

The Johnny Depp-Amber Heard trial, #MeToo and Hollywood tragedy

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28 April 2022

The \$50 million defamation lawsuit of actor Johnny Depp against his former wife Amber Heard has entered its third week in Fairfax, Virginia, and will likely last several more.

The lawsuit immediately involves Depp's claim that Heard's December 2018 opinion piece in the *Washington Post*, in which she painted herself as "a public figure representing domestic abuse," has effectively destroyed his career.

Whether Depp wins his case or not, the trial has dealt a sharp blow to the #MeToo campaign and the self-serving mythologies with which it has attempted to surround relations between the sexes, in Hollywood and beyond. Reflecting the interests of an affluent layer of female professionals in and around the Democratic Party, the campaign has created a peculiar, Victorian-age fantasy of helpless, endlessly wronged womanhood, entirely at the mercy of villainous men. It is impossible to estimate the precise number of adults who actually swallowed this nonsense, but the first two weeks of the Depp trial have restored elements of a far more complex reality.

Testimony has revealed that at the very least Heard meted out verbal abuse as much as or more than she received it, and Depp's claim that she was the physically violent one in the tortured relationship has yet to be disproven. Heard's self-righteous posturing in the *Post* as a courageous survivor of "domestic abuse" has been discredited. Depp launched his suit, as he has suggested, because it "was the only time I was able to fight back and use my own voice," but it has also brought out facts of a broader significance.

The Associated Press reported Monday that Depp has denied "that he ever hit Heard, and accused her of hitting him and throwing items including paint cans and vodka bottles at him." In one incident, he asserts that a bottle hurled by Heard severed part of one of his fingers. Jurors heard an audio clip in which Heard, the AP noted, "seems to taunt him [Depp] and suggests he won't be believed or respected if he were to publicly cast her as an abuser. 'Tell them, I, Johnny Depp, I'm a victim of domestic abuse ... and see how many people believe or side with you,' Heard says

on the recording."

Heard also suggested in the clip that the reason no one would believe Depp was because he was a "man." "You can tell people it was a fair fight ... see what the jury and judge think," she said.

This is quite critical, and devastating. The #MeToo witch-hunt, which has destroyed dozens of careers and even lives, has advanced the claim that the woman accuser must always be believed, even in the absence of any corroborating evidence. Amber Heard, in her recorded comments, both makes a mockery of this and exposes its untruth. Clearly, she was well aware that the media and middle class public opinion would take her side. Indeed, she was fully banking on it.

Those swept along by the reactionary torrent of identity politics ought to pay heed. Does anyone seriously suppose that Heard was alone in Hollywood, the entertainment industry and the media in being canny (or cynical) enough to count on the "presumption of male guilt"? That would seem highly unlikely. What retroactive light does this shed on the uncorroborated claims of Rose McGowan, Asia Argento, Mira Sorvino, Ashley Judd, Rosanna Arquette and many others? Why, in general, should any of the unsubstantiated allegations be taken at face value?

The WSWS has insisted on this from the beginning of the #MeToo effort in October 2017. More than four years ago, we condemned those who cringed before the sexual misconduct crusaders and meted out "instantaneous punishment for unsubstantiated claims passed on by the corrupt, sensationalist American media."

After one year of the #MeToo campaign, we wrote that its ostensible aim was "to combat sexual harassment and assault, i.e., to bring about some measure of social progress. However, the repressive, regressive means resorted to—including unsubstantiated and often anonymous denunciations and sustained attacks on the presumption of innocence and due process—give the lie to the campaign's 'progressive' claims."

These positions have been vindicated, not only by the

Depp trial, but by the entire evolution of the #MeToo campaign, which continues to pick off victims, and the social milieu that promotes it, now caught up in large part in the ferocious US-NATO war drive against Russia.

In order to challenge Heard's claim to be a victim of abuse, Depp has been obliged to let the public in on his life and the lives of Hollywood celebrities in general, including some of their more sordid features. As the actor is well aware and admits, it is not a pretty picture in many regards. The self-indulgence and self-absorption, the immense waste of time and talent, the all-too-frequent pettiness, the misplaced rage and frustration, all of this nourished by substance abuse ...

That Depp is suing for \$50 million has its instructive character. The number was not picked out of the air. The actor may well have lost tens of millions of dollars as a result of the allegations or smear-rumors about his conduct. With giant conglomerates such as Disney raking in billions in profits, they can afford to shower a select number of performers with large sums. As we recently noted in a comment on Will Smith's actions at the Academy Awards, "The actor belongs to the world of celebrities, whose immense wealth (Smith is estimated to be worth \$350 million) and fame put them largely beyond the normal reach of the authorities or mere mortals generally—unless, of course, an alleged sexual transgression or 'micro-aggression' is involved. The cult of celebrity has reached an advanced and severely damaging stage in America, having 'flourished' dramatically in recent decades."

Moreover, it is difficult not to relate, to one extent or another, the nightmarish, mutually destructive character of the Depp-Heard relationship to the emptiness and falsity of the material with which the two actors were obliged to contend. Depp, who has done a number of intriguing films, both early in his career and more recently (including *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *City of Lies*, and *Minamata*), was largely prominent at a certain point for the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series. That "franchise" ran out of anything amusing to say during the first installment released in 2003 and has simply been sustained after that—through four sequels so far—by the dead hand of corporate profit-making. (The lucrative series has brought in more than \$4.5 billion at the box office.)

Heard is best known for her participation in the "DC [Comics] Extended Universe," as "Atlantean princess" Mera in the superhero film *Justice League* (2017), and later playing the same part in *Aquaman* (2018), *Zack Snyder's Justice League* (2021), and *Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom* (2023).

How could appearing in this sort of rubbish not prove demoralizing and psychologically damaging in the shorter or

longer run, at least for individuals with the slightest sensitivity or artistic ambition? Performing in empty and bombastic work must be the most exhausting and debilitating sort of activity, still making great demands on the individual's energy and conscientiousness, but giving nothing—or less than nothing in some instances—artistically or morally rewarding in return.

Even when the American film studios were creating their most intriguing and realistic works, they devoured their human material at an alarming rate. The studios always fought for, whether they achieved it or not, the strict subordination of the artistry and personality of the actor, writer or director to corporate interests, including ideological and political interests. Individual films could be—and were—highly critical and perceptive, but Hollywood as an institution was dedicated to creating an unreal and fantastical picture of America as a land of beauty, wealth and success. This "double bind" at the heart of film production and distribution, usually only intuited by the individual artist, has led to vast personal distress and tragedy.

Leaving aside the not insignificant number of outright political casualties of the anti-communist blacklist, American film history is still littered with victims, from the famed (Marilyn Monroe, Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, Frances Farmer, Margaret Sullavan, Montgomery Clift, Veronica Lake, Judy Garland, Natalie Wood, River Phoenix) to the lesser known (Barbara Payton, Constance Smith, Gail Russell and a thousand more), from those who violently ended their own lives or drank and drugged themselves into oblivion to those who suffered in less spectacular fashion.

In the final analysis, this sorry record is the expression in tears and blood of the conflict between the imperative, unrelenting need of the sincere artist to reveal the truth about life and the large film companies' need to conceal it, of the essential incompatibility of art and commerce.

On July 29, 1940, less than five months before his death, at which time he was working on a novel about a film studio (*The Last Tycoon*) and futilely attempting to make a living writing scripts, F. Scott Fitzgerald commented in a letter, "Isn't Hollywood a dump—in the human sense of the word? A hideous town, pointed up by the insulting gardens of its rich, full of the human spirit at a new low of debasement."

The Depp case is another reminder that while immense talent resides in the film industry, it requires a new, radically altered orientation and purpose.



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