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Surely You're a Creep, Mr. Feynman

On toxic moral license and the mythos of male scientific genius



Fig. 109

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THIS SPRING, SCIENTISTS and science writers alike celebrated the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Nobel Prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman. To mark the occasion, I sent out a tweet that included a quote from Feynman's widely beloved memoir, *"Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman!"* in which he calls women in bars "bitches" for not sleeping with him. My initial intention was to critique *Nature* magazine's [celebratory](#)

[profile](#) of Feynman's oeuvre, which made only glancing mention of "disturbingly sexist" sections of his book that revealed "predatory behaviour towards women," without further explanation of Feynman's well-documented history of sexual predation. But if you were to ask the many men who filled my mentions for weeks, my actual intention was to erase every trace of Feynman from the history books and to destroy the memory of a brilliant man who was just as much a victim of his time as the women whom he preyed upon.

Feynman, who died in 1988, is only one of the famous male scientists now sparking heated debates over the question of whether it's possible, or even desirable, to separate the science from the scientist. Even as several high-profile scientists have lost their jobs due to charges of sexual misconduct over last few years, [#MeToo has not much altered the science professions](#), and it likely won't until the culture of science is dismantled and rebuilt from the ground up. Part of this process must include a serious reconsideration of how we've regarded abusive male scientists in the past—and how we have allowed such figures, in turn, to control the story and direction of science.

By anyone's definition, Richard Feynman was a highly intelligent man. Among his many accomplishments, he contributed to several key conceptual breakthroughs in quantum physics, and his role in developing the field of quantum electrodynamics led to a Nobel Prize in 1965, which he shared with [Julian Schwinger](#) and [Shin'ichirō Tomonaga](#). What's more, in striking contrast to the stereotype of the distant and ultra-serious, all-work-and-no-play scientist, Feynman offered an alluring image of scientific inquiry in his popular physics books for non-scientist readers and humor-laden autobiographies. He came off as a fun, likeable guy who just liked to do math, play pranks, and bang on the bongos.

These things are true. But it's also true that throughout his career, Feynman reveled in blatant misogyny and sexism. In "*Surely You're Joking*", Feynman details how he adopted the mindset of a pick-up artist (an outlook he also

claims to have eventually abandoned) by treating women as if they were worthless and cruelly lashing out at them when they rejected his advances. He worked and held meetings in strip clubs, and while a professor at Cal Tech, he drew naked portraits of his female students. Even worse, perhaps, he pretended to be an undergraduate student to deceive younger women into sleeping with him. His second wife accused [him of abuse](#), citing multiple occasions when he'd fly into a blind rage if she interrupted him while he was working or playing his bongos.

Simply pointing out these parts of Feynman's life and character is like sending up a bat signal to science bros everywhere—a call to defend one of their heroes. After years of writing feminist critiques of science online, I am well versed in the vitriol that comes along with critiquing favored male scientists, but mentions of Feynman seem to hit a particular nerve. A cult of personality has cropped up around him that allows white male scientists to see themselves in him. In 1984, *People* magazine called “*Surely You're Joking*”—the same book that recounts his adventures as a pick-up artist—“irreverent” and noted that Feynman's unbuttoned memoir “gives nerds a good name.” Sheldon Cooper in the TV show *The Big Bang Theory* idolizes Feynman and plays the bongos in his honor, which feeds into the larger “[adorkable misogyny](#)” M.O. of the show. The recent *Nature* piece casts him as a “wild-nonconformist.” This type of representation gives Feynman's seedier side a pass, or in the case of the *People* article, even implies that it's something of a cultural virtue.

The Groping Geniuses

I am not here, however, just to roast Richard Feynman—the problem of unchecked misogyny in the sciences goes far beyond the conduct of a solitary bad actor. Predatory male scientists abound in such numbers that it would be a Sisyphean task to devote a series of essays to describing their

abuses in painful detail; even as this article was heading off to press, pop astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson was accused of sexual misconduct by multiple women. In addition to cataloguing the trespasses of individual scientists who abuse the cultural power of their position, we have to dismantle the structures that have allowed their abuses to continue with little to no disruption. Just for starters, this means abandoning the myth that the science can be separated from the scientist.

The conversation about separating the person from the practice has been slower to surface in science than it has in the literary, film, journalism, and art worlds. It might seem that there is less distance between an artist and the thing they create than for their counterparts in the sciences because art is often positioned as subjective and abstract. It's easier to draw a clear line from a writer like [Junot Diaz](#) who has displayed abusive behaviors to women in real life and his male characters who do the same. Scientists, however, have been framed as objective observers of phenomena while scientific practice itself has been seen as empirical, measurable, stable, and separate. This typical framing disconnects science from the rest of the world, allowing it to be perceived as a disembodied conduit for unadulterated knowledge. But science isn't just a body of knowledge; it's an institution and a culture with material connections to a lived-in world. Its practitioners are makers of and participants in that institution and culture.

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Because this conversation has matured in the art and entertainment world more than it has in science, I think it is worthwhile for the overlapping fields of scientific research, science communication, and science history to look to some of the cultural criticism that has come out in this post-Harvey Weinstein moment. With more and more revelations of sexual abuse coming from all corners of the culture industry, separating the art from the artist is becoming increasingly untenable and indefensible. In her *New York Times* article, “[How the Myth of Genius Excuses the Abuse of Women](#),” Amanda Hess points to several prominent examples of men who have been allowed to play out their abuses of women both on and off the stage and how the prestige of the former gives permission for the latter. “A proclivity for reprehensible acts is built right into the mythos of the artistic genius,” Hess writes. “The art excuses the crime.”

Genius is a familiar term in science too. It’s been applied generously to male scientists throughout history to the present. When Stephen Hawking, a scientist who scoffed at the title, died in March, Emily Atkin at *The New Republic* [detailed](#) how the term has historically been unequally distributed between men and women, and she advocates for the word’s retirement from science all together. *National Geographic* kicked off its anthology TV series titled *Genius* with a season on Albert Einstein, whose [recently published diaries](#) reveal gross racism and xenophobia, and the network’s most recent season portrayed Pablo Picasso, who believed women were either “[goddesses or doormats](#).” Indeed, James Gleick titled his 1992 biography of Richard Feynman *Genius: The Life and Science of Richard Feynman*.

Power Plays

Built into the popular conception of the genius mythos in the sciences is something more than mere intelligence; the solitary free-thinking scientist is also expected to showcase a proclivity for eccentricity, rule breaking, and

unconventional thinking and behavior. But when it comes to the abuse of scientific power for sexual predation, this stable of behaviors represents a slippery slope.

Two others in the “free-wheeling genius” category are astrobiologist [Geoff Marcy](#) and theoretical physicist [Lawrence Krauss](#), both of whom have finally been forced to face consequences for years of sexual predation in their respective fields. *BuzzFeed*’s stellar reporting of these cases, and many more besides, shows that Marcy’s and Krauss’s home universities and colleagues knew of their predation years before anything was done about it. Krauss will retire in May of 2019, more than a year after his predation was made public in February of 2018. In November of 2018, the *Boston Globe* broke the story of three former Dartmouth neuroscience professors who turned the psychology and brain sciences department into a “21st-century Animal House,” groping and assaulting female students, seven of whom are now suing the college. For a long time, their contributions to science—the evidence of their putative genius—excused their crimes. The same excuse is still trotted out by Feynman’s defenders.

Some might think that comparing Feynman, who practiced science in a different generation, with someone like Marcy is a false equivalency. We’ve put distance between the two, not just historically, but ethically—we typically treat even the smartest people in the past as backward or innocent by way of ignorance, deprived of the enlightened and progressive institutions we’ve erected to remedy such abuses, like workplace harassment trainings and Title IX proceedings. But this invidious contrast conceals a core continuity of patriarchal science, past and present: the power structures that gave Marcy years of free reign to prey on graduate students are the same ones that gave Feynman permission to draw portraits of naked female students. Power differentials have always existed, and men exercising their power over women to get what they want is corrupt, whenever it may happen under any sort of cultural license. If we had been

holding men like Feynman to account when they abused their power, we might have managed to ensure that men like Marcy would have faced consequences sooner—and that fewer women in the scientific community were victimized as a result.

No one has done a better job of illustrating how past failures connect to the present than Hannah Gadsby in her Netflix comedy special *Nanette*. Using art history, she seamlessly connects our continued reverence of Pablo Picasso to the abuses of some of Hollywood’s most egregious recent offenders:

They’re all cut from the same cloth: Donald Trump, Pablo Picasso, Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, Woody Allen, Roman Polanski. These men are not exceptions, they are the rule. And they are not individuals, they are our stories. And the moral of our story is, “We don’t give a shit. We don’t give a fuck about women or children. We only care about a man’s reputation.” . . . These men control our stories!

Science is as much a story as art or history. And it is a story that we have done a particularly bad job of telling because we have let men like Feynman control it.

Public records of Feynman’s abuse aside, Feynman told us who he was in his own memoirs: “*Surely You’re Joking*” and “*What Do You Care What Other People Think?*” He dressed up his misogyny and sexism with jokes and disguised it with a devil-may-care attitude; he built his bad behavior into his own genius mythos. That he was able to control his own narrative is a sign of the power that science can confer upon men—a privilege that has rarely been granted to women scientists, especially when they’re also women of color.

The Control Group

Feynman is not the only powerful man who has been able to control the story of science to the disadvantage of the women in his professional orbit. For a long time, the world believed that Rosalind Franklin had nothing to do with James Watson's and Francis Crick's discovery of DNA's structure. In no small part, that's because Watson said she didn't, and we believed him. His 1968 autobiography *Double Helix* was the first full-length account of the discovery story. He refers to Franklin as "Rosy" throughout the book, and describes her physical appearance in blatantly sexist ways. He also omits the part of the story in which he and Crick used Franklin's [Photograph 51](#) without her permission or knowledge; Photograph 51 was the key evidence to unlocking the structure of DNA. He couldn't completely erase Franklin, since too many people knew who she was, but he diminished her enough with a whimsical nickname and assessments of her attractiveness that her part in the story could easily be missed.

The solitary free-thinking scientist—the genius—is also expected to showcase a proclivity for eccentricity, rule breaking, and unconventional thinking and behavior.

In addition to enjoying the license to shape the stories about themselves, men like Feynman and Marcy have also been able to control the broader trajectory of science. Marcy was a senior leader and pioneer figure in astrobiology, and his influential and respected position in the field made him an arbiter of the field's data. This meant that women who required access to that data for their own work were often in an impossible position. As Ruth Murray-Clay, an associate professor of astrophysics and astronomy at UC Santa Cruz, [told BuzzFeed](#), "You don't want to make an enemy with someone who has access to data you might need." In the case of the Dartmouth neuroscientists, the complaint details how these men "exercised

tremendous control over their students academic careers, delaying exams, withholding advisory meetings, and threatening the research and funding of women who shunned their advances.” These men determine who gets access and who doesn’t. It’s impossible to know how many careers were re-routed or ended entirely by such abusive behaviors, and we should recall this basic disparity of power whenever we might feel tempted to bemoan the expulsion of Marcy and his ilk from the sciences.

But the impulse to defend men like Feynman or lament science’s loss of a pioneer like Marcy is not just about protecting the purity of scientific knowledge—after all, even if we were able to erase men like Feynman from the history books, we can’t suddenly unlearn what they taught us about quantum physics or faraway planets. No, the intensity with which Feynman’s fan base seeks his exoneration at the bar of history is about something more commonplace, and ugly: the instinctive behavior of men protecting themselves, each other, and their reputations. The men who replied to my original tweet and tried to argue against mentioning Feynman’s treatment of women were overwhelmingly preoccupied with Feynman’s legacy, which he is no longer around to defend—or more to the point in this context, to control. The men who are so quick to defend his legacy and disregard his misogyny not only see themselves in him as the once nerdy science boy who was able to become a symbol of cool; in all likelihood, they have been complicit, at a minimum, in perpetuating the kinds of conduct that Feynman is guilty of. They know at least in principle that Feynman’s behavior is wrong; after all, people do not tend to make excuses for things that they think are right. When Feynman adopts the mindset of a pickup artist, he tells himself that women are worthless whores; that way, if one rejects him, his masculinity stays intact. Perhaps some members of Feynman’s online troll brigade have also gone to a bar and bought a drink for a woman who still would not sleep with them, and tempered the sting of rejection by convincing themselves that she was just a bitch in the first place. When they tell me that Feynman practicing pick-up

artist techniques is not that big a deal, they are also reassuring *themselves* that it's not that big a deal. If Richard Feynman was a predator, so are they. And if a man as powerful and popular as Feynman can fall, so can they.

Feynman as a scientist and Feynman as a misogynist are not different storylines; they run in parallel tracks, but you wouldn't know it from the way we have told his story. While Marcy was making breakthroughs in astrobiology, he was harassing women with impunity. These men became unassailable because of the power and prestige that their scientific work confers upon them. Their stature in the world of science lent them the permission and the protection to prey upon women without consequence. So no, the life of the scientist cannot be separated from the science. To borrow another line from Hannah Gadsby, "Stop wasting my time."

Leila McNeill is the co-editor in chief of *Lady Science*. Her writing appears in *The Atlantic*, *Real Life*, and elsewhere.



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