

Describe portia's
suitors, and discuss
her opinions of them
essay



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This is the first scene that we see Portia and Nerissa, her maid. Although one works for the other they are still close friends despite this and talk to each other in an honest and friendly way. Shakespeare introduces them to us in this way because it gives a large amount of information that the audience need to know, it also gives the audience a good indication to what these two characters are in fact like. In the conversation that takes place between Portia and Nerissa we (the audience) learn of what situation both the characters are in.

We learn that Portia's father has recently died before Portia has become engaged; we also learn that she has inherited all of his wealth. Her father has stated in his will that Portia must marry a man that completes the puzzle/challenge that he has devised. We learn in the very beginning of the conversation that Portia is feeling down and sad at the world, because she feels "curbed by the will of a dead father" She feels that it is unfair on her that her father has set this challenge to all the suitors that will now come to try to woo her, she feels that it is more unfair that she cannot choose or refuse who her husband will be.

The task that has been set by Portia's late father is a challenge designed to make sure that the man that Portia marries is interested in her and not in the inheritance that she has. He has done this making the challenge symbolic of wealth; the task is to pick the casket that has a portrait of Portia within.

There are three caskets in total, one made of gold, one of silver and one of lead. Each one has a riddle engraved on the front to help the suitor choose the correct case, they are symbolic of wealth because the suitor who

chooses the gold is obviously interested in the money because gold is the most expensive material there.

So the suitor who chooses the lead case will have Portia's hand in marriage because he chose the casket that has the least value. Although it is a gamble for the suitor because if he chooses the wrong casket he must promise never to marry, this was set because it means that the men that do enter the challenge are very interested in Portia and willing to take such a gamble for her. In the conversation of Nerissa and Portia, Nerissa starts to list the suitors that have already been to try and woo Portia and asks her of her opinions of each of them.

In this we see that Portia is in fact very witty and intelligent, which in Elizabethan times it would have been odd for a woman to have been portrayed as more intelligent than the men. First is the Neapolitan Prince, who when with Portia talks about nothing but his horse and he boasts about he is able to shoe it himself. To an Elizabethan this would have matched the stereotype that they conceived as someone from Naples; the audience will have known that young men from Naples are renowned for their horse skills.

And the audience would have enjoyed the fact that the Prince played up to this stereotype, and that all this character did was boast about his horse skills. Portia at one point mocks him by calling him a "colt", which is a term for a young, untamed male horse. She makes fun of him again saying that his mother, who in Naples will be a woman of high status and wealth, must have "played false with a smith". By this she is suggesting that his mother

had an affair with a black smith, with him being the result and this is why he has such an interest in horses.

Portia, although she does not give an over all opinion of him, we can tell from what she has said that she is not attracted to him, because if they did get married then he would probably love his horse more than her. The second suitor was the County Palatine or German Prince. The first thing that Portia says about him is " He doth nothing but frown" According to Portia he is miserable and finds nothing to his amusement, or anything that makes him happy let alone smile.

" He hears merry tales and smiles not" By this Portia means that he doesn't even smile at jokes and she believes that he will become the weeping philosopher" Meaning that he will submerge himself in deep thought, which will only make him miserable further. Portia then goes on to make a slightly crude comment when she says " I had rather be married to a death's-head with a bone in his mouth than to either of these. " Portia is making a strong statement here; she is saying that she would rather be married to a skull or a dead man than to one of these princes. She then asks God to defend her from them; we learn here she is religious and that she is asking God to make them pick the wrong casket so that she doesn't have to marry either of them.

The third suitor is the French Lord, Monsieur Le Bon. The Elizabethan audience will have had known what the stereotypical French man was like, and again they will have enjoyed to have seen this character live up to that stereotype. They would have believed (we still believe in the same

stereotype today) that the French were fussy, that they picked at every single thing whether it food or a political system, they will have also believed that the French are arrogant, believing that they are above every one else in every single aspect.

Portia comments on his arrogance by saying, Why he had a better horse than the Neapolitan's... " By this she means that he boasted about his horse, saying that it was better than the Neapolitan's, she also goes on to comment on his personality by saying, " better bad habit of frowning than the count Palatine" So the French prince despite being rich is miserable with life and the world in general. She doesn't like his personality at all and thinks that he is moody, and that these moods can swing from to the other with no warning what so ever, " he is every man and no man; if a throstle sing, he falls straight a-capering; he will fence with his own shadow.

She finds his different personalities difficult to cope with and if they did get married it would be like marrying " twenty husbands". Overall she doesn't like him and doesn't think that she could ever love him. " If I should marry him, I should marry twenty husbands. " The fourth, Falconbridge the young Barron of England, although the English Elizabethan audience is not likely to know what the other nations will conceive as a stereotypical English man, Shakespeare still makes this suitor play up to his national stereotype.

The English in the 1500's were known for being ignorant of other cultures; many believe this to be because they're on an island and so have being cut off from the rest of Europe. One of the major reasons that this is believed is because very few of the English know a second, let alone third language.

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This is mentioned by Portia because Nerissa asks "What do you say then to Falconbridge?" To which Portia replies, "You know that I say nothing to him, for he understands not me, nor I him: he hath neither Latin, French nor Italian"

This is an immediate problem because they cannot communicate with each other, and so it is very difficult for the Barron to court Portia. We also learn that Portia thinks that the Young English man is very attractive when she says, "He is a proper man's picture" Portia also makes quite a cruel comment, although it is very amusing when she says, "Alas who can converse with a dumb show?" The English are also believed to be ill educated, and therefore not particularly bright. Also because England was invaded by many different nations then their language and fashion is a mixture of different cultures, even if they don't particularly match.

The young Barron lives up to this national stereotype because Portia does comment on it by saying, "How oddly he is suited I think that he bought his doublet in Italy, his round hose in France, his bonnet in Germany, and his behaviour everywhere." The next is the Scottish Lord, the audience of the period will have known that there were often wars between England and Scotland, they will have also known that the French often backed the Scottish armies when they were at war with England.

We see that this reflected in the play, when the individual characters play it out from the different nations, when Nerissa asks Portia her opinion on the Lord, Portia replies, "He borrowed a box of the ear of the Englishman, and swore he would pay him again when he was able. I think that the Frenchman

became his surety and sealed under for another. " Finally there's the young German, the Duke of Saxony's nephew. Here the stereotype of a German man is played up to, an Elizabethan audience would have believed that all Germans drank a lot, which the young German defiantly plays up to.

Portia when asked if she likes him says " Very vilely in the morning when he is sober and most vilely in the after when he is drunk" She also says that he is worse than a man when he is sober and little worse than a " beast" when he is drunk. From what she says we can tell that she really does not like him, so much so that she plans to (if he does decide to choose the casket) put a glass of wine on the wrong casket so that " If the devil be within, and temptation without, I know that he will choose it"

By this she means that he would be tempted to the casket that is not the right one and so she would not have to marry him, for she would rather cheat her dead fathers will than be " married to a sponge. " Nerrisa informs Portia that all of these suitors have left without choosing any of the caskets.

Nerrissa also reminds Portia of a young Venetian man that came to visit when he father was alive, called Bassanio, Portia does remember him and becomes quite exited at the memory, at which point she says, I remember him well, and I remember him worthy of thy praise. " A servant enters the room towards the end of the scene and informs Portia that the four suitors are taking their leave and wish to bid farewell to her. He also brings news that a fifth is arriving, a prince of Morocco. Portia comments saying, " If he have the condition of a saint, and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he

should thrive me than wive me. ” Which is a truly racist comment, which shows that she is no better than male characters in the play.