
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

Shakespeare Speaks

A pound of flesh



Narrator

It was late in the evening. William Shakespeare is at the palace of King James I.

King James

Mr Shakespeare! Welcome, welcome.

Will

Your majesty, it is a great honour to perform The Merchant of Venice for you a second time.

King James

The Queen and I enjoyed it so much we just had to see it again.

The Queen

You fell asleep halfway through dear, that's why you want to see it again.

King James

Nonsense. Mr Shakespeare, I particularly enjoyed your character Shylock. But what was all that about a pound of flesh?

Will

Well, Shylock lent some money to the businessman Antonio. And Antonio promised that if he didn't pay the money back, Shylock could cut a pound of flesh from his body.

King James

That's right, that's right. I remember it well now. What did he say? If you repay me not on such a day...

Shylock

If you repay me not on such a day,
In such a place, such sum or sums as are
Express'd in the condition, let the forfeit
Be nominated for an equal pound
Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken
In what part of your body pleaseth me.

Narrator

We'll leave them there for now. A pound of flesh? That's nearly half a kilogram! Modern English speakers use the phrase a **pound of flesh** when someone says they want justice, but the punishment they're asking for is so severe that it seems more like revenge. In the terrible case of US cinema gunman James Holmes, former prosecutor Bob Grant said:

Clip 1

The district attorney will argue that although the defendant is mentally ill, he is not insane under the law, and society deserves its pound of flesh from him.

Clip 2

I apologised and paid for the repairs after I crashed his car, but it isn't enough for him. He wants his pound of flesh. I think he's going to call the police...

The Queen

Mr Shakespeare, please tell the King what happens in the end, just in case he falls asleep again.

King James

I did not fall asleep! But yes, do tell me.

Will

Well, Antonio didn't pay the money back. The court agreed that Shylock could have his pound of flesh, but the court also said that he could not take even a single drop of blood.

King James

Aha! So Antonio was saved.

Will

Yes, your majesty.

The Queen

Ooh, the play is starting. Now do stay awake this time, dear...

King James

To sleep or not to sleep: that is the question...