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How Johnny Depp was victorious against Amber Heard and what it means



Johnny Depp arrives at the High Court in London in 2020. (Alberto Pezzali / Associated Press)

BY RICHARD WINTON | STAFF WRITER

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Johnny Depp's courtroom victory over ex-wife Amber Heard is being viewed by legal experts not just through the twists and turns of the courtroom drama but also for the wider implications the jury's verdict will have in the larger world.

Several experts deemed the verdict in the dueling defamation cases — in which Depp was the winner — a step back for the #[MeToo movement](#) and said it highlighted a distrust and dislike of Heard. Some feared it could set back the cause of women who complain about abuse by powerful men.

After a six-week trial, the jury found that [Heard had defamed her former husband](#) in a Washington Post opinion piece and acted with malice by casting him as a domestic abuser. The damage, Depp said, [cost him millions of dollars and starring roles](#) after decades as an A-list actor.

Jurors awarded him \$10 million in compensatory damages and \$5 million in punitive damages, which were immediately reduced by the judge to Virginia's statutory cap of \$350,000.

Heard, for her part, got a \$2-million verdict for defamation after one of Depp's lawyers accused her of creating a hoax that included staging a scene by trashing an apartment and spilling wine to make the "Pirates of the Caribbean" actor look guilty of violence.

Legal experts, including Greg Smith, a prominent Los Angeles and Texas civil attorney who has racked up tens of millions of dollars in civil verdicts, said Depp was found at fault for defamation because the trial presented no real evidence to defend the hoax allegation.

Troubling implications



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Johnny Depp wins more than \$10 million in defamation case against Amber Heard

“From a #metoo standpoint, it’s ... bad and dangerous,” said UC Irvine law professor Susan Seager, a 1st Amendment legal expert who spent decades representing media organizations.

“I just think that sends a bad signal to men and women or whoever is the abuser that, you know, you just can sue your victim and ruin them by bringing them to court for a defamation case,” Seager said. “It sends a signal that if you have the money to hire a lawyer — or even hire a defamation lawyer on contingency, they get a cut of your win — you can succeed against an accuser.”

Veteran lawyer Lara Yeretsian, who was part of [convicted murderer Scott Peterson](#)’s legal team, said celebrity trials are about the personalities of the participants as much as the lawyers. Yeretsian called Heard “[a terrible witness](#),” adding that “when a witness starts embellishing a story, exaggerates and overdramatizes, that witness loses credibility.”

She said the case also sent a warning to accusers. “The jury sent a clear message with this verdict: Do not make false accusations of domestic violence. If you do, there is a steep price to pay!”

David Ring, a Southern California civil attorney who represents numerous sexual-abuse accusers, including those making allegations against Harvey Weinstein, said the case is tough for victim advocates to get behind.

“I don’t know if you can equate it to a #MeToo case. Obviously, Johnny Depp has a lot of star power and these are two celebrities airing their dirty laundry,” Ring said.

In the end, Wednesday’s decision, which played out in a courtroom in Virginia, may be overturned or appealed.

What comes next

Heard’s lawyers likely will challenge the verdicts, Seager said, noting they were inconsistent and at odds with each other. She said proof of economic loss was not clear-cut and also will be grounds for a challenge.

Courtroom drama

Smith said jury trials are driven by the narrative told to jurors. He said in the Depp-Heard case, it is surprising how much testimony was allowed on the record that wasn’t really relevant. For example, Depp was “allowed to go on about parts of his life and his mother that had little relevancy to the facts of the case.” To some degree, Smith said, the judge — like many in celebrity cases — [lost control some of the time](#), and that makes for strong grounds for appeal.

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While Yeretsian noted that Depp's team out-lawyered Heard's, she said the strongest takeaway from the case is that men can be victims too. "They are saying that men can be victims of domestic violence, and as an attorney, I have seen that happen when women lie."

"Depp won in the court of public opinion, and he won the court of law," said Ring. "At the end of the day, maybe the #MeToo pendulum swung back a little."

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