

Pseudo-Seneca's *Octavia* and the Last of the Julio-Claudians

As our only extant Roman historical drama, or *toga praetexta* (Ferri 2003), *Octavia* must conform to historical narrative. There can only be one ending for Octavia, the last of the Julio-Claudians, or the play veers off into fantasy. The play cannot reshape history. It can and does, however, deploy a distinctive structure and style to make points that extend beyond historical detail. And no matter what the judgment of *Octavia* as a drama - and many are unkind (Herington 1961, Poe 1989) - the play's structure, and some of its stylistic features, are acknowledged as skillful (Sutton 1983).

This paper will discuss two characteristics of *Octavia*: first, its carefully wrought structure marked by doubling, mirroring, ring composition, and repetition, and second, its extreme allusivity. Furthermore, it will examine these two features to make two points. It is Octavia's family - and not just Octavia - that is being extirpated. Second, while the end of Octavia is characterized as terrible and regrettable, the end of the Julio-Claudians is presented as reasonable.

The structure, replete with doubling, ring composition, and repetition, underscores the innocence of Octavia. Set over a three-day period, only Octavia appears on each. Her suffering and fear, recounted during the first and final acts, bookend the entire tragedy. When she or her supporters are onstage, the fall of the house of Claudius is told and retold, lamented and mourned again. The Nurse-Octavia scene in the first act is mirrored by the Nurse-Poppaea scene in the third act. In both, a nurse attempts to comfort an empress deeply troubled by a dream in which Nero wield a sword. Seneca's attempt to restrain Nero in the second act is matched by the Prefect's attempt to do so in the fifth. Nero orders the execution of Plautus and Sulla and that of his wife using identical vocabulary. The play has two prologues, two nurses, two choruses, two

dreams, two wives of Nero and two marriages of Claudius and Messalina. In image and motif there is likewise parallel repetition. The nightingales that Octavia likens herself to in the opening return in the final act as she leaves Rome. Other motifs from the first act appear in the last: fate, *Fortuna*, *pietas*, *salus*, the Furies, stygian torches, death, a city's fall, marriage, family, exile, and blood, to name but a few. While these features colour Octavia's death as pitiable and a true loss, they also invest her story - and the narrative of *Octavia* - with a cyclical imperative, a notion of unavoidable ending.

Nothing in *Octavia* is more frequently recounted than the crimes of the Claudian house. In these accounts told and retold, bloodshed and wrongdoing dovetail with bloodline. In the first act, the killing of husband by wife, mother by son, and brother by brother, is told at least nine times, often in passages that extend to forty lines or more. Each passage detailing the violent offences shares characteristics, the most important of which are killing, lineage, and the end of Claudius' line and house. In the following acts, these accounts expand to the crimes or deaths of other members of the Julio-Claudian household, particularly to those of the female members. There is the implicit suggestion that women of the imperial household bear the seeds of destruction within. Parturition suggests competition, scheming, even kin slaughtering kin. The last song of Octavia's Chorus details the early and violent ends of other royal women, some guilty of crime, others not. In this song, the inevitable endpoint of the Julio-Claudian line is revealed. Destruction is in their DNA. Their end is acceptable.

Bibliography

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