

Antonio is ready to help Bassanio, whatever the circumstances. Bassanio explains that he wishes to marry Portia, a wealthy heiress. Rich and famous men from all over the world come to woo her.

1 Antonio's pledge: 'My purse . . .' (in pairs)

In lines 134–8, Antonio offers everything to help his friend Bassanio. Take turns in reading the lines aloud, then talk together about Antonio's attitude towards Bassanio. Also discuss whether you think he is throwing good money after bad.

2 First impressions of Portia (in small groups)

In lines 160–71 the audience first hears of Portia. Bassanio uses stories of Ancient Greece and Rome to praise her. He compares her (line 165) to Portia who was the daughter of Cato, a famous Roman politician, and the wife of Brutus, the 'honourable man' who was one of Julius Caesar's assassins. Bassanio also sees her as a rich prize, like the Golden Fleece the Greek hero Jason sought in Colchis (see p. 181). These references would have been understood by educated members of Shakespeare's audience. They also indicate Bassanio's high social status.

- Read aloud lines 160–71. Each person reads up to a punctuation mark, then hands on. Emphasise all the words and phrases Bassanio uses to praise Portia.
- Write a paragraph giving your own impressions of Portia from Bassanio's description.
- Talk together about what Bassanio's classical references add to his description of Portia.
- Suggest at least two possible reasons why Shakespeare chose to have Bassanio begin the description of Portia by explaining that she is 'a lady richly left'.

And if . . . honour and if it's honourable, as you are

My purse . . . occasions everything I have is at your disposal

a wilful . . . lost like a stupid boy, I've lost every penny I've borrowed from you

To wind . . . circumstance to make use of my love for you in a roundabout way

prest unto forced into

a lady richly left a rich heiress

ANTONIO	I pray you, good Bassanio, let me know it, And if it stand as you yourself still do Within the eye of honour, be assured My purse, my person, my extremest means Lie all unlocked to your occasions.	135
BASSANIO	In my schooldays, when I had lost one shaft, I shot his fellow of the selfsame flight The selfsame way, with more advised watch To find the other forth; and by adventuring both I oft found both. I urge this childhood proof Because what follows is pure innocence. I owe you much, and like a wilful youth That which I owe is lost; but if you please To shoot another arrow that self way Which you did shoot the first, I do not doubt, As I will watch the aim, or to find both Or bring your latter hazard back again And thankfully rest debtor for the first.	140 145 150
ANTONIO	You know me well, and herein spend but time To wind about my love with circumstance; And out of doubt you do me now more wrong In making question of my uttermost Than if you had made waste of all I have. Then do but say to me what I should do That in your knowledge may by me be done, And I am prest unto it: therefore speak.	155
BASSANIO	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 Colchos' strand, And many Jasons come in quest of her.	160 165 170

Act 1 Scene 1 - Before we meet Portia