

## BOOK REVIEW

*Staging Memory, Staging Strife: Empire and Civil War in the Octavia*. By LAUREN DONOVAN GINSBERG. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. 229. Hardback, \$78.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-027595-2.

*Staging Memory, Staging Strife: Empire and Civil War in the Octavia* is a most welcome and innovative foray into the study of that enigmatic sole-survivor of Rome's *praetextae*. Lauren Donovan Ginsberg argues that civil war is the over-arching theme at work throughout the play, though it has been largely sublimated into a strife no less bloody within the walls of the *domus augusta*. The result is a challenge to Julio-Claudian claims, central to their ruling ideology, of having brought to heel Rome's tendency to turn on itself, and thereby having introduced lasting peace and stability to the empire. As the *Octavia* calls into question Julio-Claudian imagery of *pax et concordia*, Ginsberg claims that it both witnesses and participates in contests over the memory of the early principate by echoing and responding to Julio-Claudian literature. Ginsberg's book, then, is a study of the inextricably bound reception of both the principate and the literature produced under it.

Cultural memory studies provides the theoretical framework. Methodologically, it is a deep dive into intertextualism. Ginsberg's aim is to subject the *Octavia* to a comprehensive philological analysis in order to explore the play's "sophisticated manipulation of literary and cultural memory" about the end of the Julio-Claudian period (5). In so doing, Ginsberg shows how the play is a dramatization of the "dynamics of historical and literary interpretation" (15). That is, as the play dramatizes the chaotic end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, it also reveals a fragmented portrait of that dynasty's history and the literature that commemorated and challenged it. Hence the title: *Staging Memory, Staging Strife*—the contest over what and, more importantly, how Rome remembers plays no second fiddle to Nero's internecine wars waged inside his own house.

In the first chapter, Ginsberg argues that Octavia and Agrippina are modeled on figures of strife from Roman history and myth. The imperial women are presented as great generals (Magnuses, via Lucan) waging civil war against their own Caesar. Simultaneously, they summon figures such as Vergil's Aeneas, Dido and

Turnus. Strife staged, but also memory: Octavia's nurse represents another kind of reader whose less-grim, teleological reading of texts about the imperial dynasty the erstwhile empress contests. As the play moves to Seneca and Nero contending over how best to rule, Ginsberg sees two interlocutors each representing divergent ways of reading Julio-Claudian Rome. She separates into two chapters Seneca's and Nero's attempts to shape and mobilize memories of Augustus. In Chapter 2, we see Seneca configuring an Augustan *exemplum* by deploying and manipulating the public language that celebrates the career of the older, less-bloody *princeps*. Seneca struggles to turn Augustus into an Aeneas—a pious man struggling to bring peace—and keep him there. But Octavian's bloody rise overwhelms Seneca's version of history no matter how hard he tries to excise the ruthless triumvir—the more he attempts to keep Augustus clean, the less comfortable Seneca grows proffering him to Nero. In Chapter 3, Ginsberg turns her attention to Nero's reading. Nero concedes to Augustus' exemplarity, but the young emperor refuses to allow the triumvir's butchery to be papered over. Seneca's attempt to merge Augustus with a sanitized Aeneas is turned on its head when Nero takes up his tutor's thread, showing himself an equally close reader, not just of Vergil, but also Lucan. For Nero, the Aeneas who planted his sword in Turnus lands better, and Augustus—and the Caesars who followed him—must acknowledge their debt to Pharsalus and *Pharsalia*. It turns out that Nero's endorsement of civil strife as a blueprint for effective rule is born out of a reading no-less valid than Seneca's. In Chapter 4, Ginsberg demonstrates how the *Octavia* stages Nero's troubled relationship with the Roman people using language alluding to civil war leitmotifs in Horace, Lucan and others. The result is to show the pernicious tenacity of civil war as it lurks in Rome even under the principate. Nero takes out his vengeance on the rebellious Roman public as Octavian would have him, and any other *princeps* worth his salt, do. In Chapter 5, Ginsberg demonstrates how the playwright has dug deep into the Augustan and Late-Republican literary corpus for rich veins of civil war imagery—from Troy, the Sabine Women, Lucretia, to the Gracchi, Cataline and so on—to show civil war as endemic to *romanitas*. The splintering of the chorus represents a perpetually splintering *populus*. But lest we lose focus, Ginsberg is keen to remind us that the *Octavia* is not just a play about Neronian civil strife, it is a representation of, and active participant in, the commemoration of the events it stages. In the epilogue, Ginsberg posits an early Vespasianic date, marshalling evidence of early Flavian fears of recent civil slaughter. She continues with the theme of staging memory

even here: the *Octavia* actively participates in early Flavian reimagining of Julio-Claudian, especially Neronian, Rome.

This is an excellent book with a fresh approach on a text deserving of much nuanced attention. Ginsberg's intertextualism is impressive, though some scholars might be inclined to quibble over the differences between what Ginsberg summons as an echo, and what is a "proper" allusion. The fact remains that Ginsberg understands full well that the *Octavia* poet was a sophisticated reader writing for an audience of sophisticated readers conditioned to keeping their eyes peeled for what might be (or might not be) points of contact with other texts. This is where cultural memory studies come in, to show us that *Erinnerungsfiguren* are spun from very delicate fibers indeed.

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