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*Goddesses, a Whore-Wife, and a Slave*EURIPIDES' *HIPPOLYTUS* AND EPISTEMIC
INJUSTICE TOWARD WOMEN*Edith Hall*

*But when Hippolutos exclaimed with rage
Against the miserable Queen, she judged
Intolerable life, and, pricked at heart
An Amazonian stranger's race had right
To scorn her, perished by the murderous cord:
Yet, ere she perished, blasted in a scroll
The fame of him her swerving made not swerve.*

—ROBERT BROWNING, "Artemis Prologizes," 1842

HERE IS SOME advice which appeared in a standard textbook on the law of evidence published repeatedly between 1899 and 1961 and used in the training of many thousands of lawyers and judges in English-speaking countries throughout those decades:

Modern psychiatrists have studied the behaviour of errant young girls and the women coming before the courts in all sorts of cases. Their psychic complexes are multifarious and distorted. . . . One form taken by these complexes is that of contriving false charges of sexual offences by men.¹

The author was an American jurist named John Henry Wigmore, the dean of the Law School at Northwestern University. He concluded here that all

1. Wigmore (1940) section 924a.

female evidence in cases of sexual assault *must* be vetted by psychiatrists to see if it is reliable enough to go to court.

Things may have improved for women witnesses somewhat since 1961, which is coincidentally the year when Sarah Pomeroy was awarded her PhD from Columbia University. It is in profound admiration and gratitude for her incomparable contribution to the investigation and teaching of ancient women that this chapter has been written.² But much more recent events in the cinema and other industries have cast an unprecedented spotlight on the issue of the reliability of women's accounts where they say that they have been sexually harassed, intimidated, assaulted, or raped by men. Women's testimony in all such cases, not only historically but also in our own time, has often been doubted or subjected to a greater degree of aggressive examination than other kinds of testimony, for a complex variety of reasons.³ These include the difficulty of proving or disproving acts to which there were no witnesses other than the accuser and the accused, and the indisputable fact that some women in history have laid false allegations of sexual violence against some men. A recent article in the *Journal of Forensic Psychology* studied police records of allegations made between 2006 and 2012 in the USA and determined that a very small proportion of rape allegations—approximately 5 percent—had been deemed either false or baseless.⁴ Yet, even taking into account the problem that the original investigators may have come to the incorrect conclusion in deeming a case false or baseless, and that the scholars (all male) who published the article were not focused on discovering how those judgments had been arrived at, this is a remarkably small proportion of the total allegations laid. It is, moreover, a far smaller proportion of rapes that actually take place, since this crime is notoriously and shockingly underreported,⁵ partly because women are afraid that they will not be believed.

By far the most important reason that women's word is routinely doubted has been ideological: it is the ubiquity of the belief that women are at a

2. It is appropriate that the venue in which I delivered this paper, as Bluhm Visiting Lecturer at Hunter College, CUNY, New York City, in April 2015, was the institution with which Professor Pomeroy was affiliated for much of her career. One of my editors, Professor Ronnie Ancona, is on the faculty at Hunter, and the other, Georgia Tsouvala, studied there. I am deeply grateful to comments made on the occasion that I delivered the lecture by Lawrence M. Kowerski, Helene Foley, and Judy Hallett.

3. Mack (1993).

4. De Zutter, Horselenberg, and van Koppen (2017).

5. See, e.g., for England and Wales, OFS (2018).

fundamental level epistemologically more unreliable than men. This unfortunate perception transcends both times and cultures. The particular motif of the sexually spurned woman, who frames for sexual assault the man who has spurned her, is attested in mythologies worldwide, including the biblical story of Potiphar's wife and Joseph in Genesis 39.⁶ Patriarchy needs to bolster the perceived real-world pervasiveness of the motif. In this chapter, I argue that it has been reinforced for twenty-five centuries by the powerful influence on our shared cultural imagination of the Greek mythical figure of Phaedra. The "classic" status of Euripides' *Hippolytus*, in which, as Browning said, she murderously "blasted" her stepson in her suicidal "scroll,"⁷ and Euripides' equally influential epigones, Seneca's *Phaedra*, and Jean Racine's *Phèdre*,⁸ have helped to "naturalize" in our culture a very specific figure: the woman who takes revenge on a man she desires, if he rebuffs her, by falsely accusing him of sexual assault. The naturalization of the woman-who-cries-rape is made even easier because the erroneous idea that women are somehow more prone to vengeful behavior than men, an idea physically embodied in the emphatic if deviant femininity of the Erinyes, also ran very deep in ancient Greek culture and society.⁹ This does not mean that we should exclude these aesthetically superb dramas from the curriculum or the repertoire, but it does mean that we should be careful when teaching or staging them to draw attention to the ideological work that the figure of Phaedra is doing and has always done.

I first published this argument in a short blog posted on May 24, 2015.¹⁰ I wrote it in response to an apology issued by the Hampshire Police for mistreating a rape victim from Winchester in southern England. She had reported the crime at the age of seventeen in 2012. The police threatened her with prosecution for lying about the attack. A male classics colleague had said to me at that time that she was one of the large number of women (he alleged) who, "like Phaedra," frame innocent men for sex crimes because they have been rejected or out of vindictive spite. But when the police finally conducted forensic tests on the T-shirt the Winchester woman had provided, they realized her evidence was entirely credible. The rapist was charged and convicted. The case clarified my intuitive dislike of Euripides' tragedy *Hippolytus*, a play of

6. Yohannan (1968); Goldman (1995).

7. Browning (1991) 109.

8. See Amodeo (1930); Heldmann (1968); Tschiedel (1969).

9. See Hall (2018).

10. Hall (2015).

exquisite poetic beauty but toxic ideology,¹¹ the text of which I had come to know intimately when I played the role of Phaedra in a production by Oxford University Classical Drama Society in the gardens of St. John's College in the summer of 1980.

Between the Greek original, the Neronian *Phaedra* attributed to Seneca, and Racine's *Phèdre* (1677), let alone descendants such as Eugene O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms* (1924), Mike Nichols' movie *The Graduate* (1967),¹² and Sarah Kane's iconoclastic *Phaedra's Love* (2005), this plot line has been mightily applauded on page, stage, and screen over the centuries. Eighteenth-century conservative aristocrats recommended that their sons study the myth of Phaedra and Hippolytus intensively.¹³ Countless actors, such as Madame Rachel, Sarah Bernhardt, Glenda Jackson, Diana Rigg, Isabelle Huppert, and Helen Mirren, have been keen to play the mendacious rape-accuser of Racine's famous tragedy *Phèdre*, in which the plot, which adopts elements from both Euripides and Seneca,¹⁴ is further complicated by Hippolyte's heterosexuality and love affair with Aricie. All these women stars have received rapturous acclaim for the supposed sublimity of the psychological portraits they have drawn.¹⁵

Spectators at one of Bernhardt's performances in England said that they could not bring themselves to applaud, since "the tragedy appeared too awful a reality."¹⁶ Bernhardt herself used the language both of the method actor's "reality" and the metaphysical epiphany of the divinely inspired performer in remembering her experience of the role alongside the star Jean Mounet-Sully:

11. At the time, Zuckerberg (2015) criticized my blog, claiming that it implied "an imaginary state of nature surrounding rape allegations: as though once upon a time, when people claimed they'd been raped, they were implicitly believed, until one day, somebody decided to lie (probably for revenge), and ever since then we've been deeply suspicious of sexual assault victims. If we could just stop telling stories about false allegations, goes the undertone, we'd forget that they'd ever happened and revert back to believing victims." I see no need to refute Zuckerberg here, since my own blogpost had maintained nothing of the kind, either explicitly or in any "undertone."

12. For the relationship between this movie and Euripides' *Hippolytus*, see Looney (2014).

13. See, for example, what the Right Honorable Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield, writes to his son, Philip Stanhope, Esq., in Stanhope (1774) vol. 1, 114.

14. See Wygant (1999). Much of the evidence for the Euripidean influence comes from Racine's markings on his Euripidean texts: see Phillippo (2003) 111–121.

15. For such lavish praise of Rachel as Racine's *Phèdre*, see Anon. (1846); for Bernhardt, see Richardson (1977) 57; in general, see Booth, Stokes, and Bassnett (1996).

16. Cited in Richardson (1977) 79.

I suffered, I wept, I implored, I cried: all of it was real; my suffering was horrible, the tears that flowed were burning and bitter. I implored Hippolyte for the love that was killing me, and the arms that I stretched out to Mounet-Sully were the arms of Phèdre, tense with the cruel longing to embrace. The god had come.¹⁷

Mirren's Phaedra was "a real woman poleaxed by passion."¹⁸ Every performance, especially if it is sensed as a psychological reality and enhanced by the emotional conviction of a famous actor, constitutes another authoritative "proof" of the mass delusion that information imparted by women is unreliable—the delusion that, as we shall see, philosopher Miranda Fricker calls "epistemic injustice" against them.

Although there have been a few attempts by classical scholars to interpret Euripides' *Hippolytus* in a way that recovers Phaedra for modern feminism,¹⁹ this has not been much reflected in the performance arts. Unlike the many revisionist authors and directors of plays about Clytemnestra, Medea, Jocasta, and Aeschylus' Danaids, or the heroine of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* for that matter,²⁰ the writers and directors of few productions or adaptations of which I am aware have decided to alter the ancient playscript altogether by, for example, removing the false accusation,²¹ or by reversing the gender roles to portray the obsession and lies of a young husband of a middle-aged woman when he falls in love with her daughter. Julia Ward Howe, for whom women's rights were a cause along with abolition and world peace, did nothing to ameliorate the impact of Phaedra's lethal lie in her otherwise radical rewriting of *Hippolytus* performed in Boston in 1911.²² Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry emphasized the damage done to the Indian psyche by British imperialism in her Punjabi verse adaptation of Racine's *Phèdre, Fida* (1990). She wanted to use the parallel Punjabi legend of

17. Cited in Mckee (2017) 168.

18. Billington (2009).

19. For feminist interpretations of the play, emphasizing Phaedra's attempts at self-control, moral agency, and the cruel limitations of life for women in the world of Athenian tragedy, see Rabinowitz (1986, 1993); Goff (1990), especially the first two chapters.

20. See the discussions in Hall, Macintosh, and Wrigley (2004); Macintosh et al. (2006); Hall, Macintosh, and Taplin (2000); and Rackin (2001). For feminist adaptations of *Antigone* and *Iphigenia in Tauris*, see Mee and Foley (2011) and Hall (2013) 256–273.

21. For the few exceptions, which often play down Theseus' role entirely and consummate the relationship between Phaedra and Hippolytus, see Lauriola (2015).

22. On which see Foley (2015).

Loona, the vindictive queen who persecutes her chaste stepson, Puran Bhagat, when he will not sleep with her, even though this story is equally as damaging to women's claim to veracity as Phaedra's. But beyond making Rani Fida much more emotionally confused than in the previous plays, there is no difference in Chowdhry's play in her culpability for the false charge.²³

It is perplexing that so few adaptors have shunned the motif of the false rape accusation. Rewriting the plot altogether was already recommended by Stevie Smith, in her poem "Phèdre," composed in the early 1960s after watching a production of Racine's tragedy starring Marie Bell:²⁴

*Now if I
Had been writing this story
I should have arranged for Theseus
To die,
(Well, he was old)
And then I should have let
Phèdre and Hippolytus
Find Aricie out
In some small meanness,
Say
Eating up somebody else's chocolates,
Half a pound of them, soft centred. Secretly in bed at night, alone,
One after another,
Positively wolfing them down.
This would have put Hip. off,
And Phaedra would be there too
And he would turn and see
That she was pretty disgusted, too,
So then they would have got married
And everything would have been respectable,
And the wretched Venus could have lumped it,
Lumped, I mean, Phèdre
Being the only respectable member
Of her awful family,
And being happy.*

23. *Fida* is included in Mukherjee (2005).

24. Reproduced from Smith (1975).

Smith concludes that classical stories *could* be rewritten: “If I were writing the story / I should have made it a go.”

There have, in fact, been a tiny number of versions where the false accusation has become entirely the work of one of Phaedra’s servants and never corroborated by her, which exculpates her from the perjury charge—if not the prejudice—against libidinous women: Rameau’s opera *Hippolyte et Aricie* (1733), with a libretto by Abbé Simon-Joseph Pellegrin, draws on both Euripides and Seneca, and above all on Racine’s *Phèdre*. But in Act III only Thésée and the nurse Oenone are on stage when Oenone invents the charge against Hippolyte. She does so to explain why he had been struggling over a sword with Phèdre when Thésée unexpectedly returned from the Underworld. Hippolyte is thought (mistakenly) to have died before Phèdre’s integrity can ever be tested by asking whether she refutes or corroborates Oenone’s testimony.²⁵ In the event, Phèdre kills herself before she is thus tested, and Hippolyte’s life is saved by Diana for the happy ending obligatory in French operatic entertainments of the 1730s. A false rape charge is here laid by a woman, but the woman is for once not Phaedra. In the most famous English-language neoclassical version of the story, Edmund Smith’s *Phaedra and Hippolytus* (1707), the lie is invented not by a female nurse but by the male Lycon, a courtier who is in love with Phaedra.²⁶ Smith, however, leaves Phaedra’s complicity in the falsehood ambiguous as she does nothing to refute Lycon’s accusation.

I suspect that the Euripidean Phaedra’s function as archetypal maker of a false rape allegation has drawn less attention from explicitly feminist scholars than it might have done because it has partly been obscured by her status as stepmother. Cultural histories of her influence often emphasize her close relationship by marriage with Hippolytus and the quasi-incestuous nature of her desire for him as, legally speaking if not by consanguinity, a surrogate mother figure—one of the legion of persecutory stepmothers not only in Greek myth and literature but in the Roman imagination and the folk tales of the world.²⁷ Psychoanalytical discussions have also emphasized the vicariously parental nature of Phaedra’s relationship with Hippolytus: this is the “Phaedra Complex” as identified in 1969 by the influential psychiatrist Alfred

25. See the discussion of McKee (2017) 84–85, although she does not notice the unusualness and significance of the exculpation of Phèdre.

26. See further Hall and Macintosh (2005) 71–74.

27. Watson (1995); Yohannan (1968).

A. Messer, then a professor at Emory State University and chief of Family Research and Treatment at the Georgia Mental Health Institute. He defined it as any eroticized feelings of a stepparent toward a stepchild.²⁸ That is, the reception of the Phaedra myth has failed to take the ethical issue of her decision to make a false allegation seriously enough in comparison with her erotic impulse.

First, let us remind ourselves exactly how this persuasive case of a “false rape allegation” unfolds in Euripides’ canonical tragedy, which was awarded first prize at the Athenian City Dionysia in 428 BCE. Phaedra is actually a victim of collateral damage, since Aphrodite tells us in her prologue that she has made her conceive a passion for Hippolytus in order to use the queen as an instrument in destroying her stepson in punishment for neglecting to worship Aphrodite (24–50); Artemis’ appearance at the end of the tragedy implies that the entire episode has been just one part of a much longer term game played between gods and goddesses over the lives and deaths of their favorite and least favorite humans. But since Phaedra’s scenes are played out entirely without further divine intervention, we watch her take decisions and act on them as if she is an entirely autonomous moral agent. The implication is that Aphrodite can use her as her instrument in a false rape allegation only because, as a Cretan woman, the daughter of Pasiphae and sister to Ariadne, she is genetically vulnerable to sexual aberration (337–339). She has tried to control her desire but has failed and resolved on suicide in order to protect her young sons’ good names (391–402). She reveals weakness of character in letting her nurse extract information from her and an apparent agreement to consider pharmaceutical help, even though she explicitly says she fears that the nurse will inform Hippolytus about the situation (486–520). When she overhears the opening of their dialogue, she leaves the stage (596–601).

On her return, she secures an oath from the chorus that they will divulge nothing of what has happened (711–714) and tells them that she will kill herself in order to preserve her own and her sons’ good names (723). In addition, however, she will become a menace to Hippolytus (728–731) in order “to prevent him from being self-righteous about my plight” (μη’ πὶ τοῖς ἐμοῖς κακοῖς/ ὑψηλὸς εἶναι). “By taking his share in this malady of mine, he will learn to be temperate” (τῆς νόσου δὲ τῆσδὲ μοι/κοινῇ μετασχὼν σωφρονεῖν μαθήσεται). In one of the first, and certainly one of the most dramatic false rape allegations

28. Messer (1969); see also Gérard (1993).

in world literature, she frames Hippolytus by hanging a sealed tablet from her gown before hanging herself. Theseus either reads out her writing or infers from it that Hippolytus “presumed forcibly to assault my marriage bed” (Ἰππόλυτος εὐνήs τῆs ἐμῆs ἔτλη θιγεῖν /βία; 855–856). Because Theseus is incandescent with rage, believes the message, and makes no attempt to check whether anyone has any evidence to adduce or can corroborate her allegation, Hippolytus is doomed.

Phaedra’s behavior in accusing Hippolytus of rape is immoral: “Thou shalt not bear false witness.” So is the behavior of anyone who makes false allegations against anyone else, even if the motive has an altruistic element, such as Phaedra’s hope to protect her own children’s names. In Euripides’ own earlier version of the myth, *Hippolytus Veiled*, about which we know very little for certain, she seems to have behaved even worse, although scholars disagree about the reason. It seems to be Phaedra who even admits in one fragment (fr. 430) that she has “a teacher of daring and audacity [τόλμηs καὶ θράσους] who is most inventive amid difficulties—Eros, the hardest god of all to fight.”²⁹ It is difficult to imagine a self-characterization more different from that of Euripides’ other Phaedra, who is preoccupied with maintaining a reputation for modesty and honor.³⁰ *Hippolytus Veiled* may have involved Phaedra plotting to persuade Hippolytus to kill Theseus and seize the throne, or approaching him directly or through a letter sent by her nurse, or by staying alive to accuse Hippolytus directly.³¹ The hypothesis prefixed to the extant *Hippolytus* by Aristophanes of Byzantium (T i) says that it was written later than *Hippolytus Veiled*, “for what was unseemly and reprehensible [τὸ γὰρ ἀπρεπὲs καὶ κατηγορίας ἄξιον] has been put right in this play.” Aristophanes clearly did not see Phaedra’s false accusation as notably “unseemly” or “reprehensible”: like most ancient and many modern men, he probably just thought it was a typical example, and further proof, of women’s congenital unreliability as moral agents and custodians of truth.

Sadly, we know next to nothing about the contents of Sophocles’ *Phaedra*.³² The woman’s perjury is much more detailed in the more

29. All references to the fragments of and testimonia to Euripides’ lost plays are cited from Collard and Cropp (2008).

30. See the classic article by Dodds (1925) and the response of Craik (1993).

31. See Roisman (1999); Hutchinson (2004).

32. See Kiso (1973).

substantial remains of Euripides' *Stheneboea*. This dramatized the story of Stheneboea's sexual passion for Bellerophon, the Corinthian guest-friend who had committed a murder and fled to the palace of her husband, Proetus, King of Tiryns. The surviving hypothesis contains this information (Test. iia.7–15):

Βελλεροφόντην δὲ φεύ-
γοντα ἐκ Κορίνθου διὰ φόνον αὐτὸς
μὲν ἤγγισε τοῦ μύσου, ἡ γυνὴ δὲ αὐ-
τοῦ τὸν ξένον ἠγάπησε. τυχεῖν δὲ οὐ
δυναμένη τῶν ἐπιθυμημάτων δι-
έβαλεν ὡς ἐπιθέμενον ἑαυτῇ τὸν
Κορίνθιον [ξένο]ν. πιστεύσας δὲ
ὁ Προῖτος αὐτὸν εἰς Καρίαν ἐξ-
έπεμψεν, ἵνα ἀπολῆται.

When Bellerophon fled Corinth because of a killing, Proetus purified him of the pollution, but his wife fell in love with their guest. When she was unable to achieve her desires, she traduced the Corinthian [guest] as having assaulted her. Trusting [her], Proetus sent him to Caria to be killed.³³

In the prologue, Bellerophon said that he resolved to leave Tiryns because Proetus had a “foolish wife” who had “shamed” her husband (γυνὴ κατήσχυν’ ἐν δόμοισι νηπία; fr. 661.5) by her constant sexual propositions to Bellerophon, relayed by her nurse (fr. 661.8–14):

λόγοισι πείθει καὶ δόλω θηρεύεται
κρυφαῖον εὐνῆς εἰς ὀμιλίαν πεσεῖν.
ἀεὶ γὰρ ἤπερ τῶδ’ ἐφέστηκεν λόγῳ
τροφὸς γεραῖα καὶ ξυνίστησιν λέχος,
ὕμνει τὸν αὐτὸν μῦθον. “ὦ κακῶς φρονῶν,
πιθοῦ· τί μαίνῃ; τλήθῃ δεσποίνης ἐμῆς
[one or more lines missing]
κτήσῃ δ’ ἀνακτος δώμαθ’ ἐν πεισθεῖς βραχύ.”

33. Translated by Collard and Cropp (2008).

She tried words to persuade me and guile to snare me into slipping covertly into the intimacy of her bed: for her old nurse, who is in charge of this talk and tries to bring us together, always sings the same tune: “Your thinking is bad! Be persuaded! Why this madness? Have the courage . . . of my mistress, and you will gain the king’s palace, once you are persuaded in this one small thing.”

Bellerophon concludes that he must leave, since he has no wish (30–31) to denounce Stheneboea and thus stain her reputation in a way that would tear apart Proetus’ household (οὐδ’ αὖ κατειπεῖν καὶ γυναικὶ προσβαλεῖν/κηλῖδα Προΐτου καὶ διασπάσαι δόμον). This, of course, is the sort of selfless, manly moral scruple that neither Phaedra nor Stheneboea possesses.

The play covered an unusually extended period of time, for by its end Bellerophon had returned from Lycia, having survived his ordeals there, and dispatched Stheneboea by dropping her from Pegasus’ back into the sea near Melos. Her body was taken back to Tiryns, and Bellerophon returned there once more, to tell Proetus that by her death, and Proetus’ bereavement, he had punished both of them for plotting against him. The last fragment sums up the moral of the play (fr. 671); someone, presumably Proetus, asks that she (probably her corpse) be taken inside, since “no sensible person ought to trust a woman” (πιστεύειν δὲ χρῆ/γυναικὶ μηδὲν ὅστις εὖ φρονεῖ βροτῶν).

The point of exploring Euripides’ *Stheneboea* in detail is to show how, in his surviving *Hippolytus*, the spotlight was cast much more intensely on Phaedra’s false accusation. In *Stheneboea*, the antiheroine’s plans included deposing her husband, presumably by killing him, as well as adulterous sex. She only compounded these nefarious designs by laying the false charge against her beloved. In *Hippolytus*, on the other hand, Hippolytus may be arrogant and Theseus may take precipitate decisions, the nurse is meddlesome and disobedient, and Phaedra sexually frustrated. But the sole seriously immoral act—the leaving of the mendacious suicide note—is committed by a woman. This makes the play’s message—that even otherwise virtuous women with previously unblemished records do not make credible witnesses—even more ideologically potent.

In the Renaissance and Early Modern periods, the Senecan *Phaedra* exerted a much greater cultural influence than Euripides’ play, which was not published in Greek until 1495, nor translated into English until 1781.³⁴ The

34. Lascaris (1495); Potter (1781).

Senecan play was performed in Latin at the Palais de Cardinal Saint Georges in France as early as 1474 and was imitated closely by Robert Garnier in his humanist tragedy *Hippolyte* in 1573. Its influence can be seen at work in Shakespearean drama and in the work of many other authors.³⁵ In this influential Senecan version, it is the nurse, not Phaedra, who invents the false charge against Hippolytus (719–735). But Phaedra does elaborate the details of the fabricated rape directly to her husband, Theseus (888–902). She redeems herself to a certain extent by confessing that she had lied before she commits suicide, but Hippolytus is dead. The moral effect is just as sexist as the version in Euripides—indeed, the play implies that even when *two* women lay the identical charge against a single man, their word should routinely be doubted. But in sharing the falsehood between the nurse and Phaedra and in writing a confession for Phaedra, the Senecan play slightly dilutes Phaedra’s revenge motive. Her nurse is primarily concerned to save Phaedra’s life (she is convinced that if the truth is revealed, Phaedra will kill herself immediately; see 854–857), and Phaedra does eventually make an effort to clear Hippolytus’ name.

One line of argument often used by social conservatives to defend artworks in any media that appeal to obsolete ideological beliefs, whether about race, class, sexual orientation, or gender, is that they are designed for entertainment and have negligible social impact. The ancient Greeks themselves were rather more honest about the enormous potential of stories to shape individual character and collective history. In Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, there is a curiously modern-sounding interchange between Aeschylus and Euripides on the relationship of tragedy to its spectators. Aeschylus claims that his plays about heroic warriors helped keep the citizens of Athens ready for warfare. He did not put “whores” like Phaedra and Stheneboea on stage, and nobody knows of any “erotic woman” about whom he has ever written a role (1043–1044):

ἀλλ’ οὐ μὰ Δι’ οὐ Φαίδρας ἐποιοῦν πόρνας οὐδὲ Σθενεβοίας,
οὐδ’ οἶδ’ οὐδεὶς ἤγντιν’ ἐρώσαν πώποτ’ ἐποίησα γυναῖκα.

But by Zeus I created neither whorish Phaedras nor Stheneboeas, And nobody knows of any lustful woman I have created.

An interchange follows alleging that Euripides’ own wife had behaved similarly to these whores (*pornai*), leading into this discussion of the relationship between fiction, truth, and the poet’s role as civics teacher (1049–1056):

35. Arkins (1995); Jacquot (1964); Lefèvre (1978).

ΕΥΡΙΠΙΔΗΣ	καὶ τί βλάπτουσ' ὦ σκέτλι' ἀνδρῶν τὴν πόλιν ἄμαι Σθενέβοιαι; Αἰσχύλος ὅτι γενναίας καὶ γενναίων ἀνδρῶν ἀλόχους ἀνέπεισας κῶνεια πιεῖν αἰσχυνθείσας διὰ τοὺς σοὺς Βελλεροφόντας.
ΕΥΡΙΠΙΔΗΣ	πότερον δ' οὐκ ὄντα λόγον τοῦτον περὶ τῆς Φαίδρας ξυνέθηκα; Αἰσχύλος μὰ Δί' ἄλλ' ὄντ': ἄλλ' ἀποκρύπτειν χρὴ τὸ πονηρὸν τόν γε ποιητὴν, καὶ μὴ παράγειν μηδὲ διδάσκειν. τοῖς μὲν γὰρ παιδαρίοισιν ἔστι διδάσκαλος ὅστις φράζει, τοῖσιν δ' ἠβῶσι ποιηταί. πάνυ δὴ δεῖ χρηστὰ λέγειν ἡμᾶς.
EURIPIDES	And what harm do my Stheneboeas do to the state, you wretch?
AESCHYLUS	You incited noble wives of noble men to drink hemlock out of shame on account of your Bellerophons.
EURIPIDES	So was the story I composed about Phaedra imaginary?
AESCHYLUS	No, it is real. But the poet should cover up wickedness, not represent it and teach it. For little boys are taught by teachers, and adults by poets. We are under obligation to speak about honourable matters.

In this breathtaking sequence, no fewer than four different ways of thinking about the relationship of “whores” in Euripidean tragedy to social reality are considered: (1) that these stage characters can make virtuous women feel so ashamed that they are suicidal; (2) that they are somehow inspired by Euripides’ own experience of his own real-life wife; (3) that the story of Phaedra is “real,” whether in the sense that the events depicted in Euripides’ tragedy were historical or that the story about Phaedra was so well known that she had acquired an indisputable ontological status; and (4) that poets need to avoid staging or to hide “real” wickedness in order to improve the morals of their audience.

Plato’s Socrates is almost certainly thinking of the same Euripidean females when he argues in the *Republic* that citizens should not be involved in the theatrical mimesis of inappropriate character types, including the “erotic woman” (ἐρώσαν), because people internalize habits even if they are just assumed during the “make-believe” process of theater (3.395d–e).³⁶ Just because ancient men seemed more concerned about the sex drive of Phaedra and Stheneboea than about their duplicity, whereas in the twenty-first century we are much more likely to find the latter completely unacceptable, does not

36. On which see further Hall (2017) 35–41.

detract from the theoretical sophistication of the discussions in Aristophanes and Plato regarding the relationship of art to life. We may not take hemlock out of revulsion at characters in the fictions we consume, nor embark on blind imitation of their misconduct. But our sensibilities and attitudes to others are certainly shaped by these fictions' contents.

And in academia, if not in the popular press, few would now deny that myths were a crucial part of the ideological training of individuals in classical antiquity. The conduct of heroes and heroines offered role models, positive and negative paradigms of behavior, reinforcement of fundamental taboos and imperatives, and the establishment of boundaries between human and god, human and animal, Greek and non-Greek, man and woman, adult and child, civilized and uncivilized, honorable and dishonorable. Young men were trained for the horrors of the battlefield with stories of the heroic exploits of Achilles and Diomedes; they were shown ideal models of male friendship by Heracles and Theseus or Orestes and Pylades. The *Odyssey* offered a variety of episodes of *xenia* exemplifying the right and wrong way of treating guests and hosts and even poor beggars who entered your portals. And a Greek author writing under the Roman Empire in the second century CE suggests that *women* did relate closely to the experiences of the female characters whom they saw on stage in drama. The author is Artemidorus, who recorded in his *Interpretation of Dreams* two dreams women had really experienced in which tragic myth is involved. The deterioration in a relationship between a woman and her slave girl, for example, was presaged by her dream about the conflict between Hermione and her slave Andromache in Euripides' *Andromache* (4.59). Another woman dreamed that she danced in a chorus for Dionysus, a dream that correctly predicted that she would kill her own son, as Agave kills her son Pentheus in Euripides' *Bacchae* (4.39).

An important work of classical scholarship asking seriously and in a sustained manner how myth shaped female psyches is Helene Foley's path-breaking commentary on the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, published in 1994. Foley emphasized the relationship between the psychological development of girls, especially their preparation for marriage and motherhood, and the myth of mother-daughter separation, loss, and then partial reunion after the daughter had been incorporated into her new, patrilocal, marital household. But the landmark text in terms of the ideological work done by stories in the limiting of the potential of female experience is Carolyn Heilbrun's essay "What Was Penelope Unweaving?" She first delivered it to a conference in 1985, lamenting the lack of female quest heroes in our cultural heritage and claiming that women had at that time few stories other than marriage and

motherhood by which to shape their lives. The problem for Penelope was that hers was an unwritten story: “how a woman may manage her own destiny when she has no plot, no narrative, no tale to guide her.”³⁷ It could be argued that women have had no positive paradigms for how to behave properly when erotically smitten with an inappropriate person. It could equally well be argued that men watching *Hippolytus* come away with the conviction that any accusation of rape made by a woman is likely to be untruthful, and that an accused man may be innocent even if he does not use all the legal defenses at his disposal because he may well be an honorable man and have sworn someone an oath of silence.

Doubting women’s evidence is an international menace. At its most extreme, under sharia law, women’s evidence is officially worth half or a quarter of a man’s, if admissible at all. At the other end of the spectrum, it has merely impeded women’s progress in professions where custody of the truth is central: the church, the law, and academia. Within classics, the vocabulary used historically in reviews of works published by female scholars has often undermined their claim to reliability or veracity by the use of skeptical or dismissive vocabulary.³⁸ The brilliant work of philosopher Miranda Fricker in her *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (2009) has done much to advance our understanding of the ways implicit bias works against groups, including women, who have been historically regarded as unsafe custodians of the truth.

Fricker identifies two types of dysfunction in our epistemic practices. Much of our knowledge is acquired from the testimony of others, whether from family members, colleagues, or newspapers. But some speakers are granted a reduced degree of credibility by a listener on account of some prejudice the listener holds. This is not just an epistemological question. A testifier whose credibility is reduced on account of a prejudice is wronged by having her or his “capacity as a knower” belittled. An example would be when a jury does not believe something said to them by a witness because the person is female or speaks with a foreign accent. “Testimonial injustice” is partly a result of Fricker’s second dysfunction, which she calls “hermeneutical injustice.” This is a more general phenomenon,

37. Heilbrun ([1985] 1990) 126.

38. See Hall and Wyles (2016) 20–21.

when someone is trying to make sense of a social experience but is handicapped in this by a certain sort of gap in collective understanding—a hermeneutical lacuna whose existence is owing to the relative powerlessness of a social group to which the subject belongs. Such a lacuna renders the collective interpretive resources structurally prejudiced.³⁹

Both forms of injustice were experienced by women individually and as a group in classical Athens, where women were not even allowed to represent themselves in court and where tragedy repeatedly reaffirmed the inferiority of female deliberative powers and the chaos that unsupervised womenfolk could inflict on households in the absence of legitimate husbands.⁴⁰ Both forms of injustice still blight our attitudes to allegations of sexual assault, and both rest on prejudices that are constantly reaffirmed in certain kinds of fiction which we consume as part of our canonical curriculum as well as recreationally.

Euripides' *Hippolytus* is correctly included in the article entitled "False Rape Accusation" on the popular-culture wiki *TVTropes*,⁴¹ founded in 2004 and now also covering film, theater, and fiction as well as television. The length of the list of false rape accusations made by women against men in both canonical and contemporary popular culture is depressing. Several acclaimed high-brow novels feature the trope, from the trials of Dr. Aziz, wrongly accused of raping Adela in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), and Tom Robinson, the victim of Mayella Ewell's lies in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), to Briony Tallis' vicious lies in Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001). These novels have all been made into famous movies. Other successful "false rape accusation" films abound: ones in which the females are motivated by revenge include in Alan Shapiro's *The Crush* (1993), where the accuser is only 14; John McNaughton's *Wild Things* (1998), and *The Life of David Gale* (2003), directed by Alan Parker and starring, ironically, Kevin Spacey as the victim of the false charge. Accusations of sexual misconduct are just some of the lies told by the pernicious Amy Elliott Dunne in the hugely popular thriller *Gone Girl* (2014). False rape accusations are also a staple of plot lines in major television series that have included *M*A*S*H*, *Baywatch*, *CSI NY*,

39. Fricker (2008) 69.

40. Hall (1997, 2009).

41. See "False Rape Accusation," *TVTropes*, accessed August 18, 2020, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/FalserapeAccusation>.

Dexter, and *Hetty Wainthropp Investigates*. I am not suggesting that such plot lines be banned, of course, although I am personally surprised that women seem to queue up to act in them. I am simply suggesting that, as in the case of Euripides' *Hippolytus* and its derivatives, we take considerable pains to keep our own minds and those of our students focused on the indisputable truth that the stories they tell of mendacious females framing men for rape are, in actual fact, fiction.