

Politics as Poetry III, or, Self-Pity as Heroism

For centuries, perhaps the only thing that most people knew about the *Republic* was that Plato would ban the poets from his ideal state, and yet it's striking that so few commentators have emphasized that he targets not lyric poets, but epic poets such as Homer. Plato ignores the brave, violent and, perhaps, sociopathic exploits of Achilles and Odysseus to focus on the soliloquies and lamentations through which Homer's characters bemoan their lot:

Hear and judge: The best of us, as I conceive, when we listen to a passage of Homer, or one of the tragedians, in which he represents some pitiful hero who is drawling out his sorrows in a long oration, or weeping, and smiting his breast --the best of us, you know, delight in giving way to sympathy, and are in raptures at the excellence of the poet who stirs our feelings most.

Yes, of course I know.

But when any sorrow of our own happens to us, then you may observe that we pride ourselves on the opposite quality --we would fain be quiet and patient; this is the manly part, and the other which delighted us in the recitation is now deemed to be the part of a woman.

Very true, he said.

Now can we be right in praising and admiring another who is doing that which any one of us would abominate and be ashamed of in his own person?

No, he said, that is certainly not reasonable.

Nay, I said, quite reasonable from one point of view.

What point of view?

If you consider, I said, that when in misfortune we feel a natural hunger and desire to relieve our sorrow by weeping and lamentation, and that this feeling which is kept under control in our own calamities is satisfied and delighted by the poets;--the better nature in each of us, not having been sufficiently trained by reason or habit, allows the sympathetic element to break loose

because the sorrow is another's; and the spectator fancies that there can be no disgrace to himself in praising and pitying any one who comes telling him what a good man he is, and making a fuss about his troubles; he thinks that the pleasure is a gain, and why should he be supercilious and lose this and the poem too? Few persons ever reflect, as I should imagine, that from the evil of other men something of evil is communicated to themselves. And so the feeling of sorrow which has gathered strength at the sight of the misfortunes of others is with difficulty repressed in our own.

I think it's a safe bet that there is no historical support for Plato's claim that epic poetry makes men "womanly," or, to put it in less gendered terms, inclined toward vocalized self-pity. As Jerry Toner noted in *Homer's Turk*, classics were at the center of the British public school curriculum as that nation was constructing their empire, so the emotional outpourings of Achilles don't seem to have weakened the imperial resolve to subjugate, imprison, torture, and kill millions of people around the globe. One reason these sorrowful, self-doubting, and even self-pitying orations remain compelling is that they're an exteriorization of the emotions that virtually every "real" "hero" must have both felt and suppressed. It's hard to imagine (for example) Wellington, Bolivar, Washington, L'Ouverture, or Mandela publicly complaining about their misfortunes. Churchill didn't whine after Gallipoli; the Confederate General George Pickett never complained about General Robert E. Lee's order for him to charge at Gettysburg. (Asked what went wrong in the attack now named for him, Pickett responded "I've always thought the Yankees had something to do with it," which is a pretty good line from someone committing treason in defense of slavery.) At the same time, one can be sure they were plagued by the same emotions to which the Homeric heroes gave voice, but in public they would have been "quiet and patient" since that is "the manly [sic] part."

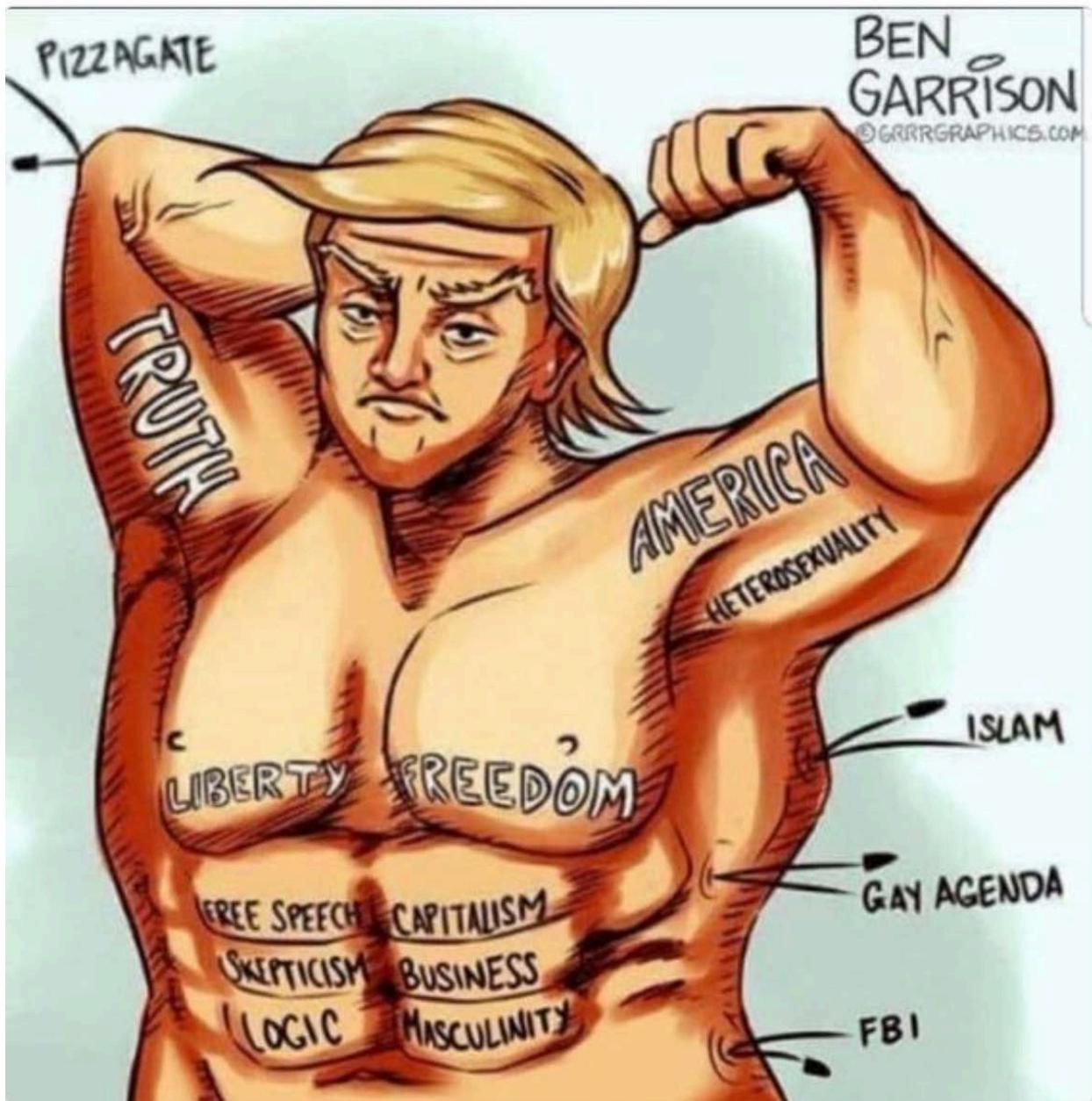
That's a useful context for examining the Trump phenomenon. During the campaign, Trump's supporters stressed his "manliness" in unapologetically masculinist and misogynist terms. T-shirts and

with slogans such as “Trump the bitch” and “Finally, a president with balls” were common at his rallies, and Trump’s support among men has remained strong even as it has plummeted among women. His antagonistic style is almost a parody of hypermasculinity: Trump is the brash, sexually aggressive billionaire New Yorker who grabs women by the pussy because “they just let you,” and who never backs down from a fight. And yet if we accept Plato’s definition of manliness as being “quiet and patient,” Trump is anything but masculine. Despite being the most powerful man in the world, Trump spends a substantial percentage of his waking hours whining about how unfairly he’s been treated by the press, the Attorney General he himself selected, Robert Mueller, the FBI, the CIA, NATO, China, Jimmy Fallon, NATO, Harley Davidson, Robert DeNiro, Diane Feinstein, Hillary Clinton, Maxine Waters etc., ad infinitum. We know that almost of his complaints about unjust treatment and criminal conspiracies to undermine his reign are horseshit, which makes his plaintive bluster even more pathetic.

While Homer suggests that the acts of the (ostensibly) courageous and violent hero are undermined or even erased by his vocalized complaints about his plight, Trump shuns anything resembling conventional heroism. He is notoriously conflict averse: despite “you’re fired,” his famous tagline from the office, he remains reluctant to axe even the most incompetent or “disloyal” of his advisors. Trump dismissed Rex Tillerson, his former Secretary of State, through a tweet. After Omarosa Manigault Newman was sacked from Trump’s administration, she called Trump and recorded the call. When she said “General Kelly -- General Kelly came to me and said that you guys wanted me to leave,” Trump responded with a bald-faced lie: “No. Nobody even told me about it. You know, they run a big operation but I didn’t know it. I didn’t know that.” Trump is the most powerful man in the world, but here he pretends he is essentially powerless: he expects Omarosa to believe that some unnamed “they,” who run “a big operation” fired her without telling him, and there’s nothing he can do about it.

Trump is both the incarnation and apotheosis of Victimized Masculinity, a tendency on the American right to spew masculine bluster from a position of abject and feigned powerlessness. Half a century ago, white, nominally straight men held almost every lever of power in the US. Now, as women, people of color, and LGBT folks have slowly and incrementally moved from the margins, Trump and his supporters are pretending to be victims. That's a fairly common move among authoritarians – Mussolini's fascists invented stories about powerful socialists who were supposedly destroying Italy, and anti-Semitism was of course at the core of National Socialism, but Trump's authoritarian attacks on the free press, the rule of law, and anyone who dare criticize him differ fundamentally from other hypernationalist movements. In the "First Manifesto of Italian Futurism," F.T. Marinetti claims the Futurists want to "exalt movements of aggression, feverish sleeplessness, the double march, the perilous leap, the slap and the blow with the fist." Although Marinetti was writing thirteen years before Mussolini's March on Rome, it's clear these early Futurist texts were important precursors to Italian Fascism, and in 1919 Marinetti would co-author the Fascist Manifesto. Mussolini and his supporters had already adopted a strategy of violent intimidation of their enemies, most of whom were socialists. The Blackshirts would beat local Socialist leaders, often savagely, and force them to leave their towns and villages. Mussolini embraced this tactic, saying "[t]his is heroism... This is the violence of which I approve and which I exalt. This is the violence of Fascism."

By way of contrast, Trump's authoritarianism is a quasi-fascism for the late middle-aged and older, for those who (thankfully) lack the energy of their much younger predecessors in the Blackshirts and would rather yell at the TV or rant in the comment section at Breitbart than actually *do* anything. One good way to understand this authoritarianism for the AARP is in the following image:



This cartoon is such a mishmash of incoherence and fantasy that it's hard to know where to start.

Obviously, it's bizarre to portray an inactive, overweight 72 year-old as a ripped superhero, but what's even more telling is that he's not actually *doing* anything, except repelling a series of nonsensically metaphorical bullets. How does "Pizzagate" – the laughable conspiracy theory that claimed John

Podesta was running a child sex ring out of a pizza parlor in Washington DC – constitute an attack on Trump? How is Trump fending off the “gay agenda,” especially since his only attack on LGBT folks was an ill-fated plan to ban trans people from serving in the military – a plan that was quickly blocked by rulings in four federal courts. What are the “attacks” from Islam and how has he repelled them? How is Trump defeating the FBI (which presumably means Robert Mueller’s investigation) when they’ve already secured guilty pleas from his campaign manager, National Security Advisor, and personal attorney? The answer is that he’s simply whined, tweeted, kvetched, and talked shit about them, which is exactly what anyone who vaguely familiar with Trump’s record would expect. Despite Republican majorities in both houses of Congress, Trump hasn’t done much of anything. His single major legislative accomplishment is passing a massive, debt-financed tax cut that went overwhelmingly to the wealthy – a move that was almost boring in its predictability. His major campaign promises – building the wall and having Mexico pay for it, bringing back factory and mining jobs, passing an infrastructure bill, providing health care coverage for everyone, pulling out of NAFTA, locking up Hillary Clinton, etc., etc. -- remain not only unfulfilled but (in many cases) unstarted.

Trump’s “heroism” consists primarily of the performative self-pity that Plato found so distasteful. While the Greek heroes were constrained by the indomitable forces of fate and the whims of the gods, Trump mews about the power of women, people of color, the media, Muslims – almost everyone but white, nominally straight men. Unlike Homer’s heroes, however, Trump has no heroic exploits to counterbalance his airing of grievances. He got five deferments to avoid the draft, then suggested that the risk of contracting an STI from his sexual encounters was his personal Vietnam. Trump portrays himself as a nationalist Samson for the digital era, shackled by the media and everyone

except his base, but really he's a rage-addled Grandpa Simpson, railing at a world he does not understand and pretending his fear and anger are, somehow, heroic.