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Editorial

The *Annual Meeting of Postgraduates in Ancient History* brings together students from all over the world with an interest in the ancient world. This broader scope does not restrict itself to considering only Greek and Roman cultures and civilisation or even to those other cultures and communities with which the Romans and Greeks interacted directly, but casts its interest even wider, gathering together other perspectives and approaches on cultures that we as Classicists would generally consider fully external to our interests.

In 2023, the Malta Classics Association was honoured and privileged to host this *Annual Meeting of Postgraduates in Ancient History* here in Malta, with the support of the University of Malta's Department of Classics and Archaeology. The conference was held in hybrid format, with in-person attendees gathering within the welcoming rooms of the Malta Society of Art's Palazzo de La Salle between the 23rd and 24th of March. During these two days twenty-five speakers shared their research and exchanged reviews and ideas in a celebration of the ancient world and the various aspects of the study of these cultures.

The proceedings of nine of these presentations are now presented here, and we thank the authors for entrusting us with their work. We trust that these works will inspire you and encourage within you the desire to pursue your own research into these ancient cultures and their people, and our ongoing interaction with these materials.

Once again, this collection of research is being brought to you with the steadfast financial support of the Farsons Foundation, who have our enduring thanks.

Later this year, the Malta Classics Association will be hosting the *Annual Meeting of Postgraduates in the Reception of the Ancient World*, and we look forward to bringing you more research by promising scholars from all over the world in future editions of our *Melita Classica*.

In the meantime, we thank you for your ongoing interest in and support of our work.

Samuel Azzopardi

Executive President and Editor

In Memoriam

The Malta Classics Association wishes to salute the memory of our dear friend, colleague teacher, mentor, former treasurer of the MCA and former editor of this same *Melita Classica*, Victor Bonnici, who left this world earlier this year. He is sorely missed.

Lil Nas X and the Classical Tradition: Exploring Classical Imagery in the Montero (*CMBYN*) Music Video

*Yentl Love*¹

Abstract

This paper explores how the artist Montero Lamar Hill, better known as Lil Nas X, employs Classical imagery within his *Montero (CMBYN)* music video, before situating this as a work of Classical Reception through Queer Theory, Black Classicism, and Queer Theology. The paper theorises that through analysing the music video through these theories, the video can be read as a challenge to the alt-right adoption of Classics, and a celebration of the history of the Queer experience.

Introduction

On March 9 2021, the artist Lil Nas X tweeted an image of himself appearing in a Michaelangelo inspired, cupid-esque pose (Fig. 1), teasing the release of his *Montero (CMBYN)* music video, a heady Queer celebration, filled with Classical imagery and motifs.² This paper will situate this music video as a work of Classical Reception analysing the piece through the theoretical approaches of Queer theory, Black Classicism, and Queer Theology. The music video, directed by Tanu Muino & Lil Nas X, was released alongside the title track and lead single of Lil Nas X's debut album, *Montero*.³ This paper will perform a close reading of the imagery used throughout Lil Nas X's award winning music video, exploring how allusions to key periods of Roman history and specific Graeco-Roman mythology support the central Queer theme of this production. Through the lens of this imagery, the paper will subsequently analyse the video as a work of Classical reception, employing theoretical approaches from Queer Theory, Black Classicism, and

1 Yentl Love is a doctoral student at the University of Potsdam, where she researches the cult of Bacchus through the lens of Queer Theory.

2 For the music video, see *Montero (CMBYN)* on YouTube.

3 Minsker (2021).

Queer Theology. The paper will explore how the use of ancient motifs by Lil Nas X as both a Black and Queer artist may challenge the white heteronormativity of Classics, and what the significance of this performance may prove to be.

Close Reading

Before beginning the central analysis of the *CMBYN* music video, it may be useful to consider the aforementioned image shared by Lil Nas X announcing the video's release (Fig. 1). Here, Lil Nas establishes the upcoming exploration of the Queer and the Divine through an early use of Classical imagery. By appearing with a bow and arrow, Lil Nas draws a connection with Eros, celebrated both as a god of desire and sexuality, while in some traditions also becoming associated with homoeroticism.⁴ With the mirroring of Lil Nas X on either side of Eros' famed arrows, the artist arguably sets himself up as a Narcissus figure, being the recipient of his own desire. Furthermore, we see the poses of both figures deliberately mimic the 'Creation of Adam', a fresco painted on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel by the Renaissance painter Michelangelo, in which we see God reaching down from the heavens to Adam, the first human.⁵ In referencing Michelangelo, Lil Nas X further emphasises two central themes that will run through this video; the Renaissance artist is known for both his Queerness, and his use of Classical motifs.⁶ This image then forms a suitable introduction to the exploration of Queerness and Antiquity that this video will present.

As the video begins, we see the camera pan over a ruined landscape, flying past the remains of a Doric temple, associated in Ancient Rome with masculinity and manhood.⁷ As the shot continues, a similarly destroyed viaduct appears. In the politics of Roman expansion, viaducts were of great importance, both in terms of the physical landscape, and as a form of propaganda. Through bringing water to previously arid environments, it was considered that the 'savageness' of the natural world had been conquered, letting the monumental architecture serve as a symbol of the victory of civilisation.⁸ It does not seem coincidental that these architectural features are emphasised within the ruined landscape; through their disrepair, the music video begins to introduce ideas of Queer Disruption. By highlighting the destruction of these symbols of masculinity, and social order, we see the Queer potential of dismantling of societal and cultural norms.

4 Stafford (2013) 182.

5 Barolsky (2013) 23.

6 On Michelangelo and Queerness see Saslow (1988); on Michelangelo and Classical inspiration see Howard (2003).

7 Williams (2016) 230.

8 DeLaine (2002) 211.

As the music video progresses, we reach a shot of Lil Nas X seated with a guitar at the base of the tree. The combination of his long hair and beautiful appearance, alongside the effeminacy of the pink guitar marks a stark contrast to the threatening figure of the snake approaching from behind the tree, casting Lil Nas X as an innocent, feminine figure, arguably being hunted. The snake itself, while most obviously a Biblical reference to the Book of Genesis' depiction of the serpent as an agent of temptation, can also be seen as representative of alternative figures in Antiquity, such as the god Apollo, often associated with snakes in the ancient world.⁹ Apollo's frequent characterisation as a sexually aggressive predator arguably fits the next scene well, as the camera pans to a marble figure surrounded by branches and foliage, reminiscent of the character Daphne, who was transformed into a tree in order to escape the clutches of the god (Ov. *Met.* 1.525–58). As Lil Nas X continues through this landscape, faces begin to emerge from purple flowers in a potential homage to Hyacinth, yet another mortal who Apollo became obsessed with, and an obsession which ended in the death of the young man, and his transformation into a flower. The chase scene culminates in a Python-esque figure staring into the eyes of Lil Nas X in a display of hypnotism and control, reminiscent of both the encounters between mortals and divine in Classical tradition, but also arguably reflective of the character Medusa.

As the camera pans away, it reveals an inscription carved into a tree from Plato's *Symposium*, referencing the mythology of Zeus' division of early humans, and their subsequent searches for their other half (Plat. *Symp.* 191). This passage falls into a wider theme of homosexuality within the *Symposium*, and can be considered an early attempt at explaining the existence of different sexualities.

With the change of the music video's location comes a shift in the hair and wardrobe of Lil Nas, where characters adopt elaborately curled updos in the style of Flavian Rome (see Fig. 2 for comparison). Long curled hair became synonymous in this period with femininity and passivity, while equally symbolising the growing power and public involvement of women within society, and a challenge to the previous status quo.¹⁰ Returning to the central character, we see Lil Nas X outfitted this time in pink, with a faux fur drape across his chest evoking the hero Heracles. While this image of Heracles in chains is common in popular culture, Heracles additionally acts as an interesting case of non-normative gender expression in the ancient world. Not only did his mythology include a tragic Queer love story between the hero and his lover Hylas, but he additionally demonstrates atypical representations of gender during his most defining mythologies. During his famous encounter with Hippolyta, the queen of the Amazons, he 'took the female

9 Ogden (2013) 192.

10 Bartman (2001) 1–3.

role' in their relationship, dressing in women's clothes, and becoming the passive figure, subverting gender expectations.¹¹

Moving on through the video, we watch Lil Nas X escaping from his chains to become a winged Icarus, soaring towards the heavens, before being struck down in the famous pole scene, descending back through the amphitheatre, and into what can be understood as Hell, or Hades. This effectively forms a *katabasis*, and places Lil Nas in the leagues of heroes like Theseus, Odysseus, and Aeneas, whose heroic descents into the underworld all form a major part of their narrative arc, to ensure their *kleos*, or eternal renown. As Lil Nas continues into hell, statues on either side of the monumental gateway resemble that of Polykleitos' Doryphoros – created as a representation of idealised masculinity. These monumental sculptures continue inside, with feminine figures displaying glowing eyes and coiled hair, seemingly symbolising Medusa and the gorgons.

As we meet the devil himself, the figure is seated on a throne bearing a similarly Medusa-esque portrait behind them, with Classical symbolism blending with Satanic imagery to create a deeply evocative scene. The Latin inscription at the base of the throne *Damnant quod non intelligunt* – “they condemn what they do not understand” – only emphasises this further, with the line retaining an emotive, arguably Queer message, even as Lil Nas X gives a lap dance to the Devil.

As the dance finishes, we see Lil Nas X kill the Devil, and take his crown, in a beautifully portrayed display of sexuality and power. He gains the wings that he would have needed to reach the heavens earlier in the narrative, and has defeated the ruler of the underworld, therefore completing his heroic narrative. As he places the crown on his head, his eyes glow – again evoking the mythology of Medusa, and the gender empowerment and simultaneous threat to patriarchal norms that has historically relegated her to the role of ‘monster.’

Queer Theory and Lil Nas X's *CMBYN*

As previously discussed, it proves beneficial to examine this classical reception through various aspects of literary theory, beginning with Queer Theory. Queer Theory is a form of literary criticism that was presented as an alternative approach to Gay and Lesbian studies amidst criticism of its oversimplification of the complex intersections between sexuality, race, and gender identities.¹² Practitioners of Queer Theory sought to create a more inclusive alternative theory through grounding their research in intersectional critical political philosophies,

¹¹ Wohl (1998) 7.

¹² de Laurentis (1991).

with the goal of identifying and deconstructing social dynamics of power.¹³ The approach did not emerge exclusively as an academic practice, but instead developed alongside Queer political movements as a dynamic activist-led form of critique, with scholars of Queer Theory considering the approach a tool of political disruption.¹⁴ Perhaps one of the most significant aspects of the Queer Theory in approaching this music video is the tension between two alternative methodologies, namely constructionism vs essentialism. Broadly understood, a constructionist Queer Theory suggests that qualities such as gender and sexuality are not fixed through time, but instead are a product of an individual's contemporary cultural and societal surroundings.¹⁵ In contrast, an essentialist approach theorises that there is some innate aspect or 'essence' to certain identities and social categories, that they are "historically invariant and culturally universal".¹⁶ This approach has been largely criticized by practitioners of Queer Theory, who point to its potential for heteronormative and binary assumptions of gender identity, gender roles, and sexuality.¹⁷ Despite this criticism however, some scholars argue that a well-considered use of essentialist Queer Theory still holds importance. In our contemporary culture, where the lives and history of Queer and Trans people have continuously been erased and overlooked, arguably there is value in finding evidence for LGBT+ lives through history, regardless of the exact parallelism of the Queer experience.¹⁸ It is this approach, as championed by Fuss, which the subsequent Queer exploration of the *CMBYN* music video will follow, suggesting that the work develops and champions the idea of the Queer individual in the ancient world, and re-claiming the LGBTQ+ presence in history that has been so often overlooked.¹⁹

Throughout the *CMBYN* music video, classical imagery can be seen to both communicate and celebrate Queerness. The video itself can be split into three thematic portions: the chase scenes, the chained gladiator in the amphitheatre, and the descent into hell. Throughout each of these sections, Lil Nas emphasises Queer identity, with each classical reference contributing to the overarching theme of the subversion of traditional masculinity and social order that the audience saw foreshadowed in the ruined Doric temple and aqueduct in the opening scenes. This civic destruction can further be read as a metaphor for the contemporary and historic fears of the so-called "homosexual agenda", or

13 Bernini et al. (2020) 47.

14 Dowson (2000) 163; Wilcox (2006) 93.

15 Butler (1990).

16 Haslam et al. (2000) 114.

17 Nagoshi and Brzuzy (2010) 434.

18 Fuss (1990) 104.

19 For Fuss' approach, see Fuss (1990).

the dissolving of societal norms and the status quo.²⁰ It is possible to develop this symbolism even further through the consideration of the work of José Esteban Muñoz, a Queer Theorist whose seminal work on Queer futurity and Critical Race Theory informed and furthered the study of intersectionality within Queer Theory.²¹ In particular, his work developed the critique of colonialism as a fundamental aspect of Queer Theory, challenging the field to develop beyond a critique of cis–heteropatriarchy, towards an opposition of eurocentrism alongside colonialist and imperialist ideologies.²² As previously discussed, the aqueduct in Roman imagination served as a figure of empire building and imperialist ideology, symbolising Roman expansion and triumph over the natural world.²³ By viewing this section of the music video through this lens of intersectional Queer Theory it is possible to reimagine the demolished aqueduct as a symbol of the destruction of Western imperialism, and the challenge of colonialist ideals.

Further expressions of Queer identity come from the heroic styling throughout the music video, in particular the outfit worn in the colosseum/amphitheatre scenes. Through Lil Nas’ portrayal in the Heracles–esque costume, particularly in combination with the subsequent katabasis, Nas aligns himself with the Classical heroic traditions, often upheld in modern culture as the pinnacle of heterosexual, and notably white, masculinity.²⁴ Historically, figures from the past have frequently been ‘straightwashed’, with their sexuality erased in order to maintain a heteronormative narrative of history, an act which Queer Theory would seek to challenge.²⁵ This is particularly seen in the case of heroic traditions in Antiquity, where it is possible to see figures such as Achilles and Heracles treated as heterosexual, despite the homoeroticism of their surrounding mythologies.²⁶ Through putting a Queer, feminine, male artist then into the position power as a recognisable ancient hero, the *CMBYN* music video can be read as an act of Queer disruption, and a challenge to homophobic receptions of antiquity. Lil Nas continues to juxtapose this traditional hyper–macho heroism with the epic homoerotic lap–dancing finale, a performance which secures his victory over the ruler of hell, and therefore completes his heroic narrative. Through this display of Queer sexuality and power, he has asserted himself as the vanquishing Homeric

20 Buss (2004) 266.

21 For his impact, see the 10th anniversary edition of *Cruising Utopia* (2019), in particular the foreword by his colleagues and close friends.

22 Muñoz (2015).

23 DeLaine (2002) 211.

24 Dozier (2020) 262; Kennedy (2023) 93–94.

25 Ryan (2014) 83–89.

26 Dozier (2020) 254–255, 261–263; Jenkins (2022) 117–118.

hero, both of Hell, and of the heteronormative hyper–masculinity often associated with the heroic tradition.

Furthermore, the use of both Greek and Latin texts brings a level of emotional depth and Queer significance to the performance. Through including the excerpt of Plato’s *Symposium*, the video is grounded in the exploration of sexualities outside of heteronormativity, while simultaneously ensuring the audience is aware of the links with ancient imagery. This in particular is reflective of Fuss’ emphasis on the importance of the Queer ancestor, and acts as a reflection of the long history of LGBTQ+ lives.²⁷ As the video reaches its climax, the Latin inscription once again emphasises this reliance on Classical motifs, whilst providing an emotive critique of anti–Queer rhetoric: ‘they condemn what they do not understand’. The combined use of these quotations acts to convey the long history of Queer love, celebrating the thousands of years of homoeroticism and Queer identities that has preceded this celebration of Queerness. Simultaneously, through employing ancient literature in support of this Queer message, Lil Nas continues to highlight the homoeroticism visible through numerous ancient sources, that too often is erased by heteronormativity and societal homophobia.

Black Classicism and Lil Nas X’s *CMBYN*

As previously discussed, a founding principle of the Queer Theoretical approach is the emphasis on intersectionality, ensuring consideration of identities such as class and race, which equally contribute to cultural dynamics of power.²⁸ While this music video leans heavily on Lil Nas X’s Queer identity, central to the performance is his identity as a Black artist. Through Queer Theory these dynamics of race and power can be identified, and explored further through the lens of Classics and Black cultural studies, often referred to as Black Classicism.²⁹ Scholars frequently attribute the conception of the field to discussions and research prompted by the publication of Snowden’s *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco–Roman Experience* and *Before Colour Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks*.³⁰ The subsequent release of Bernal’s *Black Athena* series, while contentious for many, further developed the study of Black Classicism, with its release signalling a paradigm shift in the study of Classics, which some claimed was forever changed as a result.³¹ Subsequently, the field of Black Classicism has developed into a

27 Fuss (1990) 104.

28 McDonald (2015) 314.

29 Schliephake (2016) 53.

30 Greenwood (2009) 87, 102.

31 Asante (1998) 206; Johnson–Odim (1993) 88.

broad and varied discipline. An important aspect of discussion centres around how African–American authors have employed texts from the Classical canon as a measure of counter discourse in order to challenge racist and imperialist ideology.³² The discipline further aims to reconceptualise the view of Graeco–Roman history existing in isolation, but instead developing the perception of multicultural nature of the Classical world, highlighting scholarship on ethnicity in Graeco–Roman antiquity.³³ This is perhaps best summed up by Derbew’s exploration of blackness in Greek Antiquity, which situates an analysis of primary evidence for ancient black lives within the historic Classical scholarship that has reduced their presence to caricatures, or simply removed them altogether.³⁴ The discipline can therefore be understood to simultaneously demonstrate the presence of black lives and multiculturalism in the ancient world, alongside identifying and challenging the inherent whiteness and historic racism of the field of Classics.

While a Queer reading of the *CMBYN* music video is certainly appropriate, it is also significant to consider the video through the lens of his identity as a Black artist. Throughout the *CMBYN* music video, Lil Nas X makes frequent use of gorgon imagery, evoking the character Medusa. This iconography seems particularly fitting when considering the relationship between Medusa and Black individuals, particularly Black women, who have seen themselves echoed in the ancient figure.³⁵ Over the last fifty years, we have seen a movement towards using Medusa as a symbol of the reclamation of female power and freedom, as exemplified in H  l  ne Cixous’ *Laugh of Medusa*.³⁶ At the forefront of this movement, but arguably often overlooked, has been the work of African and diasporic writers, who have reclaimed Medusa in order to challenge structures of power from imperialism and racism to misogyny.³⁷ As the artist Dorothea Smartt claimed in an interview about her performance piece ‘Medusa’, “Medusa was probably some black woman with nappy hair, and some white man saw her and cried: a monster!”³⁸ Another of Smartt’s pieces ‘medusa? medusa black!’ similarly emphasises this connection with Medusa, joining other Black poets like Shara McCullum in using the gorgon’s reviled hair as a metaphor for the shaming of Black women’s hair within American and European society.³⁹

32 Schliephake (2016) 54–56.

33 Greenwood (2009) 88; Schliephake (2016) 61.

34 Derbew (2022) 19–21, 24.

35 Nisco (2009) 142–143; Goodman (1996) 197–198, 200–201.

36 Cixous (1975).

37 Zapkin (2022) 24–25.

38 Goodman (1996) 200–201.

39 Zapkin (2022) 27, 32.

This modern reclamation of the gorgon myth is supported by ancient literature, with texts by multiple ancient authors all associating the figure with an African origin, most commonly ancient Libyan, or West African. Whether through rationalisation of mythology, as Pausanias' Libyan warrior queen, or through the exploration of the character's fictive background as discussed by Lucan, the ancient association between Medusa and Africa is clear (Paus. 2.21.5; Luc. 9. 619–699). The gorgons' origins arguably imbue the Black reception of Medusa with a more significant meaning; this is truly a reclaiming in its most vital form. Through taking the African queen stripped of her humanity, and recognising and identifying with her struggles through the lens of Black womanhood, Medusa is celebrated in art among the collective ancestors and heritage of African and diasporic women.⁴⁰ For Medusa's imagery to then be used by Lil Nas in this video cements the performance as a celebration of Black heritage and beauty in all its forms.

A central aspect of Lil Nas X's portrayal throughout the *CMBYN* music video stems from the colosseum/amphitheatre scene. While certainly reminiscent of a number of heroic figures, an alternative reading of this scene may be a portrayal of Lil Nas as a gladiator. Gladiators in antiquity are frequently associated with the amphitheatre, where they would perform in fights.⁴¹ While attempts to whitewash history often sees ancient gladiators portrayed as white, recent archaeological finds have suggested evidence of black gladiators in Ancient Britain, a theory supported by primary sources who detail the presence of black gladiators in Italy (Dio Cassius. *Rom. Hist.* 62.3).⁴² We may then interpret this scene as representative of these gladiators, providing a Fuss style emphasis on the importance of the collective ancestor, and acting as a memorial to the lives of these black fighters who have often been overlooked.

As previously discussed, the costuming in this scene may also be reflective of the hero Heracles, establishing a heroic narrative throughout the *CMBYN* music video and its positioning of Lil Nas among the ranks of Heracles, Odysseus, and other heroes of Antiquity. This may be interpreted as providing a challenge to the adoption of Classical heroic ideals by white supremacists; Heracles in particular has been embraced by a number of white nationalist websites, who celebrate him as a model of hyper-masculinity.⁴³ These far-right hate groups claim nostalgia for a fictive, airbrushed, Hollywood history, where they see themselves echoed in the likes of the Spartan warriors of the 300, battling to protect 'Western civilisation'

40 Zapkin (2022) 34.

41 Carter (2009) 303.

42 Alberge (2023).

43 Dozier (2020) 262.

from effeminate barbarism.⁴⁴ The BBC's 2019 TV mini-series *Fall of Troy* witnessed this alt-right fixation on the Classics through the casting of David Gyasi as the so-called 'best of the Greeks' Achilles.⁴⁵ The immediate backlash fuelled solely by racial prejudice exemplifies the white nationalist fervour for the Ancient World, particularly in the context of warfare, and belief in a false white antiquity.

For this ancient heroism to be embodied by a Black man while he simultaneously embraces femininity challenges the hateful rhetoric which often pervades discussion of ancient warfare. Lil Nas reclaims Heracles and the Homeric heroes from the hands of the alt-right, turning the heroic narrative from a hyper-masculine white call to power into a celebration of Black excellence, femininity, and beauty.

Queer Theology: an Alternative Approach

A final alternative lens through which to view the *CMBYN* music video is through its religious parallels with Christianity. The first thematic portion, that of Lil Nas X seated in what can be interpreted as a garden, while a snake approaches from behind, is easily correlated with the Genesis story of Adam and Eve. The lyrics themselves substantiate this interpretation, specifically the line "If Eve ain't in your garden...". Here Lil Nas X appears to take the place of Eve, with the snake representing the Biblical serpent, who will tempt Eve into consuming the forbidden fruit (*Gen. 3:1–6*).⁴⁶ Through his identification with Eve, Lil Nas arguably sets himself as a figure of innocence, and an central aspect of the archetypal heteronormative pairing.⁴⁷ This is arguably Queering in its highest form; Lil Nas takes a motif commonly used in homophobic religious rhetoric, and presents a gender-bending reimagination in one of the critical scenes of the Queer celebration that is the *CMBYN* video.

The religious allusion continues to be visible throughout the next thematic portion, specifically the chained figure in the amphitheatre. Here, the character portrayed by Lil Nas X could be read as John the Baptist, a central follower of Jesus who was chained and imprisoned by King Herod (*Gospel of Mark 6:17*). To have one of the most important figures in Christianity represented by an openly Queer man is revolutionary, particularly in the face of modern homophobic backlash, often purportedly fuelled by religion. Alternatively, this scene may be interpreted as a reflection of the character of Samson, famed for his strength, who later is similarly chained, and set between two pillars (*Judges 16: 21–25*). This allusion to Samson

44 Kennedy (2023) 89.

45 Kennedy (2022).

46 Genesis 3: 1–6, New International Version.

47 See the use of Adam and Eve in homophobic religious protesting, specifically the popularity of the "Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve" strapline. For more, see Sullivan–Blum (2009).

is perhaps particularly interesting considering alternative Queer interpretations of the Biblical story, with scholars such as Mascrenge feminising Samson as an allegory for the wife of God.⁴⁸ Further analysis of the narrative of Samson and Delilah has been conducted through the lens of Queer Theory, identifying the cutting of Samson's hair, and therefore power, as a symbolic castration.⁴⁹ Samson therefore then provides an insightful character through which Lil Nas X can channel himself, a figure of Christian strength, whilst simultaneously arguably Queer.

The scene in the amphitheatre can further be read as reflective of the persecution of Christians in Roman history, where they joined other criminals in being sentenced to death in the amphitheatre as a form of spectator sport, often against wild animals.⁵⁰ In Ancient Rome, Christians were largely persecuted for their participation in what was considered a secretive collective group, who were considered a threat to the status quo.⁵¹ In particular, early Christians were linked to illicit sexual activity, threats to the nuclear family – particularly children, and hatred of 'normal society'.⁵² It is an interesting parallel to consider these charges, with modern homophobic religious rhetoric, which often characterises the LGBTQ+ community in exactly the same way.⁵³ Arguably then one could view this scene as an ironic reflection of a select history of prejudice, presenting an early Christian persecution, while reflecting on the oppression faced by LGBTQ+ people, often with an ostensibly religious motive.

By reading the *CMBYN* music video through the lens of Queer Christianity, it presents a number of insightful and interesting interpretations. From the Queering of Biblical characters and motifs, to the parallelism of historic events with modern day persecution, Lil Nas X conducts a meaningful exploration of what it means to be both Queer and religious. In particular, the reflection of both ancient and modern stigma forms an evocative reflection on the cyclical nature of persecution, and the formation and targeting of the 'other' which is central to Queer theory and discussion.

Conclusion

Over the course of this paper, it has become clear that Lil Nas X makes deliberate use of Classical motifs and ancient historical references throughout the *CMBYN*

48 Mascrenge (2019).

49 Derks (2015) 11.

50 Paschke (2006) 496–497; Clark (2004) 39.

51 McGowan (1994) 413.

52 De Vos (2000) 876–877.

53 For discussion on the variety of homophobic religious rhetoric see Williams (2018), Ayoub (2014) 338 and Duggan (1994) 4.

music video. The allusions to Roman architecture and Graeco–Roman mythology are supported by the use of Greek and Latin epigraphy, emphasising the use of Antiquity as a deliberate motif. Throughout the three thematic portions, Lil Nas repeatedly refers back to the ancient world, using Classical imagery as an innovative lens through which to explore the performance’s overarching journey through the destruction of traditional masculinity, before the eventual victory of the Queer experience.

In line with principles of Queer Theory, Lil Nas X uses ancient literature to establish the existence of the collective ancestor, alongside highlighting Queer mythologies, and acting to readdress the heteronormativity and hypermasculinity normally identified with the ancient hero. Furthermore, by establishing himself as a Black Homeric hero, Lil Nas X challenges the claiming of Heracles and other heroes by the alt–right. The use of the Medusa imagery serves to highlight the use of the figure in historic African–American and Diasporic counter discourse, alongside her use as an emblem of the beauty and power of Black women in the face of white imperialist culture. An additional reading of this music video through a Queer theological lens only serves to emphasize the emotive history of persecution and ‘the other’, and celebrate Queerness by evoking aspects of religious belief which have often been used against the LGBTQ+ community.

Primarily, this performance acts as a celebration of Lil Nas X’s identity as both Black and Queer. So what does it mean to then have Classical imagery consistently expressed alongside this? Historically, the field of Classics has gained a reputation for erasing the presence of LGBTQ+ lives in Antiquity. Whether this is still the case is debatable, but certainly the public perception of this remains, and memes of ‘historians will say they were just friends’ are as popular as ever. This performance arguably challenges the hetero–centrism of traditional Classics through the use of Antiquity in this overwhelmingly Queer performance. Additionally, there is something particularly significant about this reclaiming of Ancient History by a Black artist. The rise of alt–right protests employing ‘*molon labe*’ placards, alongside the public furor every time media is published suggesting the presence of people of colour in Antiquity demonstrates how Classics has been adopted and embraced by White supremacists.^{54 55} To then see a Black man placed among the ranks of Ancient heroes, and employing these same Classical motifs often used against people of colour to instead uplift and celebrate them is nothing short of revolutionary.

54 Molon Labe: Ancient Greek for ‘Come and take them’, attributed by Plutarch to King Leonides I in response to the invading Persians, since co–opted by the alt–right as a response to the anti–gun lobby in the United States. For more, see Hodkinson (2022).

55 Kennedy (2023) 93–94.

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Figures



Fig. 1 Image taken from X (formerly Twitter) account of Lil Nas X (@LilNasX), as published on March 9th 2021.

Access at: https://twitter.com/LilNasX/status/1369378599896244226?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1369378599896244226%7Ctwgr%5E19fc30eb35a900761bf1413955b51e2b1caa85b3%7Ctwcon%5Es1_%ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.pride.com%2Fmusic%2F2021%2F3%2F09%2Fcover-art-lil-nas-xs-new-song-hilarious-you-d-expect

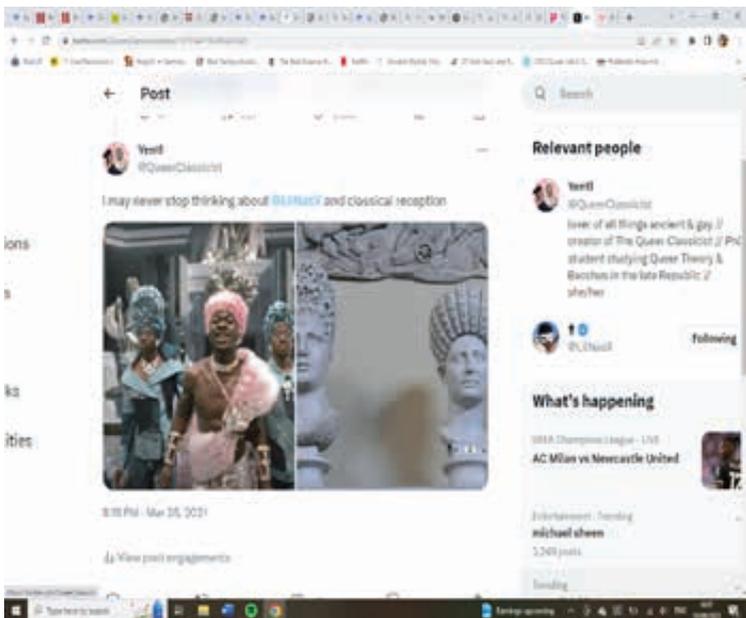
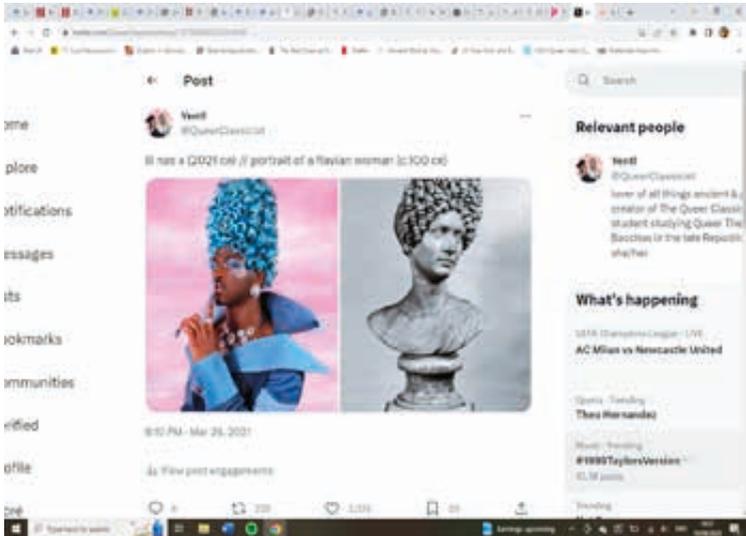


Fig. 2 Comparison taken from author's X (formerly Twitter) account (@QueerClassicist) as tweeted on March 26, 2021.

Access at: <https://twitter.com/QueerClassicist/status/1375540567535419397>

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