

With “Defenders” Like This...

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Abstract

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Article

Alice Dreger Destroys Academic Freedom in Order to Save It

It is an old adage that “crime, once exposed, has no refuge but in audacity.” This appears to be the thinking behind Alice Dreger’s latest attempt to stifle criticism of J. Michael Bailey’s pseudoscience in the name of “academic freedom”.

Joelle Ruby Ryan recently issued a Call for Proposals for a proposed panel of the National Women’s Studies Association entitled *The Bailey Brouhaha: Community Members Speak Out on Resisting Transphobia in Academia in Beyond*. In it, she accurately summarises the history of the “controversy” around Bailey’s *The Man Who Would Be Queen: The Science [!] of Gender Bending and Transsexualism*, as follows:

*While Bailey’s book *The Man Who Would be Queen* was released in 2003 to overwhelmingly negative reviews, the book caused a stir for its assertion that trans women can be split into two groupings: “homosexual transsexuals” and “autogynephilics.” Trans activists and allies mobilized and took Bailey to task for his bogus claims and helped to document a compelling case against him. Many considered it an open-and-shut case until the 2007 appearance of an article by Bailey colleague and intersex researcher Alice Dreger, who published a lengthy apologia for Bailey in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior* and castigated trans women activists for their attempts at “ruining” Bailey.*

In response, Dreger declared that the CFP was “laden with factual errors and misrepresentations about the history of the Bailey controversy and my work”, of which she could identify none, and points to her own dubious “scholarly history” (to be published by a journal controlled by Bailey, Blanchard, and Lawrence) and a breathtakingly inaccurate New York Times article that I have discussed previously as reliable sources of information. Dreger repeats her unsupported and unspecified claims of misrepresentations (in one case “profound” misrepresentations”) and factual errors throughout her correspondence on the subject with Emi Koyama on the Women’s Studies listserv WMST-L, and falsely claims that Bailey’s critics attempted to censor him. She does not enlighten interested readers about the scientific status of Bailey’s claims or his defamatory responses to criticism. She closes the e-mail

exchange by endorsing a veiled threat directed at Ryan by Emi Koyama(1):

What is the “academic freedom” that Dreger defends so fiercely as to resort to threats and blatant misrepresentations? Is it the freedom to publish scientific findings and engage in scholarly discussion without state or institutional censorship? Clearly not. That right has not been impinged upon. No one is calling for censorship of Bailey’s work, nor has any censorship occurred. The book remains in print, for all to see. Bailey’s right to fetishise “controversy” over science remains inviolate.

No, the “academic freedom” Dreger is so vigorously defending goes much farther. She believes that Bailey should not only have the right to publish and discuss his work without censorship, but without criticism. She believes that academic freedom includes the right to be free from complaints by research subjects whose rights you have violated, the right to make defamatory misrepresentations without them being exposed. Dreger believes that academic freedom includes not only the right to misrepresent pseudoscience as The Science of Gender Bending and Transsexualism, but also the right to have one’s work go unchallenged. By her own definition, then, she is violating the academic freedom of the scientists and other academics who have exposed Bailey’s quackery and research misconduct.

Dreger, ultimately, is defending the Emperor’s right to demand that his new suit of clothes be praised.

Lest one start to think that Dreger has reached the height of audacity, Dreger actually attempts to defend her fanciful version of academic freedom by using intimidation and defamation to stifle an academic discussion of Bailey’s work! What other purpose could be served by unsupported claims of unspecified (and, in fact, nonexistent!) “misrepresentations”? What else would Dreger be trying to do by cautioning Ryan that she is “putting herself at risk” by attempting to hold an academic forum to discuss the issue?

In Dreger’s bizarre world, Bailey’s misrepresentations are “science” and Dreger’s defamation and intimidation tactics are a “defence of academic freedom”. Lysenko would surely approve.

(1) In response to a post on the subject by Emi Koyama, I would like to note that the use of the word “threat” refers to Dreger, rather than Koyama. I can see how Emi Koyama could mean them in a non-threatening way; however, Dreger’s history of false accusations and surreal smears against Bailey’s critics (exemplified in her “scholarly history”) tips the balance in favour of “threat” when she repeats those words. I’d like to make clear that I did not mean to imply that Koyama was making a threat. The fact is, this is the first time I’ve seen her name come up in this context. I was unaware of any of the claims - described in her post - that had been made about her. I meant merely that her words became a threat when repeated by Dreger, who seems to specialise in them.

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