

JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES &  
DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

# thersites

10/2019

Filippo Carlà-Uhink & Maja Gori (Eds.)

## Modern Identities and Classical Antiquity



[www.thersites-journal.de](http://www.thersites-journal.de)

## **Imprint**

### **Universität Potsdam 2020**

Historisches Institut, Professur Geschichte des Altertums  
Am Neuen Palais 10, 14469 Potsdam (Germany)  
<https://www.thersites-journal.de/>

### **Editors**

PD Dr. Annemarie Ambühl (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)  
Prof. Dr. Filippo Carlà-Uhink (Universität Potsdam)  
Dr. Christian Rollinger (Universität Trier)  
Prof. Dr. Christine Walde (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)

**ISSN 2364-7612**

### **Contact**

#### **Principal Contact**

Prof. Dr. Filippo Carlà-Uhink  
Email: [thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de](mailto:thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de)

#### **Support Contact**

Dr. phil. Christian Rollinger  
Email: [thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de](mailto:thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de)

### **Layout and Typesetting**

text plus form, Dresden

### **Cover pictures:**

1 – The Archaeological Museum of the Republic of North Macedonia in Skopje at the time of its construction. Photo by Maja Gori, 2008.  
2 – Roman gladiator. Part of a statuary group in Rruga Taulantia, Durrës, Albania. Photo by Filippo Carlà-Uhink, September 2019.

### **Published online at:**

<https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol10>

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons License:  
Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).  
This does not apply to quoted content from other authors.  
To view a copy of this license visit  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

ANDELKO MIHANOVIC

(IMT School for Advanced Studies Lucca)

## Review of Donna Zuckerberg: *Not All Dead White Men. Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age*

Harvard University Press (Cambridge 2018). 270 pp.

ISBN 9780674975552 \$ 27.95/£ 20.0/€ 25.00

“I am absolutely a nationalist, and I’m proud of it”, said president Trump to journalists on 24 October 2018, adding that “he’s never heard of the term being associated with white nationalism”.<sup>1</sup> However, the issue he dismisses is what Donna Zuckerberg addresses in her book *Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age*, published by Harvard University Press, in relation to the widespread abuse of the Classics by white nationalist groups.

---

<sup>1</sup> CNN. *Trump: I am absolutely a nationalist*, “CNN”, 23.10.2018., <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/politics/2018/10/23/donald-trump-nationalist-sot-oval-office-lead-vpx.cnn>, accessed 11 December 2018.

In her *Introduction* (pp. 1–10) Zuckerberg explains the importance of analysing recent abuses of the Classics by white supremacist, nationalist and misogynist movements in the US that are collectively known under the umbrella term “the Red Pill”, and gather in very high numbers on the Reddit platform of the same name. Zuckerberg notes how these movements may not only change the meanings surrounding ancient Greece and Rome in contemporary society, but may also lead to a widespread establishment of dangerous and oppressive behaviours with regards to gender and race.

A large number of people follow different radical ideologies on the Internet as a whole, and more particularly on

social media: Zuckerberg reports that there are more than 230,000 followers of the r/TheRedPill platform on Reddit, as well as more than 240,000 members of the subreddit r/seduction. At the moment of writing this review, there are more than 292,000 subscribers to the subreddit r/seduction, and the r/TheRedPill has been quarantined by Reddit because of its content.

The author shows how aggressively these movements behave towards women and feminist writers, and thus demonstrates why it is important to study this phenomenon. Zuckerberg states that her book is about “how men of the Red Pill use the literature and history of ancient Greece and Rome to promote patriarchal and white supremacist ideology” and writes that her goal is “to lay bare the mechanics of this appropriation: to show how classical antiquity informs the Red Pill worldview and how these men weaponize Greece and Rome in service of their agenda” (p. 5).

In the first chapter (pp. 11–44), entitled *Arms and the Manosphere*, the largest communities and their ideologies are described: the *Men’s Human Rights Movement*, the *seduction community*, *Men Going Their Own Way*, and the *Alt-Right*. While analysing why and how they use Classical heritage, the author formulates her argument provocatively and presents their misuse of the Classics as “only the latest development in the millennia-long use of classical an-

tiquity to promote reactionary ideologies” (p. 22).

What is more, the author discusses different examples from classical literature as used by the Red Pill to justify their misogyny: Hesiod’s *Theogony*, the poem *Types of Women* by Semonides’ from Amorgos, Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus*, Juvenal’s *Satire VI*, and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. These men present themselves as guardians of classical heritage against women who supposedly want to destroy it. At the end of the chapter, the author argues that it is not enough to point out that what these groups do is philologically wrong; in addition, it is essential to strive for a deconstruction of this phenomenon in order to counteract its dangerous operation.

The second chapter (pp. 45–88), entitled *The Angriest Stoics*, analyses the Stoic writings and the Red Pill Stoicism. A short literature review is presented at the beginning of the chapter, aiming at explaining the reasons why this particular philosophical school has gained popularity today. This is followed by a brief and general overview of Stoicism. Zuckerberg writes that Stoic texts seem progressive in comparison to other texts of their time (pp. 48; 70). However, underneath some of them carry misogynist meanings, they are “filled with insinuations that women are generally inferior to men: Cicero’s ideal fellowship is one of ‘good men’ (*boni viri*) [...] Seneca believes that women have a low

capacity for self-control. He also praises Marcia for not showing the customary ‘weakness of the feminine mind’” (p. 74). Stoic writings of this kind are simplified by the Red Pill movement and used to validate their supremacist ideas. Zuckerberg draws a connection between elitism and sexism and answers why the Stoics (and more particularly Marcus Aurelius) are popular in this oppressive community: “By studying Stoicism, all men today can assimilate themselves to the best ancient Romans ... His appeal [sc. Marcus Aurelius’] undoubtedly owes a great deal to his being not only famously learned and wise [...] but also perhaps the most powerful man in the world” (pp. 69; 58). What is more, Zuckerberg gives a Stoic response to the Red Pill Stoicism, and argues that the Stoic approach may help men in the United States to fight the “social pressure to be stoic” (p. 87). She finishes the chapter by suggesting that counteracting the Red Pill agenda will require more work to deconstruct the complexity of its relationship with Stoic heritage and to answer why it is so appealing to the Red Pill community.

The third chapter (pp. 89–142), entitled *The Ovid Method*, focuses on the use of Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria* by pickup artists (PUA), and compares PUA’s and Ovidian views on gender roles and sexual politics. By juxtaposing *Ars Amatoria*, *Metamorphoses* and *Remedia Amoris* along with stories of protagonists of the PUA community, the author points

to a predatory and oppressive attitude towards women today. The author clarifies how the use of Ovidian heritage is restricted by the PUA community: they consider Ovid to be “the father of seduction” (p. 91) and use him to legitimize themselves as intellectual descendants of a historically renowned literary figure. However, Zuckerberg very insightfully deciphers both Ovidian’s and Red Pill’s discourses by emphasizing similarities between the two. She examines “what it means to be ‘male’ and ‘female’” (p. 95) in the Stoic and Red Pill frameworks and she argues against the PUA’s myths.

Zuckerberg presents Clarisse Thorn’s classification of pickup artists, and describes the logic behind their system. Also, she writes that the marketing strategies of the most prominent PUA are similar to strategies “used by Ovid to construct his narrator’s authority in *Ars Amatoria*”, and she reveals the importance of the financial aspect and economic interests within the PUA community (p. 97). As she puts it toward the end of the chapter, “for these men, sex is warfare, and women are the enemy to put under siege” (p. 137).

In the fourth chapter (pp. 143–184), ironically entitled *How to Save Western Civilization* (she actually cites the title of one PUA’s blog post), Zuckerberg connects the Red Pill and the PUA communities in a clearer way, showing their orientations towards sexual abuse and political control of women. Following the PUA’s strategies, exemplified by

the use of the myth of Hippolytus and Phaedra, she focuses on the concept of false rape allegations in order to argue against misogynist gender politics and to show how perverse the aforementioned communities' views are: by reshaping the myth they facilitate the development of a rape culture. Thus, Zuckerberg demonstrates how this leads to the reduction of female voices in contemporary society and to the establishment of binary gender roles.

Additionally, she interprets arguments about sexual relationships by feminist scholars, such as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine Mackinnon, and engages with the problems of rape and marriage in the Classical world. Zuckerberg draws on linguistic differences between Latin, Greek and present-day English, and thus points to the lack of precise terminology for sexual assault and rape in Latin and Greek. She concentrates largely on the myth of Hippolytus and compares different versions of it, moving to a critique of a Red Pill concept of marriage and their abuse of women toward the end of the chapter.

The *Conclusion* (pp. 185–190) summarizes the findings of the study. Zuckerberg acknowledges that the Red Pill community successfully manipulates Classical sources for their political agenda, promoting white male nationalist supremacist behaviour and subjugation of women, their civil rights and their sexual life on an ideological basis. On the other hand, Zuckerberg calls for

a more engaged feminist reading of the Classics, aiming at tackling the very issues Red Pill men talk about. She reminds her readers of her own experience of harassment that happened when her article “How to Be a Good Classicist under a Bad Emperor” was published at the end of 2016 in the *Eidolon* journal,<sup>2</sup> and prompts further analyses of connections between the Classical world and its contemporary receptions, problematic or otherwise.

The book is accompanied by a glossary (pp. 191–194) of Red Pill terms and an extensive Notes section (pp. 195–228) that complements arguments from the main text. References (pp. 229–252) also show the depth of research conducted for the preparation of this book.

The writing style makes the book highly accessible to non-experts when it comes to these particular aspects of Classics and Classical Reception. The author states modestly that the “book is written for people who have an interest in Classics but have not studied it extensively” (p. 6). However, I find it also useful for scholars, who may particularly benefit from its precise comparisons and analyses of different characteristics of the contemporary issues discussed, as well as their complex relationship

---

2 Donna Zuckerberg, *How to Be a Good Classicist Under a Bad Emperor*, “*Eidolon*”, 21. 11. 2016., <https://eidolon.pub/how-to-be-a-good-classicist-under-a-bad-emperor-6b848df6e54a>, accessed 11 December 2018.

with the ancient world. This actualization of the ancient world by Zuckerberg may serve as a stimulus to rethink the connections between Classics and contemporary society from an aspect that has so far not been extensively studied, regarding these difficult questions and within particular contexts she highlights.

In addition, considering religious and racial issues even more closely, as well as the struggle of people of oppressed ethnicities, to see how these communities are related to the issues discussed in this book, may be another step towards future work. Although the focus is on white nationalist and misogynist communities in the United States, the Classics are used by extremist right-wing movements and political parties for similar agendas in Europe as well. On the same note, the complexity of reasons why these communities turn to Roman history should be further studied, as the author herself states. The author in several places mentions the concept of nostalgia, and that may in the future be analysed in relation to the concept of escapism.

In the end, Zuckerberg's book is a ground-breaking interdisciplinary study of a social phenomenon that needs to be further addressed. The book courageously looks at some of the most disturbing uses of the Classics in the here and now, while still advocating the importance of studying antiquity.

## Table of Contents

### Introduction

1–10

### 1. Arms and the Manosphere

11–44

### 2. The Angriest Stoics

45–88

### 3. The Ovid Method

89–142

### 4. How to Save Western Civilization

143–184

### Conclusion

185–189

### *Glossary of Red Pill Terms*

191–194

### *Notes*

195–228

### *References*

229–252

### *Acknowledgments*

253–254

### *Index*

255–270

<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674975552>

Review of Donna Zuckerberg:

---

Not All Dead White Men

---

Andelko Mihanovic

IMT School for advanced Studies Lucca

**Suggested citation:**

Andelko Mihanovic: Review of Donna Zuckerberg: Not All Dead White Men. *Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age*. In: *thersites 10* (2020): Modern Identities and Classical Antiquity, pp. 221–226.

<https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol10.94>