

## Finding Empathy for Phaedra in Roman Wall Paintings

Phaedra, the daughter of Minos, sister of Ariadne, wife of Theseus and stepmother of Hippolytus, attempted an affair with Hippolytus, committed suicide, and orchestrated Hippolytus' murder by means of his father Theseus. Phaedra's actions and their results are condemnable acts to the modern audience and would have likely been seen as such by Roman viewers who encountered images of Phaedra on the walls of Roman houses and on sarcophagi. However, I think it possible that the representations of Phaedra in Greco-Roman antiquity were not solely meant to point to all of her mistakes as a disloyal wife. My goal in this paper is to show that, despite Phaedra's reputations as a terrible wife, representations of her in Roman private art were designed to invoke empathy in the hearts and minds of Roman viewers.

Phaedra is well known through her literary treatment in both Euripides' *Hippolytus* and Ovid's *Heroides IV*. Phaedra and her myth are also frequently represented in Roman private art. Wall paintings from Pompeii and Herculaneum dating from the late first century BCE to the late first century CE feature a seated Phaedra by her nurse who often holds the letter to Hippolytus in her hand. In some examples Hippolytus is also depicted leaving the scene, presumably after he has received the letter and rejected Phaedra's offer.

Phaedra was repeatedly chosen to be portrayed in Roman homes as an example of consuming love, whether by a god's influence or her own choice, not condemnable betrayal of her husband and household. This particular scene of Phaedra's story highlights a moment of suspense, before Phaedra's decision and actions lead to Hippolytus' death and Theseus' mournful regret. These representations of Phaedra, seated alongside her nurse before her suicide, encourages the viewer to focus on her internal struggle prior to any action and to understand the

rationale behind her choices in a relatable way. Ovid's depiction of Phaedra's letter also explores this decision-making process in a way that leads the reader to sympathize with her situations and rationale to some extent. Scenes of lovers, both mythical and unnamed, were very common throughout Pompeii at this time so it is likely that viewers would have emphasized the tragic love over the tragic events later in Phaedra's myth. Through an analysis of representations of Phaedra in Roman wall paintings and preceding literary, I intend to bring to light the possibility of a kinder perception of Phaedra in the eyes of Roman viewers.

I argue that Roman representations of Phaedra highlight her tragic situation and torturous indecision thus eliciting a strong connection and feeling of empathy from viewers. This understanding of a positive representation of Phaedra then leads to questions of why such a figure is chosen to be represented in domestic and funerary contexts, especially in a society that emphasizes more traditional family values. I hope that my line of questioning could be effectively applied to other figures in Greco-Roman myth to further our understanding of how representations of ill-behaved or disloyal women were not always meant to serve as negative examples, but were used to draw out positive interpretations and evoke empathy in ancient audiences.