

17 - THE QUALITY OF MERCY

What is Portia trying to achieve in this speech?

WHAT YOU NEED

- Some pieces of paper, or a notebook and something to write with.
- A computer with internet connection, ready to visit [this page](#).
- A copy of Act 4 Scene 1 from *The Merchant of Venice*, to read either on the page or onscreen.

ACTIVITY

- Visit this Language page on the Shakespeare Learning Zone [here](#), to read and explore the speech.
- Imagine you are Portia. Read the speech aloud, as if you are giving a lecture to the whole court of Venice. Every time you feel you have made a good point, write a tick on a piece of paper. How many ticks do you have by the end of the speech?
- Read the speech aloud again, this time whispering it, as if you are persuading Shylock to show mercy. Every time you feel you have persuaded Shylock, write a tick. This time, how many ticks do you have?
- Ask yourself: which parts of the speech felt better spoken to the whole court? Which parts felt better spoken directly to Shylock? What do you think Portia is trying to achieve in this speech? What is her objective? Note down your discoveries.
- Imagine you are Shylock listening to this speech. What questions might he want to ask, and when? Write those questions down.
- Now imagine you are Bassanio listening to this speech. What comments might he want to make, and when? Write those comments down.
- Watch the film of this speech in performance from the 2015 RSC production [here](#).
- Ask yourself: What difference do the reactions of the other characters in court make to this version of the speech? What would you say Portia was trying to achieve? How does this compare with the objective you chose?
- Write a couple of sentences explaining what Portia is trying to achieve in this speech and the tactics she uses to reach her objective.

EXTENSION

- This is one of the most famous speeches in Shakespeare's plays. Imagine Portia is unable to get to the court in person, so has to send in a film of the speech for the court to watch.
- Film yourself speaking the speech, as if you are Portia. Think about what you are trying to achieve through the film. Experiment with different camera angles, close ups and long shots.