

## Rulers Make Bad Lovers: The Nurse's Elegiac Exit Strategies in the *Octavia*

Elegy's influence on Silver poetry in general has been a topic of growing consideration, especially amongst scholars of Senecan drama (Trinacty 2007, Hinds 2011, Curley 2013, Ginsberg 2015). But as much as modern scholarship is seeing a rising interest in the literary texture of the pseudo-Senecan *Octavia*, the play remains curiously understudied in this regard. And yet the numerous parallels noted by Ferri and Boyle in their recent commentaries suggest that elegy, and especially Propertian elegy, is a particularly important generic mode for this historical drama, especially regarding the marriage of Octavia and Nero. This paper investigates elegy's multivalent significance for the *Octavia* and, in doing so, makes a new contribution both to the study of our sole surviving historical play and to the reception of elegy in the post-Augustan period.

The *Octavia* uses well-known *topoi* of elegy to supplement the actions and characterizations of the *dramatis personae*, creating a system of generic interplay in which elegy becomes a generic alternative to the tragic pattern of history. The *Octavia*'s Nurse initiates the play's elegiac frame by appropriating for herself the role of *praeceptor amoris*. She encourages Octavia, in Propertian language to act like an elegiac *amator* to mollify Nero and improve her situation ([Sen.] *Oct.* 84-5, 177; Prop. 1.8b40, 2.3.16). For Nero too is cast as the elegiac beloved, the *dominus* (master and husband). In this position, he has all of the power in the relationship. He has other women (Acte, Poppaea) he can go to when he is displeased with Octavia, and he can—at a whim—destroy her (here of course, the destruction is literal, not poetic). Thus Nero also fits into this generic framework as the Nurse sets it up. Since Nero has the qualities of the elegiac *domina*, if Octavia becomes the elegiac *amator*, they could successfully be together within an elegiac framework.

In the Nurse's eyes, the *amator* role fits Octavia, as she is in an unbalanced relationship where the other partner has all of the power and control. Further, she is already miserable and laments her fate, a trope shared between tragedy and elegy (cf. [Sen] *Oct.*, 75-6, 100-1, 651-2; Prop. 1.1.1, 2.1.78). Though the Nurse recognizes that Octavia hates Nero, she uses the generic code of elegy in an attempt to 'normalize' this hatred of a wife for her husband into a standard elegiac trope of the heated, often violent, hateful relationship between the *amator* and the *domina* (cf. Prop. 1.1, 2.5, 2.17.9-10, 3.25). The Nurse, in essence, is looking for an elegiac 'way out' in a desperate attempt to protect her charge from a man who has total power of life and death over his wife. For the Nurse, elegy is the only option to avoid a tragic outcome, and the similarities in language (words of misery and woe, love and hate and sorrow) allow for an easy transition from tragedy to elegy. But only if the parties are willing—and Octavia is not.

Octavia recognizes the generic model the Nurse presents and rejects it. She is confident that elegy cannot help her rebuild her family or survive Nero's new marriage (cf. 178, 186-8); nor is elegiac misery preferable to the sorrow she currently endures as Nero's sister-wife. A generic shift may turn her current tragic setting into an elegiac one, but for Octavia, the essential misery of her situation would not change. Thus her rejection of the Nurse's suggestions is both literal within the play, and generic within a metatextual reading: she would rather maintain her tragic identity than switch to an elegiac role in which her misery would be even more dependent on Nero and in which it would be eternal.

And yet though Octavia rejects an elegiac framework, the playwright nonetheless maintains an elegiac frame throughout the play. Octavia cannot escape elegy's role in the script of her story. In fact, the failure of her relationship and her final moments on stage are likewise structured as if she were an elegiac *relicta puella*. Thus even though Octavia has rejected elegy,

the language of the play reinforces that elegy is still in the background of the action, playing itself out in the center of Imperial Rome.

### Bibliography

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