

ARTICLE

As *Eidolon* Lay Dying

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Abstract

I ran the online classics publication *Eidolon* from 2015 to 2020. *Eidolon* sought to make Classics “personal and political, feminist and fun,” publishing more than 500 articles and receiving 3 million total views in its five years of active existence. Because our editors (and many of our writers) were scholars who grew up consuming and producing digital content, we were able to bring a measure of academic rigor and methodology to inform urgent personal and timely essays. *Eidolon*’s position as both insiders and outsiders to the discipline of Classics made it uniquely suited to address some of the most challenging and necessary conversations facing the field, from white supremacist classical appropriation online to sexual harassment and racial discrimination within the discipline. But the lack of institutional support that allowed total freedom also made the publication vulnerable and contributed to its closure in late 2020. It’s wonderful to have fans, but a publication also needs champions. I argue that, for an online publication to be exciting and fresh but also resilient, it must maintain a delicate balance between fearlessly commenting on the most pressing issues of the day (without, perhaps, waiting for the temporal distance and perspective that academics usually prefer!) while still cultivating the institutional support necessary to weather inevitable challenges. And, most importantly, you need to have fun while doing it.

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In early 2015, I had the bright idea to try and start a public-facing Classics publication. I was reading an article in *Nature* about using X-ray tomography to decipher charred Herculaneum papyri during my daughter’s naptime, and I thought, “Why *isn’t* there a publication where classical scholars can show why their research is interesting and relevant to a wide audience?”¹ And then, with the hubris of a 28-year-old bored out of her mind after spending most of the past year as stay-at-home mom to a toddler, I thought, “If it doesn’t exist, someone should make it. I guess that person might as well be me.” Three months later, I launched *Eidolon*, “a modern way to write about the ancient world,” a publication that would run for five years and accrue millions of views.

It isn’t quite true to say I started the publication on a whim, because the effort spent building relationships with writers, editing and preparing a month’s worth of essays, and developing

¹ See Mocella et al. 2015.

plans for how to handle promotion and pitches was anything but whimsical. But the lead time from idea to launch was only a few short, feverish months.

I've come to see this was part of the magic of *Eidolon*: because its editors (and many of its writers) were scholars who grew up consuming and producing digital content, we were able to bring a measure of academic rigor and methodology to inform personal, timely essays. We believed that, with enough urgency and willingness to ignore our children and/or other responsibilities, we could make an idea become a reality in a matter of mere months. Or mere weeks: when it was announced in mid-October 2019 that Professor Dirk Obbink had been stealing papyri and selling them to Hobby Lobby, my co-editors and I hustled to put together a special issue on papyrus theft with five articles by experts in the field that came out the first week of November.² And the lead time from idea to publication for *Eidolon*'s most-viewed article, "How to Be a Good Classicist Under a Bad Emperor," was just a few short days in November 2016, shortly after Donald Trump was elected President.³

The article didn't come out of nowhere, of course. I'd spent the past year researching classical reception in the alt-right while writing my first book, *Not All Dead White Men*. Still, the result of the election came as a horrifying shock to me. I hadn't *actually* thought such an obvious misogynist could win. Less than a week later, I got on a plane to give a talk on my book material. The first draft of my lecture had almost a page devoted to justifying the importance of my research, because I assumed I'd be dealing with a snooty and skeptical Ivy league audience who needed some convincing about why they should listen to a blue-haired thirty-year-old without a real academic job lecture them about why we should be paying attention to white supremacist internet trolls. Instead, I faced a room packed with people who looked as frightened and numb as I felt – and, worst of all, seemed to think that I might be able to help them. I almost cried during the Q&A when someone asked me what we could do to combat online extremism. Didn't they know that, if I'd had a good answer, I'd be doing *that* and not standing in front of them talking about Ovid and pickup artists?

Three days later, I gave that talk a second time. I felt a little less frozen, and when someone asked me again what classicists could do, I actually had a few ideas. And I'd realized that my book manuscript, the first draft of which I had sent to my editor literally two days before the election, was going to need a massive overhaul if the book was going to speak to readers in our new normal. So, on Friday afternoon, I told my *Eidolon* team I was thinking about writing something. I probably pitched it to them by saying, "So, I have a really, really, bad idea." But they encouraged me to go for it. After two and a half feverish days of writing, editing, more editing, crying, figuring out custom art, and brainstorming titles, on Monday morning we hit "publish" on "How to Be a Good Classicist Under a Bad Emperor."

The piece was our biggest ever – it got over a hundred thousand views and Ross Douthat mocked it in an op-ed in the *New York Times*, which I considered a win. Many of our colleagues responded to the piece's urgency: they, too, had been looking for answers to the questions I'd been getting. But there was a backlash, too.

I knew I might face some online harassment after "How to Be a Good Classicist." But I wasn't really prepared for the scope of the fallout. At the time, I was running *Eidolon* under the auspices of a nonprofit I'd helped cofound a few years earlier. One of my two cofounders had

² See Zuckerberg 2019.

³ See Zuckerberg 2016.

become increasingly uncomfortable with *Eidolon's* feminist and progressive bent, and he thought "How to Be a Good Classicist" went too far. He pressured me to publish a rebuttal piece he'd written that argued I was engaging in ad hominem attacks and failing to take into account the "intellectually interesting" aspects of the alt-right. He wrote the piece as a dialogue and wanted it published anonymously, because he was concerned about how his colleagues might react if they knew his political views. He wasn't wrong, in a way – a few years later, he would end up effectively ostracized from the discipline because of his extreme anti-feminism. But it still stung that while I was getting harassment and death threats for writing about the research I was proud to share, he wanted me to publish his feelings with several degrees of separation and plausible deniability.

I declined to publish the piece, although I invited him to create his own publication if he wanted a venue. (He thought that sounded like a lot of work, which I can confirm is true.) And over the next six months, my relationship with the nonprofit grew increasingly strained until we decided it would be best to part ways. I decided to relaunch *Eidolon* as an independent publication in late 2017. We were no longer "a modern way to write about the ancient world": now we were going to make Classics "personal and political, feminist and fun." Later we also added the tagline "Classics without fragility" to signal our commitment to fighting the white fragility that had made it so hard for people of color to succeed within the discipline.

Editorially, the move only strengthened the publication. Our content got more interesting, more exciting, and more popular. We had a unique position as both insiders and outsiders to the discipline of Classics – although we had strong connections with our colleagues in academia and had an editorial board of tenured professors, neither I nor any of my co-editors held a traditional academic job. That position allowed us to address some of the most challenging and necessary conversations facing the field, from white supremacist classical appropriation online to sexual harassment and racial discrimination within Classics departments, without having to worry *too* much about upsetting our colleagues. And I believe our work on those issues changed the entire discipline for the better.

When I started *Eidolon* on not-quite-a-whim, I wasn't really thinking about how our work fit into the broader context of trends in the field. Now I can see that it was part of a much larger ecosystem of young scholars – many of them women of color, like half of our editorial team – pushing to create the field they wanted to be in, rather than the field as it existed in the public imagination. Several new groups and initiatives, including the Mountaintop Coalition, Asian and Asian-American Classical Caucus, and the Sportula were all doing remarkable work to shift the discipline away from its tweed-and-elbow-patch-wearing, imperialist-apologizing past.

The work was important and politically urgent, but it was also *fun*. So far I've made it sound like *Eidolon* was all about combating white supremacy and misogyny, and we did devote a lot of our energy to those topics. We aimed to have 70% of our writers be women and 20% be people of color, which put us far ahead of any other publication in the discipline. But we also ran a special issue on tattoos and an article about the penis size of ancient statues and a translation of Ovid into limericks. We created an entire sister blog, *idle musings*, where we could be as ridiculous as we wanted and published pieces like "Things I've Said as Both an Editor and a Woman" and "A Grad Student's Existence in Academic Paper Titles."

The fun we had was what kept me going through the more taxing aspects of the role. As Editor-in-Chief, I soothed a lot of ruffled feathers – scholars who didn't like how their books

were reviewed, who didn't like us asking whether we should adopt a "burn it all down" approach to Classics, who didn't like us saying that professors should never sleep with their students. I was better at that role than I expected to be. But having the job of keeping the publication running, being its face, and bearing its liability took a toll.

Inevitably, our independence came at a cost to our resilience. It gave us the freedom to move fast and not concern ourselves with departmental politics, but even as we were espousing "Classics without fragility," the publication had become more fragile than I realized. A series of difficult events in my personal life in 2019 left me burned out going into 2020, and when the pandemic hit I had no reserves and needed to step down. Our editorial board and team tried to find a new Editor-in-Chief to take my place, but ultimately we decided it would be better to gracefully shut *Eidolon* down and wait to see what bloomed in the space left by its absence.

It's been almost ten years since the idea for *Eidolon* occurred to me, and I believe as strongly as ever in its mission. But I learned, ultimately, that it's wonderful to have fans, but a publication also needs champions. For an online publication to be exciting and fresh but also resilient, it must maintain a delicate balance between fearlessly commenting on the most pressing issues of the day – without, perhaps, waiting for the temporal distance and perspective that academics usually prefer! – while still cultivating the institutional support necessary to weather inevitable challenges.

But it is just as important for publications to cultivate a sense of joy and fun, and to lean into the elements that give a publication its unique character. Running a mission-driven organization is hard work, and the rewards often feel disproportionate to the costs. Watching the needle shift ever-so-slowly toward a more progressive field is great, but have you tried not being attacked by trolls every single day? I don't think I would have lasted for more than five years as Editor-in-Chief of *Eidolon* if it hadn't been for the community I found in my fellow editors, our wonderful writers, and our dedicated readers. The progressive work drove us forward, but the immature jokes kept us going.

The title of *As I Lay Dying* is actually a quote from an old translation of the *Odyssey*, from a scene where the ghost of Agamemnon describes how his wife Clytemnestra couldn't be bothered to close his eyes after he died. On the other hand, just a line earlier, he admitted that with his dying breath, he tried to kill Clytemnestra after she killed Cassandra, so his outrage at her mistreatment of his corpse feels a little misplaced. It's kind of funny in its lack of self-awareness, when you think about it. Maybe somebody should write about that somewhere.

Donna Zuckerberg is the author of the forthcoming memoir *Antiquated: Gender, Marriage, and Other Myths I Used to Love* (2026) and the award-winning *Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age* (2018). She received her PhD from Princeton in 2014. She founded and was editor-in-chief of the online publication *Eidolon* from 2015 to 2020. She writes a newsletter called *Myth Takes* and lives in Palo Alto with her partner, their three children, and her bulldog.

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