

The Ancients Online: Classical Reception in Online Political Discourse

Ana Victoria Jankowski, supervised by Dr. Shane Hawkins

Perhaps one of the most notable qualities of Classical antiquity is its remarkable aptitude for reinterpretation. From Charlemagne and Dante, to Mussolini and Margaret Atwood, antiquity functions as an ever-flowing spring of tales and symbols put to the service of all storytellers regardless of their political ideologies. Thus, a past that might seem long-gone is in reality deeply cemented in our culture. In recent years we have begun to witness a new wave of classical reception among young adults. The purpose of my research is to investigate how classical reception functions to create subcultural identities in an online context, particularly on TikTok and X, and specifically among right-leaning young men and queer/feminist youths.

The study of these groups and their contrasting interpretations can serve as an example of the increasing polarization within our society and help us reflect on the role of academia in the face of such issues. On one hand, young men seek to model themselves after figures like Marcus Aurelius and believe our society to have been corrupted by “woke” ideals, the feminist movement, and gender ideology. To them, antiquity functions as an idyllic traditionalist past we must restore by embracing alt-right values. I will refer to these individuals as Stoic Bros, a term which I decided to coin in order to situate them as participants in the history of hyper-masculine, sexist subcultures in North America. On the other hand, Hellenic Polytheist pagans appear to believe the worship of Greek gods to be a form of protest against the oppressive Judeo-Christian tradition. In this way, these practices empower marginalized groups such as queer and neurodivergent folk, women, or individuals with disabilities. Both groups resort to Classics as a tool to oppose mainstream culture and communicate radically different political ideologies.

Referring to Emily Greenwood’s *omni-local classic*,¹ I argue that Classics become a universal cultural symbol. Millennia of re-interpretations from communities with diverse ideologies facilitates their adoption into seemingly conflicting environments. Therefore, Stoic Bros and Hellenic Pagans alike are able to refer to their *omni-local classics*, which respond to their personal and sociopolitical context. Figures from antiquity become associated with political leaders and social justice activists, presenting the Classical period as a utopia that both provides evidence and is the basis for their arguments.

Classical antiquity is part of the world’s cultural patrimony, and anyone regardless of their education level, cultural background, age, or ethnicity is entitled to immerse themselves in this world. However, no one should condone the use of antiquity to perpetuate narratives of hate. It is of the utmost importance that students and scholars in the field firmly oppose any use of antiquity that promotes racist, misogynist, or homophobic ideologies. To be tolerant of these on the grounds of “free speech” is to be complicit. Students and professors alike must strive away from idealization and adopt a critical lens, while also recognizing that perhaps Classics can be revitalized by the analysis of new forms of interpretation. In such a manner, Classics can become a tool to help combat cruel extremist political ideologies.

¹ 128 Emily Greenwood, “Reception Studies: The Cultural Mobility of Classics,” *Daedalus* 145, no. 2 (2016): 42-44, https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00374.