OCTAVIA

A PLAY ATTRIBUTED
TO SENECA

ROLANDO FERRI

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A PLAY ATTRIBUTED TO SENECA

EDITED WITH INTRODUCTION
AND COMMENTARY

BY

ROLANDO FERRI

Associate Professor of Latin, Università di Pisa

A LAURA E GIULIO

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PREFACE

This book originated as a Tesi di Perfezionamento of the Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa, where it was examined in July 1998. Most of the work, however, was done during my earlier tenure of the Momigliano Fellowship in the Arts at University College London (1993–96), and during my subsequent residence in the same city until October 1998. The rest of the book was completed during my successive academic postings at Cremona (Università di Pavia) and at Pisa. The final version was delivered to the Press in the summer of 2002.

Of the many debts of gratitude I have contracted in the course of writing this book, the first I wish to acknowledge is to the electors to the Momigliano Fellowship in the Arts, endowed by Anna Laura and Giulio Lepschy in memory of Laura's father, Arnaldo Momigliano. It is to Laura and Giulio that I dedicate this book, for their friendship and inspiring intellectual support over the years. I do not think the book would have existed without them.

Of other London friends, Helen Gregory has put me in the greatest debt, helping me to revise the English of sizeable portions of both Introduction and Commentary, as well as discussing and disagreeing with me on many points of substance and detail. The Italian Department at UCL provided a congenial and inspiring place for work and research, even for a classicist, as did the Institute of Classical Studies and its splendid library. The then Scuola (now Facoltà) di Paleografia of the Università di Pavia helped me financially in various ways, especially in contributing towards the cost of acquiring MS microfilms.

I also wish to thank the Series Editors, above all Michael Reeve, Richard Tarrant, and Jonathan Powell for including the volume among the *Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries.* Anyone who knows these scholars knows what it means to receive their advice. I thank them for their patience, their intelligent suggestions, and for all they have taught me. Gian Biagio Conte

and Elaine Fantham read different semi-final drafts and gave me great encouragement and the benefit of their critical insight along the way. In the commentary, the initials of all these scholars identify some of the more specific proposals they have advanced. Of people I have never met, but who have been with me on my desk these several years, I have to thank Otto Zwierlein. I have taken issue sometimes with what he argues about *Octavia*, but I have learned most of what I know about Senecan tragedy from his edition and his *Kommentar* (Mainz, 1986).

The Cambridge staff who saw the book through the press, and particularly Muriel Hall, Alison Powell and Michael Sharp, deserve praise for dealing so efficiently and helpfully with a difficult typescript.

Finally, I wish to thank my parents for their support, and my wife, Barbara, for accompanying some critical moments with her understanding and intelligence.

INTRODUCTION

I. *OCTAVIA* AND ITS GENRE

Octavia is the only complete Latin drama of historical subject which has come down to us. The title of the play given by the MSS is simply *Octavia*, but the drama is often referred to in modern secondary literature as *Octavia praetexta*, a practice which should be abandoned.[1]

The title heroine, *Claudia Octauia*, was the daughter of the emperor Claudius and of Valeria Messalina. Born in 40, she became Nero's wife in 53,[2] reportedly after being adopted into an unknown family to avoid rumours of incest within the imperial family. In legends of this period, her name always appears without the patronymic *Claudia*.[3] The name *Octauia*, however, was hardly that of an adoptive *gens*. Rather than a *gentilicium*, it must have been an inherited *cognomen* of the imperial family; like her older sister's name, *Antonia*, it was probably given to stress the link with a previous generation of Julio-Claudian women.

The play dramatizes the events of three days in June 62 (a chronological fiction: see next section), culminating in Nero's divorce from Octavia, his subsequent marriage to Poppaea, and, lastly, Octavia's deportation to Pandateria.

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[1] The normal way of quoting dramatic titles is, e.g., *Accius (in) Bruto* or *Aeneadis*. Titles in the form (proper noun) + *tragoedia, comoedia, fabula*, in either order, are found: cf. Plin. *Nat.* 18.65 *Sophocles poeta in fabula Triptolemo* (other instances of this appositive use in titles are given in *TLL* vi.1, s.v. *fabula*, 33.67–9; 34.3–6, also with a genitive); Don. *GL* Keil iv 375.24–5 *sunt . . . sono masculina, intellectu feminina, ut Eunuchus comoedia, Orestes tragoedia*. On the forms of Latin comic and tragic titles in the ancient sources, mainly grammatical, cf. Jocelyn, *Ennius*, 58–63.

[2] Cf. Brassloff in *RE* III.2 (1899), s.v. Claudius, 428, coll. 2893–98; *PIR²* C 1110.

[3] In inscriptions and coin legends, her name seems to appear simply as *Octauia* (so, for instance, in *Acta fratrum Arualium*, Henzen (Berlin, 1874), 67.16; 71.41; 77.26). There are only three exceptions, one inscription (*IGRR* 4.969) and two coin legends (cf. *Roman Provincial Coinage* (London, 1992), 1033 (Crete); 2341 (Methymna)).

Very little is known of *fabulae praetextae*, or *praetextatae*, the historical 'dramas in purple-bordered toga' performed under the Republic.[4] They may have been anything from simple historical pageants, celebrating a triumph, to full-scale dramatizations of significant historical episodes along the lines of Greek tragedy. Ancient critics did not recognize significant differences between *praetextae* and *cothurnatae*, dramas in Greek dress dealing with mythological characters. At any rate, the influence of Greek tragedy, alongside that of Seneca, is very important in *Octavia*, and, as far as can be seen, more significant than that of early Roman drama.[5]

In Republican *praetextae* the celebration of important military and political events, and even of eminent aristocratic individuals, seems to have been prominent.[6] The genre remained productive in the first century of the Empire, but topicality and the reference to contemporary events is unlikely to have been so direct as in early *praetextae*. To judge from some of the extant titles, celebration of Republican heroism played a central part (Maternus wrote a *Cato* and a *Domitius*; Pomponius Secundus an *Aeneas*), sometimes in an anti-imperial key. This element may partly account for the progressive disappearance of *praetextae* from the stage.[7] Political caution, a propensity for themes increasingly irrelevant to popular audiences at large, and a long-term process of 'gentrification' of literature at Rome[8] made *praetextae* more

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[4] On *praetextae* in general cf. R. Helm, *praetexta*, in *RE* 22.2 (1954), 1569–75; for an exhaustive collection of the *testimonia* cf. Klotz, 358.

[5] The genre of *Octavia* has often been discussed, especially as regards its kinship to the Republican *praetextae*: for a survey of the relevant bibliography cf. Schmidt (1985), 1425; Manuwald (2001), 95, n. 86. A recent monographic issue of *Symbolae Osloenses* hosts a debate on *praetextae* in the imperial age: cf. *SO* 73 (2002), 5–105; see also *infra*, 61–2.

[6] On the occasions for performance of Republican *praetextae* and on subsequent restagings of some of them cf. H. I. Flower, *CQ* n.s. 45 (1995), 175.

[7] For a discussion of the staging–recitation debate specifically with reference to *praetextae* cf. the *SO* issue cited in n. 5, *passim*.

[8] See *infra*, chapter 5, n. 137.

suitable for recitation in the auditoria of a few aristocratic patrons than for onstage performance before large theatre audiences.

2. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF *OCTAVIA*

The narrative of Tacitus concerning Octavia in *Ann.* 14.59–64, which is the most complete account of the events covered by the *praetexta*, is compressed and elliptical, and reconstruction of the incidents leading to Octavia's divorce and subsequent execution is accordingly difficult.

According to Tacitus, Nero finally resolved to get rid of Octavia and to marry Poppaea after disposing of Sulla and Plautus (14.59 *posito metu nuptias Poppaeae . . . maturare parat Octauiamque coniugem amoliri*). After a first attempt to suborn a charge of adultery failed, the reason adduced to justify divorce was Octavia's inability to produce an heir (14.60 *exturbat Octauiam, sterilem dictitans; exim Poppaeae coniungitur*). Octavia was at first not removed from Rome, receiving Burrus' house and Plautus' estate in compensation. Tacitus does not relate any specific charge to account for her subsequent banishment to Campania (*mouetur . . . primo ciuilis discidii specie . . . mox in Campaniam pulsa est*): perhaps none was on record, if the princess had been whisked away unobtrusively. There was at first discontent among the Roman people at the treatment meted out to Octavia; then rejoicing, as if Nero had given in and recalled her (text uncertain). Under pressure from Poppaea, Nero decided to eliminate Octavia. A plot was set up against her, and Anicetus, fleet commander at Misenum, was bribed into confessing to adultery with her. Deportation to Pandateria and, shortly afterwards, execution ended the story.

The account of the same events given by Suetonius (*Nero*, 35.2) is even more summary: (*Octauiam*) *dimisit ut sterilem, sed improbante diuortium populo . . . etiam relegauit, denique occidit sub crimine adulteriorum.* Suetonius omits the temporary banishment to Campania, as do Dio's epitomizers (*Hist. Rom.* 62.13.1 Boiss.; but the story

may have been just as succinct in Dio himself). Suetonius (*Nero*, 35.3) also states that eleven days elapsed between Octavia's divorce and Poppaea's marriage (*Poppaeam duodecimo die post diuortium Octauiae in matrimonium acceptam*). The chronology of the events in the play is compressed for reasons of dramatic effectiveness. In fact, while in *Oct.* 437 Nero orders the elimination of Plautus and Sulla on the day preceding the marriage, we deduce from Tacitus that Nero set about the divorce only after receiving confirmation of the two opponents' deaths: as many as thirty days probably elapsed after Nero issued the order and before news of its execution reached him.[9] In the play, on the other hand, the divorce takes place on the same day as the marriage (666).

Clearly, succession was a crucial concern for Nero, and peace and stability required a legitimate heir. If Octavia was really incapable of producing one, divorce was inevitable, and Nero, legally, did not need a pretext. Divorce in similar circumstances was a prerogative of all husbands in Rome.[10] Yet a divorced princess of royal birth, alive and in distress, was too great a temptation for anyone aiming at removing Nero. This point is made explicit by Poppaea in Tac. *Ann.* 14.61, for the benefit of readers not fully alive to the level of violence and political calculation involved in the whole affair: Nero conceivably did not need to be reminded. It has been argued persuasively that the demonstration in favour of Octavia was much more threatening than suggested by our sources and that indeed there were grounds for Nero to fear a general insurrection, masterminded by the Claudian faction.[11]

[9] Plautus was in exile in Asia Minor, and the average time of a journey from Rome can be calculated as between ten and fifteen days (cf. L. Casson, *Ships and Seamanship in the Ancient World*, Princeton, 1971, 281–99).

[10] Cf. S. Treggiari, *Roman Marriage* (Oxford, 1991), 436–8. *exturbat*, in *Ann.* 14.60, is a *t.t.* for divorce; the expulsion from the husband's house was one of the sanctions of separation. Domitian probably divorced his wife under circumstances similar to Octavia's case in 84: evidence and secondary literature in Griffin, *CAH*[2] xi (2000), 61, n. 294.

[11] Cf. E. Meise, *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Julisch-Claudischen Dynastie* (München, 1969), 173.

The charges of adultery subsequently set up against Octavia appear, in this light, as a natural course of events in the context of the ruthless dynastic infighting of Julio-Claudian Rome.[12] If the elimination of Octavia was part of a long-term scheme, divorce was equally necessary as a preliminary step, because charges of adultery could not be brought against a married woman: a husband had to divorce his wife first, then formally accuse her.[13] Under the Julian law, the punishment for adultery was relegation to the islands; in Octavia's case, there was the aggravation that the crime could be presented as a conspiracy against the life of the emperor.[14]

The extant sources are clearly biased against Nero, and fail to give an objective analysis of the political stakes involved in the affair. While Octavia may well have been an innocent victim, the account of her story given by the tragedian is entirely in keeping with, indeed dependent on, the fiercely anti-Neronian stance taken by the historiographical *vulgata*, a fact which has a considerable bearing on the question of the date of the work.

3. THE DATE OF THE PLAY

The case for an early dating

Few scholars at present grant serious consideration to the thesis that Seneca himself wrote *Octavia*, perhaps as an attack on Nero. Even leaving aside all questions of language and style (see *infra*, p. 31), the prophecies of 618 ff. speak in favour of a date later than

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[12] Very probably, Claudius' marriage to Agrippina had been eminently political, a pacificatory move aiming at reuniting the two feuding branches of the royal house. The choice of Nero as his successor was probably made in this spirit, as an attempt to ensure the allegiance of the army to the descendants of Germanicus and Augustus.

[13] Cf. Treggiari, *Roman Marriage* 286: in Ulpian's words, 'as long as a marriage lasts, a woman cannot be accused of adultery'. After the divorce, the husband could set up the suit within sixty days.

[14] In general, an adultery in the emperor's household was a graver matter: cf. Woodman-Martin ad Tac. *Ann.* 3.24.3 (Cambridge, 1996).

68.[15] Giancotti's argument[16] that 'astrologers had prophesied to Nero the end in his life-time' fails to see that the story is a blatant fabrication *post eventum*. What astrologer would have gone and told Nero that he would die an outlaw and a fugitive?

A case has been made more recently for relatively early composition. P. Kragelund[17] has proposed that the play was written to celebrate Galba's triumph in 68.[18] Kragelund's main argument

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[15] The attribution to Seneca was questioned as early as Petrarch (*Fam.* 24.5.17) and Salutati (*Ep.* 3.8 Novati, 1.152 *nonne Neronis exitus . . . plane, prout accidit, recitatur? que premoriens Seneca nec uidit nec . . . potuit diuinare*). Petrarch's letter (1348) blames Seneca for leaving a scathing portrayal of his former pupil after pandering to his vicious inclinations; yet from the charge of composing *Octavia* Seneca could be exonerated if the rumour were true that 'another Seneca' had composed this, as some passages of the play seem to suggest (*Octauie . . . locus aliquis hanc suspitionem recipit*, *Fam.* 24.5.17); cf. R. Sabbadini, *Le scoperte dei codici latini e greci ne' secoli XIV e XV* (Florence, 1905–1914), 2.178. Elsewhere, Petrarch expressed some amazement at the words of 'Seneca' in 377 ff., which seemed to him to forecast the future end of the philosopher too truly (cf. Martellotti, *IMU* 15 (1972), 153–4). Salutati's doubts pivoted mainly on 618–31, where Nero's death is foretold, but considerations of style and literary convention also played a part (cf. Martellotti, 161). For views analogous to Salutati's, or influenced by his judgement, in the margins of several MSS cf. Kragelund (1982), 72–3; Tarrant, *Agam.*, Introd. 37. The author of the marginalia in BL Harl. 2484 (who, however, predates Salutati), for instance, notes at 620–1: *describit mortem Neronis futuram et ex hoc tu potes scire quod Seneca non composuit hoc opus quia Nero necauit Senecam ut dicit Boetius de consolatione et alii*. The question of the authenticity of *Octavia* overlaps with that of the identity of that elusive *Doppelgänger* of Seneca, 'the tragedian', who was believed (since late antiquity: cf. Sid. Apoll. *Carm.* 9.230–4) to be different from the philosopher, probably on account of an equivocal passage in Martial 1.61.7–8, where the 'two Senecas' in question are the rhetor and the philosopher. Older editors discussing the problem conjure up the ghost of Marcus Annaeus Seneca, the supposed son of the philosopher, to whom some ascribe the, in their view, less successful dramas of the corpus. Also of interest is the *Vita Senecae* of Gasparino Barzizza (1411), in L. Panizza, *Traditio* 33 (1977), 297–358, esp. p. 348 for Gasparino's position on the authorship of the tragedies. An extract from Petrus Crinitus' *De poetis Latinis* (1505) is enclosed in Avantius' preface, which seems to give *Octavia* to the 'alter Seneca'. The *Ad lectores* of Farnabius has a useful survey of positions held by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century critics.

[16] Giancotti (1954), 23.   [17] Kragelund (1982), *passim*; (1988), 492–508.

[18] Emphasis on the necessity for peace (279–81) and the condemnation of cruelty (982) may well reveal the attitude of a witness to the events of 68–69.

consists of a supposed parallelism between Galba's 'republican' slogans and the alleged populism of the play.[19] Yet Galba's recognition of the authority of *Senatus populusque* is widely paralleled in early imperial history. Vespasian initially followed very much the same guidelines, and so did Nerva and Trajan.[20] In addition, the lines in which the Chorus summons itself to rebel against the *princeps* display little Republicanism: the rebels only want to restore the Claudian princess to her legitimate share in the government.[21] There is nothing triumphalistic about the play, and the final lament over the fickleness of the *uulgus* (877–7• *o funestus multis populi | dirusque fauor*) seems to dispel any impression that the people could be considered a political body, and could describe Galba's end as aptly as Octavia's. The *praetexta* is remarkably vague and non-committal on all constitutional issues regarding the position of the *princeps*. Nothing can be gleaned from supposed references to constitutional debates. No traces of the so-called Senatorial opposition under Vespasian can be detected. The language in which political issues are discussed applies to situations which range through the whole of the first century. In the words of its first choral ode, *Octavia* proclaims allegiance to the legitimate branch of the Claudians – a harmless proclamation which would in fact fit well with the Flavian emperors' attitude towards Claudius.

T. D. Barnes[22] has also argued for a very early date (Galba's reign), maintaining that the author of *Octavia* was familiar with the political events of 62 at first hand. He claims to recognize in

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[19] Cf. *Oct.* 676–82 *ubi Romani uis est populi . . . ?*

[20] Legends with *Libertas* were coined under several rulers (Octavian VINDEX LIBERTATIS: *RIC* I², 79, 476; Claudius (?): LIBERTAS AVGVSTI: *RIC* I², 128, 97; Vespasian: LIBERTAS PVBLICA, LIBERTAS RESTITVTA: *RIC* I² 271, 69; 272, 80; Nerva: LIBERTAS AB IMP. NERVA RESTITVTA (*CIL* VI.472); for Trajan cf. P. L. Strack, *Untersuchungen* I.176–7. For other revivals of *Libertas* and related ideas in post-Neronian coinage of various date cf. Kragelund (1998), 152 n. 2.

[21] Cf. *Oct.* 789–90 *reddere penates Claudiae diui parant | torosque fratris, debitam partem imperi.*

[22] *MH* 39 (1982), 215–17.

the play a sympathetic attitude towards Messalina which would reveal a somewhat different approach to the history of the Julio-Claudians, one which precedes the establishment of the official historical *vulgata*.[23] Yet the only sympathetic remarks made about Messalina in the play are uttered by her daughter,[24] and no pre-vulgata tradition need be presupposed behind them. They are simply adapted to the point of view of a bereaved daughter. On the other hand, Nero's references to Messalina already attest the diffusion of the tradition depicting her as driven by an insatiable lust.[25]

Barnes also drew attention to the play's failure to mention Otho as Poppaea's husband at *Oct.* 731, which is taken as an argument in favour of a Galban dating. Under Galba, Otho was an influential figure, and caution would have recommended passing over in silence his past acquaintance with the Neronian court. After the fall of Nero, however, there were two competing versions in circulation of Otho's relations with Poppaea. One, attested in Suetonius, Plutarch, Cassius Dio and Tacitus, and commonly claimed for Pliny's historical work, represented Otho's marriage to Poppaea as a fiction contrived by Nero to cover his encounters with Poppaea while still officially married to Octavia.[26] But no such sham-marriage is mentioned in the later version represented by Tac. *Ann.* 13.45, wherein Nero came to know of Poppaea only through Otho's incautious praise of her beauty. The divergence between the two conflicting versions followed by Tacitus in his two successive works has been tentatively explained by the hypothesis that, while working on the *Annales*,

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[23] A view shared by Meise (1969), 175.

[24] *Oct.* 259–60 *furore miserae dura genetricis meae,* | *quae nupta demens nupsit . . .* ; 266–7 *cecidit infelix parens* | *heu nostra ferro.*

[25] 536 *incesta genetrix detrahit generi fidem.* On doubts raised against Claudius' paternity on account of the notorious conduct of Messalina cf. Juv. *Sat.* 6.115–32, 10.329–45; Suet. *Nero* 7 (*Nero*) *Britannicum . . . ut subditiuum apud patrem arguere conatus est.*

[26] Suet. *Otho* 3 *Poppaeam Sabinam . . . nuptiarum specie recepit*; Plut. *Galba* 19.2; Cass. Dio *Hist. Rom.* 61.11.2; Tac. *Hist.* 1.13 *Poppaeam Sabinam, principale scortum, ut apud conscium libidinum deposuerat* (sc. *Nero*) *donec Octauiam uxorem amoliretur.*