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“Our Battle Cry Will Be: Remember Jenny McCrea!” A Précis on the Rhetoric of Revenge

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The few locals of Fort Edward, New York, who buried Jane McCrea in July 1777 had no idea they were laying to rest a martyr. The first reports of McCrea’s death portrayed her as an unfortunate casualty of war, collateral damage in the conflict between British general John Burgoyne’s troops and the Continental army that culminated in the decisive Battle of Saratoga. Yet in August and September, references to McCrea’s murder appeared frequently in colonial newspapers, and as her story circulated, its horror was heightened. Soon McCrea was said to have been a British captive murdered mercilessly by Indian “devils” in the employ of the British. Burgoyne’s counterpart, General Horatio Gates, dashed off a blistering letter to Burgoyne that identified McCrea as the fiancé of a Tory officer and claimed that she was killed on her wedding day. Drawing on the conventions of captivity narratives, literary romanticism, sentimental fiction, and classic fables, McCrea’s tale was further embellished by the able literary hands of David Ramsay, Mercy Otis Warren, Joel Barlow, Sara Hale, and Washington Irving.¹ Her story was canonized in art history with John Vanderlyn’s 1804 “The Death of Jane McCrea.” The tale was retold in history textbooks and a popular “biography.” By the mid-nineteenth century, Jane McCrea had become a national icon.

As the story goes, McCrea was murdered in her wedding gown by Indians entrusted to escort her from a friend’s residence near Fort Edward across the battlefield into the loving arms of her Tory fiancé, David Jones, an officer in Burgoyne’s army camped at nearby Fort Anne. Her escorts did not deliver on their promise, however. Disagreeing over who deserved the largest share of the reward of rum, the Indians raped, scalped, and murdered McCrea, though she prayed on her knees for mercy. In some accounts, her captors disagreed over her fate—the Noble Savage (Kiashuta or Duluth) attempted to save her, yet the primitive wolf-like savage (Le Loup or Wyandot Panther) killed her anyway.² It was British policy to pay for American scalps, and therefore in a

cruel irony, McCrea's long golden tresses were presented by Le Loup to Jones for payment. Jones recognized his beloved's scalp, but fulfilled his duty and paid the reward. This was and remains a haunting image: a military officer funding his fiancé's murder. As the story was popularized in the early United States, historians attributed the American victory at Saratoga to the inspired backlash against McCrea's murder.

McCrea became a legend, and it should therefore be no surprise that her saga is prominent in historical scholarship about the early Republic.³ Though prior analyses illuminate various facets of the McCrea myth, we feel that they miss an important component—for McCrea's death was first and foremost a revenge story. In this essay, we reread the myth of Jane McCrea to probe cultural fictions about revenge in the United States. Cultural fictions, Stephen Hartnett notes, are the "stories, norms, explanations, icons, justifications, and sustaining myths" that a culture develops to explain and justify its political actions and way of life; cultural fictions are the basis of our symbolically constituted reality as a people.⁴ The story of McCrea's death was an enduring cultural fiction after the Revolutionary War; indeed, generations of U.S. citizens following the Revolution found meaning and order in her tale—which, while the plot remained more or less the same, was repeatedly unearthed and reinvented to serve the needs of the moment. Our reexamination of McCrea's story complicates cultural fictions about politics in the United States, specifically the role that revenge plays in the construction of political subjectivities, behaviors, habits, and sovereignties—in short, the role it plays in modern governance.

For Michel Foucault, the central questions of modern governance are "how to govern oneself, how to be governed, how to govern others, by whom the people will accept to be governed, and how to become the best possible governor," and he applies the term *governmentality* to describe the dissemination of political power throughout the modern state.⁵ As Wendy Brown reads Foucault, there are four critical features of governmentality: first, modern governance is concerned with orchestrating "the conduct of the body individual, the body social, and the body politic"; second, modern governance "has multiple points of operation and application"; third, modern governance is not restricted to rule or law but "works through a range of invisible and unaccountable powers"; and fourth, modern governance "both employs and infiltrates a number of discourses ordinarily conceived as unrelated to political power, governance, or the state," including the discourses of science and religion.⁶ One outcome of Foucault's work is the decentering of the state,

for he poses biopower as an alternative to sovereignty, a concept he wishes to downplay. Yet if we focus exclusively on the individual as a site and lever of power, we miss so much—especially when it comes to revenge. Here we break from Hobbes, Hegel, Freud, and others who focus on revenge as an individual phenomenon. Instead, we follow Brown, who redirects our critical gaze back onto the state and sovereignty.⁷ To eliminate the state as a focus of analysis is to miss a vital site of modern governance, and it is to give politicians a free pass: for the state is always trying to establish its own legitimacy and expand its powers over life and death.

The McCrea myth suggests that revenge should be understood not primarily as a moral wrong, as an innate human depravity, or as a universal, trans-historical inevitability, but instead as a historically conditioned, circulating discourse of power in modern states. Following the American Revolution, as elite politicians attempted to establish republican order, the cultural fictions then circulating in public culture suggested that revenge could be particularly useful. It was not the case that Americans were inherently violent and the state needed to step in to control this violence—though this was (and remains) one particularly useful narrative for justifying state power. Rather, the McCrea myth suggests that by persuading Americans that their nation and thus they themselves have been wronged, it is possible to discipline democratic bodies. The state thus learned to gain a manner of control over the demos by filling them with hatred for the nation's "enemies" and then encouraging them to release this hatred in explosive acts of imperialist violence. As time passed, and as the public sphere expanded, circulating stories in public memory ensured that these wounds never healed. As Americans told and retold, dramatized and visualized, performed and produced the story of Jane McCrea, they acted as unconscious agents of state power. This is the troubling lesson of McCrea's awful death as codified in U.S. mythology: to heal the deep wounds in the nation's soul, whites succumb to resentment and kill the "savage."

The Invention of Jane McCrea

As Jane McCrea was one of the first cultural icons in the United States, it is shocking how little we know about her. All we know for sure is that she was killed in upstate New York in late July of 1777, and then buried near Fort Edward.⁸ Any access to what occurred on that fateful day was lost. Recent DNA testing of her bones has revealed little, for her body has been exhumed and tampered with five times—in 1777, 1822, 1852, 2003, and 2005. During

the 1852 exhumation, local notables purportedly took her skull and many of her bones as souvenirs.⁹ We learned in 2004 that her grave contains the bones of at least two other people.¹⁰ Studying the McCrea myth hence takes us into the realm of rhetoric, for from the beginning her image was hollowed out and infused with new meanings. The McCrea we know today is an amalgam of stereotypes and assumptions: a prefabricated rhetorical product handed down from previous generations.

That the McCrea myth is a product of war is understandable, for war does not exist outside of words. Going to war is a decision fraught with tangible consequences and the first campaigns of battle are therefore for public opinion. War must have a rationale, making the process of rhetorical invention vital to the war effort. The rhetoric of war, in turn, is particularly conducive to the hollowing out of tropes and the invention of myths. We can thus see the McCrea myth as clearly rooted in the violent early history of the American Revolution. By July 2, 1777, Burgoyne's army had neared the Hudson River Valley, a region densely populated by Anglo-American colonists. As Burgoyne advanced across New York, noncombatants fled in droves for the South. Many from the Fort Edward and Fort Anne area fled to Albany, Troy, and Schenectady, forty-five miles down the Hudson River. Those who fled risked losing their hastily abandoned possessions, including homes and crops. One loyalist newspaper, the *Newport Gazette*, described the refugees: "Great numbers of the back inhabitants are flocking down with their families, having left most part of their substance behind them.—Their case is truly deplorable."¹¹ Those who stayed risked losing much more.

On July 26, British auxiliaries and rebel militiamen engaged in a series of skirmishes around Fort Edward. The battles soon widened into a larger conflagration with the arrival of British regulars. Americans claimed to have lost one lieutenant, Van Vechten, along with one or two sergeants and two or three privates. All were stripped of their clothes. One soldier's hands were cut off before he was killed.¹² Worse yet, Van Vechten was "most inhumanely butchered."¹³ One American soldier noted in his journal: "They stripped poor Van Actor, and after scalping him, stabbed him in several places; they then fastened a tomahawk to his breast, sharpened a stick and erected him on his feet, by bracing the sharp part of the stick under his chin, and left him a standing monument to their barbarity."¹⁴

Van Vechten's death may have been the root cause for a ratcheting up of the rhetoric about British atrocities. Allusions to Van Vechten as an "unarmed soldier" passing from one fort to another are ubiquitous in letters that were

sent from the front in late July and early August. In a letter to New York governor George Clinton, the death of Van Vechten was mentioned along with “two or three other Inhabitants in that Quarter”—suggesting that, in the American army at least, the officer’s death was the only significant death that had occurred at Fort Edward in late July.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, the desire for revenge against the British and their allies colored letters from the front. Indeed, the vicious killing of a comrade and the accompanying desire for revenge may have escalated the rhetoric streaming out of the pens of American officers in the Hudson River Valley, inspiring them to kill redcoats and revenge their comrade.

Soldiers were not the only people to die in and around Fort Edward in late July. Once unleashed, war assumes a life of its own, and as a consequence, the awful reach of battle is never confined to the battlefields. A few newspapers reported that an entire family had been killed, though the family name, Allen, did not appear in print until the nineteenth century.¹⁶ A letter sent to newspapers on July 28 described the deaths of two young girls who had been picking raspberries.¹⁷ One letter dated August 1 and 2 reported, “The Indians are all around us, they are very bold, they often kill and scalp sentries and others, in sight of the army; they have killed and scalp’d about 60 men, women and children, making no distinction between Whigs or Tories.”¹⁸ Two centuries later, these sixty people remain unnamed—if they existed at all. These reports made little impression on the public mind. The Allen family tragedy was remembered only as a prelude. Van Vechten was not remembered—historians later Americanized his name to “Palmer.” The two raspberry-picking girls were never mentioned again.

The one who was remembered was Jane McCrea—not because her death was special, but because her murder came to symbolize all American deaths during the Revolutionary War. As a self-identified “gentleman” on the scene in 1777 explained:

It would take too much time to enumerate every action of this kind. One instance which happened yesterday, during the skirmish, may serve for the whole; a young lady of the name of miss Jenny McCrea, of a good family, and some share of beauty, was by some accident at fort Edward when the enemy attacked the picket guard; she and an old woman, whom she was with, were taken by the savages . . . and then with a barbarity unheard of before, they butchered the poor innocent girl, and scalped her.¹⁹

Of course, the barbarity was familiar, which is why McCrea’s death could serve for the whole and why colonists could believe it so easily when it was repeated.

But American officers needed to enlist more soldiers, and as a consequence they appealed to those people, especially the fence-sitters and moderate Tories, who had not joined the cause. John Adams observed in 1775: “We were about one third Tories, and [one] third timid, and one third true blue.”²⁰ In order to appeal to the center, the American officers needed to simplify the record of British atrocities so that they could be easily communicated in the press. They needed, in short, a *synecdoche*, a convenient talking point capturing the horrors of British aggression and the perils of acquiescence to the king. Soon after McCrea’s death, the British actions were distilled into the image of a singular atrocity, the murder of a beautiful young woman, from a good family, named Jane McCrea.

Words won the Revolutionary War as much as cannonballs and bayonets. To transform McCrea’s story into effective war rhetoric, propagandists had to rework it, inventing new, more persuasive lines of argument about her death. In this way, McCrea became a vessel for the rhetorical politics that helped Americans win their independence. She was like John Locke’s white paper, a blank canvas on which stories could be inscribed. During August and September 1777, every significant American newspaper reported on McCrea’s death. The first report, published in Boston and New York and reprinted elsewhere, was contained in a brief letter dated July 26, 1777, and sent from Moses Creek, a temporary headquarters for the American army located five miles south of Fort Edward. It read:

We have just had a brush with the enemy at Fort-Edward, and in which Lieut. Van Veghten, was most inhumanely butchered and scalped. Two sergeants and two privates were likewise killed and scalped, one of the latter had both his hands cut off. They took a young woman, Janey M’Crea, by name, out of a house at Fort Edward, carried her about half a mile into the bushes, and there killed and scalped her in cold blood. They have killed and scalped another woman near the same place.²¹

Here, the explanation for McCrea’s death was simple: Indians killed her and at least six others during a skirmish. This incident of one woman’s death would not have struck readers as abnormal. In fact, one soldier in Burgoyne’s army wrote: “I am afraid you will accuse me of great apathy, and conclude the scenes of war have hardened my feelings, when I say, that this circumstance, put in competition with all the horrors attendant on this unfortunate contest, and which, in all probability, are likely to increase hourly, is but of little moment.”²² For this soldier, McCrea’s death was forgettable in the midst of a numbing war.

The simplicity of the earliest explanations stand in stark contrast to the gruesome tale of murder in the August 14, 1777, issue of Boston's *Independent Chronicle*. Elaborating on elements from the earlier report, this article, prominently displayed on page one, labeled Indians "Devils" who are "disposed to murder, merely for the sake of murdering." It continued to argue that "even the harmless, helpless female, by nature, too feeble to make defense, falls a sacrifice to their thirst for blood. It is undeniably true, that they took a young woman out of a house at Fort Edward, dragged the harmless victim into the woods, and in cool blood, murdered and scalped her." The Indians of this account were less than human because they lacked pity for a helpless white girl. Even worse for the *Independent Chronicle* was British complicity in McCrea's death: "Though this, perhaps, was not done immediately by the hands of Britons, yet it was done by British hirelings. No reason can possibly be given for their cruelty, but this, the captive was an American." In this retelling, violence was nationalized, for McCrea was targeted because she was "American." The grievance, here, created an "American" subject. By transforming McCrea into an "American," the story served a triple persuasive function: first, it made Indians guilty of killing an innocent patriot; second, it condemned the British for cruelty; and third, it forged American solidarity at a low point in the Revolutionary War through a call for revenge. "When we contemplate these things, and in our warmth blame the man who opened the gates for the enemy to enter," this paper concluded, "let not the ideas cramp our exertions, but fire us with revenge."²³

In a September 2, 1777, letter written to Burgoyne and widely published in rebel newspapers, General Horatio Gates tapped into the power of revenge to bring American troops together and turn them against the British. Gates's letter repackaged important elements from the August 14 *Independent Chronicle*, thereby furthering the evolution and circulation of McCrea's story. "Miss McCrea, a young lady lovely to the sight, of virtuous character and amiable disposition, engaged to be married to an officer in your Army," he wrote, "was with other women and children taken out of a house near Fort-Edward, carried into the woods, and there scalped and mangled in a most shocking manner." While others were murdered, McCrea's death was special because the virgin bride—"virtuous" in the eighteenth century connoted virginity—was killed while dressed for marriage to a British officer: "The miserable fate of Miss McCrea was particularly aggravated by her being dressed to receive her promised husband, but met her murderer employed by you." Gates frequently disputed the use to which the British put Indians, yet he himself put Indians

to use as an other in the construction of an “American” identity.²⁴ Indeed, Burgoyne’s use of “savages,” and his involvement in McCrea’s death, became an additional weapon in the symbolic battle of the Revolutionary War: for it helped to distinguish “Americans” as an independent people.

The Nationalization of Revenge

The sordid tale of Jane McCrea is one of the earliest and most popular revenge stories from the early Republic. Following McCrea’s death, the British suffered a devastating defeat at Saratoga. Supposedly, McCrea’s death encouraged hundreds of new recruits to participate in the victory. This was not necessarily true; the timing suggests that it might simply have been the end of harvest season that freed soldiers to fight. Nevertheless, a historical marker near the spot where McCrea was killed in Fort Edward links the two events: “Her death helped to defeat General Burgoyne at Saratoga.” Saratoga and Fort Edward are only fifteen miles apart, and though tourists and bookies now know Saratoga more for horse racing than for muskets and redcoats, it is a short trip from Fort Edward to the Saratoga battlefield. Whether or not McCrea’s murder in fact contributed to the war effort, McCrea is remembered as a catalyst; as a nineteenth-century historian claimed, although McCrea’s death “involved only a case of individual suffering,” it “made a deep impression on the public mind, and roused indignation to the highest pitch.”²⁵

U.S. observers believed that McCrea was a martyr who died in order to give birth to a nation. Washington Irving explained: “The blood of this unfortunate girl . . . was not shed in vain. Armies sprang up from it.”²⁶ The historian Benson Lossing, the editor of *Harper’s Weekly*, George William Curtis, and the historian John Fiske made similar claims.²⁷ From the beginning, such observations put Burgoyne on the defensive. He accused Gates of distorting McCrea’s death for political gain, contending that “her fate wanted not of the tragic display you have laboured to give it.”²⁸ When forced to defend himself in 1778 before parliamentary hearings into his conduct during the Saratoga campaign, Burgoyne insisted that he and not McCrea had been the victim, claiming, “the stories upon which the honorable gentleman founded his accusation of me, were merely those fabricated by committees, and propagated in news-papers, for temporary purposes.”²⁹ Here, we are not interested in whether Irving and other historians were factually correct. We are interested, rather, in why so many believed that McCrea was causally linked to victory at Saratoga and hence to victory in the Revolutionary War. The lesson of

McCrea's death, which supposedly enlarged the ranks of true-blue patriots and spurred them on to victory at Saratoga, is that revenge can be politically productive. Moreover, the supposed relationship between McCrea's death and victory suggests that the desire for revenge can be invented, manufactured, and encouraged. Indeed, if McCrea's death roused the public mind, then other stories could, too, which means that as the McCrea myth circulated in the early Republic, those who constituted the United States' institutions learned that producing hate and encouraging revenge could make violence productive of desired ends.

By updating McCrea's death and making it ever more tragic, early rhetors attempted to carry the lust for revenge beyond Saratoga and make it productive of the continued war effort. Take, for instance, Philip Freneau's 1778 poetry, which enumerated a dramatic vision of "American" empire. Significantly, it was after the murder of Jane McCrea (whom Freneau called Lavinia) that his vision of empire became possible. Indeed, in a deadly rhetorical maneuver, the guilt of McCrea's murderer came to justify revenge against *all* Indians, the British, and anyone else who stood in America's way:

Drenched in her gore, Lavinia of the vale;
The cruel Indian seized her life away,
As the next morn began her bridal day!—
This deed alone our just revenge would claim,
Did not ten thousand more your sons defame.³⁰

For Freneau, McCrea's demise was the catalysis for success in the Revolutionary War. Her death, when coupled with the other war casualties, demanded the perpetuation of the war effort in 1778 and beyond until grievances were righted and victory was achieved. Freneau's work is significant, then, because he was one of the first authors to explicitly argue that revenge in the future was a justified response to events like McCrea's death in the past.

Freneau's rhetoric demonstrates that because revenge is necessarily predicated on a long memory of past grievances, it is always in dialogue with the past. Learning from the earliest cultural fictions about McCrea's death, and believing that revenge could be politically and militarily productive, Freneau called on Americans to continue to seek revenge for McCrea's death even though she was, strictly speaking, avenged at Saratoga. He understood that political communities are rhetorical inventions. How to invent "the people" has long been a seminal concern of politicians, but imagining "the people" as an audience and then addressing them is the first step. For Freneau, the

grievance of McCrea's murder allowed him to imagine a nation dedicated to avenging her death. In turn, if colonists acted to avenge this grievance, this could make the imagined "American" community real. He therefore urged his fellow rebels to action in 1778 and beyond:

Americans! revenge your country's wrongs;
To you the honour of this deed belongs,
Your arms did once this sinking land sustain,
And saved those climes where Freedom yet must reign—
Your bleeding soil this ardent task demands,
Expel yon' thieves from these polluted lands,
Expect no peace till haughty Britain yields.³¹

For Freneau, "Americans" became a people through the perpetuation of a founding act of revenge. By calling on the people to rise up together to revenge the war dead, Freneau employed a rhetorical maneuver common to public address in the early Republic.

Following the Revolutionary War, McCrea's death lived on in public memory, where it continued to portray her as representative of the revolutionary experience. Because McCrea's story became an integral component of U.S. public culture, we should better understand its underlying messages, which become clear in the two most popular representations of McCrea's death—John Vanderlyn's "Death of Jane McCrea" (1804) and the epic poem on which that painting was based, Joel Barlow's *The Columbiad* (which was finally published in 1807 with another artist's illustrations).³² Vanderlyn's work became a familiar image in school textbooks during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, largely because it captured the horrors of McCrea's murder: the helpless girl, with ripped red, white, and blue dress, will soon be murdered and scalped by hypermasculine, monstrous Indians. Her breast is exposed, implying that she has been, or will soon be, raped—a common claim in the eighteenth century.³³ In the background, her fiancé, David Jones, approaches but not quickly enough; he will be too late to save McCrea, but not too late to exact vengeance. As an 1832 history noted, Jones was seized by the "furious determination to immolate the first Indian he could find."³⁴ Vanderlyn's painting predicts the future; though Jones cannot save McCrea, he will avenge her death.

Deploying elements from the August 14, 1777, issue of the *Independent Chronicle* and General Gates's letters, Barlow described McCrea's murder in graphic detail:

With calculating pause and demon grin,
 They seize her hands and thro her face divine
 Drive the descending ax; the shriek she sent
 Attain'd her lover's ear; he thither bent
 With all the speed his wearied limbs could yield,
 Whirl'd his keen blade and stretcht upon the field
 The yelling fiends; who there disputing stood
 Her gory scalp, their horrid prize of blood.
 He sunk delirious on her lifeless clay
 And past, in starts of sense, the dreadful day.³⁵

This detailed description is far removed from the earliest reports of Jane McCrea's death, and suggests the power of rhetoric to transform a simple story into a national myth. Stories such as this served multiple social functions, simultaneously rallying troops for war, producing a more unified "American" people, and justifying imperial expansion that required the slaughter and removal of Indians. U.S. imperialism was premised on the racialization of Indians, and the striking images of this story, a snow-white virginal woman slaughtered by "dark," inhuman "savages," was an early articulation of this logic. This myth, and stories like it, helped to collapse the many different and competing Native American nations into a coherent "Indian" subject that could, in turn, be used in the construction of an oppositional "American" subject. In modernity, Foucault argues, the process of subject formation works by transforming an act into an expression of an underlying subject type.³⁶ Just as homosexual or criminal acts became expressions of the homosexual or the criminal, so too did savage acts—like McCrea's murder—become expressions of the "savage." The "Indian" was constructed as a murderer, and treated as such. In later iterations of the McCrea myth, a benevolent "Noble Savage" was introduced. But this figure always failed to protect McCrea from his savage counterpart. The message: some "Indians" might have good hearts, but they cannot be trusted. The McCrea legend teaches that ultimately the "savage" always wins out.

In this way the blame for the destruction of Native American civilizations was redirected back onto the victims. In the 1790s, after many Native Americans had been forced west of the Appalachians, U.S. elites suggested that it was the Indian's destiny to die, hence deploying the rhetorics of "the vanishing American" to displace guilt for their slaughter onto nature.³⁷ Similar acts of rhetorical displacement were common in the McCrea saga. In 1840, for instance, the *New York Mirror* suggested that McCrea's murder, not the deadly violence accompanying U.S. empire, was the cause of the widespread

disappearance of Indians from North America. “After this event, a curse seemed to rest upon the red man,” this paper proclaimed. “The prophets of the Indians had strange auguries; they saw constantly in the clouds, the form of the murdered white woman invoking the blast to overwhelm them; and directing all the power and fury of the Americans to exterminate every red man of the forest, who had committed the hateful deed of breaking their faith and staining the tomahawk with the blood of a woman, whose spirit still called for revenge.”³⁸ For this author, writing from mid-nineteenth century New York, where the threat of Indians resisting the ambitions of greedy settlers had long since passed, McCrea’s murder provided a convenient rationale for racism, violence, and abuse.

The myth of Jane McCrea thus justified the westward march of empire as retribution for past grievances. According to Barlow, McCrea’s dying shrieks attained her lover’s ear. Revenge consumed Jones, who could think of nothing but vengeance. Thus Jones, dressed in patriot blue in Vanderlyn’s painting, ran for revenge, redirecting the white on white, Tory on Whig violence of the Revolutionary War against Native Americans. Yet McCrea’s story could not long subsist like this as a foundational cultural fiction, for it was awkward to have a Tory, blue-clad but nevertheless British, be McCrea’s avenger. If anyone was going to do the avenging, it had to be a U.S. citizen; therefore, later versions of the story made Jane’s brother John a central figure in the myth.

To celebrate the sesquicentennial of McCrea’s death in 1927, the town of Fort Edward planned, among other things, to put on a play by Philip Henry Carroll titled *Jane McCrea: A Tragedy in Five Acts*. Though Carroll’s motivations for writing this play are lost, it was clearly a product of the progressive era—which made political pageantry a central part of civic education.³⁹ This play taught Americans how to act when confronted with a grievance. After 150 years, the story of Jane McCrea was now as much about her brother John as it was about Jane. When listing the cast of characters, for instance, Carroll placed John McCrea (“A Resolute Patriot”) first, David Jones (“A Tory, in love with Jane McCrea”) second, and Jane McCrea (“A Patriot, Sister of John McCrea”) second to last. A number of things about this play immediately jump out. First, it focused predominantly on the conflict between John McCrea and David Jones, not on McCrea’s death—for McCrea died midway through the play, but the tragedy continued. Second, Jane McCrea was listed as a patriot and not a Tory, as most early accounts suggested. This allowed Carroll to make her a true, unambiguous martyr to the rebel cause. Third, Jane was identified as the “Sister of John McCrea,” and not John as Jane’s brother. For Carroll,

Jane was the vessel for John's story. She mattered only insofar as she carried the troops from their difficult July to their victory at Saratoga.

One of the fundamental preoccupations of politicians following the Revolutionary War was order: they thus strove to transform rowdy citizens into "republican machines," to use Benjamin Rush's provocative phrase.⁴⁰ Carroll's play sheds light on one of the foundational cultural fictions about how republican machines can be made—by embracing or even manufacturing grievances, it is possible to make revenge productive of state power. In 1777, there was no nation, no state, no country; there were instead thirteen allied states fighting a mutually beneficial war. After the war, these states had a difficult time putting aside their differences, though eventually they did. Yet Carroll wrote the nation back into the Revolutionary War, arguing that it was waged to preserve the United States (which of course did not exist in 1777). John McCrea was already a republican machine committed to preserving his nation; he told his sister, "My life belongs to my country," and after she died, the only thing that kept him from total despair was the hope that his country would defeat the British. Upon learning of Jane's death, he wrestled with depression only to be revived by nationalism: "I am mad. Yes, I am mad. I have lost all in the world to me. I have nothing to live for, nothing. (*A brief silence.*) Yes, Yes. My country."⁴¹ John will live for his country by seeking revenge against the British for killing his sister. Carroll reinterpreted the Barlow and Vanderlyn accounts by making it McCrea's patriot brother John, not her Tory lover, David Jones, who revenged her death, suggesting that perhaps it was John, dressed in patriot blue, and not David who sped to Jane's side in "The Death of Jane McCrea."⁴² In fact, in the climactic scene of his play, Carroll introduced a new twist to the saga—John killed David in a "duel to the death."

When John killed David, he cemented the U.S. social contract. Modern political sovereignty, Foucault argues, should not be understood simply as the power to repress uprisings and compel obedience, but also as the power to shape and constitute subjects in ways that are amenable to the state's stability. Yet as the state seeks to transform citizens into "docile bodies," citizens often resist. Revenge narratives hailed citizens into the new national order while instructing them how to behave as enraged citizen-patriots. While Carroll demonstrated that one of the primary motivations for war was revenge, he also demonstrated the disciplining power of revenge when nationalized. An American officer reported to John that his sister's death "has aroused a spirit of resistance in our men which I doubt the whole British army can overcome.

They are impatient, eager for battle, and cry loudly for revenge.” He continued, “In the cruel massacre of your sister a new dawn of hope has so securely taken hold of the patriots, I doubt if General Burgoyne ever reaches Saratoga.”⁴³ Thus, John McCrea readied himself for battle by saying, “This poor heart for one shall never . . . cease throbbing until a hundred British shall pay the penalty for the massacre of this innocent girl.”⁴⁴ By 1927, interpreters of the McCrea myth had come to understand that revenge was a powerful motivator for persuading citizens to die for their nation. Because having soldiers willing to die is a prerequisite for nationhood, manufacturing the desire for revenge is politically expedient for the state.

Max Weber and Norbert Elias have argued that modern sovereignty is founded on the state’s monopolization of violence.⁴⁵ Though foundational to nation building and modernity itself, monopolization is complicated because the nature of society multiplies grievances that need to be rectified. Though revenge, in the form of the interpersonal blood feud, can rip society apart, the rhetorics of revenge, if monopolized and controlled by the state, are a way of controlling violence by channeling it in desired directions. Foucault has argued that we should reverse Clausewitz’s principle that war is politics by other means and argue instead that “politics is the continuation of war by other means.”⁴⁶ For Foucault, modern sovereignty is not just about monopolizing violence but also about generating it, harnessing it, and making it productive of correct behavior. The sovereign in the United States is thus the one who can harness the originary, revolutionary violence of the state, transform it into an impulse for revenge, and then displace this impulse onto desirable targets. The McCrea myth suggests that political sovereignty is intimately tied to the rhetorical management of violence.

The McCrea myth is revealing because it teaches us that one of the most basic ways to achieve sovereignty is by harnessing, and then nationalizing, revenge. Yet it is revealing in another sense. During the nineteenth century, U.S. citizens battled, removed, and exterminated Native Americans, and as this project progressed, and as Americans extended their territorial and political sovereignty westward, McCrea disappeared from public culture, remaining only as an enthymematic visual icon used in textbooks. Up to the Civil War, Jane McCrea was a name that everyone knew, but her myth became less national and more local in the 1870s and 1880s. Her story, which was deployed to excuse the murder of Indians, was no longer necessary, so it disappeared. We therefore read Carroll’s 1927 play as an echo of the past meant to convey the importance of a small backwater town in upstate New York. The Fort Edward

residents who watched this play wove their town back into the tapestry of their nation's patriotic history as exemplified by revenge narratives of all sorts. Thus, in the twentieth century, the revenge narrative itself became a trope to which the town of Fort Edward attached itself in order to prove its patriotism. We know very little about Philip Carroll, but this does not matter. His play was not about the author but instead about his audience's desire to reconnect themselves to the American myth by reasserting the central part they played in America's genesis via the story of Jane McCrea. Hence, locals connected themselves to the imagined national community by retelling gruesome stories of revenge from the past.

“Save Yourself for Saratoga”: Rethinking the Rhetorical Politics of Revenge

Significantly, Carroll ended the penultimate act of his play by having an American soldier tell his comrades: “Save yourselves for Saratoga, where our battle cry will be: Remember Jenny McCrea! Remember Jenny McCrea!”⁴⁷ Carroll's play was just one of the many productions that the residents of Fort Edward have put on to memorialize Jane McCrea, connecting their small town to the United States' founding myth of national revenge. On July 9, 2004, for example, the town unveiled a new gravestone for Jane McCrea in the local Union cemetery to replace the cracked marker that had recognized her grave since 1852. The dedication of her gravestone was deeply patriotic, including a rendition of the national anthem, the pledge of allegiance, and a reading of the Preamble of the Constitution—which did not seem out of place in this idyllic little town where flags and banners are proudly flown.

This ceremony also included a reading of “The American's Creed,” by Mrs. Cynthia Needham, the regent of the local Jane McCrea chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution:

I believe in the United States of America as a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, whose just powers are derived from the consent of the governed; a democracy in a republic; a sovereign Nation of many sovereign states; a perfect union, one and inseparable; established upon those principles of freedom, equality, justice, and humanity for which American patriots sacrificed their lives and fortunes. I therefore believe it is my duty to my country to love it; to support its flag and to defend it against all enemies.

These words, which could have been spoken by John McCrea in Carroll's play, had new meaning after September 11, 2001. In 2004, Jane McCrea helped the approximately 120 people at this ceremony believe in their nation, their

union, and their flag. For these folks, the status of McCrea's story as a cultural fiction persists; it gives life in our republic meaning, for it is a story of sacrifice and triumph, murder and defense, friends and enemies, loss and revenge.

By viewing revenge as a historical creation open to critical inspection and revision, this essay runs counter to two common understandings of this phenomenon. The first views revenge as a moral wrong to be eradicated.⁴⁸ While we agree that revenge should be countered, we disagree with those who follow Hegel, who maintains that revenge is a personal experience, a "particular caprice of the subjective will."⁴⁹ By studying individual motivations for revenge, and by directing arguments against revenge at the individual, moral philosophers overlook the state. Thus, we argue that revenge should be understood in terms of its social and political functions, but here we break away from many thinkers in the liberal tradition who see revenge as the expression of an innate, human hostility that must be managed by the monopolization of violence in the state.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud follows Thomas Hobbes in arguing that *homo homini lupus*, man is a wolf to man. Humanity's natural aggressiveness disturbs its ability to form communities, and thus Freud argues that the state "hopes to prevent the crudest excesses of brutal violence by itself assuming the right to use violence against criminals, but the law is not able to lay hold of the more cautious and refined manifestations of human aggressiveness."⁵⁰ The lust for revenge is typically precipitated by some wrong, perceived or real; to rectify that grievance an individual lashes out at another with the desire to harm—this is precisely, for Freud, what the state seeks to mitigate. To preempt the dangers of *lex talionis*, the state fulfills the need for vengeance by punishing someone so that the individual does not have to. René Girard, who sees the problems posed by revenge as transhistorical inevitabilities, argues that scapegoats are useful for modern politics because by projecting a community's resentment onto the scapegoat and then executing him or her, it is possible "to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric." The sacrifice of a scapegoat satisfies a community's need for vengeance while simultaneously stopping the circle of violence; hence, Girard argues: "the function of sacrifice is to quell violence within the community and to prevent conflicts from erupting."⁵¹ In this tradition, humans are naturally violent and the state must step in to manage the deadly cycle of revenge. The natural hostility of humans, which Hobbes dramatized in the state of nature, justifies state power as a counter to the inevitability of the herd destroying itself.

We read revenge differently than Hobbes, Freud, and Girard. The liberal myth sees the state intervening to manage individual disputes in the state of nature. Liberalism calls on subjects to hand power over to the state out of necessity. But what if this necessity is a rhetorical construction rather than an ontological reality? Rather than seeing revenge as the natural expression of human excrement, the Jane McCrea myth helps us to see the desire for revenge as a useful historical production for fledgling sovereignties looking to gain some manner of control over democratic bodies. In opposition to revenge, Hannah Arendt posits two alternatives, forgiveness and punishment, which are both forward looking and “attempt to put an end to something that without interference could go on endlessly.”⁵² While forgiveness can close the potentially endless cycle of vengeance, Arendt notes that there is nevertheless an institutional slippage when it comes to forgiveness. The state cannot forgive for the individual, and state forgiveness cannot be substituted for individual forgiveness. There is no necessary correlation between state and individual forgiveness; there is, however, a closer connection when it comes to revenge. The state can achieve revenge for an individual (which is one point of the death penalty), and, as the story of Jane McCrea demonstrates, something powerful happens when citizens perceive grievances against the nation as personal insults to be personally revenged. The McCrea myth suggests that we can understand horrible outbursts of vengeful violence as expressions of underlying forces of political power present since the founding period. Learning to desire revenge against the nation’s enemies was one of the ways that people in the United State came to see themselves as “Americans,” and one of the ways that they learned how to behave as citizens in the new nation.

It is no coincidence that Carroll dedicated his 1927 *Jane McCrea* to the Jane McCrea chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, for their creed captures the essence of McCrea’s story. It is the duty of citizens, the DAR argues, to love and support their nation, to be, in other words, republican machines. It is also the duty of citizens to honor the war-dead by defending their nation from future generations of enemies. These duties are intimately related through the rhetoric of revenge. The myth of Jane McCrea helps us to reevaluate such rhetoric, because her story suggests that revenge is not an individual problem or an expression of individual psychosis but is instead a historically productive articulation of state sovereignty. This is, after all, the moral of her story—after McCrea died, Americans banded together to destroy the British and win their independence. In turn, the post-9/11 ceremonies in Fort Edward are a way for the residents of Fort Edward to attach themselves to

the national narrative of revenge as an act of loyalty, patriotism, and submission. We become patriots when willing to revenge wrongs against our nation. The United States is founded on an act of revenge, and we have been dealing with the consequences ever since.

Notes

1. David Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: R. Aitken & Son, 1789), 2: 37; Mercy Otis Wilson, *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution* (Boston: Manning and Loring, 1805), 2: 233–34; Joel Barlow, *The Columbiad, A Poem* (Philadelphia: Fry and Kammerer, 1807), 606–36; Sara J. Hale, “Lines on Jane McCrea,” in *Ballads and Poems Relating to the Burgoyne Campaign*, ed. William L. Stone (1893; Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1970), 205–7; Washington Irving, *The Life of George Washington*, 5 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1855–1859), 3: 154.
2. Le Loup is introduced into the McCrea saga in John Bryson, *Jane McCrea, A Dramatic Poem* (Fort Edward, N.Y.: Public Ledger Job Office Print, 1856), and Arthur Reid, *Reminiscences of the Revolution, or LeLoup’s Bloody Trail from Salem to Fort Edward* (Utica, N.Y.: Book & Job Printer, 1859), 24–31; for the first instance of Wyandott Panther we found, see William L. Stone, *The Campaign of Lieut. Gen. John Burgoyne* (Albany, N.Y.: n.p., 1877), 305; Kiashuta is introduced in Michel René Hilliard-d’Auberteuil, *Miss McCrea: A Novel of the American Revolution*, trans. Eric LaGuardia (1784; Gainesville, Fla.: Scholars’ Facsimiles & Reprints, 1958); Duluth is a character in David Wilson, *The Life of Jane McCrea* (New York: Baker, Godwin & Co., 1853).
3. See Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority 1750–1800* (1982; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 137–44; June Namias, *White Captives: Gender and Ethnicity on the American Frontier* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 117–44; and Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire, and the World, 1600–1850* (2002; New York: Anchor, 2004), 228.
4. Stephen John Hartnett, *Democratic Dissent and the Cultural Fictions of Antebellum America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 2.
5. Michel Foucault, “Governmentality,” in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 95.
6. Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 81.
7. Brown, *Regulating Aversion*, 83.
8. We date her death July 26 rather than July 27 (as other scholars do) based on a letter General John Burgoyne wrote that day alluding to McCrea’s death—see John Burgoyne to Simon Fraser, July 26, 1777, in *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 26.108 (1948), 142.
9. Paul Rayno, “A Grave Subject,” *The Post-Star* (Glens Falls, N.Y.), December 4, 1974.
10. On the 2003 excavation, see David Starbuck, *Rangers and Redcoats on the Hudson* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2004), 103–12, and Dennis Yusko, “Loss Deepens a 1777 Whodunit,” *Times Union* (Albany), May 11, 2003, A1; on her 2005 burial, see David R. Starbuck, “The Mystery of the Second Body: A Forensic Investigation of Jane McCrea’s Final Resting Place,” *Plymouth Magazine* 21.2 (2006), available online at <http://plymouthmagazine.plymouth.edu/issue/story.html?id=243>, accessed January 25, 2007.
11. *Newport Gazette*, September 4, 1777.
12. On this tactic, see Jill Lepore, *In the Name of War: King Philip’s War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 179.
13. *Boston Gazette and Country Journal*, August 11, 1777.
14. William Scudder, *The Journal of William Scudder, an Officer in the Late New-York Line* (New York: n.p., 1794), 13.

15. John Barclay to George Clinton, August 9, 1777, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 10 vols. (New York: Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford, 1900), 2: 202.
16. "Extract from a letter from Stillwater, August 4," *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, August 12, 1777.
17. "Extract of a letter from Fort Stanwix, July 28," *Pennsylvania Gazette*, August 13, 1777.
18. "Extract of a letter, dated Saratoga, Aug. 1 and 2," *Boston Gazette and Country Journal*, August 11, 1777.
19. "Extract of a letter from a gentleman at Snook-kill, dated July 27, 1777," *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, August 12, 1777.
20. Quoted in David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Touchstone, 2001), 78.
21. "Extract of a letter from Moses's Creek, July 26," *Boston Gazette and Country Journal*, August 11, 1777, 3; *New York Gazette and the Weekly Mercury*, August 11, 1777. Bostonians read a similar report in a letter from Moses's Creek dated July 28, 1777—*Boston Gazette and Country Journal*, August 11, 1777.
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23. Massachusettensis, "To the Inhabitants of the Massachusetts-Bay," *The Independent Chronicle and Universal Advertiser*, August 14, 1777.
24. General Horatio Gates to General John Burgoyne, September 2, 1777, reprinted in *The Spirit of 'Seventy-Six: The Story of the American Revolution as Told by Participants*, ed. Henry Steele Commanger and Richard B. Morris (New York: Da Capo Press, 1958), 560.
25. Robert Sears, *Pictorial History of the American Revolution* (1846; New York: n.p., 1860), 252.
26. Irving, *Life of George Washington*, 3: 154.
27. Benson J. Lossing, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution; Or, Illustrations, By Pen and Pencil, of the History, Biography, Scenery, Relics, and Traditions of the War for Independence*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1851), 1: 48; Curtis quoted in Philip Henry Carroll, *Jane McCrea: A Tragedy in Five Acts* (Albany, N.Y.: Fort Orange Press, 1927), viii; John Fiske, *The American Revolution*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1891), 1: 277–79.
28. Burgoyne to Gates, September 6, 1777, in *Spirit of 'Seventy-Six*, 561.
29. John Burgoyne, *The Substance of General Burgoyne's Speeches on Mr. Vyner's Motion, On the 28th of May, 1778* (London: J. Almon, 1778), 6.
30. Philip Freneau, "America Independent and Her Everlasting Deliverance from British Tyranny and Oppression" (1778), in *Poems of Philip Freneau: Poet of the American Revolution* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963), 279.
31. Freneau, "America Independent," 281–82.
32. On Vanderlyn's painting, and its relationship with Barlow's epic poem, see Samuel Y. Edgerton Jr., "The Murder of Jane McCrea: The Tragedy of an American Tableau d'Histoire," *The Art Bulletin* 47 (1965): 481–92; and Robert Sheardy Jr., "The White Woman and the Native Male Body in Vanderlyn's Death of Jane McCrea," *Journal of American Culture* 22.1 (1999): 93–100.
33. See Edmund Burke, Speech to Parliament, February 6, 1778, in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. Paul Ford (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 3: 363–64; René Michel Hilliard d' Auberteuil, *Essais*, quoted in Lewis Leary, "Introduction," in *Miss McCrea*, 9.
34. John Howard Hinton, *The History and Topography of the United States*, 2 vols. (1832; Boston: Samuel Wilke, 1846), 1: 258.
35. Barlow, *The Columbiad*, 220.
36. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (1976; New York: Vintage, 1990), 42–44.
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44. *Ibid.*, 115.
45. Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 78; Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (1939; Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).
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47. Carroll, *Jane McCrea*, 122.
48. Jon Elster, "Norms of Revenge," *Ethics* 100.4 (1990), 862–85; Suzanne Uniacke, "Why Is Revenge Wrong?" *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 34 (2000): 61–69.
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50. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (1930; New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 69, 70.
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52. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 241.