

On Unwelcome Attention: 007, Trolls, and Academic Feminism

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In 2017, I published a piece of literary criticism in *Feminist Theory* called [‘The sweet tang of rape: Torture, survival and masculinity in Ian Fleming’s Bond novels’](#). It was an attempt to critically dissect the representations of torture in Ian Fleming’s original canon of 007 narratives, motivated by my observation that in them Bond is frequently tortured by communist characters marked in varying ways as diverging from heterosexual norms. In short, the article made the argument that torture and seduction are fascinatingly and problematically interlaced in Fleming’s novels. In addition, I argued that what this representation of torture said about Fleming’s conception of desire as in some way necessarily violent was to an extent mirrored by his representation of the patriarchal power structure of heterosexual relations; hence the provocative title, a quotation from *Casino Royale* (1953) which illustrated rather starkly the way in which violence and desire were, for Fleming, mutually constitutive. I considered that this representational trend in the novels, which spoke so powerfully to Fleming’s major themes of masculinity, desire, and power, was worth feminist attention.

I had, naturally, hoped that my writing would be of interest to other academic feminists and literary critics, and to the reasonably substantial community of scholars with an interest in Bond as a cultural phenomenon (among the regular scholarly attention it receives, there is a dedicated journal, the *International Journal of James Bond Studies*). Perhaps, given Bond’s popularity, I hoped that it might also have the potential to attract some degree of attention from a wider popular audience. Any of these forms of scholarly or lay attention would have been very welcome; this piece is about some unwelcome online attention that it attracted. As I write, my essay is yet to be cited by any scholarly publication of which I am aware, but it has already had a brief flash of minor fame thanks to a humorous twitter account called Real Peer Review. In this short reflection, I want to consider Real Peer Review’s response to my essay, not so much because they have said anything substantive or interesting about my argument (which I have briefly rehearsed here to contextualise their reaction to it), but rather because I think their engagement with it says a great deal about a certain right-wing economy of feeling and an increasingly worrisome phenomenon in contemporary intellectual life: politicised, pseudo-intellectual, antifeminist trolling.

Real Peer Review is a twitter account which aims to ‘satirise’ what they describe as ‘poor research’. Their anonymous and avowedly conservative team trawls online archives of scholarly material, posting screengrabs of abstracts and of journal text from publications that they describe as ‘laughable’, accompanying the screengrabs with sarcastic remarks mocking the content of the research ([Airaksinen 2017](#)). The rhetorical force of the joke is derived from their claim that these remarks constitute more rigorous peer review than that which is standard practice in humanities publishing; their basic position is that all peer review in the humanities is saturated with confirmatory bias, which blinds everybody working in the humanities to its own inherent absurdity, and to which they offer a frank, ‘real’ corrective. Sometimes their comments, which are a debased form of the act of critical reading, seem to be methodological critique – asking, for

example, whether a theoretical point can be supported by hard data – which would indicate a sincere concern for robust and rational scientific enquiry, whereas others are more nakedly confrontational or dismissive, describing work as crazy, clownish, or silly.

The topics of the work that they target in this way are uniformly left-aligned: fat studies, trans feminism, vegan studies, critical race studies, queer theory, animal rights research, and so on. Such research often addresses popular sources or texts, or uses qualitative methodologies such as autoethnography, reflexive life-writing, or, indeed, literary criticism; the ostensible purpose of Real Peer Review is to call out such methodologies as bullshit because they are not considered sufficiently academically rigorous. However, upon even cursory scrutiny, the claim to be concerned with research methods is revealed as a flimsy screen for a familiar right-wing agenda. I have published reasonably widely for an ECR, but this essay, the first that I have placed in a specifically feminist journal, was the only piece of my work to attract their attention. Clearly, it is not literary criticism as a discipline that they are interested in ‘debunking’, but rather it is *feminist* literary criticism. It is not the epistemology, the method or the scientific rigour, but the underlying political philosophy with which they want to take issue. That is, though their mobilisation of academic terminology may be intended to present their satirical interventions as motivated by a concern with the intellectual integrity of the contemporary university, it is a transparently reactionary use of social media, designed to harangue and undermine humanities researchers. As much as they congratulate themselves for detecting ideological bias in research with open political commitments, they too are pushing an agenda, an agenda which aims to trivialise and undermine academic work with politics to which they are opposed. One cannot help thinking that the aim is to playfully troll left-wing research out of the academy.

As such, it forms part of a pattern of online heteropatriarchal bullying faced by feminists who occupy or frequent online spaces like twitter. Online abuse – whether misogynist, racist, homophobic, disablist or a combination of these or other prejudices – can include targeted and sustained harassment, threats of violence, rape, torture, or death, and doxxing (the revelation of personal contact details in order to expose people to the risk of physical harm). Now, of course, Real Peer Review is by no means as unpleasant as some of the harsher troll invective, which, as Emma Alice Jane (2014: 558) writes, is often ‘heavily laced with expletives, profanity and explicit imagery of sexual violence: it is calculated to offend, it is often difficult and disturbing to read, and it falls well outside the norms of what is usually considered ‘civil’ academic discourse’. At no point was I at risk, and I was not personally contacted; Real Peer Review’s tone, whilst it may be patronising, belittling, and sarcastic, is not directly threatening, and at no point was I deluged with sexualised and credible murder threats in the way that many public-facing feminists are (although it is worth noting that a harmful communication doesn’t need to rise to the level of a death threat to be distressing). Nonetheless, my experience forms part of a pattern of online hostility to feminist activity which can, as Jessica Megarry emphasises, be ‘conceptualised by taking account of the broader political structures of patriarchy which function to police female behaviour in the public sphere’ (2014: 53). It has also been shown that many minority individuals are ‘trolled into silence’ (Olson and LaPoe, 2017: 117) by online abusers, and argued that hateful social media contact with feminist women functions as a patriarchal disciplinary activity (Cole, 2015). Karla Mantilla has described specifically gender-related online harassment, which she calls ‘gendertrolling’, as a ‘strategy to keep women from full participation on the internet’ (2013: 569) which functions analogously to the way that catcalling intimidates women on the street and workplace harassment aims to reduce women’s ability to participate and compete in professional life. That is, trolling functions as a way to exclude women from public online activity. Likewise, the ideological and

political purpose of Real Peer Review is to discredit, intimidate and silence specific groups of feminist researchers in the academy.

Before I proceed I offer the caveat that one should perhaps be careful not to flatter Real Peer Review by according them too much importance. It's only one twitter account among many, and I am of course aware of the conventional wisdom that one should not feed the trolls. Nonetheless, as other scholars (including those cited above) have noted, ignoring this stuff does not make it go away. Emma Alice Jane remarks that the only thing that stopped the trolling was the cessation of her journalistic work, that is, her silence (560). Further, Real Peer Review produce representations – reductive caricatures of left-wing scholarship – which, as a literary scholar invested in critically appraising right-wing cultural production, I am interested in constituting as objects of study. They may be unsophisticated and vindictive, but their tweets are performative utterances which reveal very clearly the affective and intellectual economy of a certain strain of right wing cultural production, and further, they exemplify the ways in which representations can be strategically weaponised for the political purpose of undermining feminist scholarship. To demonstrate this, I turn to a brief critical reading of the tweet relating to my work.

I am Three Unhappy Feminists

In early 2017, when my article was online-only, Real Peer Review posted an image of my abstract under the heading 'a gender scholar reads a James Bond book and becomes rather unhappy'. The final sentence summarising my argument – 'Further, the horror of torture, for Fleming, is the horror of a hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity in disarray: Bond's survival represents the regrouping of normative heterosexual masculinity through the rejection of homosexuality and Communism' – was highlighted, presumably because it was considered particularly hilarious, the punchline.



New Real Peer Review
@RealPeerReview



A gender scholar reads a James Bond book and becomes rather unhappy

journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.117...

Abstract

Little scholarly attention has been paid to the torture scenes in Ian Fleming's canon of Bond novels and short stories (1953–1966), despite the fact that they represent some of the most potent sites of the negotiations of masculinity, nationhood, violence and the body for which

There is a clear reactionary imaginary underpinning the mimesis of their post. In this imagined scenario, I, a gender scholar, read a James Bond book for the first time in my life and knock out a hysterical and absurd critique of it simply because I am appalled; so extreme is my imagined shock at reading Fleming that one of the people who commented on the post said that they wished they had been 'there with a video camera' to capture it. This piece of theatre mobilises three interacting

caricatures of feminist intellectuals: firstly, it relies on the stereotype of the snowflake liberal, secondly it relies on the figure of the moralising feminist, and finally, it relies on a notion of feminist intellectual labour as a knee-jerk activity.



Burnt Toast

@BurntToast1111

Wish i was there with a video camera <https://t.co/4U4eYlun6l>

26 May 2017

Firstly, I am positioned as a snowflake who has been triggered by a Bond book. A snowflake here is a conservative caricature of an oversensitive liberal who responds to imagined material wrongs with disproportionate and censorious demands for reparation; the professionally offended finger-wagger characterised by what one journalist calls ‘a sense of entitlement, an untamed narcissism, or a form of identity politics that is resistant to free speech’ (Nicholson, 2016). That is, I am positioned as somebody who pretends to have been done personal harm by the book I am reading (and to which I incomprehensibly and self-importantly object) and who responds to this harm with a demand for censorship. This of course taps into overarching debates about free speech, censorship, no-platforming, and revisions to curricula that are current in the academy; the inconvenient critical voice is positioned as a censorious and hence totalitarian voice, helping to position feminists as brittle weaklings who employ their unreasonable emotions in order to close down creative or intellectual activity to which they object.

The second caricature – moralising feminists as thought police or as fun police – follows readily from this. This strategic misrepresentation of feminist critique as the enforcement of stultifying and narrow moral norms is useful for antifeminists, writes Sara Ahmed in her recent *Living a Feminist Life*, because ‘hearing feminists as police is a way of not hearing feminism’ (2017: 2). By positioning the writer of a feminist critique of Bond as a fragile authoritarian, a reactionary twitter account positions itself as a radical anti-establishment force, but more importantly, in the process it attempts to obscure – talk over, shout down, interrupt, derail – the debate about, ironically enough, heteropatriarchal representations of hegemonic masculinity in which I was attempting to intervene.

The final stereotype, regarding feminist scholarship as a knee-jerk activity, is related to their broader strategy of describing humanities research as ‘making stuff up’. Feminist scholarship is conceived of as a discipline to which empirical evidence is considered irrelevant by its doctrinaire practitioners and in which tendentious facts are frivolously invented to suit a predetermined agenda. One commenter described my essay as a ‘screed’, for instance. Underlying this is the notion that feminism is simply not intellectually serious, that I have written about Bond out of shrill and shallow disapproval and not out of any scholarly desire to make a nuanced argument about a popular set of texts. Common to all three of these stereotypes are the timeworn misogynist motifs of the hysterical, irrational, nagging woman.

Meme Anatomy

The original post was commented upon 26 times and retweeted 85 times; as the analytics page for my article shows, the tweet took on an afterlife as it was rephrased and redistributed.¹ Here I want to remark upon several aspects of this modest response. As the meme spreads, the accompanying message and sarcastic remarks gradually metastasize. I am described by people who retweet and misquote the original post as having become upset over a James Bond film, and not a Bond novel. Some people use it as further evidence that their loathing of postmodern relativism is justified, as my research demonstrates the absurd logical end point of such antifoundationalist, anti-empirical and anti-rational philosophies; others lament the existence of gender studies as a field altogether ('Gender studies retards mental function').



Frank Laird

@eff_dblu_ell

We now live in a world in which "gender scholar" is seen as a legitimate scope of serious study and scholarship... We-are-sooo-fucked-up!!! <https://t.co/jnHxfxOdqn>

26 May 2017

Retweeting it, ex-MTV journalist Kurt Loder said that it was evidence that 'just when you thought academic babble couldn't get any more ludicrous' something new could surprise you.



Kurt Loder

@kurt_loder

Just when you thought academic babble couldn't get any more ludicrous... <https://t.co/dAvhsRNxS1>

27 May 2017

Importantly, however, the article was not identified in the original tweet, as it was simply a screenshot of the abstract (although in a much later reposting the doi address was included). This means that at the time it was being most actively discussed on twitter, none of the respondents had downloaded the article or read its arguments.² Consequently, those who were reacting to it were instead reading a polemical or antagonising tone into the necessarily compressed prose of the abstract and reacting to this imagined moralising tone. That is, the pre-existing stereotype of the hysterical snowflake feminist influenced the way that my abstract was read by twitter users, tautologously confirming and amplifying the stereotype.

¹ The publicly available analytics page for my article catalogues the additional attention that the article attracted, not all of it negative: <https://sage.altmetric.com/details/18149824/twitter>

² I was able to track the download statistics at the time. While the article was being discussed, the number of downloads remained unchanged.

It was also interesting that it was not clear that Real Peer Review actually disagreed with the sentence that they had emphasised, that is, the uncontroversial points that Fleming objected to communism and homosexuality. Rather, they were saying, in effect, ‘ugh, obviously’, as though I had spoiled the fun by describing Bond with a patronising and disapproving sneer in my voice. Sara Ahmed writes that feminists are often described as ‘sensationalizing the facts of the matter... exaggerating, on purpose or with malice’ (21). This classic antifeminist strategy is perhaps the most definite way in which Real Peer Review’s tweet attempted to undermine my work: they try to show that I’m inventing problems where none exist, confabulating a pointlessly antagonistic and politicised interpretation of something which everybody knows is harmless. One commenter, indeed, asks what else I expected from Fleming. Of course, I am not telling anybody that they cannot enjoy Bond. The power and pleasures of a sixty-year-old global cultural phenomenon are unlikely to be undone by one more scholarly article (I am in no way the originator of feminist critiques of Bond). And yet, for Real Peer Review and their audience, the act of critically engaging with Bond places me in the position of hegemonic censor, which in turn legitimates their opposition to my work.

In the comments below the original tweet, a second level of assumptions about the author become visible. People start to assume that I have written the essay for money (‘What a load of self induced crap. Do they really get paid for this? Busboys do more good for the nation’), or that I am an employed or full-time tenured professor or lecturer. More interestingly, some respondents use feminine pronouns to describe me (‘she makes it sound like a bad thing (even if we assumed she was right... which I very much do not)’). A portrait begins to emerge, with predictable gender and class coordinates, and as much of the animus is directed at this imaginary figure as it is at my research. Those who purport to object to the abstract are actually engaging in ad hominem attacks against an imaginary wealthy, female, middle class, prestigious scholar who takes issue with popular conservative texts.



Deplorable me

@GT_bd1986

What a load of self induced crap. Do they really get paid for this? Busboys do more good for the nation. Cheers for busboys! @P4V3D4RK3R <https://t.co/l8NpMrAodo>

27 May 2017

It is not simply a matter of disagreeing with my position or of critiquing my argument – even of undertaking a philosophical critique of my method – but rather a matter of putting an elite college professor in her place. Parenthetically to this point, I will reveal that, as it happens, I am a low-income male Early Career Researcher from a working class background. That I do not correspond to their image of me shows that their ridicule has nothing personal about it: it is aimed not at me as a specific individual researcher but generally at feminists as a group.

Troll Discourse and Feminism

So much for my experience, which is, I repeat, minor in comparison to what other scholars (indeed, this journal) have encountered, and utterly trivial in comparison to the hateful and threatening

abuse that many people encounter online on a daily basis. To be absolutely clear: I'm not scared of critique, and like most scholars would relish the opportunity to debate the merits and limitations of my work. Neither am I simply aggrieved or offended that they chose to ridicule my abstract, nor afraid of the non-academic voices of the public, which should be important to those of us who create knowledge and research ideas; distasteful antagonisms like this should not prejudice us against the perspectives of lay people or non-academics, because I do not believe that they represent the views of most ordinary people. What is significant, however, is the increasingly vocal, dismissive and confrontational strain of anti-intellectual neoreactionary antifeminism that Real Peer Review, and other voices like it, represents. Although they disingenuously claim to be defending epistemological and ontological rigor, they are actually simply peddling casually reductive vituperation, bad faith argumentation, and coarsely politicised misogynist sneering. This is a toxic element of our intellectual and academic culture that should be confronted.

This raises the broader question of how to engage 'critics' like Real Peer Review. I can in no way offer a coherent programme for confronting trolls, but I can be certain on one point: we should not take them seriously on their own terms, that is, we cannot defer to them as the high-minded guardians of rationalism or grant them the status of methodology police. If we are to take them seriously at all, it should be purely as a trolling problem. But how to tackle it? [My brother](#), who is a moderately successful YouTuber (he has over thirty thousand subscribers), gave me the following advice: 'Don't ever respond directly. Just read their tweets aloud [to yourself] in the voice of Dale from *King of the Hill*.' As privately satisfying as such counter-ridicule may be, taking the higher moral ground and leaving trolling unchallenged risks appearing to concede ground to them and allowing them to achieve their goal, that is, silencing researchers. Equally, however, one can readily predict the disingenuous glee with which Real Peer Review would use their slippery discourse to derail any conversation about their pernicious influence.

Indeed, part of the difficulty of addressing online patriarchal harassment is that troll discourse is strategically and deliberately elastic and inconsistent. As Sartre wrote regarding anti-Semites, they place the burden of seriousness on their targets the better to lampoon them.

They know that what they have said is trivial and open to dispute; but they find it amusing, and after all it is their opponent who must treat words seriously, since he believes in words; the anti-semites are *entitled* to treat the matter as a joke. They even like to play with their replies, since by producing farcical reasons, they discredit the serious intention of their questioner; they find delight in exercising ill faith, because their purpose is not to persuade with sound arguments but to intimidate or disconcert. (Sartre 1944: 15-16)

As William McBride has observed ([Goldhill 2016](#)), Sartre's prescient analysis of the pointlessness of rationally engaging anti-semites shows very clearly why it is a mistake to engage directly with the intentionally farcical points that trolls like Real Peer Review present as 'critique'. To take issue with the claim that I was upset by Bond novels, for instance, by arguing that, actually, I wasn't really that shocked, would not just be to make the mistake of dignifying their joke. Taking their suggestion seriously would place me in the position of appearing both infantile in substance and defensive in approach; and further, even if I was to provide a devastating case to the effect that my affective reaction to Fleming is not what is at stake in my argument, the trolls would simply be able to flippantly shift the ground beneath my feet in order to make me appear absurd in some other way

that I would not be able to anticipate. That is, directly answering the charge of being fragile and ridiculous would produce a response which confirmed my fragility and ridiculousness (and any response at all, including this one, could confirm the stereotype of the humourless feminist). Instead, in this piece, I have deliberately not 'rebutted' their 'accusation' but instead tried to show what is at stake in their humorous attacks on left-leaning academia, specifically academic feminism.

It is not simply that Real Peer Review want to foster a right-wing, masculinist, empiricist academic monoculture in which feminism by definition has no place. Neither is it simply that they want to caricature the humanities as kindergartens in which academic standards are not upheld, and to parody politically committed research as inimical to rational thought and clear assessments of evidence. Nor is it simply that they want to engage in methodological debate, or to just ask questions about intellectual work. Further, it is not my distress that is at stake, neither in my original article or in this present piece. What is at stake in Real Peer Review's harassment of the humanities is the same insistent, repetitive and unremarkable political demand that every feminist has heard time and again: they want women to shut up and stay out of a man's world.

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