

Condidit suos enses: allusion to Vergil and Lucan in The Octavia

It has long been noted that, during his dialogue with Seneca in the middle of *The Octavia* (*Oct.* 440—592), Nero virtually quotes the opening of Lucan's *Bellum Civile* (Hosius 1922; Ferri 2003; Boyle 2008). Recently Boyle has also suggested that Nero's use of the verb *condere* (*Oct.* 524), recalls the multifaceted use of the verb in Vergil's *Aeneid*, especially at the epic's end (Boyle 2008). In this paper I will argue that these intertexts are part of a wider and significant nexus of allusions to these two somewhat programmatic Julio-Claudian epics, and that a proper understanding of the famous dialogue between Nero and Seneca is in part predicated on how each character 'reads' these epics and their ideological underpinnings.

As Seneca instructs Nero on the proper duties of kinship and Augustus' rise to power (*Oct.*472-491), he rewrites the opening of the *Aeneid* with Augustus as its star, emphasizing what is now often called "the Augustan voice" of Vergil's epic (Thomas 2001; Ganiban 2007). Augustus, like Aeneas, has been tossed about on land and sea by the hand of fate (*illum tamen fortuna iactavit diu/ terra marique Oct.*479-480; *fato... ille et terris iactatus et alto Verg.A.* 1.2-3). Both men suffered much at war (*Oct.* 480; *Verg.A.*1.5) and both undertook their toils in order to found something great: Aeneas founds the Roman race and a home for his gods (*dum conderet urbem Verg.A.*1.5), while Augustus pursues his enemies across the globe, weighed down by his *pietas*, so that he could refound the city once again (*hostes parentis donec oppressit sui Oct.*481). Seneca adds to this Vergilian sounding account of Augustus' early career the admonition that Nero, as *princeps* must *parcere afflictis* (*Oct.*473), an allusion to Anchises' famous declarations that a true Roman must *parcere subiectis et debellare superbos* (*Verg.A.*6.853).

Nero, however, reads Augustus' career through what is often referred to as "the private voice(s)" of the *Aeneid* (Parry 1963; Lyne 1987; Thomas 2001; Ganiban 2007) and also through Lucan's *Bellum Civile* which had itself explored the tensions left within Vergil's text. Nero counters Seneca's idealized vision of Augustus with his own understanding of history, one focused on the blood bath that led Augustus to his seat in heaven (*Oct.*492-532). A gruesome description of the civil wars following the death of Caesar is filled with echoes of Lucan (e.g. *exposita rostris capita...videre Oct.* 522; *spectate...caput hoc positum rostris B.C.* 7.305). After alluding to Philippi, Sicily, the proscriptions and other horrors, Nero finally comes to Antony's Egypt where he rewrites in iambic meter the opening of Lucan's epic (*concussus orbis viribus magnis Oct.* 518; *totis concussi viribus orbis B.C.* 1.5). Only when Augustus tires of bloodshed does the civil war end, and when Nero asserts that Rome's first emperor *condidit tandem suos iam fessus enses victor hebebatos feris vulneribus*, this reader hears an echo of the end of the *Aeneid* with all of its problematic associations (*ferrum adverso sub pectore condit Verg.A.*12.950).

The Octavia has received much recent attention with two new critical commentaries and a host of new studies (Wilson et al. 2003; Smith 2003; Ferri 2003; Boyle 2008). This paper builds on these studies while also suggesting a method by which

the play's often-unnoted rich intertexts can be productively examined as part of a wider engagement with its Julio-Claudian literary past. As a post-Julio-Claudian text, *The Octavia* engages not only with the memory of the dynasty's final ruler, but also with the ideologically significant literature produced while the family was in power. It is thus an interesting document for the early reception of Julio-Claudian literature and its interpretation after their fall.

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