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The James Franco Test: Feminists fighting internalized patriarchy

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I reeeeally love James Franco. I held my breath watching *127 Hours* , I wondered what the heck was wrong with Julia Roberts in *Eat, Pray, Love* , and I fell in love by the end of *Tristan + Isolde* . Admittedly, he has played some questionable roles and many of his movies are straight duds (sorry, but I couldn't make it 10 minutes into *Howl* and the promo ads for *Spring Breakers* are cringe-worthy...). But Franco has this amazing mix of witty, creative, intelligent, multi-talented drive and retro, scruffy good looks that makes most women (and many men) swoon. And those Gucci ads? Be still my heart! Heck, even my brother loves him and just got his curly hair cut in a similar style. I'm almost embarrassed to admit it, but we were checking Franco's Facebook updates from the bar. We can't get enough!

So my heart sank when my favorite hipster artsy dream boy popped up in my Facebook trending feed: "James Franco tries to hook up with teen fan?" [Lezebel covered the story](#), postulating: "Maybe this is some kind of performative viral marketing campaign for his

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upcoming movie about a teenager who falls in love with her school's football coach? Or maybe James Franco is just a big creep. There's a 99% chance it's the latter." No, not James! I was shocked. Do I currently have a pedophile on my desktop wallpaper?

As [documented in a series of Instagram messages](#), Franco had apparently met a 17 year old Scottish girl at an autograph signing. She posted an image of them together, tagged Franco, and Franco responded by allegedly propositioning her to hook up in a hotel room. This was *after* it was made absolutely clear that she was under 18.

I wasn't as critical about it as I would have liked. Discussing the news with my friends, I noticed that the same victim-blaming, patriarchy-apologist tropes were flying into my mind: "She obviously did this to get attention," "James Franco would never do that, he's a great guy!" Wait, what?

James Franco might be the boy-next-door heart throb to young people everywhere, but that doesn't make him impervious. I started to think about how easily I can get on board when the alleged perpetrators are small town football players or celebrities in fields out of my interest. I have no incentive to doubt the victims. But Franco is dear to my heart and apparently my fandom gets in the way. I'm sure it's no different at all for basketball fans who could not believe their beloved [Kobe Bryant](#) capable of the same. After all, he's famous, he could get anyone he wants — this chick just wants a minute in the spotlight. Right?

The truth is, this is rarely the case. In a patriarchy, men are almost always given the benefit of a doubt though false rape reports are exceedingly rare. Women do not enjoy that same benefit, with most of us wrongly under the assumption that about half of rape



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accusations are false. What's more, this faulty thinking is usually accompanied with vicious backlash. The deluge of threats, vitriol, and violence that victims usually experience after reporting their attacker (especially if he is famous) has subsequently necessitated shield laws protecting their identity. Given this reality, it is foolish to presume that girls and women are reporting for personal gain. Indeed, they are knowingly taking on a tremendous personal risk in coming forward. There is a reason why so few speak out. Especially when the victim in question is a child, something is seriously wrong when we would prefer to assume the victim a liar and spare a grown man a false accusation.

And so this, ladies and gentlemen, is the James Franco test. If our Hollywood darling is caught in the act, how will we react? When it really hits home, will we hold true to our training? Will we second-guess women and children when it is a man we love and respect who is in question? At first, I was unclear if the allegation was part of an April Fool's joke or a promotional stunt for his upcoming film. In a way, I suppose I'm using these possibilities as a crutch — I'm trying to avoid victim-blaming while simultaneously clutching to the belief that certain men can be impervious. Focusing on rumours means I don't have to really consider that it could be true.

Turns out it wasn't a hoax. But ultimately, whether he is guilty or not, our reaction is of significance. Victims should always be given the benefit of a doubt given the ubiquitousness of male violence. Men harass, assault, rape, and even kill women all the time. The statistics make this abundantly clear. This isn't about attraction, loneliness, or desperation. This is about male power. Men hurt women and other feminized bodies to assert their dominance. They do it because they can.

Even our modern day James Dean is capable of violence against women. Heck even teen pop idol Justin Bieber exploits prostituted women. This is the thing — no man is incapable of violence against women. Rich and famous men are just as culpable, perhaps even more so given their position of power. James Franco was raised under patriarchy just like anyone else. And so are feminists, as was made abundantly clear in my struggle to overcome my socialized reaction.

Update – 04/04/2014: [Franco responds on Live With Kelly and Michael](#) this morning: “I’m guess I’m, you know, embarrassed, and I guess I’m just a model of how social media is tricky.” Hmm.... Yeah pretty “tricky” Franco.



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