



ARISTOTLE, SCULPTURE AND PHOTOGRAPHY: THE QUESTION OF REVENGE¹

ARISTÓTELES, ESCULTURA E FOTOGRAFIA: A QUESTÃO DA VINGANÇA

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ABSTRACT – Much is said about revenge and its reach: how far somebody can go when taking revenge on someone; or, still, is it ethically and morally acceptable? It would not be a mere reproduction of human irrationality formed along the construction of society, “a kind of wild justice,” according to Bacon. If it is justifiable, to what extent could it be feasible? How did Aristotle see it in his **Ethics**? Moreover, if revenge is the result of an error, a mistake? We could raise several questions that would not be capable of being included in an article. However, we ask how revenge was treated in literature and imagery representation over the centuries. In addition, we ask ourselves: Would it be possible to **take revenge** by employing the text and photography?

KEYWORDS: revenge, image, photography, word, Aristotle.

RESUMO – Muito se fala, atualmente, a respeito da vingança e de seu alcance: até que ponto pode-se ir quando se trata de vingar-se de alguém; ou, ainda, ela é ética e moralmente aceitável? Não seria uma mera reprodução inconsciente da irracionalidade humana formada ao longo da construção da sociedade, uma “espécie de justiça selvagem”, segundo Bacon? Se for justificável, em que medida poderia ser exequível? Como Aristóteles a via em sua **Ética**? E se a vingança for fruto de um erro, de um engano? Poderíamos aqui levantar vários questionamentos que não seriam passíveis de serem incluídos em um artigo, no entanto o que nos cabe perguntar é: de que modo a vingança foi tratada ao longo dos séculos na literatura e na representação imagética. Além disso, procuraremos nos questionar: seria possível “vingar-se”, empregando o texto e a fotografia?

PALAVRAS-CHAVE – vingança, imagem, fotografia, palavra, Aristóteles.

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The legitimization of revenge

According to Webster (1989), **revenge** means a “punishment or expiation for a wrong on behalf of, especially in a resentful or vindictive spirit; [...] an opportunity of retaliation or satisfaction”; in other words, to make someone suffer what he previously did to another so that his attitude is no longer repeated.

Talking about revenge implies that not only philosophical and religious concepts are used – when we would go into moral, ethical, and salvation issues – but also social ones, whose rules of conduct have been refined over generations. Its purpose was to curb possible behavior deviations in its midst, even legitimizing it.

In this way, many societies, to maintain their self-preservation, stipulated norms of behavior that all should follow to avoid excesses that would lead to mutual and unnecessary destruction of their gear, in addition to being, evidently, an effective form of social coercion to maintain the *status quo* of its upper classes.

That becomes clear when we read the **Code of Hammurabi**, which established conduct programs for Babylonian society, when it makes a clear distinction between *alum* (higher class, that of free men), *mushkenum* (free citizens, of lower *status*), and *wardum* (enslaved people), as seen in the following articles:

203. If a free-born man strikes the body of another free-born man or equal rank, he shall pay one gold mine.

204. If a freed man strikes the body of another freed man, he shall pay ten shekels in money.

205. If the slave of a freed man strikes the body of a freed man, his ear shall be cut off.

206. If one man strikes another and wounds him during a quarrel, he shall swear, “I did not injure him wittingly,” and pay the physicians.

The question of the **legitimacy** of revenge becomes more evident, however, when one verifies, in the same code, the well-known **Talion law** (from the Latin *talis*, identical), and there is total reciprocity regarding the crimes committed:

196. If a man put out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out. [An eye for an eye]

197. If he breaks another man’s bone, his bone shall be broken.

198. If he put out the eye of a freed man or break the bone of a freed man, he shall pay one gold mine.

199. If he put out the eye of a man’s slave, or break the bone of a man’s slave, he shall pay one-half of its value.

200. If a man knocks out the teeth of his equal, his teeth shall be knocked out. [A tooth for a tooth]

Despite this presumed legitimization of revenge, it should be clear that the code established limits to specific penalties so that an imputed punishment was not, *a priori*, more significant than the crime committed. It was from this Babylonian pattern, and probably following its model, that the precepts of the Hebrew **Torah**, present in Exodus, were created:

If men strive, and hurt a woman with child, so that her fruit depart *from her*, and yet no mischief follow: he shall be



surely punished, according as the woman's husband will lay upon him; And if *any* mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life, and he shall pay as the judges *determine*. **Eye for eye, tooth for tooth**, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. And if a man smites the eye of his servant or the eye of his maid, that it perish; he shall let him go free for his eye's sake. And if he smite out his manservant's tooth or his maidservant's tooth; he shall let him go free for his tooth's sake. (Ex 21, 22-27)

For Aristotle (1999), in Ancient Greece, man is a **social animal**; **moreover**, because he needs to be inserted in society, the use of coexistence rules becomes essential. Thus, even if specific laws are of general order and cannot be extended to all situations, they would still be adequate since neither the law nor the legislator is faulty, but the particularity of the case (ARISTOTLE, 1999). Faced with this, conflict situations may occur, such as the feeling of injustice that often leads its members to take extreme attitudes.

The Stagirite shows us, for example, two types of attitudes (and of people) in the face of injustice: that which is driven to anger and that which does not react. Getting angry would be a natural, even if impulsive, attitude:

The person who is angry at the right things and toward the right people, and also in the right way, at the right time, and for the right length of time, is praised. This, then, will be the mild person if mildness is praised. For [if mildness is something to be praised,]

being a mild person means being undisturbed, not led by feeling, but irritated wherever reason prescribes, and for the length of time it prescribes. And he seems to err more in the direction of deficiency, since the mild is a person ready to pardon, not eager to exact a penalty. (ARISTOTLE, 1999, p. 61)

On the other hand, Aristotle criticizes the attitude of **non-irascibility** of the **passive**, considered foolish:

The deficiency [...] is blamed. For people who are not angered by the right things, or in the right way, or at the right times, or toward the right people, all seem to be foolish. For such a person seems to be insensible and to feel no pain, and since he is not angered, he does not seem to be the sort to defend himself. Such willingness to accept insults to oneself and to overlook insults to one's family and friends is slavish. (ARISTOTLE, 1999, p. 61)

Exalted people in the face of injustice show themselves to be virtuous because they do not remain silent cowardly; in the face of error, they are the **kind ones**. On the other hand, the Stagirite demonstrates his contempt for passivity in front of what is considered unjust.

Some irascible people get angry with the **wrong people**, yet they tend to curb their state quickly, but there are still the grudge people who are choleric people, quick-tempered to extreme, and irritable about everything and at everybody,

It is hard to reconcile and stay angry for a long time since they contain their



[angry] spirit. It stops when they pay back the offense, for the exaction of the penalty produces pleasure in place of pain and so puts a stop to the anger. But if this does not happen, they hold their grudge. For no one else persuades them to get over it since it is not obvious, and digesting anger in oneself takes time. This sort of person is most troublesome to himself and to his closest friends.

The people we call irritable are those who are irritated by the wrong things, more severely and for longer than is right and are not reconciled until [the offender has suffered] a penalty and corrective treatment. (ARISTOTLE, 1999, p. 61)

For Aristotle, therefore, the problem is not **wrath**, nor is **ire**, as long as it is used to denounce injustice and directed at the right people for the right things in the right way; what is objectionable is its excess and its lack, not your middle ground.

Western culture grew in light of Greek and Judeo-Christian culture; in this way, we could establish a relationship between these two conceptions concerning the harm done to others. We observe that for Aristotle, possible punishment for an unjust person stems from disrespect to the norms established by the society in which the transgressor is inserted since such transgression harms an individual and the entire community. That becomes clear when the Stagiritae (ARISTOTLE, 1999, p. 84) refers to suicide and the fact that he acts unjustly against himself and πόλις (*polis* – city). On the other hand, when speaking of punishment, the Hebrew law of talion is not concerned with the individual who suffered aggression or with society itself,

but only with the breach of divine precepts.

It was precisely against this tradition that Jesus stands:

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have [thy] cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you. (Mt 5, 38-44)

There is a shift here and, for Christianity, there is no more room for revenge since only God can do it, but even so, He abstains from this role; after all, he is a Father and, as such, his anger is directed to “the right people, about the right things, in the right way,” as Aristotle (1999, p. 62) had said.

However, this does not mean that Christ's ideas align with Aristotle's regarding punishment; on the contrary, those of the Master of Nazareth are much closer to those of Stoics such as Seneca.

The sculptural depiction of revenge

If, as Aristotle states (1996, p. 187), “it is human to be vengeful,” this presupposes that such a feeling is



intrinsic to us; therefore, it will be effusively expressed in myths and widely used in art, as well as love, passion, tenderness, hate. After all, what is art, if not the quest to imitate the reality that man has around him, in addition to opening his own interior wide open?

According to Chauí (2000, p. 318),

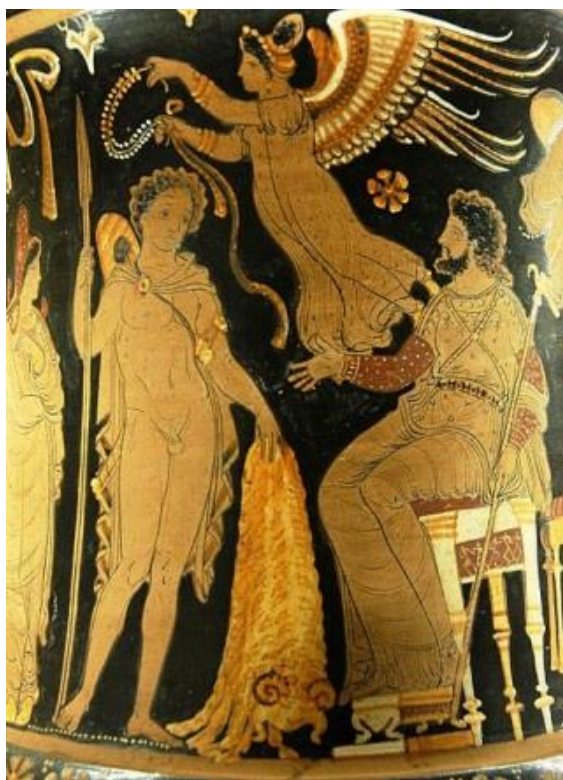


Figure 1

Jason Delivers the Golden Fleece to King Pelias,
c. 240 to 320 B.C.

[...] the arts were not intended to imitate reality, nor are they intended to be illusions about fact, but to express reality itself through artistic means. The painter wants to reveal what the visible world is: the musician, what is the world of sound; the dancer, what is the world of movement; the writer, what is the world of matter and form.

The myth, on the other hand, when trying to explain to man his reality, his origin, and that of the cosmos – even confusing himself with the very basis of *λόγος* (*lógos* – word) – will be widely used in literary art:

With myth, man creates poetry to explain what his *ratio* couldn't make explicit, and by trying to demonstrate what is not shown, poetry will differentiate itself from current language, from the objectivity of the **normal flow** of the world through metaphors, allegories, and musicality. Poetry, therefore, remains indifferent to the language in which it manifests itself, demonstrating its relationship with the sacred: the *λόγος* itself, for many civilizations, was only used by the priestly caste, not aimed solely at the reproduction of reality, but at the truth. (BRANDÃO, 2009a, p. 4)

Like this, the theme of revenge starts from orality and reaches literary art from this to the pictographic and sculptural one and becomes a recurrent object in art. From the mythological source that discusses the theme, several models were taken by artistic making. What does Homer's *Iliad*, for example, show us by portraying the end of the Trojan War, if

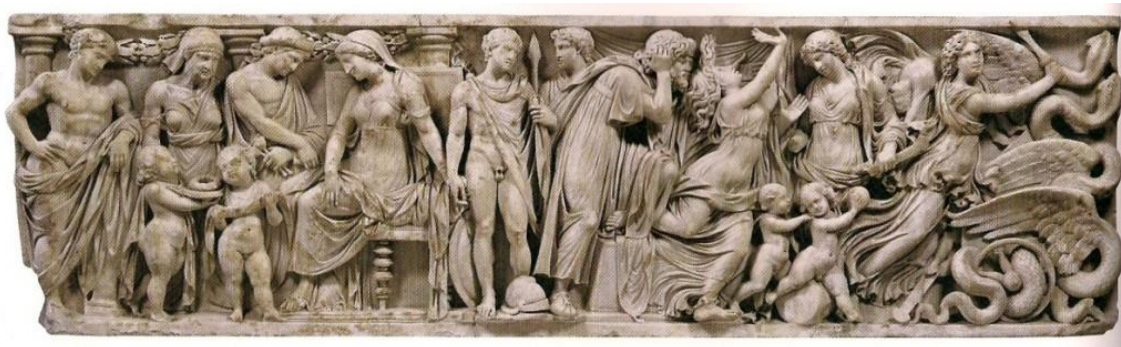


Figure 2
Sarcophagus of Medea, c. 140 -150 AD

not the damage resulting from revenge? However, this article has one particular myth of particular interest: the story of Jason and Medea. That is due to two reasons:

a) by how revenge was calculated and carried out to the last consequences;

b) due to explaining the myth of a coffin from the 2nd century AD (fig. 2), which is in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin.

In myth, Jason is convinced by his uncle, Pelias, to go on an adventure searching for the golden fleece. Upon reaching the kingdom of Colchis, where the thread was found, he claims to his king, Aeetes, that the object was kept in a cave under the protection of a dragon.

The king promises to give him the fleece as long as he plows the land, using two bronze-legged bulls that breathe fire through their nostrils and mouth and, in the open furrows, sow the teeth of a dragon. Medea, the king's daughter, falls in love with Jason and helps him in his quest. In possession of the fleece, Jason, Medea, and their companions leave.

Back in Thessaly, Medea plots revenge against Jason's usurping uncle Pelias by convincing her daughters to cut him to pieces with the promise that he will become young again, just as she had done to Jason's father, Aeson. This fact does not occur, and they leave for Corinth. There, King Creon convinces Jason to reject his wife in favor of his daughter, Creusa.



Figure 3

Detail from the Sarcophagus of Medea, the sons of Jason deliver a gift to Creusa



Figure 4

Detail of the Sarcophagus of Medea, Creusa, and King Creon stricken by a mysterious fire



Figure 5

Detail from the Sarcophagus of Medea: Medea's children address their mother

From that moment, Medea engenders her perverse revenge depicted on the sarcophagus.

Obsessed with being passed over and abandoned after everything she did to Jason, Medea takes revenge on her rival, sending her, through her children and Jason, a dress and jewelry enchanted with a mysterious potion. In fig. 3, we can see her sitting and the children in front of the father, who looks at them affectionately.

Creusa feels her body burn in flames when wearing the dress, corrupted by a mysterious fire. Everyone who runs to

help her hears her piercing screams in the palace. Faced with his daughter's despair, the king tries to help her, but he, too, is affected by the same illness.

Creusa's expression of despair **seeks** to be clear, just like his father's: the artist seeks to capture the most expressive moment of literary action, **that instant**, to perpetuate it in marble. It may seem to the 21st-century reader that the pose is **artificial** and does not represent the roar of pain. However, the work follows the Greek beauty standard



Figure 6
Detail from the Sarcophagus of Medea: Medea flees to Athens

[The master] aimed at supreme beauty under the accepted bodily pain conditions. In all its disfiguring violence, the latter was incompatible with the former. He [the artist] was obliged to reduce it; [...] to soften the cry into a sigh, not because it betrays an unworthy soul, but instead because it sets its face loathsomely². (LESSING, 2013, p. 13)

² [Der Meister] arbeitete auf die höchste Schönheit, unter den angenommenen Umständen des körperlichen Schmerzes. Dieser, in aller seiner entstellenden Heftigkeit, war mit jener nicht zu verbinden. Er mußte ihn also herab setzen; er mußte Schreien in Seufzen mildern; nicht weil das Schreien

Lessing also stated that the object of painting (as well as sculpture) would be to employ a single moment of action – thus renouncing time – choosing for this the most expressive moment, from which one will understand “what happened and what will follow.”³ (LESSING, 2013, p. 54-55) That is because the artist is limited by

eine unedle Seele verrät, sondern weil er das Gesicht auf eine ekelhafte Weise verstellt. (our translation)

³ [...] aus welchem das Vorhergehenden und Folgende am begreiflichsten wird. (our translation)



space; poetry, in turn, by having the narrative, exposes the bodies through their actions in **time**.

The fluttering drapery of the clothes to one side, the hair disheveled upwards, the position of the hands... they try to demonstrate the woman's desperation to get rid of the fire consuming her. In the other scene (fig. 5), one can see the two children running toward their mother, who, despite her complacent look, holds a dagger in one hand. Cesare Ripa (2007) talks about this when explaining the Allegory of Revenge:

Revenge is represented with a dagger in hand to show the spontaneous act that occurs in the will when it runs to take revenge for the injuries received, taking said revenge with great bloodshed, which is why he puts [the woman] in red⁴. (RIPA, 2007b, p. 390)

Medea, still blind with hatred and with her thirst for revenge not yet rebelled, goes to a chariot drawn by serpents [in the case of the sarcophagus, winged ones], but before that, the *grand finale*: in the act of coldness and **last retaliation**, using Aristotle's words seen earlier, he murders his children and flees to Athens (fig. 6). It is possible to see one of the children behind her shoulder, while the other one can only see her feet as if she were falling from the car in which the mother is.

As we saw earlier, Aristotle tells us about the role of anger in the face of

injustice and, further, in the same work – **Nicomachean Ethics** – addresses the issue of **desire**, comparing the two concepts.

According to Houaiss⁵, desire is the “act or effect of desiring; aspiration before something that corresponds to the expected; expectation of having something or achieving something,” but there is another meaning that deserves to be highlighted: “physical instinct that drives human beings to sexual pleasure; physical attraction.” It is evident that desiring is not bad; on the contrary, we live on desires, and they move our lives and lead us to them. In other words, desire is nothing more than *libido*, vital energy that goes far beyond the commonplace of mere sexual impulse.

When the Stagirite speaks of desire (*ὄρεξις*), this can either be *ἐπιθυμία* (*epithymia* – irrational faculty of the soul, desire) or *θυμός* (*thymós* – ardor, courage, vital force); and, by demonstrating that anger, up to a certain point, listens, even if incompletely, to reason, he affirms that desire (*ἐπιθυμία*), in turn, *does not*, because “only needs reason or perception to say that this is pleasant, and it rushes off for gratification” (ARISTOTLE, 1999, p. 108). That means that the *ἐπιθυμία* causes the subject to abandon reason since it is irrational, in view simply of the “expectation of having” the object of longing.

⁴ Se representa la venganza con un puñal en la mano, para mostrar el acto espontáneo que se produce en la voluntad cuando corre a tomar venganza de las injurias recibidas;

tomando dicha venganza con gran efusión de sangre, razón por la que le pone [la mujer] revestida de rojo.

⁵ The most crucial dictionary, currently, of the Portuguese language in Brazil.



Aristotle shows that anger is not disguised but emotional and blatant in its outburst. *ἐπιθυμία*, on the other hand, is **crafty and**, therefore, more **criminal**; it corresponds to a “moral deficiency” since such desires are excessive and unnecessary. That is because, according to the Stagirite, cholera, *a priori*, has some reason that leads to it, such as an outrage or an injustice, while the same does not exist in desire.

Thus, we arrive at Medea who, sparing no effort in pursuit of her desire, was utterly “maddened by Jason's cynicism, ingratitude and infidelity” (BRANDÃO, 1987, p. 62), with whom she was still in love, due to Aphrodite (BRANDÃO, 1986, p. 222), commits the most heinous and criminal acts provided by the blind passion of desires, making it a well of hatred. But, as Aristotle (1999, p.61) had said: “When they pay back the offense [revenge]; [...] the exaction of the penalty produces pleasure in place of pain.” Hence, the serenity she expresses in the fleeing car: one does not see remorse in her eyes, but rather haughtiness.

The literary portrayal of revenge

The *λόγος* also has a lot to offer us in terms of revenge; check out Shakespeare's **Hamlet**. There is, in scene III of Act III, an occasion that the prince, at first, believes to be conducive to revenge for his father's death since the king was alone in a room in the castle:

HAMLET
Now might I do it pat, now he is
[praying;

And now I'll don't: – and so he goes to
[heaven;
And so am I **revenged**: – that would
[be scann'd:
A villain kills my father; and for that,
I, his sole son, do this same villain
[send

To heaven.
O, this is hire and salary, not **revenge**.
He took my father grossly, full of
[bread;
With all his crimes broad blown, as
[flush as May;
And how his audit stands who knows
[save heaven?
But, in our circumstances and the
course of

[thought,
'Tis heavy with him: and am I, then,
[**revenged**,
To take him in the purging of his soul,
When he is fit and season'd for his
[passage?

No.
Up, sword; and know thou a more
[horrid hent:
When he is drunk, asleep, or in his
[rage;
Or in th'incestuous pleasure of his
[bed;
At gaming, swearing; or about some
[act
That has no relish of salvation in't; –
Then trip him, that his heels may kick
[at heaven;
And that his soul may be as damn'd
[and black
As hell, where to it goes. My mother
[stays:
This physic but prolongs thy sickly
[days.
(SHAKESPEARE, 2004 (?), p. 695)

The prince, however, ponders whether this would be the opportune moment despite having the king there quickly before him to commit his act of reparation. Here, we have to remember



the words of Aristotle when he states that anger listens “to a certain extent” to reason because, on reflection, he verifies that if he committed his reparation at that moment, he would do **a favor** to the king who, despite his mortal sin, would be sent to Paradise, after all, the same was in prayer.

His act, therefore, would not be one of revenge but of reward! His father had gone much worse, as he had been murdered “With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May,” amidst his many iniquities, like spring flowers (May in the northern hemisphere).

No, such an act could not take place at that moment; it would have to wait for a more convenient moment when the king would also find himself in sin “When he is drunk, asleep, or in his rage; Or in th’incestuous pleasure of his bed; At gaming, swearing; or about some act” so that he is dragged to the perdition of hell... It turns out that the simple death of the uncle would not have felt like revenge; after all, if, according to Hamlet, the father was killed in sin and won the perdition, the uncle would have to suffer the same fate.

Middle Ages: revenge as a social precept

Revenge was widely accepted in the Middle Ages (and which would remain, to a certain extent, in the Modern Age), including as a fundamental theme of politics, to the point that no political motive was so well understood by the people than that of hatred and of itself. (HUIZINGA, 1996, p. 21) Which often

bordered on an obsession that stretched across generations. This tradition goes back to the collapse triggered by the end of the Western Roman Empire and the consequent invasion of the barbarians, for whom revenge was a cultural attitude.

Thus, while the Roman *res publica* was abandoned, there was a generalization of private law, a Germanic innovation that even led the thief to be punished with the death penalty – in the case of *flagrante delicto* or, if its author was a slave, 120 or 150 lashes, torture or castration (ROUCHE, 2009, p. 482) –; the same, however, did not always happen, legally, with a murder that, despite being able to unleash successive revenge on his relatives:

Once a murder had been committed, the victim's lineage had an imperious religious duty to avenge that death, either on the culprit or on a member of his family. And this, in turn, should do the same thing. All education for aggressiveness culminated in these endless private vendettas that sometimes lasted for centuries [...]. (ROUCHE, 2009, p. 488)

It could be ended with the payment of sums of money, the *vergeld* – man's gold – as

each wound, each person was literally “tagged” with an exact value in gold solders; it was enough for the kin to demand the man's price, or the man's gold, and for the murderer to agree to pay it to complete the private revenge. In a society where human life does not count, where only the damage suffered matters, such a solution was seductive sense, given the enormous sums at stake, an immediate enrichment followed. (ROUCHE, 2009, p. 489)



Among the Franks, for example, as soon as the hair on the boy's face was born, his aggressiveness would be cultivated, as well as his gift for handling a sword and riding a horse (ROUCHE, 2009), and the best way to that was the hunts, considered a rite of passage for teenagers of the Frankish nobility (DUBY, 1982, p. 195)

Through them, the young man learned the art of killing and dominating his instincts amid the hostility represented by the wild, mysterious, and unknown world since only through violence could this be dominated (ROUCHE, 2009). Thus, more than "stocking the kitchens," hunting prepared him for war, teaching him the "art of killing," even if he often became a victim. (ROUCHE, 2009, p. 476)

Faced with the bit of importance given to human beings by the Salic Law of the Franks – which, of its seventy articles, at least 22 referred to theft (ROUCHE, 2009) – it appears that private property had great importance in that society, even so, the idea of avenging the death of a relative, for example, was taken very seriously, to the point that homicide was even equivalent to virility: killing had become a habit, so that "often, indemnities [*vergeld*] were not used, and revenge continued." (ROUCHE, 2009, p. 489)

As a habit, no one could even deprive the right of revenge nor try to minimize the suffering of those punished. This applies especially to those victims exposed in public as an image representing a duty

fulfilled by the relatives who practiced it, an act known as *faida*. That should be very clear: having even a religious character, which is why these convicts were displayed at a crossroads or on a fence post, which would trigger not only the imposition of fines but also the triggering of a series of other revenge:

"If anyone meets a man whom his enemies have left without hands and feet [...] at a crossroads and kills him, he will be punished with one hundred sous." So, too, "if anyone takes the head of a man whom his enemies have nailed to a stake without the consent of another [...] he shall be punished with fifteen sous." These acts were solemn and incomprehensible to us today. In both cases, the victim was publicly exposed in a sacred place – a crossroads or fence post – to signify the religious execution of private revenge. The interference of a third party triggered another series of vendettas. Three relatives would then become involved in the same *faida*! (ROUCHE, 2009, p. 488)

The photographic portrayal of revenge

Evidently, with time, revenge has not ceased to be part of human society; it has only sought ways to **improve itself**. That implies that, not always, the death, torture, or payment of the *vergeld* or their correspondents throughout history became the only solution; society has changed and sophisticated its behavior. Other solutions were sought, such as defamation, slander, detraction, injury... which, even though they are synonymous words, maintain their particularities and



whose sole objective continued to remain as a reprisal against damage received.

In many cases, the Talion law was passed over, or even the Salic Law with its compensations, the body's death in favor of the end of honor, morality, and dignity. What did the Brazilian poet Gregório de Matos want to do when he wrote the following verses?

If you call me Flowerpecker,
A flowerpecker I accept being,
but now it remains to be known,
if, in the name you give me,
You put the flower, which you keep
In the best birdie!
If you give me this favor,
being me, only the Pecker,
and yours, of course,
that I am then Flowerpecker.⁶
(MATOS, 1990, p. 651, our translation)

Much more than a satire, he intended to take revenge on a nun “who, satirizing the poet’s slender face, called him a *Flowerpecker* (hummingbird).” If this represents little for our big cities, imagine yourself in a city in Bahia in the middle of the 17th century, where everyone knew each other. The same happened with other artists who held not only the power of the word but also the power of the image. Those who did not have these skills were left with another nefarious power of revenge: **rumors**. Many were the people who suffered, were humiliated, and

succumbed due to its effectiveness, both yesterday and today.

A few years ago, a Brazilian actor, Mário Gomes, who was very successful on a major television network in the 70s and 80s, clarified why he disappeared from the media at the height of his career and had his masculinity questioned due to a **carrot**: This happened, according to the actor, because he acted exactly the opposite of what was propagated, that is, having had an affair with the wife of his former director⁷. We are in the century that began under the domination of digital media. Today, revenge is carried out via messages on cell phones or the Internet, when ex-boyfriends, rejected *fiancées*, betrayed women and men publish and disseminate vexatious photos or films (which spread at an unimaginable speed!) of their former partners on the Internet or, then, false truths are created to destroy their enemies. More than ever, **logo-imagetic** power is at the service of revenge...

It can be assumed that, only now, the image is at the service of revenge, which is not without its logic; after all, **image power** was, for a long time, the prerogative of a few – from artists to patrons, for example –. Very few were also those who could employ this means of revenge, except through engravings, graffiti, or graffiti executed in public places, such as in bathrooms, whose origin is lost in time, as seen in Pompeii, Italy. No

⁶ *Se Pica-flor me chamais,/ Pica-flor aceito ser, mas resta agora saber, se no nome, que me dais,/ Meteis a flor, que guardais/No passarinho melhor!/Se me dais este favor,/sendo só de mim o Pica,/e o mais vosso, claro fica,/que fico então Pica-flor.*

⁷ Interview with actor, July 2, 2012, in: <http://gente.ig.com.br/2012-07-02/mario-gomes-a-cenoura-nao-me-matou.html>.



wonder taking justice into one's own hands was so much easier.

Since the advent of photography and its improvement, the documentary version of revenge has emerged. That starts to function as an inverted **totem**; that is, it not only serves to represent the

remembrance of ancestors who should not be forgotten but that of enemies who were execrated. Their ignominy would be forever remembered, lest others try to do what those **marked** on the photographic plate did.

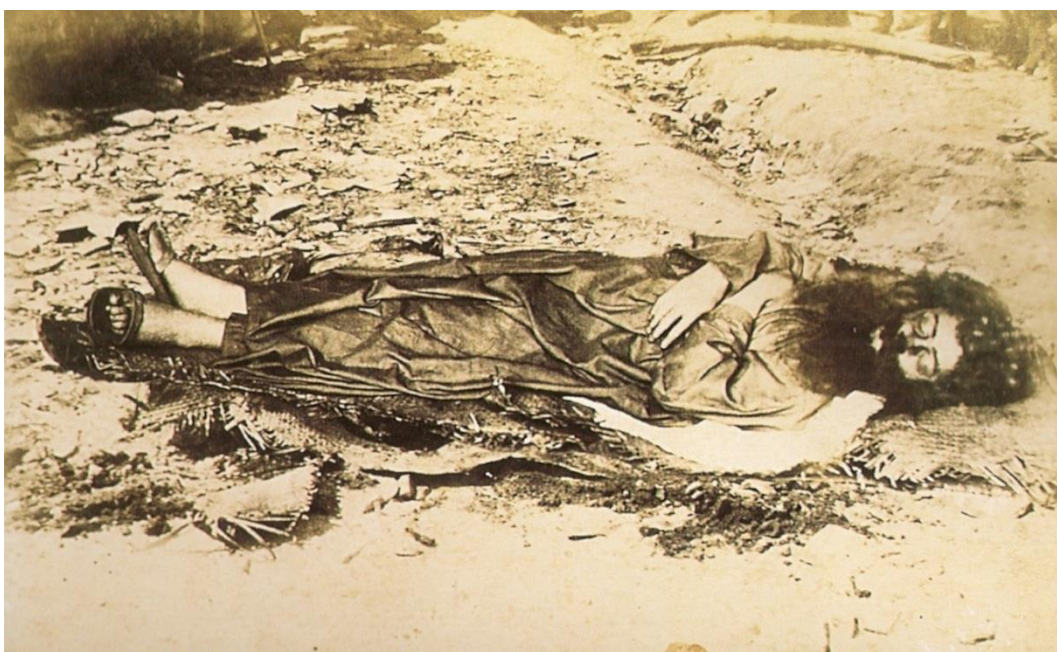


Photo 1

Photograph of the exhumed body of Antônio Conselheiro, 06/10/1897, Canudos/BA - Brazil
(Photo by Flávio de Barros)

Euclides da Cunha, who accompanied the ignominious **War of Canudos** in the northeastern Brazilian hinterland with the invasion and destruction of an entire village by the Brazilian Army, shows this when he depicts the exhumation of Antônio Conselheiro⁸ (photo 1), whose

corpse had been carefully dug up; after all, it was a “unique prize, the only opportune spoils of such a war!” (CUNHA, 1998, p. 498)

With these words, Euclides da Cunha ends his work on a relentless and shameful war, but which had active

⁸ Religious leader and founder of the Belo Monte camp, better known as Canudos, was destroyed by

Republican troops. He, however, had died weeks before the final collapse.



participation in photography, whether to portray the *infamous ruthless monsters* of Canudos taken prisoner or to prove the overthrow of its leader – even though he died before the end of the conflict and had to be exhumed so that, from a photograph, all of Brazil could witness him: after all, photography cannot lie! (BRANDÃO, 2010, p.104-105)

The photograph, therefore, more than a testament to the veracity of the event and the duty fulfilled, had become a paradigm of revenge and a reminder for all those who dared to face the *status quo*, as the miserable people of Canudos did. Something similar to what happened in China until the beginning of the 20th century, only not with corpses.

There was, in the Asian country, an **official revenge** imputed by emperors to

those considered traitors, the *lingchi* (Photo 2). The punishment consisted of tying the naked condemned man's hands and feet to wooden stakes and, given a crowd (the execution was public), he was simply chopped up alive, slowly and methodically. Hence, capital punishment also being known as cutting into a **thousand pieces**.

The debasement was total, and to keep the condemned alive as long as possible (otherwise, the same could be inflicted on the executioner), they were given opium, but this only happened recently (this capital punishment was applied until 1905). That seems to be why many of the executed appear in a trance amid their mortal mutilation, as seen in photographs and postcards from the period. Thus, as if



Photo 2

Postcard showing execution of a prisoner employing lingchi



public condemnation, humiliation, and shredding were not enough, there was also its perpetuation through photography.

It cannot be said that such acts are isolated and restricted to the **ends** of the world among **wild aborigines**. An example of this, we will see in the following photos, is the result of a crowd that rushed madly to a forum (Photo 3) to remove a man who had been arrested, accused of having assaulted a girl. There are two important details: first, it was unknown whether or not he was guilty; second, he was black (Will Brown, 41 years old – photo 4), and the girl in question was white (Agnes Loebeck).

The demonstrators (estimated between five and fifteen thousand people), wanting to have the accused in their hands and inflamed with a recurrent racial hatred, went to the building and fired several shots at it due to the refusal of the police authorities to give them the suspect; and, after setting fire to part of the building, they snatched the accused, probably from the cell where he was, beat him until he was unconscious, dragged him out into the street, hanged him and shot him several times in his already inert body. Still unsatisfied, they dragged him tied up in a car, something like Achilles had done with Hector in the **Iliad**, in front of the wall of

Troy, only now the vilification was on the streets of a small town in Nebraska, USA. Finally, they set fire to him in a public square in front of the dazzle of the mob. (photo 5)

All this without the slightest regret; after all, they were repaying **evil** with **evil**; they believed themselves to be **virtuous**. However, for that, there would be an adequate need to have proved an injustice, a fact that, according to Aristotle, did not occur. What was found, therefore, was not mere anger, which reacts to an error and injustice, but the extrapolation of **resentment**, whose fury is only relieved in the face of pure and simple **revenge**. (ARISTÓTELES, 1996)

That becomes clear when one sees that the **evil** of which Brown was accused did not correspond, in number and degree, to that which, supposedly, Loebeck had suffered, this to stick to the law of talion. However, for that mob, the law that should govern such conflicts was the code of Hammurabi (art. 205°), but they plucked more than one ear. Detail: There was no more slavery in the United States when the fact recorded by the photograph occurred, but the idea of white supremacy over blacks was still latent and very much alive.



Photo 3

Protesters destroy the forum, Omaha/Nebraska, September 28, 1919



Photo 4

Will Brown, who is accused of
assaulting a white woman

Moreover, the flames consume the
man who probably had nothing to do with

the crime he was accused of (besides
having vehemently denied it before being



pulled out of the forum, he had acute rheumatism!) but who satisfied the quest for revenge of the crowd in a cathartic and bestial way, therefore without control and in a frightening way.

Photo 5 is extremely transitive.⁹ And shocking: first, we see a crowd around a human corpse in flames, and, despite this, they pose for the photographer. They make a point of showing themselves to posterity by the **human act** what they did; second, worse than the scene itself, is the look of satisfaction from all those who are part of it, look and pose of **duty accomplished**, as if they were in front of beautiful built work and were contemplating the result of their efforts. None of those present seem surprised by what we would probably be surprised by: the odor of human flesh being incinerated, similar to the haughty look on Medea's face after completing her revengeful intent, which included the death of her children.

A guy is further to the right of the scene, which serves as a *punctum*.¹⁰ (Clipping 1) with his winning attitude, hand by his side, whose smile almost bursts with laughter. It is impossible not to be impressed by his attitude. This one is highly embarrassing and was not photographed in a remote village in Africa, nor amid war (the Great War had already

ended almost a year ago, 11/11/1918). Despite this, the scene must be read within the context and society in which it is inserted: they believed in a white racial superiority in front of other ethnicities, considered inferior, such as the black, hence the morbid satisfaction of having at their feet – literally – the carbonization of the one who wanted (as if it were possible to say the opposite in front of the mob) to face his *status quo*.

Vengeance was therefore not directed at the victim of aggression or even rape if it occurred; after all, any one of those present there – in front of that charred body – could have been the rapist, but out of the pure **desire** to destroy in him all the race he represents.

It is clear the use of *ἐπιθυμία*, as the most irrational **faculty** of the human being, disapproved not only by religion but by the pagan ethics of Aristotle, who saw in its dissimulation a **moral deficiency**, criminal par excellence; after all, it does not allow itself to be guided by *ratio*. That is why, in the face of such a grotesque scene, there is a smile on the faces of those people, because “revenge **relieves** them, producing pleasure instead of suffering” (ARISTÓTELES, 1996, p. 186); only, unlike the myth of Jason and

⁹ I call it transitive photography when an image pushes us out of it to discover what is beyond the frame. For example, it is when I see someone in a photograph looking and talking to a person on the side, but this person is not present in the scene, but I know that he exists. (BRANDÃO, 2010, p. 38)

¹⁰ For Barthes (1984, p. 47-48), not all photographs have the same reception by the individual self; we

pay more attention to some while simply passing quickly through others. For this, the French theorist created the concepts of *punctum* and *studium*: the *studium* field is diversified, of inconsequential taste, of like/do not like, of I like / I do not like, while *puncta* would be specific, not general, not to-the-point like, but to love.



Medea, Creusa here has flesh and bone;
she is not part of the myth but of real life.

the ground but also fed it; liquid (blood)
gushes from the tree beside it over the



Photo 5

After being lynched and mutilated, Will Brown's body is charred to the delight of the mob that pulled him from the courthouse in Omaha, USA, on 09/28/1919

Faced with this image, another appears, taken from the emblematic one, demonstrating the relationship between fire and those who used it in such a vile way. In figure 7, we see wolves dressed as monks and crows that not only set fire to a pyre dug in



Clipping 1

flames, extinguishing them.

The wolf's image is very present in Western culture as a representation of evil or has been associated with it since antiquity; there are many allusions to this animal in the Renaissance. Horapolo (1991) shows us that the wolf expresses man's discomfort with his enemies (HORAPOLO, 1991, p. 271) or even aversion (HORAPOLO, 1991, p. 489). In this sense, he was also seen as an image of the enemy since he was not afraid to face and destroy members of his species (HORAPOLO, 1991, p. 490). Horapolo



uses a crow, but what he calls a **nocturnal crow** is, in reality, an owl.

Plague or Pestilence (RIPA, 2007, p. 205), **Robbery** (RIPA, 2007, p. 245),



Figure 7
Emblema 7 *Ex parvo satis*, de Georgette de Montenay, 1615

For Ripa (2007), the figure of the wolf may be associated with various allegorical representations of mostly negative attitudes: in volume 1, we find **Mars' Chariot** (RIPA, 2007, p. 168), **Council** – in representation with three other heads of the dog (facing the right); of the lion (in the middle); of the wolf (facing left, represents the past) – (RIPA, 2007, p. 218), **Doubt** (RIPA, 2007, p. 297), **Self-interest** (RIPA, 2007, p. 535); in volume 2,

Silence (RIPA, 2007, p. 314), and **Voracity** (p. 432). Ripa, about the crow, brings us in Volume 1: **Indecision** (RIPA, 2007, p. 515), **Misfortune** (RIPA, 2007, p. 523), in Volume 2: **Revenge** (RIPA, 2007, p. 391).

Several emblem elements could be read in Photograph 5 without having to create metaphors for it. The wolves of the emblem could represent those men who, dressed in holiness, are very far from the



divine despite propagating their abject actions as if they were celestial works. Still, they are nothing more than sinister works. No wonder they get drunk in front of the incinerated corpse on the pyre they built, demonstrating an insatiable avidity to accompany the misfortune of others to make use of it – similar to the wolves following armies (RIPA, 2007, v. 1, p. 168) – as in the superb demonstration in the photo that serves as an advertisement for his acts; these demonstrate selfish interests to show their power – hence the photograph of the young man in a sarcastic pose in front of the burning body –, whose voracious hunger (RIPA, 2007, p. 535) makes him seek guilty for his actions, to satisfy his desires, your thirst for morbid desire. Thus, the words of Plautus come to us – *homo homini lupus* [man is man's wolf] –, an aphorism widely used in the 17th century, taken up by Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651):

Due to its way of life-based on robbery, the wolf is usually considered the face of evil. Due to its ferocity, it is associated with the **morally bestial**, i.e., war; it is not by chance that it is among the symbols of Mars, as Ripa observes in his “Chariot of Mars.”¹¹ (HORAPOLO, 2007, p. 271, our translation and emphasis added)

¹¹ Por lo general el lobo, debido a su forma de vida basada en la rapiña, ha sido considerado como imagen de la maldad. Debido a su ferocidad se le asocia con lo **moralmente bestial**, es decir, con la guerra; de ahí que se encuentre entre los símbolos propios de marte, como lo señala Ripa en su “Carro de Marte”

Greedy for revenge – whose representation for Ripa uses fire, the flame to signify the turbulence of the soul that agitates and boils the hearts of men, leading them to hatred and boundless anger –symbolized, in the emblem, by the crow that, for Ripa, stings a scorpion. (RIPA, 2007, v. 2, p. 391)

In this way, little would remain for the unfortunate black man who was immolated in Omaha if not for the detail – in the emblem – of the blood that gushes from the tree onto the pyre, which represents the very blood of Christ, the only one capable of quelling the flames that, otherwise they would not succumb to the constant nourishment provided by wolves and ravens.

When analyzing the photograph, however, we will see that there is no tree close to the flames that come out of the body of the dead and incinerated man, but one detail calls our attention: his position on the ground and his **pyre**. The boy is in a place reminiscent of Christ himself, crucified with a *patibulum* that passes under his arms... the head itself, turned upwards, also reminds us of Christ, who cries out: “Father, forgive them! They do not know what they are doing!” (Lk 23, 34) to then cry out even louder: “Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit!” (Lk 23, 46)

According to the soul of the emblem¹², the tree would also represent the cross of

¹²“The emblems had a tripartite structure consisting of: a) an image – this should be fixed in the memory of the readers and would transmit moral precepts to them: it was his **body**; b) a motto, the *inscription* – usually a sharp sentence written in Latin: directing the reader to a particular



Christ, and the blood that flows from it is the same that gushed from its side after the crucifixion, the only one capable of quelling those flames:

The crows and the wolves make an extravagant fire. Nothing, however, can

put out the fire once it has been lit in the wood. By the blood of Christ that flows from the sacred tree, the flames of the false fire of the barren pyre are extinguished¹³. (Our free translation)

reading of the image; c) an epigram (or explanatory text) – it sought to relate the **body** with the motto of the emblem, clarifying the existing relationship: it was his **soul**.” (BRANDÃO, 2009b, p. 131)

¹³ *Feralem struxere focus owl lupique :*

*Nec tamen , access fomite , ligna hot .
Nē pe sacra manās Christi cruor arbore , flāmas
Obruit , & sterili false light, I pray.*



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