

Rereading Octavia and Poppaea: Unraveling the Literary Afterlives of Nero's Wives

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Defense Date: April 1, 2024

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy in the Department of Classical Studies in The Graduate School of  
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ABSTRACT

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## **Abstract**

Claudia Octavia and Poppaea Sabina, Nero's first and second wife, have long been typecast based on how they appear in the historiographical works of Tacitus and Cassius Dio. Tacitus paints Octavia as a passive, meek victim who endures Nero's abuses, including the murder of her brother, without complaint and without displaying emotion. Her death scene is famously brutal and needlessly cruel, heightening her status as a victim of Nero and of Poppaea. Poppaea, on the other hand, is portrayed as scheming and manipulative, a woman who controls Nero and urges his worst crimes through her combination of wicked attributes. And often the women are shown in conflict: Tacitus famously recounts how a triumphant Poppaea demanded to see Octavia's severed head after her execution.

These images of Octavia and Poppaea have persisted in modern historical scholarship and in the modern popular imagination of Nero's reign. At the same time, there exists a wider breadth of ancient characterizations of these two women: beyond the historiographical tradition, Nero's wives appear in encomiastic poetry, epigram, satire, natural history, biography, historical drama, and other genres. The Octavias and Poppaeas of these other genres often differ dramatically from those of historiography, sometimes in a mutually exclusive way, and particularly in how these authors write the women's emotional inner lives. This dissertation explores the literary characterizations of Octavia and Poppaea outside of the historiographical accounts. Each chapter investigates one important genre or text and offers a close reading of that work's central themes, language,

intertextual and intratextual allusions, generic features, and, where illustrative, comparative study of the iconographical record in order to uncover that particular author or text's idea of Octavia and Poppaea. The goal of each chapter or of the work as a whole is not to create a cohesive picture of one single literary Octavia or Poppaea, much less to parse a "true" historical Octavia or Poppaea as one might find in a modern work of history or biography. Rather, this dissertation returns to the study of these women the wide body of literary reflections of their lives in all its variety. This dissertation argues that the literary afterlives of these women is as variegated and important as that of more well known (and, therefore, more well studied), figures of Nero's reign.

## **Dedication**

For Riley, Billie, and my parents. Thank you for supporting me through this process.

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# 1. Introduction

The past few decades have seen increasing interest in constructions of Nero. In other words, there has been increased scholarly analysis of not only how the ancient written record provides evidence for Nero, the historical person, but also how Nero is remade in each text according to that text's goals, themes, and arguments. This renewed interest in Nero began in earnest with the 1994 publication of *Reflections of Nero*. This book aims to show the constructions of the image of Nero which have come through various media. Each individual chapter is dedicated to a different construction of Nero, including the Nero of Tacitus<sup>1</sup>, the Nero of Seneca<sup>2</sup>, and Nero onstage<sup>3</sup>. All of these Neros differ from one another.

There has been an increase in Neronian scholarship in recent years. Two companions, *A Companion to the Neronian Age* (2013) and *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Nero* (2017), and three biographies on Nero have been published in the past two decades. These new publications have been clearly influenced by the approaches in *Reflections of Nero*: they all recognize the constructions of the historiographical record.<sup>4</sup> The companions also replicate *Reflections of Nero* in offering individual studies of texts or other media and how those create the image of Nero we have today. To quote "Introduction: Angles on an Emperor" from the Cambridge Companion (2):

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<sup>1</sup> Rubiés 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Williams 1994, Too 1994, and Schiesaro 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Edwards 1994 and Alcock 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Drinkwater 2019, Shotter 2014, Champlin 2005.

“It is because he has been passed down to us as too many outrageous versions of the same man that Nero remains imaginable as something other than what all, and what little, the ancients made of him. He does not take to being sewn together merely as the sum of his parts because we have been left with far too many parts to work with, and because many of them do not take to being sewn into human form. But it is from this mass of contradictions and monstrous assertions and open ends that new ways of thinking about Nero and his age must emerge and new versions of the man be conceived.”

This interest has also extended to the public sphere: there have been three museum exhibits,<sup>5</sup> including one such exhibit at the British Museum titled *Nero: the man behind the myth*. This exhibition, as the title demonstrates, is dedicated to complicating the record left to us by the hostile historiographical tradition.

And yet within this wider reconsideration of the various Neros which the literary-historical record contains, little attention has been paid to Nero’s wives. The *Nero: the man behind the myth* exhibit only had a single case dedicated to “women,” in which Octavia and Poppaea played very small roles. No chapters in *A Companion to the Neronian Age* focus on the women of Nero’s court; one chapter, “*Domus Neroniana: The Imperial Household in the Age of Nero*” focuses on the imperial household, but is much

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<sup>5</sup> “Nero: the Man Behind the Myth” by the British Museum in 2021, Trier: “Nero Kaiser Künstler und Tyrann” at Trier in 2016 and “Nerone” at the Palatine Museum in Rome in 2011. The former two exhibits were particularly focused on Nero as a construction.

more interested in the household as an institution rather than the characters of the women within it. The *Cambridge Companion to the Age of Nero* includes a single chapter on all the women in Nero's household, titled "Nero's Women." The biographies, as discussed below, also pay little individual attention to the women Nero married.

The lack of attention given to Nero's wives is surprising given the amount of attention paid in these and other works to Nero's mother, Agrippina. For example, Agrippina is mentioned by name fifty-three times in "*Domus Neroniana: The Imperial Household in the Age of Nero*." In contrast, Octavia is named eight times, and Poppaea only four. In "Nero's Women," Agrippina is discussed on almost every page and is the focus of the first nine pages (pp.64-73). She is mentioned by name fifty-seven times in the chapter. Poppaea is the focus of three pages (pp.72-75) and is named twelve times. Octavia is never discussed in-depth and is mentioned only seven times in the chapter. One particular study on Agrippina by Judith Ginsburg includes a detailed study on the literary character of Agrippina within the historiographical tradition and demonstrates the complexity of this fundamentally literary characterization. These studies pay particular attention to deconstructing the image of Agrippina found in the historiographical sources and use similar methodologies to the deconstructions of Nero in the scholarship cited above. Agrippina as handed down by Tacitus (and Dio) is both a historical figure but also a literary character, shaped according to certain rhetorical *topoi* and theories about women and political power.

My dissertation applies the approaches from *Reflections of Nero* and subsequent work on Nero and Agrippina to the study of Nero's wives in the literary tradition. Nero

was married three times: to Octavia, to Poppaea, and finally to Statilia Messalina.<sup>6</sup> Strangely, Statilia Messalina is almost entirely absent from the historiographical record (which has been harmed by the loss of the final books of Tacitus' *Annales*); she also does not appear outside of historiography in the wider literary record, despite being Nero's wife at the time of his death. But things are different with Octavia and Poppaea: these women appear throughout the historiographical record alongside Nero and Agrippina, but they also appear outside of the accounts of Tacitus and Dio in a number of texts which shed different lights on the women and the significance of their lives. These other texts were written by a diverse body of authors all with their own literary agendas and tools of characterization which leads to a fascinatingly discordant record that presents competing and divergent images of these women at every turn.

My dissertation offers the first major study of the picture of Nero's wives in non-historiographical literature, including hexameter poetry, historical tragedy, biography, natural history, epigram, satire, and others. The project has several aims. First, my project centers on two imperial women who are often overlooked in scholarship on the reign of Nero but who have left multifaceted traces in the wider literary tradition. Second, my project foregrounds the heterogeneity of this tradition in its study of the characterization of these women in a variety of literary texts. Thirdly, my dissertation demonstrates that

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<sup>6</sup> He also had a long-term relationship with the freedwoman Acte that was occasionally assimilated to marriage in the sources. If we are to believe Suetonius, Nero married Acte prior to his marriage to Poppaea (Suet. *Ner.* 28). This information is most likely false and is uncorroborated, but should be noted nonetheless.

the literary characterizations of these women are as complex as those of more foregrounded (and therefore more well studied) figures like Nero and Agrippina. The goal is not to create a cohesive picture or to parse a “true” historical Octavia and Poppaea as one might find in a biography, but rather to investigate how they are presented within a wide body of literary sources and to understand the variety of these presentations. I focus on the individual thematic and rhetorical goals of each individual work of literature in which these women appear in order to demonstrate that the literary presentation of these women is as variegated as that of the more well-known figures of Nero’s reign.

In order to achieve these aims, my dissertation investigates the following questions: How were these women portrayed in the major literary sources? How do the characterizations within these sources overlap or contradict? How do these contradictions complicate and affect our understanding of these women as literary characters? My dissertation investigates the major themes that emerge in the characterizations of these women, some examples of which are agency, motherhood, and subversive versus acceptable behavior. The goal of this project is to reshape our perception of how Octavia and Poppaea were constructed and understood by a variety of authors and audiences after their deaths as well as to return to modern consideration the complexity of literary voices which are often overlooked in preference for the writings of Tacitus.

## ***1.1 Thinking Beyond Tacitus (and Dio)***

What do we know about the lives of Octavia and Poppaea as historical figures?

Octavia was born to the emperor Claudius and his third wife, Messalina in 39 or 40 CE.<sup>7</sup>

She was initially betrothed to Lucius Junius Silanus Torquatus when she was two years

old, a betrothal which lasted until he was accused of incest in 48 CE and forced to resign

from the praetorship, allegedly at Agrippina's behest.<sup>8</sup> She was then betrothed to her

step-brother Nero, whom she married in 53 CE.<sup>9</sup> She had no children, but was popular

with the people, who rioted on her behalf when Nero initially attempted to divorce her for

sterility.<sup>10</sup> Octavia was accused of adultery with Eucærus, for which no corroboration

was found.<sup>11</sup> Octavia was then reinstated as Nero's wife. Anicetus, Nero's freedman,

eventually testified to adultery with Octavia. As a result, Octavia was exiled to Pandateria

and executed on the charge of *maiestas* in 62 CE.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Octavia was older than Britannicus by about two years. Britannicus was around fourteen, the age at which Roman men donned the *toga virilis*, at the time of his death in 55 CE. This means Britannicus was born in around 41 CE, and Octavia would have been born in 39 or 40. Tacitus mistakenly says that Octavia was 20 at the time of her death in 62, when she actually would have been about 22 (Suet. *Claud.* 27; Levick 2012, 55).

<sup>8</sup> Suet. *Claud.* 29. Levick 2012, 71. *OCD*, "Claudia Octavia." Brill, *New Pauly*, "Octavia, Daughter of emperor Claudius and Messalina."

<sup>9</sup> Levick 2012, 74. *OCD*, "Claudia Octavia." Although inscriptions show that Octavia was included in portrait groups of Claudius' family as a child (CIL 6.921), there is no evidence of her portrait included with Nero, as these portraits would likely have been targets for angry Octavia supporters after her death. Wood 2000, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 14.60. *Octavia* 669-689.

<sup>11</sup> Suet. *Ner.* 35. Tac. *Ann.* 14. 60.

<sup>12</sup> Suet. *Ner.* 35. Tac. *Ann.* 14.62-63. *OCD*, "Claudia Octavia."

Poppaea was born in around 30 CE to a prominent Roman gens:<sup>13</sup> her grandfather was a consul under Augustus and her father was a quaestor under Tiberius, though his friendship with Sejanus stunted his political growth and eventually led to his suicide.<sup>14</sup> Poppaea married Rufrius Crispinus in 44 and bore a son, who would perish after Poppaea's death.<sup>15</sup> Poppaea later divorced Crispinus and began a relationship with Otho, which may have been a marriage-- our sources are inconsistent on this.<sup>16</sup> Nero and Poppaea married in 62 CE, soon after Octavia's exile and death, and Poppaea bore their only child, Claudia Augusta, in 63 CE.<sup>17</sup> Claudia died at four months old.<sup>18</sup> Poppaea herself died in 65 CE, after Nero allegedly kicked her in the stomach.<sup>19</sup> The validity of this story has been questioned given that the kick to the stomach is a literary trope for a tyrant; given the biases in the sources which recount this, it is quite possibly a literary

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<sup>13</sup> Her exact birth year is unknown, but her father, Titus Ollius, committed suicide in 31 CE after being implicated in Sejanus' conspiracy, so Poppaea must have been born before 31.

<sup>14</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 13.45.

<sup>15</sup> Champlin 2005, 3. *OCD*, "Poppaea Sabina."

<sup>16</sup> Tacitus claims that Poppaea and Nero met and began an affair when she and Otho were already married (Tac. *Ann.* 13.45-46). Suetonius (*Otho* 3) and Plutarch (*Galba* 19) both state instead that Poppaea's marriage to Otho was a sham to cover her affair with Nero. Richlin 2013, 238.

<sup>17</sup> An Arval inscription (CIL 6.2043) from 63 CE reads: *ob adventum Neronis Claudi Caesaris Augusti Germanici et Poppaeae Augusti et Claudiae Augustae*. This inscription, which celebrates the arrival of Nero, Poppaea, and Claudia, must have been made during Claudia's short life. CIL 11.6955 also mentions Poppaea and is evidence that she was included in statue groups with Nero. Wood 2000, 18.

<sup>18</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 15.23. Kragelund 2010. *OCD*, "Poppaea Sabina."

<sup>19</sup> It is unclear exactly when in 65 Poppaea died, but Tacitus has her appear at Nero's council after the Pisonian conspiracy (Tac. *Ann.* 15.61.2) and the inscription CIL XI 1331, which wishes for the health and safety of Nero and Poppaea, seems to be in response to the exposed conspiracy.

invention. Poppaea may have died from a miscarriage or complications from her pregnancy.<sup>20</sup> Nero had Poppaea deified after her death, though worship of *diva Poppaea* ceased after Nero's fall.<sup>21</sup>

The details of Octavia and Poppaea's lives are murky; even the above attempts to briefly describe the known facts of their lives reveal contradictions within our sources and significant gaps in information. When examining the subjective details of these women's lives, such as their motivations, relationships, and goals, we can only consider the constructions of various authors. As this dissertation shows, Octavia and Poppaea, appear as both major and minor characters in a number of literary works from the ancient world. However, when scholars approach Nero's wives, we often see that their perspectives replicate the perspectives of the historians Tacitus and Cassius Dio. On the one hand, this is understandable. The works of Tacitus and Dio remain our best, most detailed sources for the reign of Nero. They also offer our most expansive treatment of the women of Nero's court. But their depictions are not the only way that authors were understanding these women at the time and should not be imagined to encapsulate the complete literary afterlives of Octavia and Poppaea.

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<sup>20</sup> Tacitus (*Ann.* 16.6), Suetonius (*Ner.* 35), and Dio (62) all tell variations of this story. Tacitus and Suetonius allege that Poppaea was killed by a kick to the stomach, while Dio writes that Nero jumped onto Poppaea, killing her, and that this may have been an accident. Poppaea may have died from complications of a miscarriage (Rudich 2005, 134).

<sup>21</sup> Three inscriptions to *diva Poppaea* (CIL 6.40419, CIL 11.1331, CIL 11.6955), the second of which also has a dedication to *diva Claudia* and the latter two of which are both dedications by L. Titinius) are evidence for the brief period of worship of Poppaea after her death. Muich 2004, 46.

In order to show the pervasive influence of Tacitus on modern studies of Nero's wives, it will be useful to look at a recent example.<sup>22</sup> One of the foremost scholars on Neronian women (and Neronian Rome in general) is Anthony Barrett, whose biography of Agrippina remains a standard text.<sup>23</sup> It is not surprising, then, to find him as the author of the essay, "Nero's Women," in the *Cambridge Companion to the Age of Nero*. This essay aims to understand the role of women close to the imperial throne in the age of Nero. When it comes to Octavia, Barrett writes:

"History has recorded little of the personality of Octavia... We do know that [Nero] very quickly tired of [Octavia] and within two years had started to find her distasteful; she, for her part, simply learned to suffer in silence."<sup>24</sup>

This statement is certainly true for the Octavia who appears in Tacitus' *Annals*. Tacitus notes in almost identical language how Nero tired of his wife (*abhorrebat*, Tac. *Ann.* 13.13). Elsewhere, Tacitus draws attention to his own narratorial inability to understand what Octavia might have been thinking at any given time (Tac. *Ann.* 13.16):

*quippe sibi supremum auxilium ereptum et parricidii exemplum intellegebat. Octavia quoque, quamvis rudibus annis, dolorem caritatem omnes adfectus abscondere didicerat.*

Indeed [Octavia] knew that her final help had been snatched away and that this was a precedent for parricide. Octavia also, although she was young, had learned to hide her grief, fondness, and every feeling.

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<sup>22</sup> Cassius Dio is often cited in support of Tacitus' narrative and when it comes to Octavia and Poppaea, the two are often in agreement and I refer to them jointly as "the surviving historiographical record." Cassius Dio's account of Nero's reign, however, survives only in epitomes deriving from centuries later and as a result has had less influence on modern scholarly approaches to Nero's wives.

<sup>23</sup> Barrett 1996.

<sup>24</sup> Barrett 2017, 65.

However, Tacitus' portrayal of Octavia's reaction to Nero's brutality contrasts with the Octavia found in the *Octavia*, who contemplates vengeance for her dead brother and father, and who does not intend to suffer silently (*Oct.* 174-175):

*Oct. Extinguat et me, ne manu nostra cadat.*  
*Nurse. Natura uires non dedit tantas tibi.*  
*Oct. Dolor ira maeror miseriae luctus dabunt.*

*Oct.* He must kill me also, or fall by my hand.  
*Nur.* Nature has not given you such strength.  
*Oct.* Pain, anger, sorrow, misery, grief will give it.

I discuss Octavia's desire and capacity for vengeance in the *Octavia* in greater depth in Chapter 3; however, it is clear even from these few lines that not every literary version of Octavia is created equal. While Tacitus' Octavia is, as Barrett states, prone to suffering in silence as an archetypal victim, the Octavia of the *Octavia* is not content to do the same. The picture is more complicated when sources beyond the historiographical tradition are considered.

Accounts of Poppaea are similarly liable to replicating Tacitus' interpretations. In the same essay, Barrett introduces Poppaea in this way:

“The death of Agrippina unfettered Nero from his mother's domination, and he might have been expected to avoid placing himself again in a similar situation. To the contrary, he made every effort to acquire a wife seemingly shaped in the same very mold as his mother.<sup>25</sup>”

Once more, this seems an appropriate summary of Tacitus' Poppaea who, as we will see below, shares many similarities with Tacitus' Agrippina. But is it true of Poppaea in the

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<sup>25</sup> Barrett 2017, 72.

wider literary tradition? We might also consider what Edward Champlin writes about

Poppaea:

“A few years later, in 58, the now 20-year-old emperor fell in love again, this time with Poppaea Sabina, the ambitious wife of his friend Otho. It was she who badgered him into at last removing Agrippina, for she realized that she could never replace Octavia as Nero’s wife until his strong-willed mother was dead.<sup>26</sup>”

This claim comes without citation but can be traced to assertions from Tacitus and

Cassius Dio.<sup>27</sup> Tacitus writes (*Tac. Ann.* 14.1):

*Gaius Vips[t]ano [C.] Fonteio consulibus diu meditatatum scelus non ultra Nero distulit, vetustate imperii coalita audacia et flagrantior in dies amore Poppaeae, quae sibi matrimonium et discidium Octaviae incolumi Agrippina haud sperans.*

In the consulship of Gaius Vipstanus and Gaius Foneius, Nero no longer put off his long considered crime, since his boldness was strengthened by the length of his rule and his love for Poppaea burned more every day, Poppaea who hoped in no way for marriage and Nero’s divorce from Octavia while Agrippina was safe.

Similarly, Cassius Dio states (*Dio. Rom. Hist.* 62.12):

Μαθοῦσα δὲ ταῦθ' ἡ Σαβίνα ἀνέπεισε τὸν Νέρωνα ὡς καὶ ἐπιβουλεύουσάν οἱ αὐτὴν διολέσαι.

After learning these things, Sabina persuaded Nero to kill [Agrippina] since she was plotting against them.

In both texts, the authors allege that Poppaea directly persuaded Nero to kill his mother, a statement Champlin repeats as fact. However, this blood-thirsty and calculated image of

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<sup>26</sup> Champlin 2005, 86.

<sup>27</sup> Champlin does discuss elsewhere in his book the conflicting sources on Poppaea’s relationship with Nero and Otho, which I will also discuss in Chapter 5. See Champlin 2005, 46-48.

Poppaea, as we will see, is an interpretation repeated by Tacitus and Dio which does not align with the Poppaea of other texts where ideas of Poppaea's virtue and victimhood are more often foregrounded.<sup>28</sup>

If Tacitus has so persuaded modern scholars with his vision of Nero's two wives, what picture emerges from his writing? We can begin with his wider representation of Poppaea as a manipulative, sexually aggressive, and dangerous woman (Tac. *Ann.* 13.45)<sup>29</sup>:

*Non minus insignis eo anno impudicitia magnorum rei publicae malorum initium fecit. erat in civitate Sabina Poppaea, T. Ollio patre genita, sed nomen avi materni sumpserat, inlustri memoria Poppaei Sabini consularis et triumphali decore praeferentis; nam Ollium honoribus nondum functum amicitia Seiani pervertit. huic mulieri cuncta alia fuere praeter honestum animum. quippe mater eius, aetatis suae feminas pulchritudine supergressa, gloriam pariter et formam dederat; opes claritudine generis sufficiebant. sermo comis nec absurdum ingenium. modestiam praeferre et lascivia uti; rarus in publicum egressus, idque velata parte oris, ne satiaret adspicuum, vel quia sic decebat. famae numquam pepercit, maritos et adulteros non distinguens; neque adfectui suo aut alieno obnoxia, unde utilitas ostenderetur, illuc libidinem transferebat. igitur agentem eam in matrimonio Rufri Crispi[ni] equitis Romani, ex quo filium genuerat, Otho pellexit iuventa ac luxu et quia flagrantissimus in amicitia Neronis habebatur. nec mora quin adulterio matrimonium iungeretur.*

A no less shameless symbol began the great evils to the state the same year. There was in the state Poppaea Sabina, born from her father Titus Ollius, but she had taken on the name of her maternal grandfather, in the

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<sup>28</sup> For example, although the character Octavia alleges that Nero killed Agrippina for Poppaea in the *Octavia* (*Adice his superbam paelicem nostrae domus spoliis nitentem, cuius in munus suam Stygiae parentem natus imposuit rati*, "Add to these things an arrogant mistress, glittering with spoils from our house, on whose gift of a Stygian ship a son placed his mother" *Oct.* 125-127), the rest of the text does not authorize this interpretation (cf. *Oct.* 600-605) and instead focuses on different ideas of Poppaea.

<sup>29</sup> Poppaea is labeled a promiscuous and power-hungry women in the following sources: Barrett 2017, 72, Champlin 2005, 86, Mordine 2013, 108, Drinkwater 2018, 52.

illustrious memory of Poppaeus Sabinus, famous for the adornments of a consulship and a triumph: for friendship with Sejanus overturned Ollius before he had attained honors. This woman had all other things except an honest spirit. Indeed her mother, who surpassed in beauty the other women of her time, gave her fame and beauty equally; her wealth was sufficient for the fame of her family. Her speech was pleasant and her mind was sound. She professed modesty but practiced wantonness; she went out in public rarely, and veiled part of her face, lest she satisfy people's gaze or indeed to suit her beauty. She never spared her reputation, not distinguishing husbands and adulterers; she was not vulnerable to her own affection or that of another, where usefulness appeared, she brought her desire there. Therefore while living in marriage to Rufrius Crispinus, a Roman *eques*, by whom she bore a son, Otho enticed her with his youth and most flashy luxury and indeed because he had a friendship with Nero. With no delay indeed marriage joined adultery.

Tacitus' introduction to Poppaea is deservedly famous for the way it constructs a compelling psychological portrait of Nero's new love interest in action. But, as scholars of women in Tacitus have often noted, these set pieces are equal parts history as well as rhetorical, literary creation.

Major advances have been made in the study of women in Tacitus particularly by scholars who recognize and analyze the historian's recourse to stereotypes of female behavior.<sup>30</sup> Linda Rutland (1978) demonstrates how Tacitus rhetorically casts women

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<sup>30</sup> Ronald Syme (1981) argues that women in Tacitus are intentionally constructed as archetypal villains and he posits that these women are modeled on Republican women. Like Rutland, Ellen O'Gorman (2006) discusses the parallels between Agrippina and Livia and argues that these two women were used to shape one another within Tacitus' narrative. Both were cast as a sort of "evil stepmother," who plotted to redirect the imperial lineage to include their own sons. This specific focus on the Tacitean women who use violence and manipulation to gain control and power over the princeps is prominent in scholarship. In his chapter "Masculinity and Gender Performance in Tacitus," Thomas Späth (2012) argues that Tacitus uses the subversion of gender norms to demonstrate why the Julio-Claudian dynasty fell. Späth deconstructs Tacitus' depiction

through various tropes and language. She focuses in particular on the parallels between Livia and Agrippina; such similarities indicate that Tacitus is crafting these women around specific tropes. Judith Ginsburg's unfinished *Representing Agrippina : Constructions of Female Power in the Early Roman Empire* (2005) builds upon the framework set by Rutland by identifying and listing specific tropes which Tacitus applies to Agrippina. Ginsburg discusses Agrippina through the lens of the various literary tropes in which she is cast: the evil stepmother, the *dux femina*, and the sexual transgressor. We can see these same stereotypes at work in Tacitus' introduction to Poppaea, especially the sexual transgressor.

This introduction of Poppaea in Tacitus' *Annals* sets the scene for her characterization in the text quite explicitly: she is beautiful and wealthy, from a noble background, and she uses these attributes to her benefit. Modesty in particular was a valued trait in Roman matrons; although Poppaea is rarely seen in public, this is not a sign of modesty but a calculated strategy.<sup>31</sup> Poppaea's immediate perversion of modesty, evidenced by her ulterior motives for veiling her face, exemplifies that she is a subversive and wicked woman.<sup>32</sup>

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of Nero and explains how Nero did not successfully attain manhood due to his submissive behavior and his extravagance. In contrast, Agrippina and Poppaea subvert their own inherent feminine natures by being controlling and dominating. Tacitus uses these tropes of evil women, Späth argues, to represent the decline and fall of the Julio-Claudian empire.

<sup>31</sup> See Späth 2012, 443 for analysis of Poppaea as calculated in this passage.

<sup>32</sup> See Strong 2016, 18 for modesty standards for Roman women.

Poppaea's desires are also a central theme in this passage, as Tacitus notes that Poppaea engages in wantonness (*lascivia uti*) and desires what seems useful to her (*unde utilitas ostenderetur, illuc libidinem transferebat*). Both *lascivia* and *libido* are female coded traits in Tacitus, specifically for women involved in politics.<sup>33</sup> Tacitus' Poppaea will, as we have seen above, become involved in Nero's regime by convincing him to kill his mother— she does so by leveraging Nero's passion for her (*flagrantior in dies amore Poppaeae*, Tac. *Ann.* 14.1). Sexual manipulation is a larger trend for women in Tacitus and in this case, Poppaea is already using her beauty to her advantage before she ever meets Nero.<sup>34</sup>

Poppaea's intelligence is a central piece to Tacitus' characterization. Female intelligence is not an inherently negative trait in Rome or in Tacitus' historical works but can be dangerous.<sup>35</sup> Poppaea is a prime example as to why: an intelligent woman can use her beauty and sexuality to advance her own ends.<sup>36</sup> Poppaea is a self-interested social climber in Tacitus: the epitome of a wicked woman. Poppaea's character arc is predicted by those of Tacitus' Agrippina and Livia, both of whom are ambitious and wickedly maneuver their sons onto the throne.<sup>37</sup> These predecessors sexually manipulated their husbands into adopting their sons and putting them on the throne, then met their

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<sup>33</sup> See Rutland 1975, 16 for these terms as qualities of women in politics in Tacitus.

<sup>34</sup> L'hoir 2006, 153 discusses Poppaea's beauty in Tacitus.

<sup>35</sup> See Strong 2016, 20 for commentary on female intelligence.

<sup>36</sup> See Syme 1981, 42 for negative elements of women's intelligence in Rome.

<sup>37</sup> See O'Gorman 2000, 137 for Agrippina and Livia as precursors to Poppaea.

downfalls when their insatiable ambition continued after they had already achieved their ends.<sup>38</sup> While Poppaea dies before she can install anyone on the throne or create heirs, her introduction and character traits are consistent with those of Tacitus' Livia and Agrippina; she is too smart and ambitious for her own good.

Tacitus' Octavia is similarly constructed out of stereotypes, in this case that of the noble, virtuous victim. Early on in Nero's reign, Tacitus asserts that Nero hates Octavia simply because of her nobility and her observed virtuousness (*nobili quidem probitatis spectatae*, 12.2). Her death scene brings this treatment to the foreground (Tac. *Ann.* 63-64):

*63. At Nero praefectum in spem sociandae classis corruptum et incusatae paulo ante sterilitatis oblitus, abactos partus conscientia libidinum, eaque sibi comperta edicto memorat insulaque Pandateria Octaviam claudit. non alia exul visentium oculos maiore misericordia adfecit. meminerant adhuc quidam Agrippinae a Tiberio, recentior Iuliae memoria obversabatur a Claudio pulsae: sed illis robur aetatis adfuerat; laeta aliqua viderant et praesentem saevitiam melioris olim fortunae recordatione adlevabant. Huic primum nuptiarum dies loco funeris fuit, deductae in domum in qua nihil nisi luctuosum haberet, erepto per venenum patre et statim fratre; tum ancilla domina validior et Poppaea non nisi in perniciem uxoris nupta, postremo crimen omni exitio gravius. 64. Ac puella vicesimo aetatis anno inter centuriones et milites, praesagio malorum iam vitae exempta, nondum tamen morte adquiescebat. paucis dehinc interiectis diebus mori iubetur, cum iam viduam se et tantum sororem testaretur communisque Germanicos et postremo Agrippinae nomen cieret, qua incolumi infelix quidem matrimonium sed sine exitio pertulisset. restringitur vinclis venaeque eius per omnis artus exolvuntur; et quia pressus pavore sanguis tardius labebatur, praefervidi balnei vapore enecatur.*

But Nero announced by edict that the prefect had been seduced [by Octavia] in the hope of the allegiance of his fleet and, with [Nero]

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<sup>38</sup> O'Gorman 2000, 137.

forgetting the charge of sterility a little before, that mindful of her desires, Octavia had an abortion and after these things were discovered by Nero, he enclosed Octavia on the island of Pandateria. No other exile ever evoked more pity in onlookers. Some remembered the exile of Agrippina by Tiberius, more recently the memory of Julia, driven out by Claudius, occurred to others; but for these women the fullness of life had already occurred; they had seen some happy things and lightened the present savagery with the recollection of earlier better fortune. For [Octavia], first, her day of marriage was the occasion of her funeral, led away into a house in which nothing except grief waiting, after her father was taken away by poison and soon after her brother; then her maid, stronger than her mistress, and Poppaea, married only for the destruction of a wife, finally a charge more serious than any destruction.

And the girl, 20 years old, among the centurions and soldiers, having been cut off from life already by foreknowledge of evils, nevertheless did not yet acquiesce to death. After a few intervening days, she was ordered to die, although she swore that she was now unmarried and only a sister and she invoked the name of her relative Germanicus and finally Agrippina, for whom she supported marriage, indeed unhappy but without disaster. She was tied with chains and her veins in every limb were opened; and indeed her blood, suppressed by fear, flowed too slowly, she was killed by the steam of a very hot bath.

Paul Murgatroyd (2008) has carefully shown how Tacitus creates the idea of Octavia as a sympathetic, innocent victim. Tacitus uses two tricolons just in this passage to emphasize the unprecedented tragedy of Octavia's death. The first is the list of horrors which Octavia has endured prior to her execution: her marriage turned funeral, the disrespect of Nero's adultery with Acte and Poppaea, and, most terribly, the fabricated accusations of adultery.<sup>39</sup> The final item in this tricolon, the adultery charge, is particularly outrageous because of the implication that Octavia would never exercise the sort of wantonness that has been seen in Tacitus' "bad" women, like Poppaea. Instead she has always been

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<sup>39</sup> Murgatroyd 2008, 271.

modeled in Tacitus as a “good” woman, although one without agency. The second tricolon of women exiled again demonstrates the unprecedented nature of Octavia’s fate. The first two women, Agrippina the Elder and Julia, were both older and had happy memories, while Octavia, the implied third component of the tricolon, is young and has had a horrible life.<sup>40</sup> Tacitus uses this emphasis on the sympathy of those around Octavia and the highlighting of her particularly gruesome death to encourage sympathy for Octavia, who is clearly presented as undeserving of this fate.<sup>41</sup>

Tacitus equates Octavia’s wedding day with her funeral (*Huic primum nuptiarum dies loco funeris fuit*): although she has been married for nine years, her wedding is elided with her death day. This idea of “marriage and death” draws on a tragic *topos* best seen in the myth of Iphigenia or Polyxena who were deceived into being sacrificed through the promise of a wedding.<sup>42</sup> In Seneca’s *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra states that she is motivated to kill Agamemnon for the death of Iphigenia (Sen. *Ag.* 158-159):

*Equidem et iugales filiae memini faces  
et generum Achillem: praestitit matri fidem.*

Indeed I remember both the marriage torches of my daughter and my son-in-law Achilles: he demonstrated faith for a mother!

Clytemnestra is speaking ironically: the audience, of course, knows that Achilles never became her son-in-law and Iphigenia’s wedding was a farce to lure her to sacrifice.

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<sup>40</sup> Murgatroyd 2008, 271.

<sup>41</sup> Murgatroyd 2008, 264.

<sup>42</sup> See Rush Rhem 1994 on the trope of virgin women killed on their wedding day. See Ferri 1998, 353 for this trope in this scene of Tacitus.

Iphigenia is a picture of innocence, the virgin killed on her fake wedding day; Tacitus' Octavia similarly "died" on her wedding day, but suffered a slow, nine-year descent to her inevitable death day.

Francesca L'hoir also demonstrates that Tacitus omits potentially salacious elements of the written tradition about Octavia in order to characterize her as sympathetically as possible. For example, Tacitus states that Octavia was accused of treason based on the baseless allegation of adultery (Tac. *Ann.* 14.59-63), but Zonaras says that Octavia was also accused of practicing magic (μοιχείας και γοητείας, Zon. 11.12).<sup>43</sup> If Tacitus were aware of such a charge, his omission indicates that he chose to eliminate any salacious accusations against Octavia that could not be easily dismissed in order to preserve his characterization of Octavia as entirely innocent.

As the above selected example of recent work show, scholars have well demonstrated that Tacitus' constructions of Octavia and Poppaea are *literary* creations born out of stereotypes and shaped to serve certain narrative arguments about Nero. As has long been recognized, this means that we should be wary of repeating interpretations in Tacitus as if they were the same as the facts he includes. Champlin (2005, 103-104) writes about the enduring Tacitean image which has dominated our understanding of Poppaea:

"The real Poppaea is all but lost to history, permanently obscured by the ferocious caricature of her in the fourteenth book of the Annals of Tacitus as the implacable mistress who drives Nero into removing her rivals, first his mother Agrippina in

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<sup>43</sup> L'hoir 2006, 180 points out that Tacitus omits details for rhetorical purposes and provides this example.

59, then his wife Octavia in 62. Tacitus asserts (without evidence) that behind a veil of modesty she was sexually voracious, and he charges her with using sex as a means to power. But she rarely appeared in public, and it is remarkable how little the historian says about her, introducing her only five times into his narrative: at her original seduction of Nero, at the two dramas of 59 (the Death of Agrippina) and 62 (the Death of Octavia), at the birth of her child in 63, and at her own death. Tacitus offers much about her motives, much about her speeches exhorting Nero to crime, but not a word about her four years as mistress and three years as empress. Dio paints the same picture, but without the nagging. Suetonius does no more than report without any criticism Nero's infatuation with her, their marriage, and her death. Her only crime may have been to supplant Octavia, who was canonized by some as the rightful empress. Soon after Nero's death the anonymous play *Octavia* would label Poppaea as the proud mistress, *superbam paelicem*, and the word "mistress" seems to have stuck."

Champlin is correct when he notes that Tacitus has dominated our understanding of Poppaea. Much the same thing could be said about Octavia's lasting image as nothing but a meek victim. But Champlin here is also mistaken when he asserts that this construction of Poppaea as *paelex* is the only one we have. Champlin uses as evidence for this claim of unanimity a line from the *Octavia* in which Octavia states that Poppaea is a *superbam paelicem*. But, as Chapter 4 will show, this line is a subjective characterization of Poppaea by a character within the play whose view is far from authorized. So too Champlin mentions Suetonius as a corroborator of Tacitus' characterization, but Chapter 5 of this dissertation shows just how far Suetonius' Poppaea is from Tacitus'. In other words, while Champlin is correct that the historical Poppaea (and Octavia) are irrecoverable, he and others are incorrect that the Tacitean (and Dionian) portraits are the only ones that survive. Tacitus is but one voice among many authors who tell the story of these women.

My dissertation analyzes these other voices, the pictures of the women that are created by them, and the themes that run through them. Moreover, I take a holistic approach to the literary characterizations of Octavia and Poppaea. Rather than focusing on how these texts confirm or conflict with the predominant historiographical narrative, I examine how each source or genre adds a new, sometimes contradictory, image of these empresses. The goal of this dissertation is not to create a coherent picture of Octavia and Poppaea to compete with the historiographically-derived portraits which dominate modern scholarship. Instead, I uncover and examine the complicated images and multifaceted portrayal of these two women in the surviving literary tradition which have for too long been overlooked.

## ***1.2 Chapter Summaries***

My dissertation explores the varying characterizations of Octavia and Poppaea across ancient literature. This study will demonstrate that the literary tradition around Nero's wives was far from standardized, especially in the years immediately following Nero's reign. These texts will be explored in approximate chronological order, though debates about dating make the precise order difficult to determine.

My first chapter, "Poppaea's Apotheosis: the controversial empress characterized as the ideal wife", explores the depiction of Poppaea in the text on P. Oxy. LXVII 5105. This papyrus contains a poem about Poppaea's apotheosis that likely dates to the age of Nero in the wake of Poppaea's death. The poem portrays Poppaea as a sympathetic figure, perhaps surprisingly given the historiographical characterization. The tragedy of Poppaea is her potential: she has all the makings of an ideal wife and mother but dies

before her potential is realized. This Poppaea is simultaneously a relatable woman who died in childbirth and a tragic imperial figure who was unable to solidify her husband's dynasty. Poppaea's 'failure' to produce an heir is framed as a failure to protect Nero himself, and the deeply erotic undertones of the poem emphasize Poppaea's devotion to her husband. A central theme of the poem is Poppaea's adoration for Nero and her inclination to reject divinity in order to remain with her husband—something Tacitus' Poppaea would never dream of doing.

The next two chapters deal with the characterizations of Octavia and of Poppaea in the *Octavia*, a surviving historical tragedy written soon after Nero's death. The first, "Octavia in the *Octavia*: ideal woman or vengeful adversary?" explores the ways in which others characterize Octavia in the play and how these perspectives conflict with Octavia's appearance onstage. Characters impose various, sometimes even contradictory, constructions of imperial womanhood on Octavia, namely *pudor*, *fides*, and, at times, *virginitas*. The pro-Octavia chorus in particular views Octavia as a representation of celebrated Roman women of the past, without regard for how these characteristics conflict with Octavia's actual role as Nero's wife. The pro-Octavia chorus eventually riots on Octavia's behalf and Octavia is blamed despite having no active role in the uprising. The pro-Octavia chorus turns Octavia into a symbol of their rebellion, which results in Octavia's execution when Nero views her as the driver of the riots despite her lack of actual involvement. The constructions imposed upon Octavia by both friends and foes are rejected by Octavia as a character. It is the perspectives of other characters - both

positive and negative perspectives - that shape her fate, rather than her own words and actions.

The next chapter, “A Surprising Poppaea: Conflicting characterizations of Poppaea in the *Octavia*,” explores Poppaea’s characterization in the *Octavia*. Like *Octavia*, Poppaea is constructed in a variety of ways by many characters throughout the *Octavia*. Poppaea herself does not appear onstage for almost the first two thirds of the play. Thus, the audience receives a number of images of the empress from Octavia, Seneca, Nero, Agrippina, and the pro-Octavia chorus. Octavia views Poppaea as her principal adversary who is encouraging Nero kill her. Seneca thinks Poppaea is merely the object of Nero’s lust, while Nero has a romantic view of his future bride and the mother of his child. In Agrippina’s eyes, Poppaea is merely collateral damage in her crusade against Nero, the true reason for her downfall. The pro-Octavia chorus despises Poppaea because she threatens the position of their favored Octavia. All these perspectives sometimes conflict but create a fairly neutral or negative picture of Poppaea, so her arrival onstage, terrified by an ominous dream, is especially striking and even sympathetic. Rather than a villain, Poppaea is constructed as a parallel to Octavia: both women will ultimately be victims of Nero. The shocking appearance of Poppaea onstage highlights the different perspectives of the other characters. Each character has their own interpretation of Poppaea’s role in Octavia’s downfall and these can contradict. It is left for the audience to decide whether Poppaea is wicked or sympathetic.

The final chapter, “Octavia and Poppaea in Biography” explores the characterizations of Octavia and Poppaea in biography as a distinct genre from annalistic

historiography. Although Suetonius especially is often cited in support of Tacitus's narrative, his constructions of Nero's wives are multifaceted and should be explored separately from the dominating historiographical narrative. Suetonius and Plutarch, the biographers who deal with Nero's wives, characterize Octavia and Poppaea in various ways in order to suit the themes or arguments in different parts of their imperial biographies. This chapter explores how these two authors use intratextuality, generic enrichment, and existing Roman discourses around female sexuality and domestic violence to shape these women within limited snapshots. Their appearances in biography are brief and auxiliary to larger characterizations of the titular emperors but portray the empresses in vibrant and sometimes surprising ways.

### ***1.3 Case Studies: Octavia and Poppaea in smaller texts***

Before turning to the four chapters outlined above, it will be useful to explore another group of texts, primarily by near contemporaries of Poppaea, in which she makes only a few appearances: those of Pliny, Juvenal, Josephus, and Leonidas of Alexandria. Three of the four authors of these texts, Pliny, Josephus, and Leonidas of Alexandria, lived through Nero's reign and may have met Poppaea; Josephus certainly met her and Leonidas of Alexandria had some degree of contact with her since he sent her a gift. The larger texts of these men do not focus on Poppaea exclusively, but she does appear in varying modes of *representatio*. As I show, the two Latin authors, Pliny and Juvenal, use Poppaea to exemplify a negative image of Nero's reign which bears certain similarities to her depiction in Tacitus. This is hardly surprising given that Pliny the Elder was one of Tacitus' major sources and Juvenal was Tacitus' rough contemporary. However, the

Greek authors, Josephus and Leonidas, who come from an eastern perspective, have different ways of representing her interests, personality, and character— namely, they portray her positively.

This section will trace the variety of responses to Poppaea that appear in these early, near contemporary texts. But I should note that these texts only treat Poppaea; Octavia does not appear aside from one brief note in Josephus.<sup>44</sup> While the rest of this dissertation explores texts by authors with sustained engagement in Poppaea and/or Octavia, this survey of texts shows how the fragmented yet fascinating characterization of Poppaea begins very early.

### 1.3.1 Pliny's Poppaea: Luxurious Influencer

Pliny the Elder was one of the main sources for subsequent narratives of Nero's reign and was likely a key source of interpretation for how Nero's wives would be remembered.<sup>45</sup> But while his history of the period does not survive, his *Natural History* does. Pliny's *Natural History* largely focuses on the beneficence of nature and the ways in which luxury exploits and corrupts that which is already functional for man.<sup>46</sup>

Anecdotes featuring emperors and those close to them appear in the work in connection

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<sup>44</sup> καίπερ υἶόν ἔχων γνήσιον Βρεττανικόν ἐκ Μεσσαλίνης τῆς προτέρας γυναικὸς καὶ Ὀκταουίαν θυγατέρα τὴν ὑπ' αὐτοῦ ζευθεῖσαν Νέρωνι· (“although he had a legitimate son, Britannicus, by his former wife Messalina and a daughter, Octavia, who was married to Nero by him.” Jos. *Jewish War*. 2.249.)

<sup>45</sup> See Grau 2017 and Varner 2017 for the importance of Pliny for the narratives of Nero's wives.

<sup>46</sup> Wallace-Hadrill 1990, 86 discusses the major themes of the *Natural History*.

with historical examples, sometimes positive, sometimes negative. Pliny's *Natural History* is not explicitly political; Pliny hides his political assertions in seemingly impartial statements of fact.<sup>47</sup> The *Natural History* is quite critical of Nero and his propensity for luxury, but Pliny couches these critiques by simply stating Nero's indulgent ways and allowing the reader to connect this to Pliny's overarching thesis. Nero and his reign become for Pliny the ultimate examples of this exploitation and corruption. Pliny especially elaborates on Nero's lack of moderation: Nero and those around him indulge in excessive and unnecessary luxury.<sup>48</sup> For example, in a section about textiles and weaving, Pliny mentions (Plin. *Nat. Hist.* 8. 196)<sup>49</sup>:

*Metellus Scipio tricliniaria Babylonica sestertium octingentis milibus venisse iam tunc ponit in Capitonis criminibus, quae Neroni principi quadragiens sestertio nuper steter.*

Metellus Scipio places this among Capito's charges that Babylonian coverlets then already cost 800,000 sesterces, which lately cost the Emperor Nero 4,000,000 sesterces.

Pliny does not explicitly call Nero extravagant in this passage. Instead, he states that Nero paid over four times the already inflated price for coverlets and allows the reader to extrapolate Nero's frivolity.

Pliny's *Natural History* includes anecdotes featuring several Julio-Claudian women, including Livia, Messalina, and Agrippina. The mentions of these women are not

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<sup>47</sup> See Grau 2017, 262 for Pliny's rhetorical strategies.

<sup>48</sup> See Grau 2017, 261 and Lao 2011, 36 for Pliny's use of luxury as a rhetorical strategy.

<sup>49</sup> Grau 2017, 262 provided this example.

inherently critical; in one instance, Pliny recounts how Livia apparently used egg hatching to predict the sex of Tiberius (Plin. *Nat. Hist.* 10.154):

*Quin et ab homine perficiuntur. Iulia Augusta prima sua iuventa Ti. Caesare ex Nerone gravida, cum parere virilem sexum admodum cuperet, hoc usa est puellari augurio, ovum in sinu fovendo atque, cum deponendum haberet, nutrici per sinum tradendo ne intermitteretur tepor; nec falso augurata proditur.*

Indeed [eggs] can be hatched even by a human. Julia Augusta in her early youth was pregnant with Tiberius Caesar by Nero, since she especially desired to bear a baby of the male sex, she used this augury, popular with girls, she nourished an egg in her bosom, when it had to be put down she handed it to a nurse through the folds of their clothes, so that the heat might not be interrupted; and it is said that her prediction was not wrong.

Pliny does not include an obvious value judgment in this anecdote or in the larger passage; rather, this information is included in order to explain contemporary practices in poultry farming and to tie that practice to a famous example.

Although Pliny is not inherently critical of empresses as a universal category in his text, his distaste for Nero's regime colors his depictions of Poppaea. Whenever Poppaea appears, the stories connect her with the idea of rampant abuse of nature and overindulgence. Pliny twice notes that Poppaea bathed in ass' milk in order to whiten her skin and stave off wrinkles:

*Poppaea certe Domiti Neronis coniunx quingentas per omnia secum fetas trahens balnearum etiam solio totum corpus illo lacte macerabat, extendi quoque cutem credens.*

Indeed Domitius Nero's wife Poppaea used to drag five hundred she asses with foals with her everywhere and soaked her whole body in a tub with ass's milk, believing that it also smoothed wrinkles.

*Poppaea hoc Neronis principis instituit, balnearum quoque solia sic temperans, ob hoc asinarum gregibus eam comitantibus.*

Poppaea, wife of the Emperor Nero, began this custom, even filling her tubs with the milk, and for this purpose she was always attended by flocks of she-asses.

28.183

Pliny's vivid picture becomes a popular and prolific image of Poppaea which has reappeared even in modern portrayals of the empress.<sup>50</sup> Pliny configures the extravagance of this practice in several ways. First, we have the number of animals: in both instances, Pliny emphasizes the sheer number of asses necessary for Poppaea's beauty regimen: *quingentas* and *gregibus*. Second, Pliny implies an excessive frequency of practice. The imperfect tense of the verb *macerabat* in the first passage adds an iterative sense to the action: Poppaea repeatedly used to bathe in ass' milk. So too *solia* in the second passage underscores her habitual recourse to this beauty regimen. Third, Pliny also thinks spatially in his use of *per omnia* (everywhere) and *totum corpus* (over her whole body). Poppaea is constantly bathing in milk on every occasion, hauling (*trahens*) these hordes of asses along with her everywhere she goes explicitly for this purpose, seemingly without regard for the effort that this requires, and bathes her whole body, rather than just her face.

The context of the former quote, in a section about lactation and milk production, casts Poppaea as extravagant in and of itself, as she requires such an immense effort for

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<sup>50</sup> E.g. Claudette Colbert portrays Poppaea bathing in ass' milk in the 1932 film *The Sign of the Cross*.

See Kragelund 2005, 81 for the longevity of Pliny's Poppaea.

something she only believes (*credens*) will preserve her beauty. This image is then recalled in the later section about beauty products. Here Poppaea's prefers to bathe her entire body in the milk, rather than merely applying it to her face to prevent wrinkles as many other women would (*notumque est quasdam cottidie septies genas custodito numero fovere*. "It is known that certain women nourish their cheeks with [ass' milk] seven times, taking care for that number." Plin. *Nat. Hist.* 28.183), again highlighting the immense extravagance required for this production. Pliny does not condemn the cosmetic use of ass' milk generally, but the emphasis on the sheer amount that Poppaea uses, the frequency of use, and the transport needed contributes to Pliny's overall portrayal of Poppaea as excessively indulgent.

Pliny's assertion in the second passage that Poppaea began a trend of bathing in ass' milk (*instituit*) also suggests that her extravagance negatively influences others and contributes to the consumption of the wider population. This too is part of a pattern in Pliny's references to Poppaea. In another appearance, Poppaea again exemplifies luxury and contributes towards larger societal trends of excess (Plin. *Nat. Hist.* 33.140):

*vasa cocinaria ex argento fieri Calvus orator quiritat; at nos carrucas argento caelare invenimus, nostrarque aetate Poppaea coniunx Neronis principis soleas delicatioribus iumentis suis ex auro quoque induere iussit.*

The orator Calvus laments that cooking pots are made of silver; but we ourselves invented decorating carriages with silver, and it was in our day that the emperor Nero's wife Poppaea ordered that her favored mules be shod with gold.

In this passage, Pliny indicates that "we" (*invenimus*) began decorating carriages with silver and that in "our day," (*nostrarque aetate*), ostensibly the days of Nero, Poppaea had

her mules shod with gold. This establishes a continuum of decadent decline which reaches its height in the age of Nero as an age of excess, with Poppaea and her golden shod mules at the center. There is also an escalation: everyone else was decorating their carriages and pots with silver (*ex argento*), but Poppaea uses gold (*ex auro*), a more precious and expensive material. Poppaea, a central figure to this age, is held responsible for perpetuating and escalating a culture of excessive opulence.

Gold, while having natural properties which are useful, is often symbolically tied to Nero and his excess within Pliny's *Natural History*.<sup>51</sup> Poppaea, as a member of Nero's court, typifies this meaningless indulgence by covering even the feet of her mules in gold. The carriage drawn by mules, the *carpentum*, was an explicitly female coded form of transportation.<sup>52</sup> In the imperial age, imperial women were allowed to be transported in this way on certain occasions. At the same time in the Roman imagination, such vehicles could be controversial as they granted women freedom of movement, which ostensibly could lead to female recklessness.<sup>53</sup> In addition, these vehicles were usually used to convey images of gods or important figures during special religious events.<sup>54</sup> That

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<sup>51</sup> Pliny accuses Nero of hoarding artwork in his *domus aurea* (*Nat. Hist.* 35.120): *carcer eius artis domus aurea fuit, et ideo non extant exempla alia magnopere* ("The Golden House was a prison for his art, and for this reason other examples do not exist on a large scale"). Anguissola 2021, 46 n. 38.

<sup>52</sup> See Hudson 2016, 215 for information on gender and the *carpentum*.

<sup>53</sup> Hudson 2016, 218. Tullia drives over her father in a *carpentum* in Livy and women fight for the repeal of the *Lex Oppia*, which restricted their ability to drive the *carpentum*.

<sup>54</sup> Tacitus describes Agrippina being honored by being allowed to use the *carpentum* (*Annals* 12.42) and Dio notes that Messalina was granted the right to use the *carpentum* by the Senate (*Rom. Hist.* LX. 21). Agrippina the Elder appears on the obverse

Poppaea shod her mules in gold to pull her in her *carpentum* becomes doubly wanton: Poppaea is indulging in excessive luxury and transgressive behavior simultaneously in her use of a mode of transport that was meant to honor her virtue. The wider context of the excerpt highlights Pliny's larger point: complaints of excess in the Flavian era, under which this is written, should be directed at the Neronian era, under which such excesses peaked.

In one instance, Pliny recounts that Nero labeled Poppaea's hair as "amber colored," which popularized the color (Plin. *Nat. Hist.* 37.50):

*Domitius Nero in ceteris vitae suae portentis capillos quoque Poppaeae coniugis suae in hoc nomen adoptaverat quodam etiam carmine sucinos appellando, quoniam nullis vitiis desunt pretiosa nomina; ex eo tertius quidam hic colos coepit expeti matronis.*

Among his other portents Domitius Nero adopted this name for the hair of his wife Poppaea, even calling it 'amber-colored' in a certain poem, since an expensive name lacks no flaws; from then, this color began to be sought out for the hair of maidens as a third color.

The association of Poppaea with amber again emphasizes her contribution to the larger culture of excess consumption in Nero's court. Poppaea's hair color becomes trendy, again indicating the influence that Poppaea's extravagant life has over the broader public. It seems that from Pliny's perspective, this hair color is attractive because of its association with something very expensive (*pretiosa*). According to Pliny, amber is the

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with a *carpentum* on the reverse on at least forty coins minted in Rome between 37 and 41 CE (e.g. RIC I Gaius/Caligula 55). Five coins with Agrippina the Younger on the obverse and a *carpentum* on the reverse which were minted in Rome between 50 and 54 CE have been found (e.g. RIC 1 Claudius 103). Hudson 2016, 216.

only luxurious substance which has no practical or aesthetic use but is only satisfying due to its inherent luxuriousness (Plin. *Nat. Hist.* 37.49):<sup>55</sup>

*in omnibus denique aliis vitiis aut ostentatio aut usus placet: in succinis sola deliciarum conscientia.*

Finally in all other vices which either display or use pleases us: as for amber, the knowledge alone of its luxury delights us.

Poppaea's hair is a symbol which ties her to the least useful and most luxurious, and therefore offensive, of substances. The use of *delicia* recalls the language Pliny used to describe Poppaea's mules, her *delicatiorebus iumentis*. Poppaea clearly favors *delicia*, according to Pliny.

Nero's indulgence on Poppaea's behalf also appears when Pliny describes Poppaea's funeral (Plin. *Nat. Hist.* 12.83):

*periti rerum adseverant non ferre tantum annuo fetu quantum Nero princeps novissimo Poppaeae suae die concremaverit.*

Knowledgeable men declare that [Arabia] does not produce so large a quantity of perfume in a year's output as Nero the *princeps* burned in a day at the for his lover Poppaea.

Perfumes are doubly objectionable for Pliny: they are formed by mixing nature's essences, which are perfectly functional independently, and they evaporate immediately, so they have little practical use and cannot be inherited.<sup>56</sup> Pliny also states his distaste for

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<sup>55</sup> See Darab 2012, 151 on the unique luxury of amber.

<sup>56</sup> See Wallace Hadrill 1990, 88 for major arguments in the *Natural History*.

eastern indulgence in perfume immediately before this anecdote about Poppaea's funeral (Plin. *Nat. Hist.* 12. 83):

*beatam illam fecit hominum etiam in morte luxuria quae dis intellexerant genita inurentium defunctis.*

The luxury of men even in death made her fortunate, when they burn departed products which they know were created for the gods.

According to Pliny, this funerary custom of burning perfume, the amount notwithstanding, is inherently problematic because it ascribes to a human something that should be reserved for gods. The enormous excess of perfume burned during Poppaea's funeral, emphasized by the correlative *non tantum... quantum* is the pinnacle of Nero's luxurious tastes on top of this affront to the gods. Pliny also assures his readers that he has heard this from reliable sources (*periti rerum*), perhaps in an attempt to defend against accusations of bias for such an extreme claim. Pliny labels Poppaea as *suae* in this scene, a word which highlights her relationship to Nero and seems to confer some responsibility for Nero's indulgence at her funeral. Taken together with the other mentions of Poppaea in the *Natural Histories*, this scene of Poppaea's funeral completes the characterization of Poppaea as a woman whose life centered on luxurious excess and wastefulness.

Some of Pliny's critiques of Poppaea are reminiscent of those later found in Tacitus' *Annales*, and this is unsurprising given that Pliny is one of Tacitus' major sources for Nero's reign. Tacitus also portrays Poppaea as obsessed with her own beauty

and interested in foreign luxuries (Tac. *Ann.* 16.6). Poppaea is introduced in the *Annals* (Tac. *Ann.* 13.45):

*Quippe mater eius, aetatis suae feminas pulchritudine supergressa, gloriam pariter et formam dederat; opes claritudini generis sufficiebant. sermo comis nec absurdum ingenium: modestiam praeferre et lascivia uti. rarus in publicum egressus, idque velata parte oris, ne satiaret aspectum, vel quia sic decebat.*

Indeed her mother, who surpassed the women of her day in beauty, had given her fame and beauty equally. Her wealth was worthy of her noble heritage. Her conversation was charming and her wit was never inappropriate. She professed modesty and exercised wantonness. She rarely came out in public, and her face was always partly veiled, either not to satisfy others' gaze or to suit her beauty.

Tacitus' Poppaea is aware of her own beauty and uses it to her advantage. Her beauty is a tool which she uses to exercise her bid for control. Like Pliny's Poppaea, this Poppaea is interested in her own beauty and is portrayed as vain and indulgent. However, unlike Pliny's Poppaea, Tacitus' Poppaea actively practices evil through her power-hungry nature; Pliny's Poppaea is merely a symptom and participant in a larger societal problem, frivolous and therefore casually harmful rather than a wicked mastermind.

### **1.3.2 Juvenal's Poppaea: Influencer after Death**

Juvenal's Poppaea retains several qualities from Pliny's Poppaea in Juvenal's infamous sixth satire. The details of Poppaea's appearance in this satire suggests the long duration of Poppaea's Plinian reputation, an image which was recognizable long after Poppaea's life. He writes (Juv. *Sat.* 6.461-470):

*interea foeda aspectu ridendaque multo  
pane tumet facies aut pinguis Poppaeana  
spirat et hinc miseri uiscantur labra mariti.  
ad moechum lota ueniunt cute. quando uideri*

*uult formosa domi? moechis foliata parantur,  
his emitur quidquid graciles huc mittitis Indi.  
tandem aperit uultum et tectoria prima reponit,  
incipit agnosci, atque illo lacte fouetur  
propter quod secum comites educit asellas  
exul Hyperboreum si dimittatur ad axem.*

Meanwhile her face, horrible and laughable to look at, is piled with bread-paste or smells of Poppaeian salves which smear on the lips of her wretched husband. She will come to her lover with clean skin. When does she wish to look beautiful at home? For her lovers the ointments are prepared, for them she buys whatever the slender Indians send. Finally she reveals her face and removes the first plaster, she begins to be recognized, and nourishes her face with that milk on account of which she leads with her a herd of asses, if she is sent away as an exile to the Hyperborean pole.

Juvenal, who is writing around the same time as Tacitus and more than fifty years after Pliny, reports that women of his day are still covering their faces in “Poppaeian salves.” This is the only evidence for some kind of face cream invented by Poppaea which was apparently still being used.<sup>57</sup> The wider context of the passage, however, contains further Poppaeian associations which can tell us more about how Juvenal understood the empress’s legacy. In particular, Juvenal combines the idea of Poppaea’s excessive beauty regimen - including ass’s milk and her herd of asses - with a predilection for adultery. Within the context of discussing beauty regimens, Poppaea and her herd of five hundred asses becomes the inspiration for these adulterous women, suggesting a continuum between Pliny’s Poppaea and Juvenal’s.

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<sup>57</sup> See Watson 2007, 382 for the significance of Poppaeian salves in skincare and women’s luxury.

In this satire, Juvenal portrays Roman women as vain and licentious. Poppaea is twice referenced in this scene. It is Poppaea's salve which women use to beautify themselves and indulge in vanity, and it is her tradition of bathing in ass' milk which the women use to wash away their poultices to become ready for their lovers.<sup>58</sup> Juvenal repeats Pliny's accusations of decadence but takes it further: Poppaea's decadence is evidence of her promiscuity and this intertwined accusation has stood the test of time, influencing other Roman woman to similar behavior.

### 1.3.3 Josephus's Poppaea: Powerful Imperial Consort

The author Josephus is our only textual source who emphasizes that he had actually met Poppaea. In multiple instances, Josephus chooses to portray Poppaea neutrally or positively where he could have cast her as a villain. Although the power dynamic between Poppaea and Josephus, and Josephus and the Roman empire more broadly, could explain why Josephus chose a more positive image for the empress, it is notable that even after her death, Josephus continued to write positively about her. The two met sometime between September of 63 CE and Poppaea's death in 65 CE during Josephus' embassy to Rome.<sup>59</sup> Josephus' brief account of their meeting reads (*Jos. Vit.* 3):

διασωθεις δ' εις την Δικαιαρχειαν, ην Ποτιόλους Ἰταλοι καλοῦσιν, δια φιλιας αφικόμεν Ἀλιτύρω, μιμολόγος δ' ην οὔτος μάλιστα τῷ Νέρωνι καταθύμιος, Ἰουδαῖος τὸ γένος, καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ Ποππαία τῆ τοῦ Καίσαρος γυναικὶ γνωρισθεις προνοῶ ὡς τάχιστα παρακαλέσας αὐτὴν τοὺς ἱερεῖς

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<sup>58</sup> See Watson 2007, 394 for more on this interpretation.

<sup>59</sup> den Hollander 2014, 37.

λυθῆναι. μεγάλων δὲ δωρεῶν πρὸς τῇ εὐεργεσίᾳ ταύτῃ τυχὼν παρὰ τῆς Ποππαίας ὑπέστρεφον ἐπὶ τὴν οἰκείαν.

Having been kept safe on the way to Dicaearchia, which the Italians call Puteoli, I came through friendship to Aliturus, a mime actor who was especially favored by Nero, Jewish by birth, and having been introduced to Poppaea, Caesar's wife, through him I sought her as quickly as possible, calling upon her to free the priests. In addition to this favor, having large gifts from Poppaea, I turned back to my own homeland.

The relationship between Poppaea and Josephus is not necessarily unusual; empresses and other members of the imperial family have handled business like this before.

Augustus' sister Octavia, for example, facilitated financial support from Augustus for Vitruvius.<sup>60</sup> In other words, Poppaea is not acting outside of her purview as empress in her aid to Josephus.<sup>61</sup>

In addition to helping Josephus, Poppaea also grants him gifts, a public display of generosity from a woman. This act is one of few publicized acts of public expenditures by an imperial woman at this time; such acts were not typically associated with imperial

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<sup>60</sup> Vitr. *De arch.* 1 praef. 2–3: *cum eis commode accepi, quae cum primo mihi tribuisti recognitionem, per sororis commendationem servasti.* Den Hollander 2014, 64. See also Livia's support of various senators, Boatwright 2021, 29.

<sup>61</sup> We also have two surviving graffiti from Pompeii which praise Poppaea's unspecified *iudicia*: *Iudiciis Augusti Augustae feliciter / nobis salvis felices sumus / perpetuo* ("Good fortune to the judgements of Augustus and Augusta, whilst you are safe we are forever fortunate," CIL IV 1074) and *Iudici(i)s Augusti p(atris) p(atriciae) et Poppaeae Aug(ustae) feliciter.* ("Good fortune to the judgements of Augustus, father of his country, and of Poppaea Augusta," CIL IV 3726). Although it is unclear exactly what these *iudiciis* are, they are ascribed to both Nero and Poppaea, who both appear in the genitive case. This indicates that Poppaea is imagined to have some contribution to these *iudiciis* alongside Nero (den Hollander 2014, 63).

women until the second century.<sup>62</sup> However, Josephus does not present Poppaea's gift poorly. Josephus could have twisted many of these acts into a negative characterization of Poppaea, but he actively chooses to present her actions as positive.

Although Poppaea's actions in the above passage are not out of step with her position as wife of the emperor, we can learn several things from the way Josephus tells the story. Josephus writes that he was connected with Poppaea through the Jewish actor Aliturus. This actor was a favorite of Nero; however, despite the poor reputation of actors in Rome, Josephus does not include this detail in a derogatory manner. The fact that Aliturus is an actor does not reflect poorly on Nero and, by extension, Poppaea in Josephus' telling. This passage also implies that Aliturus facilitated the meeting between Josephus and Poppaea specifically, rather than between Josephus and Nero. It is notable that Aliturus secured Poppaea as an audience rather than Nero despite his relationship being with Nero; William den Hollander suggests that this is because Poppaea was already known to be favorable towards the Jews.<sup>63</sup> Alternatively, Mary T. Boatwright posits that imperial women would have been seen as intermediaries to the power of the principate due to their liminal status between imperial figure and woman.<sup>64</sup> In this case, Aliturus or Josephus may have preferred Poppaea to Nero for this appeal. Notably, Josephus frames Poppaea's deed as *εὐεργεσία*, a term which refers to the patron-client

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<sup>62</sup> See Boatwright 2021, 29 on imperial women and acceptable public acts.

<sup>63</sup> Den Hollander 2014, 161.

<sup>64</sup> Boatwright 2021, 163.

relationship which the emperor held with the people of the empire.<sup>65</sup> Poppaea is acting as a proxy for Nero and as a sort of patron for Josephus – in this case, a patron who helps Josephus to secure the freedom of priests who were imprisoned due to conflict with the dominant Roman powers in Judea. This speaks to the degree of Poppaea’s influence.

According to some, it may also indicate some sort of interest in Judaism. Josephus may have sought Poppaea out specifically through Aliturus because he believed she was familiar with aspects of Judaism. According to Josephus, Poppaea had interceded on behalf of the Jews previously in a debate over a wall in the temple (*Jos. Ant.* 195-196):<sup>66</sup>

Νέρων δὲ διακούσας αὐτῶν οὐ μόνον συνέγνω περὶ τοῦ πραχθέντος, ἀλλὰ καὶ συνεχώρησεν ἕαν οὕτως τὴν οἰκοδομίαν, τῇ γυναικὶ Ποππαία, θεοσεβῆς γὰρ ἦν, ὑπὲρ τῶν Ἰουδαίων δεηθείση χαριζόμενος, ἢ τοῖς μὲν δέκα προσέταξεν ἀπιέναι, τὸν δ’ Ἑλκίαν καὶ τὸν Ἰσμᾶηλον ὀμηρεύσοντας παρ’ ἐαυτῇ κατέσχεν.

Nero, having heard the case, not only agreed with what had been done, but also agreed to allow the building to remain in this way, showing favor to his wife Poppaea, who was God-fearing, since she asked on behalf of the Jews, and she commanded the ten to depart, with Helcias and Ishmael serving as hostages, she held them in her house.

Josephus portrays Poppaea as having quite a bit of sway over Nero, who favors (χαριζόμενος) her. Josephus’ use of οὐ μόνον... ἀλλὰ καὶ implies that Nero’s concessions went above and beyond what was expected, and this is thanks to Poppaea’s request.

According to Josephus, Poppaea made this request because she was “god-fearing”

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<sup>65</sup> den Hollander 2014, 63 points out this connection.

<sup>66</sup> den Hollander 2014, 59 states that this episode predated Josephus’ meeting with Poppaea described in his *Vita*. Josephus may have sought a meeting with Poppaea because she gained a reputation as θεοσεβῆς in this previous episode.

(θεοσεβῆς γὰρ ἦν).<sup>67</sup> As has been recognized, the adjective θεοσεβῆς is important for his characterization of the empress.<sup>68</sup> Not only does she have influence over Nero, but she uses this influence to benefit pious ends because of her own innate piety. Unlike the manipulative and controlling Poppaea of other sources, this Poppaea shows the piety and traditionality expected of a Roman wife. She does still have influence over Nero, like Tacitus' Poppaea, but exercises that influence within the bounds of imperial womanhood. Her relationship with Nero is, in some ways, consistent across both Josephus and Tacitus, but each author twists this characteristic in positive and negative lights.

Josephus has the opportunity to present Poppaea negatively in another episode, in which Poppaea helps her wicked friend's husband attain the procuratorship of Judea (Jos. *Ant.* 20. XI.1):

Γέσσιος δὲ Φλῶρος ὁ πεμφθεὶς Ἀλβίνου διάδοχος ὑπὸ Νέρωνος πολλῶν ἐνέπλησε κακῶν Ἰουδαίους. Κλαζομένιος μὲν ἦν τὸ γένος οὗτος, ἐπήγετο

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<sup>67</sup> Scholars have debated whether Poppaea was a Jew based on this comment from Josephus, but this question is not within the scope of this discussion. Mary Smallwood's article "The Alleged Jewish tendencies of Poppaea Sabina" is a piece of foundational scholarship regarding the possibility that Poppaea was a Jew. Smallwood argues that despite the fact that Poppaea was a murderer and adulteress who consulted astrologers, she could have met the bare minimum of Jewish identity: worship of the Jewish G-d and rejection of idols. Margaret Williams convincingly debunks Smallwood's previous arguments and instead presents the idea that Josephus' use of "θεοσεβῆς" was intended only to portray Poppaea as a Jewish sympathizer. Williams looks at the vocabulary usually used in Josephus for Jewish converts and finds none of these terms to be applied to Poppaea. Instead, Williams argues that Poppaea was interested in Jewish practices, but was firmly rooted in her paganism. In addition to Williams, Karl Baughman argues that Poppaea's relationship with Judaism is one of "eclectic religiosity."

<sup>68</sup> Poppaea's piety is also commemorated in a graffito from Pompeii in a distinctively Roman religious context: *Munera Poppaea misit Veneri sanctissimae berullum helencumque unio mixtus erat.* ("Poppaea sent as gifts to most holy Venus a beryl, an ear-drop pearl, and a large single pearl," AE 2004: 404).

δὲ γυναῖκα Κλεοπάτραν, δι' ἣν φίλην οὖσαν Ποππαίας τῆς Νέρωνος  
γυναϊκὸς καὶ πονηρία μηδὲν αὐτοῦ διαφέρουσιν τῆς ἀρχῆς ἐπέτυχεν.  
οὕτω δὲ περὶ τὴν ἐξουσίαν ἐγένετο κακὸς καὶ βίαιος, ὥστε διὰ τὴν  
ὑπερβολὴν τῶν κακῶν Ἀλβῖνον ἐπήνουν ὡς εὐεργέτην Ἰουδαῖοι·

Gessius Florus, who had been sent by Nero as Albinus' successor, piled many evils on the Jews. He was Clazomenean by birth, and he brought his wife Cleopatra, because she was a friend of Poppaea, wife of Nero, and having no less wickedness than [her husband], and he attained the office. He was so evil and violent through his authority, that, on account of his excess of evils, the Jews applauded Albinus as their benefactor.

Josephus explicitly and repeatedly states that Gessius Florus and Cleopatra are wicked (πολλῶν ἐνέπλησε κακῶν Ἰουδαίους; πονηρία μηδὲν αὐτοῦ; κακὸς καὶ βίαιος). However, Poppaea is not criticized for her friendship with Cleopatra nor for helping this couple gain power, despite their apparently notorious lack of morals. Josephus could have used this as an opportunity to suggest a dangerousness to Poppaea's influence, but instead her influence here remains surprisingly somewhat neutral. Poppaea is merely mentioned amidst Josephus' criticisms of Florus and Cleopatra, which allows her characterization in Josephus to remain positive and focused on her influence over Nero.

It is also useful to situate Josephus' presentation of Poppaea within his wider treatment of women, especially powerful women. Tal Ilan (2015) provides an in-depth survey of the women presented throughout Josephus' various works. This includes historical women (biblical figures whom Josephus likely believed to be historical) and contemporary women, some of whom Josephus knew personally. Ilan concludes that Josephus is largely critical, unfairly so at times, of women who behave "out of place." However, Josephus also favorably portrays contemporary women with whom he is

acquainted due to the beneficial nature of his relationship with them. This paradigm is reflected in Josephus' characterization of Poppaea; although she does exercise a form of power over Nero's actions in state affairs, something that Josephus usually frames in a negative light, she does so within the boundaries of her role and leaves a positive impression on Josephus during their interaction.

### 1.3.4 Leonidas's Poppaea: Learned Empress

Another contemporary of Poppaea, Leonidas of Alexandria, wrote an epigram for the empress to accompany an astrological map sent to her as a birthday gift. This epigram is evidence for Poppaea's reputation for intelligence and interest in astrology which permeated beyond her social circle. Leonidas wrote (*Pal. Ant.* 9.355):

Οὐράνιον μίμημα γενεθλιακάϊσιν ἐν ὥραις  
τοῦτ' ἀπὸ Νειλογενοῦς δέξο Λεωνίδεω,  
Ποππαία, Διὸς εὖνι, Σεβαστιάς· εὐάδε γάρ σοι  
δῶρα τὰ καὶ λέκτρων ἄξια καὶ σοφίης.

Poppaea Augusta, wife of Zeus, receive this map of the heavens on your birthday from the Egyptian Leonidas; for gifts worthy of your alliance and your learning delight you.

This epigram is clearly meant to be flattering for Poppaea, as was its accompanying gift. Leonidas calls Poppaea Διὸς εὖνι, which is high praise and indicates that Poppaea is worthy of Zeus because of her knowledge.<sup>69</sup> This is emphasized by the framing of the poem, which opens with Οὐράνιον and closes with σοφίης. The positions of these two

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<sup>69</sup> Leonidas addresses Poppaea as wife of Zeus, which aligns with the depictions of emperor and empress as Zeus and Hera in the eastern provinces. Beck 2007, 13.

words frames Poppaea as having heavenly wisdom – this is the reason why Leonidas is sending Poppaea this map in the first place.

Leonidas has chosen to send Poppaea an astrological map for her birthday, ostensibly because Poppaea is fond of astrology. This also appears in Tacitus, who states in his *Histories* (Tac. *Hist.* 1.22):

*genus hominum potentibus infidum, sperantibus fallax, quod in civitate nostra et vetabitur semper et retinebitur. multos secreta Poppaeae mathematicos, pessimum principalis matrimonii instrumentum, habuerant.*

This type of men, untrustworthy for the powerful, deceitful to the hopeful, which in our state will be both rejected and retained always. The secrets of Poppaea held many astrologers, the worst tools of the imperial couple.

Tacitus strongly emphasizes the untrustworthiness of those who use astrology, including Poppaea. Like Tacitus, Leonidas associates Poppaea with astrology, but unlike Tacitus, Leonidas presents this association positively.

This is not the first gift which Leonidas has sent to an empress with particular attention to her interests. In an epigram to Agrippina, Leonidas describes a poem with a hidden numerical puzzle which he has sent to Agrippina (*Pal. Ant.* 6.329):

Ἄλλος μὲν κρύσταλλον, ὁ δ' ἄργυρον, οἱ δὲ τοπάζους πέμψουσιν,  
πλούτου δῶρα γενεθλίδια· ἀλλ' ἴδ' Ἀγρειπίνῃ δύο δίστιχα μῶνον ἰσώσας,  
ἀρκοῦμαι δώροις, ἃ φθόνος οὐ δαμάσει.

One will send crystal, another silver, a third topaz, rich birthday gifts. But I, look, having only made two “isopsephon” distiches for Agrippina, am satisfied with this gift, which envy shall not damage.

Leonidas states that he does not aim to send the empress the most lavish gift, but one which he thinks she will enjoy. This is also his motivation for his gift to Poppaea (εὔαδε

γάρ σοι δῶρα τὰ καὶ λέκτρων ἄξια καὶ σοφίης)-- he sent her a gift based on her reputation for wisdom which he sees reflected in her interest in the stars.

Through this brief survey of early mentions of Poppaea in the wider literary tradition, several things emerge. First, there is continuity between the negative stereotypes of Poppaea. These stereotypes also increase in significance. Echoes of Pliny's Poppaea in Josephus' Poppaea show the duration and influence of the characterization of the former but also how luxury can be extrapolated into sexual immorality. This survey also reveals that it was possible to present Poppaea positively as an important and valued courtier in Nero's world as well as a learned empress whose reputation was celebrated. The fact that Josephus writes under the Flavians who were universally predisposed to negative treatments of Nero and his co-villains makes this even more surprising. There is also a notable divide between Latin and Greek authors: those working in the West close to the center of power in Rome tend to portray Poppaea negatively and those writing in the East tend to stray from anti-Neronian tradition. All suggest various competing approaches to understanding powerful women in general and Nero's wives in particular. This theme will continue in my dissertation as I explore larger works and genres.

### ***A Note on Translations***

All Greek and Latin texts used in this dissertation are taken from the Loeb editions unless otherwise noted. The text of P. Oxy. LXVII 5105 is taken from Paul Schubert's 2011 edition of the papyrus. All translations are my own unless otherwise

noted; the exception to this is the translation of P. Oxy. LXVII 5105, for which I use Paul Schubert's translations from his 2011 edition of the papyrus.

## 2. Poppaea's Apotheosis: the controversial empress characterized as the ideal wife

In 2011, Paul Schubert published P. Oxy. LXVII 5105, a previously unknown text. The forty-two partially surviving lines of the poem (hereafter referred to as the Poppaea papyrus, and the poem upon it as the Poppaea poem) tell the story of an unnamed pregnant woman who, dying, is visited by Aphrodite and brought through the stars to the gods. Although the woman is not named in the extant lines, Nero's name appears four times as her husband in the surviving fragments (ἐτέλεσσε Νέρωνι, 16, τέ]κνα Νέρωνι, 21, ἡ δὲ Νέρων[, 41, ]τι Νέρωνος επει, 71). Given that Poppaea is Nero's only wife to bear children, the pregnant woman who is the subject of the poem must be Poppaea. The poem sees Aphrodite and, eventually, other gods trying to help Poppaea come to terms with her death, say farewell to Nero and her life on earth, and accept her new life among the blessed as a *diva*. But things are not so simple for Poppaea.

Due to its novelty, there has been limited scholarship on the Poppaea papyrus, and this scholarship has been primarily limited to the papyrus' *editio princeps* by Paul Schubert (2011).<sup>1</sup> Schubert dates the papyrus to the late second or early third century CE. Schubert argues that it is unlikely that a first century text about Poppaea would have continued to be copied into the third century. He instead hypothesizes that the poem may

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<sup>1</sup> The papyrus is one of a plethora discovered at the Oxyrhynchus site throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is now owned by the Egypt Exploration Society and held at Oxford University. Schubert notes that this is a dual sided papyrus and is likely a sheet from a codex.

have been the product of a stock writing exercise or an *ekphrasis* from a larger third century text. But in terms of this argument for the poem's original dating, Schubert stands alone, as other scholars, including Caitlin Gillespie and Livia Capponi, argue that the poem was likely written in the years between the deaths of Poppaea and Nero and later copied onto the extant papyrus for irrecoverable reasons.<sup>2</sup> Both scholars argue that it would be unusual for Poppaea to be the subject of any newly composed poem, let alone a positive one, so long after her death and so long after Nero's fall and the creation of the hostile historiographical tradition. I myself follow Gillespie and Capponi in seeing the Poppaea poem as originally a product of the 1st c CE in the reign of Nero in the wake of Poppaea's death. This poem likely served a variety of purposes. Following Gillespie and Capponi, I see the poem as serving as a *consolatio* to Nero and to the Roman world following Poppaea's death as a human woman whose death mirrored losses which everyone could identify with. At the same time, it is clearly also a reflection of a widespread dissemination of news of her divinity and is in dialogue with the idea of what Diva Poppaea would represent in her new divine incarnation.

Regardless of its date, the Poppaea poem is unique among surviving literary sources for its presentation of Nero's relationship with Poppaea. Historians, including Tacitus and Cassius Dio, tend to portray Poppaea as an opportunistic and manipulative wife and Nero as a violent and irrational man.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, as this chapter will show, the

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<sup>2</sup> Gillespie 2014, Capponi 2017. See also Malik 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Murgatroyd 2008, 269, L'hoir 2006, 82, Ginsburg 2005, 46. *Poppaea non nisi in perniciem uxoris nupta* ("Poppaea married only for the destruction of his wife

Poppaea poem emphasizes the deep love and commitment of Poppaea towards Nero. She is portrayed as an ideal and idealized wife and mother. Moreover, as I show, the poem centers not an external view of the imperial marriage but instead Poppaea's conflicting emotions and grief as she becomes a goddess. As a result, the poem invites us to sympathize with Poppaea along several lines which derive from her three primary roles: wife and mother, lover, and goddess.

### ***2.1 Poppaea as Wife and Mother***

The Poppaea poem is written both to create the reader's impression of a relatable individual woman while simultaneously foregrounding the larger impact her death has as part of an imperial tragedy. Poppaea is written to be a sympathetic character because she plays a role to which any woman can relate. She attempts to fill the role of ideal wife and mother but eventually dies in childbirth, which was not an uncommon fate. In this

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[Octavia],” Tac. *Ann.* 14. 63); *additurque atrocior saevitia quod caput amputatum latumque in urbem Poppaea vidit.* (“The even more horrific savagery is added, that Poppaea beheld the severed head which was brought to the city,” Tac. *Ann.* 14. 64). ἡ δὲ δὴ Σαβίνα αὐτὴ οὕτως ὑπερετρόφησεν (ἐκ γὰρ τῶν βραχυτάτων πᾶν δηλωθήσεται) ὥστε τὰς τε ἡμιόνους τὰς ἀγούσας αὐτὴν ἐπίχρυσα σπαρτία ὑποδεῖσθαι, καὶ ὄνους πεντακοσίας ἀρτιτόκους καθ’ ἡμέραν ἀμέλγεσθαι, ἵν’ ἐν τῷ γάλακτι αὐτῶν λούηται· τὴν τε γὰρ ὄραν καὶ τὴν λαμπρότητα τοῦ σώματος ἰσχυρῶς ἔσπουδάκει, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο οὐκ εὐπρεπῆ ποτε αὐτὴν ἐν κατόπτρῳ ἰδοῦσα ἠῴξατο τελευτῆσαι πρὶν παρηβῆσαι. (“Sabina also perished at this time through an act of Nero’s; either accidentally or intentionally he had leaped upon her with his feet while she was pregnant. The extremes of luxury indulged in by this Sabina I will indicate in the briefest terms. She caused gilded shoes to be put on the mules that drew her and caused five hundred asses that had recently foaled to be milked daily that she might bathe in their milk. For she bestowed the greatest pains on the beauty and brilliancy of her person, and this is why, when she noticed in a mirror one day that her appearance was not comely, she prayed that she might die before she passed her prime,” Dio, *Rom. Hist.* 62.28).

section, I analyze how the poem constructs Poppaea's image as wife and mother. In doing so, I explore both what the fragments of the poem allow us to say about how it depicted Poppaea as wife and mother as well as how it reflects existing discourses on Roman wifely and maternal virtue. I also argue that the Poppaea poem can be better understood when it is considered in dialogue with several forms of textual commemoration for deceased women and for maternal mortality in the ancient world.

The poem as we have it focuses our attention on Poppaea's advanced pregnancy and motherhood at the time of her death. The poem reads (15-22):

εὔρε δ' ἀνασσαν ἐῆς ἐπὶ γαστέρα ὄσ' ὄγκωι  
 μ]ένην· καὶ μηνὶ πα.ου[.] ἐτέλεσσε Νέρωνι  
 ]καῶς αἰδεσθεῖσα, γόου δ' [ἐ]νεχεύατο λήθ[ην]  
 καὶ φ]άτο· “τέκνον, ἄδακρυς ἐ[πε]ίγεο· παντί σε θυμ[ῶι]  
 προδέχ]ετ' αἰ Διὸς ἄστρα καθιδρύετα[ί τε σ]ελ]ήνηι  
 ]νοῶς ἔνθεν ἄνακτι πο[..... τ]εὔχε δὲ Μοῖρα  
 -στ]έρην σε, μάκαιρα, γάμου [. τέ]κνα Νέρωνι  
 ].ουῶς αἰῶνας ..ου.....[. ] φυλάξεις.”

“she found the lady . . . over the swelling of her belly;  
 . . . month, she accomplished for Nero  
 the . . . with respect; she instilled oblivion of wailing  
 and said: “My child, stop crying and hurry up: with all their heart,  
 Zeus’ stars welcome you and establish you on the moon  
 whence . . . ruler. Fate has made  
 you more . . . than marriage, you blessed one; your children for Nero  
 you will guard for eternity . . .”

When Aphrodite arrives, Poppaea has a “swollen belly” (15; “ἐπὶ γαστέρ[[α]] ὄς ὄγκωι”; “over the swelling of her belly”). The following line includes the phrase “ἐτέλεσσε Νέρωνι(16; “she accomplished for Nero”).” As Poppaea weeps over her own death, Aphrodite tries to make Poppaea forget her grief at her own death (17; γόου δ' [ἐ]νεχεύατο λήθ[ην]; “she instilled oblivion of wailing”). When this fails, Aphrodite begins her speech to Poppaea by chastising her for her wailing (18; ἄδακρυς ἐ[πε]ίγεο;

“stop crying and hurry up”). Aphrodite then reassures her in a (fragmentary) speech that Poppaea will guard her children for Nero forever (21-22; τέκνα Νέρωνι [...]οις αἰῶνας..ου.....[.]φυλάξεις; “your children for Nero you will guard for eternity”). Due to the fragmentary nature of this section of the text, the dative Νέρωνι is ambiguous; Νέρωνι could be a dative of possession, as the children are Nero’s, or could be a dative of reference, meaning that Poppaea will guard these children for Nero’s benefit. In the latter case, Poppaea is standing in for Nero as the protector of their children in the afterlife. From Aphrodite’s perspective, Poppaea will be consoled by the idea that she is continuing to serve Nero as mother of her children, even as a goddess.

This emphasis on Poppaea’s pregnancy and her eternal care for her children in the afterlife casts Poppaea as an ideal wife by configuring her as a mother. One of the principle responsibilities of the Roman wife is to provide heirs for her husband.<sup>4</sup> Although no children of Poppaea and Nero survived infancy, she was pregnant with his child— his potential heir— at the time of her death. As a Roman mother, Poppaea also needed to care for her children as part of her household duties.<sup>5</sup> Aphrodite seems to recognize these aspects of Poppaea and thereby appeals to Poppaea’s motherhood while trying to comfort her at the time of her death; Aphrodite points out that Poppaea will be able to care for her deceased children (one of whom is dying along with Poppaea, the

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<sup>4</sup> See Boatwright 2021, 97 and Treggiari 1991, 40 for the role of wives in the family.

<sup>5</sup> Boatwright 2021, 100 and Treggiari 1991, 229.

other of whom predeceased her).<sup>6</sup> Thus, Poppaea will spend eternity fulfilling her duties as a mother.

The poem foregrounds Poppaea's role as wife by explicitly setting the events of the poem within the domestic sphere. The poem reads (23-26):

ὥς φα]μένη χερὸς ἤγε κατηφέα μηδὲ δοθῆντι  
] ιανθεῖσαν ἔλειπε γὰρ ἴσον ἀκοίτην  
ἀθανά]τοις, ἀδινὸν δὲ πόθῳ στένεν. εἶπε δ' ἐπ' ἄκρων  
στᾶσα δ]όμων πύματόν τε, χαρίζετο δ' ἀμφὶ μελάθροις.

Having thus spoken, (Aphrodite) led her by the hand; she was downcast and did not rejoice in the offered (favour). For she was leaving her husband, (a man) equal to the gods, and she moaned loudly from her longing. Standing on the rooftop, she spoke her last words, and brought pleasure about the house.

In Poppaea's final moments, she is led from the house by Aphrodite and stands on the roof (25-26; ἐπ' ἄκρων [στᾶσα δ]όμων; "Standing on the rooftop"). She then speaks her final words, which delight the house (26; χαρίζετο δ' ἀμφὶ μελάθροις; "[she] brought pleasure about the house"). As she ascends to her eternal position as mother, a manifestation of her role within the domestic sphere, Poppaea is also literally located

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<sup>6</sup> Poppaea gave birth to a daughter, Claudia, in 63 CE, who died after 4 months ((Tac. *Ann.* 15.23; Suet. *Ner.* 35). This poem differs from the historiographical and biographical tradition in its presentation of how Poppaea died by suggesting she died in childbirth. Tacitus reports that Nero kicked Poppaea in the stomach while she was pregnant, killing her (Tac. *Ann.* 16.6.). Suetonius tells a similar story, which is discussed in the Chapter 5 (Suet. *Ner.* 35). Dio states that Poppaea was killed, perhaps in an accident, when Nero jumped on her (Dio, *Rom. Hist.* 62.27). However, scholars have recognized that this is a common literary *topos* for tyrannical figures; Poppaea could have simply died from a miscarriage or other complications of pregnancy (Rudich 2005, 136, Mayer 1982, 316).

within the home—exactly where the ideal wife should be.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the house is described as being delighted (*χαρίζετο*) by Poppaea’s final words. This moment not only places Poppaea physically within the domestic sphere, but also highlights her domesticity. She is physically located in the home and her final words delight the physical space which she occupies. This is tied directly to Poppaea’s commitment to Nero; the personified house is delighted by Poppaea’s final words, which are addressed to Nero and seem to be a final expression of spousal commitment and care.

The poem also somewhat surprisingly casts Poppaea as an *univira*. She is concerned only with Nero and her children with him. Schubert<sup>8</sup> posits that the fragmentary *-voς* in line 20 of the Poppaea papyrus may be a remnant of the word *παρθένος*. Caitlin Gillespie points out that if this is the case, the papyrus is portraying Poppaea’s marriage to Nero as a transition from *παρθένος* to wife.<sup>9</sup> This would imply that Poppaea was a virgin entering her first marriage when marrying Nero. In addition, when Aphrodite initially addresses Poppaea, she calls her “τέκνον” (18). The use of *τέκνον*, child, and the possible use of *παρθένος* portray Poppaea as less mature and experienced in marriage than she actually is. Poppaea is cast as a young, first-time wife.

The status of *univira* was respected and praised in the Roman world, and this appears especially on tombstones; a married couple who remained committed for life was

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<sup>7</sup> Treggiari 1991, 212 discusses the physicality of the domestic sphere.

<sup>8</sup> Schubert 2011, 77.

<sup>9</sup> Gillespie 2014, 128.

the ideal and reflected positively on the woman.<sup>10</sup> The *univira* was an embodiment of *pudicitia* and *fides*, two central components of Roman womanhood.<sup>11</sup> She also represented good fortune; women of child-bearing age whose husbands predeceased them were required to remarry by the *Lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus*, introduced in 18 BCE.<sup>12</sup> It was preferred instead for wives to predecease their husbands, thus ensuring their status as *univirae*.<sup>13</sup> Such status was also publicly praised on numerous tombstones from the imperial period.<sup>14</sup> These women were seen as particularly pure and as a result granted special religious privileges as well.<sup>15</sup>

Several women within the imperial family were dubbed *univirae*. Antonia the Younger, who was never married to a *princeps* and did not live to see her son Claudius head the principate, nevertheless was a central figure in the imperial family as the mother

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<sup>10</sup> Treggiari 1991, 230 for the positive reputation of women in lifelong marriages.

<sup>11</sup> Pomeroy 1995, 161 discusses the positive reputation of the *univira*.

<sup>12</sup> Lightman and Zeisel 1977, 20, Wood 2000, 143.

<sup>13</sup> See Pomeroy 1995, 161 for expectations of the ideal wife.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. CIL 6.5162: *VIX (it) ANN (is) L | UNO CONTEN(ta) | VIRO* “She lived 50 years and was satisfied with one husband.” Lightman and Zeisel 1977, 22. More examples include CIL 3:3573, 5:7763, and 6: 25392. For an extended list, see Lightman and Zeisel 1977, 22 n.14.

<sup>15</sup> Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 8.56.4: ἡ μὲν οὖν βουλή ὡς ταῦτ’ ἔμαθεν ἐνηφίσατο θυσίας ἄλλας καὶ σεβασμούς, οὓς ἂν οἱ τῶν ἱερῶν ἐξηγηταὶ παραδῶσι, καθ’ ἕκαστον ἔτος ἐπιτελεῖν. αἱ δὲ γυναῖκες ἐν ἔθει κατεστήσαντο, τῇ τῆς ἱερείας χρησάμεναι γνώμῃ, τῷ ξοάνῳ τούτῳ μήτε στεφάνους ἐπιτιθέναί μήτε χεῖρας προσφέρειν γυναῖκας ὅσαι δευτέρων ἐπειράθησαν γάμων, τὴν δὲ τιμὴν καὶ θεραπείαν αὐτοῦ πᾶσαν ἀποδεδόσθαι ταῖς νεογάμοις. “The senate, upon hearing what had passed, ordered other sacrifices and rites to be performed every year, such as the interpreters of religious rites should direct. And the women upon the advice of their priestess established it as a custom that no women who had been married a second time should crown this statue with garlands or touch it with their hands, but that all the honor and worship paid to it should be committed to the newly-married women.” Wood 2000, 143.

of Germanicus. Upon the death of her husband, Drusus, Antonia did not remarry, despite the Augustan legislation, and was subsequently praised for her virtue by the senate (S.C. de Cn. Pisone Patre, 140-142):

*itemq(ue) Antoniae Germanici Caesaris matris, quae unum matrimonium Drusi Germ(anici) patris experta sanctitate morum dignam se divo Aug(usto) tam art a propinquitate exhibuerit.*<sup>16</sup>

Likewise [of] Antonia, mother of Germanicus Caesar, who, having experienced one marriage to Drusus, father of Germanicus, exhibited by the sanctity of her habits that she was worthy of such closeness to the divine Augustus.

Part of what gives Antonia especially sacred status is her marriage to one man. It is unclear how Antonia was able to remain unmarried despite the Augustan legislation, but it is notable that she had already produced several viable heirs for her husband and for the principate itself.

But Poppaea's earlier marriages did not stand entirely in the way of the poet who wanted to grant her *univira* status. The Julio-Claudian dynasty had already established ways to turn a non-*univira* into an *univira* rhetorically: Livia is implied to be a *univira* by Ovid, who described her participating fully in the rites of the Matralia, a role reserved for *univirae* (*Fasti* 6.637), and Horace (*Odes* 3.14) despite previously being married, having an existing child, and being pregnant with another at the time of her marriage to Augustus.<sup>17</sup> And so while it is not the case that multiple marriages was looked down on

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<sup>16</sup> Wood 2000, 143.

<sup>17</sup> Hor. *Odes* 3.14: *unico gaudens mulier marito* "The woman [Livia] rejoicing in her only husband."

and indeed was encouraged by law, it is also clear that the status of *univira* was desirable for the public presentation of imperial women.<sup>18</sup>

The Poppaea poem attempts to place Poppaea within the tradition of *univirae* and pseudo-*univirae* by ignoring her prior marriages. Poppaea's surviving child, the son of her first husband, Rufrius Crispinus, is notably absent from Aphrodite's speech about Poppaea's children.<sup>19</sup> While it is unsurprising that Poppaea's past husbands are not mentioned in a poem about her love for Nero, the discussion of her children with Nero makes the exclusion of Poppaea's (still living) third child all the more evident.<sup>20</sup> This poem focuses on Poppaea's nuclear family with Nero; Aphrodite focuses only on Poppaea's children with Nero because Poppaea is concerned only with her connection to Nero and, by proxy, her children with Nero.

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Ov. *Fasti* 6.637: *Te quoque magnifica, Concordia, dedicat aede | Livia, quam caro praestitit ipsa viro.* "To you also, Concordia, Livia dedicated a magnificent shrine, which she herself presented to her dear husband."

Johnson 1997, 410 connects this quote to the *univira*.

<sup>18</sup> There is a fundamental incompatibility between the extolling of *univirae* and the importance of producing as many children as possible. Boatwright 2021 (88) notes that this reveals the importance of controlling women's sexuality in the ancient world.

<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that due to the fragmentary nature of the papyrus, we cannot definitively say that he is not mentioned in the papyrus. However, there is no evidence that his name or any reference to him would have been included in the relatively short caesurae in this section of the poem.

<sup>20</sup> Poppaea's first husband, Rufrius Crispinus, and their child are well attested in the ancient sources (e.g. Tac. *Ann.* 15.71; *Octavia* 732). Poppaea's second husband was Otho, though the validity of their marriage is unclear from the sources. Tacitus presents the marriage between the two as genuine in *Annals* 13.45-46, but as a pseudo-marriage in the *Histories* 1.13.

Throughout the poem, it is clear that Poppaea is devoted to Nero. While affection or *adfectio* (as opposed to agreeableness or *concordia*) was not required in a Roman marriage, it was a central component of an idealized marriage.<sup>21</sup> Poppaea wails and cries when Aphrodite arrives to escort her away (17-18). Poppaea also groans (25; “στέενν”) when she departs. The word used here, στέενν, is often used in funerary contexts. Typically, the mourners are lamenting for the dead, though in this scene, Poppaea is speaking from beyond the grave to lament her separation from Nero.

In order to best understand this poem’s combination of grief, mourning rituals, and celebration of female virtue, it is useful to consider the wider cultural context of how women were mourned in the Roman empire. The image presented in this poem of a married couple separated by death in childbirth would be relatable to many Roman families; maternal mortality was extremely high in the ancient world. Conservative estimates indicate that 25 out of every 1000 women and 300 out of 1000 infants died in childbirth.<sup>22</sup> Even Juvenal, in his famously misogynistic *Satire 6*, acknowledges the *partus [...] discrimen* (Juv. Sat. VI. 592).<sup>23</sup> The dangers of childbirth were familiar to all and impacted a significant portion of the population, regardless of location or class status.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See Treggiari 1991, 247 for discussion of the ideal marriage.

<sup>22</sup> Todman 2007, 83.

<sup>23</sup> Carroll 2018, 54.

<sup>24</sup> See Carroll 2011, 100 for the dangers of childbirth and impact on literature.

The lives of deceased mothers could be mourned and honored through funerary customs and rituals and through various forms of textual commemoration including *consolationes* and epitaphs. Capponi argues that the Poppaea poem is best understood through comparison with the genre of *consolatio*.<sup>25</sup> The poem, she argues, uses elements drawn from the genre of *consolatio*, a literary composition for surviving family members after the death of a loved one. In fact, Capponi ties her dating of the Poppaea poem to the first century based on elements it shares with *consolationes*. If this poem was intended to be a *consolatio*, Capponi argues, it would have been written for Nero himself.<sup>26</sup>

I will build on Capponi's assertion that this poem is a *consolatio*.<sup>27</sup> Notable extant *consolationes* include Plutarch's *Consolatio ad Apollonium* and his *Consolatio ad Uxorem*, as well as Ovid's *Consolatio ad Liviam*. These texts can serve as comparanda; they are distinct in form from the Poppaea poem, but contain similar sentiments. These *consolationes* are addressed to the living; they extol the virtues of the deceased and instruct the living on how to mourn and move on.<sup>28</sup>

The *consolatio* is far from the only textual genre with a role to play in mourning the dead. I suggest that Capponi's reading of the Poppaea poem as a *consolatio* should be

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<sup>25</sup> Capponi 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Capponi 2017, 69. There is precedent for deification as a form of *consolatio* (see Cicero's deification of Tullia, Cic. *Att.* 12.14 and McIntyre 2013, 232.)

<sup>27</sup> Capponi aims to identify the author of this poem by comparing the text to that of prominent members in Nero's court. Capponi (2017, 78) settles on Leonides of Alexandria as the most likely candidate due to his position in the court and his literary style. However, I make no claim about the authorship of the Poppaea poem in this chapter.

<sup>28</sup> See McIntyre 2013, 232 for the purpose of *consolationes*.

put into dialogue with another corpus of material: epitaphs for wives who died in childbirth. Unlike *Consolationes*, epitaphs serve not only to address the immediate pain of those left behind but also represent monuments to the memory of the deceased. And, perhaps most interesting for our present purposes, they also often imagine the women as speaking,<sup>29</sup> just as our poem ventriloquizes Poppaea – gives her voice – in a final farewell speech which reaffirms her dedication to her husband.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> I will use a synchronous approach to the funerary epitaphs; the style of epitaph discussed in this paper appears throughout the Roman Republic and Empire temporally and geographically. I will be reading these tombstones as reflections of general social constructs for wives and mothers, which endured throughout ancient Rome.

<sup>30</sup> Before we turn to textual commemorations which can help us illuminate the Poppaea poem, I note that it is not entirely unusual for dead women to be given a voice in Greek and Latin literature. Tragic female ghosts are common, but are usually vengeful (e.g. Clytemnestra in the *Eumenides*, Agrippina in the *Octavia*). The Greek bogeymen Gello, Mormo, and Lamia are also ghostly women. Gello, who died a virgin, was supposed by the women of Lesbos to haunt children and bear responsibility for other premature deaths. Similarly, the mythical beast Lamia was once a woman who, after all her children had died, ordered the kidnapping and slaying of other newborns. Mormo, whose name was invoked to frighten children, was a Corinthian woman who ate her children (Johnson 2018, 151). Sarah Iles Johnston argues that these women served as mythical reminders to women of the dreary afterlife that awaited them if they did not bear children (Johnson 2018, 164). While elements of the stories of Gello and Lamia resemble that of Poppaea, who died early and lost both her children, Poppaea is neither threatening nor vengeful in this poem. Propertius 4.7 ventriloquizes the dead Cynthia, who chastises Propertius for his insufficient mourning. Though Cynthia does command Propertius to cease his mourning, the tone of the poem indicates that Cynthia is giving this instruction out of anger, rather than compassion. The nearest resemblances to the Poppaea of this poem in Roman literature are Creusa in the *Aeneid* and Eurydice in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 10.1-85. Here both women are portrayed as dutiful and loving wives, just as Poppaea is, but neither speaks (Grillo 2010, 43). The dutiful, loving, wife who is reluctant to depart is not given a voice in Roman or Greek literature.

*Stelae* and the epitaphs upon them were the most accessible form of public remembrance for the deceased.<sup>31</sup> These were relatively inexpensive and provided a physical space in which the living could interact with and remember their loved ones. Funerary epitaphs record the lives of thousands of people who would otherwise be lost to history, though they do not necessarily depict an accurate or detailed picture of the lives of the deceased. Valerie Hope writes, “The tombs commemorated the dead but were the products of the living. In the cemetery, people reflected and constructed their social identity, their familial role, their work or their standing in the community.”<sup>32</sup> Epitaphs are not literal depictions of the lives of the deceased, but social constructs which projected a curated image of the deceased and, by extension, their living relatives.<sup>33</sup> These epitaphs project a romanticized picture of the lives of women and their devotion to their husbands and children.

Epitaphs spoke in several voices. Inscriptions could be written in the third person to describe the deceased.<sup>34</sup> Epitaphs could also be written from the perspective of a surviving relative, especially when the deceased were children, whose mothers would write about their grief in the first person.<sup>35</sup> I am most interested in epitaphs addressed to the reader from the perspective of the deceased herself. In general, epitaphs rarely included details about the death of the honoree, with the exception of deaths that were

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<sup>31</sup> See Hope 2009, 159 for the relationship of epitaphs to the living.

<sup>32</sup> Hope 2009, 154.

<sup>33</sup> See Williams 1958, 25 for the social construction of epitaphs.

<sup>34</sup> See Hope 2009, 139 for conventions of epitaphs.

<sup>35</sup> Hope 2009, 146, 176.

particularly notable for their impact or honorable nature.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the frequent inclusion of death in childbirth in epitaphs is not a reflection of necessary information, but a reflection of the respect given to the act of childbirth, even when it led to death.<sup>37</sup>

Mentions of death in childbirth in epitaphs range from detailed depictions of despair to short, factual statements. One example, *AE* 1991.1076, from Hispania, commemorates Gemina, a *serva*. Her tombstone is addressed by a freedman, Gaius Aerarius, who laments his loss and briefly states “*obi(i)t in partu* (“she died in childbirth<sup>38</sup>”).” This is the only mention of her death in the inscription, but it is notable that Aerarius chose to include it at all. In contrast, *CLE* 2133a from Dalmatia, is an anguished and detailed account of the death of a 40 year old woman in childbirth. It reads:

*[fu]nesto gravis heu triste puerperio  
nequivit miserum partu depromere fetu(m)  
hausta qui nondum luce peremptus abiit,  
adque ita tum geminas g[e]mino cum corpore  
praeceps  
laetum ferali [transtu]lit hora an[imas].*

“While pregnant, in deadly childbirth, alas!, sadly she was not able to bring forth in birth the wretched offspring, who left, dead, not yet in the light, and thus then a swift death took double souls with a doubled body in a funereal hour.”<sup>39</sup>

The family who erected this tombstone laments the death of this woman and describes in great detail the *funestum puerperium* of the *miserus fetus*, which resulted in the loss of

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<sup>36</sup> Hope 2009, 41.

<sup>37</sup> See Olasope 2009 for reception of women who died in childbirth.

<sup>38</sup> Carroll 2018, n.61 provides these examples.

<sup>39</sup> Carroll 2018, 61.

*gemmae animae*. The graphic depiction of her death serves as the central theme chosen in her final commemoration. The centrality of death in childbirth in this epitaph reflects the honor that comes with such a demise.

Epitaphs commonly ventriloquize deceased woman. The words of these epitaphs should not be taken literally. The woman's thoughts and words are not her own, but constructions based upon societal expectations for wives and mothers. For example, *CIL* VIII.20288 reads:

*D(is) M(anibus) s(acrum). Rusticeia Matrōna v(ixit) a(nnos) XXV. causa meae mortis partus fatu[m]que malignum]. set tu desine flere mihi kariss[ime coniux] [et] fil(ii) nostri serva com[munis amorem]. [- -- ad caeli] transivit spi[ritus astra] [- - -].*

“Sacred to the shades. Rusticeia Matrōna lived for 25 years. The cause of my death was childbirth and a wicked fate. But you, stop crying for me, dearest husband, and protect the love our shared son.[...] My spirit has crossed to the stars of heaven [...].”<sup>40</sup>

This epitaph, from Mauretania, is written from the perspective of a 25-year-old woman who has died in childbirth. The subject, Rusticeia, attributes her death to *partus fatumque malignum*, but follows this statement by emphatically commanding her husband (*set tu desine*) to stop grieving and to preserve their love for their son.<sup>41</sup> The fragmented text following says that Rusticeia's spirit will ascend to the stars. This tombstone, which was likely commissioned and erected by Rusticeia's husband himself or another family

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<sup>40</sup> Carroll 2018, 63.

<sup>41</sup> It is unclear whether the son is the fetus or a living child. Hope 2009, 63.

member, does not represent her words or thoughts, but a construction of how a mother and wife should console her husband. As such, the central focus is the grief of the husband and not that of the wife. In death, Rusticeia aims to comfort her husband and advocate love for their son—a truly selfless request.

The first-person epitaph of women who died in childbirth is also prevalent on Jewish-Egyptian tombstones, a context important for studying our papyrus fragment.<sup>42</sup> A late Ptolemaic epitaph from Schedia written from the perspective of the deceased Dosithea:<sup>43</sup>

Παῖδα με Δωσιθέαν τὴν Οἰκ[---]  
Λεύσσων εἰς ξεστῆς γράμ[ματα ταῦτα (?) πέτρης]  
Θαλλοῦς ἐμ μεγάροισιν ἔγημ[έ (?) με - - -]  
Χαιρή[μ]ων, θνήσκω δ' ἄλγεσ[ι πικροτατοῖς (?)]  
ὠδῖνας προφυγοῦσα, συναίμου [- - -]  
πεντεκαιεικοσέτης πνε[ῦμα λιποῦσα βίου (?) ]  
καὶ νούσῳ, τῆι πρόσθεν ε[ - - - ]  
κεῖμαι δ' ἐν Σχεδίῃ, σῆμα λ[αχοῦσα τόδε (?) ]  
ἀλλὰ παραστεύχοντες ὁδ[ὸν τήνδε (?) εἶπατε πάντες (?) ]  
Δωσιθέα χρηστή, χαῖρε κ[αὶ ἐν φθιμένοις (?)]  
...I am Dosithea, child of Oik... looking at this inscription on polished stone. In the house of Thallo, Chairemon... married me, but I died in grievous (?) pain after fleeing beforehand from the pangs of childbirth... of a kinsman (?)... at the age of twenty-five, losing the breath of life (?), and by an illness by which previously... I lie in Schedia [with this] tomb

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<sup>42</sup> These are included due to their incorporation into the larger cultural phenomenon of women being ventriloquized in epitaphs and mentioning their death in childbirth. It is notable that these particular tombstones come from Egypt, as Gillespie 2014 has addressed the close relationship between the Poppaea poem and Egyptian death narratives. That these epitaphs came from the graves of Jews is merely coincidence; there is a long scholarly debate about the relationship between Poppaea and Judaism, but such debate lies outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>43</sup> Text and translation from Horbury and Noy 1992, 23.

[as my lot (?)]. But, passers-by [on this road, say, all of you (?)]: Dosithea, excellent woman, farewell, [even among the dead (?)].<sup>44</sup>

Dosithea notes that she died in childbirth, then commands (εἶπατε) passersby to say farewell to her. She refers to herself as χρηστή, “useful,” praising herself for a quality which is essential for the ideal wife and mother. This text is, once again, presumably written by family members, and include the elements of Dosithea’s life that would most ideally represent her and her family. In a similar fashion, in two other tombstones, both from Leontopolis, the women, who died in childbirth, solicit laments and weeping from passersby.<sup>45</sup> One of the two notes that the deceased was beloved by her husband (CPJ iii no. 1530b). These tombstones highlight the enormity of the family’s loss and present the deceased as perfect mothers and wives.

This survey of epitaphs demonstrates that it was not uncommon for such commemorative texts to ventriloquize the deceased woman to commemorate the experience of dying in childbirth and to focalize her emotional state in the immediate aftermath of her death and separation from her family, especially her husband. These epitaphs construct women who die in childbirth or pregnancy as honorable; death in childbirth is notable enough to include in their commemorations.

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<sup>44</sup> Text and translation from Horbury and Noy, 1992, 23.

<sup>45</sup> The first: mid 2nd -1st century BCE. CIJ ii. No 1510; Horbury and Noy 1992, 33. The second: mid 2nd century BCE-early 2nd century CE. CPJ iii no. 1530b; Horbury and Noy 1992, 99.

I see the Poppaea poem as in dialogue with this long tradition of epitaphs in which women speak from beyond the grave to express not only sadness, but also love for their family members. The image of the deceased mother is easily recognized in the ancient world due to the prevalence of maternal mortality. By associating Poppaea with this imagery, the Poppaea poem casts Poppaea as a relatable character. Through her relatability, Poppaea attains a level of familiarity with the reader which was otherwise inaccessible due to her status as an imperial woman and soon-to-be goddess. This familiarity leads to heightened sympathy for Poppaea, who is one woman out of so many who died from complications with pregnancy.

But while the poem borrows elements standard in *consolationes* and epitaphs to give voice to the loss of Poppaea, it is unusual in that it the addressee of the consolation and the person imagined to be in mourning is not the husband left behind. Instead, Poppaea herself, not Nero, is the one who is explicitly instructed by Aphrodite to stop mourning (18; τέκνον, ἄδακρυς ἐ[πε]ίγγο).

Poppaea mourns her own loss of her husband and bids a final farewell to her house (23-27):

ὥς φα]μένη χερὸς ἦγε κατηφέα μηδέ δοθέντι  
 ] ιανθεῖσαν; ἔλειπε γὰρ ἴσον ἀκοίτην  
 ἀθανάτ]οις, ἀδινὸν δὲ πόθωι στένεν; εἶπε δ' ἐπ' ἄκρων  
 σταῖσα δ]όμων πύματόν τε, χαρίζετο δ' ἀμφὶ μελάθροισ;  
 “]ν οὐκ ἐβάρυνα, πόσι, θρόνον, εἴ σ' ἐφύλαξα[

Having thus spoken, (Aphrodite) led her by the hand; she was downcast and did not rejoice in the offered (favour). For she was leaving her husband, (a man) equal to the gods, and she moaned loudly from her longing. Standing on the rooftop, she spoke her last words, and brought

pleasure about the house: “I did not burden the . . . throne, my husband, if I protected you”

Rather than functioning solely as a *consolatio* for Nero, as Capponi suggests, or as a monument which helps the living grieve appropriately, like an epitaph, this poem acts more like an instruction in grief *for Poppaea* as she loses her husband. While Nero seems to have mourned the loss of his wife on earth, this poem focuses on how Poppaea is mourning her separation from Nero at the time of her death.

Poppaea’s devotion to Nero as wife and mother should also be understood as deeply intertwined with the theme of protection that recurs throughout the poem. Poppaea opens her final words with a contrafactual statement. She states, “]ν οὐκ ἐβάρυνα, πόσι, θρόνον, εἴ σ’ ἐφύλαξα (27).” Schubert translates the line, “I did not burden the [...] throne, my husband, if I protected you.” I contend that this translation does not properly capture the force of the condition. I propose the alternate translation: “I would not have burdened the throne, husband, if I had protected you.” This alternate translation conveys the root of Poppaea’s lament; Poppaea did not protect Nero, and thus did indeed burden the throne. The protection discussed in the line seems vague due to the fragmentary nature of the subsequent text. However, the use of the word φυλάσσω provides a link to an earlier line in the poem.

The word φυλάσσω appears twice in the poem: when Aphrodite tells Poppaea that she will guard (22; φυλάξεις) her children for eternity and when Poppaea laments not being able to protect (27; ἐφύλαξα) Nero. Poppaea echoes Aphrodite’s earlier statement about protecting Nero’s children when she says that she failed to protect Nero. The

remaining lines of Poppaea’s speech are too fragmentary to reconstruct, but the repetition of φυλάσσω ties Poppaea’s protection of her children with her protection of Nero. The word παιδὸς (34) does appear in the fragments of Poppaea’s speech, as does κοιρανίη (29; “sovereignty”), θαλαμ[ ] (30; “bedroom”), and ἀλόχου (31; wife). The theme of the speech revolves around the household, their marriage, the regime, and their children. Given the central themes of her final words and the repetition of the word φυλάσσω, Poppaea’s final line can be interpreted to be about her inability as an imperial wife to produce a living male heir.<sup>46</sup> This is a powerful image of Poppaea’s emotional state, while simultaneously complicating the characterization of Poppaea as an ideal wife. While the Poppaea poem celebrates Poppaea’s attempts to produce an heir and her potential to do so successfully, her premature death prevents her from fulfilling her role fully.

Nero’s reign saw increasing instability as the childless emperor eliminated potential rivals to the throne.<sup>47</sup> His legitimacy as Claudius’ heir had been strengthened by

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<sup>46</sup> Line 37 is supposed to be the final line of Poppaea’s speech because the following fragmentary line reads “[...]φάτο, λῦσε δὲ θαιροῦς[...],” seemingly transitioning back to the third person narration. RPC I 1759D, a provincial coin from Thrace, depicts Poppaea as *Poppaea Augusta* on the obverse, with *Securitas* on the reverse with the inscription *Securitas Augusti S C*. This coin was likely minted during or after Poppaea’s first pregnancy, since she is called *Augusta* and thus has born or will bear an heir. The association of *securitas* with Poppaea as a producer of heirs shows an early association in the eastern provinces between the security and the establishment of Nero’s lineage. RPC I 2060 from Bithynia, which depicts Nero on the obverse and Poppaea assimilated to *Securitas* on the reverse, has a similar message.

<sup>47</sup> Nero assassinated his rival Rubellius Plautus immediately before divorcing Octavia (Tac. *Ann.* 14.59): *talem eum centurio trucidavit coram Pelagone spadone quem Nero centurioni et manipulo, quasi satellitibus ministrum regium, praeposuerat. caput*

his marriage to Octavia. Upon their unpopular divorce (which at times Nero tried to argue was due to Octavia's inability to bear a child), Nero needed to strengthen his hold on the throne through a child with his second wife. This was the child that Poppaea hoped to bear to protect Nero. Poppaea seems to have been pregnant when she and Nero married and the birth of their child, Claudia, was celebrated throughout the Roman world, but died in infancy. Poppaea then died when pregnant with their second child, who died with her. This poem, then, imagines that Poppaea feels that she failed to protect (ἐφύλαξα) Nero in the way that society and the empire expected her to. The poem in its entirety casts Poppaea as striving to be the perfect Roman wife and mother; her death is devastating because she is unable to achieve her potential to protect her husband by doing her duty as an imperial wife.<sup>48</sup>

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*interfictire latum; cuius aspectu (ipsa principis verba referam) 'cur', inquit, 'Nero ... ' et posito metu nuptias Poppaeae ob eius modi terrores dilatas maturare parat Octaviamque coniugem amoliri, quamvis modeste ageret, nomine patris et studiis populi gravem.* "At all events, he was surprised at midday, when stripped for exercise. In that state the centurion slew him in the presence of Pelago, a eunuch, whom Nero had set over the centurion and his company, like a despot's minister over his satellites. The head of the murdered man was brought to Rome. At its sight the emperor exclaimed (I give his very words), "Why would you have been a Nero?" Then casting off all fear he prepared to hurry on his marriage with Poppaea, hitherto deferred because of such alarms as I have described, and to divorce his wife Octavia, notwithstanding her virtuous life, because her father's name and the people's affection for her made her an offence to him."

Torquatus Silanus was also executed because he was descended from Augustus (Tac. *Ann.* 15.35): *isdem quippe illis diebus Torquatus Silanus mori adigitur, quia super Iuniae familiae claritudinem divum Augustum abavum ferebat.* "For during the very same period Torquatus Silanus was forced to die, because over and above his illustrious rank as one of the Junian family he claimed to be the great-grandson of Augustus."

<sup>48</sup> Protection of one's husband in times of political instability appears as a theme in Roman literature. This is particularly prominent in discussion of the proscriptions (such acts are praised by Valerius Maximus (6.7)). The *Laudatio Turiae* is a particularly

Poppaea, like many of the women ventriloquized in epitaphs, wails and cries when Aphrodite comes to lead her away. Although Aphrodite attempts to instill a forgetfulness of grief (17; γόου δ' [ἐ]νεχεύατο λήθ[ην]), this is ineffective and Poppaea's sadness persists. Though fragmentary, Poppaea's final words convey that although she is a queen on earth, it is not her royal power that she will miss, but Nero. The last two words of her speech, σεῖο μένουσα (37; "remaining [with?] you"<sup>49</sup>) are seemingly addressed to Nero and express a desire to remain with him. Poppaea knows that she is being escorted into the divine afterlife and that she will be with her children, but this does not alleviate her grief because motherhood alone is not the only reason that Poppaea will miss her role as Nero's wife.

## 2.2 Poppaea as Lover

Poppaea's commitment to Nero and her grief over their separation highlights her qualities as a wife, but also goes beyond this to suggest a different aspect of female devotion not as often highlighted in Roman marital discourse: erotic love and sexual

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relevant *comparandum*. The *Laudatio* is a 1st century BCE funerary inscription erected by a husband for his wife. The husband praises his wife for a variety of deeds, and the deeds which he chooses to include ostensibly reflect positively on both himself and his deceased wife. Like Poppaea, the wife in this inscription is unable to provide viable heirs for her husband, but is praised and loved nonetheless (Treggiari 1991, 237). The *Laudatio Turiae* also describes an instance in which the wife concealed her husband, who had been proscribed, at great personal risk. Such an act appears often in proscription narratives. This motif of a wife prioritizing her husband's safety appears in the Poppaea poem. Despite the fact that Poppaea was not, in fact, able to protect Nero due to her death, she has attempted to do so, which demonstrates her *fides* and reflects positively on her as a wife.

<sup>49</sup> My own translation.

passion. Sexual attraction does appear in some ancient portrayals of marriage but is also not seen as essential or expected.<sup>50</sup> But Poppaea and Nero are presented not just as spouses but as devoted, passionate lovers. The erotic imagery permeates the poem at every level, from the gods who interact with her to Poppaea's own perspective. While it is difficult to distinguish erotic love from other forms of devotion which I discussed earlier, the prominent sexual elements present throughout the Poppaea poem deserve analysis in their own right. The type of erotic language seen in this poem is more usually associated with lyric or elegiac poetry expressed as a private communication between lovers. Here, however, the narrator of the poem describes this sexuality from outside the relationship and positions the reader as a witness to this intimacy. The erotic connection between the two is presented as an objective narratorial truth and as a bedrock to the imperial couple's relationship, which makes Poppaea's sexual relationship with Nero an important component of her reluctance to ascend to heaven.

The Poppaea poem is filled with the language and imagery of sexual passion. Poppaea is guided to the afterlife by Aphrodite, whose symbolism heightens the erotic themes of the poem. Aphrodite traditionally governs sexuality, particularly unbridled, indulgent passion.<sup>51</sup> Poppaea was known to be particularly devoted to Venus/Aphrodite in life and was associated with her after death.<sup>52</sup> When Eros and Aphrodite arrive to

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<sup>50</sup> See Treggiari 1991, 253 for conventions of the ideal marriage.

<sup>51</sup> See Pirenne-Delforge 1994 for Aphrodite's domain.

<sup>52</sup> See Gillespie 2014, 124 and Kragelund 2010, 559 for relationship of Poppaea with Venus.

escort Poppaea away, the poem reads, “[ἵ]ον Ἔρως ἀνέκοψε (14; “Eros pushed back [the bolt]”).” The object of ἀνέκοψε is lost, but Eros, the divine manifestation of and embodiment of erotic love, is almost certainly opening the door of Poppaea’s home for Aphrodite, as Schubert supplies. It is Eros who, both literally and figuratively, opens the door for Aphrodite to access Poppaea. The erotic element of Aphrodite’s divinity is centrally important to her interaction with Poppaea.

The erotic undertones of the poem are heightened by the parallels of Poppaea’s apotheosis with the aspects of the Roman marriage ritual which likewise celebrate the sexual consummation of marriage. The Roman marriage ritual focuses on leading the bride and crossing thresholds out of her family home and into the home of her husband.<sup>53</sup> The Roman wedding culminates in the *thalamus* as a literal manifestation of the new erotic relationship between husband and wife; the marriage ritual heavily focuses on the new erotic relationship between husband and wife.<sup>54</sup>

Epithalamia, including the songs which would be sung as part of the ritual and the wider literary genre connected to the ritual, invoke these images while incorporating the gods who are involved in marriage. Venus commonly acted as *pronuba* in depictions of Roman marriage.<sup>55</sup> Eros, too, plays a central role in Roman weddings; erotic love is

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<sup>53</sup> See Hersch 2010, 180 for Roman wedding rituals.

<sup>54</sup> See Wasdin 2018, 8 and VÉrilhac and Vial 1998, 324–26 for eroticism in the marriage ritual.

<sup>55</sup> Wasdin 2018, 8. See also Statius *Silvae* 1.2.11-15: *ipsa manu nuptam genetrix Aeneia duxit | lumina demissam et dulci probitate rubentem, | ipsa toros et sacra parat cultuque Latino | dissimulata deam crinem vultusque genasque | temperat atque nova gestit minor ire marita.*

particularly celebrated in the wedding in the hopes that the new couple will produce heirs.<sup>56</sup> Celestial imagery is also present in extant wedding and erotic poetry. *Hesperus* in particular is a prominent figure who drives the wedding procession.<sup>57</sup>

The author of the Poppaea poem presents Poppaea's apotheosis as an inverted wedding procession. Eros seeks Poppaea in her bedchamber (30) and Venus leads her to heaven. The inverse is true in Roman wedding imagery, where Venus leads the bride to her *thalamus*. Venus has ostensibly brought Poppaea into her *thalamus* when she wed Nero; in the Poppaea poem, the goddess ends the marriage by removing Poppaea from that same *thalamus* and brings her to heaven. As Venus leads Poppaea to heaven, they travel through a number of celestial bodies, including Ἑσπερον (55). Schubert points out that this celestial body is associated with Aphrodite by Eratosthenes (*Cat.* 2.43).<sup>58</sup> Importantly, this is also *Hesperus*, the evening star which drives passionate action in wedding and erotic literature.<sup>59</sup> In the Poppaea poem, the appearance of *Hesperus* marks the erotic division of Poppaea from Nero rather than anticipating their erotic joining: rather than being united with Nero in the *thalamus* by Aphrodite under *Hesperus*,

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“The mother of Aeneas herself leads the bride, lowering her eyes and blushing with sweet modesty, by the hand, she herself prepares the beds and the sacraments, having hidden her divinity with Latin culture, she tempers her hair and face and cheeks and endeavors to walk with less height than the bride.”

<sup>56</sup> Wasdin 2018, 8; Sissa and Staunton 2008, 89.

<sup>57</sup> Wasdin 2018, 70; See Catullus 62, in which *Hesperus*, the evening star, drives the action of the wedding. Such characterization of *Hesperus* can also be seen in Sappho and Callimachus.

<sup>58</sup> Schubert 2011, 79.

<sup>59</sup> See Wasdin 2018, 70 for *Hesperus* in marriage and erotic literature.

Poppaea is separated from her husband against her will and brought to heaven. The gods who inaugurated her sexual relationship with Nero are now leading her away. The poem tries to recreate the erotic anticipation, consummation, and passion that the wedding hymn celebrates between a stable couple about to produce heirs. By recreating that erotic energy, the poem shows us how devastating Poppaea's losses are and how great her pain is.

Outside of its connection to epithalamia, echoes of lyric meditations on desire add to the erotic overtones. The Poppaea poem portrays Poppaea as devastated at the prospect of being separated from her beloved Nero in terms that foreground sexual passion. Aphrodite offers her hand to Poppaea to lead her away, and when Poppaea takes it, “she was downcast and did not rejoice in the offered [favor] (23-24; κατηφέα μηδὲ δοθέντι [ ] ἰανθεῖσαν).” The narrator then explains her reaction: “for she was leaving her husband, equal to the gods (24-25; ἔλειπε γὰρ ἴσον ἀκοίτην [ἀθανάτ]οις).” I read this line as an allusion to the opening line of Sappho 31, “that man seems to me to be equal to the gods (φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν).”<sup>60</sup> The Poppaea poem and Sappho 31 are both couched in the theme of unattainable love and separation from one’s lover. In Sappho 31, Sappho laments her inability to speak to her love interest/lover.<sup>61</sup> Poppaea laments a similar

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<sup>60</sup> I am not the first to see this potential allusion to the famous line of Sappho 31, but I believe the significance of such an allusion has yet to be adequately explored for what it contributes to Poppaea's characterization. Schubert 2011, 77 is the first to note the allusion.

<sup>61</sup> Whether this woman is Sappho’s lover or her love interest is unclear. See Wills 1967.

impending situation, in which she will be physically separated from Nero. The appearance of the man “equal to the gods” in a desirous and erotic context connects the two poems.

Though Sappho did not originate the phrase, the fame of the poem and its erotic context make it an easily accessible allusion for the poem’s readers.<sup>62</sup> Sappho 31 was widely known and circulated in the early Roman Empire. Catullus 51 is famously a translation of the poem. Imperial authors such as Plutarch and Lucretius discussed Sappho’s symptoms in the famous poem.<sup>63</sup> The poem was generally regarded as Sappho’s best, and as such, was prominent in ancient commentaries and lyric discourses.<sup>64</sup> Due to the widespread fame of the poem, any somewhat-educated reader of the Poppaea poem could immediately associate the description of Nero as a man “equal to the gods” with Sappho’s famous opening line.<sup>65</sup>

But while the language invites comparison between the two poems, there are also some important contextual differences that further contribute to Poppaea’s

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<sup>62</sup> The use of the phrase “equal to the gods” (ἴσος ἀθανάτοις/θείοισιν/δαίμονι) is not limited to Sappho. Caitlin Gillespie (2014, 126) points out that “ἴσος δαίμονι” is a common Homeric epithet, and this line in the Poppaea poem evokes a heroic image of Nero. The variation of the phrase ἴσος θείοισιν appears repeatedly in Euripides and Homer (See Hom. *Il.* 21.315, 9.603, *Od.* 11.304, 15.520). In both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the phrase is used with reference to the honor and fame of the many heroes in the story. Euripides uses the phrase in a metaphorical sense; “ἴσος θείοισιν” is used to emphasize, not as a literal statement (See Eur. *Elec.* 67, *Hec.* 356, *Hel.* 819). However, neither Euripides nor Homer use the phrase in a romantic or erotic context.

<sup>63</sup> See Stimson and Lipking 1988, 60 for mentions of Sappho in ancient literature.

<sup>64</sup> See Greene 1996, 54 for ancient reception of Sappho.

<sup>65</sup> Gillespie 2014, 127 makes this argument.

characterization. Sappho's poem opens with a first-person assertion that the man seems (φαίνεται) to her to be equal to the gods, while the parallel line is spoken by a narrator in the Poppaea poem. Sappho 31 describes an entirely internal experience; Sappho is grappling with her overwhelmed senses.<sup>66</sup> In contrast, the narrator makes Poppaea's desire for Nero public and invites the gaze of the reader. This does not mean that Poppaea's perspective is overlooked; the narrator is explaining why (γάρ), from Poppaea's perspective, her death is devastating. This is not a subtle or private expression of sexuality, but an openly manifest display of erotic love. The Poppaea poem converts the private experience of Sappho 31 into a public display by a wife who desires her husband.

The second issue of context is the role of the man equal to the gods in each poem. Scholars have long debated whether Sappho 31 is an expression of passionate love or jealous love towards the woman.<sup>67</sup> Regardless of the type of love, the object of affection in the poem is the woman, not the man who is equal to the gods. In contrast, Nero, the man equal to the gods in the Poppaea poem, is also Poppaea's lover. The parallel of the "man equal to the gods" in Sappho 31 and the Poppaea poem is not necessarily a comment on the attractiveness or erotic desire directed at the man, but his emotional resolve in comparison to the perspective of a despondent lover. One possible interpretation of the man in Sappho 31 is that he is equal to the gods because of his

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<sup>66</sup> I say "Sappho" with the understanding that the poet and the poetic persona are not one and the same.

<sup>67</sup> See Furley 2000 for this debate.

emotional resolve. While Sappho is completely overcome with emotion, this man is able to maintain his composure.<sup>68</sup> The contrast between Sappho and the man is predicated on the condition that both are taken by the desirability of the woman to whom the poem is addressed, but the two have very different reactions.<sup>69</sup>

The Poppaea poem functions similarly, though the source of this extreme emotional experience is not a woman, but the loss of their relationship through Poppaea's death. I posit that the reference to Sappho 31 in the Poppaea poem can refer to Nero's composure after the death of Poppaea. The poem has established the intense love between Poppaea and Nero; a reference to Nero's composure at the loss of the relationship, especially in contrast to Poppaea's lack thereof, is a comment on his masculine composure. Both are mourning the loss of the relationship in manners appropriate for their role as husband and wife.

Immediately following the reference to Sappho, as Aphrodite ushers the grieving Poppaea from the house, Poppaea groans (στένεν) with desire (πόθωι) for Nero (25). Στένεν can evoke funeral contexts of grief and lament, as I have argued above, but when combined with πόθωι, it suggests a supplementary reason for the groan. Πόθωι is often used as a shorthand for sexual desire; Sanders, Thumiger, Carey, and Lowe (2013) defines the term as an expression of "longing for someone of something that is missed or has been missing," often with an erotic undertone.<sup>70</sup> Πόθωι has a dual function in this line

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<sup>68</sup> Wills 1967, 172 points this out.

<sup>69</sup> Furley 2000, 14 points this out.

<sup>70</sup> Sanders et al. 2013, 253.

of the poem; it not only emphasizes Poppaea's grieving but it also underscores the erotic elements to Poppaea's grieving. Poppaea is grieving her own death *and* her separation from Nero, who is both a husband and a sexual partner.

The more pronounced Sappho allusion invites us to see further potential erotic imagery even in the exceptionally fragmentary lines that follow. Line 30, a section of Poppaea's farewell speech, reads, "θαλαμ[.]δε . . . χην ἔφιγξα θυρέτροι[ς]" ("bedroom... I pressed... door")." The surviving words seem to convey that sometime in the past Poppaea had closed the doors to their bedroom. This could be a reference to Poppaea's fidelity to her husband;<sup>71</sup> much of the poem portrays Poppaea as the ideal wife and barring the metaphorical doors to the bedroom from other suitors would align with this portrayal. But this line could allude to or even describe an erotic scene, as Poppaea is addressing Nero and discussing the doors to the bedroom and the desires that were consummated there during their marriage. As we saw, earlier Eros opened the door at Aphrodite's arrival ("Ἴον Ἔρος ἀνέκοψε (14)") meaning that the door had been closed to all but Nero until that point with only Eros having access to the private world of the couple. There is an association between the physical space of the domestic house, especially the bedroom, with the sexual relationship between Poppaea and Nero. Poppaea's speech is immediately followed by the fragmentary line, λῦσε δὲ θαιρούς (38; "she opened the doors"). Perhaps the doors that Poppaea closed, as referenced in the

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<sup>71</sup> Gillespie 2014; 125 argues for this interpretation.

speech, are now opened at the conclusion, as she accepts her fate and travels to the afterlife and leaves the erotic space of her marriage bed and bedroom behind.

Poppaea's expression of erotic love is at odds with the offer from Aphrodite. Aphrodite attempts to comfort Poppaea by appealing to her nature as the ideal mother who will protect her children in heaven (21-22; τέ]κνα Νέρωνι [...] αἰῶνας [...] φυλάξεις). Poppaea's promised divine future in which she will be the guardian of Nero's children is a manifestation of maternal love. Aphrodite miscalculates when she assumes that Poppaea's dedication to caring for her children is equal or greater than her devotion to Nero and his well-being. From Poppaea's perspective, protecting her children in heaven is not a manifestation of ideal motherhood but a constant reminder of her inability to produce living children for the protection of her still-living husband. The choice is not between motherhood and wifedom, but between success and lack of success in her labor for and devotion to Nero. This grief over role-not-fulfilled is compounded by Poppaea's intense erotic attachment to Nero. Aphrodite fails to address this sexual desire when she attempts to appeal to Poppaea's maternal virtue.

As I have shown so far, the Poppaea poem highlights her role as wife, mother, and lover in idealized terms at the liminal moment she leaves these roles to become a goddess. Aphrodite expects Poppaea to be excited by this transition and the honors conveyed by it. In fact, immediately after trying to end Poppaea's wailing and while attempting to comfort her, Aphrodite tells Poppaea that she need not be so sad because "Fate has made you more [...] than marriage, you blessed one. (20-21; τεῦχε δὲ Μοῖρα [...στ]έρην σε, μάκαιρα, γάμου"). Although the full comparative adjective is lost, it is

likely that this word expressed a positive future for Poppaea, in which she transcends her role in marriage for something better. Aphrodite expects Poppaea to be cheered by the idea that she is more than a wife - that she belongs among the blessed gods. However, Poppaea is not swayed; she prefers to remain as Nero's wife above the future Aphrodite is offering.

### ***2.3 Poppaea as Goddess***

What is the imagined divine future that awaits Poppaea in the world of this poem? In order to understand what Poppaea wants to reject in favor of her mortal life with Nero, we need to consider what this poem and what comparable apotheosis narratives tell us about the life of *Divi* and *Divae* among the gods. Poppaea's (reluctant) apotheosis is unusual but has some literary precedent in those of other imperial or royal figures in both Rome and Egypt. Because Poppaea's eventual ascension to heaven is fragmentary in this poem, a comparative reading with these other narratives can illuminate the textual tropes which lay behind Poppaea's imagined afterlife, which she wishes to trade to continue living with Nero as his mortal wife.

Poppaea's apotheosis was the first instance of a woman being deified by her husband and the Senate. Drusilla, deified by Caligula in 38 CE, and Livia, deified by Claudius in 41 CE, and Claudia, deified by Nero in 63 CE, were the only imperial women to be consecrated prior to Poppaea.<sup>72</sup> As chance would have it, she is also the earliest

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<sup>72</sup> Malik 2020, 3. It is important here to distinguish between private claims of deification, which certainly existed and continued to exist, and a *consecratio*, the official recognition of apotheosis by the Senate, which was reserved for members of the imperial

imperial family member for whom an apotheosis narrative of any sort survives.

Unfortunately any apotheosis narratives of Augustus, Livia, and Drusilla that may have existed are now lost, and Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* belongs more to the genre of satire than a sincere commemoration of his newfound divinity. But the Poppaea poem can be compared to Ovid's accounts of the apotheoses of Romulus, Hersilia, and Caesar which preserve contemporary literary approaches to narrating deification in the early empire.

What does the poem suggest Poppaea's afterlife will be like? As we have seen, Aphrodite has offered Poppaea the role as caretaker to her children in the afterlife (21-22; τέ]κνα Νέρωνι [...] αἰῶνας [...] φυλάξεις). After Aphrodite whisks Poppaea away through the cosmos (50-57), they arrive at a celebration of the gods, ostensibly in Poppaea's honor. There is a choral performance of gods and Muses (58-59; ὅληι δ' ἤειδον ἄπ[αντες ἀρμολ]νήι. Μο[ῦσαι] τε συνήντεον) and Poppaea sits upon a throne (62; ἐπὶ θρόνον ἴζε). The gods rejoice around her (63-64; γεγηθότες ἴζανον ἀ[μφις] δαίμονες). However, this joy and revelry does not sway Poppaea who continues to grieve and look around for Nero (74; παπ]ταίνουσα σύν[ε]θνον ὑπὸ κνέφας). Though this fragmentary passage does not necessarily portray this sadness as a perpetual status for Poppaea, a comparative reading with other apotheosis narratives suggests that her grief will not wane.

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family (McIntyre 2013, 224). For example, Cicero describes in his letters to Atticus that he built a shrine to his late daughter, Tullia (Cic. *Att.* 12.14; McIntyre 2013, 232). In contrast, *consecratio* included the establishment of a priestly college and a shrine or temple (Boatwright 2021, 147).

Although as with the rest of the poem the portion of the Poppaea poem containing the moment in which Aphrodite takes Poppaea from earth is fragmentary, mentions of Poppaea’s journey through meteors (50; “δοκίδες”), comets (51-52; “φρέαρ [...] λαμπάδες [...] τεκμαρ”; “where (there are?) jar-shaped comets”), the sun (54; “Ἡελίου”), the moon (53; “γ]λαυκώπιδος ἀντὶ σ[ελήνης”; “in place of the green-gazed moon”), the stars (54; “ἀστέρα Κυ[λ]ληναῖον”; “Cyllenaean star”), and various planets (55-57, 67) remain or have been reconstructed by Schubert. In one of the more famous accounts of Caesar’s catasterism, Ovid writes that Venus took Caesar’s *animus* among the heavenly stars (Ovid *Met.* 15.846; *caelestibus intulit astris*), where the *animus* “flew higher than the moon, dragging its fiery tail, and shined as a star. (Ovid *Met.* 15. 848-850; *luna volat altius illa flammiferumque trahens [...] crinem stella micat.*)” In both narratives, the deceased is brought through the heavens and celestial bodies, as is common for apotheoses. In his account of Hersilia’s apotheosis, Ovid describes that she vanishes into the air with a falling star (*ibi sidus ab aethere lapsum | decidit in terras; a cuius lumine flagrans | Hersilie crinis cum sidere cessit in auras*; “there, the star slipping from heaven, descended to the earth; from its light, glowing with respect to her hair, Hersilia vanished into the air;” Ovid *Met.* 14. 846-848). These accounts of catasterisms and apotheoses often utilize celestial imagery; Poppaea’s journey through space is an expanded form of the imagined travels of new divinity already found in Ovid.

The involvement of Aphrodite is also precedented. Ovid depicts Romulus’ apotheosis as unique: Romulus is not guided to heaven, but instead vanishes into thin air (*corpus mortale per auras | dilapsum tenues*; “his mortal body vanished into thin air;”

Ovid *Met.* 14.824-825). This unique ascension was requested by Romulus' father, Mars, and granted by Jupiter. Ovid's later account of Julius Caesar's apotheosis states that Venus, his ancestor, took his *animus* to the stars (Ovid *Met.* 15.846). Similarly, Poppaea is escorted into the afterlife by Venus (Aphrodite in the poem, as the poem is in Greek), the mother of Julio-Claudian lineage and a goddess for whom Poppaea had a known affinity.<sup>73</sup> Godly escort, particularly by a god with whom the deceased is associated, is a frequent trope of apotheosis narratives.<sup>74</sup>

Hersilia's apotheosis is also an important comparandum for the Poppaea poem because Hersilia, although legendary, was another deified royal woman. At its core, Hersilia's apotheosis is a story of a devoted wife reunited with her husband. In this narrative, Juno sends Iris to lead Hersilia to heaven after the apotheosis of Romulus. Hersilia replies to the goddess' command *illa verecundo vix tollens lumina vultu* ("that woman, scarcely raising her eyes, with a modest look;" Ovid. *Met.* 14.840). This line emphasizes Hersilia's modesty- a womanly virtue. She then tells Iris to lead her to heaven, saying, *et offer | coniugis ora mihi, quae si modo posse videre | fata semel dederint, caelum accepisse fatebor* ("bring the face of my husband to me, which if the fates allow me to see once, I will say that I have received heaven;" Ovid. *Met.* 14.842-

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<sup>73</sup> Kragelund 2010, 559 points this out.

<sup>74</sup> Claudius is escorted by Hercules in the *Apocolocyntosis*. The trope of the godly escort is preserved even in the satire. Sen. *Apoc.* 5.

844).” Hersilia’s final words express her desire to see her husband again and to remain with him. Hersilia is happily following her deceased husband in death.

Hersilia’s eventual reunion with Romulus in the afterlife indicates that Poppaea’s separation from her husband was temporary. Ovid describes the reunion: *hanc manibus notis Romanae conditor Urbis | excipit et priscum pariter cum corpore nomen | mutat* (“The founder of the Roman city received this woman with his familiar hands and he changed her old name together with her body.” Ovid *Met.* 14. 849-851). These are the only lines in which Hersilia’s experience in the afterlife is described. She is reunited physically with her husband (*manibus...excipit*). He then restores her youth and changes her name to her deified name. Hersilia’s final moments revolve entirely around her relationship with her pre-deceased husband; her apotheosis is a tale of reunification between the ideal wife and her husband. Unlike the apotheoses of Caesar and Romulus which view them as individuals, the apotheoses of women, such as Hersilia and Poppaea, center their relationships with their husbands and their roles as wives and mothers.

But the poets of the early empire were not the first authors in the ancient Mediterranean to consider the immediate afterlife of newly deified monarchs. We can also consider earlier Ptolemaic exemplars which originate from similar geographic contexts as the Poppaea papyrus. In fact, Caitlin Gillespie<sup>75</sup> has analyzed the similarities between Poppaea’s apotheosis and those of Berenice I (Theoc. *Idyll.*) and the lock of

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<sup>75</sup> Gillespie 2014, 129.

Berenice II (Callim. *Aet.*; Cat. 66).<sup>76</sup> The apotheoses of these women prefigure our poem's presentation of Poppaea's transformation into a goddess especially through the presence and facilitation of Aphrodite as the goddess presiding over their marital love as well as the theme of separation from loved ones.<sup>77</sup> After Berenice I's death, she is led to a temple and given dominion over erotic desires of mortals (πᾶσιν δ' ἥπιος ἦδε βροτοῖς μαλακοῦς μὲν ἔρωτας | προσπνείει, κούφας δὲ διδοῖ ποθέοντι μερίμνας; "This gentle woman breathes upon the soft desires of all men, and she makes cares light for those yearning;" Theoc. *Idyll.* 17.51-52). After death, Berenice I is a goddess reigning over a portion of Aphrodite's domain; her affiliation with Aphrodite continues after death.<sup>78</sup> She is also responsible for comforting those who have lost a loved one, just as her husband, Ptolemy did when Berenice I herself died.<sup>79</sup> Berenice I accepts her role as goddess in the afterlife, though her separation from her husband affects her duties as sovereign over part of Aphrodite's domain. This undercurrent of grief at separation from one's spouse is reminiscent of Poppaea's apotheosis as well; the experience of becoming a goddess does not eliminate the loss even for those who embrace the transition to the divine.

Caitlin Gillespie has already demonstrated that the Poppaea poem associates Poppaea with the Ptolemaic queens; I will build upon her argument by discussing the

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<sup>76</sup> The apotheosis of Arsinoë II, which Gillespie also discusses, does not detail her experience after arriving in heaven and thus will not be discussed here.

<sup>77</sup> Gillespie 2014, 129.

<sup>78</sup> Gillespie 2014, 130.

<sup>79</sup> Gillespie 2014, 130.

implications of this association on Poppaea's apotheosis.<sup>80</sup> The catasterism of the lock of Berenice II is most similar to Poppaea's apotheosis. Catullus portrays the lock as mourning its separation from the other locks; its grief is so severe that the separation is akin to torture (*non his tam laetor rebus quam me afore semper | afore me a dominae vertice discrucior*; "I am not so gladdened by these things as I am tortured to always be separated from the head of my mistress;" Cat. 66. 75-76). Despite occupying the heavenly sphere as a constellation, rising and setting daily, the lock wants nothing more than to return to the head of Berenice II.<sup>81</sup> Like Poppaea, the lock is not comforted by its divine status. Instead, it arrives in heaven weeping. The poem concludes with a short statement, reinforcing the fact that the lock would prefer an earthly existence over a divine one: *utinam coma regia fiam | proximus Hydrochoi fulgeret Oarion* ("If only I were a royal lock, just as Orion gleams near Aquarius;" Cat. 66. 93-94). The precedent set by the lock of Berenice II is that divinity does not alleviate the pain of separation from one's loved ones. Just as the lock laments the loss of the other locks and Berenice II's head, Poppaea grieves her temporary separation from Nero. Poppaea searches for Nero when she arrives in heaven (74) and the precedent of the lock of Berenice II suggests that this pain will not dissipate, even with the divinity promised by Aphrodite.

The comparison of Poppaea's apotheosis with those of Hersilia, Berenice I, and the lock of Berenice II illuminates the potential heavenly future which is largely obscured

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<sup>80</sup> Gillespie 2014, 134.

<sup>81</sup> Cat. 66.63-76.

for us due to the fragmentary state of the Papyrus - a future that Poppaea rejects. Unlike the apotheosis of Hersilia, Poppaea's apotheosis is a story of separation rather than unification. Hersilia, whose husband predeceases her, rejoices at her death because she will reunite with her beloved, whom her apotheosis narrative focalizes. Poppaea's apotheosis narrative also centers on her husband, but the story is one of separation and loss. Poppaea's experience in the afterlife promises not romantic reunification, but separation and divine work like those of Berenice I and the lock of Berenice II. Like Berenice I, Poppaea was given a role as a divinity to care for her deceased children. However, unlike Berenice I, Poppaea does not embrace the transition to divinity and is primarily concerned instead with the loss of her husband. Just as the lock of Berenice II never stopped grieving its separation from its loved ones, Poppaea will never stop grieving her separation from Nero.

Poppaea's grief is twofold; any separation from Nero, even temporary, is unbearable, and her divine role as mother to her deceased children is itself painful, as her children should be living and protecting Nero's legacy with their existence. Instead, Poppaea must be separate from Nero and unable to protect him, along with her children; no promise of divinity can alleviate that pain. Nothing, to her, is better than marriage.

## ***2.4 Conclusion***

This poem is not the only evidence we have for the image of Poppaea as the ideal wife and mother and eventually as Diva Poppaea in the ancient world. The Arval Records include a sacrifice to *spes* and possibly *felicitas* when Nero, Poppaea, and the infant

Claudia return to Rome after Claudia's birth.<sup>82</sup> This record reaffirms that the birth of Claudia portended stability for the realm, as Poppaea was able to bear heirs for Nero. After Poppaea's death, she was deified by the Senate and, according to Cassius Dio, at least one shrine in Rome was established to Venus Poppaea, reinforcing the association between Poppaea and the goddess Aphrodite.<sup>83</sup> Poppaea's deification is also confirmed in the epigraphic record: the Arval Records include at least two mentions of sacrifices to the deified Poppaea.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> CIL 06, 02043:

*Isdem [co(n)s(ulibus)]*

*<:ante diem> III idus +[---]*

*magisterio Q(uinti) Tilli Sassi c[ollegi fratrum]*

*Arvalium nomine im[molavit in Capito]=*

*lio A(ulus) Vitellius ob adv[entum Neronis Claudi]*

*Caesaris Augusti G[ermanici et Poppaeae]*

*Augustae et Claud[iae Augustae Iovi b(ovem) m(arem)],*

*Iunoni vacc(am), Min[ervae vacc(am), Saluti Pu]=*

*blicae vaccam, [Felicitati? vaccam],*

*Spei vacc(am), Gen[io ipsius taurum, Iunoni]*

*Poppaeae Aug[ustae vaccam, Iunoni Claudiae]*

*Augustae v[accam].*

*In collegio a[dfuerunt A(ulus) Vitellius, Sulpicius]*

*Camerin[us, ---, L(ucius) Vitel]=*

*lius, C(aius) Pis[o].*

*I[sdem co(n)s(ulibus)]*

*<:ante diem> II[---]*

*magist[erio Q(uinti) Tilli Sassi collegi fratrum]*

*Arv[alium nomine immolavit in Capito]=*

*lio [---]*

*Au[g(usti)? ---]*

<sup>83</sup> For Poppaea's deification by the Senate, see Tac. *Ann.* 16.22. For shrine to Diva Poppaea, see Dio. 63.26.3. Kragelund 2010, 559.

<sup>84</sup> CIL 06, 02044, CIL 11, 01331.

Poppaea also appears on coins minted in both Rome and the provinces. As portable objects with wide circulation patterns, coins are a type of media which can shape popular reception of certain figures and which can even outlive the people portrayed on them. Poppaea's coins, both those from the Imperial mint in Rome and those minted in the provinces, continuously foreground the image of Poppaea as an idealized wife and mother while, in certain cases, also advertising her divine aspects. Poppaea appears as *AUGUSTA* on two issues minted in Rome (Fig. 1).<sup>85</sup> Poppaea is unnamed on this coin type: Nero appears on the obverse, with figures labeled *AUGUSTUS* and *AUGUSTA* on the reverse. Poppaea is the only wife of Nero to have achieved the title of *Augusta*, so she is likely the wife depicted on this coin.<sup>86</sup> This is the only surviving coin type depicting Poppaea that was minted in Rome. After the deluge of imperial coins depicting Agrippina in the earlier years of Nero's reign, the imperial mint seems to have resisted advertising Nero's three wives to the same degree. But even here we can see elements of Poppaea's wider image: her title matches Nero's and celebrates her as a queen consort, she is depicted with a cornucopia which symbolizes fertility, and she is shown sacrificing, which demonstrates piety. All of these elements emphasize Poppaea's status as an ideal imperial wife and mother within imperial messaging.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> RIC I2, 153 nos. 44, 56, pl. 18; BMCRE I, 208 nos. 52-54, pl. 39. Wood, "Vanishing Wives," 2000, 46 n.2.

<sup>86</sup> Alexandridis 2004, 16.

<sup>87</sup> Boatwright 2021, 126 discusses the murky relationship between emperors and centrally minted coins. We can generally assume that centrally minted coins are part of an "imperial ideology," although they cannot necessarily be connected to the emperor directly.

Poppaea's presence on provincial coins, especially from the eastern provinces, is far more widespread and shares many features with our Papyrus poem. Poppaea is depicted on coins in fifteen provinces, eleven of which call her *Poppaea Sebaste*, the Greek equivalent of *Augusta*.<sup>88</sup> Sometimes she appears as a portrait, other times in connection with or assimilated to various goddesses.<sup>89</sup> Unlike the coins minted in Rome, these coins are not part of imperial messaging, but instead reflect more localized understandings of imperial women and their significance.<sup>90</sup> Importantly, eastern provinces were influenced by Hellenistic traditions of presenting both male and female rulers: this influence explains why Poppaea appears on many more provincial coins than imperial coins.<sup>91</sup> Judith Ginsburg shows that provincial coinage is often more interested in a present or prospective view— that is, provincial coins are often concerned with symbolizing the future under the regime.<sup>92</sup> Some examples of these coins demonstrate how eastern provincial coinage perpetuated the image of Poppaea as the idealized imperial wife and mother.

The first example, from Phrygia, depicts Poppaea on the obverse with Aphrodite, accompanied by her scepter and dove, on the reverse (Fig. 2).<sup>93</sup> The connection between Poppaea and Aphrodite has been discussed previously in this chapter. However, the

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<sup>88</sup> Wood 2000, 16.

<sup>89</sup> Wood 2000, 17.

<sup>90</sup> Rose 1997, 3.

<sup>91</sup> Ginsburg 2004, 74.

<sup>92</sup> Ginsburg 2004, 75.

<sup>93</sup> RPC I 2924. According to the online database of the RPC, six examples of these coins survive, all found in Phrygia.

connection of an imperial woman with Aphrodite on a coin is not unique to Poppaea. Generally, Aphrodite symbolizes the marital relationship between emperor and empress, with an emphasis on her domain of love, including but not limited to erotic love.<sup>94</sup> In the context of this coin, Aphrodite represents the marital relationship between Poppaea and Nero and the potential for that relationship to bear an heir. This connection of Aphrodite with Poppaea presents Poppaea as an ideal wife, whose relationship with her husband is rooted in a love which will hopefully result in an heir and stability for the regime.

This theme of Poppaea's potential to mother an heir is also manifest in a second example, RPC 1759D (Fig. 3) from Thrace. Poppaea is depicted on the obverse of this coin and the seated divine personification *Securitas* is on the reverse. The connection of Poppaea with the goddess *Securitas* is another manifestation of the hope that Poppaea will bring stability to the realm through the birth of an heir. Similarly, on RPC 1352A from Euboea (Fig. 4), Poppaea on the obverse is accompanied by Hera on the reverse. The image of Hera, as wife of Zeus, again associates Poppaea with the idealized image of the imperial wife as well as the imperial mother.<sup>95</sup> It is impossible to know whether these coins were minted to commemorate Poppaea's marriage to Nero, the birth of Claudia, or after Claudia's death when Poppaea became pregnant again, given the narrow timeline of Poppaea's marriage to Nero, but the fact that Poppaea did bear a child only perpetuated the hope that she would secure Nero's dynasty and bring stability to the empire.

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<sup>94</sup> Alexandridas 2004, 220.

<sup>95</sup> Alexandridas 2004, 235.

These coins commemorate Poppaea during her life, but they would not have vanished at her death. One coin type from Bithynia depicts Nero on the obverse, with an intentional defacement in favor of Galba, and Poppaea as *Securitas* on the reverse.<sup>96</sup> These coins would have been minted during Poppaea's life but must have been defaced after her death, meaning that these coins would have been circulating long after her death. This shows that images of Poppaea assimilated to goddesses also remained in circulation, taking on new significance after her death: though Poppaea was expected to bring stability and security to the realm through heirs, she became a figure of missed potential.

Our only definitive numismatic evidence for the wider Roman reception of Poppaea's deification comes from a single coin from Judea. This coin depicts a temple for the deified Augusta Poppaea on the obverse and a temple for the deified Claudia on the reverse (Fig. 5).<sup>97</sup> Several examples of this coin have been found and its circulation suggests a wider acceptance of the divine status of Poppaea in the East while also showcasing her status as divine mother of a divine daughter as well. Poppaea is also labeled in Latin as an Augusta on the coin, a title typically reserved for imperial wives who bore children and which was first accorded Poppaea on the birth of her daughter in 63 CE. Judith Ginsburg refers to this method of propaganda as "the politics of legitimacy;" the use of coinage to propagate the status of an imperial woman as Augusta or as divine in order to enforce the legitimacy of the emperor's rule is a common tactic in

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<sup>96</sup> RPC I 2060, 7 coins of this type with similar defacement have been found.

<sup>97</sup> RPC I 4846, 24 coins of this type have been found.

the empire.<sup>98</sup> Although the temples on the coins do not seem to have been built, the very appearance of temples linked with the images and titles of these two women demonstrates an acceptance of their deifications far from Rome in the area of the world where our fragmentary poem comes from.<sup>99</sup>

This material, visual, and documentary material testifies to a lively and multimedia celebration of Poppaea as idealized wife, mother, and eventually goddess in the city of Rome and throughout the empire during Nero's reign. It is within this context that we should understand the surviving Poppaea poem. At the same time, this poem goes further than this complementary evidence in creating for Poppaea an inner emotional life full of conflicting feelings. Throughout the poem, Poppaea is portrayed as a perhaps surprisingly sympathetic figure; she is the potential ideal wife and mother but dies before she is able to achieve this. She is relatable as a woman who died in childbirth without producing viable heirs for her family. This relatability makes her all the more sympathetic. But she is also placed in a uniquely imperial position. Her death is doubly

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<sup>98</sup> Ginsburg 2005, 62.

<sup>99</sup> Kragelund 2010 hypothesizes that at least one Temple to Poppaea may have indeed been dedicated or built in Campania in early spring of 68, but it is likely that this coin uses temple architecture to underscore the divinity of Poppaea and her daughter.

Notably, no positively identified imperial portraits of Poppaea survive (Varner 2004, 83). This is perhaps unsurprising, given the memory sanctions Nero's image experienced after his death which included a collateral *damnatio* for the now long dead Poppaea (Varner 2004, 83). At least one inscription survives, which indicates that such portraits did once exist (CIL 11.6955. Wood, "Vanishing Wives," 2000, 17; Rose 1997, 94-95.). However, because these have been lost, destroyed, or recarved, the only surviving images of Poppaea are the coins discussed above and two cameos which are currently housed in Florence and Bonn (Fig. 6) (Varner 2004, 83).

devastating because she did not achieve her potential as an ideal imperial wife and imperial mother. Poppaea views herself and her children as protection for Nero, her beloved husband who needs an heir to protect his legacy. In ‘failing’ to produce a viable heir, Poppaea feels she has failed Nero, the man to whom she is committed above all else.

Poppaea’s love for Nero in the Poppaea Poem goes beyond expected norms; their love is deeply erotic. Poppaea’s attraction to Nero underscores the poem and emphasizes a crucial point: Poppaea is solely dedicated to Nero. Poppaea is not lamenting her own death, but her separation from Nero. She does not care for status nor does she seek power, as she wishes to remain with Nero rather than become a goddess. This is a fundamentally different characterization than that of the historiographical tradition; Poppaea’s love (erotic and romantic) for Nero is her only motivation, rather than a desire for power. Aphrodite tries to console Poppaea by offering status as a goddess who will care for her children in the afterlife; in so doing, Aphrodite fundamentally misunderstands the basis of Poppaea’s love for Nero. Poppaea does not care for power or status and protecting her children in the afterlife is only a constant reminder of her failure to protect her husband, Nero.



Figure 1: RIC I2, 153, image from the British Museum



Figure 2- RPC I 2924, image from RPC



Figure 3- RPC 1759D, image from RPC



Figure 4- RPC I 1352A, image from RPC



Figure 5- RPC I 4846, image from RPC



Poppaea, Florence, Museo Archeologico, inv. 14519.



Poppaea, Bonn, Private Collection.

Figure 6- Image from Varner 2000, 46.

### **3. Octavia in the *Octavia*: ideal woman or vengeful adversary?**

The *Octavia* is a historical tragedy and the only extant complete example of the *fabula praetexta*. The play focuses on the divorce of Nero from Octavia, his subsequent marriage to Poppaea Sabina, and Octavia's exile in 62 CE. These events are compressed into three days for dramatic purposes; on the first day, Nero divorces Octavia, on the second, he marries Poppaea, and on the third, Octavia is sent away for execution, an event which the play does not stage. Before turning to the arguments of this chapter, it will be useful to rehearse the major movements of the play, all of which I will discuss in turn. The play opens with Octavia's laments about the mistreatment of her family at Nero's hands. She discusses this and her impending divorce with her Nurse, resigning herself to either exact revenge or die (1-272). This scene is followed by the appearance of a Chorus of Roman citizens, who are dismayed at the deposal of their beloved princess (273-375). Then, Nero discusses his intention to marry Poppaea with Seneca, who advocates for Octavia as the more ideal imperial wife (376-592). After their departure from the stage, the ghost of Agrippina appears and curses the marriage of Nero and Poppaea (593-645). The wedding of Nero and Poppaea happens offstage, but Octavia reacts to the news on stage, announcing that she will inevitably be killed (646-668). The Chorus then plans a revolution in Octavia's name (669-689). Poppaea and her Nurse rush on stage and Poppaea recounts an ominous dream while her Nurse attempts to comfort her (690-761). This scene is followed by the appearance of a second Chorus of Roman citizens, who are appalled by the behavior of their Choral counterparts and advocate for social order (762-779). Nero reacts to the riots of the Pro-Octavia Chorus by blaming

Octavia and sentencing her to death (780-876). Octavia laments her fate along with the second Chorus and departs to be executed (877-982).

As is apparent from the above summary, the playwright's portrayal of Octavia is markedly different from the historical tradition. The play's Octavia is indignant about the treatment of her family, voices that indignation frequently to her Nurse, and even debates revenge on Nero; this character is much more dynamic and emotionally engaged than the Octavia of other texts. Where Tacitus and other historians rarely allow us to see things from Octavia's point of view, this play centers her emotional experience and her voice. While there is considerable debate over the date of the *Octavia*, it seems certain that it was written shortly after Nero's death, either under Galba's brief reign or, as I consider more likely, under the Flavians.<sup>1</sup> This makes it the earliest surviving account of Octavia that we have from the post-Neronian world; as a result, the play offers a glimpse into how Octavia's final days were being understood in a world no longer ruled by Nero.

Throughout the play, Octavia is cast as the ideal imperial wife by a number of characters, including her Nurse, the pro-Octavia Chorus, and Seneca. However, there is a considerable yet little noticed disconnect between the portrayal of Octavia by others and Octavia's own words and actions. Despite the fact that many impose the characteristics of the ideal wife upon her and some characters even resort to violence on her behalf, Octavia does not perform the part of wifely virtue, creating a conflict within the play

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A on the date of the *Octavia*.

between the perception of Octavia by others and the reality of the imperial wife's experience of Neronian Rome.

This chapter will analyze how various characters impose self-contradictory constructs of imperial womanhood upon Octavia. On the one hand, those who support Octavia's marriage to Nero project a version of peaceful womanhood upon Octavia which the play suggests is undesirable and unattainable. On the other hand, others imagine that Octavia is a leading figure in the revolution against Nero, despite internal evidence to the contrary. Both projections represent one way of understanding the significance and imagined power of imperial women but neither matches the truth of Octavia's lived experience as staged in the play. Throughout the first two sections, I will show that Octavia outright contradicts and even rejects these characterizations that are imposed upon her; this will thematically tie to the third section, which explores Octavia's symbolic role as Nero's sister and wife, an uncomfortable duality which the play often foregrounds. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the final scene, in which the pro-Poppaea Chorus and Octavia share the stage. Although they both sing their final songs, their dissonant language foregrounds a theme which runs through the play: characters view and describe Octavia based on their imagined constructions of her and have little regard for the lived reality that the character Octavia portrays onstage.

### ***3.1 Wifely Virtues***

In the *Octavia*, the image of an ideal imperial wife is imposed upon Octavia by other characters. These characters see these idealized qualities in Octavia while also simultaneously exhorting Octavia to work harder to embody their projected idea of an

ideal imperial wifedom. Octavia's supporters cite her womanly virtues as the basis for her claim to the role of imperial wife. In their eyes, her lineage is one aspect that strengthens her claim, but her *pudor* and *fides*, among other virtues, uniquely qualify her for the role, especially in contrast to her rival, Poppaea.

We can see this projection at work in the conversation that Seneca and Nero have about Nero's desire for a divorce in the play's second scene (376-592). Nero tells Seneca, *inuisa coniunx pereat et carum sibi | fratrem sequatur: quicquid excelsum est cadat* ("My hated wife must die and must follow her dear brother: whatever is lofty must fall"; 470-471). Nero hates Octavia (*inuisa*); the two are in an unhappy, loveless marriage. This theme is repeated throughout Nero's argument with Seneca; Nero's desire for Poppaea as his wife is motivated primarily by his own happiness, rather than the wishes or perspective of the people. Seneca and Nero weigh the benefit of Nero's marriage to Octavia to the people against the benefit of Nero's marriage to Poppaea to his own personal happiness. But despite this seemingly simple dichotomy between public and private goods, the distinction between Nero's personal happiness and the will of the people becomes blurred as the two debate the political ramifications of Nero's exercise of absolute power.

The debate between Seneca and Nero covers several topics. Most notably for this analysis, the two weigh Octavia's virtues against her personal conflict with Nero. Their argument reads (533-550):

**Sen.** *Implebit aulam stirpe caelesti tuam  
generata Diuo, Claudiae gentis decus,  
sortita fratris more Iunonis toros.*

**Ne.** *Incesta genetrix detrahit generi fidem  
animusque numquam coniugis iunctus mihi.*  
**Se.** *Teneris inannis haud satis clara est fides,  
pudore uictus cum tegit flammam amor.*  
**Ne.** *Hoc equidem et ipse credidi frustra diu,  
manifesta quamuis pectore insociabili  
uultuque signa proderent odium mei.  
tandem quod ardens statuit ulcisci dolor  
dignamque thalamis coniugem inueni meis  
genere atque forma, uicta cui cedet Venus  
Iouisque coniunx et ferox armis dea.*  
**Se.** *Probitas fidesque coniugis, mores pudor  
placeant marito; sola perpetuo manent  
subiecta nulli mentis atque animi bona;  
florem decoris singuli carpunt dies.*

**Sen.** She, born from a god, delight of the Claudian family, will fill your court with a celestial line, she, allotted the bed of her brother in the same way as Juno.

**Ne.** Her incestuous mother drags down the integrity of the family, and my wife's heart was never joined to mine.

**Sen.** Love and fidelity are not at all clear to the young, when love, conquered by modesty, covers its flames.

**Ne.** Indeed I myself even believed this for a long time in vain, although clear signs exhibited her hate for me in her unfriendly heart and on her face. Finally, I am punished by the burning pain in me and I have found a wife worthy of my bed in both family and beauty, conqueror to whom Venus and the wife of Jupiter and the fierce armed goddess will yield.

**Sen.** Probity and faith, morals, modesty should be pleasing to a husband; only the good virtues of the mind and soul remain, bested by none; the days pluck every single flower of beauty.

Seneca emphasizes the divine lineage of Nero's potential children with Octavia; the juxtaposition of *Diuo, Claudiae* (534) highlights Claudius' divinity and, by extension, the inherited divinity of the Julio-Claudian line.<sup>2</sup> Octavia is compared to Juno and is here a

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<sup>2</sup> Ferri 2003, 277 and Berlinger 1935, 92-93 discuss inherited Julio-Claudian divinity.

counterpart to her brother, Nero, as Jupiter. Octavia is divine in her own right through her kinship with Claudius, and Nero and Octavia as a couple are akin to the king and queen of the gods.<sup>3</sup> Seneca implies that fate requires the marriage between the two; Octavia was not just married to Nero on a whim but was *sortita* (535). Nero, therefore, is going against what is divinely ordained by divorcing Octavia.<sup>4</sup>

Nero counters Seneca with two points: Messalina has corrupted the *fides* of Octavia's line and, a point which he elaborates at greater length, Octavia is hostile to Nero.<sup>5</sup> The first point is concerned with the larger legitimacy of Octavia's connection to imperial power as articulated by Seneca. One of Octavia's primary good qualities is her *fides* (echoed by Seneca in 547), but the *fides* of the entire family line has become untrustworthy as Octavia's bloodline has been tainted by the actions of her mother. According to Nero, Messalina's behavior calls Octavia's parentage into question and, by extension, her relationship to the divine Claudius.<sup>6</sup> It is important to note here that the men are arguing about two different manifestations of *fides*; Seneca sees an internal virtue of wifely *fides* in Octavia, while Nero questions her legitimacy and that of her line due to the lack of wifely *fides* displayed by Messalina.<sup>7</sup> Nero does not (at this moment, at

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<sup>3</sup> Boyle 2008, 175 points out the analogy of Nero and Octavia to Jupiter and Juno.

<sup>4</sup> Wilson 2003, 69.

<sup>5</sup> *Fides* is a crucial quality of a good wife and a *perfida* wife can bring ruin. See Bernstein 2019 for the importance of *fides* in marriage. Stat. *Silv.* 3.5.44-51 and Prop. 13.12.23-38 are examples of idealized faithful wives in Roman literature. See also Treggiari 1991, 234-240 for *fides* in a wife.

<sup>6</sup> For Messalina as the corrupter of *fides* in the line, see Ginsberg 2019, 210 and Boyle 2008, 175.

<sup>7</sup> Bruckner 1976, 93.

least) argue that Octavia lacks *fides* as a woman, but that her own *fides* is undermined by her mother's lack thereof. Octavia's virtues as a woman are outweighed by her dubious familial link to Claudius.

Nero follows this point at significantly greater length with the more personal and (in his eyes) compelling reason for his divorce from Octavia: she does not like him. Nero emphasizes Octavia's hostility in his next lines: *manifesta quamuis pectore insociabili | uultuque signa proderent odium mei* ("Though a hostile heart and face revealed plainly the reality of her hate"; 541-542). Octavia's *odium* for Nero is obvious to him; she is unable and perhaps even unwilling to hide her feelings. Perhaps more importantly, Nero is in pain (*dolor*, 543) being married to Octavia because she hates him.<sup>8</sup> As Ginsberg has argued, these lines draw on and invert elegiac imagery to underscore Nero's erotic angst: Octavia's passionate hate of Nero is, in Nero's eyes, a subversion of the elegiac love he would prefer.<sup>9</sup> This language demonstrates that Nero desires a wife who is both faithful, yes, but also passionately loving, in contrast to Octavia's thinly veiled hate.<sup>10</sup>

Seneca attempts to assuage Nero's complaint, but seeks to reframe the value of womanly virtue over erotic passion in the imperial marriage. In his response, Seneca

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<sup>8</sup> Ferri 2003, 279.

<sup>9</sup> As Ginsberg (2019, 216) argues, Octavia and Nero's relationship is an inversion of the elegiac love; the two burn with mutual hatred (*secreta repetit semper atque odio pari | ardens mariti mutua flagrat face*. ("She always seeks seclusion and, burning with hate for her husband, blazes with the same torch"; 49-50)". Octavia's hatred for Nero is both personally hurtful and politically problematic; she is failing her imperial duty by refusing to bear Nero's children (Ginsberg 2019, 218). See also Bruckner 1976, 94.

<sup>10</sup> See Boyle 2008, 178 for Nero's marital preferences and priorities.

mirrors Nero's elegiac language, but brushes aside Nero's complaint of lack of amatory passion from Octavia. Instead, Seneca portrays Octavia as a woman in love, whose virtues compel her to hide her passion behind a demure façade.<sup>11</sup> What continues to matter to Seneca is Octavia's suitability to the role of empress because of her lineage and virtues; from his perspective, the importance of the imperial marriage is not private marital harmony but the public status of each of the participants. While making this argument, Seneca reduces Nero's relationship with Poppaea to one driven by lust and beauty (549-550). Seneca argues that Octavia is superior to Poppaea due to her virtues: *probitas*, *fides*, and *pudor* (557-558).<sup>12</sup> It is these qualities that matter. Poppaea, therefore, must be unfit for the throne because she lacks the virtues of Octavia.<sup>13</sup> The ideal imperial wife does not need to feel overwhelming sexual passion for her husband, from Seneca's perspective, so Poppaea does not have any advantage over Octavia.

Seneca's foregrounding of *probitas* is noteworthy, as Octavia's moral rectitude also becomes an important source of spousal disgust in another later text which can help explicate the word's significance here. At *Annales* 13.12.2, Tacitus explains Nero's dissatisfaction with his wife because:

*quando uxore ab Octavia, nobili quidem et probitatis spectatae, fato quodam an quia praevalent inlicita, abhorrebat*

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<sup>11</sup> Ferri 2003, 278 explains Seneca's rhetorical strategy here.

<sup>12</sup> *Probitas* is often used to describe the innate virtue of a wife (see Ovid *Heroides* 17.174, Cicero *epistulae ad familiares* 14.1.1, and Tacitus *Annals* 13.12.2).

*Pudor*, alongside *fides* is seen in reference to a wife's virtues (*fuit uxori fides et mixta pudori gratia*, Stat. *Silv.* 5.1.65). See Treggiari 1991, 161-183 for examples of desirable female *pudor* in marriage.

<sup>13</sup> Boyle 2008, 177 argues that this is Seneca's implication.

since he hated his wife Octavia, who indeed was of noble birth and visible probity, because of a certain flaw or because illicit deeds prevail.

In this passage, Tacitus suggests that it is some degeneracy on Nero's part that is destroying his marriage to Octavia; her *probitas* is understood to be a desirable trait in a wife. That Tacitus invokes the same virtue of *probitas* in discussion of the same scenario, Nero's hatred for Octavia, shows that Octavia's *probitas* is of central importance to the construction of her character in the literary record from its earliest days and also that this concept, which lasts until Tacitus, gives her story its definitive shape as a virtuous woman (married to an unvirtuous man). According to Seneca and to Tacitus, the disintegration of this imperial marriage is due in large part to Nero's twisted rejection of a desirable trait in an imperial wife.

But the *Octavia's* Seneca is ignoring a crucial point: regardless of the claim and prestige of Nero and Octavia's potential children, they cannot have children if Octavia refuses to have a sexual relationship with Nero, as he suggests. Seneca entirely ignores the interpersonal relationships which stand in the way of Octavia's potential to "fill the royal court with celestial children" (*Implebit aulam stirpe caelesti tuam*). Seneca interprets imperial marriage as politically beneficial with no regard for the importance of amity in the relationship. He seems to assume that children just *happen*. As a result, he fails to acknowledge Nero's complaint that he cannot procreate with a woman who hates him so deeply.

Seneca is not the first character to overlook Octavia's antipathy for Nero in order to focus on her reproductive potential. Just before the Seneca-Nero scene, a Chorus of

Roman citizens also described Octavia as virtue-incarnate as they lament the rumor that Nero intends to divorce her. The Pro-Octavia Chorus' opening lines read (273-287):<sup>14</sup>

*Quae fama modo uenit ad aures?  
utinam falso credita perdat  
frustra totiens iactata fidem,  
nec noua coniunx  
nostri thalamos principis intret,  
teneatque suos nupta penates  
Claudia proles.  
edat partu pignora pacis,  
qua tranquillus gaudeat orbis  
seruetque decus Roma aeternum.  
Fratris thalamos sortita tenet  
maxima Iuno,  
soror Augusti sociata toris  
cur a patria pellitur aula?  
sancta quid illi prodest pietas  
diuusque pater? quid uirginitas  
castusque pudor?*

What rumor now has come to our ears? If only it caused our trust to wane, believed falsely, thrown around too much in vain, no new wife should enter the bed of the *princeps*, and the offspring of Claudius should hold her household as wife. She should bear pledges of peace in birth, in which the peaceful world would rejoice and glorious Rome would protect forever. Greatest Juno, allotted the bed of her brother, holds it, why should the sister of Augustus, sharing his bed, be beaten from the halls of her father? How does her holy piety and divine father benefit her? How do her virginity and chaste modesty benefit her?

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<sup>14</sup> There are two Choruses in this play (Ginsberg 2017, 142; Boyle 2008, 62). The first appears after Octavia's scene with her Nurse— this is the pro-Octavia Chorus. This Chorus riots after Nero's wedding to Poppaea. The second Chorus appears after Poppaea's scene with her Nurse. This Chorus is the pro-Poppaea Chorus, though their viewpoint tends more towards maintaining peace and the status quo rather than an affiliation with Poppaea specifically. See n.70 for information on the identity of the final Chorus.

The Chorus praises Octavia's *sancta pietas*, *virginitas*, and *castus pudor* (286-288) and are aghast that a woman of such virtue can be driven from her husband-brother's bed.<sup>15</sup> But if the Chorus of Roman people hope for an imperial baby, there is something odd about the virtues they focus on.

Both *pietas* (dutifulness) and *pudor* (modesty) are virtues often associated with the publicly agreed upon standard for ideal wives; Roman maidens and *matronae* outwardly displayed these qualities and were publicly praised for them.<sup>16</sup> Ovid, for example, praises his wife in the *Tristia* for being a *pia coniunx*: her offer to publicly accompany him into exile confirmed this designation.<sup>17</sup> The ideal wife is the paragon of these virtues when appearing in public settings. But *virginitas* comes as a surprise; this virtue is a quality reserved for praising young, unmarried girls, not wives. Discussions of women's virtue and marital status commonly appeared in epitaphs; the Romans had several words for women without husbands, depending on their situation, but the labels of *virgo* and *virginitas* were reserved for women who had never been married and who were, therefore, imagined to not have been sexually active.<sup>18</sup> In contrast to qualities of *pietas* and *pudor*, which women were expected to model throughout their lives, *virginitas* was a temporary label, ascribed only to unmarried women. Once women were married,

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<sup>15</sup> The Chorus emphasizes the virtues of past Romans in this ode and holds Octavia up as a symbol of those virtues. Ginsberg 2017, 150.

<sup>16</sup> Strong 2016, 18 on the qualities of the ideal wife.

<sup>17</sup> See Strong 2016, 20 for examples of *pietas* in a spouse.

<sup>18</sup> Mueller 2010, 301 n. 26.

they were no longer publicly praised for *virginitas*, even in epitaphs which aimed to present the best, most sanitized, most sexually “pure” version of the women.

The Chorus’ citation of Octavia’s *virginitas* also draws attention to *castus* as the adjective attached to *pudor*. While there is nothing unusual in expecting a married woman to be chaste (*castus*), that expectation is already implicit in *pudor*. The use of *castus*, then, seems to bring *pudor* closer to *virginitas* in the Chorus’ idea of Octavia: a woman separate from sexual activity. The concept of *castus pudor* appears elsewhere in Latin literature. The author of the *Appendix Vergiliana* writes (*Lyd.* 53-55):

*Ausus egon primus castos violare pudores,  
sacratamque meae vittam temptare puellai  
immatura mea cogor nece solvere fata?*

Am I, since I dared first to violate the chaste purity and to test the sacred ribbon of the girl, forced to end my life prematurely with death?

The emphasis of *primus* in this passage indicates that the described girl was a virgin; the author describes the act of assaulting with a virgin as violating her *castus pudor*. The act of sex seemingly destroys *castus pudor*.

Ovid also associates *castus pudor* with virginity. He describes the sacrifice of the virgin Polyxena on the tomb of Achilles in this way (Ovid *Met.* 13.477-480):

*illa super terram defecto poplite labens  
pertulit intrepidus ad fata novissima vultus;  
tunc quoque cura fuit partes velare tegendas,  
cum caderet, castique decus servare pudoris.*

That girl (Polyxena), sinking to the ground with bending knees, held her impassive expression to her death; then also she took care to cover her body while she fell and to preserve the dignity of her chaste modesty.

Once again, the term *castus pudor* is associated with an unmarried, and in this case explicitly virginal, woman. This sort of chastity is a characteristic of ostensibly virginal women; Octavia, married for nine years, would not generally be assumed to have this trait.

The Chorus' suggestion that Octavia's virtue is defined by *virginitas* and to some degree, her *castus pudor*, is incongruent with her married status. Scholars have indeed puzzled over this his emphasis on virginity. Ferri, for example, suggests that the Chorus mentions Octavia's virginity in order to obfuscate Nero's historical charge of infertility, which was the official reason for which Octavia was divorced.<sup>19</sup> However, the discussion of this historical allegation is absent from the play; instead, the Chorus, along with other Octavia supporters, is implicitly quite sure of the princess' fertility (*edat partu pignora pacis*; 279).

The Chorus' mention of *virginitas* is doubly strange given their insistence that Octavia - not some other woman - bear Nero's heirs. The Chorus is simultaneously praising Octavia's childlike virtue of *virginitas* along with her matronly virtues of *pudor* and *pietas* and, implicitly, *fecunditas*. The Chorus both cites Octavia's public virtues as justification for her status as imperial wife and imposes the expectations of the ideal imperial woman upon Octavia, without regard for how these contradict. Octavia is doubly cast as the innocent virgin and the idealized matron, motifs which will allow a comparison to Lucretia and Verginia later in the same choral ode which I will explore

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<sup>19</sup> Ferri 2003, 208.

below. The contradiction is a non-issue to the Chorus, who quickly move to focusing on a different paradigm for Octavia: the archetypal chaste woman standing in contrast to a corrupt regime.<sup>20</sup>

Let's turn back to Seneca's discussion with Nero where, Nero explains, Octavia's lack of sexual passion is one of his complaints about his wife; his line "my wife's heart was never mine" is spoken in response to Seneca's assertion that Nero will share Octavia's bed and she will bear him heirs (533-539).

**Sen.** *Implebit aulam stirpe caelesti tuam  
generata diuo, Claudiae gentis decus,  
sortita fratris more Iunonis toros.*

**Ne.** *Incesta genetrix detrahit generi fidem,  
animusque numquam coniugis iunctus mihi.*

**Sen.** *Teneris in annis haud satis clara est fides,  
pudore uictus cum tegit flammam amor.*

**Sen.** She, born from a god, delight of the Claudian family, will fill your court with a celestial line, she, allotted the bed of her brother in the same way as Juno.

**Ne.** Her incestuous mother drags down the integrity of the family, and my wife's heart was never joined to mine.

**Sen.** Love and fidelity are not at all clear to the young, when love, conquered by modesty, covers its flames.

Seneca responds that Octavia's *pudor* prevents her from showing a passion which he is sure she feels. However, this assertion seems hopelessly naive, as was the assertion by the Chorus that Octavia will bear Nero's children despite remaining virginal. Here Seneca uses Octavia's *pudor* to justify her lack of passion for Nero; Octavia is simply too

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<sup>20</sup> Smith 2003, 408 points out the Chorus' lack of concern with its own contradictory statements.

virtuous to be the wife that Nero wants. This unrealistically idealized portrayal of Octavia belies the truth of the matter: in the world of this play, Octavia hates Nero and simply will not consummate her marriage to him.

Throughout the play, Octavia's supporters expect her to embody the role of ideal imperial wife (including through pregnancy) because she already embodies the virtues of an ideal imperial daughter and ideal imperial woman more generally. Seneca and the Pro-Octavia Chorus speak about Octavia as if she always displays these virtues. But in the play's first scene, we have a contrasting idea voiced by Octavia's Nurse. The scene between Nurse and empress occurs in the imperial bedroom away from anyone else's eyes and ears. It therefore represents an intimate conversation between confidants, between an empress and the woman who knows her best. It is striking, therefore, that the Nurse does not necessarily see Octavia as the embodiment of the ideal imperial woman, but rather as a woman filled with passions that stand in the way of performing her role as wife, including a sexual relationship with Nero. As a result in her conversations with Octavia, she encourages Octavia to *perform* these virtues for her own benefit and safety regardless of their veracity (174-182):<sup>21</sup>

**Octavia.** *Extinguat et me, ne manu nostra cadat.*

**Nurse.** *Natura uires non dedit tantas tibi.*

**Oct.** *Dolor ira maeror miseriae luctus dabunt.*

**Nur.** *Vince obsequendo potius immitem uirum.*

**Oct.** *Vt fratrem ademptum scelere restituat mihi?*

**Nur.** *Incolumis ut sis ipsa, labentem ut domum genitoris olim subole restituas tua.*

**Oct.** *Expectat aliam principis subolem domus.*

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<sup>21</sup> Ginsberg 2019, 215 argues for this interpretation of the following quote.

*me dira miseri fata germani trahunt.*

**Oct.** He must kill me also, or die by my hand.

**Nur.** Nature did not give you great enough strength.

**Oct.** Pain, anger, sorrow, misery, grief will give it.

**Nur.** Conquer your harsh husband with compliance.

**Oct.** So that he might restore to me my brother, snatched away by his wickedness?

**Nur.** So that you yourself might be safe, and so that you might restore the house of your father one day with your offspring.

**Oct.** The house of the *princeps* awaits the offspring of another. My wretched brother's dreadful fate drags me down.

Octavia's Nurse urges Octavia to stifle her need for vengeance and her grief, opting for *obsequendo* (177) instead. *Obsequia*, compliance, is yet another term used to praise wives. For example, Quintilian refers to a wife in this way (*decl.* 262): *uxorem pudicam, obsequentem, fidelem*. The terms *pudicam* and *fidelem* are already familiar praises for the ideal wife, and here Quintilian adds compliance. CIL III 8340 also uses *obsequia* in conjunction with *fides*, calling the deceased woman *coniugi fideli et obsequiae*. And so it seems that in Roman culture, *obsequium* was considered an ideal performance of wifely virtue and that the ideal wife was one who was by nature a follower of her husband. With this advice, Octavia's Nurse is encouraging her to again conform to the image of the ideal wife if not in virtuous nature then in performance.

In spite of the Nurse's own acknowledgement of Nero's violence, all her solutions are centered on Octavia's role as obedient wife: she encourages Octavia to show deference (*obsequendo*, 177) to Nero, which in this context takes on the narrow meaning

of sexual compliance, also an implicit quality of ideal wives in the Roman imagination.<sup>22</sup> According to the Nurse, it is this which will enable Octavia to restore the house of her father with her own sons. Octavia need only continue to *perform* the role of the ideal imperial wife, suppressing any impulses which contradict with this, in order to regain Nero's favor.

Octavia responds that she sees no path to reconciliation with Nero; Poppaea's pregnancy is a threat to Octavia and any future heirs she might bear (182-183; *Expectat aliam principis subolem domus. | me dira miseri fata germani trahunt*; "The emperor's house awaits other sons. My poor brother's dreadful fate drags me down"). However, the Nurse continues to insist, despite Octavia's arguments, that Octavia can win in the love triangle if only she embodies a similar constellation of qualities as Seneca cites in his conversation with Nero. As a result, her strategy ignores both Octavia's own assertions and the reality of the relationship between Nero and Poppaea.

Within the play, those who support Octavia's status as empress and wife of Nero project a number of gendered virtues upon her. To some, she is already the ideal wife and Roman matron and, more importantly, she is the ideal *imperial* wife; to others, she need only perform this role in a way that satisfies Nero and the empire. Octavia's supporters impose several virtues of the ideal imperial woman upon her, in spite of the fact that these virtues can be mutually exclusive, and this fundamental incompatibility of virtues

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<sup>22</sup> Boyle 2008,105. See CIL III 8340 (*coniugi fideli et obsequiae*) and CIL VIII 27711 (*Aureia Tertula marito suo se(m)per obsecuta*) for examples of *obsequia* as a trait of the ideal wife.

highlights the unattainable standards placed upon Octavia in the play by those closest to her and by the Roman public. Despite the praise heaped upon her, from the very opening of the play, Octavia cannot play the role of Nero's ideal wife.

### **3.2 Vengeance, Power, and Imperial Marriage**

For those familiar with Octavia's role in Tacitus' *Annales*, it may come as a surprise that one of the play's major themes is vengeance. First and foremost, Octavia desires vengeance against Nero. But we also see the Roman people desire vengeance on Octavia's behalf. And ultimately Nero desires vengeance against his wife for the revolution he assumes she has fostered. The desire for vengeance motivates every action in the play and undercuts any of the play's projected idealization of imperial marriage or its insistence that Octavia play the part of harmonious wife.

The strongest voice speaking against Octavia's ability to play the role of Nero's virtuous wife is her own. Octavia's hatred of Nero and her desire for vengeance run throughout the *Octavia*. Behind closed doors she openly despises her husband and dreams of avenging her father and brother. She debates whether she has the ability to exact revenge personally, but regardless of whether she has the capacity to execute her plans, Octavia's expression of such emotions contradicts the desire of other characters to see her only as the ideal imperial wife.

When she is alone on stage at the start of the play, Octavia thinks that she has no power but this does not stop her from wanting vengeance. This sentiment is exemplified by her comparison of her own situation to that of Electra (57-71):

*O mea nullis aequanda malis*

*fortuna, licet  
 repetam luctus, Electra, tuos!  
 tibi maerenti caesum licuit  
 flere parentem,  
 scelus ulcisci uindice fratre,  
 tua quem pietas hosti rapuit  
 textitque fides:  
 me crudeli sorte parentes  
 raptos prohibet lugere timor  
 fratrisque necem deflere uetat,  
 in quo fuerat spes una mihi  
 totque malorum breue solamen.  
 nunc in luctus seruata meos  
 magni resto nominis umbra.*

Oh my bad fortune equal to nothing, indeed I repeat your suffering, Electra! It was permitted for you, lamenting, to weep for your murdered father, to avenge wickedness with your vengeful brother, whom your faith snatched from the enemy and your trust hid: fear prevents me from lamenting for my parents, snatched by cruel fate, and forbids me from weeping for the murder of my brother, on whom my only hope rested, my brief respite from so many evils. Now, preserved in my grief, I remain as a shadow of a great name.

Like Electra, her father was murdered by her (step)mother, leaving her desirous of vengeance. However, Octavia's grief is unparalleled, even by Electra (*nullis aequanda malis*, 57) because Octavia's brother, her Orestes figure, has been murdered as well.<sup>23</sup> This leaves Octavia with little hope for vengeance; she is paralyzed by fear (*prohibet...timor*, 66) and helpless.<sup>24</sup> She sees death as her only escape (*Qui me Stygias mittet ad umbras*, "[the day] which will send me to dark Styx." 79).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Boyle 2008, 82 for the interpretation that Octavia's grief is unparalleled and the loss of her Orestes.

<sup>24</sup> See Ferri 2003, 147 for Octavia's lack of recourse.

<sup>25</sup> Kragelund 2016, 211 for the implications of Octavia longing for death.

This comparison to Electra is perhaps unsurprising given the role of the Orestes myth on the Neronian stage. Suetonius (*Nero* 21.3) and Dio (63.9.4) report that Nero was compared to and performed as Orestes after the death of Agrippina as part of an attempt to frame the narrative around that shocking and unpopular event.<sup>26</sup> By explicitly casting Octavia as Electra and Britannicus as Orestes, the *Octavia* subverts this paradigm. Nero is no longer the ‘heroic’ Orestes whose matricide could be justified. Instead, he is Aegisthus, the tyrant. His actions prevent the possibility of vengeance by the Orestes figure Britannicus. Octavia wants to be an Electra, a female figure whose father’s murder is avenged, but she sees no avenue to this vengeance without her Orestes, Britannicus.

Octavia’s desire for vengeance remains consistent, but her resolve for vengeance oscillates in the play. In her opening lines, Octavia is lamenting alone and is convinced of her powerlessness. She cites fear as the reason that she cannot even mourn her family (*prohibet...timor*; “fear prevents me”; 66) and emphasizes her sadness (*nunc in luctus seruata meos | magni resto nominis umbra*; “Now living for my tears I’m left, The shadow of a great name”; 70-71). Initially, Octavia does not believe that she has the resources or accomplices necessary to avenge her family.

But as the scene continues and she begins conversing with her Nurse, her perception of her own capacity as a vengeful agent seems to shift. The Nurse enters after Octavia’s opening monologue and attempts in vain to stifle Octavia’s tears before

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<sup>26</sup> Leigh 2017; Champlin 2005; 77; Kragelund 2005, 71; Boyle 2008, 17 note this connection and discuss the veracity of this anecdote. See also Bartsch 1994, 8-58 for analysis of the relationship between Nero’s actions and his performances.

recounting the various evils enacted by Nero and Agrippina (137-174). Octavia responds to the Nurse's exposition (174-186):

**Octavia.** *Extinguat et me, ne manu nostra cadat!*

**Nurse.** *Natura uires non dedit tantas tibi.*

**Oct.** *Dolor ira maeror miseriae luctus dabunt.*

**Nur.** *Vince obsequendo potius immitem uirum.*

**Oct.** *Vt fratrem ademptum scelere restituat mihi?*

**Nur.** *Incolumis ut sis ipsa, labentem ut domum genitoris olim subole restituas tua.*

**Oct.** *Expectat aliam principis subolem domus; me dira miseri fata germani trahunt.*

**Nur.** *Confirmet animum ciuium tantus fauor.*

**Oct.** *Solatur iste nostra, non releuat mala.*

**Nur.** *Vis magna populi est.*

**Oct.** *Principis maior tamen.*

**Oct.** He must kill me also, or die by my hand.

**Nur.** Nature did not give you great enough strength.

**Oct.** Pain, anger, sorrow, misery, grief will give it.

**Nur.** Conquer your harsh husband with compliance.

**Oct.** So that he might restore to me my brother, snatched away by his wickedness?

**Nur.** So that you yourself might be safe, and so that you might restore the house of your father one day with your offspring.

**Oct.** The house of the *princeps* awaits the offspring of another. My wretched brother's dreadful fate drags me down.

**Nur.** The great favor of the people should strengthen your spirit.

**Oct.** My spirit is comforted, my misfortunes are not lightened.

**Nur.** The force of the people is great.

**Oct.** The force of the emperor is greater.

Octavia proclaims that Nero must fall by her hand or kill her, a prospect which her Nurse deems impossible due to Octavia's lack of strength. Octavia counters that her overwhelming grief and anger will allow her to exact vengeance (*dolor ira maeror miseriae luctus dabunt*, 176). This change of perspective on her own capacity for vengeance is preceded by the Octavia/Electra comparison; Sophocles' Electra too

proposes vengeance against Aegisthus, which her sister discourages (955-7, 1019-29).<sup>27</sup> Similarly to Octavia's assertion that Nero must kill her or die by her hand (*manu nostra cadat*, 174), Electra declares to her sister that Aegisthus must be killed by Electra's own hand, αὐτόχειρί μοι μόνῃ (Soph. *Elec.* 1019). Electra's sister, like Octavia's Nurse, attempts to dissuade her, but only succeeds in angering her more. Octavia's grief and anger has been stirred by the very monologue which the Nurse intends to calm her. Notably, Octavia views her own grief and anger as motivators now rather than hindrances, but she seems to consider that the only path towards vengeance available to her is one that comes from her own hands (*manu nostra*, 174).

This is because Octavia consistently understands her predicament as a personal, familial matter, and this is highlighted by the setting of the play. Until Octavia's final speech as she is led away to her death, the women in the play only appear within the walls of the imperial palace.<sup>28</sup> Octavia seemingly only considers her marital implosion as a personal situation between herself, Poppaea, and Nero rather than a matter of public concern. An audience can almost forget, just as Octavia seems to have forgotten, that the imperial household is not entirely private, and intersects with the public sphere.<sup>29</sup> But as the play demonstrates, the relationship between the imperial family and the Roman public is fundamentally symbiotic. This is shown even in the play's scenography: as it progresses, Octavia moves from the interior spaces of the home, to the threshold, to

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<sup>27</sup> Ferri 2003, 178.

<sup>28</sup> Boyle 2008, 63; Kragelund 2005, 89.

<sup>29</sup> Boyle 2008, 63; See Milnor 2005.

public space as her conflict with Nero evolves from romantic dispute to public threat to the regime.<sup>30</sup>

In the early empire, the image of the health of the imperial family is analogous to the health of the empire, and the play endorses this message.<sup>31</sup> In fact, Octavia's Nurse even suggests to her that she need not worry about divorce because the Roman people's love of her will protect her (183-185):

Nutrix: *Confirmet animum civium tantus fauor.*

Octavia: *Solatur iste nostra, non releuat mala.*

N: *Vis magna populi est.*

Nurse: Take courage from your people's great support.

Octavia: That comforts, not lightens, my misfortunes.

N: The people's power is great.

While Octavia herself dismisses this idea and continuously views her divorce as a conflict between herself, Nero, and Poppaea, the play soon confirms the Nurse's assessment that the people have as much a stake in the imperial marriage as the individuals within the marriage. Nero's marriage is as much a public issue as it is a private one.<sup>32</sup>

Despite lacking strength on an individual level, Octavia's popularity as the imperial wife could have posed a threat to Nero. Historically, imperial women enjoyed few official powers within the principate; women were expected to refrain from public

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<sup>30</sup> Kragelund 2016, 185; Ballairra 1974.

<sup>31</sup> Fertik 2019, 10; Milnor 2005, 147.

<sup>32</sup> For the public/ private dichotomy of the imperial marriage, see also Manuwald 2003, 53.

displays of power and to act with restraint.<sup>33</sup> Ancient authors praised various empresses on their self-control. For example, Livia is praised for her discipline and restraint in the *Senatus Consultum de Pisone patre*:<sup>34</sup>

*item senatum laudare magnopere Iuliae Aug(ustae) Drusiq(ue) Caesaris  
moderationem imitantium principis nostri iustitiam*

(133-134)

That the Senate earnestly praised the restraint of Julia Augusta and Drusus Caesar, emulating the justice of our *princeps*.<sup>35</sup>

*Senatum arbitrari et Iuliae Aug(ustae), optume de r(e) p(ublica) merita  
non partu tantum modo principis nostri, sed etiam multis magnisq(ue)  
erga cuiusq(ue) ordinis homines beneficis, quae, cum iure meritoq(ue)  
plurimum posse in eo, quod a senatu petere<t>, deberet, parcuissimum  
uteretur eo, et principis nostri summa<e> erga matrem suam pietati  
suffragandum indulgendumq(ue)...*

(115-120)

That both Julia Augusta, who was most well deserving of the republic not only because she gave birth to our *princeps* but also because of her many and great kindnesses to men of every order— although she rightly and deservedly should have the greatest influence in what she requested from the Senate, she used it most sparingly— and the very great devotion of our *princeps* to his mother should be supported and indulged.

However, the ideal of restraint was not always the reality; multiple empresses, including Livia and Poppaea, are documented using their influence to sway the emperor in favor of various causes.<sup>36</sup> It is clear that, despite their lack of official power, imperial women exercised their influence via their relationship with the emperor.

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<sup>33</sup> Boatwright 2021, 16.

<sup>34</sup> Boatwright 2021, 17.

<sup>35</sup> *SCPP* Latin and translations from Potter and Damon 1999.

<sup>36</sup> Boatwright 2021, 47.

Octavia lacked this influence due to her estrangement from Nero, but she still had the opportunity to wield popular influence. Within the play, Octavia never deliberately uses the people to her advantage, but, as we will see below, the rage of her supporters over her divorce is enough influence to drive Nero to eventually command Octavia's execution. Historically, the power of the people would influence the marital choices of several future emperors. Domitian remarried Domitia *quasi efflagitante populo reduxit* (Suet. Dom. 3.1).<sup>37</sup> According to Suetonius, Domitian remarried Domitia out of his own desire, but did so as if (*quasi*) he was compelled by the people. This comment indicates that the power of the people has the potential to drive the emperor's choice of wife by the end of the first century CE. This reality lends power to the threats of the mob in the *Octavia*; despite Nero's attempts to exercise absolute power in his pursuits, the people can and did influence the emperor's marriage. Octavia lacked institutional power in the traditional sense due to her non-harmonious relationship with Nero, but her popularity among the people was an alternative form of power, which the historical Octavia could have wielded.

In the *Octavia*, Octavia seems unaware of the immense power she could wield through popular support, but the play makes clear that this power poses a real threat to Nero's reign from the perspective of other characters. As Octavia considers vengeance on a personal level, we soon see that her supporters, the Pro-Octavia Chorus, plan to use their power to keep her as the imperial wife (293-308):

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<sup>37</sup> Boatwright 2021, 110.

*Illi reges hac expulerant  
 urbe superbos  
 ultique tuos sunt bene manes,  
 uirgo dextra caesa parentis,  
 ne seruitium paterere graue et  
 improba ferret praemia uictrix dira libido.  
 Te quoque bellum triste secutum est,  
 mactata tua, miseranda, manu,  
 nata Lucreti,  
 stuprum saeui passa tyranni.  
 dedit infandi sceleris poenas  
 cum Tarquinio Tullia coniunx,  
 quae per caesi membra parentis  
 egit saeuos impia currus  
 laceroque seni uiolenta rogos  
 nata negauit.*

Those men expelled proud kings from this city, and avenged your ghost well, virgin slain by the hand of her father lest you suffer grave slavery and lest harsh lust, conquering, gain a wicked prize. Sad war followed you also, wretched girl, daughter of Lucretius, slaughtered by your own hand, after enduring the rape of a savage tyrant. Tarquin and his wife Tullia paid penalties for the inspeakable crime, Tullia who drove her savage chariot through the limbs of her slaughtered father impiously and denied pyres to the old mangled man viciously.

The Chorus compares Octavia to Verginia (298-300) and Lucretia (301-303), women who were renowned for their virtues, and whose deaths brought about the end of a tyranny through popular revolution. According to Livy, Verginia was a *virgo* who displayed remarkable *pudor* (*hanc virginem adultam forma excellentem Appius amore amens pretio ac spe perlicere adortus, postquam omnia pudore saepta animadvertit*, “Appius, mad with love, tried to overcome this maiden, exceptionally mature in beauty, with money and hope, after he noticed all her protected *pudor*”; *ab Urbe Condita* 3.44.4) and Lucretia a woman with *obstinatam pudicitiam* (*ab Urbe Condita* 1.58.5). By praising

the same virtues in Octavia as Livy praises in Verginia and Lucretia, the Chorus invokes the image of both women before mentioning them by name. By praising Octavia's qualities of *pudor*, *virginitas*, and *pietas*, the Chorus legitimizes their later characterization of Octavia as a Verginia and a Lucretia.<sup>38</sup> Octavia is tied to the two virtuous women by both her unimpeachable (if contradictory) virtues and her impending doom.

Verginia and Lucretia are significant and influential not because of the political power they wielded in life, but because of the symbolism of their deaths. Both women acted as powerful symbols of virtue against tyranny; their most powerful and subversive acts were their own deaths.<sup>39</sup> These deaths encouraged others to rise up against tyranny and take revenge on their behalf. The Chorus unintentionally foreshadows Octavia's impending death with this comparison: while Octavia's virtues enhance her power against tyranny, the most powerful thing that she can do in the fight against Nero is die.<sup>40</sup>

At the end of the *Octavia*, violence erupts among the people, leading to Octavia's execution. Notably, although Octavia briefly contemplated vengeance and prayed for divine intervention to this end at the start of the play, she is never presented as an active

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<sup>38</sup> Boyle 2008, 128 makes this argument.

<sup>39</sup> Pierini 2001 argues that this scene immediately evokes Livy's versions of Lucretia and Verginia. Ginsberg argues that when the Chorus compares Octavia to Verginia and Lucretia but desires for Octavia to bear heirs, this is tantamount to wishing for an eternal tie to her Sextus Tarquin or Appius Claudius. The absurdity of this comparison foreshadows Octavia's demise. Ginsberg 2017, 148.

<sup>40</sup> The Chorus is not (yet) advocating for rebellion against Nero, but for a return to the status quo, in which Octavia and Nero reconcile and have children. See Kragelund 1982, 44.

instigator of this violence. The people riot on her behalf. Though she is blamed by Nero as if she were an instigator, the play makes clear that the people are motivated not by Octavia as an active agent but by what Octavia represents to them in their imagination: innocence, virtue and lineage.

Nero's primary motivation for executing Octavia is also vengeance. After the riots, in which Octavia's supporters tear down statues of Poppaea and attempt to reinstate Octavia (785-805), a prefect arrives to inform Nero that the mob has been subdued (847). Nero responds, *haec uindicta debetur mihi?* ("That is the revenge I'm owed?"; 849) The vengeance Nero demands echoes Octavia's lines from her opening monologue: *tibi maerenti caesum licuit | flere parentem, scelus ulcisci uindice fratre, | tua quem pietas hosti rapuit | texitque fides*. ("You were allowed to weep for a father's murder, punish crime with a vengeful brother, whom your loyal devotion snatched from the foe and hid"; 60-65) Nero demands the same vengeance, *uindicta*, that Octavia lamented not having due to Britannicus' death (*uindice fratre*). The two are motivated by violence against their family. Nero rages over the mob violence against himself and Poppaea (851-855), while Octavia dreams of revenge for the murder of her family. Both perceive the other as the driving force behind the violence against their loved ones and both hope for revenge. The play draws this parallel between Nero and Octavia and endorses Octavia's side. But while Octavia's assertion that Nero has killed her family is endorsed by the play, Nero's belief that Octavia has commanded the mob to attack Poppaea's images is nowhere authorized. Octavia is the victim of the play because her grievances are legitimate, while Nero's are unfounded.

But regardless of the reality of Octavia in the play, Nero and his prefect engage in a debate over the *possibility* of Octavia as an instigator to begin, with which can also shed light on the play's investigation of female imperial power. The exchange reads (863-876):

*Nero. Quod parcis hosti. Prefect. Femina hoc nomen capit?*  
*Ne. Si scelera cepit. Pre. Estne qui sontem arguat?*  
*Ne. Populi furor. Pre. Quis regere dementes ualet?.*  
*Ne. Qui concitare potuit. Pre. Haud quemquam reor.*  
*Ne. Mulier, dedit natura cui pronum malo animum, ad nocendum pectus instruxit dolis.*  
*Pre. Sed uim negauit. Ne. Vt ne inexpugnabilis esset, sed aegras frangeret uires timor uel poena, quae iam sera damnatam premet diu nocentem. Tolle consilium ac preces et imperata perage: deuectam rate procul in remotum litus interimi iube, tandem ut residat pectoris nostri tumor.*

**Ne.** You spare my enemy.

**Pre.** This woman is labeled an enemy'?

**Ne.** If she is labeled as wicked.

**Pre.** Who is it that calls her guilty?

**Ne.** The rage of the people.

**Pre.** Who is able to control the mad?

**Ne.** The one who is able to stir them up.

**Pre.** I think there isn't anyone.

**Ne.** A woman, to whom nature gave a mind inclined to evil and furnished her spirit with tricks for the purpose of harm.

**Pre.** But nature denied her strength.

**Ne.** SO that she not be unbeatable, but fear or punishment might break her feeble strength, which, now very late, will suppress her, condemned and harmful. Take away your counsel and prayers and carry out my commands: command that she, after she is taken far away in a ship to a remote shore, be killed, so that finally the swelling in my chest might subside.

The prefect is unable to believe that a woman (*femina*, 863) could be labeled a *hostis* (863) and could be guilty of *scelera* (865). According to the prefect, a woman, even as popular as Octavia, lacks the force (*vim*, 870) to control the people.<sup>41</sup> Nero, however, argues that Octavia is able to stir up the masses (*concitare potuit*, 867) and control their madness (*Quis regere dementes ualet*, 866) specifically because she is a woman. Nero ascribes Octavia's influence over the mob to specifically female-coded attributes of manipulation and trickery (*prorum malo animum*, 868, *ad nocendum pectus dolis*, 869).<sup>42</sup> Such accusations of manipulation are not abnormal for women in power,<sup>43</sup> but Nero twists Octavia's powerlessness as a woman, which has previously been cited by Octavia herself, her Nurse, and the prefect, into the very thing that gives her power over the mob.

This section has shown that the question of an imperial wife's power and ability to exact vengeance is at the core of the play and its representation of Octavia. Octavia desires to do violence against Nero out of vengeance, but believes she acts alone and cannot. The Chorus desires to do violence against Nero's household on behalf of Octavia even though she is unaware of this. Nero and the prefect debate whether a woman, even a woman as popular as Octavia, has that sort of power; in the end Nero punishes Octavia for the vengeance he believes she had tried to exact against him. The *Octavia* presents the

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<sup>41</sup> See Amoroso 1981 for Octavia's potential *vim*.

<sup>42</sup> Manipulation and trickery are seen in descriptions of Livia, Agrippina the Elder, Agrippina the Younger, and many other imperial women, particularly in Tacitus. These attributes are used almost exclusively to describe women in imperial power (see O'Gorman 2000 and L'hoir 2006). Ferri 2003, 380; Bruckner 1976, 95.

<sup>43</sup> See Ginsburg 2005, 23 for such accusations, specifically against Agrippina.

perspective that popular support of an imperial woman can indeed threaten the realm, but the people do not need to be directly called to action by the woman herself. Nero's concern about public rage is not necessarily unfounded, but this is a problem of his own making; he has previously dismissed the will of the people and his violence against Octavia's family doomed their publicly beloved marriage from the start. Octavia is doubly the victim: Nero has killed her family and now replaced her with Poppaea. The Chorus, in a misguided effort to help, has highlighted the threat that Octavia poses to Nero through no fault of Octavia herself.

The central conflict of the play is indeed the dissolution of a marriage and the formation of a new one, but it is also the public impact of this seemingly private event. The *Octavia* demonstrates the stake held by the people even in the *princeps*' marriage. The conflict between Octavia and Poppaea is very much a personal one, but it is also public due to the nature of the principate, and it is this that leads to Octavia's execution.

### **3.3 Sister/ Wife**

Thus far this chapter has explored two conflicting ideas: Octavia as idealized wife and Octavia as enemy of Nero. One recurrent motif throughout the play brings these two themes together: Octavia as Nero's sister-wife and the related analogizing of Octavia and Nero to Juno and Jupiter. While the image of the imperial couple as Jupiter and Juno is not unusual in celebratory imperial imagery, the play uses a variety of literary strategies to destabilize the positive valence of such assimilation, emphasizing a perverted, strife-ridden sibling relationship between Octavia and Nero. Multiple characters try to justify the marriage between Octavia and Nero by drawing a parallel to Juno and Jupiter, but

unintentionally emphasize the sibling dynamic between the two. So too the play's references to Juno often allude to the goddess' vengeful relationship to her brother-husband over his constant infidelity. The play thereby twists the accepted image of the imperial couple as Jupiter and Juno to emphasize the unnatural and unharmonious elements of such a pairing.

According to Cassius Dio, the historical Octavia, prior to her marriage with Nero, was adopted into another family in order to avoid the image of incest (τὴν θυγατέρα ἐς ἕτερόν τι γένος ἐκποίησας ἵνα μὴ ἀδελφοὺς συνοικίσειν δοκῆ; “[after] placing his daughter into another family lest siblings seem to be married”, Dio *Rom. Hist.* 60.33). Dio writes that this led to a mighty portent: the sky seems to be on fire (60.33). In his narrative, the duality of stepsiblings and spouses was not only an optical issue, but perhaps even profane.<sup>44</sup> No other surviving source relates this anecdote, and Tacitus himself never makes much of this brother-sister relationship.<sup>45</sup> The play, however, capitalizes on this historical issue by repeatedly foregrounding the image of Octavia as Nero's *soror* and *coniunx* as bizarre and pseudo-incestuous, even in the mouths of characters who attempt to show the relationship as the ideal.

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<sup>44</sup> For the duality of Nero and Octavia as stepsiblings and lovers in Dio, see Ferri 2003, 1; Griffin 1985, 30.

<sup>45</sup> Tacitus' only reference to the dual wife/sister relationship (*Ann.* 14.64): *paucis dehinc interiectis diebus mori iubetur, cum iam viduam se et tantum sororem testaretur* (“After a few intervening days it was ordered that she die, although she swore that now she was unmarried and only a sister.”)

Several characters in the play use the image of Jupiter and Juno as wholly positive for the depiction of Octavia and Nero as an imperial couple. While speaking with Nero, Seneca compares Octavia to Juno explicitly (533-535):

*Sen. Implebit aulam stirpe caelesti tuam  
generata Diuo, Claudiae gentis decus,  
sortita fratris more Iunonis toros.*

**Sen.** She, born from a god, delight of the Claudian family, will fill your court with a celestial line, she, allotted the bed of her brother in the same way as Juno.

We have seen before how Seneca's language emphasizes the divinity of Nero's potential children with Octavia. But his language also endows Octavia with a number of divine attributes and analogies as *generata Diuo, Claudiae gentis decus, | sortita fratris more Iunonis toros* (534-535). Although Seneca implies that Nero is Jupiter, the brother (*fratris*) whose bed Juno-Octavia shares, Seneca's language emphasizes Octavia's divine connections at the expense of reference to Nero's. Seneca's conception of divinity is hereditary with an emphasis on the Claudian line to which, he suggests, Nero has little claim without Octavia.<sup>46</sup> This is not an unpopular or unprecedented sentiment.<sup>47</sup> Outside of the imperial palace, the pro-Octavia Chorus also invokes the image of Octavia and Nero as Juno and Jupiter in their argument in favor of the continued marriage between the two (282-285):

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<sup>46</sup> Ferri 2003, 277 makes this argument.

<sup>47</sup> See Dio *Rom. Hist.* 62: καί ποτε εἰπόντος “οὐκοῦν καὶ τὴν προῖκα αὐτῆ” τοῦτ’ ἔστι τὴν ἡγεμονίαν “ἀπόδος.” (“with Burrus once even saying, “Then, give her back her dowry,” by which he meant the sovereignty.”)

*Fratris thalamos sortita tenet  
maxima Iuno:  
soror Augusti sociata toris  
cur a patria pellitur aula?*

Greatest Juno, allotted the bed of her brother, holds it, why should the sister of Augustus, sharing his bed, be beaten from the halls of her father?

The Chorus casts Nero and Octavia as Jupiter and Juno in order to argue that as long as the gods remain married, so too should Octavia and Nero.

Such a comparison between the imperial couple and the king and queen of the gods is not unprecedented in Julio-Claudian ideology. This imagery was invoked at the start of the empire by Augustus himself as part of his imperial messaging.<sup>48</sup> From that point on, the Roman imperial couple often drew imagery from Hellenistic royalty, particularly the Ptolemies, who practiced sibling marriage and were compared to Jupiter and Juno.<sup>49</sup> Julio-Claudian couples then borrowed the Ptolemaic association between rulers and the divine couple in imperial imagery without borrowing the practice of Ptolemaic sibling marriage. For example, Ovid refers to Augustus as Jupiter and Livia as Juno in his poetry. In his *Fasti*, Ovid says of Augustus and Livia: *Hanc tua constituit genetrix et rebus et ara | Sola toro magni digna reperta Jovis* (“Your mother, who alone was found worthy of great Jupiter’s bed, established this one by both her life and an altar,” *Fasti* I. 640-641).<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Milnor 2005, 58; Grether 1946, 223.

<sup>49</sup>e.g. Theocritus *Idyll* 17.131–4; see Ager 2020.

<sup>50</sup>Grether 1946, 229.

In the Eastern empire, the association of living emperors and empresses with Jupiter and Juno, among other gods and goddesses, was even more common.<sup>51</sup> A number of inscriptions associating Livia with Hera from the period of her life have been found in the east.<sup>52</sup> Throughout the Julio-Claudian era, Hera remains one of the goddesses often associated with imperial women on provincial coins as a symbol of fertility.<sup>53</sup> For example, Messalina appears on the obverse of coins from Nicea with *NEA HRA* on the reverse.<sup>54</sup> Livia appears as *LIBIAN HERAN XARINOS* on the obverse of a coin from Pergamon.<sup>55</sup> A number of coins from Samos represent both emperors and empresses on the obverse, with some form of cult statue to Hera on the reverse.<sup>56</sup> A similar coin, RPC I, 1755 (59-63 CE) from Perinthus depicts Octavia on the obverse as *OKTAOYIA ΣΕΒΑΣΤΗ* with a statue of Hera of Samos, labeled *HPA ΠΙΕΡΙΝΘΙΩΝ* on the reverse.<sup>57</sup> This coin is a fairly standard provincial representation of the empress; Octavia is one of many empresses to be connected to Hera.<sup>58</sup> The association of the imperial couple with

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<sup>51</sup> Grether 1946, 250.

<sup>52</sup> E.g. Ἰουλίᾳ Ἥρα Σεβαστή in Mylae, C.I.G. II. 333; Θεὰ Λειουία Ἥρα νέα Σεβαστή in Assos, I.G.R. IV. 249; See Grether 1946, 241 for more examples. Grether 1946, 241.

<sup>53</sup> See Horster 2013, 251.

<sup>54</sup> RPC I, 2033-34

<sup>55</sup> RPC I, 235. See Horster 2013, 247 n.17.

<sup>56</sup> e.g. RPC I, 2685, RPC II, 1128, 1130-32, 1134. Horster 2013, 251 n. 31-32.

<sup>57</sup> According to the RPC database.

<sup>58</sup> Leonidas of Alexandria wrote an epigram for Poppaea which addresses her as the wife of Zeus (*Pal. Ant.* 9.355) in what was clearly meant to be a positive context. See discussion of this epigram in the introduction.

Jupiter and Juno and the depiction of the imperial couple as the god and goddess in the east continued throughout the Julio-Claudian regime.<sup>59</sup>

We can see from this tradition that an analogy between an imperial couple and Jupiter and Juno in Roman court language and imagery was something celebratory rather than problematic despite possible incestuous overtones. However, the repeated emphasis in the *Octavia* of the sibling relationship between Jupiter and Juno and the imperial couple perverts this encomiastic iconography into something which does carry uncomfortable associations. To return briefly to the pro-Octavia Chorus, their language of brother, sister and bed (*fratris | soror, sociata toris*) foregrounds the sibling rather than spousal relationship in an overtly sexual context.

These incestuous connotations also occur elsewhere in the play. In her opening lines, Octavia's Nurse laments the crimes of Agrippina and Nero before turning to her own Octavia-as-Juno comparison (45-50):

*mox illa nati, cuius extinctus iacet  
frater uenenis, maeret infelix soror  
eademque coniunx nec graues luctus ualet  
ira coacta tegere: crudelis uiri  
secreta refugit semper atque odio pari  
ardet maritus, mutua flagrant face.*

Soon that one to a son, from whose poison a brother lies dead, the unlucky sister and wife at the same time weeps and is not able to cover her heavy grief, compelled by anger: always she seeks hidden places from her cruel husband and burns with hate equal to her husband's, they burn with a shared torch.

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<sup>59</sup> Clauss 1999, 76.

In these lines, the Nurse outlines a simplified family structure. Nero is Agrippina's son (*illa nati*, 45), Britannicus is Octavia's brother (*frater*, 46), Nero's is Octavia's husband (*vir*, *maritus*, 48, 50), and Octavia is Britannicus' sister (*soror*, mirroring *frater* at the beginning of the line, 46) and Nero's wife (*coniunx*, 47). However, the family structure is more complex than the Nurse presents here, a fact which would be obvious to any audience.<sup>60</sup> When read against the backdrop of the rest of the play, including what she herself goes on to say, the Nurse's version of the family tree appears deliberately sanitized, omitting this aspect of the family.

Octavia's Nurse comes to their conversation with an agenda and a belief that a Juno-analogy would support that agenda: the Nurse compares Octavia to Juno in an attempt to convince her to stand by Nero. This appeal reflects the standard imperial imagery of the imperial wife as a Juno figure as discussed above, but here the Nurse uses the dual sibling-spouse relationship between the divine figures as justification for her analogy.<sup>61</sup> This emphasis on the sibling relationship between the gods and the imperial couple further undermines the Nurse's point about Octavia's need to submit (*obsequendo*) discussed in this chapter's first section. The Nurse says (201-221):

*Passa est similes ipsa dolores  
regina deum,  
cum se formas uertit in omnes  
dominus caeli diuumque pater  
et modo pennas sumpsit oloris,  
modo Sidonii cornua tauri;  
aureus idem fluxit in imbri;*

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<sup>60</sup> See Ferri 2003, 138 for how the audience might interpret this scene.

<sup>61</sup> Kragelund 2005, 89 argues for this interpretation.

*fulgent caelo sidera Ladae,  
patrio residet Bacchus Olympo,  
deus Alcides possidet Heben  
nec Iunonis iam timet iras,  
cuius gener est qui fuit hostis.  
uicit sapiens tamen obsequium  
coniugis altae pressusque dolor:  
sola Tonantem tenet aethereo  
secura toro maxima Iuno  
nec mortali captus forma  
deserit altam Iuppiter aulam.  
Tu quoque, terris altera Iuno,  
soror Augusti coniunxque, graues  
uince dolores.*

The queen of the gods herself endured similar pain, when the master of heaven and the father of the gods turned himself in all sorts of forms and once took on the wings of a swan, once the horns of a Sidonian bull, he himself, golden, flowed in rain; Leda's stars gleam in the sky, Bacchus sits on paternal Olympus, divine Alcides holds Hebe and does not now fear the anger of Juno, since he is her son-in-law and was her enemy. Nevertheless wise compliance and suppressed grief of the lofty wife endure: only greatest Juno holds the Thunderer in the heavenly bed securely and Jupiter, not captive to a mortal, does not desert his lofty hall. You also, another Juno on earth, sister and wife of Augustus, conquer your heavy pains.

Octavia's Nurse reasons that Juno is constantly reminded of Jupiter's lovers, Leda, Semele, and Alcmena and their offspring and yet the couple remain placidly married. Leda is commemorated in the stars, presumably those which were dedicated to Helen's birth by Jupiter. Bacchus is allowed to live on Olympus alongside the other gods. Alcides lives with his lover and does not fear Juno's wrath (211). The key seems to be Juno's demure obsequiousness: as Juno is obsequious, so too should Octavia be. The Nurse advises Octavia that *uicit sapiens tamen obsequium | coniugis altae pressusque dolor* ("Wise compliance and concealed pain made the wife on high triumphant"; 213-214).

Again, *obsequendo* is proposed as a course of action; like Juno, Octavia should suppress the grief (*dolor*) which Octavia previously cited as the motivation behind her vengeance (176). Octavia will be triumphant (*uicit*, 213, *vince*, 221) and will keep her own status as *regina* if she keeps Nero in his throne, just as Juno keeps Jupiter in his *aula* (218). Here too the Nurse is sanitizing and simplifying her vision of marriage - both imperial and divine. In the Nurse's version of these myths, Juno, the chaste wife, persists as Jupiter's chosen partner despite her full awareness of his history of infidelity. Thus, Octavia will be able to do the same by simply submitting to Nero's whims and ignoring any insult.<sup>62</sup>

The Nurse's comparison of Octavia's plight to that of Juno fails on multiple levels. First, it emphasizes the unprecedented nature of Octavia's predicament and the differences between Octavia and Juno. Jupiter's infidelity was always temporary, while Nero intends to leave Octavia for Poppaea.<sup>63</sup> But perhaps more striking is that the Nurse cites Juno as a model of a wife who passively endures adultery. The irony, of course, is that Juno never actually accepted or ignored her husband's infidelity.<sup>64</sup> The *Octavia*'s audience would be well familiar with how the queen of the gods responded to Jupiter's infidelity. But the Nurse's final description of Octavia as *soror Augusti coniunxque* (220) also calls to mind specific earlier texts of imperial literature that would drive home this point. This final line echoes the *Aeneid* 1.46-47, in which Juno calls herself *Iovis et soror*

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<sup>62</sup> Ferri 2003, 186 also interprets the Nurse's words in this way.

<sup>63</sup> Kragelund 2005, 80 also points out this inconsistency in the Nurse's logic.

<sup>64</sup> Boyle 2008, 111 also notes this irony.

*et coniunx*, a scene which directly contradicts the Nurse's characterization of Juno.<sup>65</sup> In

this scene, Juno torments Aeneas, motivated by her *dolor* (Ver. *Aen.* 1.25-28):

*necdum etiam causae irarum saevique dolores  
exciderant animo: manet alta mente repostum  
iudicium Paridis spretaeque iniuria formae,  
et genus invisum, et rapti Ganymedis honores*

Indeed, the reasons for her anger and her savage grievances had not yet left her mind: the judgment of Paris and the injustice of her spurned beauty and the hated race, and the honors of snatched Ganymede remained fixed in her lofty mind.

This *dolor* is the very thing which the nurse claims Juno endures passively (*passa est similes ipsa dolores regina deum* (201)). This *dolor* is, in part, motivated by Juno's anger over the honors given to Ganymede, an erotic rival.

Similarly, Juno calls herself Jupiter's sister and wife in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (3. 263-266):

*ipsa petenda mihi est; ipsam, si maxima Iuno  
rite vocor, perdam, si me gemmantia dextra  
sceptra tenere decet, si sum regina Iovisque  
et soror et coniunx, certe soror.*

I must seek her out; that girl, if I am rightly called most mighty Juno, I must attack, if I am fit to hold in my hand the jeweled scepter, if I am queen, both the sister and the wife of Jupiter, certainly his sister.

In this scene, Juno is raging about Jupiter's infidelity with Semele and Semele's subsequent pregnancy. Juno uses a set of three conditions which establish her vengeance (*petenda mihi est; perdam*) as a condition for retaining her power and status (*si maxima*

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<sup>65</sup> See Farrell 2021, 57 and Lease 1928, 89 for this parallel.

*Iuno [...]; si me gemmantia [...]; si sum regina [...]*). Once again, the assertion of Juno as Jupiter's sister and wife is centered in a discussion about Juno's vengeance for Jupiter's infidelity. The language of Octavia's Nurse would recall for the *Octavia's* audience several specific scenes of Juno's vengeance, despite the fact that the same Nurse is trying to convince Octavia to tolerate Nero's infidelity. Through the very scenes which the Nurse invokes with her language, she undermines her own characterization of Juno.<sup>66</sup>

The final way in which the Nurse's analogy fails is the way in which it responds to only one of Octavia's chief accusations against Nero. The Nurse's comparison of Octavia to Juno reveals a disconnect between Octavia's perception of her situation and her Nurse's proposed solution. Octavia cites the murder of her family as her primary motivation for anger and desire for vengeance (100-136). The Nurse, too, lists these heinous crimes against Octavia's family (137-174), but her solution addresses only Nero's infidelity. The Nurse's comparison of Octavia to Juno names the products of Jupiter's infidelity as evidence of Jupiter's sexual misdeeds towards his wife. Any strategy for coming to terms with the murder of Octavia's family is left out of this solution. The Nurse, despite knowing that history, chooses to focus on Nero's relationship with Poppaea as a solvable problem rather than include the other offenses, perhaps because she knows that such acts can never be avenged. By reframing Octavia's anger as erotic jealousy over a rival, the Nurse twists the situation into one which is

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<sup>66</sup> Bruckner 1976, 92 also points out this inconsistency.

precedented and solvable. Octavia, however, knows that there is no precedent for her misfortune or solution for her anger.

Octavia's family has been murdered by Nero and his mother, an offense which Octavia is unable to ignore. She is motivated by this violence to defy Nero, though she never succeeds in exacting revenge in this play. The solution optimistically proposed by the Nurse, that Octavia submit to Nero and allow him to engage in extramarital affairs, ignores the magnitude of Nero's offenses against Octavia and her family. Nero is not merely an unfaithful Jupiter, he is responsible for the murders of Octavia's father, mother, and brother. These additional offenses prevent Octavia from having any future with Nero, if such a future could even be a possibility with Poppaea around. The Nurse's position is hopelessly optimistic and unrealistic; the offenses against Octavia are unbearable and can only result in Octavia's death. Juno's marriage to Jupiter cannot be used as a precedent because Octavia's grief is unparalleled.

Octavia's response picks up on the Nurse's mythological allusions and responds in kind. Octavia states that she will never consummate her marriage to Nero (222-226). Instead, she laments the lack of divine vengeance against Nero, who is worse than Typhon, whom Tellus in her rage bore to spite Jupiter (*non tam ferum Typhona, neglecto Ioue, | irata Tellus edidit quondam parens*; "Typhon was less toxic—whom mother Earth once bore in vengeful anger to spite Jove"; 238-239).<sup>67</sup> Typhon was born to avenge the

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<sup>67</sup> Octavia's assertion that Typhon is the child of Tellus, born for vengeance because Jupiter imprisoned the titans, is a tradition found in many ancient sources (e.g. Hes. *Theog.* 820, Apollodorus 1.39, Aes. *Prom.* 353, Aes. *Seven Against Thebes* 516, Ov.

Titans, Tellus' children whom Zeus had imprisoned. In this analogy, Octavia is the Typhon, set on avenging her family, and Nero is worse, ostensibly because his actions are not born of any sort of vengeance but his own depravity. According to Octavia, even if she exacts vengeance, Nero is worse than she is.<sup>68</sup>

The parallel of Juno and Jupiter to Octavia and Nero in this play serves two complementary and simultaneous purposes that return us to two major thematic strands of the play. The first is to create the impression of an unnatural, incestuous relationship between husband and wife; while such a marriage is acceptable for the gods, the play little endorses the idea that calling Octavia a Juno makes her an ideal wife for Nero. The

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*Met.* 5.324, *Ver. Georgics* 1.276). However, there is also a tradition in which Juno bears Typhon as vengeance for Jupiter's infidelities (Hom. Hymn 3.300, Stesichorus Frag. 239). The omission of this tradition is notable; Octavia opts for the tradition in which Typhon avenges his family, like Octavia, instead of the tradition in which he avenges infidelity.

<sup>68</sup>Both Nero and Octavia acknowledge their dual relationship without qualification, which allows the audience to ponder the unnatural nature of the couple. For example, on the day of Nero's wedding to Poppaea, Octavia says, *soror Augusti, non uxor ero* ("I'll be Augustus' sister, not wife"; 658). This simple statement juxtaposes Octavia's role as the sister of the emperor with her role as wife; no comparison to the divine is necessary because this proposal by Octavia seemingly undoes the incestuous component of their relationship. Octavia will be a *soror*, not an *uxor* to Nero. Nero too notes their strange relationship when he decides to execute his sister/wife. Nero says, *suspecta coniunx et soror semper mihi, | tandem dolori spiritum reddat meo | iramque nostram sanguine extinguat suo* ("The wife and sister I ever suspected, must forfeit her life to my suffering at last and quench my anger with her blood"; 828-830). Again, there are no justifications for Octavia's bizarre title of *coniunx et soror*; in fact, Nero's juxtaposition of this label with the term *suspecta* adds to the undercurrent of perversion which pervades their relationship. Despite attempts by their supporters to explain away the relationship between the two siblings, Nero and Octavia themselves do not attempt to justify their relationship with the self-aggrandizing comparison to Jupiter and Juno and instead even emphasize the bizarre and perverse nature of their marriage.

parallel also deepens our understanding of Octavia's drive for vengeance. It is the parallel to Juno, which is intended to encourage Octavia to passively endure, which ironically validates her drive for revenge within a mythological frame. Even Juno, the queen of the gods, does not tolerate the insult of infidelity by her husband.

### **3.4 *The Final Chorus***

Throughout this chapter, I have shown how different characters have constructed Octavia in various roles, which depend on their individual understandings of and assumptions about Octavia's role as imperial wife in Neronian Rome. Over the course of the play, she is an ideal wife, a potential mother, a virgin, a powerless victim, a powerful mob leader, and an incestuous sister/wife with the powers and vengeful potential of Juno. But the audience repeatedly sees that these images contradict the actions and words of Octavia herself when she appears onstage. These various, contradictory characterizations of Octavia and the disregard for the reality of Octavia as a person arise in the final Choral scene, and therefore it serves as an appropriate conclusion for a chapter that explores the contradictory constructions of Octavia in this play.

In the final choral song, the pro-Poppaea Chorus of Roman citizens laments the doomed princess while also repeating the pro-Octavia Chorus' characterization of Octavia as virgin and potential mother of future emperors.<sup>69</sup> In other words, like the other

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<sup>69</sup> Scholars have debated the identity of this Chorus without firm conclusion. Some argue that this must be the pro-Poppaea Chorus, as the pro-Octavia Chorus would not have referred to themselves in the third person nor condemned their own actions. The pro-Octavia Chorus departed after 669 and would likely have been dispersed by Nero's guards after rioting (see Ferri 2003, 382; Zwierlein 1966, 86; Kragelund 1982, 79; La

Chorus, they praise Octavia's virtues, despite their support of Nero's new wife. This Chorus explains their position by casting the conflict over Nero's marriages as an issue of civil concord. They do not condemn Octavia or her virtues, as Nero did, but they nevertheless blame Octavia's popular power for a conflict that endangers them and endangers peace. This Chorus is concerned first and foremost with public stability and this is mirrored in this scene's final location. While much of the play has taken place within the imperial palace and has focused on interpersonal relationships between imperial family members, the setting has now moved into a public space. This Chorus too is discussing Octavia as a construct: imperial daughter, sister, wife, and popular figure. Her previous words and actions in the play and even her final words in this scene are hardly considered by Chorus.

Unlike the first Chorus, the pro-Poppaea citizens view public favor as potentially fatal (*O funestus multis populi | dirusque fauor* ("Oh the favor of the people is often fatal and harsh"; 877-878)). They compare Octavia to the Gracchi and Marcus Livius Drusus through the analogy of the people's love for these populist figures (882-890):

*Fleuit Gracchos miseranda parens,  
perdidit ingens quos plebis amor  
nimiusque fauor,  
genere illustres, pietate, fide,  
lingua claros, pectore fortes,  
legibus acres.  
Te quoque, Liui, simili leto*

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Penna 1991, 42.) Some scholars, however, label this Chorus as the same group who plans the riots earlier in the play, who perhaps are attempting to distance themselves from their own actions as they see the destruction they have brought upon the person they were trying to protect (see Ferri 2003, 382; Herington 1961, 22n.5; and Boyle 2008, 242).

*fortuna dedit,  
quem neque fasces texere sui  
nec tecta domus*

A wretched mother wept for the Gracchi, whom the enormous love and excessive favor of the plebs killed, nobly born, pious, trustworthy, famous for their speech, brave hearted, harsh in their legislation. Fortune gave you also, Livius, to a similar death, you whom neither *fasces* nor covered home protected.

The Chorus equates the political power of these assassinated reformers with Octavia's popular support.<sup>70</sup> And through this analogy they highlight the public, governmental power of the populist leaders they cite: the Gracchi were notable for *lingua claros, pectore fortes, legibus acres* (886-887) and Drusus held the *fasces* (889). These men had political positions, political agency, and direct influence over the people.<sup>71</sup> In contrast, Octavia is an imperial woman who holds no official power, and certainly not that of a Republican era Tribune of the Plebs. Her only power is her symbolic influence as a figure of the imperial family. But even so, the Chorus sees Octavia's power as comparable to the popular support of public political figures whose actions divided the state, and they see this as the reason for her demise. This Chorus has no awareness of Octavia's private motivations or even Nero's stated desire for vengeance; instead, they explain Octavia's

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<sup>70</sup> The Chorus alludes to a long history of the deadliness of public favor. See Ginsberg 2017, 164.

<sup>71</sup> A repeated motif in the play is the repetition of history. Octavia's situation has already been shown to be unparalleled as a whole, but the consistent comparison of Octavia to other historical figures (Verginia, Lucretia (298-303), the Gracchi) shows how the people do not learn from their own history (Boyle 2008, 243).

death as first and foremost the result of a popular support that does not require understanding her as an individual person.

This lament is followed by Octavia's final words, in which she mourns her impending death and calls herself *thalamis expulsa soror* ("sister driven from his bed"; 909-910). This label is ironic; Octavia was indeed divorced and driven from her home, but it was Octavia who initially refused to share a bed with Nero. The two are officially married, but by Octavia's own prior admission, have never and will never consummate their marriage. This also echoes earlier lines by the pro-Octavia Chorus and the nurse, in which they hail Octavia as both virgin and future mother to Nero's heirs. But it is also important to note how Octavia emphasizes the unnatural nature of her relationship with Nero in this line; no longer does she even call herself *uxor* or *coniunx*, she is only *soror*, but *thalamis expulsa*. This phrasing frames the marriage as explicitly incestuous; there is no justification, only a perverse characterization of the marriage from its very beginning.

Although sharing the stage with Octavia and presumably hearing her lament, the pro-Poppaea Chorus' final lines ignore both Octavia's allusions to incest and her animosity. Instead they attempt to comfort Octavia by listing the various misfortunes and injustices which other imperial women have suffered (*Animum firment exempla tuum | iam multa domus quae uestra tulit* ("let these examples strengthen your spirit, examples which your house now bears"; 929-930)). In doing so, they ignore Octavia's individual circumstances and individual perspective about those circumstances; she becomes for

them merely another in a long line of imperial women, some of whom, according to the Chorus, have suffered even worse fates.<sup>72</sup>

But as the Chorus tries to make Octavia one of many through their own understanding of the history of imperial women's punishment, they once again highlight what sets her apart from the others. The Chorus compares Octavia to Agrippina the Elder, Livilla, Julia<sup>73</sup>, Messalina, and Agrippina the Younger while noting the fertility of four of these women. About Agrippina the Elder, they say, *utero totiens enixa graui | pignora pacis* ("Having born from your full womb pledges of peace"; 937-938), Livia is called *felix...natis* ("lucky in offspring"; 942-943), Messalina is described, *quae rexit principis aulam, | cara marito partuque potens* ("Who ruled the court of the *princeps* with a dear spouse and strong womb"; 948-949), and Agrippina the Younger is called *parens tanta* ("great mother"; 953). The Chorus makes no distinction between guilt or innocence in its catalogue, but it is striking that the Chorus emphasizes the motherhood of these women. Octavia's own desires, her rejection of Nero, and the brother-sister relationship between the two are ignored; as an imperial wife, Octavia is here represented only as the potential mother of heirs, regardless of her words and actions.<sup>74</sup>

The words of the Chorus in this scene contrast with the visual spectacle onstage if this play were to have been staged. Octavia, the captive woman in chains, is being led

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<sup>72</sup> Ferri 1998, 340 interprets the Chorus in this way.

<sup>73</sup> The daughter of Livilla, according to Boyle.

<sup>74</sup> Boyle (2008, 253) argues that this choral song mimics epitaphic language for these women; in this way, the passage also serves as an epitaph for the doomed Octavia.

away into exile (and to her eventual death) before a number of mourners, in the form of the Chorus. She cries out when she sees the ship which will carry her away, either imagined or onstage, which she mistakes for the ship on which Agrippina met her end.<sup>75</sup> This image of the bound captive, led away before an audience to a ship, evokes a captive *hostis*, but that image is subverted.<sup>76</sup> It is not a foreign enemy being dragged away, but Octavia, Emperor Claudius' daughter, the imperial princess, who the audience knows has done nothing to stir up the people.

Regardless, Octavia is named by the Chorus among a number of imperial female predecessors, all of whom were labeled *hostis* and condemned during their lifetimes (929-953).<sup>77</sup> The simultaneous action of Octavia being led away as a captive and the Chorus' words juxtaposes what should be two wholly discordant images: a captive enemy and Octavia, the ideal imperial woman. The staging of this scene would highlight the perversion of Nero's actions and his reign as a whole, as he puts his own sister/wife in chains.<sup>78</sup>

### **3.5 Conclusion**

Throughout the *Octavia*, characters impose various contradictory constructions of imperial womanhood upon Octavia. Some view her as the ideal imperial wife: the

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<sup>75</sup> Kragelund 2005, 96 argues that Octavia interprets the ship in this way.

<sup>76</sup> For the inverted image of the captured *hostis*, see Kragelund 2005, 94. For the traditional definition of a *hostis*, see Flower 2006, 125, and for subversions of the *hostis* trope, see Flower 2006, 121.

<sup>77</sup> Varner 2004, 85 for historical context.

<sup>78</sup> Kragelund 2005, 95 for comments on staging.

embodiment of *pudor*, *fides*, and, sometimes, surprisingly *virginitas*. These characters are trying to fit Octavia and her refusal to consummate her marriage into the accepted and celebrated qualities of Roman women whom the city has supported in the past. But when these followers riot on Octavia's behalf, Nero reads into their riot the idea that Octavia is leading a rebellion. This too is a construction based on Nero's own ideas about his wife and the political threats she might pose. Although the audience is aware that Octavia had no involvement in spurring on the rioters, her presumed popular power and the fanatic celebration of her virtues by her supporters are enough for Nero to label Octavia as a threat. But none of these perspectives accurately resemble the Octavia who appears onstage and who speaks to us, the audience, about her experiences and her feelings. This Octavia rejects these constructions. She refuses to become a mother and refuses to endure; but as she heads off to exile, she also encourages the people not to riot in her name (646-50). But it is the perspectives of other characters - both positive and negative perspectives - that shape her fate, rather than her own words and actions.

Octavia's characterization in the *Octavia* adds a new dimension to Octavia in the ancient imagination. Tacitus' Octavia is certainly sad and scared; famously she watches Britannicus' death with hidden emotions (Tac. *Ann.* 13.16):

*quippe sibi supremum auxilium ereptum et parricidii exemplum intellegebat. Octavia quoque, quamvis rudibus annis, dolorem caritatem, omnis adfectus abscondere didicerat.*

[Octavia] saw, in fact, that she was robbed of her only remaining refuge, and that this was a precedent for parricide. Even Octavia, although she was in her youthful years, had learned to hide her grief, her affection, and indeed every emotion.

Octavia's outward appearance here is unemotional; inwardly, she was grieving (*dolorem*). However, Octavia in the *Octavia* is brimming with emotions and, although she is indeed grieving, she is also angry. This anger, and the threat it poses to Nero's regime, is central to the *Octavia*, despite being entirely absent from Tacitus' narrative or the wider historiographical tradition. The *Octavia* demonstrates that, at least in the early years after Nero's regime, Octavia was characterized as a much more dynamic and emotional character.

## **4. A Surprising Poppaea: Conflicting characterizations of Poppaea in the *Octavia***

Although the *Octavia* focuses on the experience of Nero's first wife, Poppaea plays a significant role in the conversations and imaginations of others. Poppaea herself does not appear onstage until the final third of the play (712), and her presence onstage is limited to a single brief scene. This delayed entrance allows for multiple ideas of Poppaea to be raised by different characters who describe her in numerous, sometimes contradictory ways while she remains shrouded in mystery for much of the play. When she finally does appear, allowing the audience their own opportunity to study her, her sole appearance only further complicates her characterization as both co-conspirator and also victim of Nero.

This chapter explores the dramatic impact of withholding Poppaea offstage and analyzes how this dramatic choice shapes Poppaea's characterization in the *Octavia* both before and after her appearance onstage. In order to analyze the way in which the play slowly constructs (and deconstructs) audience understanding of Poppaea scene by scene, I have organized this chapter by character and in the order in which each appears onstage. Multiple characters in the *Octavia* discuss Poppaea before she ever appears onstage and each character perceives her differently. Such conflicting presentations muddle the audience's expectations for Poppaea's arrival. When Poppaea finally arrives onstage, she is neither master manipulator nor loveswept bride. She is terrified, already anticipating her own death and the destruction of her family.

### **4.1 *Octavia's Poppaea: Villainous Murderess***

As the central character in the play and also as the play's tragic victim, Octavia is the first to appear on stage. This gives her character a powerful dramatic role in shaping

the audience's understanding of the dramatic situation as well as in shaping their expectations for what will unfold. As I go on to show in the pages that follow, Octavia has a particular idea of who Poppaea is, what her motivations are, and the role she plays in Nero's court. While Octavia acknowledges Nero's responsibility in the murder of her brother, she casts Poppaea as the driving factor in her own imminent doom. The *Octavia* opens with the titular character's lament; her family has been murdered and she will soon be divorced from her brother-husband, who perpetrated those killings. Octavia states that she would prefer death rather than to see and kiss Nero (109-110), but she suggests that the primary enemy in her current battle is Poppaea. Octavia laments her inability to avenge her brother's death by Nero's hands (115-124), but then lays blame on Poppaea for the violence which she will soon face.

Octavia speaks about Poppaea using a number of familiar stereotypes (125-136):

*Adice his superbam paelicem nostrae domus  
spoliis nitentem, cuius in munus suam  
Stygiae parentem natus imposuit rati,  
quam, dira post naufragia, superato mari,  
ferro interemit saeuior pelagi fretis.  
quae spes salutis, post nefas tantum, mihi?  
inimica uictrix imminet thalamis meis  
odioque nostri flagrat et pretium stupri  
iustae maritum coniugis captat caput.  
Emergere umbris et fer auxilium tuae  
natae inuocanti, genitor, aut Stygios sinus  
tellure rupta pande, quo praeceps ferar.*

Add to these things an arrogant mistress, glittering with spoils from our house, on whose gift of a Stygian ship a son placed his mother, whom, after her dire shipwreck and survival of the sea, he cut down with iron, crueler than the straits of the sea. What hope of safety is there for me after such great evil? A hostile conqueror hangs over my bed and burns with hate and she would seize a rightful wife's head as the price for adultery. Emerge from the shades and bring help to your calling daughter, father, or after rending the earth, open a Stygian chasm into which I will fall headlong.

Octavia casts Poppaea as the stereotypical mistress (*paelicem*, 125): from Octavia's perspective, Poppaea seduced a married man and is at least partially responsible for Nero's divorce from Octavia. As represented in Roman drama and elegy, the *paelex* is the rival of the wife; she is a married man's sexual partner and often of lower status than the wife.<sup>1</sup> In the Roman literary imagination, a *paelex* can be particularly threatening to a citizen marriage due to her fertility; the fertility of the *paelex* presents a complication in which the romantic rival can also threaten the inheritance of the rightful, first wife and her offspring.<sup>2</sup>

The *paelex* appears as the romantic rival to the wife in Plautus' comedy. In the *Rudens*, Daemones worries that the two girls, whom he has rescued from prostitution, will be mistaken for *paelices* by his wife (Plaut. *Rud.* 1045-1048):

*Serio edepol, quamquam vobis volo quae voltis, mulieres,  
metuo, propter vos ne uxor mea me extrudat aedibus,  
quae me paelices adduxe dicet ante oculos suos.  
vos confugite in aram potius quam ego.*

Seriously, by Pollux, although I wish for you the things which you want, women, I fear, on account of you, that my wife will drive me from our halls, my wife who will say that I have brought mistresses before her eyes. Flee to the altar rather than me.

This scene plays on the wife's jealousy of *paelices* as humorous— the major misunderstanding of the act is that the wife thinks these girls are, indeed, *paelices*. The implication of this is that her anger towards her husband for introducing these rivals and flaunting them before her (*oculos suos*) would be justified if the girls were indeed his

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<sup>1</sup> Richlin 2014, 28. TLL c.v. *paelex*.

<sup>2</sup> Feltovich 2020, 256.

mistresses. Plautus assumes that his audience understands that the *paelex* is the direct rival of the wife.

But outside so-called “light” genres - and sometimes even within them - the *paelex* can also appear in similar circumstances but with deadlier outcomes. Ovid describes such a situation when he has Medea write to Jason about Creusa in *Heroides* 12 (Ov. *Her.* 12.173-174):

*quos ego servavi, paelex amplectitur artus  
et nostri fructus illa laboris habet.*

A *paelex* now embraces those limbs which I preserved and she has the fruits of my labor.

Seneca also uses the term in his *Agamemnon* to describe a similar situation when Aegisthus, in dialogue with Clytemnestra, describes Cassandra as a *paelex* in order to goad her into murdering Agamemnon (*ultimum est nuptae malum | palam maritam possidens paelex domum*. “The greatest evil for a wife is a *paelex* dwelling openly with her husband”; Sen. *Ag.* 257-258). According to Seneca’s Aegisthus, the open (*palam*) presence of a *paelex* in the home is the greatest evil for a wife.

Octavia also portrays Poppaea-*paelex* as despoiling her home, ostensibly stealing her possessions and flaunting them (*Adice his superbam paelicem nostrae domus | spoliis nitentem* (125-126)).<sup>3</sup> The image of the mistress, bedazzled in her lover’s wife’s jewelry evokes Roman comedy, which contains a trope of the husband preferring his mistress over the lawful wife, even going so far as to give away his wife’s jewelry to his mistress.<sup>4</sup> One prominent example of this *topos* occurs in the *Menaechmi*, when Menaechmus becomes exasperated with his jealous, overbearing wife and gives her mantle to Erotium,

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<sup>3</sup> Ferri 2003, 162 interprets the line in this way.

<sup>4</sup> James 2003, 91.

a *meretrix* (Plaut. *Menaechmi* 63-66). Despite the fact that, from Octavia's perspective, she is obviously more qualified and fit for the role of imperial wife, Nero treats her like a comic wife and gives away her belongings to his greedy mistress, Poppaea.

The presentation of Poppaea as despoiling Octavia's house also evokes the image of the elegiac lover. Elegiac women are often presented as greedy for expressing their needs or desires to their lovers.<sup>5</sup> As Sharon James notes, this stereotypical set of behaviors is part of elegy's comic inheritance. Elegiac poets invoke the *meretrix* of comedy, placing themselves as comic men, victims of greedy mistresses, but adapt the storyline to less comic circumstances.<sup>6</sup> James points out that such condemnations by elegiac poets simultaneously emphasize the dependence ancient women would have had on their lover economically.<sup>7</sup> Instead of addressing these systemic inequalities and the needs of their lovers, elegiac poets often encourage these "greedy" women to become the superior, non-greedy lover.<sup>8</sup> Octavia equates Poppaea with the greedy elegiac *domina* and the comic *meretrix*, both of whom demand gifts and who despoil the true wife's possessions. As in the genres of elegy and comedy, this figure destabilizes citizen marriage; Poppaea cannot be a good wife. Octavia is invoking the dichotomy of "good" and "bad" women with this language; Poppaea has despoiled Octavia's house due to her greed, while Octavia asks nothing of Nero.

But it is important to note that the stakes are even higher for Octavia, because Poppaea's presence threatens not only Octavia's marriage but also her life, as befits a tragedy. And so as she borrows topoi, images, and language from comedy and elegy, Octavia also represents those borrowings as inherently more dangerous in the world of

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<sup>5</sup> James 2003, 71.

<sup>6</sup> James 2003, 215.

<sup>7</sup> James 2003, 72.

<sup>8</sup> James 2003, 72.

Neronian Rome. We can start with her portrayal of Poppaea as a conqueror (*victrix*). Octavia accuses Poppaea of despoiling her home (*nostrae domus | spoliis nitentem*, 125-126) and besieging her bed (*inimica uictrix imminet thalamis meis*, 131). The language Octavia uses to characterize Poppaea (*spoliis, inimica victrix, imminet*) is that of war.<sup>9</sup> *Spoliis* are specifically spoils removed from a conquered enemy; Octavia labels Poppaea as the *victrix*, the conqueror and despoiler.<sup>10</sup> Such war imagery is a reflection of the stakes of Poppaea's involvement with Nero; from Octavia's perspective, Poppaea is a threat to the lives of those who get in her way.

Octavia also seems to think Poppaea has a central role in the murders of Neronian Rome past and present. It was Poppaea, according to Octavia, who reveled in Agrippina's death: this murder was Nero's *munus* (*cuius in munus suam | Stygiae parentem natus imposuit rati*; "on whose gift of a Stygian ship a son placed his mother," 126) for Poppaea. Octavia's understanding of Poppaea as the mastermind behind Agrippina's murder prefigures the perspective which the subsequent historiographical tradition will take up, including Tacitus (*Ann.* 14.1) and Cassius Dio (61.12.1). But as we will see later in this chapter, it is a perspective that the play as a whole hesitates to endorse.<sup>11</sup> Others point to Poppaea's involvement, but the characterization of Poppaea as the primary beneficiary of Agrippina's death is unusual and demonstrates Octavia's skewed perspective towards Poppaea.

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<sup>9</sup> Ferri 2003, 163 makes this argument.

<sup>10</sup> *Victrix* is also a common epithet for Venus. The association of Poppaea with Venus is a recurrent theme throughout the play (See Boyle 2008, 94).

<sup>11</sup> Ferri 2003, 163 points out that this characterization of Poppaea is not consistent with that of Poppaea in the *Octavia*. See Townend 1961, 245-246 for Poppaea's characterization in Tacitus and Dio.

Octavia imagines Poppaea as the elegiac or comic mistress who demands gifts from her husband, but in contrast to the inconsequential gifts of elegy and comedy, Poppaea demands her head *pretium stupri* (131-133) as if an enemy at war. Octavia's language here and especially her use of *pretium stupri* recalls Propertius' *Elegies* 3.11, in which he states that Cleopatra demanded the walls and Senate of Rome *coniugii obsceni pretium* ("as the reward from her obscene husband"; 3.11.35).<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Wallis points out that Propertius draws a parallel between his own submission to Cynthia and Cleopatra's attempted takeover of Rome.<sup>13</sup> By invoking Propertius' Cleopatra in her depiction of Poppaea, Octavia casts Poppaea as more than the comic or elegiac lover; just as Cleopatra manipulated her spouse to gain political power, so too does Poppaea manipulate Nero. And just as Cleopatra had the power to destroy Rome through this action, so too does Poppaea. Poppaea's despoiling of Octavia and greed are not minor infractions of a purely erotic nature, but an indication of dangerous female power that threatens the stability of Rome. She is a violent foreign military leader and a romantic rival to "good" Roman women. Although Nero has been the perpetrator of Octavia's hardships and losses, Octavia views Nero as acting on Poppaea's orders; Poppaea is the driver of conflict; Poppaea is the conqueror and usurper of Octavia's throne.

This idea is solidified in the following exchange between Octavia and her Nurse, who emphasize Poppaea's power over Nero. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the Nurse encourages Octavia to play the role of dutiful wife.<sup>14</sup> Octavia responds that Poppaea's *subolem* (181) and her brother's fate (*miseri fata germani*, 182) prevent this outcome. Britannicus, Claudius' biological son, was superseded by Nero's adoption, a

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<sup>12</sup> See Boyle 2008, 94 for the reference to Cleopatra.

<sup>13</sup> Wallis 2018, 17.

<sup>14</sup> See Chapter 3, Page 140.

decision which ultimately led, according to the play, to Nero killing Britannicus to solidify his rule. Octavia says, *me dira miseri fata germani trahunt* (182, “my poor brother's dreadful fate drags me down”). This line is often interpreted as Octavia expressing that she is held back by fear or sadness over her brother's fate. But I argue that it can also be understood as Octavia recognizing that her brother was an example of dynastic conflict; she will not have children with Nero because they could be killed by his children with Poppaea or in preference to those children. Even if Octavia had children with Nero, as the Nurse suggests, Octavia feels that Britannicus' life is evidence that her own children would never be safe from Poppaea and her children (182).<sup>15</sup>

The Nurse responds (186):

Nurse. *Respiciet ipse coniugem.* Octavia. *Paelex uetat.*

Nur. He'll respect his wife. Oct. His mistress won't let him.

The Nurse insists that Nero will respect Octavia, his *coniunx* (186), and Octavia responds that Poppaea, Nero's *paelex*, will forbid it (186). The driving force behind the threat to Octavia and her children is, from Octavia's perspective, Nero's *paelax*, Poppaea. The chiasmic structure of the line calls attention to the contrast between the juxtaposed words *coniugem* and *paelex*. Octavia, the *coniunx*, is the object of the verb *respiciet*; she is at the mercy of Nero's (*ipse*) actions. In contrast, Poppaea, the *paelex*, is the subject of the verb *vetat*, which puts her in a position of power over Nero.<sup>16</sup> Poppaea is forbidding Nero from respecting Octavia, and with this dialogue, Octavia is establishing a clear hierarchy between the three.<sup>17</sup> Octavia is subject to the whims of both Poppaea and Octavia, while Poppaea also has control over Nero. In addition to these power dynamics, the use of

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<sup>15</sup> Boyle 2008, 106 argues for this interpretation.

<sup>16</sup> See Kragelund 2005, 75 for the power dynamics of this scene.

<sup>17</sup> See Ginsberg 2019, 214 for power dynamics.

*coniugem* and *paelex* convey an inverted moral hierarchy.<sup>18</sup> Poppaea has power over Octavia, but Octavia's virtue is unquestioned. That the mistress has such control over the wife is a subversion of a traditional household and emphasizes the perversion of marriage values in Nero's household.

As this exchange continues, the nurse argues that negative public opinion towards Poppaea and the fickleness of Nero's lust for her will turn the tide in Octavia's favor (187-192):

Nur. *Inuisa cunctis nempe.* Oct. *Sed cara est uiro.*  
Nur. *Nondum uxor est.* Oct. *Iam fiet, et genetrix simul.*  
Nur. *Iuuenilis ardor impetu primo furit,*  
*languescit idem facile nec durat diu*  
*in Venere turpi, ceu leuis flammae uapor:*  
*amor perennis coniugis castae manet.*

Nur. She is certainly hated by all. Oct. But dear to her husband.  
Nur. She is not yet a wife. Oct. Dhe will be soon, and also mother.  
Nur. Youthful passion burns at first attack, then easily wanes and does not endure for a long time in shameful lust, just like the light heat of a flame: the love of a chaste wife remains forever.

Again, the dialogue emphasizes opposites with juxtaposition, here with the synthesis of *inuisa cunctis... cara est viro* (187). These lines reflect a central conflict in the play: the power of Nero versus the power of the people. There are two opposing interpretations of imperial power. Either the people's power when it comes to the question of imperial marriages matters or the *princeps* holds absolute power and the right to impose his will - here choice of wife - on the people regardless of their wishes. By extension, in the former

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<sup>18</sup> See Strong 2016, 83 for instances of *paelex* associated with Nero's relationships.

case, Nero's marriage can be influenced by the people and Octavia can be reinstated. In the latter case, Poppaea cannot be removed and the favoritism of the people is meaningless.

These conflicting ideas of the *princeps*' power in marital choice are manifest in the exchange between Octavia and her Nurse. The Nurse argues for the former viewpoint. She attempts to console Octavia by arguing both that the people's will matters and that Nero's passion for Poppaea will not last. The Nurse also believes that Poppaea is unpopular: she states *inuisa cunctis nempe* (187), demonstrating that, from her perspective, the will of the people should matter to Octavia's position. In this line, the Nurse creates an expectation for the audience that the people do, in fact, hate Poppaea - all of them (*cunctis*). As we will see, this will prove to be much more complicated as more characters appear. But the Nurse's statement is already undermined by her use of *nempe*, which belies her doubt. She does not know definitively that the people hate Poppaea but is hypothesizing that the people will react poorly to Nero's new wife because of their love for Octavia. Octavia should be consoled by the people's will because Nero will have to capitulate. When this is rejected by Octavia, the Nurse responds: *nondum uxor est* ("she is not yet his wife," 188). The Nurse's *nondum* is emphasizing that there is still time for the people's will to override Nero's.

The Nurse reinforces this viewpoint in her ensuing speech. The Nurse argues that Nero's *ardor* (189) for Poppaea is fickle, using dismissive language: *iuvenilis* (189), *languescit* (190), *nec durat* (190), *levis* (191). The Nurse's perspective here reflects conventional wisdom about lust; a contemporary audience would recognize that the

Nurse is sharing a common opinion.<sup>19</sup> In contrast to Nero's *venere turpi* for Poppaea (191), the Nurse claims that Nero's *amor* for Octavia, his *coniugis castae* is enduring (192). The Nurse notably emphasizes Octavia's status as Nero's *coniunx* and the recipient of Nero's *amor*. She emphasizes Octavia's chastity (*castae*, 192) as the reason for Nero's *amor* and as a core contrast to the shameful (*turpi*, 191) lust between Nero and Poppaea. The Nurse is arguing that Poppaea is only capable of inspiring fickle, easily extinguished lust. Because this lust is the basis of Poppaea's influence over Nero, her power over Nero is tenuous.

Octavia holds a different viewpoint on Nero's power and on Poppaea's influence over her situation. Octavia emphasizes the power of Nero over the will of the people and over Octavia herself; it does not matter that Poppaea is hated by all (*cunctis*, 187), because she is dear to Nero (*cara*, 187), who holds the power. In the following line, Octavia states the consequence of these power dynamics. Poppaea is not yet Nero's wife, but she will certainly be, and will be the one to bear heirs (*genetrix*, 188) for Nero. In fact, Poppaea's status as a *genetrix* will ensure her victory over Octavia. That the people reject Poppaea and prefer Octavia will have no bearing on Nero's decisions because his power is absolute.

Throughout their conversation, Octavia ties Nero's love for Poppaea to a destructive side of Venus who has previously destroyed her family (257-261):

*Graui deorum nostra iam pridem domus  
urgetur ira, prima quam pressit Venus*

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<sup>19</sup> See Boyle 2008, 106 for the recognizability of the Nurse's perspective.

*furore miserae dura genetricis meae,  
quae nupta demens nupsit incesta face,  
oblita nostri, coniugis legum immemor.*

The heavy rage of the gods burdens our house for a long time already, since harsh Venus first overwhelmed it with the lust of my wretched mother, who, married, madly married with an incestuous torch, forgetful of us, unmindful of her husband and the law.

Octavia's mother, Messalina, famously engaged in extramarital affairs, which Octavia here blames on *dura* Venus, who inflicted Messalina with *furore* (259), driving her mad (*demens*, 260) and causing her to forget her *coniunx* (261).<sup>20</sup> This reinforces the parallel in Octavia's speech; Nero is Messalina, driven mad by Venus and forgetful of his rightful *coniunx*. This madness will lead to his downfall, as it did with Messalina. However, Nero's downfall has much higher stakes than that of Messalina, as the dynasty fell with him. Venus, and by extension, Poppaea, is the driver of destruction within Octavia's family. Venus appears repeatedly within the *Octavia* as the destroyer of Octavia's family and, by extension, the Julio-Claudian line. The *Octavia* plays with the relationship of Venus Genetrix with the Julio-Claudian family: she is both originator and destroyer.<sup>21</sup> Venus stands metonymically as the reason for Messalina's and Nero's lust, which destroys their marriages and leads directly to Octavia's current predicament.<sup>22</sup> This too has bearing on the play's shaping of our expectations of Poppaea.

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<sup>20</sup> Juvenal *Sat.* 6.115-632, 10. 329-345, Tacitus *Ann.* 11.27.

<sup>21</sup> See Kragelund 2016, 112 and Kragelund 2005, 84 for the relationship of Venus Genetrix with the Julio-Claudians in this play.

<sup>22</sup> See Ginsberg 2019, 210 for the destructive nature of Messalina's lust.

As we have seen in Chapter 2, the historical Poppaea was associated with Venus/Aphrodite after her death and possibly during her life in both Italy and the Eastern empire.<sup>23</sup> For example, she appears on coins and also in graffiti in connection with various manifestations of this goddess.<sup>24</sup> This association, moreover, was felt to be a positive analogy for Poppaea's role in Nero's imagined imperial dynasty. This pre-existing historical connection between Poppaea and Venus adds a new meaning to the *Octavia*'s recurrent image of Venus as the destroyer of the Julio-Claudians. In other words, in Octavia's eyes, Venus the destroyer of the family can be read as an allegory for Poppaea's influence on Nero, including the impending death of Octavia and the end of the Julio-Claudian line as a whole.<sup>25</sup> It is not only Nero's lust that is problematic - the Nurse reminds us that he moved on from Acte quickly - but rather Poppaea's Venus-qualities.<sup>26</sup> Seneca too cites Nero's destructive lust for Poppaea later in the play as he attempts to convince Nero to remain married to Octavia, a passage to which we will soon turn.

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<sup>23</sup> Kragelund notes that other deified women of the first century (Livia and Drusilla) were not commemorated with a new temple, but instead were honored in their deified forms at pre-existing sanctuaries (2010, 567).

<sup>24</sup> See Introduction, p. 47 n. 61, p 49 n. 68 and Chapter 2, p. 93-100.

<sup>25</sup> See Kragelund 2005, 84 for Venus Genetrix as the destroyer of the Julio Claudians in this play.

<sup>26</sup> *uiolare prima quae toros ausa est tuos | animumque domini famula possedit diu | iam metuit eadem nempe praelatam sibi | subiecta et humilis, atque monumenta extruit | quibus timorem fassa testatur suum.* "The slave, who dared first to violate your bed and held the mind of her master for a long time, now the same girl fears the one recently preferred over her, submitted and humble, and she builds monuments by which she, confessing, shows her fear." (193-197)

We can also see within this Poppaea-Venus conflation specific reshaping of Julio-Claudian ideology. The name Venus appears in close juxtaposition to the word *genetrix* multiple times in the *Octavia* (see 258-259 above). For example, Poppaea's Nurse refers to the goddess *genetrix Amoris, maximum numen, Venus* ("Venus, Mother of Love, greatest of gods"; 698). And we have already seen Octavia point to Poppaea's pregnancy as turning her into a *genetrix* for Nero. *Venus Genetrix* was a prominent figure in the early Roman empire; a temple to the divinity stood in the Forum of Caesar. Venus was famously the ancestor of Aeneas, Julius Caesar, and the Julio-Claudian line by extension. Within the imagery of this play, then, Venus becomes both the progenitor of the Julio-Claudian line, as she was in imperial ideology, and *also* the destroyer of the Julio-Claudian line. Kragelund argues that this presentation of Venus acknowledges imperial propaganda but rejects the positive aspects of the family's association with the goddess.<sup>27</sup> Instead, Venus' gifts to Poppaea and, by extension, Nero, are ironically the very things which will lead to their downfall. The proud lineage's claim to the divine is the very thing which will end the dynasty.<sup>28</sup>

To bring these ideas together, in the opening scene of the *Octavia*, Octavia casts Poppaea as a murderous seductress who has used her beauty to obtain immoral and dangerous power over Nero. Poppaea is the primary antagonist and it is her influence, according to Octavia, which has destroyed the household and threatens Octavia's

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<sup>27</sup> Kragelund 2005, 86.

<sup>28</sup> Kragelund 2005, 86.

wellbeing. In the face of the loss of her birthright and the threat to her life, Octavia turns the blame on Poppaea and imagines that Poppaea is demanding Octavia's downfall. This opening scene, and the fact that these ideas are stated as facts by Octavia primes the audience to expect a Poppaea who fits Octavia's vision. Octavia is the titular character of the play, its protagonist, its chief victim; her unjust death is the central tragedy of the play. In other words, the first characterization of Poppaea in the play comes from its most sympathetic character; this conditions the audience to expect this impression to be confirmed in the remainder of the play. However, it soon becomes evident that Octavia's perception of her rival is not the only possibility for how to understand Poppaea in this play.

#### **4.2 Seneca's Poppaea and Nero's Poppaea: Mistress or Mother**

The play's second major scene also occurs between a member of the imperial household, here Nero, and an advisor figure, here Seneca. Their debate returns to many of the themes of the Octavia-Nurse scene with its focus on Nero's desire for a divorce and on the nature of the power of the people. At the same time, the scene also invites us to revisit the consistent image of Poppaea shared by Octavia and her Nurse and to introduce new - even conflicting details - into the play's representation of Poppaea.

As Seneca and Nero debate Nero's divorce of Octavia and his remarriage to Poppaea, the two echo the argument between Octavia and her Nurse about the relevance of the people's will (571-592):

Seneca. *Vix sustinere possit hos thalamos dolor  
uidere populi, sancta nec pietas sinat.*  
Nero. *Prohibebor unus facere quod cunctis licet?*

Sen. *Maiora populus semper a summo exigit.*  
 Ne. *Libet experiri uiribus fractus meis*  
*an cedat animis temere conceptus fauor.*  
 Sen. *Obsequere potius ciuibus placidus tuis.*  
 Ne. *Male imperatur, cum regit uulgus duces.*  
 Sen. *Nihil impetrare cum ualet, iuste dolet.*  
 Ne. *Exprimere ius est, ferre quod nequeunt preces?*  
 Sen. *Negare durum est. Ne. Principem cogi nefas.*  
 Sen. *Remittat ipse. Ne. Fama sed uictum feret.*  
 Sen. *Leuis atque uana. Ne. Sit licet, multos notat.*  
 Sen. *Excelsa metuit. Ne. Non minus carpit tamen.*  
 Sen. *Facile opprimetur; merita te diui patris*  
*aetasque frangat coniugis, probitas pudor.*  
 Ne. *Desiste tandem, iam grauis nimium mihi, instare,*  
*liceat facere quod Seneca improbat.*  
*Et ipse populi uota iam pridem moror,*  
*cum portet utero pignus et partem mei:*  
*quin destinamus proximum thalamis diem?*

Sen. Scarcely could the pain of the people endure to see this wedding, nor would their sacred faith allow it.  
 Ne. Am I alone prohibited to do what is permitted to all?  
 Sen. People always require more from the highest.  
 Ne. It is pleasing to me to try to break them with my strength and let their conceived favor purposelessly yield from their spirits.  
 Sen. It is better to obey your citizens peacefully.  
 Ne. A city is ruled badly, when the mob rules the leaders.  
 Sen. When they are able to accomplish nothing, they grieve justly.  
 Ne. Is it just to force what their prayers are unable to bring about?  
 Sen. It is hard to deny.  
 Ne. It is wrong to force a *princeps*.  
 Sen. He himself should yield.  
 Ne. But rumor would say he was defeated.  
 Sen. It is vain and empty.  
 Ne. It brands many.  
 Sen. It fears the lofty.  
 Ne. Nevertheless it seizes them no less.  
 Sen. It is crushed easily. Let the deserved age of your divine father and your wife's probity and modesty bend you.  
 Ne. Stop, finally, now you weigh on me too much, let me be permitted to do what Seneca disapproves. Even I myself have delayed previously the wishes of the people, since she carries a pledge and part of me in her womb: indeed should we establish tomorrow for the wedding?

Seneca argues that the people will not tolerate (*sustinere*, 572) or allow (*sinat*, 573) Nero's remarriage.<sup>29</sup> Seneca advocates that Nero yield to the people's will because the people demand (*exigit*, 574) better things (*maiora*, 574) from the *princeps* (*summo*, 574). The use of *exigo* implies force or violence from the people.<sup>30</sup> They do not just want better from the *princeps*, they can and will force it. Seneca exhorts Nero to obey the people (*obsequere*, 577); this verb echoes the Nurse's earlier advice to Octavia, when she advised the princess to choose *obsequendo* over grief (177).<sup>31</sup> This echo reminds the audience of Octavia's impossible situation, which *obsequendo* will not fix, while demonstrating the absurdity of Seneca's advice to Nero. *Obsequere* is a verb of subservience, fitting, perhaps, for women and common people, but wholly inappropriate for a *princeps*.<sup>32</sup>

Seneca also echoes the prior statements of Octavia's Nurse about the fickleness of lust (561-563):

*Vis magna mentis blandus atque animi calor  
amor est, iuuenta gignitur, luxu otio  
nutritur inter laeta Fortunae bona*

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<sup>29</sup> The *Octavia* centers the debate of the importance of the people's will in the princeps' actions, without taking a firm stance on either side (Ferri 2003, 74).

<sup>30</sup> *Exigo* literally means "drive/thrust out," and is often used in violent contexts. E.g. *Exigo* meaning "kill" (*hic damnatos cum dedecore et traductione vita exigit*, Sen. *De Ira* 1.6.4.); *exigo* meaning "stab" or "drive through [a weapon]" (*induat et crudum per costas exigit ensem*, Verg. *Aeneid* 10.682; *Aut aliquis Magno dignus comes exigit ensem*, Luc. *Pharsalia* 8.656).

<sup>31</sup> For parallels between Seneca's advice and the *De Clementia*, see Bellincioni 1984, 20-22.

<sup>32</sup> See Boyle 2008, 184 for implications of *obsequere*.

The great force of the mind, and the heat of the soul is love, it is born of youth, it is nurtured by excess and leisure amidst the happy joys of Fortune.

From Seneca's perspective, a marriage between Nero and Poppaea cannot endure due to the instability of their attraction and the pressure of the people.<sup>33</sup> Seneca downplays Poppaea's potential political and dynastic importance, reducing Nero's attachment to her merely as lust which will soon fade. Seneca advises Nero to capitulate to the people (577) and assures Nero that he will not lose authority or power by doing so (586-587). Seneca views respect for the will of the people as an essential part of the *princeps*' power.<sup>34</sup> The people hold some degree of influence over Nero's choice of wife.

In contrast, Nero views his own power as absolute, even divinely sanctioned, and this is the foundation of his refusal to capitulate. He tells Seneca that capitulating to the people would be ruling badly (*male*, 578). He goes so far as to call capitulation to the mob *nefas* (581). It would be deeply wrong, even unnatural, for a *princeps* to be forced to act against his own will.<sup>35</sup> Nero alone is able to choose and empower an empress and he has found the perfect woman to be an imperial bride (544-546):

*dignamque thalamis coniugem inueni meis  
genere atque forma, uicta cui cedit Venus  
Iouisque coniunx et ferox armis dea.*

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<sup>33</sup> Kragelund 2005, 83 interprets Seneca's argument in this way.

<sup>34</sup> Kragelund 2005, 77 makes this point.

<sup>35</sup> See Ginsberg 2016, 422 for the power of the *princeps* in relationship with the people.

I have found a wife worthy of my bed in both heritage and beauty, to whom conquered Venus and the wife of Jupiter and the fierce armed goddess will yield.

In Nero's lines, he compares Poppaea to Juno, Venus, and Minerva, judging her to be more beautiful than the three goddesses. In doing so, Nero positions himself as Paris, judging the beauty competition of the goddesses, but awarding the prize to Poppaea.<sup>36</sup>

A.J. Boyle notes that Nero borrows language from Ovid's praise of Livia in the above passage (*Ov. Ex Ponto* III.114-118):<sup>37</sup>

*Caesaris est coniunx ore precanda tuo  
quae praestat uirtute sua, ne prisca uetustas  
laude pudicitiae saecula nostra premat,  
quae Veneris formam, mores Iunonis habendo  
sola est caelesti digna reperta toro.*

The wife of Caesar must be prayed to with your mouth, she who stands out for her virtue, lest the former time suppress our age with praise of chastity, she who alone is found worthy of the celestial couch because she has the beauty of Venus and the character of Juno.

Livia, according to Ovid, shares Venus' beauty and Juno's character, making her alone (*sola*) worthy of Augustus' bed (*caelesti digna reperta toro*). Similarly, Poppaea is worthy of the bed of Nero, her Augustus (*dignamque thalamis coniugem [...] meis*), because of her beauty and family (*genere atque forma*). Nero is drawing a parallel between Poppaea and Livia, who is an idealized empress in the Ovid passage. This

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<sup>36</sup> See Kragelund 2005, 81 for this reference. This allusion, however, has dark undertones given that this mythical contest led to the Trojan War and the fall of Troy which we will explore in connection with the choral odes below on p. 200-207.

<sup>37</sup> Boyle 2008, 176.

parallel is heightened because Augustus also divorced a wife in order to marry Livia (Suet. *Aug.* 62):<sup>38</sup>

*Mox Scriboniam in matrimonium accepit nuptam ante duobus consularibus, ex altero etiam matrem. Cum hac quoque divortium fecit, "pertaesus," ut scribit, "morum perversitatem eius," ac statim Liviam Drusillam matrimonio Tiberi Neronis et quidem praegnantem abduxit dilexitque et probavit unice ac perseveranter.'*

Soon after he married Scribonia, who was married previously to two consuls, and even a mother by one. When he also has a divorce with her, "disgusted," as he wrote, "by her untowardness," and immediately he took Livia Drusilla from her husband Tiberius Nero while she was indeed pregnant and he loved her and esteemed her singularly and endlessly.

Nero can rely on Augustus' precedent by doing with Poppaea what Augustus did with Livia. By invoking Ovid's picture of Livia specifically, which is extremely flattering and idealized, Nero can reimagine his marriage with Poppaea as a positive political move, in spite of the unpopular divorces which his romance requires.

Poppaea's beauty is repeatedly emphasized throughout the dialogue of both her friends and enemies in this play but with different understandings of beauty's significance to an imperial wife. Seneca views Nero's preference for Poppaea as surface level and therefore unstable (561-563), based only in sexual attraction and therefore doomed to fail.<sup>39</sup> But while Nero admits that he feels lust for Poppaea, he also introduces new ideas (566-571):

*Hanc esse uitae maximam causam reor,*

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<sup>38</sup> See discussion of Nero and Poppaea as Augustus and Livia in the Chapter 5, p. 248.

<sup>39</sup> See Ballaira 1974 for Nero's fickle lust for Poppaea in this play.

*per quam uoluptas oritur, interitu caret,  
cum procreetur semper, humanum genus,  
Amore grato, qui truces mulcet feras.  
hic mihi iugales praeferat taedas deus  
iungatque nostris igne Poppaeam toris;*

I consider this to be the greatest reason for life, through which pleasure arises. The human race avoids extinction since it procreates always because of pleasing Love, which softens wild beasts. Let this god bear torches at my nuptials and let him join Poppaea to my bed with his fire.

Nero emphasizes the divine nature and the importance of sexual attraction in the propagation of the human race.<sup>40</sup> From Nero's perspective, sexual passion is extremely important and not a frivolity. Nero positions himself as the Epicurean, elegiac lover in contrast to Seneca's stoicism, while rejecting the idea that his romantic ideals are trivial.<sup>41</sup> While Seneca is concerned with the public popularity of Octavia, Nero is focused on the people's desire for an heir and the stabilizing factor of a happy imperial marriage. The people's desire for an heir, after all, cannot be satisfied if Octavia refuses sexual contact, as we have seen in the previous chapter.<sup>42</sup> Poppaea stands ready to provide an heir, as the people and Nero greatly desire.

Nero also responds to Seneca's advocacy for Octavia's virtue by regaling him with Poppaea's virtues: *omnes in unam contulit laudes deus | talemque nasci fata uoluerunt mihi* ("a god placed all virtues in one woman, and fate decreed that she be born for me"; 551-552). The *laudes* here refer to the qualities that Seneca previously attributed

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<sup>40</sup> Bruckner 1976, 98 makes this observation.

<sup>41</sup> See Kragelund 2016, 231 for Nero as an elegiac and Epicurean lover.

<sup>42</sup> See Chapter 3, p.116

to Octavia: *probitas fidesque coniugis, mores pudor | placeant marito* (546-547). And so while Seneca would limit these virtues to Octavia, Nero also claims them for Poppaea. But Nero's language describing his love for Poppaea is centered on another important quality which, he argues, Octavia lacks: Poppaea is willing to bear Nero's children. Nero's line *procreetur [...] humanum genus* (568)" indicates that Nero's love for Poppaea is not based purely on lust but also on her fertility. It is heirs which the people view as the stabilizing force in the principate.<sup>43</sup>

Poppaea is pregnant with Nero's only viable heir; in this way, Poppaea surpasses Octavia as an imperial wife.<sup>44</sup> In contrast to Octavia's and Seneca's perspectives, Nero views Poppaea as having virtues fitting for a wife in addition to her spectacular beauty. Later in the discussion, Nero mentions Poppaea's womb directly when he announces her pregnancy (*cum portet utero pignus et partem mei*, "for her womb bears a pledge and part of me"; 591). In this way, Poppaea fulfills the role of wife in a way that Octavia does not. And if we remember that Nero has already analogized Poppaea to Livia through his Ovidian language, Nero equates Poppaea with an empress who bore a future *princeps*; Poppaea, unlike Octavia, can also fill this role. Ironically, Nero's criteria for a wife are not outrageous; he argues that he wants to be married to a wife who is kind to him and will bear his children. Both of these qualities are integral to the standard imperial wife.

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<sup>43</sup> See Ferri 2003, 292 and Birt 1921, 334 for the importance of an heir for the stability of the regime.

<sup>44</sup> See Wilson 2003, 78 for the importance of fertility in an imperial wife.

Nero dramatically withholds the information that Poppaea is pregnant until the end of the debate with Seneca. Seneca has been considering whether Octavia or Poppaea would hypothetically better fill the role of imperial mother; his arguments about Octavia's virtues are essentially moot when this information comes to light.<sup>45</sup> Nero plays the elegiac lover in his discourse about Poppaea; his romantic notions about their relationship and his concealment of Poppaea's pregnancy obfuscate the ultimate point of the debate.<sup>46</sup> Whether Octavia will or will not bear Nero's heirs is now irrelevant because Poppaea is pregnant already. The heir has been conceived and Octavia's reputation, virtue, and character mean nothing in the practical sense anymore.<sup>47</sup>

But while this extensive debate discusses Poppaea in some detail, Poppaea's desires and actions are never the subject of the dialogue. In stark contrast to the power hierarchy established by the conversation between Octavia and her nurse in the opening scene of the play, Poppaea's influence is virtually absent from the discussion between Seneca and Nero. She is an object, whom Amor has placed in Nero's bed (*hic mihi iugales praeferat taedas deus | iungatque nostris igne Poppaeam toris*, "May he be torch-bearer at my wedding and his fire put Poppaea in my bed." 570-571). Nero does not mention Poppaea's desires or actions beyond her pregnancy and some stock qualities of a good wife; Seneca's objections rest primarily on the fickle nature of lust and the will of

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<sup>45</sup> Boyle 2008, 70 points out that Seneca's point is moot.

<sup>46</sup> See Kragelund 2016, 235 for Nero's rhetorical obfuscation of the point of the debate.

<sup>47</sup> Boyle 2008, 71 argues that nothing matters practically except for Poppaea's pregnancy.

the people rather than on any objectionable behavior on Poppaea's part. Seneca and Nero discuss only the ramifications of Octavia's divorce in a political context. If Nero is influenced by Poppaea's desires in his assertion that Octavia must be killed along with his other political enemies, he does not voice this to Seneca. The absence of Poppaea as an active agent and seductress in the dialogue between Nero and Seneca contrasts with Octavia's portrayal of her romantic rival. There is no suggestion of Poppaea's lust or indeed bloodlust, leading the audience to question whether this is imagined by Octavia or whether Seneca is unaware of Poppaea's influence and Nero unwilling to say it out loud.

### **4.3 Agrippina's Poppaea: Collateral Damage**

The next scene of the play has the ghost of Agrippina appearing onstage on the night after Nero and Poppaea's wedding. She appears brandishing a torch and curses the coming marriage. Agrippina also shares her own interpretation of the events surrounding her death and her account notably contradicts that of Octavia. As we have seen, Octavia named Poppaea as the mastermind behind Agrippina's demise, but Agrippina hardly mentions Poppaea at all. Poppaea is merely collateral damage in Agrippina's vengeance against her son.

Poppaea appears in the opening lines of Agrippina's speech (593-597):

*Tellure rupta Tartaro gressum extuli,  
Stygiam cruenta praeferens dextra facem  
thalamis scelestis. nubat his flammis meo  
Poppaea nato iuncta, quas uindex manus  
dolorque matris uertet ad tristes rogos.*

With the earth ripped apart I came from Tartarus,

Bearing in my bloody right hand a Stygian torch  
To these wicked nuptials. Let Poppaea marry my son  
In these flames, which a vengeful hand  
And the grief of a mother will turn into sad pyres.

Agrippina calls the marriage between Nero and Poppaea *scelestis* (595), but this is the only mention of Poppaea in the speech. Although Agrippina does not seem to blame Poppaea for her fate, she is willing to make her son's new bride collateral damage in her revenge. Agrippina states that she will turn (*uertet*, 597) the marriage torches into funeral torches; this image is tied to Poppaea's death omens later in the play. In addition, Agrippina's reference *uindex manus* combined with *dolor matris* could be a reference to the blow of Nero's vengeful hand which, according to Tacitus, brought about Poppaea's death.<sup>48</sup> Agrippina is suggesting here that she might be driving Nero's rage, which will lead to Poppaea's death as well as the death of her children and which, in and of itself, be further punishment for Nero.

In stark contrast to Octavia's prior statements, Agrippina blames the plot for her death on Nero alone (600-605):

*reddita et meritis meis  
funesta merces puppis et pretium imperi  
nox illa qua naufragia defleui mea.  
comitum necem natiq̄ue crudelis nefas  
deflere uotum fuerat; haud tempus datum est  
lacrimis, sed ingens scelere geminauit nefas.*

The price paid for my favors was a deadly ship and the price of command was that night on which I lamented my shipwreck. There was reason to

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<sup>48</sup> See conversation about the conflicting accounts of Poppaea's death in the Introduction, p. 17, p. 18 n. 20, and Chapter 2, p. 60 n.7.

weep for the death of friends and the wickedness of a cruel son; no time was given for tears, but he doubled immense wickedness with crime.

Agrippina's *funesta* came in return for Nero's *imperium*. She decries Nero's crimes (*scelere*) as *nefas*; the blame is not on Poppaea who may or may not have encouraged the crime, but on Nero, who committed the unspeakable act of matricide. Once again, the magnitude of Poppaea's influence over Nero and her bloodthirsty nature, as described by Octavia, contrasts with Agrippina's version of events.

#### **4.4 The First Chorus's Poppaea: Hated Empress**

The Chorus in the *Octavia* is divided into two groups: the pro-Octavia and the pro-Poppaea Chorus.<sup>49</sup> The first two appearances of a Chorus are both the Pro-Octavia Chorus. Initially, they appear immediately after Octavia's opening scene with her Nurse, and I have explored this ode in my previous chapter. The Chorus, likely made up of Roman citizens, is aghast that Nero will be divorcing Octavia; much of their first ode is focused on *Nero's* evil.<sup>50</sup> In their second appearance immediately before Poppaea's arrival, this same Chorus is stirred to violence in reaction to statues which depict her as the new imperial wife. And here their anger moves from Nero to the woman he has

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<sup>49</sup> The Pro-Poppaea Chorus can more accurately be called the "Pro-Stability" or "Pro-Status Quo" Chorus. See Chapter 3, p. 113 n. 15.

<sup>50</sup> See Chaumartin 2002, 58 for this interpretation of the Chorus.

chosen to be his new wife.<sup>51</sup> This Chorus is fiercely loyal to Octavia and despises Poppaea because she is usurping their beloved princess.<sup>52</sup>

In a short song, the Chorus expresses their inflammatory anger at Poppaea and Nero, spurred on by physical images of Poppaea with Nero (669-689):

*En illuxit suspecta diu  
fama totiens iactata dies.  
cessit thalamis Claudia diri  
pulsa Neronis,  
quos iam uictrix Poppaea tenet,  
cessat pietas dum nostra graui  
compressa metu segnisque dolor.  
Vbi Romani uis est populi,  
fregit claros quae saepe duces,  
dedit inuictae leges patriae,  
fasces dignis ciuibus olim,  
iussit bellum pacemque, feras  
gentes domuit,  
captos reges carcere clausit?  
Grauis en oculis undique nostris  
iam Poppaeae fulget imago  
iuncta Neroni.  
affligat humo uiolenta manus  
similes nimium uultus dominae  
ipsamque toris detrahat altis,  
petat infestis mox et flammis  
telisque feri principis aulam.*

Behold, that such awaited day which we suspected for a long time. Claudia yielded harsh Nero's bedchamber after being driven out, the bedchamber which triumphant Poppaea now holds, faith fades while slow grief crushes us with heavy fear. Where is the force of the Roman people, which often broke famous leaders, which gave laws to an unconquerable

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<sup>51</sup> The Chorus prefaces this passage by recalling tyrants of the past, so it is a bit surprising that the object of their anger is not a [male] tyrant, but his consort. Ginsberg 2017, 152.

<sup>52</sup> While the last choral ode focused on the virtues of Romans of the past and their acts of warfare, this choral ode focuses on *vis populi* and violence. Ginsberg 2017, 150.

country, which once gave power to worthy citizens, which commanded war and peace, which tamed Savage tribes, which shut into prisons captive kings? Behold now Poppaea's image joined with Nero weighs on our eyes from all sides. Let a violent band dash the face of the empress on the ground and drag her herself from her lofty couch, let them soon seek the hall of the wicked emperor with harsh flames and weapons.

Echoing Octavia, the Chorus calls Poppaea *victrix* (673) and states that their eyes are weighed down by Poppaea's image (682-4) They call for Poppaea's statues to be torn apart and for Poppaea herself to be dragged violently from her couch (685-689). The violence and vitriol which the Chorus directs at Poppaea in this scene speaks to a deep hatred amongst the people in this play, just as the Nurse had suggested. However, the Chorus does not include any criticism of Poppaea as empress; there is nothing specific they cite as leading to their dislike. They label her *victrix* (673), a motif which Octavia also invoked for Poppaea (131), however, unlike Octavia, the Chorus does not suggest that Poppaea has done anything specifically against Octavia. Her only crime seems to be the fact that she is not Octavia.

This portion of the Chorus rages at Poppaea not because Poppaea threatens Octavia's life, as Octavia predicts, but because she has usurped their beloved queen, who is called "Claudia" in the passage to emphasize her connection to the last emperor, Claudius.<sup>53</sup> The Chorus is enraged by the sight of Poppaea's shining image because it is joined to Nero's (682-4). The presence of Poppaea necessitates the absence of Octavia. They object to Poppaea not as a person but because she is a symbol of the rejection of

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<sup>53</sup> Boyle 2008, 205 points out the emphasis of Octavia as a Claudian.

Octavia.<sup>54</sup> This adds further nuance to the earlier assertion of Octavia's Nurse that the people hate (*invisa*) Poppaea for her own sake; rather, they violently resent Poppaea because she is not Octavia.

This scene is also the first time that the audience has seen Poppaea, or at least a representation of her. The Chorus' rage here is triggered by images of Nero and Poppaea together. If we imagine the play performed, it seems likely that prop statues of Nero and Poppaea were present onstage.<sup>55</sup> This would mean that the audience could react to the statues at the same time as the Chorus does.<sup>56</sup> If these statues were meant to be recognizable as typical images of imperial women, they likely would have highlighted her role as wife and mother as well as her piety and the virtues which Nero ascribed to her in the earlier scene.

Thanks to other statues of imperial women, we can imagine what this would look like. Statues of imperial wives were very formulaic; Poppaea likely would be displayed with an emphasis on modesty and elements of divinity, as would be traditional for an

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<sup>54</sup> See Ginsberg 2017, 153 for the rejection of Poppaea.

<sup>55</sup> Susan Wood points out that the statues which were torn down were in reality likely wood portraits or hollow bronze statues due to the description of rioters carrying the statues on their shoulders in Tacitus' description of events (2000, 271). It is unclear exactly what type of images would be present onstage in the *Octavia*—the images need only be immediately recognizable as imperial portraiture. Beyond that, they would not need to be historically accurate in medium. Peter Meineck points out that onstage props and dialogue in a play were meant to evoke an easily recognizable image in the audience (2013, 162). Given the prevalence of imperial portraiture in Rome, an image of Poppaea and Nero, regardless of medium, would be recognizable for the audience.

<sup>56</sup> See Boyle 2008, 52 for the staging. For an analysis of the relationship between the *Octavia* and parallel scenes in Tacitus' *Annals*, see Devillers 2000 and Ferri 1998.

imperial woman.<sup>57</sup> These qualities could be represented in various ways: for example, statues could wear the *stola*, a symbol of the Roman matron, hold a cornucopia as a reference to Demeter and to fertility, wear clinging clothing to emphasize the woman's fertility, or wear a veil and hold a *patera*, as if practicing a religious ritual.<sup>58</sup> Such iconography on stage would have highlighted the positive idea of Poppaea's role as pious wife and mother. Although depictions of women in statuary largely fall into a few generic categories, the fact that this image of Poppaea is explicitly paired with an image of Nero as part of a group (*Poppaeae fulget imago | iuncta Neroni*, 682) emphasizes her new family tie with the emperor. She is the idealized woman, the sole wife of Nero, and the mother of his heir, everything that Seneca and the Pro-Octavia Chorus wanted Octavia to be. Such a statue group may have existed at Rome, given the iconography of RE1 208 (Figure 7), a coin which features Nero on the obverse, labeled "NERO CAESAR AUGUSTUS" and Nero and an unspecified wife on the reverse, labeled "AUGUSTUS" and "AUGUSTA." The wife, who is likely Poppaea due to being labeled "AUGUSTA," is portrayed as veiled, holding a *patera* and a cornucopia.<sup>59</sup> Her breasts are prominent; her curves, along with the cornucopia, indicate that she is fertile. Her veil and *patera* demonstrate her piety as she is *iuncta* to Nero.

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<sup>57</sup> See Fantham et al. 1994, 306 for typical representations of imperial women.

<sup>58</sup> See Alexandridis 2004, 58–64; Fejfer 2008, 331 for these sorts of representations of imperial women.

<sup>59</sup> Nero's other two wives, Octavia and Stotila Messalina, did not bear children, and therefore would not have attained the label of "Augusta".

If a similar statue group appeared as part of the scenery of the play, two things would happen. First, it would visually replicate Nero's perspective on his new wife and her importance to his reign. But, second, it would stand in contrast to Octavia's perspective on Poppaea as the antithesis of these values of modesty and piety. The Pro-Octavia Chorus reacts violently to this image, which means that they react violently to seeing a representation of Poppaea in the guise of Nero's chaste and fertile wife: Poppaea has both usurped Octavia's position and is pregnant with an heir. Her statues provide a visual manifestation of this usurpation, which drives the Chorus to violent revolt.

In this song, the Chorus laments their lack of power over Nero (676-681):

*Vbi Romani uis est populi,  
fregit claros quae saepe duces,  
dedit inuictae leges patriae,  
fasces dignis ciuibus olim,  
iussit bellum pacemque, feras  
gentes domuit,  
captos reges carcere clausit?*

Where is the force of the Roman people, which often broke famous leaders, which gave laws to an unconquerable country, which once gave power to worthy citizens, which commanded war and peace, which tamed Savage tribes, which shut into prisons captive kings?

The *uis* of the people has, according to the Chorus, dictated the best leaders of the state (*claros duces* (677), *inuictae patriae* (678), *dignis ciuibus* (679)). The use of *claros* and *dignis* indicates that the best leaders are the ones who submit to and are chosen by the will of the people. Nero feared that he would seem weak if he capitulated to the people; in contrast, the Chorus here portrays those who submit to the will of the people as the

famous and worthy leaders.<sup>60</sup> The Chorus also acknowledges the potential violence of the people in order to attain their goals. The use of *uis* and *fregit* reminds the audience of the power of the people, who have the ability to violently seize control and choose their own leaders. This is the same violence that the Chorus threatens (and partially carries out) against Poppaea. The Chorus hates Poppaea both because her presence necessitates Octavia's absence and because she is a manifestation of the Chorus' lack of power over the *princeps* and his marriage.

The rage and violence which the Chorus directs at Poppaea is surprising given the motivation for their hate. The Chorus' primary complaint about Poppaea is that she is not Octavia. Their threats to tear Poppaea limb from limb seem to be an overreaction. This could perhaps be explained by the underlying attitude of the play that the mob is uncontrollable and dangerous. However, the pro-Octavia Chorus does seem to be adopting some of the language and perspective of Octavia from earlier in the play; their level of vitriol could be a reaction to Octavia's perspective on Poppaea, even absent of proof for her perspective.

#### **4.5 Poppaea on Stage: Haunted Victim**

By the time Poppaea appears onstage in person, the audience has already been given several, sometimes contradictory, images of her. Octavia accuses Poppaea of being a seductress who, as an allegorical Venus, has influenced Nero to murder his mother and

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<sup>60</sup> Salles 2008, 167 suggests that this perspective on the Republican past may not be meant genuinely. See also Ginsberg 2017, 150.

lawful wife. In contrast, Nero views Poppaea as one who will save his reign by providing him stability through an heir. The audience has also just seen an imperial portrait of Poppaea as Nero's wife, presenting her as the proud successor of Octavia in idealized terms, but it has also seen the Pro-Octavia Chorus begin to tear that image limb from limb.<sup>61</sup>

But when the audience first sees Poppaea as a living person, she is alone and afraid in her bedroom.<sup>62</sup> She shares her fear with her Nurse; her Nurse attempts to soothe her and to encourage her to take comfort in her marriage to Nero. This scene should sound very familiar: we have seen a version of it before. The playwright shapes Poppaea's one scene to mirror Octavia's opening scene and thereby invites the audience to compare, contrast, and draw parallels between the experience of the two imperial women.<sup>63</sup> Notably, both Octavia and Poppaea initially appear discussing dreams with their Nurse in the *thalamus*, the marital chamber. The nearly identical circumstances of the scenes demand comparison between the scenes and, by extension, the two Neronian wives, despite the seemingly dramatically different circumstances of the two women. The parallelism which links the two women casts both as the victims of Nero's violence; the sympathy which is evoked for victimized Octavia is again evoked for the supposed

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<sup>61</sup> See Kragelund 2005, 91 for the impact of this staging.

<sup>62</sup> Kragelund 2005, 92 points out this jarring juxtaposition.

<sup>63</sup> Scholars have noted that the play is filled with doubled imagery and invites comparisons between the pair. See especially Herington 1961, 22; Walde 2001, 374; Smith 2003, 405; Boyle 2008, 238; Kragelund 2016, 258 n.1.

villain Poppaea.<sup>64</sup> This scene replicates the structure and dynamics of the first scene, and that echo impacts the audience by presenting Octavia and Poppaea as parallels rather than as opposites.

Poppaea's appearance on stage seems designed to shock; rather than expressing evil cunning or joy at her new marriage, she arrives frantic and terrified. Her arrival is introduced by her Nurse, who says (690-697):

*Quo trepida gressum coniugis thalamis tui  
effers, alumna, quodue secretum petis  
turbata uultu? cur genae fletu madent?  
certe petitus precibus et uotis dies  
nostris refulsit.*

Why do you emerge trembling from your husband's bedchamber, my child, and why do you seek privacy with a disturbed expression? Why are your cheeks wet with tears? Certainly the day which we sought with prayers and vows has dawned.

Poppaea's terror is highlighted by her Nurse's language; the imagery of Poppaea trembling (*trepida*), terrified (*turbata uultu*), and crying (*genae fletu madent*) is quite illustrative. This fear would be highlighted by the actor's mask and actions, assuming the play was indeed staged. The mask would exhibit Poppaea's legendary beauty – beauty which would have been previously seen by the audience when Poppaea's image appeared on stage, but now, that beauty is marred by fear.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps the mask itself would depict terror and weeping or the actor would be miming such actions. This is an impactful

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<sup>64</sup> See Boyle 2008, 61 and Kragelund 2016, 259 for this parallelism.

<sup>65</sup> See Kragelund 2005, 91, 93 for the staging.

introduction for Poppaea; from the instant she appears onstage, her Nurse directs the audience's attention to reading fear on her face.

Such fear is problematic for the Nurse—she immediately attempts to persuade Poppaea to be the happy wife.<sup>66</sup> The Nurse attempts to reexplain Poppaea's dream, asserting that Poppaea is merely misunderstanding the images. She points out that Poppaea has finally attained her goal (*petitus*, 693) of marrying Nero. The Nurse's insistence that Poppaea should be joyous only makes her fear more evident.

In the Nurse's opening lines, she reasserts Octavia's prior assertion that Nero is captive to his lust for Poppaea; Poppaea has power over the most powerful man in Rome. She states (694-701):

*...Caesari iuncta es tuo  
taeda iugali, quem tuus cepit decor,  
et culta sancte tradidit uinctum tibi  
genetrix Amoris, maximum numen, Venus.  
O qualis altos quanta pressisti toros  
residens in aula! uidit attonitus tuam  
formam senatus, tura cum superis dares  
sacrasque grato spargeris aras mero*

You are joined to your Caesar in marriage, he whom your beauty seized, and Venus, mother of Love, the greatest deity put him in chains for you for your sacred worship. O how greatly you rested on the high couches, settling in the palace! The senate was thunderstruck when they saw your

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<sup>66</sup> Ginsberg argues that nurses in this play have a vested interest in the happy appearance of their charges, particularly in light of Nero's prior assertion that fear is an effective way to control the populace (492-494): *Munus deorum est, ipsa quod seruit mihi Roma et senatus quodque ab inuitis preces humilesque uoces exprimit nostri metus*. "It is a gift from the gods, that Rome herself and the senate also serves me and that their fear of me forces prayers and humble entreaties from the unwilling." Ginsberg 2017, 155. See also Kragelund 2016, Ch. 2.

beauty, when you gave incense to the gods and scattered the sacred altars with pleasant wine.

The use of binding terms *cepit* and *uinctum* reinforce the idea that Poppaea has captivated Nero in exchange for her worship of Venus (*culta*, 696), though the Nurse clearly means this in a positive context.<sup>67</sup> However, these lines recall the dialogue between Octavia and her Nurse, in which Octavia asserts that Poppaea is using her beauty to influence Nero to murder. No character in the play denies that Nero is overcome with Poppaea's beauty, but the degree of power that Poppaea holds over Nero seems to be much smaller than Octavia's interpretation at the beginning of the play. Poppaea's Nurse is acknowledging and corroborating that Venus has elegiacally given Nero to Poppaea by means of Poppaea's beauty, while simultaneously presenting this as a positive idea.<sup>68</sup> This beauty is highlighted when the Nurse describes the senate, thunderstruck at Poppaea's beauty. The senate marvels at Poppaea's *formam* specifically when she is worshiping the gods and acting piously. By linking her beauty with her piety, the Nurse adds an even more positive connotation to Poppaea's beauty which, she suggests, is also shared by the Senate of Rome as well as the Emperor.

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<sup>67</sup> Boyle 2008, 211 points out that the Nurse means this positively.

<sup>68</sup> Treggiari 1991 explores the many ancient perspectives on the importance of a woman's beauty for her marriage prospects. Importantly, while some authors argue that beauty is an important component to a woman's desirability (e.g. Jerome *adv. Iov.* 1.47, Apuleius *Apol.* 92), the authors who argue against the importance of beauty are making the argument because of the prevalence of men selecting their brides based on their looks (e.g. Plut. *Stich.* 135, Cic. *Off.* 2.71). Beauty is clearly a central part of selecting a bride, even if some moralists oppose the idea (Treggiari 1991, 83-125).

The Nurse also echoes the image of the yoke (*iuncta*, 694), which both the Chorus and Agrippina used for Poppaea's marriage to Nero (Agrippina: *nubat his flammis meo | Poppaea nato iuncta* ("Let Poppaea marry my son by these flames"; 595-596); Pro-Octavia Chorus: *Grauis en oculis undique nostris | iam Poppaeae fulget imago | iuncta Neroni* ("Look, everywhere now our eyes smart from Poppaea's gleaming image paired with Nero's"; 682-684)). The *Octavia* has established the term *iuncta* as a symbol of marriage—Nero and Poppaea are now joined, regardless of what is to come. This means that Agrippina's plot against Nero will also take down Poppaea, to whom he is joined. Poppaea is collateral damage in Agrippina's eyes because she is connected to Nero through marriage. This concept of *iuncta* is also what has enraged the Pro-Octavia Chorus, since the physical appearance of Poppaea joined with Nero is symbolic of the marriage which has unseated their beloved Octavia. While the Nurse uses this term in an attempt to comfort Poppaea and assure her of the security which comes from being linked to the *princeps*, her words are undermined by the pervasive enmity evoked by the union in other characters throughout the play.

Treggiari and Hersch have both noted the significance of the language and imagery of yoking (*iungere*) in Roman marriage.<sup>69</sup> This language also recurs in epithalamia, usually through the related term *coniunx*. Catullus uses the metaphor three

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<sup>69</sup> Hersch 2010, 15, 200-210 and Treggiari 1991, 208. Treggiari focuses on the sexual undertones of the word.

times in 61 (61.32, 44, 233) and five times in 68 (68.73, 81, 84, 107, 139).<sup>70</sup> Statius also uses the term (*Silv.*1.19-21):

*nec blandus Amor nec Gratia cessat  
amplexum niveos optatae coniugis artus  
floribus innumeris et olenti spargere nimbo.*

And neither pleasant Love nor Grace cease to splatter you, embracing the snowy limbs of your hoped-for spouse with countless flowers and a cloud of perfume.

*Iungo*, and its derivative *coniunx*, have been seen as key language for romantic characterizations by scholars and this is reflected by the prevalence of this language in wedding songs.

But while the Nurse echoes aspects of other characters' assessments of Poppaea to imagine her as an all-powerful and beloved bride, Poppaea's own words belie such an image. Poppaea reveals to her Nurse that she is greatly distressed by a dream, in which her wedding day is perverted into a funeral procession (718-739).<sup>71</sup>

*uisa nam thalamos meos  
celebrare turba est maesta; resolutis comis  
matres Latinae flebiles planctus dabant.  
inter tubarum saepe terribilem sonum  
sparsam cruore coniugis genetrix mei  
uultu minaci saeua quatiebat facem.  
quam dum sequor coacta praesenti metu*

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<sup>70</sup> E.g. in poem 61: *at boni | coniuges, bene vivite*

But, good spouses, live well (61.232-233)

E.g. in poem 68: *quo tibi tum casu pulcherrima Laodamia | ereptum est uita  
dulcius atque anima | coniugium.*

Then, most beautiful Laodamia, for this reason, a marriage sweeter than life and spirit was ripped away from you. (68.105-107)

<sup>71</sup> See Ferri 2003, 329 and Kragelund 1982, 9 for the wedding turned funeral.

*diducta subito patuit ingenti mihi  
tellus hiatu, lata quo praeceps toros  
cerno iugales pariter et miror meos,  
in quis resedi fessa. uenientem intuo  
comitante turba coniugem quondam meum natumque:  
properat petere complexus meos  
Crispinus, intermissa libare oscula,  
irrupit intra tecta cum trepidus mea  
ensemque iugulo condidit saeuum Nero.  
tandem quietem magnus excussit timor,  
quatit ora et artus horridus nostros tremor  
pulsatque pectus, continet uocem timor.  
quam nunc fides pietasque produxit tua.  
Heu quid minantur inferum manes mihi?  
aut quem cruorem coniugis uidi mei?*

For I saw that my bedroom was packed with a mourning crowd; weeping Latin mothers with unbound hair beat their breasts. Among the terrible sound of the trumpets my husband's mother, savage with a menacing face, shook a torch, spattered with blood. While I followed her, driven by the present fear, suddenly the earth, having split, opened into a huge cleft before me, into which I fell headlong and then saw my marriage bed and I marveled at it, on which I sat, exhausted. I saw my former husband and my son coming from the accompanying crowd: Crispinus hastened to seek my embrace, to taste the kisses which he missed, when Nero burst into my room, trembling, and buried his savage sword in his throat. Finally great fear shook me from sleep, a horrible tremor shook my face and limbs and my heart pounded, fear restricted my voice. Now your faith and loyalty have produced my voice. Alas, what do the shades below threaten for me? Why did I see the blood of my husband?

In Poppaea's dream, mourners flood her marriage chamber, a central symbol of her marriage. Poppaea then sees a hostile, blood-spattered Agrippina (*sparsam cruore coniugis genetrix mei/uultu minaci saeua quatiebat facem*, 722-3), whom she follows into an abyss. Poppaea sees her marriage couch, a respite, and reclines to rest (727-728). She encounters her former husband Crispinus and their son, before Nero bursts in and either

murders Crispinus or commits suicide.<sup>72</sup> Three consecutive lines conclude with words of fear: *timor*, *tremor*, *timor* (734-736), emphasizing Poppaea's frantic terror, which her Nurse attempts to quell.

Poppaea concludes the description of her dream with the image of *cruorem coniugis* (739). Although it is not clear whether she is referencing Nero's or Crispinus' blood, the ambiguity of the statement also recalls Octavia's fear of her coming death, as Nero's former *coniunx*.<sup>73</sup> However, this scene as written seems intentionally ambiguous.<sup>74</sup> By the time that this play was written, Poppaea, Crispinus, their son, and Nero will all be dead (and their deaths will, to varying degrees, be Nero's responsibility). The ambiguity of the Latin reminds the audience of the fate of all three.<sup>75</sup> This dream bodes poorly for Poppaea; haunted by mourners and her dead mother-in-law on her wedding day, even her marital bed is stained with *cruorem coniugis*, with the identity of

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<sup>72</sup> Kragelund 2016, 264 argues that Nero's violence in this scene mirrors his murder of Britannicus as described by Octavia (122), furthering the parallels between the two scenes. Nero's ability to exact murder demonstrates his absolute power and ruthlessness against both women.

<sup>73</sup> The person whose throat is slashed has been debated in scholarship since the discovery of the *Octavia*. Kragelund (1982, 13; 2015, 266) argues that this scene is intentionally ambiguous; the text usually utilizes pronouns quite liberally, so the lack of defining pronoun here is all the more conspicuous. Ferri (2003, 332; see also Carbone 1977, 57) argues that Nero cuts his own throat and that this scene is a prediction of the future, in which Crispinus and Poppaea are both already dead and are watching Nero commit suicide. Crispinus, Ferri argues, is a marginal character in the scene, whose only role is to demonstrate Poppaea's arrival to the realm of the dead. Ferri disagrees with Kragelund's reading of the scene because Ferri views this scene as a traditional foretelling of the death of a monarch via dream.

<sup>74</sup> See Kragelund 1982, 13 for this ambiguity.

<sup>75</sup> See Boyle 2008, 218 and Kragelund 1982, 16 for the interpretation of this ambiguity.

the *coniunx* left ambiguous. The sanctity and privacy of her bedchamber is violated, invaded by Agrippina, mourners, and a violent Nero.<sup>76</sup> Clearly the bloodshed has not ended, and this prospect terrifies Poppaea.

The foreboding tone of Poppaea's dream is underscored by its parallel to the Roman wedding ritual. The *Octavia* describes Roman matrons wailing during the marital procession (746-747), which contrasts with the traditional *deductio*. Rather than celebration and song, Poppaea's dream marital procession is marred by mourning.<sup>77</sup> The perversion of the marital ceremony continues in the following scene: Poppaea is in the *thalamus* when Nero bursts in and murders either himself or Poppaea's former husband. The *thalamus* symbolized the health of a marriage, so such desecration foretells horror in the marriage of Poppaea and Nero.<sup>78</sup> In addition, the *thalamus* was specifically a haven for the wife, whose existence was centered in the domestic sphere.<sup>79</sup> Nero's violent actions violate the marital chamber, the marriage, and Poppaea herself. Poppaea's dream is disturbing not only because of the violence and the violation of Poppaea herself, but also because Nero's actions reflect upon the empire at large.

Nero, as *princeps*, was the *pater patriae* and a symbolic *paterfamilias* for the empire as a whole.<sup>80</sup> The omens which predicted bloodshed within the marriage also

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<sup>76</sup> Smith 2003, 414 makes this point about the invasion of the bedchamber.

<sup>77</sup> See Panoussi 2019, 23 and Hersch 2010, 141 for discussion of this procession.

<sup>78</sup> See Panoussi 2019, 15 and Kragelund 2016, 114 for the violation of the *thalamus*.

<sup>79</sup> See Panoussi 2019, 15 for the symbolism of the *thalamus*.

<sup>80</sup> See Panoussi 2019, 58 and Milnor 2005 for the symbolism of the *pater patriae*.

reflect upon Nero's reign and the state of the empire as a whole. Panoussi (2019) has expounded upon the motif of corrupt marriage as a symbol for a corrupt state during times of civil strife; Panoussi's arguments center on Cato and Marcia in Lucan's *De Bello Civili* and Polyxena and Achilles in Seneca's *Troades*, both depictions of marriage during active war. In contrast, the perverted marriage ceremony of Poppaea's dream does not take place during war; the invocation of this motif acts as a strong condemnation of Nero's regime and indicates significant political strife.

Poppaea's Nurse unsuccessfully attempts to console her and to dissuade her from fear. This scene is atypical for the *domina-nutrix* trope. Such scenes usually consist of nurses warning women against excessive confidence or plots (e.g. Octavia's Nurse warns her against plotting vengeance, Seneca, in the advisor role, advises Nero against his passion for Poppaea); in contrast, Poppaea's Nurse is trying to warn her against fear.<sup>81</sup>

Her speech reads (746-751):

*Octaviae discidia planxerunt sacros  
intra penates fratris et patrium larem.  
fax illa, quam secuta es, Augustae manu  
praelata, clarum nomen invidia tibi  
partum ominatur. inferum sedes toros  
stabiles futuros spondet aeternae domus.*

They were mourning Octavia's divorce among the sacred *penates* of her brother and *lares* of her father. That torch, which you followed, born in the hand of Augusta, presages bright fame, born from jealousy, for you. That infernal space promises the future stable bed of an eternal house.

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<sup>81</sup> See Taylor 2010, 215 for the trope of the Nurse/advisor.

The Nurse states that the funeral procession is the expression of grief from the people because of Octavia's divorce (746-747).<sup>82</sup> It is notable that the Nurse acknowledges the people's desire for Octavia to remain the imperial wife. Her interpretation of the mourning matrons leaves open the possibility that Poppaea could have some guilt for the deposition of Octavia. This guilt does not necessarily mean that Poppaea has acted immorally; rather, there is space to acknowledge Octavia as collateral damage while simultaneously celebrating Poppaea's achievement of her goals. This small mention of Octavia in these lines stands in stark contrast to the hateful bloodlust that Octavia imagined Poppaea to hold. Instead, this scene draws parallels between the two Neronian wives, who both discuss with their nurses the potential danger which Nero poses.

In her speech, the Nurse acknowledges that Poppaea sought (*secuta es*, 748; cf. *petitus*, 696) to take Agrippina's position and become an *Augusta* (748).<sup>83</sup> *Augusta* was a title first given to Livia upon Augustus' death; the same title was granted to Antonia under Caligula.<sup>84</sup> Claudius granted Agrippina the title in her lifetime as the mother of Nero. By the time of Nero's regime, the title has come to refer to a woman who bore the

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<sup>82</sup> Ferri 2003, 336 interprets the line in this way.

<sup>83</sup> *Peto* can refer to pursuing someone in an elegiac sense. *TLL* c.v. *peto*. Poppaea will be the only wife of Nero to be commemorated as *Augusta* in the historical record (Tacitus *Annals* 15.23).

<sup>84</sup> Augustus stipulated that Livia should be called *Augusta* in his will, but Tiberius vetoed this along with many other privileges with which the senate sought to endow Livia. However, Ovid was already calling Livia *Augusta* during her life (*Fasti* I, 536). Grether 1946, 233-235. Antonia was voted numerous honors, including the title *Augusta*, by the senate under Caligula, Grether 1946, 247.

emperor's child.<sup>85</sup> Nero's other wives do not appear in the historical record as *Augustae*, perhaps unsurprisingly, as they never bore heirs. The omen of fame, the torch, is being born not just by Agrippina as a manifestation of jealousy, but by Agrippina as an *Augusta*. Poppaea is pregnant with Nero's child at this time; thus, she is chasing fame and status that will come from her pregnancy. This also implies that Poppaea's pregnancy may not be a happy accident, but a calculated strategy to attain the status of *Augusta*. In other words, Poppaea's closest confidant suggests throughout this scene that Poppaea had some significant agency in pursuing and wedding Nero.

There are strong overtones of death in Poppaea's dream which her Nurse essentially ignores. She states that the image of the underworld represents the stability of the new imperial marriage. The Nurse is seemingly oblivious to the obvious dual meaning, as *aeterna domus* (751) is a name both for the imperial house and, in epitaphs, for the underworld. Likewise, *toros* (750) can refer both to the marriage bed and to the funeral bed.<sup>86</sup> The Nurse then attempts to portray Nero's act of violence (as described by Poppaea: *irrupit intra tecta cum trepidus mea | ensemque iugulo condidit saeuum Nero*, 732-733) as one of peace, in which he will sheath his sword (753); her interpretation hinges on the dual definition of *condo* as "hide" rather than "bury".<sup>87</sup> This

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<sup>85</sup> See Severy 2004, 242 for background on the term *Augusta*.

<sup>86</sup> See Boyle 2008, 219 and Ferri 2003, 338 for the dual meaning of *toros*.

<sup>87</sup> See Ferri 2003, 339 for the dual meaning of *condo*.

reinterpretation of Poppaea's words aligns with Neronian propaganda: in either 64 or 66 CE, Nero closed the doors to the Temple of Janus for the first time since Augustus.<sup>88</sup>

The Nurse's attempts to comfort Poppaea by explaining away her fear paradoxically validates Poppaea's fear.<sup>89</sup> The Nurse's explanation of Poppaea's dream is based on linguistic reinterpretation; this does not change what Poppaea *saw* in her dream, which has led to such terror. These dismissive explanations belie the Nurse's desperation to console Poppaea in the face of obvious ill omens. In the Nurse's eyes, Poppaea puts herself, her position as empress, and her Nurse, by extension, in danger by panicking and sharing such ill omens on her wedding day. Her position is already tenuous given the resistance to the marriage by several characters; Poppaea's only protection from the ire of the people is her marriage to Nero. Suggesting that the marriage may be doomed could destabilize Poppaea's only protecting force and leave her vulnerable to the anger of the people. It is the safest course of action for Poppaea to hide her dream, which her Nurse demonstrates by intentionally obfuscating Poppaea's description of the episode.

This subversion of the usual *domina-nutrix* trope is pointed out by JP Poe, who interprets the scene as Poppaea fearing her "just desserts."<sup>90</sup> Poppaea is not portrayed sympathetically, Poe argues, but rather is standing in as a proxy for Nero as Agrippina exacts her revenge.<sup>91</sup> Nero must still be a remorseless villain to explain the impending

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<sup>88</sup> See Boyle 2008, 219 and Mattingly 1923, 174 for the significance of Nero closing the Temple of Janus.

<sup>89</sup> See Smith 2003, 405 for this paradox.

<sup>90</sup> Poe 1989, 455.

<sup>91</sup> Poe 1989, 456.

murder of Octavia; it is Poppaea instead, then, who must demonstrate the inevitable fall which is coming for both antagonists.<sup>92</sup> However, I find this approach to be dismissive of the degree of Poppaea's terror and the varying perspectives of the characters when they discuss the new empress. The author of the *Octavia* was likely aware of negative traditions about Poppaea; after all, Poppaea, along with Nero, received memory sanctions condemned under Galba and again under Vespasian.<sup>93</sup> But instead, the playwright chooses to limit this perspective to Octavia alone; Poppaea, as she appears in the play, is virtually incongruous with Octavia's characterization of her rival. This scene subverts the *domina-nutrix* Senecan type-scene and the wider memory sanctions against the historical Poppaea in order to foreground just how disempowered and removed from the central action Poppaea is. She is not plotting or manipulating, as one might expect in a scene of this type, she is terrified and paralyzed.<sup>94</sup>

After the various perceptions of Poppaea by Octavia, Nero, Seneca, the Chorus, and Agrippina, Poppaea's appearance on stage is shocking. The audience would already be aware of the contradiction between Octavia's claims of Poppaea's agency in the political violence currently impacting Rome and the accounts of Nero, Seneca, and

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<sup>92</sup> Poe 1989, 458.

<sup>93</sup> On the memory sanctions against Poppaea after Nero's death, see Varner 2004, 83. Arce 1988 and Carré 1999 delve into the inconsistent reception of Nero during the year of the four emperors. Octavia references a fear that Poppaea wants to see her decapitated head, an idea that becomes fact in Tacitus' story (*Tac. Ann.* 14.64). See also Barnes 1982, 215.

<sup>94</sup> See Ginsberg 2017, 153 n. 36 and Bonnet 2006, 213 for this surprising subversion.

Agrippina. All accounts do agree, however, that Poppaea has used her beauty to win over Nero and usurp Octavia. However, Poppaea's frantic fear is unexpected and impactful. She is not a politically motivated usurper, but a pious, scared woman who seems overwhelmed by her new husband's tendency towards murderous violence.<sup>95</sup> There is no denying that Poppaea seduced Nero in the story of this play, but, contrary to Octavia's claims, Poppaea is entirely unconcerned with vengeance against Octavia. Octavia's divorce is an unfortunate but inconsequential reality of her marriage to Nero. Poppaea is neither political mastermind nor power hungry murderer.

#### **4.6 Second Chorus: Beautiful Stabilizer, Dangerous Beauty**

After Poppaea's exit, a Chorus appears on stage who looks a lot like the first Chorus but sings a very different kind of song. This Chorus, in contrast to the one we met earlier, celebrates the new marriage and sings an epithalamium in celebration of Poppaea's marriage to Nero. Epithalamia are typically optimistic and even naive presentations of marriage, usually omitting the images of unhappy or cursed marriages that commonly appear in other genres.<sup>96</sup> This epithalamium sung by the Pro-Poppaea

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<sup>95</sup> Sander Goldberg (2003, 21) questions if this portrayal of Poppaea is evidence of an alternative tradition in which Poppaea is not the Tacitean villain or if this portrayal is a clumsy attempt by the author of the *Octavia* to draw a parallel between the scenes of Octavia and Poppaea with their nurses. I favor the former argument, as the *Octavia* is not unique in portraying Poppaea as complex and perhaps sympathetic (see the *Apotheosis of Poppaea* and Josephus' texts).

<sup>96</sup> See Hersch 2010, 19, 297 for conventions of epithalamia.

Chorus is initially typical, but by the end the song twists with an uncharacteristically dark ending.<sup>97</sup>

The Chorus opens their song by assuring Poppaea that she is more beautiful than even the women who attracted Zeus (762-777):

*Si uera loquax fama Tonantis  
furta et gratos narrat amores  
(quemmodo Leda pressisse sinum  
tectum plumis pennisque ferunt,  
modo per fluctus raptam Europen  
taurum tergo portasse trucem),  
quae regit et nunc deseret astra,  
petet amplexus, Poppaea, tuos,  
quos et Leda praeferre potest  
et tibi, quondam cui miranti  
fuluo, Danae, fluxit in auro.  
Formam Sparte iactet alumnae  
licet et Phrygius praemia pastor,  
uincet uultus haec Tyndaridos,  
qui mouerunt horrida bella  
Phrygiaeque solo regna dedere.*

If talkative rumor speaks true secrets of the Thunderer and his pleasing loves (they say that he once pressed the lap of Leda while covered in feathers and wings, that once he carried the snatched Europa through the waves on his back as a savage bull), and now he will desert the stars which he rules, he will seek your embrace, Poppaea, which he prefers over both Leda and you, Danae, for whom, amazed, once he flowed with bright gold. It is permitted for Sparta to boast the beauty of its daughter, and the Phrygian farmer to boast his prize, this face conquers the Tyndarids, who roused horrible war and gave the Phrygian kingdom to the earth.

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<sup>97</sup> To distinguish between these two Choruses, I will label this group as the Pro-Poppaea Chorus. However, unlike the Pro-Octavia Chorus, who supported Octavia and despised Poppaea, the Pro-Poppaea Chorus does not share the same passions. They are repulsed by the violence of the other Chorus, but their support for Poppaea is more akin to acceptance of the status quo rather than fierce loyalty. In other words, the Pro-Poppaea Chorus is not inherently anti-Octavia; in fact, they will lament for her later.

They cite the same three examples which Octavia's Nurse used in her analogy of Octavia and Juno: Leda, Europa, and Danaë.<sup>98</sup> In fact, she is more beautiful than these women, making this situation again more extraordinary.<sup>99</sup> In doing so they inadvertently echo the advice of Octavia's Nurse who had framed Octavia's marital problems in similarly mythological language; but while Octavia's Nurse suggested that Octavia would endure as Nero's wife, in spite of his infidelities, by means of her extraordinary virtues, the Chorus here states that Poppaea surpasses other paramours with her extraordinary beauty.

When the Chorus states that Poppaea is also even more beautiful than Helen herself (*uincet uultus haec Tyndaridos*, "Her face is fairer than Helen's"; 775), this might give us pause, but Katherine Wasdin's work on *epithalamia* shows that this is not unusual: allusions to Helen are common in marriage songs and are not necessarily meant in a foreboding fashion. Typically, Helen was evoked as the erotic ideal for brides.<sup>100</sup> As Wasdin argues, such evocations of figures like Helen are meant only to compare the bride to the mythical figure in the liminal moment of the wedding.<sup>101</sup> Such comments are meant only to flatter, as the bride becomes Helen who is frequently portrayed with bridal imagery and is, of course, the epitome of beauty.<sup>102</sup> Wasdin cites Catullus 61 as an example of this; the subject, Junia, is compared to Venus at the judgement of Paris (Cat. 61.16-19):

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<sup>98</sup> Boyle 2008, 221 points out the parallel.

<sup>99</sup> Boyle 2008, 222 discusses the rhetorical techniques used in this ode.

<sup>100</sup> Wasdin 2018, 145. See Sappho fr. 23V and fr. 166V, Theocritus *Idylls* 18.

<sup>101</sup> Wasdin 2018, 141.

<sup>102</sup> Wasdin 2018, 145.

*qualis Idalium colens/venit ad Phrygium Venus/iudicem, bona cum  
bona/nubet alite virgo.*

Just as Venus, dwelling in Idalia, came to the Phrygian judge, the good maiden marries among good auspices.

The reader, Wasdin argues, cannot help but continue the narrative from the judgment of Paris to the resulting marriage between Paris and Helen.<sup>103</sup> Catullus' emphasis on the goodness of the wedding (*bona cum bona*, 61.19) shows that this reference to the judgment of Paris is meant to be taken positively, despite Catullus' excoriation of Helen elsewhere in his poetry.<sup>104</sup> Another example of comparison of the bride's beauty to that of Helen's is Statius' *Silvae* 1.2.42-43:

*nec si Dardania pastor temerarius Ida  
sedisses, haec dona forent*

And if you were seated in Dardanian Ida as a rash shepherd, this gift would not be yours.

The Chorus here addresses the groom, Lucius, and tells him that if he were Paris, his bride (Helen) would not be as beautiful as Violentilla, his bride today. The invocation is meant to be positive: Paris' gift (*dona*) from Venus in the judgment was marriage to the most beautiful woman. The divine parallel between the newlyweds and mythical figures

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<sup>103</sup> Wasdin 2018, 148.

<sup>104</sup> E.g. Catullus 68. 101-104: *ad quam tum properans fertur lecta undique pubes | Graecae penetrales deseruisse focos | ne Paris abducta gavisus libera moecha | otia pacato degeret in thalamo*. "To which then, the youth of Greece, hurrying from all sides to abandon their innermost hearths, are taken, lest Paris, having rejoiced in the adulteress [Helen], led away, freely enjoy leisure in a calm bed chamber."

Wasdin 2018, 141.

only exists as long as the wedding itself and does not extend into the marriage with what happened next in the myth.

However, the language of the epithalamium in the *Octavia* twists the traditional idea of the bride as Helen into a foreboding omen. They follow their praise of Poppaea's and Helen's beauty by reminding the audience that Helen's beauty "spawned war's horror and flattened Phrygia's realm" (*mouerunt horrida bella | Phrygiaeque solo regna dedere*, 776-777). The Chorus unambiguously connect Helen's marriage to Paris to the destruction of Troy.<sup>105</sup> Despite the fact that Poppaea, Nero's Helen, was dead before Nero's death, which is equivalent to the fall of Troy in this analogy, the comparison of the imperial couple to the mythical couple who brought about the destruction of a great city is poignant. This is a subversion of the epithalamia genre and emphasizes the potential for destruction that Poppaea's marriage to Nero could bring. Helen's beauty and Venus' meddling caused the fall of Troy, Rome's ancestral city, and Poppaea's beauty and Venus' influence will again cause the fall of Venus' line.<sup>106</sup>

This epithalamium is followed by discussion between the Pro-Poppaea Chorus and a Messenger, who reports that the Pro-Octavia Chorus has rioted, as they previously promised, and have torn down Poppaea's statues (794-800):

*Quaecumque claro marmore effigies stetit  
aut aere fulgens, ora Poppaeae gerens,  
afflicta uulgi manibus et saeuo iacet*

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<sup>105</sup> This reference could be doubly poignant for a Roman audience who may have heard the rumor that Nero started the Great Fire and recited the *Troica* while Rome burned in 64 CE (Tacitus *Annals*, 15.39.3). Boyle 2008, 223.

<sup>106</sup> See Ginsberg 2017, 158 for Venus' destructive influence.

*euersa ferro; membra per partes trahunt  
diducta laqueis, obruunt turpi diu  
calcata caeno. uerba conueniunt feris  
immixta factis, quae timor reticet meus.*

Whatever image stood gleaming with bright marble or bronze, bearing the face of Poppaea, lies torn down and destroyed by bands of people and their harsh iron; they drag the limbs apart, pulled away with ropes, they cover the trampled bits with filthy mud. Words, about which my fear silences me, are mixed with these horrible deeds.

The juxtaposition between the beauty of Poppaea's statues (*claro* 794, *fulgens* 795) and the destruction emphasizes the violence of the hatred of the pro-Octavia Chorus. They are not simply removing Poppaea's statues but tearing them limb from limb and dragging them through the mud, as if they are the body of Poppaea herself rather than an image. The image of the statues ripped limb from limb evoke the process of capital punishment against Poppaea.<sup>107</sup> This scene does not merely convey a preference for Octavia, but suggests that fierce favoritism for Octavia has led to equally fierce hatred for Poppaea over the course of the preceding scenes, perhaps spurred by the wedding.<sup>108</sup> Such hatred is powerful, given that the only objection which the Pro-Octavia Chorus has raised about Poppaea is that her marriage to Nero necessitates the dismissal of Octavia.

The Pro-Poppaea Chorus' reaction to this report reveals their attitude about the Poppaea/Octavia conflict; they are horrified by the violence and advocate for heeding Cupid for the sake of peace. Here they reveal that their support of Poppaea has grown from their desire for peace, rather than innate loyalty to or preference for the new

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<sup>107</sup> Kragelund 2005, 92 points out this imagery.

<sup>108</sup> Boyle 2008, 225 hypothesizes this.

empress. But they also see her value, and in praising Poppaea can showcase what they believe Octavia lacks: they assert that Poppaea holds Nero's marriage bed *concordi fide* (*Quos iam tenet Poppaea concordi fide*; [the bed] which Poppaea now holds with pledged consent; 791). The presence of *concordia* and *fides* in the marriage between Poppaea and Nero casts the marriage in a positive, even idealized light as something they hope will now bring stability to the reign.

However, the Pro-Poppaea Chorus' opinion on the marriage is illuminated by their ode at the conclusion of the scene. They say (806-819):

*Quid fera frustra bella mouetis?  
inuicta gerit tela Cupido;  
flammis uestros obruet ignes,  
quis extinxit fulmina saepe  
captumque Iouem caelo traxit.  
Laeso tristes dabit poenas  
sanguine uestro.  
non est patiens feruidus irae  
facilisque regi.  
ille ferocem iussit Achillem  
pulsare lyram;  
fregit Danaos, fregit Atriden,  
regna euertit Priami, claras  
diruit urbes.  
Et nunc animus quid ferat horret  
uis immitis uiolenta dei.*

What fierce and futile battle are you waging? Cupid has unbeatable weapons; he will overrun your fires with his flames, which often extinguished lightning and dragged a captive Jupiter from the sky. You will pay the sad penalty of your blood for this offense. The fervid god does not endure anger and is not easy to rule. The one ordered fierce Achilles to play the lyre; he broke the Danai, he broke Atrides, he overturned the kingdom of Priam, he overthrew famous cities. And now the mind fears what violence of the harsh god looms.

The Pro-Poppaea Chorus' support of Poppaea and Nero stems from their acknowledgement of the power of Cupid. Unlike Octavia's Nurse and Seneca, who warned against the fickle nature of lust, the Pro-Poppaea Chorus points out that resistance to Cupid is futile (*frustra*, 806). Cupid is described as angry and difficult to control (*non est patiens feruidus irae facilisque regi*, 813-814). His power has broken even the strongest, including Jupiter himself; the riots of the Pro-Octavia Chorus would always be fruitless against such power. The Pro-Poppaea Chorus supports the marriage between Poppaea and Nero not out of loyalty to Poppaea, but because they see no point in resisting Nero's passion. The Pro-Poppaea Chorus even expresses some trepidation about Poppaea and the destruction this marriage could cause in their comparison of Poppaea to Helen in the *epithalamium* (776-777); in spite of these reservations, they support Poppaea and oppose the violence of the Pro-Octavia Chorus because they see no alternative. Their support of the new empress is not an endorsement of Poppaea per se but an acquiescence to the power of lust.

#### **4.7 Octavia's Poppaea: Villainous Murderess Again**

Following the Pro-Poppaea Chorus' appearance, Nero and a prefect debate Octavia's culpability for the riots. Nero insists on Octavia's execution, much to the Prefect's horror, and blames her for the actions of her supporters. It is the rage and the actions of the people in this scene that triggers Nero's final decision to kill Octavia.<sup>109</sup> He states (825-830),

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<sup>109</sup> See Boyle 2008, 225 for Nero's motivations.

*Admissa sed iam morte puniri parum est:  
graviora meruit impium plebis scelus.  
At illa, cui me civium subicit furor,  
suspecta coniunx et soror semper mihi,  
tandem dolori spiritum reddat meo  
iramque nostram sanguine extinguat suo;*

But now it is fitting for their crimes to be punished by death: the impious crime of the plebs deserves even worse. But that woman, to whom the rage of the citizenry would subject me, my wife and sister, always suspicious to me, finally must relinquish her life to me, pained, and extinguish my rage with her blood.

In this passage, Nero repeatedly emphasizes his own decision making by repeating emphatic personal pronouns (*me*, 827, *mihi*, 828, *meo*, 829). The riots trigger Nero's anger; he will punish the people, but first and foremost, he views this as a conflict between himself (*meo*, 829) and Octavia (*suo*, 830). Within this play, Octavia's death is the result of Nero's anger towards the people and his fear of Octavia as a symbol for the people, not from the urging of Poppaea, as Octavia had predicted.

After Nero gives this decree, the Pro-Poppaea Chorus reappears onstage, along with the captive Octavia, who awaits exile and execution. It is Octavia's popularity that Nero uses to justify her execution, but Octavia seems unaware of this fact. Instead, Octavia, in her final scene, blames Poppaea for her exile or death. As she is dragged towards the ship which will bring her to her fate, Octavia cries (899-905):

*Quo me trahitis quodue tyrannus  
aut exilium regina iubet?  
sic mihi uitam fracta remittit,  
tot iam nostris euicta malis?  
sin caede mea cumulare parat  
luctus nostros, invidet etiam  
cur in patria mihi saeva mori?*

Where do you drag me or what exile do the tyrant and queen order? Thus does that worn down woman yield my life to me, conquered by my misfortunes? But if she prepares to heap murder upon my grief, why does she savagely begrudge my death in my fatherland?

Octavia initially asks where Nero (*tyrannus*, 899) and Poppaea (*regina*, 900) are sending her. She then immediately shifts to singular verbs and feminine forms, focusing on Poppaea alone (*fracta remittit*, 901, *euicta*, 902, *inuidet*, 904, *saeua*, 905). Octavia wonders whether Poppaea will spare her life or send her to die in a foreign land. She questions her fate but is certain that Poppaea is the one making the final decision; the question is not who will punish Octavia, but what punishment Poppaea, the singular subject, will choose for her.

Despite the fact that Poppaea has demonstrated no animosity towards or power over Octavia in any of the scenes in the play, Octavia herself perceives Poppaea as the primary threat. In this final scene, Octavia does not mention Nero's clear animosity toward her as his wife nor the danger presented by popular power (which the Chorus had mentioned only a few lines before, *O funestus multis populi | dirisque fauor* (877-878)). Octavia views her death as the result of a personal conflict between herself and Poppaea: from Octavia's perspective, Poppaea views Octavia as a threat to her romantic relationship with Nero and thus compelled Nero to order Octavia's death. But in holding

this opinion, Octavia also shows little regard for the public impact that this private feud has had.<sup>110</sup>

#### **4.8 Conclusion**

Octavia's comments about Poppaea bookend the play; her perspective on Poppaea is the first and last we hear. However, these moments have very different impacts. In the opening of the play, Octavia's characterization is the sole image of Poppaea presented and the audience has no reason to doubt Octavia's perspective. As I noted, historical Poppaea was subject to collateral *damnatio* after Nero's death and so it would be unsurprising for the *Octavia* to present Poppaea as a villain in an age interested in punishing Nero's allies and championing his martyrs.<sup>111</sup> However, the audience's expectations are subverted as more characters - and more versions of Poppaea - appear on stage. Nero, Seneca, the pro-Octavia Chorus, and Agrippina's ghost present varied, sometimes conflicting images of the new empress; particularly inconsistent are questions of Poppaea's agency, agenda, and maliciousness towards Octavia.

When Poppaea herself appears onstage near the end of the play, she lacks the malice that Octavia ascribes to her at its opening. By no means is Poppaea a passive figure in the *Octavia*. She herself and her Nurse admit to her seduction of Nero and her

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<sup>110</sup> Ferri 2003, 389 points out Octavia's surprising lack of awareness for her own public influence.

<sup>111</sup> Poppaea's deification was rescinded and images of Poppaea were removed from public display along with those of Nero under Galba. Under Otho and Vitellius, her image was rehabilitated (Tac. *His.* 1.78, Suet. *Vit.* 11.2). The *damnatio* was reinstated under Vespasian. Varner 2004, 83.

aspirations to marry him, despite his marriage to Octavia. Aside from Octavia and her Nurse, no characters ascribe the violence and the murders of the Claudian and Neronian reigns to Poppaea or her influence. Thus, when Octavia appears again at the end of the play, her idea of Poppaea remains consistent but her presentation of Poppaea is no longer authoritative for us. In particular, Octavia's assertion that it is Poppaea who is punishing her conflicts with the events shown onstage. While Octavia is certainly a casualty of Poppaea's goal to marry Nero, the active persecution of Octavia by Poppaea seems to be an invention of Octavia, rather than a reality within the play. It is not that Octavia is lying. Rather, she lacks the full perspective given to the audience of the play. The audience can see how the different characters perceive the same events and ascribe blame, and we are left to our own understanding about whether to label Poppaea a villain or victim, or somewhere in between.



Figure 7- RE1 208, image from the British Museum

## 5. Octavia and Poppaea in Biography

Although some might consider ancient biography a subsidiary of history, it is a distinct genre. While ancient history is usually event-driven and focuses on major episodes and multiple characters, ancient biography is a historical account of a central figure which aims to present a cohesive narrative of that figure.<sup>1</sup> The prevalence of biography in the Roman imperial period is perhaps unsurprising as the events of a principate were naturally structured around the reigns of emperors.<sup>2</sup> Biographers like Suetonius and Plutarch aim to present a coherent characterization of each central figure in their biographical works rather than a more generalized account of an era. As a consequence of this, the characterization of other characters can be limited and even contradictory. In this chapter, I will analyze how the goals of biography as a genre condition how Suetonius and Plutarch select which episodes from the stories of Octavia and Poppaea they share, including how they use those episodes to shape their characterizations of Nero and Otho.

Before we turn to the authors' presentation of these two women, it is important to note that Suetonius and Plutarch have different approaches to structuring their biographies. Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars* are organized into rubrics which serve

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<sup>1</sup> See O'Gorman 2011, 291, Stadter 2007, 503, Wardman 1971, 256 for the conventions of biography.

<sup>2</sup> O'Gorman 2011, 292.

Suetonius' rhetorical strategy.<sup>3</sup> The biographer utilizes rubrics in order to create a persuasive characterization of each emperor.<sup>4</sup> Within these rubrics, Suetonius compiles his evidence, which has been arranged in order to present an overall characterization of the emperor as told through a series of habits, characteristics, actions, etc.; Suetonius unsurprisingly takes liberties with this strategy, at times stretching and bending anecdotes to fit his points.<sup>5</sup> Notably, Suetonius tends to divide his books in half, grouping together the “good” and “bad” attributes of each emperor. In books with overall negative characterizations, Suetonius begins with the positive qualities, then shows how the negatives outweigh them; the inverse is true for books which portray their titular emperors positively.<sup>6</sup>

Plutarch's *Lives of the Caesars*, of which only the *Life of Galba* and the *Life of Otho* survive, originally consisted of biographies of every emperor from Augustus to Vitellius. These biographies would have ranged in length, with the earlier accounts perhaps giving “cradle to grave” accounts of the emperors.<sup>7</sup> Scholars speculate that the

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<sup>3</sup> Extensive work has been done on Suetonius' rhetorical strategy, in which he groups together information under a variety of headings, called “rubrics” by scholars (See Phoebe Garrett 2018 and Verena Schulz 2019). This strategy is also described by Suetonius himself in his *Life of Augustus: Proposita uitae eius uelut summa partes singillatim neque per tempora sed per species exequare, quo distinctius demonstrari cognoscique possint.* (Aug. 9; Garrett 2018, 199) The rubrics enable Suetonius to ascribe elements of each emperor's life to certain personality traits. Using this strategy, Suetonius is able to convey a concise characterization of each emperor within each book of his *Lives*.

<sup>4</sup> Hurley 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Damon 2014.

<sup>6</sup> See Garrett 2018, 199 for discussion of this rhetorical model.

<sup>7</sup> See Stadter 2007, 511 and Syme 1980, 124 for thoughts on the lost books.

*Lives* showed the birth of the Roman Empire from civil war, followed by its gradual decline back to civil war, and ending with an optimistic ending, as Vespasian came into power.<sup>8</sup> The two extant biographies are short, with focus on the political careers of the titular characters.<sup>9</sup> Plutarch often centers his books on the moral character and development of his titular figures.<sup>10</sup> Plutarch often cites his sources and comments on the veracity of his sources.<sup>11</sup> This rhetorical strategy assures the reader that Plutarch is thinking critically about his evidence and therefore should be trusted.<sup>12</sup> This does not mean, however, that Plutarch's accounts are more reliable than those of other biographers; Plutarch uses this rhetorical strategy to reinforce his characterizations of central characters.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, Plutarch's *Life of Nero* has been lost and little is definitively known about its contents.<sup>14</sup> But Nero's second wife, Poppaea, does make a memorable appearance in Plutarch's *Life of Galba*, which I will examine below.

This chapter will explore the characterizations of Octavia and Poppaea in the genre of ancient Roman biography as represented by the works of Suetonius and Plutarch. The majority of material related to these two women comes from Suetonius.

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<sup>8</sup> See Stadter 2015, 57 for this hypothesis.

<sup>9</sup> Syme 1980, 101.

<sup>10</sup> See Gill 1983, 470 and Swain 1989, 62 for Plutarch's rhetorical strategies.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. τοῦτο μὲν οὖν οὐκ οἷ δα ὅπως ὁ Κικέρων, εἶπερ ἦν ἀληθές, ἐν τῷ περὶ τῆς ὑπατείας οὐκ ἔγραψεν αἰτίαν ("If this story is true, I cannot understand why Cicero did not mention it in his account of his consulship," Plutarch, *Life of Caesar* 8.3.) Pelling 2023, 13.

<sup>12</sup> See Pelling 2023, 14 for discussion of Plutarch's rhetoric.

<sup>13</sup> Pelling 2023, 12.

<sup>14</sup> Georgiadou 1988, 349.

First, I will analyze Octavia and Poppaea in Suetonius' *Life of Nero* through the lens of domestic violence: both women are presented as victims of Nero's violence in distinct, important ways as part of Suetonius' argument about Neronian tyranny. Then, I will pivot to the characterization of Poppaea in Suetonius' *Life of Galba*, in which she is portrayed as the wife in an adultery mime. I will compare this with Plutarch's presentation of the same episode in the same generic mode. Through this analysis, I will show that although neither author seeks to present a complete picture of either woman, the literary and rhetorical tools they use to characterize them within the lives of the emperors to whom they were married create complex literary figures that often stand apart from the narrative of Tacitus.

### ***5.1 Domestic Violence in Suetonius***

Suetonius' *Life of Nero* presents an unambiguously negative picture of the emperor. Suetonius includes a few positive attributes of Nero in the early chapters of the book, correlating vaguely with his early years, before introducing a plethora of horrific qualities which will characterize the emperor and leave a lasting impression.<sup>15</sup> Suetonius writes (*Ner.* 26):

*Petulantiam, libidinem, luxuriam, auaritiam, crudelitatem sensim quidem primo et occulte et uelut iuuenili errore exercuit, sed ut tunc quoque dubium nemini foret naturae illa uitia, non aetatis esse.*

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<sup>15</sup> See Garrett 2019, 203 for this rhetorical strategy.

First he exercised petulance, wantonness, luxury, greed, and cruelty gradually and secretly as if out of youthful mistakes, but even then no one doubted that those flaws were of his nature, not his age.

Suetonius crafts the remaining chapters to characterize Nero as the embodiment of these negative traits, which he will demonstrate with a number of examples. Nero's treatment of his wives appears in a single chapter (35) within the rubric of Nero's *crudelitas* and *saevitia* (*Ner.* 33-38).<sup>16</sup> Although these women play much larger roles in other accounts of Nero's life, Suetonius uses them primarily as a vehicle with which to expound on Nero's violence. The women are characterized in this book only so far as necessary to prove Suetonius' points about Nero. Within the *Life of Nero*, Octavia appears only once before her death, while Nero's other two wives are entirely absent outside of this chapter.

We'll begin with Octavia who appears several times in Suetonius' biography. At her first appearance, Suetonius writes (7-8):

*Nec multo post duxit uxorem Octaviam ediditque pro Claudii salute circenses et venationem.*

*VIII. Septemdecim natus annos, ut de Claudio palam factum est, inter horam sextam septimamque processit ad excubitores, cum ob totius diei diritatem non aliud auspicandi tempus accommodatius videretur.*

Not much after, he married Octavia and put on circus games and a hunt for Claudius' health.

(VIII) At 17 years old, when the situation about Claudius (his death) was made public, he went out between the sixth and seventh

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<sup>16</sup> Schulz 2019, 274.

hour to the guards, since on account of the harshness of the whole day, no other time for reading auspices seemed more fitting.

These lines appear within Suetonius' initial, chronologically organized account of Nero's early life.<sup>17</sup> Octavia has no active role in the passage, and thus not much can be said for her characterization, but this is an excellent example of Suetonius' art of suggestive juxtaposition which marks the marriage as ill-omened from the start. One chapter ends with the dual action of marriage and a public display for Claudius' health. Both these events should strengthen Claudius' power and regime, but the next chapter opens with an unmarked flash-forward to Claudius' death. In doing so, Suetonius rewrites our interpretation of the marriage and games as connected to the *health* and *safety* of Claudius' reign and reconfigures them to be harbingers of the emperor's death. The games honoring Claudius' health did not have the intended effect. In addition, Suetonius notes that the omens were especially disastrous (*diritatem non aliud auspicandi*); these omens are not explicitly about the marriage of Octavia and Nero and probably refer to Nero's entire reign; in the parallel account of Tacitus, for example, such omens foretell Claudius' death and prefigure the disaster of Nero's reign (*nec multo post duxit uxorem Octaviam ediditque pro Claudi salute circenses et uenationem. (8) Septemdecim natus annos, ut de Claudio palam factum est, inter horam sextam septimamque processit ad excubitores.* "Soon after he married Octavia and put on games and a hunt in honor of Claudius' health. He was 17 years old when Claudius' [death] was made public, and went

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<sup>17</sup> Suetonius' books follow a consistent narrative structure, beginning with a chronology of early life before ascending the throne. See Garrett 2018.

out to the guard between the 6th and 7th hour.” Suet. *Ner.* 7-8). In reality, Claudius died over a year after Nero’s marriage to Octavia, but Suetonius’ subtle art of compression and juxtaposition creates the suggestion that the transition point between Claudius’ and Nero’s reigns is marked by Nero’s marriage to Octavia, a thing which casts a sense of foreboding onto the relationship from the beginning.

Octavia next appears in the chapter that narrates her death as well as the sufferings of Nero’s other wives. Chapters 33-35 address Nero’s murders of various family members. The section begins: *Parricidia et caedes a Claudio exorsus est; cuius necis etsi non auctor, at conscius fuit* (“He began the practice of parricide and murder with Claudius himself; for although he was not the contriver of his death, he was privy to the plot;” Suet. *Ner.* 33) A string of murders of family members follow: Claudius, Britannicus, Agrippina, and Domitia in chronological order, are killed before Suetonius details Nero’s atrocities towards his wives.<sup>18</sup> The transition of other familial murders to the murder of a series of wives creates the image of Nero’s violence growing and rippling out to more and more people, including those closest to him.

Suetonius lists all three of Nero’s wives in chronological order to introduce his section on the wives (Suet. *Ner.* 35):

*Uxores praeter Octaviam duas postea duxit, Poppaeam Sabinam quaestorio patre natam et equiti R. antea nuptam, deinde Statiliam Messalinam Tauri bis consulis ac triumphalis abneptem. Qua ut poteretur, virum eius Atticum Vestinum consulem in honore ipso trucidavit. Octaviae consuetudinem cito aspernavit, corripientibus amicis sufficere illi debere respondit uxoria ornamenta. Eandem*

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<sup>18</sup> See Schulz 2019, 199 for the rhetorical escalation of Nero’s violence.

*mox saepe frustra strangulare meditatus dimisit ut sterilem, sed improbante divortium populo nec parcente conviciis, etiam relegavit.*

He married two other wives besides Octavia, Poppaea Sabina, who was daughter of a quaestor father and had been married before to a Roman knight, then Statilia Messalina, the great grandchild of Taurus, twice a consul and recipient of a triumph. In order to have her, he butchered her husband, the consul Atticus Vestinus in his own honor. Quickly he spurned the companionship of Octavia, he responded to his friends who criticized him that her wifely adornments ought to be sufficient for her. Soon, having tried to strangle her often in vain, he sent her away under the guise of sterility, but because the people disapproved of the divorce and did not spare their outcries, he also banished her.

As scholars have noted, it is unusual that he then elaborates on these marriages out of order, beginning with Statilia Messalina, then Octavia.<sup>19</sup> Although Statilia Messalina was not entirely spared of Nero's cruelty, given that her first husband was murdered by Nero, she is the only of Nero's wives to survive the marriage.<sup>20</sup> Thus, she is the least relevant example of uxorial suffering in terms of Suetonius' goal of proving Nero's savagery and thus is mentioned and quickly forgotten in this text.

## **5.2 Octavia: Virginity and Violation**

Suetonius then turns to Nero's marriage to Octavia, which he casts as a political arrangement devoid of romantic attachment.<sup>21</sup> Throughout Suetonius' account of the

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<sup>19</sup> Garrett 2018, 212, Schulz 2019 315.

<sup>20</sup> Suetonius unsurprisingly does not give any indication about Messalina's feelings on the matter.

<sup>21</sup> Although romantic love is not a necessity for a successful Roman marriage, Suetonius does note such love where it occurs, e.g. Augustus loves and esteems Livia

abusive marriage, his word choice and echoes of earlier lives create a complex interplay between ideas of virginity and violence.

Suetonius says that Nero refused intimacy with Octavia, writing *consuetudinem cito aspernatus*. When Suetonius uses the term *consuetudo* in reference to relationships between emperors and individual women, it is typically characteristic of a sexual or romantic relationship.<sup>22</sup> Suetonius refers to Caligula's alleged incest with his sisters as *consuetudinem stupri* (Suet. *Cal.* 24). Similarly, the allegation that Drusus was fathered by Augustus is called *per adulterii consuetudinem* (Suet. *Cl.* 1). Otho's camaraderie with Nero, which spawned from his seduction of a freedwoman, is called *consuetudine mutui stupri* (Suet. *Otho* 2). In these examples, the term *consuetudo* is qualified as lowly or adulterous by the dependent genitives that follow (*stupri, adulterii*), but the term itself does not necessarily refer to inherent immorality in the Latin language or in Suetonius' usage. In the *Life of Tiberius*, for example, Suetonius describes Tiberius' affection for Vipsania Agrippina, the earlier wife from whom Augustus forced him to separate, in similar terms: *cum et Agrippinae consuetudine teneretur et Iuliae mores improbare* ("although he was held by affection for Agrippina and disapproved of the habits of Julia," Suet. *Tib.* 7). In this case, *consuetudine* is not qualified by any sort of shame. Instead, it refers to the bond between former spouses who were forced apart for the sake of politics.

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(*dilexitque et probavit*, Suet. *Aug.* 62). See Chapter 2, p71 and Treggiari 1991, 253 for discussion about the importance of marital love and attraction.

<sup>22</sup> The term also appears as a form of political approval in the context of relationships between men at Suet. *Jul.* 21, 30, 31, 41.

When we turn to Suetonius' *Life of Nero*, further intratextual nuance can be found. Outside of the present passage, *consuetudo* is used to mean "custom" or "habit" several times, most notably in Claudius' death scene. When Claudius sinks to the ground, dying of poison, Suetonius reports that Nero *comitali morbo ex consuetudine correptum apud conuiuas ementitus* ("pretend[ed] to the guests that [Claudius] was overcome by an epileptic fit as usual", Suet. *Ner.* 33). Here, *consuetudo* refers to a commonplace occurrence.

Both meanings of *consuetudo* color Suetonius' assertion that Nero spurned *consuetudinem* with Octavia. He is rejecting a sexual relationship with his wife. That this sexual relationship is called *consuetudo* also emphasizes that spending time with one's wife, including but not limited to sexual contact, is considered *customary*; Nero's rejection of such a relationship is therefore coded as abnormal.<sup>23</sup> Suetonius also notes that Nero's spurning of *consuetudo* with Octavia happened quickly (*cito*), ostensibly quickly after their wedding. This leaves open the possibility that the two either never consummated their relationship or quickly ceased sexual contact; and either way, this compounds the outrage of Nero soon accusing Octavia of infertility (*sterilem*).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Suetonius' Nero repeatedly demonstrates an unusual relationship to sexual norms. See Langlands 2006, 353.

<sup>24</sup> While it might seem outrageous to suggest that the historical Nero never consummated the relationship with Octavia, the literary tradition elsewhere hints at this idea including in the *Octavia* which presents the empress often as a *virgo* - something which has long puzzled its readers. See discussion of Octavia's virginity in Chapter 3, p. 129. Poppaea is also depicted as an *univira* in the Poppaea papyrus; the sexual status of imperial women is clearly open to some rhetorical manipulation by authors (See Chapter 2).

Nero defends his lack of contact with his wife by saying that she should be satisfied by *uxoria ornamenta*, her wifely spoils. This is the only instance in Suetonius in which the privileges of imperial wifedom are described as *ornamenta*. Elsewhere in his *Lives*, *ornamenta* refers to women's ritual adornments at Caesar's funeral (*matronae etiam pleraeque ornamenta sua, quae gerebant, et liberorum bullas atque praetextas*. Suet. *Jul.* 84). The term is also used to refer to triumphal regalia:

*super triginta ducibus iustos triumphos et aliquanto pluribus triumphalia ornamenta decernenda curavit*

he had regular triumphs voted to over thirty generals, and the triumphal regalia to somewhat more than that number

Suet. *Aug.* 38

*triumphalibus ornamentis honoratus*

He was honored with triumphal adornments.

Suet. *Tib.* 9

It is unlikely that Nero is referring to any sort of physical adornment when he speaks about Octavia's *uxoria ornamenta*. Instead, given the symbolism of such adornments elsewhere in Suetonius, Nero is referring to Octavia's public image as imperial wife. She is Nero's wife in the public eye; their lack of sexual or romantic contact in private should not matter. Nero is content for the outside world, and especially the *populus Romanus*, to see Octavia as his wife while, privately, he is not having sex with her.

But the following sentence reveals a more insidious revelation in the imperial bedroom: he attempted to strangle her multiple times (*Octaviae consuetudinem cito aspernatus, corripientibus amicis "sufficere illi debere" respondit "uxoria ornamenta." eandem mox saepe frustra strangulare meditatus dimisit ut sterilem*, "After he spurned intercourse with Octavia quickly, he responded to his friends, who chastised him, "the adornments of wifedom ought to suffice for her." Soon after trying often to strangle the

same woman (Octavia) fruitlessly, [Nero] dismissed her as sterile,” Suet. *Ner.* 35). Nero seemingly replaces marital sex with strangulation. Suetonius’ extensive use of adverbs in this scene is significant. Nero rejects Octavia quickly after marriage (*cito*), then turns to frequent violence soon after (*mox saepe*). The rejection of sex (*aspernatus*) is grammatically parallel with Nero’s constant attempts at strangulation (*meditatus*). Notably, Nero’s violence against Octavia is repeated (*saepe*) and intentional (*meditatus*), just as one might expect sex between two newlyweds eager to produce an heir to be. Suetonius also notes that, for some reason, Nero is unable to kill his wife through this repeated strangulation (*frustra*). Instead, the intimate partner violence that Nero perpetuates against Octavia stops short of murder due to external influence, becoming instead an iterative form of torture akin to repeated rape.

Unsuccessful strangulation has appeared earlier in the *Life of Nero*. Fearing that Nero is a threat to Britannicus, Messalina hires assassins to strangle Nero, but they are scared off by the appearance of a snake (Suet. *Nero* 6). Suetonius explicitly states that Messalina wanted Nero strangled to eliminate a political rival for her son Britannicus (*emanaret in uulgus missos a Messalina uxore Claudii, qui eum meridianem, quasi Britannici aemulum, strangularent*; Suet. *Ner.* 6). Within the architecture and narrative of the *Life*, then, Nero, almost a victim of this violence, later perpetrates the same violence against his wife Octavia, daughter of Messalina, perhaps in a perverted form of retribution, perhaps also seeing her as politically inconvenient.

While strangulation in general remains rare in Suetonius’ lives, when this form of execution does occur it stands out from other forms of violent execution as an example of

excessive brutality and cruelty. The emperor whom Suetonius most explicitly links with strangulation is Tiberius who, according to Suetonius, enjoys this form of punishment.<sup>25</sup> In one particularly gruesome example, Tiberius wishes to execute young girls through strangulation. Because, according to Suetonius, Tiberius understood that it was *nefas* according to ancient tradition to execute a virgin by strangulation, he first has the young girls raped and then strangled (Suet. *Tib.* 61):

*immaturae puellae, quia more tradito nefas esset uirgines strangulari, uitiatae prius a carnifice, dein strangulatae.*

Because, according to an ancient custom, it was not lawful to strangle virgins, the young girls were first raped by the executioner, and afterwards strangled.

Tacitus also preserves this story but limits it to the daughter of Sejanus as an individual act of Tiberian barbarism (Tac. *Ann.* 5.9).<sup>26</sup> Suetonius, however, narratively presents it as a regular pattern. Regardless of the historicity of this ancient regulation against strangling virgin girls, Suetonius has marked the rape and strangulation perpetrated on Tiberius' orders as a sign of imperial barbarism in his text: true tyrants first sexually violate young girls before having them strangled.

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<sup>25</sup> In one anecdote, Tiberius expects praise because he mercifully did not have Agrippina the Elder executed by strangulation (Suet. *Tib.* 53). In another, a group of guards strangle a group of men seeking clemency and cast their bodies down the Gemonian steps after Tiberius' death (Suet. *Tib.* 75). This act enrages the people, who are reminded of Tiberius' cruelty. See Barry 2008, 223.

<sup>26</sup> Nagel 2013, 293 points out that this is not a pattern in Tacitus as it is in Suetonius.

Outside of Suetonius' *Lives*, there is a connection in imperial Roman literature between bruising on the neck and rape.<sup>27</sup> For example, Nemesianus describes Donace after she was raped (*Nem.* 2.10-13):

*sed postquam Donacen duri clausere parentes,  
quod non tam tenui filo de voce sonaret  
sollicitumque foret pinguis sonus, improba cervix  
suffususque rubor crebro venaque tumentes.*

But afterwards, Donace's harsh parents kept her inside, because she didn't sound as delicate in the fiber of her voice, and its rich sound was worried, her neck was shameless, and redness frequently welled up, and her veins were swelling.

Nemesianus does not describe any sort of strangulation during the assault, but Donace is left with injuries consistent with strangulation: her voice is harsh and her neck is red and swollen. Somehow, the violence against one portion of her body has manifested physically in another part of her body; the forcible destruction of her virginity is mirrored by injuries specifically to her neck. Nemesianus plays upon the connection between the neck and the female reproductive system here: Donace's rape has resulted in damage to her genitalia<sup>28</sup> and, by extension of the pun, her neck as well.<sup>29</sup> This passage, like Suetonius' passage on the rape and strangulation of virgins, links the violent loss of virginity with strangulation.

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<sup>27</sup> See Lee 2022, 55 for this argument. Lee 2022 provides this example.

<sup>28</sup> The Latin word *cervix* is associated with the cervix. The Latin translation of Soranus (8.7) refers to the cervix as *cervix matricis*.

<sup>29</sup> See Temkin 1991, 184 for the pun of *cervix* referring to the neck and the genitals.

For the reader coming to the *Life of Nero* having already read the *Life of Tiberius*, the two passages are easily read as in intratextual dialogue, conditioning the reader's understanding of what Nero's treatment of Octavia means in terms of imperial vice. In other words, for Suetonius' reader, who would have read the passage from *Life of Tiberius* before the account in the *Life of Nero*, the connection between execution by strangulation, virginity, and sexual violence would stand out, as well as the barbarity of executing young women. By creating this intratext, Suetonius casts an even darker light on Nero's intimate partner violence against Octavia than the episode would have on its own. Strangling Octavia, who is either a virgin or has very limited sexual contact with Nero, is in and of itself *nefas* according to Suetonius' own account. Beyond this, this strangulation invokes a pre-existing discourse about the potential violence of loss of virginity and sexual contact in ancient literature without the element of sexual contact, which one would expect in the relationship between Nero and Octavia. Nero's act is doubly deviant: he is violent towards his wife and he also does not fulfill his expectations as a husband in need of an heir.

An ablative absolute at the end of the sentence gives further context for Nero's abusive treatment: Nero's violence is seemingly directly in response to chastisements from his friends because he will not sleep with his wife. Suetonius writes (35) *Octaviae consuetudinem cito aspernatus, corripientibus amicis*. As I noted above, Nero responds: *sufficere illi debere respondit uxoria ornamenta*. Cynthia Damon (2014) has shown that Suetonius often invents dialogue for the emperors which underscores the overarching rubric. Nero's *crudelitas* towards Octavia is manifest in this quotation; he claims that she should be satisfied with the *uxoria ornamenta* but refuses to treat her as an *uxor*. The next

sentence begins with Nero strangling Octavia: *eandem mox saepe frustra strangulare meditatus*. The use of *eandem* (the same woman) and *mox* (soon) links the two clauses together: Nero spurns Octavia and is chastised by his friends, and then he begins strangling the same woman (Octavia). This connection between the sentences lends a causal sense to *corripientibus amicis*: Nero is strangling Octavia *because* his friends chastised him for neglecting her. He is punishing her for their concern and also practicing (*meditatus*) for his eventual execution of her.

This begins a wider narrative pattern in which Suetonius highlights how the opinions and chastisements of others about his treatment of Octavia impact Nero, always through an embedded ablative absolute. In the second example, Nero divorces Octavia due to her alleged barrenness, causing protests from the people (*improbante divortium populo nec parcente conviciis*.) Immediately after this, Nero has Octavia executed (*denique occidit sub crimine adulteriorum adeo inpudenti falsoque*). Once again, this causal ablative absolute explains the escalation in Nero's behavior against Octavia. The final example in this tricolon is in response to the vehement denials of all when Octavia is accused of adultery (Suet. *Ner.* 35):

*denique occidit sub crimine adulteriorum adeo inpudenti falsoque, ut in quaestione pernegantibus cunctis Anicetum paedagogum suum indicem subiecerit, qui fingeret et dolo stupratam a se fateretur.*

At last he killed her under the charge of adultery so shameless and false that after all denied it under interrogation, he added to his case his pedagogue Anicetus, who confessed falsely that he had touched her and defiled her.

Suetonius recounts an anecdote also found in Tacitus, that Nero fabricated adultery charges against Octavia. First, he interrogated her slaves, and when they too become oppositional, then he hired Anicetus to claim a secret affair. Suetonius is quite clear that this allegation is false. He calls it *adeo impudenti falsoque* and states that the allegation is *pernegantibus cunctis*, thoroughly denied by everyone. This statement is the most powerful of the three ascending causal ablative absolutes. Now seemingly everyone (*cunctis*) is rejecting Nero's claims, and doing so quite forcefully (the *per-* on *pernegantibus* is intensive).

Tacitus recounts the same story (Tac. *Ann.* 14.60):

*destinaturque reus cognomento Eucaerus, natione Alexandrinus, canere tibiis doctus. actae ob id de ancillis quaestiones et vi tormentorum victis quibusdam ut falsa adnuerent, plures perstitere sanctitatem dominae tueri; ex quibus una instanti Tigellino castiora esse muliebria Octaviae respondit quam os eius.*

The one established as guilty was Eucaerus by name, Alexandrine by birth, who was learned at making music with the flute. On account of this, interrogations were conducted on the slave girls and although certain ones were overcome by the force of the torture so that they corroborated falsehoods, many persisted in upholding the inviolability of their mistress; one of these said to the threatening Tigellinus that Octavia's privates were cleaner than his mouth.

In Tacitus' account, the denial comes from the *ancillae* and even then there is some disagreement (*plures*); Suetonius expands both the support of Octavia (now unanimous) and the individuals doing the supporting (*cunctis*). In response to this, Suetonius' Nero has Anicetus lie that he and Octavia are engaged in an affair. It is this action that enables Nero to finally execute Octavia.

It is also notable that Suetonius claims that Octavia was executed under the adultery law; in reality, she was executed for *maiestas* connected with adultery.<sup>30</sup> This slight alteration to the story reinforces the familial aspect of Nero's violence within the given rubric; Suetonius is trying to show that Nero was irrationally violent towards his family, here his wife, while minimizing any real political threat she could have posed. Suetonius' account casts this dispute as a private marital dispute, rather than as a public threat of treason. Unlike in other sources, Octavia poses no political threat to Nero.<sup>31</sup>

In order to better understand Suetonius' account of Octavia's abusive marriage, it is useful to put Suetonius' account in dialogue with wider Roman ideas about spousal abuse. Margherita Caruggi (2018) discusses the phenomenon of domestic violence, specifically intimate partner violence, in ancient Roman thought. Caruggi argues that Roman texts and Roman authors often tacitly or even explicitly condone domestic violence when perpetrated against women whom Roman culture and/or a given author mark as "wicked" or transgressive.<sup>32</sup> The inverse is also true: that Roman authors disapprove of violence against women they mark as virtuous or "good." As a result, Caruggi argues, we see a marked binary in Roman thinking on the issue of domestic violence which focuses not on the perpetrators of such violence but which rather divides victims into categories of

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<sup>30</sup> Champlin 2005, 162.

<sup>31</sup> See Chapter 3, p. 113 for discussion of the potential threat that Octavia poses to Nero's power.

<sup>32</sup> Caruggi 2018, 61.

“the good” who do not deserve such treatment and “the transgressive,” who, in Roman thought, sometimes suffer justifiably.

This binary can help us understand Suetonius’ presentation of Octavia as a victim of intimate partner violence. Suetonius characterizes Octavia as an unquestionably virtuous woman and victim of domestic abuse. Nero tyrannically strangles her, reminding readers of Tiberius’ wanton cruelty and Messalina’s plots. The echoes of this binary and of Tiberius’ particularly gruesome abuse of young girls also scripts Octavia in a virginal or almost-virginal light, underscoring her sexual and political innocence and the abuse she experienced in the imperial bedroom at Nero’s hands before her public execution. Suetonius also highlights how many different groups of Romans supported Octavia against Nero’s treatment. In doing so, Suetonius firmly puts Octavia in the category of “innocent victim” in the Roman discourse of domestic violence.

### **5.3 Poppaea: *Passionate Love and Murder***

Suetonius follows his description of Nero’s marriage to Octavia with his marriage to Poppaea (Suet. *Ner.* 35) with a similar focus on the violent death of Nero’s second wife:

*Poppaeam duodecimo die post divortium Octaviae in matrimonium acceptam dilexit unice; et tamen ipsam quoque ictu calcis occidit, quod se ex aurigatione sero reversum gravida et aegra conviciis inceserat.*

He married Poppaea twelve days after the divorce of Octavia, and he loved her singularly; and, nevertheless, he killed her with blow of his foot, which he did when she chastised him for coming back from the races late when she was pregnant and sick.

In contrast to Suetonius’ portrayal of a loveless and sexless marriage between Octavia and Nero, Suetonius introduces Nero’s second wife through the idea of Nero’s extreme passion

for Poppaea. Suetonius writes that Nero loved (*dilexit*) Poppaea. However, this statement of love is immediately followed with the description of Nero kicking the ill, pregnant Poppaea to death. Margherita Caruggi argues that Suetonius emphasizes Nero's love for Poppaea alongside his violence, as the two can be viewed as the result of similar passion in ancient thought.<sup>33</sup> Nero's intense love and his intense rage towards Poppaea are both symptoms of his uncontrolled passion and emotion, symptoms which often accompany accounts of domestic violence in the ancient world.

But passion is not inherently a precursor to violence in Suetonius' accounts of imperial marriage. In fact, Suetonius' introduction of Poppaea echoes his earlier account of Augustus' love for Livia: Suetonius says that Augustus loved Livia uniquely, using the same words (Suet. *Aug.* 62):

*Mox Scriboniam in matrimonium accepit nuptam ante duobus consularibus, ex altero etiam matrem. Cum hac quoque divortium fecit, "pertaesus," ut scribit, "morum perversitatem eius," ac statim Liviam Drusillam matrimonio Tiberi Neronis et quidem praegnantem abduxit dilexitque et probavit unice ac perseveranter.'*

Soon after he married Scribonia, who was married previously to two consuls, and even a mother by one. When he also has a divorce with her, "disgusted," as he wrote, "by her untowardness," and immediately he took Livia Drusilla from her husband Tiberius Nero while she was indeed pregnant and he loved her and esteemed her singularly and endlessly.

Suetonius' accounts of Augustus and Livia's marriage in the *Life of Augustus* and of Poppaea and Nero's marriage in *Life of Nero* are the only two instances in which *dilexit*

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<sup>33</sup> Caruggi 2018, 64.

*unice* is used to describe the relationship between an emperor and his wife. In addition to this parallel, both relationships develop extremely quickly. Suetonius states that Augustus married Livia *statim*, in spite of her pregnancy by another man.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, according to Suetonius, Nero married Poppaea only twelve days after his divorce from Octavia. Both emperors have swift and passionate marriages to their wives after abrupt divorces from their previous wives, despite issues with the optics of both relationships. However, Suetonius elaborates that Augustus and Livia had a long-lasting and harmonious relationship, unlike Poppaea and Nero. The parallels between the two couples suggest intratextually that Nero and Poppaea had the potential to become the next Augustus and Livia: a loving marriage born quickly from strong passion, had not Nero's violence corrupted his own love and led him to murder Poppaea. It is not the passionate love that drove Nero to murder Poppaea; rather, such passion, which in the case of Augustus can lead to a happy marriage, is twisted when felt by a wicked man like Nero.

Caruggi argues that Suetonius' Poppaea fits the Roman idea of the "wicked" woman in the domestic violence paradigm. Her reason for this is Suetonius' note that Poppaea chastises Nero for coming home late (*quod se ex aurigatione sero reversum gravida et aegra conviciis incesserat*), which, according to Caruggi, can be seen to explain Nero's violence from a Roman patriarchal point of view.<sup>35</sup> On this reading, we would then

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<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, Poppaea also is married prior to her marriage with Nero and was "stolen" by Otho on Nero's behalf, but this anecdote is omitted from the *Life of Nero* and appears only in the *Life of Otho*.

<sup>35</sup> Caruggi 2018, 64.

see Suetonius replicating an essential binary in Roman thought between “good” and “bad” women in his accounts of Octavia and Poppaea. But while Caruggi's wider analysis of Roman thought patterns concerning domestic violence does demonstrate a Roman acceptance of abuse of certain women, Suetonius' account does not fit into this paradigm.

Suetonius portrays Poppaea sympathetically.<sup>36</sup> Before Suetonius describes her sole verbal action, chastising her late husband, he notes that Poppaea is *gravida et aegra*. By combining these two adjectives, Suetonius moves beyond the basic biological fact of Poppaea as pregnant woman to a description of the physical symptoms that accompany pregnancy. Poppaea is weak, she is sick. As a result, her chastisement of Nero is seen to causally come from her need for him in her weakened, ill state. By placing these two adjectives first, Suetonius shapes our perception of the legitimacy of Poppaea's complaints before we see Nero's violence.

Suetonius calls her chastisements *conviciis*, a word which he had just used earlier in this chapter. Suetonius used the same word for the people's reproaches when Nero divorces Octavia (*sed improbante divortium populo nec parcente conviciis*). With these *convicia* the people protest a bad ruler's treatment of a good wife. It is these *convicia*, in turn, which then drive Nero to banish Octavia, but Suetonius condemns Nero, not the people. By repeating the same word for complaint twice in quick succession, Suetonius

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<sup>36</sup> Pryzwansky 2008 points out that *gravida et aegra* paints Poppaea as exceptionally sympathetic.

further characterizes Nero: twice, Nero overreacts to *convicia*, once by banishing and murdering Octavia and once by murdering Poppaea.

In contrast, just a few chapters later, Suetonius uses the same word when he reports that Nero is surprisingly lenient when couplets mocking him appear throughout the city (Suet. *Ner.* 39):

*mirum et uel praecipue notabile inter haec fuerit nihil eum patientius quam maledicta et conuicia hominum tulisse, neque in ullos leniorem quam qui se dictis aut carminibus lacessissent extitisse.*

It was amazing and peculiarly notable that among these things he was no more lenient than when he bore verbal abuse and reproaches from men, and he was more lenient with no others than those who provoked and attacked him with words or songs.

In contrast to his violent reprisals against his wives when the *convicia* are on their behalf, Nero is able to restrain his anger when it comes to artistic expression. In contrast to Caruggi's reading, I suggest that Suetonius demonstrates quite clearly that the fault for Nero's unbridled rage towards Poppaea's *convicia* falls solely on Nero, who is clearly capable of responding to such reproaches moderately but chooses not to when he can retaliate with domestic violence. Suetonius does not blame rebukes or passion for Nero's murderous behavior. It is Nero and his proclivity for murdering family and his wives that is to blame for the death of Poppaea. She is part of a pattern of abusing wives.

This episode falls within a rubric focusing on Nero's extreme violence against his family. As Phoebe Garrett argues, Suetonius presents the main episodes from the marriages of Nero with Octavia, Poppaea, and Statilia Messalina not in chronological order, but in

ascending order of violence.<sup>37</sup> First is Statilia Messalina, the only wife of Nero to survive the marriage, then Octavia, with Poppaea at the end. In this reading, Poppaea, sick, pregnant, and kicked to death by Nero is positioned as the ultimate victim of the most horrific and impactful murder by Nero.

Suetonius' word choice adds further nuance to his depiction of the violence against Poppaea. He calls Nero's kick to her stomach *ictu*, a term which Suetonius otherwise uses to describe a death blow to emperors.<sup>38</sup> Suetonius uses it in his description of the assassinations of Caesar and Caligula:

*atque ita tribus etuiginti plagis confossus est uno modo ad primum ictum gemitu sine uoce edito*

He was stabbed with three and twenty wounds, uttering a groan only, but no cry, at the first wound.

Suet. *Jul.* 82

*Chaeream exclamasse: 'accipe ratum!' respicientique maxillam ictu discidis*

Chaerea cried out, "Be it so !" and then, on his looking round, tore one of his jaws with a blow.

Suet. *Cal.*58

Suetonius also uses the word to describe Otho's suicidal blow (Suet. *Otho* 11): *se traiecit ictu infra laeuam papillam* ("he stabbed himself under the left breast"). Aside from Poppaea's death, the term *ictu* is male-coded and describes gruesome, violent, unexpected deaths with significant political importance. By using this term to describe

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<sup>37</sup> Garrett 2018, 212.

<sup>38</sup> In terms of bodily injury. The term also appears for lightning strikes as omens (Suet. *Aug.* 95, 97). Both Augustus and Vespasian are injured on the battlefield by an *ictu* (Suet. *Aug.* 20, *Ves.* 6).

Nero's violence against Poppaea, Suetonius highlights Nero's brutality. An *ictus* is particularly inappropriate and unexpected against a woman, especially one who is *gravida et aegra*. Suetonius leaves no doubt as to Nero's cruelty and savagery against Poppaea.

It is illustrative to contrast Tacitus' treatment. On the face of it, Tacitus' narrative of Poppaea's death is almost verbatim the same as Suetonius', suggesting a common source (*Post finem ludicri Poppaea mortem obiit, fortuita mariti iracundia, a quo gravida ictu calcis adflicta est*, "after the end of the games, Poppaea met her death because of the chance anger of her husband, by whose kick she was assailed while pregnant," Tac. *Ann.* 16.6). But there is a key difference: Tacitus does not include the sympathetic adjective *aegra*. Tacitus' wider treatment of Poppaea, moreover, has already eliminated sympathy.<sup>39</sup> In the

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<sup>39</sup> See Syme and Gallop 2000, 139 and Murgatroyd 2008, 269. Tacitus' Poppaea is explicitly to blame for the deaths of Agrippina and Octavia (*Gaio Vips[t]ano [C.] Fonteio consulibus diu meditatatum scelus non ultra Nero distulit, vetustate imperii coalita audacia et flagrantior in dies amore Poppaeae, quae sibi matrimonium et discidium Octaviae incolumi Agrippina haud sperans crebris criminationibus, aliquando per facetias incusare principem et pupillum vocare, qui iussis alienis obnoxius non modo imperii, sed libertatis etiam indigeret. cur enim differri nuptias suas? formam scilicet displicere et triumphales avos, an fecunditatem et verum animum? timeri ne uxor saltem iniurias patrum, iram populi adversus superbiam avaritiamque matris aperiat. quod si nurum Agrippina non nisi filio infestam ferre posset, redde[re]tur ipsa Othonis coniugio: ituram quoque terrarum, ubi audiret potius contumelias imperatoris quam viseret periculis eius immixta. haec atque talia lacrimis et arte adulterae penetrantia nemo prohibebat, cupientibus cunctis infringi potentiam matris et credente nullo usque ad caedem eius duratura filii odia*. "In the year of the consulship of Caius Vipstanus and Caius Fonteius, Nero deferred no more a long meditated crime. Length of power had matured his daring, and his passion for Poppaea daily grew more ardent. As the woman had no hope of marriage for herself or of Octavia's divorce while Agrippina lived, she would reproach the emperor with incessant vituperation and sometimes call him in jest a mere ward who was under the rule of others, and was so far from having empire that he

*Annals*, Octavia's death is particularly horrific and graphic; Poppaea's death is significantly more subdued.<sup>40</sup> Suetonius' description of Nero's treatment of Octavia is also horrible, but structurally within the chapter Poppaea's death concludes a brutal *tricolon crescens*. It is intended to be the most gruesome treatment of Nero's wives and even worse than that of Octavia. Although Suetonius states that Poppaea is murdered because she

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had not even his liberty. "Why," she asked, "was her marriage put off? Was it, forsooth, her beauty and her ancestors, with their triumphal honours, that failed to please, or her being a mother, and her sincere heart? No; the fear was that as a wife at least she would divulge the wrongs of the Senate, and the wrath of the people at the arrogance and rapacity of his mother. If the only daughter-in-law Agrippina could bear was one who wished evil to her son, let her be restored to her union with Otho. She would go anywhere in the world, where she might hear of the insults heaped on the emperor, rather than witness them, and be also involved in his perils." These and the like complaints, rendered impressive by tears and by the cunning of an adulteress, no one checked, as all longed to see the mother's power broken, while not a person believed that the son's hatred would steel his heart to her murder." (Tac. *Annals* 14.1, translation from Church and Broadribb 1882.)

<sup>40</sup> *Ac puella vicesimo aetatis anno inter centuriones et milites, praesagio malorum iam vita[e] exempta, nondum tamen morte adquiescebat. paucis dehinc interiectis diebus mori iubetur, cum iam viduam se et tantum sororem testaretur communesque Germanicos et postremo Agrippinae nomen cieret, qua incolumi infelix quidem matrimonium, sed sine exitio pertulisset. restringitur vinclis venaequae eius per omnes artus exsolvuntur; et quia pressus pavore sanguis tardius labebatur, praefervidi balnei vapore enecatur. additurque atrocior saevitia, quod caput amputatum latumque in urbem Poppaea vidit.* "And now the girl, in her twentieth year, with centurions and soldiers around her, already removed from among the living by the forecast of doom, still could not reconcile herself to death. After an interval of a few days, she received an order that she was to die, although she protested that she was now a widow and only a sister, and appealed to their common ancestors, the Germanici, and finally to the name of Agrippina, during whose life she had endured a marriage, which was miserable enough indeed, but not fatal. She was then tightly bound with cords, and the veins of every limb were opened; but as her blood was congealed by terror and flowed too slowly, she was killed outright by the steam of an intensely hot bath. To this was added the yet more appalling horror of Poppæa beholding the severed head which was conveyed to Rome." (Tac. *Ann.* 14.64, translation from Church and Broadribb 1882.)

chastised Nero for coming home late (*quod se exaurigatione sero reuersum grauida et aegra conuiciis incesserat* (Suet. Nero 35)), the rhetorical function of this anecdote is not to explain away Nero's rage but to demonstrate the irrationality of Nero's murderous acts. For Suetonius, Nero's murder of Poppaea is not a justified response to a nagging wife but a disproportionately violent and cruel act against a vulnerable victim.

Tacitus very explicitly characterizes Octavia as a "good woman" and Poppaea as a "bad woman."<sup>41</sup> Octavia is an obedient and quiet woman who is a victim of one of the most brutal and clearly undeserved death scenes in the text. In contrast, Poppaea plots against Agrippina and drives Nero to murder both his mother and his first wife. Poppaea even demands to see Octavia's severed head after the murder. While many see in Suetonius' account a simple condensing of major points from Tacitus' due to a common source,<sup>42</sup> Suetonius' account of Nero's marriages destabilizes the clear dichotomy that we see in Tacitus and in other historical texts. Suetonius' Octavia and Poppaea are both decidedly sympathetic victims of Nero's violence, part of a continuum of domestic violence rather than on either side of a binary. Suetonius' omission of some of Tacitus' most scandalous

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<sup>41</sup> The contrast between the two women is manifest in Tacitus' anecdote, in which the wicked Poppaea accuses Octavia of adultery. Octavia is so innocent that her slaves defend her even under torture: *Igitur accepto patrum consulto, postquam cuncta scelerum suorum pro egregiis accipi videt, exturbat Octaviam, sterilem dictitans; exim Poppaeae coniungitur. Ea diu paelex et adulteri Neronis, mox mariti potens, quendam ex ministris Octaviae impulit servilem ei amorem obicere. destinaturque reus cognomento Eucaerus, natione Alexandrinus, canere tibiis doctus. actae ob id de ancillis quaestiones et vitormentorum victis quibusdam ut falsa adnuerent, plures perstitere sanctitatem dominae tueri; ex quibus una instanti Tigellino castiora esse muliebria Octaviae respondit quam os eius.* (Tac. Ann. 14.60)

<sup>42</sup> See Power 2014, 205 for Suetonius and Tacitus having common sources.

accusations against Poppaea, notably her involvement in Octavia's death and subsequent decapitation, indicates that Suetonius is aiming for an entirely sympathetic characterization of Nero's first two wives. Rather than being opposites and adversaries, Suetonius' Octavia and Poppaea are parallel victims of Nero's unrestrained violence against his families and, specifically, his wives.

#### **5.4 Octavia's Vengeful Reappearance**

Although a single chapter kills off Nero's wives, this is not the last we have heard of them in Suetonius' *Lives*. In the *Life of Nero* specifically, readers may be surprised to meet Octavia again. She has now become a vengeful ghost. Nero has an ominous dream preceding his death, in which Octavia drags him to hell<sup>43</sup> (Suet. *Ner.* 46):

*Terrebat ad hoc portentis somniorum et auspicioꝝ et ominuꝝ, cum veteribus tum novis. Numquam antea somniare solitus occisa demum matre vidit per quietem navem sibi regenti extortum gubernaculum trahique se ab Octavia uxore in artissimas tenebras et modo pinnatarum formicarum multitudine oppleri, modo a simulacris gentium ad Pompei theatrum dedicatarum circumiri acerique progressu; asturconem, quo maxime laetabatur, posteriore corporis parte in simiae speciem transfiguratum ac tantum capite integro hinnitus edere canoros. De Mausoleo, sponte foribus patefactis, exaudita vox est nomine eum cientis. Kal. Ian. exornati Lares in ipso sacrificii apparatu conciderunt; auspicanti Sporus anulum muneri optulit, cuius gemmae scalptura erat Proserpinae raptus; votorum nuncupatione, magna iam ordinum frequentia, vix repertae Capitolii claves. Cum ex oratione eius, qua in Vindicem perorabat, recitaretur in senatu daturos poenas sceleratos ac brevi dignum exitum facturos, conclamatum est ab universis : "Tu facies, Auguste. " Observatum etiam fuerat*

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<sup>43</sup> A Roman audience would have been primed to ascribe prophetic meaning to any dream in history and biography, especially a dream that appears among so many portents (Pelling 1997, 197).

*novissimam fabulam cantasse eum publice Oedipodem exsulem  
atque in hoc desisse versu:*

*Θανεῖν μ' ἄνωγε σύγγαμος, μήτηρ, πατήρ.*

He was terrified at this by the portents of his dreams and the auspices and the omens, both old and new. Never before was he accustomed to dreaming until his mother was killed and he saw in his sleep that he was steering a ship and the rudder was twisted from his grasp and he was dragged away by his wife Octavia into the tightest corner and once was buried in a plethora of winged ants, once surrounded by the images of the prominent families which are established at the theater of Pompey and they restricted his progress; the Spanish jennet, by which he was most greatly delighted, was changed in the posterior part of its body into the appearance of an ape and, neighing, let out melodies with its head unchanged. With the doors opening spontaneously, a voice was heard from the Mausoleum of Augustus calling him by name. The Lares, being adorned on the Kalends of January, fell down during the preparations for the sacrifice; Sporus presented a ring as an auspicious gift, on the stone of which was carved the rape of Persephone; at a public pronouncement of vows, with a great number of orders assembled, the keys to the Capitol could scarcely be found. When in his speech, in which he spoke against Vindex, it was read out in the senate that all who committed crimes would pay the penalty and would quickly meet a worthy end, it was exclaimed by all, "You will do that, Augustus." Also it was observed that the most recent story he had sung in public was *Oedipus in Exile* and he fell at this verse:

"Wife, mother, father, force me to my end."

Octavia's appearance in this chapter is powerful and striking. Nowhere else in the *Life of Nero* is Octavia given such agency and power; she is an entirely passive object in her marriage to Nero. In contrast, Nero chooses a quote which names Octavia, his wife, first in his downfall. Nero's ultimate demise in this dream is the action of Octavia, his *uxor*. The specification that Octavia is his *uxor* is relevant in combination with the final line of the chapter, in which Nero sings, as his last tragic performance: "Wife, mother, father,

force me to my end.” Neither Agrippina nor Claudius act in the dream or appear in any other portents. Agrippina’s death is the catalyst for Nero’s dreams and the rudder (*gubernaculum*) may reference Nero’s attempt to assassinate his mother, but only Octavia takes an active role in Nero’s downfall.

I suggest that the figure of Octavia in this chapter can be read as a manifestation of popular support. In his earlier depiction of Octavia’s life and death, Suetonius left out many details about the people’s love for Octavia which appears in other texts (the *Octavia*, Tacitus), but even there he noted that several groups of people, and eventually everyone (*cunctis*) objected to Nero’s treatment of his wife. In the description of Nero’s dream and the subsequent omens, Suetonius includes increasingly prominent references to Nero’s loss of popular support as part of his downfall: the swarm of ants can symbolize the people turning on the *princeps*, as do the garlands which fall off the *Lares*.<sup>44</sup> The image of the statues from the Theater of Pompey symbolize uprisings from the provinces.<sup>45</sup>

Octavia’s textual presence again after death can be read as an extension of this theme. In other texts, Octavia is cast as the “true” inheritor of the principate. For example, the epitome of book 62 of Cassius Dio’s *Roman History* describes this remark from Burrus (Dio *Rom. Hist.* 62.13):

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<sup>44</sup> See Bradley 1978, 296 for the symbolism of the dream.

<sup>45</sup> Bradley 1978, 296.

ἐν δὲ τῇ Ῥώμῃ ὁ Νέρων Ὀκταβίαν τὴν Αὐγουσταν ἀπεπέμψατο μὲν πρότερον διὰ Σαβῖναν τὴν παλλακίδα, ὕστερον δὲ καὶ ἀπέκτεινε, καίτοι τοῦ Βούρρου ἐναντιουμένου αὐτῷ καὶ κωλύοντος ἀποπέμψασθαι, καὶ ποτε εἰπόντος “οὐκοῦν καὶ τὴν προῖκα αὐτῇ” τοῦτ’ ἔστι τὴν ἡγεμονίαν “ἀπόδος.”

In Rome, Nero divorced Octavia Augusta, on account of his mistress [Poppaea] Sabina, and later he killed her. He did this with Burrus opposing him and trying to stop the divorce, with Burrus once even saying, “Then, give her back her dowry,” by which he meant the sovereignty.

Burrus cannot mean that Octavia herself could inherit the principate, but that the power of the principate should be traced to her husband through her. Octavia’s status as Claudius’ daughter and her subsequent marriage to Nero lend legitimacy to Nero’s regime. Not only is she beloved as the imperial wife, but as a symbol of continuity in the dynasty. By divorcing and killing Octavia, Nero skewers his own popular support and destabilizes his regime. The presence of Octavia in Nero’s prophetic dream emphasizes the political folly of Nero’s offenses against her: Suetonius here acknowledges that the murder of Octavia was a major blunder for Nero’s image and power over the empire and suggests that Nero recognized this fact at least subconsciously in his final days.

Dreams as death omens is recurrent in Suetonius’ *Lives*, particularly among “bad” emperors. In addition to Nero’s prodigious dream, Caligula, Galba, and Domitian all dream of their downfalls. Suetonius writes:

*pridie quam periret, somniauit consistere se in caelo iuxta solium Iouis impulsumque ab eo dextri pedis pollice et in terras praecipitatum.*

The day before he was killed he dreamed that he stood in heaven beside the throne of Jupiter and that the god struck him with the toe of his right foot and hurled him to earth.

Suet. *Cal.* 57

*proxima nocte somniauit speciem Fortunae querentis fraudatam se dono destinato, minantisque erepturam et ipsam quae dedisset.*

[The] next night, he dreamed the appearance of Fortune, complaining that she was defrauded of her intended gift, and threatening to snatch back what she had given him.

Suet. *Gal.* 18

*Mineruam, quam superstitione se colebat, somniauit excedere sacrario negantemque ultra se tueri eum posse, quod exarmata esset a Ioue.*

He dreamed that Minerva, whom he worshipped out of superstition, was departing from her sanctuary, denying that she was able to protect him further, because she was disarmed by Jupiter.

Suet. *Dom.* 15

In each of these examples, the emperor has a foreboding dream which signifies their impending deaths or downfalls. Every downfall is predicated by abandonment or rejection by a divine figure; in this way, Nero's dream is unique. Nero's dream death is not the result of any offense to the gods but is the consequence of his abuse of Octavia. Octavia takes the place of the divine figures in the dreams of other emperors; it is her power that ultimately will drag Nero down.

This reading of Octavia's prominence in Suetonius' account of the end of Nero's life and the repercussions of Nero's abuse is made even clearer when Suetonius notes that Nero dies on the anniversary of his murder of Octavia: *obiit tricensimo et secundo aetatis*

*anno, die quo quondam Octaviam interemerat*, (“he died in the thirty-second year of his age, upon the same day on which he had formerly put Octavia to death.” Suet. *Ner.* 57).

In every way, Nero’s murder of Octavia haunts him to his grave.

### **5.5 Adultery, Adultery Mime, and Female Sexuality**

Much like Octavia, Poppaea also “lives on” in Suetonius’ later *Lives*. After such a sympathetic account of Poppaea’s life and death, the reader who continues to read Suetonius’ *Lives* in order might be surprised by the Poppaea he meets in Suetonius’ *Life of Otho*. This inconsistency is not problematic within the genre; Poppaea’s characterization within each *Life* is intended to help shape the image of the central emperor. The Poppaea of Suetonius’ *Life of Otho* and Plutarch’s *Life of Galba* has more agency than her counterpart in the *Life of Nero* and plays a pivotal role in the relationship between Nero and Otho, a relationship which is entirely omitted from the *Life of Nero*. This section of the chapter will explore the love triangle between Poppaea, Nero, and Otho as depicted in the texts of Suetonius and Plutarch with particular attention to the generic modes which the two biographers use and to the question of Poppaea’s sexual agency.

Both biographers describe how Otho seduces Poppaea away from her husband (Crispinus, named in neither biography) on Nero’s behalf and then marries her. This marriage is intended to cover for the affair between Poppaea and Nero, as Nero is still married to Octavia, but it results in Otho falling in love with Poppaea. The centerpiece of

the stories by both Suetonius and Plutarch is a scene in which Nero is denied sexual access to Poppaea by being locked out of the house that he expects to be the site of their tryst. Both biographers manipulate the conventions of adultery mime and elegy, but also each author turns those generic modes to their own interpretation.

Suetonius' narrative of the events is as follows (Suet. *Otho* 3):

*item Poppaeam Sabinam tunc adhuc amicam eius, abductam marito demandatamque interim sibi, nuptiarum specie recepit nec corrupisse contentus adeo dilexit, ut ne rivalem quidem Neronem aequo tulerit animo. Creditur certe non modo missos ad arcessendam non recepisse, sed ipsum etiam exclusisse quondam pro foribus astantem miscentemque frustra minas et preces ac depositum reposcentem. Quare diducto matrimonio sepositus est per causam legationis in Lusitaniam. Et satis visum, ne poena acrior mimum omnem divulgaret, qui tamen sic quoque hoc disticho enotuit:*

*Cur Otho mentito sit, quaeritis, exsul honore?*

*Uxoris moechus coeperat esse suae.*

Also when Poppaea Sabina, who was then his (Nero's) girlfriend, was taken from her husband (Crispinus) and turned over in the meanwhile to Otho, he put on the appearance of marriage and, not content with seducing her, he loved her so much that he could not bear to have Nero even as a rival. It is certainly believed that he not only would not receive those sent to summon her, but he also shut out [Nero] himself, who, while standing before the doors, mixed threats and prayers in vain and demanded back his property. Therefore after the marriage was ended Otho was banished to Lusitania under the guise of governorship. And this seemed to be sufficient, lest a harsher punishment make public the whole mime, which nevertheless also became known by this couplet:

Why, you ask, is Otho an exile in a counterfeit honor?

He began to be the adulterer of his own wife.

In his final sentence, Suetonius labels the story he has just told about the love triangle between Otho, Nero, and Poppaea as a *mimus* (*ne poena acrior mimum omnem divulgaret* (Suet. *Otho* 3)), stating that Nero, after sending Otho away to govern Lusitania, resisted

harsher punishment in order that the *mimus* not become public. By repeating this apparently popular jab, Suetonius invites his audience to cast Otho, Nero, and Poppaea as actors in an adultery mime on the stage of his biography.

The adultery mime was a stock stage scenario in which a woman would bring her lover into her home, only for her husband to interrupt the love affair.<sup>46</sup> The lover would often be hidden somewhere comical before being discovered by the husband, who would try to attack his wife's lover.<sup>47</sup> Such scenes often cast the wife as the mastermind of the scene and her husband as powerless against his wife and her lover.<sup>48</sup> In many cases, however, the husband would regain power and attain justice against his wife and her lover.<sup>49</sup> Elements of the adultery mime, namely the concealment of the lover and the scene of discovery, became tropes of the genre and are easily recognizable in other literature. Both Horace and Juvenal reference the motif of the lover hidden in a chest (Horace *Sat.* 2.7.60, Juvenal *Sat.* 6.237). References to the typical adultery mime scenario immediately evoke an association with the stock characters and events of the adultery mime.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Mime was a form of theater in the Greek and Roman worlds in which both male and female actors performed an array of scenes, often with sexual undertones or overtones (Florence 2013, 381). The parameters of the genre are difficult to define given that much of the genre was oral and thus lost to us (Fantham 1989, 154). However, tropes of the genre are identifiable in extant mime and in other literature.

<sup>47</sup> See Reynolds 1943, 83 for conventions of mime.

<sup>48</sup> Reynolds 1943, 83.

<sup>49</sup> Papaioannou 2002, 36.

<sup>50</sup> See Reynolds 1943, 78 for the recognizability of conventions of mime.

The lens of the adultery mime colors Suetonius' portrayal of Poppaea's relationship with Nero and Otho. In his *Life of Otho*, Suetonius describes how Poppaea, who had been Nero's mistress previously, was given in sham marriage to Otho, who then fell in love with her (Suet. *Otho* 3):

*item Poppaeam Sabinam tunc adhuc amicam eius, abductam marito demandatamque interim sibi, nuptiarum specie recepit nec corrupisse contentus adeo dilexit, ut ne rivalem quidem Neronem aequo tulerit animo*

Also when Poppaea Sabina, who was then his (Nero's) girlfriend, was taken from her husband (Crispinus) and turned over in the meanwhile to Otho, he put on the appearance of marriage and, not content with seducing her, he loved her so much that he could not bear to have Nero even as a rival.

But the language of this scene complicates the roles of Nero and Otho within this mime. Poppaea is called Nero's *amica*; he is explicitly not her *maritus*, in contrast to Crispinus. However, Otho too is not truly Poppaea's husband. Their wedding is merely *nuptiarum specie*: despite having a legal marriage, it is intended to be a sham marriage from its inception. Poppaea never "belongs" to Otho sexually, despite being his wife, because of her relationship with Nero.

The action of this scene perverts the Roman marriage ritual.<sup>51</sup> Rather than being symbolically abducted from her family by a new husband, Poppaea, an already married woman, is abducted from her husband into a new marriage which is not meant to be a real marriage. The verbs are quite graphic: she is *abductam demandatamque*, abducted from her husband and handed over to Otho for safekeeping. This scenario casts Poppaea as the

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<sup>51</sup> See Hersch 2020, 71 for conventions of the marriage ritual.

accusative object, moved around physically and romantically, without input of her own. She is removed from her first husband (*abductam*) spatially, since she is literally “led away” from him and is entrusted (*demandatamque*) to another man as if a piece of property. The strong language of the scene reinforces her passivity and contrasts with the typically powerful role of the wife in the adultery mime. Suetonius calls on his readers to imagine a scene in which Poppaea is literally carried away from Crispinus, perhaps violently, and inserted into Otho’s house in a sham marriage, seemingly without any action or desire of her own.

Suetonius’ mimic scenario also looks back intratextually to other moments in his biographies. Suetonius has used *abduco* twice elsewhere to describe a situation in which an emperor “stole” someone else’s wife. The first instance is Suetonius’ account of Augustus and Livia. Suetonius writes (Suet. *Aug.* 62):

*ac statim Liviam Drusillam matrimonio Tiberi Neronis et quidem  
praegnantem abduxit dilexitque et probavit unice ac perseveranter*

and at once he took Livia Drusilla from her husband Tiberius Nero, although she was pregnant at the time; and he loved and esteemed her singularly and endlessly.

The words *abduxit* and *dilexit* appear in both this narrative and in Suetonius’ later version of Otho and Poppaea’s relationship. Marleen Flory points out that Suetonius’ allegation that Augustus “stole” Livia from Nero is unique to this passage.<sup>52</sup> The more common version which appears in other histories and in Suetonius’ *Life of Tiberius* states that

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<sup>52</sup> Flory 1988, 344.

Nero gave Livia to Augustus. Flory argues that Suetonius is drawing from Antonian anti-Augustan propaganda in this scene, which is intended to cast Augustus in a negative light. The use of *abduco* is reserved for the seduction of women away from their husbands against their husband's will or with their husbands actively protesting.

This term also appears in Suetonius' account of Domitian's seduction of Domitia away from Aelius Lamia (Suet. *Dom.* 10.2):

*Aelium Lamiam ob suspiciosos quidem, uerum et ueteres et innocios iocos, quod post abductam uxorem laudanti uocem suam 'eu tacto' dixerat quodque Tito hortanti se ad alterum matrimonium responderat: μή καὶ σὺ γαμήσαι θέλεις;*

As Aelius Lamia about some suspicious statements, truly both old and harmless jokes, because after his wife was abducted, praising his voice, he said, "alas, I am silent," and to Titus, advising him to marry another, he responded, "Do you also wish to marry?"

In this anecdote, Suetonius makes it clear that Domitia's first husband opposes the marriage, despite being powerless to stop it. This sort of bad behavior is emphasized in all three instances and is condemned by Seneca in his discussion of similar phenomena (Sen. *ben.* 1.9.4):

*Inde decentissimum sponsaliorum genus est adulterium et inconsensu uidui caelibatus, quoniam nemo uxorem duxit, nisi qui abduxit.*

Soon adultery becomes the most respectable form of marriage, and widowhood and celibacy are commonly practiced. No one takes a wife unless he takes her away from someone else.

Seneca casts this behavior of “stealing” one’s wife as adultery and condemns it; similarly, Suetonius uses *abduco* to cast a negative light on the behavior of Augustus, Domitian, and Otho in these scenes. This vocabulary choice highlights the legitimacy of Poppaea’s marriage to Crispinus (and contrasts with her marriage to Otho, as Nero does not *abduxit* Poppaea from Otho) and Otho’s moral degeneracy in taking her away.

This moral degeneracy is further emphasized by Suetonius’ description of Otho seducing Poppaea (*corrupisse*). *Corrupisse* has heavily sexual undertones and can be used to describe extramarital sexual relationships.<sup>53</sup> This vocabulary choice recalls Suetonius’ description of another figure who famously seduced Roman matrons – Julius Caesar (Suet. *Jul.* 50.1):

*prorum et sumptuosum in libidines fuisse constans opinio est, plurimasque et illustres feminas corrupisse, in quibus Postumiam Serui Sulpicii, Lolliam Auli Gabini, Tertullam Marci Crassi, etiam Cn. Pompei Muciam.*

It is a consistent opinion that he was inclined to and lavish in his desires, he corrupted very many famous women, among whom were Postumia, wife of Servius Sulpicius, Lollia, wife of Aulus Gabinius, Tertulla, wife of Marcus Crassus, and even Mucia, wife of Gneius Pompey.

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<sup>53</sup> *lamnas duci in speciem vitri non nisi ex optimo posse creditum: fuerat id integrum, sed id quoque iam fraude corrumpitur.* (Pliny. *Nat.* 33. 128). *dum tibi lubet licetque, pota, perde rem, corrumpere erilem adolescentem optimum.* (Plaut. *Most.* 1, 1. 19- 20)

In this passage, Caesar seduces (*corrupisse*) a list of *illustres feminas*; the juxtaposition of the status of these women as *illustres* with the emphatic *corrupisse* is striking. *Corrumpe* means to seduce, but also means to ruin, and in this passage, Suetonius clearly condemns Caesar's tendency to sleep with Roman matrons. The status of these women makes Caesar's behavior particularly condemnable, as he is ruining the position of respected matrons.<sup>54</sup> Suetonius usually describes matrons as being seduced or forced out of marriage, rather than seeking out adulterous affairs, which tends to cast the male seducers as the more guilty party.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, Otho should be understood in the same light. He too seduced a married woman, marring her reputation with adultery.

Otho then transforms from Nero's trusted confidant to an excessively emotional and sexually driven lover. Otho falls in love (*dilexit*) with Poppaea and is unsatisfied to share her or have Nero as a rival (*contentus, ne[...] aequo [...] animo*). This love is heavily predicated on sexual attraction. Suetonius describes Otho's seduction as *corrupisse*, a word with heavily sexual undertones and which can be used to describe extramarital sexual relationships.<sup>56</sup> Otho has fallen for his own trick: Poppaea is his wife, but the marriage is a cover for her relationship with Nero. Therefore, although Nero is

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<sup>54</sup> Prysowsky 2008, 201 makes this point.

<sup>55</sup> Prysowsky 2008, 204.

<sup>56</sup> *lamnas duci in speciem vitri non nisi ex optimo posse creditum: fuerat id integrum, sed id quoque iam fraude corrumpitur.* (Pliny. *Nat.* 33. 128). *dum tibi lubet licetque, pota, perde rem, corrumpe erilem adulescentem optimum* (Plaut. *Most.* 1, 1. 19- 20).

ostensibly the adulterer in Otho and Poppaea's "marriage," Otho is the adulterer in the original relationship between Nero and Poppaea.

Such confusion between husbands and adulterous lovers - and which man plays which role - comes to a head in a humorous way when Otho's love for Poppaea leads to a conflict between Nero and Otho (Suet. *Otho* 3):

*Creditur certe non modo missos ad arcessendam non recepisse, sed ipsum etiam exclusisse quondam pro foribus astantem miscentemque frustra minas et preces ac depositum reposcentem. Quare diducto matrimonio sepositus est per causam legationis in Lusitaniam. Et satis visum, ne poena acrior mimum omnem divulgaret.*

It is certainly believed that he not only would not receive those sent to summon her, but he also shut out [Nero] himself, who, while standing before the doors, mixed threats and prayers in vain and demanded back his property. Therefore after the marriage was ended Otho was banished to Lusitania under the guise of governorship. And this seemed to be sufficient, lest a harsher punishment make public the whole mime.

In this passage, it is believed that Otho turns away those who were meant to take Poppaea to Nero and even Nero himself. The inclusion of *creditur* indicates the central aspect of public discourse about this situation; according to Suetonius, people are primarily concerned with Otho's attempts to keep Nero out, a sentiment which will be echoed in the final lines of the passage (see below). The dueling relationships of Poppaea and Otho and Poppaea and Nero clash in this scene. Otho is simultaneously the scorned husband, who desperately attempts to lock out his wife's lover, *and* the lover of the adultery mime who locks out the legitimate husband, Nero.

The blending of roles of Otho and Nero highlights the confusion of the marriage between Otho and Poppaea. Suetonius calls the relationship *nuptiarum specie* initially; Nero clearly intended for the wedding to be a cover for his affair with Poppaea after he entrusted her (*deductam*) to Otho. *Nuptiae* refers to nuptials or wedding, as opposed to a marriage, so it does not seem that Nero ever intended for Poppaea and Otho to develop a genuine relationship beyond a sham wedding.<sup>57</sup> Otho was husband to Poppaea in name only, while Nero was Poppaea's "true" husband in actuality.

However, once Otho falls in love with Poppaea, he attempts to act as her legitimate husband. He wishes to act as the husband, preventing his wife from seeing her lover, but inevitably is his own wife's lover under the original arrangement. Suetonius later calls the marriage between Otho and Poppaea a *matrimonium* when he describes Nero's annulment of the arrangement. Unlike *nuptiae*, *matrimonium* refers to the marital relationship, which Otho and Poppaea have indeed cultivated against Nero's will.<sup>58</sup> Ultimately, Otho's attempt to legitimize his own marriage is undone by Nero's power. Otho, who was Poppaea's sham husband but aspired to be Poppaea's legitimate husband, is sent away to Lusitania by Nero.

The "staging" of Suetonius' adultery mime inserts these prominent political figures into an easily recognizable scenario. Suetonius' account centers on the door to the house, which closes out Nero, with Poppaea and Otho within. The door is a central image

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<sup>57</sup>TLL c.v. *matrimonium*.

<sup>58</sup> TLL c.v. *matrimonium*.

in Greek and Roman drama which symbolizes the division between the conflict within the story and the broader world from which the characters have come.<sup>59</sup> The door is sometimes kept by a doorkeeper, who literally and figuratively straddles the line between the public and private worlds.<sup>60</sup> In Suetonius' account, Otho is the initial doorkeeper and the control of the door is analogous to access to Poppaea's sexuality; the primary power struggle over the door between Nero and Otho reflects their struggle over Poppaea's body within the private sphere of the house.

This portrayal also casts Nero as the *exclusus amator*. This trope is common not only to mime but also to elegy and comedy: a woman refuses to admit her lover to her home, leaving him to beg and lament her cruelty.<sup>61</sup> The female beloved or her agent is most often the one controlling the threshold in elegy (as we will see in Plutarch's account below), but not always. In Ovid's *Amores* 1.4, the narrator laments (Ov. *Am.* 1.4.60-61):

*nocte vir includet, lacrimis ego maestus abortis,  
qua licet, ad saevas prosequar usque fores.*

At night her husband will lock her in; with tears welling up I shall follow

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<sup>59</sup> See Beacham 2013, 369 for the symbolism of the door in drama.

<sup>60</sup> Beacham 2013, 369.

<sup>61</sup> Elegy is strongly influenced by mime; See McKeown 2013.

E.g. Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* 2.523-528

*Forsitan et vultu mendax ancilla superbo*

*Dicet 'quid nostras obsidet iste fores?'*

*Postibus et durae supplex blandire puellae,*

*Et capiti demptas in fore pone rosas.*

And perhaps the lying maid with a proud face will say: 'Why is he sitting at our door?' And, as a suppliant, flatter the doorposts of your harsh mistress and place the roses, from your head, outside.

See also: Horace *Odes* 3.7.21-32, 3.10.1-4, Propertius 1.16.17-26, Ovid *Amores* 1.6.16-17 (Copley 32). Cairns 2020, 270.

Sadly right up to the cruel door, which is allowed.

In this account, the husband is the cruel keeper of the door, while the narrator's lover is seemingly as powerless over her sexuality as the narrator himself. The door is both the physical barrier between the two and the manifestation of the husband's control over his wife's sexuality. The door shuts the narrator out, leaving him unaware of the events on the other side and shrouding the sexuality of his lover in mystery. The torture is not just the physical exclusion but the lack of knowledge about what is happening between the lover and her husband. Nero is initially the tortured elegiac lover, who is shut out by his lover's husband and left powerless and knowledgeable on the doorstep. However, unlike the elegiac lover, Nero is able to regain control over Otho and over Poppaea's sexuality through his own superior political power.

This scene concludes with an image which further emphasizes Otho's pathetic and fruitless position while underscoring the confusion between husbands and adulterers. Suetonius reports a widely published couplet: *Cur Otho mentito sit, quaeritis, exsul honore | Uxoris moechus coeperat esse suae*. The couplet confirms Otho's dual identity. Poppaea was ostensibly his *uxor*, but Otho himself is her *moechus*. Despite the appearance of marriage between the two, Otho was only ever Poppaea's lover, and everyone knew it.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Richlin 2013, 238 interprets this line in this way.

After being bested by Nero, the current emperor, Otho is motivated to reverse the power dynamic once again. Chapter 4 of Suetonius' *Life of Otho* opens (Suet. *Otho* 4):

*ut tandem occasio ultionis data est, conatibus Galbae primus accessit; eodemque momento et ipse spem imperii cepit magnam.*

Finally when the chance for vengeance was given, he first entered Galba's enterprises; and at the same moment he also took up a great hope for command.

It is this love triangle which Suetonius implies motivates Otho to rebel against Nero and eventually seek the position of *princeps*. For Suetonius, a biographer, Poppaea becomes a catalyst for a battle between two emperors who both become the butt of comic scenarios and jokes through their interaction with her.<sup>63</sup>

In fact, Nero seems to recognize the potential harm of this generic mode to his reputation when he worries that this *mimus* will become public. Mime was a particularly shameful form of theater due to the sexual undertones of the scenarios and the appearance of women acting onstage.<sup>64</sup> It would be considered scandalous for any of these elite figures to take part in such a performance were it to be public. Nero's reluctance to punish Otho further and allow this situation more publicity protects Poppaea from scandalous accusations. Ironically, however, *mimus* by its very nature is a public performance. Despite Nero's attempts to keep this situation secret, it is inherently public, as is demonstrated by the reported graffiti. By staging this story as an adultery mime in

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<sup>63</sup> It is notable that Suetonius leaves Poppaea's relationship with Otho out of *Life of Nero*; Suetonius saves it for his *Life of Otho*, where this relationship and the power dynamics which it exposed motivated Otho to seize power.

<sup>64</sup> See Fantham 1989, 153 for public reception of mime.

his work, Suetonius emphasizes the public nature of the affair and invites his readers to imagine these prominent historical figures as actors on the stage. These powerful people are recast as everyday, even lowly, actors in a relatable and recognizable scenario that we are invited to laugh at.

Although Poppaea lacks agency in this characterization, in contrast to a traditional mime in which the wife directs the adultery and deception, her casting in this adultery mime still reflects poorly on her as does the idea, highlighted by Suetonius, that anonymous romans are scrawling that casting on the walls of her city. Mime was the only genre of drama in which women acted on stage; such public exposure reflected poorly on actresses. Mime actresses portrayed characters who cheated and deceived their husbands. These figures stood in direct contrast to the idealized concept of the wife and mother and mime actresses, by extension, became symbols of the antithesis of the ideal Roman woman.<sup>65</sup> One prominent example of this phenomenon is Cicero's and Plutarch's portrayals of Cytheris, mime actress and Mark Antony's lover. Cicero describes how Antony and Cytheris ride together in an open litter, portraying Cytheris as Antony's *ulteram uxorem* (Cic. *Ad Atticum* 10.10.5). Cytheris, an adultery mime actor, is performing the same role with Antony that she performs onstage. Cicero blurs Cytheris' identity as an actress with her behavior; this phenomenon of conflating the character of the actress onstage with her identity offstage is common.<sup>66</sup> Cytheris' Plutarch notes that

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<sup>65</sup> See Panayotakis 2006, 125 for the relationship of mime actresses with ideals for Roman women.

<sup>66</sup> See Panayotakis 2006, 125 for Cicero's portrayal of Cytheris.

the litter was followed by as many attendants as that of Antony's mother (Plut. *Antony* 9.4-5; καὶ τὸ φορεῖον οὐκ ἐλάττους ἢ τὸ τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ περιέποντες ἠκολούθουν). Both authors intend to draw a contrast between Antony's treatment of Cytheris, who is undeserving of such celebration in their eyes, and his wife and mother, whom he neglects despite their virtue.<sup>67</sup> Poppaea, as the actress in Suetonius' adultery mime in addition to her role as a character in that mime, is turned into a recognizable *topos* for a woman marked by *infamia*, inherently unworthy of her eventual role of wife, mother, and empress.

But while Suetonius' account gives us a Poppaea who is more of a sexual object than a sexual agent, Plutarch's *Life of Galba* shapes the same story to different ends. The fact that both biographers know the same story suggests that it was a widely circulating way of understanding Poppaea's relationships with her two imperial husbands. But it also gives us an important opportunity to see how each biographer shapes the idea of Poppaea's sexual agency.

Plutarch introduces Poppaea in his *Life of Galba* with a comparison to Helen (Plut. *Galba* 19):

ὡς δὲ τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον Ὅμηρος “Ἑλένης πόσιν ἠὔκομοιο,” μηδὲν ἔχοντα πρὸς δόξαν ἄλλο σεμνύων ἀπὸ τῆς γυναικός, ὀνομάζει πολλάκις, οὕτως γεγονῶς περιβόητος ἐν Ῥώμῃ διὰ τὸν Ποππαίας γάμον

And as Homer often calls Paris “the husband of fair-haired Helen,” giving him a dignity borrowed from his wife, since he had no other title to fame, so Otho was celebrated at Rome for his marriage with Poppaea

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<sup>67</sup> Panayotakis 2006, 133.

This statement is a critique of Otho, who, like Paris, is a soft eastern man whose marriage to a beautiful woman is his greatest achievement. This is a bold and damning statement for a man who will eventually become emperor of Rome. But as the rest of his account of Poppaea shows, the comparison to Helen is not merely a comment on Poppaea's beauty; Poppaea's manipulative behavior in the following passage hearkens to the ambiguity of Helen's loyalties and the destruction which she brings to Troy. After reading the remainder of the passage, a seemingly innocuous comparison to Helen's beauty takes a darker meaning.

Just as in Suetonius' account, Plutarch's Otho makes an attempt on Poppaea's womanly honor (πειρῶντα)<sup>68</sup> at Nero's request and ostensibly succeeds in doing so.

Plutarch describes (Plut. *Galba* 19):

ἀλλὰ τὴν γε Ποππαίαν προμοιχεύσας τῷ Νέρωνι, καὶ διαφθείρας  
ταῖς εἰς ἐκεῖνον ἐλπίσιν, ἔπεισεν ἀποστῆναι τοῦ ἀνδρός. ἐλθούσης  
δὲ παρ' αὐτὸν ὡς γαμετῆς οὐκ ἠγάπα μετέχων, ἀλλ' ἤσχαλλε  
μεταδιδούς

But having corrupted Poppaea for Nero, and having seduced her in the hopes for that man, he persuaded her to leave her husband. After she came to live with him as his wife, he was not content to share her, but was vexed to give Nero a share.

This account of events differs from that of Suetonius: Otho seduces Poppaea with the hope of a relationship with Nero (ταῖς εἰς ἐκεῖνον ἐλπίσιν), but this relationship has not yet begun. In Suetonius' version of events, Poppaea and Nero have already begun their affair when Otho seduces her.

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<sup>68</sup> TLG, c.v. πειράω.

As Plutarch's account continues, the divergence between the accounts increases

(Plut. *Galba* 19):

οὐδὲ αὐτῆς ἀχθομένης, ὡς φασι, τῇ ζηλοτυπίᾳ τῆς Ποππαίας. καὶ γὰρ ἀποκλεῖσαι τὸν Νέρωνα λέγεται μὴ παρόντος τοῦ Ὄθωνος, εἴτε τῆς ἡδονῆς ἀφαιροῦσα τὸ πλήσιμον, εἴτε, ὡς φασιν ἔνιοι, βαρυνομένη τὸν Καίσαρος γάμον, ἐραστῇ δὲ μὴ φεύγουσα χρῆσθαι διὰ τὸ φιλακόλαστον. ἐκινδύνευσεν οὖν ὁ Ὄθων ἀποθανεῖν· καὶ παράλογον ἦν ὅτι τὴν γυναῖκα καὶ ἀδελφὴν ἀποκτείνας διὰ τὸν Ποππαίας γάμον ἐφείσατο τοῦ Ὄθωνος.

While Poppaea herself, as they say, was not displeased at the rivalry. For indeed it is said that she would shut out Nero even when Otho was not there, whether to prevent an excess of pleasure, or whether, as some say, she was wary of marriage with the emperor, but was not averse to having him as a lover, out of wantonness. Therefore, Otho risked death; and it was strange that although his wife and sister were put to killed on account of his marriage with Poppaea, Otho was spared.

Plutarch here characterizes Poppaea as fickle; her marriage to Crispinus is easily cast away. The adultery is quite explicitly stated (προμοιχεύσας) and Poppaea's dishonorable behavior is quite explicit as she is corrupted by Otho (διαφθείρας). It is Otho who persuades Poppaea to leave Crispinus (ἔπεισεν) but Poppaea is the subject of the active infinitive ἀποστῆναι and of the active participle ἐλθούσης. She is corrupted, but ultimately has agency in leaving Crispinus for Otho/Nero.

This characterization of Poppaea as a manipulative wife with agency continues in Plutarch's subsequent narrative of the romantic rivalry between Otho and Nero. Otho attempts to prevent Nero from a relationship with Poppaea (οὐκ ἠγάπα μετέχων, ἀλλ' ἤσχαλλε μεταδιδούς), again assuming the role of the husband in the adultery mime. Otho resents sharing Poppaea, a sentiment which is emphasized by the repetition of the prefix

μετα-. In contrast to Suetonius, Plutarch then emphasizes Poppaea's own agency. The former half of the sentence, οὐκ ἠγάπα μετέχων, ἀλλ' ἤσχαλλε μεταδιδούς, has Otho as its subject, ostensibly casting him as the driver of the action, but this is undermined by the genitive absolute at the end of the sentence: οὐδὲ αὐτῆς ἀχθομένης, ὡς φασι, τῆ ζηλοτυπία τῆς Ποππαίας. Poppaea is the subject of the deponent ἀχθομένης and thus, at least in the public eye (ὡς φασι), Plutarch's Poppaea retains some grammatical agency. The inclusion of Poppaea's opinions, moreover, provides her with psychological and emotional agency in a rivalry between two powerful men; she is not merely a passive object being passed around. Instead, she is the driver of the conflict: a true player in this adultery mime.

The public nature of this affair as a mime is highlighted by Plutarch's inclusion of ὡς φασι and λέγεται. These phrases bring a private relationship into public discourse. Plutarch does not present these events as his own interpretation but as a widely circulating story. This rhetorical strategy lends credence to Plutarch's assertions: he is not creating a story but reporting the predominant public discourse. This rhetorical framing sensationalizes the scandalous story—Romans loved to gossip about illicit affairs like this.<sup>69</sup>

Plutarch reports that Poppaea herself would shut Nero out, even when Otho wasn't home (καὶ γὰρ ἀποκλειῖσαι τὸν Νέρωνα λέγεται μὴ παρόντος τοῦ Ὄθωνος). Poppaea is the subject of the active infinitive ἀποκλειῖσαι while Nero is the accusative

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<sup>69</sup> See Richlin 2013, 238 for Plutarch's rhetorical strategy.

object of her action. Poppaea controls the scene and embodies the woman of the adultery mime, whose deception is central to her characterization.<sup>70</sup> Plutarch postulates on why Poppaea may have done this (εἴτε τῆς ἡδονῆς ἀφαιροῦσα τὸ πλήσιμον, εἴτε, ὡς φασιν ἔνιοι, βαρυνομένη τὸν Καίσαρος γάμον, ἐραστῆ δὲ μὴ φεύγουσα χρῆσθαι διὰ τὸ φιλακόλαστον); both his proposals present Poppaea as calculated and wanton; she is the cruel lover of elegy. Poppaea either wishes to keep Nero wanting more by limiting contact, which is quite calculated and indicates that Poppaea is quite skilled in playing on men's desires, or she desires only an illicit affair with Nero, rejecting any sort of legitimate partnership. Plutarch also explicitly states that Poppaea is φιλακόλαστον, literally a lover of being sexual or licentious (ἀκόλαστος). Poppaea cruelly controls the threshold, shutting out Nero while masterminding the conflict between the two men.

Additionally, the use of ζῆλοτυπία is a poignant description of the erotic rivalry between Otho and Nero, particularly within the context of the adultery mime. The ζηλότυπος, the jealous one, is a stock character in adultery mime.<sup>71</sup> The jealous lover of mime often lacks restraint and flies into rage, which is intended to be humorous for the audience.<sup>72</sup> This emotion-fueled irrationality is seen in Nero in Plutarch's anecdote. As a

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<sup>70</sup> See Papaioannou 2002, 31 for women of adultery mime.

<sup>71</sup> See Panayotakis 1995, 123 for the stock characters of adultery mime.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. The link between ζηλότυπος and rage is not limited to mime. In Arsitophanes' *Plutus*, the old woman describes how her lover is so enraged when another man looks at her that he beats her for a day (*Plut.* 1013-1016):

μυστηρίοις δὲ τοῖς μεγάλοις ὀχουμένην  
ἐπὶ τῆς ἀμάξης ὅτι προσέβλεψέν μέ τις,  
ἐτυπτόμην διὰ τοῦθ' ὅλην τὴν ἡμέραν.  
οὕτω σφόδρα ζηλότυπος ὁ νεανίσκος ἦ

mime, the scene is humorous for an ancient audience: not only is Poppaea, a woman, controlling Nero's access to her own body, but she is doing so even when Nero's romantic rival is absent. Poppaea delights in being shared by the men (ἐλθούσης δὲ παρ' αὐτὸν ὡς γαμετῆς οὐκ ἠγάπα μετέχων, ἀλλ' ἤσχαλλε μεταδιδούς, οὐδὲ αὐτῆς ἀχθομένης, ὡς φασι, τῆ ζήλοτυπία τῆς Ποππαίας) and drives conflict by shutting Nero out (ἀποκλειῖσαι). Plutarch's Poppaea controls the door and manages the access to her body. She is the mastermind and stage manager: control over her own eroticism is hers alone. Poppaea holds all the control in this scenario, casting Nero as weak and pathetic.

However, Plutarch reminds us that this scene, although reminiscent of mime, goes beyond the bounds of the genre into reality. This is not a contained stage production, but a scenario which, as Plutarch reports, led to the deaths of Otho's family members (καὶ παράλογον ἦν ὅτι τὴν γυναῖκα καὶ ἀδελφὴν ἀποκτείνας διὰ τὸν Ποππαίας γάμον). Plutarch states that these murders happened because of Otho's marriage to Poppaea (διὰ τὸν Ποππαίας γάμον); ostensibly Poppaea's behavior in the scene, specifically her torment of Nero, contributed to this tragic end for Otho's female family members.

Unlike in Suetonius' characterization of this love triangle, Plutarch's Poppaea retains a fair bit of agency. She is given emotions, opinions, and desires; she manipulates those around her within the romantic relationship rather than being an object of Otho's and Nero's whims. This characterization of Poppaea is far more negative than that of

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When I was at the Mysteries of Eleusis in a carriage, someone made eyes at me; he was so jealous that he beat me the whole of that day.

Suetonius, but it is notable that while the story of these marriages is overarchingly similar between the two biographers, Poppaea is used rhetorically in quite different ways.

Suetonius' Poppaea is a passive object, while Plutarch's Poppaea has agency and the ability to manipulate those around her for her own goals. In both accounts, however, Poppaea's reputation is tainted by the *infamia* associated with being a mime actress. Both authors allude to wider public discourse about this love triangle and the characters within it; Poppaea, regardless of the degree of agency afforded her, does not escape the negative role of a mime actress.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

Biographical treatments of Nero's wives are often overshadowed by the historiographical tradition, especially Tacitus' *Annales*. As a result, little attention is paid to biography as its own genre with its own conventions. This chapter has isolated biography as a distinct form of historical writing with its own interpretations of Octavia and Poppaea. Suetonius and Plutarch, writing in different forms of the genre, each shape specific episodes in the lives of both empresses according to the arguments of their biographies. In doing so, they use intratextuality, generic enrichment, and existing Roman discourses around female sexuality and domestic violence to narrate vivid and compelling narratives of these women in fragmented snapshots. And despite the brief appearance each woman makes in the surviving biographical tradition of early imperial Rome, those appearances are no less interesting or important than narrative historiography for the study of their literary afterlives.

## 8. Conclusion

Octavia and Poppaea have appeared across literary genres in a number of different lights. The historiographical characterizations of Nero's wives are only a fraction of the ancient portrayals of these two women. Both Octavia and Poppaea play a number of roles which engage with major themes of imperial women throughout literature.

One recurring theme for both Octavia and Poppaea is literary engagement with marriage ritual and epithalamia motifs. Importantly, these themes appear primarily as metaphors for death in these texts. Poppaea's journey to heaven in the Poppaea poem is compared to a marital procession and her wedding in the *Octavia* turns into a funeral in her dreams. Likewise, Octavia's wedding day is called her death-day in Tacitus' *Annals*. This recurrent theme of weddings conflated with funerals shows an ancient understanding that an affiliation with a bad emperor like Nero is deadly for those around him, especially his wives. Both Octavia and Poppaea appear as inevitable victims of Nero from the date of their weddings— that is, the day on which they were bound to him.

These texts also explore the stereotypes of good and bad imperial wives. In some cases, Octavia and Poppaea are idealized, such as in the Poppaea poem and by the Pro-Octavia Chorus in the *Octavia*, respectively. These texts imagine Octavia and Poppaea as devoted wives and potential mothers of heirs for Nero. In contrast, Octavia's characterization of Poppaea and Nero's characterization of Octavia in the *Octavia* explore the negative stereotypes of women in power. The characters imagine Poppaea

controlling Nero with her sexuality and Octavia using her popular support to stage an uprising. Although the characters themselves are not portrayed partaking in such behavior, they are nonetheless blamed for the actions of others because of their perceived potential power.

Perhaps the most important common motif across this dissertation is its explication of how the majority of the texts explored in this study cast Octavia and Poppaea in a sympathetic, or at the very least in the case of Poppaea, not villainous, light. When Octavia appears, she is almost always being tortured at Nero's hands, such as in Suetonius' *Life of Nero* and in the *Octavia*. In the latter case, although the play engages with the idea that Octavia could symbolize a threat to the regime, Octavia is never seen actually engaging with the destructive mob. She is predominantly an Electra figure and doomed to follow her unavenged family. Poppaea, too, is cast sympathetically in much of the literature, not only in encomiastic texts like the Poppaea poem but also in more complex texts like Suetonius' *Lives* and the *Octavia*. Suetonius' Poppaea, in dramatic contrast to Tacitus' Poppaea, is emphatically cast as a victim of Nero's rage. The Poppaea of the *Octavia* is characterized in a variety of ways by other characters but appears as terrified and haunted. Even more morally gray scenarios, like the love triangle between Poppaea, Nero, and Otho in both Suetonius' and Plutarch's *Lives*, refrains from condemning her as fundamentally manipulative and power-hungry like Tacitus' Poppaea.

My dissertation analyzes a number of characterizations of Octavia and Poppaea across genres and the themes which run through them. I take a holistic approach to the

literary characterizations of Octavia and Poppaea. Rather than focusing on how these texts confirm or conflict with the predominant historiographical narrative, I examine how each source or genre adds a new, sometimes contradictory, image of these empresses. The goal of this dissertation is not to create a coherent picture of Octavia and Poppaea to compete with the historiographically-derived portraits which dominate modern scholarship. Instead, I uncover and examine the complicated images and multifaceted portrayal of these two women in the surviving literary tradition which have for too long been overlooked.

## Appendix A

The context of the *Octavia* is shrouded in obscurity. As the only complete surviving example of the *fabula praetexta* genre, so tropes of the genre are nearly impossible to identify within the play.<sup>1</sup> Scholars once presumed the author of the *Octavia* to be Seneca; modern scholars agree that this is impossible for a variety of reasons.<sup>2</sup> However, both the dating and the performance context of the *Octavia* are still debated among scholars. These debates are not the focus of this dissertation, but must be considered as essential background for the text. For the purposes of the discussion of characterization of Octavia and Poppaea, I will assume a general Flavian date for the text and will consider how the debate over performance context can impact the interpretation of different scenes.

In recent years, scholars have proposed different dates for the authorship of the *Octavia*. The play is undeniably written after the death of Nero, as his death is foreshadowed in the play.<sup>3</sup> The play also portrays Nero poorly, indicating that the text was written under a regime which was hostile to Nero.<sup>4</sup> Kragelund and Barnes argue for a Galban date for the play due to the anti-Neronian sentiment and the omission of Poppaea's marriage to Otho, as Otho would have been a prominent political figure at the

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<sup>1</sup> See Wiseman 2022, 200-210 and Baier 2002 for issues with understanding the genre.

<sup>2</sup> See Poe 1989 and Westman 1966 for linguistic differences between the *Octavia* and Seneca's corpus.

<sup>3</sup> See Boyle 2008, 73 and see Carbone 1977 for foreshadowing.

<sup>4</sup> Boyle 2008, 71 argues this.

time.<sup>5</sup> Boyle and Ferri disagree on the political stance of the play; Boyle argues that the play is anti-imperial due to its poor portrayal of Nero while Ferri views the play as anti-Neronian but pro-imperial because the mob does not fight for independent power; instead, they fight for their preferred monarch.<sup>6</sup> Both Boyle and Ferri propose Flavian dates, but Boyle prefers a Vespasianic date, while Ferri argues for a Domitianic date. Boyle points out that Vespasian's son, Titus, was associated with Britannicus in his youth and was possibly even friends with the prince. Thus, if the play is Vespasianic, the playwright would have a motivation to emphasize the tragedy of Britannicus' death and the evil of Nero's schemes.<sup>7</sup> Ferri argues that the play is Domitianic as criticism of Nero was quite popular at the time as a metaphor for public disdain for Domitian himself.<sup>8</sup> The arguments for the specific Flavian periods under which this play may have been written are tenuous, but these scholars convincingly argue for a general Flavian date, when anti-Neronian sentiment was flourishing.

Scholars also disagree on the performance context of the play. Ferri believes that the play was written for private individuals to read due to the structure of the play. Some scenes, Ferri argues, would not translate well to stage due to the lack of character introductions and the long, expository speeches. One such example of this is the scene in which Poppaea runs onstage, terrified by her dream, in response to which her Nurse gives

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<sup>5</sup> Kragelund 2016, 172, Barnes 1982.

<sup>6</sup> Boyle 2008, 15; Ferri 2003, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Boyle 2008, 17.

<sup>8</sup> Ferri 2003, 3.

a lengthy description of her wedding the day before. What, Ferri asks, would the terrified Poppaea be doing onstage during this monologue?<sup>9</sup> For these reasons, Ferri proposes that the play was not intended to be performed onstage. In contrast, Boyle and Kragelund argue that this play would have been staged. Boyle points out that the powerful, stichomythic exchanges between characters would only be powerful if spoken aloud by characters.<sup>10</sup> Kragelund argues that the staging of the play would be essential to communicating the message of the scenes clearly.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the lack of character introductions can be read as a stylistic feature of the play rather than an indication that it could not have functioned onstage; Michel points out that many characters are described in relation to Octavia and the Julio-Claudian family rather than explicitly named.<sup>12</sup> While I do not intend to favor either of these hypotheses, I consider instances in which performance and staging would enhance the characterization of Octavia and Poppaea.

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<sup>9</sup> Ferri 2003, 60.

<sup>10</sup> Boyle 2008, 53.

<sup>11</sup> Kragelund 2016, 96.

<sup>12</sup> Michel 2013, 746.

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