

The Lucretia Paradigm:  
Tacitus's Octavia and the Death of the Body Politic

Scholarship has successfully demonstrated that women's bodies are valuable political and politicized objects to the Roman body politic. Joshel, for example, has argued that "raped, dead, or disappeared women" litter the pages of Roman history, their bodies employed in ritualistic sacrifices which maintain, stabilize, and/or revitalize the health of the body politic (Joshel 1992). Thus, the bodies of literary women at the precipice of major historical moments must be read with extreme care and attention. Lucretia is an exceptional figure through whom we may study this concept, given that her death catalyzes the fall of the Roman monarchy and rise of its Republic: her virtuosity purifies Rome of its corrupt monarchy and therefore enables its successful development.

Although scholarship has addressed the political function of some literary women's bodies, other figures merit further analysis. Tacitus's Octavia, in particular, has not received adequate scholarly attention in terms of her body's contribution to the Neronian principate. In studies of Tacitean female characters, scholarship has typically been concerned with "exceptional," transgressive women's disruption of and resistance to imperial politics (Benoist 2015), or women who pose potential threats because of their participation within such (e.g. Fertik 2020). Yet women who are exceptional *because of* their conformity to Roman gender conventions also have political significance, namely as "Lucretia-figures" whose sacrificial bodies and idealized femininity preserve the body politic. For instance, Octavia's proximity to Nero renders her politically important, yet her virtuosity distinguishes her from other Tacitean women notable for their harmful effect on the body politic. This, when juxtaposed with the violence of her death and viewed through the lens of Joshel's "dead or disappeared" women,

suggests Octavia's unique function to Tacitus's history of Nero's reign. Therefore, further investigation of Octavia's death is required to develop a more nuanced perspective of Tacitus's commentary on the period's political turmoil.

My paper therefore assesses the role of Octavia's death within the Neronian body politic, as represented within the *Annales*. Through comparative analysis of Tacitus's Octavia and Livy's Lucretia, I argue that Tacitus represents Octavia as a Lucretia-figure whose death is meant to catalyze the overthrow of Nero's "monarchy." Like the Lucretia-paradigm, Octavia's virtuosity and adherence to Roman gender norms render her an ideal victim for the state's purification. Through her death, Tacitus hints at the possibility of cleansing the body politic from Nero's corruption and revitalizing it via the Pisonian conspiracy. Yet Tacitus departs significantly from the conventions of the Lucretia-paradigm: the conspiracy fails, and Octavia's body is unsuccessful in establishing a healthy body politic. I therefore contend that Tacitus employs Octavia-as-Lucretia as a literary device to illustrate the extent of the imperial body politic's decline, underscoring the pessimistic view of the principate that he develops throughout the *Annales*.

My paper first develops the Lucretia-paradigm via Livy's account of Lucretia's death (*AUC* 1.57-60) and Joshel's assessment of women's contribution to the body politic. This will determine 1) the major features of the paradigm that can be mapped onto Tacitus's Octavia, and 2) the function of dead female bodies in maintaining the body politic. I will then perform a comparative analysis of Lucretia's story to the death of Octavia through a close reading of *Annales* 14.60—64, assessing the ways that Tacitus adheres and departs from this paradigm. I will illustrate that Octavia's virtuosity is paralleled to Lucretia's, and that the violation of their virtuous bodies provides the conditions for the political upheaval that follows their deaths. Yet

while Lucretia's death successfully brings about significant political change, Octavia's death does not accomplish the same. I argue that this is a crucial adaptation of the Lucretia-paradigm: by establishing Octavia as a Lucretia-figure whose death does not neatly conform with the "Lucretian" effect on the body politic, Tacitus continues his pessimistic representation of imperial politics and suggests the impossibility of the state's revitalization.

The relevance of this study to broader investigations of women's role in Roman politics cannot be understated. By building upon the work of other scholars and contributing my own analyses of the literary function of women within imperial politics, I provide deeper insight into Tacitus's construction of the body politic and offer a new perspective on the role of exceptional, non-transgressive female bodies at critical junctures in Roman imperial history.

#### Works Cited

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