

# The date of the Octavia

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## The Date of the Octavia

By Timothy D. Barnes, Toronto

The author of the *Octavia* cannot be identified. He is clearly not Seneca, under whose name this unique *fabula praetexta* has been transmitted, for Seneca is a character in the drama, and the text refers to events which occurred after his death<sup>1</sup>. Other candidates have been proposed, most notably Curvatus Maternus, who certainly composed in the genre (Tacitus, *Dial. de orat.* 2, 1; 3, 4), but the arguments canvassed in their support amount to little more than wishful thinking or a mere distaste for leaving the work anonymous<sup>2</sup>. The date ought to be ascertainable, at least approximately, since the *Octavia* describes important political transactions at Rome in the year 62, of which historical narratives survive in Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio. Yet the wide range of modern estimates may indicate that the effort at precision is vain – and there appears to be little chance of propounding a view which is both new and true, and still less chance of providing a convincing proof. Nevertheless, a brief and modest statement can do no harm.

The *Octavia* unmistakably alludes to the death of Nero (619ff. 718ff.): therefore, it was written after 9 June 68<sup>3</sup>. No historical allusion to subsequent historical events can be detected, and no convincing proof has been provided (though many have been essayed) that the *Octavia* draws on either the extant accounts of Nero in Tacitus and Suetonius or on their identifiable sources, such as Pliny the Elder or Cluvius Rufus, who wrote in the reign of Vespasian<sup>4</sup>. Accordingly, although prudence appears to dictate agnosticism on the date, the claims of the period which immediately followed Nero's death – and which tends to be rejected or passed over as improbable on a priori grounds<sup>5</sup> – deserve

1 Observe also the stylistic arguments of R. Helm, *Sber. Berlin, Phil.-hist. Klasse* 1934, 238ff.; G. Herzog-Hauser, *Glotta* 25 (1936) 109ff.; C. J. Herington, *Cl. Quart.*, n.s. 11 (1961) 18ff. However, Senecan authorship continues to find adherents: it is assumed, for example, in the recent edition with commentary by L. Y. Whitman, *Noctes Romanae* 16 (1978).

2 Maternus was confidently claimed as the author by F. Ritter, *Octavia praetexta* (Bonn 1843). For discussion, and on other candidates who have been canvassed, L. Herrmann, *Octavie: tragédie prétexte* (Paris 1924) 27ff.; M. Coffey, *Lustrum* 2 (1957) 183f.

3 M. E. Carbone, *Phoenix* 31 (1977) 48ff.

4 E.g., G. Nordmeyer, *Jahrbücher für classische Philologie, Suppl.* 19 (1893) 263ff. (Cluvius Rufus); A. Gercke, *Jahrbücher für classische Philologie, Suppl.* 22 (1896) 195ff. (Pliny); P. Rizza, *La pretesta «Octavia»* (Messina/Florence 1970) 32ff. (Tacitus and Suetonius).

5 As by L. Herrmann, *op. cit.* 95f.: «il est bien improbable que la tragédie ait pu paraître pendant les temps troublés qui suivirent immédiatement la chute de Néron».

consideration. The *Octavia* (I believe) was probably composed in the last months of 68. This date cannot strictly be proved, but it will explain and lend significance to certain features of the text.

The author of the *Octavia* is clearly familiar with the political events of 62 at first hand<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, his sympathetic attitude towards Messalina ought to indicate that he is writing before the historical tradition about the reign of Claudius crystallised into the form which the extant historical accounts preserve<sup>7</sup>. On both these counts, a date later than the 70's can be ruled out. Now it has often been noted that, although the *Octavia* brings on Poppaea as a character, includes her marriage to Nero in the course of the action, and makes her talk about Rufrius Crispinus, who was her first husband (690ff.), it eschews the merest allusion to Otho, who seduced her from Crispinus before she became Nero's mistress (Tacitus, *Ann.* 13, 46). Why? Not through ignorance: therefore, by design. Otho was prominent in the entourage of Galba, and supplanted him as emperor on 15 January 69. The silence of the *Octavia* would be completely comprehensible if Otho were alive and powerful. After his death, who cared? A poet writing after April 69 would surely not have ignored the dramatic possibilities of Poppaea's marriage to a close companion of Nero. The absence of Otho ceases to be puzzling if the *Octavia* was composed during his lifetime.

A similar, though less probative, argument concerns the anonymous praefectus who appears briefly in two scenes. First, he enters with Nero, who commands him to bring the heads of Rubellius Plautus and Faustus Sulla, and he at once departs to the camp to give the necessary orders (438–440). Second, after the emperor's marriage to Poppaea, the praefectus reports to Nero that he has suppressed riots in favour of Octavia, but shows great reluctance to kill Octavia – though his silent departure after Nero's instructions on how she is to be killed must indicate ultimate acquiescence (846–876). Who is the prefect? It will not do to brand him a stock figure, a servant or minor character lacking any individuality, and therefore automatically anonymous<sup>8</sup>. The text makes it clear that he is Nero's praetorian prefect, and both author and intended audience will have known who Nero's prefects were. Afranius Burrus died early in 62 and was replaced by Ofonius Tigellinus and Faenius Rufus (Tacitus, *Ann.* 14, 51). Moreover, Tigellinus both persuaded Nero to kill Plautus and Sulla and took a prominent part in discrediting Octavia (*Ann.* 14, 57. 63). The prefect who hastens to liquidate Plautus and Sulla in the *Octavia* should be Tigellinus, and it

6 F. Giancotti, *L'«Octavia» attributa a Seneca* (Turin 1954) 107ff. – though he deduces Senecan authorship.

7 E. Meise, *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Julisch-Claudischen Dynastie*, *Vestigia* 10 (1969) 133ff.

8 The view of F. Ladek, *De Octavia Praetexta*, *Dissertationes Philologiae Vindobonenses* 3 (1891) 32.

should be the same prefect who appears later in the drama<sup>9</sup>. Why then is he not named? It should be relevant that Tigellinus lived on after Nero's death, protected by Titus Vinius, until the murder of Galba and Vinius removed his protection: he committed suicide at Sinuessa shortly after 15 January 69 (Plutarch, Galba 17; Tacitus, Hist. 1, 74). A dramatist writing while Tigellinus retained influence had an obvious motive for leaving Nero's prefect anonymous.

A date for the Octavia of late 68 will also lend added point to the final lines, where the chorus compares Octavia to Iphigeneia. Less cruel than Rome are Aulis and the land of the Tauri where foreigners are sacrificed to the gods: *civis gaudet Roma cruore* (983). Those words may have been written by one who saw how feeble the government of Galba had shown itself, who predicted and dreaded the resumption of civil war in 69. If the date of the Octavia is not to be left imprecise, then the reign of Galba is surely the most appropriate historical context for its composition.

<sup>9</sup> L. Herrmann argued from the contrast between the prefect's behaviour on the two occasions that it was Tigellinus in the first scene, Rufus in the second (op. cit. 63). L. Y. Whitman, op. cit. 84, identifies the prefect in both scenes as Rufus (who perished in 65).

## Miszelle

### Vergil, Georgics 3, 280–281

*By Howard Jacobson, Urbana (Illinois)*

*Hic demum, hippomanes vero quod nomine dicunt  
pastores, lentum destillat ab inguine virus.*

*destillat = manat.*