

THE TRUMPAN HORSE

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discovers some educational uses for classical myth in modern politics

Classicists should be overjoyed: we are no longer irrelevant. In the current chaotic global climate, hardly a week goes by without politicians or the media referencing the ancient world in order to clarify current affairs. One might argue that, in volatile times, people find solace in turning to the past. By tracing precedents and correspondences in history, we hope to prophesy the outcome of our own predicament. The ancient world, as the root of our self-defined Western world, featured heavily in Brexit and the US presidential election on both sides of the increasingly diametrically opposed political spectrum.

Classicists have been busy to keep up with this inundation of references: Brexit was wonderfully compared to the Athenians' Mytilenean debate, Trump with just about every rotten Roman ruler and Twitter witnessed with glee the heated debate between Arron Banks and Mary Beard on the role of immigration in the fall of the Roman Empire (i.e. the EU).

As I was teaching my third-year 'Classics in Popular Culture' module in the midst of all this, I decided to integrate weekly references to spark debate about what classical reception entails. Cartoons, tweets and quotes from politicians and the media were all used to explore the ways in which the ancient world (particularly its literary and mythological aspects, as these are my areas) is open to appropriation by different ideologies. One person commented in the end-of-module feedback that I had no business bringing politics into the classroom; otherwise, my students told me they were inspired. While I made my own personal opinions known, I encouraged disagreement and debate.

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Hercules: a model for Theresa May? (Bronze statuette, possibly by the Ciechanowiecki Master, Italy, late 16th to early 17th century).

Hercules and Plato in Brexit cartoons

My favourite Brexit cartoon features Theresa May as Hercules, hyper-feminized in a leopard skin and pink heels, yet with masculine muscles, straining to control Cerbrexit (Boris Johnson, David Davies and Liam Fox) in front of the fiery Underworld. The cartoon allowed us to investigate not only reception of the Hercules myth(s), but also comparative ideologies of gender, monstrosity and the Underworld/Hell.

On the other side of the political divide, we debated a cartoon depicting the British ship of state proudly sailing into the sun while the EU ship tumbles off the earth, worn down by terrorists, Angela Merkel, debt and other horrors. We worked

on Plato's *Republic* a lot in the module (through, for example, discussion of the allegory of the cave in films such as *The Matrix* and *The Lego Movie*), and this cartoon allowed us to reflect on it in another medium.

The two cartoons worked beautifully together in teaching Reception since, though they both mock the other side for plunging Britain into Hell, they engage with Classics differently. While the Hercules cartoon is based on a conglomeration of Hercules narratives, both literary and iconographical, the ship of state – albeit an image passed through the ages – engages with one specific literary reference.

Did Trump read Homer?

In the US presidential election, a picture of Nigel Farage and Donald Trump in the latter's golden elevator went viral on Twitter, described as 'the inside of Pandora's box'. While the author's meaning was obvious (Pandora's box contained all the evils in the world, and thus these two figures can be equated with those evils), there is scope for alternative interpretations, depending on whether you mean the box pre- or post-opening by Pandora and whether you consider Hope a good or bad thing. Cue a discussion of Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works & Days*.

It was the image of the Trojan horse, however, that really sparked the imagination of both sides. Anti-Trump cartoons mockingly represented the Mexican response to Trump's proposed wall as a giant piñata-like horse and also Trump's face as the backside of the Trojan horse with KKK and neo-Nazi fighters climbing in, ready to enter the US. In the former, Trump is the

Trojans, too foolish or arrogant to see through the ruse; in the latter, Trump becomes (the worst) part of the Trojan horse itself, fooling a naïve United States into letting in the forces of the so-called alt-right. Trump referred to the same myth when he stated that he was ‘not just a Trojan horse’ of the Clinton machinery, put in a position of potential power simply to lead Clinton to an easy victory.

Trump’s strongest use of the Trojan horse, however, was in reference to the refugee crisis: ‘This could be the ultimate Trojan horse. This one could be written about for a long time. They probably think, “this is going to be easy: we will send all these ISIS people”, so a big percentage could be ISIS’. Trump argued that the US would let in a swarm of terrorists – disguised as harmless refugees – so great that it would create a future narrative as enduring as that of the Trojan War. *The Huffington Post* was quick to point out that there is an irony in Trump’s image, since, in the Homeric epics, the Greeks are in fact depicted as the good guys, and so Trump inadvertently places the terrorists in the role of rightful conquerors. This simplified interpretation of good and evil in the Homeric epics led to interesting classroom discussions regarding morality and heroism.

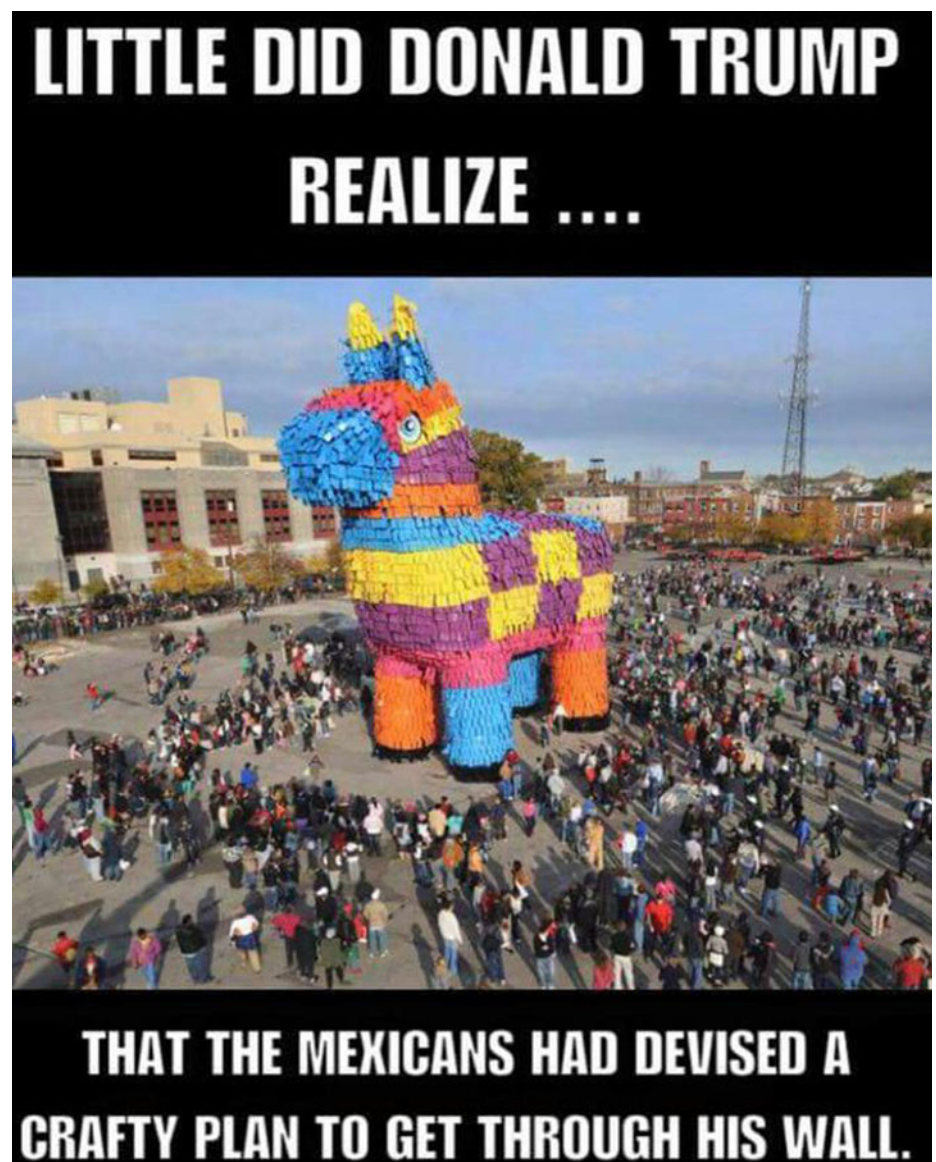
Between academia and extremism

What these very different applications of one particular image from ancient mythology primarily teach us, however, is how easily Classics can be appropriated to lend status and meaning to very different ideological agendas. While Classics as an academic subject area is far from neutral territory, shaped as it is by centuries of appropriation by the ruling elites of the Western world, the ancient world is in fact ‘neutral’ territory. It is not owned by anyone, least of all the experts. Since we base our understanding of antiquity on analysis, in a post-truth world *any* interpretation is potentially valid.

A rather horrifying example of this is the US fascist group ‘Identity Evropa’. Open only to white non-Jewish males with a certain disposable income, this group identifies itself as European (ironic, since Europe seems quite uncertain about its own identity for the moment), while its ideology hails the Greeks, Romans, Vikings and Normans as the roots of our current civilization, superior to all others. They even spell ‘Evropa’ with a ‘v’ in a nod to Roman spelling. Their so-called ‘epic’ posters featuring statues of famous ancient heroes, such as Caesar, Apollo and Hercules, reflect their members’ aspiration to a sterilized heroism of an imagined past. Their racist campaign, based on slogans such as ‘protect your heritage’, caused

upset on several university campuses in the US.

It is easy to pick holes in their interpretation of antiquity. Extremism has a tendency to simplify both past and present into a sharp good and evil dichotomy. Yet it is futile to enter into debate, since their ideology is one of *pathos*, not *logos*: being hit in the face – as happened to one of their ringleaders – seems to be the only response they understand. That does not mean that classicists are powerless, however. Classics has never been a safe subject; but since it has become such a key part of the present political narrative, it is pivotal that we work together to explore and articulate the nuance and messy nature of our heritage, to create a counterweight to simplification and extremism.



A typical internet meme showing a piñata-like Trojan horse.