

### Book Review

#### Whence Poetic Justice?

A Review of William Flesch, *Comeuppance: Costly Signaling, Altruistic Punishment, and Other Biological Components of Fiction*. Harvard University Press, 2007, 252 pp., US\$39.95, ISBN 978-0-674-02631-5.

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*Comeuppance* by William Flesch seeks to explain some important aspects of fiction in light of insights from theoretical biology. Flesch proposes that humans enjoy stories because they tend to showcase altruistic behavior, something that certainly exists but whose high costs make it unexpected or difficult to rationalize. Put another way, though individuals possess selfish genes, which accounts for nepotism or parental sacrifice, they also exhibit a natural disposition to practice generosity themselves and to appreciate it in others. Flesch argues: “First, irrational behavior can be a paradoxical advantage within a social system. Second, altruism is a form of such behavior. And, finally, altruistic punishment is the form of altruism most necessary to the maintenance of cooperation within a society made up largely of nonkin, that is, most human societies” (p. 22). He goes on to sketch out a deft rationale for the “evolution of cooperation,” showing that strong reciprocity enhances social cohesion (see also Barash 2008; Ridley 1996). He next establishes that it depends on tracking other people, i.e. a “Theory of Mind” that can gauge their interests, motives, and perspectives, and predict likely responses based on circumstances and past actions. As he states:

Humans cooperate, and continue cooperating, because we monitor one another’s cooperation vigilantly. To give us an incentive to monitor and ensure cooperation, nature endows us with a pleasing sense of outrage at defection and a concomitant sympathy for the victims of defection—an endowment demonstrated by the prevalence of strong reciprocators. We all monitor the behavior of others and often punish and reward in response to what we ourselves track or to what we learn about them. Emotional involvement is the proximal or efficient cause of our tendency to reward or (more likely and more intensely) to punish. Such rewarding and punishing is altruistic. (p. 50)

Given this general scenario, Flesch surmises that stories engage our interests by imitating these fraught situations. To cite his own words again: “Fiction recruits this central capacity

in human social cognition for taking pleasure in responding to the nonactual. It gratifies the proximal or psychological aim of our interest in what some have done and how others have responded. That aim is the pleasure we take in strong reciprocation, particularly punishment, a pleasure useful in nonliterary contexts as an incentive to altruistic punishment and presumably evolved for that reason” (p. 51). As his subtitle suggests, his main concern is then to analyze literary representations of altruistic punishment, understood as a costly signal.

“Altruistic punishment” is used in a technical sense, meaning an act of socially-beneficial castigation or exposure that costs the doer more than he or she directly gains. For instance, catching plagiarists nowadays is time-consuming, and while cheating is officially condemned, vigilant professors who enforce honor codes are often demonized. Or to bring in a literary example, Beowulf loses his life slaying the dragon terrorizing his kingdom—a high cost indeed. “Costly signaling,” an extremely useful concept deriving from biological research by the Zahavis, refers to honest or hard-to-fake displays of an animal’s fitness or intentions that are broadcast to rivals, potential mates, would-be predators, or other interested living organisms. The gaudy, heavy peacock’s tail, which so troubled Darwin, presents the paradigmatic example—it is a handicap, a show of conspicuous consumption—but astute analysts have recently invoked the idea to explicate military shows of force (or “saber-rattling” to employ a classic metaphor) in various geopolitical hotspots such as the Middle East. According to Flesch, most literature contains an underlying plot in which an innocent party is exploited by someone who in turn is then punished by a heroic protagonist, whose rescue operation signals his willingness to sacrifice for the greater good. Since people have a long-developed interest in promoting teamwork, the author avows, we like this kind of narrative a lot. *Comeuppance* explores several illustrations and ramification of these ideas, including the significant issues of vengeance and vindication.

Several worthwhile insights are advanced by this work. Flesch makes a good case that the primal hold stories have on us is less a matter of identification, as many have conjectured, than a corollary to the vigilant high-stakes monitoring we practice in real life: they elicit our “volunteered affect.” This suggestion would put narratives—non-actual representations of life—on a continuum with gossip and even prehistoric hunting rituals, and adds a major point to this ongoing debate. Likewise, Flesch thoughtfully expounds how tears are mostly transparent indicators of heartfelt emotions, in both literary texts and the reality they imitate. His explanations, drawn from bullfighting and game theory (specifically the Prisoner’s Dilemma), are also helpful. In general, the move to cross disciplinary lines, to apprehend narrative as a biocultural activity practiced by a highly gregarious and intelligent species, is a step in the right direction.

Substantial flaws, however, mar Flesch’s argument. The scope of his claims seems paradoxically too broad and too narrow. It is too broad in that Fleschian comeuppance adequately covers only a restricted range of modern or early modern texts. To consider one counter-example, in the first part of *Beowulf*, after the hero punishes the Grendel-kin for attacking the Scyldings, he is amply rewarded with treasure and renown—an outcome that is the very opposite of altruistic. Or recall that in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (quickly becoming the go-to text for Darwinian interpretation), it is Mr. Darcy’s refusal to exact painful retribution from the scheming, unscrupulous Wickham, however self-interested his accommodations are in catalyzing his subsequent marriage to Lizzy Bennet,

that we find appealing.

Furthermore, the cases treated by Flesch are too new (with the exception of the wrath of Achilles in *The Iliad*, briefly cited). If human delight in poetic justice originated in the Environment of Evolutionary Adaptation, then ancient oral sagas, old fairy-tales, and prehistoric myths would deserve extended treatment to establish a valid etiology for the workings of more recent novels and urban theater. Indeed, the biggest problem in *Comeuppance* stems from a certain nostalgic idealism, a green-world construction of the past. Its treatment of altruism and kindness to strangers overlooks the Hobbesian aspects of human nature, eliding “Machiavellian Intelligence” and the conflicts that inevitably arise due to competition over scarce resources.

What makes good deeds so noteworthy, then, is both that they exist in tension with powerful opposing forces, and that it is not always as clear as Flesch would have it just what the most charitable course of action would entail. John LeCarré’s Cold War spy novels, for instance, explore such moral grey areas. However, throughout Flesch’s book, gossip functions simply as an accurate and beneficent mechanism for sharing news, rather than as a propaganda tactic used by cunning, self-interested social players. His suppression of Shylock’s long-term economic rivalry with Antonio in Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* and of Lily Bart’s need to remain upperclass in Edith Wharton’s *House of Mirth* may derive from these blindspots; such fierce struggles over status lay beyond his purview.

It appears to this reader that much of the richness of great literature lies in its ability to represent these complicated features of real life. Attempts by Brian Boyd, Denis Dutton, Patrick Colm Hogan, Jonathan Gottschall, David Sloan Wilson, and others to reverse-engineer narrative as a useful adaptation for learning how to deal with such murky complexities have much to recommend them in this regard, while John Kerrigan’s *Revenge Tragedy* (1998) provides a substantially deeper account of the ambivalent powers of vengeance per se and its literary depictions. Some nice interpretations are offered throughout Flesch’s tome, but his not uncommendable efforts to synthesize the “European philosophy, psychoanalysis, and literary theory” of a previous generation of criticism with twenty-first-century sociobiology falls a tad short (p. 207n). His apprehension of evolutionary psychology is somewhat thin, and in later chapters he drifts away from interpretation informed by biology.

The book’s weird elements also merit brief mention. Every few pages, the author resorts to tautology, such as the following: “Effective narratives are therefore likely to be accurate representations of human interactions, just because genuine human interactions are what we are so attuned to monitor. Those genuine human actions themselves have to do with how people monitor one another. Therefore our monitoring of how they monitor one another is thematized in the way they monitor one another, and the way they monitor one another models how we monitor them” (p. 72). If you’re keeping score, “human (inter)actions” takes the early lead with a field goal, but “monitor” wins with a touchdown, 7-3. Flesch also ranges all over the place, expecting his audience to have at instant recall tickle points of niceness among Enlightenment thinkers as well as myriad subplots and minor characters in Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, sprawling Victorian novels, the complete plays of Shakespeare, and elements of pop culture.

Another annoying tick is the parenthetical inclusion of modern publication dates rather than years of composition. Presumably this is a house style matter and most English Ph.D.s will know that Kyd, Cervantes, Chaucer, Plato, and Milton were not in fact all

active last decade, but someone surely will be misled by such references. More substantively, Flesch's uneasiness and unfamiliarity with current thinking about evolutionary psychology and how it has shed light on the verbal arts breaks through here and there, such as the dense, illogical defense of free will vis-à-vis genes (pp. 40-45) and the very lengthy note (pp. 205-209) reductively disparaging contemporary literary interpretation informed by knowledge of the life sciences.

Finally, a modest proposal for distillation, not reduction: there is some consensus that too much is getting published nowadays, most of it trendy cookie-cutter stuff of low quality. As the job market in the liberal arts continues its free fall, as tenure requirements based on *quantity* go up, as a kind of writerly arms race ensues, literati are increasingly pushed to publish or perish. Especially as scholars strive to cross traditional disciplinary boundaries, it's becoming impossible to keep up with either reading or writing. Part of a solution would be to cut many books down to essays, leave many essays as conference papers, and strive to evaluate the *quality* of publications more closely and carefully. *Comeuppance* presents a fine example. It could have been a lucid, tightly argued article, setting forth its main points, illustrating them with appropriate examples, and delineating their strengths and limits, which would have made it in the long run, more helpful, more generous - more altruistic.

## References

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