

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Themes in Shakespeare

REVENGE

MEASURE FOR MEASURE; THE MERCHANT OF VENICE; TITUS ANDRONICUS

Shakespeare has little to say for revenge, as he has much to say for love. The three of plays we signal below all point to the perils of vengeance. Angelo's case illustrates the cunning of revenge as it turns against his creator; for having propositioned Isabella, Angelo harvests a lifetime of fidelity to his wife, and a low respectable profile. Shylock, who has been an extortionist, harvests like Angelo a commitment to desist from profiting off others. The revenge against Shylock, for having thrown his weight around, is this: he must commit to convert to Christianity, and must give away a good chunk of his property and assets. Titus Andronicus, caught in a revenge web initiated by his sacrifice of Tamora's young son, and culminating in the feeding of Tamora on the heads of two of her sons, uses his own tortured life to

illustrate the hopeless ravages of revenge.

MEASURE FOR MEASURE The beautiful novice Isabella is desperate because her brother, Claudio, is in prison, about to be executed for adultery. She goes to the presiding magistrate, who has charge of the case, and begs for mercy for her brother. The judge, Angelo, makes a proposal to her, that he will dismiss the case if she sleeps with him. Her revenge is to trick Angelo by finding a substitute for the sex—in fact Angelo's own fiancée—and to make a laughing stock of the judge. The wise Duke ultimately pardons Angelo, condemning him to live forever after with his own wife.

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE. Relegated to ghetto status, in early modern white capitalist Venice, the Jewish money lender, Shylock, finds himself in a strong position to take revenge. When Antonio, a shipping magnate, loses ships to a calamitous storm, and cannot pay back what he owes Shylock, as venture capital on the expedition, Shylock turns to his contract with Antonio, and demands the penalty guaranteed in case the magnate fails to pay his debt: a pound of flesh. Talk about revenge! Thank God mercy saves the day!

TITUS ANDRONICUS The entire development of the play centers around revenge. Upon return from ten years of war, Titus has ordered the sacrifice of the son of Tamora, the Goth queen who has been taken prisoner by Rome. This sacrifice opens the whole revenge narrative of the play. The subsequent rape and mutilation of Titus's daughter, Lavinia, traces back directly to Tamora's desire for revenge against Titus. Titus' ultimate revenge against Tamora must await the end of the play, and the news she has consumed the heads of her two boys in a pie prepared for her by Titus.