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Preface: On Revenge

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I believed then, as I believe now, that I stood ... in the place of an injured man, whose right it was, in self-defense and self-assertion, to injure you. ... On my side, I had indefatigable patience ... and more than all, that stealthy, unflagging strength of purpose which only springs from the desire for revenge.

—Wilkie Collins, *Basil* (1852)

It is not eminent talent that is required to ensure success in any pursuit, so much as purpose—not merely the power to achieve, but the will to labour energetically and perseveringly. Hence energy of will may be defined to be the very central power of character in a man—in a word, it is the Man himself.

—Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help* (1859)

When Robert Mannion, the scheming villain of Wilkie Collins’s sensation novel *Basil*, reveals his revenge plot to the eponymous narrator, it might appear at first that he has thrown off the mantle of middle-class respectability to expose his “true” monstrous self: rapacious, violent, motivated equally by perverse appetites and the desire for vengeance.ⁱ Yet, I would suggest that the relationship between Mannion’s persona as socially-productive, disciplined, and efficient self-made man and his role as a stealthily, indefatigably vengeful plotter is much more synergistic than antagonistic. Mannion stakes a claim to revenge based on his very rights as a man. The fear that *Basil* explores is that the “good citizen” of modern liberal society might *also* be the *mauvais sujet* of revenge, not because the semblance of the former masks the latter, but, more disturbingly, because Mannion’s “right to injure” is fundamental to the very social order that he ostensibly threatens. In other words, it is no coincidence that a villain like Mannion emerges at the same historical moment as some of the most enthusiastic articulations of liberal ideals of self-determining, autonomous subjectivity. Mannion not only embodies the very qualities that, according to Samuel Smiles’s runaway bestseller *Self-Help*, “make the man”—“great perseverance, application, and energy” (30)—but these qualities are explicitly the products of his “desire for revenge.” So, what might that intersection of revenge fantasies with the liberal dream of self-determination and economic success that Smiles’s book pedaled in 1850s England have to tell us about revenge as a cultural phenomenon and a fictional device? What is happening at the interstices between revenge and rights, in other words?

Nietzsche called the phenomenon *ressentiment*, and according to his account in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), it is one of the defining, culturally-productive features of modern liberal society because, as he says, it “becomes creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary

revenge” (36; First Essay, Section 10). *Ressentiment* is the imaginative work of converting weakness and vulnerability to injury into moral virtues, and, consequently, conceiving of potentially-injurious external forces as positively evil:

Slave morality from the outset says No to what is “outside,” what is “different,” what is “not itself”; and *this* No is its creative deed. This inversion of the value-positing eye—this *need* to direct one’s view outward instead of back to oneself—is of the essence of *ressentiment*: in order to exist, slave morality always first needs a hostile external world; it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all—its action is fundamentally reaction. (36–37)

And, this conversion of powerlessness and the desire for vengeance into moral superiority creates a socio-legal system in which the law functions to redress injury, “to sanctify *revenge* under the name of *justice*—as if justice were at bottom merely a further development of the feeling of being aggrieved—and to rehabilitate not only revenge but all *reactive* affects in general” (73–74; Second Essay, Section 11).

Wendy Brown explores this “reactive” dynamic in *States of Injury* when she invokes Nietzsche’s *ressentiment* to explain “the contemporary proliferation of efforts to pursue legal redress for injuries related to social subordination,” which project, she argues, “seeks not power or emancipation for the injured or the subordinated, but the revenge of punishment, making the perpetrator hurt as the sufferer does” (27). Without discounting the realities of social injury or the need to address injustices, Brown highlights one troublesome effect of the “politics of *ressentiment*”: “Social injury ... becomes that which is ‘unacceptable’ and ‘individually culpable’ rather than that which symptomizes deep political distress in a culture: injury is thereby rendered intentional and individual, politics is reduced to punishment, and justice is equated with such punishment on the one hand and with protection by the courts on the other” (27–28). In other words, revenge narratives cast social violence in individual terms—in which the punishment of offenders offers satisfying resolution and reward for victims—and by so doing they forestall substantive critique of, or intervention in, the larger systems that enable individual instances of social violence.

Revenge plots offer particularly compelling combinations of fear and self-justification to those who consume them. The injuries that others may do to the innocent, the infringements upon victims’ rights, loom with a kind of Gothic terror. Conversely the righteous vengeance that is due to the injured not only provides satisfying “closure,” but authorizes whole narrative arcs of ethically-justified violence. Who cannot recall a film premised upon the vigilante hero’s quest for vengeance against an enemy who has wronged him (or less frequently her)?ⁱⁱ Or who cannot think of a thriller in which the vengeful villain preys upon more or less innocent and unsuspecting victims until he or she meets a satisfyingly violent end, usually at the hands of a suddenly-empowered victim?ⁱⁱⁱ

But the appeal of revenge plots is by no means limited to fiction; rather, it structures much of our public discourse about crime and violence. It is not difficult to call to mind a report of a horrific

crime in the news, which then produces a public outcry calling for equally gruesome violence. A 2008 article in the online *London Evening Standard*, for example, offers a highly sensationalized account of the Austrian father Joseph Fritzl's 24-year imprisonment and rape of his daughter, by whom he fathered seven children. Truly, Fritzl's heinous crimes, to which he eventually confessed, defy imagination. It hardly seems hyperbolic to call him a monster. And, yet, the public responses to the article, from readers all over the world, describe retributions which, were *they* reported as crimes rather than fantasized about as punishments, would likely elicit the same horror from readers:

"He should be electrocuted and castrated as soon as possible." - Aliyah Parker, Newark

"My heart goes out to the poor children, especially Elisabeth. I have no words to express how this man should be tortured." - Darrin, New York, USA

"He must be killed, in a torturous way, that this sick world get ride of such a dirt." - Vn, Middle East

"I am a 6'4 325 pound former football player send him down here to Louisiana, I will take care of him." - Jason, South louisiana

"This cruel man should be handed over to Public Crowd and ask crowd to beat him with stones until he die on same spot. He owe each and every drop of his blood to his innocent daughter." - Teena, Canada

"pure evil... he should be eatin alive by rats and left for dead....." - inni, New Zealand.
(“Pictured,” all spelling and punctuation preserved from the original)^{iv}

Revenge against Joseph Fritzl, or at least the public (if mostly anonymous) expression of the *desire* for that revenge, seems both to affirm the rights of the abused daughter Elisabeth and to deny the rights of her abuser. The gesture of compassion to the child, the “heart going out to” her, is concomitant with the call to torture, to murder the bad father. This ethical differentiation between the violence one condemns in others and the behavior one finds justified in response to, as revenge for, others’ violence is enabled by the individual character of the narrative: one innocent victim, one monster, one Gothic tale of imprisonment, rescue, and retribution. But, as Brown reminds us, this focus on the individual prevents us from asking what of Joseph Fritzl’s case is not monstrously aberrant. His masculine privilege as “head of the house”? The inhumanity of bureaucracies: police who returned an escaped teenage Elisabeth to her parents; social workers who visited the Fritzl house frequently but failed to notice a dungeon in the basement?

But, even more than this, revenge creates a subject out of injury—the injured self emerges as an effect of its injuries, both past (resented) and future (dreaded). The “rights” by which we define universal personhood are defining precisely because they mark the territorial boundary at which the actions of another become a violation of that personhood. Thus, I would suggest, the fictional revenge

plots we consume, however farfetched, resonate with our fundamental conceptions of ourselves as selves. This is, I think, partly what William Godwin meant when he wrote in *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793): “In reality nothing can appear more wonderful to the careful enquirer, than that two ideas so incompatible as man and rights should ever have been associated together. Certain it is, that one of them must be utterly exclusive and annihilatory of the other” (67; bk. 2, ch. 5). As I have argued elsewhere, Godwin’s Gothic novel *Caleb Williams* (1794) critiques, and attempts to offer ethical alternatives to, the self-annihilatory logic of individual rights (Jones). I think Collins’s *Basil* offers a similarly useful interrogation of the interdependency of rights and revenge. Texts like these are interesting because they invite their readers to think about revenge, not merely as an individual pathology or as the legitimate, satisfying exercise of personal autonomy, but as a problematic and complex social function.

This special issue of *FORUM* represents a valuable intellectual undertaking in the same way. The essays here cover topics ranging from Sophocles’ *Women of Trachis* to Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting*, from Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist* to Neil Gaiman’s *The Sandman*. Of course revenge means differently in these different texts and genres and in the various historical moments and cultural locations that produced them. Vengeance in *The Merchant of Venice* may or may not have much in common with vengeance in *Gaudy Night* or *I Spit on Your Grave*. The differences matter. But, given the centrality and, I would argue, taken-for-grantedness of revenge as a narrative pleasure and an interactive mode in our contemporary context, these disparate analyses together also have much to say to us about ourselves.

Mannion, a confidential clerk for (and future partner of) a linen draper, has plotted secretly, patiently to corrupt Basil's young wife, Margaret, who is also his employer's daughter, all to pay back the hapless Basil for injustice done to Mannion's father by Basil's father.

Think for example of films like the following: *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978, 2010), *The Punisher* (1989, 2004), *The Crow* (1994), *Payback* (1999), *Kill Bill* (2003–04), *Memento* (2000), *A Man Apart* (2003), *Man on Fire* (2004). These are just a few titles that come to mind. One might easily think of a dozen more, even excluding the ones based on literary works, like *The Count of Monte Cristo* or *Hamlet*. Nor is the popularity of the revenge plot exclusive to Hollywood; one might include titles like *Eskiya* (1996), *Oldeuboi* (2003), *Om Shanti Om* (2007), *Låt den Rätte Komma In* (2008), and *Kokuhaku* (2010), from Turkey, South Korea, India, Sweden, and Japan respectively.

Think of *Cape Fear* (1962, 1991), *Fatal Attraction* (1987), or *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (1992). This is also the set-up for many of the horror franchises like *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984–2010) and *Halloween* (1978–2009), though the vengeful monsters in these are, of course, much more robust than the human villains who are dispatched with relative ease in *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* and similar thrillers.

One needn't go back to 2008 to find instances of public calls for revenge in response to individual crimes. The high-profile trial in Orlando, Florida of Casey Anthony for the murder of her two-year-old daughter received highly sensationalized international media coverage, and, when she was acquitted, so did the death threats against the defendant, her parents and her defense attorney, and the jurors who delivered the not-guilty verdict. See, for example, a July 14, 2011 article on the UK tabloid *Daily Mail* Web site, which reported breathlessly that "the woman, known only as juror number 12, left her job and went into hiding fearing co-workers would 'want her head on a platter'" ("Casey Anthony").

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