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The Paradoxes of Sin: Vengeance as Death Drive in Janet Lewis's *The Wife of Martin Guerre*

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Abstract: If revenge functions to compensate for inequity arising from an initial transgression, thereby restoring equity, can we speak of restoration of an equitable social or personal situation in Janet Lewis's novel *The Wife of Martin Guerre* (1941)? This work belongs to Janet Lewis's series of three novels based on "Cases of Circumstantial Evidence", of which *The Wife of Martin Guerre* is the most famous. It concerns the case of Martin Guerre, the sixteenth-century French peasant who apparently returned home to his wife after a long absence but was later revealed to be an impostor. The wife at first believes that the impostor is indeed her husband, then starts to have doubts, gathers information to contest his assertions, develops an exaggerated religious sense of guilt for the sin of adultery, and successfully sues him, leading to his being hanged. Several questions arise: is she justified in feeling guilty for having given in to sexual attraction, thus blinding herself to the available clues pointing to the impostor's deception? Can the outcome be considered an equitable result, despite the fact that the false Martin Guerre was actually a good administrator, dealing fairly both with his subjects and his wife, and thus created a much more harmonious life for everybody than the lawful husband had done? I consider the story as a case of revenge stemming from an incorrect religious perspective, or alternatively narcissistic damage, which does not bring about redress of a tort, but rather social unhappiness.

Keywords: revenge; sin; Janet Lewis; *The Wife of Martin Guerre*

Revenge, both as an emotion and an action, is deeply ingrained in human nature and culture. It is a multifaceted term that entails moral, religious, social, political, psychological, and legal perspectives:

In the ideational sphere, revenge is accompanied by a fantasy (conscious or unconscious) of having been grievously harmed by someone and of finding relief from inflicting damage upon

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the perpetrator. In the emotional sphere, revenge is accompanied by feelings of “mental pain.”¹

Indeed, revenge constitutes “part of the individual’s neurobiological homeostatic system to rebalance a disordered sense of self,”² and can represent “a defence against repressed emotions, especially those of loss, separation and mourning.”³

The conscious aim of vengeance is retribution and punishment, while the unconscious aim is to cover up disastrous damage to the ego.⁴ “Vengeance can also serve as a defence against guilt, whereby the self-directed aggression is turned toward the external world.”⁵

Revenge also has a considerable psychological dimension because “the drive for revenge seems to be an understandable, if destructive, aspect of human nature. To mitigate its destructive effects and to move forward one needs to understand the traumas that precede revenge-seeking.”⁶

If revenge functions to compensate for inequity arising from an initial transgression, thereby restoring equity, can we speak of restoration of an equitable social or personal situation in Janet Lewis’s novel *The Wife of Martin Guerre* (1941)?⁷ This work belongs to Janet Lewis’s series of three novels based on “Cases of Circumstantial Evidence”, of which *The Wife of Martin Guerre* is the most famous one. It concerns the case of Martin Guerre, a sixteenth-century French peasant who, after having quarrelled with his domineering father, leaves home and, apparently, later returns to his wife after a long absence, but the returning husband is later revealed to be an impostor. The wife at first believes that the impostor is indeed her husband, then she starts to have doubts, gathers information to contest his assertions, develops an exaggerated religious sense of guilt for the sin of adultery, and successfully sues him, leading to his being hanged, despite the fact that he was a much better husband than the lawful one had been.

The word “revenge” appears twice in the story. Several questions arise from the novel’s treatment of the case: is the wife right in feeling guilty for having given in to sexual attraction, thus blinding herself to the available clues pointing to the impostor’s deception? Can the outcome be considered an equitable result, despite the fact that the false Martin Guerre was actually a good administrator, dealing

1 Salman Akhtar and Henri Parens, *Revenge: Narcissistic Injury, Rage and Retaliation* (Lanham and New York: Jason Aronson, 2014), Ebook, 2720.

2 Akhtar and Parens, *Revenge*, 67.

3 H.F. Searles, “The Psychodynamics of Vindictiveness,” in *Collected Papers on Schizophrenia and Related Subjects*, ed. H.F. Searles (New York: International Universities Press, 1956).

4 Akhtar and Parens, *Revenge*, 186.

5 Akhtar and Parens, *Revenge*, 180.

6 Akhtar and Parens, *Revenge*, 2368.

7 Janet Lewis, *The Wife of Martin Guerre* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 2013 [1941]), Ebook.

fairly both with his subjects and his wife, and thus created a much more harmonious life for everybody than the lawful husband had done? Can this rather be considered a case of revenge for wounded pride because the wife cannot accept that she has been cheated? What can be considered justice in this case: the fake husband creating harmony and happiness around himself, or the lawful husband negatively affecting everyone's lives? Can this rather be seen as a case of vengeance in response to an upheaval of the social hierarchies represented by patriarchal authority?

In my own reading, I consider the story as a case of revenge stemming from an incorrect religious perspective, or alternatively narcissistic injury, which does not bring about redress of a tort, but rather social unhappiness.

Revenge, in this case, appears to be founded upon severe childhood frustration and actual trauma: Bertrande, the wife, had been forced to marry when she was still quite young. She was practically "sold" to the farmer, by whom she felt herself to be violated. She felt abused and betrayed by her parents. This feeling initially caused in her a sort of rebellion against, and later acquiescence to a mistaken sense of discipline and hierarchy, which she transformed into an exaggerated religious sense of sin. Her childhood experience originated in a sort of paranoid death instinct centred on infantile persecutory anxieties and fantasies of retaliation against what she considered to be bad behaviour: she thus passed from feeling herself to be a victim to being the victimiser, seeking revenge against someone who thwarted hierarchies and subverted the well-established status quo.

Bertrande is thus faced with a conflict between a drive towards sexual and spiritual satisfaction on the one hand, and "lawful" deprivation on the other. In a sense, her pride has been injured, first because she had previously accepted a position of subjection and victimisation (and the false husband makes her aware of it), and later because the false husband has deceived her in order to make her believe that he is her lawful husband. This state leads to an excess of vindictiveness, which she uses to repress her emotions, especially that of loss. She becomes implacable. All the emotions she has been forced to stifle (unhappiness at her treatment by her lawful husband, the sexual and spiritual satisfaction she feels when she is with her false husband, and the fulfilment she experiences as a mother) cause in her a sense of guilt. Ever since the experience of her childhood traumas, she has not felt herself to be either fit for or worthy of happiness. This situation leads to the transformation of her husband from friend to fiend, and the emergence within Bertrande of a narcissistic rage: revenge begins as the pursuit of a just cause, then is rapidly transformed into a destructive and self-destructive drive.

The harshness of the wife's position allows us to approach the novel in terms of a vindictory system. Let us therefore consider the novel from the perspective of a juridical system of vindication. This system involves, in the first instance, an attempt

at reconciliation with a gift of reparation (compensation for damages), and only subsequently recourse to a legal solution and punishment as an *extrema ratio*. This is exactly what happens in the novel: the priest at first encourages Bertrande to withdraw her charges against her impostor husband, which would give him the opportunity to escape from the whole affair, but Bertrande persists in her accusations, which she dresses in a language sin: “in his love he has wronged me most [...] he has damned my soul [...] I have sinned through him.”⁸

Although vindictory systems of justice require us to distinguish between, on the one hand, legal and social justice (where vengeance is seen as an institution) and, on the other hand, vengeance as a subjective feeling, the events of the novel involve both these dimensions: vengeance is indeed triggered by Bertrande’s personal sensation of having been offended and exploited, but she also considers that the whole community has been cheated, through her own injury. The laws of the community have been violated, and so a legal solution is required. Bertrande’s instinctive sense of justice may therefore play a role in the quest for justice. In vindictory systems, not only the laws of the community but also the figure of the offended person are central to the final attempt to restore justice.

The court first tries to assess the veracity of the accusation, then intervenes in the protection of the offended party. The accusation also entails the crime of treason: “Treason is one of the most important crimes in vindictory societies. It goes against the solidarity and reliance necessary for [...] economic and political undertakings.”⁹ The impostor’s false behaviour in relation to the wife can also be considered a betrayal of trust, which implies a crime against a society based on a patriarchal and agricultural economic system. On the other hand, Bertrande can also be considered to have acted unfaithfully, and this unfaithfulness can again be judged as treason.

Bertrande hates the false husband because he has forced her to commit a sin of betrayal, which in her eyes requires a rite of expiation and purification, a joint ceremony involving both the offended and the offending parties. Such retaliatory practices require a judicial authority, and it is at this point that the court is called upon. The novel relates the various stages of the vindictory process, starting with recognition, that is, the acknowledgement of the offence, then addressing the subjective duty and objective obligation to redress the injustice, according to a vindictory ethos.

However, what happens in Bertrande’s soul is even more complex: indeed, her need for revenge has its origin in a misplaced sense of sin. It is crucial to distinguish

⁸ Janet Lewis, *The Wife of Martin Guerre*, 74.

⁹ Raúl Márquez Porras, Riccardo Mazzola, and Ignasi Terradas Saborit, eds., *Vindictory Justice: Beyond Law and Revenge* (Baltimore: University of Baltimore, Springer, 2022), Ebook, 53.

here between guilt and sin. Whereas the sense of guilt is psychological, the sense of sin is theological; in the novel both perspectives are intertwined. The sense of guilt causes frustration by producing dissatisfaction with oneself and anger at the idea of the fault committed, as well as the sensation of having been deceived, as if one were of unsound mind. The sense of sin, conversely, becomes a sort of dialogue between oneself and God: it is dialogical and based on love for God. Bertrande initially tries to involve the priest as a way of validating her accusation, as if she were asking for approval of her behaviour from a religious point of view. However, when the priest shows himself to be more flexible than she is, Bertrande goes in search of another ally, whom she finds in her brother-in-law. For Bertrande, religion is therefore a tool for seeking vengeance, the private vengeance that she wants to attain as a personal satisfaction for the deception that she has been subjected to: she feels this deception as a form of damage to her ego.

The triggers for her impulse to vengeance pass through three phases of cognisance of guilt: (1) a psychological awareness of guilt; (2) a moral sense of culpability; and (3) a religious culpability or sense of sin.¹⁰ Bertrande's pathological state is marked by an excessive insistence on her guilt, which she conceives through an exaggerated religious perspective. The sensation of having overcome a liminal situation between legality and illegality, and the self-destructive anxiety arising from this affective fear, lead her to introject a social law (faithfulness to one's husband) into a duty, an obligation to rigidly respect a patriarchal law in spite of the many extenuating circumstances for her actions. The whole novel is rooted in a rigidly hierarchical form of organisation. This can be seen in Bertrande's description of her father-in-law:

without bearing any outward symbol of his power, he was in his own person both authority and security [...] Because of him the farm was safe, and therefore Artigues, and therefore Languedoc, and therefore France, and therefore the whole world was safe as it should be.¹¹

The family is a microcosm within a wider macrocosm, which is extended to include the whole nation. The violation of this principle of authority amounts to a subversion of the entire equilibrium of the world: the stakes of such a violation therefore contribute to transforming a devouring sense of guilt into an impulse for vengeful reaction. For Bertrande, suing her false husband becomes a form of atonement, a rite of passage that is necessary in order for her to feel once more integrated within the community.

¹⁰ Giuseppe Sovernigo, "Dal senso di colpa al senso del peccato," *Note di Pastorale Giovanile* n. 10302 (1979), 9–34.

¹¹ Janet Lewis, *Wife of Martin Guerre*, 16.

The first instance of a perceived violation of an accepted world order took place when Bertrande sided with her husband against her father-in-law, thereby undermining paternal authority:

If you have no obedience for your father, your son will have none for you, and then what will become of the family? Ruin. Despair.¹²

These are the words of Bertrande's mother-in-law, which anticipate what will happen over the course of the novel. Once Bertrande becomes aware of the deception, her consciousness of the dire consequences of her decision to accept the false husband as her lawful one leads her to seek vengeance and legal redress.

I suggest that Bertrande's obsessive search for revenge (even though it is disguised as fulfilling a legal requirement) can be defined as a religious form of obsessive compulsive disorder, or even a religious sort of melancholy, which causes the person to feel constantly at fault, and to feel an unquenchable thirst for purification, to the extent that they even seek recourse through the legal system in order to attain a public restoration of a state of purity. Such religious scrupulousness implies a rigid morality connected to a deep fear of having committed an unpardonable sin, one that could lead to her being thrown out of the community. This kind of religious sin is often connected to a forbidden sexual impulse, and indeed Bertrande accuses the impostor of having exploited her sexual needs and satisfaction, which reinforces her obsessive quest for revenge.

Her obsession is so pronounced that she performs rites of purification, such as praying constantly, secluding herself in her room, avoiding any physical contact, and trying to demonise her husband in an attempt to find a supernatural justification for her own behaviour. In her case, revenge is therefore a very complex feeling, and the legal dimension makes up only a small part of her pathological behaviour. The excessive punishment of the culprit demonstrates how cleverly she has managed to manipulate the law to satisfy her personal needs.

The situation within the novel wavers between a perspective of punishment and revenge respectively: whereas punishment is civilised, justifiable, and carried out within the framework of the law, revenge is irrational and mindless. Bertrande's attitude covers the two modes: she appears to be rationally seeking an exemplary sort of legal punishment in order to redress a social upheaval, while also craving a personal retaliation to satisfy her wounded sense of honour, which thus appears to be a barbaric and brutal kind of behaviour. Robert Nozick asserts that:

revenge involves a particular emotional tone, pleasure at the suffering of another, while retribution need involve no emotional tone or involves another one, namely pleasure at justice

¹² Janet Lewis, *Wife of Martin Guerre*, 18.

being done; [...] there need be no generality in revenge [...] whereas the imposer of retribution, inflicting deserved punishment for a wrong, is committed to (the existence of some) general principle (*prima facie*) mandating punishment in other similar circumstances.¹³

We can therefore assert that Bertrande is, on the one hand, emotionally involved in the pursuit of punishment for the impostor and has recourse to some general principles of law, but on the other hand she strives to transform her personal needs into a legal case that will establish a precedent. Bertrande is therefore prey to two contrasting moods.

At the beginning of the novel, Bertrande has already reflected that there had been a real necessity for punishment at the moment when her (real) husband, having incurred his father's wrath, chose to run away in order to avoid his authority:

Bertrande admitted the inflexible justice of Martin's father, and regretted bitterly that she had fallen in with Martin's plans for avoiding punishment. How much better if he had stayed and submitted!¹⁴

We can therefore observe that Bertrande's dichotomous behaviour, wavering between punishment and revenge, is established from the very beginning of the novel. Moreover, Bertrande's attitude when her husband comes back and behaves very harshly towards her is anticipated by another observation:

He had deserted her in the full beauty of her youth, in the height of her great passion, he had shamed her and wounded her, and when he returned, if he should return after the death of his father, his authority would be as great as his father's then was, and to murmur against his treatment of her would then be improper in the highest degree.¹⁵

The situation invites a comparison with Chaucer's tale of the Clerk of Oxford about Fair Griselda, and thus allows us to approach this novel as a moral fable. Bertrande, like Fair Griselda, is put to test. What is tested is the acceptance of authority (both male and divine): the husband appears to be a symbolic representation of God in His absolute authority over the human soul (the macrocosm), just as patriarchal power corresponds to authority within the family (the microcosm). Bertrande has therefore violated the respect and obedience expected of her because she has accepted, although with some doubts, the stranger as her husband:

¹³ Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 366–68.

¹⁴ Janet Lewis, *Wife of Martin Guerre*, 24.

¹⁵ Janet Lewis, *Wife of Martin Guerre*, 26.

as he advanced from the shadow he seemed to Bertrande a stranger, the stranger of the wooded pathway, then her loved husband, then a man who might have been Martin's ancestor but not young Martin Guerre.¹⁶

What if Martin, the roughly bearded stranger, were not the true Martin? ... Her sin, if such indeed were a fact, would be most black, for had she not experienced an instinctive warning?

She does not immediately accept the stranger's identification as her husband, but is subsequently seduced by the stranger's words: "Madame ... you are very beautiful."¹⁸ These words are ambiguous: both his expression of surprise and the term "Madame" are clues as to the stranger's true nature. This is what, in the course of time, causes Bertrande's sense of sin and her request for punishment: she feels that she has been led into sin. Her fear of sin darkens all the pleasure she may derive from her husband and her new pregnancy: she admits to herself that she may be either wholly insane or "consciously accepting as her husband a man whom she believed to be an impostor."¹⁹ Finally, she reaches a decision: "I am imposed upon, deceived, betrayed into adultery,"²⁰ "I have sinned through him."²¹

Having reached this conclusion, she nonetheless goes on living with the man, which is the reason for her self-accusation of adultery. From now on, she will strive for forgiveness. Moreover, she realises that the stranger has conquered the hearts of the whole household, thus treacherously robbing her of the loyalty and trust of her subjects and relatives. This is when the lust for revenge sets in: she has been isolated in her belief and her love has been transformed into hatred for the impostor. And this hatred leads to her revenge. But revenge can be a sin in itself, as she is warned by the priest:

I counsel you to withdraw the charge before it is too late [...] Is it for you to assume vengeance? You believe that you have sinned. You are in danger of sinning far more greatly. If there is evil in the matter, God will unravel it in His own good time.²²

We hear echoes of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* here, when Shylock refuses to withdraw his request and goes relentlessly on towards his own ruin. This also brings us back to the extensive debate over whether to apply the law rigorously or to apply it in an equitable way. In Bertrande's case, is it more profitable for her to pursue "the peace and happiness" of her people (they were happy under the stranger's rule) at the cost of the "secret weight of shame against her soul" (an

¹⁶ Janet Lewis, *Wife of Martin Guerre*, 35.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Janet Lewis, *Wife of Martin Guerre*, 47.

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ Janet Lewis, *Wife of Martin Guerre*, 74.

²² Janet Lewis, *Wife of Martin Guerre*, 75.

equitable behaviour), or to struggle for the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? “The truth is only truth. I cannot change it.”²³ The doubt remains, because in the end all will be punished.

The salvation she longs for passes through an experience of humiliation: Bertrande, in her cry “My God, my God ... deliver me from my sin,”²⁴ appears to be the very moral exemplum of a human soul that has lost its way. Whereas Griselda passes her test and is rewarded with restoration in heaven, Bertrande ultimately fails. Her uncertain attitude, between sin and revenge, plunges her into Hell: she will be tormented with guilt at having caused the stranger’s beheading (an excessive punishment) and she will be harshly punished by the real Martin Guerre because he considers her an adulteress:

Dry your tears, Madame. They cannot and they ought not, move my pity [...] The error into which you plunged could only have been caused by wilful blindness. You, and you only, Madame, are answerable for the dishonour which has befallen me.²⁵

The end of the novel raises the question of mercy, but no mercy is presented by either character: Bertrande is ferociously moved by revenge as well as Martin: no equitable justice is achieved.²⁶

Bionote

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²³ Janet Lewis, *Wife of Martin Guerre*, 84.

²⁴ Janet Lewis, *Wife of Martin Guerre*, 70.

²⁵ Janet Lewis, *Wife of Martin Guerre*, 95.

²⁶ This novel brings to mind a very similar case that took place in Italy in Turin around the years 1927–28: the famous Bruneri-Cannella case, concerning the so-called “Amnesiac of Collegno.” A deranged man was found wandering among the tombs in a cemetery in Turin, and was later recognised by Mrs Cannella as her lost husband, Professor Cannella. However, after further enquiries he was also identified by a Mrs Bruneri as her own lost husband. A long legal struggle developed from the two identifications, and only recently has DNA testing made it possible to ascertain that he was in fact Mr Bruneri and not Professor Cannella. The description of the event is very similar, but in *The Wife of Martin Guerre* the debate regarding the real identity of the man takes on an ethical dimension, transforming the story into a moral exemplum, while the Bruneri-Cannella case had only a legal dimension. Is it possible that Janet Lewis was familiar with this other story?

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