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Hell Hath No Fury: The Place of Revenge in Moral Repair

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Abstract

Revenge is a powerful word. It can conjure up the scheming, embittered individual, plotting the downfall of his enemies well beyond reason and morality—or, more seriously, tragic cycles of violence and blood vendettas, spiralling into entrenched civil conflict over generations. Philosophers have argued that the consequences and the moral psychology of revenge mean it is incompatible with—even antithetical to—any plausible conception of moral repair. In this paper I challenge that incompatibility by suggesting that, in contexts of unresponsive and imperfect institutional justice, appropriate acts of vengeance may both demand accountability and express solidarity, thus contributing to repair. Drawing on my own past work on revenge as *moral address* (MacLachlan 2016) and Peter French’s conception of the *virtuous avenger* (2001)—as well as two feminist revenge films—I sketch a feminist approach to virtuous third-party vengeance as a starting point for broader, more reparative understandings of legitimate personal interventions after wrongdoing.

There are only three possible endings—aren’t there?—to any story: revenge, tragedy,
or forgiveness. That’s it. All stories end like that.
(Jeanette Winterson 1997)

I can tell you how it ends
Don’t get sad, get even
So on the weekends
I don’t dress for friends
Lately I’ve been dressing for revenge.
(Taylor Swift 2022)

1. Introduction¹

In October 2017, the hashtag #MeToo swept across social media. Women around the world shared their experiences of being sexually harassed and assaulted after actor Alyssa Milano invited them to identify themselves publicly to demonstrate how pervasive sexual violence is. While the #MeToo movement, founded by activist Tarana Burke, had been operating for over a decade, 2017 became the year of the public hashtag and—for public figures—the year of reckoning. High-profile men in the Hollywood entertainment industry had charges pressed against them and several, most famously producer Harvey Weinstein, were found guilty. #MeToo ricocheted through global industries—including politics, education, technology, sports, government, finance, and the church—in at least eighty-five countries (Wikipedia 2022). The hashtag has maintained a place in public discourse since.

The power and reach of the #MeToo movement were unprecedented, causing a cultural shift in understandings of sexual violence and assault. Perhaps unsurprisingly, within three months it had provoked a forceful and lasting backlash. By early 2018, news headlines began to describe #MeToo as a “witch hunt” (Livsey 2018), “vigilante justice” (Hall 2018), “vigilantism” (Levick 2019), “mob rule” (Sharf 2018), and, crucially, nothing more than “revenge” (Branco 2018)—language that is still regularly used to discredit the movement’s aims and tactics. Interestingly, much of this criticism did not grapple with the admittedly thorny issue of false accusations; the charge that #MeToo is vengeful vigilante mob justice went beyond worries about innocent casualties. It seemed intended to hold whether or not the targets were actually guilty of harassment and rape. Revenge is just wrong, it was implied, even when you get it right.

That the language of vigilante vengeance was seen as sufficient to condemn the movement highlights just how strong cultural and moral aversions to revenge can be. Revenge is a powerful word. It can conjure up the scheming, embittered individual, plotting the downfall of his enemies well beyond reason and morality—or, more seriously, tragic cycles of violence and blood vendettas, spiralling into entrenched civil conflict over generations. Vengeful people are typically seen as sadistic (Chester and DeWall 2017), malicious (Uniacke 2000), reactive (Cherry 2021), and even narcissistic (Schumann and Ross 2010). They may well be petty and spiteful. Indeed, most philosophers who take up the topic have argued that the consequences and the moral psychology of revenge mean it is incompatible with—even antithetical to—any plausible conception of moral repair after wrongdoing (Arendt [1958] 1998, Nozick 1981, Uniacke 2000, Govier 2002, Cherry 2021).

I wish to challenge that presumed incompatibility. While I don’t actually believe that the practices of #MeToo (i.e., publicly recounting one’s experience of sexual assault and, potentially, naming one’s attacker when doing so) count as revenge, I am interested in the *power* of the accusation that they were: the idea that qualifying as revenge automatically delegitimises a response to wrongdoing. Instead, I argue, in contexts of unresponsive and imperfect institutional injustice, appropriate acts of vengeance might both create accountability and express solidarity with victims, thus contributing to crucial aspects of moral repair. In other words, my interest in revenge is provoked by, but ultimately not centred on, practices of #MeToo activism—though the context of my analysis will be similar (sexual violence and misconduct).

1 I am deeply grateful to audiences at the Atlantic Regional Philosophical Association (Halifax, Canada, 2007) and “Let’s Talk about Revenge! Retributive Emotions, Justice, and Moral Repair” (Essen, Germany, 2022) for their thoughtful engagement with previous versions of this work. My deep thanks also to Alfred Archer and to an anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments and criticism, and to Myisha Cherry for helping me work through some of the thornier aspects of vengeful emotion. Finally, I would like to thank Catherine Clune-Taylor and Deborah Finding for encouraging me to think more deeply about *Promising Young Woman*, Elliot Page in *Hard Candy* for initially inspiring my thoughts about feminist vigilantism, and David Wyatt for starting all of this thirty-five years ago when he read me *The Princess Bride*.

My argument in defence of revenge takes the following form: first, I examine the philosophical case against revenge, and argue that both categories of objection can potentially be answered. I then turn to my previous work on revenge as a form of *moral address* (MacLachlan 2016) and to Peter French's argument in favour of recognising potentially *virtuous avengers* (French 2001). Third, I illustrate the potential of virtuous vengeance as a response to sexual violence (as well as its pitfalls) by considering two films featuring feminist avengers of sexual assault: *Hard Candy* (2005) and *Promising Young Woman* (2020). Drawing on these narratives, I supplement French's notion of virtuous vengeance with what I call *reparative* revenge, focusing especially on the value of interpersonal accountability and victim solidarity. I recognise the significant risks and complexities of any campaign of vengeance, but I suggest that acknowledging its value broadens our understanding of what qualifies as an appropriate personal intervention in the aftermath of wrongdoing, especially in contexts of institutional failure.

2. The Case against Revenge

Revenge is a kind of wild justice, which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out.
(Francis Bacon [1625] 1986)

Philosophical arguments against revenge tend to fall into one of two categories. I call these objections (i) escalating consequences and (ii) destructive motivations—in particular, seeking satisfaction in the suffering of another. While the latter objection focuses on affective states internal to the act of revenge (the emotions and aims of the revenger), the first concerns itself with the risks of a *culture of revenge*. Robert Nozick articulates one source of this risk in *Philosophical Explanations* (1981), when he outlines the differences between revenge and retribution. Among them, he argues, is that revenge—unlike retribution—“sets no limits” on what can count as payback and, further, has no generality requirement. Whether or not something warrants revenge depends on the revenger's attitude to the wrong and wrongdoer at the time, and the revenger is not thereby committed to the principle that similar acts would warrant similar responses; in particular, she is not committed to the idea that she might similarly be accountable. In other words, practices of revenge are unregulated and irregular, with no internal brakes in either a single case or across cases (367–68). Hannah Arendt also views revenge as contrary to agency and choice—not because it is unpredictable and chaotic, but rather because it is inevitable: “far from putting an end to the consequences of the first misdeed, everybody remains bound to the process, permitting the chain reaction contained in every action to take its unhindered course” ([1958] 1998, 240–41). In a society where everyone remains wholly committed to revenge, one act of wrongful harm could set off a chain reaction that has no end. In other words, while a singular act of revenge may do no real significant harm, the risks of a culture that promotes or even allows for revenge are too great to allow ourselves to contemplate even a one-off instance.

Yet, as Jon Elster points out, social practices of revenge “can be subject to very elaborate norms” (1990, 870). These internal standards include norms of agency (who can take revenge for a particular harm), proportionality (what counts as appropriate revenge), and target (who can legitimately be harmed in the act of vengeance), and are bound up in understandings of shame, honour, and kinship. Because these norms are both socially understood and enforced, on one hand, and complex enough to require careful judgment and consideration, on the other, they are unlikely to allow for either the wild and unpredictable sprees Nozick predicts or the kind of automaticity Arendt fears. In other words, widespread practices of revenge may well protect against the variability of one-off *acts* of revenge.

Even without a culturally established set of norms, there is no reason to think that acts of revenge are necessarily open-ended. Proportionality (*lex talionis* or “an eye for an eye”) has played a crucial role in concepts of retaliation as far back as Hammurabi’s Code; while individuals may disagree about the precise magnitude of a proportional response, most people see some responses as proportionate and not others. As Suzanne Uniacke—herself a critic of revenge—notes, “successful retaliation within limits can be satisfying and some people know when to stop. Revenge can be conducted in secret and can be confined to the relevant parties and remain an isolated event” (2000, 64).

Indeed, acts of revenge need not be violent or violate the rights of the target. While it is tempting to envision duels and devastation, sometimes the most satisfying acts of revenge are a well-placed cutting remark, a skipped invitation, a down-vote at a meeting, or the decision to cc the right people when replying to an embarrassing email. Robert Solomon is quite explicit on this point: we live “in a tit-for-tat world. We are all moral accountants, even if the bookkeeping varies considerably” (1999, 126)—in most cases being “in the red” in such accounting does not lead to actual bloodshed. Fabian Bernhardt pushes this point further, arguing the tendency of early modern political philosophers to characterise revenge as uncontrolled, dysfunctional, and excessively violent may have something to do with the desire to mark a sharp boundary between (public) punishment and (private) revenge, to “provide normative ground for the rule of [the] state and its monopoly on the use of retributive violence” (2020, 503).

The second set of philosophical objections to revenge focuses on the emotions and motivations that lead to it: rage, resentment, malice, hatred, and the desire for payback or to “lower” the target in some crucial way. Revenge is morally problematic because is motivated and given a rationale by our uglier, “vindictive” passions.

Uniacke argues that revenge is typically malicious and vindictive (2000, 62)—seeking out evil or harm to another person and deriving pleasure from that harm—but not always. Rather, “the emotion that gives rise to the desire for revenge is resentment: bitter feelings about an injury sustained” (63). Not only injuries can prompt such bitter feelings. The desire for revenge may be prompted by a slight, affront, or threat to our reputation or self-esteem, even as we recognise the provoking action may have been accidental or unavoidable (“she didn’t mean to leave me out of her thank-you list, sure—but she should still pay for that public humiliation”). Uniacke understands resentment as both pain at the offence and the sense that the pain can only be alleviated by striking back, returning like for like, or by contemplating fantasies of doing so. The tendency of such bitterness to *become* malicious is certainly concerning, but Uniacke condemns even acts of revenge that are “non-vindictive or relatively harmless” (64). Indeed, for Uniacke, the distinctive emotional motivation and rationale for revenge is what makes it wrong:

Some acts of revenge, although morally inappropriate *qua* acts of revenge, can be independently justified. A book may deserve an unfavorable review on its merits even though the reviewer’s motive is vindictive. (2000, 68)

Uniacke acknowledges our attitude toward revenge and revenge-takers is more mixed than other emotions associated with pleasure at the suffering of others (e.g. pure malice or *schadenfreude*), due to our sympathy with their plight as victims and the intuitive appeal of payback as a kind of karmic balance. She also acknowledges the naturalness of resentment as a response to injury, but she concludes that this emotional response “cannot morally justify reprisal in kind” (68).

Myisha Cherry also connects revenge to resentment, critiquing what she calls “ressentiment rage” as morally and politically problematic because its aim is revenge. Cherry’s context of analysis is rage arising from racism and the disempowerment of racialised groups; she writes, “the outraged wishes for revenge as payback for the racial group taking away his group’s power. And he may wish for and even cause physical, mental, or status harm as a result” (2021, 19). For Cherry, the central problem with this vengeful emotion is not that it is angry, but that its anger is reactive; in needing to “lower” the other or settle the score, the revenge-seeker continues to centre the target’s agency and not their own. Vengeful rage is passive and self-defeating: its continued focus on its target only feeds feelings of envy and insecurity, rather than bolstering the agency of the oppressed.

In later work, Cherry expands her analysis of vengeful emotions, arguing that anger is neither necessary nor sufficient for what she calls “feeling vengeful.” Instead, the passions of revenge (which Cherry calls “vindictive passions”) include shame, contempt, resentment, disgust, and love of justice, emotions that have been overlooked in the philosophical focus on anger and hatred (2022, 5–6). Cherry’s moral psychology of revenge includes the revenger’s *plans* to harm the target, the vindictive passions that fuel these plans, the pleasures that come with either completing the plan or contemplating its completion (dreaming of revenge), and the beliefs that this kind of harm is instrumental for righting wrongs or gaining recognition (*ibid.*).

The emotional case against revenge is compelling, admittedly, but it also risks a certain circularity unless we can independently establish the wrongness of *taking* revenge. After all, the vindictive passions are considered unpleasant precisely because of their association with the desire for revenge. The same goes for the rest of the moral psychology of revenge: planning to take revenge, dreaming of those plans, and deriving pleasure from that dreaming—these are wrong only insofar as the plans themselves are wrong, i.e., insofar as revenge is wrong. Trudy Govier claims that the desire for revenge is an evil desire, and that to act on it is “to indulge and cultivate something evil in ourselves,” resulting in our moral diminishment (2002, 13). What makes the desire for revenge, and the moral psychology that develops around this desire, so evil? As Govier asks:

Suppose it were non-obsessive, non-violent, kept proportional and within bounds, applied to those who really were the wrongdoers and not inflicted on innocent third parties, and satisfying in the end. In such a case, could revenge be right? In other words, is there anything wrong with the desire for revenge or the quest for revenge as such, considered apart from its consequences? (11)

For Govier, Uniacke, and others, the answer is that the revenger desires—as a kind of core aim—that another person suffer for my satisfaction.² In feeling vengeful, I need them to feel bad so that I can feel better. Their suffering may not include actual physical violence and may not violate their rights, but it still treats them as a means to my end. This offends against respect for persons and human dignity, of course—and seems especially pernicious when what I am using is their (non-consensual, and presumably unwanted) *harm* for the end of my *satisfaction*. Insofar as the vengeful passions are identifiable by this core desire and the psychology of revenge built around it as either project or fantasy, these passions and this psychology are immoral, and taint whatever actions are taken as a result.

2 As Govier says, “when we seek revenge, we do so in order to take pleasure in the fact that *the offender has been made to suffer and it is we who have brought this about*” (2002, 13, italics added). In Uniacke’s words, “the satisfaction that someone who indulges in revenge seeks or derives from another person’s suffering is a matter of retaliation for an injury” (2000, 67).

3. Moral Address and the Virtuous Avenger

At first glance, this is a damning criticism of revenge. Even if things don't escalate, even if everything remains non-violent, even if no one's rights are violated, even if malice and spite are kept in check – at its core, these philosophers argue, the intent to enact revenge is always disrespectful of human dignity. Revenge treats its target as an object to be used, *through the infliction of harm* (however minor), and not as a person to be engaged. Revenge fails to acknowledge the extent to which we are *all* guilty of inadvertent and intentional slights and harms to others (not to mention more serious injuries . . .)—and we do not, and should not, lose access to our status as persons with dignity as a result. The moral bookkeeping of revenge leaves little room for grace. But the worry goes much further. Learning to see those who wrong us as mere objects on which we are *allowed* to inflict vindictive satisfaction for our own emotional needs cannot help but contribute to, among other social ills, deeply unjust and inhumane attitudes towards incarcerated persons. Anything that comes to see others as crucially *less*, even disposable, will work against attempts at moral repair following wrongdoing.

But is this what revenge does? A defence of the practice requires that we look more closely at what it means to take revenge. In his 2006 paper “Revenge,” Robert Stainton meticulously itemises the various conditions on revenge and, specifically, how an act that might seem to be revenge can fail as such, depending on the internal states of the revenge-taker and target. After reviewing several cases where one person, A, aims to take revenge on another, B, and fails, Stainton concludes that “the ideal cases are those in which B sees the *connection* between harm H_A which she did, and harm H_B which is now done to her. And that is likely to require B to realise that it was A who brought about H_B ” (2006, 17). This is quite plausible. If B never realises that they have not just suffered some unfortunate accident of fate but have, in fact, been brought *low* by A, because of B's past actions, then there is some sense in which A's vengeful feelings will not be satisfied by the act. Put crudely, “an eye for an eye” is not satisfied if the original eye-taker suffers an unfortunate accident with a fork in the face shortly after their misdeed.

But already, this explanation pulls against the idea that revenge treats the target as a mere means to my satisfaction. We do not require this level of recognition from objects; such engagement is appropriate to fellow subjects. The desire for revenge isn't just a desire to shift our present feelings to the target (e.g., to make our pain and suffering now theirs) but also, to share our plans (that they are being hurt *by* us, intentionally and because of their prior actions) and, ideally, our beliefs (that they are not beyond our reach, that they have brought this on themselves, perhaps even that they *deserve* what has come to them). Adam Smith, writing in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, captures the persuasive element of vengeful resentment beautifully:

Resentment would prompt us to desire, not only that he should be punished, but that he should be punished by our means, and upon account of that particular injury which he had done to us. Resentment cannot be fully gratified, unless the offender is not only made to grieve in his turn, but to grieve for that particular wrong which we have suffered from him. He must be made to repent and be sorry for this very action. ([1759] 1976, II.i.I.6)

Here we see the vindictive picture captured in contemporary philosophical accounts: the desire that the wrongdoer experience pain (“be punished”), and specifically that we be the agent of that pain (“by our means”) and that the wrongdoer's pain be *tied* to ours in a way that both we and he are aware of (“upon account of that particularly injury”). Moreover, Smith rightly identifies the ways in which we want the offender to transform: “he must be made to repent and be sorry.” As I have argued in past work on the topic (2016, 140), the aim

of revenge is not only harm to another, but *transformational* harm. Smith is describing a fantasy of forcible moral persuasion; the target of resentment is not merely an instrument for its satisfaction, but audience for its message. The revenger wants the target not only to feel differently, but to think differently. Revenge is, among other things, an act of communication (admittedly a fairly forcible, unilateral communication in most cases)—what I have called a form of *moral address*.³

The idea of moral address opens up the moral potentialities of revenge, recasting it as part of a moral communication between revenger and target, or—in their original roles—victim and wrongdoer. Recognising the communicative dimension of revenge also widens our understanding of its emotional dimension; someone might be desperate to initiate this kind of moral conversation not because they are overwhelmed by malice, but because they are overwhelmed by love or grief. I might fantasise about aggressively confronting the negligent driver who killed a family member not because I am filled with malice, but because I can't bear the idea that my loved one didn't matter in their eyes, might have meant less to them than the text they were answering. Similarly, suppose a friend's assault was never successfully prosecuted, whether because of local failures or—equally likely—some structural or systemic bias. I might entertain fantasies of revenge out of an intensive form of third-person indignation—the need for the wrongdoer to recognise that at least one person knows what they did, knows that it was wrong, and intends to hold them accountable.⁴

Yet while the idea of moral address opens up conceptual space for permissible—even morally productive—acts of revenge, it provides us little guidance for distinguishing acts of revenge likely to contribute to the righting of wrongs from those which may exacerbate the effects of wrongdoing by reigniting hostilities, opening old wounds, and so on. There are many permissible actions that are nevertheless profoundly unhelpful and thus problematic in the delicate aftermath of wrongdoing. Margaret Walker invites us to consider the moral work of this aftermath as moral repair: “the task of restoring or stabilising—and in some cases creating—the basic elements that sustain human beings in a recognisably moral relationship” (2006, 23). Most of the time, moral repair will entail holding wrongdoers accountable and responsible, addressing the harms themselves and acknowledging victims and survivors, engaging in rituals and practices that establish or re-establish trust (e.g. apologies and rituals of forgiveness), asserting or reasserting appropriate normative horizons, and—where possible and appropriate—building or rebuilding appropriately moral relationships among those implicated in the wrong.⁵ How might appropriately communicative and constrained acts of revenge fit into this reparative picture? To answer this question, I turn to a second philosophical defence of vengeance, offered by Peter French.

3 One of the best examples of revenge as moral address can be found in the 1973 William Goldman novel and 1987 film *The Princess Bride*: the Spanish fencer Inigo Montoya has spent his life seeking his father's murderer to enact vengeance and practicing the speech he will give when he confronts them. “Hello. My Name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die.” I have argued that, if Montoya had failed to identify and address his target, identify himself, name the wrong, and connect it to the suffering he was about to inflict, he would not have succeeded in taking revenge (despite duelling with and ultimately killing his target). See MacLachlan 2016 for more details.

4 Indeed, the longed-for conversation need not always be directly with one's wrongdoer. Sometimes resentment and the desire for revenge linger as a form of protest against others (even a whole society) who have simply *moved on*, without wholly attending and responding to the depths of the wrong. Jean Améry describes the loneliness of being out of time in relation to others by refusing to look away from the horrors of his own torture or the genocidal reality of the Nazi Holocaust. Améry contemplates the fantasy of revenge as a form of *fellowship* with his persecutor: “when the SS-man Wajs stood before the firing squad, he experienced the moral truth of his crimes. At that moment, he was with *me*—and I was no longer alone with the shovel handle. I would like to believe that at the instant of his execution he wanted exactly as much as I do to turn back time, to undo what had been done” (2009, 70).

5 Walker is clear that she does not intend moral repair to be a synonym for reconciliation. Morally right relationships can be as minimal as mutually acknowledging the other's humanity before separating entirely. But obviously the physical and psychological safety of victims must be prioritised in the establishment of *any* relationship with wrongdoers.

The careful reader will have spotted the shift in the examples of the negligent driver and the assault: in each case, the revenger is not the original primary victim of the wrongdoing. In the case of the negligent driver, the revenger is arguably a secondary victim of the injury: the driver's negligence has harmed them by taking a loved one from them. In the second case, however, the revenger is clearly an invested third party, motivated to take vengeance because of their care for the victim, their friend. And yet, it does seem that while revenge is *personal*, the injuries which I can reasonably take personally are not limited to my own. Nozick, for example, specifically notes that the revenge taker should have "special or personal tie to the victim" as a condition of revenge: "'this is because of what you did to my ___' (self, father, group, and so on)." (1981, 367).⁶ Similarly Elster acknowledges that "who [is] allowed or required to exact revenge" for a certain offense is one of the complex governing norms of revenge cultures, meaning that the question is not a foregone conclusion and must be negotiated among kin or group (1990, 867).

While most still insist that the tie must be close (e.g. kinship) for the act of retaliation to be sufficiently personal to count as revenge, Peter French stands out as the exception. In *The Virtues of Vengeance* (2001), he argues that the moral value of revenge as a response to evil has been overlooked and establishes a set of conditions under which, he argues, vengeance is virtuous. Intriguingly, while French acknowledges that "revenge is typically more personal than retribution [and t]he avenger is often linked in some crucial way to the person or persons who were injured, harmed, slighted, by the target" (67), he argues that this personal connection is not necessary. Rather, what he calls the "authority" to enact vengeance derives from independent moral qualities of the revenger—in French's terminology, the avenger—and not their personal connection to the victim.⁷

French's defence of revenge sees it as an individual moral effort to correct for both the nonkarmic nature of the universe and the failures of impersonal institutions and mechanisms of justice. When both the universe and the authorities fail to respond adequately to harms and wrongdoing, revenge picks up on a basic moral intuition: that wrongdoing somehow *demands* a hostile response. For the most part French's focus is the film genre of Westerns, which he reads as both expressions of the cultural and moral values of revenge and as an illustrative context: practices of revenge arise in conditions of moral and state lawlessness. Vengeance fills the gap left by institutional failure or absence and ultimately, it becomes a way to rectify structural social inequalities and those who are vulnerable to them.

Like Elster, French argues that for revenge to be coherent as a practice, it must be norm governed and intelligible within a set of recognisable social practices; like I do, he believes that revenge is fundamentally communicative. For vengeance to be successful, the target must understand that she is suffering as a penalty for the actions that triggered the revenging behaviour. Ultimately, however, French's defence rests on the possibility of there being acts of *virtuous* vengeance; that is, conditions under which taking vengeance is the right thing to do—that is, where it displays the appropriate motives, dispositions, and emotions.

In addition to revenge being both intelligible as a cultural practice and appropriately communicated to the target (both conditions which distinguish moral address from mere satisfaction) a virtuous act of revenge must meet three conditions. First, the target must *deserve* it. This rules out both cases of mistaken identity

6 For a parallel discussion of who does or doesn't hold the prerogative to *forgive* wrongdoings to others, see Pettigrove (2009) and MacLachlan (2017).

7 French is quite clear on this point: "I believe that Nozick's second point of difference between revenge and retribution—that revenge can only be inflicted by a person with a personal tie to the victim—is wrong" (68).

or attribution, as well as non-culpable and minor slights, offences, and injuries. While French is not explicit on this point, his discussion implies a certain threshold of wrongdoing above which revenge is appropriate.⁸ Closely connected to the desert condition is that of *proportionality* and fit: the penalty should, in some sense, fit the crime, both in magnitude and in quality or nature. A penalty that was significantly *less* than what was warranted might fail to register as revenge, while one that went too far would constitute a new act of aggression. Understandings of fit/proportionality will vary from context to context, and they may be open to dispute; French says avengers must be prepared to explain their choice of penalty, remarking that “the virtues of vengeance are regulated through the moral dialogue of the community” (229). Finally, the virtuous avenger must possess the *authority* to take revenge. This authority is not bestowed by the victim or the avenger’s relationship to her; instead, the avenger holds authority if she acts on the right motives (for example, appropriate motives and desires), possesses the appropriate virtues of character (French suggests both inner strength and moral originality), and uses an epistemologically reliable procedure to determine her target and penalty.⁹

French’s picture of the virtuous avenger fills in the opening created by the idea of revenge as moral address; his virtuous avenger is someone who, given her appropriate motives, upright character, and reliable procedure, is able to grasp or create the appropriately proportionate, fitting response to a sufficiently significant offense, ensuring that her response is directed at the deserving target, and that it communicates the moral reasons for which the penalty is inflicted. If French is right, then this avenger’s actions are both textbook revenge and—unless she commits some other wrong in performing them—entirely morally acceptable. Moreover, French’s emphasis on the ways in which practices of revenge fill the gaps left by inadequate institutional justice hints at how revenge might play a role in moral repair. If moral repair requires holding wrongdoers accountable and finding ways to set people back in right relationship, the kind of virtuous vengeance French has in mind could potentially play a role.

4. Two Cases: *Hard Candy* and *Promising Young Woman*

French’s argument is illustrated largely by the cultural archive of classic Westerns. I want to turn to two other films, belonging to what is sometimes (unfortunately) named the rape-revenge genre. I choose these films for several reasons. First, they return us to the domain which first motivated my interest in this topic: namely, the legitimacy of personal retributive responses to sexual violence in the absence of institutional justice. Second, and importantly, the differences between the two revenge-taking protagonists illustrate crucial elements of virtuous vengeance that French overlooks—and which I argue redirect our attention away from virtuous vengeance, and towards *reparative* revenge. These films are David Slade’s *Hard Candy* (2005) and Emerald Fennell’s *Promising Young Woman* (2020).

Hard Candy was billed as a cat-and-mouse game between a fourteen-year-old vigilante, Hayley, and Jeff, a man she suspects of being a sexual predator. The film opens with their online flirtation, a tentative meet-up at a

8 Presumably there is both cultural and individual variation here. While few people would see failing to replace the milk in the fridge as a revenge-worthy offence, some would see forgetting a birthday or important anniversary might as revenge-worthy, while for others revenge only becomes a question in cases of significant betrayal and deceit (e.g., keeping a secret second family or cleaning out a shared savings account).

9 This might seem redundant, given the desert and proportionality condition, but for the avenger to act virtuously, it can’t be a coincidence that her actions are directed at the right target, in the right way.

coffee shop, and his studiously casual invitation to come back to his place.¹⁰ Yet the audience soon learns that Hayley is wholly in control of this interaction; indeed, she already knows that Jeff colluded with another man (Aaron) to rape, photograph, and kill a local girl, because this is her second vengeful confrontation. She has been tracking and baiting both of them and, moreover, one of the first things she does is to locate the pictures of Donna that Jeff has locked in his safe. In other words, we are shown Hayley has an epistemologically reliable method for determining her target.

Over the course of the film, things between Hayley and Jeff escalate radically. When he tries to give her alcohol, she insists on making the drinks herself and drugs him (at which point she locates the evidence and ties him to a chair). When he manages to retaliate and overpower her, threatening her with the gun, Hayley manages to choke him with plastic wrap from behind. In the next scene, Hayley falsely persuades Jeff that she is castrating him (by putting ice on his genitals) which is traumatic for Jeff. She walks away, he attacks her with a scalpel, and she retaliates with a stun gun. In the final act, Hayley persuades Jeff to kill himself, by telling him that if he doesn't, she will expose his secrets; killing himself is the only way to keep them. Jeff attempts to bargain and plead, offering to tell her the other man's name, at which point Hayley reveals that she already knows it, and Aaron is already dead. Jeff jumps off the roof with a noose around his neck and Hayley leaves the evidence for the police to find, despite her promise, and walks away.

In some ways, Hayley most resembles the classic avenger that French envisions. Her connection to the original victim is minimal—they are both young girls vulnerable to sexual predation, but it's not clear that they even knew each other. Hayley acts on her own sense of indignation and rage at the impunity of predators and the apathy of everyone else. Her chosen revenge scheme is both communicative and, arguably, fitting. Her language and actions mimic those of Jeff and other predators, and she narrates this to him (and the audience): tracking her target online, interfering with his drink, overpowering him when he passes out, and assaulting his genitals against his explicit wishes while filming his assault. Jeff's end resembles that of the original victim, Donna—except, unlike Donna, Jeff seems to be given some agency. Hayley's revenge scheme depends entirely on Jeff making culpable choices at each stage: bringing a fourteen-year-old to his house, offering her alcohol, first threatening her, and then attacking her with a gun and scalpel. Each escalation in violence is predicated on his initial decision to attack.

Yet the agency given to Hayley's target, Jeff, is largely illusory. Although he consistently acts badly, bringing on the worse option, it's not clear that if Jeff had experienced genuine contrition at any point (including the willingness to turn himself into authorities) Hayley's plans would have changed. Her communication is one-sided, and while it's true the film's audience would likely rather not hear much more of Jeff's perspective, this still makes for a profoundly unilateral address: moral command rather than moral persuasion. As I have previously argued, morally problematic "revenge fails to participate in a moral dialogue . . . it always aims to shut that dialogue down, ending the moral conversation" (2016, 144) because the revenger cannot be open to her target's perspective. Hayley's ability to do what she does depends on her continuing to believe in the righteousness of her cause, and that requires silencing her interlocutor, rather than being open to any reciprocal persuasion. Again, the audience is not expected to mourn Jeff's silence, but this attitude carries the risk of disrespect and, worse, the idea that some people need never be heard from and can simply be silenced and then disposed of.

¹⁰ While the protagonist, Hayley, is played on screen by Elliot Page, my discussion concerns the character and not the actor. Thus, I will use "she" and "her" as Hayley's—and not Page's—pronouns.

Even more worrying, perhaps, is the vanishingly small role played by Jeff's victim, Donna, in the film and in Hayley's machinations. While Hayley may address Jeff, in some ways she *uses* Donna to do so, even leaving out explicit photos of Donna's rape and death in a sordid display at the end of the movie. Donna becomes the means by which Hayley achieves her goal of punishing Jeff for his predation: while the viewer is persuaded of Hayley's genuine and deeply sincere anger and indignation at Jeff and those like him, we see almost no concern—or even much thought—for Donna and those like her. Hayley may achieve accountability for Jeff, but her actions fail to prioritise the perspective and value of his victim(s).

Hayley's disconnect from the victim she claims to avenge contrasts sharply with Cassie, the protagonist of *Promising Young Woman* (2020). Cassie is entirely consumed by the loss of her best friend, Nina, who committed suicide after a med school classmate of theirs, Al, raped her. Cassie is clearly grieving; she has dropped out of med school, works at a coffee shop, and lives with her parents; at first, she seems to have no plans and no direction. She spends her nights pretending to be drunk in clubs and bars so that men will take her home and try to take advantage of her, at which point she reveals she's completely sober, "thrusting them into a jarring moment of self-reflection," in the words of critic Aisha Harris (2021). But, in addition to her habitual practices of moral confrontation, Cassie has also embarked on a comprehensive program of revenge on Al and everyone else she holds responsible for Nina's suicide. This includes Madison, a classmate who blamed Nina for her own rape because she had gotten drunk; Elizabeth Walker, the college Dean who dismissed Nina's case for lack of evidence and then celebrated Al as a visiting alumnus; and Jordan Green, Al's lawyer who harassed Nina into dropping the charges against him. Nina's rapist, Al, is Cassie's final target.

Like Hayley, Cassie has planned her revenge extraordinarily carefully. Her targets are well-researched, and her plans for each are both proportionate to their degree of responsibility and fitting modes of communicating the moral message Cassie needs them to hear. For Dean Walker, who insisted there was no reason to doubt boys of character, Cassie highlights the inconsistency between Walker's careless treatment of the young women students in her care, on one hand, and Walker's fierce protectiveness of her own young daughter, on the other. She deceives the Dean into thinking that Amber, her daughter, has been alone in a dorm room with drunk male students for several hours, and now can't be reached; Walker finds herself panicked, desperate, and terrified—utterly at odds with her earlier casual reassurance that, after all, these are "good boys of character." The deceit is the only real harm Cassie inflicts on Walker; in fact, Amber has been persuaded to wait safely in a diner, and Cassie has hidden her phone. For Madison, who engaged in victim-blaming and thought Nina should have taken more responsibility for her drinking, Cassie roofies her drink at lunch, and then pays a gay man to take Madison to a hotel room so that Madison can experience waking up wondering if she's been raped. For Al, who treated Nina like dirt and put her behind him as he moved on with his life, Cassie escalates to violence: her plan is to carve Nina's name into his chest while he is handcuffed to a bed at his bachelor party. Cassie will leave Nina's mark on his body and psyche, as he violently left his mark on Nina's.

The audience never learns exactly what Cassie's plan is for Jordan Green, the lawyer who harassed her friend. When she arrives at his house, she learns he is on leave after having a nervous breakdown following Nina's suicide. He is deeply guilty and remorseful. Instead of harming him, Cassie forgives Jordan and ends up comforting him. She doesn't need to take further action because her revenge has been satisfied, revealing that her aim had always been accountability through suffering—in Jordan's case, the suffering of his own remorse—and not her targets' suffering for its own sake.

Cassie's actions, like Hayley's, depend on the reactions and responses of her interlocutors, but, unlike Hayley, her plans for revenge are open to revision in light of remorse and contrition. Cassie's plans are also almost entirely non-violent (with the exception of Al). Her revenge aims to *shock* the target more than harm them, to shake them into moral transformation. This is true both of her purposeful plans for revenge on behalf of Nina, and her more aimless—though arguably vengeful—practice of disturbing would-be rapists by suddenly revealing her sobriety. In both cases, Cassie's vengeful strategies are in line with philosophers like Macalester Bell (2013), Ami Harbin (2016), and Imke von Maur (2022) who argue that experiences of cognitive and affective disorientation, disturbance, and disruption can be valuable for moral agency, shaking our complacency and settled, habitual expectations, inviting us to recognise the reasons we have for doing and thinking differently, forcing us to ask: "how can I go on?" In other words, disorienting shocks of the kind that Cassie inflicts can play a role in holding wrongdoers accountable and in having them internalise that accountability.

Cassie enacts revenge as a way of forcing her targets to confront their wrongdoing (Al), their hypocrisy (Madison and Dean Walker), or their cowardice (Ryan, the former classmate Cassie was in love with until she learnt he was a silent bystander to Nina's rape, is forced to silently witness his friend Al's downfall in a parallel bystander role; in doing so, she makes Ryan confront his own weakness).¹¹ In some ways, her campaign of vengeance is less a moral conversation she has with her targets than a conversation she forces them to have with themselves. At the same time, her response to Green's contrite devastation reveals her openness to genuine moral conversation. Additionally, the audience learns that for Cassie, revenge is a last resort, a way to have the moral conversation that Al's moral community (his friends and classmates) and at least two institutions (the university and the courts) refused to have with him.

Finally, she never loses sight of Nina as the heart of her vengeance. Cassie is deeply vengeful and at times she is intensely angry, but the emotional source of her vengeance is always inflected by her abiding love and grief for Nina, represented by the half-heart-shaped necklace with Nina's name Cassie wears when she sets off to confront Al.

5. Revenge and Moral Repair

I take Cassie and Hayley to be both illustrative of and a challenge to French's ideal of the virtuous avenger. While French draws his moral picture from Westerns, a genre premised on the absence of law and order ("the Wild West"), I have turned to a very different genre—albeit one that is also premised on the absence of functioning institutional justice. Both Hayley and Cassie live in a "wild west" of sexual violence, where predators and rapists are able to act with impunity and without fear of accountability. They both enact programmes of revenge that are, on one hand, targeted at specific wrongdoers and which, on the other hand, function as censure of the lawless state they find themselves. At one point Hayley tells Jeff directly: "I'm every little girl you ever watched, touched, screwed, killed." Cassie takes this symbolic status further; her nightly habits turn her into an everywoman of sorts: the universal drunk girl at the bar, as a silent symbol of vulnerability. For both women, revenge is also an act of protest.

Cassie's and Hayley's aims draw our attention to a role for revenge largely overlooked in the philosophical literature. Insofar as the avenger steps up when no one else will, their actions—and their sheer willingness

¹¹ Since *Promising Young Woman* is a relatively recent film and relies on some significant plot twists, I try to remain as vague as possible about the ending.

to act—function as an implicit rebuke to the institutions and authorities that failed to intervene, and they highlight how the risks of acting outside the law are outweighed by the frustrations and pointlessness of working within it. When the wrongdoings in question are facilitated and enabled by broader issues of injustice and oppression, such protest contributes to processes of moral repair insofar as it draws our attention to conditions of mistrust and what needs to change. Dean Walker has been forced to confront her willingness to overlook sexual violence on campus; Madison will hesitate before condemning other women.

The contrast between Hayley and Cassie also points to the limits of French's account. Hayley most closely resembles the virtuous avenger as French describes them. Yet, above, I identified what I took to be two moral weaknesses in Hayley's approach to vengeance unaccounted for in French's framework: first is the unilateral nature of her revenge-taking. While Hayley pretends to engage Jeff in moral conversation—letting him tell her about his own childhood abuse, pretending to consider a bargain of death for secrecy—ultimately her communication is more command than conversation. This is perhaps best illustrated in the moments before Jeff jumps off the roof with the noose around his neck. Second, Hayley fails to stand in appropriate moral relationship to the victims whose wrongs she aimed to avenge. Donna—the girl whom Jeff killed—only features peripherally in Hayley's decision-making, but is left exposed (literally, in photographs) in her wake. Hayley may be avenging Donna's death, but her vengeance is something she does *to* Jeff, and not *for* Donna. She may be relevantly similar to Donna, and take revenge on her behalf, but there is a very real sense in which Hayley fails to stand in solidarity with Donna, precisely because she lacks an appropriate relationship of care or concern.

Cassie's actions, by contrast, demonstrate both receptivity to her targets as interlocutors and openness to their ability to change for the better, as shown in her interaction with Jordan. Similarly, Cassie consistently engages in reparative rather than retributive vengeance: the penalties she inflicts are specifically selected for their ability to disrupt her target's perception of their own actions and agency, putting them in a position to *see* themselves as responsible and accountable, thus inviting them into a moral conversation via their own remorse and atonement. If one of the moral risks of revenge is its tendency to function like a moral mic drop, ending the conversation exactly where the revenge taker wishes, Cassie exacts her revenge in a way that minimises that moral risk by remaining vulnerable to further interjections from others. Indeed, Madison shows up later in the movie, to confirm that Cassie's actions had their intended effect by helping—and thus endorsing—Cassie's cause. Madison then angrily tells Cassie never to contact her again, revealing to Cassie—and the audience—what it *felt* like to be on the receiving end of Cassie's moral address, even if she was persuaded by it. The audience is also allowed to see how much Madison's distress—and Green's contrition—leave Cassie shaken.

Second, Cassie's consistent focus on Nina and their relationship challenges both French's insistence that the avenger's authority has nothing to do with the victim, and philosophical accounts that locate the desire for revenge in resentment, malice, and hatred. While Cassie is undoubtedly angry, her governing emotions are grief and love, both of which play a role in *how* she avenges Nina; her recognisable rage and anger never overpower these. Nina is so present in Cassie's emotions and decision making that her final cumulative act is to carve Nina's name into the flesh of her rapist, insisting that he remember Nina as vividly as Cassie does. Furthermore, Cassie's only moments of doubt in her mission arise from wondering what Nina would think of it, or whether she would want Cassie to move on with her life—something Cassie cannot do, precisely because of her love for Nina. Cassie's revenge is an act of what Jean Harvey calls “moral solidarity” (2007) with Nina, a “caring attentiveness” to the nuances of Nina's experiences and a determination to make things right as

best she can for Nina's sake and the sake of their friendship, even if she does not ultimately defer to what she imagines Nina would have wanted (30).

There is no question that Cassie takes revenge against her targets and that in doing so she intentionally causes them harm. Further, it is equally clear that Cassie is deeply emotionally invested in her project of vengeance, and that her grief and anger fuel and shape her plans for revenge. She is, by any measure, a recognisable revenge taker, and one who displays many of the traits described by philosophers critical of revenge: her quest for revenge consumes her to the point of risking her other projects, relationships, and life, and it causes her to act deceitfully and even manipulatively, coercing others into confronting their moral responsibilities. Yet Cassie is far from the embittered, obsessive, reactive avenger that philosophers and others have feared. She chooses actions that aim at accountability rather than suffering, considers both proportionality and fit, and alters her intended actions in the face of remorse and contrition. Her capacity to enact revenge thoughtfully and morally seems *tied* to her care and concern both for justice, as a general principle, and to her friend Nina and their friendship, as a concrete relationship. Cassie has a deeply relational approach to revenge, one that connects her both to her targets and her cause in morally sensitive ways; the vision of revenge she enacts is relational, responsive, and—I would argue—profoundly feminist.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been, first, to challenge the idea that revenge is always bad—that calling something revenge is tantamount to condemning it. I have done so first by challenging philosophical arguments against revenge, then by offering a philosophical framework that opens up the possibility of a moral role for revenge, both as a form of moral address and as something that can be enacted virtuously, by the right agent acting in the right way. But, in shifting to depictions of revenge that illustrate some of the features of righteous revenge, I have tried to go further than simply allowing for the conceptual possibility of revenge done (morally) well. Rather, I have argued, such narratives explore what appropriately constrained acts of revenge might actually *contribute* to processes of moral repair, following wrongdoing.

Both Cassie and Hayley illustrate how interpersonal revenge can draw out accountability and express moral protest in the absence of institutional justice. In Hayley's case, the accountability and protest in question might well make us withdraw from endorsing the possibility of legitimate interpersonal revenge. And yet, I've argued, the differences between Cassie and Hayley point to what is missing both in Hayley's actions and in the account of virtuous vengeance French has offered: not only does reparative revenge aim at accountability for wrongdoers and others who hold responsibility, it does so in solidarity with victims, expressing care and concern for their value, while remaining accountable (if not deferential) to their perspectives and wishes. Moreover, Cassie's revenge—what I have described as *reparative* revenge—aims to disturb and disrupt rather than harm, putting her targets in a position to reconsider their actions and agency. These two characteristics—victim solidarity and reparative accountability—provide a useful framework for reflecting on the value not only of acts of revenge, but also of other interpersonal interventions into the aftermath of wrongdoing.

Cassie's project of vengeance is precarious and risky: it damages her own prospects, her other relationships, her safety, and her life. In this way, she represents another cautionary tale: the serious costs of enacting individual responses to a collective and systemic problem (in this case, the failure to hold perpetrators of sexual violence responsible). It's not hard to imagine how much better things might have gone for Cassie if she had friends,

allies, or even a movement behind her, and how much *less* she would have had to personally risk to demand a moral conversation that needed to happen with institutions and individuals who had up until now refused to listen. Indeed, in such a situation, her actions might well have come to resemble the demands of #MeToo.

The horizon for my discussion has been the legitimacy of *personal* responses to wrongdoing in the absence of institutional justice, specifically as they arise in relation to sexual violence and assault. My hope is that taking seriously even the drastic, shocking methods employed by heroines in genre films gives us a new perspective on the more moderate forms of accountability that survivors and others in solidarity have demanded, through #MeToo activism and elsewhere. Not only can #MeToo not be reduced to “mere revenge” as a response to decades of sexual violence and harassment but, if it could, that is no reason not to take it seriously.

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