



Character Assassination!

Media and Mudslinging from Caligula to King Gorilla

Organised by Edwina Hagen (VU) and Martijn Icks (UvA)

Character assassination is a phenomenon that can be found in every historical epoch. Throughout the ages, numerous kings, queens, generals, clergymen, thinkers and rebels have suffered visual and verbal attacks which sought to undermine their prestige and cast them in a negative light. While this is currently done through tweets and campaign ads, in previous ages speeches, chronicles and pamphlets were the weapons of choice. Their effects were no less devastating. The reputation of notorious figures such as Emperor Caligula, the “Iron Duke” of Alba and the Dutch “King Gorilla” [William III] has been determined by character attacks to this day.

This colloquium places character assassination in historical perspective. In doing so, we focus primarily on persons from the political sphere: kings, aristocrats, statesmen. Can we identify constant factors through time in the ways these people’s reputations were attacked and in the motives behind these attacks? How have acts of character assassination been influenced by changing historical circumstances, particularly by the introduction of new technologies and media such as the printing press, the newspaper and radio? And can historians make use of methods and models from the political and social sciences to analyse character assassination? By discussing and comparing case studies from various historical epochs, we hope to shed light on these questions.

Imperial madness? The case of Roman emperor Gaius Caligula

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This address discusses three fundamental questions related to the character assassination of Roman emperor Caligula. Why was Caligula's reputation so fiendishly damaged? How was this done? When is such defamation effective?

1. Why? When Caligula came to power, he stepped into a paradox. His great-grandfather, Augustus, had designed a new political order by cleverly using traditional Republican concepts to justify his hierarchical system. As emperor, Caligula was a monarchic element in a republican social order. This situation could not last, and after a severe conspiracy against his life, Caligula openly denounced the Senate and began to demonstrate the realities of absolute power. Shortly after, he was assassinated. 2. How? By defying the Roman elite, Caligula had chosen the wrong role. As a result, the elite authors of Roman history depicted Caligula as a ruthless, insane and entirely perverted monster, thereby ostracising him for posterity and pushing him beyond the realm of humanity. The name Caligula became a synonym for an insane, sadistic psychopath. 3. When? For suggestive accusations to anchor into the conceptual system of a specific social group, the trustworthiness of the stories for the target group must be acceptable and preferably, in one way or another, visible. The accusation of Caligula's incest with all three of his sisters may illustrate this necessary condition.

Defaming the Merovingians: manipulating the past to accommodate political change in the Early Middle Ages

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In 751 CE a pair of scissors ignominiously ended the Merovingian dynasty. Bereft of their long hair, the chief symbol of Merovingian royal power, King Childeric III and his son were ousted from the palace to spend the remainder of their lives in monastic isolation. They owed their demise to their maior domus, Pippin the Short (d.768), who subsequently claimed the Frankish throne for himself and thereby founded the Carolingian dynasty.

After three centuries of Merovingian rule, the Carolingian coup was nothing short of revolutionary and, as with all revolutions, in desperate need of legitimation. In this context, a discourse was engineered that aimed to defame, if not openly ridicule, the Merovingian dynasty. Historians have largely accepted this Carolingian narrative and only since the 1990s have attempts been made to rehabilitate the Merovingian reputation.

This contribution takes a closer look at this Carolingian strategy of defamation, which was perhaps much more refined than historians generally tend to think. This paper seeks to explain why a 'strategy of defamation' was needed from a Carolingian point of view, arguing that the Carolingians introduced a new royal model with severe political ramifications, and which aimed to redefine the relationship between the king and his elite. It will then take into consideration the literary context of this discursive strategy. I shall argue that the Carolingian recollection of their royal predecessors was not a simple black-and-white affair, but instead maintained a precarious balance between reverence/continuity and contempt/radical change.

Crusades and character assassination: political mudslinging in the thirteenth century

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The crusades were intricately related to the political history of central and late medieval Europe. Beyond their direct material effects, they produced a specific language that would influence political ideals and interactions for centuries. Just as proclaiming a crusade was a means for ecclesiastical and secular authorities to stress their role as good Christian authorities, being the subject of one could severely damage one's status in the political arena. Taking the career of the 13th century German emperor Frederick II as example, this paper will explore the political uses of crusade language to make and break rulers' reputations. Frederick's three decades as German emperor were filled with political conflicts, first and foremost with the Roman papacy. In these conflicts, crusade-related themes and language became important means to claim one's position vis-à-vis the other side's presumed moral and political illegitimacy. Thus we see Frederick both undertaking and becoming the subject of a call for crusade, while his peaceful acquisition of Jerusalem in 1229 received a very mixed press. Taking such crusade events from Frederick's life as starting point, this paper will consider the language and media mobilized by the parties involved to slander the opposing side. As we will see, reputation management was foremost on these rulers' minds since a problematic reputation could have disastrous effects.

The Duke of Alba and the Revolt in the Low Countries: the character assassination of an individual and a nation

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Character assassination is mainly linked with individuals, since it deals with the reputation of one particular figure. This paper aims to reflect on two aspects: firstly on the possible overlap between the individual and the collective. Is it possible to assassinate the character of a nation? In the case of an historical figure like the Duke of Alba, Philip II's (in)famous governor of the Low Countries during the first phase of the Revolt, two narratives seem to coalesce in his 'character assassination'. One is linked to his being Spanish, as an ethnotype of the so-called Spanish Black Legend of Spanish Tyranny, the other focuses more particularly on his individual figure and reputation. As a result of a well-orchestrated strategy, Alba would become the object of despise, scorn and fear, not only in historiographical texts and in effective propaganda media, like pamphlets and other popular prints.

The second aspect this paper engages with, regards the way Alba's character assassination transcends genres and time. Literature, as an excellent mirror of the preoccupations of a society at a certain time, also reflects Alba's profound impact in the Dutch Republic. His character assassination will be further refined in the literary sphere, especially in very popular picaresque-like novels that also integrate elements of the Spanish Black Legend. Literature as an excellent vehicle for the celebration of a collective past and for memory culture strongly reveals how certain 'master' character assassinations can endure for centuries.

The murder of John and Cornelius de Witt: the body of state demolished

Luc Panhuysen

On the 20th of August 1672 John de Witt and his brother Cornelius were murdered by a crowd of well-to-do citizens, united in a city militia. After the lynching of the brothers their corpses were left to the mercy of a huge crowd of the lower classed of society. This crowd mutilated the two bodies in a way which even to seventeenth-century senses was horrific.

What did the brothers De Witt do to deserve such treatment? Of course, they had been the most powerful and influential persons in the Dutch Republic, and their brutal death occurred during the 'Year of Disaster', a war against the strong army of the French king Louis XIV and his allies which everybody thought the Dutch were bound to lose. But does this explain the hatred and, more important, the strange mixture of cruelty and creativity in which the crowd killed both statesmen?

No, for that we will have to look more closely to the war of 1672, to the way the Dutch with their pamphlets and papers were already a news nation, and to the manner the enemies of John and Cornelius de Witt in a more or less spontaneous fashion ventured into a nationwide campaign of demonization.

Fake news for the American Revolution: the character assassination of George Washington

Eric Shiraev, George Mason University

The case of George Washington can be a classical example of character assassination examined in a historical context. In 1776, in New Jersey, the advancing British army captured Washington's manservant carrying several letters addressed to Washington's close confidantes. In these letters, he expressed deep disbelief in the cause of the war; he appeared uncertain, weak, apologetic, and even cowardly. The British and the loyalists believed that the publication of the seized letters would have delivered the fatal blow to Washington's reputation and might have, as they hoped, accelerated the end of the rebellion in North America. In fact, the letters were fakes. They were apparently made up by a few loyalists eager to disgrace Washington. Yet these fraudulent letters were published and sold very well. The analysis of the letters and their impact reveal several everlasting trends of character assassination. First, fake reports have existed long before today's social networks. In the 18th century many politicians regularly schemed against each other, and pamphlets—with character attacks rooted on falsifications, rumours, and innuendo—were common. Second, character attack—perpetuated by the media—can have both immediate as well as long-term effects. Washington first was trying to ignore the forged letters; yet almost two decades later, the same lies would re-emerge in new reprints, which, apparently, were emotionally hurtful to Washington. Third, character attacks often benefit the attacker: fake archival documents, forged eyewitness accounts, and folk legends not only can damage a target's reputation but also produce revenue or bring publicity to the attacker.

King William III (1817-1890): reputation and reality

Dik van der Meulen

The reputation of the Dutch King William III (1817-1890) was in every sense doubtful. He was rude and cruel towards his relatives, royal household, ministers and other people. He loved many women, with one exception: his own wife. The camarilla tried to hide this from the outside world. In vain.

No wonder that his republican enemies took advantage of his character flaws. Among socialists and anarchists, he therefore became known as King Gorilla in the 1870s. The rumours about his behaviour were brought out to the public by his opponents.

The result was that King William failed in his attempts to reverse the democratic reforms from the past; even his kindred spirits did not trust him with his father and grandfather's political legacy. As a consequence, the Dutch democracy gained a foothold and began to grow.

Deathblow to debate? Character attacks in Dutch parliament, a historical analysis

Carla Hoetink, Radboud University Nijmegen

Undoubtedly Freedom Party leader Geert Wilders is the uncrowned king of character attacks in Dutch parliament today. Over the last ten years, Wilders has made several attempts to damage the reputation of his political opponents, mainly to gain public exposure, sharpen his own profile and discredit unwelcome views. His favorite target par excellence has been the leader of the liberal-democratic party Alexander Pechtold. Wilders has mocked him as a hypocrite, an adulterer and a filthy little man (Wilders is especially keen on diminutives). Pechtold has proved to be a good counter attacker too, usually taking the moral high ground and depicting Wilders as a charlatan, a dishonest politician, playing the role of Cassandra.

For both Wilders and Pechtold the plenary served as their main battleground, as it did for many of their predecessors. Personal attacks abound in Dutch parliamentary history. This contribution raises the question whether character assaults are an intrinsic part of parliamentary debate. Following Martijn Icks and Eric Shiraev (2014) I will indicate the close kinship between character assaults and argumentum ad hominem abusive, a fallacious argumentative strategy to challenge the authority of the speaker instead of the substance of his (or her) argument. How widespread is the phenomenon? What sociopolitical developments, like for instance the increase of media, have influenced the occurrence of character attacks in parliament? What forms of ad hominem arguments can be distinguished and, equally important, what are the limits? Drawing on a rich collection of personal insults and personal statements in response to allusions made by others, I hope to shed some light on the complicated nature of character attacks within the context of parliament: often condemned as indecent, yet to some extent appreciated as a cunning debating strategy.

How character assassination unfolds in a Pakistani context: the case of Benazir Bhutto

Munira Cheema, University of Sussex

In recent years, character assassination in media has shortened the political career of a few politicians (Kashmala Tariq, Ayla Malik and Reham Khan) in Pakistan. However, the practice of character assassination of public figures unfolds in a unique way in Pakistan. In most cases, religion is at the heart of it. Public figures are usually judged based on their piety and compliance towards Islam. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that in Pakistani society, standards for character assassination vary with class and gender. Given the conservative nature of the society, women as public figures, are viewed as the repositories of nation's collective honour. One such example is that of Benazir Bhutto. While Western and Indian media portrayed her as the liberal and the pro-West leader; at home, she was portrayed as a sister and a daughter. In the initial years of her political struggle, Bhutto faced character assassination in relation to her religious beliefs, but that significantly changed with time. This paper explores the strategies adopted by Bhutto to survive character assassination. It will essentially focus on how religion, gender and class were used in her political rhetoric to protect herself from attacks on her personal life. Moreover, her choice for a typical dress code provided her with an additional shield. I argue, that she made informed choices to survive in politics. However, in doing so, she made huge compromises that limited her policy latitude. Using data from her 5 public addresses and 4 interviews, the paper will share the strategies used by Bhutto to maintain a conservative public persona in political and mediated contexts. Using Benazir Bhutto as a case study, the paper will offer a unique insight into how character assassination unfolds towards women politicians in Pakistan. It will, then, discuss the approaches used by women politicians to protect themselves that could be both empowering and disempowering for them.

From citizen father to caricature: Provo and the character assassination of Gijs van Hall

Dirk Wolthekker

New times, new standards, new media. If ever someone had to deal with these phenomena in recent political history, it was Gijs van Hall, the man who was warmly welcomed as the new social-democratic (PvdA) mayor of Amsterdam in 1957. Ten years later he was expelled from office and from the town hall. How could it have come to that? Van Hall said he knew the answer himself: the (then new) media and the young post-war generation had intentionally made a caricature of him and committed character assassination. As a descendant of an influential Amsterdam family with an excellent track record during the war and in public administration, they always had to go after him. Everything that happened to him, it was all just *Because I am a Van Hall*. In this colloquium I would like to go deeper into the question of how things got that far: he himself tarnished, the family name tarnished and the reputation of the mayoralty discredited.

Who actually committed character assassination? Was it the protest-movement Provo? Was it the government? The (new) media? And what had been the role of Van Hall himself? Hadn't he provoked the problems himself with his bumbling and regent-like public actions, with his lack of vision and view on the mayoralty, on the municipal civil service and on politics in The Hague? If we put Van Hall to the administrative yardstick and assess his mayoralty on the basis of a number of criteria, we can only conclude that quite a lot of his duties were inadequately fulfilled. Although Van Hall was a skilled negotiator and appreciated by his aldermen in the intimacy of the boardroom, he seemed to be unaware of the chances, limitations, risks and challenges of the office. We will see that he himself played an important role in the caricature that was made of him.

All of this does not change the fact that Provo and the new media (the television!) saw in him the personification of everything that was wrong with public administration, with society in general and with Amsterdam in particular. But the confessional-liberal De Jong government, which had just taken office in 1967, was also guilty of Van Hall's tragic downfall: the PvdA was no longer in government. Nobody needed Van Hall anymore.