



A pound of flesh

©2010 eNotes.com, Inc. or its Licensors. Please see [copyright information](#) at the end of this document.

Shylock:

Most learnèd judge, a sentence! Come prepare!

Portia:

Tarry a little, there is something else.
This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood;
The words expressly are "a pound of flesh."

[The Merchant Of Venice Act 4, scene 1, 304–307](#)

"A pound of flesh" is a figurative way of referring to a harsh demand or spiteful penalty—the consequences of defaulting on a desperate bargain. But the usurer Shylock demands a literal pound of flesh as security when the merchant Antonio comes to borrow money for a friend [*see* [BATED BREATH](#)]. It's clear that the sensational bargain, with its hint of archetypal vengeance, fascinated its first audience as it fascinates us. When the play was first published, its title page advertised "The most excellent History of the Merchant of Venice. With the extreme cruelty of *Shylock* the Jew towards the said merchant, in cutting a just pound of his flesh. . . ."

Clever marketing, but false advertising. It's true that Antonio agrees to Shylock's brutal terms, although he knows that the usurer despises him. But while Antonio is ultimately forced to default, and while Shylock refuses the merchant's pleas for mercy, the usurer is foiled in the end. Dressed as an eminent judge, Antonio's indirect beneficiary Portia takes Shylock's insistence on the letter of the bond to its absurd conclusion. The bond specified only a pound of *flesh*, she maintains, but "no jot of blood." Shylock may be demonic but he can't perform miracles; Portia's clever piece of legal hairsplitting carries the day.

Copyright Notice

©2010 eNotes.com, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems without the written permission of the publisher.

For complete copyright information, please see the online version of this work:
<http://www.enotes.com/shakespeare-quotes>