Murderous Fallout: Post-Lépine Rhethoric

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For the sake of those who don't care as much about harm to men, however, let me also point out that hatred has a way of being returned. It would not surprise me if one of the demons that tortured Marc Lépine was the steady torrent of abuse directed at men in general by too many feminists.

Statement made by a
University of Alberta Philosophy Professor
three months after the Montreal massacre

On December 6, 1989, Marc Lépine screamed "You are all feminists" (Montreal Gazette) at the targets of his anger and then murdered fourteen female engineering students.

At the time, the University of Alberta was deeply embroiled in a controversy over sexist, extremely degrading and libellous comments printed in *The Bridge*, a publication produced by the engineering students, about a female engineering student and the city's female mayor. The student complained to university authorities about these sexist practices and was subsequently (less than two months after the Lépine murders) subjected to having cries of "Shoot the bitch" aimed at her while performing at an "Engineering Week Skit Night." She also received death threats.

The statement with which I began this paper was actually part of an attempt to convince a university investigative panel that these violent verbal responses were not sexist. In December 1989, I thought it would be impossible for anyone to view Marc Lépine's act as anything but—in the words of Elliot Layton, a Canadian expert on mass murders —an extreme "demonstrat[ion of] how male chauvinism threatens women's lives." As Layton said, "No catastrophe is unrelated to major changes in society" (Staff). To my surprise, anti-feminist denial of even the possibility that Marc Lépine's actions might have been an extension of "misogynist attitudes that permeate our society" ("Anger") has been amazingly virulent. These responses are provokingly similar in their rhetorical tactics and are commonly based on the rhetorical fallacies of *ad hominem* and *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* argumentation, and of begging the question. I would like to investigate the function of these rhetorical similarities through an exploration of letters to the editor, an editorial, and several "news" articles printed in *The Edmonton Journal* in response to the Montreal massacre.[1]

The first rhetorical tactic common to these responses is a type of *ad feminam*[2] fallacy, an attack on the feminist rather than a discussion of her position, which results in an insidious portrayal of feminists as wildly irrational and opportunistic, somewhat "mad," or at the very least, "unnatural." The editorialists at the *Journal* respond to the news of the murders in Montreal by maintaining that "Canadian women" are "groping to comprehend the

sniper's [sic] overwhelming hatred of their sex" and that these women want "to lash out—somehow, at someone—for women's suffering at the hands of men." Their editorial speaks of a "fog of anger and disbelief," and of the "worst impulses" raised by this tragedy, which "impulses" seem to be "an angry backlash against men" and "raw fury." They conclude their article by stating that "Canadians must respond with moderation in the aftermath of this tragedy. One man's rampage cannot be allowed to destroy our sense of justice and well-being" ("Canada's"). As Doctors Diane Chisholm and Susan Hamilton point out in their response to this editorial:

> To dismiss the careful, lucid and unanimous analysis of women who have been speaking out across the country as "raw fury" in danger of fuelling "our worst impulses" is to perpetuate the mythology that women are emotional, hysterical and irrational.

The author of a letter printed several weeks later characterizes the feminist and anti-feminist "sides" of this debate as, respectively, "one of boiled emotions and one of cold logic" (Chouinard). The claim being made is that female theoreticians are not only irrational, but they are also not nurturing; they do not attend to the needs of men and should thus be condemned for their self-serving arguments. "Most of those who denounce violence against women in the media never mention the far greater amounts against men, as if they didn't see or didn't care," writes the philosophy professor as he attempts to convince his reader that what he claims as women's greater physical vulnerability "justifies a special protectiveness toward them" (Christensen). A letter writer who approvingly identifies this professor's major point as an assertion that "the current wave of anti-male propaganda is false in its hasty generalizations" (Phelps-Wilson) is joined by several others who see the major point as "the obvious fact ... that there is far more concern over physical or emotional harm to a woman than to a man" (Rochet). One of these writers goes on to state that:

> In view of the hatred engendered [sic] in the woman [sic] threatening to out-Herod Herod, what Christensen said cannot all be dismissed as "drivel."
>
> With a fine understanding of the anguish of the bereaved men in the mourning families in Montreal, radical feminists in the media and academia stood on a "soap-box of coffins" and appealed to the emotions of the moment to stir up hatred against all men. (Phelps-Wilson)

The cause of this lack of feminine concern for male feelings is constructed as a self-serving desire by "women... [to] use the senseless loss of these valued members of society as a tool to gain ground in other feminist battles" (Diwert). This statement is later rephrased: "Marc Lépine['s unhinged] statements are taken at face value, and some petty women are capitalizing on this to further their own cause, which is not pro-male" (Chouinard). Only a pro-male argument, says the grammar, would not be a petty cause. Feminist arguments about ideology are only possible in the case of Marc Lépine because feminists "[distort] their perceptions, for ideological reasons," because they "[suppress] consciousness of half the data," because they indulge themselves in obstructive "ideologically motivated explanations for violent behaviour" (Christensen). Feminists are thus constructed as destructive, petty, irrational women who have distorted or suppressed themselves into acting out some sort of Freudian mode of unconsciousness.

Having "erased" feminists themselves, the next step, a type of begging the question, is to elide the terms of the discussion—to refuse any argument phrased in terms of systems, to conflate or confuse the term "misogynist attitudes" with "attitudes held by all males," to reduce the discussion to a consideration of "one man's act of madness" ("Canada's"). The assumption behind this fallacious technique is that the validity of the anti-feminist argument is so clearly evident that it need not be explicated or articulated.

This tactic "erases" the feminist argument. "The mass murder at the University of Montreal was not a symbol of society's acceptance of violence against women," begins one article. "An associate professor of philosophy who deals in feminism, ethics and sexuality,"[3] is then quoted as saying, "If people try

to turn this into a men-versus-women problem they're going to exacerbate the real problems that are there" (Farrell). In this statement, not only are underlying causes denied, but the origin of any violent impulses is shifted to feminist speakers. The word "people" here is, oddly enough, a specifically gendered one, as the speaker is commenting on the statements of female feminist speakers at a vigil held on the University of Alberta campus.[4]

In the same article, another "associate professor of philosophy whose specialty is ethics" is quoted as saying that "It's completely unfruitful to attempt to understand (the murderer's) motives in terms of any general cultural pattern. Maybe some experts in the field of psychopathology are able to, but people standing up on platforms can't." Not only does a philosophy professor deny that cultural realities and ideologies motivate actions within a cultural setting, he states that feminist theoreticians such as Noreen Bell of the Alberta Status of Women Action Committee and various members of the Women's Studies program at the University of Alberta cannot be experts in understanding motives in terms of "general cultural patterns"; they can only be (again gendered) "people on platforms." The first professor's postulate is later picked up by one author who maintains that "this incident was an isolated one, not bearing commonality [sic] with the feelings of all men" (Diwert), and by another who writes:

> I perceived the gist of the [*Journal*'s] commentary to be that the root cause of Lépine's slaughterfest is this hypothesized prevailing social attitude that suggests it's OK to abuse women. I doubt that this societal attitude towards women had a great deal to do with Lépine's reasons for killing 14 people. So to point a finger at this mysterious attitude, in hope of someday eliminating it, is both naive and perhaps dangerous. (Price)

No reason is ever given for this doubt, but a pervasive societal attitude is again denied, in a bid, so it seems, to stop any attempts to eradicate it.[5] One person asks the *Journal* to "Please portray the Montreal massacre as a people issue, not a feminist issue. Men should not have to shoulder the guilt of one man who singled out one part of society on which to field his anger." Not only is there no misogyny in society, but feminists are accused of "blaming" all men. As well, the impression given by this writer's grammar is that feminists are not people, cannot be interested in "people" issues.

One of the philosophy professors explicitly articulates this position. This person refuses to enter any discussion of social misogyny in terms of systems and Althusserian ideologies and thus writes that, "To add further irony, the claim that men in general feel or condone hatred of women is itself hatred—sexist bigotry and stereotyping coming from people who claim they abhor sexism" (Christensen). The same statement is made somewhat less skilfully in another letter: "I am sick of this man-bashing. Just because I got stuck with a Y-chromosome does not mean I should be condemned to suffer the intolerance of some people's inability to deal with the realities of life" (Chouinard). Because this person reads feminist arguments as anti-male, and any argument which attempts to alter any aspect of "the [masculinist-dominated] realities of life" is "intolerant," he feels personally indicted.

Two others who use the rhetorical fallacy of begging the question maintain that "feminists blame all men for these murders just as Marc Lépine blamed all women for his problems" (Cheung) and that "feminists have stereotyped all men as being murderers" (Hemeyer). Not only are the terms of the feminist argument perverted to such an extent they are no longer recognizable, the problem of violence against women disappears into a rhetorical "fog" thrown up around the belief that female and feminist theorizing is not a response to socially perpetuated violence but its cause.

Having altered the terms of the argument and accused feminists of illogical and hurtful behaviour, anti-feminist rhetoric culminates with a *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* argument which both ignores historical realities (pervasive violence against women was a cultural reality long before there were feminists) and conceals an underlying threat intended to silence feminists through fear. Verbal and physical violence become conflated. As M.J. Hymers phrases it in her letter, "I have heard it anxiously pointed out that this tragedy occurred because feminism threatens men." The victim (or the intended

victim) is blamed for the violence enacted against her: "I'd guess that it is not any attitude of society toward women that must change, but some women's attitude toward society, especially toward shy, seemingly unsuccessful men like Lépine before they're driven into a psychosis" (Price). The unnurturing feminist constructed by this anti-feminist *ad feminam* fallacious rhetoric drives men to kill. These feminists are also, in the view of these authors, to blame for their own (and other women's) fear of misogynist violence:

> To the extent that they[6] convince women all men are to be feared, such claims only increase their trauma; to the extent that they alienate men, they widen the chasm between the sexes still further.
>
> But since male pain means little to some, let them consider the anger the steady stream of anti-male charges might make some men feel toward women—especially what it is doing to little boys now being raised with it. (Christensen)

The future holds little promise and much threat, according to this viewpoint, unless feminists cease to advance the cause of women against the wishes of the other sex. Thus, a male-versus-female state of affairs is created and upheld by this prose. Two short letters conclude this portion of my paper. The first appears under the heading "'Victim' bad label" and the second under "Feminism."

> When women in the public eye label themselves as victims, they add to the problem of violence against women.
>
> The "victim" label puts into focus the idea that women are a physically weaker sex and are easily overcome by force. For males who are constantly rejected by women, or who simply feel a need for power, this can be a strong suggestion. When these women add livid emotional fervor and volume to their statements, and imply that men are responsible for their woes, it may provoke an aggressive response. (Biggs)

According to this rhetoric, women who turn men down or hold strong opinions or discuss societal violence against women are constructing themselves as victims.

> The battle of the sexes, with the increasing strength of the feminist movement, it [sic] is causing an awful lot of sparks, maybe even a fire.
>
> An example of this could be the Montreal slayings. Feminists have stereotyped all men as being murderers. This is an unfair accusation. Anyway, if there is a fire, you should look at who created the spark.
>
> Both males and females may end up having to work together to put out the fire that all of the sparks have caused. The feminist movement has done a lot of good, but now it has come to where more pushing will do more harm than good.
>
> If feminists stop pushing, the momentum will bring equality, anyway. (Hemeyer)

Not only is the feminist movement here made responsible for the Marc Lépine murders, the implication is that the feminist movement is unnecessary and that, at this point, men are being drawn into extinguishing a raging forest fire caused by irresponsible women. The fire imagery in this letter stands as a "symbol of unrestrained, dangerous, destructive female sexuality" (Wills). In this *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* argument, women's emancipatory actions, occurring as they did before Marc Lépine's murderous ones, caused the Montreal massacre.

Because I do not believe that if I stop "pushing, the momentum will bring equality anyway," and because I refuse to let my voice or the voice of other feminists be silenced by implicit threats, I would like to point out one more time that, "Within our own culture, the inscription of bodies occurs both *violently* ... and by *less openly aggressive* but no less coercive means, through cultural and personal values, norms and commitments" (Grosz 2). Not only were Marc Lépine's actions an extremely violent example of the physical inscription of cultural realities on women's bodies, post-Lépine anti-feminist rhetoric has reinscribed and continues to inscribe that violence again and again onto the minds and bodies of the women of this society. My hope is that this paper will make it difficult for those who wish to silence women, and specifically feminist women, to hide behind falsely "humanist" rhetoric of an anti-feminist nature.

NOTES

1. I am aware that Edmonton is not the only site of such reactions, but it is the site with which I am most familiar, and thus my paper concentrates on this particular area. I chose *The Journal* because it is Edmonton's major newspaper; its editors pride themselves on the "fairness" of their reporting and representation.
2. This alteration of the term *ad hominem* to reflect the true target of anti-feminist arguments properly belongs to my colleague Deborah Wills, whose comments on this paper were particularly helpful. I would also like to thank JoAnn Wallace for her assistance in the reconstruction of this paper.
3. This list of "credentials" is telling. For the purposes of this article, stating that someone "deals in feminism" is a lot like saying the Ku Klux Klan "deals in racism." The statement contains a truth of sorts, but it also hides a deadly reality.
4. An analysis of the disregard for pronoun referents in these texts, through which refusal of basic grammatical necessities feminists generally become "they" and "them" (and thus Other), would be extremely interesting but requires more space that I have available here.
5. The grammatical pattern of this passage is also interesting as it is actually a movement away from a denial of the reality of this attitude: first the attitude is hypothetical; then, the attitude is there but not a cause of abuse; then, for some unclear reason, attempts to alter the attitude become dangerous. Oddly enough, this argument backs up Layton's statement: "I think we have to understand how virulent and malevolent sexist feelings can be.... Whenever a social group rejects its subservience, as women everywhere have been doing, it threatens those in power.... No catastrophe is unrelated to major changes in society."
6. The pronoun referent does not appear in this text as anything other than "some" but seems to be "most of those who denounce violence against women" or the "large segment of feminism" which appears in the third last sentence of this lengthy letter. However, the implication that the "large segment of feminism" which convinces women "all men are to be feared" is not female (womanly?) is quite clear. The choice of when to use the word "women" or "woman" in this type of rhetoric is another truly fascinating study.

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