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INGENS AS AN ETYMOLOGICAL PUN IN THE *OCTAVIA*

The poet of the *Octavia* has often been criticized for his uncreative, repetitive, and imprecise vocabulary. This critique is especially leveled at his frequent recourse to disyllabic words that add little to the narrative beyond their metrically convenient length.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the poet seems to have chosen one such word especially for its etymological potential. The significance of this word choice has to date largely escaped critical attention, and yet once noted the adjective clearly mirrors and reinforces the poet's depiction of the strife-ridden Julio-Claudian house and his greater thematic focus on intradynastic conflict within dysfunctional ruling families.

That Vergil often implied with his use of the adjective *ingens* an etymological derivation from *in* + *gens*—suggesting something “innate” or even “native”—has been well studied.<sup>2</sup> More recently Alison Keith has drawn attention to two other such uses of the word in post-Vergilian literature, arguing against J. W. Mackail's assertion that later poets show little interest in the pun. Her examples, one from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (6.426) and the other from the *Octavia* (363), seem to suggest that the same etymology of *in* + *gens* could be used to imply something “within a *gens*” or even “against a *gens*,” based on whichever root sense of *in* is understood.<sup>3</sup>

There is more to be said, however, about the use of the word in the *Octavia*. *Ingens* appears thirteen times in the play, and nearly all of the these uses, if considered in their contexts, can be read as puns that further emphasize the play's focus on intradynastic strife.<sup>4</sup> Seneca—the poet whose vocabulary the *Octavia* adheres to most closely—uses the word infrequently and with less attention to its potential etymological nuances, even in his tragedies that similarly focus on crimes within the family.<sup>5</sup> The *Octavia* poet's uncharacteristic divergence from the linguistic pattern of his model deserves closer attention.

1. For critiques of the playwright's repetitive language, see most recently Ferri (2003, 35): “In addition, *Octavia* exhibits numerous cases of repeated expressions, which acquire the status of fillers or near-formulae, betraying a poet less at ease in composition.” Ferri is by no means, however, the only critic to find fault with this language, and in fact later allows that (45): “the impression of formulaic composition presented here and there by *Octavia* might be diminished by a comparison with the tragedies of the Augustan poets, had any survived.”

2. See Hinds 1998, 10 with n. 2; Keith 1991; Ross 1987, index s.v. *ingens*; Mackail 1912, 251–55.

3. For an ancient etymological discussion of *ingens* in this sense, see Paul. Fest. 114, which derives the adjective from “*in*” intensive and “*gens*.” This passage was drawn to my attention by Keith (1991, 74). Keith does not, however, pursue the frequent and insistent use of *ingens* as an etymological pun or its rhetorical force throughout the rest of the play. See also Maltby 1991, s.v. *ingens*. The *TLL* categorizes many of *Octavia*'s uses, such as *ingens nefas* (*Oct.* 363), under *ingens* IVA (*de modo, vi, virtute*).

4. I follow the text printed by Zwierlein 1986; all translations are my own. Calder (1983, 193) notes that the term *scelus ingens* (*Oct.* 91) and other references to dynastic crime connect the world of Julio-Claudian Rome to that of Mycenae; nevertheless, it is unclear if he reads *ingens* as a pun that reinforces his point.

5. The usage of *ingens* in the tragedies of Seneca is as follows, with potential puns marked (\*). It appears most frequently in the *Hercules Furens* where, however, it usually retains only its original implications of largeness (94, 441, 666, 714, 717, 799, 947, 1089). After Hercules' murder of his family, some potential puns appear: (1238\*, 1282\*). It is slightly less common in the *Troades*, but half of its uses are potentially puns (181, 198, 357\*, 483\*, 834, 945\*, 1093\*, 1057). Unsurprisingly, the usage of *ingens* in the *Thyestes*—although even less frequent—is often in contexts suggesting the etymological pun's associations with conflict (91\*, 234\*, 358\*, 594, 680, 929\*, 1008\*). It appears infrequently in the remaining plays and equally often with or without the suggestion of a pun: *Medea* (223\*, 226, 377, 721, 961\*), *Phaedra* (607\*, 1015, 1047, 1134), *Phoenissae* (191\*, 320\*), *Agamemnon* (810\*), and *Oedipus* (542). The infrequent appearance of *ingens* in the *Agamemnon*, *Phoenissae*, and *Oedipus* particularly illustrates the divergence in linguistic practice between Seneca and the *Octavia* poet.

The clearest example of such usage, noted first by Keith, occurs when the chorus compares the patricide of Tullia with a *nefas* from its own age, namely Nero's murder of his mother Agrippina: *ingens geminatque nefas . . . patiturque moram sceleris nullam* ("and he twins the monstrous sin . . . and endures no delay in the crime," *Oct.* 363–65). The chorus focuses on Agrippina's murder as an exemplary illustration of Julio-Claudian cruelty. The immediately preceding lines devoted to Nero's unnatural and impious grief over his mother's survival (*dolet / vivere matrem / impius*, *Oct.* 361–62) emphasize the reason why this crime is so abhorrent: it is a crime within the family. In order to reinforce his point further, the playwright describes this matricidal *nefas* with the adjective *ingens*. This term would generally be used to describe something particularly large or monstrous, and certainly the chorus emphasizes the enormity of the crime. Nevertheless, the adjective's additional etymological nuance ought also to be felt as it underscores that the chorus' horror derives from the fact that Nero has committed a crime within and against (*in*) his own family (*gens*).

Agrippina markedly echoes the chorus' pun later in her own account of the same crime: *sed ingens scelere geminavit nefas* ("but he twinned the monstrous sin with crime," *Oct.* 605). Her virtually identical phrasing is not due to the author's limited vocabulary, but rather underscores that the perception of the Roman people in the previous choral ode matches the perception of the woman at the center of both the crime and the family. That is to say, it reinforces the historical memory and the narrative "truth" behind the description; simultaneously, it also further highlights how the playwright uses the etymology of *ingens* to suggest that Neronian crime is inherently that within and against his imperial family.

Given the play's intense focus on the crimes that various Julio-Claudians commit against one another, it should not surprise us that *ingens* and its etymological potential appear many other times in the text. The crimes Agrippina commits within the family to further her son's imperial ambition are described as an *ingens scelus* (*Oct.* 91). The terror that awakens Octavia from her nightmare about her brother's murder is a *tremor et ingens pavor* (*Oct.* 123). Silanus, Octavia's betrothed and one whose bloodlines and fiancée made him a rival to Nero's throne, died through a *facinus ingens* (*Oct.* 147). The author's suggestion that *ingens* be read with familial resonance in the majority of its appearances should cause us to examine the more ambiguous uses for punning potential.

The *populus Romanus* who riot for Octavia are described as an *ingens turba* (*Oct.* 834–35) who commit a *nefas ingens* (*Oct.* 787). The chorus itself later characterizes its partisanship throughout history as an *ingens amor* (*Oct.* 883), admitting that the fickle and *ingens* love of the Roman people often leads to the death of its beloved leaders. The repetition of *ingens* in the *Octavia*'s descriptions of popular favor draws our attention to the reason why Nero is so upset with the rioters: their political allegiance (*favor*, *Oct.* 786, 792) for a rival family member, namely his sister-wife Octavia, threatens his own position within that family and within the imperial structure he has inherited through his bloodlines. The Roman citizens in the play largely see Octavia's lineage as the true keys to peace and the continuity of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, and their love for her is represented as devotion to the "true" Julio-Claudian line (e.g., *Oct.* 273–81). The adjective *ingens* thus alludes to the central danger in the crowd's actions and also the central problem of the play as a whole: too many potential claimants to the throne born into a dynastic system where Julio-Claudian blood became the prime criterion through which successive emperors claimed power.

In the same vein, Nero's anger toward Plautus and Sulla stems from their blood ties to the Julio-Claudian name first and foremost, as indicated in the phrase *ingens favor* (*Oct.* 647) used to describe their political faction.<sup>6</sup> Had their popularity not been *ingens*, namely, legitimized through their bloodlines, Nero would not have had to worry and, the poet suggests, he would not have had to resort to murder.<sup>7</sup> The reappearance of *ingens* juxtaposed with *favor* to later describe the riot for Octavia underscores, through its intratextual reminiscence of Plautus and Sulla, the reasons for Octavia's own exile and similarly foreshadows her execution beyond the play's end (*Octaviae favore percussa agmina / et efferata per nefas ingens ruunt*, *Oct.* 786–87). The *nefas ingens* of the crowd is the result of the intradynastic struggle shown to be innate to the Julio-Claudian family and leads once more to its resolution through the murder of a family member.

Finally there is Poppaea's dream (*Oct.* 711–39), which is most commonly interpreted as foreshadowing her own death at Nero's hands and even Nero's suicide, the final intradynastic murder, in a sense, and the end of the Julio-Claudian line.<sup>8</sup> What has not been noted in support of this interpretation is that her sojourn into the underworld occurs when her new marriage bed, formerly occupied by Octavia, Agrippina, Messalina, and other ill-fated Julio-Claudian women, plunges into the underworld through an *ingenti hiatu* (*Oct.* 725–26). Thus Poppaea, on her first night as a Julio-Claudian woman and holding a Julio-Claudian heir in her womb, foresees that she will die the way all Julio-Claudians die—murdered by her own family—and will meet Nero in Hades.<sup>9</sup>

The use of *ingens* in this sense throughout the *Octavia* was indeed already suggested by the playwright's poetic predecessors. In fact, Vergil's use of *ingens* at several points anticipates the sense found in Ovid and then in the *Octavia*, and perhaps is the inspiration for both. In Jupiter's reply to Venus in the first book of the *Aeneid*, he prophesies that Aeneas will reach Italy and there wage a huge war (*bellum ingens geret*, 1.263). The appearance of *ingens* in this context foreshadows the undertones of civil war running throughout the second half of the epic, a war significant for the emergence of the Roman people and the Julio-Claudian dynasty.<sup>10</sup> The playwright may borrow this language specifically from Vergil's strife-ridden battlefield only to redeploy it within the walls of

6. Kragelund (2005, 72–73) notes that the poet uses the executions of Plautus and Sulla to outline Nero's logic in the murderous policies that will soon implicate Octavia, a parallel highlighted by the similar vocabulary used to describe the reasons why they must die.

7. I disagree with those who read the murders of Plautus and Sulla as extraneous and irrelevant to the themes of the plot as a whole (e.g., most recently Ferri 2003, 11–12). The reasons given for their deaths are at the heart of the playwright's message: Julio-Claudian will kill Julio-Claudian until there is only one left for the crowd to favor, and then he will kill himself. Note also that *A* reads *ingens furor* for *favor* at *Oct.* 647. If correct, this would associate Nero's political rivals with the concept of *furor* usually reserved for villains. Similarly, *A* reads *furor* for *favore* at *Oct.* 786, describing the motives for the crowd's riot as either based on partisanship for Octavia or as if influenced through Octavia's *furor* (or *furor* inspired by Octavia) to attack the palace and Nero. The confusion between *furor* and *favor* is easy to understand from an orthographical perspective and is one that no doubt the poet of the *Octavia* would have enjoyed.

8. For the abyss as an allusion to Poppaea's death, see Boyle 2008 ad 724–26; Ferri 2003 ad 724–26; Kragelund 1982, 9–21; Carbone 1977, 57–66. Octavia foresaw that Poppaea's marriage would be her undoing when she alluded to her imminent *genetrix* status (*iam fiet et genetrix simul*, *Oct.* 188), a word otherwise used exclusively to describe former imperial mothers who met with bad ends (e.g., Messalina, *Oct.* 10; Agrippina, *Oct.* 722).

9. For *thalamus* as symbol of imperial continuity, conflict, and cursed women, see Kragelund 2002, 45–46.

10. Similarly, as Stephen Hinds (1998, 8–10) has noted, this etymology might be a further reason why Vergil describes the trunk of Priam as *ingens*, besides the obvious appeal of using the word to reinforce his allusion to the death of Pompey *Magnus*. If we reread the Vergilian passage with the etymological sense of *ingens* sketched above, we see that its use here becomes an especially appropriate allusion to the fallen Republican hero of Rome's civil war. I am indebted to my anonymous referee from *CP* for both points.

Nero's palace, no longer looking forward as Vergil had to the rise of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, but rather looking back on that dynasty's end.<sup>11</sup>

The poet of the *Octavia* may employ a limited vocabulary in comparison with his poetic predecessors. He does not, however, employ an empty or thoughtless vocabulary. As I have argued, behind at least one of the words that on the surface may seem uninteresting is in fact a consistent etymological pun that underscores the play's depiction of familial conflict and intradynastic violence. Perhaps it is time that the poet's vocabulary as a whole is reexamined in terms of how it reinforces and mirrors the *Octavia*'s larger thematic concerns.<sup>12</sup>

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11. The influence of Vergil's *Aeneid* on Senecan drama has been well studied. In particular, for Seneca's profound engagement with the epic's destructive passions and its controversial end, see Putnam 1995. The *Octavia*, however, as a work of historical poetry about the final years of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, engages with the *Aeneid* in different ways from its Senecan forerunners as it uses Vergil's allusions to Augustus' rise to tell a historical story about the collapse of the very dynasty Augustus founded. See, for example, how Octavia borrows Aeneas' words of comfort (Verg. *Aen.* 1.199) to address her followers as she departs Rome in exile: *graviora tuli / dabit hic nostris finem curis / vel morte dies* (*Oct.* 652–54, with Boyle 2008 ad loc.). The *Octavia*'s protagonists in many ways replay the *Aeneid*'s famous conflicts as the play looks back on the dynasty's fall, and the poet's use of *ingens* seems to be part of this allusive engagement. Of course *ingens* is also an "epic" word (Ingvarsson 1950), but its secondary etymological nuance can be felt more often in Vergil's successors than has been previously explored.

12. I wish to thank the editors of *CP* and my anonymous referees for their helpful comments. I am also indebted to Shadi Bartsch, Jeri DeBrohun, Caroline Bishop, Elizabeth Gloyn, Darcy Krasne, and Isabel Köster for their thoughtful suggestions. Any errors that remain are my own.

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