

# The Pseudo-Senecan *Seneca* on the Good Old Days: The Motif of the Golden Age in the *Octavia*

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## I. Introduction

In his *fabula praetexta* entitled *Octavia*, the playwright stages the historical events that occurred during the reign of the last Julio-Claudian emperor in 62 CE.<sup>1</sup> Following the divorce from his wife Octavia and re-marriage to another woman, Poppaea Sabina, the emperor gives the order for the former to be exiled. Neither a thorough dispute with his advisor *Seneca*<sup>2</sup> nor the interventions of the pro-Octavia Chorus of Romans can deter Nero from his decision to put down the riots amongst the populace by using the sentence of Octavia as a warning.<sup>3</sup>

For a number of reasons, the *Octavia* has always been one of the most intriguing and in many ways most controversial pieces of Latin literature. While the fact that this play has been almost fully preserved can be regarded as extremely gratifying, not least because it stands in contrast to the number of *praetextae* known to us from no more than a few fragments, or even just one, it is particularly its textual transmission that has overshadowed scholarly dispute. Due to its sharp opposition to the eight mythological plays — excluding the *Hercules Oetaeus* of doubtful authorship — doubts have been raised about the assumption that the *Octavia* has been transmitted in manuscripts along with the tragedies now unanimously assigned to Seneca the Younger. To many researchers it seems inconceivable that the earlier advisor and later adversary of Nero would choose to appear as a *dramatis persona* on stage, particularly in a play where the contemporary emperor was presented in such a disreputable light.

The claim that the *Octavia* was not written by the Younger Seneca but by an anonymous post-Neronian successor has gained ground through the growing attention

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\* I wish to thank Dr. Christine Plastow for correcting my English. I am of course solely responsible for all the remaining deficiencies.

<sup>1</sup> On the question of performance of the *Octavia* cf. Kragelund (2002, 9f.) and Boyle (2008, XLlf.) who have persuasively argued that the *Octavia* was staged. For the sake of clarity, I shall speak of the author of the *Octavia* here as ‘playwright’.

<sup>2</sup> To avoid confusion, I shall use *Seneca* for the *persona* on stage and Seneca for the historical figure, i.e. Nero’s former advisor and author of philosophical writings. Even though it is of small importance for my argument here, I assume, as is *communis opinio*, that Seneca *philosophus* is identical with Seneca *tragicus* and the author of the *Apocolocyntosis*. Even if we go as far as to deny Seneca’s authorship of the *Apocolocyntosis* and the *tragoediae* as a whole and, therefore, exclude the respective passages adduced here, this would not have an impact on the conclusions drawn. Using the treatise *De Clementia*, his *Consolatio ad Helviam matrem* and the *Epistulae* alone would provide enough material to substantiate the claims I shall make.

<sup>3</sup> As indicated by Zwierlein in his edition, we have a *Chorus duplex* in the *Octavia*.

and thorough investigation of several modern scholars.<sup>4</sup> Linguistic features, such as the repetitious language and metrical anomalies, have been persuasively adduced to argue against the authenticity of the play. Most persuasively, two scenes from the *Octavia* seem sufficiently detailed and too close to our historical record to be genuinely Senecan work. The prophecy of Nero's death by the Ghost of Agrippina (*Oct.* 618-31) and Poppaea's dream (*Oct.* 718-33) can only be interpreted as references to the deaths of Poppaea and her ex-husband Crispinus (of 65 and 66 CE respectively) and the events of the summer of 68 CE, three years after Seneca's death.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, scholars have not failed to adduce the 'play's anti-tyrannical, pro-republican image of the Roman people'<sup>6</sup> as well as the alarming way the emperor is portrayed as arguments for a Flavian date of composition.

Other relevant questions have been neglected. For instance, there has been no thorough analysis of the function of one of the protagonists in conjunction with the specific content of the core scene where he appears on stage for the key message of the play. The emperor's advisor, *Seneca*, appears as a *dramatis persona* on stage at V. 377.<sup>7</sup> Upon arrival, he delivers a polemic soliloquy on the decline of moral vices over the (last) centuries, in which he makes extensive use of the motif of the Golden Age. He then comes into conflict with the *persona* of Nero, who enters the stage shortly afterwards (V. 437). After their vigorous dispute on the right *virtutes* for an emperor to display — either show *clementia* and *venia* (e.g. V. 442) or rather cause *terror* and *timor* (e.g. V. 457) — *Seneca* exits and does not appear on stage again (V. 592). Even though *Seneca* is on stage for barely more than two hundred lines, the way he is characterised through the content of both his soliloquy and his verbal contributions to the dispute with Nero is crucial for the understanding and correct evaluation of the *Octavia* as a whole.

In my contribution I shall focus on *Seneca*'s soliloquy (V. 377-436) in general and the sequence of ages more specifically (V. 395ff.). Since the protagonist *Seneca* is alone on stage, his utterances genuinely express the thoughts of the *dramatis persona*. Since here we have the protagonist who is to be identified with Seneca alone on stage, this passage is the most important and the most promising for analysing the reception of or intertextual allusions to Senecan material in the *Octavia*. In other words, this passage is the best example of the playwright's use of material from the writings of the historical author Seneca.

I shall then not only connect up the content of *Seneca*'s speech with the (surprisingly few) passages of similar content in the prose writings of the historical Seneca, but also investigate further the question why the playwright makes his protagonist so deeply

<sup>4</sup> Scholars in favour of a Flavian date include, most prominently, Richter (1965), Carbone (1977), Zwierlein (1996), Manuwald (2002, 107 n. 3 and 2003, 38), Ferri (2003, 5-30), and Boyle (2008, XIII-XVI).

<sup>5</sup> On the question of the historicity of the *Octavia*, mainly by comparing the events presented in the play with those in Tacitus and Suetonius, cf. Schmidt (1985, 1426-30, 35-37 on Nero).

<sup>6</sup> Boyle (2008, XV).

<sup>7</sup> I use the text by Zwierlein (1993) with the many textual amendments and comments discussed in Ferri (2003). Ferri generally re-prints Zwierlein's text — leaving aside questions of punctuation — with a few modifications in V. 407 and 412-5. The translations are taken from Fitch (2004). Both text and translation of the relevant passage can be found in the appendix.

interested in the idea of the Four Ages, when the historical counterpart seems not to have been. Both the questions of what the philosopher utters on stage and why the playwright chooses such content and wording shall be of primary interest here.

It is pivotal, I shall argue, that the *dramatis persona Seneca*, who is modelled and named after the philosopher and former advisor of Nero, makes use of the motif of the Golden Age.<sup>8</sup> He thus recalls the application of the same motif to the reign of Nero by his historical counterpart in works from the 50s CE, such as the *Apocolocyntosis* and *De Clementia*, and the *Epistulae*.<sup>9</sup> By this means, a sharp contrast is created: a previously-announced glorious future has turned into a sad tyrannical present. This effect is used specifically for the purpose of highlighting Nero's evil character further, as is implicitly suggested or explicitly announced time and again throughout the play.<sup>10</sup>

## II. The *Dramatis Persona Seneca*

Not least because of the names of protagonists and the events described — divorce, re-marriage, order for execution — there can be no doubt that Octavia, Poppaea, and Nero are modelled after their historical namesakes. Even though these observations could be, *mutatis mutandis*, transferred to *Seneca* almost without hesitation, the playwright has scattered further hints that confirm the correctness of our assumption.<sup>11</sup>

Even before all ambiguities are solved at the end of the scene by naming the *persona* in V. 589, we find one unambiguous piece of evidence and a number of linguistic intertextual parallels. Not long after his arrival, *Seneca* proclaims that he would have done better to stay in the remote regions of Corsica (V. 381f.). These lines, of course, recall Seneca's island exile under Claudius and the latter's statement that he was not unhappy there (*Helv.* 3.2-3). Moreover, if we take a closer look, we may rightly identify that the source for a series of motifs present in the soliloquy is the oeuvre of Seneca. *Seneca* mentions, among other things, the mutability of fortune, fragility and dangers of success or power, desire for the simple life, human decline, and the Stoic ἐκπτώσις. All

<sup>8</sup> We here have a unique form of intertextuality since a *dramatis persona* alludes to the work of his historical model. In other words: a fictional character refers to the work of his historical counterpart.

<sup>9</sup> For the dates of these works I follow *communis opinio*: 54 CE, perhaps the Saturnalia, for the *Apocolocyntosis*, 55 or 56 for *De Clementia*, and Seneca's years of retirement from public life for the *Epistulae*.

<sup>10</sup> On these grounds it would be worth including the earlier scene with the *nutrix* and the choral ode and in particular the dispute with *Nero* (436-592) in my discussion. However, I shall limit myself to just touching upon these parts here and refer to the excellent work on these sections by Schubert (1998, 267-73) — in contrast to these thorough analyses, his work on Seneca's soliloquy is less successful. On the negative portrayal of Nero in the *Octavia* in general cf. *ibid.* (254-89).

<sup>11</sup> Staging the play would have made clear that we here have Seneca, as this of course allows the playwright to use a number of techniques to make a quick identification with the historical Seneca possible. See n. 1.

of these can be found in a number of Seneca's tragedies and philosophical writings.<sup>12</sup> One example shall suffice to illustrate our assertion:

Oh what a delight it was to gaze at the greatest creation of Mother Nature, architect of this measureless fabric — the heavens, the holy paths of the sun, the movements of the cosmos, the recurrence of night and the circuit traced by Phoebe, with the wandering stars around her, and the far-shining glory of the great firmament!

*Oct.* 385-90<sup>13</sup>

This recalls both in terms of language and in content, i.e. the applied motif, the following passage:<sup>14</sup>

This firmament, than which Nature has created naught greater and more beautiful, and the most glorious part of it, the human mind that surveys and wonders at the firmament [...] Accordingly, so long as my eyes are not deprived of that spectacle with which they are never sated, so long as I may behold the sun and the moon, so long as I may fix my gaze upon the other planets, so long as I may trace out their risings and settings, their periods, and the reasons for the swiftness or the slowness of their wandering, behold the countless stars that gleam throughout the night — some at rest, while others do not enter upon a great course, but circle around within their own field, some suddenly shooting forth, some blinding the eyes with scattered fire as if they were falling, or flying by with a long trail of lingering light [...]

*Helv.* 8.4-6<sup>15</sup> (transl. Basore 1932)

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the extensive list by Boyle (2008, 169ff.) who then concludes: 'He is using the audience's cultural and historical competence to locate himself' (170). Similarly, Ferri (2003, 227) states, 'Seneca expatiates on the corruption of the present times with expressions recognizably taken from his exilic writings. This is done in an attempt to conjure up a sense of authenticity in the portrayal of the philosopher'. Earlier Gatz (1967, 77) argued along the same lines: "Der Dichter der *Praetexta* hat den Seneca gut gekannt. Er legt ihm Gedanken in den Mund, die bis in die Formulierung hinein authentisch sind."

<sup>13</sup> O quam iubat, quo nihil maius parens  
Natura genuit, operis immensi artifex,  
caelum intueri, solis et cursus sacros  
mundique motus, noctis alternas uices  
orbemque Phoebes, astra quam cingunt uaga,  
lateque fulgens aetheris magni decus;

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Giancotti (1981 [1985], 95f.) and Boyle (2008, 171-3).

<sup>15</sup> Mundus hic, quo nihil nque maius neque ornatius rerum natura genuit, <et> animus contemplator admiratorque mundi, pars eius magnificentissima [...] Proinde, dum oculi mei ab illo spectaculo cuius insatiabiles sunt non abducantur, dum mihi solem lunamque intueri liceat, dum ceteris inhaerere sideribus, dum ortus eorum occasusque et interualla et causas investigare uel ocuis meandi uel tardius <dum> spectare tot per noctem stellas micantis et alias immobiles, alias non in magnum spatium exeuntis sed intra suum se circumagentis uestigium, quasdam subito erumpentis, quasdam igne fuso praestringentis aciem, quasi decidant, uel longo tractu cum luce multa praeteruolantis [...] (text Reynolds 1977)

In view of these arguments, it is safe to say that *Seneca* is to be identified with Seneca.

### III. The Sequence of Ages in *Seneca's* Soliloquy

By the time *Seneca* introduces the myth of the ages, we can expect the audience to have doubtlessly identified the historical Seneca as his role model. Furthermore, the intertextual allusions also suggest clearly that the playwright wants his recipients to recall the oeuvre of the historical role model.

*Seneca's* sequence of ages in the *Octavia* (V. 395ff.) encompasses four generations, not labelled by “the metals traditionally associated with each new generation. The four ages are marked by, respectively, 1) absence of social structure and wars, 2) a generic loss of innocence, 3) agriculture, hunting and fishing, 4) onset of war and mining”<sup>16</sup>. The first age, reminiscent of the Golden Age, is set out in detail (V. 395-405), while the second age is only briefly hinted at (V. 405f.). The third race is explained both in view of its early inventions and its later restlessness (V. 407-15). The largest number of verses is dedicated to the extended description of the fourth race (V. 416-28), whose vileness and vices are said to have degenerated even further over time (V. 429-34).

The narration of the myth of the ages is interrupted by the arrival of Nero, whose first order is to have Plautus and Sulla beheaded (V. 437f.). The emperor's order not only substantiates *Seneca's* claim that the present race has become more and more corrupted over time, but his sudden appearance even seems to mark the anti-climax of all generations. Far away from the times of the glorious Golden Age, contemporary society has reached its ultimate low point with its emperor as the personification of evil and blood-thirstiness. The playwright has arranged *Seneca's* soliloquy and Nero's appearance on stage in a way that implies that the current society under, and maybe even because of, Nero has reached its lowest point. This underlines what other protagonists, who observed that the society of Seneca's times is far removed from the times of the Golden Age and stands in sharp contrast to it, previously stated (e.g. the Nurse at V. 160-4).<sup>17</sup>

The two ages which stand in sharpest opposition, not least because of the length of their descriptions, are the age reminiscent of the Golden Age and the present times under Nero. For our further analyses it is crucial to bear in mind that it is *Seneca* who narrates the myth of the ages, and that the playwright's arrangement of the protagonist's soliloquy as interrupted by Nero's order implies more or less clearly a link between the last age and the present times under Nero.

<sup>16</sup> Ferri (2003, 236). For a different division cf. Boyle (2008, 176), who speaks of 5 races. The key to our division is our interpretation of *mox* (V. 409), which either “marks a different stage within the same age” or “the passage to a different generation of men, the fourth” (Ferri 2003, 239). As Boyle (2008, 176) rightly stresses, “arguments can be advanced for each position”. Our potential literary models do not illuminate this seemingly unsolvable question either, as they all give different versions: *Ov. Met.* 1.89-150 has 4 races, Hesiod 5, and Aratus 3, while Tibullus 1.3.35 and *Ov. Am.* 3.8 list only 2. For textual issues see n. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Schubert (1998, 267f.).

#### IV. Intertextuality and Seneca's Myth of the Ages

Scholars have thoroughly and satisfactorily analysed the dependence of the motif of the Golden Age in *Seneca's* soliloquy on the treatment of the motif of the Golden Age in Hesiod and the Augustan poets Tibullus and Ovid.<sup>18</sup> However, one more source must be taken into consideration: the historical philosopher Seneca the Younger.<sup>19</sup> After all, what would be more reasonable to expect from the audience when hearing *Seneca* narrate the myth of the ages than to recall what Seneca had to say about the ages, and, in particular, about the most glorious of all, i.e. the Golden Age?<sup>20</sup>

Let us look at the *Apocolocyntosis* first. Overall, Seneca here talks about Nero in glowing terms. The emperor's arrival is proclaimed as *initio saeculi felicissimi* (*Apoc.* 1.1) and as *aurea saecula* (*Apoc.* 4.1 V. 9). All Rome will gaze upon Nero, who will bring happy years to the Romans (*Apoc.* 4.1). Apollo is in Nero's greatest favour; both the emperor's beauty and his skills as a singer are praised (*ibid.*).

This agrees with what Seneca proclaims in his philosophical treatise *De Clementia*, dated to 55-56 CE. Even though the philosopher here omits to explicitly speak of Nero's early reign as the return of the Golden Age, his description of Nero's arrival and its consequences for the Roman people are reminiscent of it:

No one will dare to compare the deified Augustus with your gentleness, even if Augustus' advanced old age be set against *your* youth.

*Clem.* 1.11.1

a noble utterance, great-spirited and very gentle, which burst forth of a sudden, spontaneous and uncalculated, making plain how your goodness struggles with your high fortune

*Clem.* 2.1.1<sup>21</sup>

The new emperor is said to bring society back to a state of peace, and the return of the glorious old, golden times is attributable to Nero's greatness:

<sup>18</sup> Cf. e.g. Gatz (1967, 77-79), Barbera (2000, 181ff.), Ferri (2003, 236ff.), Boyle (2008, 176), Van Noorden (2015, esp. 272).

<sup>19</sup> Connections to Seneca's genuine prose works have already been observed by Giancotti (1981 [1985], 96-9), though he does not go beyond merely highlighting these links, and Marti (1952, 35), but with different assumptions — she thinks of the *Octavia* as a genuine work by Seneca. They have been widely overlooked by Barbera (2000) and Ferri (2003) in their commentaries; Boyle (2008, 176ff.) adduces Sen. *Ep.* 90. 36-46 only.

<sup>20</sup> See the methodological preliminary discussion in section II. p. 4f.

<sup>21</sup> comparare nemo mansuetudini tuae audebit diuum Augustum, etiam si in certamen iuuenilium annorum deduxerit senectutem plus quam maturam (*Clem.* 1.11.1)  
vocem generosam, magni animi, magnae lenitatis, quae non composita nec alienis auribus data subito erupuit et bonitatem tuam cum fortuna tua litigantem in medium adduxit (*Clem.* 2.1.1)

All translations from *De Clementia* are taken from Kaster (2010), the text is from Braund (2009).

The Roman people were facing a great gamble when it was unclear what turn that noble character of yours would take; but now the people's wishes have been answered, for there's no risk of your suddenly forgetting who you are.

*Clem.* 1.1.7

The mildness of your spirit will be handed on and spread through the whole framework of your dominion, and all things will be modelled on your likeness. [...] There will be fellow citizens, there will be allies worthy of this goodness, and right conduct will be restored to all the world: nowhere will you have to raise your hand to chastise. Allow me to linger a bit on this statement of yours, not as mere flattery for your ears (that's not my way; I'd rather offend by telling the truth than give pleasure as a toady).

*Clem.* 2.2.1-2<sup>22</sup>

As emerges clearly from the listed passages from the *Apocolocyntosis* and *De Clementia*, Seneca in his early writings praised Nero. Since the *persona Seneca* is modelled on the historical figure Seneca, we could even go so far as to say that the former praised Nero in his early writings. By contrast, by the dramatic time of the *Octavia*, i.e. from the beginning of Nero's reign until the year 62 CE, the tide has turned. Similarly, the deaths of Sulla and Plautus, as well as the many lives Nero might have on his conscience from his years as a ruler thus far, undermine a claim made by Seneca — or, by extension, *Seneca* — in his *De Clementia*:

You, Caesar, have kept the community free of bloodshed, and this accomplishment — the subject of your great-spirited boast that you have let not one drop of human blood in all the world — is all the more grand and admirable because the sword of authority has never before been entrusted to anyone at an earlier stage in his life.

*Clem.* 1.11.3<sup>23</sup>

In order to fully understand the implications of the decline from an announced return to the Golden Age to the ultimate low point where vices and blood-thirstiness thrive, it is necessary to include one further line of argument from Seneca's philosophical writings: with the worsening of the character of the emperor society was condemned to deteriorate as well.

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22 Magnam adibat aleam populus Romanus, cum incertum esset, quo se ista tua nobilis indoles daret; iam uota publica in tuto sunt; nec enim periculum est ne te subita tui capiat obliuio. (*Clem.* 1.1.7)

tradetur ista animi tui mansuetudo diffundeturque paulatim per omne imperii corpus, et cuncta in similitudinem tuam formabuntur. [...] erunt ciues, erunt socii digni hac bonitate, et in totum orbem recti mores reuertentur; parceretur ubique manibus tuis. diutius me morari hic patere, non ut blanditur audibus tuis (nec enim hic mihi mos est; maluerim ueris offendere quam placere adulando) (*Clem.* 2.2.1-2)

23 praestitisti, Caesar, ciuitatem incruentam, et hoc, quod magno animo gloriatus es nullam te toto orbe stillam cruoris humani misisse, eo maius est mirabilisque quod nulli umquam citius gladius commissus est.

### V. The Connection between Emperor and Society in *De Clementia*

At several stages in his treatise *De Clementia* Seneca makes it clear that the fate of the people is closely linked to the person and behaviour of their emperor. Mankind in its entirety is doomed and destruction brought upon them if their leader's virtues are corrupted:

Just as the whole body is in thrall to the mind and — though the body is much larger and far more pleasing to the eye, while the mind's slender being is concealed, its hiding place uncertain — the hands, feet and eyes still do the mind's bidding, the skin protects it, we lie still at its command, or we restlessly dash about when it has given the order. We search the seas for profit's sake, if it's a greedy master, while if it's eager for glory we have long since placed our right hand in the flames or willingly suffer death. Just so, this measureless mass of people surrounding one man's soul is ruled by his spirit and guided by his reasoning, doomed to overwhelm and shatter itself with its own forces, were it not held uplifted by his deliberation.

*Clem.* 1.3.5<sup>24</sup>

Seneca employs the same line of argument, i.e. the impact that the tyrant has on the degeneration, in one of his *Epistulae*. Most importantly, this occurs in the very *Letter* where the motif of the sequence of the ages is treated, as the philosopher explicitly deals with Posidonius' interpretation of the myth of the ages:

Accordingly, Posidonius holds that in the so-called Golden Age, government was in the hands of the wise. They restrained aggression, protected the weaker from the stronger, dispensed policy, and indicated what was advantageous and what was not. Their good sense saw to it that their people did not run short of anything, their bravery warded off dangers, and their beneficence enhanced the prosperity of their subjects. They gave commands not to rule others but to serve them. They never used to test their strength against those who were the initial source of their power. They had neither the intent nor any reason to act unjustly; because their orders were properly given, they were properly obeyed. A king could utter no greater threat to his recalcitrant subjects than his own abdication.

Yet once kingdoms were transformed into tyrannies with the infiltration of vices, there began to be a need for laws [...] Thus far I agree with Posidonius.

*Ep.* 90.5-7<sup>25</sup> (transl. Graver / Long 2015)

<sup>24</sup> quemadmodum totum corpus animo deseruit et, cum hoc tanto maius tantoque speciosius sit, ille in occulto maneat tenuis et in qua sede latitet incertus, tamen manus, pedes, oculi negotium illi gerunt, illum haec cutis munit, illius iussu iacemus aut inquieti discurrimus, cum ille imperavit, siue avarus dominus est, mare lucri causa scrutamur, siue ambitiosus, iam dudum dextram flammis obiecimus aut uoluntarii \*\*\* sub <terram de>siluimus, sic haec immensa multitudo unius animae circumdata illius spiritu regitur, illius ratione flectitur pressura se ac fractura uiribus suis, nisi consilio sustineretur.

<sup>25</sup> Illo ergo saeculo quod aureum perhibent penes sapientes fuisse regnum Posidonius iudicat. Hi continebant manus et infirmiore a validioribus tuebantur, suadebant dissuadebantque et utilia atque inutilia monstrabant; horum prudentia ne quid deesset suis providebat, fortitudo pericula arcebat, beneficentia augebat ornabatque subiectos. Officium erat imperare, non regnum. Nemo quantum posset adversus eos experiebatur per quos coeperat posse, nec erat cuiquam aut animus in iniuriam aut causa, cum bene



If we pursue this train of thought further, our reading of *De Clementia*, which has offered a fertile ground for the comparative assessment of the implications of *Seneca's* soliloquy thus far, will prove, yet again, illuminating. In order to distinguish a good from a bad emperor, Seneca introduces the terms *rex* and *tyrannus*. While the former is benevolent, the latter will slaughter people out of pleasure and oppress them by causing terror and fear:

What difference is there between a tyrant and king (for their fortune looks the same, and they both have equal license), save that tyrants indulge in violence as a matter of pleasure whereas kings do so only for some necessary reason?

*Clem.* 1.11.4<sup>26</sup>

savagery is close to tyrants' hearts. A tyrant differs from a king in his behaviour, not his title

*Clem.* 1.12.1<sup>27</sup>

When we apply Seneca's claims from the treatise *De Clementia* to Nero in the *Octavia*, we will notice that the playwright has made sure that we cannot identify Nero with the *rex* rather than the *tyrannus*. The emperor's first words upon coming on stage are his command to behead Plautus and Sulla as soon as possible and, as if this was not enough, to have their heads brought to him immediately thereafter. He boasts that extinguishing the enemy is a virtue (443), then goes on to claim that his will is unrestricted and fearing the gods would be a silly thing to do (449), before stressing firmly that the emperor is best off if the citizens fear him (455ff.).<sup>28</sup> Thus, he turns out to be the perfect example of how Seneca defined a *tyrannus*.

Seneca proclaimed the arrival of Nero as the return of the Golden Age in the mid-50s CE, whereas the current situation in 62 CE is depicted as dark and the society as doomed and corrupted. Bearing in mind that the society is closely linked to its ruler, this contrast implies that the degeneration that has occurred in these years is primarily because of Nero's vices. This is made ultimately clear if we judge the *dramatis persona Nero* by Senecan measurements. He must be called a tyrant.

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imperanti bene pareretur, nihilque rex maius minari male parentibus posset quam ut abiret e regno. Sed postquam subrepentibus vitiis in tyrannidem regna conversa sunt, opus esse legibus coepit [...]

Hactenus Posidonio adsentior

<sup>26</sup> quid interest inter tyrannum ac regem (species enim ipsa fortunae ac licentia par est), nihi quod tyranni in uoluptatem saeuunt, reges non nisi ex causa ex necessitate?

<sup>27</sup> tyrannis saeuitia cordi est. tyrannus autem a rege factis distat, non nomine

<sup>28</sup> Since the focus here is on *Seneca's* soliloquy, I shall only touch upon the observation that his dispute with Nero is modelled on Senecan philosophical material. *Seneca* advocates the right decisions for an emperor to make as does Seneca in his philosophical treatises, while Nero stands in for the opposite side. Compare, e.g. *Oct.* 442 with *Clem.* 1.3.3-4.3, 7.3, 10.2, 19.4-6, 22.4 and *Oct.* 444 with *Clem.* 1.1.5, 2.6.2-3. Cf. the detailed discussion on the subject by Manuwald (2003, 47-59), and Wesolowska (1996). I could not summarise more aptly than Boyle (2008, 182): "What 'Nero' has learned from *De Clementia* seems quite other than what the historical Seneca may have intended."

## VI. Conclusion

The playwright uses the Golden Age motif not only as such to contrast earlier lucky times with the bad times under Nero, but by putting it in a specifically pessimistic manifestation in the mouth of *Seneca*, the playwright creates a piece of propaganda. The motif recalls Seneca's statements mainly in his early works (*De Clem.*, *Apoc.*), but also in the *Epistulae*; all of these turned out to be wrong. Nero was proclaimed to bring back the good old days and re-establish the state of the Golden Age, yet turned out to be an evil and cruel ruler, whose vices and blood-thirstiness have corrupted society even further. This suggests that even *Seneca* himself, one of Nero's former closest advisors, has now turned away from the emperor, implicitly accusing him of being the reason for today's decline.

These traces of an openly anti-Neronian tendency substantiate the key message of the play, which can be equally extracted from other sections of the play. It would go beyond the scope of this contribution and require a large amount of further work, particularly on Vespasianic politics of propaganda, to take these conclusions further and link them with the matters of date and authorship.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, I shall confine myself to highlighting once more that in view of the current situation in 62 CE, the Pseudo-Senecan *Seneca* cannot but look back at the good old days.

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<sup>29</sup> I agree with Boyle (2008, XV) that the play's image of Nero and core message as a whole suit the early Vespasian (69–mid-70s CE) reign best, while the other dates that have been suggested in the past, i.e. the reign of Galba (June 68–January 69) and middle or late Flavian principate (81-96) are less likely — a date in the time of Galba was argued, for instance, by Kragelund (2002, 39f.). It would be particularly valuable to check the most recent monograph by Kragelund (Kragelund, P.: *Roman Historical Drama. The Octavia in Antiquity and Beyond*. Oxford 2016), which, unfortunately, was not available to me while I was working on this contribution. The same applies for Bruckner's 1976 Dissertation "Interpretationen zur Pseudo-Seneca-Tragödie Octavia".

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### Appendix: Text and Translation of *Oct.* 391-434

391            qui si senescit, tantus in caecum chaos  
               casurus iterum, tunc adest mundo dies  
               supremus ille, qui premat genus impium  
               caeli ruina, rursus ut stirpem nouam  
               generet renascens melior, ut quondam tulit  
               iuuenis, tenente regna Saturno poli.  
               Tunc illa uirgo, numinis magni dea,  
               Iustitia, caelo missa cum sancta Fide  
               terra regebat mitis humanum genus.  
               non bella norant, non tubae fremitus truces,  
               non arma gentes, cingere assuerant suas  
               muris nec urbes: peruium cunctis iter,  
               communis usus omnium rerum fuit;

- et ipsa Tellus laeta fecundos sinus  
 pandebat ultro, tam piis felix parens  
 406 et tuta alumnis. Alia sed suboles minus  
 conspecta mitis \* \* \*  
 \* \* \* Tertium sollers genus  
 nouas ad artes extitit, sanctum tamen,  
 mox inquietum quod sequi cursu feras  
 auderet acres, fluctibus tectos graui  
 extrahere pisces rete uel calamo leui,  
 decipere uolucres crate \* \* \*  
 412<sup>bis</sup> tenere laqueo, premere subiectos iugo  
 tauros feroces, uomere immunem prius  
 sulcare terram, laesa quae fruges suas  
 \*  
 interior, alte condidit sacro sinu.  
 416 Sed in parentis uiscera intrauit suae  
 deterior aetas; eruit ferrum graue  
 aurumque, saeuas mox et armauit manus;  
 partita fines regna constituit, nouas  
 exstruxit urbes, tecta defendit sua  
 aliena telis aut petit praedae imminens.  
 neglecta terras fugit et mores feros  
 hominum, cruenta caede pollutas manus  
 Astraea uirgo, siderum magnum decus.  
 cupido belli creuit atque auri fames  
 totum per orbem, maximum exortum est malum  
 luxuria, pestis blanda, cui uires dedit  
 roburque longum tempus atque error grauis  
 429 Collecta uitia per tot aetates diu  
 in nos redundant: saeculo premimur graui,  
 quo scelera regnant, saeuit impietas furens,  
 turpi libido Venere dominatur potens,  
 luxuria uictrix orbis immensas opes  
 iam pridem auaris manibus, ut perdat, rapit.
- 391 If the heavens are growing old, doomed despite their immensity to fall  
 back into blind chaos, we are now approaching that final day which will  
 crush this sacrilegious race beneath the collapsing sky. That will allow a  
 reborn and better cosmos to bring forth once again a new progeny, such as  
 it bore in youth when Saturn held the throne of heaven. In those days that  
 virgin goddess of great power, Justice, descended with holy Faithfulness  
 from heaven, and ruled the human race mildly on earth. The nations knew  
 no wars, no grim trumpet's blare, no weapons, nor the practice of  
 surrounding cities with walls; travel was open to all, everything was held  
 in common; and the glad earth opened her fertile bosom without coercion,  
 a mother blessed and unharmed by nurslings who so revered her.

- 406b But a second breed appeared, of less gentle character. A third race arose, inventive of new arts, yet reverent; but then a restless race, that ventured to pursue wild beasts in the chase, to draw fish from their shelter in the waves with heavy nets or light rods, to trick birds into wickerwork traps or set snares to hold the vagrants fast, to subject fierce bulls to the weight of the yoke, and to furrow with the plough the previously unscathed earth; when injured she <put forth> her crops <grudgingly, and the lavish resources> within her she hid deep in her sacred bosom.
- 416 But a worse generation delved into the body of its own parent, rooted out heavy iron and gold, and soon made weapons for its cruel hands. It assigned boundaries and established kingdoms, built cities for the first time, defended its homes or attacked others', bent on plunder. 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. Lust for war and hunger for gold grew throughout the world; and the great evil arose of extravagant excess, a seductive curse, given strength and force by the lengthening years and grave moral blindness.
- 429 The vices accumulated over time, over so many ages, are flooding out over *us*; we are burdened by an oppressive era in which crime reigns, unrighteousness runs mad, lust rules, gaining power through sexual degradation, and triumphant extravagance has long been plundering the world's immense resources with greedy hands, in order to squander them.