

The Misuse of Power:
The Pumpkinification of Claudius
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Introduction:

Leaders of nations are often found in the crossroads of using the role of power for the greater wellbeing of society or for personal benefit. The humility of one leader to put their people over themselves has proven to be successful in creating a productive, prospering state. On the other hand, corruption occurs with leaders that fall victim to the unlimited control and authority of the position. In Classical Roman history, there are examples of both of these leadership traits. Throughout the work of the famous Roman writer, Seneca, one can observe the two varying paths that Roman Emperors pursued and how their citizens perceived them.

Seneca The Younger, a Roman stoic philosopher, statesman and dramatist writes vicariously about the tales of one ruthless leader after his death. In the *Pumpkinification of Claudius*, also known as *Apocolocyntosis*, Seneca announces his overall irritation and frustration towards the Roman Emperors taking advantage of their hierarchal situation. Throughout this political and menippean satire, former Emperor Claudius (10 BC – 54 AD) attempts to achieve godhood in heaven (Atchity, 1997). Seneca portrays this journey as a desperate effort by a flawed, self-obsessed man. Additionally, Seneca uses Octavian Augustus to compare a masterful Roman leader to the flaws in Claudius' reign. In effort to fully understand Seneca's perspective, one must look into the context of the Julio-Claudians period and the acts of Roman Emperors like Claudius. An analysis of the *Pumpkinification of Claudius* reveals three major elements of the work: Seneca's motivation to write negatively about Claudius, the corruption and obsession of power by emperors, and lastly, the public's realistic perception of their ruler.

Overview of Seneca:

The author of *Pumpkinification of Claudius* was born in 4 B.C. in the Spanish Cordoba. Seneca the Younger's father was a well-known Roman rhetorician and writer who is portrayed by the name of Seneca the Elder throughout history. Seneca the Younger was educated in Rome during his childhood, just like his well-known father. He enjoyed studying under the likes of Attalus the Stoic and Demetrius the Cynic. Regarded as the "most important thinker and writer" of his era, Seneca was not liked by the rulers of his time. Emperor Caligula could not stand his presence. Claudius went as far as exiling him to the island of Corsica off the west coast of Italy. After exile, Agrippina, the great-granddaughter of the Emperor Augustus, requested Seneca to serve as Nero's tutor and close advisor (Atchity, 1997). Claudius maintained this noble position with Claudius' processor until once again he was disappointed by the actions of the ruling elite. The murdering of Agrippina by Nero's commands completely baffled Seneca. Seneca believed the true idea of the emperor had been tarnished and forgotten due to the mere obsession of power. The cruel actions by Claudius, such as to exile the brilliant philosopher, are major reasons why he completely tarnishes the emperor's image in his satire.

Overview of Claudius:

In the year of 41 AD, the nephew of Roman leader Tiberius was put into the spotlight by being proclaimed emperor by the Praetorian Guard at the time. Claudius was near the age of 50 when he took the throne over the Roman people. At an early age, Claudius suffered a dangerous injury that gave him a limp and made him slightly deaf (Atchity, 1997). These characteristics do not embody the ideal Roman person or furthermore, a ruler of the people. Claudius seemed weak to the senate and challengers at the time because of his rather quiet political past and his infirmities. In order to overcome this soft image, Claudius believed he needed to assert himself with executions and exiles to those who defied his reign. As claimed by Emperor Augustus on

Mount Olympus in the *Apocolocyntosis*, Claudius murdered two of his granddaughters, one by starvation and one by the sword. Augustus continues by listing off royal family names that Claudius has killed. He also mentions how he did not give fair trial to many of those victims, including his great grandson L. Silanus (Seneca, 10). This testimony by Augustus is considered extremely valid amongst the gods in the story because of Octavian's nobleness and knowledge of the processor. The act of executing and exiling important people of Roman society to show his power and scare off opposition did not settle well with ancient writers of the time. In this light, one can see how Seneca grew bitter towards Claudius.

There was a bitter disgust Seneca the Younger had towards the reign of Claudius and emperors of that time. In the time he spent in the empire's capital and the eight hard years he was banished from it, Seneca saw the overuse of power by an individual to the highest degree. Claudius had taken the elements of divine right and absolute power as a political tool to assert himself cold-heartedly as emperor. Seneca believed the emperor was power-mad and obsessed with himself. The author took this anger towards Claudius and the timing after his eventual death to deal out one of the greatest political satires of Ancient Rome. In an interesting and creative way, Seneca the Younger uses the *Pumpkinification of Claudius* as way of expelling his own personal hatred, as well as exposing the corruption of one particular emperor.

The Arrogance of a Corrupt Leader:

The text, *Apocolocyntosis*, begins with the death of Claudius and his entrance into heaven on October 13, 54 ACE. Seneca claims it being a day in which he was made free and the people rejoiced.

The god Mercury had the last fatal call in Claudius' life, saying, "Do what has to be done: Kill him, and let a better man rule in empty court." (Seneca, 4)

Emperor Claudius' life and "Imperial dunce" was plucked off, and from that moment was starting his journey for godhood. In Ancient Rome, emperors were truly thought of as being divine and would serve a purpose even after their death. People believed that deceased emperors held a position in heaven as a certain god. These certain gods embedded a particular trait that they could worship as well. For example, Octavian Augustus, the first emperor of Rome beginning in 27 B.C., is portrayed in the satire as a wise and noble god on Mount Olympus (Seneca, 9). Throughout the story, Claudius is attempting to reach this same stature as Augustus, but is seen far less qualified.

Seneca comically writes how the Gods didn't have an idea on what to do with Claudius when he arrived in heaven. After all, Seneca proclaims the man's last words on earth were referring to the mess he made of himself and Rome. Hercules, a god of strength who has traveled the world, was taken aback by Claudius' appearance. Furthermore, the Lady of Fever proclaimed Claudius hailed from Lyons in Gaul and was lying of his origins to Hercules. In response, Claudius showed his true ill-temper ways in which he ordered for the Lady of Fever to be taken away and executed (Seneca, 6). The meaning behind this flare up by Claudius is to show the usual practice of the emperor to quickly and impulsively get rid of any opposition. The fear of getting his rule undermined, combined with the authority he held, led Claudius to kill anyone interfering with his goals. In this case, it was the Lady of Fever trying to stop his achievement of godhood. However, Hercules looks upon this request as if Claudius is a complete fool, and demands to know the truth. Claudius soon realizes his change in surroundings and convinces Hercules to take him to the rest of the Gods where he can plead his case.

"What goes on in his own closet he knows not; and now he searches the regions of the

sky, wants to be a god? Is it not enough that he has a temple in Britain, that savages worship him and pray to him as a god, so that they may find a fool to have mercy upon them?" (Seneca, 7)

These are some of questions the gods ask while debating the case of Claudius in becoming a God. Jove and Janus are two of the gods that quarrel in a heated argument surrounding the recent arrival to heaven. Their words only further project the selfish and egocentric views of Claudius. The gods clearly point out that he is already a worshipped man by the reference to the temple in Britain. Not only this, but the gods also point out how Claudius is only greedy in wanting more power and virtue as a god. Furthermore, Seneca's words express that the people who search for answers from Claudius aren't going to find anything helpful. Claudius is foolish and only strives to hold power to accomplish personal tasks. The position of emperor in Roman society seemed to overtake many individuals in this aspect. Fortunate ones who were able to ascend to the thorn of Rome often didn't do it rightful, and act rather unjust when in power. However, there were arguments for the godhood of Claudius in the *Apocolocyntosis*.

The meeting amongst the gods in the story was divided. Despiter thought that Claudius was of high intelligence and should be granted a god, while receiving all the amenities that come with the position. Hercules acted as the facilitator of the conversion and collected words from each god that wanted an input (Seneca, 8). Nearing the end of the discussion, it almost seemed if Claudius actual did hold the advantage. There was a strong opinion that Claudius was to be made into a god who was to be worshipped by all. In spite of the swaying opinions in Claudius' favor, it was the words of his predecessor Augustus that changed everything.

The Virtues of an Honorable Leader:

The use of Augustus by Seneca the Younger is for the purpose of comparing and

contrasting the two emperor's style of rule and authority. Seneca was fond of Augustus, and believed although he was egocentric at times; he used the position of Emperor to better Rome. In this light, Augustus serves as the perfect man for the role of expelling Claudius' claim for godhood and announcing all of his flaws.

At first, Augustus establishes his creditability amongst the gods. Octavian states that he has never spoke out of line since becoming a god. Also, Augustus justifies his knowledge and history of matter by reiterating how he was the first Roman emperor. These simple facts put Augustus in the right position to comment accurately on the subject. Augustus claims that he cannot stay in silence for this debate and begins his counterargument with this statement:

“This fellow, Conscript Fathers, who doesn't seem to you as if he could disturb a fly, used to kill people as easily as a dog stops to rest” (Seneca, 10).

Augustus continues his rant by truly exposing all the ruthless killings of Claudius. These deaths included Messalina, Crassus, Magnus, and Scribonia who were all of royal descent and actually related to Claudius. The once called emperor disgracefully murdered personal family members in his reign. Augustus' words completed turned the tide of the argument for Claudius in heaven that day (Seneca, 11). Seneca was able to successfully tarnish and eat away at Claudius' life by having the most regarded ruler in Roman society metaphorically tear him apart. Augustus' perception by the Roman people was that yes, he was dictator, but put the state of Rome before all else. This is a major principle of Roman virtues and ideals.

All Romans had an honest belief that Rome was bigger than the individual, and dues should consistently be paid to the state. There was a strong feeling towards a sense of community and home that the Romans instilled in their lives. It was through extremely good leadership by rulers like Emperor Octavian Augustus why Rome grew in such size and power.

Rome conquest and large military were other important aspects of their lifestyle in which Augustus upheld. Romans believed it was in their fate to become the most glorious, along with the largest empire in the known world. Throughout their military conflicts, they held a high sense of confidence, nearly reaching arrogance, in which they thought people should just know when they're conquered. Although the Romans did overtake many different cultures, they weren't focused on taking away the conquered people's customs. In fact, Romans were rather focused on installing their sense of the Republic and governmental policies. These honorable practices were the characteristics of Augustus and the people of his reign. Unfortunately, Seneca did not observe these same Roman virtues in Claudius' rule and actions.

Claudius had committed unforgettable crimes. He was dishonorably attempting to become a god amongst gods who truly did not know what to think of the dead emperor. At this point, the question is asked by Augustus, "Who will worship this God, who will believe in him?" (Seneca, 11). If Claudius is to become god, than what does that say about the other Gods' virtue. Gods, such as Hercules and Jupiter, would then be devalued and found worthless by the people. There would be an overall mistrust and lack of faith in the Gods. In Roman society, Gods played a major role in not only the history of Rome, but as well as daily life. Roman citizens regarded godhood as a sacred and powerful position. Gods held particular capabilities and influenced events on earth. In the perspective of the Roman citizen, Claudius was not a man to be trusted with such power and impact. Augustus is so distraught from the thought of Claudius becoming a God, he proposes a type of motion to immediately sentence Claudius to be banished and deported from heaven within short time.

Public's Perception of Leaders

The abrupt exile of Claudius to the lower regions of the afterlife brings up an interesting

point of life on earth after a leader has fallen. Seneca illustrates the scene of Claudius being led off of Mount Olympus with force by Mercury. During his travels, he happens to view his own funeral procession taking place in Rome. The event was noticeably loud, and beautiful music was being played by multiple instruments. This funeral was one that resembled that of a future gods'. At first glance, it seemed that Claudius was missed and admired by his counterparts. However, as described by Seneca, there were a different number of emotions felt by the crowd of people in the streets.

“Joy and rejoicing on every side, the Roman people walking about like free men.” (Seneca, 11).

The people of Rome were actually celebrating the fall of the emperor with immense relief. Individuals that were afraid of Claudius and threat of their execution were coming out of dark alleyways. Once again, they were full of life. Seneca portrayed the negative effects of Claudius' rule and how it stopped Romans from pursuing prosperous, productive lives in society. At this moment, Claudius' position is a fascinating perspective to consider. A leader, who believed he was well liked by his people and just in his actions, is seeing the exact opposite unfold after his death.

The perception of leaders is vitally important for the society's well being. Augustus himself was an egotistical man. The fact that he deemed himself Caesar and absolute ruler of Rome is a testament to his obsession of power. However, these factors were not directly seen or believed by the Roman people at the time. On the other hand, it was Augustus' actions as emperor to glorify Rome and its virtues that were perceived by the people. Whether their views were skewed or not, it is essential for a leader to maintain a general public approval. If leaders are able to achieve that accomplishment, then the people of said nation will respect their decisions, and their legacy will be of a good ruler after death. The overwhelming persecutions of

individuals by Claudius seemed to make the people believe he was a cruel character. Seneca's satire on the man's afterlife only furthered this tarnished image of the leader. The corruption and killings of Claudius did not reflect the ideal Roman values found in their deep-rooted history, which in turn gave Claudius a negative perception.

Learning a Lesson

Onwards Claudius went through the lower regions of heaven where he stumbled across colleagues and family from old. One by one, they climbed out of their resting positions to see if it was truly Claudius. There was C. Silius consul elect, Juncus the ex-praetor, and practically his entire extended family was accounted for. These people were victims of Claudius' reign and had unfortunately fallen to the man's cruelty. In utter shock of the appearance of these characters, Claudius asked how they all came here. In response to this rather baffling question, Pede Pompeius answered:

"What, cruel man? How came we here? Who but you sent us, you, the murderer of all the friends that ever you had? To court with you! I'll show you where their lordships sit"

(Seneca, 13).

Pompeius shows yet another side of anger felt towards Claudius. He points out the obvious disgust that is felt by the people about Claudius' questions and actions in life. The people that were regarded as the closest to Claudius were massacred and completely forgotten by the emperor. Seneca conducts this creative meeting to enlighten Claudius on his negative actions. Also, the happening may have been used as influential material for future leaders of Rome.

The idea of seeing dead family, friends, and colleagues that one has personally executed is a hard concept to swallow for any man. Seneca is attempting to warn the emperors of

tomorrow to not decide impulsively, nor act without justice. The sentencing and killing of an individual should not be the result of anxiety, nor having the authority to do so. Roman leaders must be virtuous in their judgment and provide fair trial. The idea of the Republic, where in essence every voice is represented, is a classical Roman principle that can be utilized in this scenario. The Emperor must instill these virtues found in the concept of the Republic in order to provide honest treatment to his citizens and counterparts. An individual's leadership is only praised if respected by their fellow peers. Claudius acted without these ideas in mind, which would consequently lead to his own poor fate.

Only a Figurehead

After Pedeo spoke out against Claudius, he proceeded to lead him the rest of the way in his downward spiraling godhood process. Pedeo brought the once emperor in front of Aeacus, who was the God of judgment. Seneca's portrayal of Aeacus reiterates Roman's belief in a final judgment in the afterlife. Furthermore, the thought was that a person's position in the afterlife would be judged on the actions of their mortal life. In this case for Claudius, he was not subjected to a joyful ending. Throughout the following proceedings, it was found that Claudius had been charged with the killing of 35 Senators and 221 Roman knights (Seneca, 14). An astonishing number, Aeacus immediately decided that cruelty must be placed on the man's back.

The decision was eventually made by Aeacus to have Claudius participate in something extremely senseless, in which there was a craving without result. Claudius, from then, on was subjected to rattle a dice into a box with no bottom. Then, when he tried to retrieve the dice, they would slip from his fingers (Seneca, 14-15). In this task, Seneca created the ultimate revenge for a man he hated with a bursting passion. The author finally was able to make the self-obsessed, power-mad emperor powerless. The timing of when the piece was written, after Claudius' death,

and the political climate of Rome at the time allowed Seneca to produce such a satire. Additionally, the citizens of Rome shared the same anger and resentment towards Claudius as Seneca did. In public, people would pay homage to the emperor to avoid any complications, but would talk however they wanted in the privacy of their home. According to Seneca, the private life reflected the true individual while public life was masked. This false sense of respect toward a leader can make them turn into just a mere figurehead. In the context of Claudius and Seneca's writing, a figurehead is what Claudius became. This revelation expressed by Seneca explains why the modern translation of the title is *The Pumpkinification of Claudius*.

A figurehead is a person who has an important and powerful position, but rather does not hold any true power. In light of how citizens and Seneca felt towards Claudius, he embodied the definition of a figurehead. In regards to the translated title, it's meant to represent that if Claudius were, in fact, a pumpkin, it wouldn't change anyone's opinions or lives other than Claudius'. As Seneca illustrates, the Gods initially have no idea what to do with the old man when he arrives in heaven. However, as soon as professional accusations are brought forth before the people and Gods in heaven, it is clear that Claudius has committed wrongdoings. The leader of a nation must never become as useless figurehead as Claudius. The support of ones people, along with the utilization of a powerful position, such as that of an emperor, must be key components for a rightful leader. Seneca's tale of Claudius truly reflects the two-sided sword of absolute power and leadership.

Conclusion

The role of power has an enormous influence on ineffective and effective leadership. There are definite paths leaders can choose to pursue, which have completely different outcomes. According to Seneca, the path chosen by Claudius was filled with corruption and violence.

Claudius was obsessed with the idea of absolute power and anxiety-driven to maintain his control. On the other hand, Augustus was seen to Seneca as a model for Roman virtues and honorable leadership. The first emperor of Rome put the state and duty before any personal rewards. The level of responsibility shown by the leader who has obtained such high power is a firm indicator of their worth. Overall, poor or superb leadership is only validated in the eyes of the leader's people and how they truly perceive their ruler.

References

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