Cronfa - Swansea University Open Access Repository

_____

This is an author produced version of a paper published in:
Imagining Reperformance in Ancient Culture: Studies in the Traditions of Drama and Lyric

Cronfa URL for this paper:

_____

Book chapter :

Bexley, E. (2017). *Double Act: Reperforming History in the Octavia.* R. Hunter and A. Uhlig (Ed.), Imagining Reperformance in Ancient Culture: Studies in the Traditions of Drama and Lyric, (pp. 138-159). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Can be made public after 6mo embargo. SO

_____

http://www.swansea.ac.uk/library/researchsupport/ris-support/

DOUBLE ACT: RE-PERFORMING HISTORY IN THE *OCTAVIA*

'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.' – G. Santayana[1]

'Performance means: never for the first time. It means: for the second to the *n*th time. Performance is "twice-behaved behaviour".' – R. Schechner[2]

Abstract: This paper argues that motifs of re-performance pervade both the structure and the content of the pseudo-Senecan *Octavia*. Taking as my starting point the play's symmetrical arrangement, I examine how the *Octavia* evokes cycles in history through the dramaturgical doubling of characters, scenes, and events. Re-performative repetition is also conjured by the play's numerous references to ghosts and the dead, which establish conceptual links not only between theatre and history, but also between performance and the impersonation involved in Roman funeral practices. Finally, I consider how re-performance, at both an intra- and extra-dramatic level, works to preserve the past at the same time as acknowledging its loss.

Keywords: Octavia; Nero; *fabula praetexta*; history; memory; doubles; ghosts; repetition; surrogates

'Re-performance' is a deceptive term. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as 'the action or an act of performing something again; a second or subsequent performance',[3] which, we can safely say from this vantage point at the end of the volume, is both technically correct and conceptually misleading. The trick lies in the 're' prefix, which presupposes an originary, authentic, Ur-performance capable of being resurrected on later occasions, and clothed, like the actor, in various derivative guises. Yet any action executed on stage or in ritual (where the term 're-performance' also applies) is by its very nature repeatable, rehearsed, and subject to editing. This is what Richard Schechner means when he defines performance as 'twice-behaved' or 'restored' behaviour: conduct that invites and undergoes continual revision, and

[1] Santayana (1905) 284.
[2] Schechner (1985) 36.
[3] *OED*[3] *s.v.* 're-performance'.

thereby restores – in the sense of 'recreating' – an eternally absent original.[4] Every performance is already a re-performance, and the Ur-version no more than a fantasy (see Hanink in this volume). To adapt Herbert Blau's well-known remark: theatre is always doing what it has done before.[5]

Essential to this emended definition of re-performance is the idea that doubling and repetition inhere in all theatrical events.[6] They do so not only at the mechanical level of theatre, where actors' bodies, movements and dialogue, scripts, props, and stage spaces are all reused on a regular basis,[7] but also at a more symbolic level, in the very content of plays, and in the characters represented on stage. In Eastern as well as Western theatre traditions, the world of the play frequently reflects the problems of imitation and substitution raised by performance itself.[8] This paper examines precisely such themes as they appear in the pseudo-Senecan *Octavia*, where recurrence functions as a structuring device for the play's dramaturgy, where scenes are doubled, as are the actions of individual *dramatis personae*, and history seems to recycle itself in ever-smaller circles. Characters in the *Octavia* tend to 'stand in' for one another, in a manner suggestive of theatricalized substitution. They also repeat their crimes across generations, and revisit with obsessive regularity the memories of past events that reverberate still in the present. This tragic drama, the only surviving

---

[4] See Schechner (2013) 28-51 on the differences between 'once-behaved' and 'twice-behaved' behaviour. Despite attempts by some artists in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries to produce singular, unrepeatable theatrical events – e.g. Allan Kaprow's 'Happenings' or Marina Abramović's 'Rhythms' – all performance remains fundamentally reproducible. Even the seeming spontaneity of improvisation tends to rely upon *lazzi*, pre-prepared units of dialogue and action that can be adapted to a variety of different situations.

[5] Blau (1982/3) 149 defines as one of the universals of performance, 'the uncanny but inescapable impression imposed upon its spectators that we are "seeing what we saw before".'

[6] An argument pursued in various forms by Blau (1982/3); Roach (1996); and Carlson (2003), among others.

[7] On theatre's recycling of its mechanical aspects and dramatic scenarios, see Carlson (2003).

[8] Carlson (2003) 1-15 cites as an example the ubiquity of ghosts in drama.

example of a *fabula praetexta*,[9] is equally conscious of its characters' status as deceased historical individuals, and as roles embodied by actors. Like theatrical performance, history too is represented in this play as a cyclical, repetitive process that restores past events and people at the same time as acknowledging their ephemerality.[10] Repetition in the *Octavia* evokes, simultaneously and paradoxically, a sense of loss and a sense of preservation: Nero is dead, long live Nero.

SOME REFLECTIONS ON MIRROR SCENES

Composed sometime between A.D. 68 and 96,[11] the *Octavia* narrates in highly compressed form the turbulent events surrounding Nero's divorce of his first wife and his remarriage to the notoriously glamorous Poppaea. The play's structure is unique in ancient drama, and has been called 'pedimental' for the way it builds towards the central appearance of Agrippina's ghost before receding once more, albeit in slightly less than equal measure.[12] On either side of Agrippina's monologue, the playwright balances corresponding scenes: Octavia's discussion with her Nurse (34-272) matches Poppaea's discussion with hers (690-761); Seneca's attempt to reason with Nero (377-592) reflects the Prefect's attempt to do the same (820-76);[13] the play opens with Octavia's lyric lament (1-33) and closes in similar fashion, only this time with choral

---

[9] Whether the *Octavia* should properly be considered a *fabula praetexta* or a tragedy is a matter of much scholarly debate, which has been summarized by Schmidt (1985) 1425 and Manuwald (2001) 95 n.86, and addressed more recently by Kragelund (2002); Ferri (2002) 64-8; Ferri (2003) 1-3; and Goldberg (2003) 27-30.

[10] The relationship between theatre and history, especially in terms of their parallel attempts to preserve memory, has been theorized by Schneider (2011) and (2014).

[11] Three main options have been proposed for the *Octavia*'s date of composition: Barnes (1982), Kragelund (1982) and Flower (2006) 203 argue for Galba's reign; Smith (2003) 426-30 and Boyle (2008) xiv-xvi opt for the Vespasianic years; Ferri (2003) 5-30 proposes the later Flavian period, under Domitian.

[12] Lucas (1921) 22. Herington (1961) 21 appends, perhaps unfairly: 'no pediment can really avoid a certain stony quality'. On the play's symmetrical structure, see also Sutton (1983) 9-19 and Smith (2003) 403-5.

[13] Van Noorden (2014) 276 n.57 notes additional verbal symmetry between these two scenes: Nero's first words at 437 (*perage imperata*) are reversed to become his next-to-last words at 874 (*imperata perage*).

accompaniment (899-982). The chorus, too, is doubled in this play, one group comprising Roman citizens loyal to Octavia (273-376; 669-89; 878-982) and the other comprising either citizens or a specific group of courtiers loyal to Poppaea (762-89; 806-19).[14]

A major result (and I dare say, purpose) of this symmetrical arrangement is the creation of mirror scenes and mirrored characters that, in the play's latter half, invite the audience to judge events on the basis of what has gone before.[15] The play's first and second halves fold into each other, or better, overlap like pieces of semi-transparent paper. The audience is required, appropriately for an historical drama, to cast its mind back to a continually receding, ultimately unreachable point of origin. Not only are specific situations and conversations re-performed in the second part of the *Octavia*, but their very replication also points to the unsettling lack of an original template.

This doubling is most apparent in the figures of Octavia and Poppaea, who occupy equivalent scenes, experience similar dreams, and describe their mutual mother-in-law, Agrippina, in analogous terms. Agrippina embodies the crucial link between the two other women, as well as being the hinge on which the entire play pivots. Thus, Octavia, in her opening lament, likens her mother-in-law to a Fury that once presided over her nuptials: *illa, illa meis tristis Erinys / thalamis Stygios praetulit ignes* ('that one, that grim Erinys, carried a Stygian torch at my wedding' 23-4).[16] This metaphor acquires more substantial form later in the play, when

---

[14] Contra Sutton (1983) 14-6 most scholars rightly regard the *Octavia* as having two choruses. Boyle (2008) *ad Oct.* 762-79 remarks that Seneca's *Agamemnon* and the *Hercules Oetaeus* also feature double choruses. Chaumartin (2002) 59 advances the hypothesis that this was likewise the case in Accius' *Brutus*.

[15] As I use it in this paper, 'audience' encompasses anyone reading, listening to, or watching the play, and does not therefore entail any assumptions about the work's initial staging. On whether the *Octavia* was, or could have been, performed, see Boyle (2008) xl-xlii.

[16] Tacitus *Ann.* 14.63 features similar imagery: *huic primum nuptiarum dies loco funeris fuit.*

Agrippina's ghost appears on the eve of her son's second marriage 'bearing in her

bloody right hand a Stygian torch for the wicked wedding' of Nero and Poppaea

(*Stygiam cruenta praeferens dextra facem / thalamis scelestis*, 594-5). Agrippina

resembles a Fury at this moment both because she enacts the role Octavia has

previously attributed to her, and because she pursues vengeance for matricide (598-

613), an act that aligns her with Clytemnestra and the Erinyes of Aeschylean

tragedy.[17] Most importantly, her appearance links Octavia's past to Poppaea's future

by implying that she will behave towards the second daughter-in-law just as she

behaved towards the first.

Directly following Agrippina's speech, Poppaea dreams that 'a sorrowful

crowd throngs [her] bedchamber' (*uisa...thalamos meos / celebrare turba est maesta*,

718-19) among whom Nero's mother stands out 'savagely shaking a blood-stained

firebrand' (*sparsam cruore.../...saeua quatiebat facem*, 722-23). Like the preceding

visions of Agrippina, Poppaea's dream combines imagery of marriage and death with

the result that her mother-in-law occupies the dual role of Erinys and *pronuba*.[18] The

author of the *Octavia* heightens this effect by drawing close connections between the

new empress's actual wedding ceremony and the content of her subsequent

nightmare: the 'high couch' (*altos...toros*, 698) on which Poppaea reclines after the

ceremony reappears in her dream as a marriage couch (*toros/...iugales*, 726-7)

situated in the underworld, where its grim context also evokes a funeral bier (*torus*).

Likewise, the word *celebrare* (719), which Poppaea uses to describe the throng of

weeping women in her dream, is the same word used by the Nurse when she likens

---

[17] Although there is no direct allusion to Aeschylus in this passage, Agrippina's behaviour closely resembles that of Clytemnestra at *Eum.* 94-139.
[18] Kragelund (1982) and Boyle (2008) *ad Oct.* 594-5.

Nero and Poppaea's nuptials to those of Peleus and Thetis (*celebrasse*, 708).[19] What

Poppaea has experienced as a happy event is replayed by night as a hellish one.

This localized repetition points to a broader pattern of re-performance in

which Poppaea replaces her rival literally by taking over Octavia's role and enacting

what Octavia has already enacted; she even occupies the same *thalamus*. Like all

forms of historical fiction, the *Octavia* plays on the audience's prior knowledge of

events, and invites us to see in Octavia's imminent death the shadow of Poppaea's

own impending demise. Both women marry Nero under Agrippina's dire auspices;

both will die as a direct result of their marriage. In Poppaea's case, historical

recurrence becomes theatrical recurrence and vice versa, with the result that she can

only ever be a double for Octavia, already enmeshed in re-performance even when the

play is read or witnessed for the first time.

Nor is Octavia herself any less implicated in this process of doubling. If

Poppaea can be said to represent the 'twice-behaved' or 'restored' behaviour

described by Schechner, so too does Octavia, whose unfortunate marriage to Nero

finds precedent in her own mother's erroneous and illegal marriage to Silius.

Messalina's wedding, like Octavia's and Poppaea's, is portrayed as funereal: *illos*

soluta crine, succinta anguibus / ultrix Erinys uenit ad Stygios toros, / raptasque

thalamis sanguine extinxit faces ('with hair unbound, girded with snakes, the

avenging Erinys attended those Stygian nuptials and extinguished with blood the

torches stolen from the marriage chamber' 262-4). That the author of the *Octavia*

revisits this image so frequently need not imply his paucity of invention.[20] Rather,

such repetition signals the necessity of evaluating this play's events and characters in

---

[19] Observations made by Ferri (2003) *ad Oct.* 718-19. See also Kragelund (1982) 32-4 on Poppaea's dream as a perverted celebration of her wedding.
[20] The author of the *Octavia* has often been criticized for the demonstrable limitations in his vocabulary: see Helm (1934) 303-17 and Herington (1961) 24-7. However, Ginsberg (2011) suggests that there may be more artistry in the *Octavia*'s language than previously thought.

terms of what has gone before. If theatre is defined by reiterative conduct, the same is largely true of history, which the characters in this drama treat as a reference for and reflection of their current actions. From Messalina to Octavia to Poppaea, history manifests itself as an unending sequence of re-performance that precludes the possibility of authentic, original experiences.

Further connecting Poppaea and Octavia are the corresponding patterns of the two women's dreams.[21] In the first scene of the play, Octavia declares that she often sees her brother, Britannicus, in her sleep, where he tries in vain to escape death at Nero's hands: *refugit in thalamos meos; / persequitur hostis atque inhaerenti mihi / uiolentus ensem per latus nostrum rapit* ('he flees into my chamber; the enemy follows and as we cling together he thrusts his sword violently through our side', 120-22).[22] In a similar manner, Poppaea's dream features her ex-husband, Crispinus, and her young son by him, both of whom are destined to be killed on Nero's orders.[23] As in the case of Britannicus, Poppaea's loved ones approach her bed (726-30), and attempt to embrace her (730-31), whereupon Nero bursts into the room and 'burie[s] the savage sword in his throat' (*ensem...iugulo condidit saeuum*, 733). If the *iugulum* in question belongs to Crispinus, then the similarity between Octavia's and Poppaea's dreams increases, because both women witness a family member being killed by Nero. That neither episode adheres to historical reality – Britannicus was poisoned; Crispinus forced to commit suicide – further suggests that the playwright altered

---

[21] The similarity of Octavia's and Poppaea's dreams has been noted and analyzed by Lucas (1921) 92; Kragelund (1982) 26-34; Sutton (1983) 16-17; and Smith (2003) 414. A contrasting view, that the two dreams are not fundamentally alike, is provided by Carbone (1977) 60.

[22] Since the referent of *inhaerenti* (*Oct.* 121) is ambiguous, it is not clear whether Nero stabs Britannicus, Octavia, or both. Ferri (2003) *ad loc.* opts for Octavia; Helm (1934) 288 n.1 opts for Britannicus. I follow Kragelund (1982) 27 in accepting the ambiguity itself as deliberate, on the analogy of equally ambiguous information in Poppaea's dream.

[23] As Carbone (1977) 65 remarks, the status of Crispinus elder and younger as victims of Nero is a major reason for their inclusion in the play. Tacitus *Ann.* 16.17 recounts the death of Poppaea's former husband, Suetonius *Ner.* 35.5 the death of the son.

factual material in order to create a poetic parallel: Crispinus, to some extent, stands in for Britannicus just as Poppaea stands in for Octavia.

Yet *iugulo* at 733 is ambiguous, and may refer to Nero's own throat instead of, or as well as, Crispinus's. Kragelund asserts that the ambiguity is deliberate, which seems likely given that the author of the *Octavia* seldom foregoes an opportunity to use personal pronouns and possessive adjectives.[24] The uncertainty that occurs at a textual level may be retained in performance as well, because the information is relayed by Poppaea in reported speech and therefore lacks the concrete definition achieved through enactment. Even Poppaea's description of her vision as *cruorem coniugis...mei* ('my husband's blood', 739) does not solve the problem, since she calls both Crispinus and Nero *coniunx meus* (722; 729).[25] Beyond being a philological quandary, however, the ambiguity is rich in symbolic possibilities, because if the line does refer to Nero, then it generates yet another parallel between Octavia's and Poppaea's dreams. In the former, Britannicus is *trepidus* ('frightened', 120), and approaches Octavia for protection before Nero rushes in and stabs him. In the latter, Nero rushes in *trepidus* (732) and, depending on how the line is read, stabs himself.[26] Nero's emotional state therefore reflects that of his earlier victim, and the correspondence between these two passages suggests that the tyrant will suffer for his act of fratricide, that divine justice will transform Nero from aggressor to victim. As much as Crispinus in Poppaea's dream stands in for Britannicus in Octavia's, so too does Nero, whose histrionic suicide gestures to an endless and endlessly intertwined cycle of vengeance, history, and theatrical performance.

---

[24] Kragelund (1982) 13. On personal pronouns and possessive adjectives in the *Octavia*, see Herington (1961) 26 and Ferri (2003) 36-7. Smith (2003) 398 regards them not as a stylistic fault, but as 'self-referential gesturing devices'.

[25] *Pace* Ferri (2003) *ad Oct.* 733, who declares that *cruorem coniugis...mei* (739) refers only to Nero.

[26] Repetition of *trepidus* is noted by Kragelund (1982) 12.

Moreover, Crispinus and Nero also feature in Poppaea's nightmare as substitutes for each other. It is characteristic of the doubling effects in this play that the deaths of Poppaea's current husband and ex-husband are twinned, with the accompanying suggestion that Nero, like Poppaea, will follow the fate of his predecessor. By conflating Nero's demise with that of Crispinus, the playwright implies their essential similarity and shows that in the world of this drama replacement means replication.

There is in this doubling a superficial sense of chronological sequence, with Nero the tyrant and Poppaea the ambitious mistress both destined to endure what they once inflicted on others. But any such notion of historical or moral progress vanishes when we realize that reflection in the *Octavia* is not unidirectional – as in one mirror relaying an image of reality, or the present an image of the past – but cyclical, as in a group of mirrors endlessly duplicating each other's contents. Poppaea stands in for Octavia who stands in for Poppaea; 'now' and 'then' appear equal, and interchangeable. This equivalence becomes even more pronounced when the play is staged, because the visual and dramaturgical similarities between the Octavia-Nurse scene (34-272) and the Poppaea-Nurse scene (690-761) heighten the audience's impression of these exchanges as repeatable performances.[27] Besides usurping Octavia's marital and social position, Poppaea also takes over her rival's dramatic role, and this momentary replacement, far from confirming Octavia's authenticity, indicates that she, too, is a theatrical *persona* that actors may assume and replicate at will.

This motif of surrogates and doubles applies to virtually every family member mentioned in the *Octavia*, and is perpetuated to such a degree that multiple,

---

[27] On the significance of mirror scenes in performance, see Taplin (2003) 122-39.

sometimes contradictory, levels of correspondence can be found between the play's various characters. Political usurpation leads to usurpation of identity and, in many cases, to an equivalent kind of downfall. The play's symmetry evokes the cyclical nature of historical events, especially as they are played out within the Julio-Claudian dynasty: Britannicus' fate anticipates that of his sister, Octavia (470-71); Nero's murder of Agrippina repays Agrippina's role in the murders of Britannicus and Claudius (338-44); Nero is predicted to lose interest in Poppaea just as he has already lost interest in his previous mistress, Acte (193-200); Claudius and Agrippina bring about an incestuous marriage (141-2) as do Nero and Octavia (46-7); the same vessel that was designed to kill Agrippina (309-55) is the one that will convey Octavia to her death (906-10); Poppaea's statues are torn down and destroyed (683-86; 795-99) just as Nero destroyed Agrippina's statues following her murder (609-12).[28] Even Messalina fits within this cyclical pattern, although she is a figure well beyond the play's immediate scope: not only does she precede Agrippina in the role of Claudius' wife, but she herself undertakes to replace Claudius with Silius, thereby acquiring a second husband while the first is still alive: *nupta demens nupsit incesta face, / oblita nostri, coniugis, legum immemor* ('out of her mind, though married, she took part in a sinful marriage, forgetting us, forgetting her husband, heedless of the law', 260-61). Although the *annominatio* of *nupta...nupsit* could be used as evidence for the author's limited vocabulary,[29] it also points, intentionally or not, to the doubling inherent in Messalina's actions. The historical events represented in this play are always already a re-performance and the characters replacements of each other.[30]

---

[28] Most of these events are the product of vengeance, which, as Kerrigan (1996) 3-29 demonstrates, also tends to involve doubles, surrogacy and repetition.

[29] See n. 20, above.

[30] Another perspective on this recycling of history is Ginsberg (2013), who detects in the *Octavia*'s numerous images of civil strife a series of literary-historical allusions to the civil war between Caesar and Pompey.

USURPERS AND OTHER SUBSTITUTES

'Performance... stands in for an elusive entity that it is not but that it must vainly aspire both to embody and to replace.'[31] Acting, in Joseph Roach's influential metaphor, is a form of 'surrogacy' that simultaneously flaunts and attempts to overcome its status as secondary, inauthentic, derivative, a copy of reality that is not quite but almost real.[32] Roach's image suggests that theatre is parasitic upon reality because it undertakes not just to represent it, but also to approximate it, often with a troubling degree of verisimilitude. Likewise implicit in Roach's metaphor is the idea that performance, if not exactly unnatural, at least diverts or supplants natural processes of replication and reproduction. While the theatre specializes in fakes and spurious doubles, nature treats similarity – of parents to children, of siblings to each other – as proof of authenticity and of origins. Theatrical surrogacy is the opposite of natural creation.

Viewed through the lens of re-performance, however, the opposition between natural creation and theatrical surrogacy comes to seem very flimsy indeed, because biological regeneration likewise constitutes a series of copies that stem from an elusive, ever-receding point of origin.[33] One is a replication and replacement of one's parents, who are replications and replacements of their parents, and so on: if anything, theatrical copying mimics and exposes more fully the uncertainty and inauthenticity inherent in even the most natural processes of reproduction. The *Octavia* highlights this uncertainty in two, related ways: first, by multiplying rather than denying the characters' anxieties over parentage; and second, by making natural renewal the

---

[31] Roach (1996) 3.

[32] Roach (1996) *passim*.

[33] A prominent instance of such biological repetition in the *Octavia* is Seneca's quasi-Stoic, quasi-Hesiodic account of the Myth of Ages (391-434), which envisages endless regeneration occurring as a consequence of *ekpurosis*: *in caecum chaos / casurus iterum... / ...rursus ut stirpem nouam / generet renascens melior* (391-5). On this speech's thematic relationship to the rest of the drama, see Williams (1994) 181-2; Smith (2003) 408; and Van Noorden (2014) 268-82.

equivalent of theatrical substitution. The more desperately the *Octavia*'s characters cling to notions of biological legitimacy, the more the play's dramaturgy exposes those notions as impossible illusions.

The most significant example of surrogacy in the *Octavia* is Nero himself, who, via the dual process of adoption and murder, replaces Britannicus as Octavia's brother and Claudius' son. Octavia in particular characterises Nero as a spurious member of the Julio-Claudian *gens*, a *Nero insitiuus* ('a pretended Nero', 249). Her comment implies both that Nero's name does not belong to him – he is more properly a Domitius – and that he has been grafted (*insero*), rather than born, into the imperial family.[34] Octavia's nurse makes a similarly agricultural reference when she criticizes Claudius as 'one who was able to grant another's offspring precedence over his own son' (*qui nato suo / praeferre potuit sanguine alieno satum*, 139-40). The metaphorical language used in both instances alludes to natural sequences of growth and reproduction, where the repetition involved in regeneration is assumed to result in genuine offspring.

By excluding Nero from this process of dynastic regeneration, Octavia implies that he is a non-natural double for Britannicus, and thus, the equivalent of an actor. Although *insitiuus* need not refer specifically to the theatre, nonetheless it can denote 'assuming a false identity in a fraudulent manner', as in Cicero's portrayal of Quintus Metellus 'deleting a pretended Gracchus from the census list' (*insitiuum Gracchum...censu prohibuisset*, *Pro Sest.* 101).[35] As someone who pretends to be what he is not, the Nero of the *Octavia* resembles a stage performer, assuming an identity that is his neither in essence nor in origin. Comparison with an actor is almost

---

[34] Interestingly, Suetonius *Ner.* 7 reports that Nero tried to make a similar claim against Britannicus: *Britannicum...ut subditiuum apud patrem arguere conatus est.*

[35] A definition noted by Ferri (2003) *ad Oct.* 249. Buckley (2013) 137-8 sees in Nero's behaviour parallels to Cupid's impersonation of Ascanius in the *Aeneid*.

irresistible in this particular instance, given the historical Nero's passion for all things thespian. In addition, the phrase *insitiuus Nero* would acquire deeply ironic significance if spoken in a stage context, where it would denote not just Nero the character, but also the actor playing his role.[36]

Yet Octavia's attempt to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate, natural and performed identities sounds a false note in this drama, especially in the context of the heroine's own similarity to Poppaea. For if the fact of Octavia's substitution highlights her status as a role, the same may be said of Nero and Britannicus: being replaced implies that one is replaceable. Octavia herself refuses to acknowledge this possibility: she often describes Britannicus with the word *germanus* (115; 182), not just to distinguish between her brothers, but also to make clear that one of them is an imposter. When the Nurse urges Octavia to submit to Nero and thereby win him over, Octavia replies sarcastically: *ut fratrem ademptum scelere restituat mihi?* ('so that he may restore to me the brother he stole by crime?' 178). Here the more neutral term *frater*, along with the repetition inherent in *restituo*, points to the double role of Nero and Britannicus: Octavia asserts the impossibility of bringing someone back from the dead and, at the same time, hints that Nero has usurped the position of her brother. But Octavia's own words belie her claim about imposture, since Nero, through his act of substitution, has in fact restored *a* brother to her, and has perpetuated the role, albeit in a manner that Octavia does not appreciate.

It could even be said that Octavia equates Nero and Britannicus without realizing. By acknowledging Britannicus' death, she puts him in the position of both being and not being her brother; Nero, too, occupies this position, not only because he

---

[36] An analogous example is Plautus *Am.* 497, where Mercury describes Jupiter as *Amphitruo subditiuos* ('a counterfeit Amphitruo'), implying both that Jupiter is appearing in the role of Alcmena's husband, and that an actor is playing Jupiter playing Amphitruo.

has taken Britannicus' place, but also because his actions parallel those of an actor, who stands in for and thereby resurrects the person – or *persona* – he has been called upon to portray (see Bassi in this volume).[37] Just as a theatrical performer both is and is not the figure he embodies on stage, so Nero both is and is not Octavia's *frater*. If Britannicus is now a ghost, Nero may likewise be called the ghost of Britannicus. Such connections between re-performance and ghostliness are explored more fully in a later section of this paper; for now, it suffices to observe the contradictions latent in Octavia's sarcasm: Nero has already restored her brother via his own 'restored behaviour'.

Alongside bloodlines and parentage, restoration is another major theme that runs throughout this drama. No sooner does Octavia use *restituo* (178) to evoke Britannicus' death, than her Nurse also employs the verb, this time to suggest that her young mistress ought to engage in procreative acts: *labentem ut domum / genitoris olim subole restituas tua* ('so that one day you may restore your father's collapsing house with your own offspring' 179-80).[38] The Nurse's advice establishes a contrast between physical reproduction and the sterile resurrection envisaged by Octavia at 178. Rather than strive to recapture the past, the Nurse counsels, Octavia ought to replicate the Claudian house in another way, by looking to the future and bearing Nero's children. Whereas Octavia thinks in terms of Nero's false identity, the Nurse dwells on the possibility of perpetuating and validating that identity through offspring. Yet this very possibility of biological replication only serves to remind the audience of the blatantly theatrical repetition that pervades this play: would Nero and Octavia's offspring be classed as authentic, or spurious? Distinctions between natural

---

[37] The topic of theatrical resurrection is addressed by Carlson (2003), Rayner (2006), and Luckhurst and Morin (2014) 1-26.

[38] Procreation appears to have been an issue for the historical Octavia, as well, since Nero is said to have divorced her on the basis of sterility: *exturbat Octauiam, sterilem dictitans* (Tac. *Ann.* 14.60); *dimisit ut sterilem* (Suet. *Ner.* 35.2).

and theatrical reproduction dissolve upon close inspection, so that Nero's recreation through his (putative) descendants is no different from his surrogate recreation of Britannicus.

While Octavia worries about Nero's parentage, Nero, for his part, worries about Octavia's, which he regards as tainted by Messalina's second marriage: *incesta genetrix detrahit generi fidem* ('her mother's adultery has made her bloodline suspect', 536). Although his accusation is neither supported nor perpetuated by other characters in the play, it crucially alerts the audience to the possibility of Octavia likewise having the status of 'surrogate'. The entire concept of biological authenticity is consequently thrown into question, because neither Octavia nor Nero seems to be able to claim it; both are impostors standing in for lost originals. At the same time, the reproductive vocabulary present in Nero's statement – *genetrix*; *generi* – points to Octavia as the outcome of a natural process; thus, she is simultaneously a fake and a genuine biological product. Rather than establish a strict dichotomy between authentic, natural regeneration on the one hand, and spurious theatrical substitution on the other, the *Octavia*'s playwright continually collapses the two.

A BIT OF HISTORY (AND DRAMA) REPEATING

The motifs of reiteration that pervade the *Octavia* are related to theatrical performance by more than just the analogous fact that theatre, too, involves reiteration. When the playwright doubles the identities of Octavia and Poppaea, and Nero and Britannicus, he not only equates these characters with actors, but also points to the play's status as a re-play of history. Octavia, Poppaea, and Nero are doubles in the very literal sense that they are dramatic figures standing in for absent historical counterparts. Although the *Octavia* is not meta-theatrical in the style of Senecan

tragedy,[39] nonetheless it is pervaded by awareness that its *dramatis personae* are

reliving in performance – or at very least in a play text – events they have lived

already in historical reality.

This combination of historical and theatrical recurrence is conveyed primarily

by words that denote continual or resumed action. For instance, the Nurse urges

Poppaea to cease worrying about her dream and instead, 'recover [her] spirits, regain

[her] joy...return to [her] chamber' (*recollige animum, recipe laetitiam.../...redde te*

thalamis tuis, 754-5); Poppaea, in turn, hopes that her 'fear and shock may rebound

on [her] enemies' (*terrorque in hostes redeat attonitus meos*, 759). Repetition also

motivates the civic rebellion against Nero, in which the people hope to 'restore

Octavia to her home...and brother's bed' (*reddere penates Claudiae.../torosque*

fratris, 789-90) and at the same time, demand that Nero 'hand over his new wife'

(*coniugem reddat nouam*, 802). The verb *reddere* features prominently in this play:

Agrippina's ghost declares that Nero will 'pay for his crimes' (*reddat suis*

/...sceleribus, 629-30); Nero decides that Octavia must 'yield up her life to [his]

anger' (*dolori spiritum reddat meo*, 829); Octavia looks for a nightingale to 'echo

[her] tears in complaint' (*lacrimis nostris questus / reddere aedon,* 915); and the

chorus imagines Agrippina, shipwrecked, asking her son, 'is this the reward you repay

me for such great service?' (*mihi pro tanto / munere reddis praemia, nate?* 332-3).

Octavia employs this kind of vocabulary more than any other person in the

drama. She is particularly fond of the word *semper*, which she applies to her grief

(*semper genetrix deflenda mihi*; 'I must weep always for my mother', 10); her fear

(*trepidante semper corde*; 'my heart always trembles', 106); Agrippina's grim

---

[39] Although Boyle (2006) 223 calls the *Octavia* 'self-consciously a tragedy', its characters are far from being the self-reflexive, meta-theatrical figures of Senecan drama. Meta-theatre in Seneca is addressed by Boyle (1997) 112-37 and Littlewood (2004) 172-258.

reputation, which she claims will endure *longo semper in aeuo* ('forever through the ages', 97); her 'everlasting memory of her dead brother' (*semper fratris extincti memor*, 226); and daylight itself, which she calls *semper funesta* ('always death-bearing' 18).[40] The implication is that all of Octavia's actions, and all of her misfortunes are – to use Schechner's terminology – happening for the *n*th time.

In fact, Octavia qua *dramatis persona* exemplifies the concept of (re)performance on several levels: first, because she resurrects a historical personage and thereby resumes that woman's activity; second, because she depicts her own actions as part of an on-going, repetitive process; third, because she imitates well known tragic heroines, Electra being the most prominent among them (*repetam luctus, Electra, tuos*; 'I shall reiterate your grief, Electra', 59).[41] At the play's outset, when Octavia exhorts herself to 'resume habitual laments' (*repete assuetos...questus*, 6), she implies, simultaneously, that she reactivates an emotion belonging to the historical Octavia,[42] that she herself resumes an activity by now habitual to her, and that she replicates Electra's role as a mourner for deceased family members. She may even allude to Euripides' *Electra* 125-6: ἴθι, / τὸν αὐτὸν ἔγειρε γόον, / ἄναγε πολύδακρυν ἁδονάν ('come, rouse the same lament, lift up the pleasure of long weeping').[43] By replacing ἄναγε with the less than equivalent *repete*, Octavia draws attention to the repetition inherent in any act of citation, however imprecise. Both here and throughout the drama more generally, Octavia conveys the impression that her

---

[40] Boyle (2008) *ad Oct.* 10 notes the prominence of *semper* in this play.

[41] Herington (1961) 20-1 nominates Sophocles' *Electra* as the main model for Octavia. Ferri (1998) 344-6 and (2003) 60-1, and Boyle (2008) lxiv-lxv list a number of other intertexts, including Euripides' *Medea, Electra, Alcestis*, and Sophocles' *Antigone*.

[42] Naturally, this implication need have no truth value outside the realm of the play; it is impossible to know how the historical Octavia reacted to her situation. Tacitus ascribes great composure to her at *Ann.* 13.16 (*Octavia quoque, quamuis rudibus annis dolorem caritatem, omnis adfectus abscondere didicerat*), though he later defines her state as one of perpetual suffering (*Ann.* 14.63: *deductae in domum in qua nihil nisi luctuosum haberet*) and the latter description may well owe a debt to the *Octavia*, on which, see Ferri (1998).

[43] Noted by Ferri (2003) *ad Oct.* 5-6.

words, her deeds, her afflictions are second-hand; her entire tragedy has always already happened, before she even steps onto the stage.

THROUGH A GHOST, DARKLY

Equally indicative of re-performance in the *Octavia* is the ubiquitous presence of ghosts. I say ubiquitous, because although Agrippina is the only self-proclaimed spectre to feature in this play, the *Octavia*'s status as historical drama lends all of its participants a quasi-spectral aspect. As representations of actual, historical individuals, Octavia, Poppaea, Nero, and Seneca are walking shadows of the dead; they resemble ghosts because they stand in for and reproduce the traces of another person's existence.[44] Their ghostliness is also fundamentally theatrical, since, as Karen Bassi explores in her contribution to this volume, ghosts share with dramatic performance a propensity for 're-appearance', and for embodying people without quite *being* them.[45] As a fundamentally corporeal medium, theatre produces a ghostlike effect whereby an actor simultaneously is and is not the figure embodied on stage, and conversely, that figure simultaneously is and is not an actual presence in the theatre. In other words, it is in the very act of 'bringing a character to life' that a performer cements theatre's association with the dead. Nor does this association depend solely upon performance: the text of the *Octavia*, whether or not it was designed for the stage,[46] teems with references to ghosts, death, haunting, and substitution, all of which contribute to its self-conscious 'secondariness' and its dual role as a piece of theatre and a piece of history.

---

[44] As Rokem (2007) 6 points out, historical drama is understandably more ghostlike than plays that deal with fictional characters and events.

[45] In addition to Bassi's nuanced analysis, Blau (1982/3) and Rayner (2006) ix-xxxv investigate the theoretical reasons for theatre's deep and abiding interest in ghosts.

[46] See n. 15, above.

If the shadow of death can be said to hang over the major characters in this play, it hangs over Octavia most of all, not only in the literal sense that the drama's events lead up to her execution, but also in the sense that she appears to have stopped living long before being sentenced to die. Tellingly, she characterizes herself as a *magni...nominis umbra* ('the shadow/ghost of a great name' 71), a line that uses Lucan *B.C.* 1.135 to allude to the collapse of the Julio-Claudian dynasty.[47] Besides indicating Octavia's loss of status, the phrase identifies her as the theatrical double of a deceased person (*umbra*). In a giddying spiral of re-performance, Octavia qua *dramatis persona* is declared a ghostly version of her own self at the same time as being a shadowy, infinitely iterable replacement for a now lifeless historical figure. Further examples of Octavia's ghostliness are her preference for darkness over light (18-20) and her repeated nightmare of suffering death at Nero's hands (121-22).[48] Her final act of boarding a boat for Pandataria is similarly evocative of death, both because Octavia recognizes the vessel as the one used by Nero in his plot to kill Agrippina (907-8), and because her impending journey resembles a crossing to the underworld.[49] Just as Charon ferries souls to the far bank of the Styx, so the ship's helmsman (*puppis rector*, 970) will convey Octavia 'to join the gloomy shades' (*tristes...ad umbras*, 958).

The figure of Eurydice, too, constitutes a crucial if previously unnoticed intertext for Octavia's spectral qualities. When Octavia's Nurse assures her young charge that Nero *respiciet ipse coniugem* ('will show regard for his wife' 186), she uses the same verb that Vergil does to describe Orpheus' actions at *Georgics* 4.490-1: *Eurydicen...suam.../...respexit* ('he looked back upon his Eurydice'). An almost

---

[47] Further discussion of this significant intertext can be found in Ginsberg (2013).

[48] Mazzoli (2000) examines the interlinked themes of light, darkness and ghosts in the *Octavia*.

[49] The motif of the 'ship of the dead' is duly noted by Lucas (1921) 93.

identical version of the Nurse's phrase also appears in the third chorus of Seneca's

Hercules Furens, where Proserpina instructs Orpheus, *non…tuam* <u>respice coniugem</u>

('do not <u>look back at</u> your <u>wife</u>' *Her. F.* 585). The twist in Octavia's case is that Nero,

unlike the hopelessly devoted Orpheus, will never turn around to gaze upon his

former wife, and this very lack of regard will send Octavia to her death. At the same

time, the allusion to Eurydice demonstrates that Octavia belongs already to the world

of the dead, long before she reaches her actual, physical end on the island of

Pandataria. Lastly, the verb *respicio* also marks out Octavia as historical material to

which the play's audience must cast its mind back: even if Nero forgets his wife, we

at least should remember her.[50]

The playwright anticipates Nero's death as well, primarily in Agrippina's

prophetic speech from beyond the grave (619-21; 629-31), which many scholars

regard as conclusive proof of the drama's post-Neronian dating.[51] Similarities

between Agrippina's account and the historical record presented in Suetonius (*Ner.*

47-9) have often been noted,[52] with the attendant implication that Agrippina refers to

real events, not ones fabricated for dramatic effect. By referring to them, moreover,

she draws the audience's attention to the historical circumstances of Nero's death and

thus, to his fundamentally spectral presence in the play.[53] Agrippina prophesies the

---

[50] This sense of *respicio* is acknowledged in the title of Smith (2003), 'Looking back with *Octavia*'.

[51] Internal evidence for the play's dating has been sifted thoroughly by Carbone (1977), and his conclusions widely accepted.

[52] For instance: Carbone (1977) 50-3.

[53] It is difficult to gauge how well and in how much detail the *Octavia*'s contemporary audience recognized/recalled the historical events mentioned in this play; a lot depends on the (uncertain) date of composition. For instance, Kragelund (2016) 306-14 argues that the script's passing allusions to lesser historical figures indicate an immediately post-Neronian date, when people's memories were still raw. But broad similarities between the *Octavia*'s account and those given by Tacitus and Suetonius point to the persistence of widespread popular traditions about Nero, traditions that would surely have enabled audiences to appreciate the *Octavia*'s material even decades after Nero's death.

future as a way of encouraging the audience to look to the past, and to see in the Nero of the *Octavia* a ghost of his former self.[54]

STAGING A FUNERAL

Close association of theatre and death in the *Octavia* stems not only from the play's historical material and the ghostly effects of the dramatic medium, but also from Roman funeral practices, in which performers were sometimes hired to wear a wax mask (*imago*) of the deceased, to don the clothing appropriate to his status, and to impersonate him while accompanying the bier. Polybius records that the Roman death mask 'reproduced with particular fidelity both the shape and contour' of the deceased's face (εἰς ὁμοιότητα διαφερόντως ἐξειργασμένον καὶ κατὰ τὴν πλάσιν καὶ κατὰ τὴν ὑπογραφήν, *Hist.* 6.53.5-6). He adds that these masks were placed upon actors who 'most resembled the dead man in stature and general form' (περιτιθέντες [τὰς εἰκόνας] ὡς ὁμοιοτάτοις εἶναι δοκοῦσι κατά τε τὸ μέγεθος καὶ τὴν ἄλλην περικοπήν, *Hist.* 6.53.6-7). Diodorus provides a similar account, adding that the actors in question had 'carefully observed throughout the man's entire life his gait and the peculiarities of his appearance' (ἐκ παντὸς τοῦ βίου παρατετηρηκότας τήν τε πορείαν καὶ τὰς κατὰ μέρος ἰδιότητας τῆς ἐμφάσεως, 31.25.2), which they then reproduced during the funeral procession. Verisimilitude is also stressed in Suetonius' account, where the mime artist, Favor, dared to imitate even Vespasian's legendary stinginess and upon being told the cost of the funeral, cried out that 'he should be given one hundred thousand sestertii and be dumped into the Tiber' (*centum sibi sestertia darent ac se uel in Tiberim proicerent*, *Vesp.* 19.2).

---

[54] Another possible source of Nero's ghostliness in this play is the tradition that he died on the anniversary of Octavia's murder – *obiit tricensimo et secundo aetatis anno, die quo quondam Octaviam interemerat* (Suet. *Ner.* 57) – with the result that any reference to her imminent death becomes a reference to his as well.

Despite variance in tone, all three descriptions concentrate on the same idea, namely that the actor employed at a funeral must approximate the dead man as closely as possible. In other words, the actor becomes both a double and a substitute for the dead man, whom he all but resurrects in the form of a living, walking effigy. It is this emphasis on doubling, substitution and resurrection that renders the custom theatrical, even though, as has been argued, the *imagines* did not have a primarily dramatic purpose, nor did they bear close relation to the masks commonly used on the Roman stage.[55] Unlike the stylized features and stock types of comic and tragic masks, the *imago* was designed to represent a specific individual.[56] For this reason alone, the participants at a Roman funeral may not have associated it with the theatre, at least not directly. Nonetheless, the actors attending such ceremonies did resemble stage artists, at a level far deeper than costumes and props: both kinds of performer engaged in the parallel activity of bringing a person (back) to life.

This potential theatricality of the Roman funeral is confirmed by a passage from Plautus' *Amphitruo*, in which Sosia catches sight of Mercury when the latter has assumed the former's appearance. Sosia is at a loss to explain how his identity has been stolen from him:

> di immortales, obsecro uostram fidem
> ubi ego perii? ubi immutatus sum? ubi ego formam perdidi?
> an egomet me illic reliqui, si forte oblitus fui?
> nam hic quidem omnem imaginem meam, quae antehac fuerat, possidet.
> uiuo fit quod numquam quisquam mortuo faciet mihi.

Immortal gods, I beg your mercy. Where did I go missing? Where have I been transformed? Where did I lose my appearance? Or did I leave myself behind, or forget myself? For this man occupies my entire likeness, the one I had before. He does for me while I'm living what no one will ever do for me when I'm dead.

---

[55] Wiles (1991) 130 draws a sharp distinction between *imagines* and theatrical masks, in terms of their appearance and use. In contrast, Flower (1995) 114-15 discerns a degree of potential overlap.

[56] There is also an anecdotal tradition that portrait-masks were used to represent specific individuals in Aristophanic comedy, though the hypothesis remains far from certain. See Dover (1967) and Marshall (1999) 194-5.

(*Am.* 455-59)

As a slave, Sosia can never expect to have an aristocratic funeral complete with performers and *imagines*, but he professes to experience a close equivalent when he witnesses Mercury impersonating him. Significantly, Sosia's initial reaction is to assume that Mercury's presence cancels out his own, as if the god had killed him off simply by replicating his identity. When Sosia wonders, *ubi ego perii*, he implies not only that he is in trouble (*perii*) and that his identity has vanished, but also that he himself has died.[57] Mercury is, therefore, both Sosia's double and Sosia's effigy: he embodies a "dead" man as a direct consequence of his work as an actor.[58]

Reinforcing this association of death and performance is the scene's obvious meta-theatricality. When Mercury appears on stage wearing the same mask as Sosia and presumably mimicking Sosia's carriage,[59] he draws attention to the activity of an actor, whose job is it to assume and discard *dramatis personae* as the situation demands. Mercury's ability to inhabit Sosia's identity is the equivalent of – is in fact an expression of – the actor's ability to inhabit a character, simultaneously to be it and not be it, like a ghost. David Christenson remarks that Sosia's joke about funerals relies on a discrepancy between the exaggerated comic mask and the life-like *imago*.[60] This is true, but the joke also suggests a deeper, much darker similarity between the circumstances in which such masks are worn.

Further, Sosia's encounter with Mercury makes explicit the repetition and substitution that underpin all theatrical performance. A lot of the scene's humour derives from Sosia's mistaken assumption that there can exist only one original and

---

[57] Christenson (2000) *ad Am.* 295 remarks: '*perii* becomes a kind of refrain for Sosia...by the end of the scene, the figurative exclamation becomes a literal truth in his mind'.

[58] On actors as effigies, see Roach (1996) 36.

[59] Sumi (2002) 562 rightly asserts that Mercury's impersonation must have gone beyond his simply wearing Sosia's mask.

[60] Christenson (2000) *ad Am.* 459.

no copy, in this case, of himself. But the visual doubling – two Sosias – presented on stage, proves precisely the opposite: there are only copies, and no originals. In a similar fashion, Sosia's very name indicates his replicability because it is such a standard title for slaves in New Comedy that it denotes a stock figure rather than a specific individual; Mercury implies as much when he, too, adopts the name of Sosia along with the position of being a slave. Unfortunately for Amphitruo's servant, Mercury has not taken anything that could not – potentially – belong to him as well; his re-performance of Sosia demonstrates that Sosia himself engages in re-performance merely by playing his own role.

If deathly doubling can be present in Plautine comedy, surely it was even more prominent in *fabulae praetextae*, not only because these plays depicted actual, historical individuals, but also because the actors appearing in them typically wore the *toga praetexta*, from which the genre took its name.[61] Performers in ancient Rome were disenfranchised members of society: the only other occasion on which they could be allowed to wear a *toga praetexta* was the funeral procession, when they donned the insignia of the dead man's rank.[62] The masks used in *fabulae praetextae* are another potential point of correspondence, because they cannot have been the same as those used in other serious drama. For historical figures to be recognizable on stage, their masks must have borne at least glancing resemblance to a real individual's face.[63] That resemblance, in turn, brings the *praetexta* mask closer to an *imago*. While such correspondences should not be pressed too far, it seems reasonable to suppose that Roman historical drama shared some of its features with aristocratic funeral

---

[61] On the genre's name and defining features, see Manuwald (2011) 140-44.

[62] The most authoritative source on the legal status of Roman actors is Leppin (1992) 71-83. See also Edwards (1997) 66-95.

[63] Total verisimilitude, while it cannot be discounted, was surely not the only option available in this instance: see Dover (1967) 17-24 for the parallel case of Aristophanic portrait-masks.

processions, and that the two practices were at least visually similar.[64] On the same analogy, the characters portrayed in *praetextae* attain the status of ghosts, or even corpses: they reproduce a person's appearance without also reproducing his or her essence. Like the dead at a funeral, the characters of historical drama are an absent presence.

Although it is not clear to what extent the *Octavia* can be classified as a true *fabula praetexta*,[65] nonetheless its use of historical material generates visual and thematic links with the aristocratic Roman funeral. Moreover, Nero's presence in the text increases these affinities, because his own activity as a performer appears to have combined theatricality with death. Suetonius (*Ner.*21.3) and Dio (63.9.5) both report the emperor's curious habit of acting in a mask that depicted his own face. They add that he would sometimes assume a woman's mask, either one modelled on the features of his current lover (*prout quamque deligeret*, Suet. *Ner.* 21.3), or 'fashioned in the likeness of Poppaea Sabina, so that she, though dead, might parade on stage' (πρὸς τὴν Σαβῖναν ἐσκεύαστο, ὅπως κἀκείνη καὶ τεθνηκυῖα πομπεύῃ, Dio 63.9.5). Niall Slater has argued convincingly that in order to be recognizable, Nero's masks must have been veristic and as such, must have recalled *imagines* to an unsettling degree.[66] This implied link between performance and resurrection emerges quite clearly from Dio's account, where Nero is understood to wear his dead wife's features for the express purpose of re-animating her and thus, enabling her to join in the fun. Nero's assumption of his own mask is spookier still, since it conflates actor,

---

[64] Dupont (1985) 218-24 goes as far as proposing that *fabulae praetextae* were intended for performance at Roman funerals, but the suggestion has been refuted thoroughly by Flower (1995) 177-9.

[65] See n.9, above.

[66] Slater (1996).

character, and real person to suggest that Nero is simultaneously himself and a ghost of himself, alive and dead.[67]

The text of the *Octavia* never once alludes to the historical Nero's thespian proclivities. It does not need to: the very act of scripting Nero into a drama could not fail to recall the emperor's passion for public performance. In addition, the *Octavia* pays so much attention to Nero's face that it could be construed as referring to the emperor's self-reflexive masks.[68] Thus, Octavia mentions Nero's 'grim visage' (*uultus...truces*, 22) in her opening lament, adding later: 'looking upon the tyrant's proud, grim face is a punishment worse than death' (*poena...grauior nece est / uidere tumidos et truces.../ uultus tyranni*, 108-10). Seneca employs the same language at 435-6, declaring: 'Nero approaches with agitated steps and grim expression' (*gressu fertur attonito Nero / trucique uultu*). Poppaea's face is likewise a subject of attention: the chorus celebrates it as 'surpassing the visage of Helen' (*uincet uultus haec Tyndaridos*, 775), while the Nurse remarks on her charge's 'troubled countenance' (*turbata uultu*, 692) and inquires what has caused Poppaea to change her former, presumably happy, expression (*quae...uultus causa mutauit tuos?* 710). Unsurprisingly, Poppaea's expression has altered as the result of her funereal dream, in which she has seen herself following Agrippina into the underworld. This proleptic reference to Poppaea's death not only reminds the play's audience that they are seeing a ghost, but also connects Poppaea's face to the funeral mask, specifically via the visual tradition of Roman historical drama.

Further associating faces with death is Nero's description of decapitated heads lining the rostra during Octavian's proscriptions, 'foul gore dripping down rotten

---

[67] That an actor in the *Octavia* could have performed Nero in one of Nero's masks is a semiotically dizzying possibility entertained by Flower (2002) 71.

[68] On faces and masks in the *Octavia*, see Smith (2003) 400-401.

faces' (*stillante sanie per putres uultus graui*, 513). Equally evocative, though for different reasons, is the Roman citizenry's attempt to 'hurl to the ground all-too-real images of the empress's face' (*affligat humo.../ similes nimium uultus dominae*, 685-6). The implication is that Poppaea's statues represent her in a manner equivalent to a mask; the crowd even refers to her sculpted appearance as an *imago* (684). Like the descriptions of Nero's *uultus*, this passage underscores Poppaea's presence as a masked character within the *Octavia* itself, even if the play is not presented on stage. Moreover, the Roman citizens' hostility towards Poppaea's image evokes the practice known to scholars (though not to the Romans themselves) as *damnatio memoriae*: the people tear down Poppaea's statues *as if* she were dead and *as if* they wished to obliterate the record of her life.[69] Nero responds to their daring by insisting, appropriately, that the Roman people must not 'raise their eyes to meet the sacred visage of [his] wife' (*contra...sanctos coniugis uultus meae / attollere oculos*, 841-2).[70]

'TO THE LAST SYLLABLE OF RECORDED TIME'[71]

As Poppaea's example demonstrates, death in the *Octavia* is closely related not only to theatrical performance, but also to the preservation of memory. All three concepts are, in fact, interconnected: performance engages in resurrection and therefore preserves memories of the dead; memory, like a spectre, revisits and reanimates a past event; performance and *re*collection both result from repetition; and performance, as a live yet re-iterable act, evokes both the transience of death and the permanence

---

[69] On the practice of *damnatio memoriae*, or more properly, *memoria damnata*, Flower (2006) is a comprehensive guide. Champlin (2003) 29-30 cautions against overuse of the concept, especially in relation to Nero.

[70] Connection of Poppaea's *uultus* to an aristocratic *imago* and to Roman memory sanctions is unlikely to be accidental, since, as Varner (2001) demonstrates, posthumous erasure often extended to defacing portraits and banning public display of the condemned person's funeral mask.

[71] *Macbeth* 5.5.21

accorded to historical records.[72] History shares with theatre the preservation of the past via recapitulation; in Rebecca Schneider's words, 'againness...is also a matter for historical thought', not just a matter for the stage.[73]

This nexus of associations is woven throughout the *Octavia*, where political succession repeatedly prompts the need to negotiate past memories. For instance, when Octavia declares that she will always remember her deceased brother (*semper fratris extincti memor*, 226) and always lament for her mother (*semper genetrix deflenda mihi*, 10), she assumes a stance that is not just personal, but also deeply political. Her attachment to the past has the potential to be interpreted as resistance to Nero's current rule; the Nurse implies as much by warning Octavia to keep quiet (98-9) and to comply with Nero so that she may save her life (179). But Octavia's unwillingness to forget goes hand in hand with the repetitive behaviour she exhibits throughout the play. By revisiting her grief so frequently, Octavia demonstrates that memory's preservation depends on a process of repetition, in this case, repetition that is intimately linked to acting. It is via her reiterated and re-iterable performance that Octavia perpetuates both her own and the audience's recollection of Messalina and Britannicus.[74] She perpetuates herself, too, in her dual role as a *dramatis persona* and a figure from history.

Agrippina's ghost displays similar concern for memorial permanence when she complains that Nero 'rages against her name' (*saeuit in nomen*, 609) and 'demolishes statues and inscriptions' that recall her (*simulacra, titulos destruit*

---

[72] Ideas that derive from a number of different theatre theorists: Carlson (2003) on ghosts and memory; Rokem (2007) on theatre and history; Schneider (2011) and (2014) on the relationship of performance to permanence and to historical records.

[73] Schneider (2014) 67.

[74] Attention paid to Messalina may be designed to recall, or combat, the particularly harsh sanctions imposed upon her memory under Claudius. See Flower (2006) 182-9.

memores mei, 611).[75] The complaint has a historical basis: Agrippina's fall from

power was followed by partial sanctions against her memory, enacted more fully in

Rome than elsewhere.[76] Yet the destruction of Agrippina's physical monuments –

simulacra – also hints, paradoxically, at her insubstantial survival in the form of a

spectre (*simulacrum*). Her shadowy presence in a historical drama provides the

memoria of which her transient statues proved incapable.

In fact, Agrippina's appearance on stage in ghostly form points to a close

relationship between performance and historical memory, both of which use repetition

as a means of capturing and restoring the fleeting experience of live events.[77] This

relationship between theatrical permanence and physical impermanence is a complex

one, central both to the *Octavia* and to contemporary performance theory.[78] Simply

put, performance is simultaneously ephemeral and perpetual. To the extent that

theatre is a temporal medium unfolding over the time it takes to perform a play, it

may be defined as transient and essentially unrepeatable; theatre as a live and passing

event cannot be captured.[79] The same may be said of history, which exists through

time and cannot be replayed. Yet, as we have seen, replay and repetition are

constitutive elements of all theatrical performance; likewise, re-appearance is the very

essence of memory, which summons back past material to be reviewed and renewed

in the present. Thus, when Agrippina refers to the destruction of her statues, she

draws attention both to theatre's ephemerality and to its perpetuity. On the one hand,

her ghostly presence underscores theatre's comparative flimsiness, the fact that stage

simulacra are composed not of stone but of actual, human bodies. On the other hand,

---

[75] For *Oct.* 611, I follow the text printed in Fitch (2004).

[76] Flower (2006) 189-94, and Kragelund (2007) 27-9.

[77] Thorough treatment of the issue can be found in Schneider (2011).

[78] See in particular Phelan (1993); Taylor (2003); Schneider (2011) and (2014).

[79] Thus Auslander (1999) 132: 'live performance...exists only in the transitory present moment'.

her very presence affirms theatre's ability to perpetuate memory through repetition

and resurrection: Agrippina's embodied ghost, however flimsy, is also part of the

historical record.[80]

Just as the *Octavia* employs a vocabulary of repetition in order to signal its

status as theatre, so it employs a vocabulary of memory to mark its role as a historical

document. Forgetfulness is never a positive state in this play: Messalina is *legum*

immemor ('heedless/forgetful of the law', 261) when she marries Silius, and the

chorus chides itself for being disloyal to Claudius' memory after his death (*nos*

quoque nostri sumus immemores / post fata ducis; 'we, too, are forgetful of our dead

leader', 288-89). Both passages function self-reflexively to point out the drama's own

historical purpose, namely, to preserve the memory of Nero's victims and to ensure

that Nero himself was recalled appropriately, as a tyrant rather than a popular, fun-

loving ruler.[81] Paradoxically, the *Octavia* put Nero back on stage in order to ensure

that his theatrical tendencies did not end up eclipsing people's memory of his brutally

autocratic government.[82] Viewed alongside the memory sanctions imposed in varying

measures upon Messalina, Agrippina, Poppaea, and Nero himself in the turbulent

years following his death, the *Octavia* emerges, however coincidentally, as a durable

piece of history built from the admittedly shaky foundations of theatrical

performance. The motifs of reiteration and doubling that inform this play at an intra-

and extra-dramatic level ensure that the ghosts of Nero's victims are resurrected, their

memories (and memories of them) revisited, their histories (re)written. Re-

---

[80] This link between bodies and statues becomes even more apparent when we consider that an elaborate *scaenae frons* of the early imperial period would, typically, have featured life-size marble figures as part of its decoration.

[81] The view may have gained some traction in Rome, but Nero remained such a popular figure in the Eastern Empire that he evolved into a kind of folk hero and inspired several impersonators. Champlin (2003) 1-35 is an intriguing account of emperor's evolution into a cult figure.

[82] Flower (2002) 71.

performance in drama and in history proves itself a useful means of rescuing material from oblivion.

CONCLUSION

It is ironically appropriate that a play so haunted by doubles, substitutes, memories and ghosts should have been transmitted to us under the authorship of 'Pseudo-Seneca'. To some extent, this detail is a coincidence due only to the vagaries of history. Yet the author's status as an imitation Seneca also derives from his conscious decision to reproduce broad features of the Neronian tragedian's style, and to depict the character of Seneca himself quoting liberally from his own philosophical works.[83] In this regard as in all others, the *Octavia* defines itself as secondary, derivative, recycled. From the play's shadowy authorship to its symmetrical structure, from its obsession with ghosts to its portrayal of political usurpation, from its repetitive language to its characters' repetitive behaviour, the *Octavia* concentrates its energy upon linking theatrical re-performance to historical recollection. To do anything, in the *Octavia*, is always to do it over again, to resume an activity always already performed – in a theatrical and in a prosaic sense – by someone else at some prior time. Performance, memory and history work in tandem throughout this drama, each constituted by and relying on the reuse of earlier material.

In light of this particular interrelationship, and by way of conclusion, I (re)turn to one of this chapter's prefatory quotes, from George Santayana: 'those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.' This much-quoted (and frequently misquoted!) aphorism[84] envisages a stark divorce between repetition and memory, as if the former were some kind of culturally infantile state escaped only via adequate

---

[83] On the *Octavia*'s use of Senecan material, see Poe (1989), Williams (1994) and Buckley (2013).

[84] Schneider (2011) 39-40 lists and discusses the more prominent variations of Santayana's theme.

application of the latter. But for the *Octavia* at least, memory and repetition are inseparable, because going back over, even to the extent of re-enacting, past events is presented as the only way of ensuring their appropriate recall: Nero and his crimes are resurrected to be retained in people's minds as enduringly negative examples; Nero's victims are resurrected (by the playwright) and remembered (by the characters) in order to prevent their erasure from historical and cultural records. Like re-performance, *re*collection guards against loss precisely by acknowledging it, by recognizing and preserving a sense of absence, a feeling of lack: it is later copies that matter, not putative originals. The act of generating these copies, of repeating and therefore remembering, is what binds the past to the present in the *Octavia* just as dramaturgical repetition unites to two halves of this pedimental play.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Auslander, P. 1999. *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. London and
    New York.
Barnes, T. D. 1982. 'The Date of the *Octavia*' *MH* 39: 215-17.
Blau, H. 1982/3. 'Universals of Performance; or, Amortizing Play' *SubStance*
    37-8: 140-61.
Boyle, A. J. 1997. *Tragic Seneca: An Essay in the Theatrical Tradition*. London.
— 2006. *An Introduction to Roman Tragedy*. London and New York.
— 2008. Octavia: *Attributed to Seneca. Edited with Introduction, Translation,
    and Commentary*. Oxford.
Buckley, E. 2013. "*Nero insitivus*: Constructing Neronian Identity in the Pseudo-
    Senecan *Octavia*" in A. G. G. Gibson, ed. *The Julio-Claudian Succession. Reality
    and Perception of the 'Augustan* Model' (Leiden) 133-54.
Carbone, M. E. 1977. 'The *Octavia*: Structure, Date, and Authenticity' *Phoenix*
    31: 48-67.
Carlson, M. 2003. *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as a Memory Machine*. Ann
    Arbor.
Champlin, E. 2003. *Nero*. Cambridge, MA.
Chaumartin, F.-G. 2002. 'Octavie, ouevre a la croisée de divers chemins' *SO* 77:
    57-60.
Christenson, D. M. 2000. *Plautus Ampitruo*. Cambridge.
Dover, K. 1967. 'Portrait-Masks in Aristophanes' in R. E. H. Westendorp Boerma,
    ed. *ΚΩΜΩΙΔΟΤΡΑΓΗΜΑΤΑ: Studia Aristophanea viri Aristophanei W. J. W.
    Koster in honorem* (Amsterdam) 16-28.
Dupont, F. 1985. *L'acteur-roi*. Paris.
Edwards, C. 1997. 'Unspeakable professions: public performance and prostitution in
    ancient Rome' in. J. P. Hallett and M. B. Skinner, eds *Roman Sexualities*
    (Princeton) 66-95.
Ferri, R. 1998. 'Octavia's Heroines: Tacitus *Annales* 14.63-4 and the *Praetexta
    Octavia*' *HSCPh* 98: 339-56.
— 2002. 'Comments' *SO* 77: 60-8.
— 2003. *Octavia. A Play Attributed to Seneca*. Cambridge.
Flower, H. I. 1995. '*Fabulae praetextae* in context: when were plays on
    contemporary subjects performed in Republican Rome?' *CQ* 45: 170-90.
— 1996. *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture*. Oxford.
— 2002. 'Roman Historical Drama and Nero on the Stage' *SO* 77: 68-72.
— 2006. *The Art of Forgetting: Disgrace and Oblivion in Roman Political Culture*.
    Chapel Hill.
Ginsberg, L. D. 2011. '*Ingens* as an Etymological Pun in the *Octavia*' *CP* 106.4:
    357-60.
— 2013. 'Wars More Than Civil: Memories of Pompey and Caesar in the *Octavia*'
    AJPh 134: 637-74.
Goldberg, S. 2003. 'Authorising *Octavia*' in M. Wilson, ed. *The Tragedy of Nero's
    Wife: Studies on the* Octavia Praetexta. *Prudentia* 35 (Auckland) 13-36.
Helm, R. 1934. 'Die Praetexta *Octavia*' *SBDA* 16: 283-347.
Herington, C. J. 1961. '*Octavia Praetexta*: A Survey' *CQ* n.s. 11: 18-30.
Kerrigan, J. 1996. *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon*. Oxford.
Kragelund, P. 1982. *Prophecy, Populism, and Propaganda in the 'Octavia'*.
    Museum Tusculanum Suppl. 25. Copenhagen.

— 2002. "Historical Drama in Ancient Rome: Republican Flourishing and Imperial Decline?" *SO* 77: 5-51, 88-102.

— 2007. 'Agrippina's Revenge' in M. Moltesen and A.-M. Nielsen, eds. *Agrippina Minor: Life and Afterlife* (Copenhagen) 27-43.

— 2016. *Roman Historical Drama: The* Octavia *in Antiquity and Beyond*. Oxford.

Leppin, H. 1992. *Histrionen: Untersuchungen zur sozialen Stellung von Bühnenkünstlern im Western des römischen Reiches zur Zeit der Republik und des Principats.* Bonn.

Littlewood, C. A. J. 2004. *Self-Representation and Illusion in Senecan Tragedy.* Oxford.

Lucas, F. L. 1921. 'The *Octavia*' *CR* 35: 91-3.

Luckhurst, M. and Morin, E (eds.) 2014. *Theatre and Ghosts: Materiality, Performance, and Modernity*. New York.

Manuwald, G. 2001. *Fabulae preatextae. Spuren einer literarischen Gattung*. Munich.

— 2011. *Roman Republican Theatre*. Cambridge.

Marshall, C. W. 1999. 'Some Fifth-Century Masking Conventions' *G&R* 46: 188-202.

Mazzoli, G. 2000. 'Ombre nell'*Octavia*' in E. Stärk and G. Vogt-Spira, eds. *Dramatische Wäldchen: Festschrift für Eckard Lefèvre zum 65 Geburtstag* (Hildesheim) 203-20.

Phelan, P. 1993. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. London and New York.

Poe, J. P. 1989. '*Octavia Praetexta* and its Senecan Model' *AJPh* 110: 434-59.

Rayner, A. 2006. *Ghosts: Death's Double and the Phenomena of Theatre*. Minneapolis.

Roach, J. 1996. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. New York.

Rokem, F. 2007. *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre*. Iowa City.

Santayana, G. 1905. *The Life of Reason.* New York.

Schechner, R. 1985. *Between Theater and Anthropology*. Philadelphia.

— 2013. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 3rd ed. London and New York.

Schmidt, P. L. 1985. 'Die Poetisierung und Mythisierung der Geschichte in der Tragödie Octavia' *ANRW* 32.2: 1421-53.

Schneider, R. 2011. *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. New York.

— 2014. *Theatre & History*. London.

Slater, N. W. 1996. 'Nero's Masks' *CW* 90: 33-40.

Smith, J. A. 2003. 'Flavian Drama: Looking Back with *Octavia*' in A. J. Boyle and W. J. Dominik, eds. *Flavian Rome: Culture, Image,* Text (Leiden) 391-430.

Sumi, G. S. 2002. 'Impersonating the Dead: Mimes at Roman Funerals' *AJPh* 123: 559-85.

Sutton, D. F. 1983. *The Dramaturgy of* Octavia. Königstein.

Taplin, O. 2003. *Greek Tragedy in Action*. 2nd ed. London.

Taylor, D. 2003. *The Archive and the Repertoire*. Durham, NC.

Van Noorden, H. 2014. *Playing Hesiod. The 'Myth of the Races' in Classical Antiquity*. Cambridge.

Varner, E. R. 2001. 'Portraits, Plots, and Politics: *Damnatio Memoriae* and the Images of Imperial Women' *MAAR* 46: 41-93.

Wiles, D. 1991. *The Masks of Menander. Sign and Meaning in Greek and Roman Performance*. Cambridge.

Williams, G. 1994. "Nero, Seneca and Stoicism in the *Octavia*" in J. Elsner and J. Masters, eds. *Reflections of Nero: culture, history, & representation* (Chapel Hill and London) 178-95.