



## Seneca's Apocolocyntosis and Octavia: A Diptych

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SENECA'S *APOCOLOCYNTOSIS* AND *OCTAVIA*:  
A DIPTYCH.

The attribution to Seneca of both the *Apocolocyntosis* and the *Octavia* has been questioned, the form of both is unusual and their significance far from clear. I believe that they are closely related and that the link that connects them strengthens the arguments in favor of Seneca's authorship. I shall, in this paper, attempt to show what his purpose was in writing the former during the first days of Nero's reign and the latter during the last months of his own life, at the time of the Pisonian conspiracy.

Before proceeding with the discussion, a brief summary of the traditional arguments for and against the genuineness of these two works is in order. That Seneca composed an *Apocolocyntosis* of Claudius which satirized the emperor's apotheosis is vouched for by Dio (συνέθηκε μὲν γὰρ καὶ ὁ Σενέκας σύγγραμμα ἀποκολοκύντωσιν αὐτὸ ὡσπερ τινὰ ἀθανάτισιν ὀνομάσας).<sup>1</sup> The fact that the difficult word *Apocolocyntosis* does not appear in the title given by the best manuscript, *Sangallensis* 569 (saec. 9/10) or by the inferior manuscripts, is sufficiently accounted for by the following hypothesis: The archetype's title *Divi Claudii Apocolocyntosis* was glossed *Apotheosis per saturam*, the word *Apocolocyntosis* dropped out to be replaced by the gloss. The resulting title in *Sangallensis* (*Divi Claudii ΑΠΟΘΗΟΣΙΣ Annaei Senecae per saturam*) is thus inaccurate and tautological but it does introduce the satire mentioned as Seneca's by Dio.<sup>2</sup> The fact that

<sup>1</sup> Bibliography in Schanz-Hosius, *Gesch. der Röm. Lit.*, II (1935), pp. 471 f.; L. Herrmann, "Recherches sur le Texte de la Satire sur l'Apothéose de Claude," *Rev. Belge Philol. et Hist.*, XI (1932), pp. 549-76; C. F. Russo, "Studi sulla Divi Claudii ΑΠΟΚΟΛΟΚΥΝΤΩΣΙΣ," *La Parola del Passato*, I (1946), pp. 241 ff., and his edition of the *Apocolocyntosis* (1947).

<sup>2</sup> Another possible solution was suggested by K. Schenkl in *Wien. Sitzungsab.*, hist. Kl. (1863), pp. 3 f.: like many of Varro's satires this work had a double title, one in Greek and one in Latin. See also K. Barwick, "Senecas *Apocolocyntosis*, eine Zweite Ausgabe des Verfassers," *Rh. M.*, XCII (1944), pp. 159-73. His arguments in support of two separate editions of the *Apocolocyntosis* by Seneca do not seem convincing to me. See also F. Bornmann, "*Apocolocyntosis*," *La Parola del Passato*, V (1950), pp. 69 f.

the pun (Apocolocyntosis on the analogy of apotheosis) is confined to the title instead of being carried out in the text is not unique in literature and need not detain us. One more argument, this one psychological, has been adduced against Seneca's authorship. He is known to have composed the *Laudatio funebris* read by Nero at Claudius' funeral. Is it conceivable that he should at the same time have written the ludicrous satire against the dead emperor known as the *Apocolocyntosis*?

It has been suggested that overstress of laudation results in the acutest satire and that Seneca used this device in the funeral oration he composed for Nero to read.<sup>3</sup> The fact that the audience laughed when Claudius' wisdom and foresight were mentioned in this speech may indicate that Seneca wrote it with his tongue in his cheek (Tac., *Ann.*, XIII, 3). At any rate protocol demanded that the traditional eulogy of the departed ruler be recited by his heir. Since Nero could not compose it himself (Tac., *ibid.*) Seneca wrote, according to the conventionally correct formulae of rhetoric, the panegyric demanded by tradition and Agrippina. Neither sincerity nor grief was expected of him. Once his official task was performed he could proceed to attack and satirize the dead man, whatever his motive may have been in writing the *Apocolocyntosis*, without incurring any blame for inconsistency or lack of decorum. In Pliny's terse phrase (*Pan.*, XI, 1): *dicavit caelo . . . Claudium Nero ut irrideret*. Thus there seems to be no convincing reason either in the manuscript tradition or in the occasion of its composition for doubting the genuineness of the *Apocolocyntosis* or for questioning its identity with the work mentioned by Dio.

If Seneca wrote the *Octavia* he must have done so at the very end of his life since events are mentioned which happened up to the year 65 (the great fire, work begun on the *domus aurea*). The many arguments against its attribution to Seneca were to my mind convincingly disposed of some time ago by Pease<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> A. Momigliano, *L'Opera dell' Imperatore Claudio* (Firenze, 1929), pp. 136-9; W. H. Alexander, "Seneca's ad Polybium *De Consolatione*: A Reappraisal," *Trans. Royal Soc. of Canada*, XXXVII (1943), pp. 33-53; A. Rostagni, *Senecae Divi Claudii Apokolokyntosis* (ed. Torino, 1944), pp. 20-2.

<sup>4</sup> A. S. Pease, "Is the *Octavia* a Play of Seneca?" *C.J.*, XV (1919-20), pp. 388-403. For bibliography see E. C. Chickering, *An Introduction*

and have recently been reviewed by S. Pantzerhielm Thomas<sup>5</sup> who concludes in favor of its genuineness. If the E recension of the tragedies, which does not include the *Octavia*, represents an edition published or prepared for publication by Seneca during his lifetime, and the A recension, which does include it, represents an edition published after his death, when the *Octavia* could safely appear,<sup>6</sup> then only one serious argument remains against Seneca's authorship. This is the claim made by many critics that the author knows details of Nero's and Poppaea's deaths. The passage on which their objections are mainly based is an oracular speech of Agrippina's in which her son is threatened with an early death (vv. 614-30). This has seemed to others as it does to me far too vague and general to constitute a *vaticinium ex eventu*. Von Ranke<sup>7</sup> and Siegmund<sup>8</sup> long ago showed that it contains stock literary themes and that both the mythological examples (see *Apocol.*, 14, 4) and Agrippina's other threats are found elsewhere in the poets. Moreover a well-known prophecy was current during Nero's lifetime foretelling that some day he would be deserted (Suet., *Nero*, 40, 2: *praedictum a mathematicis Neroni olim erat fore ut quandoque destitueretur; unde illa vox eius celeberrima* Τὸ τέχνηον ἡμᾶς διατρέφει . . .). Some such utterance announcing a wretched death for the tyrant as well as literary models,<sup>9</sup> as for instance

to *Octavia Praetexta* (N. Y., 1910); K. Münscher, *J. A. W.*, CXCI (1922), pp. 198 ff.; "Senecas Werke. Untersuchungen zur Abfassungszeit und Echtheit," *Philol.*, Suppl. XVI, 1 (1923), pp. 1-145; Léon Herrmann, *Octavie Tragédie Prétexte* (Paris, 1924); Schanz-Hosius, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 1), Joanna Schmidt in *R.-E.*, V. Ciaffi, "Intorno all'Autore dell' *Octavia*," *Riv. di Filol.*, LXV (1937), pp. 246-65.

<sup>5</sup> S. Pantzerhielm Thomas, "De *Octavia Praetexta*," *Symbolae Osloenses*, XXIV (1945), pp. 48-87.

<sup>6</sup> See Herrmann, *op. cit.*, (*supra*, n. 4), pp. 1-5.

<sup>7</sup> *Sämmtl. Werke*, LI-LII, p. 65.

<sup>8</sup> A. Siegmund, "Zur Kritik der Tragödie *Octavia*," *Progr. Bohm Leipa*, 1909-1910.

<sup>9</sup> Lucretius (II, 978-1023) had given of these punishments an explanation which appealed to Seneca (*Ep.*, 24, 18). Cf. also Vergil, *Aen.*, VI, 595-627. For the sufferings of Sisyphus, Tantalus, Ixion, and Tityus in Seneca's tragedies see *H. O.*, 942-7, 1069 ff.; *Pha.*, 1229 ff.; *Ag.*, 15 ff. (note also 43: *daturus contugi iugulum suae*); *Th.* 6 ff., etc. Kings threatened with death and desertion: *H. O.*, 609 ff.; *Ag.*, 79 ff.; *Pho.*, 646 ff., etc. See also *Apoc.*, 14, 4. Doubt has been cast on the

Ovid's *Ibis* (159-80), are sufficient to account for the dark prophecy of Agrippina. The parallel with Suetonius' description of Nero's death (which may contain legendary as well as historical elements) is remote and does not indicate for the *Octavia* a date later than Seneca's death. As for Poppaea, her *tristes rogos* are mentioned in the play (vv. 595-8), though we know that she was not cremated (Tac., *Ann.*, XVI, 6: *corpus non igni abolitum, sed regum extérnorum consuetudine differtum odoribus conditur tumuloque Iuliorum infertur . . . ; gravida ictu calcis adflicta est*), and the brutal manner of her death passed over, whereas it would doubtless have been included in the catalogue of Nero's sins had this been compiled after the event. Pease and Pantzerhielm Thomas have scrutinized the play minutely and shown that it contains no details circumstantial enough to indicate a date later than Seneca's death. No evidence sufficiently strong to disprove the manuscript tradition has been brought forward. But doubt is contagious and the assertion that the play contains inconsistencies and anachronisms has gained plausibility through frequent repetition.

Still, if we accept the traditional attribution to Seneca, we must account for one anomaly: Seneca appears as one of the characters in the *Octavia*. Hosius<sup>10</sup> points out that this never occurs in serious drama. Cratinus had represented himself in the *Pytine*, Herondas in one of his mimes (*The Dream*). Aristophanes uttered personal comments in the parabases as Terence and others did in their prologues. Adam de la Halle and more recently Molière, Grabbe, and Immermann all appear in their own plays.<sup>11</sup> The effect is apt to be irony or humor. What then was the impression which Seneca intended to produce in thus impersonating himself in the pseudo-drama called the *Octavia*? The Seneca he has sketched is a man he never claimed

reliability of Suetonius' account of the death of Nero by J. Köhm, *Phil. Woch.*, LV (1935), pp. 772-80.

<sup>10</sup> *Gnom.*, XIII (1937), pp. 132-5.

<sup>11</sup> See also Karl Kraus, *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit*. In Varro's *Eumenides* and in his *Gloria* the author appears to be speaking in his own name and the phrase *vosque in theatro* might indicate a work of dramatic character. He may also have appeared in person in the *Marcopolis*, *περὶ ἀρχῆς*. We do not know what genre Varro selected for his *Τρικάρων* in which he satirized the first triumvirate.

to be in real life, a man secure in the possession of truth, fearless, serene, invulnerable. He appears as the exponent of Stoicism rather than as a real person, his *sententiae* are delivered in oracular style, his every word is marked with the dignity, super-human calm, and philosophy of the Stoic ideal. In the *De Vita Beata* he had already explained that he never intended to imply that he had attained this ideal: *haec non pro me loquor . . . sed pro illo cui aliquid acti est* (17, 4). When he spoke as a sage he was only the spokesman of his school of philosophy. He knew his own weakness but could show the way to the highest good. Though he realized that the acquisition of wisdom and perfection was far beyond his power, his task was to be the mouthpiece of those who had formulated and, like him, attempted to follow the rules of reason and philosophy. In the *Octavia* he once more used this convenient device of the diatribe and other genres.

I have called the *Octavia* pseudo-drama, in spite of the fact that it is always referred to as the only extant *tragoedia prae-texta*.<sup>12</sup> When the fragments of *praetextae* available to us and the information concerning them in ancient sources are compared to the *Octavia* it is clear that Seneca's work belongs to a different genre. It shares with the *praetextae* the framework of a tragedy and the portrayal of native characters of high position. But in the *praetextae* dramatic expression was given to the traditions of the heroic age, or to praise of more recent heroes. They treat of great events connected with the history or the legend of Rome, of national heroes who fought or died nobly. Their style seems to have the solemnity, dignity, and magnificence of epic poetry. They record great victories or great disasters with a kind of magnificence. Patriotism above all, pride, courage, are portrayed directly and dramatically in lofty and resounding words. The *Octavia* contains none of the elements which, with their emphasis on valorous deeds, made the *praetextae* dramas eminently suitable for presentation on the Roman stage. Totally lacking in anything dramatic, the *Octavia* is in fact a diatribe against Nero. It can hardly be said to have a plot but consists rather of a series of monologues and duologues which tell a pathetic story and proceed to moralize it. All is told, nothing acted. The only clash of personalities is a cold and argumentative debate between the

<sup>12</sup> Bibliography in K. Ziegler, *R.-E.*, s. v. *Tragoedia*, xxiii.

emperor and his minister. All is static exposition, without progress, growth, or crisis. The *Octavia* is deliberately composed, not as drama, but as the imitation of drama. The author could, had he meant this to be a true *praetexta*, have exploited the conflicts and crises inherent in the situation which appears so dramatic in the pages of the historians. There is no feeling for staging, no regard for an audience, and the scenes which would have stirred the spectators' or the readers' emotions, had this been conceived as a true tragedy, are deliberately omitted. Nero never meets Octavia or Poppaea nor do the two women ever come face to face. The situation itself is moving but it is analyzed, never acted. As there is no tying of the threads, no rising of tension, and no suspense, so there is no untying and no resolution of conflict. The *Octavia* is a versified representation in dialogue of tragic events, apparently meant to produce pity and fear, but it is dramatic in form only, not in the treatment of characters and situations. It is not a true tragedy, any more than Seneca's remaining nine plays are tragedies in the accepted sense of the word.<sup>13</sup> By adapting and combining elements belonging to different genres (tragical history, philosophical and political dialogue, diatribe, satire), he contrived in the *Octavia* a new and not altogether successful type of pseudo-drama. As he had already used the tragic mold to expound his own brand of Stoicism, so now he represented dramatically the philosophical and political implications of the contemporary state of affairs.

We must now consider what Seneca's purpose was in writing a ludicrous and at times coarse satire against Claudius and a pseudo-dramatic piece which could not be published during Nero's lifetime. About both works opinion is sharply divided. Scholars have called the *Apocolocyntosis* a political squib (Sikes),<sup>14</sup> a silly and spiteful attack (Mackail),<sup>15</sup> a venomous political satire (Teuffel).<sup>16</sup> Duff says<sup>17</sup> that Seneca detested

<sup>13</sup> B. M. Marti, "Seneca's Tragedies: A New Interpretation," *T. A. P. A.*, LXXVI (1945), pp. 216-45; "The Prototypes of Seneca's Tragedies," *C. P.*, XLII (1947), pp. 1-16; "Place de L'Hercule sur l'Oeta dans le Corpus des Tragédies de Sénèque," *Rev. Ét. Lat.*, XXVI (1948), pp. 189-210.

<sup>14</sup> *Cambridge Ancient History*, XI, p. 727.

<sup>15</sup> *Latin Literature*, p. 174.

<sup>16</sup> *Gesch. Röm. Lit.* (1910), p. 228, § 289.7.

<sup>17</sup> *Literary History of Rome in the Silver Age*, p. 244. O. Weinreich

Claudius, "he had an old score to wipe out: he probably felt a sincere contempt for his pedantry: and thus a clever and venomous pasquinade was written by a man of flesh and blood, a Spaniard who could let his feelings—especially those of hatred—go." Others read more in it than spiteful revenge. Rostagni<sup>18</sup> believes that it represents Seneca's contempt for the official fiction of deification and that it was mainly responsible for the eventual cancellation of Claudius' apotheosis (Suet., *Claud.*, 45). Nock calls it a clever skit and a parody but warns against taking it as an attack against the institution of imperial deification.<sup>19</sup> For Bickel<sup>20</sup> it represents Seneca's announcement of a new political program (and must have been written late in December 54 or perhaps early in 55). Waltz<sup>21</sup> and Birt<sup>22</sup> see in the satire a political move against Agrippina since it mocks a ceremony organized at her instigation. Münscher<sup>23</sup> also believed that through Claudius it was Agrippina whom Seneca was attacking without ever mentioning her name. For Kurfess<sup>24</sup> on the other hand it represents the official version of the emperor's death (Claudius is shown to have died naturally while watching some comedians). In case this version were not believed, it protects Agrippina from censure by so disparaging Claudius that no one would worry about the possibility of his having been forcibly put out of the way. Viedebannt,<sup>25</sup> for whom this work is a political pamphlet, stresses the fact that Seneca, prime minister and in fact regent for a very young prince, was not in any position to publish a spiteful satire on purely personal grounds.

If we had more of Varro's Menippean satires we might find a

(tr. of the *Apocolocyntosis* [Berlin, 1923]) also considers it as a personal attack against the dead emperor.

<sup>18</sup> *Op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 3).

<sup>19</sup> *Cambridge Ancient History*, X, p. 50.

<sup>20</sup> *Phil. Woch.*, XLIV (1924), pp. 845 ff.

<sup>21</sup> R. Waltz, *Sénèque, L'Apocoloquintose du divin Claude* (ed. Paris, 1934), pp. ii ff.

<sup>22</sup> Th. Birt, *Aus dem Leben der Antike* (Leipzig, 1919), pp. 180 ff.

<sup>23</sup> K. Münscher, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 4).

<sup>24</sup> *Phil. Woch.*, XLIV (1924), p. 1308; cf. also A. P. Ball, *The Satire of Seneca on the Apotheosis of Claudius* (New York, 1902), p. 19.

<sup>25</sup> O. Viedebannt, "Warum hat Seneca die Apokolokyntosis geschrieben?" *Rh. M.*, LXXV (1926), pp. 142-55.



clue as to why this particular form was chosen and what model inspired it. In any case it seems to be far more complex a piece than we are able to judge now, with its omission of Agrippina's name and the many jokes which are meaningless to us and must have been pregnant with political implications and allusions. The most striking passages are the long, solemn panegyric of Nero and his coming rule, and the divine Augustus' savage attack against Claudius. Even if the latter speech contains some parody of Augustus' sayings it seems to have been written in dead earnest. The grotesque elements in the satire, the harsh jests, buffoonery, and humor serve as foil by contrast to the two serious passages. The description of the golden age which is at hand contains reminiscences of the Fourth Eclogue. It breathes not only relief at being at last free of a detestable emperor but the hope in a new deal, in a Utopia in which a virtuous prince will, in Apollo's words, "give to the weary world bright and happy years (*felicia saecula*) and put an end to the silence of the laws." Yet the work is not just a declaration of faith and principles but a deterrent example to point the lesson of crime and punishment. Seneca might have been expected to compose, in these early days of his rule, a treatise for the guidance of his princely pupil. But the young are particularly sensitive to ridicule and derisive laughter. Seneca must have thought that Nero, seventeen at the time of Claudius' death, would profit more by this kind of literary scarecrow than he would from a more solemn treatise on the duties of a prince. This seems to be a hastily written substitute for a *Mirror of Princes*. Under the facetious form of a Menippean Satire, this, like any Roman satire, is meant to instruct and it does so by exposing the vicious folly of the preceding ruler. Somehow the bitterness of the scathing attacks against Claudius serves to emphasize the glorious hopes raised by the accession of Nero. By judiciously combining flattering praise of the new with denunciation of the dead ruler, serious warning and censure with Rabelaisian mockery, Seneca contrived an original type of political textbook *ad usum Delphini*.

In the *Octavia* the situation represented some ten years later is reversed. Seneca has acknowledged failure both as tutor and as minister. After the murder of Octavia and the great fire he realized that Nero's excesses had become intolerable and that he would not reform. He must have felt the artist's urge to create

something which would externalize his sense of disaster and personal tragedy and which would prove his own actions to have been consistent with his philosophy. He must produce a work which would embody his thoughts, present the situation as clearly as a historian would, and perhaps also influence the attitude of others.

Opinion is divided as to whether Seneca took an active part in the Pisonian conspiracy. His age and his fall from grace may have prevented him from joining his nephew and many of his friends in their plot against Nero. But he could not have ignored their efforts and must have sympathized with them. The immediate motive which prompted him to write the *Octavia* may thus have been the feeling of urgency which caused others to plan more violent measures. The very facts mentioned by Tacitus as having caused particular indignation are singled out by him: Nero's divorce from Octavia, the great fire in Rome, the exile and death of prominent men like Plautus and Sulla, the marriage to Poppaea and the projected murder of Octavia, the growing arrogance and tyranny of the emperor. If, as many believe, Seneca was among the conspirators, the *Octavia* may have been circulated *sub rosa* and served useful ends as resistance literature. Tacitus says that in the beginning of the conspiracy the conspirators would gather to talk over Nero's crimes (*Ann.*, XV, 50). This reminds one of Brutus who, when he was organizing his plot against Caesar, would test men and bring them over to his side "by the roundabout method of philosophical discussions" (*Plut.*, *Brutus*, 12). But for Seneca, a practical man as well as an artist, conversations would not be enough, and writing would seem the best way of continuing his lifelong task, self-examination and the teaching of his fellow men.

A historical pamphlet, treating the contemporary situation in the tragic manner, or a diatribe, or a philosophical dialogue similar to those in which Cicero had represented his friends discussing political problems, might have served his purpose. He may even have remembered the dialogue on Caesar's death, the *σύλλογος* which Cicero had long planned to write (*Att.*, XIII, 30, 3 and elsewhere in the letters to Atticus). But he was sensitive to the literary taste of his contemporaries (*Tac.*, *Ann.*, XIII, 3: *ut fuit illi viro ingenium amoenum et temporis eius auribus*

*accommodatum*). Their interest in mime and dramatic recitations may have influenced his choice of a pseudo-dramatic form for the *Octavia*. We know that among the members of the opposition Piso himself had composed *praetextae* and sung tragic pieces (Tac., *Ann.*, XV, 65), that Thrasea Paetus had been concerned with the production of mimes (*ibid.*, XVI, 21), and that Lucan had written a *Medea (Vita Vaccae)*. Others doubtless shared this interest, as Nero did, a fact which may have added a touch of grim humor to Seneca's choice of medium.

Seneca's immediate purpose may have been to talk out the situation with himself and to impress with the gravity of the crisis the few privileged to read the *Octavia*. But even more, it is his own justification before posterity, after the failure of the high hopes aroused by the events of 54. About this time he represents himself to Lucilius as having withdrawn from men and affairs in order to work for other generations: *secessi non tantum ab hominibus, sed a rebus, et imprimis a meis rebus; posterorum negotium ago; illis aliqua, quae possint prodesse conscribo* (*Ep.*, 8, 1-3). He adds that he points out to other men the right way which he has discovered late in life, when already weary with wandering.

As he had written the *De Vita Beata* partly to vindicate himself against accusations of corruption and loose living, so he composed the *Octavia* as his political apology. Having failed as Nero's tutor in spite of all his efforts, he thought that now rebellion offered the only solution. If his friends, or perhaps his associates, did not succeed, he knew that there could be only one outcome for them all. In this more than in any of his earlier works Seneca is haunted by the thought of death. He has placed the evidence before his readers, appealing first to their emotions through fear, pity, and indignation. He has then represented an idealized picture of himself arguing the case of good government with Nero. In this scene both characters are almost impersonal and symbolic. Nero is the wicked, foolish tyrant who obeys his passions and through terror attempts to enslave human beings. Seneca, aloof and coldly rational, expounds that part of the Stoic catechism which deals with a ruler's duties. The philosopher and the tyrant are stock characters out of a textbook rather than real men selected among the actors of the

contemporary tragedy. *Sententia* follows *sententia* in a scene more akin to diatribe than to any other genre. Under the bitterness of the present struggle Seneca communicates to his readers his awareness of the eternal quality of this struggle between innocence, justice and tyranny. The particular events are lifted to the level of the universal, the significance of the fight against the tyrant is shown to be part of the never-ending conflict between virtue and evil.

The consequences of Nero's evil choice are briefly sketched but the reader is left with a sense that nothing is solved, nothing completed. There is no catharsis. If Nero has made the wrong choice, others are left to do otherwise. Seneca has indicated the basis of the conflict and championed the side of reason. He has shown an evil which cannot be amended and therefore must be removed because it interferes with the fundamental freedom and dignity of man. It is now up to the reader to commit himself if he so chooses, and it will be the task of posterity to pass judgment. "Virtue is never lost to view; and yet to have been lost to view is no loss. There will come a day which will reveal her, though hidden away or suppressed by the spite of her contemporaries. That man is born merely for a few who think only of his own generation. Many thousands of years and many thousands of peoples will come after you; it is to these that you should have regard. Malice may have imposed silence upon the mouths of all who were alive in your day; but there will come men who will judge you without prejudice and without favor. If there is any reward that virtue receives at the hands of fame, not even this can pass away" (*Ep.*, 79, 17, tr. R. Gummere, Loeb Classical Library).

My conclusion is this: As he had used the tragic mold to illustrate his own brand of Stoicism, so now Seneca borrowed the form of the *praetexta* to present the implications of the contemporary crisis. A kind of irony, far more subdued than that of the *Apocolocyntosis*, may be implicit in the form of the Roman national drama which he selected. What should have developed into a Roman *praetexta* with the expected praise of a hero and the usual emphasis on the valor of a Roman leader, turns out to be a satire and a heartbreaking lament for Octavia. The tyrant himself is utterly lacking in the stature, his crimes in the grandeur, which might have inspired a writer of tragedy or

of epic. Like the hero of the *Apocolocyntosis* this tyrant is mean, stubborn, petulant, and utterly without heroic wickedness. So the *Octavia* too is something of a parody, the opposite of a *praetexta* by the nature of the characters and situations it portrays. I believe that the *Apocolocyntosis* was very much in Seneca's mind when he composed the *Octavia*. The *praetexta* is the reverse of a medal on which he had depicted the new ruler, fair as Apollo. It would be odd indeed if the contemporary readers had not remembered the early explosion of relief and optimism in the *Apocolocyntosis* as they now shared Seneca's bitter disappointment. The two texts make a pair and are matched almost like a diptych. The characters involved in both are of the house and stock of Claudius, both dishonor the name of Augustus (*Apoc.*, 10: *sub meo nomine latens*; *Oct.*, 251: *nomen Augustum inquinat*). In the first piece Agrippina, though never mentioned, is nevertheless present, for she is the cause of the outrageous deification of Claudius. In the second she who had murdered her husband has in her turn been murdered by her son and her ghost appears to utter vengeful and prophetic words. In the *Apocolocyntosis* the judge of the lower world considers letting off some of the old sinners, Sisyphus, Tantalus, or Ixion, to transfer their sentences to Claudius. In the *Octavia* the classic trio of mythology (to whom is added Tityus) provides the model for the doom with which Nero is threatened. There is bitter irony in the fact that Agrippina's denunciation of Nero plays in the *Octavia* a role similar to Augustus' attack in the *Apocolocyntosis*. While in the earlier piece the approach of the Golden Age was heralded, in the later one it has again receded to the distant past. The tyranny which Augustus had so scathingly denounced in Claudius and which was to be absent from the new rule is praised by Nero as the only shrewd and wise policy. A phrase which is a sort of leitmotiv in many of the tragedies seems particularly significant in linking the two works: *petitur hac coelum via* (*Oct.*, 476). The very point of the *Apocolocyntosis* had been to show Nero how not to attempt to storm heaven (*Apoc.*, 11: *Hunc nunc deum facere vultis? . . . dum tales deos facitis, nemo vos deos esse credet*). The lesson is drawn in the *Octavia* (472-8):

Pulchrum eminere est inter illustres viros,  
 consulere patriae, parcere afflictis, fera  
 caede abstinere tempus atque irae dare,  
 orbi quietem, saeculo pacem suo.  
 haec summa virtus, petitur hac coelum via.  
 sic ille patriae primus Augustus parens  
 complexus astra est colitur et templis deus.

Here the phrase is meant, not for the tyrant whom Seneca addresses for he has proved that he is past redemption, but for future rulers. To the last Seneca is a teacher, and there may be a touch of the dour optimism of the Stoics in the lack of a definite conclusion. The ways of tyranny have been shown in two monstrous examples, with Nero the object of Seneca's anxious care in the first and the cause of his helpless defeat in the second. They remain for the edification of future generations, for the Stoic is never daunted, even by repeated failure.

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