



Amber Heard, and the grotesque disparity in how men and women are treated in cases of domestic violence

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If only people were as appalled about women being used as punchbags, as they are about the possibility of men being taken for a ride.

Imagine you're in a pub, having a quiet drink, and a woman walks in with bruises down her face, and says, "Can you please keep my husband away from me? He did this." You'd believe her, right? Sit her down, order her a brandy, call the police and give her your coat to keep her from shivering? It wouldn't occur to you to wonder if she was the kind of person who'd make up a monstrous lie. And even if it did, would you ever apply that same suspicion to a victim of burglary, armed robbery or mugging? I'm guessing no.

Pity that the same sense of common courtesy is not being extended to actress Amber Heard, a woman we'll never meet who saw her allegations of domestic violence at the hands of husband Johnny Depp leaked from the legitimate legal process she was following (during which, she presented formal evidence and was granted a restraining order by a court of law), then plonked on every front page and social-media platform for the public to dissect, challenge and find her lacking in either morality or credibility.

The tabloids gave us their strange take on a woman with large bruises and red scuffs down one side of her face: "Did Amber Heard's Lesbian Friends Have An Impact On Her Marriage?" (Hollywood Life). "Johnny Depp's Lawyer Says Amber Heard is Making Allegations To Gain An Upper Hand In Her Divorce" (People Magazine). Practically every British tabloid raised its eyebrow at Heard's Instagram snap taken the day after the alleged offence,

her hair pointedly arranged to cover her injuries, smiling with her girlfriends – suggesting strongly that not one of the journalists involved has the slightest experience of either the cycle of abuse or the nature of female friendships, particularly during a personal crisis.

Over on social media, plaintiff immediately became defendant in the public court, with users wondering aloud whether the act of hurling a smartphone at someone's face while feeling upset about your dying mother could really be classed as domestic violence anyway. No fists, no dice, it would seem. Try telling that to my friend who had her guitar whacked across her back when her boyfriend was depressed from longterm unemployment, or another girlfriend who was hit with a shower head because she'd asked her drunk husband where he'd been for three days. The terror and the bruising are in no way diminished by the degree of separation afforded by an inanimate object, and certainly not by the emotional vulnerability of your raging assailant.

But no matter, because next came the cavalry of celebrities with their unique insight into Depp's every move. His ex, Vanessa Paradis, loyally leapt to his defence – entirely understandable, only she was neither in their relationship nor present when Heard says the offence took place. Less honourably, Depp's friends Terry Gilliam (who, memorably, also felt the need to slam Michelle Williams when the father of her child, Heath Ledger, died of a self-inflicted overdose) and Doug Stanhope (piss-poor purveyor of jokes about beating prostitutes) took to Twitter to assure us all that Johnny was a man packed with moral fibre, while Amber – not so much.

While Gilliam claimed Heard must be "a better actress than I thought", and Stanhope accused her of blackmailing and gold digging (even before her marriage to Depp, Heard's net personal wealth was estimated at \$4.5m. Not that this matters – I'm no millionaire but if my rich husband beat me, and other more powerful members of our profession turned so vociferously against me, I'm pretty sure I'd want some cash too). This persistent belief that what any woman desires and needs more than dignity, self respect or justice is a rich man's money prevails in so many alleged cases of monstrous abuse and rape. If only people were as appalled about women being used as punchbags, as they are about the possibility of men being taken for a ride.

But unlike the mob buying for Heard to withdraw her allegations (and please let's be honest – would they still accuse her of lying if her husband were Peter Stringfellow, Darren Day, or someone similarly uncool and unlovable?), both Gilliam and Stanhope are friends of Johnny Depp, which apparently gives them some magic porthole into the private relationship of a married couple of less than two years. This is derisory to anyone with a known victim of domestic violence for a friend, who will agree that you'd often never imagine it of either the abuser or the seemingly happy marriage. Many aspects of any romantic relationship are kept private from friends, family - even children living in the same house. I myself was once very close to an otherwise wonderful man who one day decided to slam his partner headfirst into a shop window. Domestic violence is insidious, secret, unpredictable and delivered frequently by nice, clever men who publicly adore their wives and hold down great jobs and friendships. And by the same token, the victims of domestic violence, like anyone else, can be flawed and even downright unsavoury

people themselves. A woman can be cynical, greedy, not very bright, manipulative, dishonest, frumpy, beautiful, fat, thin, black, white or brown and still get whacked hard in the face by her ostensibly lovely partner. If you believe one woman is more deserving, or even more likely to be hit than any other, then that gives greater insight into your own core beliefs than Johnny Depp's, and frankly, you'd be wiser not to share on Twitter.

Whether or not Johnny Depp is guilty, there's no doubt his reputation and status as a deeply loved, successful and well paid actor will prevail. Amber Heard's future is less assured. Because a society, we are infinitely more forgiving of men who are violent towards women than we are of the rare cases when a woman is being dishonest (the vast majority of dropped domestic violence cases hit a wall not because of any evidence of lying, but because women, often guilty, ashamed, scared for their personal safety or of facing their abuser in court, cease to co-operate with the police or CPS). National treasure Ozzy Osbourne tried to strangle now-estranged wife Sharon, convicted rapist Mike Tyson is now some sort of novelty act on reality TV, Chris Brown still enjoys a lucrative career after beating the crap out of Rihanna. Fortune favours the famous male perpetrator, sometimes much more so than it does the woman terrorised at his hands.

What goes on in the marriage of anyone outside our families and friendships is none of our business. A court will attempt to uncover the truth in this horrible debacle, and in the meantime, it's arguably true that our picking over the bones of Depp and Heard's break-up makes victims of both parties. But what is everyone's business is the grotesque disparity in how men and women are treated in cases of domestic violence – as demonstrated so unedifyingly in the past week – and how this inevitably and demonstrably impacts on the willingness of ordinary victims to put themselves in the firing line to report the crimes committed against them. A decent person is capable of both trusting a victim and of believing a defendant is innocent until proven guilty. Any woman claiming to have been beaten by her husband deserves our sympathy and our respect, not judgement and defamation. Because there's a good chance that one day, the victim will be someone you know, her attacker, a seemingly good egg. Then, you may suddenly see Amber Heard as more than just the cynical wife of an unimpeachable hero, and wonder if you punched a woman while she was already down.

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