Review of *The Routledge Handbook of Character Assassination and Reputation Management*, edited by Sergei A. Samoilenko, Martijn Icks, Jennifer Keohane, and Eric Shiraev. New York: Routledge, 2020

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There has been a proliferation of handbooks lately, presumably because libraries continue to buy them even as their budgets shrink. Most handbooks are dutiful efforts to cover well-known fields, with deference to the major figures and ideas. The best, in contrast, help to define emerging fields, providing theory, language, exemplary cases, and methods for studying an aspect of reality that has previously been out of sight. *The Routledge Handbook of Character Assassination and Reputation Management* is in the latter category, putting the topic of character assassination (CA) firmly on the intellectual map through its diverse, sweeping, and often entertaining essays.

Because this multidisciplinary book is intended to stake out intellectual territory and attract young scholars, rather than being a perfunctory exercise in coverage, the editors seem to have taken unusual care in the quality of the chapters, which are better written than the average handbook text. It helps that CA can be quite entertaining. Cases

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from a range of regions and historical periods show the ubiquity of CA wherever politics involves persuasion – which is pretty much everywhere. We think of rhetoric as crucial in democracies, where voters must be influenced and citizens mobilized for wars, but persuasion also occurs in authoritarian regimes, albeit with smaller audiences (often only one person, the prince).

Character assassination is an attack on the reputation, especially moral reputation, of another player in some strategic or competitive arena. CA is designed to weaken the target in some way, whether preventing them from making alliances, reducing others' trust in them, deflating their own confidence and feelings of efficacy, cutting off desired resources, and so on. The targets can be individuals, usually those who already have a public reputation with certain audiences, but they can also be fictitious persons such as corporations, countries, political parties, ethnic-racial groups, genders, and really any category that can develop a group identity. CA against "the enemy" prepares countries for war; corporations use it against whistleblowers who threaten their reputation; CA is a central tool of electoral competition; it intimidates and humiliates oppressed groups to keep them in their place; it establishes our common-sense views of what is moral and immoral. Alongside encomium, CA is the core of rhetoric.

One of the strengths of CA theory is that it encourages careful description of the arenas in which reputations are made. Thus Simon Burrows shows who benefited from sullying Marie-Antoinette's reputation at court, why the gossip did not spill over into public opinion, and how a notorious criminal case eventually came to the Paris *Parlement*, which saw a chance to undermine royal authority. CA draws on classic rhetoric, which was always keen to establish what the intended impacts of speeches were, on what audiences.

I bring a special lens to CA, namely a scheme of character theory (developed in a recent book called *Public Characters*), intended to understand how reputations are created in politics by drawing on traditional literary tropes based on several basic dimensions: whether a character is strong or weak, good or bad (and active or passive, although this third dimension is less central). Heroes are strong and good, villains are strong and bad, victims good but weak, minions bad and weak. These characters animate a variety of plots: for instance, heroes can betray us, villains can convert to our side, victims can gain the strength to be heroes, and most familiar of all, heroes save victims from villains. Character tropes are powerful cultural accomplishments because they tell us how we are supposed to feel about them, almost by definition: we fear villains, admire

heroes (even if we do not especially like them), pity victims, and feel contempt for minions.

CA theory focuses on one type of character work: the construction of a villain or minion, especially the demotion of heroes to immoral statuses. Character theory suggests in addition that we distinguish between villains and minions: CA can attack someone's strength, making them appear weak and ridiculous, or it can attack someone's morality, making them appear malevolent. Different ingredients go into the two portraits, and there is a dilemma as to which is more effective: if you portray your opponents as villains, they are threatening and dangerous, and there is urgency to stopping them; if you portray them as silly and contemptuous, they are less immediately threatening, too weak to do much unless they team up with a true villain. Because CA theory tends to focus on the moral dimension it does not clearly distinguish villains and minions.

We might pose this as a question for character assassination theory: *when* does CA take the form of pointing out villains, dangerous and strong, and *when* does it instead take the form of ridicule, reducing targets to weak and laughable minions?

Character work constructs two characters: that of the target but also that of the orator or character worker. In the handbook this is clear, for instance, in the case of Xi Jinping, whose campaign to "clean up" the military and government made him into a hero at the same time that it generated a series of corrupt villains or minions (depending on how much strength was attributed to them). Numbering more than 100,000, the targets were necessarily more often minions than villains. Only a handful of targets rose to the status of well-known villains. Character assassination was not only about shaping reputations, it was also about the elimination of Xi's rivals and opponents. Jennifer Keohane similarly demonstrates that Edmund R. Murrow's attack on Joe McCarthy worked because of the reputation that Murrow had already built for himself as a heroic, trustworthy journalist, able to withstand McCarthy's counter-attack.

CA is an unsavory act that can tarnish the reputation of its creator as well as that of the target. Astute players often ask others to attack their opponents, especially politicians who wish to protect their own moral reputations. Thus we read about Richard Nixon's extensive range of surrogates, from Vice President Spiro Agnew on down, who undertook CA on his behalf. Leaks via anonymous sources in the White House served the same function.

By focusing on one type of character work, CA tends to overlook contests over reputation, for instance those typical of electoral contests. In such cases, one side's villain is the other side's hero. Each side's publicists do the appropriate work. Projecting your

leader as a hero is partly independent of assassinating your opponent's character. Typically these contests are over the moral dimension: who is better? Both sides may agree on a person's strength: those trying to demonize her, and those trying to portray her as a hero. Some contributors, such as William Benoit, recognize these binary conflicts, but few authors balance attention to negative character work with the equally important realm of positive character work.

In addition to the contrast between villains and heroes, there is a subtle arithmetic relationship between villains and victims. The more innocent or weak the victims, the more egregious is the villain who attacks them. Benoit again acknowledges this, but greater attention to the construction of victims would advance our understanding of why some cases of CA are more effective than others. CA needs to demonstrate the purity of the victims as well as the villain's motives and character.

Both CA and character theory address the relationship between a person's actions and reputation. A lot of character work, including character assassination, attempts to portray an action as indicative of a person's underlying character, as following from her inherent goodness or badness, weakness or strength. This works better on the moral dimension: a moral transgression can devastate a person's moral reputation, whereas a sign of weakness does not necessarily permanently disqualify someone. If a politician is caught in a lie, that is usually worse for her reputation than her trip to the hospital for exhaustion. (Unless that exhaustion can be attributed to ongoing mental health flaws or creeping dementia; in this way a broken ankle from a skiing accident may be less vulnerable to being reworked into a character weakness than fatigue.)

One ongoing debate in CA is apparently over whether only human individuals can have reputations or characters. This seems odd to me, since we commonly attribute character and characteristics to quasi-human entities, especially groups. Timothy Coombs and Sherry Holladay make a sensible argument that organizations have reputations that can be assassinated much as individuals do, and Neofytos Aspriadis, Emmanouil Takas, and Athanassios N. Samaras extend the idea to nations. Prejudices and stereotypes against groups incorporate the same cultural materials that we deploy against individuals: are they trustworthy, strong, or active? Modern wars require vast mobilizations that depend on demonizing "the enemy," whether the purpose is to recruit soldiers, sell government bonds, or encourage citizens to tolerate wartime hardship.

CA occurs in strikingly different arenas. Compare a political campaign and anonymous comments on the Internet. The motives behind CA are obvious in the former, less so in the latter. Efforts to explain the latter in fact lead the volume into a rare false

note of pop psychology. The horrified reaction to the notorious killing of Cecil the lion by a midwestern dentist is dismissed as "driven by individuals' urges to demonstrate their own morality, their own values, and their own ecological ethic." It is an unfortunate formulation, scorning the idea that people may actually be shocked and indignant over a moral transgression and instead portraying that outrage as an effort to feel better about themselves. It harks back to discredited Freudian theories that attributed most emotions to internal repair work rather than reasonable efforts to deal with the surrounding environment. Indignation against a dentist who killed a lion becomes irrational scapegoating, ignoring how culture works through symbols that focus our attention.

I have an untested hunch that characters are more universal than the stereotypes about groups that every culture harbors. In order to obtain and exercise their rights, oppressed groups must present themselves as heroes, good and strong. Their oppressors try to paint them as evil and/or weak. Each side thus faces dilemmas in their character work: oppressed groups must balance the strength of heroes with the compassion typically due victims, and they organize to transform themselves from victims into heroes. In excluding others, elites must choose whether to portray them as strong and bad villains or to dismiss them as silly, inept minions. (Throughout US history, for instance, white portrayals of Black Americans have bounced between ridicule and fear, with contempt and mockery the default mode until slaves revolt or Black citizens mobilize to demand their rights, when they become powerful villains.)

Like much cultural analysis in the humanities and social sciences, the study of CA draws heavily from the insights of classical rhetoric. Unlike most of that analysis, these authors generally acknowledge the debt, perhaps because several are in departments of communications and rhetoric. CA theories are richer for making the debt overt. On the other hand, images appear in only a couple chapters. One chapter on internet memes has some great examples, although – like so much work on the internet – it seems to assume that caricature and other pithy visual character work was invented in the digital age. Yet visual tools are central in character work, efficient means of suggesting how strong, good, or active a person is. CA has already proven its utility; it will contribute even more as its insights are applied to other characters and other plots.