

Mercy in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

Student worksheets

Warmer – How forgiving are you?

Read the following situations. Who would you find most difficult to forgive and why? Share your ideas with a partner.

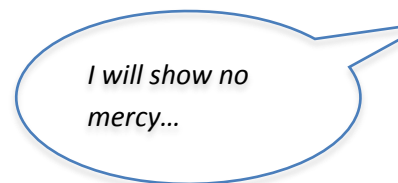
1. After drinking at a party, your neighbour drives home. He knocks down and kills your cat.
2. Your friend borrows your favourite pair of jeans – and gets them covered in white paint.
3. Your sister withdraws money from your savings account to feed her expensive drug habit.
4. Your mum logs into your social media account and reads your private messages.
5. Your partner has an affair with your best friend.



Task 1 – The meaning of 'mercy'

a. Read the sentences about mercy, and think about the meaning of the phrases in *italics*.

1. Living on a northerly island you are always *at the mercy of* the weather.
2. He held the gun to my head. He didn't care, even when I *begged for mercy*.
3. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, *have mercy on* this criminal. She was stealing to feed her children.
4. I will *show no mercy to* any students who haven't learned these irregular verbs! You will be punished if you get any of them wrong!
5. Thank heavens for *small mercies!*



b. Now match the phrases in *italics* (1-5) to their meanings (a-e).

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| 1. small mercies | a. ask someone to consider how you are feeling and to stop what they are doing |
| 2. at the mercy of | b. forgive and pardon |
| 3. show no mercy (to someone) | c. not show forgiveness or make life easier (for someone) |
| 4. beg for mercy | d. little things which make life better |
| 5. have mercy (on someone) | e. under the power of (something) |

Task 2 – Mercy in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*

How much do you remember about The Merchant of Venice? Work in pairs to ask and answer the questions.

1. Who doesn’t want to show mercy and why? What do they want instead?
2. Who tries to persuade another person to be merciful and why?
3. Who seems to be at the mercy of Shylock at the end of the play?
4. Who shows mercy at the end of the play?



A scene from Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, painted by Aleksander Gierymski
Division for Looted Art, Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage

Task 3 – Pre-reading: Portia’s speech

When Shylock demands his pound of flesh from Antonio, Portia tries to persuade him to show mercy.

The items below all feature in Portia’s speech.

scepter	justice	heaven	crown	throne	monarch
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- a. Find the items from the box shown or represented in the three illustrations below.



- b. What do you think these six words have to do with mercy?

Task 4 – Reading Portia’s speech

Read and listen to Portia’s speech to her father Shylock.

What does she say about the words from Task 3?

Shakespeare’s version

The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest. It becomes
The thronèd monarch better than his crown.
His scepter 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 sceptered 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.

Modern translation

No one shows mercy because they have to.
It just happens, the way gentle rain falls
on the ground. Mercy is a double blessing.
It blesses you if you show it and if you receive it.
It is strongest in the strongest people. It looks better in a
king than his own crown does.
The king’s scepter is a symbol of his earthly power and
majesty, the focus of royal authority.
But mercy is more important than the scepter.
It’s enthroned in the hearts of kings,
a quality of God himself.
A king’s power seems most like God’s power
when the king mixes mercy with justice.

Task 5 – Summarising Portia's speech

Choose the best summary of Portia's speech.

- a. Mercy blesses the person who shows mercy and also the person who receives it. Mercy is strongest in the strongest people. Earthly power becomes more godlike when it is merciful.
- b. If you show mercy, then you are likely to do well in life, become rich and powerful and please God. Also, everyone will like you.
- c. Mercy makes life easier for everyone. When a person shows mercy to another person, the rain which falls on them will be gentle and they will be lucky forever more.



Task 6 – Checking understanding

Find and underline the parts of Portia's speech (Shakespeare's version) which mean the same as these sentences.

1. You can't force someone to show mercy. Mercy should be as natural as the rain.
2. Mercy doesn't just make those who receive it feel good – it's got a feel-good factor for those who show it too.
3. The strongest people are the most merciful.
4. Mercy lies in the hearts of kings.
5. Kings are most God-like when they are merciful as well as just.

Task 7 – Vocabulary in context

Match the words from Portia's speech with their meanings.

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|----------------------|--|
| 1. to become someone | a. to add a quality to something |
| 2. temporal | b. respect mixed with fear |
| 3. awe | c. to suit someone |
| 4. dread | d. to do with earthly things rather than spiritual things. |
| 5. to season | e. great fear |

Task 8 – Writing and role play

Work with a partner. Imagine you have a friend who has experienced one of the situations from the Warmer activity.

Choose one of the situations in the **Warmer** at the start of this lesson. Write a modern day version of Portia's speech, so that you can persuade the other person to show forgiveness.

Read out your speech to the rest of the class.