

The “unmaking” of #MeToo’s Asia Argento

By David Walsh
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“I am thy Boy; but when reft of all senses I lie in thy arms, where then is thy Boy?”

***Der Rosenkavalier*, Richard Strauss, libretto by Hugo von Hofmannsthal**

The latest episode in the #MeToo drama unfolded earlier this week following the revelation that Italian actress Asia Argento, one of the alleged victims of producer Harvey Weinstein, purportedly paid off a young man who accused her of sexual abuse.

The *New York Times* reported on Sunday that “in the months that followed her revelations about Mr. Weinstein last October, Ms. Argento quietly arranged to pay \$380,000 to her own accuser: Jimmy Bennett, a young actor and rock musician who said she had sexually assaulted him in a California hotel room years earlier, when he was only two months past his 17th birthday. She was 37. The age of consent in California is 18.”

Bennett appeared with Argento in *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things* (2004), a film that the actress also directed and co-wrote. “Following the film’s release,” *People* magazine explains, “they reportedly remained close, frequently referring to each other as different variations of ‘mom’ and ‘son’ across social media.”

According to the *Times*, “for Mr. Bennett ... the 2013 hotel-room encounter was a betrayal that precipitated a spiral of emotional problems, according to the documents. ... The fallout from ‘a sexual battery’ was so traumatic that it hindered Mr. Bennett’s work and income and threatened his mental health, according to a notice of intent to sue that his lawyer sent in November [2017].” The lawyer’s letter “asked for \$3.5 million in damages for the intentional infliction of emotional distress, lost wages, assault and battery.”

The late Anthony Bourdain, the culinary television personality and Argento’s boyfriend, apparently helped “navigate” the affair with the help of lawyers. In the end, Argento agreed to pay Bennett \$380,000 over the course of a year and a half. An initial payment was made in April.

The letter of intent from Bennett’s lawyer asserted that for the young man, according to the *Times*, “seeing Ms. Argento present herself as a victim of sexual assault was too much to bear ... and called up memories of their hotel reunion. ‘His feelings about that day were brought to the forefront recently when Ms. Argento took the spotlight as one of the many victims of Harvey Weinstein.’”

On the face of it, the allegations by Bennett seem both opportunist and mercenary. The encounter with Argento may have been many things, but it does not seem to call for moral condemnation or criminal proceedings. For her part, Argento

strongly denies any sexual relationship with the young actor and musician. In a tweeted statement, in which she describes herself as “deeply shocked and hurt,” the actress writes that after several years of friendship with Bennett, he “unexpectedly made an exorbitant request of money from me.” Argento asserts that Bourdain, not wanting any “possible negative publicity” and also considering Bennett “dangerous,” “personally undertook to help Bennett economically.”

Argento, the daughter of talented Italian horror filmmaker Dario Argento, has played a deplorable role in the #MeToo campaign. Her allegations that Weinstein assaulted her in 1997 during the Cannes film festival featured prominently in Ronan Farrow’s October 2017 *New Yorker* magazine piece that helped launch the current witch-hunt. In the same piece, she conceded that “she eventually yielded to Weinstein’s further advances and even grew close to him. Weinstein dined with her, and introduced her to his mother. ... She said that she had consensual sexual relations with him multiple times over the course of the next five years.”

Since the appearance of the *New Yorker* article, Argento has encouraged the sexual abuse hysteria and attacks on due process and other democratic rights. At Cannes in May of this year, on stage to present the Best Actress award, Argento again claimed she was raped by Harvey Weinstein. The actress went on, “Even tonight, sitting among you, there are those that need to be held accountable for their conduct against women. But most importantly we know who you are and we will not allow you to get away with it any longer.” This type of vague, McCarthyite threat, unsupported by any evidence, reeks of vindictiveness and amounts to an attempt at intimidation.

Unsurprisingly, Weinstein’s lawyer, Benjamin Brafman, suggested the *Times*’ revelation about the payment to Bennett, “reveals a stunning level of hypocrisy ... At the very same time Argento was working on her own secret settlement for the alleged sexual abuse of a minor, she was positioning herself at the forefront of those condemning Mr. Weinstein, despite the fact that her sexual relationship with Mr. Weinstein was between two consenting adults which lasted for more than four years.”

A lawyer’s job is to do the best he can for his client, but this of course is hardly a satisfying or adequate response.

“Hypocrisy” is not primarily the issue here. Although there may be a degree to which the Italian actress is being hoisted on her own petard, what emerges from each side of the Argento affair, both her record of unsubstantiated allegations and the seemingly preposterous claims against her, is the filthy, dishonest character of the entire #MeToo movement.

We have no truck with Argento and her views, but it is not

difficult to see how this whole business threatens to become tragic for her. On the basis presumably of bad advice from others and poor decisions of her own, she got stridently caught up in the #MeToo campaign, even emerging as a leading spokesperson.

In the midst of that, she lost her boyfriend, Bourdain, to suicide (and it is conceivable the Bennett situation may have been a factor in the final surge of severe depression). Now, she faces a blacklisting of her own. In the wake of the Bennett story, the *Hollywood Reporter* explains, “Sky Italia and FreemantleMedia Italia, producers of singing competition X Factor Italy, where Argento is a judge, released a statement saying [that] ... if the *Times* story ‘were to be confirmed’ then the show would have no choice but to cut ties with Argento.”

Simultaneously, a spokeswoman for the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department told AFP that while there was no “open investigation” into the claims of sex abuse against Argento, “Enquiries will be made.”

And, it should go without saying, the *Times* and the media generally have no problem whatsoever turning on her.

The *Telegraph* in Britain already refers in a headline to Argento’s “making and unmaking.” A Yahoo! Lifestyle headline reads, “Unpacking the Asia Argento accusations: When the alleged victim becomes the alleged abuser.”

Some of her erstwhile allies wasted no time in leaving her for dead. “Intersectional feminist writer” Lara Witt already wants her readers to know why “it’s important that we hold Asia Argento accountable.” She refers to the “despicable events ... documented by Bennett and his lawyers,” and suggests that the mother-son relationship between Argento and Bennett in their 2004 film “adds layers to the grotesque abuse.” *Newsweek* blared: “[actress and #MeToo zealot] Amber Tamblyn Slams Asia Argento: ‘Protect All Bodies. Not Just Your Own.’”

On Twitter, fellow Weinstein accuser Rose McGowan was careful to distance herself, noting that she had only gotten “to know Asia Argento ten months ago.” Apparently referring to Bennett’s claims, she continued, “My heart is broken. I will continue my work on behalf of victims everywhere.”

Later, however, McGowan tweeted, “None of us know the truth of the situation and I’m sure more will be revealed. Be gentle.” Needless to say, the actress has not previously offered this legitimate piece of advice in regard to accusations of sexual harassment or abuse against any other individual. In any event, McGowan’s note of caution generated a flood of accusations that she was now playing the hypocrite. “If this were a teenage girl and [a] man in his 30s, would you still say this?” one of her Twitter followers asked her. Another commented, “I thought we were supposed to ‘listen and believe.’ Is that only when the accused isn’t one of your friends?”

The Bennett-Argento episode, its sordid explosion across the media (careful—and malicious enough—to report every salacious detail) and the various pledges by the #MeToo campaigners that they would press on “regardless,” all point to the hideous and destructive character of the current sexual witch-hunt.

As we have argued before, in the bogus name of protecting women in the workplace, a whole range of sexual behavior is in the process of being criminalized, punishment is demanded where

there is no proof of a crime and an atmosphere of bullying and repression has been imposed.

The citation at the top of this article comes from Act 1 of Richard Strauss’s comic opera, *Der Rosenkavalier* [*The Knight of the Rose*, 1911], with a libretto by the novelist and poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal. As the curtain rises, Princess Marie Therese von Werdenberg (known as the “Marschallin”) and her 17-year-old lover, Count Octavian Rofrano, are lounging in bed together just before daybreak. Perhaps this frequently performed and popular work should be banned from the repertory for its “despicable” and “grotesque” insinuations.

It’s not impossible for there to be the element of emotional abuse in an incident like the Bennett-Argento “hotel reunion” in 2013, but that doesn’t seem the most likely possibility.

As we have also been obliged to point out, human sexuality is enormously complex. Neo-Puritan outrage is both inappropriate and dishonest. In any event, while there may be many within the upper middle class who genuinely believe that the imposition and strict enforcement of their own moral code is the “best thing for everyone,” the forces manipulating this campaign are operating along different lines and with a different agenda.

The *New York Times*, the *New Yorker* and Ronan Farrow, the Clinton campaign, former Obama officials like Tina Tchen (organizer of the Time’s Up legal fund and “the most well-connected person working in women’s rights today,” *Bloomberg Businessweek*) and leading circles of the Democratic Party generally have taken advantage of the instability, subjectivism and bitterness of a group of female performers in Hollywood in particular to promote and leverage their brand of gender politics.

Terrified by the growing popular anger over social inequality, endless war and the brazen criminality of the Trump administration, these forces are exerting every ideological-propaganda muscle to divert that sentiment into reactionary or politically harmless channels, the anti-Russian frenzy, “fake news” on the Internet and the supposed epidemic of sexual abuse, and so on.

As the Argento example demonstrates, they have built something on unprincipled and extremely shaky foundations, indeed on quicksand. The fate of Argento means nothing to that section of the American establishment dedicated to the encouragement and incitement of identity politics. They are as prepared to see her trampled underfoot as they are the men she and her #MeToo colleagues have accused. Indeed, the new revelations will likely mean an intensification of the anti-democratic campaign, pushed even more viciously and relentlessly.

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