

# Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age

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## Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age

**Aven McMaster's** main areas of research and teaching are Latin poetry, ancient gender and sexuality, and race and racism within the discipline of Classics. She is also an advocate for engaged public scholarship and co-produces a podcast and video series under the name "The Endless Knot."

**Book under review:** Zuckerberg, Donna. 2018. *Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

The field of Classics might seem far removed from the very online world of Men's Rights activists and reactionary misogynistic hate groups. But in this compact and readable book Donna Zuckerberg makes a compelling, and often chilling, case for a connection between the ancient world and modern misogyny. The main focus of the book is the "Manosphere," which Zuckerberg also often refers to with the catch-all term "The Red Pill community," "a group of men connected by common resentments against women, immigrants, people of color, and the liberal elite" (1) who use social media and online platforms to connect, recruit, and attack opponents. In particular, she traces the ways in which texts, ideas, and historical facts from Athens and Rome have been used by anti-feminist movements in the last decade, and how the lingering prestige of "Classics" is employed to bolster and validate extremist views. This can mean holding Greek and Roman writers up as exemplary and unimpeachable authorities whose anti-women, classist, and xenophobic ideas justify such views today. It can also appear in the selective and often incorrect use of history to present the ancient Greco-Roman world as white, homogenous, and heterosexual, with rigidly gendered societies that conformed to current ideals of "traditional" marriage and families. Zuckerberg also points out how the academic field of Classics, itself historically a site of sexism, classism, and racism, is still actively contributing to these damaging narratives.

The book is divided into four chapters, with a brief Introduction and Conclusion, extensive endnotes, a glossary, and a detailed bibliography. The first chapter, "Arms and the Manosphere," briefly explains the main communities and groups Zuckerberg is discussing. It also surveys the mechanisms by which ancient texts are deployed to "legitimize" misogynistic positions, often by highlighting the actual misogyny of some ancient works to show that modern misogynists are the true inheritors of the classical tradition. In doing so the

Red Pill community relies on the view of that tradition as high status and culturally supreme, so its members are vigorous in their defense of “Western Civilization” and attack those who challenge the canon or broaden the educational curriculum. This is one way scholars have (perhaps unwittingly) enabled extremist views when they defend the discipline of Classics as teaching about “the roots of Western Civilization” or extol the intrinsic virtues of learning ancient languages.

The other three chapters each focus on particular instances of the intersection between the Classical world and the Red Pill community: Stoic philosophy, Ovid’s poem *Ars Amatoria* or “The Art of Love,” and the story of Phaedra. Stoicism, first formulated by Greek philosophers, was particularly influential on Roman thought, with Seneca and Marcus Aurelius its most well-known proponents. Zuckerberg defines it briefly as teaching its adherents “that nearly everything usually perceived to be harmful (including hunger, sickness, poverty, cruelty, and death) is only harmful if one allows it to be. The only true evil is vice” (46) and that true happiness comes from “recognizing what is within one’s power and what is not” (45). She points out that these central messages directly contradict the manosphere’s belief “that feminism is causing the downfall of Western civilization” (46), but that the community is nonetheless fascinated by the philosophy and by Marcus Aurelius in particular. Zuckerberg uses this contradiction to demonstrate how ancient texts are used by the manosphere: instead of studying them closely and engaging with their context and content, the leaders of these movements reduce them to simplistic summaries celebrating what they consider “real masculinity” and then use those misreadings to validate their own beliefs. This is a balanced and important consideration of the ways that ancient texts can be manipulated to support hateful ideologies, and even more crucially, how seemingly innocuous interest in ancient philosophy and history can be used as a recruiting tool.

The chapters on Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria* and on the character Phaedra from Greek myth give contrasting examples of how ancient texts about gender relations and sexual violence are used by the manosphere.

Ovid’s poem is essentially a Roman seduction manual from the first century BCE, with advice on how to meet, woo, and keep women, though scholars tend to view it as humorous and literary rather than practical. Zuckerberg shows how the “Seduction” community treats Ovid’s advice as a serious guide to relationships between men and women. Her reading of the poem asks whether some members of Ovid’s audience might also have taken the work seriously, and suggests ways to re-examine the text’s underlying assumptions about women, sex, and gender relations. On the other hand, Phaedra’s story, about a false rape accusation that results in tragedy, retold in several Greek and Roman works, seems tailor-made for appropriation by the manosphere, which is fixated on the “problem” of false rape allegations. In fact, however, the story is rarely mentioned by them. Zuckerberg’s examination of the story, then, provides the kind of close reading and historical contextualization of the myth that the manosphere does not engage in, in order to undo “the Red Pill’s false and misleading narratives about the politics of gender and sexuality that produce false allegations” (146). This chapter is therefore the one which most explicitly models a strategy that classicists could use to combat the rhetoric of the manosphere.

Zuckerberg is clear in her condemnation of the misogynistic aspects of these movements, but she takes their ideologies and arguments seriously, as demonstrated by the depth and breadth of her research. She uses blogs, posts in online communities, articles, interviews, podcasts, ancient texts, Classical scholarship, and articles by classicists pushing back against alt-right appropriation of their subject. The only major weakness of the book is that it lacks an extensive engagement with the role of racism in these ideologies. Both the title and the opening vignette in the introduction about the white nationalist group Identity Evropa suggest the importance of race and racism in this discussion. However, Zuckerberg says she “decided to focus primarily on the gender politics rather than the racial politics of Red Pill communities” (5) because they are more coherent across the various groups and because the alt-right’s discourse about ancient race is less well developed. The frequency with which issues of race and white supremacy arise within the rest of the book, however, demonstrates that this non-intersectional ap-

proach leaves too much out, and her arguments would have been strengthened by more explicit discussion of the relationship between gender and racial ideologies.

For non-classicists, the importance of this book lies in its clear dissection of the mechanics of online misogyny. Her explanation of the “Red Pill toolbox” in the first chapter provides a guide to recognising, understanding, and responding to the strategies used by those arguing these (and other) hateful ideologies, and will be useful for scholars and students alike. The book’s exploration of the links between contemporary misogyny and the ancient world should also be instructive for feminists seeking to understand these movements and for those attempting to combat their rhetoric online or in their classrooms. It reinforces the message that no discipline is disconnected from contemporary social and political issues, and its call for scholars to address these connections directly will hopefully drive further research into the ways extremist ideologies use, and abuse, scholarly work.