3) 'There's a persistent belief that describing contemporary political figures in classical terms automatically furthers understanding' (Neville Morley, *Sphinx* blog). Do comparisons with past Roman emperors and other ancient leaders help or hinder our understanding of contemporary political events?

On the back cover of Neville Morley's *Classics: Why It Matters* is written *"The ancients are as influential today as they have ever been, and we ignore them at our peril… they can offer important lessons for the complex cultural, social and political worlds of the present"* (Morley, 2018). In his *Sphinx* blog (Morley, The Wicker Man, 2019), he selects a single example of an unhelpful comparison between a figure of ancient mythology and a contemporary politician and concludes from this that such comparisons are intended to show off more than to illuminate, but I will argue that they can help us to understand a snapshot of contemporary leaders and international cultural differences, using examples of Boris Johnson comparing himself to the emperor Augustus, Donald Trump to the emperor Nero, Emmanuel Macron to the god Jupiter and Hillary Rodham Clinton being compared to Cleopatra VII. In these strange times – when Western leaders prorogue Parliament and incite violence against Congress – viewing political events through the lens of comparisons with ancient leaders reveals the constancy of the nature of leadership, both in the power-thirst of men and the exclusion of women, and the threat that some current leaders pose to democracy.

Boris Johnson compared his 2019 cull of the cabinet to the reign of emperor Augustus: a vicious purge of senators followed by 200 years of *'Pax Romana'*, regarded as a period of stability and prosperity for the Roman empire. Augustus' career was by no means without fault, as he slaughtered his way to power: pleas to him for mercy were supposedly met with

'moriendum esse' – you must die (Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* 2.15). Johnson himself acknowledged *"Augustus wasn't some benign heir of the ideals of Pericles; he was a chill and subtle tyrant"* (Johnson, Greece Vs Rome, With Boris Johnson And Mary Beard, 2015).

The focus of Johnson's comparison was between the efficacy which he hoped to achieve by his removal of 25 cabinet members, government ministers, MPs and MSPs, and Augustus' reduction from over 1000 (Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* 2.35) senators to 600 (Dio, *Roman History* 54.13) in 28 BC. Such a comparison could reveal Johnson's aspirations for his time in office: on *The Today Programme*, historian Tom Holland said that although he thought comparing the cull to Augustus' brutality *"was a lunatic thing to say … [it] does offer a fascinating insight into Johnson's hopes for what he's doing … he gives the Brexiteers Brexit and then he will … do whatever he wants"* (Holland, 2019). According to this perspective, this cull may have been motivated by removing opposition, to fulfil Johnson's undemocratic dream of creating a *"golden age"* by his personal policies.

The most uncomfortable aspect of this comparison is found in Johnson's eagerness to be connected to a leader who founded an autocracy on what was previously a republic. Augustus epitomised dictatorship, even in name: Augustus was a title invented by the senate, meaning something along the lines of *"the revered one".* Johnson himself has described the cult by which the Roman people worshipped Augustus: *"People at dinner parties in Rome would have busts [of Augustus] above their mantelpieces…if you wanted to become a local politician, in the Roman Empire, you became a priest in the cult of Augustus"* (Johnson, 2010). This comparison indicates the autocratic aspirations which can be detected in some of the actions of Johnson, who as a child declared his ambition to be *"world king"* (Cockerell, 2019). In 2019, Johnson advised the Queen to prorogue parliament, giving the explanation of

focussing on domestic legislation in order to guarantee post-Brexit renewal, although the Supreme Court ruled that this action was justiciable and unlawful (R (Miller) v The Prime Minister, 2019). Given Johnson's own choice of comparison to an unopposed autocrat, such an unprecedented step can be interpreted as an attempt to evade the constitutional right of Parliament to scrutinise his plans for Brexit, in order to give himself absolute power.

Ultimately, viewing Boris Johnson's actions through the lens of his comparison to the emperor Augustus reveals his intention to remove opposition in order to increase his own power to rival that of the classical leaders he so admires.

Donald Trump compared himself to the emperor Nero when he tweeted a meme of himself playing the violin, captioned *"My next piece is called…nothing can stop what's coming"*, accompanied by his own strapline *"Who knows what this means, but it sounds good to me!"*. The connection to Nero stemmed from the apocryphal story that *"Nero fiddled while Rome burned"*. Here Trump eagerly (but seemingly unwittingly) compares himself not only to a dictator but to one condemned as cruel, debauched and tyrannical (Suetonius describes Nero "*prodita immanitate naturae quibus primum potuit experimentis*"– betraying the cruelty of his disposition in every way he could (Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* 6.7)), perhaps illuminating Trump's own despotic tendencies.

Trump and Nero both exhibited violence towards the state. Nero has been accused by many ancient writers[1] of starting the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD (by which Tacitus writes that only four of the fourteen regions of Rome were untouched (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.40)) with the aim of building himself a larger palace (the "*Domus Aurea*"). Similarly, Trump incited

---

[1] Including Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* 6.38; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 62.16; Pliny, *Natural History* 17.1.5; Seneca, *Octavia* 831

violence against the Capitol Building, the seat of American democracy. In a speech to his followers on the day of the storming of the Capitol, Trump said *"If you don't fight like hell you're not going to have a country anymore"* (Trump, 6 January 2021), explicitly encouraging violence against the state. Five people died.

Both leaders ended their time in power facing public enmity. After Nero had fled Rome in 68 AD having realised his guards had deserted him, he was declared a public enemy by the senate (Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* 6.49.2), although he committed suicide before he could be killed. Trump's term in office ended with an impeachment inquiry. Although the impeachment was ultimately unsuccessful, Trump's public reputation has been severely damaged.

Overall, the comparison of Trump to Nero helps us to understand the apparent madness of a leader that threatens to overthrow democracy.

Emmanuel Macron encouraged comparisons between himself and Jupiter, the leader of the gods in Roman mythology. Macron said that his predecessor François Hollande *"does not believe in a Jupiterian president … [but] I do not believe in a normal president",* implying himself as the *"Jupiterian president"* (Macron, 2016), seeking to construct a sense of distinction and absolute authority that would restore strength to the country. Instead, his comparison caused his approval ratings to drop as many French people rejected and mocked this vision, viewing him instead as distant and lacking in humility.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Jupiter is an all-powerful ruler, depicted as *"sceptro… innixus eburno"* (leaning on his ivory sceptre) (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.178) in his introductory scene. This presents an obviously problematic image for the leader of a modern democratic republic, and illuminates his aloofness. The so-called "Benalla affair" in France can be seen as

a manifestation of this: Macron refused to address the severity of his aide being charged with assault and impersonating a police officer, saying to journalists *"you are the only ones who are interested in this"*, causing him to be perceived as a distant figure presiding over an Elysée Palace that apparently considered itself above the Law.

Jupiter appears in Virgil's *Aeneid* as a paternal figure, first appearing in a pose of tenderness towards his daughter Venus (Virgil, *Aeneid* 223-296). Hence, this comparison may also expose Macron's view of himself as the metaphorical *"father"* of France. This was reflected when he said, *"I want to be the country where new mobility [and] new energy will be invented and developed",* arguably equating himself with his country in an echo of the absolute monarch Louis XIV's notorious *"L'état c'est moi"* (I myself am the nation).

In conclusion, Macron's comparison of himself to a god indicates an arrogance and desire for power which is inconsistent with French democratic republican values.

However, comparisons between contemporary female political figures and ancient female leaders reveal a very different story, as is clear in the comparison of Hillary Rodham Clinton, former American first lady and unsuccessful presidential candidate, to Cleopatra VII, final ruler of the Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt. Although they appear in very different political contexts, and Clinton never achieved power for herself, the similar portrayal of both helps us to understand the undermining of women in politics. The nature of the comparison differs to the others I have mentioned: the men have narcissistically compared themselves to autocratic ancient leaders, whereas Clinton has been connected by others to figures like Cleopatra and Medusa. In both cases, the degrading labels of others have resonated: Cleopatra was labelled by Horace as *"fatale monstrum"* (deadly monster) (Horace, *Odes* 1.37.21) and Clinton by Trump as *"nasty woman"* (Trump, 2016).

The public reputations of both figures are coloured by their personal relationships as opposed to their political actions. Despite building up the Egyptian economy and having a prosperous and popular reign, Cleopatra's legacy is of her personal relationships, as the prototype of a *"femme fatale"*: Dio writes *"καν τούτῳ τῆς Κλεοπάτρας … ἐρασθεις οὐκετ᾿ οὐδεμίαν τοῦ καλοῦ φροντίδα ἐποιησατο, ἀλλὰ τη…Αἰγυπτίᾳ ἐδούλευε"* (meanwhile [Antony] fell in love with Cleopatra, and thereafter gave not a thought to honour but became the Egyptian woman's slave) (Dio, *Roman History* 48.24.2). Not only are Cleopatra's own achievements obviously missing from this and other accounts, but she is characterised as the downfall of Caesar and Antony. Hillary Clinton's political prospects were materially damaged by the scandal of her husband's impeachment as President, arising from his dishonesty to the Grand Jury, and his disreputable behaviour towards a much younger female White House intern *("I did not have sexual relations with that woman"* (Clinton, 1998)). It ended his own political career, but also fundamentally damaged the future political prospects of his wife.

Both figures' careers were ultimately defined by defeat. Aside from as a temptress, Cleopatra is known as the ruler who lost the Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt, and she ended her life immediately after (Strabo, *Geography* 17.1.10). Similarly, Clinton's political career is seemingly over since her loss of the 2016 presidential election, as before running for the Presidency she served as a Senator and then as Secretary of State, but she has not run for any public office since. Whilst these events may seem deserving of the significance given to them, I would argue that excessive emphasis has been placed on the failures of two influential women in politics such that they proved career-ending, and that the comparison between these two figures therefore may help us to understand the negative lens through which female politicians are viewed.

Ultimately, the comparison between Hillary Rodham Clinton and Cleopatra VII indicates that, when so many aspects of life have improved in the millennia since the classical world, misogyny in leadership – at least in the USA – had not improved, and the country did not seem to be ready for a female President.

In conclusion, comparisons with past Roman emperors and other ancient leaders help our understanding of contemporary political events, giving a snapshot of the strange times we live in. Although they by no means reflect the full complexities of contemporary political events, such comparisons have revealed that even in the vastly different political, social and cultural context of contemporary events, the inherent nature of leaders remains constant, indicating their desire for autocratic power such that it is only the constitutional system of checks and balances which keep our democracy intact. The response of each nation's public to their leaders' comparisons of themselves to all-powerful ancient rulers also illuminates the differences between attitudes to leadership internationally: the lack of public rejection to the comparisons of Johnson and Trump to Roman emperors reflects how leaders are comparatively lauded in these countries, whereas the French public's overwhelmingly negative response to Macron's comparison to a god shows the continued importance of their revolutionary history and the 21st century persistence of their strong national republicanism. Drawing parallels between ancient and modern female figures serves a different purpose, instead revealing the inherent exclusion of women from the highest levels of politics that largely remains today: as Dame Mary Beard declared, *"You cannot easily fit women into a structure that is already coded as male; you have to change the structure. That means thinking about power differently."* (Beard, 2017)

Word count excluding title and bibliography: 2092 words

GB

Bibliography

Beard, M. (2015) *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome.* London: Profile Books

Beard, M. (2017) *Women & Power: A Manifesto.* London: Profile Books

Clinton, H. (2017) *What Happened*. New York: Simon & Schuster

Cockerell, M. (2019) *Boris Johnson: 'The boy who wanted to be world king'* BBC Newsnight

Cooney, K. (2018) *When Women Ruled the World: Six Queens of Egypt*. Washington D.C. : National Geographic

Greece Vs Rome, With Boris Johnson And Mary Beard (2015), Intelligence Squared

Gyles, M. (1947) "Nero Fiddled while Rome Burned". *The Classical Journal, 42*(4), 211-217

A History of the World in 100 Objects: Head of Augustus (2010), BBC Radio 4

Morley, N. (2018) *Classics: Why It Matters.* Cambridge: Polity Press

Morley, N. (2019) "The Wicker Man", *Sphinx*, 19 December. Available at:

https://thesphinxblog.com/2019/12/19/the-wicker-man/

R (Miller) v The Prime Minister (2019) UKSC 41

Segal, C. (2001). "Jupiter in Ovid's 'Metamorphoses'". *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics, 9*(1), 78-99

Sweeney, N. (2019) "Claiming the Classical: the Greco-Roman World in Contemporary Political Discourse". *Council of University Classical Departments Bulletin, 48*

The Today Programme (2019), BBC Radio 4