Forms of Intertextuality in the *Octavia*

What accurséd fate
Pursues the woeful Claudian family?

--Thomas May, *The Tragedy of Julia Agrippina, Empress of
Rome*, Act IV Scene 8

One regrets that the *Octavia* is by a hand other than Seneca's as it
is in many ways the most interesting and most 'Sophoclean'[1] of
surviving dramas written in Latin during the early Empire. The deft
sureness in manipulating the sympathy of the audience, skill in the oral
conveyance of drama, and an almost undetectable calibration in the rise
in tension would surely have excited the envy of Seneca himself,[2] and
the lyrical passages surpass Seneca's own.[3] Everyone would have
known that Octavia was murdered in exile; the tension of the play rests,
in large part, with how much of her story – for it is her play – was
recounted. In this, the playwright, like Lucan in the *Pharsalia*, has
made the right choice in telling less rather than more.[4]

---

[1] See Holford-Strevens 1999 which in some ways confirms but takes issue with
Jones 1991 on production of Greek drama in the early Empire. Citations of
drama in Plutarch (O'Neil 1959), most often overlooked, add a corrective to
common perceptions of production and potentially point to a difference in taste
between Romans and Greeks during the early Empire.

[2] So Joe Park Poe 1989: 434–59.

[3] G. Luck, 1989.

It is worth considering the possibility that the first century of the Roman Empire saw the composition of more historical dramas, particularly on near contemporary topics with political relevance, than fully staged tragedies based on Greek exemplars. One has the feeling that just as tragedies must have been produced, or were at the minimum written with the intention of formal production,[5] a unifying link among *fabulae praetextae* is the inference drawn from a reading of contemporary sources[6] that they were written, at least in the first instance, for recitation.[7] Of all surviving Greek and Roman drama, the *Octavia* surely was and remains the most stilted to perform[8] but conversely is perhaps the most cerebral in its many competing layers of reference. One must be clear on what is here being proposed: I am prepared to defend the assertion that Senecan tragedy was written to be performed,[9] and in fact demands and needs to continue to be performed,

---

[4] One need only consider Thomas May's continuation of Lucan's epic to the assassination of Caesar.

[5] Harrison 2000: Introduction.

[6] Juvenal 1.1, Persius *Sat* 5, Tacitus *Dialogus de Oratoribus*, Probus *Life of Persius*, and Vacca *Life of Lucan*, among other examples. Just as Ovid had a *carmen et error*, Ahl 1976: 348-352 has speculated that Lucan's *carmen famosum* was a poem on the fire at Rome. It is not impossible, though unprovable, that this could have been a *fabula praetexta* since a *Medea* is known for Lucan as for Ovid.

[7] The cases for and against production have been outlined in sufficient detail by Kragelund 1982 and by Sutton 1983. See now Wiseman 2001.

[8] Translation of the *Octavia* for the modern stage fits comfortably in the style of the late Edwardian and early Windsor stage. The talkiness of the plays of Yeats and Eliot well suits the situation of the *Octavia;* and so the language of the 1910s and 1920s, the last decades before film could carry sound, could be emulated in a modern production as could perhaps even costumes.

[9] For the record of performance of drama during the Roman Empire see the collection of literary evidence in Jones 1991. Inscriptional *testimonia* survive of travelling actors' troupes for the empire even in remote and smaller provinces, such as Crete; cf. Harrison 1994. That a play was written with an eye

while the politically charged *fabula praetexta* of the early Empire was intended for private circulation among *cognoscenti*. Admittedly, there are drawbacks with such a view since much recent scholarship would associate the commissioning of *fabulae praetextae* with triumphs, dedication of temples, funerals, and other occasions which could advertise the majesty of grandees.[10] If this surmise is correct, what changed in the empire was not the *nature* of *fabulae praetextae* so much as the *circumstance* for delivery. The private nature of its later circulation was *ipso facto* conspiratorial: the hosts of post-prandial soirées must have been aware that the mere fact of their delivery *in camera* would excite the suspicions of the emperor, particularly since anything could be insinuated inside its dialogue and conveyed *via* movement of the lector or a mime standing nearby.[11]

From this it follows that tragedy had, or at least aimed for, some degree of mass appeal, while the *fabula praetexta,* at least in its first reading, restricted itself to the upper reaches of the political class.[12]

---

for performance did not and does not disqualify it from recitation; the reverse for *fabulae praetextae* is equally true.

[10] See on the question of the continuity or discontinuity of the genre, Manuwald 2001, Flower 1995, Wiseman 1998: 52, Kragelund 2002.

[11] Jones 1993, amplified by Csapo 1999 who cites artistic evidence from *cenaculae* to make a convincing case that drama increasingly moved indoors and to private venues during the Empire, even if public performance continued. Movement in recitation either by the lector himself or by a mime next to the lector is well attested; certainly gesture could be as provocative as words themselves and less likely to survive. Fitch 2000 manages to have it both ways in envisioning dramatic texts with modules to be inserted or deleted depending upon degree of performance.

[12] The extent of mass appeal of tragedy must remain a matter of some controversy. The construction of *odea* with seating as limited as 100–200 would argue for a small audience while new construction of large open air theatres continued unabated into at least the second century AD. Modification of orchestras for water ballet and *venationes* instead of choral dances indicates a change in taste of the audience, not a change in audience and certainly not a change from a mass audience to an erudite one; cf. Harrison 2000a.

'Political class' is used on purpose since a collation of *maiestas* trials[13] involving drama shows they were in fact restricted almost entirely to cases of circulation of political drama involving figures from Roman history and not plots drawn from Greek mythology.[14] The ancient sources are skewed: too little is known of the few surviving fragments of *fabulae praetextae* to place confidence in any judgements one might proffer, which makes it doubly dangerous to postulate changes in the genre between the Republic and Empire, or assess content and scope.[15]

Every reader of this volume will have been exposed to papers by students whose acquaintance with antiquity is restricted largely to Ridley Scott's 'Gladiator' or television episodes of 'Xena'. Iser 1993 makes the case that popular knowledge of history may have been informed by Shakespeare's dramas. One is disinclined to accept a similar situation for the *fabula praetexta*, although it is possible that they could be used to privilege the author's view of an incident. In this respect, early *fabulae praetextae* based on recent military victories are no different from ones known from later centuries.

[13] Ward, Yeo and Hechelheim 2003 in their chapter on Tiberius distinguish eleven crimes which were liable to bring a charge of *maiestas*. Few of these crimes fit the modern definition of treason but rather were ones in which the perpetrator presumed beyond his station in a situation which implied or offered violence.

[14] This is not to deny the potential political nature of Roman reworkings of Greek tragedy; certainly as early as Naevius contemporary reading of such plots could be dangerous. So, too, mime and farce could carry political references not to the liking of the emperor and his circle, but the occasion of performance and circumstance of performance allowed licence. Even so, there are instances of abuse of privilege or over-sensitive emperors. It would seem apparent in an age where ownership of histories sympathetic to the Republic was a capital crime, dramatists would have been aware of the risks of writing a *praetexta*. Maternus' choice of Cato as a subject was automatically provocative (Tac. *Dial*. 2-3).

[15] Pointed out by Wiseman 2002a in his review of Manuwald 2001. He is perhaps over severe since he himself noticed a correlation between regime changes and proliferation of *fabulae praetextae* and satire. Certainly the laudatory nature presumed for some republican *fabulae praetextae* would have been filled by imperial panegyrics. The *fabula praetexta* of Balbus seems as

Modern dramatic or operatic *'fabulae praetextae'* such as 'Nixon in China', 'Rachel', 'Poe on the Chesapeake', and 'Jerry Springer' stand as cautionary tales. They attempt to privilege the point of view of the author about the subject and so licence is taken in fabricating scenes or, in the case of 'Poe', the entire drama.[16]

The 983 lines of the *Octavia* provide enough material for investigation, most particularly concerning what central meaning or message its author intended and what strategies he chose by which to convey it. Senecan irony[17] is eschewed in favour of letting the characters expose their own shortcomings. The character Seneca, for example, damns himself with his own words: the number of near quotations from his philosophical works is too sizable to be accidental and too often remarked in scholarly literature to bear repeating here.[18] No matter how persuasive and high-minded the *sententiae* of Seneca in his *stichomythia* with Nero, the result is that his arguments, and thus his philosophy and life, are shown as failing in their aims of civilizing Nero and making himself content with his own lot.[19] If the shortcomings of Seneca are so exposed, one wonders to what extent the other characters

---

self-indulgent as Cicero's epic on his own consulate and perhaps thus belongs more to the tradition of *laudations* than drama.

[16] 'Poe' is based on an event which never happened; 'Rachel', wife of Andrew Jackson, restricts itself to a single incident – their unintentional bigamy; Nixon and Jerry Springer are figures of popular scorn yet the dramas about them are largely positive. Throughout this paper, for convenience, opera is considered a form of drama while not technically a play.

[17] Irony, for example, of the type that Mader 2002 sees in the *Thyestes* is not to be found in the *Octavia*.

[18] See, for example, the parallels cited by Whitman 1978: 78-97; Williams 1994; Manuwald 2002.

[19] For the play as a criticism of Seneca's political philosophy, see Williams 1994. The author of the *Octavia* was not the only ancient to react against the *sententiae* and other rhetorical excesses of Seneca. Fronto *Fragmentum de oratoribus* pillories and excoriates the opening lines of the *Pharsalia*, which are sometimes assigned to Seneca.

are also assailed by direct quotation or paraphrase. Ovid was a touchstone for poets of the middle of the first century AD, and Tarrant (2002) has recently traced their debt with respect to the specific theme of 'chaos'. Just as the author of the *Octavia* has wisely eschewed Senecan irony so too he kept himself from relying too heavily or too openly on Ovid. A lesser hand would have fallen into the trap of modelling Octavia closely on cast-off lovers in the *Heroides* or suffering maidens in the *Metamorphoses*; instead there are some oblique references, such as to Philomela (8), which are subtly made and quickly dropped. That he steers a middle course is laudable: no reminiscences from Ovid would have seemed as odd to his contemporaries as too many.

The play, rather, looks to tragedy for its types, particularly in the roles of advisors and opponents, both nurses and male confidants/sub-alterns. Lycus from Seneca's *Hercules Furens* and the nurse type from Seneca's *Phaedra*, and elsewhere, stand out, as does the double, competing chorus, a feature of several plays of Euripides and some of Seneca's.[20] What links the *Octavia* most to the late plays of Euripides, such as *Medea* and *Trojan Women*,[21] however, is the absence of the death of one of the main characters. The long-suffering *Helen* springs to mind, as does *Alcestis*, although both of them in the end are vindicated. The parallels might in fact be intentional indicating the author's view that Octavia's position ought also have been preserved. Those parallels are enforced by Octavia's repeated wish for death in the first third of the play (1–272), just as Helen herself loudly wished for death prior to the

---

[20] For the use of a second or supplementary chorus in Greek tragedy, see Barrett 1964: 167 on *Hipp.* 58-71, and Easterling in Hornblower and Spawforth 1996: 1540. Seneca uses a double chorus in *Ag.* and there is a similar feature in the *Hercules Oetaeus*.

[21] Double choruses, more normally a feature of comedy, in Euripides are of interest because even in his late plays he was still adapting and playing with formulae. Cross-genre fertilization is similarly a feature of the *Octavia* indicating that its author was both deeply read and confident enough to experiment.

appearance of Menelaos in the *Helen*.[22]   The lack of a death in the course of the action is remarkable and thus worthy of comment since it was an age when executions were staged as mythological *tableaux* in amphitheatres, in *odea*, in the *sphendon* of circuses, and other venues.[23] Since there is a real possibility that violence was portrayed on stage in Seneca's lifetime as a way of (possibly) trying to bring production of drama closer to popular entertainments, its absence in the *Octavia* becomes significant.[24]

The character of Octavia is the area of greatest innovation for the author:[25] she is eponymous to the play but is hardly its protagonist or antagonist. Nero fills the stage when he is on, and his interlocutors hog what is left of the light. Octavia speaks the prologue, as protagonists do also in other imperial Latin tragedy, but more often this place in Senecan drama is reserved for Furies or ghosts or embittered deities bent on revenge, that is, characters which set the drama in motion and then fade away. Octavia does neither. In this she is like Seneca's Oedipus, and the parallel drawn at the end of the first chorus (368-372) between Agrippina and Jocasta indicates the familiarity of the author with this play (Hind 1972). Octavia's prologue with its immediate reference to astral phenomena parodies the opening lines in many of Seneca's plays,

---

[22] It is not accidental that *Stygius* is a recurrent word in Octavia's speeches.

[23] K.M. Coleman 1990 has written the ground-breaking article on 'fatal charades', on which others have expanded and elaborated. It might be worthy of consideration that such mythological murders replaced *fabulae praetextae* just at the moment when public entertainments became an imperial prerogative instead of private display.

[24] For Seneca's plays, see Shelton 2000; by comparison, for the level of violence possible on the Elizabethan stage, see Goldberg in the same volume.

[25] A second problem which has great ramifications for date is why the praetorian prefect is not named. Anyone contemporary to the events would have known who it was. It is unlikely given the action of the play and the closeness of the prefect to Nero that the prefect would be the aedile in charge of public quiet or an officer under his command.

including the *Oedipus*. But unlike the prologue-speaking protagonists of the *Oedipus* or *Hercules Oetaeus*,[26] she does not play a decisive or even pivotal role in her drama, nor yet is she a *muta persona* like Vergil's Lavinia. She is one of the first occurrences in tragedy of the self-sacrificing, passive woman, submissive to male authority. This is a type of heroine familiar from Roman legend and lore, as recounted in Livy and other authors, some of whom are alluded to by the first chorus (272–376) as well as their opposites. These very Roman women are depicted as counter to the assertive heroines of Greek tragedy,[27] and counter even to the strong-willed women who inhabit Plutarch's biographies and essays on sayings and deeds of women.

Even so, in her second speech (57–71) Octavia specifically compares herself to Electra (59), and in the last closing lines of the play the chorus overtly mentions Iphigeneia both at Aulis and with the Taurians (975-982). Something magical has happened over the course of the play. Octavia starts the play in the manner of a Sophoclean heroine, for whom mourning is becoming, having lost her mother, father, and brother. Like Electra, as the text of the play makes clear, the person she mourns principally is her brother. Throughout the play she is a pitiable figure comparable to heroines of Euripides' last plays, and it is worth remembering that, although her own assassination is inevitable, in the play itself she does not die and the final chorus hopes for her preservation but fears the worst because *civis gaudet Roma cruore*, a line reminiscent of the opening of Lucan's *Pharsalia*[28] and perhaps

---

[26] Questions of authenticity of the *Hercules Oetaeus* are irrelevant to this discussion. Senecan authorship has recently been defended by Harrison 1999. It would be more informative for the history of Roman drama, and particularly Seneca's reputation, during or immediately after his lifetime, if it were in fact by another hand.

[27] The technical term is 'marianisma', as defined by Gil and Vázquez 1996. It is noteworthy, however, that this staple of literature emerges with the rise of Christianity; for assertive heroines, see (esp.) Foley 2001.

[28] Lucan uses the terms *o cives ... cruorem*, 8-9, and first addresses *Roma* at line 21.

intended to infer the civil war which followed Nero's many murders and eventually his own. The identity of the chorus which speaks the last lines is thus crucial. There is a double chorus, one which is sympathetic to Octavia and a second sympathetic to Poppaea. An alternative view proposed here is that this is a combined chorus, such as in the exodus to the *Lysistrata*.[29] Both factions could find common ground in the dismissal of Octavia, especially since Poppaea herself, as was known to the audience, was fated to die through Nero's pique. Octavia would thus become an inexorable sacrifice to implacable ambition (as if at Aulis) and simultaneously the person who would have sacrificed, if possible, her brother Orestes/Nero (as if with the Taurians).

The many capsules of literature, myth, and history which contribute to this play make it unlikely that the *Octavia* is a diptych or twinned with any other play. Marti (1952) was correct to see correspondences with Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* but pressed the case too far.[30] What is riveting is the awareness of the author of the *Octavia* that the story of Claudius and his immediate family followed the lines of a Greek trilogy, in which everyone comes to a bad end; there is no Athena *ex machina* to save the last surviving member. Even the 'fourth play/satyr drama' (if one can be allowed such license) to the *Oresteia*, Euripides' *Andromache*, has Orestes, Neoptolemus, and Hermione in murderous adultery. This comparison is apt because Nero's attempt to consult the Delphic oracle was rebuffed with a reference to Orestes, another matricide.[31]

---

[29] Cf. Smith 2003: 419. On *Lysistrata* 1296ff. see Henderson 1987: 219.

[30] In this Marti was followed by Whitman 1978 whose book has largely been superseded.

[31] LaPenna 1979: 26-31 suggested that Sejanus was behind the portrayal of Lycus in the *Hercules Furens*. Agamemnon can be read as code for Claudius and I have long suspected (but cannot prove) that Agrippina is intended by Niobe, who occurs in all of Seneca's plays but not in the *Octavia*. For the Delphic response to Nero see Parke and Wormell 1956: II. 231, no.597. It gives one pause, however, to realise that this oracle is not mentioned by Plutarch in his

The thread that holds together all the various characters and influences in this play is respect, or rather, the lack of respect conferred and received. The flight of *Pietas* noted by Octavia at 911, that is, respect for the gods and performance of religious rituals, is not so important as the breakdown of reciprocal social obligations which express themselves in *dignitas* and *auctoritas* in their many forms. Appropriately, these two words do not occur in the play. The lack of respect is universal. The nurse cannot deeply respect Octavia. This comes out in her comments, which use understatement to undercut Octavia's claims. At the other extreme, the nurse of Poppaea is too supportive of her outlandish claims to be credible. Litotes and hyperbole bring one to the same place: the retainer cannot openly contradict but must convey disapproval to the audience.[32] The opening lines (35–40) spoken by Octavia's nurse pick up on the language, including specific words, and tone of the opening lines of the prologue by Octavia in a way which is more suggestive of sarcasm than compliment. This presumes that the nurse would have been in the wings on stage to hear the prologue; her imitation thus descends close to parody. So, too, at 137 the *frustra* can, and in my view does, convey also the sense of frustration the nurse feels over Octavia's irrecoverable position.

One need only note Seneca's words at 377–380 with their thematic and verbal repetition of the opening of the first speech of the nurse (both concerned with the instability of fortune and high position). In essence, Seneca has been demoted to Nero's 'nurse', as perhaps in fact he was in many ways. Nero dismisses Seneca, and Seneca's line of half-hearted argumentation indicates that Seneca is going through the motions, realizing that he has lost the *agon* before it has started. The fourth retainer, or virtual retainer, is the Prefect who several times challenges Nero, arguing that he should not do what he intends, knowing

---

Delphic treatises or *Lives* of Galba and Otho, but belongs to a later hostile tradition.

[32] Nurses in general, like the one in the *Phaedra*, often have the function of being a brake to the rhetoric of the person they serve. Medea's nurse and Phaedra's nurse both know that the recklessness of their mistresses will encompass their own ruin.

that Nero will do it anyway. Neither Seneca nor the Prefect, one representing reason, the other representing force, is efficacious in restraining the emperor. As also in Roman comedy, the hirelings most often have a better grasp of reality and *realpolitik*.

Yet it is more complicated: the symmetry of the play, observed by Wiseman (1998: 53) among many others, might have tempted a lesser writer to black-white contrasts, but the author has chosen correctly to parallel his pairs in intransigence.[33] The 'ode' of the nurse at 201–221 and the three choral odes at 273–376, 806–819 and 877–898 form a quartet, or perhaps more properly two parallel pairs, in which each makes an appeal to mythology or mythologised Roman history. The 'ode' of the nurse is in choral metre and is in all respects like a choral lyric.[34] In this first of the four lyrics, the nurse opines that Octavia can save her position by submissiveness and points out the example of Juno who simply outwaited all of Jupiter's amours. The would-be parallel is drawn at 219–221 where the nurse calls Octavia another Juno (*altera Iuno*) who is likewise sister of her spouse. The chorus of citizens then, starting at 273, picks up the wish that Octavia not be replaced. Their knowledge of the nurse's ode would seem implicit in their reference also to the incestuous marriages of Juno and Octavia (282-283), and so their pointed reference to revenge exacted for outrages against Verginia (297) and Lucretia (303) and, somewhat quizzically, revenge taken by Tullia (306) against her dead father, must be seen as the reverse of the nurse's opinion. They would substitute revenge if Octavia leaves for the nurse's emphasis on submission as the price of staying. Both are mistaken. Octavia's present position cannot be defended nor will Nero's eventual assassination in any way vindicate her.

The short choral monody at 806–819 is a brief transition between the exit of the messenger and the entry of Nero. The chorus had previously made ripostes signifying disbelief that the messenger actually

---

[33] Smith (2003: 404-12, esp.) has anticipated a number of remarks that would have been made here.

[34] To the degree that some have felt the lines might more appropriately be attributed to a chorus; see Whitman 1978: 23.

intended to report to Nero the pro-Octavia sentiment of the *populus*. At his exit they use references to Achilles (814), Atrides (816), and Priam (817) which seem implicitly to equate this messenger with the messengers of plays of the Trojan War cycle and suggesting that to tell the truth was not in a messenger's best interests. At the exit of the Prefect (876) to fetch Octavia who is to be placed aboard ship, the chorus notes how popular favour more often brings doom than plaudits. The example that leapt to mind was the Gracchi (882) but significantly the focus is placed upon the mother of the Gracchi and her mourning (*miseranda parens*, 882), something which links her to Electra (59ff.) and thus to Octavia. A remembrance of Livius Drusus (887-889) is disturbed by sounds preceding the final appearance of Octavia. Again, what the chorus suggests in both instances cannot be: truth will not save Octavia nor will popular favour work to her advantage. Octavia who mourned her brother will pass unmourned; for who mourned Electra or the mother of the Gracchi? Thus mythology and mythical history are used in counterpoint to the action, adding to the unbelievability of what is happening to a woman of virtue who commanded respect.

The speech of Agrippina is most significant and the core of the play because it stands alone. She comes as *vindex* (596)[35] against Poppaea (596), and against Nero because of his *impiae caedis* (598), cursing equally all who helped Nero in his crimes. Her anguish at the knowledge of her statues tumbled and inscriptions removed (609-13) is immediately perpetrated by the mob against images and honorifics to Poppaea. Her final wish is that Nero should suffer for murdering her as she suffers for murdering Claudius. Most of the characters in this play had a hand in one of the murders or both, even if their duplicity was restricted to silence. Her monologue only starts with reference to Nero's adulterous marriage; most of the lines, like the prologue of Tantalus in Seneca's *Thyestes*, reflect on the theme of punishment of impiety.

Later reworkings of the material from this play show how astute the author was to focus on respect as his main theme, if not the only one of the play. *Cupido* and *Venus* occur prominently in the second half of the *Octavia* (especially at 544-546; 554-571; 696-697; 806-819), that is,

---

[35] Her appearance answers the musing of Octavia's nurse for a *vindex deus* (255); cf. Ballaira 1978, who would propose Hercules.

the half in which Poppaea is on stage, and so it is understandable that roundheads and cavaliers, Protestants and Catholics of the Reformation and Counter Reformation should have focused on unbridled lust as the central theme.[36] Uniformly these adaptations relegate Octavia to the complacent victim and place Poppaea at the fore of the action. Monteverdi's 1642 opera, *l'incoronazione di Poppea*, with libretto by Busenello, has the greatest record of performance, due in large part to the music and not the theme. In the years prior to the execution of Charles I, Thomas May, a partisan of Cromwell, published *The Tragedy of Julia Agrippina, Empress of Rome* (1639, previously performed 1628). Both had been anticipated by Gwinne's monumental *Nero: A New Tragedy* (1603) which recounted most of the significant events of his reign. As a coda, one could mention in passing two modern treatments of the story which equally miss the point. Scutt's 1994 play, *Nero on the Couch* has the subtitle *Was Evil or Mama to Blame?* and Sherwood's *Nero* (1993) is similarly anachronistic and unsatisfying. By contrast, the characters of the *Octavia* are all self-serving and venal, but hardly evil in the way the term is now understood. A. Rorty[37] has posited that Seneca understood 'evil' as disobedience which led to disorder and social disruption. Such a conception is implicit in the fear imparted by the attempt of the chorus to storm the palace. Nero's 'evil' was not towards Octavia but rather to prompt the chorus to disobedience, that is, the 'evil' of the chorus.[38] It is the genius of the

---

[36] For much of what follows I am deeply indebted to Professor L.M. Hopkins of the University of Sheffield. The material of the *Octavia* was treated in many more plays and operas during the Renaissance than can be discussed here. Other productions can be located in Professor Hopkins' web site (www.shu.ac.uk/emls) or that of Dana F. Sutton's Neo-Latin project.

[37] Rorty 2001: 18-23. Her book posits eight different definitions of or attitudes towards evil, each tied to a specific era of western history.

[38] Mamet, almost alone of modern playwrights, honours the ancient attitude in plays that lack a single socially redeeming character. Octavia's pusillanimity in the ancient tragedy apparently influenced the scheming, duplicitous character assigned to her in 'Like Father, Like Son', an episode of 'Xena', unseen by me but discussed on a 'Xena' web-site.

Octavia that it does not fall into the sentimentality or preachiness of later treatments and equally avoids pitfalls of its own time.

Recent studies have challenged the ascription of the Latin tragedies to Seneca (Kohn 2003) and advanced claims that the *Satyricon* might not have been published until after the death of Domitian (Daviault 2001). A claim has even been made (Runchina 1977/78) that the *Octavia* might belong to the reign of Trajan, or at the least was given wide circulation during his reign. Historically this is not improbable since the similarities between Trajan's building, civic, and religious programs and those of Claudius would indicate that Trajan may have pictured himself and his policies as being similar to or parallel to the wise stewardship of Claudius. In the end, the date and authorship of the *Octavia* can never be resolved and perhaps are meant never to be. What abides is the message of what happens in a world without respect, neither respect for others or more damningly respect for oneself.[39]

George W.M. Harrison
Concordia University, Montréal