

Playing the Tyrant: Nero in ps.-Seneca's *Octavia*

In the flurry of recent scholarship on ps.-Seneca's *Octavia*, many scholars have remarked on the curious lack of characterization of Nero: he is reduced to a "standard stage tyrant" (Kragelund 2005, Ferri 2003, Poe 1989), conspicuously lacking the historical emperor's singular "feyness of character" that is so carefully delineated in various historiographical sources (Fitch 2004). Why? Most of these scholars attribute Nero's two-dimensionality in the *Octavia* to the author's lack of competence. This paper will suggest a different reason: ps.-Seneca depicts Nero as Nero would have depicted himself onstage. For an emperor notoriously fascinated with role-playing and with collapsing the boundaries between theater and real life, an emperor who supposedly played tragic heroes whose crimes resembled his own (while wearing a mask of his own face), the idea of appearing in a *praetexta* as a "classic" stage tyrant would have made perfect sense. Moreover, if we are at all persuaded by Wiseman's argument that Roman culture was far more influenced by performed drama than our scant literary remains suggest, then it is quite possible that it would have occurred to Nero that he would be the subject of a *praetexta* someday; as Herington has suggested, Nero seemed quite aware of the "tragic" dimensions of his and his family's story.

The author of the *Octavia* shows Nero playing the role of the typical stage tyrant, overacting in constant blustering rage, while providing subtle glimpses of the historical Nero's distinctive sensibility. Nero's first lines are an almost cartoonishly cruel order barked to the Prefect: "Discharge your orders! Go send someone to kill Plautus and Sulla and bring me their severed heads" (*perage imperata: mitte, qui Plauti mihi / Sullaeque caesi referat abscisum caput*, 437-38). He then launches into an extended stichomythia with Seneca on whether his power has, or should have, limits (440-461) that clearly is influenced (*inter alia*) by the dialogue between Atreus and his *satelles* in Seneca's *Thyestes* (where Atreus is a cipher for Nero). Nero caps the stichomythia with a declaration of his intent to crush his enemies, including his "hated wife," and ends this speech with another melodramatic exclamation: "Everything that stands high must fall!" (*quidquid excelsum est cadat*, 471) This *gnome* functions both as a standard expression of a tyrant's ruthlessness and as a possible glimpse into the historical Nero's interest in rebuilding Rome to his specifications after the Great Fire (Suet. *Nero* 31, 38; Tac. *Ann.* 15.37-42). Seneca attempts to persuade Nero to heed popular sentiment in favor of Octavia, which

Nero rejects in a longer speech (492-532) that is remarkable for its list of Roman leaders who embraced the realities of power and sent fellow Romans to their deaths. This list turns traditional historical *exempla* on their heads in a celebration of the tyrant's standard "might makes right" philosophy; it may also betray a trace of the historical Nero's irreverent and deliberately shocking style of referring to his deceased family members (Suet. *Nero* 33-34). The author of the *Octavia* thus depicts Nero almost entirely as a clichéd stage tyrant, not out of incompetence, but because, ironically, it is a more "realistic" depiction of the historical (and self-dramatizing) Nero.

Works cited

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