The failure of Stoicism in the Pseudo-Senecan *Octavia*

Is Stoic philosophy portrayed as effective in the Pseudo-Senecan *Octavia*? Many scholars have noted that the figure of Seneca in the *Octavia* uses language drawn from his philosophical works, especially the *De Clementia*, but that Seneca cannot persuade Nero. Gareth Williams (1994) has suggested that the figure of Seneca is out of his depth in the political world. Ultimately, such a view begins to sound like an apology for the historical inability of Seneca to make Nero a Stoic ruler. Indeed, Patrick Kragelund (2016) imagines that the author of the Octavia was perhaps a member of his circle of friends, but "doubtless an admirer" (p. 213). This paper will argue that the play may be read as a critique of the adequacy of Stoicism. Although the character of Seneca uses language echoing or mirroring the philosophical writings of the historical philosopher, he fails to maintain a strong will in the face of Nero's arguments, falls in with Nero's pragmatic and political rhetoric, and finally fails to persuade Nero of anything. More broadly, the Stoic practice of analyzing emotions is drawn into question both in its results and in comparison with the parallel analysis of dreams offered by Popaea's nurse, which the drama of the play demonstrates to be inadequate and false. Finally, fire imagery hints that the Stoic doctrine of conflagration is an imagined consequence for Nero's crimes, but the prophecy of Agrippina suggests other consequences, borne out by history, while the chorus suggests that Nero has power over the Stoic cosmic theory.

References

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