

Portia appeals unsuccessfully to Shylock to show mercy. She explains that mercy can be neither forced nor diluted, and is greater than any monarch's power. Mercy and justice should go hand in hand, for mercy, not justice, will save us.

1 'The quality of mercy' (in small groups)

Portia's speech is world-famous. Try some of the following activities to help you understand its powerful appeal to women and men in all ages and all cultures.

- a Stand in a circle. Take turns to read aloud lines 180–93, handing over at each punctuation mark. Now read them again, but this time each reader adds a mime to illustrate the language. The whole group should then repeat the reader's words and actions.
- b Discuss whether, in line 193, Portia is openly anti-Semitic when she addresses Shylock as 'Jew'. Might he also be offended by her reference to 'gentle' (line 181) which puns on the word 'gentile' (a non-Jew; see p. 54)?
- c Look back to Shylock's speech (Act 3 Scene 1, lines 42–57) in which he declared not only his desire for revenge but also his common humanity with other men. Talk about the ways in which Portia's lines counterbalance Shylock's declamation. Present your response to the rest of the class in a dramatic or visual way.
- d Organise your own class debate about the conflict between justice and mercy. Should those who were guilty of the Holocaust have been shown mercy or justice? Would you follow Portia's advice and show mercy as well as justice to the Nazi soldier in this photograph?



impugn oppose
becomes suits
temporal earthly
attribute to quality of
sceptred sway authority of a monarch

seasons blends with
salvation life after death in heaven
render . . . **mercy** behave mercifully
mitigate moderate or tone down

DUKE Antonio and old Shylock, both stand forth.

PORTIA Is your name Shylock?

SHYLOCK Shylock is my name.

PORTIA Of a strange nature is the suit you follow,
 Yet in such rule that the Venetian law
 Cannot impugn you as you do proceed.
 – You stand within his danger, do you not?

175

ANTONIO Ay, so he says.

PORTIA Do you confess the bond?

ANTONIO I do.

PORTIA Then must the Jew be merciful.

SHYLOCK On what compulsion must I? Tell me that.

PORTIA The quality of mercy is not strained,
 It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
 Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
 It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes.
 'Tis mightiest in the mightiest, it becomes
 The thronèd monarch better than his crown.
 His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
 The attribute to awe and majesty,
 Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
 But mercy is above this sceptred sway.
 It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings,
 It is an attribute to God himself,
 And earthly power doth then show likest God's
 When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
 Though justice be thy plea, consider this:
 That in the course of justice, none of us
 Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
 And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
 The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much
 To mitigate the justice of thy plea,
 Which if thou follow, this strict court of Venice
 Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant there.

180

185

190

195

200

Act 4 Scene 1 - Portia's 'Mercy' Speech
 ORMISTON SENIOR COLLEGE

Shylock is defeated, and Portia insists on justice. She will not allow him to be repaid any money, only to take the pound of flesh at his peril.

1 Portia in control (in groups of four to six)

Shylock, sensing that victory is slipping away, agrees to accept a financial settlement of his bond. Bassanio is prepared to hand over the money, but Portia insists that 'justice' must prevail and that Shylock must exact the penalty. She shows that she is more than equal to the men of Venice.

- Read over Portia's speeches on the opposite page. Work out gestures you could use to accompany each statement she makes.
- Choose three quotations to show that Portia is in charge of events.
- Talk about whether you admire Portia's assertiveness. Women have little freedom in Venice, but is she setting a good example to other women in her treatment of Shylock?

2 Peripeteia: a reversal of fortune (in pairs)

A few moments ago, Shylock seemed triumphant, but now Portia has turned the tables on him. It is an example of **peripeteia** (a reversal of fortune), a term which originates in ancient Greek tragedy. Portia is determined to punish him for his treatment of Antonio. Read aloud only Shylock's words from line 294 to line 342, and trace the stages of his decline and loss of dignity. Present this in visual or diagrammatic form.

3 Gratiano rubs salt in

Gratiano is pleased to use Shylock's own words against him (lines 319, 329 and 336). Find Shylock's original expressions in this scene. Line 330 also echoes an earlier expression of Shylock's (in Act 1 Scene 3). Practise speaking the four lines aloud to convey Gratiano's pleasure at Shylock's discomfort. Decide on gestures to go with Gratiano's taunts (does 'on the hip' refer to where Shylock keeps his purse?). Do these lines confirm your earlier impression of Gratiano?

thrice three times over	principal the original sum owed (3,000 ducats)
Soft not so fast	the devil . . . it he's welcome to it
penalty the pound of flesh	I'll stay . . . question I'm not staying to argue about this
As makes . . . scruple even if it's just by a fraction	
scruple gram	

GRATIANO O learned judge! Mark, Jew: a learned judge.

SHYLOCK I take this offer then. Pay the bond thrice
And let the Christian go.

BASSANIO Here is the money. 315

PORTIA Soft.
The Jew shall have all justice; soft, no haste;
He shall have nothing but the penalty.

GRATIANO O Jew, an upright judge, a learned judge!

PORTIA Therefore prepare thee to cut off the flesh. 320
Shed thou no blood, nor cut thou less nor more
But just a pound of flesh. If thou tak'st more
Or less than a just pound, be it but so much
As makes it light or heavy in the substance
Or the division of the twentieth part 325
Of one poor scruple – nay, if the scale do turn
But in the estimation of a hair,
Thou diest, and all thy goods are confiscate.

GRATIANO A second Daniel; a Daniel, Jew!

Now, infidel, I have you on the hip. 330

PORTIA Why doth the Jew pause? Take thy forfeiture.

SHYLOCK Give me my principal, and let me go.

BASSANIO I have it ready for thee; here it is.

PORTIA He hath refused it in the open court.

He shall have merely justice and his bond. 335

GRATIANO A Daniel, still say I, a second Daniel!

I thank thee, Jew, for teaching me that word.

SHYLOCK Shall I not have barely my principal?

PORTIA Thou shalt have nothing but the forfeiture,
To be so taken at thy peril, Jew. 340

SHYLOCK Why then, the devil give him good of it!
I'll stay no longer question.