



The quality of mercy is not strained

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Portia:

You stand within his danger, do you not?

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 strain'd,
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.

[The Merchant Of Venice Act 4, scene 1, 180–187](#)

Disguised as a doctor of law, Portia has come to rescue Antonio, the merchant of Venice. Antonio had foolishly signed a bond granting the usurer Shylock a "pound of flesh" [see p.114] if he defaulted on the loan he was forced to seek—ironically, in order to help a friend court Portia. And defaulted Antonio has. After determining the facts of the case, Portia doesn't appeal at first to legal technicalities—which is the only way she will force Shylock to submit—but delivers a Christian moral. When Shylock demands to know why he "must" be merciful, Portia replies that compulsion is precisely contrary to the spirit of mercy, which is not "strain'd" (forced). Only because mercy is voluntary—because it mitigates the compulsions of the literal law—is it true mercy, which drops gently like heaven's rain, a natural and gracious quality rather than a legal one. That Portia treats her Christian ethics as natural and universal, however, raises questions about the quality of her own compassion for the Jew. In the end, only because Antonio requests some mercy for Shylock is he spared complete destitution, on the condition he convert to Christianity.

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Shakespeare Quotes: The quality of mercy is not strained

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