THE DEATH OF OCTAVIA: TACITUS' *ANNALES* 14.60-64

AND THE *OCTAVIA* PRAETEXTA

by

CHRISTOPHER LEE WEBB

(Under the Direction of James Anderson)

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the hypothesis that the praetexta *Octavia* may have been a direct source of information and/or a dramatic influence upon Tacitus' *Annales 14,* 60-64. Both texts treat Nero's banishment and execution of his young wife and stepsister Claudia Octavia. By analyzing the plot elements and the dramatic and narrative techniques of these two works, this thesis explores points of comparison and contrast which provides plausible evidence that *Octavia* was known to Tacitus and was one of his many sources for the *Annales*.

INDEX WORDS: Tacitus, Roman Historiography, Roman Tragedy, Nero, Seneca

THE DEATH OF OCTAVIA: TACITUS' *ANNALES* 14.60-64 AND THE *OCTAVIA* PRAETEXTA

by

CHRISTOPHER LEE WEBB

B.A. University of Tennessee, 2001

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2005

THE DEATH OF OCTAVIA: TACITUS' *ANNALES* 14.60-64

AND THE *OCTAVIA* PRAETEXTA

by

CHRISTOPHER LEE WEBB

Major Professor: James Anderson

Committee: Richard LaFleur
Mario Erasmo

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2005

UXORI

ET

PARENTIBUS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

CHAPTER

1 INTRODUCTION ……1

2 TACITUS' SOURCES FOR *ANNALES* 14 AND HIS USE OF DRAMATIC ELEMENTS IN *ANNALES* 14.1-9 ……...7

3 *ANNALES* 14. 60-64: TACITUS' USE OF DRAMATIC ELEMENTS IN THE DEATH OF OCTAVIA ……..36

4 THE *OCTAVIA* PRAETEXTA ……...67

BIBLIOGRAPHY ……...97

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This thesis investigates the hypothesis that the praetexta *Octavia* may have been a direct source of information for and/or a dramatic influence upon Tacitus' *Annales 14.* 60-64. Both texts treat Nero's banishment and execution of his young wife and stepsister Claudia Octavia. By analyzing the plot elements and the dramatic and narrative techniques of these two works, I shall explore points of comparison and contrast which may provide plausible evidence that *Octavia* was known to Tacitus and might have been one of his sources.

The scholarly bibliography on both the praetexta *Octavia* and Tacitus' *Annales* is substantial. Important scholarship to appear of late on *Octavia* and Roman tragedy includes Rolando Ferri's Octavia. A Play Attributed to Seneca (Cambridge, 2003). Also important are recent articles by P. Kragelund,[1] T.D. Barnes,[2] C.J. Herrington,[3] and Rolando Ferri.[4] Of use on Roman tragedy will be A.J. Boyle's Tragic Seneca (London 1997), John Fitch's Seneca: Tragedies (Cambridge, 2002), and Mario Erasmo's Roman Tragedy: Theatre to Theatricality (Austin 2004). From the vast scholarly bibliography on Tacitus, Ronald Syme's Tacitus (Oxford 1958) is essential; B. Walker's The Annals of

[1] P. Kragelund, "The Prefect's Dilemma and the Date of the Octavia," *CQ* n.s. 38 (1998) 492-508.

[2] T.D. Barnes, "The Date of the Octavia," *MH* 39 (1982) 215-217.

[3] C.J. Herrington, "Octavia Praetexta: A survey," *C.Q.* n.s. II (1961) 18-30.

[4] Rolando Ferri, "Octavia's Heroines. Tac. *Ann*. 14.63-4 and the *Praetexta Octavia*," *HSCPh* (1998), 339-56.

Tacitus (Manchester, 1952) is an assessment of Tacitus from a literary perspective; E.C. Woodcock's Tacitus: Annales XIV (London, 1992) provides the text of *Annales* 14 plus a helpful introduction and notes. A good overview of the Neronian principate is Vasily Rudich's Political Dissidence Under Nero: The Price of Dissimulation (London, 1993), which also includes a useful bibliography of Tacitean scholarship. Edward Champlin's recent book Nero (Cambridge, MA, 2003) provides a more radical view of his actions and motives.

Chapter 2 of the thesis discusses Tacitus' sources for *Annales* 14, and attempts to clear the ground for the possibility that *Octavia* was one of his sources. It is generally agreed that the *praetexta* was written sometime between A.D. 64 and the reign of Domitian (A.D. 81-96).[5] Thus, there exists no chronological impediment to the possibility of its use as a source by Tacitus, since his *Annales* 2 is known to have been written between A.D. 115 and 117,[6] and it is safe to assume that the remainder of the work was written at more or less the same time or shortly thereafter. Tacitus used a multitude of sources to construct his *Annales*. Pliny the Younger gives evidence (*Ep.* 6.16; 6.20) that Tacitus garnered material firsthand when possible. Tacitus himself credits the *Acta Senatus* and the *Acta Urbis* as sources (*Ann.* 5.4; 15.74). He also mentions Roman authors such as Cluvius Rufus and Fabius Rusticus (*Ann.* 14.2) and, indeed, C. Plinius Secundus himself as sources of information. In addition, numerous pamphlets, biographies and monographs were in circulation which could have provided source

[5] Herrington, "*Octavia* Praetexta," and Ferri, *Octavia: A Play Attributed to Seneca* (Cambridge, 2003).

[6] E.C. Woodcock, *Tacitus: Annals XIV* (Bristol Classical Press, 2001), p.4.

material for Tacitus.[7] I shall investigate whether it stands to reason to include *Octavia* in this group of possible sources.

However, the dramatic elements in *Annales* 14, especially in Tacitus' portrayal of Agrippina, Poppaea, and Octavia, suggest that Tacitus invented these elements himself, and, in addition, possibly adapted elements from other authors. B. Walker has noted that, despite Agrippina's odious character, Tacitus has injected her murder-scene with such "horror and pathos" that the reader must feel both sympathy for the victim and revulsion at the crime.[8] *Octavia*, too, includes the murder of Agrippina, and is similar on many points with Tacitus' version, as for example the failed attempt at murder by shipwreck, and Agrippina's final words. Comparisons aside, however, it is important to discuss how Tacitus employs dramatic elements at the beginning of *Annales* 14 in order to show how he continues to do so when he narrates the murder of Octavia at the end of the same book. In fact, this thesis argues that Tacitus creates a ring composition by beginning and ending *Annales* 14 with these two gruesome murders. He establishes many ironic parallels between the two episodes, and throughout depicts Poppaea as the dominant force behind the deaths of Agrippina and Octavia. Indeed, this thesis will show the care with which Tacitus gave a structural and thematic unity to *Annales* 14.

Chapter 3 focuses on Tacitus' treatment of the life and death of Octavia (*Annales* 14, 60-64). Regarding the material from a historiographical perspective, I examine what facts Tacitus chooses to include, what chronology of events he provides, and what historical causes and effects he posits behind these facts and events. Next, some of

---

[7] Ibid., 10.

[8] B. Walker. *The Annals of Tacitus* (Manchester University Press, 1952), p.24.

Cicero's ideas on the writing of history, which were highly influential on the subsequent development of Roman historiography, are analyzed. Using Cicero's ideas as a springboard, the thesis examines the various literary, dramatic, and rhetorical tropes and devices Tacitus applies to his narrative of the deaths of Agrippina and Octavia, always with a view to his purpose or rationale for employing them.

At this point I shall be in a position to compare the praetexta *Octavia* with Tacitus' narrative, and draw conclusions as to whether *Octavia* seems to have exerted an influence upon Tacitus' work. For example, the mob riot made by the people of Rome and the destruction of Poppaea's images is portrayed in both works, (*Oct.* 780-845, *Ann.* 14.61). Also, the portrayal of the murder of Agrippina occurs in both works. Octavia's horror at being incriminated for a dishonorable crime is a detail of her personality depicted in both works, and in their fierce devotion to their mistress' honor there are similarities between the nurse in *Octavia* and the *ancilla* in Tacitus. I think similarities between the two works here argue for what Ferri[9] terms a "stemmatic" priority for the *Octavia* as a source for Tacitus. He advances this interpretation from the similarities of the "choral" onlookers found in both works (*Octavia*, 899ff., *Annales* 14.63-64). The implications of their connection suggest that Tacitus turned to a dramatic source, which itself is dependent on Greek drama, for technique and effect, rather than historical information.

Chapter 4 focuses on the praetexta *Octavia*. It examines briefly questions concerning the dating and authorship of *Octavia*. Concerning the authorship, it is now generally agreed, based on comparison of language and style between Seneca's attested

[9] Ferri, Octavia's Heroines, 1998.

works and *Octavia*, that the play was not written by Seneca. This conclusion, if accepted, renders the dating of *Octavia* much more problematical. First, if the play is not by Seneca, then the year of his suicide, A.D. 65, becomes irrelevant to dating the play. If this is agreed, then other evidence must be sought in order to date the *Octavia*. The scene in which Agrippina "prophesies" Nero's destruction is often adduced as proof that the play must be dated after Nero's fall in A.D. 68.[10] P. Kragelund argues for a date immediately after Nero's fall, within the reign of Galba.[11] T. D. Barnes also argues for dating the *Octavia* within the reign of Galba. R. Ferri believes that the author of *Octavia* was most likely not a witness of the events he portrays, and therefore was reliant upon written sources,[12] which would have been the Flavian writers Pliny, Cluvius, and Fabius. Thus, Ferri offers a date of composition somewhere in the middle of the Flavian period. If this dating is accepted, then questions of a common historical source for both the *Octavia* and Tacitus arise.

The remainder of Chapter 4 is a literary analysis of specific elements in the *Octavia*. It attempts to show—in an analysis of the similarities of plot structure, characters, and dramatic effects mentioned earlier — that the praetexta was one possible source for the dramatic elements which Tacitus introduced into the last chapters of *Annales* 14.

This thesis suggests that Tacitus utilized the praetexta *Octavia* as one of his sources in his account of Octavia's death. It endeavors to show that Tacitus turned to the

---

[10] Herrington, Octavia, pp.18-30.

[11] Kragelund. "The Prefect's Dilemma" pp.492-508.

[12] Ferri, *Octavia*, pp.9-17.

Octavia intentionally and particularly as a dramatic source, and made use of the dramatic effects he found there. By doing so, Tacitus achieves a dramatic unity in *Annales* 14 spanning from the paradoxically sympathetic portrayal of Agrippina to the utterly pathetic one of Octavia.

CHAPTER 2

TACITUS' SOURCES FOR *ANNALES* 14

AND

HIS USE OF DRAMATIC ELEMENTS IN *ANNALES* 14.1-9

Of Tacitus' works, the *Annales* is his last, coming after the *Historiae*, which were written between A.D. 100 and 110. He is believed to have begun composition of the *Annales* after serving as proconsul of Asia in A.D. 112 or 113. A lack of biographical information, and only scant textual evidence, prevents a precise dating of the composition of the *Annales*. However, Book 2 was fairly certainly written between A.D. 115 and 117.[13] This assertion is based on *Ann*. 2.61.2, where Tacitus narrates Germanicus' visit to Egypt in A.D. 19. In contrast to the limits of Rome's empire in Germanicus' day, Tacitus states that now (i.e. at the time of his writing) Rome's *imperium* extends to the Indian Ocean (*quod nunc rubrum ad mare patescit)*. Tacitus seems to be echoing a claim made by the Emperor Trajan in A.D. 116, and recorded by the historian Cassius Dio (68.29.1), that he, Trajan, having advanced as far as the Persian Gulf, had marched further than Alexander the Great. The next year, A.D. 117, saw Trajan's conquests either lost or

[13] E. C. Woodcock, *Tacitus: Annals XIV* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2001), 4.

surrendered, hence, the composition of Book 2 can be confidently dated to this narrow window of time, between A.D. 115 and 117.[14]

More uncertainty exists as to when Tacitus completed, or ceased writing the *Annales*. It is generally believed that the date of his death, if it were known, would provide the answer. Arguments have been made, based on intertextual evidence with Juvenal and Suetonius, that Tacitus plausibly could have been writing as late as A.D. 120 or even 123.[15] Differences in style and vocabulary between the earlier and later books have suggested that there were long pauses in composition.[16] It seems most reasonable to conclude that Tacitus began writing the *Annales* no sooner than A.D. 116, and stopped sometime in the early 120's at the latest.

It has been said that of all the Roman historians, Tacitus was the most meticulous and thorough in the use of sources.[17] He is known to have gathered material firsthand, as two well-known letters from the younger Pliny to Tacitus reveal (*Ep*. 6.16; 6.20). In these epistles Pliny relates his own experiences as an eyewitness to the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in A.D. 79, and the subsequent destruction. Of course, the events of Nero's reign described in *Annales* 14 were not contemporary to Tacitus' own lifetime. Still, having been born near the beginning of Nero' reign and engaged in public life by the time of Vespasian's rule, Tacitus ostensibly had access to men who had been active in public

---

[14] Ronald Syme, *Tacitus*, vol. 2 (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 470-71.

[15] Ibid., 473.

[16] Woodcock, *Tacitus*, 4.

[17] Ibid., 9.

life perhaps as far back as the days of Tiberius Caesar.[18] Hence, during composition of the *Annales*, it would have been possible for Tacitus to obtain information from those who survived the last years of Nero,[19] and in fact, he relates information based on testimony of this kind, in the earlier books of the *Annales*, for instance at 3.16.1, where he describes the trial of Cn. Piso, and at 4.10.1, in discussing the idle talk surrounding the death of Drusus.

There are examples of firsthand testimony in the Neronian books at several points. At *Annales* 15.73.3, Tacitus attests to the reality of the Pisonian conspiracy by referring to oral reports of living persons. Concerning the memory of the orator Corvinus, which is brought up incidentally at 13.34.1, Tacitus writes that *pauci iam senum meminerant* (a few of the old men now remember it). Describing the death of Plautus at 14.59, Tacitus states that *sunt qui alios a socero nuntios venisse ferant* (there are those who report that other messengers had come from his father-in-law). In a vaguer allusion, Tacitus refers to *fama*, contrasting it with *auctores*, although on the matter under discussion—whether Nero or Agrippina initiated the purported incestuous relations—Tacitus states that *fama* agrees with most of his written sources (14.2.4). This allusion to *fama* proves not only that such popular belief concerning Nero was still current in Tacitus' day, but also that Tacitus was aware of it and not averse to mentioning that fact. It is possible, if not likely, that phrases used by Tacitus such as *traditur*, *ferunt*, and

[18] Syme, *Tacitus*, 299.

[19] Ibid., 300; Ronald Martin, *Tacitus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 210-11.

memoriae proditur allude to stories circulating during his own lifetime,[20] though such phrases are common among Roman historians, and cannot imply too much about sources. Thus, even though we can never know the identities of such witnesses or the sources of *fama* and stories making the rounds, nor the extent to which Tacitus made use of their testimony, the conclusion may be drawn that he used considerable resources in addition to those he directly acknowledges in his writings.

As secondary sources, Tacitus consulted official documents such as the *acta senatus*, also called *acta patrum* (5.4.1) and *commentarii senatus* (15.74.3). These records of the proceedings of the senate were published first under Julius Caesar. In addition, the *acta populi*, also known as *acta publica*, *acta diurna urbis*, *diurna actorum scripta*, and *diurna populi Romani*, records of court proceedings described as being much like a modern newspaper,[21] were consulted by Tacitus. However, it is not to be supposed that, prior to the act of composition, Tacitus pored over such documents in the manner of a modern researcher.[22] Instead, the most likely use he made of these documents was to corroborate and supplement his primary sources, or else, where these were lacking, and this was rare, to turn to them directly.[23]

Commentarii principum were private journals of the emperors, handed down to successors. Their value as a historical source was limited according to how accessible the

---

[20]Henry Furneaux, ed., *The Annals of Tacitus* (London, Oxford University Press), 20.

[21] Ibid., 19.

[22] Martin, *Tacitus*, 211.

[23] Ibid.; Martin notes that the brief narrative of A.D. 57 (*Ann*. 13.31-3) is an instance of Tacitus turning to the *acta senatus* as his primary source.

presiding *princeps* chose to make them.[24] At *Annales* 13.43.4, describing the trial of Publius Suillius, Tacitus states that Nero nullified Suillius' defense by knowledge he had garnered *ex commentariis patris*, from his father Claudius' papers. It is thought that Suetonius, *magister epistolarum* to Hadrian, may have had access to these *commentarii*, but this is uncertain. Whether or not Tacitus made use of them is no more than a possibility, since he never makes mention of them.

However, Tacitus did make use of private memoirs written by prominent members of the imperial family and the aristocracy. At *Annales* 15.16.1, Tacitus makes a specific reference to the writings of Corbulo, and the conclusion may be drawn that Tacitus relied heavily on these writings for his account of affairs in the East. At 4.53.3, Tacitus states that he obtained a detail concerning the elder Agrippina from her daughter's memoirs:

> Id ego, a sciptoribus annalium non traditum, repperi in commentariis Agrippinae filiae, quae Neronis principis mater vitam suam et casus suorum posteris memoravit.
>
> This incident, not noticed by the professed historians, I found in the memoirs of her daughter Agrippina (mother of the emperor Nero), who recorded for the after-world her life and the vicissitudes of her house.[25]

Tacitus never makes explicit mention of Agrippina's memoirs again, so it is impossible to say to what extent they may have informed his *Annales*. Still, one wonders to what extent they may have supplied Tacitus with, if not direct information, at least

---

[24] Furneaux, *Tacitus*, 19.

[25] Tac. *Ann.* Text and translation by John Jackson taken from *Tacitus: The Histories In Four Volumes*, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937). All subsequent quotes and translations are from these volumes.

corroborative testimony. For example, at *Annales* 13.21 Tacitus narrates the episode in which Agrippina is confronted by Burrus concerning the accusation that she was inciting Rubellius Plautus to revolution. Her vehement denial of the charge is recorded by Tacitus in direct speech. It is arguably plausible, though of course not provable, that Tacitus' source for such a detailed speech, one which deeply moved its auditors, might have been Agrippina's own memoirs. From the manner in which Tacitus frames his reference to Agippina's memoirs, it is clear that he did not limit himself to the writings of the historians for details. Indeed, his resources were many in number and varied in genre.

Such variety of source material may be seen at *Annales* 14.48.1, where Tacitus mentions that the praetor Antistius was accused of treason for composing *probrosa carmina* (abusive verses) against Nero. Tacitus records that a pointed debate ensued in the senate concerning the extent of Antistius' punishment, execution or exile. Thrasea Paetus championed exile, though holding Antistius in low esteem. The senate followed his lead, and even Nero complied. This implies that even an emperor as quick to carry out execution as Nero realized the futility of putting to death such authors. Again, at 14.50.1, Tacitus tells of one Fabricius Veiento, who was charged with composing *multa probrosa* (many scandalous things) against the senate and priests and disguising the nature of his writings by passing them off as his will. In addition, he was charged with selling imperial promotions, which prompted Nero to take action in the case. Veiento was convicted, not executed but exiled, and his books ordered to be burned. This notoriety, according to Tacitus, resulted in a great demand for his writings. This obviously meant that some sort of network existed whereby such writings could be published and disseminated. Hence,

this type of literature, hostile to the emperor, was accessible in some quantity, despite attempts to suppress it. Such literature may have provided material for Suetonius, although he also had access to Imperial documents and letters.[26] The fact that Tacitus makes mention of such writings means that he was aware of their existence, and that, despite his apparent judicious selection of sources, and declared lack of personal indignation or ambition in writing history (*Ann*. 1.1: *sine ira et studio*), his narrative may have been influenced by them.

Biographies also might have provided Tacitus with information, especially those that were records of opposition to the emperors. At *Annales* 16.25-26, Tacitus relates the deliberations of Thrasea Paetus and his associates concerning whether he should enter the senate-house or not, and defend himself against the threat of execution. The fullness of the account, and the mention of the offer by Junius Rusticus (the same Rusticus that later wrote a biography of Thrasea for which he was condemned under Domitian[27]) to intervene on Thrasea's behalf, suggest that Tacitus was using this very biography as his source.[28]

As did most Roman historians, Tacitus turned to earlier writers of history for the bulk of his information. With respect to the reign of Nero, the literary tradition that Tacitus was heir to seems to have been firmly established and univocal. A comparison of the narrative of Tacitus with that of Dio for this period attests to this, since they are, in

---

[26] Furneaux, *Tacitus*, 20.

[27] Tac. *Agr*. 2.

[28] Syme, *Tacitus*, 298.

fact, quite similar. It has been argued that Tacitus and Dio drew independently upon a common source, despite the fact that their portrayals of Seneca are quite different, Dio's being more hostile.[29] However, this view is unable to identify the supposed common source, and does not consider the possibility that Tacitus might have been a source for Dio. The fact that two historians retell the same historical event does not necessarily prove that the later writer has read the earlier, nor does the fact that a historian gives a different version of an incident prove that he has not read his predecessors. Dio claims to have read nearly all previous Roman historians (*Hist*.53.19.6), and his lengthy preparation for writing further suggests that he probably read Tacitus.[30] Further, it is not certain that either Tacitus or Dio used merely one primary source for any given period in their histories. In the Neronian books, Tacitus often refers anonymously to his written sources with phrases like *tradunt plerique eorum temporum auctores* (13.17.2), *sunt qui tradiderint, sunt qui abnuant* (14.9.1), and *ut plerique tradidere* (15.54.3).

However, Tacitus does give the names of three writers whom he used as sources in narrating the reign of Nero. At *Annales* 13.20 Tacitus gives explicit evidence that he has used as sources the writings of Fabius Rusticus, C. Plinius Secundus (the elder Pliny), and M. Cluvius Rufus. It is worth examining these authors in some detail for several reasons; first, because they represent that generation of writers whom Tacitus seems to have relied upon the most, second, in order to understand their relation and attitude toward Nero, and hence the extent to which they may have influenced Tacitus' position,

---

[29] Martin, *Tacitus*, 207.

[30] Fergus Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 34.

and, third, because of the relevance of these writers to the dating, authorship, and contents of the praetexta *Octavia* and its relation to *Annales* 14.

Of these three historians, Cluvius Rufus has been described as the most interesting, owing not only to the fact that he was cited by ancient historians as diverse as Tacitus, Dio, Plutarch, and most likely Josephus, but also because the nature of his writings has been a point of scholarly controversy.[31] The chronological extent of his history is uncertain. It is possible that it commenced with the death of Augustus and extended through the reign of Nero and into the civil war year of A.D. 69. Rufus seems to have been consul in either A.D. 39 or 40, and since he was not born of consular parentage and thus did not hold that office before the age of forty, his birth date should fall around the beginning of the first century A.D. He was among the inner circle of Nero's associates, serving as that emperor's herald on the occasion of his Hellenic tours, and later was appointed by Galba to be governor of the province of Hispania Citerior.[32] As to his accuracy as a historian, an anecdote recorded by the younger Pliny (*Ep*. 9.19.5) in which Cluvius speaks of the historian's obligation to the truth, may attest that his faithfulness to historical fact was esteemed:

> ita secum aliquando Cluvium locutum: "scis, Vergini, quae historiae fides debeatur; proinde si quid in historiis meis legis aliter ac velis rogo ignoscas." Ad hoc ille: "Tune ignoras, Cluvi, ideo me fecisse quod feci, ut esset liberum vobis scribere quae libuisset?"

[31] Edward Champlin, *Nero* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 42. The controversy concerns the tone of Cluvius' writings. They have been attacked as, "scabrous, unchronological *chronique scandeleuse* (G.B. Townend, "The Sources of the Greek in Suetonius," *Hermes* 88 [1960: 98-120], and defended as the production of a, "man of acute insight and eloquence" (D. Wardle, "Cluvius Rufus and Suetonius," *Hermes* 120 [1992]: 466-82). According to Champlin, Wardle's argument has won out.

[32] Syme, *Tacitus*, 293-94.

> This was the occasion when Cluvius said, "You know how a historian must be faithful to the facts, Verginius, so, if you find anything in my histories which is not as you like it, please forgive me." To this he [Verginius] replied, "Don't you realize, Cluvius, that I did what I did so that the rest of you should be at liberty to write as you please?"[33]

Cluvius' historical writings were most likely composed in the annalistic tradition, and there is little doubt that he was considered a major historian of the first century A.D. Further, what is known of his historical work bears no trace of any particular hostility toward Nero.[34]

Fabius Rusticus is cited by name three times (*Ann*.13.20; 14. 2; 15.61) by Tacitus as a source for the Neronian books. Fabius must have been writing after the time of Seneca's death (A.D. 65), since he describes that event. Further, it is tentatively asserted that he was composing before A.D. 84,[35] since in describing Britain he gives it a shape which was disproved by its circumnavigation under Agricola.[36] Tacitus' attitude toward him seems to be a mixture of admiration for his style and caution toward his content. In the *Agricola* (10.3), Tacitus describes him as *eloquentissimus auctor recentium*, and compares him with Livy. On the other hand, two of the three times Tacitus cites him in the *Annales*, he does so disparagingly. At 13.20, Tacitus doubts Fabius' report that Seneca saved Burrus from being implicated in the supposed revolution of Rubellius Plautus. Tacitus is suspicious that Fabius is partial to Seneca in his writings since it was

---

[33] Champlin, *Nero*, 43.

[34] Ibid., 43.

[35] Syme, *Tacitus*, 293.

[36] Tac., *Agr*. 10.3

owing to that man's influence that his own career flourished. At 14.2, Tacitus favors Cluvius and other writers over Fabius concerning the identity of the instigator of the alleged incestuous relationship between Nero and Agrippina. The last citing of Fabius (15.61) is in connection with the death of Seneca. This has led to the assumption that Fabius was an eyewitness to that event, and that he wrote, not a historical work, but in fact a biography or martyrology of the stoic philosopher.[37]

The elder Pliny has been nominated by many scholars as Tacitus' primary source for the Neronian books of the *Annales*. This theory of a "single source" is based on many assumptions. First of all, despite the fact that an ancient historian like Tacitus cites multiple sources, giving names of previous authoritative writers and identifying official documents, this citing of authorities is often not to be taken seriously. At best it is merely a rhetorical trope, at worst a deliberate deception. Instead, according to those who hold this view, the ancient historian followed closely a single source, diverging from it only slightly, and then more in style than in substance. This leads to a light regard for the historical precision of the ancient historian, and peculiarity of style, rhetorical force, and artistic merit may be dismissed as irrelevant. Starting from the assumption that Tacitus strictly followed Pliny as his primary source, and with this assumption reinforced by a high regard amongst some scholars for Pliny as a writer, it has been argued that Tacitus scarcely consulted other writers at all, so complete was his reliance upon Pliny. Further,

[37] Champlin, *Nero*, 42.

this view holds that it was from Pliny that Tacitus obtained what information he attributes in his *Annales* to Cluvius and Fabius.[38]

However, there are at least three strong reasons for not accepting that Pliny was Tacitus' single or primary source for the Neronian books of the *Annales*, with only very occasional use of supplemental material: first, Pliny's strong personal bias against Nero; second, Tacitus' obvious lack of blind faith in Pliny as an accurate writer of history; and third, the date of publication of Pliny's historical work, known as *A Fine Aufidi Bassi.* Pliny's encyclopedic *Naturalis Historia* is strewn with attacks against Nero, dubbing him no less than the enemy of mankind (*NH.* 7. 45). This hatred may have arisen from the frustrations Pliny experienced under Nero's rule. After serving in Germany from A.D. 46 through 58 on military duty, Pliny was not rewarded with a political appointment in Rome, and he lived in retirement until A.D. 70. Although at least part of that time was probably spent in Rome, there is nothing in his extant writings to indicate that he witnessed any of the episodes played out at Nero's court, or that he was intimate with any of the inner circle there.[39] Nor is there any indication that Pliny began composing his historical work during this period. Whatever the reason for Pliny's retirement, whether disillusionment with Neronian Rome or resentment because of lack of access to political power, the tone of his historical work can safely be assumed to be vehemently anti-Neronian.

---

[38] Syme, *Tacitus*, vol.1, 291.

[39] Champlin, *Nero*, 41.

It seems unlikely that Tacitus would have used as his virtually exclusive source a writer so obviously biased against the former emperor.Despite the capaciousness of Pliny's curiosity and exhaustiveness of his writings, he has been accused of many faults as a writer. He has been described as uncritical of his sources of information, a believer in superstition, obsessed with trivial detail, and susceptible to personal prejudice.[40] It seems likely that Pliny should be considered as one of the Flavian writers against whom Tacitus warns in his *Historiae* (*Hist*. 2.101.1):

> Scriptores temporum, qui potiente rerum Flavia domo monimenta belli huiusce composuerunt, curam pacis et amorem rei publicae, corruptas in adulationem causas, tradidere….
>
> The contemporary historians, who wrote their accounts of this war while the Flavian house occupied the throne, have indeed recorded their anxiety for peace and devotion to the State, falsifying motives in order to flatter…

It has been assumed that Pliny is the writer being criticized by Tacitus at *Ann*ales 13.31.1 for filling the pages of a history with dimensional details of public buildings erected by Nero.[41] However, this assumption has been attacked on the grounds that Pliny would hardly be one to praise Nero, even indirectly for his achievements in building.[42] Perhaps Pliny's fascination with engineering achievements briefly overcame his antagonism toward Nero. If so, perhaps only a writer of such high renown as Pliny would be singled out for censure by Tacitus, driven by his lofty regard for the writing of history.

---

[40] Syme, *Tacitus*, 292.

[41] Syme, *Tacitus*, 292; Martin, *Tacitus*, 209.

[42] Champlin, *Nero*, 280-81.

However, at *Annales* 15.53.3, Tacitus does cite Pliny by name for an anecdote that he declines to suppress, *occultare*, despite the fact that it seems *absurdum*. Is this to be regarded as a serious rebuke for marring the pages of a history with nonsense,[43] or merely a casual dismissal of a detail that hardly evinces a strong disapproval of Pliny?[44] Rather, this anecdote from Pliny, no matter its veracity, provided Tacitus with a relished opportunity to make one of his acidic yet probing psychological remarks on the human thirst for power: *nisi si cupido dominandi cunctis adfectibus flagrantior est* (unless the desire of holding power is more vehemently consuming than all the other emotions).

The date of the publication of Pliny's *A Fine Aufidi Bassi* has implications not only concerning this writer's role as a source for Tacitus' *Annales*, but also, as will be discussed later, what influence his *Historiae* may have had on the *praetexta* Octavia. Pliny's preface to the *Naturalis Historiae*, published in A.D. 77, indicates that his historical work had already been completed. Therefore, its date of composition can be placed somewhere in the years A.D. 70 –76. What is more, Pliny's historical work was published only after his death on 24 August A.D. 79. This fact suggests that Pliny may not have had access to the writings of Cluvius and Fabius.[45] If this is so, it disproves the notion that what information Tacitus attributes to Cluvius, he obtained secondhand through Pliny. *Annales* 13.20 certainly reads as though Tacitus is referring to Fabius, Pliny, and Cluvius as authors whom he has consulted independent of one another:

---

[43] Syme, *Tacitus*, 292; Martin, *Tacitus*, 209.

[44] Champlin, *Nero*, 41.

[45] Syme, *Tacitus*, 293.

> Fabius Rusticus auctor est, scriptos esse ad Caecinam Tuscum codicillos, mandata ei praetoriarum cohortium cura, sed ope Senecae dignationem Burro retentem: Plinius et Cluvius nihil dubitatum de fide praefecti referunt; sane Fabius inclinat ad laudes Senecae, cuius amicitia floruit.
>
> According to Fabius Rusticus, letters patent to Caecina Tuscus, investing him with the charge of the praetorian cohorts, were actually written, but by the intervention of Seneca the post was saved for Burrus. Pliny and Cluvius refer to no suspicion of the prefect's loyalty; and Fabius certainly tends to over praise Seneca, by whose friendship he flourished.

In addition, Tacitus' citation of Cluvius at *Annales* 14.2, with no mention of Pliny at all, patently shows that Cluvius' writings were an important source for Tacitus:

> Tradit Cluvius ardore retinendae Agrippinam potentiae eo usque provectam, ut medio diei…
>
> It is stated by Cluvius that Agrippina's ardour to keep her influence was carried so far that at midday….

and

> Fabius Rusticus non Agrippinae, sed, Neroni cupitum id memorat eiusdemque liberate astu disiectum. Sed quae Cluvius, eadem ceteri quoque auctores prodidere, et fama huc inclinat,…
>
> According to Fabius Rusticus, not Agrippina, but Nero, desired the union, the scheme being wrecked by the astuteness of the same freedwoman. The other authorities, however, give the same version as Cluvius, and to their side tradition leans…

Further, since Pliny's historical work was published a dozen years after the death of Nero, that work would have had little influence upon those who wrote on Nero in the interim, when the traditional, negative portrait of Nero became dominant.[46]

[46] Syme, *Tacitus*, 293.

Also at *Annales* 13.20, following the presentation of the conflicting reports handed down by Cluvius, Pliny, and Fabius, Tacitus gives what appears to be his methodology for evaluating and using his sources:

> Nos consensum auctorum secuturi, quae diversa prodiderint, sub nominibus ipsorum trademus.
>
> For myself, where the authorities are unanimous, I shall follow them: if their versions disagree, I shall record them under the names of their sponsors.

The passage at 14.2 seems to be an obvious place for this methodology to be applied. Tacitus again names Cluvius and Fabius as sources that he has consulted in preparing the narrative of the murder of Agrippina. First he cites Cluvius as his source for recording that Agrippina, driven by her desire to maintain her powerful position, began to offer herself incestuously to her son Nero. However, in the next sentence, he notes that, according to Fabius, it was Nero who first acted upon his desire for sexual relations with his mother. Tacitus also points out that both writers agree on the fact that the freedwoman Acte, driven on by the intervention of Seneca, disrupted the potential relations. Faced with conflicting accounts, Tacitus had to evaluate and choose which version to accept. He states that the other, or the rest of, the writers (*ceteri auctores*) agree with the account of Cluvius, as does the prevailing general opinion. Tacitus does not explicitly say that he rejects the story as Fabius has recorded it, although the implication is certainly there.[47] Still, merely by raising the dispute among his sources as to who was driven by incestuous desire, Agrippina or Nero, Tacitus subtly accuses both.

[47] Syme, *Tacitus*, p. 377; Syme also notes that Tacitus explicitly commits to neither version: "Still, Tacitus does not quite affirm the fact."

By presenting the material at *Annales* 14.2 in the manner in which he did, Tacitus seems to have declined to abide by the method he promised to follow at 13.20. Despite the fact that Tacitus has encountered diverging accounts, he has not named all of his sources according to their individual viewpoint, but merely referred to them as *ceteri auctores*.[48] Further, *ceteri auctores* implies that there were, in addition to Cluvius and Fabius, at least two and possibly more writers whom Tacitus has consulted. This fact contradicts the generally received notion, again based on the passage at 13.20, that Tacitus drew on only those three authors for information.[49] A further indication that more than three sources were utilized by Tacitus in *Annales* 14 can be adduced from what he says at 14. 9:

> Haec consensu produntur. Aspexeritne matrem exanimem Nero et formam corporis eius laudaverit, sunt qui tradiderint, sunt qui abnuant.
>
> So far the accounts concur. Whether Nero inspected the corpse of his mother and expressed approval of her figure is a statement which some affirm and some deny.

First of all, Tacitus here asserts that the murder scene of Agrippina he has just presented, including her famous defiant last words, "*ventrem feri*," is based on information that all previous writers have handed down in agreement. He does not say that Cluvius, Pliny, and Fabius all concur on this point. He is not specific at all about the identity or the number. It could be argued that Tacitus is simply doing what he stated at *Annales* 13.20, confirming that the authorities are in agreement and there is no need to name them

---

[48] Martin, *Tacitus*, 209.

[49] Ibid.

individually. However, in the next sentence Tacitus claims that some writers record that Nero gazed upon the corpse of his dead mother, and some writers did not. Here, Tacitus is not adhering to the pledge he made at 13.20. He has recorded that conflicting versions of the story have been handed down, but he has failed to ascribe any specific version to any writer by name.

Why, in *Annales* 14, has Tacitus seemingly gone back on the promise he made at 13.20 openly to name his sources when they give conflicting accounts? To claim that the Neronian books did not receive the polished revision Tacitus intended for them, in which he would have deleted specific references to sources, seems a ludicrous *argumentum ex silentio*, but no more so than the simple explanation that Tacitus arbitrarily changed his mind in mid-composition.[50] In addition, the passages at *Annales* 13.20 and 14.2 certainly eliminate the notion that Tacitus closely followed a single source throughout the Neronian books, giving little attention to variant sources and none at all to documentation.[51] The answer may well lie in the very composition of each book of the

[50] Martin, *Tacitus*, 263; Martin dismisses the former notion as implausible, but his offer of the latter (p. 209), is little improvement, although he is right in saying that the composition of the Neronian books hardly evinces that, "steady and conscientious employment of the primary material," which Syme (*Tacitus*, vol. 1, p. 286) attributes to Tacitus for the earlier books.

[51] Syme, *Tacitus*, vol. 1, 298-99; Syme goes on to cite *Ann*. 6.7.5 as a testimony to Tacitean, "authority of rank, weight, and maturity which pronounces a consular verdict upon men and affairs, peremptory and incorruptible." The passage Syme cites reads: *Neque sum ignarus a plerisque scriptoribus omissa multorum pericula et poenas, dum copia fatiscunt aut, quae ipsis nimia et maesta fuerant, ne pari taedio lecturos adficerent verentur: nobis pleraque digna cognitu obvenere, quamquam ab aliis incelebrata*; "Nor am I unaware that the perils and penalties of many are passed over by a number of historians; who either lose heart from the abundance of their materials or apprehend that a list which they themselves found long and depressing may produce equal disgust in their readers. For my own part, much has come my way that deserves a record, even though unchronicled by others." This passage also attests to the plurality of sources at Tacitus' disposal, and his willingness to use them.

Annales, which were carefully constructed to achieve a self-contained dramatic unity.[52] Thus, it is best to imagine that as Tacitus commenced the composition of *Annales* 14, he first began with the conception of the overall dramatic theme or mood he wished to convey. Next, as he was necessarily constrained to a certain degree by the annalistic framework and the historical material itself, he would sub-divide each book into sections that addressed events abroad, and events at Rome, the latter further subdivided to include affairs at and outside the court of the Emperor. Tacitus then would seek out source materials pertinent to each section.[53] As Tacitus composed *Annales* 14, he strove to depict Nero and his reign as having reached the utter depths of moral depravity, and to portray the senatorial class as reacting with the worst of servile submissiveness to the deeds of the Emperor. He attempts to elicit from his readers the proper indignation toward such moral bankruptcy and fawning complicity by narrating in a highly tragic manner the deaths of Nero's mother and young wife, followed in each instance by a grimly sardonic description of the Senate's unflinching acceptance. In doing so, he employs the structure of classic ring composition, beginning and ending the book with these atrocious murders: first the horrid and appalling murder of Agrippina, and last the intensely pathetic execution of Octavia. Given the highly emotional and scandalous nature of these two episodes, Tacitus likely found an abundance of material written about them. He was dealing here not with the detail of whether or not a praetorian prefect was

---

[52] B. Walker, *The Annals of Tacitus: A Study in Writing History* (Manchester: University Press, 1952), 37: "The construction of individual books, as all critics of Tacitus have recognized, shows a dramatic talent of a very high order"; Martin, *Tacitus*, 211: "The overall structure of each reign (and, within the reign, each Book of the *Annales*) is the result of a deliberate act of choice by Tacitus."

[53] This hypothesis generally follows that given by Martin, *Tacitus*, 211.

implicated in a revolutionary plot, as he was at *Annales* 13.20., but with the murders of the two most high-profile women in Rome, the two women closest to the Emperor, a mother and a wife. Thus, it is no wonder that Tacitus abandoned what appeared to be his methodology for handling his sources stated at 13.20. Concerning the murders of Agrippina and Octavia he discovered that he had a wealth of sources to draw on, more than was customary or even tasteful for an ancient historian to name. Indeed, his stock of sources most likely contained, as will be argued later, the praetexta *Octavia*.

The fact that *Annales* 14 begins with the murder of Agrippina must be understood in terms of the dramatic unity of the structure of that book as Tacitus envisioned it, and in terms of the rhetorical aims of the narrative, which are to persuade the reader of the despicable and lamentable condition of the Roman aristocracy and governance under Nero. *Annales* 14 should not be condemned due to unwarranted expectations of Tacitus as a historian, expectations that derive more from modern notions of historiography than ancient ones. The fact that Tacitus dwells more in *Annales* 14 upon the character analysis of a few major figures, and less upon Imperial policy, both foreign and domestic, is no cause for censure,[54] but an opportunity to understand his method of writing history.

---

[54] Syme, *Tacitus*, vol. 1, 375-76. While Syme acknowledges the importance of Agrippina as a political figure and as a subject of historical inquiry, he deems it wrongheaded of Tacitus to have begun *Annales* 14 with the narrative of her murder: "Agrippina retains due prominence in the narrative for a time—it was the most urgent task of Nero's ministers to block, circumvent, and subvert the authority of the Augusta. Tacitus traces the stages and devices in her demolition with skill and subtlety, as is proper—for power is the essential subject of political history. Agrippina was quickly reduced to impotence. Was it necessary, however, to recount at such length the epilogue, delayed for several years?....The murder of Agrippina, like the catastrophe of Valeria Messalina, seems to show a wilful neglect of historical proportion…The dramatic concentration of interest upon a few figures in the Neronian books (the Emperor and his successive victims, Agrippina, Seneca, Thrasea, and Corbulo) entails grievous disadvantages…The murder of Agrippina supplies the opening scene of Book XIV. Why did Nero decide to kill his mother precisely now—no sooner and not later?...This is rather late in the day." Ultimately, in order to explain the structure and content of the Neonian books, especially Book 14, Syme falls back on the argument that Tacitus died

Historical processes, conceived of in terms such as the economic, social, cultural and technological, which supposedly shape and move events, had not yet been invented. Instead, history to the ancients was above all *political* history, and historical change the result of the actions of individuals, not only those in power; sometimes events hinge upon minor figures as well.[55] Hence there arises the easy identification of history with drama, the predilection to write history replete with individual human characters[56] and dramatic elements.

Tacitus' narration of the murder of Agrippina, which occupies the first nine sections of *Annales* 14, exemplifies well his use of specifically dramatic elements. The opening sentence itself reveals Tacitus borrowing a device from Greek tragedy: the rapid

---

before properly revising his material: "The imperfections of the Neronian books are various in nature and origin—and the author, it may be, had not worked upon all parts with equal care and finish."

[55] Christian Meier, "Historical Answers to Historical Questions: The Origins of History in Ancient Greece," *Arethusa* 20 (1987): 41-57. In this article, Meier focuses primarily on Herodotus and the beginnings of ancient historiography. Still, he offers many interesting observations that apply to the overall Greek and Roman practice of historiography. First, it is crucial to distinguish between the modern conception of history, which interprets history as, "a great comprehensive process of change, which is so general a process and so much a part of all of us, as well as beyond the influence of the individual, that its subject can be understood as 'history itself,'" and the ancient conception as, "the history of actions and events, to which corresponds a contingent history, a sequence of events caused by many different subjects which met as chance would have it. Therefore it restricted its focus to individual participants or a small circle and its object was limited to factual ability and knowledge, never reaching the state where progress was perceived as a process of comprehensive change." Second, the writing of history was, "determined by the fact that sequences of political and military events were constructed on the basis of source material, which was however sometimes used only indirectly and could be padded out with *rhetorical embellishments* (italics mine). It was to this that the type of narration called history referred; this was its content. Many other things which influenced history could be included, such as the development of weapons, techniques of communication and reports on foreign peoples, but these were not given in the form of a history of culture but rather of a description of a state of affairs. Information was also given on economic factors when relevant. But the focus remained on the political aspects."

[56] Quintilian (*Inst*.10.1.101), matching Sallust and Livy with Thucydides and Herodotus, lists as Livy's greatest strengths as a historian exceptional narrative ability, outstanding speeches by his historical figures, and depiction of human emotion.

development of a conflict.[57] Although the desire to have his mother dead and out of the way had long smoldered in Nero, it is his inflamed passion for Poppaea which suddenly accelerates the event. Tacitus, after naming the year's consuls, skillfully, in the space of 27 words, lists the major characters of his narrative and presents the plot (*Ann*. 14.1):

> ….diu meditatum scelus non ultra Nero distulit, vestutate imperii coalita audacia et flagrantior in dies amore Poppaeae, quae sibi matrimonium et discidium Octaviae incolumi Agrippina haud sperans….
>
> Nero postponed no further the long contemplated crime: for a protracted term of empire had consolidated his boldness, and day by day he burned more hotly with love for Poppaea; who, hopeless of wedlock for herself and divorce for Octavia so long as Agrippina lived…

The speech which follows, given by Poppaea, is highly rhetorical and dramatic. Indeed, her character emerges as the catalyst of the action in the murders of both Agrippina and Octavia. Tacitus has already prepared the way for this role with his stark portrayal of Poppaea at *Ann*.13.45, but only in Book 14 does she emerge as the domineering force manipulating Nero and destroying her rivals.

As a matter of fact, the description of Poppaea at 13.45-6, which includes the story of how she graduated from being the wife of Otho to the mistress of Nero, again raises questions about Tacitus and his sources. In his earlier *Historiae*, Tacitus had given a different account of events concerning Nero, Poppaea, and Otho (*Hist*.1.13). There, Otho was brought in after the affair between Nero and Poppaea was well underway, and was married to Poppaea in order to conceal the relationship until Nero could get Octavia

[57] Walker, *Annals*, 44. Other devices from Greek tragedy of which Walker describes Tacitus as a "master" are, "the dramatic prologue, the heightening of tension towards the end of an 'act', sudden surprises and reversals of fortunes, hints of foreboding by supernatural and other means."

out of the way. Why has Tacitus changed not only the order of events, but the entire nature of the relationships involved? Further, why has he not, as he had promised at *Annales* 13.20, named the sources which attest to the different versions of the story? Explanations range from reluctance or embarrassment on Tacitus' part to refer to an earlier version in his own writings which he now believes to have been erroneous,[58] or else in the interim between completing the *Historiae* and composing the *Annales*, Tacitus has consulted a new source, such as Cluvius, which has corrected his earlier view,[59] an explanation which still does not account for his failure to name sources. An alternative explanation presents itself, based on Tacitus' dramatic use of the character of Poppaea in *Annales* 14. Her role there is so vital to the portrayal of the murders of Agrippina and Octavia, that Tacitus may have felt he had to draw her character as one more forceful, manipulative, and driven by power than the depiction of her in the *Historiae*. In the *Annales*, it is she who aggressively wins over Nero (*Ann*. 13.46.4), and she who delivers the powerful speeches which set off the chain of events that culminates in the deaths of Agrippina and Octavia (*Ann*.14.1.2; 14.62.2-4).

Following Poppaea's opening dramatic prologue, which allows the historian to move beyond the narrow realm of mere chronology and facts, and thus begin to comment on the psychology of his human subjects and the motivations of their actions, Tacitus moves to a digression concerning the alleged incest between Nero and Agrippina. First, however, Tacitus ends Poppaea's speech with a characterization of the onlookers at Nero's court, to whom he frequently refers anonymously (14.1.3). Tacitus employs this

[58] Martin, *Tacitus*, 209.

[59] Syme, *Tacitus*, 290.

technique often and it gives those surrounding the major players in the narrative something of the role of a tragic chorus commenting on the events as Tacitus presents them. This is an ingenious dramatic strategy which draws the reader closer to the narrative by subtly causing the reader to identify with the varied emotions expressed by these anonymous onlookers. In this instance the feeling expressed in many ways sums up the overall emotional effect Tacitus wishes to impress upon his readers: one of deserved indignation against a matron who is exerting her power beyond accepted bounds, mixed with latent pity that she should suffer such an atrocious death (*Ann*.14.1):

> Haec atque talia lacrimis et arte adulterae penetrantia nemo prohibebat, cupientibis cunctis infringi potentiam matris et credente nullo usque ad caedem eius duratura filii odia.
>
> To these and similar attacks, pressed home by tears and adulterous art, no opposition was offered: all men yearned for the breaking of the mother's power; none credited that the hatred of the son would go the full way to murder.

The digression on the alleged incest that follows, in which Tacitus discusses the differing versions of the story, noting the disagreement between his sources, never claims to be factual. Dramatically, however, it serves to relieve the tension created by the opening section, and it serves other purposes as well. A broader background for the developing crisis is provided. Seneca and the freedwoman Acte are brought into the story, adding to the *dramatis personae*. Their roles—the pandering Seneca and the courtesan Acte—and their fears that they might lose their own positions if knowledge of the incest should leak out, are portrayed ironically by Tacitus, since ultimately they only hasten their own demise by driving Nero on to the deed which will unleash his reckless will. Lastly, this digression allows Tacitus to make one final summing up (*Ann*.14.2),

plus a sweeping condemnation of the moral character of Agrippina, emphasizing the dogma that character is unchangeable, in tragedy and in Tacitus. Agrippina's flaw, overtly suggested by Tacitus, is her willingness to stoop to sexual depravity for the sake of power. But, henceforth, Agrippina will be a tragic figure, a victim to be pitied.

The following discussion by Nero and some unnamed advisors (*Ann*.14.3), on what means of execution to employ, borders on the grotesque; it is almost a parody of tragedy. The exasperation over the inability to hit upon any method above suspicion, owing to the example of Brittanicus, is accompanied by a cool detachment in Nero that reveals him as devoid of any feeling. To end this dilemma, Tacitus introduces the villainous Anicetus (14.3.3), who will be instrumental not only in the murder of Agrippina, but also later in the murder of Octavia. The unqualified villainy of Anicetus is worthy of any stage production, and is a perfect example of Tacitus' use of minor characters to bring dramatic fullness to his narrative. His "ingenious" proposal of the self-destroying ship is a paradoxical *deus ex machina* that results in a ludicrous failure.

Once the plan of the crime has been determined, the events of the narrative follow swiftly and vividly. The day of the murder and the night that follows are full of dramatic irony and sudden reversals of fortune. Nero greets his mother with feigned kindness (*Ann*.14.4), heightening the pathos of Agrippina and the depravity of Nero, and yet Tacitus, by merely suggesting that at their final departure Nero may have felt a tinge of regret, saves the character of Nero from lapsing into uni-dimensionality. The night is clear, the sea calm (*Ann*.14.5), in ironic contrast to the unfolding human action. It is as though the gods had provided such a night in order to expose the crime, but this is only a

Tacitean simile that emphasizes how utterly absent the divine is from Nero's world. Even by denying the expected divine involvement in a tragedy, Tacitus is pressing for dramatic effect. Later, in the narrative of Octavia, Tacitus will have occasion again to comment on the relation of the human to the divine.

The scene of the shipwreck itself (*Ann*.14.5) is a dramatic tour de force, with a great deal of ironic humor. All seems well as Acerronia congratulates her mistress on her return to favor with her son, when suddenly disaster ensues. The two attendants of Agrippina, Crepereius Gallus and Acerronia, are killed incidentally in the botched assassination attempt. Crepereius happened to be standing in the wrong spot at the wrong time, and literally never knew what hit him (*pressusque Crepereius et statim exanimatus est*). There follows the madcap scene in which those who are in on the plot attempt to capsize the ship, but are thwarted by others on board. Tacitus characterizes the chaos with a phrase typical of his opinion of a crowd: *plerique ignari etiam conscios impediebant* (the greater number of men who were ignorant were getting in the way of those who knew what was happening). Acerronia is another example of a minor character quickly but brilliantly drawn by Tacitus in order to add dramatic depth to the narrative. In the confusion, mistaken for Agripina herself, she is pummeled to death in a pathetic and darkly humorous fashion, for in attempting to save herself by crying out that she was Agrippina, she unwittingly brings about her own murder. Tacitus wryly attributes Acerronia's bad decision to *imprudentia*, as her attackers, in their zeal to carry out the assassination, clobber her with whatever they can lay their hands on (*quae fors obtulerat*). Agrippina's escape, in which the most powerful woman ever in Roman

politics swims with a wounded shoulder until mercifully hauled into a skiff and brought to shore, is a piece of picturesque and melodramatic narrative worthy of the novel.

Tacitus follows with two scenes juxtaposed to one another (*Ann*.14.6, 14.7), meant to be perceived as contemporaneous, which depict the highly emotional states of Agrippina and Nero in the wake of the failed assassination. First, Agrippina is presented alone, at her villa at the Lucrine lake, as Tacitus is careful to point out, so that his readers can visualize the background scenery, as the crushing realization comes upon Agrippina that she has just narrowly escaped murder by her son. The psychological portrayal is deftly handled. Agrippina recounts the details of the shipwreck, realizes the plot, and quickly hits upon a plan of action in an attempt to save herself. She will counter deception with deception, pretending ignorance. Nevertheless, despite her desperation, Tacitus adds that, true to character, Agrippina gives instructions to have Acerronia's will procured and her property seized.

Meanwhile, Nero has panicked, fearful of his mother's revenge. The emotions elicited by Tacitus' portrayal of him are contempt and disgust. A rapid succession of thoughts shows that he cannot act for himself, has no initiative. He calls for his advisers, Seneca and Burrus. Their meeting includes another effective dramatic element: the use of silence.[60] All are at a loss, reluctant to act. The effect of the silence is to add suspense and tension, as Agrippina's fate hangs in the balance. Tacitus augments it by musing upon what was possibly going through the two advisers' minds. Finally a plan is devised and the villain Anicetus is recalled to finish the deed.

---

[60] Ronald Mellor, *Tacitus* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 121.

The death scene (*Ann*.14.8) is presented with consummate skill. Tacitus begins in panorama, describing the entire landscape around Agrippina's villa, and then gradually narrows the focus until the reader is alone with Agrippina in her bedroom. First we see the shoreline crowded with a great mass of people, lamenting and praying for one of the great, confused and ignorant about what has actually occurred, a motif used again at the end of *Annales* 14. Then Anicetus and his henchmen arrive and disperse the crowd, and, like a tightening noose, the narrative shows them surrounding the villa, breaking down the door, dispersing Agrippina's servants. Tacitus' skills as a dramatic writer are perhaps nowhere better exemplified than by his depiction of Agrippina's last moments in her bedroom. There is only a dim light and a single servant woman, then she too abandons the mother of Nero. Anicetus and his men appear. Agrippina's last thoughts are of disbelief. They surround (*circumsistunt*) her bed. Her infamous last words punctuate a bloody death scene which in description rivals any that has ever been delivered by an anonymous messenger on the tragic stage.

Only anti-climax can follow. Tacitus relieves the dramatic tension by a digression on the historical tradition, discussing his sources again (*Ann*.14.9). They are in agreement on the details of the murder scene, but not on whether or not Nero inspected his mother's corpse. The meager funeral is described, with a suicide scene by yet another minor character named Mnester. Tacitus diffuses the potential sentimentality of the scene by wondering whether Mnester was motivated by love of Agrippina, or fear of his own death. One last dramatic element awaits: the memorable closing line (*Ann*.14.9). Tacitus deepens the analogy to tragedy by making the occasion for Agrippina's last word the

consultation of astrologers years earlier. Like the fulfillment of prophecy in tragedy, Tacitus, the ironic dramatist, reports that, in response to predictions that her son would some day rule Rome, yet kill his mother, Agrippina had replied, “Let him kill me, provided that he rule.”

CHAPTER 3

ANNALES 14. 60-64

TACITUS' USE OF DRAMATIC ELEMENTS

IN THE DEATH OF OCTAVIA

In *Annales* 14.60-64, Tacitus narrates Nero's decision to divorce his wife Octavia and have her executed. Before analyzing how Tacitus imbues the details of the story with a formal unity[61]—what has been called the 'innere Seite,'[62] or 'inner side,' of Tacitean narrative—it is essential to state the 'external' facts in the order that Tacitus gives them. In A.D. 62, following Nero's successful elimination of Cornelius Sulla and Rubellius Plautus, whose deaths were received by the senate with decrees of thanksgiving, Nero decided to put away his wife and step-sister Octavia, daughter of the previous emperor Claudius, and to marry his long-time mistress Poppaea Sabina. Under the guise of a civil divorce (*civilis discidii specie*, *Ann*.14.60.3), Octavia was at first granted the mansion of Burrus and the estates of Plautus, but was soon after banished to Campania under military guard. This action provoked a public protest in Rome, in which the people stormed the Capitoline in riot, overthrew the statues of Poppaea, the new Augusta, and set up effigies

---

[61] Charles Segal, "Tacitus and Poetic History: The End of Annals 13," *Ramus* 2 (1973): 107.

[62] Friedrich von Klinger, "Beobachtungen über Sprache und Stil des Tacitus am Anfang des 13. Annalenbuches,'' in *Tacitus*, V. Pöschl, ed., *Wege der Forschung* 97 (Darmstadt, 1969), 541.

of Octavia there and in the forum. Next, they rushed onto the Palatine and began filling the area with a great crowd (*multitudine*) and shouts (*clamoribus*, *Ann*.14.61.1) but were eventually dispelled by soldiers of the Praetorian Guard. After this temporary impediment, Nero persisted in his plans. Anicetus, the instrument responsible for the murder of Agrippina, was again employed. He falsely accused Octavia of adultery and other unnamed perversities, and this coupled with Nero's own ludicrous accusations against Octavia of committing abortion to cover up infidelities provided the grounds for her imprisonment on the island of Pandateria (*Ann*.14.63). After a few days interval, the order of execution came. Following suffocation in a steam bath, Octavia's severed head was carried to Rome for viewing by Poppaea (*Ann*.14.64).

These facts, presented barren of any literary adornment, hardly achieve the goals Roman historiography strove to attain. Cicero, about a century and a half before the composition of Tacitus' *Annales*, had spelled out those goals in *De Oratore* 2.30-50, 51-64, 65-73, and *Ad Familiares* 5.12 (the Letter to Lucceius). The principles of writing history as delineated by Cicero, so far as content was concerned, unquestionably still held sway in Tacitus' day,[63] although literary style had developed greatly.[64] It is important to

[63] A.J. Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiogaphy* (Portland: Areopagatica Press, 1988), 164-67. Woodman, writing on Tacitus' introduction to his *Historiae*, argues persuasively that in his introduction Tacitus, among other things, promises to provide in his narrative the crucial ingredients which make up the pleasure derived from reading history as delineated by Cicero most famously in his *De Oratore* and Letter to Lucceius (*Ad Familiares* 5.12). There is no reason to suppose that Tacitus did not continue to compose historiography in the same manner in the *Annales*. The features most pertinent to *Ann*. 14.60-65 include the, "pleasure [*delectationem*] to recall past misfortune in the safety of your own home. When people who haven't undergone any troubles of their own look on [*intuentibus*] other people's misfortunes without suffering themselves, they experience pleasure [*iucunda*] even as they take pity on them" (72, from the Letter to Lucceius).

[64] A.H. McDonald, "Theme and Style in Roman Historiography," *Journal of Roman Studies*, 65 (1975): 1-10. McDonald traces style in Roman historiography from Cicero's advocacy of smoothly flowing "rhetorical" history and Sallust's shocking and aggressive *inconcinnitas* up to Tacitus' day. At which time,

keep in mind that for the ancient historian and his readers, *falsum* and *verum* were inextricably linked with *gratia* and *simultas*:

> Nam quis nescit, primam esse historiae legem, ne quid falsi dicere audeat? Deinde ne quid veri non audeat ? Ne qua suspicio gratiae sit in scribendo? Ne qua simultatis?
>
> Everyone of course knows that the first law of historiography is not daring to say anything false, and the second is not refraining from saying anything true: there should be no suggestion of prejudice for, or bias against, when you write (*De Or*. 2.15.62).[65]

Tacitus' well-known assertion at the beginning of the *Annales*, that his work is written *sine ira et studio* (*Ann*.1.1), is perfectly in line with this principle. Truth in ancient historiography is founded on impartiality, and to conceive of this truth as the necessary opposite of fiction is a gross misunderstanding; "objectivity" in the modern historical fashion was never a goal of ancient historians.[66]

"despite the inevitable conceits of declamatory exercise there had been important refinements in rhetorical expression that combined to establish a new literary style. It broke down the balanced composition of 'periodic' *concinnitas* to revive the effect of brief sentences, set in abrupt sequence and not as '*cola'* of a larger rhythmic statement: each sentence appears as a pointed statement, with its own verbal emphasis. It is marked by epigrammatic *sententiae*, and its own rhythm using *clausulae*. Continuity of sense was ensured not by formal fluency, but through the force of association in rapid narrative, assisted by parallelism, antithesis, and the interplay of words and images—all combining to produce a tense movement. Special features, which had developed their conventional form, would be suitably polished to take their proper place. The freedom of colorful expression was increased, and the distinction between the verbal usage in poetry and prose lost significance: Lucan's epic could rank as rhetoric, historians would include Virgilian reminiscences in their prose. The new style required literary skill and taste, by the contemporary standards."

[65] Woodman, *Rhetoric*, 78-80. Commenting on this passage, Woodman writes, "it should be clear from the context that by the 'laws of historiography' Cicero does not mean what scholars think he means. Antonius' first pair of rhetorical questions, dealing with *falsum* and *verum*, are explained by his second pair, which deal with *gratia* and *simultas*. Thus Cicero here sees truth only in terms of impartiality (the historian should not show prejudice for or bias against anyone)."

[66] Ibid., 82-83.

In the *De Oratore*, Cicero has Antonius stress the importance of avoiding the dry, unadorned compilation of events which was the characteristic of the early Roman writers of annalistic history:

> Atqui, ne nostros contemnas, inquit Antonius, Graeci quoque sic initio scriptitarunt, ut noster Cato, ut Pictor, ut Piso. Erat enim historia nihil aliud nisi annalium confectio…. Hanc similitudinem scribendi multi secuti sunt, qui sine ullis ornamentis monumenta solum temporum, hominum locorum gestarumque rerum reliquerunt.
>
> "But nevertheless," rejoined Antonius, "(and I say this, that you may not think lightly of your own folk) the Greeks themselves also used to write, in the beginning, just like our Cato, Pictor, and Piso…. A similar style of writing has been adopted by many who, without any rhetorical ornament, have left behind them bare records of dates, personalities, places, and events" (*De Or*. 2.12.51-3).[67]

To achieve true excellence in historical writing, it is necessary to take the bare-boned facts, such as those listed above concerning the death of Octavia, and infuse them with literary power. The most important rhetorical technique in this endeavor to achieve greatness in historical writing is *inventio*. Cicero defines *inventio* as, "the devising of matter true or lifelike which will make a case appear convincing" (*Inv*. 1.9). Cicero had said (*De Or*. 2.62) that the skills of the orator were essential to the writer of the history:

> Videtisne quantum munus sit oratoris historia? Haud scio an flumine orationis et varietate maximum, neque tamen eam reperio usquam separatim instructam rhetorum praeceptis: sita sunt enim ante oculos.
>
> Don't you see how great a task history is for an orator? In terms of fluency of discourse and variety it is probably his greatest task, yet I can't find a separate treatment of the subject anywhere in the rules of rhetoric (and they're easily available for inspection).[68]

---

[67] Cic. *De Or*. Text and translation by E.W. Sutton taken from *Cicero: De Oratore*, The Loeb Classical Library, vol.III (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1939).

[68] Woodman, *Rhetoric*, 78-80.

This notion, though it may strike moderns as strange, was self-evident to the ancients, since the rhetorical skills of the orator were in fact the tools necessary to speak or write clearly, intelligibly, logically, and persuasively. An ancient historian strives to depict the people of the past as they actually spoke and their deeds as they were done. But, as was argued in Chapter Two of this thesis, to assume that an ancient historian such as Tacitus pored over countless documents in meticulous preparation of a body of detail before composition is a mistaken expectation. Not only would this have been all but impossible for the ancient historian, but he would have deemed it unnecessary, since his rhetorical training already provided him with the skills necessary to take names, dates and facts and shape them into a literary composition of history. This was the methodology which the ancient intellectual tradition provided, and the one which the historian's readers expected.[69] Thus, employing *inventio*, the historian discovers what is requisite to be said or done in a given situation, since, "this is somehow already 'there' though latent."[70] Again, one may turn to a letter to Tacitus from the younger Pliny (*Ad Fam*. 7.33) to illustrate the use of *inventio*:

> Haec, utcumque se habent, notoria clariora maiora tu facies; quamquam non exigo ut excedas actae rei modum. Nam nec historia debet egredi veritatem, et honeste factis veritatis sufficit.
>
> Whatever the merit of this incident, you can make it better known and increase its fame and importance, but I am not asking you to go beyond

[69] Cf. Woodman, p. 91-92, on the interdependence of historical fact with *inventio*: "The explanation of the paradox would seem to be that the Romans required the hard core of history to be true and its elaboration to be plausible, and further that they saw no contradiction between these two requirements but rather regarded them as complementary. Thus if a historian had reason to believe that his hard core was false, it seems that he was debarred from using it for the purposes of *exaedificatio*. If, on the other hand, an historian was faced with an awkward but true hard core, he was under an obligation not to omit it."

[70] Ibid., 88.

> what is due to the facts. History should always confine itself to the truth, which in its turn is enough for honest deeds.[71]

When Tacitus turned to the composition of his treatment of the death of Octavia at the end of *Annales* 14, he found that his bare material contained many of the elements most conducive to the writing of history which Cicero had outlined in his letter to Lucceius (*Ad Fam*.5.12). History should focus *in rebus magnis memoriaque dignis*, "on events important and deserving of remembrance." The sufferings of exile and dramatic death scenes were always choice material for the ancient historian, as Cicero realized:

> Quem enim nostrum ille moriens apud Mantineam Epaminondas non cum quadam miseratione delectat? Qui tum denique sibi avelli iubet speculum, posteaquam ei percontanti dictum est clipeum esse salvum; ut etiam in vulneris dolore aequo animo cum laude moreretur. Cuius studium in legendo non erectum Themistocli fuga redituque tenetur?
>
> Take, for instance, the way the great Epaminondas died at Mantinea; who of us but recalls it with delight, mingled with a certain compassion? Then only does he bid them pluck out the javelin, when in answer to his question he is told that his shield is safe; and so, despite the agony of his wound, with his mind at ease he died a glorious death. Who does not feel his sympathy excited and sustained in reading of the exile and return of Themistocles? (*Ad Fam*. 5.12.5).[72]

Furthermore, sudden reversals of fortune and the role of fate were necessary ingredients of history which might appeal to the deepest emotions of the audience:

> Etenim ordo ipse annalium mediocriter nos retinet, quasi enumeratione fastorum. At viri saepe excellentis ancipites variique casus habent admirationem, exspectationem, laetitiam, molestiam, spem, timorem; si vero exitu notabili concluduntur, expletur animus iucundissima lectionis voluptate.

---

[71] Plin. *Ep*. Text and translation by Betty Radice taken from *Letters and Panegyricus*, The Loeb Classical Library, vol. II (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

[72] Cic. *Ad Fam*. Text and translation taken from *Cicero: Letters To His Friends*, The Loeb Classical Library, vol.XXV (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1939).

> The fact is that the regular chronological record of events in itself interests us as little as if it were a catalogue of historical occurrences; but the uncertain and varied fortunes of a statesman who frequently rises to prominence give scope for surprise, suspense, delight, annoyance, hope, fear; should those fortunes, however, end in some striking consummation the result is a complete satisfaction of mind which is the most perfect pleasure a reader can enjoy (*Ad Fam*. 5.12.5).[73]

Tacitus realized that if, in the case of Octavia, the outcome did not produce that feeling of satisfactory pleasure in the reader, it would produce a sort of tragic pity that is oddly experienced with a pleasurable emotion (*iucunda*), which Cicero noted earlier (5.12.5). In addition, in Tacitus' hands, the story of Octavia's death could produce that moral outrage which is still felt today, for Tacitus has followed that method of historical writing which Atticus, in Cicero's *Brutus*, attributes to the historians Clitarchus and Stratocles:

> Ut enim tu [Cicero] nunc de Coriolano, sic Clitarchus, sic Stratocles de Themistocle finxit…. Hunc isti aiunt, cum taurum immolavisset, excepisse sanguinem patera et eo poto mortuum concidisse. Hanc enim mortem rhetorice et tragice ornare potuerunt.
>
> Like your story of Coriolanus' death, Clitarchus and Stratocles both have invented an account of the death of Themistocles…These say that on sacrificing a bullock, he drank a bowl of its blood and from that draught fell dead. That's the kind of death that gave them the chance for rhetorical and tragic treatment (*Br*. 10.42-11.43).[74]

---

[73] Ibid.

[74]Cic. *Br*. Text and translation by G.L. Hendrickson taken from *Cicero: Brutus, Orator*, The Loeb Classical Library, vol. V (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971). In the specific context of this passage, Cicero has just stated that Coriolanus, like his Athenian contemporary Themistocles, had died a voluntary death, a claim which Cicero anticipates Atticus will object to, since evidently Atticus had written a different account of Coriolanus' death in a work of history. Atticus jokingly does object, but grants that, in very much the same way such dramatic deaths give rhetoricians' narratives more force, so they provide historians with the opportunity to depict them "rhetorically and tragically." A.J. Woodman cites this passage (Rhetoric, 100), in order to make the point that the two terms *rhetorice* and *tragice*, "represent, not a contradiction, but alternative ways of describing the same phenomenon."

So, too, Tacitus took the few known facts—the "raw materials"—of Octavia's death, and created *historia* from them. By writing *tragice* of Octavia's death, he evokes pity; by writing *rhetorice*, he arouses indignation, thus achieving the lofty goals which Cicero had set for Roman historiography a century and a half earlier:

> Age vero, inquit Antonius, qualis oratoris et quanti hominis in dicendo putas esse, historiam scribere? Si, ut Graeci scripserunt, summi, inquit Catulus; si, ut nostril, nihil opus est oratore: satis est, non esse mendacem.
>
> "Now further," proceeded Antonius, "what class of orator, and how great a master of language is qualified, in your opinion, to write history?" "If he is to write as the Greeks have written," answered Catulus, "a man of supreme ability is required: if the standard is to be that of our fellow-countrymen, no orator at all is needed; it is enough that the man should not be a liar," (*De Or*. 2.12.51).[75]

As was shown in Chapter Two, Tacitus strove to give each book of the *Annales* a thematic and dramatic unity. In addition, one can detect a design in the overall structure of the Neronian books, beginning with *Annales* 13 and its ominous opening words: *prima novo principatu mors*…, "the first death under the new principate." As *Annales* 13 progresses, Tacitus depicts Nero as gaining more and more audacity, perhaps most shockingly in his successful assassination of Britannicus (*Ann*.13.16). In the same passage, he devotes a few lines to the characterization of Octavia and to her relationship with Agrippina, which subtly helps set the stage for their murders in *Annales* 14. Tacitus comments that Agrippina, despite attempts to conceal it, betrayed an aghast surprise at the sight of the dying boy, recognizing in the event her own future doom, *exemplum parricidii*, "the precedent for matricide." Then Tacitus describes Octavia's reaction at the

[75] Cic. *De Or*. Loeb Classical Library.

sight of her brother in the throes of Nero's poison. In doing so, he compares her with Agrippina, stressing the similarity of their reaction:

> Octavia, quoque, quamvis rudibus annis, dolorem, caritatem, omnis adfectus abscondere didicerat.
>
> Octavia, too, youth and experience notwithstanding, had learned to hide her griefs, her affections, her every emotion.[76]

Here, Tacitus begins to link together Agrippina and Octavia as sharing common destinies, that is, to die violently at the hands of Nero, and that they simultaneously become aware of their fate as they look upon the death of Britannicus.

Two chapters later (*Ann*. 13.18), Tacitus continues to portray Agrippina and Octavia as two women in sympathy with one another owing to a shared fear of Nero. After the funeral of Brittanicus, Nero sets about winning over the allegiance of the senate and the people. Agrippina, however, could not be prevailed upon:

> At matris ira nulla munificentia leniri, sed amplecti Octaviam, crebra cum amicis secreta habere, super ingenitam avaritiam undique pecunias quasi in subsidium corripiens.
>
> But his mother's anger no munificence could assuage. She took Octavia to heart; she held frequent and private interviews with her friends; while with even more than her native cupidity she appropriated money from all sources, apparently to create a fund for emergencies.

Thus, Tacitus presents Agrippina and Octavia aligning themselves in opposition to Nero. In these two passages, both related to the murder of Britannicus, he has subtly but effectively prepared the way for the murders of the next two members of the imperial family, murders which will begin and end *Annales* 14.

---

[76] Tac. *Ann.* Text and translation by John Jackson taken from *Tacitus: The Histories In Four Volumes*, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937). All subsequent quotes and translations are from these volumes.

The genres of history and tragedy overlap most noticeably in Tacitus' use of dramatic speech.[77] The speeches need not be long and in *oratio recta* to be significant.[78] Poppaea's speech at *Annales* 14.1 is brief and in *oratio obliqua*, but not only does it establish character and motivation of both Poppaea and Nero, it also creates anticipation and suspense for the tragic events to follow. By immediately alerting the reader to the inevitable deaths of Agrippina and Octavia at the beginning of *Annales* 14, Tacitus is able to employ other dramatic techniques as well as speeches in his subsequent narrative.

For example, the digressive passage (*Ann*.14.2) on the sexual intrigues of the Neronian court is very close to drama or prose fiction, as Tacitus describes the lascivious approaches of Agrippina toward Nero after an afternoon of wine, while Seneca and Acte struggle to divert Nero's attention to their own cause. Agrippina's escape from shipwreck (*Ann*.14.5) is dramatically ironic, since it creates in her the illusion of narrowly averting disaster, while the reader is fully aware of the imminent death that still awaits her. Also, this episode provides Agrippina with a scene of recognition (*Ann*.14.6), as she realizes that the shipwreck was in fact a murder attempt manufactured by her own son. Finally, the actual murder scene itself (*Ann*.14.8), brutally depicted by Tacitus, completes the descent of Agrippina from the heights of power to a violent and tragic death. These scenes provide the two plot elements that Aristotle found most satisfying in a tragedy,

---

[77] Syme, *Tacitus*, 317: "In fact the speech is the principal contrivance that enables the historian, cutting loose from the trammels of fact and chronology, to assert full independence, with a full commentary upon men and events. Combined with his other devices, it takes Tacitus a long way toward drama or prose fiction."

[78] N.P. Miller, "The Dramatic Speech in Tacitus," *The American Journal of Philology*, 85, No. 3 (1964): 279-96.

recognition (*anagnorisis*) and reversal (*peripeteia*).[79] Thus, in his narration of the murder of Agrippina, Tacitus is writing history *tragice* in his use of dramatic speech and plot devices of tragedy to give form to historical content.

At *Annales* 14.60, Tacitus begins his narrative of Octavia's execution by emphasizing Nero's confidence that any atrocity he wished to perpetrate would be accepted without censure by a servile senate. Tacitus has just narrated Nero's successful executions of Sulla and Plautus in *Annales* 14.57-59. Now, Nero feels that he can attempt any crime with impunity:

> Igitur accepto patrum consulto, postquam cuncta scelerum suorum pro egregiis accipi videt….
>
> On the reception, therefore, of the senatorial decree, since it was evident that his crimes each and all passed muster as evident virtues….

Tacitus uses the present tense verb *videt* to give vividness to his narrative, as he continues to do in the very next phrase: *exturbat Octaviam* (he drives out Octavia). This strong, violent verb, with Octavia as its object, begins the characterization of Octavia as a helpless, innocent victim of a ruthless Nero that will persist throughout Tacitus' narrative.

Nero claimed the barrenness of Octavia, *dictitans sterilem*, "claiming barrenness," as his justification for divorce. The charge was probably false, though it is possible. Poppaea, in both of her speeches (*Ann*.14.1, 14.61) which seem to carry so much weight in convincing Nero to carry through the murders of Agrippina and Octavia, boasts of her own fecundity, implying the lack of it in Octavia. Of course, Poppaea's argument cannot be taken at face value, but there is at least the suggestion of a problem. Certainly relations between Nero and Octavia were anything but conjugal, as Tacitus makes clear in a

[79] Aristotle *Poetics* 10

passage (*Ann*.13.12) which again anticipates the tragic death that awaits the young woman. In order to demonstrate Nero's growing independence from the rule of his mother, Tacitus describes Nero's youthful infatuation for the freedwoman Acte, in preference to Octavia:

> quando uxore ab Octavia, nobili quidem et probitatis spectatae, fato quodam, an quia praevalent inlicita, abhorrebat….
>
> For, whether from some whim of fate or because the illicit is stronger than the licit, he abhorred his wife Octavia, in spite of her high descent and proved honor….

Their marriage had been arranged by Agrippina to strengthen Nero's position as heir to the throne (*Ann*. 12.9):

> Placitum dehinc non ultra cunctari, sed designatum consulem Mammium Pollionem ingentibus promissis inducunt sententiam expromere, qua oraretur Claudius despondere Octaviam Domitio, quod aetati utriusque non absurdum et maiora patefacturum erat.
>
> The decision was now taken to delay no further; and the consul designate, Mammius Pollio, was induced by extraordinary promises to put forward a motion entreating Claudius to affiance Octavia to Domitius: an arrangement plausible on the score of their ages and likely to clear the way to higher things.

Octavia was the daughter of the emperor Claudius by his second wife Valeria Messalina. She was born in A.D. 40, and in 53, *Nero Octaviam Caesaris filiam in matrimonium accepit* (Nero accepted in marriage Octavia, daughter of the emperor Claudius, *Ann*.12.68). Within a year, Nero became emperor. Nero's mother Agripinna, Claudius' third wife, had poisoned her husband in order to clear the way for her son, whom Claudius had adopted as his heir. As stepbrother and stepsister, the marriage of Nero and Octavia avoided the disgrace of incest only by Octavia's adoption into an

obscure family.[80] Her name typically appears on inscriptions and coins without the patronymic *Claudia*.[81] However, it is unlikely that the name *Octavia* was from an adoptive *gens*, but rather an inherited cognomen of the imperial family; like her older sister's name, *Antonia*, it most likely was given to emphasize her connection with the previous generation of Julio-Claudian women.[82] Thus, the marriage of Nero and Octavia was clearly a political expedient that more closely tied Nero to the Julio-Claudian dynasty. It was never anything more.

After the murders of Plautus and Sulla, which Nero had carried out with absolute impunity, Tacitus points out (*Ann*.14.59.3) that Octavia was to be disposed of immediately. Her utter defenselessness is emphasized, her faults in Nero's eyes made plain:

> et posito metu nuptias Poppaeae ob eius modi terrores dilatas maturare parat Octaviamque coniugem amoliri, quamvis modeste ageret, nomine patris et studiis populi gravem.
>
> And laying aside his anxieties, he prepared to accelerate the marriage with Poppaea—till then postponed through suchlike terrors—and also to remove his wife Octavia; who, unassuming as her behavior might be, was intolerable as the daughter of her father and the favorite of the people.

The nobility of Octavia is brought into greater relief by comparison with Poppaea. Tacitus characterizes Poppaea herself as being sensitive to Octavia's superior pedigree, so "ancestor envy" intensified the contest between the two women. In her speech at

---

[80] *Paulys Realencyclopädie Der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Band III,2 (Stuttgart, Alfred Druckenmüller Verlag: 1958), 2896.

[81] Rolando Ferri, *Octavia, A Play Attributed To Seneca* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.

[82] Ibid.

Annales 14.1, in addition to trumpeting her fertility, Poppaea boasts of *triumphalis avos* (ancestors who had celebrated triumphs). In fact, only her maternal grandfather, Poppaeus Sabinus, had celebrated a triumph. At *Annales* 13.45, Tacitus states that Poppaea had rejected the name of her own father, Titus Ollio, in favor of the more distinguished name of her grandfather.

Tacitus says Nero married Poppaea immediately after driving out Octavia. Actually, Tacitus uses the verb *coniungitur* (*Ann*.14.60.1) with Nero as the subject, in contrast to the phrase *in matrimonium accepit*, used to refer to Nero's marriage of Octavia. The passive voice of the verb effectively captures the nature of Nero and Poppaea's relationship as Tacitus depicts it. Poppaea is very much the active partner, who constantly dictates to the more passive Nero. Tacitus' subsequent description of her at *Annales* 14.60.1 elaborates on this theme. First, he applies the abusive term *paelex* (concubine) to her. Then, he adds that she had power over Nero first in their adulterous affair, later in their marriage (*mox mariti potens)*. Again, Tacitus increases the pathos for Octavia by portraying Poppaea with such a fiercely hostile character. What chance did the modest young wife have against an opponent whom not even Agrippina could outmaneuver; what chance against the woman whom Tacitus had already described thus at *Annales* 13.5 thus:

> Famae numquam pepercit, maritos et adulteros non distinguens; neque adfectui suo aut alieno obnoxia, unde utilitas ostenderetur, illuc libidinem transferebat.
>
> She was never sparing of her reputation, and drew no distinctions between husbands and lovers: vulnerable neither to her own nor to alien passion, where material advantage offered, there she transferred her desires.

In narrating the death of Octavia, Tacitus intentionally puts Poppaea in the forefront of the narrative. It is she who contrives the accusation of adultery against Octavia, *quondam ex ministris Octaviae impulit servilem ei amorem obicere* (she compelled one of Octavia's servants to accuse her of a love affair, *Ann*.14.1). This scheme is as much a failure as the one of the collapsing boat Nero had tried against Agrippina (*Ann*.14.5). Tacitus seems to present such debacles as ironical, to show that despite their own ineptitude, Nero and his inner circle succeeded in bringing off the destruction of their victims, thanks in large part to the lack of any opposition from the Roman senate.

This digression allows Tacitus the opportunity of introducing minor characters into his narrative, who are, ironically, also minor characters in Poppaea's fictive scheme to destroy Octavia. First, there is the almost absurdly comical choice of a supposed paramour. A certain Eucaerus, an Alexandrian who is skilled at playing the flute (*canere tibias perdoctus*, *Ann*.14.60.2) is chosen. One imagines that there is a joke that is lost on the modern reader here. Once the accusation of Octavia's infidelity with this flautist has been made, Octavia's waiting-maids are put to the torture. Tacitus here depicts an encounter between the prefect Tigellinus and an unnamed female servant of Octavia. In a lengthy character sketch of Tigellinus elsewhere (*Hist*.1.72), Tacitus makes plain his distaste for this minion of Nero, and the anecdote at *Annales* 14.60 provides Tacitus with the opportunity to make one of his most acerbic jokes. Still, it is important to note that, in this same place, Tacitus also increases the tragic features of Octavia, since her slave-girls, even under torture, persevere in defending her honorable character. Their actions seem to

be capable of averting and denying the inevitable, and the illusion of hope is enticing to the reader, and instills suspense into the narrative:

> Actae ob id de ancillis quaestiones, et vi tormentorum victis quibusdam, ut falsa adnuerent, plures perstitere sanctitatem dominae tueri; ex quibus una instanti Tigellino castiora esse muliebria Octaviae respondit quam os eius.
>
> Her waiting maids, in pursuance of the scheme, were examined under torture; and although a few were forced by their agony into making groundless admissions, the greater number steadfastly maintained the honor of their mistress, one of them retorting under pressure from Tigellinus that Octavia's body was more chaste than his own mouth.

At *Annales* 14.60.3, Tacitus records that the result of this darkly humorous inquisition was the removal of Octavia under the guise of an ordinary divorce (*civilis discidii specie*), first to comfortable exile near Rome, then—under military guard—to virtual banishment in Campania. Next Tacitus describes the rather odd re-instatement of Octavia as Nero's wife. One of the oddities of this episode is that the common people affect this reversal. This reveals the popularity of Octavia amongst the people, to which Tacitus had already alluded (*Ann*.14.59.3) as a source of displeasure to Nero. It is also another incident in which Octavia is not the initiator of any action. In Tacitus' account thus far, she has only been acted upon. Octavia is continually the victim of Nero and Poppaea's ill will, or the recipient of the praises and efforts of her own slave-girls and the common people. We really have not yet "seen" Octavia in Tacitus' narrative, only how others act and feel toward her.

The end of *Annales* 14.60 presents difficulties of interpretation because of a lacuna in the text. Many scholars have made conjectures about the original wording of

this passage.[83] The consensus is that the *quanquam* and *revocavit* of the Second Medicean manuscript (*His…quanquam Nero paenitentia flagitii, coniugem revocavit Octaviam*) are inaccurate and should be replaced by *tamquam* and *revocarit* respectively. The gist of the passage is then rendered as something like, "out of this a false rumor arose to the effect that Nero, in repentance of his crime, had recalled Octavia to be his wife."[84]

Nevertheless, the argument has been made that the reading of the manuscript should only cautiously, if at all, be rejected.[85] This is based on the observation that the mood of the *vulgus* as depicted by Tacitus in *Annales* 14.61 is positive, as opposed to the negative reaction related by Suetonius (*Nero* 35) and *Octavia* 780-819. Hence, it is argued that Tacitus' explanation of the crowd's behavior came in the passage with the lacuna. If the reading of the manuscript is maintained, then one could surmise that Nero actually did recall Octavia, the report of which stirred the *vulgus* to celebrate, instead of the alternate reading which attributes the behavior of the *vulgus* to a false rumor of Octavia's recall. The former reading, with its sudden reversal of fortune, certainly would add to the pathos of Octavia and would add even more emphasis to Poppaea's crucial speech at *Annales* 14.61.2-4.

The reaction of the people to her restoration is a comment on the popularity of Octavia versus the widespread dislike of Poppaea, furthering the depiction of their rivalry. This scene parallels *Annales* 14.8.1, where a great crowd gathers on the shore before Agrippina's villa to express their sympathy for her. Both passages heighten the

---

[83]See Furneaux, note 6, 308.

[84] Ibid.; E.C. Woodcock, *Annals* 14, 148.

[85] Russell T. Scott, "The Text of Tacitus' *Annals* 14.60-61 and Octavia," *Classical Journal* (1983): 39-43.

pity felt for the threatened women, and intensify the sense of imminent tragedy. At the close of *Annales* 14.60, Tacitus qualified the positive role the people had played in bringing about Octavia's return:

> Inde crebri questus nec occulti per vulgum, cui minor sapientia et ex mediocritate fortunae pauciora pericula sunt.
>
> The measure led to general and undisguised protests from the common people, endowed with less discretion than their superiors, and—thanks to their humble station—faced by fewer perils.

There seems to lurk behind this remark a bit of defensiveness from one of senatorial rank. Tacitus often criticizes the subservience and complicity of the senate in its relationship to the emperors, a role that he himself had played. In the case of Octavia, once again the senate does not raise any protest against the emperor, as Tacitus tells us. The fact that it is the people who bring about Octavia's short-lived restoration, while it attests to the popularity of Octavia, is also a condemnation of the senate. It stresses even more the forlornness of the tragic heroine, whom one would think might have had allies in the senate, yet no one steps forward to champion her cause. The examples of Sulla and Plautus are fresh, and it is unlikely that anyone will come to the aid of a 22 - year-old orphan.

Yet the people do, and the scene of their storming the Capitoline (*Ann*.14.61.1), marching through the forum and onto the Palatine, is nothing less than a triumph for Octavia. Here, Octavia enjoys a victory over Poppaea. The dramatic effect is to create the illusion, the hope against all hope, that the inevitable tragic end will be avoided. Tacitus tersely comments that at last the gods were worshipped (*deosque tandem venerantur, Ann.*14.61.1). But Tacitus' irony here reaches one of its most pessimistic levels, since

very soon all will be reversed. Nevertheless, the young Octavia implicitly is given credit for bringing the people back into the proper relation with the divine. The scene builds suspense and deepens sympathy for Octavia, antipathy against Poppaea. The two are juxtaposed in successive clauses that highlight their differences in the affections of the plebs:

> Effigies Poppaeae proruunt, Octaviae imagines gestant umeris, spargunt floribus foroque ac templis statuunt.
>
> They hurled down the effigies of Poppaea, they carried the statues of Octavia shoulder high, strewed them with flowers, upraised them in the forum and the temples.

Tacitus chooses to keep the rivalry of Poppaea and Octavia in the forefront. Nero is hardly noticeable at this point. We are told that, as the crowd grew more and more riotous around the palace, soldiers were ordered to disperse it, which they promptly did. However, we are not told who gave the order. Was it Nero, or Poppaea, or Tigellinus? We are left to wonder, but I suspect that Tacitus intends us to suspect Poppaea. First of all, this scene parallels *Annales* 14.7. There, Nero is petrified at the news that his first attempt to rid himself of Agrippina has failed. He is at a loss for what to do, and must rely on Seneca and Burrus to initiate action. They realized that their own positions depended upon Nero, and arranged for Anicetus to finish the job. Likewise, at *Annales* 14.61, one can imagine Nero again in a state of indecision and anxiety. Now, Poppaea, who has taken the role of advisor in place of Seneca, perhaps assisted by the new prefect Tigellinus, takes command of the situation. They, too, owe all to Nero's power. In addition, this assumption is in conformity with Tacitus' overall depiction of Octavia's tragic demise, which her implacable rival Poppaea drove on, and this depiction was laid

out by Tacitus in the first lines of *Annales* 14. Nero's passion for Poppaea, which she had so skillfully manipulated, as Tacitus describes in *Annales* 13.46, launches the destruction of both Agrippina and Octavia. Tacitus states plainly at *Annales* 14.1 that both were obstacles to the powerful ambition of Poppaea; as long as Agrippina lived (*incolumi Agrippina*), there was no hope of a divorce of Octavia (*discidium Octaviae*), none of marriage for Poppaea (*sibi matrimonium*). So at the storming of the Capitoline and the Palatine, when all seems saved for Octavia and lost for Popaea, it is Poppaea who must have acted, ordered the troops against the people. What is more, as her speech which soon follows proves, it at this juncture of the narrative that Poppaea realizes that the divorce of Octavia has failed to satisfy her plans, and only her death will serve.

With the gods at last venerated, with Octavia's fortunes suddenly on the rise again, Tacitus quickly jerks his narrative back to its tragic course (*Ann*.14.61.2). Along the way he makes a rhetorical comment on the ability of the common people to make any lasting political or social change. In the same statement, he also makes it clear that, after a brief interruption, Poppaea has gained the upper hand again:

> Mutataque quae per seditionem verterant, et Poppaeae honos repositus est.
>
> All the changes effected by the outbreak were rectified, and the honors of Poppaea were reinstated.

This serves to introduce Poppaea's speech to Nero, a speech by which she persuades him that Octavia is too dangerous to be allowed to live. Like her parallel speech at *Annales* 14.1, this one is also in *oratio obliqua*, but no less dramatic or

revealing of her character and psychology.[86] The speech as Tacitus gives it reveals Poppaea as a very able orator, shows her manipulative power over Nero, and stresses again her hatred of Octavia and determination to destroy her. Octavia, who has even now not directly appeared in the narrative, is implied to be no match for the ruthless Poppaea. She is consumed with hatred for Octavia (*semper odio*), and made even more fierce by fear (*metu atrox*). She fears another mob uprising, which she feels might threaten her personal safety, or else she fears that Nero will give in to the will of the crowd and restore Octavia's position yet again. Poppaea commences her speech (*Ann*. 14.60.2) by assuming the melodramatic (but ironical) position of a suppliant (*provoluta genibus eius*), since Tacitus has taken pains to make the reader aware that Nero is more at Poppaea's mercy than the reverse. She makes the hardly believable claim that Octavia is quite capable of leading a popular revolt. From what we have seen of Octavia so far in Tacitus' account, she has been far too passive to instigate a political revolution. Here again we do not see Octavia as an agent capable of action, but as a silent, pitiable figure who waits in silence to suffer from the actions of others.

Poppaea prevails upon Nero to acquiesce to her desires. Once again, Poppaea plays the active role, and Nero complies with her wishes. The two verbs that account for

---

[86] N.P. Miller, "The Dramatic Speech in Tacitus," *The American Journal of Philology* (1964): 279-96. Miller, comparing Tacitean and Livian usage of speech in their narratives, remarks that, "A more difficult problem is that caused by Tacitus' characteristic use of *oratio obliqua* to present dramatically the motives and deliberations before action of an individual—the psychological *obliqua* speech. It undoubtedly belongs to dramatic speech, for the examples are usually elaborate and highly rhetorical in presentation; but they do not fit altogether happily into the Livian categories" (285). Miller also notes that Tacitus' use of *oratio obliqua* in the *Annales* is significantly more frequent than in his earlier works, and argues, "Nor is it likely to be merely accidental. It must indicate a personal predilection of Tacitus for this form of dramatic speech, and it is probably connected with the convenience of *obliqua* to express dramatically the thoughts and feelings of an individual—the psychological *obliqua* which seems so suited to his temperament. One also suspects that Tacitus had an innate distaste for the more obvious flourishes of ordinary rhetoric" (293).

how Poppaea's speech affected Nero (*Ann*. 14.62.1) could easily be applied to their relationship as a whole: Poppaea both frightens Nero (*terruit*) and inflames him (*accendit*). Poppaea's ability to manipulate Nero is here exhibited with brutal clarity.

Whether or not Octavia really posed a political threat to Nero, as Tacitus has Poppaea argue, is debatable. True, her exile did provoke a mob reaction in Rome, but one which the palace guards seemed to squelch rather easily, according to Tacitus (*Ann.*14.61.2). Tacitus is plainly skeptical that a popular revolt could accomplish anything politically, and even if the people were capable of mobilizing and posing a serious threat to Nero's power, they certainly would have required a leader of much more strength and charisma than Octavia. Poppaea's argument is that Octavia is a threat as a possible wife of a challenger to the throne. This seems plausible because Octavia was indeed of noble descent from the Julio-Claudians, but Tacitus has not given the least hint of any type of political alliance or support for Octavia from any part of the aristocracy, despite her popularity among the common people. The argument from silence suggests that Octavia was abandoned by all to suffer the plotting of Poppaea and Nero, a portrayal that intensifies her image as a tragic heroine.

Indeed, a comparison of Tacitus' portrayals of Octavia and Poppaea reveals a major theme of Tacitus' conception of the reign of the Julio-Claudian emperors: that the pathway to power lay open only to those with a character like Poppaea. Only a Poppaea could overcome the first obstacle to power at Nero's court, Agrippina, since only she matched her adversary in total disregard for traditional morality. On the other hand, Octavia's "tragic flaw" is her innate good character itself, which precludes her from

participating in the amoral politics of the Neronian principate. Tacitus subtly indicates this at *Annales* 14.63.2, where he states that worse than Octavia's destruction were the accusations of infidelity, licentiousness, and abortion aimed at her (*crimen omni exitio gravius*). But perhaps the most compelling aspect of Tacitus' use of dramatic irony is that even those who are capable of seizing power, Agrippina and Poppaea, are themselves pathetically killed, one before and one after Octavia. At *Annales* 16.6, Tacitus describes Poppaea's death:

> Post finem ludicri Poppaea mortem obiit, fortuita mariti iracundia, a quo gravida ictu calcis adflicta est. Neque enim venenum crediderim, quamvis quidam scriptores tradant, odio magis quam ex fide: quippe liberorum cupiens et amori uxoris obnoxius erat.
>
> After the close of the festival, Poppaea met her end through a chance outburst of anger on the part of her husband, who felled her with a kick during pregnancy. That poison played its part I am unable to believe, though the assertion is made by some writers less from conviction than from hatred; for Nero was desirous of children, and love for his wife was a ruling passion.

This passage contains elements common to the narratives of the deaths of Agrippina and Octavia: brutality, bitter irony, and even the implication that Tacitus is in conflict with other writers. He refuses to accept the story that deliberate poisoning was involved in Poppaea's death. It is as if he would deny Nero, just as he does in the case of Agrippina and Octavia, the dubious credit of acting consciously and decisively. Even in the performance of evil, Nero—to Tacitus—is inept and contemptible.

The plan seized upon to legitimize Octavia's destruction is to implicate her in a revolutionary plot, no matter how groundless it might appear. Accordingly, Tacitus has Poppaea and Nero call in the most transparent of villains to charge Octavia with treason,

Anicetus (*Ann*.14.62.2). By bringing in this most shameless of opportunists at this point in his narrative, Tacitus is close to fulfilling a "ring composition" for *Annales* 14, revealing the paradoxical linkage of the tragic destinies of the most ruthless woman in Roman politics and the most innocent, a bond which he first began to depict at the death scene of Britannicus (*Ann*.13.16). In addition, he is emphasizing the utter farcicalness of their executions, and what is more, the absolute depravity of those who accepted and joined in the charades which denied these crimes, even celebrated them with thanksgivings to the gods. Could anyone really be expected to believe the accusations of Anicetus, this criminal who was already responsible for engineering Agrippina's murder? Anicetus had been absent from the narrative since he and his accomplices butchered Agrippina (*Ann*.14.8). His reappearance now has the dramatic effect of bringing with it an ominous foreboding of Octavia's irreversible doom. Tacitus makes a general remark that captures the despicableness of the man (*Ann*.14.62.2):

> levi post admissum scelus gratia, dein graviore odio, quia malorum facinorum ministri quasi exprobrantes aspiciuntur.
>
> [Anicetus] after the commission of his murder, experienced some trivial favor, afterwards replaced by a more serious dislike, since the instruments of crime are counted a visible reproach.

Given Tacitus' description of this man—who is characterized by innate madness or folly (*insita vaecordia*) and inured by previous crimes (*facilitate priorum flagitiorum*)—no reasonable person could have accepted his claim that he and Octavia were lovers and were plotting against the emperor. The fact that Tacitus reports that no one objected to this absurd accusation in the least is yet another comment on the cravenness of the senate and the ineffectuality of the common people. Once again, Octavia plays no active role in

the narrative or in her own fate. Instead, she is the defenseless victim of others' wills. Tacitus' final word on Anicetus (*Ann*.14.62.4) is a masterpiece of ironic understatement, even cynicism. He says:

> Tum in Sardiniam pellitur ubi non inops exilium toleravit et fato obiit.
>
> He was then banished to Sardinia, where he withstood a not impecunious exile, and died by a natural death.

This comment on Anicetus implicitly questions any notion of a moral order in Neronian Rome. If so, this bleak realization certainly heightens the pathos of Octavia. And yet, there is something perversely just and satisfying in the not unpleasant retirement of Anicetus. He was, after all, an effective instrument in the ultimate destruction of the Julian house,[87] which good and noble citizens of Rome had been fighting in the name of liberty, since Brutus and Cassius. Perhaps Anicetus should be read as a manifestation of an avenging fury which hounded the Julian *gens* through successive generations until destroying it completely. This "mythological" reading of tragic death and destruction may actually have been the one with which the Roman mind could most readily give coherence to the historical rise and fall of the Julian *gens*.[88] It is certainly the framework

---

[87] Cf. Wilhelm Kroll, "Zur Historiographie: Tacitus," in *Studien zum Verständnis der römischen Literatur* (Stuttgart: 1924), 373. Kroll interprets Tacitus' description (*Ann*.13.58) of the withering, near death, and revivification of the tree known as the Ruminalis as a symbol of the decline of the Julians, and the growth of the Flavians: "Sehr merkwürdig ist, daß an den Schluß des Jahres und des Buches ein an sich unbedeutendes Prodigium gesetzt ist, das Absterben und Wiederaufleben der ficus Ruminalis: wirkt hier nur das alte Annalenschema, oder will Tacitus andeuten, daß er in diesem Vorfall einen Hinweis auf das Aussterben des julischen Hauses und das Aufkommen der gens Flavia sieht?'' Note that this passage (*Ann*. 13.58) closes *Annales* 13, and the death of Agrippina immediately follows.

[88] Cf. Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths: An Essay in the Constitutive Imagination*, translated by Paula Wissing (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983). Veyne writes of a culture's basic relationship to its myths: "It is the allegorical mirror of eternal truths that are our own. Or else it is the slightly distorting mirror of past events, which either resemble today's political events (myth is historical) or are at root of today's political individualities (myth is etiological). By reducing myth to history or *aitia*, the Greeks were led to make the world begin a little more than two millennia before themselves. First came

which the author of the praetexta *Octavia* applies to his drama,[89] as we shall see in Chapter Three.

It is no coincidence that Tacitus quickly follows his final word on Anicetus with Octavia's condemnation and execution, the easy retirement of the one in ironical contrast with the tragic death of the other. One absurdity follows another, with no one seeming to care. Tacitus claims (*Ann*.14.63.1) that after arrangements with Anicetus had been made, Nero accused Octavia of arranging and undergoing an abortion. Tacitus stresses the ridiculousness of this charge by reminding the reader that Nero had earlier pleaded Octavia's sterility as grounds for divorce. Again, Nero is denied any credit for being an "evil genius," instead the lack of any opposition to the ludicrous chicaneries of his will is subtly stressed by Tacitus. One wonders if Nero really was forgetful, or simply did not care that he was contradicting his earlier charge. Either way, the tragic innocence of Octavia is neatly emphasized by the outlandishness of the charge.

---

a mythical prologue, followed by their historical past, which lasted for close to a millennium. For they never doubted for an instant that the most ancient humanity of memory was the first humanity to exist" (p.123). On the similarities of mythmaking and historiography, and their truth-value, Veyne writes: "How does one accept that a king was called Ampyx? Why this name instead of a million others? A program of truth existed in which it was accepted that someone, Hesiod or someone else, told the truth when he reeled off the names that passed through his mind or spouted the most unbridled Swedenborgian fantasies. For such people psychological imagination is a source of veracity. This attitude, normal in the founder of a religion, is not incomprehensible in a historian, either. Historians are merely prophets in reverse, and they flesh out and animate their *post eventum* predictions with imaginative flourishes. This is called 'historical retrodiction' or 'synthesis,' and this imaginative faculty furnishes three-fourths of any page of history, with documents providing the rest" (p.103).

[89] C.J. Herrington, *Ocvtavia* Praetexta: A Survey," *Classical Quarterly*, n.s. II (1961): 19. "Can we really criticize this [mythological allusions in *Octavia*] as an excessive display of mythology? It seems to me that before we venture to do so, we are bound to make a double effort of the imagination, a double allowance. First, the elementary allowance for the fact that antiquity generally thought more naturally than we do in terms of myth (I suppose the house-walls of Pompeii show 'an excess of mythological display' too, if one cares to look at them that way). The second allowance must be for the miasmic imaginative atmosphere of the Neronian court. There is considerable non-poetic evidence that the court was peculiarly prone to comparing—and one might not exaggerate if one said confusing—life with myth, especially with the tragic version of myth."

What follows (*Ann*.14.63.2) is a comment on the fate of Octavia through the eyes of a group of anonymous onlookers (*visentium oculos*). Tacitus uses this technique elsewhere, for example at *Annales* 1.4, where an anonymous crowd of Roman citizens gossip (*variis rumoribus differebant*) about the bad qualities of the successors of Augustus. The effect is to remove, or rather disguise, the narrator's voice behind a mask of imaginary witnesses of the event upon which they may moralize without the author's own voice or opinion being noticed. At the same time, the reader is subtly drawn into the illusion and, if it is skillfully done, sympathetically identifies with the opinions and feelings of the imaginary witnesses. Hence, the effect approaches the dramatic technique of the chorus in tragedy. Often when a tragedy reached its crescendo of grief or horror or joy, the chorus and one or more of the actors vented their emotions in passages of song (Greek: *kommos*), for example the interchange between Euripides' chorus and Electra and Orestes after the murder of Clytemnestra, or the lament of Sophocles' chorus at the execution of Antigone. The chorus was both inside and outside of the play, at one moment addressing the actors, at another, the audience. In effect, they helped break down barriers between actors and audience, merging the two in a realm part reality, part illusion. The audience has their thoughts, "lifted up onto the universal plane of their common mythology and common religious tradition…The particular event is set in a wider perspective, feelings roused by the action of the preceding scene are calmed for the moment in a reflective pause."[90]

[90] The observations on the tragic chorus and the quote are from H.C. Baldry, *The Greek Tragic Theatre* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1971), 64-69.

Indeed, the onlookers at *Annales* 14.63.2 act very much like a tragic chorus, pitying Octavia as they compare her fate to that of Agrippina, granddaughter of Augustus, and to her daughter Julia. Agrippina had survived her popular husband, Germanicus, and continually opposed the growing power of Sejanus under Tiberius. Tiberius eventually banished her to Pandateria (also Octavia's place of exile) where she was starved to death in A.D. 33 (*Ann*.6.25). *Annales* 5.4, which describes the narrowly averted execution of Agrippina and her son Nero Caesar, uncannily parallels Octavia's sudden but short-lived reversal of fortune at *Annales* 14.61:

> Simul populus effigies Agrippinae ac Neronis gerens circumsistit curiam faustisque in Caesarem omnibus falsas litteras et principe invito exitium domui eius intendi clamitat. Ita nihil triste illo die patratum.
>
> At the same time, the people, carrying effigies of Agrippina and Nero, surrounded the curia, and, cheering for the Caesar, clamoured that the letter was spurious and that it was contrary to the Emperor's wish that destruction was plotted against the house. On that day, therefore, no tragedy was perpetrated.

As for Julia, who was the youngest daughter of Agrippina, Messalina (mother of Octavia) hated her and contrived a charge of adultery with Seneca against her. She was subsequently banished and executed (*Ann*.13.32, 43). If these onlookers witnessed and remembered the fate of Agrippina, as Tacitus portrays them, they must be identified as old men by the time of Octavia's exile and execution. However, Tacitus is not specific about their identity. Also unclear is the setting of this scene. Were they watching Octavia as she departed from Rome? Or were they on the coast of Italy, as she embarked for the isle of Pandateria? Either way, the tragic retelling these onlookers provide of just a few of the tragic deaths of the Julio-Claudian dynasty gives Tacitus the opportunity to allude to

its approaching demise, while at the same time to detail the deplorable circumstances of Octavia's short life. He states (*Ann*.14.63.2) that her marriage to Nero was nothing less than the sight of her funeral (*huic nuptiarum dies loco funeris fuit*). He notes that she had witnessed under the same roof the murders of her father and brother, Claudius and Britannicus. Then he reminds us of her humiliation at the hands of Acte, whom Tacitus calls a mere slave girl (*ancilla*), and that the marriage of her rival, Poppaea, was simultaneously her destruction. Last, and possibly worst of all, that she had been accused and falsely convicted of a crime more grievous than death. This final stress on Octavia's loss of honor reads as Tacitus' highest compliment to this tragic heroine, and yet another condemnation of that which destroyed her: the madness for power in imperial politics.

Finally, at *Annales* 14.64, Tacitus brings Octavia to the apron of his narrative "stage" for the first time. She is presented neither through the eyes of others, nor in the consequences which the actions of her enemies have determined:

> Ac puella vicesimo aetatis anno inter centuriones et milites, praesagio malorum iam vitae exempta, nondum tamen morte adquiescebat.
>
> And so this girl, in the twentieth year of her age, surrounded by centurions and soldiers, cut off already from life by foreknowledge of her fate, still lacked the peace of death.

Octavia offers a last plea for her life (*Ann*.14.64.2). Tacitus makes skillful use of dramatic speech by allowing Octavia these desperate words at the moment of death, reminiscent of tragic heroines such as Sophocles' Antigone and Euripides' Iphigeneia and Polyxena. All the other players—Nero, Poppaea, Tigellinus, Anicetus, Eucaerus, the defiant slave-girl—are absent, silent. Octavia's final monologue very much parallels Agrippina's at

Annales 14.8.3, arousing pity and building suspense by delaying the final moment. She pleads that now she is only a sister (*tantum sororem*) and not a wife. The implication is that as such she poses no threat to the succession of the empire. Octavia also protests in the name of the Germanici; the surname Germanicus had been conferred on Nero Drusus, grandfather of Claudius and Agrippina. Lastly, she appeals to the name of Agrippina herself. At this point Tacitus' narrative has almost come full circle: the two tragic heroines of Book 14 are about to meet in death. Octavia's very words about Agrippina are a deliberate echo of *Annales* 14.1. She says that, at least with Agrippina alive (*qua incolumi*), she endured alive an unhappy marriage with Nero. Poppaea had said (*Ann*.14.1) that with Agrippina alive (*incolumi Agrippina*), there was no hope for her own marriage to Nero. Agrippina's and Octavia's destinies are inextricably intertwined; the death of the one is inevitably followed by the death of the other.

It has been argued that Tacitus intended the reader to imagine this speech as though it were delivered before Nero, and that Octavia's appeals, designed to evoke pity, would have only enraged Nero more. Thus, the irony and the pathos of Octavia's fate would be further emphasized.[91] Rather, since the reader has just been drawn into the group of anonymous onlookers at *Annales* 14.63.2, it may be better to imagine Octavia addressing them as chorus—and by implication the larger audience—as she approaches death, on stage by herself, undiminished by anyone else's presence.

The death scene which follows, though briefer, is as unsparingly brutal in descriptive detail as any in Greek and Roman tragedy. Images of Agrippina's murder are

[91] S.J. Bastomsky, "Tacitus, *Annals* 14, 64, 1: Octavia's Pathetic Plea," *Latomus* 31 (1972): 606-10.

intentionally evoked in the reader's mind. To close this ring of death, Tacitus depicts Poppaea gazing upon the severed head of Octavia, just as he intimated (*Ann*.14.9) that Nero inspected—even admired—the corpse of Agrippina.

But that is not all. It was stated earlier that Tacitus presented the story of Octavia both *tragice* and *rhetorice*. After the tragic death scene of Octavia, Tacitus cannot help entering his own narrative stage and addressing the reader in a burst of indignation. He rails at the perverse relationship of the senate to the emperor, and of both to the gods, but vows faith to his mission of recording for posterity,[92] no matter how appalling, such calamities:

> Dona ob haec templis decreta quem ad finem memorabimus? Quicumque casus temporum illorum nobis vel aliis auctoribus noscent, praesumptum habeant, quotiens fugas et caedes iussit princeps, totiens gratis deis actas, quaeque rerum secundarum olim, tum publicae cladis insignia fuisse. Neque tamen silebimus, si quod senatus consultum adulatione novum aut patientia postremum fuit.
>
> For all these things offerings were decreed to the temples—how often must those words be said? Let all who make their acquaintance with the history of that period in my narrative or that of others take so much for granted: as often as the emperor ordered an exile or a murder, so often was a thanksgiving addressed to heaven; and what formerly betokened prosperity was now a symbol of public calamity. Nevertheless, where a senatorial decree achieved a novelty in adulation or a last word in self-abasement, I shall not pass it by in silence.

[92] Veyne, *Did the Greeks*, 7, on the importance of this mission to the ancient historian: "The materials of a tradition are not the tradition itself, which always emerges as a text, a tale carrying authority. History is born as tradition, not built up from source materials. We have seen that, according to Pausanius, the memory of an epoch is ultimately lost if those near the great ones neglect to relate the history of their time, and in the preface to his *War of the Jews* Flavius Josephus says that the most praiseworthy historian is the one who recounts the events of his own day for the benefit of posterity. Why was it more meritorious to write contemporary history than the history of the past centuries? The past already has its historians, while the present awaits a historian who will constitute a historical source and establish the tradition. We see that an ancient historian does not use sources and documents; he is source and document himself."

CHAPTER 4

THE *OCTAVIA* PRAETEXTA

Octavia is the sole surviving play from antiquity on a Roman subject. Plays on historical subject matter such as *Octavia* were sometimes referred to in antiquity as praetextae, because the actors wore the *toga praetexta* of Roman citizens. Much is unknown concerning praetextae, but literary fragments reveal that they were composed between 200 B.C. and A.D. 100. The celebration of a triumph might occasion a praetexta commemorating the victorious general. Also, a praetexta might dramatize essential episodes of Roman history, such as the birth of Romulus and Remus, or the overthrow of the Tarquins by Junius Brutus. Praetextae of the Imperial era seem to differ from those of the Republican era in that they are no longer celebratory and encomiastic, but critical of oppression under the emperors.[93]

Octavia is transmitted among the plays of Seneca, though only in the A manuscripts, not the E. However, despite the fact of its inclusion, scholarly consensus denies that the play was written by Seneca. The strongest argument against Senecan authorship is based on linguistic and metrical comparisons of *Octavia* with the remaining plays of the Senecan corpus.[94] The remaining arguments against Senecan authorship stem from supposed allusions in *Octavia* to events occurring after the death of Seneca,

---

[93] Mario Erasmo, *Roman Tragedy: Theatre to Theatricality* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 56.

[94] See especially R. Helm, "Die Praetexta 'Octavia'," *S B Berlin* 16 (1934) : 283-347, and C.J. Herrington, "*Octavia Praetexta*: A Survey," *CQ* n.s. 11 (1961) : 18-30.

particularly Nero's fall and suicide. Although some scholars have found fault with this argument on the grounds that the playwright could have predicted these events and thus vaguely foreshadowed them in the verses of *Octavia*, the "allusion" argument seems to support the conclusions of the linguistic and metrical analyses.[95]

The action of *Octavia* may be described as a mosaic of scenes which appear at times to have little interconnectedness with one another. The play begins with a long scene, the longest in the play, in which Octavia, along with her nurse, laments her own impending doom. Later in the play there is a scene in which Poppaea and her nurse express their own anxieties about the future. Agrippina, or rather her ghost, has a scene, alluded to above, in which she prophesies retribution for her murderous son Nero. The centerpiece of the play is a debate between Seneca and Nero on the proper exercise of power—clemency versus ruthless self-preservation. This chapter will analyze in depth the choral ode which follows the opening scene, in which the chorus laments the fall of Octavia and reminisces on the similar fate of Agripinna by narrating the events of her last days and ultimate murder. A later choral ode will be discussed, along with the report to them by a messenger of the destruction of Poppaea's images, followed by the swift vengeance of Nero. In addition, Octavia's departure scene at the end of the play will be analyzed, specifically in the terms of Rolando Ferri's argument that this scene is a deliberate allusion to a similar one in Sophocles' *Antigone.*

Once Seneca has been disqualified as the author of *Octavia*, determining the exact date of the play's composition becomes problematic. P. Kragelund argues for a

[95] Martin E. Carbone, "The Octavia: Structure, Date, and Authenticity," *Phoenix* 31 (1977): 48-67.

composition date very soon after Nero's death.[96] In fact, he places its date within the short reign (June, A.D. 68 – January, A.D. 69) of the emperor Galba. Kragelund's argument stems from an analysis of the scene in *Octavia* where Nero and a nameless prefect debate the execution of Octavia (*Oct*. 846-76). Though it is arguable that the nameless prefect is a stock character in the manner of a Senecan *satelles*, Kragelund argues that the prefect is Tigellinus. The question then is why the prefect remained nameless in the drama. Kragelund points out that Tigellinus prospered politically beyond the fall of Nero, under Galba. Despite the people's clamor for his destruction, Galba protected Tigellinus as a demonstration of his *clementia*. When Otho gained the principate, Tigellinus' political career, along with Tigellinus himself, was quickly extinguished. Kragelund thinks that this is a clue for dating *Octavia*. He feels that the play was written during Galba's short reign as a defense of Tigellinus. He points out that in the aftermath of Nero's fall, many were scrambling to defend themselves for their complicity in carrying out Nero's orders. Kragelund thinks that the author of *Octavia* chose to keep the prefect nameless from political caution, and because his anonymity would allow his situation to be identified with by many who claimed that they were simply doing their duty in following Nero's orders.

T.D. Barnes also argues for dating the composition of *Octavia* within the reign of Galba.[97] He reads the play as a sympathetic treatment of Messalina, the mother of Octavia. From this, he claims that *Octavia* must have been written before the historical

---

[96] P. Kragelund, "The Prefect's Dilemma and the Date of the Octavia," *CQ* n.s. 38 (1988): 492-508.

[97] T.D. Barnes, "The Date of the Octavia," *MH* 39 (1982): 215-17.

tradition of the Julio-Claudians became established in later writers such as Juvenal and Suetonius. This tradition emphasizes Messalina's sexual immorality, and the absence of such a depiction in *Octavia* argues for an early date of composition. However, a remark made by Nero in the play itself (*Oct*. 536) argues that Messalina's licentiousness was already popular currency at the time of the play's composition: *Incesta genetrix detrahit generi fidem* (But the line is uncertain as a result of her mother's promiscuity).[98] Further, it is difficult to accept that *Octavia* was written primarily as a defense of the memory of Messalina, who does not even figure as character in the play, but is only alluded to in speeches by others.

According to Rolando Ferri, there is no strong evidence that the author of *Octavia* was a witness of the events of the play.[99] He feels that the author was entirely dependent upon written sources. The earliest possible written sources from which the author could have drawn were the historical works of Pliny, Cluvius, and Fabius. Only after these works were published did the anti-Neronian tradition become established, of which Ferri feels the author of *Octavia* was an adherent. Therefore, a *terminus post quem* somewhere in the middle of the Flavian period would be established as the date of composition.

Herrington earlier argued for a similar dating, if not a little earlier in the Flavian period, but for reasons different than Ferri.[100] Indeed, he believes that the sympathetic treatment of Octavia in the play argues that the author was contemporary with and a

---

[98] Sen. *Oct*. Text and translation by John G. Fitch taken from *Seneca*: *Tragedies II*, The Loeb Classical Library, vol.II (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). All subsequent citations from *Octavia* are from the same source.

[99] Rolando Ferri, *Octavia: A Play Attributed to Seneca* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.

[100] Herrington, "Octavia Praetexta," 18-30.

witness to the events of the play, and, thus, not reliant upon written sources at all. Rather, Herrington argues that the author was reliant upon Seneca for style and, to a lesser extent, structure, but not for subject matter. As a matter of fact, Herrington believes that the author was nothing less than a disciple of Seneca, so much so that it would be impossible to date the composition of *Octavia* more than a half generation after Seneca's death. He bases this theory on the notion that the imitation of Seneca's style had fallen out of fashion no more than fifteen years after his death (A.D. 65). Thus, it seems quite likely that the date of composition falls between A.D. 69 and 80.

If the precise dating of Octavia is not certain, but only approximate, nevertheless one confidently can assert that the play was written before the composition of Tacitus' *Annales* 14. The possibility then arises that *Octavia* was known by Tacitus, and moreover, used by him as a source for his *Annales*. It has already been shown in Chapter One of this thesis that Tacitus drew upon a variety of sources for the composition of the *Annales*, many of whom he does not bother to name. A comparison of *Octavia* and the Neronian books of the *Annales* will strongly suggest that, in fact, the play was a source for Tacitus.

Rolando Ferri has argued that a comparison of *Annales* 14.63-64 with *Octavia* 929-46 does, in fact, reveal that the *praetexta* was a source for Tacitus, not, however, a source of factual information, but one of dramatic technique. Ferri introduces his argument by remarking that Tacitus' narration of Octavia's banishment to Pandateria, and her subsequent execution, is presented in anything but unadorned, mater-of-fact prose. On the contrary, "rhetoric is given ample scope in this chapter." As was shown in

Chapter Three of this thesis, this rhetorical, and, we may add, dramatic embellishment of the facts is a standard practice of Roman historiography.

In *Annales* 14.63, the exiled Octavia is described from the point of view of a group of anonymous onlookers. They lament the fate of the tragic heroine, and compare her to the elder Agrippina, and her daughter Julia, noting the similarity of their violent deaths, but adding that Octavia's death is all the more pitiable, since it comes so early in her life, before she has experienced any of its joys:

> Non alia exul visentium oculos maiore misericordia adfecit. Meminerant adhuc quidam Agrippinae a Tiberio, recentior Iuliae memoria obversabatur a Claudio pulsae: sed illis robur aetatis adfuerat; laeta aliqua viderant et praesentem saevitiam melioris olim fortunae recordatione adlevabant.
>
> No woman in exile ever presented a more pitiable spectacle to the eye of the beholder. There were yet some who recollected the banishment of Agrippina by Tiberius; the more recent memory of Julia's expulsion by Claudius still dwelt in the minds of men. But to these the maturity of life had come; they had seen some little happiness, and could soften the cruelty of the present by recalling the brighter fortunes of the past.

At *Octavia* 929-57, the chorus, beholding the departure of the exiled girl, also bemoans her fate by comparing it to earlier tragic victims of the Julio-Claudian dynast: the elder Agrippina, Julia, Livia, and lastly, the younger Agrippina, mother of Nero:

> Animum firment exempla tuum,
> iam multa domus quae vestra tulit.
> quid saevior est Fortuna tibi?
> tu mihi primum
> tot natorum memoranda parens,
> nata Agrippinae,
> nurus Augusti, Caesaris uxor,
> cuius nomen clarum toto
> fulsit in orbe—
> utero totiens enixa gravi

pignora pacis,
mox exilium,
verbera, saevas passa catenas,
funera, luctus,
tandem letum cruciata diu.
felix thalamis Livia Drusi
natisque ferum ruit in facinus
poenamque suam.
Iulia matris fata secuta est:
post longa tamen tempora ferro
caesa est, quamvis crimine nullo.
quid non potuit quondam genetrix
tua quae rexit principis aulam
cara marito partuque potens?
eadem famulo subiecta suo
cecidit diri militis ense.
quid cui licuit regnum et caelum
sperare, parens tanta Neronis?
non funesta violate manu
remigis ante,
mox et ferro lacerata diu
saevi iacuit victima nati?

Strengthen your heart with past examples,
of which your house has borne many now;
was Fortune crueller at all to them?
You are the first
I must mention, mother of so many children,
daughter of Agrippa,
Augustus' daughter-in-law, wife of a Caesar,
You whose name shone bright throughout the world,
whose teeming womb so often bore
pledges of peace,
but who then suffered
exile, lashes, cruel chains,
grief, bereavement,
and death at the last, after long torment.
Livia, blessed in marriage to Drusus
and in children, rushed into callous crime
and the punishment due.
Julia followed her mother's fate:
though many years later, she was put
to the sword, despite being charged with nothing.
What power was in your mother's hands

> earlier, when she ruled the emperor's court
> through her husband's affection and her status as a mother!
> Yet even she became subject to her slave
> and fell to a brutal soldier's sword.
> What of her who could once aspire to the throne
> and heaven, Nero's exalted mother?
> Did she not suffer outrage at the murderous hands
> of sailors first,
> then a lengthy mangling by the sword,
> dying as a sacrifice to her savage son?

Ferri proposes three hypotheses to account for the similarities between the two passages: 1) dependence of *Octavia* on Tacitus; 2) dependence of Tacitus on *Octavia*; 3) dependence of both works on a lost common source. Ferri rules out the first hypothesis for two reasons. First, the play gives information not present inTacitus' account, for example mention of Poppaea's pregnancy (*Oct*. 591) as a motivating factor for Nero's desire to marry her. Second, the psychological characterization of Octavia and Poppaea is noticeably different in the play as compared to Tacitus' *Annales*. Oddly, Ferri does not mention the different characterization of Nero in each work, though this seems as remarkable as that of Poppaea and Octavia. Further, he does not refer to the earlier dating of *Octavia*. Nevertheless, the assertion of the impossibility of the first hypothesis can be made with confidence.

Ferri, who feels strongly that the author of *Octavia* was dependent on, if not Tacitus, at least other written sources, concedes that the elimination of the first hypothesis seems to make a strong case for the third, namely that the author of *Octavia* and Tacitus were dependent on a common source, though not on one another. However,

Ferri insists that the second and third hypotheses are not mutually exclusive of one another, and that, indeed, Tacitus drew inspiration from *Octavia* for *Annales* 14.63.

The essence of Ferri's argument is that the exit scene in *Octavia* is deliberately reminiscent of the exit scene in Sophocles' *Antigone*. If a scene treated similarly in *Octavia* and in Tacitus has a dramatic origin, then Ferri argues that the inference should be made that the dramatic influence runs from the praetexta to Tacitus. Further, according to Ferri, Tacitus' version is imprecise in certain details and this is owing to his indebtedness to the poetic license of the author of *Octavia*.

Sophocles' Antigone and the heroine of *Octavia* are both the victims of an angry tyrant, and both are escorted by military guard to their deaths. In both plays, as the tragic victims depart the stage, a chorus expresses their sorrow for their fate, and attempts to ease their anxiety of approaching death. In order to establish the indebtedness of the author of *Octavia* to Sophocles' *Antigone*, first Ferri cites as direct parallels between the two plays the announcement of the heroines' entrances by the respective choruses (*Ant*. 807-810; *Oct*. 892-95):

> ***Χορός***
> *νῦν δ' ἤδη 'γὼ καὐτὸς θεσμῶν*
> *ἔξω φέρομαι τάδ' ὁρῶν ἴσχειν δ'*
> *οὐκέτι πηγὰς δύναμαι δάκρυ*
> *τὸν παγκοίτην ὅθ' ὁρῶ θάλαμον*
> *τήνδ' Ἀντιγόνην ἀνύτουσαν.*
>
> Lo I myself am borne aside,
> From Justice, as I view this bride.
> (O sight an eye in tears to drown)
> Antigone, so young, so fair,
> Thus hurried down

Death's bower with the dead to share.[101]

CHORUS
modo cui patriam reddere cives
aulum et fratris voluere toros,
nunc ad poenam letumque trahi
flentem miseram cernere possunt.

Just now the citizens planned to restore her
To her father's palace, her brother's bed,
But now they can watch her dragged away
In tears and sorrow to suffering and death.

Next Ferri cites the laments of the heroines' to the choruses (*Ant*. 877-82; *Oct*. 899-924):

'Αντιγόνη
ἄκλαυτος, ἄφιλος, ἀνυμέναιος ταλαίφρων ἄγομαι
τὰν πυμάταν ὁδόν. οὐκέτι μοι τόδε
λαμπάδος ἱερὸν ὄμμα
θέμις ὁρᾶν ταλαίνᾳ.
τὸν δ' ἐμὸν πότμον ἀδάκρυτον
οὐδεὶς φίλων στενάζει.

Unwept, unwed, unfriended, hence I go,
No longer may I see the day's bright eye;
Not one friend left to share my bitter woe,
And o'er my ashes heave one passing sigh.

OCTAVIA
Quo me trahitis, quodve tyrannus
aut exilium regina iubet—
si mihi vitam fracta remittit,
tot iam nostris evicta malis?
Sin caede mea
cumalare parat luctus nostros,
invidet etiam
cur in patria mihi saeva mori?
Sed iam spes est nulla salutis:
fratris cerno miseranda ratem.

[101] Soph. *Ant*. Text and translation by F. Storr taken from *Sophocles*, The Loeb Classical Library, vol.I (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press). All subsequent citations from *Antigone* are from the same source.

Hac est cuius vecta carina
quondam genetrix;
nunc et thalamis expulse soror
miseranda vehar.
Nullum pietas nunc numen habet,
nec sunt superi;
regnat mundo tristis Erinys.
Quis mea digne deflere potest
mala? Quae lacrimis nostris questus
reddere aedon?
Cuius pinnas
utinam miserae mihi fata darent!
Fugerem luctus ablata meos
pinna volucri
procul et coetus hominum tristes
caedemque feram.
Sola in vacuo
nemore et tenui ramo pendens
querulo possem gutture maestum
fundere murmur.

Where do you drag me? What place of exile
Is decreed by the tyrant or his queen?
Assuming she grants me my life, won over
And softened at last by my many sorrows.
But if she plans to crown my ordeals
With murder, why does she cruelly grudge me
Even to die in my native land?
But now I see my brother's boat:
Piteous, no hope of safety left!
This is the vessel on which his mother
Was passenger once;
Now its piteous passenger will be his sister,
The wife he divorced.
There is no god of righteousness now,
No gods exist;
The grim Erinys rules the world.
Who could make a fitting lament
For my troubles? What plaintive nightingale
Could express my sorrows?
I sadly wish
That fate had granted me her wings!
With swift wings I could get away
To escape my griefs,

Far from the dismal haunts of men
And bestial slaughter.
Alone in the empty
Woods, and perched on a slender bough,
I could utter a stream of plaintive notes,
My song of sorrow.

Finally, he cites the consolations of both choruses (*Ant*. 944-87; *Oct*. 929-57):

Χορός
ἔτλα καὶ Δανάας οὐράνιον φῶς
ἀλλάξαι δέμας ἐν χαλκοδέτοις αὐλαῖς·
κρυπτομένα δ' ἐν τυμβήρει θαλάμῳ κατεζεύχθη·
καίτοι καὶ γενεᾷ τίμιος, ὦ παῖ παῖ,
καὶ Ζηνὸς ταμιεύεσκε γονὰς χρυσορύτους.
ἀλλ' ἁ μοιριδία τις δύνασις δεινά·
οὔτ' ἄν νιν ὄλβος οὔτ' Ἄρης, οὐ πύργος, οὐχ ἁλίκτυποι
κελαιναὶ νᾶες ἐκφύγοιεν.

Χορός
ζεύχθη δ' ὀξύχολος παῖς ὁ Δρύαντος,
Ἠδωνῶν βασιλεύς, κερτομίοις ὀργαῖς
ἐκ Διονύσου πετρώδει κατάφαρκτος ἐν δεσμῷ.
οὕτω τᾶς μανίας δεινὸν ἀποστάζει
ἀνθηρόν τε μένος. κεῖνος ἐπέγνω μανίαις
ψαύων τὸν θεὸν ἐν κερτομίοις γλώσσαις.
παύεσκε μὲν γὰρ ἐνθέους γυναῖκας εὐιόν τε πῦρ,
φιλαύλους τ' ἠρέθιζε Μούσας.

Χορός
παρὰ δὲ κυανεᾶν πελάγει διδύμας ἁλὸς
ἀκταὶ Βοσπόριαι ἥδ' ὁ Θρηκῶν ἄξενος
Σαλμυδησσός, ἵν' ἀγχίπτολις Ἄρης
δισσοῖσι Φινείδαις
εἶδεν ἀρατὸν ἔλκος
τυφλωθὲν ἐξ ἀγρίας δάμαρτος
ἁλαὸν ἁλαστόροισιν ὀμμάτων κύκλοις
ἀραχθέντων, ὑφ' αἱματηραῖς
χείρεσσι καὶ κερκίδων ἀκμαῖσιν.

Χορός
κατὰ δὲ τακόμενοι μέλεοι μελέαν πάθαν
κλαῖον, ματρὸς ἔχοντες ἀνύμφευτον γονάν·
ἁ δὲ σπέρμα μὲν ἀρχαιογόνων
ἄνταν' Ἐρεχθειδᾶν,

τηλεπόροις δ' ἐν ἄντροις
τράφη θυέλλαισιν ἐν πατρῴαις
Βορεὰς ἄμιππος ὀρθόποδος ὑπὲρ πάγου
θεῶν παῖς. ἀλλὰ κἀπ' ἐκείνᾳ
Μοῖραι μακραίωνες ἔσχον, ὦ παῖ.

Like to thee, that maiden fair,
Danae, in her brass bound tower,
Once exchanged the glad sunlight
For a cell, her bridal bower.
And yet she sprang of royal line,
My child, like thine,
And nursed the seed
By her conceived
Of Zeus descending in a golden shower.
Strange are the ways of Fate, her power
Nor wealth, nor arms, withstand, nor tower;
Nor brass-prowed ships, that breast the sea
From fate can flee.

Thus Dryas' child, the rash Edonian King,
For words of high disdain
Did Bachhus to a rocky dungeon bring,
To cool the madness of a fevered brain.
His frenzy passed,
He learnt at last
'Twas madness gibes against a god to fling.
For once he fain had quenched the Maenad's fire;
And of the tuneful Nine provoked the ire.

By the Iron Rocks that guard the double main,
On Bosporus' lone strand,
Where stretcheth the Salmydessus' plain,
In the wild Thracian land,
There on his borders wild Ares witnessed
The vengeance by a jealous step-dame ta'en,
The gore that trickled from a spindle red,
The sightless orbits of her step-sons twain.

Wasting away they mourned their piteous doom,
The blasted issue of their mother's womb.
But she her lineage could trace
To great Erechtheus' race;
Daughter of Boreas' in her sire's vast caves
Reared, where the tempest raves,

> Swift as his horses o'er the hills she sped;
> A child of gods; yet she, my child, like thee,
> By Destiny
> That knows not death nor age—she too was vanquished.
>
> CHORUS of *Octavia* (CITED ABOVE, pp. 72-74)

In *Octavia*, no mention is made of the fact that, prior to her banishment to Pandateria, Octavia was "put away" by Nero in Campania, a detail given by Tacitus at *Annales* 14.60. Ferri argues that the author of *Octavia* deliberately ignored this fact for dramatic purposes. In the play, it is important that Octavia's departure should be imagined as occurring in Rome, before a chorus of Roman citizens who are sympathetic but powerless to alter her fate. On the other hand, Ferri finds confusion between Tacitus' account of Octavia's forced retirement to Campania (*Ann*.14.60), and her subsequent departure to Pandateria (*Ann*.14.63). Who are the anonymous onlookers in Tacitus? Campanians? Pandaterians? Would they have had such detailed knowledge of the circumstances of Octavia's marriage and banishment? Or is the reader to suppose that the anonymous onlookers are Roman citizens who have dared to journey to Pandateria in loyal but vain support for Octavia? Ferri feels that the source of the confusion lies in Tacitus' dependence upon *Octavia*, that the anonymous onlookers, "are in fact literary Romans, on loan from the *Octavia*."

Ferri's argument for the dependence of Tacitus on *Octavia* as a source or inspiration of dramatic form is, though unprovable, persuasive enough to be accepted. Chapter Two of this thesis has shown the wide variety of source materials that were at Tacitus' disposal, and there seems no good argument against the assumption that he

would have been aquainted with a *praetexta* that managed to find a place in a manuscript of Seneca's plays. Nevertheless, if Ferri adequately establishes Tacitus' indebtedness to *Octavia*, he betrays a poor appreciation of the historian's craft of composition. For instance, while asserting Tacitus' knowledge and use of *Octavia*, he describes this utilization by Tacitus as, "contaminating the facts as narrated by his *auctores* with the literary scenography and the rhetorical fabrications of the *praetexta*." At another place, Ferri argues that Tacitus, "overlooked historical plausibility because he wanted to adopt the *commos* of the play." Finally, Ferri claims that the anonymity of Tacitus' "chorus" at *Annales* 14.63, "bears witness to his awareness of, not to say embarrassment in, using a literary, dramatized version of the incident."[102] Chapter Three of this thesis has demonstrated that contamination of the facts, historical implausibility, and embarrassment or avoidance of using literary and dramatic techniques were not qualities of ancient Roman historians, especially one of the rank of Tacitus. On the contrary, it is the delicate balance of accurate historical content and an engaging, skillful prose form which makes up the essence of Roman historiography. Tacitus' dependence upon *Octavia* for dramatic inspiration does not merely provide him with an opportunity to create allusions to a famous *commos* (lament) in ancient Greek tragedy, and thereby increase the pathos of his heroine, Octavia. But also, as was argued earlier, the effect of anonymous spectators commenting on the characters and action in the narrative allows the historian's voice to recede, so that he might make morally or emotionally charged comments on the narrative without sounding obtrusive and heavyhanded. In fact, I would argue that this technique goes back as far as Homer himself. For example, in Book 7 of the *Iliad*, Hector

[102] Ferri, "Octavia's Heroines," 343-48 (for all quotes).

challenges the Greeks to issue forth a champion to do single combat with him in order to decide the fate of Helen and Troy. After a long and tense silence, followed by an abortive attempt by Menelaus to take up the gauntlet, and an inspirational dressing down by Nestor, nine Greeks offer themselves for the task. A casting of lots is required to determine Hector's foe, during which the poet describes the pensive Greek rank and file thus (*Il*.7.177-80):

> λαοὶ δ' ἠρήσαντο, θεοῖσι δὲ χεῖρας ἀνέσχον·
> ὧδε δέ τις εἴπεσκεν ἰδὼν εἰς οὐρανὸν εὐρύν·
> Ζεῦ πάτερ ἠὲ Αἴαντα λαχεῖν, ἠὲ Τυδέος υἱόν,
> ἠὲ αὐτὸν βασιλῆα πολυχρύσοιο Μυκήνης.
>
> and the host made prayer, and lifted up their hands to the gods. And thus would one say with a glance up to the broad heaven: "Father Zeus, grant that the lot fall on Aias or the son of Tydeus or else on the king himself of Mycene rich in gold.[103]

After the lot of Aias has been chosen, and he and Hector are about to join battle, again the poet has the anonymous throng express themselves (*Il*.7.200-05):

> λαοὶ δ' ἠρήσαντο, θεοῖσι δὲ χεῖρας ἀνέσχον·
> ὧδε δέ τις εἴπεσκεν ἰδὼν εἰς οὐρανὸν εὐρύν·
> Ζεῦ πάτερ ἠὲ Αἴαντα λαχεῖν, ἠὲ Τυδέος υἱόν,
> ἠὲ αὐτὸν βασιλῆα πολυχρύσοιο Μυκήνης.
>
> So spake he, and they made prayer to king Zeus, son of Cronos; and thus would one speak with a glance up to the broad heaven: "Father Zeus, that rulest from Ida, most glorious, most great, vouchsafe victory to Aias and that he win him glorious renown; or if so be thou lovest Hector too, and carest for him, vouchsafe to both equal might and glory."

[103] This and the following quote from Hom. *Il*. Text and translation from *The Ilaid*, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

Again, this technique of masking the narrator's voice behind a group of anonymous onlookers allows for highly pathetic comments on the action, and draws the reader, without noticing, into closer sympathy with the character being commented on.

At *Octavia* 669ff., a chorus of Romans delivers a spirited lament and complaint against the banishment of Octavia. The chorus contrasts "Claudia," who has been driven from the home of Nero, with the *victrix Poppaea*, who now occupies the marriage bed of the emperor. Here, the rivalry of the two women is hinted at, a rivalry which is a strong feature in Tacitus' account. One notable difference is the fact that the chorus in the play refers to the tragic heroine as "Claudia," a name which Tacitus avoids. In the case of the chorus, this use of the name makes sense, since the former emperor Claudius is favorably depicted in the play, and his murder deplored (*Oct*. 34-44):

> Fulgore primo captus et fragili bono
> fallacies aulae quisquis attonitus stupet,
> subito latentis ecce Fortunae impetus
> modo praepotentem cernat eversam domum
> stirpemque Claudi, cuius imperio fuit
> subiectus orbis, paruit liber diu
> Oceanus et recepit invitus rates.
> en qui Britannis primus imposuit iugum,
> ignota tantis classibus texit freta,
> interque gentes barbaras tutus fuit
> et saevae maria, coniugis scelere occidit.
>
> Are people captivated and awestruck by the glittering first impression, the unstable boon of a beguiling throne? They should look at the results of lurking Fortune's sudden onslaught—behold the overthrow of Claudius' house, just now supremely powerful, and of his offspring! The whole world was subject to his sway; Ocean, free for so long, obeyed him and reluctantly received his ships. See, the man who first imposed the yoke upon the Britons, who covered unknown straits with vast fleets and passed safely through barbaric tribes and savage seas, fell through his own wife's wickedness!

The name Claudia attaches the heroine more closely to the tragic fate of her father, evokes associations with her murdered brother Brittanicus, and, by means of her own impending doom, further emphasizes the downfall of the Claudian *gens*. Indeed, the author of *Octavia* has chosen this downfall as a major motif of the play. Tacitus, on the other hand, has absolutely no interest in glorifying the name of Claudius, and so shuns the name Claudia intentionally.

This choral ode, which presages the riotous storming of the Capitoline and Palatine—a scene depicted in both *Octavia* and *Annales* 14—also contains a short encomium on the former power of the Roman people (*Oct*.676-82):

> ubi Romani vis est populi,
> fregit claros quae saepe duces,
> dedit invictae leges patriae,
> fasces dignis civibus olim,
> iussit bellum pacemque, feras
> gentes domuit,
> captos reges carcere clausit?
>
> Where is the might of the Roman people
> which often crushed renowned commanders,
> safeguarded our country and gave it laws,
> gave power to *worthy* citizens once,
> commanded war or peace, subdued
> ferocious tribes,
> shut away captured kings in prison?

These lines express another major motif of the play, a populist protest against the oppression of Nero, and an appeal to the former virtues of the Roman people. Contrast this with Tacitus' objectives. One need only think of the remark he makes (*Ann*.14.60) just prior to his depiction of the people's uprising, that the people may act with greater audacity than those of senatorial rank, since faced with fewer dangers, but that their

actions are guided by no rational policy, only brief emotional outbursts. In other words, Tacitus is careful not to allow the people to have a positive role in his account of Octavia. Indeed, their ineffectiveness to achieve any lasting success is emphasized. Conversely, his snubbing of the people enables him to keep the tragic fate of Octavia in the forefront of his narrative, which will eventually culminate in the rhetorical outburst at the end of *Annales* 64. In fact, this passage is now revealed as the ultimate objective of Tacitus' narration of the deaths of Octavia and Agrippina—the deplorable servility of the Roman senate to an effeminate emperor and his power-crazed queen.

At *Octavia* 780, a messenger enters the stage to report the storming of the Capitoline and Palatine by the people. The cause of the riot in the play is plainly the anger of the people over the putting away of Octavia and the marriage of Nero and Poppaea (*Oct*.780-93):

NUNTIUS
Quicumque tectis miles exultat ducis,
defendat aulam, cui furor populi imminet.
trepidi cohortes ecce praefecti trahunt
praesidia ad urbis, victa nec cedit metu
concepta rabies temere, sed vires capit.

CHORUS
Quis iste mentes agitate attonitus furor?

NUNTIUS
Octaviae favore percussa agmina
et efferata per nefas ingens ruunt.

CHORUS
Quid ausa facere quove consilio doce.

NUNTIUS
Reddere penates Claudiae divi parent

torosque fratris, debitam partem imperi.

CHORUS
Quos iam tenet Poppaea concordi fide?

NUNTIUS
Hinc urit animos pertinax nimium favor
et in furorem temere praecipites agit.

MESSENGER
Those soldiers who are celebrating beneath the emperor's roof must defend the palace! It is threatened by the people's fury. The Prefects, look, are alarmed and are bringing up cohorts to protect the city. This frenzy, that started so recklessly, is not caving in to fear, but rather gaining strength.

CHORUS
What is this insane fury affecting their minds?

MESSENGER
Partisanship for Octavia has stirred the mob up, and made them run wild, committing great outrage.

CHORUS
What are they making bold to do, what is their aim? Tell us!

MESSENGER
They plan to give Claudia back her deified father's home and marriage with her brother—her rightful share of the throne.

CHORUS
But now Poppaea holds these things, with pledges given on both sides.

MESSENGER
That is why they are inflamed with an all too stubborn sense of partisanship, and driven pell-mell into mindless rage.

In Tacitus' version, however, the people are in a celebratory mood. We have discussed in Chapter Three the confusion over the true cause of the people's riot, caused by the lacuna in the text at the end of *Annales* 14.60. Nevertheless, regardless of whether

the people acted under the false impression of Octavia's restoration, or whether, in fact, Tacitus claimed that Nero had truly recalled her, it was in a mood of exultation that the people swarmed the Capitoline and Palatine. Indeed, as has been noted, Tacitus introduces his description of this scene with the remark that at last the gods were worshipped. Again, Tacitus' characterization of the people deemphasizes their ability to play a meaningful role in political affairs in Rome, and stresses what should be their proper behavior—at least in Tacitus' conservative senatorial view—that is, subservience to the gods, and implicitly, to the Roman senate.

Octavia and Tacitus' *Annales* both record the pulling down of images and statues of Poppaea, and their replacement with those of Octavia. However, again they differ in their characterization of the mood of the masses. In the *Annales*, they are strewing flowers in the forum and raising Octavia's images in the temples, after which they proceed to the Palatine to praise Nero himself. On the other hand, the *vulgus* in Octavia are in an entirely different mood (*Oct.* 794-803):

> Quaecumque claro marmore effigies stetit
> aut aere fulgens, ora Poppaeae gerens,
> afflicta vulgi manibus et saevo iacet
> eversa ferro; membra per partes trahunt
> diducta laqueis, obruunt turpi diu
> calcata caeno, verba conveniunt feris
> immixta factis, quae timor reticet meus.
> saepire flammis principis sedem parant,
> populi nisi irae coniugem reddat novam,
> reddat penates Claudiae victus suos.
>
> Every statue of bright marble or gleaming bronze that carries Poppaea's features lies dashed down by the hands of the rabble, toppled with the merciless steel; they are pulling off the limbs with rope nooses, dragging them away piecemeal, trampling them at length and driving them into the filthy mud. Their wild actions are accompanied and matched by filthy

> words—which I am afraid to utter. They are preparing to ring the emperor's house with flames, unless he hands over his new wife to the people's anger, admits defeat, and gives Claudia back her home.

In addition to the different attitudes expressed toward the Roman populace in *Octavia*, as compared with Tacitus' *Annales*, another explanation for the discrepancy can be adduced from what follows in the two versions. A major motif of *Octavia*, as has been stated, is the championing of the cause of the people against the oppressive reign of Nero. Thus, the uprising of the people is necessarily depicted as riotous and violent, a genuine threat to the safety of the emperor. Hence, what naturally follows in the play is a hostile and irate reaction from Nero (*Oct*. 820-33), in which the explanations for Octavia's execution, and the responsibility for it, are clearly presented:

> O lenta nimium militis nostri manus
> et irae patiens post nefas tantum mea,
> quod non cruor civilis accensas faces
> extinguit in nos, caede nec populi madet
> funerea Roma, quae viros tales tulit!
> admissa sed iam morte puniri parum est;
> graviora meruit impium plebis scelus.
> et illa, cui me civium subicit furor,
> suspecta coniunx et soror semper mihi,
> tandem dolori spiritum reddat meo
> iramque nostrum sanguine extinguat suo.
> mox tecta flammis concidant urbis meis,
> ignes ruinae noxium populum premant
> turpisque egestas, saeva cum luctu fames.
>
> Oh, my soldiers' hands are too slow, my own anger too tolerant after such an outrage as this! Witness the fact that the torches the citizens lit against me are not being quenched in their own blood, and that Rome, which bore such men, has not been left desolate and soaked by a massacre of the people. But now death is too slight a penalty for their offences; the rabble's sacrilegious crimes have deserved something weightier. And that woman to whom the citizens' fury would subject me, that wife and sister whom I have always suspected, must finally forfeit her life to my wrath

> and quench my anger with her blood. Next the city's buildings must fall to flames set by me. Fire, ruined homes, sordid poverty, cruel starvation along with grief must crush this criminal populace.

Now, this is exactly opposite to what is presented in *Annales* 14.61. There, after setting up Octavia's images in the temples of the forum, the crowd begins to swarm the Palatine to rejoice in the reconciliation of Nero and his young wife (*Iamque et Palatium multitudine et clamoribus complebant*). Suddenly, soldiers issue forth from the Palace, quickly disperse the horde of people, and Poppaea's images (*honos*) are restored. Tacitus does not present an angry speech from Nero. He makes no mention of Nero at all. Instead, he leaves the detail of who gave the order ambiguous, but suggestive that it was Poppaea. Indeed, what follows in Tacitus is the forceful speech of Poppaea, who is described as being as fierce in her fear as she is in her hatred (*Quae semper odio, tum et metu atrox*). It is as if the characterizations of Nero and Poppaea in *Octavia* are absolutely reversed in Tacitus. Again, this reveals the divergent themes of the *Octavia* and the Neronian books of Tacitus' *Annales*. The former is a tragic homage to Octavia and the house of Claudius, while at the same time a sympathetic defense of the Roman people against the oppression of Nero. Tacitus' work is a harsh condemnation of the servility of the Roman senate to a degenerate principate.

As was argued earlier, Tacitus strove to link the tragic destinies of Octavia and Agrippina, by beginning and ending *Annales* 14 with their respective murders in a ring composition, and ironically identifying the two women with one another as victims of the power-hungry Poppaea and the fixated passion of Nero. In the choral ode of *Octavia* 273-376, the tragedies of Octavia and Agrippina are also linked. Allusions from mythology

and Roman history are utilized by the play's author to create pathos for the two women, a device which also exploits patriotic feelings of his Roman audience while at the same time intensifying the loathsomeness of Nero.

The chorus begins by reacting to the news of Nero's divorce of Octavia with distress that the daughter of Claudius has been ousted from her own home, as the rightful provider of an heir that will ensure Rome's and the world's peace. Then in a melding of the mythological and historical worlds (*Oct*. 283-88) they stress the similarity of Juno and the wife of the Roman emperor:

> maxima Iuno:
> soror Augusti sociata toris
> cur a patria pellitur aula?
> sancta quid illi prodest pietas
> divusque pater?
> quid virginitas castusque pudor?
>
> Mighty Juno
> is her brother's appointed, established spouse:
> then why is the sister and marriage partner
> of Augustus driven from her father's palace?
> What help to her is her unstained goodness,
> her deified father,
> her maidenhood, her chastity?

The ode then seamlessly shifts to early Roman history, as the chorus deplores the loss of Roman manliness (*virtus Romana*) that should have been displayed in loyalty to the children of Claudius. They give examples of earlier exploits of the race of Mars (*genus Martis*): the avenging of Virginia by the overthrow of the decemvirate, the avenging of Lucretia by the expulsion of the Tarquins from Rome, and the punishment of Tullia for

the atrocities committed against her own father. This last example leads the chorus to a lament of Agrippina.

In fact, the remainder of this choral ode (*Oct*. 309-376) is a detailed account of the final days of Agrippina, beginning with the failed attempt to kill her by shipwreck, and ending with her dying words as she is struck down by one of Nero's servants. In many points of historical detail, and also in dramatic presentation, there are parallels with Tacitus' *Annales* 14.5-8. A comparison of the two texts suggests that Tacitus may well have turned to *Octavia* as one of his sources for his account of Agrippina's tragic death.

The chorus in *Octavia* describes the launching of the ship, and its subsequent collapse as follows:

> Properant placidos linquere portus
> iussi nautae,
> resonant remis pulsata freta;
> fertur in altum provecta ratis,
> quae resoluto robore labens
> pressa dehiscit sorbetque mare.
> tollitur ingens clamor ad astra
> cum femineo mixtus plancto.
>
> On command, the sailors
> hasten to leave the calm of the harbor.
> The sea resounds to the slap of oars,
> the vessel stands out into the deep.
> Then the ship's timbers open, it collapses,
> splits under pressure and drinks the sea in.
> A deafening outcry mounts to heaven,
> mingled with women's lamentation.

Likewise, in Tacitus' version (*Ann*.14.5) we find a placid sea, and a heaven which seems to be an awaiting witness to the impending disaster:

> Noctem sideribus inlustrem et placido mari quietam quasi convincendum
> ad scelus di praebuere.
>
> A starlit night and the calm of an unruffled sea appeared to have been sent
> by Heaven to afford proof of guilt.

While the setting of the placid sea and witnessing heavens is similar, what distinguishes the two texts is Tacitus' ironical comment on the gods in heaven. They only seem to look down on the crime in condemnation, but in fact, Tacitus intimates that they remain aloof and uncaring.

The chorus in *Octavia* makes no mention of the deaths of Agripppina's servants, Crepereius Gallus and Acerronia. Naturally, since the macabre humor of Tacitus' description of their demise would be out of place in a choral lament. Both *Octavia* (346-49) and Tacitus (*Ann*.14.5.3) depict Agrippina buffeting the waves of the sea, as she struggles to escape drowning. Tacitus adds the detail (sardonic or heroic?) that the attempt was made, in effect, with one arm, since Agrippina had received a wound in the shoulder. *Octavia*, rather melodramatically, has Agrippina deliver a speech of despair (*Oct*. 332-44) while the waves strike against her mouth (*feriunt fluctus ora loquentis*). In a final point of contrast in the shipwreck scene, Tacitus records that Agrippina chanced upon the course of some tiny fishing boats (*occursu lenunculorum*) and was saved. *Octavia* (350-55), on the other hand, stresses the heroism of the people who come to the rescue of the drowning mother of the emperor:

> mansit tacitis in pectoribus
> spreta tristi iam morte fides:
> multi dominae ferre auxilium
> pelago fractis viribus audent;
> brachia quamvis lenta trahentem

voce hortantur manibusque levant.

Still there remains in people's hearts
an unspoken allegiance that scorns grim death.
many make bold to render help
to their lady, despite being weakened by the sea;
although she drags her leaden arms,
they rally her with cries, support her with their hands.

Again, this stresses one of the major motifs of the play—the active, positive role of the people in the affairs of the Imperial household, a role which Tacitus suppresses in his account.

Further, Nero's reaction to the news of Agrippina's escape from death in *Octavia*, as compared to Tacitus' description, also reveals the vastly different portrayal of the *princeps* in the two works. In *Octavia* 361-65, as in the later scene of the pulling down of Poppaea's images and the stormimg of the Palatine, in which Nero orders a swift and violent retribution, Nero acts decisively to the report that his mother still lives:

furit ereptam
pelagoque dolet vivere matrem
impius ingens geminatque nefas,
ruit in miserae fata parentis
patiturque moram sceleris nullam.

He is furious and troubled that his mother still lives,
saved from the sea,
and renews his unnatural villainy,
spurs on with his wretched mother's death,
tolerates no delay in the crime.

In contrast, Tacitus (*Ann*.14.7) characterizes Nero as irresolute and panicked (*pavore exanimis*). As we have shown earlier, Tacitus makes Poppaea the true instrument of the death of Agrippina, and of Octavia also, by exploiting Nero's reckless infatuation for

herself. The author of *Octavia*, on the other hand, depicts Nero as the cruel oppressor and destroyer of all—Agrippina, Octavia, and the Roman people alike.

If, after the similar opening setting of the calm sea and onlooking heavens, the two texts diverge in their dramatic presentation of the failed murder by shipwreck, they reunite uncannily in the description of Agrippina's slaying. The chorus in *Octavia* (366-76) describes it thus:

> missus peragit iussa satelles:
> reserat dominae pectora ferro.
> caedis moriens illa ministrum
> rogat infelix,
> utero dirum condat ut ensem:
> "Hic est, hic est fodiendus" ait
> "ferro, monstrum qui tale tulit."
> post hanc vocem
> cum supremo mixtam gemitu
> animam tandem per fera tristem
> vulnera reddit.
>
> An attendant is sent and carries out orders:
> he opens the lady's breast with the sword.
> Dying, the ill-starred woman asks
> the agent of her murder
> to bury that heinous sword in her womb.
> "*This* is what you must stab," she said,
> "with the steel: it brought forth such a monster."
> After these words,
> mixed with a final groan,
> she yielded her sorrowing spirit at last
> through her cruel wounds.

Annales 14.8.4 parallels *Octavia* very closely, as Agrippina voices her final words, and offers up her womb to the destructive blow in essentially the same dramatic manner as in

Octavia:

> Circumsistunt lectum percussores et prior trierarchus fusti caput eius adflixit. Iam in mortem centurioni ferrum destringenti protendens uterum "Ventrum feri" exclamavit multisque vulneribus confecta est.
>
> The executioners surrounded the couch, and the trierarch began by striking her on the head with a club. The centurion was drawing his sword to make an end, when she proffered her wound to the blow. "Strike here," she exclaimed, and was dispatched with repeated wounds.

Did Tacitus use *Octavia* as a source for his depiction of Agrippina's murder? It is, of course, impossible to prove. Still, especially if one accepts Ferri's argument that Tacitus drew on the play for dramatic inspiration for the scene of Octavia's departure to her tragic doom, it is plausible that, in his *Annales*, Tacitus modeled Agrippina's last words and final gesture on *Octavia*. Another alternative would be that the author of *Octavia* followed very closely the account of an earlier writer, and a few decades later in composing the *Annales*, either a) Tacitus also followed this same author, and coincidentally wrote a very similar death scene to that in *Octavia*; or b) Tacitus followed both the earlier writer *and* the author of *Octavia*. It seems unlikely that Tacitus, in the process of using an earlier writer as a source, would have written, purely by chance, a depiction of Agrippina's murder which so closely parallels the scene in *Octavia*. Or are we to believe that both Tacitus and the author of *Octavia* were such slavish imitators of some earlier writer? On the other hand, if Tacitus knew of an earlier writer's verion of Agrippina's death, and in addition the scene in *Octavia* modeled upon it, are we to believe that he was such an uninspired imitator as to copy both? I suggest that not only the similarities of the departure scene, but the similarities of the descriptions of

Agrippina's death in both *Octavia* and the *Annales*, argue that it was very plausible that Tacitus utilized *Octavia* as one of his many sources.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Aristotle, Longinus, and Demetrius. *Aristotle : The Poetics*. Loeb Classical Library. 23 Vols. Translated by W. Hamilton Fyfe. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932.

Cicero. *Brutus*. Loeb Classical Library. Translated by G.L. Hendrickson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971.

Cicero. *De Oratore*. Loeb Classical Library. Translated by E.W. Sutton. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934.

Cicero. *Letters to His Friends, Vol.1*. Loeb Classical Library. 4 Vols. Translated by W. Glynn Williams. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979.

Dio Cassius. *Dio's Roman History*. Loeb Classical Library. 9 Vols. Translated by Earnest Cary. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Homer. *The Iliad*. Vol.I. The Loeb Classical Library. 2 Vols. Translated by A.T. Murray. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960.

Lucretius. *De Rerum Natura*. Loeb Classical Library. Translated by W.H.D. Rouse. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Pliny. *Letters and Panegyricus*. Loeb Classical Library. 2 Vols. Edited by E.H. Warmington. Translated by Betty Radice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Seneca. *Octavia : A Play Attributed to Seneca*. Edited by Rolando Ferri. Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries; V. 41, Cambridge, U.K. and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Seneca. *Tragedies II*. Loeb Classical Library. 2 Vols. Edited and Translated by John G. Fitch. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.

Suetonius. *Suetonius II*. The Loeb Classical Library. 2 Vols. Translated by J.C. Rolfe. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979.

Sophocles. *Sophocles I*. The Loeb Classical Library. 2 Vols. Translated by F. Storr. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931.

Tacitus. *The Annals*. Loeb Classical Library. 4 Vols. Translated by John Jackson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1937.

Tacitus. *The Complete Works of Tacitus*. New York: The Modern Library, 1942.

Tacitus. *Cornelii Taciti Annalium Ab Excessu Divi Augusti Libri. The Annals of Tacitus, Edited with Introduction and Notes* by Henry Furneaux. Clarendon Press Series, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1884.

Tacitus. *Annals XIV*. Edited by E.C. Woodcock. Bristol, UK: Bristol Classical Press, 2001.

Secondary Sources

Baehrens, E. "Die Octavia Praetexta und Seneca." *Philologische Wochenschrift* 43 (1923): 668-71.

Baldry, H.C. *The Greek Tragic Theatre*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1971.

Baldwin, B. “Women in Tacitus.” *Prudentia* 4 (1972): 83-101.

Barnes, T.D. "The Date of the Octavia." *Museum Helveticum* 39 (1982): 215-217.

Bastomsky, S.J. “Tacitus, *Annals* 14, 64, 1: Octavia’s Pathetic Plea.” *Latomus* 31 (1972): 606-10.

Bellandi, F. "Tra Seneca e Sofocle: Sulla Scena d'apertura di *Octavia* di Ps.-Seneca." *Paideia* 52 (1997): 31-56.

Boyle, A. J. *Tragic Seneca : An Essay in the Theatrical Tradition*. London; New York: Routledge, 1997.

Carbone, M.E. "*Octavia*: Structure, Date, and Authenticity." *Phoenix* 31 (1977): 48-67.

Champlin, Edward. *Nero*. Cambridge, Mass.; London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003.

Daitz, S. “Tacitus’ Technique of Character Portrayal.” *American Journal of Philology* 81 (1960): 30-52.

Enk, P.J. "De *Octavia* Praetexta." *Mnemosyne* 54 (1926): 390-415.

Erasmo, Mario. *Roman Tragedy. Theatre to Theatricality*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004.

Ferri, Rolando. "Octavia's Heroines: Tac. *Ann*. 14.63-64." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 98 (1998): 339-56.

Ferri, Rolando. “Two Textual Notes on Ps.-Seneca *Octavia* (458, 747).” *Classical Quarterly* 49.2 (1999): 634-37.

Flower, H.I. "*Fabulae Praetextae* in Context: When Were Plays on Contemporary Subjects Performed in Republican Rome?" *Classical Quarterly* 45 (1995): 170-90.

Fornara, C. *The Nature of History in Anclent Greece and Rome*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

Galimberti, A. “L’ Octavia e il suo Autore: P. Pomponio Secundo?” *Aevum* 75 (2001): 79-99.

Helm, R. “Die Praetexta ‘*Octavia’*.” *S B Berlin* 16 (1934) : 283-347.

Herrington, C.J. "*Octavia* Praetexta: A Survey." *Classical Quarterly* 11 (1961): 18-30.

Klinger, Friedrich von. “Beobachtungen über Sprache und Stil des Tacitus am Anfang des 13. Annalenbuches,’’ in *Tacitus*, V. Pöschl, ed., *Wege der Forschung* 97. Darmstadt, 1969.

Kragelund, P. "The Prefect's Dilemma and the Date of the Octavia." *Classical Quarterly* 38 (1988): 492-508.

_____. "Nero's *Luxuria*, in Tacitus and in *Octavia*." *Classical Quarterly* 50 (2000): 494-515.

Kroll, Wilhelm. “Zur Historiographie: Tacitus,” in *Studien zum Verständnis der römischen Literatur*. Stuttgart, 1924.

Leeman, A.D. “Structure and Meaning in the Prologues of Tacitus.” *Yale Classical Studies* 23 (1973): 169-208.

Löfstedt, E. “On the Style of Tacitus.” *Journal of Roman Studies* 38 (1948): 1-8.

Luce, T.J. “Ancient Views on the Causes of Bias in Historical Writing.” *Classical Philology* 84 (1989): 16-31.

Martin, Ronald. *Tacitus*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.

McDonald, A.H. “Theme and Style in Roman Historiography.” *Journal of Roman Studies*, 65 (1975): 1-10.

Meier, Christian. “Historical Answers to Historical Questions: The Origins of History in Ancient Greece.” *Arethusa* 20 (1987): 41-57.

Mellor, Ronald. *Tacitus*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Millar, Fergus. *A Study of Cassius Dio.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964.

Miller, N.P. “The Dramatic Speech in Tacitus.” *The American Journal of Philology*, 85, No. 3 (1964): 279-96.

Newbold, R.F. “The Vulgus inTacitus.” *Rheinische Museum fur Philologie* 119 (1976): 85-92.

Poe, J.P. "Octavia Praetexta and Its Senecan Model." *American Journal of Philology* 110 (1989): 434-59.

Rudich, Vasily. *Political Dissidence under Nero: The Price of Dissimulation*. London ; New York: Routledge, 1992.

Sage, M.M. “Tacitus’ Historical Works: A Survey and Appraisal.“ *ANRW* II (1990): 853-1030.

Schmidt, P.L. "Die Poetisierung Und Mythisierung Der Geschichte in Der Tragodie Octavia." *ANRW* 32.2 (1985): 1421-53.

Scott, Russell T. “The Text of Tacitus’ *Annals* 14.60-61 and Octavia.” *Classical Journal* (1983): 39-43.

Segal, Charles. “Tacitus and Poetic History: The End of *Annals* 13,” *Ramus* (1973): 107-21.

Sutton, D.H. *The Dramaturgy of Octavia*. Konigstein, 1983.

Syme, Ronald. *Tacitus*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958.

Tanner, R.G. “The Development of Thought and Style in Tacitus.” *ANRW* II (1991): 2689-2751.

Veyne, Paul. *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths: An Essay in the Constitutive Imagination*. Translated by Paula Wissing. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Walker, B. *The Annals of Tacitus: A Study in Writing History*. Manchester: University Press, 1952.

Wellesley, K. “Can You Trust Tacitus?” *Greece and Rome* I (1954): 13-33.

Woodman, A.J. *Rhetoric in Classical Historiogaphy*. Portland: Areopagatica Press, 1988.