

Pure Heroine: Tragic Considerations for Dating the *Octavia*

It stands to reason that Attic tragedy, itself hardly an apolitical genre, should not have become a purely literary reference when used intertextually in Roman drama, but remained continually able to resonate with current events (Ginsberg 2015). The historical drama *Octavia*, our only surviving *fabula praetextata*, invokes several tragic heroines, of whom Antigone most closely parallels Octavia's narrative, yet the characters shy away from mentioning Antigone directly. I argue that this avoidance is very pointed, and sensitive to the contemporary charged political climate. First I demonstrate that Octavia is meant to be associated with Antigone in particular, and then I discuss the political implications of not using her name, specifically the new considerations it raises for the tragedy's date.

Twice during the play Octavia is directly compared with other tragic heroines, but in the process, the speakers point out that these heroines do not quite fit Octavia's situation. Both times, the point of departure is one on which Antigone is a match. In the tragedy's first scene, Octavia compares herself to Electra, but laments that at least Electra had a brother to avenge her. Then, in the concluding lines, the Chorus compares Octavia to Iphigenia, but admits that Aulis and Tauris did not sacrifice their own citizens. Each of these passages, in a highly marked position, emphasizes its own referent's point of divergence, calling to mind the better match that exists in Antigone.

The drama's structure also guides the reader to Antigone. Multiple times, *Octavia* imitates iconic tableaux from Greek tragedy, including scenes of Medea and Electra at first but eventually narrowing in on Antigone, culminating in Octavia's final departure, which mimics that of Antigone in Sophocles (Ferri 1998). Because Antigone is Electra's levelheaded Theban foil (Zeitlin 1990), even the references to Electra might do double duty: they highlight the

emotional aspects of Octavia's personality that feel more specifically like an Electra while also evoking the action of Antigone. Electra and Antigone are two sides of the same coin (Apfel 2011), resonating at different frequencies with Octavia's narrative while working toward the same thematic end.

Why, then, do the characters refuse to name Antigone? I argue that Antigone herself is too close for comfort. Such a direct match could be politically inflammatory: Antigone famously disobeyed a tyrant in pursuit of higher justice. Octavia as Antigone would make Nero into a Creon. Two competing interpretations might explain the author's reluctance: either a comparison with Creon is too good for a villain of Nero's magnitude because Creon at least had good intentions; or the parallel magnifies Nero's crimes by directly implying that he, like Creon, defied the gods (Edwards 1994). Consequently, this split raises new considerations for the date of *Octavia* (Barnes 1982): if Creon is too favorable a comparison for Nero, a later date might fit, when by Domitian's reign it was safe to disavow Nero entirely; indeed, to suggest a redeeming quality even mimetically would have been unwise. If, on the other hand, Creon is too impious for Nero, perhaps the scope of acceptable criticism was limited. In that case, we might favor an earlier date, when some pockets of Rome still favored Nero (Griffin 1984).

Rather than advocate for one date over the other, this paper argues that the ambiguity itself is telling. Such coy avoidance might be warranted either in the chaotic period immediately following Nero's death, when both strong supporters and strong detractors were active, or during the tightly controlled reign of Domitian, when vilifying Nero was appropriate as long as he did not resemble the current emperor too closely. Although the circumstances are hardly comparable, both periods were times of political intrigue that allowed space for vague subversion but not

open defiance. *Octavia*, then, illuminates unexpectedly parallel atmospheres of suppression, when a poet might choose ambiguity as the most prudent course of action for keeping his head.

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