

Name: _____ Class: _____

On Revenge

By Sir Francis Bacon

1625

Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626) was an English philosopher, statesman, author, and advocate-practitioner of the scientific method during the scientific revolution. This passage discusses the notion of revenge, why some seek it, and the consequences of this fixation. As you read, take notes on Bacon's argument, and the purpose behind his comments.

- [1] Revenge is a kind of wild justice; which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out. For as for the first wrong, it doth but offend the law; but the revenge of that wrong pulleth the law out of office. Certainly, in taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy; but in passing it over, he is superior; for it is a prince's part to pardon. And Salomon,¹ I am sure, saith, It is the glory of a man to pass by an offence.²

That which is past is gone, and irrevocable;³ and wise men have enough to do with things present and to come: therefore they do but trifle with themselves, that labour in past matters.

There is no man doth a wrong for the wrong's sake; but thereby to purchase himself profit, or pleasure, or honour, or the like. There why should I be angry with a man for loving himself better than me? And if any man should do wrong merely out of ill nature, why, yet it is but like the thorn or briar, which prick and scratch, because they can do no other.

The most tolerable sort of revenge is for those wrongs which there is no law or remedy; but then let a man take heed the revenge be such as there is no law to punish; else a man's enemy is still beforehand, and it is two for one.

- [5] Some, when they take revenge, are desirous the party should know whence⁴ it cometh: this is the more generous. For the delight seemeth to be not so much in doing the hurt as in making the party repent: but base⁵ and crafty cowards are like the arrow that flieth in the dark.



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1. Solomon is biblical figure, a king of the Judea-Christian Old Testament known for his wisdom.
 2. A reference to the book of Proverbs 19:11
 3. **Irrevocable (adjective):** not possible to revoke or change
 4. Whence" is an archaic term meaning "from what place or source."
 5. **Base (adjective):** lowly

Cosmus, Duke of Florence,⁶ had a desperate saying against perfidious or neglecting friends, as if those wrongs were unpardonable: You shall read (saith he) that we are commanded to forgive our friends. But yet the spirit of Job⁷ was in a better tune: Shall we (saith he) take good at God's hands, and not be content to take evil also? And so of friends in a proportion.

This is certain, that a man that studieth revenge keeps his own wounds green,⁸ which otherwise would heal and do well.

Public revenges are for the most part fortunate; as that for the death of Caesar;⁹ for the death of Pertinax;¹⁰ for the death of Henry the Third of France;¹¹ and many more. But in private revenges it is not so. Nay rather, vindictive persons live the life of witches; who as they are mischievous, so end they unfortunate.

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6. May be a reference to Cosimo I de' Medici (1519-1574), known for his authoritative rule and patronage of the arts.
 7. Job is another character from the Judea-Christian Bible, the central figure in the Book of Job. A pious man, he suffers many trials as a test of his belief in and obedience towards God; in the end, he is rewarded for never losing his faith.
 8. **Green (adjective):** new or fresh
 9. Julius Caesar (100-44 BCE) was a Roman dictator, known for his assassination by approximately 60 or more conspirators.
 10. Publius Helvius Pertinax (126-193 CE) became emperor of Rome and was assassinated three months later.
 11. King Henry III of France (r.1574-1589) was assassinated during the Siege of Paris.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best describes a central idea of the text? [RI.2]
- A. Revenge is a moral and legal crime.
 - B. Revenge and justice are the same thing; what we call it depends on the situation.
 - C. If the law cannot guarantee justice, then it is up to the injured party to seek reparation.
 - D. To dwell on revenge is to dwell in the past, never moving forward, and therefore overall not worth the effort.

2. PART B: Cite evidence from the text to support the answer to Part A. [RI.1]

3. “There is no man doth a wrong for the wrong’s sake.” (Paragraph 3) What is the function of this quote in the context of the passage—does it support or contradict the rest of Bacon’s argument? [RI.8]

4. PART A: What does the term “perfidious” most closely mean as used in paragraph 6? [RI.4]
- A. Impatient
 - B. Faithful
 - C. Snobbish
 - D. Disloyal

5. PART B: Which phrase from the paragraph best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
- A. "desperate saying"
 - B. "unpardonable"
 - C. "commanded to forgive"
 - D. "content to take evil"
6. What is the author's likely purpose in this passage? [RI.6]
- A. To advocate for revenge under most circumstances
 - B. To advocate against all forms of revenge
 - C. To examine the nature and consequences of revenge
 - D. To examine the legal limits of justice and revenge

