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Democracy and Popular Media

Classical Receptions in Nineteenth, Twentieth, and Twenty-First Century Political Cartoons—Statesmen, Mythological Figures, and Celebrated Artworks[1]

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1. INTRODUCTION

There is much debate, even outside of the 'classics world', on who reads classics, whether it is only of interest to the elites of this world, or whether it is useful to non-specialists. There is, however, a huge and uncharted territory that has been overlooked by most classicists: the world of editorial cartoons. They are very accessible, challenging, and mass-produced, in numerous languages and throughout the world. Indeed, what should we make of the many thousands of editorial cartoons in popular and prominent newspapers, and propaganda leaflets, from the nineteenth century to this day, that make classical references, which use (and abuse) Greek and Roman visual myths, events, or statesmen, to mock current affairs? Printed newspapers and online papers have grown exponentially in recent years, and their readership has

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increased not only in numbers but also in popularity, encompassing readers from all social horizons. Newspapers thrive in democracies.

Studying the reception of the classical world in contemporary political cartoons may seem at first sight like opening an imaginary tin of Quality Street chocolates, and seizing with relish sweet jokes and classical references of all shapes, sizes, and colours, but in reality it is more like opening Pandora's box. In this I am not only referring to the harsh content of editorial cartoons, but rather more to the intellectual nightmare of a classicist having to bring together such different fields as the reception of classical art, myth, and politics, with concepts of democracy, freedom of expression, struggles with authority, and 'unclassifiable' humour; not to mention the field of popular culture and newspapers,[2] with its own spectra of class-related or politically slanted publications, each with its own readership, and so on. The bibliography in each of these fields is gigantic, with each having its own ongoing theoretical and methodological debates—so references will have to be kept to a minimum if the essential, that is, what we can learn from classical reception in contemporary political cartoons, is not to be lost.

Classical reception is an emerging field but with significant methodological problems. Here, the main reception questions that will be addressed are: 'how do cartoonists use classical references?'; 'why the need for a classical reference when mocking a modern reality?'; and 'who understands classical references?' In wondering, in my turn, 'what is a classic?',[3] I am only interested in how it applies to popular culture, and what 'classic', as a notion of authority rather than just tradition, means or meant to editorial cartoonists and to their no doubt enormous readership.

To complicate matters, editorial cartoons as a medium (and not a genre)[4] pose numerous methodological problems in their own right, which I will briefly develop in this section.[5]

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[2] See Goodwin 2001: 147: 'Surprisingly, the world of cartoons has found less a target than a niche in higher education. While no university has yet offered a degree in "humor studies," cartoons have invaded academic discourse under the rubric of "popular culture".' See also Smoodin 1992; Norris 1989; Gordon 1998; Varnedoe and Gopnik 1990.

[3] 'Qu'est-ce qu'un classique?', *Le Constitutionnel*, 21 October 1850, *Lundis*, vol. 3.

[4] On comics as medium and not genre: see Chute 2008: 268: 'Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1986) definitively proved to the critical establishment that "comics" is a medium, not a genre—and one that can be subtle, sophisticated, and complex.'

[5] I will not discuss general works on comics in this chapter, but one should be aware that there is an ongoing debate on terminology when discussing comics and editorial cartoons. See, for example, the discussion on 'graphic narrative' in Chute and DeKoven 2006: 767: 'a range of types of narrative work in comics' and in contrast Will Eisner (1996, 2004), the artist and theorist who uses the term 'graphic narrative' as 'a generic description of any narration that employs image to transmit an idea'. See also Varnum and Gibbons 2002.

The focus of this chapter is on editorial cartoons (or political caricatures) of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries,[6] and not 'caricatures' found in earlier centuries. Only what Hamilakis (2000: 57) aptly describes as 'single-frame cartoons', published in mass-produced newspapers will be discussed (that is, comic strips are not examined). To be understood by most readers, cartoonists rely on a complex multilayered system of stereotypes, traditional imagery, textual references, and current affairs. One could say that cartoonists tend to tap into their readership's visual unconscious collective, oscillating constantly between tradition and innovation.[7]

Political caricature is known for its veiled and venomous criticism of authority. Yet, even though it shares a long and bitter history with governmental censorship (especially in times where large proportions of the population were illiterate: this meant that they could be influenced by mass-produced cartoons), it has often also been used, and sometimes with the cartoonists' full consent, as a formidable tool of war propaganda.[8]

In contrast to most of these views, LeRoy (1970: 39) writes: 'A picture is worth 10 thousand words . . . But it's not worth many words if it isn't understood . . . it's like no other pictorial form and therefore assumptions about pictures-in-general cannot be made about this peculiar art form. It cannot be equated with a photograph. It's unlike the comic strip which tells a story via several panels. It is a pictorial puzzle often using words as well as line drawings and caricatures.' It is true that editorial cartoons are like no other medium, and that it is not always sufficient just to share the same cultural background for two readers to understand a cartoon in the same way. Other aspects complicate matters: 'A man's ability to perceive details, his ethnic background, environment, psychological set, knowledge of current events and history, ability to see allegories, and so on, play a role in interpreting editorial cartoons' (LeRoy 1970: 40).

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[6] They are called by the French *le dessin de presse* or *la charge*, after the Italian *caricare*, used for the first time in the Preface of a book by Annibal Carraci in 1646. The word caricature appears much later in French, occurring for the first time in the *Memoirs* of the Duc d'Argenson in 1740. The word 'cartoon' comes from the French *carton* for 'card' and 'paper'. 'The word "cartoon" indicated a sketch for a work of art done on paper and then transferred. Yet when the printing press developed, "cartoon" came to mean any sketch that could be mass-produced' (Chute and de Koven 2006: 779, n. 2).

[7] G. Doizy 2008: 'Quel avenir pour le dessin de presse' (<http://www.eiris.eu>): 'The cartoonist uses codes which must be understood by the reader, and thus he sets his work within a tradition, borrowing his stereotypes from a common culture. Yet, he is also commenting on a reality in constant evolution and is nourished by it. Caricature functions just like a sponge' [my translation].

[8] See Demm 1993: 186: 'A propaganda war, waged also in the area of political caricature, can only be won if its message penetrates the unconscious. In this regard, German cartoonists were certainly as successful as their Allied counterparts, at least as far as the home front was concerned.'

Finally, political cartoons are not necessarily humorous. Their main intent is to 'charge', to attack, to be polemical, and often to oppose a political situation.[9] The status of cartoonists themselves has changed radically since the early twentieth century. It has progressed gradually but surely from the status of artist and engraver to that of journalist, with an interest in wrestling with current affairs, with a brush rather than a pen.[10]

There is very little past scholarship on classical reception in cartoons, political or otherwise.[11] Hamilakis (2000) writes on classical reception within (modern) Greek newspapers and finds that cartoonists have the same need as elsewhere to admire ancient Greece. However, because of their special relationship (as Greeks) with ancient Greece, this need is somewhat 'supersized' (my expression). Thus, while some of Hamilakis' findings may apply elsewhere in Europe and cartoonists from other countries may also refer to the primacy or authority of ancient Greece in their cartoons, they will not necessarily consider their own modern culture as *lower* versus ancient Greece's supposedly *higher* culture.[12] It is unlikely that one would find anywhere else in today's Europe a cartoon such as the one in Figure 23.1,[13] showing a juxtaposition of Corinthian columns and dustbins. The image is clever and visually pleasing. The cartoon refers to a strike of rubbish collectors in Athens in 1996 and is quickly understood by the Greek reader. But it is also a good example of what seems to be a *typically* Greek view of *low* versus *high* culture.

Doubtless, this would be understood differently in other parts of Europe, especially since the nineteenth century and the Romantic movement, which felt miffed by what it considered to be a stilted and snobbish use of classicism by the elite of the art world.[14] All Europeans are the heirs of Greece (and

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[9] See Tillier 2005: 16.

[10] Delporte 1992: 29: 'le dessin politique s'impose dans la presse française de l'entre-deux-guerres. Et le dessinateur n'est plus désormais ni un artiste, ni un bohème montmartrois: le voici journaliste à part entière, avec carte de presse, syndicat et belle notoriété.'

[11] See Hamilakis 2000; Kunze 1998; De Martino 2008; Salles 2006; Leonard 1975; Kovacs and Marshall 2011.

[12] See Viala 1992, an excellent essay on the polysemy of the word classic, its numerous notions, and connotations throughout history and the issue of values.

[13] After Hamilakis 2000: figure 1.

[14] Already in nineteenth-century France, Honoré Daumier mocked the classical myths in his famous *Album d'Histoire ancienne*, published by the Charivari in 1842. Among the dozens of parodied myths, a great favourite of mine remains *Poet Arion saved by a dolphin*. According to Herodotus (1: 23–4), the poet was thrown overboard into the sea and was saved by a dolphin, which carried him all the way to Cape Tenarus. But Daumier's Arion is not a new Orpheus bossing around the animal kingdom: he is just the caricature of a scribbler holding a lyre, with a huge belly, and sporting tiny round-rimmed glasses on the tip of his nose. The accompanying text reads: 'This tenor, saved by a huge music-loving fish/Owes his life to his lovely voice/Many an opera singer threatened in a similar way/wouldn't move the heart of an anchovy'. This extract based on a burlesque piece composed by Berlioz, is typical of the comic pieces that Daumier often used as inspiration for his cartoons.
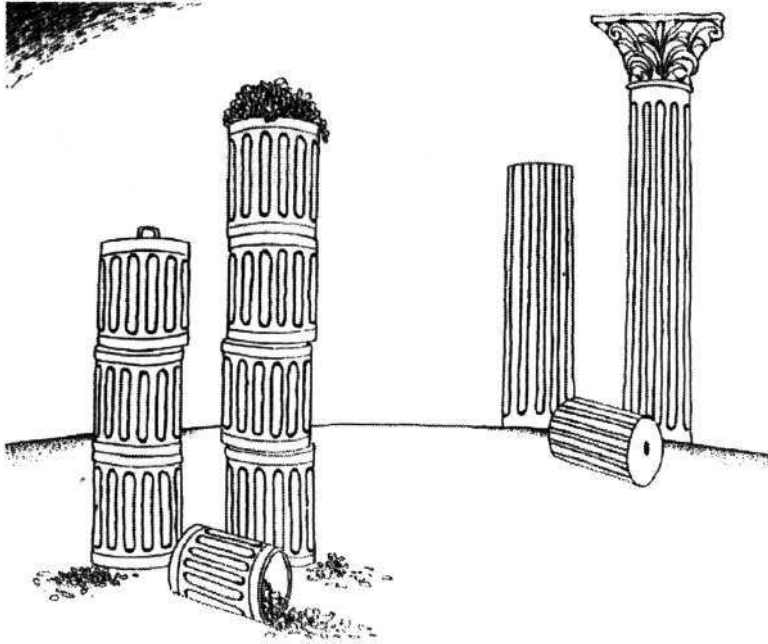
Figure 23.1 Cartoon by Kyr

Source: Kyr, *Eleftherotypia*, 12 May 1996.

Rome), a multilayered relationship that goes back at least two millennia, and not just the Greeks. In fact, each European country retains a different relationship with the 'classical world' because of its educational, artistic, religious, ideological, political, and historical divergence. However, for the sake of this overview of classical reception in editorial cartoons, we will consider Europe's experience of antiquity in its newspapers holistically.[15]

The intention here is to highlight those cartoons that use the ancient world to poke fun at contemporary subjects and not the reverse.[16]

Often editorial cartoons have an uncanny ability to promote political views through satirical means, and some have much greater impact than the newspaper articles alone. The impact of a cartoon on a reader, in contrast to a written article, is visual as well as (possibly) verbal: it leaves a stronger impression with the use of clever and powerful symbols (as well as metaphors) to communicate its political message. A few other notions may help to contextualize political cartoons: the cheapness of the medium (newspaper),

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[15] See Goldstein 1998: 107, n.1 for a general bibliography on the history of European cartoons and censorship.

[16] For a study of visual humour in ancient artefacts, see Mitchell 2009.

its relative accessibility, its popular readership, and the participation of the public. From the 1830s onwards, newspapers were produced in increasing numbers and were read *daily* by millions of people throughout the world.

In this chapter I discuss a selection of cartoons from North American and European newspapers, focusing on three main themes: classical Greek and Roman statesmen, limiting myself to the figure of 'fiddling' Nero; classical myths, which I will illustrate by reference to the labours of Herakles, even though many other classical myths are shown in editorial cartoons, such as Sisyphus, Prometheus, Odysseus, Orestes, Europa, and so on; and, finally, celebrated classical sculpture, which I will illustrate with the Laocoon group, although there are many other artworks reproduced in editorial cartoons to choose from, such as the *Venus of Milo*, Herakles *Farnese*, the *Discobolos*, and so on.

2. CLASSICAL STATESMEN: FIDDLING NERO

A number of ancient statesmen, such as Julius Caesar or Caligula, have been used in editorial cartoons to mock contemporary statesmen, but Nero remains, by far, a much-loved favourite. Specifically, the image of Nero singing from a rampart while Rome was burning is an enduring and dominant image. Cartoonists have used this powerful illustration the world over to criticize and censure various character flaws of their contemporary statesmen, for their tyranny, their 'egotistical madness', which leads them to burn their own country for the sake of gaining a little more personal power.[17]

There is a popular expression in English, which is 'Nero fiddled while Rome burned'. Even though fiddles did not exist prior to the eleventh century AD, we find Nero playing the fiddle in countless cartoons in English-speaking newspapers since the 1920s. Also, the significant impact of Peter Ustinov's flamboyant and unforgettable impersonation of Nero in *Quo Vadis* (1951) can be somewhat measured by the recrudescence of cartoons worldwide from that date onwards showing politicians as mad Nero playing the lyre or fiddling while their city burns.[18]

Many political cartoons show Nero playing music while Rome burns. So, 'fiddling or non-fiddling'? Prior to the 1920s I personally have not (yet) found any examples of Nero playing the fiddle. From the 1920s onwards, I have found numerous cases of Nero playing the fiddle in the UK and the USA media, but in non-English speaking newspapers, and other media, Nero is

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[17] I have over 200 'Nero' entries in my cartoon database, and the list is growing daily.
[18] See Gyles 1947 on the origins of this problem and the conflation between the image of Nero acting frivolously on the one hand (i.e. fiddling: from findincula>fithele>1589 fiddle) and playing music while Rome burned on the other.
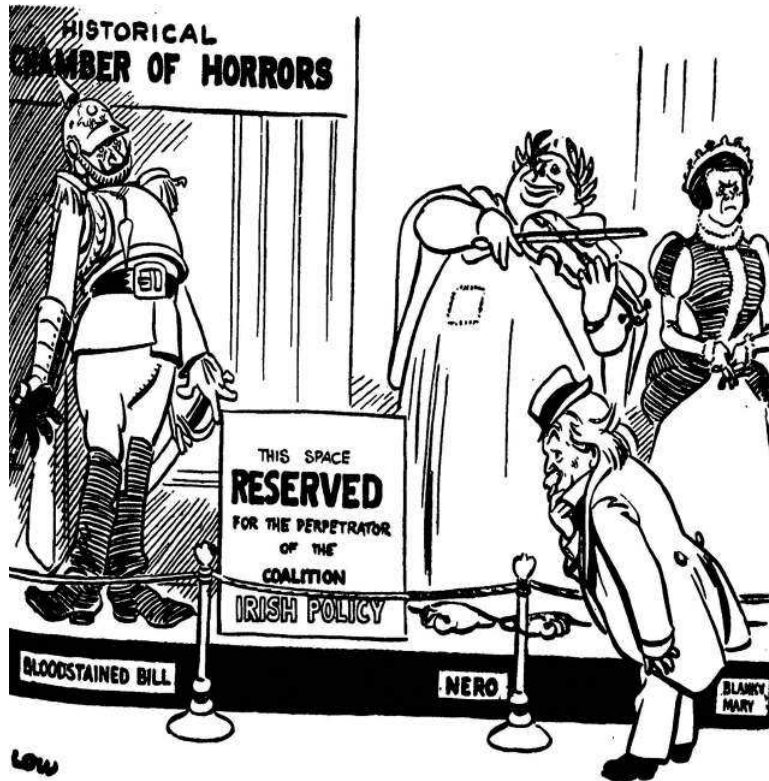
Figure 23.2 'The Yankee Nero'
Source: *Comic News*, 27 December 1864: 277.

shown singing or playing the lyre, and never playing the fiddle. Nero is identifiable either by objects, such as a lyre or a fiddle, his attire, such as a laurel crown, sandals, and/or a toga, or he is simply labelled as Nero.

Our first Nero cartoon (Figure 23.2),[19] shows a joyful Abraham Lincoln, wearing a toga over his striped trousers, a pair of sandals, and an ivy crown. He is labelled the 'Yankee Nero' and is shown playing wooden percussion instruments while the Union (labelled) is burning. He seems indifferent to the plight of the Union. In this 1864 cartoon, published one year before the end of the American Civil War (1861–5), he is being mocked not by Confederates but by his own faction, the Union, through the eyes and pencil of the illustrator Matt Morgan. The degree of licit mockery is a measure of the degree of freedom exercised by Lincoln's contemporaries and even his partisans. The figure is

[19] See also Davis 1971 [after Bunker 1996: 80].

Figure 23.3 Cartoon by David Low

Source: David Low, *The Star*, 3 November 1920.

neither carrying nor playing a fiddle or lyre, but rather percussion instruments, resembling flat and long castanets. Could it be that in 1864 Matt Morgan did not know of the tradition of a fiddling Nero?

One of the earliest editorial cartoons dating from 1920, which shows Nero fiddling (with a violin), is entitled 'A place among the immortals' drawn by David Low (Figure 23.3). It is poking fun at David Lloyd George, the British prime minister, just after the Coalition Irish Policy, which turned out to be a disastrous political move leading to dreadful and dire events in Ireland. He is shown visiting the waxworks of an 'Historical Chamber of Horrors', a tiny old white haired and moustached man, scratching his chin as he focuses on a placard that reads 'This space reserved for the perpetrator of the Coalition Irish Policy', placed between 'Bloodstained Bill' and a grossly overweight wax image of a fiddling Nero. David Lloyd George is visiting the gallery and looking at his own designated spot.

Fiddler

Figure 23.4 'Fiddler'

Source: Herblock, *Washington Post*, 25 July 1967. A 1967 Herblock Cartoon, © The Herb Block Foundation.

From this time onward, one finds numerous cartoons in North American and British newspapers of statesmen characterized as Nero fiddling while their city or country burns.

We have here (Figure 23.4), a magnificent personification of the US Congress as Nero. It is not a specific person, but an institutional body, fiddling

while Rome/USA is burning. One reads within the fire the names of important American cities: 'Detroit, Newark, Plainfield, Cincinnati, Boston, Minneapolis, Buffalo, Nashville'. This is 1967, a time in the US when a minority are leading the good life, whereas most of the inner-city inhabitants, mostly African Americans, are suffering under terrible living conditions. Their poverty and ill-treatment provoked the inner-city residents' anger and led to the infamous 1967 race riots.[20] Rather than offering an appropriate and conciliatory response, such as 'Urban Aid Programs' or 'Gun Control Legislation', which are written on the hose pipe that could quench the fires, Congress/Nero is treading all over them with his sandals. What did Congress actually offer in the end? 'The anti-agitator bill' (labelled on Nero's fiddle), which was a bill that made it a federal crime to cross state lines in order to incite a riot! This is a beautifully designed cartoon that shows an inward-looking Nero, with closed eyes, fiddling away, with some exquisite details, such as the top of the fire hydrant that looks exactly like the actual Congress building in Washington.

There is a large group of editorial cartoons mocking George W. Bush through the guise of Nero fiddling as Rome burns. One of these cartoons (Figure 23.5) shows him dressed as a military commander (*imperator*), straddling the USA over the words 'Global Warming' while fiddling to the score 'Denial, composed by George Bush Senior', placed on a lectern.

Often a simple, monochrome line drawing can project a more powerful message than its more colourful and elaborate sibling, such as the one shown in Figure 23.6. It is a very clever cartoon insofar as it is mocking both Nero *and* Bush. A bald figure, crowned with laurels and holding a violin in his right hand, is talking to another figure dressed in military gear. He says 'Invade Mesopotamia? I may be crazy, but I'm not *stupid!*' Mesopotamia stands for Iraq, crazy for Nero, and stupid, an epithet that has often been used to describe George W. Bush.[21] To be effective, an editorial cartoon or political caricature must be simple and direct. It is a draftsman's trait, a set of rapid strokes that hit their target, a politician's most vulnerable spot, sometimes his pride, but always Achilles' heel, with the speed of an arrow. It is an art of subversion

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[20] See Fine 1989 on the Detroit Riots of 1967.

[21] Among many other images of fiddling Bush, there is a particularly interesting one of Bush in a full toga, and crowned with ivy leaves. He is half immersed in water, while people are drowning in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina hit the southern states. Interestingly, there is no fire, but only a slowly drowning Nero, and a stadium partly submerged by the waters. His laurels, toga, and violin are sufficient reminders of Nero and his lunacy, that we do not need any actual 'fire'. In fact, his 'fiddling', is really nothing more than sitting idly by while people are drowning. Another cartoon shows a caricature of Bush junior as a Roman emperor giving the thumb down sign as was traditionally done at the circus games when one gladiator succeeded in putting another to death. It reads 'Our Nero, Can America survive Bush?' We can also read the beginning of the Declaration of Independence, 'We the Pe[ople]', probably about to be torn to shreds. It is an elegant pun on the name Nero and the word Hero.

Figure 23.5 Cartoon by Steve Greenberg

Source: Steve Greenberg, *County Star*, 1 June 2005. Courtesy of the artist.

"'Invade Mesopotamia'? — I may
be crazy, but I'm not *stupid!*"

Figure 23.6 Cartoon by Rex May

Source: Rex May, *Rex May Gag Cartoons*, 8 March 2007. Permission granted by CSL Cartoonstock.

that leans on its model as much as it vilifies it, attacking a public figure, his or her image and his or her politics.

There are a number of representations of Gordon Brown, the former British Prime minister as Nero. An excellent cartoon, by Chris Riddell,[22] shows an

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[22] Cartoon by Chris Riddell, *The Guardian* (*The Observer*), 22 March 2009.

unkind albeit successful example of the genre. The artistic treatment of the politician is arresting: he is sitting on a couch, surrounded by a small colonnade, with a morose look of utter dejection on his face, and playing the violin. Dark black smoke is rising from the city of London (the London landscape is easily recognizable: for instance the so-called 'gherkin' can be seen in the background). One understands better his facial expression after reading some of the music score titles scattered at his feet: 'Re-election Blues', 'Unemployment Ragtime', 'G20 Waltz', and so on. Finally, he was not re-elected, the Labour party lost the election, unemployment reached terrible proportions, and his participation in the G20 was ultimately unsuccessful. One can wonder how effective this cartoon actually is. There are too many disparate elements in the image, and the cartoonist has gone too far away from the usual image of Nero. Indeed, the point of using Nero is to show him fiddling, that is, happily singing, unaware of what is actually going on. The depressed Nero/Gordon Brown playing the Re-election Blues is far too involved.

A particularly accomplished cartoon by a German cartoonist (Figure 23.7)[23] shows Ahmanidejad, the Iranian leader, as Nero, crowned with ivy, singing 'Oh Democracy, Oh Elections, Oh Guardians' ('Oh Demokratie, Oh Wahl,

Figure 23.7 Cartoon by Goetz Wiedenroth

Source: Goetz Wiedenroth, 17 June 2009. Courtesy of the artist.

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23 See <http://www.wiedenroth-karikatur.de>.

Oh Wächterrat') while the whole of Iran is burning, on the horizon. There is also a scroll that reads 'Hymn of my election victories: 2013, 2017, 2021' ('Hymne auf meine wahlsiege 2013, 2017, und 2021'). His megalomania stands clear and erect in those few words. The lyre he is holding is actually the word Allah in its calligraphic form of a tulip, which is the emblem found on the Iranian Republic flag. He is holding it like a lyre. The cartoonist has added an extra twist to the cartoon in making a verbal pun in the labelling of the Iranian leader as Nero: he has entitled the cartoon 'Nero Tehranicus', which is a play on words between the capital of Iran, Teheran, and tyrant or tyranicus, in Latin.

Our last Neronian cartoon (Figure 23.8)[24] is also one of the most recent ones. It shows Bart de Wever, the leader of the N.V.A. (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie), a far-right, separatist Flemish party in Belgium. The cartoon was published on 6 June 2010 by Sondron, in *Avenir*, exactly one week before the general elections in Belgium, after the coalition government and its prime minister (Yves Leterme) had fallen earlier on over Flemish-Wallonian issues. The Flemish leader is caricatured as Nero, singing merrily away, in a toga, and playing the lyre. Just as for the cartoon of Gordon Brown and London, here in the background, emblematic elements of Brussels and Belgium are shown

Figure 23.8 Cartoon by Jacques Sondron
Source: Jacques Sondron, *L'Avenir*, 6 June 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

[24] See <http://www.sondron.be>.

burning, such as the famous Atomium, the crown jewel of the 1958 Universal Exhibition. The cartoon was published just before B. de Wever's landslide victory at the general elections, and shows what the Wallonian and French-speaking Brussels inhabitants fear this politician might do to their country as a whole.

3. CLASSICAL MYTH: THE LABOURS OF HERAKLES

The second theme I will focus on among the many classical myths that appear in editorial cartoons (Europa, Zeus, Athena, Sisyphus, the Trojan horse, and so on) is that of the famous labours of Herakles. Yet, before discussing these, we should look at an interesting cartoon referring to the snakes sent by Hera to kill baby Herakles in his crib. She wished to punish her husband, Zeus, the lord of the gods, for sleeping with other women (Pindar, *Nemean Odes* 1.38; Diodorus Siculus 4.10; Apollodorus 2.4.8) but could not do so openly. Yet, baby Herakles, with superhuman strength, succeeds in strangling both snakes, one in each fist. This image is well known since antiquity. In Figure 23.9, we have a masterfully drawn cartoon showing Teddy Roosevelt as baby Herakles. He is grabbing the head of J. P. Morgan and the neck of Rockefeller. In 1906, Roosevelt was trying to break the monopolies of the big corporations. He was fighting immensely powerful companies, but with the help of his attorney general, he managed it. Just like baby Herakles, he was fighting against all odds. J. P. Morgan's Northern Securities company, a huge railroad company, and Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company were eventually broken up into thirty smaller companies.

Herakles' twelve labours are the main focus of this section. The traditional order of Hercules' labours according to Apollodorus (Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Library* 2.5.1–2.5.12) was:

1. Slay the Nemean Lion.
2. Slay the nine-headed Lernaean Hydra.
3. Capture the Golden Hind of Artemis.
4. Capture the Erymanthian Boar.
5. Clean the Augean stables in a single day.
6. Slay the Stymphalian Birds.
7. Capture the Cretan Bull.
8. Steal the Mares of Diomedes.
9. Obtain the Girdle of the Amazon Queen.

THE INFANT HERCULES AND THE STANDARD OIL SERPENTS.

Figure 23.9 Cartoon by Frank Arthur Nankivell
Source: Frank Arthur Nankivell, *Puck magazine*, 23 May 1906.[25]

10. Capture the Cattle of the Monster Geryon.
11. Steal the Apples of the Hesperides.
12. Capture and bring back Cerberus, the three-headed dog that guarded the entrance to the Underworld.

We find all twelve labours in numerous representations in the ancient world, throughout the medieval area, the Renaissance, as well as in modern and contemporary contexts.

Our next cartoon (Figure 23.10), by Honoré Daumier, the most prolific and famous French cartoonist of the nineteenth century, is a parody of the Farnese Hercules sculpture in Naples. The cartoon is part of a series called *Actualités* (News of the Day) produced for the Parisian newspaper *Charivari*. This aggressive series was published just before the newspaper was muzzled by censorship laws under Napoleon III.

[25] *Puck* was the American equivalent to the British *Punch*, which modelled itself on the French Charivari.

Figure 23.10 'Un Nouvel Hercule Farnèse'

Source: Honoré Daumier, *Actualités*, *Le Charivari*, 16–17 August 1852.

The Farnese Hercules, exhibited in the National Museum in Naples, is probably one of the most famous sculptures from antiquity and it crystallized the image of the panhellenic hero in the European imagination. The French artist may have known it from small reproductions kept in the Louvre or more likely from a reproduction of a sixteenth-century engraving by Hendrick Goltzius (Figure 23.11), which shows the famous statue from the back, just like Daumier's cartoon.

In this cartoon, Daumier ridicules Louis Désiré Véron (1798–1867), a medical doctor turned newspaper owner, politician, and entrepreneur (he branded and sold a medical remedy invented by the chemist Regnault) who initiated a vast political campaign against rabid dogs in France. Daumier labels Véron 'dog exterminator' (canichorum exterminator).[26] Visually, the parody
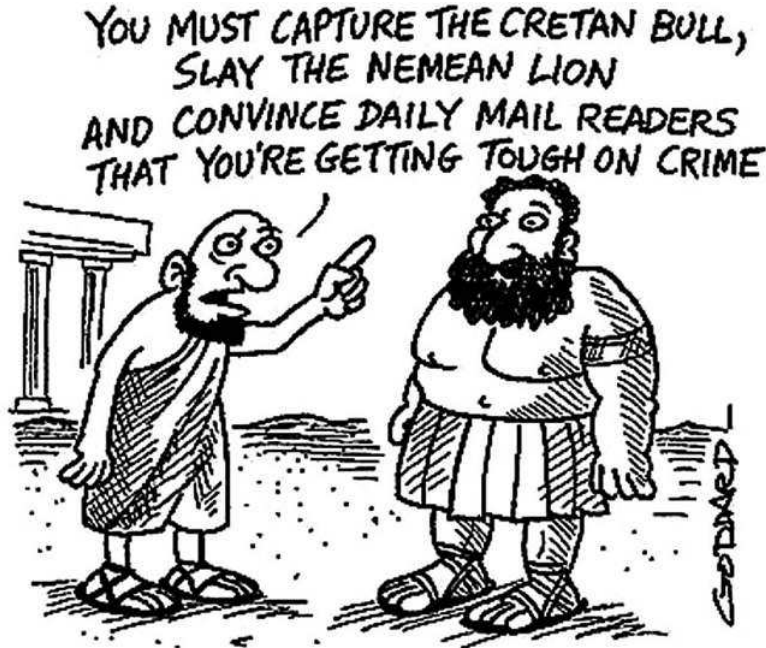
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[26] See L. Cotinat, 'Le docteur Véron, cible de Daumier: Pierre Julien, Le docteur Véron et Daumier, ou le fabricant de pâte [pectorale] en proie à la caricature', *Revue d'histoire de la pharmacie*, 234 (1977): 231.

Figure 23.11 'The Farnese Hercules'

Source: Hendrick Goltzius, engraving, 1591.

functions at multiple levels: Hercules' famous club is transformed into a huge medical enema syringe to remind the viewer that a doctor is the target of the cartoon. The naked and muscular body of Hercules is transformed into a middle-aged unfit male body wearing a pair of lined trunks. Hercules' lionskin is now a dog's skin. Instead of the hero holding apples from the garden of the Hesperides in his hand, the doctor holds some poison pellets (labelled: 'boulettes empoisonnees'). And, as in all heroic statues, there is an inscribed base, which is also ridiculed by the artist: *Ludovicus Veronus/Combattivit demagogos/et fuit/Canichorum exterminator*. The numerous canine corpses lying at his feet are actually inspired by Christian hagiography, that is, saints exterminating evil monsters.

YOU MUST CAPTURE THE CRETAN BULL,
SLAY THE NEMEAN LION
AND CONVINCE DAILY MAIL READERS
THAT YOU'RE GETTING TOUGH ON CRIME

The 12 Labours of Hercules

Figure 23.12 Cartoon by Clive Goddard

Source: Clive Goddard. Courtesy of the artist.

The next cartoon, a much more recent one (Figure 23.12), of Herakles faced with a list of labours is drawn in a very different artistic style. It shows David Blunkett, British Home Secretary from 2001 to 2004, as Herakles. A bald and bearded man, wearing a toga and sandals, is telling Blunkett/Herakles: 'You must capture the Cretan bull, slay the Nemean lion, and convince Daily Mail readers that you're getting tough on crime'. This is a typical Herculean task: no politician could ever convince *Daily Mail* readers that he or she was tough enough on crime. The targets of the joke are the *Daily Mail*, a populist conservative newspaper, David Blunkett, and his alleged 'Police State'.

The Lernaean hydra labour is used in pamphlets from the eighteenth century in France. But there are at least two occurrences of this labour in 1861 in America. Our cartoon (Figure 23.13), was published in 1861, during the American Civil War, by a Unionist cartoonist. It shows 'the Hercules of the Union slaying the great dragon of the Secession' (states), that is, the Hydra.[27]

It is a very complex drawing that aggregates many different types of information. Herakles is General Winfield Scott, the commander of the Union

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[27] See Riley 2008: 346, n. 25.

Figure 23.13 'The Hercules of the Union, slaying the great dragon of secession'
Source: Currier and Ives, 1861. *American Political Prints*, 1766–1876, New York.

forces, wielding a club, tagged with the words 'Liberty and Union', about to strike the hydra. The beast has seven heads, corresponding to the important southern leaders. The neck of each one of these is labelled with a vice. From top to bottom: 'Hatred and Blasphemy' (confederate secretary of state Robert Toombs), 'Lying' (vice president Alexander Stephens), 'Piracy' (president Jefferson Davis), 'Perjury' (army commander P. G. T. Beauregard), 'Treason' (United States general David E. Twiggs), 'Extortion' (South Carolina governor Francis W. Pickens), and 'Robbery' (James Buchanan's secretary of war John B. Floyd). The image, which is complex and exceedingly well-drawn, was engraved on wood and published as a pamphlet, as well as a letter stamp.

Interestingly, the hydra was also used in the 1870s in France by a number of cartoonists, to mock various government officials, such as Mr Thiers fighting off the hydra of socialism.[28] The hydra is a blessing for cartoonists, and is still used by many because it enables artists to represent a number of enemies or problems as thinking heads and identifiable leaders. The other wonderful aspect of the myth, which some cartoonists take advantage of, is that when one of the heads was severed another sprouted in its place.[29]

For a recent take on this aspect of the myth by cartoonists see Figure 23.14, showing Bin Laden as the hydra. In this drawing, the editorial cartoonist Plantu presents the hydra with a severed head, blood spurting. What he is saying in this powerful drawing is that little is achieved by chopping off a terrorist's head. Terrorist organizations, terrorist cells, have the bad habit of growing back as soon as they are cut back. The severed head reminds us of the hydra, and the cartoon could be labelled 'the hydra of terrorism'.[30]

4. CLASSICAL SCULPTURE: THE LAOCOON

The reception of classical art is a subject in its own right with a huge bibliography. In this very short overview, I will only focus on the use of famed classical art in editorial cartoons, and will only refer to the Laocoon group. Other famous artworks favoured by cartoonists are the *Venus of Milo*, Hercules *Farnese*, Myron's *Discus Thrower*, and a few others. I will discuss one cartoon of the *Venus of Milo*. Figure 23.15 shows a large pig sitting on its backside, and pulling on the famous statue's chiton, saying 'You devil! How can you walk around without hair?'[31] The title of the cartoon is 'Zur lex Heinz'. The cartoon is a clever attack on the infamous *Lex Heinz*, of 1900, which was a censorship law, condemning 'the immorality in the arts'.[32]

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[28] 'Mr Thiers terrassant l'hydre du socialisme', by Cham in the *Charivari*. See Menuelle 2000. Sometimes the hydra is used to mock monarchy: for example, Orsonval's drawing, 16 March 1871, shows the French Republic (the Commune) fighting Thiers and royalists as the hydra of Monarchy, with the identifiable heads of Napoleon III, Henry V, the Count of Chambord, the Count of Paris, and their lieutenants. See Garrigues 1998: 103, figure 3.

[29] See, for example, Nicholas Garland's cartoon published in the *Daily Telegraph*, 2 March 2001, on foot and mouth disease.

[30] It is unclear in this cartoon whether Plantu is mocking the terrorist organizations, American self-congratulatory V-sign, or both. On the often voluntary confusion between octopus and hydra, or the way in which the octopus has substituted itself for the hydra in editorial cartoons since the early twentieth century, see Christian Moncelet, 'Les "viles" tentaculaires: réquisitions satiriques de la pieuvre', *Ridiculosa* No. 10, *Les Animaux pour le dire*, Université de Bretagne occidentale/Université de Limoge, 2003: 43–60.

[31] Ferdinand von Reznicek, *Simplicissimus* 4, no. 49, 1900: 396.

[32] See Prettejohn 2006 for part of the voluminous bibliography on the reception of the *Venus de Milo*.

Figure 23.14 Cartoon by Plantu

Source: *L'Express*, 20 December 2001. Courtesy of the artist.

Among the numerous sculptures from antiquity that have become iconic since Renaissance times and used and abused in editorial cartoons, I have chosen to discuss the case of the Laocoon.

The sculptural group, now in the Cortile del Belvedere in the Vatican museum, dates back to the first century AD. It was found on 13 or 14 January 1506, in the Domus of Emperor Titus in the Sette Sale on the Esquiline Hill in

Figure 23.15 Cartoon by Ferdinand von Reznicek
Source: *Simplicissimus* 4, no.49, 1900.

Rome. It was quickly and correctly identified as a sculpture of Laocoon and his
sons being punished by Apollo before Troy (Virgil, *Aeneid* 2. 40–56, 199–231),
a sculpture described by Pliny (*Natural History* 36. 37–8). Michelangelo was
involved in the reconstitution of the sculpture. The artist Montosorli's restor-
ation of the Laocoon's right arm in the extended position in the 1530s (the
Laocoon was found with the right arm missing), endured for 400 years
(Figure 23.16).[33] The sculpture, which was reproduced countless times,
became the iconic, ultimate representation of human agony, a central piece
of Western art. It was described as 'pathos', transformed into art, by Winck-
elmann, as 'Exemplum doloris', by L. D. Ettlinger, and as 'a vivid embodiment
of human suffering' and 'Pathosformed' by Aby Warburg.

   In the 1950s, Filippo Magi re-restored the sculptural group (Figure 23.17),[34]
and used a 'new-old right arm found by Ludwig Pollack in 1906 in the studio
of a contemporary Roman sculptor . . . The old Laocoon had been preserved

[33] This engraving was produced before the restoration of the lost arm (after Brockhaus'
Konversations-Lexikon. Leipzig, Berlin and Vienna: F. A. Brockhaus 1894, vol. 14).
[34] This photograph was taken after the restoration of the lost arm (2000). Photograph
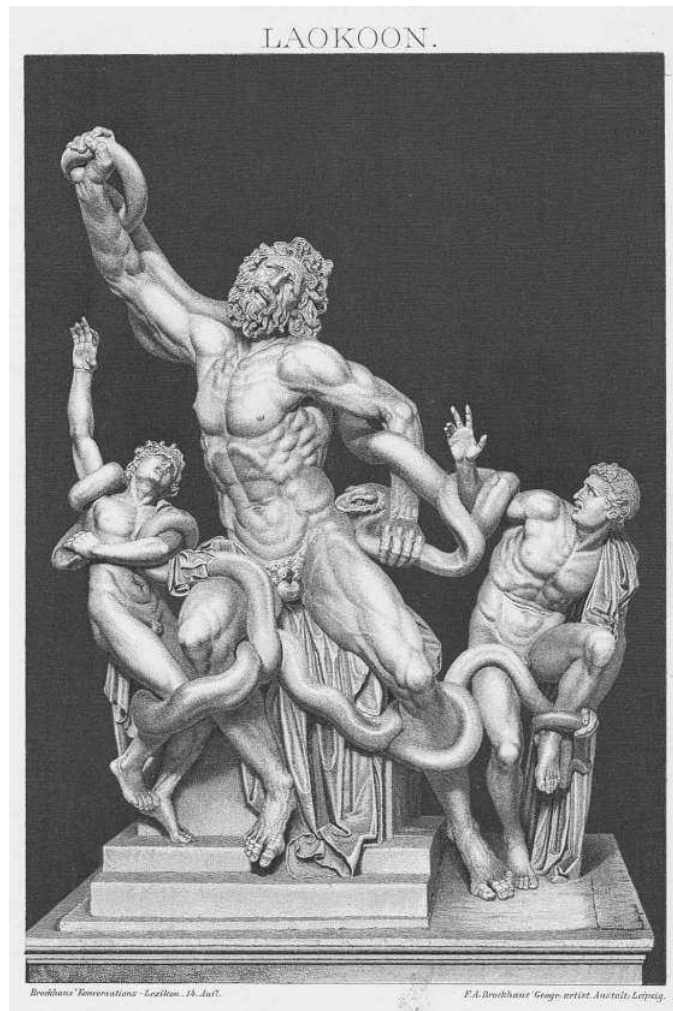© Alexandre G. Mitchell.

LAOKOON.

Figure 23.16 Laocoon, engraving

Source: Vatican City, Museo Pio Clementino, 1059, 1064, 1067.

as a cast on display in the Cortile del Belvedere, because it was The Laocoon for Renaissance artists and humanists, for Winckelmann, Lessing, Goethe, Schopenhauer, Blake and Karl Marx. The new Laocoon, whose restoration was completed in 1960 differs slightly but significantly: Laocoon's right arm now bends sharply back toward his head and the elder son, at the viewer's right, has been moved farther away from his father.'[35]

[35] Brilliant 2000: 10. There is an immense bibliography on the Laocoon. See Catterson 2005 on the Laocoon as a forgery by Michelangelo. On the reconstruction of the Laocoon group, see
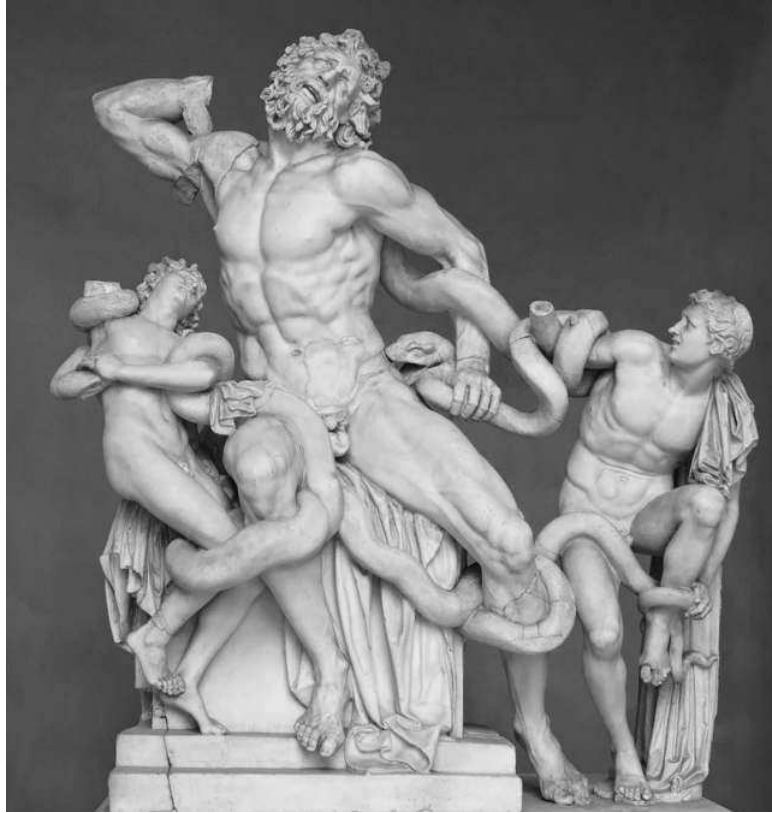
Figure 23.17 Laocoon

Source: Vatican City, Museo Pio Clementino, 1059, 1064, 1067. Photograph © Alexandre G. Mitchell.

Our first cartoon (Figure 23.18), dates back to the late nineteenth century,[36] and shows a major Canadian businessman, Sir Hugh Alan, as Laocoon being killed by Apollo's snake. The story behind the cartoon is a tale of collusion between high finance and politics. Sir Hugh Alan was alleged to have paid a bribe to the Canadian prime minister MacDonald, helping him win his election, with the help of the minister of finance, Sir Francis Hincks (right), in the hope of obtaining in return a major contract ('Charter') for the

Howard 1959, 1989; Magi 1960. For a 'historical objectivity' stance, see Bieber 1942, and for an open-ended interpretative position, see Brilliant 2000 and the long bibliography in Buranelli, Liverani, and Nesselrath 2006.

[36] We know that the Laocoon was caricatured already in Titian's time (Janson 1946: 49, fig. 1), and is found in editorial cartoons since H. Daumier's time. See, for example, his complex Laocoon caricature entitled 'Imité du Groupe Laocoon', 6 April 1868, 'Actualités', published by the *Charivari*, mocking Britannia (Laocoon) strangled by three snakes, the 'Italian question' (Garibaldi), 'Fenianism', and the 'Oriental question' (Turkey).

Figure 23.18 'Canada's Laocoon, or, Virgil on the Political Situation'

Source: John Wilson Bengough, *Grip* (Canada), 19 June 1873.

construction of a railroad. One of the really fascinating aspects of the Laocoon caricatures is the function of the snake. Here one can read words like 'Bribery', 'Charter', 'Pacific Railway Scandal', 'Suspicion', and 'Investigation' on its coils, which means that the snake represents a number of problems that have caused Hugh Alan some public discomfort.

The next cartoon (Figure 23.19), an exquisite drawing by Leo Jordaan dating to 9 May 1953, shows three major political leaders entangled by the serpent. The caricatured leaders are readily identifiable and labelled: the French President René Mayer to the left, the US president Dwight Eisenhower as the Laocoon, and the British prime minister Winston Churchill to the

Figure 23.19 'Lao(s)koon'
Source: Leo Jordaan, *Vrij Nederland*, 9 May 1953.

right. Eisenhower was trying to assist the French in the failing Indochina War. The French were losing one country after another. The US was helping the French, although in secret, both financially and in supplying military materials. By 1953 the US was paying almost half of the total French war effort. Churchill looks like he is trying to escape from the entire situation, with his iconic cigar in mouth, and the V for Victory hand sign. What is interesting is that they are all wrestling with, and being strangled by, a snake whose head is a serpent-like caricature of Mao Zedong. To assist the viewer further, Jordaan labelled the snake's head with the three letters 'MAO'. The snake, this time, is not a 'personification' of a notion or problem, but represents an actual politician, in this case, Mao Zedong. The Chinese, just as the Americans, were slyly helping their fellow Asians against the 'foreign' Western powers. The first country the French lost was Laos. Hence, the very apt verbal pun on the name 'Laocoon' in the title of this cartoon: 'Lao(s)koon'.

The next cartoon (Figure 23.20), by famous cartoonist Victor Weisz, who signed his drawings 'Vicky', mocks Harold Macmillan, the then British prime minister. The saying was that there was nothing Macmillan could not achieve.

Figure 23.20 'MacLaocoon'

Everything always worked out well. Vicky was increasingly tired of this virtual personality cult, so he produced the famous 'Supermac' cartoon showing Macmillan as Superman. But the cartoon had an opposite effect to the intended one: it made him more endearing rather than scary or ridiculous. From then on, Macmillan was called Supermac in the newspapers and very often in public life. This is a typical example of a situation where one cartoon in one newspaper can change the public's view of a politician, and his or her life.

The cartoon is entitled 'The Prime minister is in Rome to discuss European Problems' and shows Supermac at the centre as the Laocoon (hence the inscribed baseline MacLaocoon 1960), dealing with challenges such as 'Disarmament', 'NATO', choosing between 'the 6 and the 7' (European membership), all written on the snake's coils, which is here a symbol of inextricable political challenges that tie the politician in knots. On the right stands General de Gaulle, dealing with issues such as 'Algeria', the 'H Bomb', and 'European relations'; and on the left is the German Chancellor Adenauer, who looks more dead than alive, with 'Berlin' and 'East–West'. We have here three European politicians interlinked, but mainly tied and torn by political crises.

Figure 23.21 Laocoon caricature of Richard Nixon

Possibly one of the most effective political cartoons using the Laocoon is a 1974 caricature of Richard Nixon (Figure 23.21),[37] with snake/tapes coiling around his body. There is an attempt to heroize the musculature of his torso, but his tiny legs and caricatured face make it all the more comical. Who does not remember the Watergate affair and how Nixon was forced to resign his presidency before Congress took steps to impeach him, when his obsession of secretly recording on tape every prominent American citizen and politician who passed through the Oval Office as well as all his own words was made public. Here the snake that ensnares him is actually tape coming from a huge tape recording machine that serves as a statue base. It is a simple monochrome line drawing, but highly effective. The facial caricature of the former US president is also immediately recognizable. We have here a very powerful cartoon with a striking reminder of the tape recordings, which were the final nail in Nixon's political coffin.[38]

A much more recent cartoon (Figure 23.22), published in 2000 in a Dutch newspaper, shows a caricature of Lionel Jospin, the then French president, as the Laocoon, and on either side as his 'sons', H. Schroeder the German chancellor and W. Kok the Dutch prime minister. The snake is here

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[37] After <http://www.stilus.nl>, which reproduces this caricature with the date 1974 typed over the image.
[38] Nixon has been 'laocoonized' a number of times: for example, a caricature of Nixon as the Laocoon reproduced in Settis 2003: 286, figure 12, from an original caricature in the exhibition catalogue of *Das triviale Nachleben der Antike*, Basel, Kunsthalle, 1974–5.
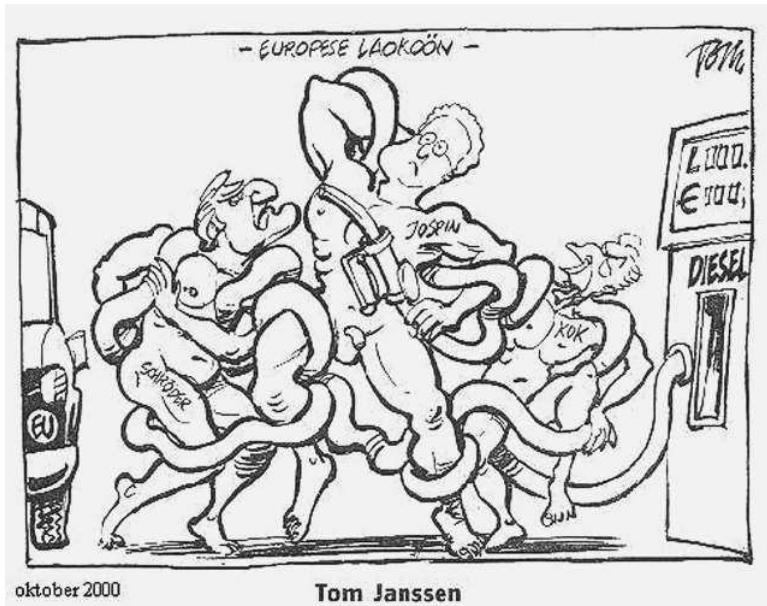
Figure 23.22 Cartoon by Janssen

Source: Tom Janssen, 'Laokoon', October 2010, Trouw. Courtesy of the artist.

represented by a petrol hose coming from a petrol pump. It reads, 'diesel', and the car to the left has 'EU' written on it. In 2000, France held the sixth monthly rotating European presidency, and Jospin was grappling with domestic issues of discontented lorry drivers as well as trying desperately to keep his promises in terms of European issues of pollution and environment. An interesting detail to note here is that the Laocoon's right arm has at last been shown in its correct posture with the arm bent behind the Laocoon's head, and not extended upwards in the air as had always been the case in the past.[39]

Yet, some cartoonists still show the Laocoon with an outstretched arm in late 2010. For example, a Singaporean interpretation of the Laocoon (Figure 23.23), shows the bearded Trojan strangled by a snake covered in dollar signs (not Euros). The cartoon is signed by Heng and is published in *Lianhe Zaobao*. Interestingly, the keywords used on the website to 'tag' the cartoon are 'European Union Statue'. We have here the last empty avatar of the Laocoon's long and complex visual history.

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[39] Similarly, a cartoon by Garland published in 2002 in *The Guardian* shows Tony Blair as the Laocoon with his arm bent (correctly) behind his head. John Prescott and Gordon Brown are shown on either side. The snake is represented by a water hose pipe, to remind us of the fire-fighters strike, which was important at the time as it showed up New Labour's social policies in a very unflattering light.

Figure 23.23 Carton by Heng

Source: *Lianhe Zaobao* (Singapore), 12 February 2010. © 2010 Lianhe Zaobao/The *New York Times*.

Why the Laocoon? Farrell and Putnam write:

> It is worth speculating about just why the Laocoon has shown itself to be so appropriate for the purposes of parody and caricature. Part of the reason may reside in the very painfulness of the human suffering that this sculpture brings so memorably to expression . . . another part of the reason, undoubtedly, resides in the statue's very celebrity: its unique visual form and its universal dissemination make it instantly recognizable not only as an illustration of a particular myth but also as an emblem of antiquity itself—as a symbol of sublime artistic values. (2010: 339)

This argument, as far as human suffering is concerned, is compelling, but we are discussing images, and just like for the hydra, there are visual reasons for using the Laocoon far removed from 'meaning'. It is a great model once emptied of its meaning and filled with new characters. Almost any situation can be mocked or referred to by using the Laocoon group. As it is a (sculptural) group, at least three politicians can be mocked. In addition, the vicious snake can take on numerous meanings. Some cartoonists have produced different cartoons of the Laocoon to mock the same politicians over and over again. What is fascinating in the Laocoon model, is *how* cartoonists use the various elements of the group, and especially their *take* on the snake and its function in the drawing. It may sometimes be a personification of ideas (bribery), problems, a person, or sometimes transform into the object of a

conflict. From showing these cartoons to many intelligent and cultured people (but non-classicists), I would affirm that most readers would not recognize the Laocoon group, and even fewer would know the myth.

More than forty years were to pass, from the restoration of the Laocoon's right arm in the 1960s, before it was finally translated correctly into the cartoon representations; and some cartoonists—even today—still perpetuate the sixteenth-century version. Why has it taken so long for the cartoonists to get it right? Possibly through laziness or possibly because prior to the use of the Internet for image searches cartoonists used older cartoons of the Laocoon to produce their own 'modern' versions rather than seeking out more 'recent', that is, post-1960s, photographs of it.

In summary, we recognize some cartoons as that of Nero, Herakles, or the Laocoon through cartoon titles, labelling within the drawing—or in the case of the Laocoon, on the statue's base, or on the snake's coils; in the case of Nero, in the flames or fire, and Herakles, frequently mentioned on the club, often humorous labelling is used such as verbal puns ('Nero Tehranicus', 'Lao(s)koon'), or on occasion we can identify the scene from the figures' clothing, attire, symbols, or distinctive attitude. Interestingly, the German caricature of Iran's leader (Figure 23.7) is only really possible from outside Iran. As R. Buss (Lambourne 1992: 9) wrote already in 1874: 'Without civil and religious liberty joined to an unshackled press, caricature cannot exist; thus it becomes, by its free exercise, a sure exponent of the degree of freedom enjoyed in any country.'

Why did the cartoonists need this reference to antiquity? One answer is possibly that it lends gravitas to the cartoons. It gives them some panache, a certain *élan* just as a neoclassical building often proffers more prestige, or semblance of tradition, of respectability, and credibility than do concrete and pre-cast functional buildings. Yet, one should not over-emphasize the impact of the cartoons' classical reception: for example, in the case of the Laocoon, the reference to antiquity might simply be a 'coat hanger' for ideas. The Laocoon may just be a figure tied up in knots by an uncontrollable situation (the snake). The reader does not need to know the original story of Laocoon to understand the meaning of the cartoon. So, who then was or is the intended reader? Even though one can certainly understand the gist of a cartoon (to a degree) without necessarily knowing the myth, the cartoonists still make a conscious effort to bring out the ancient reference. Is this so that there should remain a hope that the non-classical reader may understand the reference or better still seek it out? Or is it aimed at that elusive and increasingly rare 'cultured reader' (for the want of a better expression) who will savour the extra spice of understanding as yet another layer in the joke? Were the latter true, cartoons with classical references would have a higher rate of success and impact in highbrow newspapers rather than others, but the evidence shows that an equal number of such cartoons are published in all major newspapers.