

PORTIA – THE MERCHANT OF VENICE – WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

We actually hear about Portia before we meet her – and listening to what other characters say is a great way to learn about a character. In Act I, Scene i, Bassanio tells his buddy Antonio about Portia. The very first thing he says about her is that she's very wealthy because of an inheritance. He then mentions that she is blonde and beautiful and that he thinks she likes him because of the way she looks at him. The problem is that a lot of other people know that she's rich and available, so there are a lot of men competing for her attention. Here is Bassanio's speech:

"In Belmont is a lady richly left,
And she is fair, and, fairer than that word,
Of wondrous virtues: sometimes from her eyes
I did receive fair speechless messages:
Her name is Portia; nothing undervalued
To Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia:
Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth
For the four winds blow in from every coast
Renowned suitors: and her sunny locks
Hang on her temples like a golden fleece
Which makes her seat of Belmont Colcho's strond,
And many Jasons come in quest of her.

O my Antonia, had I but the means
To hold a rival place with one of them,
I have a mind presages me such thrift,
That I should questionless be fortunate!"

Bassanio clearly thinks Portia is pretty great, but we have to keep in mind that he's also in debt up to his eyeballs. In fact, it sounds like most of the suitors are more interested in her money than in her. So even though Portia is beautiful, the fact that she's also rich seems to be her distinguishing feature to most of the men in her life.