

Revenge, Morality, & Literature

PHIL/ENG 247
Fall 2021



Detail from John Everett Millais, *Ophelia* (1851–1852) | Tate Britain, London

Meeting Time and Location

MWF 12–1:10 p.m. | BORZ 116

Professor: Dr. Brandon Polite

email: bpolite@knox.edu

Office Hours: MW 2:30–3:15

office: OM 304

Course Description

This course investigates the moral and psychological contours of revenge through a careful examination of philosophical texts and some of Shakespeare's plays. We are especially interested in what revenge can tell us about the value of persons, along the dimensions of gender, class, race, and religion. The questions we consider are: (1) What relationship does revenge bear to justice? (2) What sorts of actions inspire a desire for revenge? (3) Is revenge ever morally permitted? (4) When should forgiveness or mercy be granted? (5) Does genre affect how revenge functions—for instance, tragedy vs. comedy?

By the end of the term, you should be able to

- **Articulate** some leading scholarly views on revenge.
- **Analyze** works of literature thoughtfully using scholarly ideas.
- **Defend** your own views on some important ethical issues.

Website: Accessible via <https://classroom.google.com>

COURSE details

Texts: William Ian Miller's *Eye for an Eye* (Cambridge UP, 2005); William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Hamlet*, & *Measure for Measure* (all Signet Classics editions).

Attendance & Participation: You should come to class regularly and prepared to participate. If you ever feel unwell, especially if you have any Covid-19 symptoms, don't come to class. Missing class or being disengaged from class discussion too frequently will negatively impact your grade, at my discretion. So, talk to me (sooner rather than later) if either of these becomes an issue for you.

Late Assignments: There is enough flexibility built into both the assignments and the structure of the course that you shouldn't find it too difficult to turn the work in on time. However, if you feel like you need some additional time and would like to negotiate alternative deadlines for *any assignment for any reason*, get in touch with me as soon as you can—preferably before it's due.

Honor Code: This course, as any other at Knox, operates within the parameters set by the Honor Code. Please note, in the everyday business of this course, students are encouraged to talk through all course material with one another and to function as inter-locutors for one another. This extends to preparing to write your papers. However, each student is required to write their own work, to cite all sources fully, and to give explicit credit where particular formulations of claims, arguments, and examples are the product of co-operative work.

Assignments

Short Papers | 60 pts You will write three (out of a possible four) short papers of roughly 900–1200 words (or 3–4 pages) each in which you analyze some aspect of 3 out of 4 plays using ideas from William Ian Miller’s book.

Term Paper | 40 pts

You will develop one or more of your short papers into a longer paper of roughly 2400–3000 words (or 8–10 pages). 5 pts of this assignment will come from your thesis proposal.

Syllabus

1. Vengeance: The Basics	
9/13	M Introductions
9/15	W Miller, <i>Eye for an Eye</i> , Preface and Chapters 1–2
9/17	F Miller, <i>Eye for an Eye</i> , Chapters 3–4
2. On Getting Even and Just Deserts	
9/20	M Shakespeare, <i>Titus Andronicus</i> , Acts I–II
9/22	W Shakespeare, <i>Titus Andronicus</i> , Act III–IV
9/24	F Shakespeare, <i>Titus Andronicus</i> , Act V
9/27	M Miller, <i>Eye for an Eye</i> , Chapter 5
9/29	W Short Paper 1 due No class
3. On Collecting and Forgiving Debts	
10/1	F Shakespeare, <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> , Acts I–II
10/4	M Shakespeare, <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> , Act III–IV
10/6	W Shakespeare, <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> , Act V
10/8	F Miller, <i>Eye for an Eye</i> , Chapter 6
10/11	M Short Paper 2 due No class
4. On Redeeming Honor	
10/13	W Miller, <i>Eye for an Eye</i> , Chapter 7
10/15	F Shakespeare, <i>Hamlet</i> , Acts I–II
10/18	M Shakespeare, <i>Hamlet</i> , Act III
10/20	W Fall Institute No class
10/22	F Shakespeare, <i>Hamlet</i> , Act IV

On Challenging Texts

Many of the texts we’ll encounter this term will ask us to consider experiences and perspectives beyond our own, ones that we may not relate to or even fully understand. While these works may make us feel uncomfortable and even vulnerable, I ask that we attempt to engage with the material and consider how these challenging texts may shape and reshape our thinking. Sometimes, the most difficult works—those that cause discomfort, those that pull at the heartstrings—are the ones we learn the most from, the ones we find ourselves coming back to, year after year. That said, I understand that such engagement may take you to a place that no longer feels productive and may be trauma-inducing. Should this occur, I respect your right to exclude yourself from a particular discussion, and I encourage you to contact [Counseling Services: \(309\) 341-7492](#) and online [link](#).

Written Work

You will submit all of your papers on **Google Classroom**. For each assignment, a new Google Doc will be created for you. You can choose to type directly into it or copy and paste your work from another word processor, such as Microsoft Word or Pages for Mac.

10/25	M	Shakespeare, <i>Hamlet</i> , Act V
10/27	W	Short Paper 3 due No class
6. On Serving Justice		
10/29	F	Shakespeare, <i>Measure for Measure</i> , Acts I–II
11/1	M	Shakespeare, <i>Measure for Measure</i> , Act III
11/3	W	Shakespeare, <i>Measure for Measure</i> , Act IV
11/5	F	Shakespeare, <i>Measure for Measure</i> , Act V
11/8	M	Short Paper 4 due No class
Term Paper		
11/10	W	Thesis Workshop Thesis Proposal due by class time
11/12	F	Paper conferences No Class
11/15	M	Paper conferences No Class
11/21	Su	Term Paper due by no later than 10 p.m.

Writing Tutors

If you want additional help on any of your papers, you can find writing tutors in the **Red Room, Seymour Library, MTuWThF, 10:30 a.m. – 4 p.m.**, and again in the Red Room, **TuWTh, 7–9 p.m.**

You can also schedule appointments to meet with a writing tutor either online or in person by clicking on the “CTL Tutoring” link in your “My Knox” apps.

Further information on all assignments can be found on Google Classroom.

grading scale	A+	100 – 97.7	B+	89.9 – 87.7	C+	79.9 – 77.7	D+	69.9 – 67.7	F	59.9 – 0
	A	97.6 – 93.4	B	87.6 – 83.4	C	77.6 – 73.4	D	67.6 – 63.4		
	A-	93.3 – 90	B-	83.3 – 80	C-	73.3 – 70	D-	63.3 – 60		