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To be Heard through the #MeToo backlash

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The Depp v. Heard case was a flashpoint in the intense online battle between popular feminism and its misogynist backlash

Nearly five years after #MeToo had galvanised millions to share their experience of sexual violence, the 2022 Depp v. Heard defamation trial became a media event around which feminists and anti-feminists converged to assess the impact of #MeToo and its limitations. The trial was a civil case which aimed to establish whether or not Heard's assertion that she was 'a public figure representing domestic abuse' was protected by freedom of speech laws.¹ Her ex-husband's counter-argument was that her statements about him were defamatory. On social media, however, the trial came to signify a referendum on #MeToo, by way of settling who, between Depp and Heard, was the perpetrator of intimate partner violence. In this article, we ask: what does the Depp v. Heard trial reveal about the double entanglement of feminism and misogyny that emerged in the aftermath of #MeToo? To what extent were the digital tools that enabled expressions of feminist solidarities used in the #MeToo backlash?

We first situate the trial at the nexus of 'popular misogyny' and 'popular feminism', to think through the significance of this trial as celebrity news and media event.² We then analyse online memes targeting Heard and discuss the role humour plays in concealing misogyny. We show the continuities between these seemingly

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innocuous TikTok trends or Twitter memes and the masculinist rhetoric deployed by Depp supporters which buttress their concerted anti-feminist attacks on Heard and her supporters. Finally, we turn to online responses to the trial from self-professed neutral observers, survivors of sexual violence and feminists. Their tweets make tangible the cultural struggle over the meaning of domestic violence. By framing the Depp-Heard relationship as passionate, Depp is exonerated, and the 'perfect victim' rape myth is reactivated by depicting Heard as a self-serving liar. Overall, the article contends that the trial exemplifies a new iteration of popular misogyny, one that acknowledges the cultural and political significance of #MeToo yet upholds the same rape myths that were previously criticised.

Popular misogyny v. popular feminism

Sarah Banet-Weiser theorises 'popular feminism' as a spectacular manifestation of feminism circulated through mainstream media and legitimised through celebrity endorsement.³ An example of popular feminism is Heard's 2018 op-ed for *The Washington Post*, in which she reflects on her experience of sexual violence and the backlash and disbelief she was subjected to when she spoke out. The piece introduces her as an actress and ACLU ambassador on women's rights, inscribing her testimony within decades of feminist activism. Heard situates her first-person account of sexual violence within the legacies of #MeToo, stressing the importance of speaking out to instigate social and political change. Her story echoes injunctions to self-confidence and 'leaning in' prevalent in other manifestations of popular feminism: she told her story despite the risks that '[she] would never work as an actress - [she] would be blacklisted', and she did so to empower other women to come forward.⁴ The op-ed cements Heard's feminist brand as a celebrity spokesperson for victims of sexual and domestic violence, thus illustrating the logics at play in popular feminism.

The essay also triggered a backlash against the perceived threat of feminism and the widespread acceptance of #MeToo, which Banet-Weiser calls 'popular misogyny'.⁵ According to Banet-Weiser, popular media enable the circulation of outright expressions of hatred of women beyond the enclosed spaces where the patriarchy asserts itself (e.g. the home) and justifies its violence (e.g. the courtroom). That Heard's op-ed is the key piece of evidence around which Depp's legal team built his defamation case is significant, for it shows the ways in which popular misogyny

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also resorts to legal institutions to legitimise the objectification of women. The celebrity defamation trial, of which Depp v. Heard is a prime example, reveals how popular misogyny operates in visible ways, as well as behind the scenes, to challenge popular feminism. By providing access into the private lives of the celebrity couple, it turns domestic violence into a media spectacle. As Banet-Weiser suggests, the struggle between feminism and misogyny is far from new, but what is notable about the contemporary conjuncture is the ways in which the contemporary networked mediascape shapes the ways in which gender wars emerge from the domestic sphere and into the public sphere. In what follows, we analyse Twitter and TikTok commentaries of the Depp v. Heard trial. Our focus on misogynistic humour, anti-feminist masculinist rhetoric and the myth of the 'good victim' sheds further light on the double entanglement of popular feminism and popular misogyny theorised by Banet-Weiser.

Subject of memes v. object of memes

One of the aspects of the trial that has been most commented on is its online reception, and the ways in which Heard, and to some extent Depp, have been turned into memes. Memes are relatively recent digital objects that serve different types of humour by playing on the juxtaposition of images, popular cultural references and original ideas, which are then reproduced and circulated through social media. Like inside jokes, the pleasure of memes derives from the understanding of these niche and highly contextual multi-layered references. The memes produced around the Depp v. Heard trial operate through two subtexts: the first is that Depp, much like the characters he plays, is a misunderstood villain; the second, that Heard is a manipulative liar. Both subtexts exemplify the templates of sexist memes which support the exclusion of women from digital spaces. Claims that men are the rightful occupants and owners of online spaces are asserted by constructing Depp as the subject of memes and Heard as an object of memes.

For the most part, memes centred around Depp draw on visuals and quotes from some of Depp's most iconic roles, such as Jack Sparrow from the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise. For example, a still from *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* directly quotes from the film: 'Norrington: You were actually telling the truth. / Sparrow: I do that quite a lot yet people are always surprised'.⁶ With his cheeky reply, Sparrow infers that he, and by extension Depp, is often misunderstood, but

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with time he, and by extension Depp, is proven right. This intertextual reference casts Depp as a subject with agency rather than an object of derision. Indeed, memes of Depp drawing on visuals from the trial capture him victoriously punching the air outside the courtroom or making a finger gun gesture as if to tell his supporters he is 'in' on the joke.

By contrast, most of the memes of Heard are based on pictures from the trial where she is ridiculed because of her looks. For example, pictures of her testimony showing her face contorted by emotions or tears are juxtaposed to screenshots of anime character Boruto crying, to make fun of her for looking cartoonish and ugly.⁷ When flattering red-carpet pictures of Heard are used as meme templates, the captions imply that this is just an appearance and she is in fact crazy. Heard's face is also sometimes edited onto well-known and well-circulated meme templates to infer that Heard's evil character contaminates otherwise wholesome popular culture references. For instance, an edited still from a 2011 episode of *The Office*, featuring Pam pulling an innocent prank on her co-worker Creed by showing two identical pictures, shows Heard being unable to differentiate a toilet from a bed.⁸ The meme asserts that Heard is stupid, and the contrast with Pam, known for her caring personality, further demonises Heard. Every example discussed shows how light-heartedness and irony mask the malicious undertone of sexist jokes, thus making misogyny less noticeable if not more acceptable. The circulation of these pictures beyond the timeline of the trial attests to the extent to which Heard has become a meme. Whilst the memeification of Heard contributed to her dehumanisation, memes of Depp have cemented his status as a cultural icon.⁹

This was particularly evident on TikTok, where popular features, songs, sound effects and hashtags are grouped together as 'trends' within the app. TikTok trends, much like memes, can be recreated, adapted and shared by other users. For instance, recordings of the trial are easily accessible on YouTube, and short clips remixing visuals or soundtrack from the trial with trending sound effects or visuals proliferated on social media. The affordances of TikTok (lip sync, superimposition of mainstream audio clips from films and songs onto clips from the trial, impersonation, etc) were used to mock Heard's rape testimony in a series of videos entitled 'Trying to understand where Johnny Depp went wrong'. These include TikTok users using the audio of Heard's description of the assault and re-enacting the scene with their partner or their dog.¹⁰ These audio-visual memes cast doubt on

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Heard's account and are imbued with misogyny.

TikTok trends centred around Depp glorify the actor and rehabilitate his image. For instance, the TikTok trend #Megapint celebrates Depp for his humour and self-deprecating persona. One of the much-circulated excerpts from the trial features Heard's legal teams interrogating Depp on a recording she made of him being violent in their home. Heard's attorney asked whether Depp was drunk at the time, after pouring himself 'a mega pint of red wine', to which Depp replied, amused, 'a mega pint?', and then resumed a serious face to correct the attorney: 'I poured myself a large glass of wine. I thought it necessary.' Depp's response makes fun of the attorney for his choice of words and establishes that a line of questioning around his alcohol consumption is laughable. Similarly, Depp's deadpan reply, 'Isn't it happy hour anytime?', to a question about his morning consumption of whisky elicited praise and laughter online. In both cases, Depp's replies became taglines on t-shirts and shot glasses, consolidating his celebrity persona as funny and sympathetic. In addition, the merchandising of #Megapint reveals the extent to which the memeification of Heard and Depp is a lucrative business.

Our discussion of sexist memes reveals the extent to which gender wars play out online and through humour. The unequivocal defence of Depp goes hand in hand with a surge of misogyny aimed at Heard, circulated through hashtags and viral memes. These social media posts draw on specific moments of the trial to make fun of or discredit Heard beyond the timeline of the trial. For instance, #amberturd, which gathered 1.9 billion views on TikTok in May 2022, had 4.9 billion views in February 2023. Several waves of iterations have emerged since then - '#amberheard 🤡' (195.5 million views), '#amberheard 😏' (30.2 million views), '#amberheardcrying' (1.3 million views) - each of them compounding misogynistic discourses. We now turn to the mobilisation of the manosphere around specific hashtags.

Masculinist Twitter v. feminist Twitter

The struggle between popular misogyny and popular feminism played on social media around specific hashtags: on the one hand there was #JohnnyDeppsInnocent, #IStandWithJohnnyDepp, #AmberHeardIsALiar; and on the other there was #IStandWithAmberHeard and #JusticeForAmberHeard; while #DeppVsHeard is used to disseminate information or perceived neutral takes on the trial. Through

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these 'pro' and 'anti' hashtags, social media users position themselves in relation to the debates surrounding the trial. These engagements are generative of identities as well as the pleasure of participating in an active fandom, exploring conspiracy theories and taking on the role of an amateur detective.¹¹ Each of the camps garners (real or fictitious) pieces of evidence from the trial and beyond to produce well-researched threads akin to prosumer activism.¹² Some Twitter accounts have even become celebrity *advocates*, i.e. activists renowned for their activist work, some of them reaching several thousand followers in the span of a few months.¹³ This notoriety also comes with increased online harassment. For instance, one prominent fan and defender of Heard, who had produced threads summarising and analysing the trial, had to close their account after they were threatened with doxing.

A quantitative analysis of tweets targeting Heard shows that she has been the victim of a concerted attack from Depp's supporters, and that it was largely constituted of *ad hominem* insults such as 'witch', 'whore', 'liar', 'fame hunter', 'narcissist'.¹⁴ The report found that Heard's defenders were similarly targeted through terms like 'feminazi', 'social justice warrior' and its abbreviation 'SJW', but also through hate speech thinly veiled with misogynistic humour. These covert attacks converged around #AmberTurd, after Depp accused Heard of defecating on their bed. The hashtag, used in conjunction with scatological images, dehumanised Heard by pathologising her actions. Other variations on this theme reveal the parasocial dimension of Depp's fandom, the actor sometimes being referred to as 'Daddy' in a sexualising manner. Sexual, physical and psychological trauma has frequently been ridiculed by other women in mainstream media - an important reminder that women, especially white conservative women critical of #MeToo, play an active part in online anti-feminist movements.¹⁵

#MeToo has reignited claims within the manosphere that men have been victimised by feminism, that false accusations can ruin a man's life and reputation, and that domestic and sexual violence is often perpetrated by women.¹⁶ These claims put misogyny and misandry on an equal footing, equating the latter with hate speech; and they have led to the creation of #MenToo, an oppositional hashtag that stems from and responds to #MeToo. Here, anti-feminists co-opt feminist hashtags, strategies and lexicon, for example accusing Heard of displaying a DARVO (deny, attack, and reverse victim and offender) strategy, or of having groomed and exerted coercive control over Depp. This reappropriation depoliticises domestic

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and sexual violence through its understanding of these forms of violence as distinct from gendered forms of oppression. This dynamic, we argue, is itself part of Depp's DARVO strategy.

Indeed, the Depp v. Heard trial introduces a rupture: the #MeToo movement empowered women to share their experience of sexual violence in the public sphere, but because of the trial, speech became once more regulated by the fear of a defamation suit. The legal apparatus and financial resources have been mobilised to silence victims. Not only is this schism imputed to Heard by masculinists; she is also blamed by victims of sexual violence for 'ruining centuries of activism with her lies', and 'discrediting women's speech'.¹⁷ In making such accusations, these women cast themselves as 'good' victims, in contrast with Heard who they dismiss: their claim to victimhood relies on the idea that some women falsely claim to being sexually assaulted. This distinction between 'false' and 'true' victims reactivates rape myths that #MeToo sought to dismantle.¹⁸ According to such arguments, Heard is dishonest, whereas they - united by hashtags like #VictimsAgainstHeard or #AmberHeardDoesNOTSpeakForMe - are true victims who stand by Depp.

Good victim v. bad victim

On the surface, a number of tweets offer a neutral reading of the trial and equally condemn Depp and Heard for their drug and alcohol consumption. Addiction is cited as the root cause of violent behaviour on both parts. This framing of the Depp-Heard couple as a tumultuous relationship prone to addiction individualises sexual violence and banalises domestic violence. The trial is no longer a representation of systemic violence and is instead relegated to celebrity news whereby the desecration of both Depp and Heard is warranted. This form of celebrity gossip plays out less in mainstream media (celebrity magazines, gossip columns, professional blogs), and more on social media (Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, Reddit, YouTube), where users produce and share their own interpretation of the trial through screenshots or edited clips from the live streaming of the trial. An example of such manufactured narratives is #TissueGate, a hashtag used in conjunction with a gif of Heard blowing her nose, which started the rumour that she was consuming cocaine on the stand. Seeing themselves as citizen journalists or amateur detectives, social media users rework the truth according to their own belief systems, and present their interpretations as facts that are true, real and neutral.

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If users embrace the role of amateur sleuths and journalists, they also espouse the role of judge and juror. Heard's testimony, outfits and behaviour are played and dissected online. Numerous tweets uphold the idea that Heard isn't behaving like a victim should. For instance, Heard is accused of putting on an act, of 'dressing up like a battered woman' because she is crying or wearing the same black dress she was wearing when she filed a restraining order against Depp in 2016.¹⁹ Research has shown that, because domestic violence is difficult to prove in a court of law, victims tend to 'perform' stereotypical representations of domestic violence and may exaggerate emotions like fear or distress.²⁰ Many readings of Heard's testimony fuel the myth of the dishonest and manipulative woman who lies about domestic violence to serve her own interests, rather than drawing attention to the challenges domestic violence victims face in the criminal justice system. Her profession is evoked to discredit her testimony at the trial: in some instances she is accused of using her acting talents to play the victim; in other instances she is accused of not being able to act. For example, another reading of #TissueGate posits Heard's behaviour as being for the benefit of the cameras: 'Amber Heard literally posing for the camera with her tissue. You can't make this shit up'.²¹ In contrast, Depp's acting talents are praised with gifs and quotes from his iconic role of Jack Sparrow. The character's famous line 'This is the day you will always remember as the day you almost caught Captain Jack Sparrow' is juxtaposed to tweets celebrating the verdict and hashtags claiming Depp's innocence, thus blurring Depp's boisterous on- and off-screen persona.²²

This double standard is symptomatic of gendered representations of celebrities. Where Depp is celebrated for #Megapint as a testament to his rebellious and misunderstood persona, Heard's alcohol consumption and drug use is condemned as a failure to be feminine and a role model. Like other famous women who have denounced Hollywood men before her, such as Maria Schneider, Heard is not only a victim of misogyny, but also of biphobia and ableism.²³ She is discredited because she is bisexual (and is often called a 'dyke'). She is repeatedly called a 'psychopath', 'psychobitch' or 'certified cray cray', and these labels fuel rumours that she has borderline personality disorder. The fact that she actively defended herself is also framed as evidence of her lack of credibility. For instance, the recording she made of her ex-husband losing his temper with a hidden camera is cited as proof that she is manipulative. Even some biographical elements which usually attract sympathy are reframed in negative terms. For example, her status as a mother is rarely mentioned,

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but when it is evoked, it is in the context of a conspiracy theory according to which Heard bought her baby to appear more human. Heard's mothering is compared to that of Vanessa Paradis, Depp's ex-partner and mother of his two children. While Paradis is celebrated as an exemplary wife and mother, Heard is cast as the evil stepmother through visual references to Disney characters.²⁴

Within feminist communities, this assault on women who don't conform to representations of the 'good' or 'true' victim has been heavily criticised, and the verdict led to a wave of online support for Heard. For instance, in France, a new hashtag #MauvaiseVictime (bad victim) has been added to the online repertoire of the #MeToo movement in the francophone Twittersphere, supplementing other hashtags like #JeSuisVictime (I am a victim), #JaiEteViolee (I was raped), or #DoublePeine (sentenced twice/ victimised twice/ twice the pain). #MauvaiseVictime aligns itself with other attempts to challenge mainstream understandings of sexual violence, by redefining rape and victimhood: women tweet that they are 'bad victims' because, like Heard, they don't see themselves in stereotypical representations of the 'good' or 'perfect' victim.²⁵ This hashtag is a counter-discursive attempt to take on the myth of the 'ideal' victim at play in anti-Heard tweets and hashtags. Calling oneself a 'bad victim' is an attempt to simultaneously overturn the stigma, resignify an insult in empowering terms, and reclaim a legal category in order to focus attention on the violence exerted by the justice system. Similarly, other victims used the hashtag #IAMAmberHeard to express their support for the actor, and, more importantly, to shed light on all the ways in which they have been failed by society and the criminal justice system for not being good enough victims. However, the memetic use of the hashtag reveals another layer of the tension between popular feminism and popular misogyny. #IAMAmberHeard can signify taking on 'an abuser [who] was older, stronger, wealthier, more experienced, and absolutely more powerful [despite not being] the perfect victim'.²⁶ But anti-feminist co-optation of the hashtag also equates #IAMAmberHeard to being 'cold & calculating ... an audience player ... a narcissist & a liar ... an abuser'.²⁷

Conclusion

Our discursive analysis of social media content produced during and after the trial reveals the extent to which the case has been constructed as a 'feminist flashpoint', i.e. a media event that opens up and constrains discourses around

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sexual violence in the public sphere.²⁸ #ThatTrial, which no longer needs to be named given its mediatisation, is a reference point understood in relation to another feminist flashpoint, #MeToo. But this media event doesn't mean the same thing for the two camps: feminists see the trial as a backlash to the #MeToo movement, as a punishment for the progressive policies it enabled, while anti-feminists and masculinists view the trial as proof that women use sexual violence to serve their own interests. We understand the Depp v. Heard trial as a site of struggle for meaning and power for popular feminism and popular misogyny, and as revealing the encroachment of misogyny, masculinism and anti-feminism online.

The dehumanising memeification of Heard is emblematic of the ways in which popular misogyny co-opts digital tools and online narrative strategies that previously enabled online feminist activism. For anti-feminists, Heard is the paragon of liars, *the* ultimate violent woman, who proves that #MeToo has gone too far. She is cited as an example to pre-emptively discredit other women speaking out against sexual violence. Her name is used as a verb - 'to Amber-heardise'; as an adjective - 'Amber Heard jurisprudence'; and as a noun - as in 'you are turning into an Amber Heard' as a way of commenting on Benjamin Mendy's sexual assault trial in the UK, or Angelina Jolie's domestic violence allegations against Brad Pitt in the US. This new iteration of popular misogyny distorts the cultural significance of #MeToo to fuel warped definitions of domestic violence and victimisation; and its misappropriation of digital feminist activism is part of a coordinated and lucrative strategy deployed by the manosphere. Hashtags defending Depp are already being used as templates by fans of Marilyn Manson (#IStandWithMarilynManson, #JusticeForMarilynManson, #EvanRachelWoodIsALiar), ahead of another impending celebrity trial, highlighting the urgent need for a feminist response to popular misogyny on- and off-line.

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