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,
Through 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.
The Merchant of Venice Notes and Activities created by the RSC

Act: Four Scene: One
Character: Portia

About the speech

The Merchant of Venice is a play that focuses on love and revenge in a world of religious intolerance between the Christian and Jewish populations of Venice. At the centre of the play is a heated courtroom scene. Antonio, a Christian Venetian merchant, has signed a contract granting the Jewish moneylender, Shylock, a pound of his own flesh if he does not repay a loan. Antonio has borrowed the money in order to help his friend, Bassanio, marry the rich and intelligent Portia. Antonio is unable to repay the loan so Shylock takes him to court in order to demand his “pound of flesh”. Unknown to everyone in the courtroom, Bassanio’s love, Portia, has dressed up as a lawyer to defend Antonio.

At the beginning of the trial, Shylock asks Portia why he must be merciful to Antonio and this speech is Portia’s answer. She says that mercy should not be “strained” or forced, but instead should be given freely.

How actors work

During rehearsals, directors and actors often investigate the background of the Shakespeare play and character they are bringing to life. Shakespeare often highlights events happening in Elizabethan England through the language, characters, and plots of his plays. Understanding the context in which these plays were written will help you make interesting choices about how to perform a particular speech. Actors also connect the character they are playing with their own experiences and the world around them.

Find out about the Elizabethan view of mercy and justice. Are there differences between how mercy and justice were viewed 400 years ago? What do you think is the difference between showing somebody mercy and making sure justice is done? What are your feelings about showing mercy towards someone you don’t like?

Portia has to dress as a man to be a lawyer in court. What kinds of jobs were women allowed to do 400 years ago? Do you think Portia is brave or foolish to have disguised herself as a man in this way?

Performance Suggestions

Think about what Portia wants to achieve by saying these words. Does she believe that she can convince Shylock to act mercifully, or does she think this is a chance for her to have a voice in a man’s world? Can you suggest another interpretation? Try saying this speech as if Portia:

- believes Shylock can be convinced and is desperate to convince him
- is preaching to Shylock about her own Christian values
- is showing off her intelligence to the courtroom

Who is Portia talking to? Look through the speech and pick out moments where you think she is directly focused on Shylock, and moments where she is speaking to the courtroom. This will help focus where your attention is when you deliver the speech.

Take a look at the language of the speech and try mixing these different choices to see which ones work best for specific moments.