

Study Questions for "Portia" (*The Merchant of Venice*)
from Chris Wind's *Soliloquies: the lady doth indeed protest*

Portia

If I'm the one with the property
You'd think I'd be the buyer
Not the bought;
A lot of faith my father has in me:
He distrusts my ability to judge, to discriminate—
A decision made by chance,
A decision inevitably and ultimately irrational,
Is preferable to a decision made by me.
 But no, you say,
The decision was not to be by chance
But choice, and thus reveal the suitor's character—
That is, he who chose lead would be wise,
To forsake appearance, and realize its irrelevance;
True, but you forget the inscription:
To choose lead, to choose 'to give and hazard all'
Is to my mind *not* wise,
For its foolish risk (all!);
Is it not better to choose silver,
And 'get what one deserves'?
It seems to me a mature perspective;
So, to judge by appearance
(And thus forsake appearance)
Or to judge by words
—That is the choice.
Words have meaning,
And unless the words be false or deceiving,
Is it not better to judge according to content,
Than to judge according to form
To substance, rather than pretence?
So if it was to be a test of character,
'Twas thus a poor test,
For who was to guess what my father intended:
The form did contradict the content;

And so choice becomes chance, after all.

That *I* am not allowed to choose
Is in principle, intolerable,
But in practice, just as well—
For there is really not a one worth choosing:
A prince who boasts of his precious Porsche

And can fix it himself;
The County Palatine, who believes
A real man never smiles;
Falconbridge, a pin-up boy
With a mind as two-dimensional;
A Scottish Lord interested in nothing
But a good fight;
An alcoholic (the duke's nephew, yes);
The Prince of Morocco, a blood-thirsty Rambo;
And Bassanio, attracted by wealth and beauty,
Willing in a moment to sacrifice his wife for his friend.
There is not one.

If I so despise men,
Why did I disguise as one?
'Twas not my choice:
Shakespeare (a man) created my costume
(And that of Viola and Rosalind),
And in his cowardice, he refused to challenge the reality
That to be able to interact
Without having to defend against
Sexual or romantic intentions,
One must be male;
That to be taken seriously,
And to be exempt from compliments that essentially trivialize
One must be male;
That to be effective at an endeavour
Of the intellectual arts,
One must be male;
That to be dominant, influential, powerful,
One must be male
In patterns of appearance, behaviour, speech, and thought
—Patterns of thought?

But didn't I put forward
The feminine concept of mercy over justice?
Didn't care and compassion win over fairness?

No, look again:

The Duke first pleaded for mercy, not I;
My case was won on a technicality,
On the letter of the law.
(Though it is worth mention
That recourse to such a legal loophole
Was my last resort.)

The masculist mode won out;
But this is not surprising in a masculist court.

Where there is no challenge,
There can be no change.
For when the disguise is finally revealed
It is not recognized
That to be what I was (what I am)

One can be female—
It is recognized only that I *am* female.
And their response concerns only themselves—
Relief, that they won't be cuckolds.

1. Do you agree with Portia's opening comments about her father's faith in her?
2. What do you think of Portia's analysis of the test her father subjected her suitors to?
3. Why does the author repeat "One must be male" so many times?

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Study Questions are also available for "Juliet", "Ophelia", "Lady MacBeth", "Desdemona", "Kate", and "Miranda".