to know what were good
15 to do, chapels had been churches, and poor men's cottages
16 princes' palaces. It is a good divine that follows his own
17 instructions. I can easier teach twenty what were good to
18 be done than be one of the twenty to follow mine own
19 teaching. The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a
20 hot temper leaps o'er a cold decree: such a hare is madness
21 the youth, to skip o'er the meshes of good counsel the
22 cripple. But this reasoning is not in the fashion to choose
23 me a husband. O me, the word "choose"! I may neither
24 choose who I would nor refuse who I dislike, so is the will
25 of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father.
26 Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one nor refuse
27 none?
28 **NERISSA:** Your father was ever virtuous, and holy men at
29 their death have good inspirations: therefore the lott'ry
30 that he hath devised in these three chests of gold, silver,
31 and lead, whereof who chooses his meaning chooses you,
32 will no doubt never be chosen by any rightly but one who
33 you shall rightly love. But what warmth is there in your
34 affection towards any of these princely suitors that are
35 already come?

1 **PORTIA:** I pray thee overname them; and as thou namest
2 them, I will describe them; and according to my
3 description level at my affection.
4 **NERISSA:** First, there is the Neapolitan prince.
5 **PORTIA:** Ay, that's a colt indeed, for he doth nothing but talk
6 of his horse, and he makes it a great appropriation unto
7 his own good parts that he can shoe him himself: I am
8 much afraid my lady his mother played false with a smith.
9 **NERISSA:** Then is there the County Palatine.
10 **PORTIA:** He doth nothing but frown, as who should say, "An
11 you will not have me, choose!" He hears merry tales and
12 smiles not. I fear he will prove the weeping philosopher
13 when he grows old, being so full of unmannerly sadness
14 in his youth. I had rather be married to a death's-head
15 with a bone in his mouth than to either of these. God defend
16 me from these two!
17 **NERISSA:** How say you by the French lord, Monsieur Le Bon?
18 **PORTIA:** God made him, and therefore let him pass for a man.
19 In truth, I know it is a sin to be a mocker, but he — why
20 he hath a horse better than the Neapolitan's, a better bad
21 habit of frowning than the Count Palatine. He is every
22 man in no man. If a throstle sing, he falls straight a-
23 cap'ring; he will fence with his own shadow. If I should
24 marry him, I should marry twenty husbands. If he would
25 despise me, I would forgive him; for if he love me to
26 madness, I shall never requite him.
27 **NERISSA:** What say you then to Falconbridge, the young
28 baron of England?
29 **PORTIA:** You know I say nothing to him, for he understands
30 not me, nor I him. He hath neither Latin, French, nor
31 Italian; and you will come into the court and swear that
32 I have a poor pennyworth in the English. He is a proper
33 man's picture, but alas! who can converse with a dumb
34 show? How oddly he is suited! I think he bought his doublet
35 in Italy, his round hose in France, his bonnet in Germany,

1 and his behavior everywhere.
2 NERISSA: What think you of the Scottish lord, his neighbor?
3 PORTIA: That he hath a neighborly charity in him, for he
4 borrowed a box of the ear of the Englishman, and swore
5 he would pay him again when he was able. I think the
6 Frenchman became his surety and sealed under for
7 another.
8 NERISSA: How like you the young German, the Duke of
9 Saxony's nephew?
10 PORTIA: Very vilely in the morning when he is sober, and
11 most vilely in the afternoon when he is drunk. When he
12 is best, he is a little worse than a man, and when he is
13 worst, he is little better than a beast: an the worst fall that
14 ever fell, I hope I shall make shift to go without him.
15 NERISSA: If he should offer to choose, and choose the right
16 casket, you should refuse to perform your father's will if
17 you should refuse to accept him.
18 PORTIA: Therefore, for fear of the worst, I pray thee set a
19 deep glass of Rhenish wine on the contrary casket, for if
20 the devil be within and that temptation without, I know
21 he will choose it. I will do anything, Nerissa, ere I will be
22 married to a sponge.
23 NERISSA: You need not fear, lady, the having any of these
24 lords. They have acquainted me with their determinations,
25 which is indeed to return to their home, and to trouble
26 you with no more suit, unless you may be won by some
27 other sort than your father's imposition, depending on the
28 caskets.
29 PORTIA: If I live to be as old as Sibylla, I will die as chaste
30 as Diana unless I be obtained by the manner of my father's
31 will. I am glad this parcel of wooers are so reasonable, for
32 there is not one among them but I dote on his very absence;
33 and I pray God grant them a fair departure.
34 NERISSA: Do you not remember, lady, in your father's time,
35 a Venetian, a scholar and a soldier, that came hither in

1 company of the Marquis of Montferrat?
2 PORTIA: Yes, yes, it was Bassanio, as I think, so was he called.
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