

# Introduction

## The Study of Vengeance in the Middle Ages

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Vengeance certainly draws a crowd. Back at the International Medieval Congress in Leeds in July 2005, the audience for our session on medieval vengeance spilled out into the hallway. And it's not just academics who are interested, either. Search online for movies or novels with "vengeance" in the title, and it's easy to see that people everywhere are prepared to lay down cold hard cash for a little revenge.

But what is vengeance, anyway?

Well over a century ago Friedrich Nietzsche noted that "the word 'revenge' is said so quickly it almost seems as if it could contain no more than one conceptual and perceptual root," and in many ways this observation holds true today.<sup>1</sup> In popular culture "vengeance" is an explanatory word used with little hesitation to explain why people do things. It is generally assumed that we all know what it means and that the term itself does not require its own explanation.

But as anthropologists and social scientists continue to demonstrate, the different words used for vengeance, and the variety of different ways in which a desire for vengeance may be expressed or sanctioned within different cultures, is truly boggling.<sup>2</sup> For historians, the puzzle is more difficult still. It can be tricky to follow the convoluted twists and turns of event and explanation in our own media-saturated times; it is downright exasperating to try to construct valid interpretations when the historical evidence is scanty and highly subjective at best. And as hard as it is to pin down the meaning of our modern words and idioms for vengeance, how can we hope to understand a whole gamut of terms and metaphors in historical languages?

Given these inherent difficulties, it may seem odd that the study of vengeance continues to draw scholars with such a siren's song. But then, vengeance is that most intriguing of human creations, an explanatory idea—a concept used to explain events. With vengeance, these events relate to human conflict. Often, perhaps always, they involve violence of one form or another. And vengeance has not only been used to *explain* violence, it has frequently been used by some to *justify* violence. So vengeance has a moral weight—of some kind.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, in K. Ansell-Pearson (ed.) and C. Diethelme (trans.), *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 131.

<sup>2</sup> A place to start is Raymond Verdier (ed.), *La vengeance: études d'ethnologie, d'histoire et de philosophie* (4 vols, Paris, 1980–84).

Therein lies the difficulty. We are not agreed on that moral weight—not in our popular cultures, not in our scholarly research. Vengeance seems universal, in that some sort of relative concept appears throughout history and across cultures. Yet vengeance also seems specific, since the rules that govern vengeance differ widely among, and even within, societies. Similarly, vengeance seems personal and deeply tied to the individual's sense of injured honor. But then we remember the stereotypical “vengeful mob” or the phenomenon of vengeance for kith and kin, and vengeance seems to have a communal function, as well. Vengeance seems a purely negative phenomenon that creates anarchy and chaos and points a society towards a time when “man is wolf to man”—yet it emerges from study that vengeance can be used constructively within a society to bolster the social fabric and enhance social stability. And so on and so forth.

It quickly appears that vengeance is not singular, but plural—that over time we are examining a variety of vengeances, all related but few (if any) identical. And as to whether the sum of these vengeances, when all their qualities and characteristics are catalogued, is a social “good” or “bad”—the jury is most certainly still out.

Strictly speaking, therefore, this collection should be titled *Vengeances in the Middle Ages*. For the essays all quite rightly attempt to clarify the natures of vengeance within specific and different medieval contexts—a particular region, a particular text, a particular social movement. By asking what relationship a distinct factor like authorship or religion has with the concept of vengeance, each author points us ever closer to the meanings of medieval vengeance, to the heart of the deeper and broader questions that spur our interest.

Several of our contributors examine the relationship between a specific geographical region and the concepts and practices of vengeance. In Chapter 1, Máire Johnson wonders if Irish saints had a notorious medieval reputation for vengefulness simply because they were Irish (and thus by ethnic stereotype vengeful). By carefully matching stories of saintly vengeance in medieval Ireland with scriptural parallels, she is able to show that, in fact, vengefulness and holiness walked hand in hand in early Irish Christianity—not because ethnic norms had overwhelmed Christian values, but because the Irish model of sanctity was based on both biblical interpretation and distinct characteristics of Irish culture. Moving forward several centuries, in Chapter 2 Jackson Armstrong visits a cross-border dispute crossing the Scottish marches, where political allegiances (public and private) shifted and divided, and emotions waxed and waned. Armstrong's detailed analysis offers a fresh take on the question of public “justice” versus private “vengeance,” and provides insight on the specific role of vengeance within frontier communities. Meanwhile, François Soyer looks at a community of religious frontiers and explores the tension between top-down law and order and private desires for vengeance in late medieval Portugal. His work in Chapter 3 provides much-needed perspective on vengeance and feuding on the Iberian peninsula, and suggests that, for some at least, conflict inside a religious group often took precedence over conflict between different religious communities.

The focus narrows as Dominique Barthélemy and Thomas Roche ask how the identity of a source's author influences the presentation of vengeance within that source. Both Barthélemy and Roche invite us to read our primary sources closely, persuasively demonstrating the effect of the individual author on a text's presentation of vengeance, and suggesting ways for scholars to approach such thorny and multi-layered evidence.

In Chapter 4, Barthélemy dissects the nature of war in tenth-century France and introduces his own concept of "feudal war"—in which adult noblemen revenge themselves upon each other's peasants, rather than each other's persons. At the same time, his comparative treatment of two different medieval authors (Flodoard and Richer of Rheims) demonstrates the importance of careful, canny reading. Roche in Chapter 5 visits a familiar medieval voice, that of Orderic Vitalis. He shows us that the discourse of vengeance functioned on three different levels within Orderic's *Ecclesiastical History*—first, in the way Orderic narrates specific events, second, in the actions and speeches of individuals within Orderic's narrations, and third, in the overarching themes Orderic creates in the work as a whole.

Finally, three chapters ask if it matters what words are used to talk about vengeance, in the Middle Ages and our own times—and if so, what words *should* be used? In Chapter 6, Marina Brownlee takes us inside an extraordinary medieval tale of gender war, incest, love and vengeance. She reveals the relationships between verbal and physical violence in a text we lightly refer to as "literature," thereby illustrating the dangerous potential of words to become deeds, and warning that we trivialize verbal violence at our own risk. Paul Hyams decisively revisits the question of the words scholars use to talk about vengeance, in particular that contentious term familiar to historians and anthropologists alike, "feud," in Chapter 7, while in Chapter 8 I look at the interplay between crusading ideology and religious emotion, using frequently repeated vocabulary as a starting point.

These contributions all have in common an acceptance of Robert Solomon's assertion that vengeance involves intensely personal emotional experiences.<sup>3</sup> In chapter after chapter we are brought face to face with the emotions enduringly labeled as "taboo" by Sigmund Freud—fear, grief, anger, shame.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, we do so within a world where emotion and violence are not separate from religion; a world where religion, emotion, violence and various ideologies coexist and co-inform each other. The medieval discourse that results from such a heady mixture is often striking, sometimes shocking; these essays purposefully direct your attention towards a subject many today may find embarrassing or even repellent.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert C. Solomon, *A Passion for Justice: Emotions and the Origin of the Social Contract* (London, 1995), p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Scheff, "The Taboo on Coarse Emotions," *Review of Personality and Social Psychology*, 5(1984), p. 153.

When all is said and done, we see our work here as one further step in an ongoing investigation—a genuine *enquête à poursuivre*. For those prepared to be challenged, this collection will surely spark a desire to learn and discover more about the varieties of medieval vengeance.