

# A tale of two Octavias: historical empathy and intimate partner ‘violence’

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## ABSTRACT

This paper starts with the contention that the category of ‘violence’ is culturally constructed and varies according to one’s cultural and historical context. This is not intended to excuse contemporary acts that violate our laws and standards, but instead to provide a platform for examining Roman ideas of acceptable and unacceptable force so far as we can access them via texts written by male members of the elite. By examining Nero’s treatment of Octavia as it is depicted in Tacitus’ *Annals*, I argue that we can identify Roman social/moral condemnation of (technically legal) violence inflicted on Octavia by Nero. However, comparison with the depiction of the same events in the anonymous *Octavia* demonstrates how conditional this condemnation could be on the victim’s presentation as a moral and social exemplar.

**KEYWORDS:** Octavia, Tacitus, Nero, Violence, Intimate partner violence, Domestic violence, Gender, Rome, Seneca the Younger, Empathy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century in many countries in the world we are beginning to work towards the point where intimate partner violence (IPV) will be both socially and legally condemned. There is still much to do, but increasingly the issue is being publicly discussed with an emphasis on the prevention of violence and the protection of victims.<sup>1</sup> Examining IPV in the Roman world, on the other hand, brings us face to face with a range of problems which are both methodological and philosophical. One of the first and most important is an issue of language. The term ‘violence’ today, as argued by David Riches and more recently by Monica Gale and James Scourfield, is one that connotes physical (also emotional and psychological) force which is regarded as entirely illegitimate.<sup>2</sup> In order for the terminology of violence to be appropriate when we are attempting to access the experience, or describe the world view, of individuals in a historical context, we need to access their understanding of what is regarded as violence.<sup>3</sup> This can be particularly difficult to apply to domestic scenarios because, even when we see Roman authors disapproving of acts that many would also condemn today, the ethical framework is not necessarily operating in the same way. For instance, as Kathryn Chew notes, where

<sup>1</sup> Although, as Laura Bates notes, there is still a tendency to read intimate partner violence as being generated by the victim, rather than the perpetrator: Bates 2020: 192–95.

<sup>2</sup> Riches 1986: 1–27; Gale and Scourfield 2018: 20–21.

<sup>3</sup> Gibson 2018: 269–70. See too the way in which societal expectations of the difference between acceptable and non-acceptable force can shift from culture to culture in the modern world: Plant 2019: 2112, 2115.

we do have a categorization and condemnation of force against women as ‘violence’ in Greco-Roman texts, the focus is often on threats to virginity or chastity, and these (in Roman terms) are not at issue in IPV.<sup>4</sup> With this in mind, in this paper I would like to explore what we can understand about the markers that the Romans themselves used to judge where ‘legitimate force’ between intimate partners tipped over into something that was societally condemned. In doing this, I am not suggesting that what we would call violence today is excusable, but rather attempting to understand where Romans themselves drew the line.<sup>5</sup>

The problem of ascertaining cultural standards is not purely an issue when dealing with ancient sources; as John L. Caughey has observed in the context of his experience as an expert witness in contemporary trials that include a clash of cultures, ‘A trial is a cultural ritual, crime a cultural construct, and the court a cultural apparatus that represents and enforces the dominant culture’s values and perspectives.’<sup>6</sup> The socially constructed nature of all elements of the condemnation or approval of an action by a society means that we need to consider events as they are contextualized within their own cultural framework if we are attempting to understand the dynamics and shape of events, however we judge them within our own legal and social framework.

This issue of cultural contextualization not only often applies to differences between countries or groups within countries but can also encompass difference in time. For instance, up until 1976 in white Australian society, marital rape was a contradiction in terms in a legal sense.<sup>7</sup> This meant that when an attempt was made in South Australia to bring a retrospective charge of marital rape in 2009 on the basis of events from the early 1960s, a key element of the discussion was the extent to which the events would have violated social mores at the time, even if they were not then strictly illegal.<sup>8</sup> When it comes to the Roman world, in the absence of explicit social commentary (other than isolated comments such as that of Cato the Elder, *Plu. Cat. Ma.* 20.2) and an absence of a legal framework defining the point at which action against an individual by an intimate partner becomes violence, we are forced to fall back on close reading of texts in order to interpret the author’s views, and their understanding of their readers’ attitudes in a similar way to those who discussed the landmark South Australian case *PGA v. The Queen* from 2009–12.<sup>9</sup> The process is necessarily subjective, and while scholars have agreed on certain cues in language that can guide us, we are still to a large extent operating on our own emotional and intellectual reactions to texts written within a very distant emotional and intellectual climate.

The particular challenge, I would argue, is one of historical empathy in the sense delineated by Thomas A. Kohut: we need, as far as possible, to put ourselves into the mindset of the historical actors with whom we are dealing.<sup>10</sup> As Kohut argues, we need to think in terms of their ‘space of experience’ and ‘horizon of expectation.’<sup>11</sup> That is, in the context of the events depicted, would the acts we read about be regarded as illegitimate and immoral, and to what extent are we dealing with hindsight in our own reactions rather than knowledge and understanding at the time?<sup>12</sup> If we allow our own reactions to be dominant, we risk achieving only ‘self-oriented perspective taking’, a state that Amy Coplan describes as ‘pseudo-empathy’, which involves imagining what we would experience in another’s position, rather than attempting to see, as far as possible, from another’s perspective.<sup>13</sup> In the context of my own identity and this chapter, that means trying hard not to read events from the perspective of a legally protected, educated, privileged white woman of the twenty-first century, but rather trying to see events from a perspective based in

<sup>4</sup> Chew 2003: 132–33, 137.

<sup>5</sup> As Alison Dundes Renteln has argued, while the ‘cultural defence’ can be misapplied in modern legal contexts, it is still an important element of understanding offender behaviour and can be critical to the trial process: Renteln 2009: 62–63.

<sup>6</sup> Caughey 2009: 323.

<sup>7</sup> Lesses 2014: 787.

<sup>8</sup> Naffine and Neoh 2013: 48.

<sup>9</sup> Witzke 2016: 249–50, 252. It is worth noting that Plutarch presumably quotes Cato the Elder on this issue because his attitude is in some way unusual or striking.

<sup>10</sup> I certainly acknowledge the complexity of empathy as a concept and the many ways in which it can be understood even within the one field, for example: Glas 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Kohut 2020: 68.

<sup>12</sup> Even in the modern world, empathy itself is hugely sensitive to cultural sensibilities, despite the Western-centric way in which it is often interpreted: Eichbaum et al. 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Coplan 2011: 53–57.

the Roman world. This is not to suggest that what we would term IPV today is excusable, but rather to attempt to understand how two Roman authors, working within their own moral and cultural context, read the limits of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, irrespective of the law at the time. While we would presumably condemn many acts in the Roman world as unacceptable today, the emphasis in this paper is on attempting to understand, rather than judge, the dynamics at play.

Given that IPV in the Roman world largely involves violence against women as described by men, we encounter additional layers of difficulty in the sense that our authors are not only male themselves but writing largely in the expectation of male audiences. We do not have access to the accounts of the victim, or even to female reactions to events outside of the reactions imagined by the author.<sup>14</sup> More than this, we encounter the question of whether ancient texts written by men include women as anything other than commentary on the men with whom they are associated.<sup>15</sup> Certainly, in the existing scholarship on characterization in *Octavia*, at least, the emphasis has been almost entirely focused either on the male characters of the play or on the character of Octavia as a cipher for male experience.<sup>16</sup> There has been little attention paid to Octavia as a specifically female character and what this means for our understanding of her actions and words.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, the case has been explicitly made that Tacitus' women are essentially extensions of his depiction of their associated men.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, while the nature of our texts from the Roman world enshrines a male perspective, the fact that an author chooses to prioritize a female character, or characters, does give some insight into that man's understanding of how the kind of women they depict inhabit the Roman world. While this might not be reflective of female lived experience, it presumably reveals not only the preconceptions of the author, but a confidence on their part that the dynamics they represent will be intellectually and emotionally accessible to their male readers. This is a limited focus, but it perhaps allows us to see something of the cognitive and social space in which women existed and were viewed, and via this some of the factors that affected (and limited) their experiences. Female voices are absent in the text, but this analysis is one way to gain at the least a sense of the frameworks which elite men constructed to hold women in their minds.

In this chapter, I intend to explore these problems of historical empathy by comparing two texts in different genres, which provide descriptions of the emperor Nero's treatment of his first wife Octavia: Tacitus' work of history, the *Annals*, and the anonymous tragedy *Octavia Praetexta*, or *Octavia*. Both these texts are written with hindsight: the authors, and their original audiences, knew what happened at the end of the story for Octavia, and they knew how Nero's reign concluded. Added to this, we have two thousand years of hindsight suggesting that the acts we see against Octavia are horrific. All of these factors present challenges to our ability to access the contemporary context of experience when we are trying to understand how Romans at the time might have read the events.<sup>19</sup> As previously noted, our view of events is highly gendered in the sense that it reflects a masculine normative viewpoint. Necessarily, this chapter will be focusing on the views of two (presumably) elite, Roman males: Tacitus, and the anonymous author of the *Octavia*. In a textual sense, these are essentially the only views we have. Still, as I will argue, examination of the male view in these cases demonstrates both that certain (legal) acts between partners could be judged as socially and culturally unacceptable, and that the particular details of the victim and their behaviour seem to have had significant influence on how these judgements were made. As in the modern world, attitudes towards the force inflicted on a victim seem to have been flexible in the face of factors that have little to do with law.

One final overarching objection could be made that these are not works about a marriage, but about a system of government. The relevance of this objection is clear for Tacitus' *Annals*, and scholars have

<sup>14</sup> Modern studies showing the way in which men's attitudes towards women can affect their behaviour, even when enforcing laws prohibiting IPV, speak to the difficulties of reading this evidence through male authors: Garcia et al. 2014: 1202. Garcia et al. also note that 'positive' attitudes towards women of the 'chivalric' model can also skew the way in which law is enforced. This becomes further complicated if we accept the studies that have shown evidence that pain (and pleasure) are interpreted differently according to the societal expectation of one's gender: Tasmeeera et al. 2021: 1637.

<sup>15</sup> For example: Hillard 1989.

<sup>16</sup> For the former see as illustrative examples Manuwald 2003, Taylor 2010, Pigoń 2017, and Schwazer 2017; for the latter, Ginsberg 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Buckley 2012 does engage with this issue to some extent.

<sup>18</sup> Swindle 2003: 105–15.

<sup>19</sup> Witzke notes the nature of the textual evidence which can at best give us a sense of general societal attitudes: Witzke 2016: 249.

also approached *Octavia* in these terms as a lens focused on tyranny, the Julio-Claudian succession, and the way in which the Principate aligns the moral state of the Roman Empire with that of its sole ruler.<sup>20</sup> In keeping with these readings, it is worth considering that one of the key aspects of the Principate as it appears in Roman authors is the way in which it makes public concerns (the government) subject to private concerns like marriage and inheritance. If we accept the drift of the public elements into the private as a preoccupation of the authors, we should also accept that we will see elements of private, domestic experiences in the discussion of public affairs. The treatment of Octavia is certainly not a purely domestic issue, but it is likewise not a purely political one either: the two things are intrinsically linked, and the personal, domestic, elements of her death are designed to have their own resonance.<sup>21</sup>

To demonstrate this point, we can look to the mistreatment and death of a woman in Tacitus' *Annals* who is not part of the imperial family. This involves some compromises in terms of the closeness of comparison, as Roman women who are not imperial and whose experience of physical force is described explicitly are few and far between in the *Annals*: Plancina (wife of Gnaeus Piso) takes her own life (6.26), Apronia's apparent murder by her husband Plautius Silvanus is investigated by the emperor Tiberius but not perpetrated by anyone imperial (4.22), Paulina (wife of Seneca the Younger) attempts to kill herself with her husband, but is stopped and revived at Nero's command (15.63–64), and we understand that Servilia (daughter of Barea Soranus) is sentenced to death by her own hands under Nero, but the section of the text describing this event is missing (16.33).<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, Tacitus does describe the involvement of Epicharis, a freedwoman, in the Pisonian conspiracy in book 15 of the *Annals* as well as her subsequent torture and death, and her treatment is very much at the behest of the emperor Nero. After Epicharis unwisely shares the details of the Pisonian conspiracy with the captain of the fleet at Misenum, Volusius Proculus (15.51), she is arrested, interrogated, and tortured until she engineers her own death (15.57). This means that we have two examples where women experience ill-treatment at Nero's instructions which we can compare: both cases involve accusations of treason. In Octavia's case, Tacitus depicts action taken by a husband against his recent wife; in the case of Epicharis, Tacitus depicts action taken by the emperor against an unrelated woman.

The major concern in using Epicharis as a comparative example is status: she is described by Tacitus as a *libertina*—a freedwoman. While Epicharis is a Roman citizen, her citizenship has technical limitations; nevertheless, in an ordinary Republican context, she should have been protected from judicial torture. In the context of the interpretation of *maiestas* in the Principate, though, torture was—while still shocking when conducted against the free—technically within the scope of the *princeps*' powers.<sup>23</sup> As with the treatment of Octavia, then, Tacitus is working in the space between legality and sociocultural acceptance, and, as in the case of Octavia, it seems clear that Tacitus wants to elicit an emotional response of compassion from the reader towards the female victim, whatever the exact legal situation.

What is very different in Epicharis' case is the rhetorical mechanism by which Tacitus cultivates this emotional connection, especially given that he introduces Epicharis by condemning her previous moral life.<sup>24</sup> This moral judgement is reinforced when Tacitus refers to Epicharis' *amicitia* with Volusius Proculus, a man known (*cognitus*) to her at an unspecified period of her life (15.51), and whom Epicharis fatally misjudges as a potential co-conspirator against the emperor Nero: this is not the chaste woman we see embodied in Octavia. Nor is Epicharis in any way submissive or meek; she is so thoroughly fed up (*pertaesa*) by the failure of the male conspirators to act that she attempts to push them into action. Likewise, when Epicharis is arrested, Tacitus states that Nero assumed a woman's body (*corpus muliebre*) would not tolerate the pain of torture and so ordered a physical interrogation of Epicharis (15.57). The historian goes on to detail the forms of torture used against Epicharis: blows, fire, and the ever-increasing anger of her interrogators.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, Epicharis will not reveal the identity of her fellow conspirators and, when being returned for a second day of torture, she manages

<sup>20</sup> Manuwald 2003; Ginsberg 2013; Schwazer 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Wilson characterizes the *Octavia* as concerned with both the public and private in Nero's behaviour and as acknowledging two different spheres of Nero's activity: Wilson 2003b: 63. See too Gillespie 2019: 145.

<sup>22</sup> On Tacitus' treatment of the story of Apronia, see Harris in this volume.

<sup>23</sup> Dig. 48.18.10.1; Gillespie 2019: 143.

<sup>24</sup> ... neque illi ante ulla rerum honestarum cura fuerat (15.51).

<sup>25</sup> at illam non verbera, non ignes, non ira eo acrius torquentium, ne a femina spernerentur, pervicere, quin obiecta denegaret.

to effect her own death using the binding of her dress despite the fact that her limbs are dislocated as a result of the previous day's interrogation.

Tacitus describes Epicharis as providing a *clarius exemplum* in her death and draws an unflattering comparison with the self-protective information-sharing of male conspirators, who had not yet been subjected to torture and were freeborn and of high status (15.57). As Pavón (2023) has argued, Epicharis is a model of *fortitudo* in the *Annals* and her death is admirable; it is also notable that at every point Epicharis' conduct contrasts with the failure of elite Roman men to act with similar resolve. Tacitus draws the comparison three times: Epicharis' attempts to motivate the male conspirators, Nero's assumptions about what a female body can take, and Epicharis' refusal to betray her co-conspirators. This focus on gender sets Epicharis in an interesting space: she is admirable, and the reader is invested in her fate, because she acts more like a man than the men.<sup>26</sup> I would argue that the violence done to Epicharis' body is primarily about the way power can be wielded by a *princeps* like Nero, and how the structures embedding that power demoralize and disempower elite Roman men.<sup>27</sup> This is in marked contrast to the suffering of Octavia, who is pursued both *as* a woman and a wife, and because she *is* a woman and a wife; as previously argued, this status has public and political significance, but not at the complete expense of the private and domestic.

## 2. THE OCTAVIAS

Both Tacitus' *Annals* and the *Octavia* tell roughly the same story as regards Octavia's death: Nero, wanting to marry Poppaea Sabina, decides to divorce his wife Octavia—daughter of the emperor Claudius and Messalina. In both texts, Octavia is exiled and condemned to death; in both texts the divorce is met with popular distress and anger.<sup>28</sup> There are substantial differences in the story, however, around the mechanisms (and degree of effort) Nero uses to justify the removal of Octavia, and the role of Poppaea. We will return to these issues, but firstly one other immediately identifiable difference between the two texts is in the characterization and role of Octavia. In Tacitus' *Annals*, Octavia has no direct speech and only one instance of indirect speech. She is a silent figure, symbolic of Nero's decline and the brutal toll it takes on the innocent. The tragic Octavia, on the other hand, is outspoken and strong, defiant in the face of her circumstances and uncompromising in her views. Given the difference in the way in which Octavia is represented in the two texts, we have an excellent context in which to look for signs that suggest we are being invited to share her experience and feel with her pain.

### 2.1 Tacitus' Octavia

The different natures of the texts mean that, from the outset, the Octavia of the *Annals* reveals little interior life. In fact, Tacitus claims that Octavia had learned to entirely hide her thoughts and feelings from an early age; he strikingly comments at the death of her brother Britannicus 'Octavia also, although still tender in years, had learned to hide pain, concern, all emotions.'<sup>29</sup> Fittingly, then, Tacitus largely shows us Octavia in terms of others' reactions to her: at 13.12, Tacitus states that Nero abhorred his wife (*abhorrere*) despite Octavia's *nobilitas* and *probitas*. At 13.18, Agrippina, frustrated by her son, cleaves to her daughter-in-law instead, and possibly advertises the wrongs done to Octavia (13.19), and Poppaea fears the potential stumbling block of Octavia's ongoing marriage to Nero at 14.1. On the one occasion where we do gain access to her thoughts and reactions, filtered as they are through both the male gaze and the choices of the author, the incident is distinct enough to have led some scholars to wonder if Tacitus is echoing the text of the *Octavia*.<sup>30</sup> At the point of execution, Tacitus depicts Octavia as arguing (*testaretur*) that she is not a wife, just a sister; calling on the shared

<sup>26</sup> In this sense, the violence done to Epicharis recalls Agrippina the Elder, Tiberius' censure of honours for Livia, and Agrippina the Younger's attempts to inhabit the masculine space of the Senate house.

<sup>27</sup> See also Gillespie on Tacitus' deliberate violation of gender norms in the case of Epicharis: Gillespie 2019: 150–51, and Pagán, who reads Epicharis as a prostitute and thus sees an even more heightened contrast: Pagán 2000: 365–66.

<sup>28</sup> On Tacitus' and the *Octavia*'s exploration of coercive control, see Cowan in this volume.

<sup>29</sup> *Octavia quoque, quamvis rudibus annis, dolorem caritatem omnes adfectus abscondere didicerat* (13.16). Gillespie notes the silent, enduring quality of Tacitus' Octavia: Gillespie 2019: 143–44. See also Murgatroyd 2008: 265 and Ferri 1998: 342.

<sup>30</sup> Ferri 1998: 339–56.

heritage of the Germanici; and invoking Nero's mother Agrippina (*cieret*). Nothing is quoted directly, and the scene concludes with Octavia's prolonged and disturbing death: she is bound, her wrists are cut, she is then put into a very hot bath, and her head (cut off post mortem) is sent to Poppaea. While others speak for Octavia (her maid, the people), she is depicted as personally responding to Nero with silence, a carefully managed expression, and submission.<sup>31</sup>

The expected reader reaction to Octavia's fate in Tacitus' text seems clear, especially as we are guided so often by the reaction of sympathizers to her. While Nero acts with authority at all points (he claims to be acting on a conspiracy against his *maiestas*), thereby ensuring that force used against Octavia is technically legitimized, Tacitus labours the point that Nero is deliberately falsifying both the crime and the evidence for it. When Nero decides to do away with Octavia, Tacitus states that she was behaving *modeste* but that Nero could not tolerate her popularity and descent from Claudius (14.59): that is, Octavia is clearly categorized as innocent from the outset. Likewise, Tacitus refers to the publicly stated motivation of Nero's initial divorce of Octavia in terms that make the falsehood clear: *sterilem dictitans*, with the frequentative present participle driving home the iteration of the lie (14.60). Next, Tacitus delegitimizes the prosecution of Octavia further by switching the impetus to Poppaea, who is depicted as wholly responsible for the charge of adultery against her rival.<sup>32</sup> Tacitus makes it clear that any evidence obtained from Octavia's slaves under torture is untrue (*falsa*), and purely the result of pain (*vis tormentorum*).<sup>33</sup> These false accusations are positioned immediately prior to Octavia's removal in the narrative, which tends to occlude the fact that—by Tacitus' account—some of the slaves, under torture, did give evidence of her adultery. When popular support for Octavia arises in response to a rumoured reconciliation with Nero, Tacitus again puts the force of the persecution on Poppaea, motivated by fear and hatred, which render her savage (*metus ... odium ... atrox*, 14.61). This strategy relies again on dishonesty, as an accusation of attempted revolution is fabricated with the assistance of Anicetus, 'to whom the charge of revolution could also be falsely attached.'<sup>34</sup> Anicetus, a matricide, characterized by *vaecordia*, and experienced in crimes, is more than happy to lie (*fingere*). The process has the look of legitimacy (Nero convenes a *consilium* to hear the confession), but once again Tacitus stresses the dishonesty that underpins it (14.63). As Octavia's life comes to an end, Tacitus' language drips with pity: she is a *puella*, only just 20, surrounded by soldiers. Octavia's past has been—at best—unfortunate (*infelix*), she is immobilized by fear (*pavor*) as she dies in gruesome stages. The decapitation of her corpse and delivery of the head to Poppaea is likewise described as *atrocior saevitia*: really appalling cruelty (14.64). When the Senate responds with thanksgivings for her death, Tacitus sees it as further evidence of the era's topsy turvy perversity.<sup>35</sup>

In terms of empathy, then, it seems that Tacitus is asking the reader to pity Octavia and to see her death as illegitimate. While, technically, legal processes were used by the recognized *princeps*, Tacitus emphasizes that the processes were based on deliberate falsehoods and hidden motives from her former husband, and that the real *potestas* sat with an ambitious, interested woman, not the emperor himself. Poppaea is even described as *mariti potens*—wielding power over her lover—by Tacitus (14.60).<sup>36</sup> These aspects classify the death of Octavia as in violation of social values and expectations, and the point is reinforced by the physical disparity between her youth and size and that of her captors, as well as the brutality of her death. With this in mind I would argue that in the Roman perspective this account could be classified as showing something close to our understanding of IPV in the sense that a husband is seen to treat his wife with socially recognized cruelty. While the mechanisms are official and public in this case, the motivations are characterized as domestic and private.<sup>37</sup> It could

<sup>31</sup> Notably, when Nero begins to solidify his plans against Octavia, Tacitus describes her as *modeste agere* (14.59). Even toward the end of the twentieth century it was largely accepted that 'passivity and a sense of powerlessness over one's environment are ... elements basic to the feminine image': Caplan 1985: 146. While Gillespie has argued that Octavia's silence represents resistance, the extent to which Tacitus emphasizes her fear is more suggestive of an attempt at self-preservation: Gillespie 2019: 152.

<sup>32</sup> Gillespie 2019: 145.

<sup>33</sup> While torture was required for the evidence of enslaved people to be admitted in an investigation, the Romans were under no illusions about its efficacy in revealing the truth: Lawrence 2016: 245–60.

<sup>34</sup> *Cui rerum quoque novarum adfingeretur ...* (14.62).

<sup>35</sup> *... dona ob haec templis decreta que[m] ad finem memorabimus?* (14.64).

<sup>36</sup> Murgatroyd 2008: 270.

<sup>37</sup> A more modern parallel might be the relegation of an inconvenient wife to an asylum by their husband: an act within the husband's legal compass at the time, but still vulnerable to public condemnation; cf. Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860).

be argued, then, that Tacitus' account in the *Annals* meets the criteria of representing popularly condemned physical force enacted at the behest of a husband against a wife for reasons that are intimately connected to their personal relationship, even if clothed in political language. The wife herself—a model of loyalty and obedience—enhances the pity of the audience by her silent, helpless submission to events, and this is further thrown into relief against the contrasting figure of feminine malice embodied by Poppaea.<sup>38</sup> Octavia is a perfect, hapless, and helpless victim who, Tacitus is careful to tell his readers, behaves with exemplary wifely loyalty; in this sense she aligns closely with Nils Christie's modern concept of the 'ideal victim', who is innocent, vulnerable, and helpless, and so designated by the public as more deserving of attention and care.<sup>39</sup> Or, as Christie puts it:

a person or a category of individuals who ... most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim when they experience harm.<sup>40</sup>

## 2.2 The Tragic Octavia

Although the *Octavia* is associated with Seneca the Younger, the author of the text is unknown, and the most that can be said is that it seems to have been written not long after the death of Nero.<sup>41</sup> The tragic Octavia is the first character we meet in the play, and she articulates her anger very clearly, initially speaking on the subject of her mother's fate (Messalina: 10–18), her father's fate (Claudius: 24–30), her stepmother's cruelty (Agrippina the Younger: 18–23), and finally, her life at the mercy of her husband—the *tyrannus* Nero (33–34). The Nurse, on entry, recaps Octavia's complaints and then expands on the nature of Nero, who is not only a *tyrannus*, but also a cruel husband (*crudelis vir*, 48). The Nurse states that Octavia is forced to conceal her grief in order to avoid her husband's *ira* (48–49)—echoing Tacitus' description of Octavia's self-protective dissimulation (*Ann.* 13.16). So far, we once again have a suffering wife and a spouse who is explicitly described as cruel and capable of rage. However, what the Nurse says next is a departure from Tacitus' sympathetic portrait of the silently desperate Octavia:

She always retreats to hidden places, and with an equal hatred  
The spouses burn; they blaze with a shared torch.  
My loyalty and duty comfort the mind  
of the aching woman in vain: her fierce pain  
Conquers my counsels, nor can the proud passion  
Of her mind be reined in, but it takes strength from its evils.<sup>42</sup>

The Nurse's assessment of Octavia contains language which, from the point of view of traditional Roman morality, had acute significance. On the one hand, the Nurse stresses admirable and morally appropriate characteristics in her own behaviour: she is motivated by *pietas* and *fides*.<sup>43</sup> Octavia, on the other hand, is motivated by *odium* and *immitis dolor*, and while *generosus ardor* (high-minded, noble, proud passion) could be read as having positive overtones, its effect is that Octavia's mind cannot be regulated (*non regi ... potest*): she is ruled by her emotions and cannot accept the advice (*consilia*) of her morally appropriate nurse. Rather, her *animus* is further incited by evils (*malis*). This impression of out-of-control passion is consolidated by the language of fire used by the Nurse to describe the emotions of both Octavia and Nero (*ardent ... mutua flagrant face*). This is not positive language, and Octavia's behaviour is not framed as acceptable by the Nurse; yes, Nero is awful, as hindsight would expect, but Octavia is not behaving as a rational person, or a good wife of the elite class, should, and this is perhaps more shocking.

<sup>38</sup> Murgatroyd 2008: 270–71, 273. As Fogarty notes, Tacitean women can often be seen as occupying these kinds of extreme binaries: Fogarty 2021: 14.

<sup>39</sup> Lewis et al. 2021: 4324–25.

<sup>40</sup> Christie 2022: 12.

<sup>41</sup> Kragelund 2000: 501–02.

<sup>42</sup> *secreta repetit semper, atque odio pari | ardent mariti, mutua flagrant face. | animum dolentis nostra solatur fides | pietasque frustra: vincit immitis dolor | consilia nostra nec regi mentis potest | generosus ardor, sed malis vires capit* (49–54).

<sup>43</sup> Two chapters have been written stressing the central role of *fides* to the text: Ginsberg 2019: 208–31 and Buckley 2019: 233–53.

When the Nurse and Octavia interact for the first time in the play, the Nurse is very clear as to how Octavia should proceed:

A gentle god will give better times  
 After your troubles;  
 You only need to calm down, and then,  
 Conquer your husband  
 With sweet submission.<sup>44</sup>

To a modern reader, this advice is probably at best problematic, and at worst, horrifying, but if we pause to consider the nature of Octavia's comments to this point and to try to imagine it from a Roman point of view, it is also very good—that is, culturally and socially appropriate—advice for a woman in a situation where she is essentially defenceless and vulnerable.<sup>45</sup> The Nurse advises Octavia to trust to the gods, to ensure that she has first calmed her own self (*placata*) of the out-of-control anger she has previously been expressing, and that she then shows obedience to her husband—in short, to behave far more like Tacitus' Octavia. Note that the Nurse does not envisage this as a strategy bereft of power; she instructs Octavia to conquer (*vince*) her husband in this way. Octavia rejects the efficacy of the Nurse's advice and declares that she is unlikely to be able to win over the heart of the *saevus tyrannus*; she goes on to criticize Nero's background and path to power (87–98). The Nurse's reaction is swift:

Shut down the words of your raging heart,  
 Suppress the rashly uttered voice.<sup>46</sup>

Once again, the Nurse characterizes Octavia's behaviour with terms that suggest unbounded, morally, and politically, negative emotion. Octavia's heart is *furens* and she speaks *temere*; her Nurse responds with two brisk imperatives designed to shock her mistress into line (*retine ... comprime*). The usage of *furere* is particularly pointed given the central role *furor* and its connected forms has in describing the kind of raging madness that has dangerous implications for the Roman state as a whole.<sup>47</sup> Octavia goes on to describe Nero (not without cause) as a *tyrannus* and *hostis* (110) and then, at line 174, she makes her position entirely clear: 'Let him also snuff me out, lest he fall by my own hand!'<sup>48</sup> Octavia explicitly articulates the desire to kill her husband. The Nurse objects that Octavia lacks the strength, but her charge doubles down on the intention, stating that 'Pain, anger, grief, wretched tears ...' will give her that strength.<sup>49</sup> That is, when the Nurse questions not Octavia's intention to kill her husband, but her ability to carry out the deed, Octavia stresses that she will be fully capable of doing it and actually celebrates her own lack of emotional control.<sup>50</sup> Once again, the Nurse makes the argument for submission, advising 'Conquer your ungentle husband with obedience.'<sup>51</sup> When Octavia responds with a sarcastic enquiry as to whether she should undertake this kind of behaviour to bring her brother back from the dead, the Nurse makes the sobering correction that submission might keep Octavia herself amongst the living.<sup>52</sup> Octavia then declares that the world will end earlier than she would accept any union of *mens* with her husband (222–26), and she prays for his destruction at the hands of the gods' judgements (227–31 and 245–51).<sup>53</sup> The Nurse again urges Octavia to accept her marriage and her fate (*cede*, 253–55) and is rebuffed.

<sup>44</sup> *Dabit afflictiae meliora deus | tempora mitis; | tu modo blando vince obsequio | placata virum* (83–85).

<sup>45</sup> Modern studies have drawn attention to the ongoing myth that 'good' behaviour (i.e. 'becoming as obedient and cooperative as possible') on a woman's part can avert IPV: Caplan 1985: 148.

<sup>46</sup> *Animi retine verba furentis, | temere emissam comprime vocem* (98–99).

<sup>47</sup> Ginsberg 2016: 419–23 and Buckley 2019: 238. Ginsberg also calls attention to the same terminology in the negative depiction of Octavia's mother Messalina in the play: Ginsberg 2019: 210.

<sup>48</sup> *Extinguat et me, ne manu nostra cadat!*

<sup>49</sup> *Dolor ira maeror miseriae luctus dabunt* (176).

<sup>50</sup> Given this, it seems difficult to sustain the comments made by some scholars that Octavia is a 'passive' character: Wilson 2003: 9; Harrison 2003: 119.

<sup>51</sup> *Vince obsequendo potius immitem virum* (177).

<sup>52</sup> *Incolumis ut sis ipsa ...* (179).

<sup>53</sup> Kragelund suggests that her words here match the technical format of a curse: Kragelund 2005: 73.



There are two important points to be made regarding this exchange: firstly, Octavia clearly and explicitly prays for the death of her husband, the emperor Nero, and expresses her hatred for him. Secondly, the Nurse at every point argues that Octavia needs to change her approach and conquer her husband with kindness and obedience, using language which is rich with moral significance.<sup>54</sup> Given this, while Octavia is undoubtedly 'fierce' in the modern, positive sense, it is worth questioning how sympathetic the tragic Octavia would have been to a Roman audience.<sup>55</sup> In a modern context, experiments on observer empathy have suggested that the same injury elicits far more sympathy when it is suffered by a 'likeable' victim than an 'unlikeable' one, and Octavia is far from uncomplicatedly likeable in this depiction.<sup>56</sup> The situation becomes even more complex if we think of observer empathy and compassion being dependent on one's ability to 'take the perspective' of another individual, and imagine a Roman viewer's reaction on being asked to take the perspective of a woman who rejects every plea to exhibit an appropriately submissive attitude towards her legal husband (and *princeps*) and in fact wants him dead.<sup>57</sup>

Octavia's ambiguous presentation becomes more pronounced if we look closely at the reaction of the Chorus to her plight. The Chorus' first entry focuses on a series of women featured in the historical record at key points in Rome's story. At 294–99, the focus is on Verginia, then Lucretia at 300–03; while both women are framed as the victims of tyrannical lust, it is noteworthy that they are exemplary because they died. Verginia is killed by her father to 'protect' her honour, and Lucretia kills herself for the same reason. Scholars have been puzzled by the segue to Tullia, who drove a chariot over her father's dead body (304–08), but it may contain a cautionary note. While it is exemplary for a woman to die to protect her own honour, manifestations of force by women against someone else can easily slide into the territory of treachery and are not to be condoned; it is striking that the author has put Tullia in such close proximity to two historical heroines. Octavia might virtuously call for her own life to end in the play, but she is far more active in desiring the end of her husband's life, and it is this that is the focus of the Nurse's advice and warnings.

The other consequence of this dynamic is that, when Seneca and Nero argue over Octavia's attitude to her husband, the philosopher Seneca is incorrect, and the tyrannical emperor Nero is spot on. After a tense exchange of *sententiae* between Nero and Seneca over the nature of rule, Nero defends his aggressive position by referring to present threats against his life, and argues that Octavia is one of these threats:

My suspected enemies must be removed by the sword,  
My hateful wife must die ...<sup>58</sup>

As we know, Nero is entirely accurate: Octavia has expressed the intention to kill her husband if he doesn't kill her first.<sup>59</sup> Octavia has designated Nero a *hostis*, three hundred lines or so before he uses the same term for her (110). Significantly, Kragelund (amongst others) has noted that the charges of adultery—which constitute a key part of the outrage against Octavia in Tacitus' account—are almost entirely absent in the play. While Kragelund argues that this could be read as an element of the campaign to clear Octavia's name after Nero's death, it does also have the effect of focusing attention on the charge that Octavia has designs on her husband's life and so is an enemy of the *princeps*—charges which we know have some basis in the play's depicted reality.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Ginsberg notes that Octavia here deviates from the role of the *relicta puella* and underlines the lack of *amor* and *fides* between husband and wife, but perhaps does not fully reflect the shocking nature of Octavia's statements in a Roman context as she does in the second reference: Ginsberg 2019: 215, 218.

<sup>55</sup> Christie 2022: 18. Christie describes examples of the 'non-ideal' victim type as being those who 'have important, but not sufficient strengths'. That is, Octavia has the strength to plot violence against Nero and resist him psychologically, but not the strength actually to overthrow him.

<sup>56</sup> Yamada and Decety 2009: 71. Yamada and Decety note that a similar lessening effect seems to be created by the association of the victim with 'negative values', which is suggestive in view of Octavia's association with *furor* and out-of-control emotion.

<sup>57</sup> Latshaw 2015: 278; Giummarra et al. 2015: 807.

<sup>58</sup> *Tollantur hostes ense suspecti mihi, | inuisa coniunx pereat* (469–70).

<sup>59</sup> Kragelund notes that the decapitation of Octavia matches the expectation for the treatment of a *hostis*: Kragelund 2005: 72. See Goldberg and Manuwald on Nero's calm rationality in this exchange: Goldberg 2003: 23; Manuwald 2003: 50.

<sup>60</sup> Kragelund 2005: 74–75; Ginsberg 2019: 218.

The tangible hostility between husband and wife is underlined further as Seneca suggests that the provision of heirs is the ideal way to secure the household and Nero states, after drawing Octavia's legitimacy into question, that 'The spirit (*animus*) of my wife has never been joined (*iunctus*) to me.'<sup>61</sup> This recalls Octavia's emphatic claim that the world will end sooner than she will join (*iungere*) her mind (*mens*) to that of her husband.<sup>62</sup> It seems that the spouses are in complete agreement on the past and future of their relationship.<sup>63</sup> Seneca argues in response that, while Octavia does not express affection for her husband, this is a consequence of her youth and modesty.<sup>64</sup> Nero retorts that he had believed this once but is now aware that Octavia resolutely hates him:

I, myself, also believed this pointlessly for some time,  
Although the clear signs of hatred towards me  
were shown by her untouchable heart and face ...<sup>65</sup>

Once again, Seneca is wrong, and Nero is correct: Octavia is not restrained by modesty, she really does loathe her husband, and this is clearly communicated to her husband in her expression and physical presence, as well as the words she speaks to her Nurse in private.<sup>66</sup> Emma Buckley has even argued that Octavia's role is so actively hostile as to cast her as a version of Pompey the Great locked in conflict with Julius Caesar, as embodied by Nero.<sup>67</sup>

We can add to this the fact that the role of Poppaea is distinctly different between Tacitus' account in the *Annals* and the tragic text: Goldberg has suggested that it is 'unique' amongst Latin texts in its sympathy.<sup>68</sup> As I have argued previously, Tacitus' Poppaea is a key instigator in the ill-treatment of Octavia, and the degree of her involvement is one of the ways in which Tacitus is able to stress the illegitimacy of Octavia's fate. In the tragic version, the character of Octavia makes similar accusations against Poppaea, referring to her as an arrogant rival (*superba paelex*, 125) who will ensure Octavia's own demise:

The hostile imperatrix threatens my marriage bed  
And burns with her hatred of me and demands from her husband,  
As the wage of adultery, the head of his true wife.<sup>69</sup>

This matches Tacitus' version in which Poppaea is seen first successfully inciting Nero against Octavia (14.62), and then gloating over her rival's severed head (14.64). In the tragic play, however, Poppaea herself says and does very little that could be seen to justify Octavia's view of her.<sup>70</sup> The character of Poppaea appears on the morning after her wedding to describe a nightmare (712–39) and is comforted by her Nurse, who interprets the nightmare as actually full of good omens and tells her mistress to go back to bed (740–55). Poppaea rejects this advice and instead goes to the altars of the gods to make sacrifices. The nearest she gets to any expression of ill will is to say that she will pray the gods turn her own fears against her enemies (*hostes*, 759). Certainly, Poppaea is a genuine threat to Octavia in that she replaces her as Nero's wife, but in no other way does she match Octavia's claims about her: she is apparently pious and genuinely in love with Nero (*inter Neronis iuncta complexus mei ...*, 716) and there is not the faintest hint of any desire for Octavia's destruction in her words. Octavia's angry misjudgement of her rival, together with the gentle imagining of Poppaea as a character by the author, creates further distance between the audience and the character of Octavia and potentially renders her

<sup>61</sup> *animusque numquam coniugis iunctus mihi* (437).

<sup>62</sup> *Iungentur ante saeva sideribus freta | et ignis undae, Tartaro tristi polus, | lux alma tenebris, roscidae nocti dies, | quam cum scelesti coniugis mente impia | mens nostra* (222–26).

<sup>63</sup> Ginsberg 2019: 216.

<sup>64</sup> *Teneris in annis haud satis clara est fides, | pudore victus cum tegit flammam amor* (538–39).

<sup>65</sup> *Hoc equidem et ipse credidi frustra diu, | manifesta quamvis pectore insociabili | vultuque signa proderent odium mei* (541–42).

<sup>66</sup> This is interesting in view of Kragelund's argument that the author of *Octavia* greatly respects Seneca and provides evidence of close knowledge of his works: Kragelund 2000: 503.

<sup>67</sup> Buckley 2012: 149.

<sup>68</sup> Goldberg 2003: 21.

<sup>69</sup> *inimica victrix imminet thalamis meis | odioque nostri flagrat et pretium stupri | iustae maritum coniugis poscit caput* (131–34).

<sup>70</sup> As Billot notes, there is a kind of reversal in the attitudes of Octavia and Poppaea between Tacitus' version and that of the play: Billot 2003: 130.

less sympathetic. In this context, it seems highly significant that the last glimpse we have of Octavia in the play sees her upright and fearless before the soldiers who hold her captive: “That death you bring is welcome to me.”<sup>71</sup> Octavia directs the soldiers to set sail, and the author does not take the opportunity for the kind of gruesome death details which feature in Tacitus, make his Octavia so pitiable, and are often seen as characteristic of Roman tragedy as it survives.<sup>72</sup>

### 3. CONCLUSION

In line with the methodology of historical empathy I would argue that we see most about the assumptions, biases, and structures that underpinned Roman society when we try to look at texts through their eyes and recognize their own, distinct cultural context. This means that it is less revealing to try to label acts we would categorize today as IPV when we see them in Roman texts. What we can do is to see if there are traces of pity or judgement in the depiction of events by authors in response to the behaviour of one spouse towards another, especially when they describe a husband’s treatment of his wife, given that our remaining texts are so narrowly representative of the male experience. What we see in the texts may not exactly match our contemporary understanding of IPV, given greatly differing understandings of the acceptability of physical force generally, and the distinctly different legal position of women in the Roman world, but we can identify actions and attitudes that the authors of our texts indicate are outside the parameters of acceptable behaviour in moral and social, if not legal, terms.

Tacitus’ Octavia is depicted as a victim of terrible events: the charges against her are fabricated; the chief motivating factors are lust, feminine envy, and fear. The small, young woman is brutally treated by soldiers, and her body is mutilated to appease her husband’s new wife. Perhaps most importantly, though, Tacitus’ Octavia is blamelessly chaste, submissive, and meek. The passivity of Octavia as a victim and the emphasis throughout on the distortion of judicial process and the immoral, domestic nature of Nero’s motivation suggest that Tacitus is demanding his readers see this as an act of intimate, as well as political, violence, which violates basic social codes. The tragic Nero, on the other hand, is clearly a distasteful tyrant, but his fear and distrust of Octavia are completely justified.<sup>73</sup> Despite the tragic Seneca’s attempts to read Octavia in terms that would apply to Tacitus’ version of her character, and despite the good advice of Octavia’s Nurse, she is motivated by anger, and boundless emotion, and she is not susceptible to rational advice.<sup>74</sup> In the end, the tragic Octavia suffers just as much as her Tacitean counterpart, but she fails to match that Octavia’s blameless victimhood, and as a result, her treatment by her husband is written with quite a different tone.

The comparison of the *Annals* and *Octavia* gives us a rare opportunity to interrogate Roman assumptions by showing us the same events told in two distinctly different ways, presumably designed to elicit different reactions from those who consumed them. In neither case are the depicted events strictly against the law: Nero, as *princeps*, has the authority to act against a perceived threat to his *maiestas*. Nevertheless, the difference between the two texts shows how critical the contextual framing of events was in guiding the Roman reader to interpret them as closer to legitimate, understandable acts of force, or to violence inflicted by a husband on his (recent) wife. In this sense, the Romans are not so distant from modern thinking which, even in those societies which legally recognize IPV, still evaluates individual victims on their adherence to the ‘ideal’ before allotting sympathy. The way in which the character of Octavia, together with her fate, can be read in Tacitus’ text suggests that there was an understanding within the cultural expectations and values of the elite members of Roman society that a husband could use force against his wife in a way which was socially and morally unacceptable even if it was technically legal. The way in which a husband’s use of force is presented in moral terms in the text is closely connected to the way in which the victim themselves is depicted. Tacitus’ Octavia is the perfect victim, whose

<sup>71</sup> *Non invisa est | mores ista mihi* (968–69).

<sup>72</sup> Note too the problematic detail of Octavia giving orders to Roman soldiers; cf. Tacitus’ account of Tiberius’ reaction to similar behaviour in Agrippina the Elder (*Ann.* 1.69).

<sup>73</sup> Buckley underlines the political threat that Octavia embodies in the play, in contrast to the spurious charges in Tacitus’ version: Buckley 2019: 243.

<sup>74</sup> As Ginsberg has argued, Octavia is also set amongst a roll call of Julio-Claudian women who have failed to live up to Roman social and moral expectations: Ginsberg 2019: 208–32.

behaviour complies with normative elite Roman morality and whose humiliation and death are motivated by the immoral motives of Nero and Poppaea. On the other hand, the text of the tragic Octavia reveals how quickly the impact of what we would call violence could be diminished by the failure of the victim to behave as a good Roman woman was expected to behave. Sadly, this arguably leaves us with a point of connection between Rome and the present day. While in most Western democracies there are laws against an intimate partner using physical force, nevertheless public responses to IPV have been shown to vary widely depending on the identity of the victim(s) and/or how they are believed to have behaved.<sup>75</sup> Close scrutiny of the rhetoric around IPV appears to be just as important to understanding, and illuminating, present attitudes as it is to our understanding of these dynamics in ancient Rome.

To come back to Rome: given the modern reputation of the Romans for gleeful, bloody, and unapologetic cruelty, it seems significant in itself to see traces of Roman discomfort with acts of force that were technically legal, especially when these involved force used by the dominant power(s) in society against societally less empowered women. While there were no legal strictures against IPV in the Roman world, the examination of Octavia's fate as represented in Tacitus' *Annals* and the anonymous tragedy suggest that there were limits to what was deemed acceptable, even if these limits are significantly different to our own. It also appears both that the acceptability of force between husband and wife was largely in the eyes of the Roman beholder, and that moral and social judgement of these actions could be defined as much by the reporter's assessment of the victim's behaviour as that of the perpetrator. This kind of detail seems to emerge most clearly from texts when we attempt to read Roman moral and social cues from a Roman perspective.

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<sup>75</sup> Dissanayake and Bracewell 2022: 254–55; Chagnon 2014: 16, 24–25. This can also be seen in legal contexts in some cases: Sacca and Massidda 2021: 69–70.

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