

SHEILA MURNAGHAM : **Tragic Realities: Fictional Women and the Writing of Ancient History**

The fortieth anniversary of Sarah Pomeroy's groundbreaking *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* (1975) is an occasion for recognizing Pomeroy's thoughtful and flexible approach to the methodological problem of using male-authored fictional texts, such as the Homeric epics and Athenian tragedy, as sources for ancient women's history. In her chapter on the women of tragedy, Pomeroy acknowledges the limits of tragic texts as testimony to women's lives but still makes careful use of them, sometimes as fearful male fantasies or "nightmares of the victors", sometimes as reflections of women's actual roles in religious and domestic life, sometimes as expressions of sympathy for women's difficult circumstances. Ten years later, Phyllis Culham initiated a vigorous debate among feminist classicists by calling for the exclusion of literary evidence in favor of material and subliterary sources that could give more direct access to ancient women's lived realities. Culham's call was answered by a series of rebuttals and two decades of scholarship that followed Pomeroy's lead in identifying connections between tragic texts and the gendered experiences of actual Athenians. The recent turn to reception in classical literary studies offers the opportunity to consider ancient male-authored fictions in relation to the real experiences of modern women. This discussion focuses on two wartime memoirs by twentieth century women, Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933) and the anonymously-published *A Woman in Berlin: Eight Weeks in the Captured City* (1954). Each woman's story echoes the Homeric epics and confirms two important points made by critics responding to Culham: that lived experience cannot be extricated from the ordering patterns of fiction or myth-making; and that the stories told by male authors are sometimes stories that women might tell.

Mots-clés :

Sarah Pomeroy – Phyllis Culham – Vera Brittain – *A Woman in Berlin* – Athenian tragedy – *Iliad* – *Odyssey* – Andromache – Penelope – women's history – reception studies