

Shakespeare in Italy

The Merchant of Venice Act 4, scene 1

Application Essay

Read the following passage and paraphrase it into more modern idiom. Your “translation” should show you understand the speech; feel free to use an annotated edition of Shakespeare to help you with the vocabulary. Then write a complete, fluid paragraph that includes answers to the questions that follow.

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:
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned 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 sceptred sway,--
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute of God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.

1. What is Portia's speech about? Why is she debating with Shylock?
2. What does she mean by “mercy”? Why is it “twice blest”?
3. How are power and mercy related?
4. Why does she use the word “seasons” in the last line here? Why is that an interesting word choice?
5. How is it possible that mercy and justice can cohere in the human realm?