

On rejection; or, If you've alarmed a journal editor, you must be on to something

Guest editorial by Mark A. McCutcheon



Mark A. McCutcheon

About two years into my doctoral studies, I had an article on Romantic literature ready to submit to scholarly journals. I submitted it to two journals and got two drastically different responses: the first was an unequivocal rejection; the next was an invitation to revise and resubmit. The first journal's rejection letter has become one of my favourite rejection letters, but I don't know whether I'd feel that way if the second journal hadn't eventually accepted and published the article.

The article, titled "*Liber Amoris* and the Lineaments of Hazlitt's Desire," analyzes the eighteenth-century radical essayist William Hazlitt's bizarre "book of love"—a too-thinly-fictionalized collection of obsessive, stalkerish love letters that he had actually sent to a servant girl who had the misfortune to work at his lodgings. The article also analyzes the strangely uncritical way in which subsequent generations of literary scholars and critics took Hazlitt's misogynistic, pejorative, and arguably actionable depiction of the girl—as a prostitute—more or less at his word.

I had initially consulted my supervisory committee and their colleagues in Romantic literary studies to learn which journals I might target: scholarly journals that were both respected and potentially receptive to my article's particular subject matter and argument. Among us, we identified two, initially. The first was a prestigious specialist journal in Romantic literature; the next was a more generalist journal on language and literary studies, though equally prestigious. I didn't send the article to both journals simultaneously—that's a no-no in scholarly publishing.

Here is the cover letter I sent, along with the article, to the journal specializing in Romanticism:

Mark A. McCutcheon

[university address]

[university phone and/or email]

The Editor

[*Journal Title*]

[journal address]

Dear editor of [*Journal Title*],

Please find enclosed two copies of my essay “*Liber Amoris* and the Lineaments of William Hazlitt’s *Desire*” (33 pages), which I submit for your consideration. As per your submission guidelines, the essay adheres to MLA style and is accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

Abstract:

This essay argues that the discourse of prostitution provides an organizing yet curiously understudied context for William Hazlitt’s *Liber Amoris*. Of central importance to this argument is the defamation of Sarah Walker’s character, which has been perpetuated by a critical tradition that has tended to accept Hazlitt’s word on Walker without question and consequently to dismiss feminist interpretations that attend to the specific historical contingencies determining his representation. By reviewing the critical literature on Hazlitt’s “book of love,” and by paying fresh attention to the text itself—an attention rewarded by the discovery of heretofore unnoticed quotations—the essay advances a feminist reading of this book as a travesty of romance in which Hazlitt’s libertinism intersects suggestively with his radical politics.

Thank you for considering this submission. I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

Mark A. McCutcheon

I include the cover letter here, in full, not just to tell this story, but to share a sample of this instrumental, academic genre—the article-submission cover letter—in the hope that it's helpful to graduate student readers. A cover letter should include the main components of a business letter, and it should be very short and to the point. It may describe—briefly—how the article has come about (i.e. it develops work for a course; it's based on a thesis chapter; etc.). It must mention the submitted article's title. If the journal requires the article itself to be stripped of identifying details, for what's called “blind” peer review—which is quite standard—then the cover letter is the crucial evidence that links article to author, establishing whose work it is. And it should go without saying that, when submitting an article to a journal, one must follow precisely all journal specifications (which are, these days, often publicly available online). Different journals have different specifications, some even for the cover letter. This sample letter describes an article sent in print copy by post. As digital scholarly publishing becomes more standard, print copy article submission is becoming rarer, but a cover letter remains a fairly standard inclusion.

So that's the cover letter I sent with my article (customized with the contact details for each of the journals to which I sent it).

A few weeks after I sent it to the first recipient, the prestigious journal specializing in Romantic literature, I got the following reply:

24 April 2003

Dear Mr. McCutcheon:

I'm sorry to have to disappoint you, but we have decided against publishing your essay on the *Liber Amoris*. Assuming we understand it correctly, your idea of comparing the sexism (even if assumed for parodic intentions) of Hazlitt's portrait of Sarah Walker in the book with the discourse of certain contemporary critical receptions of it is a clever one, but—that said—we often found your argument so convoluted with innuendo as to be hard to construe. And there is finally something a bit weak about the essay's conclusion: it seems more interested in attaching itself to an already extant critical interpretation than in saying something of its own about the book. Considering the occasional aggression of the argument, and the rather alarming (under the circumstances) endorsement of Derrida's metaphoric "hymen," the essay finally comes to seem a little overdone. We're sorry if this reaction seems ungenerous, and we appreciate the essay's scholarship and intelligence, but it seemed to us to have a bit too much effect for its own good as a coherent argument.

Sincerely,

[Editor's name redacted]

As rejection letters go, this one is substantial and unequivocal. It is substantial in its attention to particular aspects and details of my article, and it is unequivocal in rejecting the article. This letter does not invite a revised resubmission; it goes further and implies the argument itself is both indiscernible and insignificant, more style than substance—and apparently alarming style at that. If you want to read further between the lines, you might infer the editor goes so far as to question my soundness of mind.

There are a few different ways you can take a rejection letter like this. You could take the editor at their word and abandon your article. You could take their particular criticisms to heart, revise your article, and send it out again—although not to the same journal. Or you could decide that if you've truly 'alarmed' a journal editor, you must be on to something, and just send the article, as it is, to another journal.

Which is what I did. And as it happens, the second journal I sent my article to, the generalist journal on language and literature, replied a few weeks later with a more promising response: an extensive critique by peer reviewers, and an accompanying invitation by the editors to revise and resubmit. I happily accepted the invitation and put a lot of work into revising the article according to the reviewers' suggestions, but not each and every one of their suggestions.

When you get anonymous expert feedback from peer reviewers, you need not make every change they request. You have to assess their feedback in relation to your own knowledge of your subject matter, your own sense of what you want your argument to achieve, and how you imagine it taking its strongest shape.

In my case, having received such an unexpectedly receptive second response after such a dismissive first response, I felt both magnanimous and humbled enough to revise my article not just according to the second journal's feedback, but according to some of the points the first journal editor had made. For instance, their point about my article ending by attaching itself to another scholar's argument was important and I felt compelled to address it.

Several weeks after resubmitting the revised version, it must have seemed rehabilitated enough for me to get this peer reviewer's report (relayed to me by the second journal's editor):

Once I overcame the obstacles thrown up by the often-rebarbative style of this paper, I was pleasantly surprised to find it much improved from the last draft: not only better organized, but better argued. No longer does the paper distract itself by shifting its focus between Hazlitt's obsessions on the one hand and the question of his inamorata [i.e. beloved] Sarah Walker's [the servant girl] voice or lack thereof on the other. Instead, it concentrates on explaining how its close reading of *Liber Amoris* should change critics' minds about the interarticulation of Hazlitt's sexual and cultural politics. ... I can now recommend publication.

Naturally, that recommendation was contingent on "further copy-editing for style. In particular, I would like to see its propensity for jargon curbed." And that recommendation made trenchant criticisms as well. It's sobering to hear your writing style described as "rebarbative." But at that

point, the further requirements were understandable: jargon has its place in scholarship, but never as a device whereby style distracts from or obscures substance. And the further requirements were also, to my relief, easily achieved. Copy-editing demands close attention, but not the large-scale reorganization and reconceptualization that revision demands.

This experience taught me a couple of things that have proven valuable in my subsequent scholarly publishing efforts. For one thing, I learned not to be daunted or discouraged by one editor's scathing rejection. Instead, I now take it as encouragement, or even as a provocation, a dare. For another thing, I learned to treat editors' and reviewers' responses more skeptically, since one submission could be so firmly rejected by one and so warmly welcomed by another. Furthermore, the unpredictability of how a work is received by a publisher is not an experience reserved for graduate students who are new to scholarly publishing. As a tenured professor, I've had two recent such experiences, one with an article, the other with a book project. A recent article got rejected by three journals in a row (and underwent major revisions for a couple of them), before being accepted and published by a fourth. Likewise, a book prospectus of mine first got a "back to the drawing board" response from one scholarly press editor, and then the same prospectus got a "we'll take it" response from another. Well, it was more of a "we'll take it with revisions," but the revisions requested are minor, so I'll take it.

Scholarly publishing, like any publishing sector, can seem unpredictable, even capricious—and one sure way to navigate its uncertainties is by maintaining your conviction in your ideas and arguments. Trusting your inner voice helps instill the confidence you need that your analysis deserves an audience and tells you which other voices to trust in making that analysis as strong and persuasive as you can.

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