

## Becoming Agrippina: Poppaea and Assimilation in the *Octavia*

Scholars have noted that the character of Poppaea in the pseudo-Senecan play *Octavia* reverses the Poppaea in Tacitus, appears sympathetic, or is not as evil as she could be to emphasize Nero as the villain of the play. Boyle (2008) has emphasized parallels between the dreams of Poppaea and Nero's sister/wife Octavia, highlighting both as Nero's victims, and the play's prevalent "doubling" or "*semper idem* motif" further reflected, for example, in Claudius' marriages to Messalina and Agrippina replayed by Nero's to Octavia and Poppaea. Building on these associations, I examine how the play repeatedly assimilates Poppaea to Agrippina via thematic or situational parallels and verbal echoes. This assimilation not only enhances Poppaea's characterization but also establishes her as another Agrippina by presenting her as guiltier of crimes and as more likely to become another victim of Nero than she initially appears, especially in her one brief stage appearance.

Both Agrippina and Poppaea have "captured" their husbands (*captus*, 141, Claudius; *cepit*, 695, Nero), a sexually-charged and elegiac word used in this sense otherwise only of Jupiter in the play and strongly associated with their marriages (*iunxit*, 142; *iuncta es*, 694). Octavia or her Nurse denigrate both women; Agrippina is labelled "stepmother" (*noverca*, 21, 171), Poppaea the derogatory "mistress" or "whore" (*paelex*, 125, 186), and both are "cruel" (*saeva*, 21, 170; 905). Octavia and her Nurse repeatedly implicate both women in murders; Agrippina, of Claudius (25, 44, 164-65, to which Agrippina confesses, with Britannicus' murder, 340-41), Poppaea, of being complicit in Agrippina's murder (126-29) and demanding Octavia's own (132-33, 903-5). And Octavia views Agrippina as a "grim Fury" (*tristis Erinys*), in

reference to marrying Nero (23), and declares another one rules the world when her death is certain because of Poppaea (913).

Octavia, her Nurse, and the Chorus describe Agrippina and Poppaea as coming to power in similar, even identical, militaristic language. While the Nurse portrays Agrippina as responsible for an “enemy” (*hostis*, 150, Nero) and a Fury “entering”, even invading the house (*intravit*, 150, 162), the Chorus does not want Nero’s new wife, whom Octavia describes as “hostile” (*inimica*, 131), to do the same to his bed chamber (*intret*, 277). Both women are “threatening”, Poppaea to Octavia’s marriage (*imminet*, 131), Agrippina, command of the world (*imminere*, 156). In establishing themselves with the respective emperors, they are labelled “triumphant” (Poppaea, 131, 673; Agrippina, 155), the only two people for whom *victrix* is used and accounting for three of its five appearances in the play. “Empress” (*domina*), a designation used for them alone (Agrippina, 352, 367; Poppaea, 686), further signals that they have succeeded in their ambitions.

Other words link the women in criminal activity. Octavia views Agrippina’s murder as Nero’s gift to Poppaea (*munus*, 126), Agrippina her giving the empire to her son (and accompanying murders) as a great one (*tanto munere*, 332-33). Octavia also accuses Poppaea of demanding her head “for the price of illicit sex” (*pretium stupri*, 132), while Agrippina’s ghost claims that “for the price of the empire” (*pretium imperi*, 601) she suffered shipwreck and murder.

Verbal echoes between Agrippina’s speech post-shipwreck and pre-murder (recounted by the Chorus) or her ghost’s monologue and Poppaea, especially in her recounting of her dream, further set up Poppaea as Nero’s victim. Agrippina’s ghost exits the Underworld much as Poppaea leaves her marriage chamber after her disturbing dream of Agrippina’s fury and murder

(*gressum*, 593; 690). The earth splits for both, Agrippina to leave the Underworld (*tellure rupta*, 593), Poppaea to fall there in her dream (*tellus hiatu*, 726). Both are described as “exhausted” (*fessa*), Agrippina after falling into the sea when her boat collapses (349), Poppaea falling onto her marriage couch in her dream (728), and both describe people mourning and women wailing (319-20; 718-720). The description of Nero “joined and clinging” (*iunctus atque haerens*, 639; 703) to mother and wife emphasizes his close connection to both women, Agrippina’s complaint of the removal of her statues (610-12) echoes the threat against and anticipates the pulling down of Poppaea’s (685-86, 794-99), and both mother and wife, emphasizing Nero’s throat, “see” his possible death (629-31; 732-33).

By describing Agrippina’s and Poppaea’s marriages and rises to power similarly, the play establishes how alike these usurpers are in using their sexuality, reaching their ambitions, and murdering members of the imperial family. By associating Nero’s murder of his mother and her ghost’s complaints with Poppaea’s dream of seeing the murders of perhaps herself and Nero, the play further links mother and wife together, underlines how deadly Nero could be to both women, and condemns Poppaea as more criminal, destructive, and doomed, than she initially seems, as she follows in her mother-in-law’s footsteps from empress to victim.

#### Bibliography

Boyle, A.J., ed. 2008. *Octavia: Attributed to Seneca*. Oxford.