Phaedra, the daughter of Minos, sister of Ariadne, wife of Theseus, and step mother of Hippolytus, attempted an affair with Hippolytus, committed suicide, and orchestrated Hippolytus’ murder by means of his father Theseus. Her actions and their consequences 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. I will argue, however, that the representations of Phaedra in Greco-Roman antiquity were not meant solely to point to all of her mistakes as a disloyal wife. Despite Phaedra’s reputations as a terrible wife, representations of her in Roman private art—especially in Roman wall painting—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 often feature a seated Phaedra by her nurse, sometimes holding the letter to Hippolytus in her hand (figs 3 and 7-10). In some examples Hippolytus is depicted leaving the scene, presumably after he has received the letter and rejected Phaedra’s advances. As I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 2, Phaedra was frequently depicted in Roman homes as an example of consuming love who ought to be viewed sympathetically. These representations of Phaedra, seated alongside her nurse before her suicide, encouraged focus on her internal struggle prior to any action, inviting viewers to explore the rationale behind the heroine’s choices in a relatable way. By analyzing representations of Phaedra over time in Euripides, Ovid, and select Roman wall paintings, I intend to demonstrate how Roman viewers might have approached representations of Phaedra through a sympathetic lens.
This thesis is divided into two chapters followed by a conclusion. Chapter 1 analyzes the treatment of Phaedra in Greek art and literature in the fourth and third centuries BCE. In Euripides’ *Hippolytus II*, Phaedra attempts to initiate the affair with Hippolytus, being under the power of Aphrodite and the urging of her nurse. I will also analyze two representations of Phaedra on vases that will be useful comparisons to the depictions of her in Roman elegy and domestic art. In Chapter 2, I turn to Ovid’s *Heroides IV*, a fictional letter written by Phaedra to Hippolytus. In contrast to Euripides’ work, Phaedra is here presented as the author of the letter in which she willingly expresses her feelings for Hippolytus. I will elaborate further on the characterizations of Phaedra by both authors and consider the ways these texts would have influences the audience’s perception of her in both literature and art. I also explore questions about how a specific medium, point of view, and cultural context would have affected the reception of Phaedra’s myth.

After a survey of representations of Phaedra in the works of Euripides and Ovid, I will lastly turn to representations of her in Roman wall paintings from the House of Jason in Pompeii, House V.2.10-11 in Pompeii, along with three other paintings of Phaedra from Pompeii and Herculaneum as supportive examples. The paintings of Phaedra that I will focus on all represent her seated alongside her nurse either before Hippolytus has received the letter or shortly thereafter. 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. Ovid’s depiction of Phaedra’s letter also explores this decision-making process in a way that leads the reader to sympathize with her.
My goal throughout is to demonstrate the possibility of a more positive, empathetic viewing of Phaedra by Roman spectators who encountered depictions of her in private art. I also explore the ways in which Roman viewers would have reconciled their own traditional family values with Phaedra's actions, and consider why Phaedra was repeatedly portrayed in Roman domestic art despite her negative attributes. By drawing on relevant scholarship, my approach aims to bridge gaps between the fields of literature, art history, and gender studies through the use of representations of Phaedra in a way that leads to further questions in all three fields.
Chapter 1 – Phaedra in Pre-Pompeian Literature and Art

Howard Jacobson somewhat humorously stated in his 1974 commentary on the *Heroides*, “we must admit that the student of *Heroides* 4, charting the relationship between Ovid and the Greek sources, must run aground on the rocks of conjecture and insufficient evidence.”¹ I will now venture to do just that. To understand how the problematic Phaedra was portrayed as a sympathetic figure in Roman wall painting, it is first necessary to understand how she was portrayed in earlier surviving texts and images, and how she was made to elicit empathy by both Euripides and Ovid.

In this chapter I discuss several of the known works of literature and art depicting Phaedra that were produced before the Roman imperial period, paying particularly close attention to Euripides’ *Hippolytus* II. This is the primary extant literary Greek source concerning Phaedra and there has been ample scholarship on its meanings and implications for how ancient audiences perceived Phaedra. This discussion then leads to the analysis of Ovid’s *Heroides* 4 and Roman domestic art in the following chapter.

A consistent foundation for Phaedra’s myth is built upon in varying ways by each author or artist. Phaedra, daughter of Minos and Pasiphae, sister to Ariadne and the Minotaur, left Crete and married Theseus, with whom she had several children. During the time in which Phaedra realizes her passion and attempts to initiate an affair with her half-Amazon stepson Hippolytus, either out of her own inclination or by the force of a goddess, Theseus is absent, whether off on a quest or presumed dead. The always prudent and proper Hippolytus refuses

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her advances. In a letter to Theseus Phaedra accuses Hippolytus of raping her. Theseus responds by calling down a curse of Poseidon on his son. Hippolytus is then attacked by a bull from the sea and dies a gruesome, unjust death. In every version of this myth Phaedra kills herself, either before or after the accusations and curse-calling, in order to avoid the consequences of her actions.

The first appearance of Phaedra in any extant Greek literature occurs at *Odyssey* 11.321.\(^2\) The line begins with Phaedra as one of the many women Odysseus encounters in his visit to the land of the dead. However, Odysseus moves on to describe Ariadne and there is no further mention of Phaedra or her myth. Several scholars have argued that a brief mention of a myth or mythical figure, such as Homer’s mention of Phaedra in the *Odyssey*, implies that the myth would have been well enough known to spark recognition in the audience without need for further elaboration.\(^3\) It is unknown whether Ariadne and Phaedra were canonically sisters at this point in the mythical tradition, but their juxtaposition in the line could imply there is at least some connection, whether familial or otherwise.

The next known literary appearance of Phaedra after Homer is in Greek tragedy. According to Gilbert Norwood, Phaedra is “the most subtly and beautifully drawn character in Euripides” and “more complex than any other character of ancient drama.”\(^4\) While this opinion is not shared by all viewers, readers, or scholars, we do know from extant works, fragments, and references by other authors that there were at least four plays in which Phaedra was a

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\(^3\) Gantz, *Early Greek myth*, 286.

major character. The chronology of these plays is uncertain, and it is unknowable whether the myths told in the tragedies are the same as those known in the late Archaic period, when the Iliad and the Odyssey were first composed. However, Plutarch said that “there is no such conflict between historian and tragic poets,” implying that there was at least some consistency in the widely known and accepted myth of Phaedra in the Greek world.5

Euripides composed two plays named after Hippolytus: Hippolytus I was received very poorly by its audience, and Hippolytus II, a later reworking of the story earned first place in the dramatic competition. Hippolytus II is preserved in its entirety, whereas only eighteen fragments remain of Hippolytus I.6 Only seventeen fragments of Sophocles’ Phaedra survive, which do not reveal any significant plot or character differences from the Euripidean versions of this myth.7 It is unclear which version Sophocles’ Phaedra follows more closely, that of the “shameless woman” in Hippolytus I or the Phaedra of Hippolytus II, who is driven mad by Aphrodite.8 It is interesting to note that in Sophocles’ Phaedra, Theseus is presumed dead, so Phaedra’s interactions with Hippolytus would not have been intentional adultery. However, in both Euripidean versions, Theseus is only temporarily absent, so then Phaedra is not only attempting to initiate incest, but an incestuous affair while married to Theseus. A prevalent thought in scholarship on these works is that Hippolytus I preceded Sophocles’ Phaedra, which was then followed by Hippolytus II in 428 BCE.9

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5 Gantz, Early Greek myth, 286.
7 Fulkerson, The Ovidian heroine as author, 125.
8 Gantz, Early Greek myth, 286.
9 Gantz, Early Greek myth, 286.
In *Hippolytus I*, Euripides depicts Phaedra as unabashedly attempting to initiate an affair with her stepson. Phaedra then slanders him to Theseus and convinces him of Hippolytus’ guilt. Theseus, as in other versions of the myth, curses Hippolytus and Phaedra kills herself in the end. As K.J. Reckford observed, one notable aspect of this version is how quickly Phaedra surrenders to her passions and acts accordingly. Reckford is also convinced that Phaedra delivered at least three speeches, one of which was directed to Hippolytus, declaring her love verbally. It seems that the ancient audience did not take well to this Phaedra and, as a result, Euripides wrote *Hippolytus II*, which was received much more favorably.

Some of the distinguishing factors in *Hippolytus II* include Aphrodite’s control of Phaedra’s desires, Phaedra’s sickly state from the start of the drama, and the nurse’s high level of involvement in attempting to catalyze the relationship between Phaedra and Hippolytus. These factors contribute to making Phaedra a more sympathetic character, as she is depicted as a pitiful victim of circumstance. Hippolytus has angered Aphrodite by refusing to properly honor her, and as a result Aphrodite overwhelms Phaedra with love for Hippolytus while Theseus is away. During the first part of the play, Phaedra fights against these inexplicable desires born from Aphrodite’s wrath and eventually confides her feelings to her nurse who later reveals them to Hippolytus. After he rejects Phaedra’s proposal, she kills herself, fearing Theseus’ reaction if he finds out, and leaves behind a letter accusing Hippolytus of rape. Upon Theseus’ return the myth continues as expected. Hippolytus is cursed then killed and once again Hippolytus and Phaedra are dead and Theseus is left alone.

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11 Reckford, “Phaedra and Pasiphae,” 311.
Euripides begins *Hippolytus II* with a speech from Aphrodite, foreshadowing the plot of the following drama (1-57). As one would expect, Aphrodite expresses her wrath towards Hippolytus for his rejection of her and her due honors. The goddess goes on to say how Phaedra fell in love with Hippolytus with one glance due to her influence over her victim’s passions. She sets the scene by describing Phaedra’s pitiful, lovesick state.

ἐνταύθα δή στένουσα κάκτεπληγμένη
κέντροις ἰρωτος ἡ τάλαιν’ ἀπόλλυται
ση, ξύνοιδε δ’ οἵτις οἰκετῶν νόσον.

Ever since then the poor woman, groaning and made distraught by the goad of love, means to die in silence, and none of her household knowns of her malady. (38-40)

She finishes her plot summary by predicting Hippolytus’ death by means of Theseus’ curse and Phaedra’s death as a consequence of Aphrodite’s revenge, though Aphrodite speaks well of Phaedra’s end.

ἡ δ` εὐκλεῆς μὲν ἄλλ` ὀμως ἀπόλλυται
Φαῖδρα.’

Phaedra, though she dies with her honor intact, shall nonetheless die (47-48a).

The audience must then wait for the plot to unfold on stage in order to see Aphrodite’s words come true.

This introduction already makes clear that Phaedra will be a more honorable version of her previous Euripidean self and will be caught in the midst of Aphrodite and Hippolytus’ passions.

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12 Note to readers, the Greek text and English translation of Euripides’ *Hippolytus II* used was trans. by David Kovacs and was published in the Loeb Classical Library 484 in 1995.
conflict. Aphrodite states that Phaedra is being used unwillingly as a tool of revenge against Hippolytus because of his dishonorable acts towards Aphrodite. In addition to this expression of Phaedra’s innocence, Aphrodite describes her life-threatening lovesickness. From the start, Euripides depicts Phaedra as a victim of Aphrodite’s wrath at Hippolytus’ deeds and as a result she is on the brink of starvation and suicide. Although any viewer with knowledge of the myth would know that Hippolytus will die because of Phaedra, Euripides begins by portraying her as Aphrodite’s victim who deserves our pity and sympathy.

Just as Aphrodite sets the scene at the beginning, the chorus sets the mood and demonstrates emotional responses for the audience to experience and emulate. Euripides’ selection of a female chorus for *Hippolytus II* allows its viewers not only to see the sympathetic character of Phaedra herself on stage but also to see empathetic reactions from the chorus in the first half of the play, before Phaedra kills herself. The chorus repeatedly laments Phaedra’s condition as well as agreeing with her sentiments. Before Phaedra’s appearance on stage, the chorus details her bed-ridden state and tries to guess what has led her to this point (130-170). Once she finally enters in line 170, the Chorus Leader exclaims how pathetic Phaedra looks, presumably with much fervor, referring to her body as “ravaged” (173). After the true source of her pain has been revealed in her conversation with the nurse, the chorus again laments Phaedra’s suffering:

\[\text{ὄλοιμαν \ ἔγογε \ πρὶν \ σῶν, \ φίλα,} \]
\[\text{κατανύσας \ φρενῶν. \ ἴὼ \ μοι, \ φεῦ \ φεῦ·} \]
\[\text{ὦ \ τύλαινα \ τῶνδ’ \ ἄλγεών·} \]
\[\text{ὦ \ πόνοι \ τρέφοντες \ βροτούς.} \]
\[\text{ὀλωλας, \ ἔξεφηνας \ ἔς \ φίος κακά.} \]
Death take me, my friend, before
I come to share in your thoughts! Ah me! Alas!
Oh, how wretched you are because of this woe!
Oh, the troubles that have mortals in their keeping!
You are undone, you have brought calamity into the daylight! (364-368).

The chorus goes on later, just before Phaedra overhears the Nurse revealing her secret to Hippolytus, to recite an ode to the power of Eros and stories of failed love (525-565). All these lines once again emphasize the insurmountable, consuming power of Aphrodite that Phaedra is facing and is unable to conquer. By mentioning failed love affairs, the chorus also brings to the viewer’s mind a clear comparison between Phaedra and other lovers who are traditionally accepted as sympathetic figures. The chorus’s words and tone communicate not only the severity of the situation but also how sharply the chorus women feel pain for Phaedra. This is noticeable particularly in the exclamations “φεῦ” and “ὦ” both used twice within the five lines excerpted above. Also the use of words such as “τάλανα” and “ὦλωλας” reinforce how disastrous Phaedra’s situation is. The chorus’ repeated exclamations and calling out on her behalf models empathy for Phaedra to the audience.

The chorus also affirms Phaedra’s opinions, especially once she has explained in her speech to them, and to the external audience through them, that she tried to be silent and noble but when those two methods failed she decided that death was the only remedy (375-431). The continued support of the chorus reminds viewers that Phaedra is deserving of sympathy. Also, Phaedra’s arguments successfully persuade the chorus to agree with her plan. Their support for Phaedra and her plans leads the audience also to accept Phaedra’s arguments as valid. After Phaedra’s death the chorus can no longer support her in person. Rather, as
Mastronarde has argued, the continued presence of the female chorus keeps sympathy towards Phaedra in the mind of the audience although she is no longer present on stage.¹³

The nurse serves a dual purpose, unlike the supportive chorus, as both a supportive and an oppositional character towards Phaedra. The majority of her interactions on the stage with Phaedra consist of disagreements of opinions or the betrayal of her to Hippolytus. Despite her actions against Phaedra’s wishes the nurse seems, above all, to want Phaedra to live. While this is a good goal, it goes against Phaedra’s desire to be honorable through her death. The nurse tried to convince Phaedra through several arguments to live and to confess whatever is burdening her. She demonstrates her support towards Phaedra by mentioning the sons she will leave behind. The nurse blames Theseus’ lack of involvement and regular absence for Phaedra’s distraught state (278-310). As soon as Phaedra’s love for Hippolytus has been revealed, the nurse also calls out Aphrodite as the source of blame for Phaedra’s woes, unknowingly pointing to the true cause all along (353-361). She exclaims,

οἶμοι, τί λέξεις, τέκνων; ὡς μ’ ἀπώλεσας. γυναικεῖς, οὐκ ἀνασχέτ’, οὐκ ἀνέξομαι ζῶσ’ ἕχοιόν ἡμαρ, ἕχοιόν εἰσορῷ φάος. ...Κύπρις οὐκ ἄρ’ ἤν θεός, ἀλλ’ ἐ’ τι μείζον ἄλλο γίνεται θεοῦ, ἤ τίνδε κάμε καὶ δόμους ἀπώλεσεν.

Ah, what can you mean, my child? You have killed me! Women, this is unbearable, I cannot bear to live! Hateful to me is the day, the light I see! ...Cypris is not after all a deity but something even mightier, She has destroyed Phaedra, me, and the royal house! (353-355; 358b-361).

It is clearly illustrated in this reaction from the nurse that she is extremely dismayed by Phaedra and her situation. Just as the chorus showed empathy for Phaedra in their words, so does the nurse. This sympathetic response to Phaedra would have been even more keenly felt by the audience as they heard an actor emotionally recite the nurse’s distraught words. While the nurse in many ways opposes Phaedra, she is able to support a sympathetic view of Phaedra through these conflicting opinions and actions as well as through her support. First and foremost, the nurse cares for Phaedra. She wants to keep Phaedra alive no matter the consequences or means. Once again the viewer would have seen a character on the stage who was empathetic towards Phaedra in addition to the chorus.

The nurse’s arguments also take the place of the problematic aspects of Phaedra portrayed by Euripides in *Hippolytus I*. Rather than Phaedra actively seeking out an affair, the nurse carried out the action against Phaedra’s knowledge and will. The negative attributes that would likely have been rejected by the earlier audience are transferred to the nurse, thus allowing Phaedra to be more sympathetic. She is also given the opportunity to actively refute the nurse’s poor choices, furthering her honorable status (375-431). Lastly, the nurse points back to Aphrodite’s influence once again in line 438. Although Phaedra is completely unaware of Aphrodite’s influence, the nurse seems to be coincidentally in tune to the unspoken plot revealed to the audience, a helpful reminder that Phaedra’s overwhelming passion is not her own fault, but rather the work of Aphrodite. The nurse’s character emphasizes and contrasts Phaedra’s innocence in order to make Phaedra’s characterization more sympathetic.
Lastly, I will discuss the impact of Phaedra’s own words on her characterization by Euripides. She balances her words on stage between emotional outcries and compelling arguments, addressed to both nurse and chorus. This combination allows her to genuinely communicate her pain while still convincing the chorus that she has preserved her honor and is justified in her reasoning to act as she plans. Phaedra’s first words on stage are a cry to the chorus for help and comfort after she has been carried out of the palace in her bed, barely able to move because she is so weakened by her starvation. She calls to them saying,

αἰρετέ μου δέμας, ὑρθοῦτε κύρα·
λέλυμαι μελέων σύνδεσμα φιλών.
λάβετε εὐπήχεις χεῖρας, πρόπολοι.
βαρύ μοι κεφαλῆς ἐπίκρανον ἔχειν·
ἄφελ’, ἀμπέτασον βόστρυχον ὀμοίοι.

“Raise up my body, hold my head erect!
My limbs are unstrung!
Take my fair arms, servants!
It is a burden to have this headdress on my head.
Take it off, spread my tresses on my shoulders!” (198-202).

Euripides’ choice to have Phaedra’s first words be a simple and sincere cry for physical relief communicates from the start that Phaedra hopes to receive help to remedy her suffering. The chorus must be sympathetic towards Phaedra in order to wish to help her and as the chorus moves to support her, so too might the opinions of the audience support her in their minds. More of the emotionally charged pleas from Phaedra frame the beginning and end of her time on stage. Not long after her original cry to the chorus Phaedra exclaims her confusion by asking what she has done to cause her to deserve such suffering:

δύστηνος ἔγω, τί ποτ’ εἰργασάμην;
ποῖ παρεπλάγχθην γνώμης ἄγαθής;
Phaedra: Empathy for a Disloyal Wife in Roman Painting and Poetry
Abigail Dupree

Luckless me, what have I done?
Where have I wandered from the path of good sense? (239-240).

These rhetorical questions, unanswered by those listening on the stage, can be answered in the mind of the viewers, who know these things have been forced upon Phaedra because of Aphrodite’s revenge and not because of any wandering from the path of good sense. In her final words on stage, Phaedra powerfully cries out in submission to Aphrodite and admitting her defeat before she goes back into the palace to kill herself.

καὶ σὺ γ’ εὗ με νουθέτει.
ἐγὼ δὲ κύριν, ἣπερ ἐξόλυσί με,
ψυχής ἀπαλλαχθεῖσα τήδ’ ἐν ἡμέρᾳ
tέρψῳ, πικροῦ δ’ ἐρωτὸς ἰσσηθέσομαι.
ὑπάρ κακὸν γε χάντρῳ γενήσομαι
θανοῦσ’, ἐν’ εἰδῇ μή ’πι τοίς ἐμοῖς κακοῖς
ὕψηλος εἶναι τῆς νόσου δὲ τῆς δὲ μοι
κοινῆς μετασχῶν σωφρονεῖν μαθήσεται.

And you, give me advice that is good!
This day, when I have taken leave of my life,
I shall gladden the heart of Cypris,
who is bent on destroying me,
and I shall fall as victim to a hateful passion.
But my death will prove a bane to someone else
So that he may learn not to exult over my misfortune;
By sharing with me in this malady he will learn moderation (724b-731).

Phaedra’s shift from begging for help and expressing disbelief to forlorn acceptance of her only fatal option is powerfully expressed by Euripides in more emotional language than her persuasive speech between these exclamations. The viewer sees not only the reasoning behind Phaedra’s choice to die but also the emotional ramifications of Aphrodite’s control of her passions and their subsequent result.
The bulk of Phaedra’s dialogue is, as noted above, a presentation of her opinions and reasons for being considered honorable and of how she intends to ensure this view of herself to remain intact through suicide. This speech in lines 373 to 430 is often referred to as her speech of self-preservation. Phaedra accomplishes this persuasion by emphasizing the necessity of death for her honor, denouncing any connection with other disloyal women, and shifting the blame away from herself and onto her lineage and Theseus. These arguments seem to have garnered the approval of the chorus, Phaedra’s plan might have been successful had the nurse not acted in opposition to her wishes.

Phaedra first announces to the chorus in line 329 that her death will bring her honor. As the viewer would have known from Aphrodite’s introduction, Phaedra is destined to die, but with her honor intact (45-50). In her speech of self-justification, she further explains her attempted strategy to overcome her passion saying “when love wounded me, I considered how I might best bear it” (392-393a). She attempts to reconcile her situation first through silence and second by acting as the noble woman that she truly is. When these did not succeed she decides death is the only solution to hide her good and shameful deeds:

τρίτον δ’, ἐπειδὴ τοισὶδ’ οὐκ ἔξηνυτον
Κύπριν κρατήσαί, κατθανεῖν ἐδοξέ μοι,
κράτιστον—οὐδεὶς ἀντερεῖ—βουλευμάτων.
ἐμοὶ γάρ εἶπ μήτε λανθάνειν καλά
μήτ’ αίσχρα δρώσῃ μάρτυρας πολλοὺς ἐχειν.

But third, when with these means I was unable to master Cypris, I resolved on death,
the best of plans, as no one shall deny.
For just as I would not have my good deeds unknown,
so may I not have a throng of witnesses to my shameful ones! (400- 404).
Phaedra makes her final pledge to die after she has overheard the nurse and Hippolytus speaking. Phaedra says:

οὐκ ὑδα πλὴν ἐν, κατθανεῖν ὅσον τάχος, τῶν νῦν παρόντων πημύτων ἂκος μόνον.

I know but one thing, to die with all speed, the sole remedy for my present troubles (599-600).

Phaedra was convinced that Hippolytus, in great part because of his hatred of women and the ways of Aphrodite, would reveal her secret to Theseus and falsely accuse her of trying to initiate an affair, although it was the nurse who acted. Because of this misunderstanding and her distrust of Hippolytus, Phaedra finally hangs herself and leaves behind a letter to Theseus framing Hippolytus for rape. To modern readers, and possibly to ancient viewers, it seems a drastic choice on Phaedra’s part to essentially orchestrate the murder of Hippolytus post-mortem. However, through Aphrodite’s own words as well of the implications of Aphrodite by the Nurse, Euripides puts great emphasis throughout the play on the powerful affect Aphrodite had on Phaedra’s passions. Hippolytus was doomed to die through Phaedra’s actions because of Aphrodite’s wrath. The note Phaedra left behind for Theseus was the completion of Aphrodite’s inevitable plan.

In her speech, Phaedra separates herself from the disloyal wives to whom she could be compared. She starts her speech in lines 373 to 390 by answering her own question of “how it is that the lives of mortals have been ruined” (376). She goes on to state that people may know virtue and be wise but not act on it because of laziness or pleasure. She also talks about the two sides of shame: on the one hand, some shame is good, but on the other hand shame can crush
lives. This sets up a dichotomy between those who think only shameful things and those who choose to act on these common, shameful thoughts, to the disadvantage of themselves and their households. Phaedra goes on later to curse any disloyal wife who would go as far as to “besmirch her marriage bed with other men” (πρὸς ἄνδρας ἠρξατ’ αἰσχύνειν λέχη/ πρώτη θυραίους 408-409). She also points out that this trend is led by noble women who are then mimicked by those of lower classes. Phaedra expresses her disbelief in noble women’s ability to do such shameful acts against their husbands. She makes clear in the following lines that she is choosing not to act as these women did. She plans to die in order to preserve not only her own honor but also that of her sons, so that they will not be tainted by the shameful deeds of their mother and can freely live good lives (419-431). She says “One thing only, they say, competes in value with life,/ the possession of a heart blameless and good,” and such a heart she hopes for her children (μόνον δὲ τοῦτο φασ’ ἀμαλλᾶσθαι βίῳ,/ γνώμην δικαίαν κἀγαθὴν ὁτω παρῇ 426-427). Phaedra masterfully argues in her speech that honor is determined by one’s outward actions that she has not acted in any way to cause herself or her household dishonor, and that she intends to preserve this honor through her death.

The final argument Phaedra makes for herself, which she does more subtly than the previously mentioned arguments, is through shifting blame away from herself towards her cursed lineage and her husband Theseus. Phaedra mentions the misfortunes of her grandmother, mother, and sister in her discussion with the nurse before her later speech (335-340). Europa, her grandmother, was kidnapped and raped by Zeus and then taken off to Crete. Pasiphae, her mother, had relations with a bull, resulting in the birth of the minotaur. Ariadne, her sister, was taken from Crete by Theseus after he had killed the Minotaur. Then Theseus
abandoned Ariadne on one of the Cycladic islands for her to potentially die horribly and alone on the island. His reasoning for treating her in such a way and Ariadne’s later fate vary depending on the version of the myth. These stories of Phaedra’s family are not detailed by her speech in \textit{Hippolytus II}, but the audience would have easily recollected these myths and filled in the blanks. They point to a pattern of dangerous, illicit, painful love experienced by Phaedra’s female relatives and then by Phaedra herself. The sympathy felt towards these women for their sufferings would then be transferred to some extent to Phaedra. The mention of Ariadne also hints at Theseus’ abuse of her and his fault in her fate, which could then lead to questions of the same influence in Phaedra’s situation. Aphrodite and later the nurse both mention Theseus’ blame in the current situation (35-38, 278-285). His temporary exile is the reason they are in Troezen. He is absent, leaving Phaedra to her own devices and remaining unaware of her suffering. Phaedra’s comment on Theseus’ poor actions add to the other mentions by Aphrodite and the nurse to mark Theseus as partly responsible for Phaedra’s demise. Both Phaedra’s lineage and Theseus’s actions are two factors that Phaedra cites, both completely outside of her control, furthering her claim of innocence and honor. Similarly, throughout the play, we see how Hippolytus’ words and actions incur Aphrodite’s wrath and cause Phaedra’s later drastic actions. With all these factors contributing to Phaedra’s situation, it would be difficult to see Phaedra fully at fault for what happens to her and her household.

\textit{Euripides’ Phaedra in Hippolytus II} is portrayed by her own words and her interactions with others as a pitiable woman who has tried her best, in vain, to fight off consuming passions undeservedly forced upon her by the vengeful Aphrodite. Phaedra wants above all to be seen and remembered as an honorable woman for herself and her household. In the end, Phaedra
sticks to her convictions and matches her words with actions when she kills herself mid-way through the tragedy after her final words in lines 725-730. Just as a goddess opens *Hippolytus II*, a goddess closes *Hippolytus II*. Artemis arrives in the end to make a final speech on the events of the play. She explains to Theseus that Phaedra was affected by Aphrodite, fought her passions, and was ultimately betrayed by her nurse, resulting in her Hippolytus’s death (1414-1445). After Artemis’s speech, as Reckford said, “we are left with the overall impression of a noble person who was a tragic victim of circumstance.”\(^{14}\) Euripides repeatedly points to Phaedra’s innocence and honor throughout *Hippolytus II* all the way to the end.

Euripides’ staging of Phaedra’s myth in both *Hippolytus I* and *Hippolytus II* marks the beginning of extant representations of Phaedra in both literature and art. There are no surviving prior visual representations of her.\(^{15}\) Pausanias mentions a Polygnotus painting in the fifth century BCE depicting Phaedra in a swing, possibly an allusion to her hanging and there are only a few depictions of Phaedra that survive from Greek vase painting.\(^{16}\) Two Apulian vases from the fourth century BCE depict Phaedra (Figures 1 and 2). In both instances, she appears seated, well dressed, and with her face downcast. Since these vases were produced less than a century after Phaedra’s appearance on the Greek stage by at least three tragedians, it is likely that these dramatic representations of Phaedra influenced the paintings of Phaedra on these vessels. Vase painters used what M. L. Hart refers to as “recognizable iconographic tools,” in order to convey the complexity of the theatrical performance in a single scene.\(^{17}\)

\(^{14}\) Reckford, “Phaedra and Pasiphae,” 309
\(^{15}\) Gantz, *Early Greek myth*, 288.
\(^{16}\) Gantz, *Early Greek myth*, 287.
elements include elaborate dress, furniture, and recognizable figures that would all serve as triggers for a viewer to recognize the tragedy and myth the painting is based on. These elements are each found in the vase paintings of Phaedra, further signifying that the vases were influenced by the tragedies. The presence of Phaedra on at least two vessels also indicates that the myth was well established not only in mainland Greece but also in Magna Graecia by the third century, if not earlier. These vase paintings could also indicate that the tragedies, and with them sympathetic views of Phaedra, were well known and wide spread. The scene of the lovesick Phaedra is very similar to the staging of Phaedra’s entrance scene in *Hippolytus II* and further indicates a connection between the vases and Euripides’ work.

The first vessel, a Lekythos dating to 360 BCE, is particularly elaborate, with Phaedra holding a letter in her hand (Figure 1). The vessel is from Paestum and is currently in the collections of the National Archaeological Museum in Naples. Phaedra is seated, hunched over, filling the space of the body of the Lekythos. To her right is a proportionally smaller nude Eros with his head turned away from Phaedra. On Phaedra’s other side is a maidservant, likely Phaedra’s nurse, looking towards her. It is possible that the vase is a depiction of Aphrodite; however, the similarities between this Lekythos and other artistic depictions of Phaedra as well as the presence of Eros, the Nurse, and a letter suggests that it is a painting of Phaedra.

The second vase is a calyx-krater dating to 350-340 BCE (Figure 2). This krater is also from Magna Graecia. Although it was made in Puglia, it was found in Anzi, and is attributed to

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the Laodamia Painter and features red-figure decoration. Currently this krater is in the British Museum’s collection. Phaedra is pictured seated once again, with her face downcast in the top of two registers on one side of the krater. In this example, she is shown without a letter, a key attribute in the lekythos. Her name is, however, inscribed beneath the footstool, so Phaedra’s identity is conveniently clear. She is depicted in profile with her nurse standing behind her. The nurse’s hand is outstretched as if she were imploring Phaedra either to share her woes or pursue her love. In the space between Phaedra and an ornate bed, nude Eros hovers in the air. Eros seems to be addressing Phaedra, if not verbally then through the power with which Aphrodite has possessed her, by looking down upon Phaedra’s face with his right hand reaching down to her. On the other side of Eros, in front of the bed, stand two hand-maidens. Further right an old man is shown in conversations with a fourth servant. The lower register on this same side of the krater has a scene of combat between a centaur and a Lapith woman. In the center two men in heroic nude battle a centaur as he attempts to drag away one of the women. On either side of these four central figures a woman runs away while looking back in horror at the scene.

At first it might seem that there is little to no connection between the scene of Phaedra’s lovesickness and the centauromachy. However, with Euripides’s Phaedra from *Hippolytus II* in mind, a common element is discernible: Phaedra in *Hippolytus II* and the Lapith women both undeservedly find themselves in sexually illicit and violent situations because of the actions and choices of men. The virtue of these women resides in their chastity, which has

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20 The British Museum, “Collection online: calyx-krater.”
21 The British Museum, “Collection online: calyx-krater.”
been tarnished against their will in these situations despite their verbal and physical rejection of the passions being forced upon them, whether their own internal passion or the passion of savage centaurs. Like the Lapith women, Phaedra is an innocent victim. Unlike the Lapith women, however, Phaedra does not have someone to fight for her safety from Aphrodite’s control, because her husband is absent and uninformed. Thus the Laodamia painter created a correlation between the vase’s two scenes. The juxtaposition of Phaedra’s story and the centauromachy effectively suggests similarities between the Centaurs’ sympathetic, innocent victims and Phaedra. In addition to these few examples of depictions of Phaedra on Greek vases, only a few other representations of this myth exist before the first century BCE.  

Phaedra is seen to suffer throughout the representations of her in Greek texts and images because of the actions and choices of others. By focusing on the primary extant works concerning her produced before the first century BCE, I have aimed to illustrate that the ways in which the controversial figure of Phaedra was portrayed, although being notably different, elicited empathy from their audiences. This understanding of the complexity of Phaedra’s character shows that she is not only more than an evil stepmother; she is also a mythical figure that was seen as pitiable, and most importantly deserving of empathy from her ancient audiences.

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22 To see a full catalogue of representations of Phaedra reference LIMC Vol 7: 356-358.
Chapter 2: Phaedra in Roman Art and Literature

Following the Greek works of art and literature concerning Phaedra, one of the best known and most important versions of Phaedra’s myth to come down to us is Ovid’s *Heroides 4*, dated to the late first century BCE. Ovid’s *Heroides* is a series of elegiac letters written by in the voices of several mythical women to men. *Heroides 4* is a letter to Hippolytus from Phaedra written before Phaedra’s passions are revealed and both of them die, as in Euripides, because of the other’s words and actions. In this poem, Phaedra writes a letter to her stepson Hippolytus in hopes of encouraging him to engage in an affair. Unlike the other heroines in this collection of poems, Phaedra writes not from a previously established, mutual relationship but rather in the hopes of beginning a relationship. As Conte explains, “each letter [in the Ovid’s *Heroides*] is meant to be set at a well-determined point in time, a fruitful moment fixed in a narrative continuum.” The fruitful moment of Phaedra’s letter is set before the rest of the story known from other versions of the myth unfolds. The timeline of the myth is frozen as well as Phaedra’s thoughts and hopes before she is rejected by Hippolytus. While the letter gives the reader a limited view of the events of the myth, the reader is allowed to delve deeper into Phaedra’s psyche as she bares her soul to Hippolytus, hoping that her love for him will be reciprocated. Ovid both excludes and emphasizes different aspects of Phaedra’s character from Greek tragedy to flesh out her character further. By comparing *Heroides 4* with *Hippolytus II*, the only extant Greek tragedy on her myth, it is possible to see how Ovid’s portrayal of this

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heroine differs from that found in Euripides’ play. Instead of the victimized, honorable Phaedra we encounter in Euripides, Ovid presents us a bolder yet more sympathetic Phaedra, who elicits the reader’s compassion through her own fictional words.

Ovid wrote several books of elegiac poetry, a genre usually associated with amatory poems in Latin literature. The *Heroides* belong to this category of Ovid’s work. Conte describes elegy as being above all “a poetry of love, since for the elegiac poet love is the sole and absolute experience, completely filling existence and giving it meaning.” Ovid’s letters from forlorn women to their distant or estranged lovers are not only love letters but also letters of lament. This reality for the women is particularly felt by the reader who knows the tragic ends many face after the moment captured in their letters, especially for Phaedra, whose expressed love is not only never returned by *Hippolytus* but also leads to their deaths. In the *Heroides*, Ovid “reworks texts, displacing the perspective and giving voice to the women and their motives, which until then had remained unexpressed for the most part or had been sacrificed.” In *Heroides* 4 Ovid transforms the Phaedra of Greek tragedy into a contemporary Roman woman confessing her love for a man she can never be with as she aims to convince him to succumb to the same overwhelming passion she feels. But, as readers with knowledge of Phaedra’s myth know, her efforts are all for naught. Ovid’s *Heroides* 4 provides, however, a space for Phaedra to express her emotions and hopes from a suspended moment in her narrative so that her reader could understand her position and feel her pain.

26 Conte, *Latin literature*, 349.
Phaedra begins the letter by pointedly identifying herself as a Cretan maid and Hippolytus as the son of an Amazon (1-2). These chosen descriptors hark back to both Phaedra’s and Hippolytus’ origins and broken pasts while also separating them both from their familial connection through Theseus. After the brief address at the beginning, Phaedra goes on to explain why she has not spoken of her feelings to anyone before this (7-16). Her modesty kept her from putting words to her passion until love overwhelmed her. This love spoke to Phaedra and guides her words as she goes on to explain in the letter. She writes,

quina licet et sequitur, pudor est miscendus amori;  
dicere quae puduit, scribere iussit amor.  
quidquid Amor iussit, non est contemnere tutum;

Whatever modesty may attend on love, love should not lack in it;  
with me, what modesty forbade to say, love commanded me to write.  
Whatever Love commands, it is not safe to hold for naught (9-11).28

This reference to love’s power quickly leads reminds readers of Aphrodite’s more direct control of Phaedra, which has driven her to feel and act as she did in Hippolytus II. This reference does not allow the reader to discount the possibility that Ovid’s Phaedra is also under the control of Aphrodite and reacting to her uncontrollable passions in a bolder way than the Euripidean Phaedra.

Ovid’s Phaedra even goes on to emphasize, much like her Euripidean predecessor, that she is free from all blame by boldly saying, “my name—and you may ask—is free from all reproach” (fama—velim quaeras—crimine nostra vacat, 18). Just as Euripides’s Phaedra spoke

28 Note to reader, the Latin and English translation of Ovid’s Heroides used was trans. by Grant Showerman, rev. by G.P. Goold and was published in the Loeb Classical Library 41 in 1914.
of her honor and emphasized her pitiable state to garner sympathy from the chorus and audience, Ovid’s Phaedra must use only her words to bring Hippolytus (her intended audience) to agreement. While Euripides used the chorus to shape the audience’s response to Phaedra’s arguments, Ovid’s fictional letter leaves this choice entirely up to the reader’s will. Ovid’s Phaedra clearly expresses that she views herself as wholly innocent and she attempts to justify her actions with a combination of elegiac elements and well-substantiated arguments. Phaedra describes herself as having fallen in love for the first time and compares herself to a young colt being broken, ripe fruit being plucked, and the first rose. She says,

\[urimur, \text{ et caecum pectora vulnus habent.}\]

As the first bearing of the yoke galls the tender steer (20).

\[\text{est aliquid, plenis pomaria carpere ramis,}\]
\[\text{et tenui primam delegere ungue rosam.}\]

Tis something to pluck fruit from the orchard with full-hanging branch, to cull with delicate nail the first rose. (29-30).

As P.J. Davis has noted, these images used by Phaedra are common in elegy and portray Phaedra in ways “reminiscent of the elegiac lover.” The fact that this elegiac Phaedra actively chooses to pursue Hippolytus and initiate an affair stands in stark contrast to Euripides’ Phaedra, who did not act on her passions other than to end them by suicide. Ovid’s Phaedra also describes her love as pure and unstained just after comparing herself to a colt, ripe fruit, and a rose (31-32). From this passage of Heroides 4 we see that Phaedra has a more romanticized view of her passion than in Hippolytus II and she wants to see it as something that is not only permissible but also lovely and poetic.

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After Phaedra’s elegiac imagery she begins to describe her increased interest in Hippolytus’ hobbies of hunting and the outdoors (37-52). She says she honors Diana above all others and wishes to be like maenads, free in the woods. The woods and the hunt are no place for a noble woman and readers would likely have recognized the inability for this hope of Phaedra to be realized while also seeing it as a bit humorous. These lines would also bring to the mind of the reader Euripides’ Phaedra who expressed a similar love for the outdoors. Phaedra’s desperation combined with the reader’s knowledge of Phaedra’s inevitable death from the mythic tradition makes her all the more pitiable by her audience.

Next Phaedra shifts into the more logical arguments of the letter. She seems to draw her arguments directly from Euripides’ Phaedra on which she expands further. She argues that her lineage is cursed to suffer in love and that Theseus is at fault for both her suffering and Hippolytus’ troubles (53-66). Both of these points are made more subtly in Hippolytus II and Ovid’s Phaedra takes it a step further. In these lines, Phaedra describes her family’s history and the misfortunes of its women. She says that she is paying a debt to Venus because of an inherited curse upon her line.

*Forsitan hunc generis fato reddamus amorem,*
*et Venus ex tota gente tributa petat.*

It may be this love is a debt I am paying, due to the destiny of my line, and that Venus is exacting tribute of me for all my race. (53-54).

She then lists the woes of Europa, raped by Jupiter, Pasiphae, victim of a bull, and Ariadne, abandoned by Theseus after helping him kill her half-brother the Minotaur. Just as this detailed lineage worked in favor of Phaedra in Hippolytus II, in Heroides 4 it points to a divine source
outside of Phaedra’s control for her suffering and makes her out to be the victim of circumstance. Later in the letter Phaedra describes more explicitly than in Euripides how Theseus has hurt not only herself but also Hippolytus (105-129). She argues that Theseus has abandoned them both physically and emotionally. Theseus killed Phaedra’s brother and left her sister to die on an island. Theseus also did not marry Hippolytus’ mother, who bore Hippolytus as a bastard. Theseus killed her and had other sons, stripping Hippolytus of any chance of an inheritance. All of these actions were choices Theseus made without regard for the well-being of others, specifically Phaedra or Hippolytus. By giving more concrete examples than Euripides, Ovid makes the argument much more convincing in making Theseus seem as if he does not deserve respect or loyalty from either Phaedra or Hippolytus because of what he has done to them and their loved ones.

Between these more substantial arguments, Phaedra inserts a description of the moment she fell in love with Hippolytus (67-84). It is important to note that Phaedra says she wishes the land had restrained her and prevented her from seeing Hippolytus and therefore falling for him. Phaedra says:

Tempore quo nobis inita est Cerealis Eleusin,
Gnosia me vellem detinuisset humus!
tunc mihi praecipue (nec non tamen ante placebas)
acer in extremis ossibus haesit amor.

That time I went to Eleusis, the city of Ceres,
would that the Gnosian land had held me back!
It was then most of all (though you had pleased me before)
that piercing love lodged in my deepest bones. (67-70).
This wishful outcry conveys some of the suffering Phaedra would have experienced prior to this letter, which Euripides’ Phaedra felt throughout the tragedy. She also mentions several mythical love affairs as examples and encouragement to Hippolytus (85-104). These examples are not only all love affairs, but they all end tragically. In fact, these rather negative parallels are a wink at the audience from Ovid. At the same time, Phaedra’s questionable choice of exemplary lovers suggest that she is caught in her own self-delusion and full of doomed hopes.

Phaedra’s final argument to Hippolytus in *Heroides 4* is not one with an Euripidean precedent and contrasts greatly with Euripides’ treatment of Phaedra’s myth. In her letter, Phaedra writes that Hippolytus’ excessive regard for virtue is outdated, and has been for some time as Jove and Juno’s marriage amply demonstrates (129-155). This reference to old-fashioned models of martial fidelity is also a playful reference on Ovid’s part to other elegiac poems and the genre as a whole, which often centers on love affairs. Phaedra also mentions that concealing the affair would be easy since their present relation as stepmother and stepson presents a ready excuse for any interaction between them. Phaedra then begs Hippolytus to submit to love as she has done (156-174). This argument would likely be considered shocking to Euripides’ Phaedra, who aims to adhere to honor by whatever means necessary. This argument seems more in line with the nurse in *Hippolytus II* when she invoked the gods as examples of permitted and accepted love affairs. Once again this argument does not at first seem likely to be agreeable to Hippolytus or the external audience. However, given that Ovid was writing under Augustus and alongside the traditional moral values encouraged under Augustan rule, Phaedra’s words may also be interpreted as a commentary on the political and cultural climate.
of Ovid’s time. As Conte observes, elegy has “the sense of a moral rebellion, the taste for *otium*, for a life remote from civic and political engagement and disposed instead to cultivate private sentiments and to make them the object of poetic activity.” Latin love elegy is known to intentionally mock traditional Augustan morality. This genre is much more light-hearted than tragedy, and this fundamental difference in genre is reflected in Phaedra’s more daring comments in Ovid—comments that the Euripidean Phaedra would have been shocked to read, let alone write with her own hand.

After a final plea to Hippolytus to listen and consent to an affair, Phaedra concludes:

*Addimus his precibus lacrimas quoque; verba precantis qui legis, et lacrimas finge videre meas!*

I mingle with these prayers my tears as well. The words of her who prays, you are reading; her tears, imagine you behold! (175-176).

This is not only rather elegiac, it is also a profound written expression of the grief and suffering that Phaedra experiences. Through her words, Phaedra’s emotions are felt by the reader throughout the letter. It is a final reminder from Ovid and his Phaedra to Hippolytus, and the letter’s other readers, that Phaedra did not want this to happen to her and is trying to make the best out of a dire situation through prayers and tears. It also foreshadows the many woes soon to be experienced by Phaedra and her household. The closing lines of Phaedra’s letter evoke a physical expression of suffering that all readers can relate to.

Representations of Greek myths were not, however, re-imagined only by authors such as Ovid. Greek myths were also popular subjects in Roman art, especially in Roman wall paintings.

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30 Conte, Latin literature, 323.
31 Conte, Latin literature, 324.
painting. Many of these myths represented stories from tragedy and other genres of poetry that captured the hearts of their audiences with narratives of passion, danger, and death. Among the many subjects represented in the visual arts, compositions focused on mythical heroines were not uncommon. For example, the myth of Phaedra was not only a popular subject in Greek and Roman literature, but was also a frequently represented narrative in the domestic Roman wall paintings of the first century CE. According to M. Swetnam-Burland, there are 18 known Roman wall paintings of Phaedra. Phaedra’s presence in first-century Campanian homes speaks to her place in the minds of first-century viewers. Possible explanations as to why she was chosen and how she was portrayed can be found through an analysis of the iconography of Phaedra in Roman wall painting, contemporary Roman rhetorical practices, and the larger sociopolitical climate of the first century CE under Augustan rule. I hope to show how, much like the literary representations of Phaedra by Euripides and Ovid, the Roman wall paintings of Phaedra were intended to draw out an empathetic response from viewers. I will also explore the ways in which Campanian artists elicited such a response through their images of this well-known mythical heroine.

Owing to the nature of the medium, a very specific set of circumstances is required for such ancient paintings to be preserved. Fortunately for modern scholars, and unfortunately for some in antiquity, the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 CE covered the area of the surrounding cities in layers of ash and soot that allowed many examples of Roman wall paintings from the first century CE to be preserved until their rediscovery in the 18th century. The paintings that

were uncovered in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have suffered varying degrees of damage: in some cases, they were excised from their original walls and, in others, they have been lost or destroyed—often from being exposed to the elements. However, a corpus of wall paintings from Pompeii remain in good enough condition to allow the study of Roman wall painting to have grown over the last century and especially in the last several decades.\(^{33}\) In the case of Roman wall painting, prior to this growing focus on the art and its context, ancient frescoes were often used as supplements to primarily textual studies.\(^{34}\) More recently, it has become common for scholars to ask how the joint study of images and texts can help us understand how ancient viewers might have interacted with the wall paintings that surrounded them.\(^{35}\) There has also been an increased interest in the archaeological contexts of the homes in which the paintings were found. The material remains of Roman houses can enrich our view of the people who lived and moved within these spaces and how they interacted with wall paintings. Phaedra has been the subject of two important studies on Roman wall painting by Bettina Bergmann and Molly Swetnam-Burland. I will discuss the two paintings of Phaedra that these authors analyze in their articles in addition to three other paintings of Phaedra from Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Bettina Bergmann’s article, “The Pregnant Moment: Tragic Wives in the Roman Interior,” which was published in 1996, focuses on the three paintings of mythical women—

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\(^{34}\) Valladares, “Pictoral Paratexts,” 176.

\(^{35}\) Valladares, “Pictoral Paratexts,” 177.
Phaedra, Medea, and Helen—from Room E in the House of Jason in Pompeii (figs. 3-6). In this study, Bergmann attempts to reconstruct how an ancient viewer might have reacted to these images. Bergmann argues that the paintings in this room emphasize the three heroines’ passionate character and how the agency each woman expresses in her story leads them to leave their interior space, whether in life or through death, in such a way that the male figures in their lives are directly disadvantaged. Bergmann also argues that the viewer would have seen the “pregnant moment” as a frozen prison of solitude and indecision serving as a pseudo-punishment for these three passionate women who violently lashed out against their situations and superiors. Looking at these paintings in a broader context, as Bergmann aimed to do, is a very beneficial perspective. I disagree, however, with the negative judgment of these heroines that she expresses in her analysis. Instead I will show that Roman representations of Phaedra highlight her tragic situation and torturous indecision thus eliciting a strong connection and feeling of empathy from viewers.

Swetnam-Burland’s article, “Encountering Ovid’s Phaedra in House v.2.10-11, Pompeii,” discusses a painting of Phaedra with an Ovidian graffito carved into it by one of its ancient viewers. This painting has not been preserved since its excavation and excision in 1888-1892; however, a sketch of the painting drawn at the time of the excavation does survive as well as records from the excavation (fig. 7). Swetnam-Burland connects the archaeological remains of this relatively modest house and the graffito in order to show that Ovid would have been

accessible for more than just the upper classes. The graffito does not simply quote from Ovid’s text, but it also plays on his words. It reads “no eco” and is carved onto the robes of the nurse. The graffito’s author playfulness implies not only that s/he was familiar with Ovid’s poetry, but that s/he was also intellectually engaged with both the poet’s text and the painting on the wall when s/he inscribed the words on this fresco. This graffito indicates that viewers of paintings of Phaedra, whether in this house or in others, would have thought of Ovid and other authors as they viewed this image. For Roman spectators, viewing works of art required an active engagement between the viewer, myth, literature, and the image before them. If the viewer had in mind the sympathetic themes from Ovid that were outlined earlier, then it is likely that this sympathetic attitude towards Phaedra and her situation was projected onto this painting and other paintings of Phaedra.

There are three other wall paintings of Phaedra that are cited in Swetnam-Burland’s article as comparisons to the Phaedra fresco from House v.2.10-11 (figs. 8-10). All three come from unknown contexts in either Pompeii or Herculaneum and they represent Phaedra in a similar way: seated, ornately clothed, and accompanied by her ever-present nurse. One of the Pompeii paintings (fig. 8) and the painting from Herculaneum (fig. 9) are preserved in full and show a seated Phaedra, her nurse speaking to Hippolytus, and a servant of Hippolytus with his horse. The third painting is a fragment from Pompeii that most likely represents Phaedra. The partially preserved figure next to her is likely her nurse (fig. 10). There is no indication of other

39 “no eco” stands for “no ego” and is a fragmentary citation of Ovid’s Heroides 4.17: Non ego nequitia socialia foedera rumpam (It will not be through wanton baseness that I shall break my marriage-bond). Swetnam-Burland, “Encountering Ovid’s Phaedra,” 228.
figures represented alongside them, so it is possible that the full painting would have been similar to that of the House of Jason in which Hippolytus is absent (fig. 3).

These representations of Phaedra portray her almost identically and there are only a few paintings that deviate from this iconography within the corpus of extant frescoes of Phaedra. In most surviving examples, Phaedra is shown seated on a throne-like chair and elaborately dressed, as is fitting to her status as Theseus’ wife. One hand is raised to her face and in some examples she is clasping her veil in her hand harkening back to the veil worn by Phaedra in *Hippolytus II* as well as depicting Phaedra as a matron. In some instances, she is looking towards her nurse or Hippolytus and in others she is looking away or has her face downcast, similar to the representations of Phaedra on the earlier vases (figs. 1 and 2). The body language of Phaedra is similar to depictions of Penelope, the prime example of a chaste wife, waiting on Odysseus to return home in Greco-Roman sculpture, vase painting, and wall painting. Viewers would have been expected to perceive connection between the well-known representations of Phaedra and Penelope. This connection might bring the viewers to apply their positive feelings towards Penelope onto Phaedra, although the two mythical heroines find themselves in very different circumstances.

In each of these five paintings of Phaedra, the nurse is always positioned at Phaedra’s side. The nurse’s orientation varies: sometimes she is shown speaking with Phaedra (figs. 3 and 7) and in other examples, when Hippolytus is also included in the scene, she turns toward him and hands him the letter that will set the actions leading to his tragic demise into motion (figs. 8

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41 For Roman wall paintings of Phaedra that do not follow this more commonly found iconography, see LIMC Vol 7:1 (1994), 356-358.
42 For a catalogue of images of Penelope, see LIMC Vol 7:1 (1994), 291-295.
and 9). When Hippolytus is depicted in these paintings, he is shown accompanied by a servant and a horse. In the painting from House V.2.10-11, Hippolytus has his hand in the air as if he is already disgusted and refusing Phaedra’s affection. Each of these paintings and the combination of figures and attributes they contain all take place at a point in the narrative before Phaedra’s love has been fully revealed to Hippolytus and their fates have been sealed.

The iconographic consistency in the surviving representations of Phaedra, not only in wall painting but also in earlier pottery and later sarcophagi, shows that her image was highly recognizable. In addition to being quickly recognizable by viewers, representations of Phaedra carried with them the sentiments of sympathy expressed in her literary counterparts and through her body language. With her head and eyes downcast, slumped shoulders, and even what could be considered a gloomy expression, Phaedra’s body language communicates to the viewer her pitiful state of being—an aspect of her character that Euripides took great care to highlight in *Hippolytus II*. In these paintings, Phaedra’s body language also adds to the tension of the scene as she tries to fight her passions and decide how to best control her predicament. Phaedra was repeatedly and intentionally frozen in a moment in her narrative in which she was not yet the stepmother that led to ruin but rather the tormented victim of circumstance and love. Much like Ovid’s treatment of Phaedra, the paintings focus the viewer on this moment of indecision and uncertainty for Phaedra. This moment could also hark back to Euripides’ Phaedra who, although she chose not to act in the face of unconquerable love, had to suffer the consequences of her nurse’s actions. The artists who produced these paintings chose to depict Phaedra in a moment in which she is unsure of how to act and unaware of the misfortune that lies before her. Phaedra as the victim of circumstance elicits empathy from the audience who
can not only imagine what it would be like to be frozen in that same moment of uncertainty and fear, but also know that her sufferings will lead to death.

It is also important to acknowledge that Phaedra was chosen to be represented in a domestic context and that this repeated choice can influence our understanding of why Phaedra was chosen and how she was viewed. The fictional interior setting where Phaedra is placed in the House of Jason brings the viewer closer to the characters’ narrative and emotions as the viewers themselves stand in their own interior space viewing these mythical wives. We can see through the visual elements of the paintings of Phaedra that the artists made stylistic choices in order to make Phaedra, her myth, and her emotions more accessible to the viewer. The House of Jason and House V.2.10-11 were both houses of relatively small means in comparison to many other homes and villas which have been uncovered and were found to have similarly exquisite mythological wall paintings. The images of Phaedra present in both homes might lead to a few conclusions. These examples show that mythological paintings were found in the homes of more than just the upper class. Next, and most importantly, the individuals in these homes, no matter their status, would have been able to access and engage with the paintings and images of Phaedra.

The relationship established between an ancient viewer and a wall painting is well illustrated by the story of Portia in Plutarch’s *Brutus*. In Chapter 23, Brutus is about to flee Italy and Portia, his wife, is stricken with grief as she is to be left behind and separated from her husband. In her sadness she looks to a painting of Andromache saying goodbye to Hector.

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Portia is unable to conceal her suffering as she looks upon the painting several times a day and weeps before it. According to Plutarch, “the image of her own sorrow presented by it caused her to burst into tears” (23.4-5). Portia experiences immediate recognition of the scene depicted in the painting followed by an emotional reaction and connection to Andromache and her strife. As Paul Zanker argues in his analysis of this passage, the painting serves as both a means of catharsis and as a parallel for Portia. Not only is this dual experience occurring once when she first views the painting while experiencing her own heartbreak, but Portia revisits the painting in the privacy and safety of her home in order to mourn her loss of Brutus. In relating to Andromache, Portia’s internal, suppressed feelings are drawn out. She then projects her own emotions on the painting, influenced by the similarities between their situations. According to Plutarch, Portia feels empathy towards Andromache’s situation as she understands Andromache’s own suffering and then relates it to herself. Portia finds this parallelism between them although Andromache is a foreign woman from the mythical past. Portia does not allow the details of Andromache and Hector’s story to contradict her connection. She finds the parallels not in the specifics of their respective situations but rather in the emotions and pain experienced by both women after they have been left behind. Plutarch’s anecdote of Portia models what was a common occurrence for Roman viewers of wall paintings.

After his analysis of Plutarch’s account of Portia’s response to the painting of Andromache and Hector, Paul Zanker also discusses the greater implications of this anecdote

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44 Note to readers, the translation of Plutarch’s *Brutus* used was trans. by Bernadotte Perrin and was published in the Loeb Classical Library 98 in 1918.
46 Zanker, *Un’arte per l’impero*, 114.
for our understanding of how Roman spectators viewed wall paintings in their own homes. As we can see through the story of Portia, these mythical representations have the ability to mirror an individual’s experience so that the emotions are intensified and also better processed by the viewer. Zanker compares this almost therapeutic experience as an interaction with a friend or an oracle. The paintings provide not only catharsis but also guidance. As in Portia’s case, she can look at Andromache’s sorrow as well as her strong character in the face of suffering as a guideline for how she is to react to Brutus’ departure. Zanker claims that access to the mythical wall paintings was achieved in part by the imagination of the viewer and their ability to connect the figure to their myth as well as relate themselves to the figure. I would argue that in addition to the imagination of the viewer empathy was a necessary element for this sort of interaction with a painting. The viewers had not only to think about what it would be like if they themselves were in the situation represented before them, but they were also invited to consider what the depicted characters felt at these critical moments of their lives. The paintings then allowed the viewer to enrich his/her own life through this intellectual and emotional connection with the mythical figures in these paintings.

Just as Portia found solace through the empathy she felt for Andromache, so could Roman viewers have been led to feel empathy towards Phaedra. The painting of Phaedra in the House of Jason continues to be a crucial example of how empathy was intended to be drawn out in viewers. As it was mentioned before, the downcast way in which Phaedra’s body

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47 Zanker, *Un’arte per l’impero*, 113.
48 Zanker, *Un’arte per l’impero*, 114.
49 Zanker, *Un’arte per l’impero*, 129.
50 Zanker, *Un’arte per l’impero*, 129.
language is depicted brings the viewer to see the weight of her situation. The artist also chooses to freeze Phaedra in a moment of indecision before her deadly fate has been set into motion. Zanker describes this as a way in which the artist is playing on the psychological feeling of extreme love that leads to later extreme action. There is an interest in the tense moment of decision that is arguably the most empathetic scene in the myth of Phaedra. Just as Euripides used the words of Phaedra and other figures on the Greek stage to fully express Phaedra’s pitiful state and Ovid combined the styles of elegy and a letter to allow Phaedra to express unspoken hopes and desires, so does the artists of the wall paintings choose to depict Phaedra in narrative suspension to lead the viewer to understand Phaedra’s experience.

In the representations of mythical heroines in the House of Jason emphasis is placed not directly on the actions of the myth but rather on the emotional state of the women in their frozen moments. The painting of Phaedra (fig. 3) shows how distraught, indecisive, and conflicted she feels in her pitiful situation. The painting of Medea (fig. 4) also in the House of Jason channels similar emotions in addition to the anger that later drives Medea to kill her sons. The third painting in the room of Helen and Paris (fig. 5) focuses more on feelings of lust, the appeal of sex, and the thrill of intrigue. Helen also experienced a period of indecision similar to Phaedra’s. And although Helen’s choice of adultery would have likely seemed less egregious than incest, her choice resulted in more severe consequences. Each of these women succumbs to their passions and does terrible things for the sake of love. The representations of these women frozen in the process of making a difficult decision bring the viewer to think of their

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51 Zanker, *Un’arte per l’impero*, 118.
52 Zanker, *Un’arte per l’impero*, 118.
current predicaments and individual experiences. Some viewers may have seen the paintings solely as conveying a moral lesson of what not to do. However, as Zahra Newby has argued, “others, following the lead of Ovid’s *Heroides*, might instead seek to empathise, inhabiting the minds of these tortured women as they stand poised on the edge of disaster.” These portrayals of Phaedra, Medea, and Helen (figs. 3-5) in the House of Jason do not seek to ignore the later events of their myths. Rather, by highlighting these “pregnant moments” (as Bergmann calls them), these paintings focus the viewer’s attention on the different predicaments of each of these mythical heroines, inviting the spectator to consider how they might have felt in those moments of profound doubt and anxiety.

Roman rhetoric also reflects this practice of “inhabiting the minds” of mythological figures in declamation. Roman declamation was used to educate the privileged few who were able to study rhetoric through mock speeches. Many of these speeches included the use of *exempla* based on historical or mythological figures in order to boost an argument or prove a point. Some rhetorical practices, such as *controversiae* and *suasoriae*, required students to hypothetically defend or engage with mythical and historical figures. *Controversiae* were mock legal speeches arguing for or against the actions of well-known characters from either myth or history; and *suasoriae* were speeches meant to persuade such figures to choose a certain path of action (or not). In these exercises, students were asked to argue different sides of a

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53 Newby, *Greek Myths in Roman Art*, 182.
54 van der Poel, Marc. “The Use of *exempla* in Roman Declamation.” *Rhetorica* 27 (2009), 333; Newby, *Greek Myths in Roman Art*, 182.
55 van der Poel, “The Use of *exempla*,” 334-335.
controversial situation in order to hone their forensic skills. For instance, a student might be asked to defend Phaedra’s choice to leave a note to Theseus claiming Hippolytus had raped her, while another might be required to convince Medea not to kill her children. Not only did the students of rhetoric employ well-known mythological figures to persuade their audiences, but practitioners of rhetoric also imagined themselves in the place of mythical figures in order to defend them and give advice. The myth of Phaedra would have been particularly useful in these rhetorical exercises, in which a student might give a speech either defending her choices or attempting to convince her to follow a less destructive course of action. This use of myth in rhetoric provides yet another lens through which wall paintings of Phaedra could have been viewed empathetically by their audiences. Since rhetoric was an integral part of Roman education, ancient viewers, whether formally trained as orators or not, would have been spurred on by the scene of an indecisive Phaedra to think on her behalf or from her point of view, just as one might in the practice of declamation.

In addition to the empathetic tones of these rhetorical customs of Roman society, the social, cultural, and political changes of the Augustan period would have been a contributing factor to how people would have viewed Phaedra in wall paintings. During his reign, Augustus enacted several new laws that directly affected the lives of Roman citizens. Among these, the marriage laws and the intended “moral reform” of Roman society constituted the most controversial innovations of the Augustan regime. Some scholars think that the moral reform was suggested by Augustus in 28 BCE when he restored the temples; however, it was so badly

56 Dinter, Martin T., Guérin, Charles, and Martinho, Marcos, eds. Reading Roman Declamation: The Declamations Ascribed to Quintilian. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2016, 1.
received that he ceased efforts to promote these changes until a decade later.\textsuperscript{57} The Julian laws on marriage were promulgated in 18 and 17 BCE and then revised in 9 BCE.\textsuperscript{58} These laws enforced strict regulations on who could marry whom, based on class or status. They also regulated how marriages should be structured or dissolved by means of divorce, and set severe punishments for extramarital relations, especially those involving women of high rank.\textsuperscript{59} Through this legislation, Augustus claimed to be harkening back to the true Roman morals of the past and reinstating order to Roman society.

Augustus’ reform, as with any major sociopolitical change in antiquity or modernity, caused some push back among the Roman people and especially the elite. Some specifics are known about public figures, such as Ovid and other elegists, reacting to the Julian laws on marriage by writing love poetry that celebrated the illicit love affairs Augustus was eager to control and stamp out.\textsuperscript{60} The most famous case of a noble woman rebelling against the Julian laws during the time of Augustus revolves around the emperor’s own daughter, Julia, whose transgressive sexual behavior led her to be condemned to exile in 2 BCE.\textsuperscript{61} Because of the new focus on Augustus as Rome’s sole ruler, women in the imperial family became prominent in the public eye as topics of gossip and intrigue as well as models of good or bad behavior.\textsuperscript{62} The combination of reform and public scandal fed into the concern of sexual morality in Augustan

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\textsuperscript{58} Hallett, “Women in Augustan Rome,” 373; Treggiari, \textit{Roman Marriage}, 277.


\textsuperscript{60} Treggiari, \textit{Roman Marriage}, 291.

\textsuperscript{61} Treggiari, \textit{Roman Marriage}, 298.

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Rome and made it even more of a hot topic in society. As a contemporary issue, it would have been on the minds of ancient viewers who encountered paintings of Phaedra in Roman houses.

The Augustan laws on marriage made clear with their “ringing ideological message” what was socially and legally expected of women in their sexual conduct, specifically for the citizen class. Roman women were compelled by these laws not only to practice either chastity or fidelity depending upon their marital status, but also to find their social worth in these attributes. Roman viewers of wall paintings would have been aware of the cultural significance female sexuality held in Augustus’ time. Many myths featuring heroines represented in Roman wall paintings incorporated themes of love and sex in their narratives. Roman perceptions of transgressive mythological women such as Phaedra would have been shaped by this cultural framework, especially since their stories seemed to place greater value on the experience of love than on traditional morality and conjugal fidelity.

Phaedra’s actions, whether attributed to divine intervention or her own choice of passion, are in direct contrast to the cultural trends imposed by Augustus. She acts to break her fidelity in marriage and forsake not only her husband Theseus but also her household and children. Most Romans would not have wished to follow in Phaedra’s footsteps, especially as Phaedra not only ruined her situation but also led to the death of Hippolytus. However, I do not think that this necessarily means that Phaedra was chosen only to be depicted in this time period as a negative exemplum for Roman people to see and be reminded of the dangers of promiscuity and passion. Based on the evidence I have pointed out in Greco-Roman art and

literature, it seems that Phaedra was represented in a sympathetic way to her ancient audience in order to elicit empathy through her inescapable, unjust circumstance brought on by the passions of love.
Conclusion

In this thesis, I have aimed to convey to the reader the complex nature of the mythical heroine Phaedra who captivated her audiences just as she entrances us today. Greco-Roman poets and artists fashioned their representations of Phaedra by employing their specific medium and cultural context to convey her as a character worthy of empathy. Euripides portrayed a physically broken and defeated woman who exclaimed from the stage that death was the only honorable escape from the agony of her situation. Ovid gave a voice to Phaedra in her letter to Hippolytus, allowing her to put words to her suffering, passion, hope, and reasoning. And lastly the Roman wall paintings of Phaedra capture not only a single moment in the narrative before destruction has come to Phaedra and her household, but also these moments of indecision capture the weight Phaedra felt upon her hunched shoulders and the difficult decisions which lie ahead.

In addition to the walls of Roman homes, Phaedra is found in later Roman tombs.\textsuperscript{64} Representations of Phaedra and Hippolytus became frequent in the late second and third centuries CE and these depictions of Phaedra on Roman sarcophagi are iconographically similar to those we find in Campanian wall paintings.\textsuperscript{65} Such sarcophagi can be found in the collections


\textsuperscript{65} To see a fuller list of sarcophagi featuring Phaedra, see LIMC Vol. 5:1 (1990): 445-464
of the Louvre, the Vatican, and the National Roman Museum. As in the frescoes mentioned earlier, images of Phaedra on Roman sarcophagi show her reclining on a chair in a moment of suspended action. Once again, the way Phaedra is portrayed leads the viewer to think of the tragic situation of the doomed lover. Images of Phaedra on Roman sarcophagi place her in a memorial context and, especially in the cases in which the portrait of the deceased wife is combined with the figure of Phaedra, express a positive view of this heroine that was influenced by the past literary representations and a large body of visual representations of this myth in Roman private art. This raises the question of why the myth of Phaedra and Hippolytus is an appropriate subject for Roman funerary art, how the fusion of the figure of Phaedra with portraits of Roman wives expresses certain Roman feminine ideals, and how these representations of a complex tragic character may be reconciled with the celebratory function of sarcophagi. This body of rich evidence would provide further support to my argument of empathy communicated through the representations of Phaedra and requires further study.

Ultimately, it is unknowable how each individual, whether Roman, Greek, man, woman, citizen, or slave, felt upon seeing Phaedra on the Greek stage, reading her words through Ovid, or looking at her downcast face painted in their home. However, as I have argued here, it is possible that these representations of Phaedra in Greco-Roman art and literature were intended to incite empathy in the hearts and minds of their audiences. I hope that my methodology for the case of Phaedra 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 evoke positive
interpretations in ancient audiences. Phaedra is portrayed as more than an evil stepmother who made deadly choices. Phaedra is shown as a pitiable woman consumed by forbidden love and driven by her circumstance to escape from her suffering by the only means she felt possible: death.
Figure 1 *Phaedra*, Lekythos, ca. 360 BCE, now Museo Nazionale Archeologico di Napoli, Naples, inv. no. 81855.

Figure 2 *Phaedra*, Krater, ca. 350 BCE, now British Museum, London, inv. no. F 272.
Figure 3 *Phaedra*, wall painting, 30-20 BCE, House of Jason, Pompeii IX.5.18, now Museo Nazionale Archeologico di Napoli, Naples, inv. no. 114.322.

Figure 4 *Medea*, wall painting, 30-20 BCE, House of Jason, Pompeii IX.5.18, now Museo Nazionale Archeologico di Napoli, Naples, inv. no. 8977.
Figure 5 Helen, wall painting, 30-20 BCE, House of Jason, Pompeii IX.5.18, now Museo Nazionale Archeologico di Napoli, Naples, inv. no. 114320.

Figure 6 Floor plan, House of Jason, Pompeii IX.5.18, from B. Bergmann, “The Pregnant Moment: Tragic Wives in the Roman Interior,” from N. Kampmen, ed. *Sexuality in Ancient Art: Near East, Egypt, Greece, and Italy*, 1996, pg 201.

Figure 9 Phaedra, wall painting, early first century CE, Herculaneum, now Museo Nazionale Archeologico di Napoli, Naples, inv. no. 9041.

Image List

*Phaedra*, Lekythos, ca. 360 BCE, now Museo Nazionale Archeologico di Napoli, Naples, inv. no. 81855.


*Phaedra*, wall painting, 30-20 BCE, House of Jason, Pompeii IX.5.18, now Museo Nazionale Archeologico di Napoli, Naples, inv. no. 114.322

*Medea*, wall painting, 30-20 BCE, House of Jason, Pompeii IX.5.18, now Museo Nazionale Archeologico di Napoli, Naples, inv. no. 8977.

*Helen*, wall painting, 30-20 BCE, House of Jason, Pompeii IX.5.18, now Museo Nazionale Archeologico di Napoli, Naples, inv. no. 114320.


*Phaedra*, wall painting, early first century CE, Pompeii, now Antiquarium di Pompeii, Pompeii, inv. no. 20620.

*Phaedra*, wall painting, early first century CE, Herculaneum, now Museo Nazionale Archeologico di Napoli, Naples, inv. no. 9041.

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