Bacon first published his essays in 1597, and then twice more in coming years adding additional essays each time. Supposedly he wrote the pieces initially for the amusement of himself and his friends, but his friends were so enthralled and taken by the pieces they urged him to publish. Only Michel Montaigne seventeen years before had written such pieces as these (Bacon was probably familiar with Montaigne’s work), so they may both be thought of as the originators of what we call the essay—a short, pithy and subjective look at a single subject.

REVENGE is a kind of wild justice—the more a person seeks revenge, the more the law should weed it out. The first wrong breaks the law; revenge of that wrong destroys law itself. Certainly, in taking revenge, a man becomes even with his enemy, but in passing it over, he is superior, for it is a prince’s part to pardon. And Solomon, I am sure, said, “It is the glory of a man to ignore an offense.”

That which is past is gone and irrevocable. Wise men have enough to do with things present and future—therefore, they who labor in past matters do but harm themselves. There is no man who does a wrong for the wrong’s sake, but to purchase for himself profit, or pleasure, or honor, or the like. Therefore, 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, it is but like the thorn or briar which prick and scratch because they can do nothing else.

The most tolerable sort of revenge is for those wrongs which have no law to remedy and punish them. But then let a man beware: revenge on a man’s enemy when there is a law risks two for one. Some, when they take revenge, desire that the party should know from whom it comes. This is the more generous way. The satisfaction seems to be not so much in doing the hurt, as in making the party repent. Base and crafty cowards who operate in secrecy are like the arrow that flies from the dark.

Cosimo de’ Medici¹, Duke of Florence, had a saying about perfidious or neglecting friends, as if those wrongs were unpardonable: “You shall read that we are commanded to forgive our enemies, but you never read that we are commanded to forgive our friends.” But the spirit of Job was nearer the truth: “Shall we take good at God’s hands and not be willing to also accept evil?” And so it is with friends.

This is certain, that a man consumed with a desire for revenge keeps his own wounds open which otherwise would heal. Public revenges, for the most part, are good—as in the case of the conspiracies to murder Caesar, Pertinax, Henry the Third of France², and many more. However, in private revenges, it is not so. No, vindictive persons live the life of witches: they are mischievous and come to a bad end.

¹ 1389-1464; the first of the Medici political dynasty that ruled Florence off and on for 350 years.
² Julius Caesar, consul, general, and short-lived Roman dictator assassinated in 44 BCE; Pertinax, Roman emperor assassinated in 192 CE; Henry III of France, assassinated in 1589 CE.

Note: The language in this version has been changed and updated in one or more of the following ways: Certain archaic words and phrases have been replaced, text has been condensed or cut, syntax has been reordered, and punctuation changed to render the text more understandable to a modern reader. However, whenever possible, the original text has been faithfully reproduced.

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