What's Seneca to Him? Senecan Shakespeare
ISSN 2283-8759
pp. 149-178 (2023)

"Teach me how to curse": Senecan Historiography and Octavia*'s Agrippina in* Richard III

Caroline Engelmayer

This article extends explorations of a Renaissance "Seneca available for generic appropriation" (Mayne 2020) by tracing Shakespeare's receptions of the pseudo-Senecan *Octavia* in *Richard III*. As the only complete *fabula praetexta* (Roman historical drama) to have survived from antiquity, the *Octavia* offers critics the chance to trace the dramatic resources that an underexplored classical genre offered to early modernity. In the *Octavia*, an anonymous Flavian tragedy attributed to Seneca in the Renaissance, Shakespeare encountered a historiographical debate – invested in exploring processes of cultural memory and national myth-making – that interrogates the arc of Rome's past. In *Richard III*, Shakespeare intervenes in the *Octavia*'s historiographical clash between Nero, who champions a teleological vision of the peace and stability of *imperium sine fine*, and the ghost of Agrippina, who locates in the ruling dynasty's regime a cyclical continuation of Roman wars worse than civil. By reimagining Agrippina in Margaret of Anjou – an unrecognized adaptation – and staging the fulfilment of her Octavian curse, Shakespeare dramatizes the triumph of her cyclical philosophy of history. He discovers in the *praetexta* an unlikely source of inspiration for female voices from the margins that purge the sins of tyranny and shape the trajectory of a nation's history.

Keywords: Seneca, Shakespeare, *Octavia*, *Richard III*, historical drama, curses

My warmest thanks to Raphael Lyne and Leah Whittington for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay. I presented a version of this paper at the Sixteenth Century Society's 2023 conference, and I am grateful to the audience for their feedback.

The past decade has witnessed a radical reevaluation of Renaissance Senecanism[1]. Critics have expanded beyond the focus on "autar-

1 All citations of the *Octavia* refer to Boyle's 2008 edition. All citations of *Richard III* refer to Siemon's 2009 edition. All citations of other Shakespeare plays refer to Proudfoot, Thompson, and Kastan's 1998 edition. All translations of the *Octavia* are Boyle's unless otherwise noted.

kic selfhood" and unquenchable *ira* that had long dominated the scholarly conversation. Instead, they have uncovered a Renaissance "Seneca available for generic appropriation" (Mayne 2020, n.p.)[2]. We are now inclined to think of Senecanism as a pervasive literary phenomenon that infiltrated nearly every early modern genre, from pastoral to epic, comedy to lyric[3]. This development is a welcome one, not least because it has encouraged critics to explore aspects of the tragedies' afterlives that had previously been sidelined. This includes the plays that circulated as Senecan in the Renaissance but are now recognized as spurious. Emily Mayne's study of appropriations of *Hercules Oetaeus* in the *Faerie Queene* notes that the play's apocryphal status helps account for its idiosyncratic mix of "tragedy and tragicomedy" (Mayne 2020, n.p.). Curtis Perry's *Shakespeare and Senecan Tragedy* likewise recovers the pseudo-Senecan *Octavia* as a source for Shakespeare's history plays (Perry 2020, 37-72). Perry argues that the *Octavia*, which recounts a historical episode from the emperor Nero's reign, encourages "subsequent writers to see Senecan drama as a vehicle for depicting political history" (Perry 2020, 45). By reading the play alongside *Richard III* in particular, he convincingly shows how the generic coordinates of Shakespeare's historical tragedy form a direct imitation of the pseudo-Senecan drama.

Perry's study, however, does not capture the full range of dramatic possibilities that the *Octavia* suggested to Shakespeare and his contemporaries. In the complex ecosystem of scholarship on early modern Seneca, the *Octavia* holds a dubious distinction. The play stands as a plausible contender for the single most influential Senecan tragedy in the European Renaissance, the ultimate model for the historical dramas that held the early modern stage from Mussato to Racine. Yet it has often been treated as a footnote to accounts of early modern Senecanism[4]. When critics do consider it, they tend to read it for its points of overlap with authentic Senecan drama: as a window into the psychology of tyranny, with Nero as a real-life Atreus (Jones

2 On autarkic selfhood, see especially Braden 1985; Boyle 1997; and Miola 1992.

3 On pastoral, see Espie 2019 and Espie and Adkins 2022. On epic, see Mayne 2020; Byville 2008; and Braden 1989. On comedy, see Perry 2020, 23; Burrow 2013, 184; and Miola 1992, 177-87. On lyric, see Moul 2017 and Moul 2015, 41-47.

4 Braden (1985, 8, 106, 202, 249); Boyle (1997, 84, 101-02, 145, 200); and Miola (1992, 145, 191) only mention it a handful of times in their seminal studies.

1977, 270; Braden 1985, 106, 202; Miola 1992, 145); a narrative of bloody vengeance (Boyle 1997, 145, 200); or the site of a particularly resonant *domina-nutrix* scene (Kragelund 2016, 363-419). Perry follows this trend. He argues that the *Octavia* helps Shakespeare construct *Richard III* around a typically Senecan double-bind of historical causality. Just as revengers like Atreus and Medea remain poised between assertions of "their own will-to-power" and their keen awareness of the constraints of the prior literary tradition, Richard's desire to "escape into the 'open air'" clashes with his recognition of the "inescapability of the Tudor myth" that has pre-determined his dramatic plot (Perry 2020, 39, 50, 63).

This article argues that Shakespeare derived a unique set of dramatic resources from his reading of the *Octavia*, theatrical techniques on display only in this idiosyncratic Roman play. Although the drama was transmitted as part of Seneca's corpus[5], classicists now recognize the *Octavia* as an anomaly in three main ways. First, it was not written by Seneca; we know this because the play includes a reference to Nero's death (*Oct.* 624-631) and the emperor outlived his old tutor. Second, the play differs in literary-political periodization from the authentic dramas. The tragedy's anonymous author (the "*Octavia*-poet") likely wrote it during the Flavian period, reflecting on Nero's regime from the vantage point of the imperial dynasty that took power after his death. Third, and most importantly, the *Octavia* is unique in genre. In recent years, classicists have demonstrated that *fabula praetexta* (Roman historical drama) forms a genre distinct from mythologically-inspired plays, complete with its own performance tradition, thematic concerns, and aesthetic conventions (Kragelund 2016; Ginsberg 2015a). This development renders the *Octavia* ripe for further exploration amid the scholarly recovery of a generically diverse Renaissance Seneca. Indeed, as the only complete *praetexta* to have survived from classical antiquity, the *Octavia* offers critics the

5 In her discussion of *pseudepigrapha* (texts whose authorship is misattributed) from classical antiquity, Irene Peirano notes that "the pseudonymity, or wrongful authorial ascription, of a text is sometimes primary and organic to the work itself and sometimes secondary, the result of the text's reception history" (Peirano 2012, 1). The *Octavia* is an example of secondary pseudonymity; the text does not explicitly claim to be written by Seneca, but its stylistic overlap with the authentic dramas led to its inclusion in the corpus.

chance not just to trace a single play's Renaissance afterlives but to uncover the dramatic resources that an entire ancient genre offered to early modernity.

The gap between the Renaissance and modern understanding of the *Octavia* – as a seamless part of a unified literary corpus and as an outlier that teems with oddities – opens suggestive possibilities for reception studies. Although its inclusion in the Senecan corpus granted this anonymous tragedy authority and cultural currency in the Renaissance, its apocryphal status invites us as modern critics to explore how it does not always mesh neatly with prevalent Senecan aesthetics. In what follows, I aim to resist the readerly impulse for assimilation that the *praetexta*'s canonical status seems to encourage: it is tempting to imagine that, because of its mistaken attribution to the Roman dramatist, the play's early modern afterlives closely track the reception histories of authentically Senecan tragedies. Yet that approach only tells half of the story. If early modern readers of the *Octavia* encountered a Senecan *praetexta*, critics have explored the "Senecan" part in detail, but not the "*praetexta*". Now that scholars have meticulously analyzed the links that connect the *Octavia* to the rest of the Senecan corpus, what remains is to attend to the divergent possibilities for appropriation that it offered to Shakespeare, vestiges of generic, authorial, and political idiosyncrasies that we now recognize even if he did not.

This article contends that the *Octavia* informs Shakespeare's exploration of competing narratives of English history in *Richard III*. When he read the *Octavia*, Shakespeare accessed critiques of empire that owe as much to Silver Age epic, annals, and biography as Seneca's authentic plays. He encountered a historiographical debate – invested in exploring processes of cultural memory and national myth-making – that pits Nero's teleological narrative of *imperium sine fine* against the assertions of cyclical strife championed by the raging ghost of Agrippina[6]. My argument will unfold in three parts. First, I place the *Octavia* in its context as a *fabula praetexta*, illustrating how

6 The *Octavia* might even form a point of contact between Shakespeare and Lucan, offering a new perspective on an intertextual relationship that has proven notoriously vexing. On Shakespeare and Lucan, see Gillespie 2001; Hadfield 2005; and Burrow 2013, 21, 30.

the play, as a result of its generic affiliation and political-literary context, contests the stories that the Romans told themselves about their history in the first century CE. Next, I demonstrate that Shakespeare encountered the *Octavia* mediated through a Renaissance interpretive tradition that read Agrippina's prophecy as a vector for Christian providential justice. Finally, I argue that, in *Richard III*, Shakespeare engages with the *Octavia*'s historiographical debate by reworking Agrippina in Margaret of Anjou – an unrecognized site of Senecan appropriations. By showing how Margaret's Octavian curses are fulfilled, Shakespeare recovers the *Octavia*'s unrealized potential for female voices from the margins to purge the sins of tyranny and shape the arc of a nation's history.

Fabulae Praetextae: *Roman Historical Drama and Imperial Philosophies of History*

The *Octavia*'s marginal place in early modern studies stems, in part, from the preoccupations of classical scholars. Confronted with the play's anomalies, classicists initially relegated it to the periphery of critical interest[7]. Yet by prompting scholars to veer away from thorny questions of authorial intent, the rise of reception studies in classics has inspired a "renaissance of interest" in this pseudepigraphic tragedy (Ginsberg 2016, 4). Rolando Ferri and A. J. Boyle argue that the play espouses post-Neronian political propaganda, setting the peaceful Flavians apart from their ruthless Julio-Claudian predecessors (Ferri 2003, Boyle 2008). Patrick Kragelund contends that the *Octavia* is consistent in form and structure with republican *praetextae*, painstakingly reconstructing a Roman genre despite the scant evidence that survives (Kragelund 2016, 3-360). Lauren Donovan Ginsberg and Emma Buckley demonstrate that the play marshals Vergilian and Lucanic intertexts to present Nero's feud with his closest relatives as a replay of Aeneas' killing of Turnus and the civil war between Caesar and Pompey (Ginsberg 2013; Ginsberg 2016; Buckley 2013). These re-

7 The play's anomalies extend beyond its non-Senecan authorship, political context, and generic affiliations. It also features a famously disjointed sequence of scenes; includes both Nero and Seneca as characters; and often quotes Senecan philosophy nearly verbatim.

cent scholarly interventions have brought about a paradigm shift in critical approaches to the play. We are now inclined to read the Flavian drama in connection with historiography, epic, and other *praetextae* as much as authentically Senecan tragedies.

These developments in classical scholarship position the *Octavia* as a point of contact between the Renaissance stage and the ancient performance tradition of Roman *praetextae*. A mainstay of Roman drama from the third century BCE onward, *praetextae* initially formed a vehicle to memorialize Rome's political and military victories. Republican *praetextae* were commissioned to be performed at ritualistic occasions: "self-congratulatory events" like triumphs and funerals (Ginsberg 2015a, 216) as well as the military-religious celebration of the *ludi sollemnes*, a series of performances that affirmed Roman civic identity and the special favor afforded to the fledgling nation by the gods (Kragelund 2016, 25). As a result, despite the scarcity of surviving examples, scholars nearly unanimously agree that republican *praetextae* – a tradition to which every major tragedian of the period contributed – adopted a "celebratory" tone (Ginsberg 2015a, 216). Kragelund convincingly shows that these plays often eschewed tragic material altogether to dramatize the conquests and "exploits of the *populus Romanus* under the brave leadership" of distinguished generals and politicians (Kragelund 2016, 100)[8]. As late as the Augustan period, ancient literary critics stressed the distinction between the victorious outlook of *praetextae* and the *pathos*-inducing sorrow of mythological tragedy. Horace's *Ars Poetica* explains that the purpose of a *praetexta* is to "celebrate domestic deeds" ("celebrare domestica facta", *AP* 287), while *fabulae crepidatae* (Roman tragedies on Greek mythological topics) stir up powerful pity through moving displays of sorrow ("cor spectantis tetigisse", *AP* 98)[9].

These differences extend to *praetexta*'s dramatic treatment of time. The ritualistic settings at which these plays were staged – with their

8 This celebratory outlook also reflects a sense of national pride around the distinctly Roman invention of *praetexta*, a genre without any direct Greek precedent (Ginsberg 2015a, 220). The victorious march of Roman military-political progress mirrors the triumphant arc of literary history, in which Roman playwrights outdo their Greek forebears.

9 I quote from the translation in Ginsberg 2015a, 220. I cite from Wickham and Garrod's edition of Horace's works (1922).

explicit goal of drumming up civic pride – encouraged playwrights to craft sweeping narratives of Roman progress that took an expansive view of the triumphant trajectory of the nation's history. As a result, while mythological dramas tend to adhere to the compressed timeframe championed by Aristotle's three unities, *praetextae* recount "a sequence that reaches far beyond the temporal framework of the drama itself" (Kragelund 2016, 142). Accius' fragmentary *Brutus*, for example, juxtaposes the Roman king Tarquin's grip on power – illustrated by his unavenged murder of Brutus' brother – with predictions of Roman republican glory that come to the tyrant in a dream (*Brutus* frag. i Klotz). The play enacts a perspectival separation between the delusional king, who maintains that his rule will persist unchallenged, and the Roman audience, who recognizes the veracity of the drama's predictions of his looming defeat. *Brutus* is not the only *praetexta* to employ this technique. Anonymous dramas about the *Nonae* and the Magna Mater, as well as Accius' *Decius*, Pacuvius' *Paullus*, and Balbus' *Iter*, likewise expand beyond a tightly focused temporal scope to gesture instead to "aetiological causes and ensuing consequences" (Kragelund 2016, 142). In contrast to Greek historical dramas like Aeschylus' *Persae* or Phrynichus' *Sack of Miletus*, which hone in on discrete historical episodes, the fusion of past, present, and future central to *praetextae* encourages audiences to locate the plays' narratives within a sweeping historical context. Interrogating the process of narrativizing history is built into the generic code of these Roman dramas.

The *Octavia* takes up *praetexta*'s project of historiographical inquiry within a Silver Age literary culture invested in questioning the authorizing mythology of Augustan *imperium sine fine*[10]. For the *Octavia*-poet and his fellow imperial authors, the realities of empire suggested that the plot of Roman history might be a tragic one, driven by the cyclical strife that the Julio-Claudians claimed to have ended once and for all. Such anxieties were widespread. Horace's *Epodes*, published a year after Octavian's victory at Actium (31 BCE), pronounce civil war to be Rome's inevitable fate, a consequence of Romulus' primal fratricide

10 It is difficult to generalize about how imperial *praetextae* before the *Octavia* responded to this tension because such little evidence survives. Besides the *Octavia*, we only have seven brief references to performances of imperial *praetextae*.

(*Epodes* 7.17-20)[11]. Vergil's *Aeneid* suggests that the quasi-civil wars that Aeneas wages against his distant Italian relatives have embedded factional strife into Rome's national DNA (Marincola 2010, 186-87). Ovid frets that the Julio-Claudian dynasty resembles the House of Atreus, forever at war with itself (*Met.* 15.821-15.833; 15.855)[12]. This theory of history gained particular traction in accounts of Nero's rule. Lucan's *Bellum Civile* exposes the false providentialism of Augustan teleology to implicitly equate Nero's reign with the civil conflicts of the late republic (*BC* I.33-45; Leigh 1997, 23-26)[13]. Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio theorize the *discordia* that Julio-Claudian *imperium* inspires, concluding that "Nero makes war on his own city much more directly" than his imperial predecessors (Keitel 1984, 307)[14]. For these authors, Nero's violence against his imperial subjects provided an incontrovertible *exemplum* of the inexorability of Roman civil strife.

In its own account of Nero's reign, the *Octavia* pits this pessimistic strand of imperial historiography against the authorizing mythology that justifies Julio-Claudian rule. The play dramatizes a three-day period in which Nero marries Poppaea Sabina, quashes a popular uprising in protest of his new bride, and sentences Octavia, his former wife, to death. Nero is the play's champion of imperial teleology. The emperor asserts a firm break between the bloody civil wars that drove prior Roman history and the teleological trajectory of empire. He suggests that Augustus' victory at Actium has ushered in an age of uninterrupted stability that he will maintain by ruthlessly eliminating political enemies. This despotic *pax Romana*, he claims, will culminate in his own deification (*Oct.* 530-32). In fact, by killing his own mother – a crime recounted in detail by the horrified chorus (*Oct.* 308-76) – he strives to script his own apotheosis: he eliminates the source of his earthly beginnings. The *Octavia*-poet thus adapts Senecan aesthetics to the generic code of *praetexta*. He conflates the Senecan tyrant's personal quest for absolute independence from the past with the Julio-Claudian claim to have replaced the violence of civil strife with the stability of empire.

11 I cite from Garrison's 1991 edition of the *Epodes*.

12 I cite from Tarrant's 2004 edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses.*

13 I cite from Shackleton Bailey's 1988 edition of Lucan.

14 See also Luke 2010, 514 and Lange 2023, 453.

The ghost of Agrippina systematically deconstructs Nero's authorizing mythology. She exposes the bloody transgressions that he suppresses from historical memory by literalizing the tropes of civil strife that he claims to have relegated to the past. Her shade forms a physical manifestation of the ghosts of civil-war victims that Nero asserts that the Roman victors buried in Egypt long ago ("nunc leues umbras tegit", *Oct.* 522). Likewise, in instructing Nero's henchman to plunge his sword into her womb ("condat […] ensem", *Oct.* 370), she recycles the tyrant's own language to challenge his claim that the peaceful Julio-Claudians have sheathed the swords of civil war once and for all ("condidit […] enses", *Oct.* 524-25). For Agrippina, the violence of the battlefield has merely migrated to conflict within the imperial family itself (*Oct.* 599-613). By cursing the emperor to be murdered at the apparent height of his power (*Oct.* 624-31), she mounts a Silver Age case for the untenability of tyrannical *imperium*, contending that the iterative bloodshed that enables his regime will inevitably redound against him.

The *Octavia* concludes without fully resolving the tension between these competing visions of history. Agrippina's curses ("uota", *Oct.* 632) accurately forecast Nero's distant future. Indeed, later historians like Tacitus and Suetonius echoed her lines when they penned their own accounts of the emperor's demise (Boyle 2008, *ad loc*)[15]. Yet, within the play itself, authorizing voices drown out her prophecies. After she reappears to Nero's new bride in a dream to reiterate her dire predictions (*Oct.* 712-39), Poppaea's nurse misreads Agrippina's omens as portents of happiness, longevity, and lasting peace for the emperor and his second wife (*Oct.* 740-53; Boyle 2008, *ad loc*). Similarly, although Octavia and Agrippina level strikingly similar charges against him[16], Octavia repeatedly denounces the murdered matriarch for her complicity in Nero's crimes; the emperor's mother had helped him carry out the string of killings that cemented his authority (*Oct.* 21-33; *Oct.* 91-97). She thus calls into question Agrippina's claims to moral authority as a victim of Neronian violence. Unscathed by their

---

15 Agrippina's curse thus differs from curses in authentically Senecan tragedies, which "are used to express an abundance of hatred, frenzy, despair, and grief, rather than to serve dramatic (i.e. foreshadowing) ends" (Clemen 2013, 57).

16 Cf. especially *Oct.* 609-10 and 959 (labeling Nero a *ferus tyrannus*) and *Oct.* 114 and 617 (deeming him an *auctor necis*).

critiques, the tyrant ends the play seemingly in full control of his future. After defeating a group of dissident citizens (*Oct.* 820-76), he imposes on Octavia a death sentence explicitly framed as a reenactment of his matricide (*Oct.* 908-10).

By inscribing a series of historically accurate predictions in a dramatic plot that leaves them unrealized, the *Octavia*-poet crafts a historiographical debate that invites subsequent intervention. For Flavian and Renaissance readers alike, aware of the truth of Agrippina's predictions, the ghost serves as a figure for the transition between dynasties. The scorned mother is simultaneously a witness to the horrors of Neronian rule and a prophetess for the eventual purgation of the tyrant's sins. Of all the vengeful shades that haunt Senecan tragedies, she is uniquely preoccupied with the forces that shape historical memory: she painstakingly records the circumstances of her death ("semper memoria", *Oct.* 599) in a last-ditch effort to counteract the *damnatio memoriae* that Nero imposes on her. Her fixation on her posthumous reputation presents her rebukes as a meditation on historical memory itself, how she is (not) remembered. Invested with a keen awareness of her own position in narratives of Roman history, the figure of Agrippina encourages later playwrights to decide how to memorialize her: to side with Nero in undermining her curse and reasserting triumphant teleology or to stage the prophetic pull of her predictions and follow her in condemning the cyclical civil strife that enables tyranny.

The Renaissance Octavia *from Mussato to Shakespeare: Strife, Resistance, Justice*

Although long overlooked by scholars, the *Octavia* was immensely popular in the Renaissance. Because it circulated widely in editions that included the entire Senecan tragic corpus – the eight tragedies that modern scholars attribute to Seneca, plus the *praetexta* and *Hercules Oetaeus* – the *Octavia* quickly became a fixture in humanists' libraries[17]. From the *editio princeps* in 1478 to the end of the sixteenth century, printers on the continent published more than 100 editions

17 On the manuscript tradition of the play, see Tarrant 1983, 378-81 and Herington 1958.

across at least nine countries and 25 cities[18]. Continental editions – including those printed by Sébastien Gryphe in Lyon and Christophe Plantin in Antwerp – circulated among well-educated English readers in the 1580s, even though the first Latin collection was not printed in England until 1589 (Machielsen 2014, 65n20; Mayne 2019, 3). Latinless readers could consult Thomas Nuce's English translation of the play, which first appeared in 1566 and was anthologized in Thomas Newton's widely read collection *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies* (1581). In contrast to modern hesitations about the *Octavia*'s disjointed structure or bizarre style, the Renaissance attribution of the play to Seneca meant that it was held in high esteem.

The *Octavia* taught the Renaissance that a nation's history could form a compelling topic for tragic drama. The first-known Renaissance tragedy, Albertino Mussato's *Ecerinis* (1314), takes its generic coordinates from the *praetexta* to dramatize the oppressive reign and abrupt downfall of the Neronian tyrant Ezzelino III of Padua. For Mussato, Senecan aesthetics offered a way of making sense of his city's recent past: Ezzelino's wickedness offers a real-life confirmation of the psychology of mythological tyrants like Seneca's Atreus, while the trademark Senecan technique of *semper idem* – the cyclical, escalating criminality common in Senecan drama (Ginsberg 2015b, 200 n. 4) – helps explain the iterative bloodshed that the Paduan tyrant inflicts on his own city. This mode of historical tragedy was a runaway success. Mussato's play was performed every Christmas at Padua's main piazza and frequently anthologized in Italian manuscript collections as "Seneca's eleventh tragedy" (Boyle 2008, lxxvi). In these collections, it often appeared immediately after the *Octavia*, its classical counterpart in tragic history (Kragelund 2016, 365).

The *Octavia* played a foundational role in English theatrical culture, too. The first-known English Renaissance tragedy, Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville's *Gorboduc* (1565) was an English *praetexta*. The play imitates the *Octavia*'s generic coordinates to dramatize an episode from British pre-history, complete with a raging tyrant, a popular uprising, and a cast of political advisors who try, in vain, to restrain the ruler from slaughtering his own

18 Figures gathered from the Universal Short Title Catalogue.

citizens. The *Octavia* soon became a mainstay of the English Renaissance stage. A recent commentary, for example, lists 23 tragedies that demonstrate clear debts to the *praetexta*. Although it was once considered a mere source of commonplaces or rhetorical flourishes, the *Octavia* has recently reclaimed an important place in Shakespeare's library. Critics now confidently identify references to specific passages and scenes in such varied plays as *Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Titus Andronicus, Julius Caesar, Coriolanus,* and *Cymbeline* (Boyle 2008, lxxviii -lxxix). Generically, the *Octavia*'s treatment of historical topics offered Shakespeare a precedent for both his ten history plays and his three Roman tragedies, not to mention *Richard III*, whose fusion of history and tragedy signals its Octavian inheritance in no uncertain terms (Burrow 2013, 169). Nearly half of the playwright's works, then, draw on the *praetexta*. In some sense, this is unsurprising: the *Octavia* formed the only classical history play that Shakespeare could have accessed[19]. As the preeminent ancient model of historical theater, the *praetexta* exerted a pervasive influence on the dramatic production of Shakespeare's England.

When they read the *praetexta* in Latin, Shakespeare's contemporaries encountered a paratextual apparatus that presented Agrippina's vengeful prophecies as morally justified and ripe for fulfilment. Despite her ethically dubious complicity in Nero's crimes, the popular moral-philosophical commentaries composed by the Oxford humanist Nicholas Trevet (1315-1316) read her as a righteous Fury, poised to enact God's will (Junge 1999, 34). The humanist printer Jodocus Badius Ascensius, whose commentaries aimed for the "familiarization and domestication" of classical texts (White 2013, 75), interpreted her as a champion of the ethical precepts of the Ten Commandments. For Badius, the eventual fulfillment of her revenge illustrated the obligations of filial duty: "Scriptum enim est, honorate patrem & matrem, vt sitis longæui super terram" ("For it has been written, honor your father and your mother, so that you may

19 Athenian and Hellenistic historical tragedies did not circulate in Latin or English translations in sixteenth-century England, and his "small Latin and less Greek" would almost certainly have prevented him from reading them in the original.

live for a long time on earth", Seneca 1514, CCXVIII^{r})[20]. These moralizing glosses separated Agrippina from the raging shades of the authentic Senecan corpus; humanists read those ghosts – especially *Thyestes*' Tantalus and *Agamemnon*'s Thyestes – as embodiments of hatred and wickedness[21]. In fact, for learned commentators, Agrippina's proto-Christian martyrdom accentuated the inevitability of her vengeful predictions. Early modern editions often noted the echoes between her prophecy of vengeance and historical accounts of Nero's subsequent death, Eutropius and Suetonius chief among them (Seneca 1514, CCXVIII^{r}-CCXVIII^{v})[22]. By presenting the ghost as a figure of divine retribution, humanist commentators suggest that her prophecy stands poised to bring the trajectory of Roman history in line with the arc of Christian providential justice.

Inspired in part by these moralizing interpretations, early modern playwrights often aimed to parse Agrippina's indeterminate ethical status: as a willing accomplice turned vehement critic of Nero, she invites subsequent authors to resolve her moral contradictions. Mussato's *Ecerinis*, which reworks her in the tyrant's mother Adeleita (Locati 2006, 150), presents Agrippina as a harbinger of Christianizing salvation. *Ecerinis* explicitly attributes the despot's sudden death to his mother's redemptive predictions, which free Padua from oppression and illustrate the city's position of divine favor[23]. This salvific interpretation, however, was not unanimous. *Gorboduc*

---

20 All translations of Renaissance *Octavia* commentaries are my own. I silently expand abbreviations and write ampersands as "et." Ascensius quotes from Exodus 20:12, as rendered into Latin in the Vulgate Bible: "Honora patrem tuum et matrem tua, ut sis longevus super terram" ("Honour thy father and thy mother that thou mayest be longlived upon the land"). The translation is from Swift 2010.

21 See especially Seneca 1514, fol. XL^{r}-XLIII^{r} and CLXXXIII^{r}-CLXXXIIII^{v}.

22 For Trevet's quotations from Suetonius and Eutropius, see Junge 1999, 35-36. The *mise-en-page* of Renaissance editions, which often featured commentaries by Badius and other humanists and adopted a standard layout, bolsters the readerly impulse to interpret the dramatic present in concert with subsequent history. By surrounding the text of the play itself with the commentators' glosses, Renaissance editions required readers to constantly glance back and forth between dramatic text and later historical context. See e.g. Seneca 1514, fol. CCXVIII^{r}-CCXIX^{r}.

23 See especially *Ecerinis* 505-507 and 521-36. I cite from Grund's 2011 edition of *Ecerinis*.

casts the filicidal mother Videna as a second Agrippina to opposite effect[24]. After she outdoes her Octavian predecessor by stabbing her despotic son herself, the horrified British citizens deem her filicide the twisted transgression *par excellence*, rebelling against her and her husband instead of the tyrant. This Agrippina outstrips even Nero's penchant for evil.

In *Richard III*, Shakespeare sidesteps the tendency to read Agrippina through a moralizing lens. The play is not particularly interested in probing whether Margaret is sympathetic or corrupt, sinned against or sinning. Shakespeare insists that she is both, and her ethical multivalence contributes to the inscrutability that helps render her a compelling presence on the English stage. Instead, Shakespeare amplifies scattered hints of a transhistorical connection between the *Octavia*'s Agrippina and Richard's anti-tyrannical dissidents embedded in prior dramas about the English tyrant's reign. In Thomas Legge's neo-Senecan *Richardus Tertius* (1579), for example, Richard is repeatedly deemed a second Nero and the tyrant's female objectors quote the *Octavia*'s women nearly verbatim[25]. But it is Queen Elizabeth who channels the royal mother's vengeful spirit. A furious ma-

24 Like her Senecan predecessor, Videna rails against her own son, the tyrant Porrex. She, too, utters an extended soliloquy that denounces the crimes that he committed to cement his power (*Gorboduc* IV.i.1-81) and envisions the hellish torments that he will endure after his death (*Gorboduc* IV.i.33-35; cf. *Oct.* 619-23). Indeed, her comment that her womb is cursed, "That the accursed Porrex brought to light" (*Gorboduc* IV.i.56) marks a nearly verbatim translation of Agrippina's command that Nero's henchman stab her womb, "which bore such a monster" ("monstrum qui tale tulit", *Oct.* 372; the translation is my own). In wishing that Porrex had stabbed her womb (*Gorboduc* IV.i.53-57; cf. *Oct.* 369-72), she laments that she did not suffer Agrippina's tragic fate. I cite from Cauthen's 1970 edition of *Gorboduc*.

25 On Richard as a second Nero, see especially *Richardus Tertius* III.3003, III.3569, III.4308, III.4537-38 and Norland 1993, 288. For the English women's echoes of the *Octavia*'s female dissidents, cf. e.g. Elizabeth's "en, vindices mater deos supplex precor, / dirum caput flammis nefandis obruant" (As a suppliant mother, I pray to the vengeful gods: may they strike his vile head with unnatural fire, *Richardus Tertius* I.546-47) and Octavia's "utinam nefandi principis dirum caput / obruere flammis caelitum rector paret" ("Would that heaven's ruler would strike with fire / This unnatural prince's vile head!" *Oct.* 227-28). I silently expand abbreviations. I cite from Sutton 1993. Translations of *Richardus Tertius* are my own.

triarch who "seeks vengeance" ("vindictam petit", *Richardus Tertius* I.1268) for Richard's murder of her two sons, she echoes Agrippina as she confronts the tyrant. She declares, "at non potest matri scelestus parcere. / infame generi vulnus inflixit suo" (But he is so wicked that he cannot spare a mother. He has inflicted a crime on his own family – an act of infamy, *Richardus Tertius* III.3942-3943; cf. *Oct.* 596-97, 609-10, 635). Although Elizabeth abruptly relents, grudgingly agreeing to marry her daughter to the tyrant, the play forces its audience to contend with the possibility that England's Nero might face retribution from the Octavian women scorned by his pursuit of power[26].

The anonymous *True Tragedy of Richard the Third* inches closer to acknowledging the predictive power of Agrippina's curse. In that play, the Agrippina-like Elizabeth seems to marshal supernatural powers to bring about the tyrant's downfall. Noticing that his arm has become "withered", for example, Richard interprets his deformity as evidence of her spell, exclaiming, "that accursed sorceresse the mother Queene hath bewitched me" (Field 1966, 33)[27]. From here, the *True Tragedy*'s Octavian points of contact become even more pronounced. Buckingham, dismayed at the tyrant's abuses of power, closely quotes Agrippina's ghost as he levels the play's only "curse" against Richard. His exclamation, "And after death thou maist more torture feele, / then when *Exeon* [*sic*] turnes the restlesse wheele" (Field 1966, 46) reworks Agrippina's wish for Nero's posthumous "torture to surpass […] the flesh-ripping wheel of Ixion" (*Oct.* 621-23). These Octavian references show that, by restaging Agrippina in Margaret, Shakespeare taps into a longstanding literary-historical link between Richard, Nero, and the pseudo-Senecan *praetexta*. In prominent historical accounts like Edward Hall's *Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families* and Holinshed's *Chronicles* – both key sources for *Richard III* – it became something of a commonplace to label Richard England's Nero. As Howard Norland notes, "like the Roman tyrant, Richard betrayed his mother" and "was believed to have caused the deaths of his brother Clarence and his wife Ann as well as the deaths of his nephews" (Norland 1993, 294).

26 On *Gorboduc* and *Richardus Tertius*' Senecan treatments of English history as a precursor to *Richard III*, see also Ullyot 2008.

27 See also Field 1966, 49.

Richard III is not Shakespeare's only foray into receptions of the Octavian Agrippina. He repeatedly invokes the emperor's matricide as the ultimate violation of the bonds of family and country. Hamlet, for example, considers a Neronian paradigm as he prepares to confront his own royal mother. In a speech that drips with Senecan horror ("'Tis now the very witching time of night / When […] hell itself breaks out / Contagion to this world. Now I could drink hot blood", *Hamlet* III.ii.378-81), he steels himself to "let not ever / The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom". Instead, he resolves, "I will speak daggers to her, but use none" (*Hamlet* III.ii.384-86). Additional parallels link Rome and Denmark. Like Agrippina, Gertrude is the target of her son's excessive, possibly even incestuous, affections; she, too, faces accusations that she poisoned her husband and lived with his brother (Thompson and Taylor 2016, *ad loc*). The unrealized specter of Octavian matricide haunts this scene, poised to double the fissures within the Danish royal house by matching Claudius' fratricide with maternal slaughter and condemning Denmark to the cyclical strife that triumphs in the Roman historical tragedy.

In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare turns to the *Octavia* to dramatize the inescapability of factional violence. As A. J. Boyle has demonstrated, Calphurnia's account of her nightmarish vision of her husband Caesar's bleeding statue restages Poppaea's account of her own nightmare, in which the ghost of Agrippina shows her a gruesome vision of her husband Nero's bloody death (*JC* II.ii.83-90; *Oct.* 712-33; Boyle 2008, lxxxii). Both Calphurnia and Poppaea recount their dreams to skeptical audiences whose interpretations of these dire portents are so optimistic as to strain credulity. Poppaea's nurse insists that Agrippina's hellish omens are signs of Nero's future health and prosperity (*Oct.* 740-53), while the conspirator Decius – intent on coaxing Caesar to the Forum – asserts that the image of the ruler's bloody statue is a "vision fair and fortunate" (*JC* II.ii.84) that "signifies that from you great Rome shall suck / Reviving blood" (*JC* II.ii.87-88). As a result, just as the nurse urges Poppaea to marry Nero despite Agrippina's nightmarish predictions, Decius maintains that Calphurnia's dream should not deter Caesar from traveling to the Senate House (*JC* II.ii.83-90). In the *Octavia*, Poppaea remains skeptical of the nurse's rosy interpretation of Agrippina's prophecies; she ends the scene unsure whether she should go through with her marriage to Nero (*Oct.*

756-61). Shakespeare replaces Poppaea's lingering hesitations with enthusiastic assent: Caesar, eager to bolster the illusion of his invulnerability, confidently resolves to venture to the Forum (*JC* II.ii.105). Yet, even so, Shakespeare confirms the dream's Agrippina-inspired prophecy of Caesar's murder. The dictator's ensuing assassination reveals the lingering tensions that lurk under the veneer of stability at Rome, launching the series of civil wars against which the Octavian Nero promotes the illusion of imperial unity. Shakespeare thus scripts a prehistory of the *Octavia* to locate the origins of its cyclical civil violence in the strife that divided late republican Rome.

If *Julius Caesar* dramatizes the *Octavia*'s conflict-ridden past, *King John* traces the bloody replays of Neronian strife in subsequent history. Decrying England's vicious civil wars, Richard Plantagenet, the play's moral center of gravity, excoriates the feuding factions by labeling them "bloody Neroes, ripping up the womb / Of your dear mother England" (*KJ* V.ii.152-53). Conflating violence within the family and the state ("mother England") to comment on a prior set of English civil wars that erupted during the reign of Richard's predecessor, *King John*'s reference to Agrippina suggests the playwright's sustained interest in reading English civil strife alongside its Roman precursor. In search of a symbol that epitomizes the factional conflicts that prefigure the Wars of the Roses, Shakespeare turns to the matricidal violence of Neronian Rome. For Shakespeare, English civil bloodshed formed yet another iteration of the strife that plagues the imperial play-world of the *Octavia*.

Shakespeare's Agrippina: Margaret's Curse and Richard III's *Octavian Philosophy of History*

Scholars have long considered *Richard III* to be Shakespeare's most Senecan play (Boyle 1997, 148; Muir 2005, 37; Miola 1992, 72-92). In this section, I extend scholarly accounts of the drama's Senecanism by arguing that Shakespeare imports the Octavian Agrippina to stage a conflict over the narrative arc of English history. Reflecting on Richard's reign while living under Tudor rule, Shakespeare marshals the *praetexta* to reframe the tyrant's proclamations of peace as propaganda designed to disguise the continuation of the Wars of the Roses. By reimagining Agrippina in Margaret, Shakespeare draws on her

cyclical philosophy of history to expose the hollowness of Richard's fictions of post-war stability. In doing so, he transforms his pseudo-Senecan source. He fulfils Agrippina's predictions of iterative strife, recovering the unrealized Octavian potential for female voices from the margins to expiate the sins that enable tyranny. In a theatrical culture intent on dramatizing the "unruly female speech" that challenges patrilineal hierarchies (Traub 2001, 130), the *Octavia* invites Shakespeare to imagine that the subversive utterances of marginalized women shape the course of English history.

Critics often focus on Richard's engagement with his personal past: how his perception of his premature birth and resulting deformity informs his belief that he is "determined to prove a villain," for example (*R3* I.i.30; Adelman 1992, 1-10; Garber 1988, 28-51). But the aspiring tyrant also manipulates the story of English history. In wooing Anne, for example, he claims, "I did kill King Henry, / But 'twas thy beauty that provoked me […] / 'twas I that stabbed young Edward, / But 'twas thy heavenly face that set me on" (*R3* I.ii.182-85). He thus recasts even his most objectionable acts of civil strife as signs of his aspirations to unity across factional lines, evidence of his "love" for his Lancastrian foe. Richard likewise announces to the fuming Margaret that his slaughter of the defenseless Lancastrian Prince Edward enacted God's will ("And God, not we, hath plagued thy bloody deed", *R3* I.iii.180). In cases like these, Richard's manipulation of the historical record is hardly subtle. Prominent chronicle accounts like Holinshed and Hall uniformly condemned Edward's murder as an act of petty cruelty; in Shakespeare's dramatization of this moment in *3 Henry VI*, even the Yorkist King Edward worries that Richard and his accomplices have gone too far (Lucas 2013, 215; *3H6* V.v.12-343). By incorporating this murder into a narrative of moralistic closure and divinely ordained victory, Richard untethers himself from both the dictates of prior English history and his own dramatic past as represented by Shakespeare himself. In asserting a radical separation between the country's war-torn past and conciliatory present, England's Nero crafts a historiographical extension of his psychological compulsion to insulate himself from his own origins[28].

28 On this psychological compulsion, see especially Berkeley 1963 and Charnes 1993, 20-69.

But it is Buckingham who provides the play's fullest account of Richard's authorizing mythology. As he aims to convince the gullible mayor to accept Richard as king, Buckingham manipulatively chides the usurper for refusing the crown. Acting at Richard's behest, in a scene carefully choreographed by the tyrant, he exclaims,

> Know then, it is your fault that you resign […]
> The sceptered office of your ancestors,
> Your state of fortune, and your due of birth,
> The lineal glory of your royal house,
> To the corruption of a blemished stock. (*R3* III.vii.116-21)

Assertions of Yorkist teleology abound. In Buckingham's story, Richard's coronation stands poised to restore the proper line of dynastic succession ("the sceptered office of your ancestors", "your due of birth", "the lineal glory of your royal house"), rescuing England from the bloody contingencies of wartime usurpation with his ascent to the throne. The horticultural metaphor of "blemished stock" imports overtones of organic rebirth to Buckingham's narrative. By erasing the corruption of the bastard Edward from the family's "lineal stem" (Siemon 2009, *ad loc*), Richard's succession promises to regenerate the wilting family tree. Indeed, Buckingham's speech traffics in the language of medical healing. He declares, "The noble isle doth want her proper limbs; / Her face defaced with scars of infamy" (*R3* III.vii.124-25), yet concludes that Richard's reign will "recure" the nation's gruesome injuries (*R3* III.vii.129). He invokes the civil-war trope of division within the body politic only to reject it: the fissures within England's war-torn body politic will yield to the singularity of the new king's body. Buckingham thus presents Richard's coronation as a turning point in the country's history, replacing the iterative violence of civil war with dynastic stability that promises to usher in a period of national renewal.

Margaret draws on the *Octavia* to challenge this rosy vision of English history. Shakespeare signals the raging queen's Octavian inheritance from the moment she enters the tragic universe of *Richard III*. As she berates the Yorks for the crimes that they committed to secure their dynasty's power (*R3* I.iii.110-302), she emerges as a refraction of the ghost of Agrippina. Critics have long puzzled over the literary sources that inspired Shakespeare's deposed queen because

of her ahistorical presence in *Richard III*: by the time of the events of the play, Margaret was certainly exiled to France, and possibly even dead (Brooks 1980, 722; Stapleton 2006, 101, 104). At this point, scholars agree on the Senecan coordinates of her character (Perry 2020, 63-64; Ornstein 1972, 80; Bullough 1960, vol. 3, 221; Rossiter 1961, 420; Brooks 1980, 722-33; Stapleton 2006). But we can be more specific. In leading Richard's other disenfranchised victims in a ritualistic display of communal mourning, Margaret is a version of the Hecuba of Seneca's *Troades* (Boyle 1997, 148-49; Brooks 1980, 721; Miola 1992, 77-78; Stapleton 2006, 123; Perry 2020, 63). In her rebukes against England's Nero, she mirrors the *Octavia*'s Agrippina.

Although only Stapleton (2006, 101) has raised the possibility of Octavian receptions here, the preliminary evidence is quite strong. It is well established that Shakespeare, in concert with the preceding dramatic tradition, reimagines the pseudo-Senecan Nero in dramatizing Richard, presenting Agrippina as a likely source of inspiration for the royal mother who curses him (Perry 2020, 49-65; Norland 1993, 285-300). Indeed, the *Octavia* offers the only example – not just in the Senecan corpus but in Roman drama altogether – of a raging woman who curses a tyrant for crimes committed to ease his path to political power. What is more, in dramatizing Margaret's appearance in Yorkist England, Shakespeare employs the distinctly Octavian technique of transcending the dictates of historical reality to import an anti-tyrannical critic to his play-world. Agrippina revels in her ability to transport herself back to Rome in defiance of the banishment that Nero imposes through his matricide (*Oct.* 593-95). Margaret, too, suggests that the pull of vengeance inspires her to disregard her exile and return to the center of royal authority in England (*R3* I.iii.167-72)[29]. She likewise follows Agrippina's ghost in denouncing the tyrant for a brutal murder that deprives her of the role of mother; she rails against Richard's slaying of her son Prince Edward (*R3* I.iii.117-19, I.iii.199-200, I.iii.208; *Oct.* 598-613). Yet despite Margaret's self-presentation as an unjustly maligned victim, she and Agrippina

29 Agrippina is the only Senecan ghost who secures her own release from the Underworld; the other vengeful shades in the Senecan corpus are released by a Fury or external force. See especially *Thy.* 1-121 and *Ag.* 2. I cite from Zwierlein's 1986 edition of Seneca's tragedies.

both occupy complex ethical positions as they deliver their rebukes. They have each committed twisted crimes of their own, bestowing on them a twofold status of transgressor and victim that leaves them isolated and unpitied. The scene, as Kluge notes, lacks "an innocent point of view" (Kluge 2019, 165).

From here, Shakespeare's appropriations become even clearer. Margaret, too, announces her unexpected arrival from the realm to which the ruling dynasty has banished her (*R3* I.iii.167-68; *Oct.* 593-95); identifies herself as a horrid tableau of vengeful rage (*R3* I.iii.159-61; *Oct.* 593-95); laments her fall from grace (*R3* I.iii.154-61; I.iii.167-72; I.iii.201-05; *Oct.* 598-602; 609-13); exclaims that she remembers the crimes that the tyrant aims to expunge from the historical record (*R3* I.iii.117; *Oct.* 599); denounces him for depriving her of the position of royal authority that is rightly hers (*R3* I.iii.169-72; I.iii.201-02; *Oct.* 600-02; 609-13); frames his crimes as an affront to his mother (*R3* I.iii.230; *Oct.* 596-97; 609-13); asserts his hatred for his own relatives (*R3* I.iii.301; *Oct.* 608-09); hopes that he will suffer just punishment in hell (*R3* I.iii.142-43; *Oct.* 619-23); and issues desperate warnings about his future transgressions (*R3* I.iii.298-302; *Oct.* 624-28). Like the Octavian ghost, Margaret presents herself as a "prophetess" (*R3* I.iii.300) and ends her speech with a series of historically accurate predictions. She, too, prophesies that the crimes of civil war will redound against the ruling dynasty that committed them and curses the tyrant to suffer a sudden, violent death only after his sins have festered (*R3* I.iii.216-232; *Oct.* 624-31).

Margaret even quotes her Senecan forebear nearly verbatim. She remarks that she is haunted by the Yorkist transgressions that erased her identity as a mother: "I do remember them too well" (*R3* I.iii.117). She thus echoes Agrippina's denunciation of Nero's matricide, especially as rendered by Nuce: "I always do remember wel beneath / […] Th'unkindly slaughterous deede" (Nuce 1927, 174)[30]. Likewise, as she fumes that Richard's crimes have left her the roles of "neither mother, wife, nor England's queen" (*R3* I.iii.208), Margaret channels

30 The progression from Agrippina's "remember well" to Margaret's "remember […] too well" perhaps signals Shakespeare's aim to surpass his Senecan source, suggesting that the English Agrippina's memory of past suffering proves even more agonizing than her Roman predecessor's.

Agrippina's outrage, in Nuce's translation, that Nero has deprived her of the roles of "Wyfe, stepdame, mother dire" (Nuce 1927, 176). While Margaret doubtless draws on other Senecan sources too, the Octavian royal mother occupies a privileged place in her literary genealogy. The ghost of Agrippina haunts Seneca and Shakespeare's plays alike[31].

At first, *Richard III* seems poised to follow the *Octavia* in undermining Agrippina's curses. Margaret's rebukes inspire the Yorks to put aside their petty squabbling in favor of a show of dynastic unity, and they strive to relegate her to the margins once again. Dorset asserts her insanity ("Dispute not with her; she is lunatic", *R3* I.iii.253) and Buckingham attempts to silence her disconcerting outspokenness ("Peace, peace, for shame, if not for charity", *R3* I.iii.272). In subtly suggesting her imprisonment ("I muse why she's at liberty", *R3* I.iii.304), Rivers and his fellow Yorks reassert their aspirations to control her movements and bar her from the center of royal power. They propose a symbolic reenactment of her banishment to France. Richard, too, seizes on her frenzied rebukes to reassert the mythology of reconciliation and forgiveness that he has already begun to craft for himself. His declaration, "She hath had too much wrong, and I repent / My part thereof that I have done to her" (*R3* I.iii.306-07) inspires Rivers to conclude that he has reached a "virtuous and Christian-like conclusion" (*R3* I.iii.315). Margaret's Octavian critiques seem to be contained, cementing her relegation to the periphery and bolstering the Yorks' self-presentation as bringers of mercy and peace.

Yet the string of crimes that Richard continues to commit in the play confirms Margaret's assertions of iterative Yorkist bloodshed. In the mourning scene, she contends that Richard's murders have

31 Margaret is not the play's only Octavian dissenter. Anne initially imitates Octavia as she denounces Richard's wartime murders. She, too, mourns a father (here, a father-in-law) killed by the future usurper – even invoking his ghost (*R3* I.ii.8-10; *Oct.* 134-36) – and prays for the tyrant's violent death (*R3* I.ii.14-16; *Oct.* 227-231). Her exclamation, "heaven with lightning strike the murderer dead" (*R3* I.ii.64) recalls Octavia's prayer, already a favorite of Legge's, for Nero to be struck with vengeful lightning (*Oct.* 227-28; cf. *Richardus Tertius* I.iii.i.86-87). Yet Richard quickly incorporates her into his pursuit of teleological dynastic stability by convincing her to marry him. He converts her from Octavia to Poppaea.

transposed the violence of the Wars of the Roses to the factional strife that divides the ruling family. Her denunciation of Richard's wartime crimes ("I had an Edward, till a Richard killed him; / I had a husband, till a Richard killed him", *R3* IV.iv.40-41) shades seamlessly into her condemnation of the tyrant's peacetime transgressions ("Thou hadst an Edward, till a Richard killed him. / Thou hadst a Richard, till a Richard killed him", *R3* IV.iv.42-43), parallel in form and content. This time, her Octavian critiques prove contagious. Richard's mother, the Duchess of York, joins the group of dissident women as another Agrippina figure. In fact, she quotes the ghost nearly verbatim even before this scene. After learning of Richard's impending marriage to Anne, her exclamation, "O my accursed womb, the bed of death. / A cockatrice hast thou hatched to the world, / Whose unavoided eye is murderous" (*R3* IV.i.53-55) recalls Agrippina's disgusted reference to her "womb, which bore such a monster" (*Oct.* 370)[32]. When she confronts Richard after the women's laments, she echoes the Octavian matriarch more extensively: she lists the woes that her tyrant-son has created for her (*R3* IV.iv.166-75; *Oct.* 598-613); wishes that she had prevented him from being born (*R3* IV.iv.137-39; *Oct.* 636-43); and catalogues the political crimes that he aims to suppress from historical memory (*R3* IV.iv.145-48). She even utters a "most grievous curse" (*R3* IV.iv.188) against him[33]. Shakespeare thus doubles the Octavian ghost in *Richard III*, split between the disenfranchised queen who returns from exile to expose the civil violence that enables tyranny and the raging mother who denounces her own son for the crimes that he committed to secure his power. Out of the single figure of Agrippina, he creates a chorus of marginalized, anti-Neronian female voices[34]. In doing so, he invites early modern audiences to grapple with the Octavian critiques that linger and multiply on the English stage.

32 This passage likely also refers to Videna's quotation of the same Octavian line (*Gorboduc* IV.i.56).

33 Before the Duchess' curse, Elizabeth seems poised to emerge as another Agrippina in her own right: she begs Margaret to "teach me how to curse mine enemies" (*R3* IV.iv.117). Yet she soon reverses course and Richard's mother takes her place.

34 Shakespeare here fuses the *Octavia* with the ritualistic laments of the *Troades* (Stapleton 2006; Miola 1997, 76-80; Brooks 1980).

Most importantly, Shakespeare fulfills the prophecies of his Agrippina *within the play-world* of *Richard III*. Richard tries to flee the women's curses, yet he cannot escape their pull. Margaret's prophecies overthrow the seemingly all-powerful tyrant, and even his allies remark on their predictive veracity (Jowett 2000, 23; Alfar 2019, 800-01; Walen 2020, 635; Perry 2020, 64). In *Richard III*, "Now Margaret's curse is fall'n upon our heads" resounds as the drumbeat that drives English history[35]. It is easy to read the fulfillment of the curse as a tidy, if not simplistic, plot device, part of Shakespeare's interest in manufacturing an over-abundance of prophetic hints to account for Richard's abrupt downfall. Yet the curse-come-true also represents a complex site of Senecan receptions. We have seen how *praetextae* like the *Octavia* construct a tension between the dramatic present and the prophetic future. While the immediate action of the play suggests that Nero's grip on power remains firm, the *Octavia*'s readers understand that Agrippina's vision will triumph in the long term. Shakespeare collapses this opposition. By tethering the arc of his dramatic plot to the fulfillment of Margaret's prophecies, he allows his English audience-members to confirm, through their own spectatorly experience, her version of national history.

Helen Cooper argues that Shakespeare's first tetralogy transposes a triumphant narrative of Christian "salvation history played out over the whole of time, onto a century of the secular history of England" (Cooper 2010, 99). In suggesting that Margaret helps realign English history with divine providence, I have argued that Shakespeare's rewriting of the *Octavia* inspires him to present an immoral female dissident as a source of national deliverance, paving the way for the Tudors' redemptive ascent to the throne. As he crafts a prehistory of Elizabeth's reign that doubles as an etiology for the period of salvific reunification and stability over which she presided, Shakespeare reimagines Agrippina's ghost to dramatize the shift from Senecan *semper idem* to Elizabethan *semper eadem*. For Shakespeare, then, the *Octavia* provided both a plot ripe for appropriation in its own right and a conduit through which he accessed the generic norms of

35 See especially *R3* III.iii.14 and *R3* V.i.25.

praetexta[36]. If the *Octavia* seems to undermine Agrippina's attempts to fashion herself into the play's internal director – capable of scripting Nero's future to align with her anti-tyrannical philosophy of history – Shakespeare stages this unrealized possibility by fusing the historical and prophetic time that remain at odds in pseudo-Seneca. In fact, as she brings about Richard's downfall through her curses, Margaret mirrors Shakespeare himself. The English playwright likewise stages Richard's defeat and memorializes, through *Richard III*, the crimes that the tyrant aims to suppress from the historical record. In appropriating pseudo-Seneca's historiographically-minded ghost, perhaps he, too, transforms into her.

References

Adelman, Janet. 1992. *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to the Tempest*. New York: Routledge.

Alfar, Cristina León. 2019. "Speaking Truth to Power as Feminist Ethics in *Richard III*." *Social Research* 86, no. 3: 789-819.

Belsey, Catherine. 2010. "Shakespeare's Sad Tale for Winter: *Hamlet* and the Tradition of Fireside Ghost Stories." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 61, no. 1: 1-27.

Berkeley, David S. 1963. "'Determined' in *Richard III*, I. i. 30." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 14, no. 4: 483-484.

Boyle, A. J. 1997. *Tragic Seneca: An Essay in the Theatrical Tradition*. London: Routledge.

—, ed. 2008. *Octavia: Attributed to Seneca*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Braden, Gordon. 1985. *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition: Anger's Privilege*. New Haven, Yale University Press.

—. 1989. "Epic Anger." *Milton Quarterly* 23, no. 1: 28-34.

36 In *Richard*'s relentless predictions of the tyrant's impending downfall, Margaret's chief among them, we can glimpse a link – albeit a faint, indirect one – between Shakespeare's tragedy and the anti-tyrannical prophecies of republican *praetextae* like Accius' *Brutus*. As Kragelund notes, those prophecies almost certainly formed a key source for Agrippina's curse in the *Octavia* (Kragelund 2016, 142).

Brooks, Harold F. 1980. "*Richard III*, Unhistorical Amplifications: The Women's Scenes and Seneca." *The Modern Language Review* 75, no. 4: 721-737.

Buckley, Emma. 2013. "*Nero Insitiuus*: Constructing Neronian Identity in the Pseudo-Senecan *Octavia*." In *The Julio-Claudian Succession: Reality and Perception of the "Augustan Model"*, edited by Alisdair Gibson, 133-154. Leiden: Brill.

Bullough, Geoffrey. 1957-1975. *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*. 8 vols. London: Routledge.

Burrow, Colin. 2013. *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Byville, Eric. 2008. '"This More Delusive': Tantalus and Seneca in *Paradise Lost*." *Modern Language Quarterly* 69, no. 2: 245-268.

Cauthen, Irby B., Jr., ed. 1970. *Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton: Gorboduc, or Ferrex and Porrex*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Charnes, Linda. 1993. *Notorious Identity: Materializing the Subject in Shakespeare*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Clemen, Wolfgang. 2013 (1968). *A Commentary on Shakespeare's Richard III*. New York: Routledge.

Cooper, Helen. 2010. *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*. London: Bloomsbury.

Espie, Jeff. 2019. "Spenser in Buskins: *The Shepheardes Calender* and the Tragedians." *The Review of English Studies* 70, no. 295: 399-417.

— and David Adkins. 2022. "The Relics of Hippolytus in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*." *English Literary Renaissance* 52, no. 2: 153-175.

Ferri, Rolando, ed. 2003. *Octavia: A Play Attributed to Seneca*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Field, Barron, ed. 1966. *The True Tragedy of Richard the Third*. Nendeln, Liechtenstein.

Garber, Marjorie. 1988. "Descanting on Deformity: *Richard III* and the Shape of History." In *The Historical Renaissance: New Essays on Tudor and Stuart Literature and Culture*, edited by Heather Dubrow and Richard Strier, 79-103. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Garrison, Daniel H. 1991. *Horace: Epodes and Odes*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.

Gillespie, Stuart. 2001. *Shakespeare's Books: A Dictionary of Shakespeare's Sources*. London: Bloomsbury.

Ginsberg, Lauren Donovan. 2013. "Wars More than Civil: Memories of Pompey and Caesar in the *Octavia*." *American Journal of Philology* 134, no. 4: 637-674.

—. 2015a. "Tragic Rome? Roman Historical Drama and the Genre of Tragedy." In *Brill's Companion to Roman Tragedy*, edited by George W. M. Harrison, 216-237. Leiden: Brill.

—. 2015b. "Don't Stand So Close to Me: Antigone's *Pietas* in Seneca's *Phoenissae*." *TAPA* 145, no. 1: 199-230.

—. 2016. *Staging Memory, Staging Strife: Empire and Civil War in the Octavia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Grund, Gary, trans. 2011. *Humanist Tragedies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hadfield, Andrew. 2005. *Shakespeare and Republicanism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hall, Edward. 1548. *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre & Yorke*. STC 12721.

Herington, C. J. 1958. "A Thirteenth-Century Manuscript of the *Octavia Praetexta* in Exeter." *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 101: 353-377.

—. 1966. "Senecan Tragedy." *Arion* 5, no. 4: 422-471.

Jones, Emrys. 1977. *The Origins of Shakespeare*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Jowett, John. 2000. "Introduction." In *William Shakespeare: The Tragedy of King Richard III*, edited by John Jowett, 1-132. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Junge, Rebekka. 1999. *Nicholas Trevet und die Octavia Praetexta: Editio princeps des mittelalterlichen Kommentars und Untersuchungen zum pseudosenecanischen Drama*. Paderborn: Schöningh.

Keitel, Elizabeth. 1984. "Principate and Civil War in the Annals of Tacitus." *American Journal of Philology* 105, no. 3: 306-325.

Ker, James. 2006. "Seneca: Man of Many Genres." In *Seeing Seneca Whole: Perspectives on Philosophy, Poetry, and Politics*, edited by Katharina Volk and Gareth D. Williams, 19-41. Leiden: Brill.

King, John K. 1990. "Representations of the Virgin Queen." *Renaissance Quarterly* 43, no. 1: 30-74.

Kluge, Sofie. 2019. "Deformed, Unfinished History: *Richard III* as Mourning Play." *Renaissance Drama* 47, no. 2: 153-176.

Kragelund, Patrick. 2016. *Roman Historical Drama: The Octavia in Antiquity and Beyond*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lange, Carston H. 2023. "Cassius Dio on Civil War: Between History and Theory." In *Brill's Companion to Cassius Dio*, ed. Jesper Majbom Madsen and Andrew G. Scott, 453-478. Leiden: Brill.

Leigh, Matthew. 1997. *Lucan: Spectacle and Engagement*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Liebler, Naomi C. and Lisa Scancella Shea. 2001. "Shakespeare's Queen Margaret: Unruly or Unruled?" In *Henry VI: Critical Essays*, edited by Thomas A. Pendleton, 87-104. London: Routledge.

Locati, Silvia. 2006. *La rinascita del genere tragico nel Medioevo: L'Ecerinis di Albertino Mussato*. Florence: F. Cesati.

Lucas, Scott. 2013. "Holinshed and Hall." In *The Oxford Handbook of Holinshed's Chronicles*, edited by Felicity Heal, Ian W. Archer, and Paulina Kewes, 203-216. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Luke, Trevor. 2010. "Ideology and Humor in Suetonius' 'Life of Vespasian' 8." *Classical World* 103, no. 4: 511-527.

Machielsen, Jan. 2014. "The Rise and Fall of Seneca *Tragicus*, c. 1365-1593." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 77, no. 1: 61-85.

Marincola, John. 2010. "*Eros* and Empire: Virgil and the Historians on Civil War." In *Ancient Historiography and its Contexts: Studies in Honour of A. J. Woodman*, ed. by Christina S. Kraus, John Marincola, and Christopher Pelling, 183-204. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mayne, Emily. 2019. "Presenting Seneca in Print: Elizabethan Translations and Thomas Newton's *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies*." *The Review of English Studies* 70, no. 297: 823-846.

—. 2020. "With bloody verses charmd? Spenser and Seneca." *Spenser Review*. http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/spenseronline/review/item/50.1.2

Miola, Robert. 1992. *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy: The Influence of Seneca*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Moul, Victoria. 2015. "Lyric Poetry." In *The Oxford Handbook of Neo-Latin*, edited by Sarah Knight and Stefan Tilg, 41-56. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

—. 2017. "Seneca, Horace, and the Anglo-Latin 'Moralising Lyric' in Early Modern England." In *Horace and Seneca: Interactions, Intertexts, Interpretations*, edited by Martin Stöckinger, Kathrin Winter, and Andreas T. Zanker, 345-370. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Muir, Kenneth. 2005. *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays*. Abingdon: Routledge. Originally published 1977.

Norland, Howard B. 1993. "Legge's Neo-Senecan *Richardus Tertius*." *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 42, 285-300.

Nuce, Thomas, trans. 1927. *The Ninthe Tragedy of Lucius Annæus Seneca Called Octavia.* In *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies*, edited by Thomas Newton, 143-190. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Ornstein, Robert. 1972. *A Kingdom for a Stage: The Achievement of Shakespeare's History Plays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Peirano, Irene. 2012. *The Rhetoric of the Roman Fake: Latin Pseudepigrapha in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Perry, Curtis. 2020. *Shakespeare and Senecan Tragedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Proudfoot, Richard, Anne Thompson, and David Scott Kastan, eds. 1998. *The Arden Shakespeare: Complete Works*. London: Bloomsbury.

Reynolds, Paige Martin. 2010. "Mourning and Memory in *Richard III*." *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews* 21, no. 2: 19-25.

Rossiter, Arthur Percival. 1961. *Angel with Horns and Other Shakespeare Lectures*. London: Longmans.

Seneca the Younger. 1514. *L. Annei Senecae Tragoediae*. Paris: Jodocus Badius Ascensius.

Shackleton Bailey, D. R. 1988. *Annaei Lucani De bello civili libri X*. Stuttgart: Teubner.

Siemon, James, ed. 2009. *The Arden Shakespeare: King Richard III*. London: Bloomsbury.

Stapleton, M. L. 2006. '"I of old contemptes complayne': Margaret of Anjou and English Seneca." *Comparative Literature Studies* 43, no. 1/2: 100-133.

Sutton, Dana, F., ed. 1993. *Thomas Legge: The Complete Plays: Volume 1, Richardus Tertius*. New York: Peter Lang.

Swift, Edward, ed. 2010. *The Vulgate Bible: Douay-Rheims Translation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Tarrant, R. J. 1983. "The Younger Seneca: Tragedies." In *Texts and Transmission: A Survey of the Latin Classics*, edited by L. D. Reynolds, 378-381. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

—, ed. 2004. *P. Ovidi Nasonis Metamorphoses.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

—. 2006. "Seeing Seneca Whole?" In *Seeing Seneca Whole: Perspectives on Philosophy, Poetry, and Politics*, edited by Katharina Volk and Gareth D. Williams, 1-18. Leiden: Brill.

Thompson, Ann and Neil Taylor, eds. 2016. *The Arden Shakespeare: Hamlet*. London: Bloomsbury.

Traub, Valerie. 2001. "Gender and Sexuality in Shakespeare." In *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, edited by Margreta de Grazia and Stanley Wells, 129-146. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ullyot, Michael. 2008. "Seneca and the Early Elizabethan History Play." In *English Historical Drama, 1500-1660*, edited by Teresa Grant and Barbara Ravelhofer, 98-124. Basingstroke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Walen, Denise A. 2020. "Exiling Margaret in Shakespeare's *Richard III*." *Shakespeare Bulletin* 38, no. 4: 635-658.

Wickham, E. C. and H. W. Garrod. 1922. *Q. Horati Flacci Opera*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

White, Paul. 2013. *Jodocus Badius Ascensius: Commentary, Commerce and Print in the Renaissance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zwierlein, Otto, ed. 1986. *L. Annaei Senecae Tragoediae: incertorum auctorum Hercules (Oetaeus), Octavia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.