



*The Merchant of Venice* — Act 2, Scene 1:  
"To make me blest—or cursèd'st among men!"

**A** **Comprehension & Close Reading**

- 1 How does the prince of Morocco respond to Portia's dislike of his black skin?
- 2 Read Portia's response to Morocco carefully. Why does she repeatedly stress her lack of choice in the matter of her marriage? In particular, explain the dramatic irony in Portia's response that the prince "stood as fair / As any comer [she has] looked on yet / For [her] affection." Although her tone is polite, how might her meaning be perceived as cruel?
- 3 How might Portia's cruelty to her suitors be a response to her frustration at being bound by her father's lottery system?
- 4 How does his allusion to Hercules and Lychas playing dice explain Morocco's misgivings as he contemplates the caskets?
- 5 What does Portia reveal about her father's test that makes the risk of losing even greater?



**B** **Writing Task — Analysing Character and Language** (*in pairs*)

This is a short scene, preparing for Morocco's choice of casket, and his words are intended to make an instant impression on Portia.

1. *Share a reading of Morocco's two speeches (2.1.1-12 and 22-38), then work together to rewrite them in simple, modern English prose. Afterwards, place your new script alongside Morocco's original.*
  - *What are the main differences between the two versions, and what does Morocco's language suggest about him as a character?*
2. *Morocco is described in the stage direction as a "tawny Moor". He asks Portia not to dislike him for the colour of his skin (1-2).*
  - *While Portia's reply is polite, is she being ironic when she calls him "fair"?*
  - *Keeping in mind how critical Portia seems about her dead father, referring to the way in which he "scanted" (restricted) and "hedged" her actions, write a diary entry in modern English in which Portia reveals her true feelings about Morocco and her father.*



*The Prince of Morocco, costume design by Jess Goldstein, 2015.*



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**5** What does Portia reveal about her father's test that makes the risk of losing even greater?

*Suitors who choose incorrectly become bound by word and honor "never to speak to lady afterward / In way of marriage." By forfeiting their right to marry, they forfeit the chance to produce heirs, a serious consequence to men of fortune.*

### **1** Teacher's Guide — Act 2, Scene 1

#### *Summary & Analysis of Act 2, Scene 1:*

*The Prince of Morocco arrives at Portia's house in Belmont, seeking her hand in marriage. He asks Portia to disregard their racial difference and judge him instead by his personal merits. Portia reminds Morocco that the choice is not hers to make; he, like the other suitors, must face her father's challenge of the three caskets. She assures him, however, that she regards him "as fair/ As any comer [she has] looked on yet/ For [her] affection" (lines 20-22). Morocco laments that, in spite of his valor, mere chance may deprive him of Portia. Portia refers him to the terms of her father's will, which he accepts. They agree to perform the test after dinner.*

*This short scene introduces the audience to the Prince of Morocco, who will make the first unsuccessful attempt to pass the test designed by Portia's father to determine who will marry her. In terms of the play's themes, its chief interest is its explorations of racial animosity, which we have seen earlier in the encounter between Shylock and the two Christians. Morocco requests that Portia "Mislike [him] not for [his] complexion" (line 1) but rather consider him for his personal worth. Although Portia claims that this is her policy, the sincerity of her claim is later called into question at the close of Act II Scene 7. A*

*fter Morocco fails the test and departs, Portia says in relief "A gentle riddance.../ Let all of his complexion choose me so" (lines 78-9). Unlike Shakespeare's contemporaries, who may have endorsed such sentiments, more modern audiences might perhaps have an ugly impression of the attitudes of the Christians in the play. Though Morocco is a minor character, such scenes may inform the audience's feeling about Shylock and his indictments of Christian hypocrisy. Morocco's incorrect choice also represents the tendency of suitors to treat Portia like an object of desire rather than a human being.*