

CHAPTER I

*And If You Wrong Us, Shall We Not Revenge?
 The Value of Grappling with the Experience
 of Revenge among Youth*

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I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge? [...] The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction. *Shylock, Act III, Scene I*

The quality of mercy is not strained. 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 [...] It is an attribute to God Himself; and earthly power doth then show likest God's when mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew, though justice be thy plea, consider this: That in the course of justice none of us should see salvation. We do pray for mercy, and that same prayer doth teach us all to render the deeds of mercy [...] *Portia, Act IV, Scene I*

William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

The Merchant of Venice is a morally ambiguous and disquieting play, and the monologues by Shylock and Portia—among the most memorable and stirring in Shakespeare's oeuvre—often leave audiences unnerved and uncertain about their allegiances. The play aptly lets us in on the many abuses and injustices that befall Shylock, and the various reasons for his distress—the widespread societal aversion for his culture, and his more personal and deeply wounding woes. Shylock was scorned, taunted, spat upon, mocked, and humiliated by Antonio and his coreligionists because he was a Jew. He was also betrayed by his own daughter Jessica, who stole his money along with a ring he had kept in remembrance of his deceased wife, and bestowed it all on her fortune-hunting Christian suitor, a friend of Antonio's. So when Shylock delivers the rousing "Hath Not a Jew Eyes?" monologue, he commands more than our pity—we understand him: like us, when injured or wronged he feels pain and itches to strike

back; he yearns for justice, aches to reclaim a sense of his own value. We may not like Shylock, but we also do not quite blame him for craving revenge.

But having admonished us, eloquently, about the qualities shared by human beings, Shylock does not choose to treat those who wronged him as he would have liked them to treat him. Rather, he announces he will do as they have done to him, and more; his chilling pledge that he will reciprocate, and even outdo, the evil that was done to him is downright alarming and discomfiting. And so our budding sympathy for Shylock is shaken: The yearning for justice that makes many of us *want* revenge (or understand how one might come to *want* revenge) might sit well with most of us, but the soon-to-come obdurate insistence on a murderous “pound of flesh”—not so much.

And so we might welcome wealthy and witty Portia’s call for mercy. Disguised as a male lawyer, Portia appears in court to plead Antonio’s case and urges Shylock to forego revenge and spare Antonio. In principle, her appeal seems unassailably righteous. But the moral architecture surrounding her plea soon reveals itself as somewhat squalid, and the hollowness of Portia’s and her friends’ professions of virtue becomes shockingly evident. Portia’s exhortation for Shylock to show compassion and generosity cloaks a petulant ruse as well as prejudice and outright meanness; she cunningly lets Shylock believe he has a rightful claim against Antonio, only to pull the “no jot of blood” trick—a trick that suggests the game had been rigged against Shylock from the start. And displays of heartlessness toward Shylock are not limited to Portia: The duke presiding over the Venetian court begins the proceedings by declaring Shylock an “inhuman wretch”; Gratiano, not satisfied with Shylock losing his wealth, wants him hanged; and the court’s final verdict not only leaves Shylock utterly bereft of his possessions, but also forces him to convert into the religion of his foes and to acknowledge or pretend (“Art thou contented, Jew?”) that the coerced conversion was an act of compassion the court extended to him.

And so, while these developments do not necessarily turn audiences against mercy *per se*—and likely are not meant to—we might come to see Shylock’s urge to get revenge under such deeply unjust circumstances in a different light. Of course, Shakespeare does not lead us down a sentimental path—Shylock does not suddenly become an endearing or wholly redeemed character. And yet, few modern audiences cheer when the Venetian court derides and destroys him, and many might leave the theater condoning, perhaps secretly, perhaps ever so slightly, perhaps ambivalently, his vindictive wrath.

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A full exegesis of *The Merchant of Venice* is not the point of this chapter; more than 400 years after its publication, scholars still debate Shakespeare's intentions and meanings. And yet, most might agree that one of the play's remarkable qualities is the extent to which it compels us to get close to Shylock, never quite liking him or even agreeing with him, but also never fully able to dismiss him. Naturally, the play is not a treatise on revenge; rather, it invites us to know the man Shylock and to try to understand him and the specifics of his plight. But, in so doing, it offers us several signposts that may guide our nuanced examination of the place of revenge in human experience.

First and foremost is the play's reminder that a vengeful desire—even one that reveals specific personal or societal failures or pathologies—is not an alien experience. Rather, it is always born of and inextricably linked to a most basic human capacity—the capacity to feel hurt by the actions and inactions of others. Therefore, as we ponder revenge beyond the play, we are beckoned to remember that everyone's lives are inevitably ridden by small, and not so small, harms and injustices that we suffer at the hands of others—people close to us, or strangers. The pain we experience when we feel wronged by others is real, and the visceral hankering to even the score is strikingly commonplace—it conveys people's fundamental belief in justice and signals a basic need, aptly encapsulated in Shylock's "Hath Not a Jew Eyes?" cry, to have those who hurt us see us as fully human again.

The shifting views the play evokes in most of us vis-à-vis Shylock's yearning for revenge illuminate the extent to which the meaning, justification, and validity of his vengeful inclinations are fundamentally and tightly connected to the features of the milieu in which they arose. In grappling with the events of the play, we look not only at the scope of Shylock's pain and anger; we attend closely to the sources of the harms Shylock endured and to the recourses he could—or could not—appeal to for mitigation and justice. The way we may end up thinking and feeling about Shylock's revenge at the play's conclusion hinges not only on Shylock's persona and actions, but also on what we have come to understand about Shylock's universe and what we have learned about the quality of the mercy and justice that Portia and sixteenth-century Venice afforded him. And what goes for Shylock, likely goes for all. Therefore, as we parse the experience of revenge outside the play, our encounter with Shylock reminds us that we cannot hope to fully understand anyone's vengeful desires and actions—much less contain them or eliminate them—without attending to the features of the personal and societal harms that give rise to those desires and actions and the possibilities available for redressing them.

Thus guided by Shakespeare's signposts, in this book we examine the experience of revenge as it emerges and unfolds in the lives of children and adolescents. Of course, the Shylock we met on stage was an adult and we never hear directly about his childhood or teenage years. But in a brief scene (Act III, Scene I), when Shylock presses his friend Tubal for news on his daughter's elopement and Tubal tells him that Jessica was seen in Genoa exchanging Shylock's ring for a monkey, Shylock responds "Thou torturest me, Tubal. It was my turquoise. I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys." This comment grants us an elusive window into Shylock's history—at a minimum, we now cannot but recognize that the Shylock we know was a widower, perhaps one who had raised his daughter on his own; before that, then, Shylock must have been married, and before that a bachelor, one who shared closeness and affection with a young Leah. The play does not grant us access into any of these details, but it does set the stage for more speculating, about the kinds of experiences that Shylock the bachelor had, and before that, Shylock the child, and more broadly about the extent to which present-day Shylock's vengefulness could be further parsed in light of a lifetime of experiences.

Outside the play, examining revenge experiences in childhood and adolescence could be useful as much more than a means for illuminating the pathways that lead to adult revenge. Children and adolescents are not merely adults-in-training; they are full-fledged people in their own right, with their unique needs and perspectives that deserve to be understood and documented. These unique needs and perspectives, moreover, merit being taken into account as we, adults, interact with them, engage in efforts to socialize them, and even create systems that youths then need to navigate, such as schools. In addition, adopting a developmental perspective and charting the varying shapes revenge takes as children grow older, the varying processes and forces that shape it, and the ways it shapes life trajectories—all contribute to understanding its ontology, thereby revealing something uniquely meaningful about the human experience of revenge. Thus, in this volume we examine research conducted with diverse youths in various parts of the world on their experiences of wanting, pursuing, and reflecting on revenge, and two distinct, though intersecting, broad themes run through this volume's chapters.

The first theme bears on the aspect of revenge that typically preoccupies scholars and laypeople alike—namely, that revenge is a maladaptive and problematic response to conflict and injury, one that carries markedly adverse consequences to individuals, groups, and society. The chapters in

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this book describe research conducted with youth exposed to war and community violence and trauma that can help illuminate the range of familial, societal, and political conditions that give rise to or foster revenge, as well as the varied types of problematic social and psychological outcomes and trajectories associated with vengeful ideas, desires, and behaviors. Importantly, findings from research on the conditions giving rise to revenge and the maladaptive sequelae of revenge will also serve as a backdrop for discussions about both the policies and programs that may help address revenge among youth, as well as the specific foci, goals, and targets deemed appropriate targets for intervention. Recalling how calls for Shylock to merely renounce revenge were hopelessly hindered by the unjust conditions that gave rise to his vengefulness, attempts at addressing the retaliatory inclinations of youth growing up in adverse environments must ensure to convey understanding and compassion toward their circumstances.

Also mindful of what we learned about Shylock, an important question to keep in mind while poring over conceptual and empirical work that tackles the maladaptive dimensions of the revenge experience is whether youths' retaliatory motives and behaviors could be thought of as some sort of an *adaptive* response to their dangerous and unpredictable environments. In other words, and notwithstanding the many maladaptive consequences accompanying revenge, the research in this volume might help readers consider the ways in which revenge might constitute a sensible and organized strategy—one that allows youth to not only survive but thrive in specific adverse circumstances. Though this question is unlikely to garner definitive answers from the readings in this volume, seriously entertaining it in light of the discussed research stands to deepen our understanding of the antecedents, functions, meanings, and consequences of revenge for the countless, differently wounded, young Shylocks in our world.

This idea, that revenge might reflect a sensible adaptation for youths growing up in insecure or violent environments, lets us segue into the second broad theme of this book—the proposition that revenge is not an exclusive feature of adverse environments or lives gone wrong. In fact, most people—children as well as adults—can recall numerous occasions when they felt hurt and wanted to get back at the person who hurt them and many can also recall having pursued revenge, even if in small ways; this is likely why it is not hard for many of us to understand, and even empathize with, Shylock. It is also worth noting that, although scholars, parents, teachers, and others, tend to see revenge as an undesirable response in youth, there is little to suggest that vengeful motives, and even

vengeful actions, merely disappear, or even decrease, as children become either more mature or more fully socialized, or both.

The research discussed in this volume will serve to illuminate the ways in which revenge is part and parcel of normative development during childhood and adolescence. We will learn about the shapes that wanting and seeking revenge take in the context of the varied relationships children and adolescents engage in in their everyday lives; the goals and functions that revenge might serve at different ages throughout development; the relative endorsement of vengeful desires and behaviors at different ages; and the ways in which revenge might be interwoven with other aspects of development, such as children's growing capacities to regulate emotion, to solve interpersonal conflicts, to make moral judgments, and how such intersections vary throughout development. Research will also point to the types of socializing forces operating on youth of different ages within the family, in educational settings, or in society at large, and help us to consider whether these socializing processes focus on preventing (or encouraging) the enacting of revenge behaviors or whether they more broadly target revenge motives and desires as well. Research on these developmental processes and pathways might prompt readers to consider broad questions about the nature of revenge in childhood and adolescence. We might ponder, for example, whether revenge should be best conceived of as an immature response, a failure of socialization, a universal (albeit dark) feature of human experience, or perhaps as manifestation of emerging concerns for justice and equity. The research in this volume is unlikely to compel or privilege any one answer; nevertheless, engaging with this question may illuminate our understanding of revenge among youth and inform the goals we pursue as we strive to address it—including the extent to which we aim to merely socialize revenge away.

The chapters included in this volume bring varied theoretical lenses and varied methodologies to bear on the complex experiences of revenge among children and youth growing up in diverse communities across North and South America, Europe, and the Middle East, including those exposed to significant community and intergroup violence. It is worth noting that the two themes running through this volume, bearing on the maladaptive and normative dimensions of revenge, do not map precisely onto specific chapters. Although some chapters deal more exclusively with one or the other theme, the boundaries between normative and problematic aspects of development are porous. Examining the unfolding of normative experiences of revenge is likely to provide further insight into our understanding of its more challenging manifestations, and vice

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versa. Our main hope in gathering such diverse perspectives in a single volume was that, in grasping youths' more and less problematic pathways of revenge side-by-side, the reader will gain a fuller—and more empathic—understanding of what youths convey when they desire and pursue revenge.