

THE *OCTAVIA*: STRUCTURE, DATE, AND AUTHENTICITY

MARTIN E. CARBONE

ALTHOUGH the *Octavia* survives solely through manuscripts containing the plays of L. Annaeus Seneca, most scholars of the past two decades at least have been able to refer confidently and casually to the non-Senecan authorship of the play.¹ This view is correct, but the evidence usually adduced in support of it should not yet be thought to be entirely beyond challenge: of three categories of evidence traditionally thought to disprove authenticity, only one, that of the linguistic and metrical anomalies of the *Octavia*, has been carefully and persuasively examined: in 1934 Rudolph Helm effectively demonstrated that such features were not consistent with any theory of Senecan authorship.²

On the other hand, those familiar with recent work on the manuscript tradition of Seneca's tragedies must allow that the tradition offers no guide and can neither add to nor detract from the weight of internal arguments for or against authenticity.³ The third class of evidence, that of supposed allusions to events after Seneca's death, remains inaccurately assessed and misunderstood, largely because such references have not been properly related to each other or to the larger question of poetic structure. That is, the fabrications of the artist have eluded most researchers.

Connected with, and developing from, this problem has been a tendency to concede that a final and convincing evaluation of the evidence might not be possible.⁴ Academic interest has therefore waned and been replaced by faith, by a vague consensus that the indications are against

¹Cf., e.g., J. Hind, "The Death of Agrippina and the Finale of the 'Oedipus' of Seneca," *AUMLA* 38 (1972) 204, and R. W. Garson, "The Pseudo-Senecan *Octavia*. A Plea for Nero?" *Latomus* 34 (1975) 754-756.

This study is based upon material developed in *The Octavia and History*, my Phil.M. dissertation submitted to the University of Toronto in 1974 and hereafter cited simply as "Carbone;" references to the text of the *Octavia* and of Seneca's tragedies are to the edition of I. Giardina, *L. Annaei Senecae Tragoediae* (Bologna 1966), and abbreviations of ancient names and titles are usually as given in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*², ix-xxii. My debt to Professor R. J. Tarrant of the University of Toronto is considerable.

²R. Helm, "Die Praetexta 'Octavia'," *SB Berlin* 16 (1934) 283-347; refinements and additions in such studies as G. Herzog-Hauser, "Reim und Stabreim in der Praetexta Octavia," *Glotta* 25 (1936) 109-116, and C. J. Herington, "Octavia Praetexta: A Survey," *CQ* n.s.11 (1961) 18-30.

³Detailed discussion in Carbone (above, n.1) 133-140.

⁴Herington (above, n. 2) 25, n. 3 is representative: "It does seem that style and structure are the decisive criteria in the question of authorship; . . . any argument [based on the play's subject-matter] turns out in practice to be two-edged: the pro-Senecans can always find a not-impossible retort."

authenticity, even if a compelling investigation has not been published. Yet it should not be necessary to take such a position. It is possible, through careful analysis of historical allusions and dramatic structure, to demonstrate that the author of the *Octavia* knew of events after Seneca's death and that the play must therefore be spurious.

No single passage proves that the *Octavia* was written after the death of Seneca in 65. The latest secure *terminus* which can be established from obvious mention of a historical event is July, 64: there is a clear reference to the Fire of Rome and an associated reference to Nero's *Domus Aurea*.⁵ But two passages which have often been considered separately for their historical allusions—the prophecy of Agrippina (593–645) and Poppaea's report of her vision (712–739)—are, as I will argue, structurally related: a careful reading of Poppaea's dream narrative set against Agrippina's prophecy produces from their combined evidence a solution to the problems of each passage, and reveals an ordered series of allusions to events after 64 and culminating in Nero's death by suicide.

Some scholars have discounted this evidence provided by the play's subject matter, largely in misguided deference to the testimony of the A tradition of the tragedies; hence the argument that Seneca, a truly wise man with much experience in affairs, could have predicted the destinies of Nero and several persons with whom Nero was involved.⁶ On the other hand, some of those who have tried to impugn the drama's authenticity on the basis of its content have obscured a sound enough case by making unreasonable demands on the text, which was not intended as a historical document.

The whole question of historical allusions is one of perspective. Although Seneca might possibly have been able to make one or two vague guesses about things to come, he could not have foreseen many important and unexpected events of the last few years of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. One reference to an occurrence after the death of Seneca might not be significant, but the existence of several such references—each of them carrying a positive probability and pointing toward an interpretation common to all—must be considered probative: all the more when this evidence is set alongside the results of stylistic studies which indicate an author other than Seneca.⁷

⁵*Fire*: 831–832, cf. Tac. *Ann.* 15.38 ff., Suet. *Nero* 38, Cass. Dio 62.16 ff., and (for the date) C. Hülsen, "The Burning of Rome under Nero," *AJA* 13 (1909) 46; *Golden House*: 624–625, cf. Tac. *Ann.* 15.42 and Suet. *Nero* 31. J. Schmidt, *RE* 17.2 (1937) 1794, rejects the value of these passages, associating vss. 831–832 with the activity of the populace as mentioned, e.g., in 688–689 and 801; wrongly, since the reading *flammiis* . . . *meis* (831) is secure and its meaning unequivocal.

⁶Thus, e.g., E. Flinck, *De Octaviae Praetextae Auctore* (Helsinki 1919) 8; Schmidt (above, n. 5) 1794 and 1798; S. P. Thomas, "De Octavia Praetexta," *SymbOslo* 24 (1945) 71.

⁷Above, n. 2.

Many of the incidents merely hinted at in the *Octavia* are of course retrievable in greater detail from the surviving ancient historians and biographers. The obvious absence of such particulars from the drama should not stand in the way of a sensible appreciation of the material under study. The playwright was, and should be expected to have been, reasonably careful about the dramatic date: he did not want to destroy the tragic context by diminishing our pity for Octavia and our attendant hatred for Nero, as he surely would have done if he had explicitly recounted the unhappy end of Nero's new marriage and of his reign. Hence the only unequivocal anticipation of an event after the dramatic date is justified on artistic grounds: posterity looked upon "the burning of Rome by Nero" as one of the Emperor's greatest enormities. For the rest, the *Octavia* merely hints, through dark prophecy and dream, that justice will eventually prevail. It was with good reason that the poet avoided the more explicit references and literalness which scholars arguing either for or against Senecan authorship have wrongly expected from a *post eventum* composition.⁸

Perhaps the most important passage referring to an event after the suicide of Seneca is that in which the ghost of Nero's murdered mother Agrippina predicts the Emperor's death; this prediction first led to a suspicion that the play was spurious,⁹ and it in fact determined the nature and shape of other passages critical to the present discussion. The ghost of Agrippina describes the end which awaits Nero as follows:

iam parce: dabitur, tempus haud longum peto.	
ultrix Erinys impio dignum parat	
letum tyranno, verbera et turpem fugam	620
poenasque quis et Tantali vincat sitim,	
dirum laborem Sisyphi, Tityi alitem	
Ixionisque membra rapientem rotam.	
licet extruat marmoribus atque auro tegat	
superbus aulam, limen armatae ducis	625
servent cohortes, mittat immensas opes	
exhaustus orbis, supplices dextram petant	
Parthi cruentam, regna divitias ferant:	
veniet dies tempusque quo reddat suis	
animam nocentem sceleribus, iugulum hostibus	630
desertus ac destructus et cunctis egens.	

Agrippina's words parallel circumstances and particulars given in Suetonius' complete account of Nero's last hours. Suetonius records,

⁸The desire for precision and detail has too often blocked sound judgement, cf. Flinck (above, n. 6) 8-9; A. S. Pease, "Is the *Octavia* a Play of Seneca?" *CJ* 15 (1920) 393; B. M. Marti, "Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* and *Octavia*: A Diptych," *AJP* 73 (1952) 27; and A. Dawson, "Whatever Happened to Lady Agrippina?" *CJ* 64 (1969) 266.

⁹618-631. In 1371 Coluccio Salutati recorded reasons for doubting the ascription to Seneca: *nonne Neronis exitus . . . plane, prout accidit, recitatur? que premoriens Seneca nec vidit nec . . . potuit divinare* (Ep. 3.8).

inter alia, revolt of the armies, refusal of the tribunes and centurions of the Praetorian Guard to follow Nero in his flight, desertion by his guard and denial of aid by his friends, flight with only four companions to the villa of his freedman Phaon, hunger and thirst quenched only by tepid water, a senatorial decree for punishment *more maiorum* (*nudi hominis cervicem inseri furcae, corpus virgis ad necem caedi*), and finally suicide by a dagger in the throat.¹⁰ Hence a suspicion that the *Octavia* was written only after Nero's flight and death, for the words of the ghost are a prediction of what definitely will happen rather than a mere imprecation or vague hope for Nero's death.

A suggestion that Nero would lose power and die in a violent manner is not in itself strong evidence for *post eventum* composition: the conspiracy detected in April of 65, although it was a disastrous failure demonstrating the security of Nero's position, shows that there existed a sizable group of persons who could no longer tolerate the Emperor's rule and who were secretly preparing to act against overwhelming odds. In this group were literati.¹¹ Yet the dramatic setting of the prophecy, its detail, and the way in which even Senecan motifs and mythological references have been carefully shaped to fit the facts of Nero's end, all offer strong indication that the *Octavia* is spurious.

First, the dramatic setting. It is surely noteworthy that this prediction is made not by a living person but by a ghost; for, although predictions made by mortals carry no necessary authority and thus need not be correctly made,¹² both ghosts and dreams were regarded by the ancients as eminently qualified vehicles of truth. Equally important is the fact that in Senecan drama ghosts do not err, and ghost scenes are characteristically used to augur misfortune and unhappiness which does in fact come about; thus, in the *Thyestes* the ghost of Tantalus comes forth and is urged by a Fury to set in motion the chain of horrible events depicted in that play; and in the *Agamemnon* the ghost of Thyestes foresees details of the murder of Agamemnon by Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus.¹³ In the *Octavia* the prediction of Nero's death, because it is made by a ghost, is invested with some authority; the use of this traditionally reliable vehicle of prophecy is a strong indication that the writer felt no

¹⁰Suet. *Nero* 47-49, cf. Cass. Dio 63.27.2-63.29.2. For evidence on the date of Nero's death see most recently B. R. Reece, "The Date of Nero's Death," *AJP* 90 (1969) 72-74; his argument in favour of June 11 is not convincing.

¹¹On reaction to the middle years of Nero's reign see O. Murray, *Gnomon* 43 (1971) 833-834.

¹²So 199-200, which are of little value as prophecy: these words of the nurse are a mere consolation rather than a prediction.

¹³*Thyest.* 1-121; *Agam.* 1-56. For complete discussion of Senecan ghosts and their purposes ("motivation" and "prediction") see M. V. Braginton, *The Supernatural in Seneca's Tragedies* (Menasha, Wisconsin 1933) 30-33 and *passim*.

uncertainty about the events foretold and that—far from making an idle guess about an important historical personage and his fate—he was writing confidently and with a knowledge of the circumstances of Nero's end.

Moreover, it is difficult to believe that a person writing *ante eventum* would have used the specific and unique description *desertus ac destructus et cunctis egens*. As Nero himself realized, the circumstances of his end were totally different from conditions attending earlier imperial deaths: Julius Caesar was killed in the crowded Curia while secure in his power, and it is clear that Caligula, about whose assassination the extant accounts are ambiguous and discordant, was not in any event *desertus ac destructus et cunctis egens* at the time of his death.¹⁴ Indeed, even the conspirators of 65 do not seem to have planned or hoped that such favourable circumstances would attend their deed.¹⁵

The historical tradition suggests the existence of prophecies, current according to Suetonius in Nero's lifetime, that the Emperor would one day be repudiated.¹⁶ But these prophecies, if not formulated *post eventum*, at any rate appear to have contained no suggestion that Nero would die violently at the time, and many of them even specified either that he would rule elsewhere or that he would be restored to his former estate. Similarly, it might be argued that these words were written *ante eventum* to make the circumstances of Nero's death as humiliating as possible, and that the description is a lucky piece of wishful thinking. But it is difficult to imagine why anyone writing *ante eventum* about an important historical occurrence would have been so deliberately and unnecessarily specific as to defy normal expectation and probability.

Other details in the prophecy indicate knowledge of Nero's last hours. The words *verbera et turpem fugam* and *sitim* must refer to the punishment *more maiorum* decreed by the Senate, and to Nero's flight and thirst, all recounted by Suetonius.¹⁷ Those who defend the authenticity of the *Octavia* reject the significance of these allusions. In a way that obscures the basic unity of the passage they isolate the critical phrases from their context and from each other, and they adduce passages from other plays in the Senecan corpus to demonstrate that such words represent nothing other than normal Senecan usage. Thus it is argued that the words *verbera* and *fugam*, because they appear after the word

¹⁴Nero; Suet. *Nero* 42.1, cf. Tac. *Hist.* 3.68; *Caesar*: Suet. *Div. Iul.* 81.4–82.2 and Cass. Dio 44.19–20; *Caligula*: Suet. *Calig.* 58, Cass. Dio 59.29.1–7, and Joseph. *Æt.* 19.99–118.

¹⁵Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 15.48–53.

¹⁶Cf. Suet. *Nero* 40.2–3. Cass. Dio 63.27.2 places Nero's comment about his artistic pursuits in 68.

¹⁷Although decreed, the punishment *more maiorum* was not carried out: the reading of the text (which uses the word *parat* at 619) is consistent with this fact.

letum, must indicate punishment to be suffered by Nero only after he has died; that these references to punishment in the underworld were inspired by the flight of another matricide, Orestes, who experienced the lashes of the Furies after he had killed his mother; that the word *siim*, occurring in a passage which lists the punishments in Hades of Tantalus and the other famous criminals of mythology, is not important; and that the catalogue of the stock criminals of the underworld is yet another instance of a favourite Senecan motif.¹⁸

Yet such argumentation is unacceptable: it ignores the general tone of the passage and the way in which the prediction has been carefully shaped. The *verbera*, *turpem fugam* and *poenas* (of which thirst will form a part) are not punishments which will follow Nero's death. Rather, the movement of the text makes it quite clear that the words in question explain, and expand upon the nature of, *letum tyranno*; these circumstances will precede and attend Nero's death.

Although Nero and Orestes were alike in that each had murdered his mother,¹⁹ the play nowhere exploits the connection. There is no reason to believe that the poet was thinking of Nero as a latter-day Orestes, and he certainly was not attempting in these lines to emphasize Nero as matricide.²⁰ Here and elsewhere in the passage and in the rest of the play the emphasis is on Nero as impious despot, and the words *impio dignum parat/letum tyranno* would not cause anyone to think of Orestes. If the poet had wished to suggest Orestes, he surely would have used the *color* of matricide or even have named him.

Finally, the reference to the thirst of Tantalus represents much more than a regular component in a typical catalogue of the sufferers of mythology. Appropriately, and surely not accidentally, Tantalus is placed first among the famous sufferers, it is his punishment rather than himself or his crime which is stressed, and attention is clearly focussed on the relevance of thirst to Nero's circumstances. Although many passages show that Seneca regularly adduced the stock criminals of Hades, no other catalogue of sufferers in the tragic corpus mentions Tantalus first and emphasizes the fact of his thirst in the same way.

¹⁸This position has been argued most extensively by Flinck (above, n. 6) 3–5, and is maintained (sometimes with variations) by all who accept Senecan authorship: cf. Pease (above, n. 8) 390–391 and Marti (above, n. 8) 26, esp. n. 9.

¹⁹Suet. *Nero* 39.2–3 and Cass. Dio 61.16.2² (posters linking Nero with Orestes and Alcmaeon); cf. Suet. *Nero* 21.3, Philostr. *VA* 4.39 (p. 158, line 12 Kayser), and Cass. Dio 63.9.4 and 63.22.6 for Nero's favourite acting roles. The cases of Orestes and Nero were dissimilar: Juv. 8.211–230 with C. P. Jones, *CR* 22 (1972) 313.

²⁰Despite Suet. *Nero* 34.4, where the reference to the Furies might represent an inaccurate recollection of Nero acting the role of Orestes. To have seen in Nero another Orestes would have tended to extenuate the guilt of a criminal; that was not the poet's desire.

Because this important fact has not before been demonstrated, some general observations on Seneca's use of the motif are necessary.

In the plays for which Senecan authorship is generally accepted, all or most of the four criminals adduced by the ghost of Agrippina are mentioned together—sometimes others are included—five times. In all cases (listed below) there is a relationship, however slight, between a persona or event of the tragedy on the one hand and one or more of the sufferers on the other. The relationship either is based on friendship or kinship or is somehow developed during the course of actions antecedent to the dramatic situation. None of the catalogues is introduced gratuitously. Rather, not only does the dramatic situation motivate or clearly justify the reference to sinners and their punishments but it also determines, *if appropriate*, the shape and emphasis of the catalogue:

(i) *Hercules Furens*, 750–759: Theseus, having returned with Hercules from the underworld, describes for Amphitryon the way in which the guilty suffer fitting punishment there. Both the criminals and their respective tortures (without emphasis for either) are introduced, aptly since Theseus is describing all aspects of the underworld and the crimes and punishment of Lycus are a central theme of the play. Yet the ordering of the catalogue (Ixion, Sisyphus, Tantalus, Tityos) is not dictated by specific dramatic considerations; Tantalus is registered simply as an unnamed *senex* and he is seen to suffer not only thirst but hunger too.

(ii) *Phaedra*, 1229–1237: Theseus, who is fully aware of the penalties suffered in the underworld, seeks to be returned there for punishment, and asks that he be given the punishments of (in order) Sisyphus, Tantalus, Tityos, and Ixion. The emphasis is appropriately on the different punishments rather than on the criminals suffering them and, not surprisingly therefore, only Tityos is noted by name. The dramatic context requires no emphasis on any particular sinner or torture, and Tantalus is not singled out in any way.

(iii) *Medea*, 740–749: Medea calls for the release of two of the traditional criminals (Ixion and Tantalus) but immediately excepts Sisyphus: as the legendary founder of Corinth whom Medea regards as an ancestor of Creon and therefore as a new father-in-law for Jason, Sisyphus should receive not a remission of his penalty but a heavier toil.²¹ The criminals themselves, not their punishments, are here stressed, and the theme has led Medea to single out Sisyphus.

(iv) *Agamemnon*, 15–31: The ghost of Thyestes is reminded of the crime and horrors of former days and declares that he would prefer to return to the underworld and gaze upon the sufferings of the great

²¹For discussion of problems attending the interpretation of Medea's list, see C. D. N. Costa, ed., *Seneca, Medea* (Oxford 1973) *ad loc.*

criminals. He lists their *tortures* in the following order without naming any of the four sufferers or even much thinking of the first three: Ixion, Sisyphus, Tityos, and Tantalus. Tantalus alone receives slightly fuller treatment and the reason for his appropriate punishment is given (*caelitum dapibus*, 21), not so much because he was an ancestor of Thyestes but because the sin of Tantalus was so similar and yet so much less heinous in the eyes of Thyestes: Tantalus had served one son to the gods, whereas Thyestes had himself consumed three of his own children and then, by his own daughter, had become father of Aegisthus. Clearly, the dramatic situation has justified the introduction of the catalogue and has caused Seneca to emphasize Tantalus and selected aspects of his situation.

(v) *Thyestes*, 4–12: The ghost of Tantalus suspects that a punishment worse than his present one has been devised for him. He asks if the punishment of (in order) Sisyphus, Ixion, or Tityos is to be transferred to him. The introduction of Tantalus is entirely appropriate to the dramatic context, and in his list of sufferings he not surprisingly dwells upon the lot of Tityos, the *plenum pabulum*. It is significant that Tantalus defines his own present punishment as thirst and hunger, and elsewhere in the play the chorus gives a full description of his sufferings: terrible hunger and thirst (149–150 and 152–175).

Such are the relevant passages. They indicate that it is unwise to regard catalogues of this kind as mechanical formulae. Seneca did not adduce the sufferers of mythology gratuitously: different dramatic themes suggested their own appropriate ordering of the components, and a specific occasion might dictate that emphasis be placed on crimes rather than on punishments, or even on a family relationship.

In light of Seneca's art, it cannot be accepted that mention in the *Octavia* of the thirst of Tantalus represents an inevitable motif. Especially when it is understood that the words *verbera* and *turpem fugam* explain circumstances attending Nero's last hours, the following verse—*poenasque quis et Tantali vincat sitim*—must be accepted as a statement that Nero will suffer "thirst greater than that even of Tantalus." The poet, seizing upon an opportune similarity between Nero's suffering and that of one of the stock criminals, has further molded his passage to accommodate one fact of Nero's end to a Senecan motif. The other sufferers of course follow in a catalogue, since Tantalus without his fellows would cut a rather poor figure before a post-Augustan audience.²²

²²The poet has betrayed incompetence here. Nero's thirst caused our author to think of, and adduce, Tantalus. If convention had to be followed and the other sinners introduced, they should have come in a new syntactic unit: the verb *vincat* should not have been allowed to yoke the real and the fantastic.

Before suggesting the probable significance of the detail that Nero will one day give his throat to his enemies, it will be useful to examine the relevance of an incidental allusion to Rome's foreign policy; for this allusion too will indicate that the prophecy was carefully constructed after the death of Seneca. The ghost of Agrippina, listing certain events in spite of which Nero will suffer a violent death, uses the words *supplices dextram petant/ Parthi cruentam* (624–628). Tiridates, king of Armenia, came to Rome as a suppliant in 66; as part of a public display of obeisance, he fell at the feet of Nero, who then raised him with his right hand.²³

The importance of this reference to a Parthian submission has long been denied by scholars defending Senecan authorship. They argue that these words could have been inspired and written as early as 63, when, at a meeting at Rhandea with the Roman general Cn. Domitius Corbulo, Tiridates had in fact promised to go as a suppliant to Rome, there to receive back his diadem from the hand of Nero.²⁴

That argument might convince if the reference stood *in vacuo*. It does not. The context in which the Parthians are mentioned is important, and it suggests that the poet knew of several major events (including the actual visit of Tiridates to Rome) of the last five years of Nero's reign. The poet's interest in structural balance and chronologically arranged lists is obvious,²⁵ and it is surely significant that the allusion to suppliant Parthians occurs fourth in a catalogue which first gives, in correct chronological order, a reference to the building of Nero's Golden House, a probable allusion to the conspiracy of 65, and a possible mention of financial troubles and exactions which became serious after the conspiracy.²⁶ The poet seems to have made his list with characteristic regard for sequence and it is probable that, in suggesting the suppliant Parthians, he was thinking not of events in 63 but of the visit of Tiridates in 66.

The detail that Nero would ultimately give his throat to his enemies should be considered in light of the above indications that the poet has patterned the prediction after the facts of Nero's last years and hours. Scholars who favour Senecan authorship have rejected the value of the term *reddat . . . iugulum hostibus*, adducing passages to show that Seneca himself preferred the *iugulum* for descriptions of violent death, and claim-

²³Full account of events in 66 in Suet. *Nero* 13, Tac. *Ann.* 16.23.3, and Cass. Dio 63.1.2 ff.

²⁴So, e.g., Schmidt (above, n. 5) 1794, and Thomas (above, n. 6) 82–84. For events of 63 see Tac. *Ann.* 15.24–31, esp. 15.29.2–3; cf. Cass. Dio 62.23.2–4.

²⁵Cf. 102 ff. and 932 ff., and below, p. 57 with nn. 29 and 30.

²⁶624–625 and above, n. 5 (Golden House); 625–626 (conspiracy, cf. Tac. *Ann.* 15.57.4). 626–627 mention an *exhaustus orbis* sending *immensas opes*; although there is evidence of exactions earlier than 65 (cf. Suet. *Nero* 38.3 and *Ann.* 15.45 with D. Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor* [Princeton 1950] 1422, nn. 76 and 77), Nero's financial troubles caused much greater concern after the conspiracy (cf. *Ann.* 16.1–3 and Suet. *Nero* 31.4–32) and it is possibly to this latter period that vss. 626–627 refer.

ing that the detail is therefore insignificant and even inaccurate.²⁷ It is true that Seneca was fond of employing the *iugulum* in his death scenes;²⁸ similarly the gladiatorial associations of *dare iugulum*, which was available to any Roman writer as an image of complete humiliation (cf. Cic. *Mil.* 11, Tac. *Hist.* 1.41, and Hor. *Sat.* 1.3.89), justify a cautious interpretation of the *Octavia*'s use of the phrase. But the allusion in the *Octavia* should be evaluated in its context and especially in light of the line following it and of the care with which the entire prophecy has been shaped.

At this point we should look at the second passage in the *Octavia* which reflects knowledge of events of the years after Seneca's death, the vision of Poppaea which culminates in the ambiguous *ensemque iugulo condidit saevum Nero* (733).

It will help us to understand the cross-references in the narrative sequence of the play if we recognize the author's concern with symmetry of design and balanced structure.²⁹ The basis of organization is a temporal one: the action spans three days (the day before, the day of, and the day after the wedding), and the central day acts as a pivot round which are arranged corresponding scenes and themes; Octavia is the only character who appears on each of the three days, since she is indeed the main character and the play is about her fate.³⁰

Basically the narrative is as follows. On the day before the wedding Octavia reports to her nurse a frequently recurring dream reminiscent of a past event: she has dreamed that she and Britannicus, who is held in her arms, are transfixed by Nero wielding a sword (115–124). During the night before the wedding (between day one and day two) the ghost of Agrippina appears;³¹ carrying a Stygian torch for the *thalamis scelestis*

²⁷For an array of evidence see Flinck (above, n. 6) 6; the passages are: *Agam.* 43 (a close parallel), 656, 972, 973; *Oedip.* 1037; *Thyest.* 723; *Troad.* 50; cf. *Herc. Oet.* 991. Flinck's insistence that the expression is historically untrue need not detain the reader: although *reddere iugulum hostibus* might suggest the offering of a living throat to be cut by the enemy (rather than an act of suicide), the slight inaccuracy is mitigated by the need for a zeugma with *animam reddere*, cf. Helm (above, n. 2) 292, and above, p. 50.

²⁸Cf., e.g., *Agam.* 43–46 (a prediction by the ghost of Thyestes) and 897 ff., esp. 901–902 (prediction fulfilled); *Thyest.* 726–729. *Troad.* 50 (cf. *Agam.* 656) is instructive: although Vergil's account in the *Aeneid* is clearly the model, Seneca has deliberately shifted the location of the wound from Priam's side (*lateri*, *Aen.* 2.553) to his *iugulum*.

²⁹For demonstration see Herington (above, n. 2) 21–24.

³⁰*Ibid.* 21–22. For the three days, Herington notes 592 (Nero fixes next day for wedding); 646 ff., esp. 646–647, *festo/laetique die*, showing that it is the day of the wedding; and 690 ff., esp. 714–715 (*laeta nam postquam dies . . .*) and 743–744 (*amplexu novi/haerens mariti*), showing that it is the day after the wedding. Several scholars (e.g. Braginton [above, n. 13] 94, n. 4) wrongly assign only two days.

³¹She appears before, and speaks to, the audience only, and she does not become involved in the action at this point: she will intrude into the dramatic sequence only once, and that will be on the night after the wedding, in the single apparition to Poppaea.

this shade, in an interlude at the centre of the play, foretells *tristes rogos* as the outcome of the new marriage, recounts the Emperor's past crimes, and predicts his death.³² On the day after the wedding Poppaea reports to her nurse a vision of the night before (the night between day two, the day of the wedding, and day three), which suggests evil in the future. The text containing Poppaea's account of her dream is as follows (717-734):

..... nec diu placida frui
 quiete licuit. visa nam thalamos meos
 celebrare turba est maesta: resolutis comis
 matres Latinae flebiles planctus dabant; 720
 inter tubarum saepe terribilem sonum
 sparsam cruore coniugis genetrix mei
 vultu minaci saeva quatiebat facem.
 quam dum sequor coacta praesenti metu,
 diducta subito patuit ingenti mihi 725
 tellus hiatu; lata quo praeceps toros
 cerno iugales pariter et miror meos,
 in quis resedi fessa. venientem intuo
 comitante turba coniugem quondam meum
 natumque; properat petere complexus meos 730
 Crispinus, intermissa libare oscula:
 irrupit intra tecta cum trepidus mea
 enseque iugulo condidit saevum Nero.
 tandem . . .

731 Crispinus *Av.* pristinus *A* (-os *O*) || 732 irrupit *S e*
 irrupit *K* *Q* irrumpit *P C l n* | cum *A* tum *O rec.*

Poppaea has seen mourning women in her bedroom and, after following a threatening Agrippina, has fallen suddenly into the underworld and seen there her own wedding couch, her former husband Rufrius Crispinus, and their common son;³³ and Nero has rushed *intra tecta* and plunged an *ensem saevum* into an unspecified throat. It is to Poppaea's dream, the interpretation of which is crucial, that attention must now be directed.

Although the text is not obviously defective at the critical places, it is hard to discern, and harder to prove, what the poet wanted Poppaea to claim to see or anticipate in her vision. There are several reasons for this, not the least of them being a suspicion that the Latin, which is unclear and forced, might not say precisely what it was intended to imply; for

A similar situation is found in the *Thyestes*: the Fury and the ghost of Tantalus seem to infect the palace before the play begins, but Atreus summons the Furies only at 250.

³²593 ff., esp. 595-597; note esp. the future tense *vertet*. The *vindex manus* is that of Agrippina, *pace* Pease (above, n. 8) 393. That Agrippina's appearance is an interlude was well remarked by Herington (above, n. 2) 23.

³³The son (*PIR*¹ R 122) had the same name as his father (*PIR*¹ R 121). For the son's fate see Suet. *Nero* 35.5, and esp. below, n. 58.

example, the poet seems often to have inserted short words into a line merely because of the demands of metre.³⁴ And the apparent symmetry of Poppaea's dream with the recurring dream of Octavia distracts the reader from the vision's intended relationship to Agrippina's speech.³⁵

Because the word *iugulo* in 733 is not accompanied by a possessive adjective, it is unclear whose violent death is represented; it must be that of either Nero or Crispinus, and textual emendation which would make Poppaea herself a candidate is unnecessary and unconvincing.³⁶ The question is crucial: if the throat is Nero's, then the play contains an allusion to Nero's death by suicide and so strengthens the case for composition after Seneca's death. The problem has of course led to a great mass of critical discussion: proponents of Senecan authorship generally insist that the throat of Crispinus is intended, while opponents of the play's authenticity hold that the throat is Nero's.³⁷

A superficial reading of Poppaea's account suggests that the throat represented is that of Crispinus; for supposing that the Crispinus who embraces the Empress is her former husband rather than her son (and this does seem to be the intent of the text), the sequence of events appears to make better sense if Nero plunges the sword into Crispinus' throat: Nero would murder his rival after catching him in the act of kissing Poppaea and enjoying long-forbidden love.³⁸ Such an interpretation of the text might seem to be suggested by a supposed parallelism of scenes on the day before and the day after the wedding: just as Octavia, the first wife, has reported to her nurse a recurring dream in which Britannicus, held in her arms, is murdered by Nero's sword, so Poppaea, the *second* wife, should (it is thought) tell *her* nurse of a dream in which Crispinus, held in *her* arms, is murdered by Nero.³⁹

Yet the obvious solution need not be the correct one, and this interesting dialogue between Poppaea and her nurse repays closer study, especi-

³⁴Cf. Helm (above, n. 2) 315-317 and Herington (above, n. 2) 26-27. Should any weight be attached, then, to the epithet *saevum* (733)? Or did the poet attempt to distinguish different persons by using *quondam* with *coniugem* in 729 but, in 739 and 742, no qualification with a form of the noun *coniunx*? Cf. below, n. 44.

³⁵Cf. below, p. 60.

³⁶Cf. 739, *quem cruorem coniugis*. S. P. Thomas (above, n. 6) 79-80, has wrongly suggested that Poppaea's own throat is meant; so too T. H. Sluiter, *Octavia Fabula Praetexta* (Leiden 1949), commenting on 733.

³⁷A convenient history of the question is given by F. Giancotti, *L'Octavia attribuita a Seneca* (Turin 1954) 28-46. Flinck (above, n. 6) 7, comments that the obscure words of a sleepy character (Poppaea) cannot be considered reliable; this conclusion merely avoids a key issue, and is also completely misguided.

³⁸Thus, e.g., G. Nordmeyer, "De Octaviae Fabula," *JKPh* supp. vol. 19 (1893) 267-268; H. Bardon, "Notes sur la littérature impériale," *Latomus* 3 (1939) 257; Giancotti (above, n. 37) 44-45.

³⁹So, e.g., F. L. Lucas, "The *Octavia*," *CR* 35 (1921) 92.

ally if it is considered not *in vacuo* but in light of the rest of the play and specifically of the parallels of structure already noted. Indeed, the supposition that the poet intended Octavia and Poppaea to have such similar dreams is based largely on the mistaken belief that Nero (rather than Octavia) is the central character of the play, and that Octavia and Poppaea are mere antagonistic forces placed one on each side of him.⁴⁰ But this view, which makes Octavia a secondary figure in the drama, is wrong, and there is *a priori* very little reason to look for extensive affinity in these dreams which in fact have few similarities.⁴¹ The hypothesis that Poppaea's dream should have the same pattern as the recurring dream of Octavia has obfuscated both the meaning of Poppaea's dream and the more intricate structural plan which the author followed.

There is a definite link between the dream of Poppaea and the predictions made by the ghost of Agrippina. The nexus has in a very few earlier studies been suggested,⁴² but because it has never been adequately demonstrated the obvious interpretation of the dream has continued to find willing supporters. In fact the conclusion that the unidentified throat is that of Crispinus is wrong; the throat is Nero's, as both the symmetrical structure of the play and a close reading of the text show.

It will be recalled that during the night *before* the wedding the ghost of Agrippina appears to the audience and predicts two things, first that the marriage of Poppaea and Nero will end unhappily in *tristes rogos*, and second, that Nero will die a violent death. During the night *after* the wedding (the second of the two nights encompassed by the drama), Poppaea has her dream. Although there are several details and suggestions in this dream, the substantial dangers foreboded are two, as is shown by the two summarizing questions which the Empress directs to the nurse: she fears threats from the underworld against herself, and she is alarmed by the *cruorem coniugis* (738-739). Poppaea's concern for her own well-being is clearly related to fears about her marriage: not only had mourning women seemed to fill her chamber, but she found her own bridal couch in the underworld (725-728). The nurse, attempting to allay her mistress' fear, explains the abode in the lower world (*inferum sedes*) as promising a stable marriage-bed in an unending home (*toros stabiles . . . aeternae domus*), and then interprets the plunging of the sword into the unspecified throat as signifying that Nero will not wage wars (750-753).

A threatening Agrippina has been responsible for Poppaea's imaginary descent to the underworld, and Poppaea's description of Agrippina fits

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹It should be noted that Octavia's repeated dream is not shown to occur within the period of time encompassed by the drama.

⁴²Cf., e.g., Braginton (above, n. 13) 96 and Helm (above, n. 2) 296.

precisely the apparition of the first night;⁴³ also, the Empress' first question and the nurse's answer relate to the first of the two predictions made by Agrippina's ghost. In view of this and of the poet's attention to structural balance, one naturally assumes that the second cause of alarm should probably be connected to the second of Agrippina's prophecies; that is, the driving of a sword into a throat should relate to the prediction that Nero will die in this way.⁴⁴

What then of the alternative reading of this passage, that Nero, finding his wife and her former husband kissing, kills his rival? The answer is that this aspect of Poppaea's report has been misread: nowhere does she explicitly say that Nero "sees" or "catches" Crispinus kissing her. In fact the supposition that Crispinus and Nero meet or confront each other is not necessitated or even supported by the text; this interpretation results from a misunderstanding of the poet's use of the convention of the *katabasis*. Studies of Poppaea's vision have long been based on the unquestioned premise that Nero's entry is an entry into the underworld which already holds Poppaea and Crispinus; that is, it has been assumed that the description of Nero and his action is part of the portrayal of the visit to the lower regions.⁴⁵ Undoubtedly the presumed similarity between the dreams of Octavia and Poppaea was one factor which gave rise to this belief, and the traditional punctuation of the text was probably another contributory factor.

It is time that the report of Poppaea's dream was studied anew, with especial attention to the tradition of the *katabasis* and the elucidation offered by the nurse. For far from being an erratic jumble of explanations, the nurse's reply is surely (as one might expect from this poet) a carefully constructed speech which picks up all the major points raised by Poppaea. Indeed, the conclusion that the throat is Nero's is supported by the sequence of events, provided the poet's intent is understood.

The tradition of the *katabasis* has obviously influenced the author of the *Octavia* in his representation of Poppaea's imaginary descent. Plunging

⁴³The menacing apparition at 593 ff. has come from Tartarus and carries a torch in her bloody hand; Poppaea describes Agrippina as having a threatening countenance and brandishing a blood-spattered torch, 722-723.

⁴⁴In evaluating the following discussion, the reader should note that 722 is ambiguous. The clear identification of Agrippina seems to demand that *coniugis genetrix mei* be taken as a unit, leaving the indefinite *sparsam cruore* to describe *facem*. But the word order tempts us to read *sparsam cruore coniugis*, so that we would then have an explicit antecedent for *cruorem coniugis* (*vidi*) in 739: such an antecedent is only implied in 733, where Poppaea does not actually see blood. The poet might have intended *sparsam cruore coniugis*, leaving us to deduce whose *genetrix* was seen from the reference to *cruor coniugis* and its relationship to 593-595.

⁴⁵So, e.g., Helm (above, n. 2) 297.

into the lower regions, she sees there her own bridal couch, whereon she settles.⁴⁶ She also sees there Crispinus and their common son, approaching *comitante turba*. It is commonly thought that Poppaea is here represented as finding in the underworld people who have predeceased her and who now come forward to welcome her.⁴⁷ According to this interpretation, the poet has distorted historical sequence: since Crispinus in reality died only after the Empress, a portrayal of Poppaea arriving in the underworld after he is already there is (it is claimed) inaccurate.⁴⁸

Yet the text does not say that her former husband and the attendant throng are already in the underworld when the Empress arrives, and other katabaseis adduced to show this are not persuasive. For example, Odysseus deliberately employs the rites of necromancy and thereby brings Elpenor, Anticleia and Teiresias out of the nether world. Nor is Aeneas approached spontaneously in the underworld by Palinurus, Dido and Anchises: rather, he himself must journey through the underworld, there to accost each of them in turn. The spontaneous coming of Crispinus is more compatible with his arrival from life on earth, and there is nothing improbable in the interpretation that Poppaea, settled upon her couch before he and the others arrive, sees them following from the upper world. Indeed, that the *turba* is made up of persons who have just now died is surely confirmed by a parallel passage in Seneca's *Hercules Furens*, which describes Hercules' journey to capture Cerberus; there the chorus describes the route to the lower world as being *frequens magna comitante turba*: people of all ages make up the throng continuously moving towards Cocytus' stream.⁴⁹ Arriving in the underworld after his former wife, Crispinus hastens to embrace her.⁵⁰

Both Poppaea and Crispinus are, moreover, represented as dead when they encounter each other. Poppaea is not a mere visitor, like Odysseus and Aeneas, but a new and permanent resident. For rather than seeing the *cubilia* of others she sees and makes use of her own *toros . . . iugales*; Agrippina's ghost, in predicting that Poppaea's marriage to Nero would

⁴⁶726–728. Literary parallels at Sen. *Oedip.* 582 ff. and *Herc. Fur.* 662 ff., and Verg. *Aen.* 6.255 ff. At *Aen.* 6.274 Aeneas sees the *cubilia* of the *ultrices Curae* and of *Luctus*.

⁴⁷So, e.g., Helm (above, n. 2) 296–297, suggesting the following parallels: Odysseus meets Elpenor, Anticleia, and Teiresias *inter alios* (Homer, *Od.* 11.36 ff.); Aeneas meets Palinurus, Dido, and Anchises (Verg. *Aen.* 6.337 ff.); Claudius' victims come to him (Sen. *Ludus* 13).

⁴⁸So, e.g., Helm (above, n. 2) 329, and P. Maas, *Kleine Schriften* (Munich 1973) 606; cf. Tac. *Ann.* 16.6 (death of Poppaea in 65) and 16.17 (death of Crispinus in 66). The precise time of Poppaea's death is unknown, although cf. R. S. Rogers, *TAPA* 86 (1955) 192, n. 7.

⁴⁹*Herc. Fur.* 830–874, esp. 837; cf. Verg. *Aen.* 6.305 and 318.

⁵⁰The reading *Crispinus* in 731 is a generally accepted conjecture of Avantius for the unmetrical ms reading *pristinus*, cf. Giardina's edition *ad loc.*

end unfortunately, had implied by the term *tristes rogos* that death would attend that reverse. Moreover, only if the Empress believes herself dead in the dream can the actions depicted occur: the living and the dead cannot embrace each other, as the vain attempts of Odysseus and Aeneas (cf. Homer, *Od.* 11.204–208 and Verg. *Aen.* 6.700–702) clearly show; if one of the two is portrayed dead, then both must be.

The next event narrated by Poppaea is Nero's hurried entrance *intra tecta . . . mea* and the driving of a sword into the throat. The hypothesis that Nero should kill Crispinus after catching the latter kissing Poppaea, based as it is upon the supposition that Poppaea sees Nero entering the underworld, is fraught with problems. Why should any author, wishing to portray Nero punishing a rival lover of the Empress, have chosen Crispinus as that lover? Long before the dramatic date Poppaea had given up Crispinus for M. Salvius Otho, and the historical tradition is aware of no lingering love of the Empress for her first husband;⁵¹ yet Otho is not mentioned in the dream, or anywhere else in the play. Another disturbing factor is the symbolic interpretation given to Nero's action by Poppaea's nurse (752–753). Her understanding of the incident is odd in any event in that she interprets an act of violence as an omen of peace. Her explanation is absurd if she understands that Nero has plunged a dagger into and murdered Crispinus, but it is less forced if she believes that he has plunged the weapon into his own body, turning it inward and thereby sheathing it.⁵² Conversely, it is difficult to understand why Nero, seeing his wife and Crispinus in an embrace, would commit suicide; and why should he commit suicide only after he has entered the underworld?

The solution to the problems of this passage, one which has thus far eluded scholars, is that the poet does *not* portray Nero as entering the underworld to which Poppaea and Crispinus have already gone. Rather, the representation of Poppaea's katabasis ends with the reunion of the two former lovers. When Nero appears he comes not into the underworld but *intra tecta . . . mea* (to use Poppaea's own words). Poppaea had mentioned finding her couch in the underworld, but not a chamber or house, and there is no justification for the traditional, and seemingly universal, belief that *tecta* is to be equated with "underworld." Just as the throng of mourning matrons is seen to fill Poppaea's *thalamos*, just as Agrippina's

⁵¹Of Poppaea's relations with Crispinus, Otho, and Nero, two distinct traditions are extant. One version (preserved by Suet. *Otho* 3, Plut. *Galba* 19, Cass. Dio 61.11, and Tac. *Hist.* 1.13) is suspiciously reminiscent of details of Nero's affair with Acte, cf. *Ann.* 13.12.1. The other main account, found at *Ann.* 13.45–46, must surely represent deliberate alteration following reconsideration of the available evidence. For recent discussion see G. B. Townend, *Hermes* 89 (1961) 242–247.

⁵²Cf. Octavian's career as represented at 524–526.

ghost is thought to appear and lead Poppaea off for a vision of the underworld and harm to herself, so Nero suddenly appears *in the bedroom* and provides a glimpse of his own end: *trepidus*,⁵³ he plunges a sword into his own throat. The appearance of Nero is unrelated to the imaginary katabasis; it is a separate incident, not at all motivated by the embrace of Poppaea and Crispinus. There are then four major incidents in the vision: the appearance of the women, the brandishing of the torch by Agrippina, Poppaea following Agrippina to the underworld, and (with an abrupt return to the bedroom) the suicide of Nero; the nurse, after some preliminary comments on the nature of dreams, deals with each part of the dream in turn.⁵⁴

This interpretation of the passage might seem better supported by the reading *tum* for *cum* in 732, with a full stop after *oscula* in the preceding line. Although the change would be easy, it would make the fourth and last event of the dream quite unconnected with what goes before; since the poet has clearly linked the first three sections,⁵⁵ it would be stylistically weak to make verses 732–733 a separate sentence. On the other hand, the reading *cum* is not grammatically implausible, and does not preclude the shift of scene postulated above. Verses 718–731, which culminate in the embrace of Poppaea and Crispinus, show a clear asyndetic movement. To this movement *cum*, with a colon at the end of the preceding line as given by Giardina or even with no mark of punctuation, links verses 732–733 but brings a strong contrast, stressing the simultaneous occurrence of Poppaea's lingering embrace with Crispinus in the underworld and Nero's irruption into Poppaea's chamber.⁵⁶ In fact a valid parallel for both grammar and simultaneous contrast might be provided by Seneca's *Agamemnon* (465 ff., esp. 470):⁵⁷

nox prima caelum sparserat stellis, iacent

cum subito luna conditur, stellae latent,
 in astra pontus tollitur, caelum perit.

Two nights are included in the action of the *Octavia*, and during the night after her wedding Poppaea in fact sees the very Agrippina who, the night before, appeared before the audience. She sees in her dream the

⁵³*Trepidus* (732) is more appropriate to the fear of a person about to die than to the passion of a murderer. Thus Britannicus in 120; cf. 690 (*trepida* of Poppaea). One might recall Suet. *Nero* 49.3: *trepidanter effatus*.

⁵⁴740–744 (causes) and 744–753 (detailed explanation).

⁵⁵Cf. the careful transitions at 720–721 and 724–726.

⁵⁶The reading *irrupit* (PC, against the generally accepted *irrupit*), if correct, would neither strengthen nor weaken the interpretation here advanced.

⁵⁷This parallel is easier because of continuity of subject matter and mere change of circumstance in a single context. But in a dream the change of context would be acceptable, and the word *tecta* is sufficient indicator that the scene has shifted back to Rome.

events promised by that Agrippina: the unhappy end of her marriage and the violent death of Nero. The threatening ghost of Agrippina has been at work twice, and thus Poppaea has had a foreboding of the fulfillment of the ghost's predictions. It cannot be emphasized too much that the apparition of the first night and the dream of the second night are inextricably bound both in form and in content, and neither can be properly understood without the other: the two are complementary.

Indeed, in introducing the ghost of Agrippina to predict both an unhappy end to the marriage and the death of Nero, the poet evidently involved himself in a difficulty for which Senecan precedent offered no ready solution. In the *Thyestes* and *Agamemnon* of Seneca, for example, events foretold in the ghost scenes are fulfilled in the dramatic action within the period of time encompassed by the play; but the incidents prophesied by the ghost in the *Octavia*, because they happened so long after the actions which form the main theme of the drama, could not be represented as occurring during the course of it. Moreover, an overly explicit portrayal would have destroyed the dramatic effect, evoking unwanted pity for Nero and Poppaea at the expense of sorrow felt for Octavia, the heroine. The solution adopted by the poet is admirable: with due attention to pattern and structure he introduced Poppaea's dream as a confirmation that all will one day be set right, that the ghost's words are not empty threats but prophecies which will indeed be fulfilled. By keeping the meaning of the dream vague and through some blurring of detail, the author has maintained the mood and integrity of the tragic situation of 62. At the same time, the katabasis of Poppaea's dream provided an opportunity for the introduction of Crispinus and his son into this play about Octavia and other victims of Nero; for they too were victims.

The proper interpretation of Poppaea's dream is crucial in the question of authenticity and in fact militates against Senecan authorship of the *Octavia*. The clear prediction of Nero's violent death and the suggestion that it will involve a self-inflicted wound in the throat, the intimation that the death of Crispinus will occur after that of Poppaea and before that of Nero,⁵⁸ and the unequivocal promise that the marriage of Nero and his new wife will end badly and with Poppaea's death, all provide proof of non-Senecan authorship. Seneca could not have predicted the unique circumstances of Nero's last hours. Moreover, until the sudden death of Poppaea (after Seneca's death) Nero was completely captivated

⁵⁸Following the interpretation of Poppaea's dream advanced above (pp. 61 ff.). On the basis of my argument a new fact of history might also be inferred. The son of Poppaea and Crispinus died at a time not specified by any historian (cf. above, n. 33); Poppaea's dream suggests that the deaths of father and son occurred at about the same time (both as a result of Nero's reaction to the conspiracy?).

by her;⁵⁹ there were during Seneca's lifetime no hints either that the marriage would come to an unfortunate end with Poppaea's death or that Poppaea would die before Crispinus.⁶⁰

The *Octavia*, it may safely be concluded, was written after Nero's death in June, 68. The traditional ascription to Seneca must be disregarded. At the same time it is impossible to determine what length of time elapsed between Nero's death and the writing of the drama. Reliable evidence is lacking, and attempts to bring down the *terminus post quem* have proved unconvincing. It remains to examine two arguments erroneously thought to support a *terminus* even later than the death of Nero.⁶¹

A date of composition at least some years after Nero's death has been inferred from the play's departures from historical fact.⁶² This argument holds that a man writing immediately after the events described would not ignore strict historical accuracy, because there would be contemporaries of the events still living who would note and object; only after the lapse of a certain length of time could a poet deviate from actuality and give "poetic truth" rather than "historical truth."⁶³ This theory is not cogent. For it fails to recognize that the *Octavia* is a work of art rather than a history text. Artistically motivated adaptations of history will have been expected, and there is little reason to believe that the poet would have much cared about being taken to task for his departures from fact. Aeschylus felt free to alter history in the *Persae*, and his work was produced within a decade of its dramatic date.

Secondly, it has been argued that composition of the *Octavia* should be assigned specifically to the reign of Otho, since no other explanation than

⁵⁹Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 16.6.1. That Nero caused her death by kicking her (cf. Suet. *Nero* 35.2) is possible but by no means certain.

⁶⁰Corroboration is not provided by the statement at 753 that Nero *bella haud movebit, pace sed ferrum teget*. Although the nurse's imaginative interpretation might have been inspired by ceremonies attending the arrival of Tiridates at Rome in 66, numismatic evidence suggests that Nero closed the temple of Janus as early as 64 (cf. Suet. *Nero* 13.2, with P. A. Gallivan, *Historia* 23 [1974] 304-305): events before Seneca's death could therefore have prompted such an unusual sentiment.

⁶¹Apparent similarities (chiefly verbal) between the *Octavia* and various historical sources have too often been adduced as evidence for a later *terminus*. These parallels do not prove or suggest composition after the date already established (detailed examination and discussion in Carbone [above, n. 1] 67-86).

⁶²To a minor extent the poet did rewrite history; the main points of alteration are given by Helm (above, n. 2) 329 ff., with discussion in Carbone (above, n. 1) 90-99. I hope soon to publish a short article dealing with the poet's use of history and with the value of the *Octavia* as a document.

⁶³So (emphatically) Helm (above, n. 2) 329, 345, and 347, who believes that a few decades would suffice, and L. Vürtheim, *Octavia Praetexta* (Leiden 1909) 8-10, adducing, e.g., the play's representation of Poppaea and of the Fire of Rome.

prudence would account for the absence of any reference to Otho; support for such a date is thought to be found in the mood of the play's final choral comment.⁶⁴ But there is little reason to believe that the play's last words were inspired by the political and military chaos which followed Nero's death, and there is less reason to accept that this choral comment was written before peace and order were established by Vespasian. The fact that Otho does not appear and is nowhere named in the drama is simply explained on other grounds. Otho, who some time before 62 was already in Lusitania,⁶⁵ had nothing really to do with the events with which the tragedy is chiefly concerned; and his absence as former husband in the dream of Poppaea is acceptable once the meaning of that dream has been correctly understood. Equally important, all of the named characters of the drama were victims of Nero, either real or alleged, and other contemporaries who receive mention are, for the most part, introduced because they too were victims. There was no room in this work for Otho, because he outlived Nero.

To conclude. The *Octavia*, erroneously attributed to Seneca, was in fact written after the death of Nero in June, 68. Given the state of the evidence, that much and no more can safely be said of the play's *terminus post quem*.

UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO, LONDON/
FOUNTAIN VALLEY, CALIFORNIA

⁶⁴So V. Ciaffi, "Intorno all'autore dell'*Octavia*," *RivFC* 65 (1937) 264 and 257, n. 1.

⁶⁵Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 13.46.5 and the note of H. Furneaux *ad loc.*