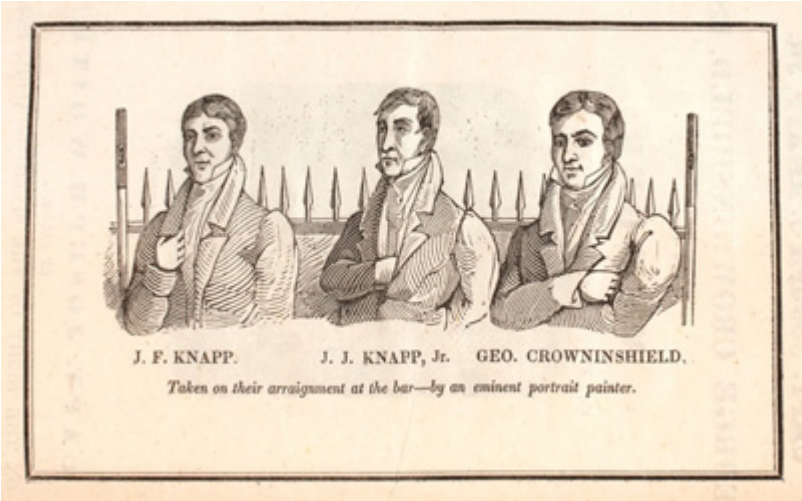
Digging for Dirt: Reading Blackmail in the Antebellum Archive



When I mention to colleagues that I'm working on a book on the history of blackmail in England and America, tracing its development from the sixteenth century to the present, I always expect to be asked first for salacious details: the raunchiest secret over which a victim was ever blackmailed, or the most a victim ever forked over to his or her tormentor in exchange for their silence. Surprisingly, however, my colleagues' first question is invariably an archival one: Where does one even *find* evidence of blackmail, they ask? How is it possible to do that sort of research?

The curiosity behind such questions is not without foundation, for blackmail seems to be the sort of phenomenon that almost by definition resists recovery. A blackmailer and his or her victim both have a vested interest in keeping the victim's secret a secret, and this interest—driven by fear and mortification on the part of the victim and avarice on the part of the blackmailer—more often than not exceeds the ability of the researcher to render the secret public. Blackmail therefore presents an extreme case of what sociologist Gary T. Marx has called the "hidden and dirty data problem," by which he means the difficulty scholars confront in attempting to recover information that is both concealed and discrediting. The challenges of digging into the secrets of "dead informants," as Karen Hansen and Cameron McDonald call them, are still more acute, since all we have are textual traces that endure in the archive. And the difficulty in finding evidence of blackmail is compounded still more by our tendency to misread the etymology of the "mail" in blackmail as having something to do with letters ("mail" here actually derives from the Old French word for rent), reinforcing our archetypal image of blackmail as an act that, at best, leaves few traces other than a threatening note. We all too easily imagine the scenario: a letter arrives in the mailbox, or is slipped under the door. It claims knowledge of a well-hidden moral flaw, and it threatens exposure, humiliation, and ruin, unless payment is advanced. The letter is

destroyed, payment is made, and both blackmailer and victim carry their secrets to the grave. Or perhaps there is no letter in the first place, simply a late-night encounter, a whispered insinuation, a sharp intake of breath, and a hurried exchange of money for silence.

Fig. 1. Frontispiece from Trials of Capt. Joseph J. Knapp, Jr. and George Crowninshield, Esq. for the murder of Capt. Joseph White of Salem . . . by Joseph Jenkins Knapp (Boston, 1830). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

A successful act of blackmail, it would seem, leaves no evidence; its very terms render its perpetration invisible. By implication, the only blackmailing about which we could know would be the failed attempts and the letters they leave behind, which would skew our quantitative, and perhaps qualitative, understanding of what blackmail was all about. It was the challenge of excavating actual evidence of blackmail, perhaps, that led literary scholar Alexander Welsh to speculate in his influential 1985 study, *George Eliot and Blackmail*, that the proliferation of blackmail plots in mid-Victorian novels by Eliot, Dickens, Wilkie Collins, and others was not a response to an upsurge of blackmail acts in fact but simply reflected the anxiety nineteenth-century authors experienced concerning its possibility. The research I have been undertaking suggests otherwise, at least for the same period in America. While blackmail plots loom large in American fiction and drama in the 1840s and 1850s, so too do instances of blackmail itself, very little of it mediated by handwritten letters. So, how *does* one research blackmail, at least in the antebellum period, and to what conclusions might that research lead?

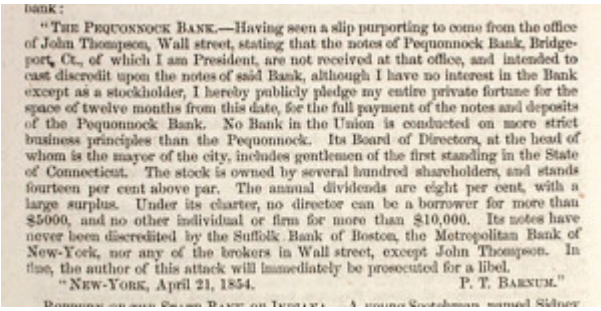
I confess that I didn’t give a great deal of thought to the archival challenges of writing about blackmail when I embarked on my project; had I done so, I probably would have balked. I just went for it. Long before I stumbled on Marx’s discussion of the dirty and the hidden, I was an admirer of “history from the bottom up,” and I have always taken to heart Jesse Lemisch’s

encouraging words: “When they tell you there are no sources for history ‘from the bottom up,’ be skeptical. Look at old sources in new ways. Have the patience to assemble the bits of data. Imagine the kinds of sources you would need and then seek them. They are there. Only imagine.” Of course, the history I am currently trying to write is not precisely “from the bottom up”—although it does feature blackmailers from the humbler walks of life, often extorting much wealthier victims—but the challenges and rewards I have encountered in researching these crimes of information are not unlike those of historians working in that field pioneered by Lemisch and others.

Boston Castigator.

Fig. 2. Masthead of the Boston Castigator, 21 August 1822, Boston, Massachusetts. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

My research has required me to imagine what my ideal sources might be and then find them. It has prompted me to look for evidence of blackmail in places I would *not*expect to find it. It has also compelled me to *give up*—at least provisionally—on finding certain other types of evidence. And it has challenged me to put together fragmentary or ambiguous evidence in ways that render it at least provisionally meaningful. Researching blackmail is not for the archivally complacent or the epistemologically faint-of-heart, but it does have its surprises and concomitant rewards. In this essay, I forego any substantive discussion of the content of blackmail or its emergence in the sixteenth century; its mutation in the eighteenth or florescence in the nineteenth; and its curiously vexed and incestuous relationship with the state, to focus on the methodological challenges of simply identifying and excavating evidence of it from the antebellum archive. Such an account tells us much about where and how antebellum blackmail was transacted, and perhaps sheds light more generally on researching resistant materials.



bank:

"THE PEQUONNOCK BANK.—Having seen a slip purporting to come from the office of John Thompson, Wall street, stating that the notes of Pequonnock Bank, Bridgeport, Ct., of which I am President, are not received at that office, and intended to cast discredit upon the notes of said Bank, although I have no interest in the Bank except as a stockholder, I hereby publicly pledge my entire private fortune for the space of twelve months from this date, for the full payment of the notes and deposits of the Pequonnock Bank. No Bank in the Union is conducted on more strict business principles than the Pequonnock. Its Board of Directors, at the head of whom is the mayor of the city, includes gentlemen of the first standing in the State of Connecticut. The stock is owned by several hundred shareholders, and stands fourteen per cent above par. The annual dividends are eight per cent, with a large surplus. Under its charter, no director can be a borrower for more than $5000, and no other individual or firm for more than $10,000. Its notes have never been discredited by the Suffolk Bank of Boston, the Metropolitan Bank of New-York, nor any of the brokers in Wall street, except John Thompson. In fine, the author of this attack will immediately be prosecuted for a libel.

"NEW-YORK, April 21, 1854. P. T. BARNUM."

Fig. 3. Paragraph titled "The Pequonnock Bank," from The Bankers' Magazine and Statistical Register, Vol. 8 (June 1854): 1000, Boston, Massachusetts. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

When I began my research, I imagined that I'd soon be making the same sort of discoveries as New York Police Detective William Wilson, who in 1862 had the good fortune to arrest one William Kinney. Kinney had spent the better part of eight years making a living by sending letters to wealthy men in New Orleans, Washington, D.C., and New York, under the pseudonym Mrs. Ellen Eyre, inviting them to visit "her" in the evening in "her" rented rooms in those cities. There, Kinney, dressed expertly as a woman, would cuddle and kiss with his visitors and subsequently blackmail them in exchange for silence. It's not clear if the basis of the blackmail was that the visitors shared intimacy with a married woman, or that they shared intimacy with a man disguised as a married woman, but it seemed to have been a successful ruse nonetheless. Kinney came to my attention by way of Ted Genoways' recent book, *Walt Whitman and the Civil War*, because Whitman was one of the recipients of an Ellen Eyre letter, although no one knows precisely what Whitman and Kinney did together, or what Whitman made of it all. At any rate, when Wilson arrested Kinney, he found a carpet bag containing "in all about one thousand letters, being copies of the epistles sent, and answers received from upward of three hundred men, merchants, ministers, lawyers and lecturers, editors of independent religious journals, and ably conducted quaint magazines." Although a handful of those letters were subsequently published in the New York *Sunday Mercury*, the editors showed some tact in what they shared, out of consideration for the victims, although not without a hint of extortion on their own part. How I'd love to lay hands on a bag of letters like that! Such letters in such substantial volume would constitute a core sample of evidence from which to draw powerful conclusions regarding blackmail. In reality, alas, and for reasons that must be too obvious, the letters one finds tend to be few in number and from immensely disparate episodes. Moreover, blackmail letters are somewhat harder to read, or at least pin down, than we might suppose, even when we have them. Two that I found illustrate the illuminating continuities they sometimes share and the interpretive challenges they frequently present.

Fig. 4. Section titled “The Turf,” from The Flash, November 6, 1841, New York, N.Y., with James Whiting’s annotations. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

The first was written in 1830, a few weeks after the bloody murder of Captain Joseph White in Salem, Massachusetts. Its author was an enterprising ne’er-do-well by the name of John Palmer, a former sailor who was on the fringes of the murder conspiracy, and who decided to capitalize on his knowledge of the plot by blackmailing one of its initiators, Joseph J. Knapp Jr. Knapp was indeed worth blackmailing, for he and his brother John Francis had offered Richard and George Crowninshield $1,000 to kill White and destroy his will, which, Joseph believed, would ensure that his wife (a distant relation) would inherit a significant chunk of White’s estate. Writing pseudonymously, Palmer opened his letter by “requesting a loan of three hundred and fifty dollars, for which I can give you no security but my word,” but promising to “refund it with interest in the course of six months.” On the other hand, he noted, “the refusal … will ruin you! Are you surprised at this assertion? rest assured that I make it, reserving to myself the reasons, and a series of facts, which must inevitably harrow up your soul.” “I am,” he added by way of explanation, “acquainted with your brother Franklin [sic], and also the business that he was transacting for you on the second of April last, and that I think you were very extravagant in giving one thousand dollars to the person that would execute the business for you; you see, such things will break out.” The “loan” in other words, was one of those “offers you can’t refuse” that are so well known to protection racketeers and blackmailers.

Unfortunately for Palmer, the letter was opened by Knapp’s father, who had the same name as his son, and who, after some confusion, turned it over to Salem’s Committee of Vigilance, then investigating the murder. A small sum of money was sent to the post office Palmer was using, by way of bait, and he was arrested upon retrieving it. Knapp and his brother went to the gallows as a result of

Palmer’s evidence; Richard Crowninshield took his own life before he could be convicted (fig. 1).

The second letter was written two decades later—in 1850—and was hand delivered to the impresario P. T. Barnum by messenger, so that while he had suspicions as to its author, he couldn’t prove who wrote it. The threat, however, was quite clear. Barnum, at that juncture, was some months into what would turn out to be an immensely lucrative tour with the Swedish soprano Jenny Lind, and was experiencing some backlash from crowds who discovered that very expensive tickets for Lind’s concerts were being sold at a fraction of the cost on the night of the show, to ensure full houses. While Lind was a huge hit, there had been restive crowds and even some riotous behavior following a few shows. The letter Barnum received sought to capitalize on his precarious situation and is interesting enough to print in its entirety. “Mr. Barnum,” it began:

> One of our occasional correspondents has sent an article which I find is in type, handling you very severely. Thinking that you would dislike very much to be placed before the public in an unfavorable light, especially at this particular time, I concluded to write this and say, that if you desire it, I will prevent its appearing in our columns. Please reply by bearer, and believe me Faithfully yours. P.S.—Please loan me One hundred dollars for a few days to aid me in making an improvement in our paper.

While the language and tone of this letter is more polished than that of Palmer’s, one is struck by the presence of the “loan” language in letters two decades apart (and in others I have found, dating back to the 1790s). In part, it is evidence of a degree of snideness that one sees often in such letters. It suggests that blackmailers enjoyed not only the money they could make, but also the feeling of power that such asymmetrical relationships engendered.

Just as importantly, however, references to “loans” and other equally euphemistic terms can be understood as giving the blackmailers a degree of protection. This protection takes the form of what we now call “plausible deniability,” a term coined within the American intelligence community and that first came to public attention during the congressional Iran-Contra hearings of 1987. As Michael Lynch and David Bogen explain in their thoughtful analysis of the hearings, plausible deniability is predicated on a subject’s apprehension that their actions might come under hostile scrutiny in the future, and entails preemptively weaving ambiguities into the record to thwart such scrutiny. This “produced undecidability,” as Bogen and Lynch call it, can irremediably taint the evidential record, so that while an unfavorable construction can be made, an equally plausible but less damning interpretation is also available. Blackmailers, who make their money by manipulating and exploiting the stories of others, excel at weaving plausible deniability into their own texts, so that the request for a “loan” can be read as a threat but also as, simply, a request

for a loan.

Fig. 5. “The Animal What Levy’s ‘Black Mail,'” lithograph (ca. 1842). Courtesy of the Political Cartoon Collection, the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

We see blackmailers working their “outs,” in the two cases I have offered, in fact. Palmer, for instance, in the wretched memoir he wrote to cash in on his notoriety following the trial of the Knapps and the Crowninshields, explained at some length that he wasn’t trying to blackmail Knapp. No, his letter was written “for the express purpose of satisfying myself with regard to [Knapp’s] innocence or guilt.” Once Palmer had the reply and the money in hand, he claimed, he planned on turning both over to the Committee of Vigilance that was investigating the crime. He wasn’t a bad guy; he was actually one of the good guys. The letter received by Barnum similarly created a wave of vehement denials, although here the focus was less on content than on authorship. The Boston *Chronotype* claimed that the author was John McLenahan of the *New York Herald*. The Boston *Herald* (no relation) claimed that the letter had been written by Barnum himself to create publicity while attacking his enemies. And Barnum, under threat of legal action from McLenahan, published an affidavit in which he denied vigorously that McLenahan had had anything to do with the affair, even though the *New York Herald* was—as we shall see—notorious for exacting just such blackmail, and even though Barnum had been feuding with the paper for close to fifteen years at that point.

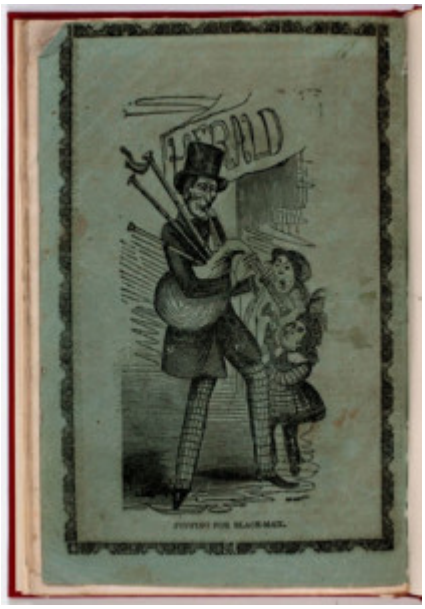


Fig. 6. “Puffing for Black-Mail,” engraving taken from the last page of The Life and Writings of James Gordon Bennett…, engraved by Manning (New York, 1844). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Perceiving the recurrent use of plausible deniability in the blackmail letters that I found led me to several conclusions. Firstly, the presence of plausible deniability suggested that the authors of blackmail letters had a very clear sense that their texts might end up being read by the wrong people. Although blackmail letters appear crafted to be read in private, they almost always anticipate the possibility of being introduced into the public. They appealed, therefore, to two audiences, one of which was intended to “get” its message, the other of which was encouraged not to.

Secondly, the realization that there was often a “public” dimension to these seemingly private texts led me to conjecture that some blackmailers might in fact rely on their skills as plausible deniers to actually communicate their *threats* in public. While it might be a case of making methodological lemonade out of archival lemons, I think it is possible to argue that the media bias that lay behind my initial research procedure—the assumption that blackmail was mediated by the handwritten word—made it hard for me to see that blackmail was just as often transacted through other media, most notably the oral and the printed. As it turns out, searching for blackmail in print very quickly yielded results.

Fig. 7. “A Sawney in Ireland trying to pass for an American Gentleman,” detail of lithograph by H.R. Robinson, 32.8 x 47.2 cm. (New York, 1843). Courtesy of the Political Cartoon Collection, the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Thirdly, the use of equivocation, euphemism, ambiguity and the whole repertoire of evasive techniques suggested that while some texts would be easy to see through, others would resist decisive reading, and this was just as true—perhaps more so—of printed texts as handwritten ones. Blackmail texts are almost always couched in slippery language, almost always riddled with ambiguity, and almost always denied after the fact. To research blackmail is to enter a world of smoke and mirrors, with precious few smoking guns.

Lastly, the opaque and ambiguous nature of many of these letters occasionally compelled me to change my research question from “Is this a blackmail text?” to “On what grounds might people in the nineteenth century have thought that it was?” At times, in other words, I found myself practicing social history, at others something akin to what James Machor has called historical hermeneutics.

Fairly early on in my research on antebellum blackmail, then, I came to the conclusion that it might be to my advantage to focus on materials other than handwritten letters. In fact, and as the letter that Barnum received in 1850 suggests, blackmail could be, and in fact often was, mediated through the printed and public, as well as the handwritten and private, word. John Russell Bartlett’s 1848 *Dictionary of Americanisms* actually defined blackmail as “money extorted from persons under the threat of exposure in print, for an alleged offense, or defect,” but I conjectured that the threats, as well as the threatened exposures, might appear in print. This reorientation from the handwritten to the printed, and from the private to the public, turned out to be immensely convenient for me, since the resources and tools for searching printed materials are more readily available, and far more powerful, that those for searching manuscript archives. Of course, this didn’t always make the texts easier to read, but it did give me a larger archive over which to pore. If manuscript letters are thin on the ground, traces of blackmail in print are seemingly everywhere. Crucially, they were present in the era’s newspapers, where, on account of their wide diffusion, the threat of exposure was most potent.

One of the earliest examples of a paper that engaged in blackmail—and arguably the most blatant—is the *Boston Castigator*, which appeared weekly between April and December of 1822. (A second run was published between 1827 and 1829.) Printed, published, and edited by Lorenzo T. Hall, the *Castigator's* stated aim was to "promote the public weal" by attacking corruption in Boston's new municipal government. It also ran items from readers that offered neighborhood gossip and threatened to expose local wrongdoing. A typical one announced: "I would through the medium of your paper just *hint* to a certain cobbler in D___ts alley, that he would be better employ'd in beating his lap-stone, than in hammering his Wife; so as *almost* to deprive her of that blessing, sight! This is not the first time we had our hook *Bate*-ed. Shame!! Shame!!" Or again: "The son of a certain Tavern Keeper is advised to terminate his nocturnal visits to Gouch-street, or the father of little George will repay him 75 for 50 cents before he passes the Sugar-house." Dozens of such items filled each issue, and Hall indicated that he would publish as many as he could, so long as they were "well written, and not worded in such a manner that they can be taken hold of by law." In other words, Hall encouraged his correspondents to use just the sort of evasive language that we saw deployed in the letters by Palmer and McLenahan.

Hall's subscribers proved remarkably adept at rendering their submissions in language that was just vague enough and just euphemistic enough to keep it from seeming either libelous or extortionate, yet precise enough that anyone with a city directory in hand might decode the names. So it is something of a wonder to note how blunt and to the point Hall was himself. Here, at least, is a smoking gun. In the very first issue of the paper, he announced that "Proposals will be received by the editor of the CASTIGATOR, from those gentlemen who keep *Billiard Tables*, & c. for admitting the Editor to amuse himself free of expense, on consideration of not having their names exposed.—All persons interested who do not avail themselves of this notice may expect to see their names held up to public view." Hall was being extraordinarily canny in wording his announcement in this way, since while billiards itself was far from disreputable—it was a sport enjoyed by the wealthy—the private halls that had begun to spring up in the early nineteenth century were often venues for gambling and prostitution, which were illegal. The motto that ran across the banner of the paper was a clear announcement of Hall's intent to blackmail. "Hands Off Gentlemen," it said, "Down Dust, and No Grumbling" (fig. 2). Translation: Back off, pay up, and shut up.

Nor did Hall relent. The following week, he gave a "Last Notice" to the effect that "those gentlemen who keep Sporting Establishments… MUST come to some understanding with us, as no further indulgence will be allowed." And, true to his word, for the next few weeks, Hall listed the names, addresses, and proprietors of billiard halls that, he claimed, were the resort of "Gamblers, Rogues & Pick-Pockets" and where "small convenient rooms may be had at a moments notice, for any purpose whatever, & no questions asked." He even went so far as to threaten that if the city authorities did not shut down several billiard halls *they* would be lambasted in the paper.

Hall's frankness regarding his agenda, and his shamelessness in levying blackmail, offer a rare opportunity to study a blackmailer in his public habitat. Yet he was not the only person brave, or brazen, enough to declare in print that blackmail was on his mind. A raft of "flash" papers, owing a great deal to the *Castigator*, began to crop up in 1830s and 1840s that also stated their intent to extort in fairly blunt terms. In 1843, for example, the *New York Sporting Whip* sought to blackmail a dancer named Madame Trust, by announcing that it had "on hand a queer, funny, and explicit *exposé* of the doings of a quack who married this *madame*—of her transactions—and of the secret affairs of both." And it added, "If we can make any blackmail by suppressing it we will." In 1841, the *Sunday Times* (no relation to the*New York Times*) made a similar confession to a correspondent who hid behind the pseudonym Argus: "Argus accuses us of wanting to raise hush money—Vel, vot of it? Hush money may be as good as any other money, if it's only *honestly* come by. Besides, it's fashionable—and so, *Mr. Argus* if you are in any way afraid of us, down with your dust."

Once I became attuned to the fact that blackmail was often conducted in plain sight of the public and through the medium of the printed word, I started to find evidence of it everywhere. It was indeed "fashionable." Three more attempts to extort P. T. Barnum—who was probably the most blackmailed man of the nineteenth century—illustrate the variety of ways in which the printed word could be pressed into the service of blackmail, and the variety of weaknesses a blackmailer could exploit. I'll discuss these in reverse order.

In 1863, Barnum was confronted by a woman who had written a truly bizarre poem, *The Pigmies and the Priest*, accusing him of colluding with Lincoln to enflame the Civil War in order to make his various entertainments more appealing and hence lucrative. Her poem was already printed but had not yet been disseminated, and she offered him the chance to buy the whole edition and also the copyright in order to suppress it. Barnum took one look at the poem and, as he recalled, "fairly roared at this exceedingly feeble attempt at black-mail" before sending her on her way. As feeble as the attempt may have been, it should alert us to the fact that blackmail was sometimes conducted by means of literature, and silence was purchased by suppression. In 1840, for example, three men were arrested after approaching Reverend Antoine Verren of New York with a libelous pamphlet they had had printed about him, which, according to one report, "they offered to suppress for a certain sum of money in the shape of *black mail* or hush money." I have found several other examples of blackmail along these lines in both Britain and America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which suggest that juvenalian satire and romans à clef might have been turned to the purposes of extortion fairly often.

A decade earlier, a blackmailer threatened Barnum with considerably greater damage. The threat came after Barnum was appointed president of the Pequonnock Bank in Connecticut in 1851. Until the Civil War, anyone could open a bank and print their own money, so long as they received a state charter and adequate capitalization. Many banks were insufficiently capitalized, and—as Stephen Mihm

has demonstrated in *A Nation of Counterfeiters*—the alteration and counterfeiting of banknotes was rife, meaning that it was hard to have confidence in notes from a bank that was not local. As a result, a number of popular serial publications known as banknote reporters, or sometimes counterfeit detectors, started to appear, which listed all the bank notes in circulation, describing legitimate notes and obvious counterfeits, and assessing the financial health of the banks in operation. The poor evaluation of a bank could spell disaster for its customers and owners, and the potential for extortion on the part of the reporter editors was huge. Throughout the 1850s, accounts of banknote reporter owners blackmailing banks were rife, leading some to refer to these publications as "Black Mail Detectors." In 1854, Barnum received a note from John Thompson, editor of the most popular bank reporter, telling him that the Pequonnock Bank appeared to be insufficiently capitalized. This, for Barnum, was clearly an attempt to shake down the bank, and rather than pay up, he posted a "card" in various publications pledging his personal fortune to underwrite the bank's notes should anyone wish to redeem them for specie (fig. 3).

Realizing that it would not be possible to extort the bank, at least as Barnum tells it, Thompson published a retraction, and the bank went on to prosper. Although this episode had only "a squinting towards 'black mail,'" as Barnum put it in his 1855 autobiography, "that is an operation that I never did and never will submit to."

Barnum, however, was not being honest in saying that he had never paid blackmail. Although he never mentioned the episode in any of his autobiographies, Barnum had been successfully blackmailed in the 1840s. The episode in question began on March 13, 1843, when the *New York Herald* announced that the celebrated English magician Mary Darling, a student of the great Herr Defrong, had just set sail for America, where, upon arrival, she was to perform "under an arrangement made with the agent of the American Museum"—this being Barnum's venue. "The celebrity of this Young Lady," Barnum trumpeted a week later, "is known to all travellers and the favorable notices of her performances which have appeared in the London Times and other English Papers of high standing, the manager trusts will be sufficient to introduce her to the kind notice of the American public." The same evening, the *Herald* reported with satisfaction, the magician "went through an astonishing and dazzling performance with unequalled grace."

Darling's performance was more astonishing, however, than even the *Herald* realized, for as Barnum well knew, there was no such person as Mary Darling. There had been no reviews in the London *Times*, no performances throughout England, no journey across the Atlantic, and, in fact, no mentor named Defrong. The entire story was a hoax. The woman whom Barnum promoted was, in fact, an American named Mills, who had travelled from no farther than Boston, and whose greatest claim to fame was that she had spent a stint in the Worcester Insane Asylum, served after having robbed her father and eloped with her partner in crime. Someone—Barnum suspected a disgruntled employee—tattled Mills' secret to

a competitor, who in turn passed the news on to the staff of the New York *Sunday Times*, then edited by William Joseph Snelling and Walt Whitman. On the evening before Darling's first performance, they ran a brief item blowing Barnum's carefully drawn but completely fraudulent narrative. Shortly thereafter, the editors of the*Times* made it clear that their business was not revelation but blackmail. "The *Times* men," Barnum wrote to business partner Moses Kimball, "have just called to say they are *very sorry* they assailed me and Miss Darling, *will not do it again*, &c. I regret to say they were induced to do this by a *large quid pro quo*." Barnum, that is to say, paid money to keep the story out of the *Times*' pages. Score one for the blackmailers.

This was the last time Barnum would ever submit to blackmail. When Snelling tried to extort yet more money through a "scurrilous advertisement" in a different newspaper—another vector for blackmail—Barnum retorted that "it was of no use, that they could not get a farthing out of me, *directly* or *indirectly*, and if they published a word disrespectfully of me, my museum, or anyone employed therein, I would sue the whole concern." And when "The Sunday Times men … tried to*suck* me for $50—Black Mail," he told Kimball a few days later, "I blowed them up … I will put three or four writs on them tomorrow & either *jail* them or make them give [$5000] or $6000 bail which I guess will bother them." Later that week his plan came together. "I have put it to the Times folks *rayther* strong," he crowed to Kimball. "Snelling is in the Tombs for want of bail—the others had bail for $5000 each. They now feel sore and behave." Score one for Barnum. Score another for his successful suppression of this story, so that he could create the impression in his autobiographies that he had never paid hush money.

The cases I have just cited are important not merely because they suggest how ubiquitous blackmail was, but because while all of them involve printed materials—a pamphlet-length poem, a bankers' and merchants' periodical, and a newspaper exposé—there is nothing explicit *within these texts* that tells us that they were vectors for blackmail. We know that they were only because, in the first two cases, Barnum mentioned them in his rather self-serving autobiographies, and in the last, because Barnum's correspondence with Moses Kimball survives and is available to researchers at the Boston Athenaeum. If Barnum hadn't written about the circumstances behind them, would we even know that blackmail had been attempted? The Lorenzo Halls of the world notwithstanding, few blackmailers were frank about their intention to extort. Thus, the question arises: if blackmail is ultimately about silence, and if silence cannot—by definition—be tracked, how is one to find signs that blackmail might be present?

After a good deal of epistemological hand-wringing, I was forced to concede that there would be times when I might suspect strongly that blackmail was afoot but—either on account of inadequate documentation or on account of the slipperiness of the parties involved—I would be unable to prove that this was the case. In instances such as this, I switched tack from trying to "prove" my own conviction to trying to examine the grounds on which nineteenth-century

Americans held such convictions. After all, if artfully contrived blackmail texts were designed to be read in two ways—as threatening to victims and as innocuous to others—then it would be interesting to examine the reading practices of those who encountered suspect texts as a way to shed additional light on the matter. My discovery was that antebellum readers were shrewd practitioners of a hermeneutics of suspicion, drawing inferences of blackmail from two key—but utterly equivocal—forms of evidence: newspaper retractions and unfulfilled threats.

Retractions appeared often in scandal papers, such as the *Boston Castigator*, and racy papers such as the *Whip* and *Flash*, which traded in gossip and threats, often featured such backpedaling notes. The *Flash* of November 6, 1841, for example, which was edited by Snelling, ran the following:

> Hiram Marsh—We have been strongly assured by a gentleman of our acquaintance, for whose judgement we have considerable respect, that some of the charges against Mr. Marsh in our last number are unfounded. We have not been able, for peculiar reasons, to sift the matter thoryughly, but intend to do so at an early opportunity, and then, if we find injustice has been done, we will most cheerfully correct the errors, and not only contradict them, but strike an avenging blow upon the malicious instrument of their commission.

And a few items below this:

> Mr. Aall has called at our office and requested us to deny that he alleges Mr. Marsh to have been in any wise concerned in the mysterious disappearance of the thousand dollars from their office.

So, is this evidence of blackmail? We cannot say for certain, but James Whiting certainly thought so (fig. 4).

Whiting, in 1841, was district attorney for New York and had been tracking the rise of the flash press for some time, following complaints by some of those it had allegedly libeled. In the margin next to the Hiram Marsh retraction, Whiting penned: “hush money probably paid,” and below the snippet on Mr. Aall, “in this case money doubtless was paid.” While Whiting hedged his verdicts with equivocations such as “probably” and “doubtless,” what we see is a keen and interested reader of these papers trying to break the code they used. He is not simply trying to read these papers as an officer of the court; he is trying to read them as he believed others did. Of course, Whiting may or may not have been aware that the editor of the paper, William Joseph Snelling, also edited the *Sunday Times*, which, as we saw above, quite frankly admitted its proclivity for blackmail. At any rate, Whiting eventually had the pleasure of prosecuting Snelling, although on the grounds of libel, rather than blackmail, since

blackmail was not at this time specifically a crime in New York.

If retractions were one way in which readers inferred evidence of blackmail, another was the impending threat. In 1850, the New Hampshire *Daily Patriot* quoted an item from a competing paper, the *Independent*, which read: "'Justicia's communication relative to the conduct of a 'nice young man recently married to a widow's daughter,' is reserved for consideration. We have no doubt our correspondent's strictures are well deserved." The editor of the *Patriot* offered the following gloss: "Now this, being interpreted, means just the following—'If this "nice young man" would avoid castigation … he must *put money in my purse*.' … and if the 'nice young man 'refuses to comply with the demands of this common libeler, the next number of the 'Independent' will probably contain something … despicable." Again, we see the concession that the *Independent's* column has to be "interpreted" to yield a blackmail threat, but the editor shows little of James Whiting's hesitation. What interests me here is less whether or not the editor of the *Patriot* is right than that he believes himself to be so, since it indicates that others might have shared his convictions and acted on them, either as blackmailers themselves, or as potential victims.

Of course, the interpretive strategies and evidential standards of the antebellum period are not our own, but when we adopt them, it is hard not to see intimations of blackmail in such episodes as the following from the *Boston Herald* (also edited by William Joseph Snelling) and assume that others in the nineteenth century saw it too. "A rich piece of scandal has reached our ears," Snelling crowed in the *Herald* on May 20, 1848. The scandal concerned a young woman from Summer Street and a merchant from Milk Street discovered in "rather an equivocal situation" by the woman's mother. Snelling went on:

> We shall, probably, in a few days, give our readers an inkling of this passage in high life, unless the solicitations of the young lady's friends not to make the affair public, persuade us to preserve a profound silence relative thereto. We shall, notwithstanding the tears of the lovely creature, and the earnest implorance of the gentleman, write the history of their amorous affection for each other, and expose their wicked acts to the gaze of a covetous world, if we think justice demands it at our hands.

Four days later, Snelling confessed that he still hadn't made up his mind whether or not to run the story. He had been "importuned" by the merchant, he explained, "to give no publicity to the facts … as it would ruin him and destroy his business." Friends of the woman also sought to "have her name kept out of the public journals." With more than a hint of the ominous, Snelling announced: "We shall make up our mind what to do to-day." Nothing further of the affair was ever mentioned in the *Boston Herald*. So, again, we are compelled to ask, is this evidence of blackmail? Without a doubt, there would have been

many in the nineteenth century—not least among them the Merchant from Milk Street—who thought so.

Here, again, then, we run into the aforementioned phenomenon of plausible deniability. Blackmail was hard to prosecute, as a writer in the *Subterranean* explained, because "the timid knaves who practice it, are too cautious and guarded in their pilfering to be entrapped in the loose snare of Extortion." Writing in euphemistic terms enabled blackmailers to elude capture and prosecution.

Another favored trick was counter-accusation. Almost every antebellum newspaper accused of blackmail not only vehemently denied the charge but turned around and charged other papers with doing just the same, which sustained the notion that they were free of the taint themselves. The *Era* accused the *National Police Gazette*. The *Daily Advertiser* accused the *Freeman*. The *Path-Finder* accused *Ned Buntline's Own*. The *New York Herald* accused the *Evening Mirror*. And everyone accused the *New York Herald*.

Indeed, whenever I think about the problematic nature of the evidence respecting antebellum blackmail, and the challenges of construing that evidence, I end up thinking about the *New York Herald*. It's not quite as substantial as a carpetbag full of blackmail letters, but it's pretty substantial nonetheless, constituting an archive of the extortionately tawdry that spans close to forty years, and it presents a correspondingly vast interpretive conundrum. Founded in 1835, by a canny, cross-eyed Scottish immigrant named James Gordon Bennett, the *Herald* very quickly became the best selling and most influential paper in America. Following the formula set by the pioneering penny papers, the *Sun* and the *Daily Transcript*, the *Herald* combined traditional news of commercial and political doings with sensational accounts of local crimes, police court reports, and gossip of scandalous happenings around town. Almost immediately, the *Herald* developed a reputation for exacting blackmail. In part, the grounds for this reputation can be established. Captain Frederick Marryat, who visited America in 1837, recalled that after he was attacked repeatedly in the *Herald*'s pages, he received a copy of the paper "with this small note on the margin:—'Send twenty dollars, and it shall be stopped.'" James Silk Buckingham, who also came to America at around the same time to lecture, experienced a somewhat more subtle variation on the theme. On seeking to advertise his lectures in the *Herald*, he was charged about five times the standard rate, and it was explained to him that this was Bennett's "method of asking and obtaining 'hush money;' and I was strongly recommended to pay it, as the only method of escaping from his lash." Fanny Elssler, yet another visiting European, found that repeated attacks on her dance performances abated only when she bought gifts for Bennett and his wife. And Barnum, as we saw above, believed that McLenahan, of the *Herald*, had sent him a blackmail letter.

Yet once we move beyond these somewhat obvious cases, we enter the more conjectural realm, such as the assumption that deferred revelations,

retractions, and mercurial stances indicate blackmail. An anonymous1844 pamphlet, *The Life and Writings of James Gordon Bennett*, summed up an argument along these lines in plain terms:

> The most common charge made against Bennett, is that of receiving hush money, or 'black mail.' That he has received large sums of money, in this way, no one pretends to doubt, and yet there is no charge so difficult to prove. From the very nature of the case, those who pay hush money, are likely to keep it a secret. It only becomes known to intimate friends, or leaks out by accident. All through the files of the Herald, we find promises of astounding disclosures, affecting individual characters and interests, which never appear. The inference that means have been used to suppress them is inevitable. We find in numerous instances remarkable changes from gross abuse to extravagant praise. The case of Madam Restell is in point. That of Robinson, of Ellen Jewett memory, is another. We have it upon the most respectable authority, that several of those who were in Rosina Townsend's house, paid large sums of hush money. One of these, an old gentleman, who had borne an irreproachable character, in other respects, after paying several thousands of dollars, was finally driven to his grave, it is charged, by the dread of this man.
>
> We have full and unquestionable evidence of the manner in which the eminent artists have paid their black mail tribute, in the disclosures of Mr. Henry Wikoff, in the columns of the 'Republic,' respecting his treatment of Fanny Elssler, whom the Herald alternately eulogized in the most fulsome manner, and attacked with the most cruel innuendoes and positive abuse.

So common were such accusations made, in fact, so often was Bennett hauled into court for libel, and so often did he threaten others with libel suits, that Wikoff, one of his alleged victims, proposed the establishment of an "Anti-Black Mail Fund" to pay the court fees of those who wished to prosecute "this Ishmael of the press."

More generally, Bennett was characterized—and caricatured—widely, and for thirty years, as the consummate blackmailer. "[H]ush money," wrote Mordecai Noah, "commonly called *Black Mail*, is his great and despicable source of revenue." Henry Wise, in 1855, described him as "Bennett, the political Fagan, the cross-eyed, whining demon of politics, who has made himself a millionaire by black-mail." He appeared in Osgood Bradbury's 1855 roman à clef, *The Modern Othello*, as "the notorious blackmail editor—Jennett," and in Ned Buntline's *Three Years After* (1850) as James McGregor Clanragetty of *The Ethiopian Mail*. And then there are the cartoons and engravings. In one, from 1842, Bennett is depicted as "The Animal What Levy's Blackmail" (fig. 5). In another, from *The Life and Writings of James Gordon Bennett*, he is dressed in tartan, playing the

bagpipes, and “puffing for blackmail” (fig. 6). In a third, he clutches a copy of the *Herald* with the word “Black Mail” printed across it (fig. 7).

What are we to make of all this evidence? How are we to read the threats, the retractions, the innuendos; the accusations, grievances, and accounts; the satires, characterizations, and caricatures? What evidential weight do we grant to this weighty pile of documents? Isaac Pray, who wrote a flattering biography of Bennett in 1855, denied categorically that Bennett had ever demanded blackmail and explained that “Inquiries followed up, year after year, in order to gain, if possible, any reliable intelligence that could fix this charge upon the Editor, have been made, and invariably without the least shadow of success… . [I]n this whole community there has never been found a single man of probity and veracity who has dared to assert that he has paid the editor for his opinions.”

And therein lies the rub, for we have abundant evidence, but none of it is, as Pray would have it, “reliable.” We have any number of accusers, but how are we to determine their “probity and veracity,” especially when these were precisely the traits a blackmailer sought to call into question? The frank answer is that we cannot. Perhaps the most interesting thing we can say about the *Herald* is that, despite its reputation for levying blackmail, and maybe even because of it, it remained one of the most popular newspapers of the nineteenth century.

“The law of blackmail,” wrote scholar A. H. Campbell in 1939, in response to its tangled judicial status, “has something in common with the blackmailer: it allows its student no peace of mind.” The same, I think, might be said of the study of blackmail more generally, for since I embarked on this project, I have enjoyed no peace of mind whatsoever. Evidence of blackmail seems to be everywhere and nowhere. It amounts to heaps of references, and it amounts to nothing. My archival skills are pushed to the limit, and so are my considerably less robust epistemological abilities. Still, I dream of that bag of letters, waiting for me out there. Somewhere. Somewhere.

Further reading

There are three very suggestive monographs on blackmail: Mike Hepworth, *Blackmail: Publicity and Secrecy in Everyday Life* (London, 1975); Alexander Welsh, *George Eliot and Blackmail* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985); and Angus McClaren, *Sexual Blackmail: A Modern History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002). None of them, however, touch other than passingly on antebellum American topics. Lawrence Friedman’s *Guarding Life’s Dark Secrets: Legal and Social Controls over Reputation, Propriety, and Privacy* (Stanford, Calif., 2007) makes the American nineteenth century central to his argument that laws against blackmail were intended to protect the already respectable. Also indispensable is *The Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York*, ed. Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy J. Gilfoyle, and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz in association with the American Antiquarian Society (Chicago, 2008). Overwhelmingly, this essay has been built from primary materials and brief references in secondary works too

numerous to list. On the challenge of dealing with dissembling informants and duplicitous texts, the reader is directed to Michael Lynch and David Bogen, *The Spectacle of History: Speech, Text, and Memory at the Iran-Contra Hearings* (Durham, N.C., 1996), which offers a broader discussion of the issues than its title might suggest; and Gary T. Marx, "Notes On the Discovery, Collection, and Assessment of Hidden and Dirty Data," which the author has posted online.

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