



# Enemy of Rome: Characterizing Octavia in the Neronian Era

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# Background Details

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- **Work of Interest:** Octavia, written in AD 69–75
- **Author:** unknown, previously ascribed to Seneca
- **Key Characters:**
  - **Claudia Octavia:** empress of Rome, sister–wife of Nero who gets exiled and killed on Nero’s orders
  - **Nero:** last Julio–Claudian emperor of Rome, commits suicide during a people’s rebellion, dies on the 6<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Octavia’s death
  - **Poppaea Sabina:** Nero’s mistress, who is with child
  - **Seneca:** Stoic politician, advisor to Nero, forced to commit suicide on Nero’s orders



# Octavia's Composite Characterization

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- Nature of Octavia's Character: serves as a conduit for past figures, deities, and historical events to predominate the narrative
  - Central Figures:
    - Claudius, her father and late Roman emperor
    - Juno, wife of Jupiter, king of the Gods
    - Astraea, goddess of innocence and Justice
    - Virginia and Lucretia, Republican heroines
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# Octavia as Astraea

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## ● Key Quotes:

- Astraea: “Away from the Earth where she was scorned, from the savagery of humans, from hands polluted with bloody *slaughter*, fled the virgin Astraea, great glory of the stars.” Seneca, 422–4 (italics mine)
  - Octavia: “I sadly wish that fate had granted me wings! With swift wings I could get away to escape my griefs, far from the dismal haunts of men and bestial *slaughter*.” Octavia, 918–20 (italics mine)
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# Octavia as Lucretia & Virginia

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## ● Key Quotes:

- Lucretia: “Civil war ensued from your death too, daughter of Lucretius, when you died by your own hand, pitiful woman, after suffering brutal tyrant’s lust.” Chorus, 300–3
  - Virginia: “It was they who drove proud kings out of this city, and later avenged your spirit well and truly, maiden slain by your father’s hand.” 294–9
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# Why This Matters

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## ● My Theory:

- Octavia forms a vital example of a hitherto ignored Roman trope – women as “points of inflection” in Roman history

## ● Examples:

- Rape of the Sabine Women: abduction allows Rome to flourish as a kingdom
  - Lucretia: suicide leads to the end of the Roman monarchy
  - Virginia: murder re-establishes the Roman republic
  - Octavia: exile damns the first dynasty
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# Key Takeaway

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- Exploring the characterization of Octavia not only allows us to make inferences about the Neronian Era, but also to identify a crucial element of the way Romans viewed history – with women as points of inflection.



Questions?

MANY THANKS  
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