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**Beerden, K. & Epping, T. (Eds.). (2020). *Classical Controversies: Reception of Graeco-Roman Antiquity in the Twenty-First Century*. (234 pp.). Leiden: Sidestone Press. ISBN 9789464270365 (Paperback) 9789464270372 (Hardback).**

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#### Keywords

antiquity; reception; politics; heritage ethics; alt-right

The volume stands between Reception Studies and Outreach, and admits engagement with current ideologies, as politics and ideology influence public perceptions of antiquity, appropriations of the classical past, and heritage strategies. It focuses on 21<sup>st</sup>-century classical appropriations by conservatives and the alt-right. The editors' declared aim is to review current interpretations of ancient sources and the narratives constructed by different agents; to analyse kinds of misconceptions and misuses, their impact on popular perceptions and politics, and finally, to discuss academics' contributions to popular perceptions of the classical world. Intriguingly, the editors requested contributors to contemplate on ways to tackle the misuse of the classical past by radical and mainstream conservatives. Accordingly, instead of summarising each essay (abstracts are freely accessible online), this review revolves around the editors' request and it is regrettable that not all contributors chose to present their views. The lack of Conclusions to collect, evaluate, and advance individual suggestions may be equally regrettable.

Part II adheres to the volume's title and aims, and contains essays pertaining to classical appropriations and current debates in the US, Northern Europe, and Italy. Essays in Part III discuss museum and heritage topics. Perhaps as a result of its circumstances (the volume collects papers from a conference hosted by the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities), the fi-

nal outcome appears uneven. The contributions in Part III lack either the Greco-Roman or the Controversies element, occasionally even both, and venture on topics loosely connected to the volume's aims and scope.

Part I begins with the editors' Introduction, wherein they put forth three clusters of actions that also feature in individual essays. They propose universities engage more with 21<sup>st</sup>-century classical receptions and collaborate with academics with relevant research interests. They make a case for museum personnel, whose jobs are safer than those of (especially junior) academics, to engage with such sensitive topics – and this is where parts of Part III become relevant. A third proposed course of action is to focus on enabling students as future teachers with the power to influence popular perceptions of Classical Antiquity.

Frederick Naerebout's must-read long essay concludes Part I and outlines culture wars and their reliance on classical tradition. The author pinpoints three tributaries to Classical Receptions and Perceptions. First, academic researchers with little overall appeal. Second, more popular quasi-scholars whose superficial analyses may reach further and their impact will probably grow with reposting on social media. Finally, popular culture and its unmatched grasp of the audience's attention (often put at the service of conservatives). The author argues that it is unrealistic to think anyone can halt the abuse of the past by either side of the culture wars, or to aspire that the nuances can reach the general populace or the radical right. Instead, the author suggests we alter the subject matter of Classical Studies. Essentially,

topple the Greeks and Romans; deprive them of their privileged position in the hierarchy of our values; and contextualise them broadly, beyond the boundaries of what we think or they thought was their world (just like museums, which display material culture across eras). With the Greeks and Romans out of the limelight, their abuse will cease. The insightfulness of the proposal notwithstanding, I remain sceptical but receptive to what seems to be a call to return to the ways of historians of old, who tackled big questions and deployed an eagle-eyed view, at least in the classroom and university curricula. In an age of extreme specialism and exponential growth of knowledge, I am not certain how academics and universities can change tack. It is not just about 'moving the goalposts', as the author admits: it is about removing them altogether, change ground lines and guidelines, and play cricket instead of football.

Renske Janssen draws our attention to the oft-neglected practice of speakers in the US to evoke the metaphor of early Christianity and its sufferings to present a group, a tenet, or an action in positive light (e.g., draw a parallel to a marginalised group to elicit sympathy, or to authorities doing the unchristian thing, as did the Romans, to impress animosity). Conservative speakers deploy such metaphors to form battle lines: early and modern Christians are *Us*, ancient and modern liberal/secular authorities are the *Other*. The author briefly touches upon the editors' request with a call to study more closely the use of metaphors relating to early Christianity in modern-day politics.

In light of the appropriation of Spartan-like quotes and symbols by the groups who razed the Capitol on 6/1/21, Stephen Hodkinson discusses instances of and the causes behind the use of what is perceived as Spartan tradition, with an emphasis on the Spartan mirage, i.e., the misconception that Sparta was an exceptional case among Greek cities, an exclusively militaristic state. Sparta and the stand of Leonidas at Thermopylae, among oth-

ers, have been misused in the name of resistance against the US government or liberals, in support of white supremacy, virtue, and military prowess. To challenge alt-right appropriations of Sparta, the author suggests we start within the academy: first, academics should re-evaluate the obsolete, misconceived yet popular militaristic perception of Sparta(ns), and then train the future teachers in primary and secondary education. Instead of engaging with the alt-right, academics should target those on the fence and offer a way out for extremist-clinging individuals. The author argues that engaging with online platforms, responding to questions from members of the public, and working with communicators who influence broad audiences may be key and immediate actions forward.

Siapakas and Sjösvärd document the literary and political perception of the Greeks as guardians of civilisation against the onslaught of oriental barbarians in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Sweden and Finland, and the timely post-war reversal of a tenet that grew during mid-war tensions with the Soviet Union. They link this misuse to Spartan appropriations by authoritative regimes in the 1930s, and provide a rare discussion of such appropriations by the Greek dictatorship of the time. The authors propose we challenge long-standing traditions of Greek military exceptionalism in the academy and popular culture.

Julia Müller studies the appropriation of pseudo-Spartan symbols by some identitarian groups and suggests more research to debunk the practice and educate teachers and students, as well as engaging more with the public to grow our outreach, together with a firm stand against alt-right appropriations. Marco Gay's study of the reception of Aeneas as a refugee in contemporary Italy discloses misappropriations other than the alt-right's. Progressive readings are equally vulnerable to challenges on their veracity and accuracy; for Aeneas, *any* political appropriation requires a distortion of the ancient text and bypassing its innate controversies.

Barbara Holler insightfully turns to a crucial question: what does the public think researchers do? She looks at five novels whose protagonists are classicists. She compares literary stereotypes with the real situation in Classical Studies and acknowledges the importance of direct engagement with the public to inform perceptions of Classics, classicists, research, and antiquity, and of fine-tuning links between the ancient and the modern world.

Part III comprises a few stimulating essays loosely connected with the volume's topic.

Patricia Kret attempts a typology of exhibiting ancient death in museums and Suus van der Berg unfolds ways museums can queer their antiquity collections, which may be already queered by nature. Daniel Soliman's paper discusses resurging orientalism in a Dutch comic series for children and Liesbeth Claes collects strategies of local authorities and countries along a Roman road to promote cultural tourism – and suggests a unified, joint project to replace the currently fragmented maintenance and development strategies.

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