

Gesine Manuwald  
Nero in Opera

# Transformationen der Antike

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Librettos as Transformations of Ancient Sources

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## Preface and acknowledgements

The pseudo-Senecan drama *Octavia* can be seen as the starting point of the stage career of a particular story that provides a literary insight into the life of the Roman emperor Nero. The first (early) modern opera on a historical topic centres around the events that are presented in *Octavia*. Many operas on Nero followed, some of them extending the thematic focus. Moreover, there is a great number of thematically related dramas, ballets and – in more recent times – films and musicals, all of which influence the audiences' view of the life of emperor Nero. In so far as all these performative works are part of the reception of the Latin *Octavia*, their textual form and intertextual connections are intriguing research topics for a Classicist. The present study singles out the librettos of Nero operas, which have had a large share in propagating the portrait of the emperor Nero, first dramatized in *Octavia*, as well as some paradigmatic spoken dramas and ballets, closely linked to the character and impact of the operatic pieces.

This study would not have been possible without the help of a number of individuals and institutions, all of whom I would like to thank for their support.

The following libraries provided reproductions of librettos: Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Musikabteilung mit Mendelssohn-Archiv; Biblioteca Universitaria Bologna; Cambridge University Library; Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg; University of Illinois Library; Universitätsbibliothek Leipzig; British Library London; Senate House Libraries London; Biblioteca Braidense Milano; Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München; Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris; Biblioteca di Parma; Biblioteca Vittorio Emanuele, Roma; National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth; Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Wien; Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Wien; Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel.

With the exception of *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (and some early 20th-century pieces), none of these operas (for which the music has survived) belong to the standard repertoire of modern opera houses in any country. However, Feind's and Keiser's *Octavia* was performed at the Badisches Staatstheater Karlsruhe during the '27. Händel-Festspiele' in 2004 (for a short description see <http://www.omm.de/veranstaltungen/festspiele2004/KA-2004octavia.html>). I am obliged to the staff of the Badisches Staatstheater, particularly Katrin Lorbeer and Ulrich Reid, for lending me the score of the opera used for this production and for providing me with a copy of the programme.

Likewise, the ancient ancestor of these operas, the pseudo-Senecan *Octavia*, is hardly ever brought on stage. Hence I am very grateful to Joseph A. Smith, who gave me a DVD recording of his *Octavia* production at the Experimental Theatre at San Diego State University in April 2006 (using an earlier version of A.J. Boyle's translation, published in 2008), which demonstrates the dramatic potential of the play.

From the early stages of this project I received indispensable advice from the great expertise of the musicologist Reinhard Strohm (Oxford); Francesco Giuntini (Pisa), an expert in the field of Italian librettos, was so generous as to look at a draft of the entire manuscript in great detail and provided me with a number of invaluable comments. Paul Atkin gave me access to relevant sections of his unpublished PhD dissertation ("Opera Production in Late Seventeenth-Century Modena: The Case of L'ingresso alla gioventù di Claudio Nerone (1692)", Diss. Royal Holloway, University of London, London 2010) and engaged into a discussion on this opera with me. I have also benefited from comments by audience members and fellow speakers when I had the chance to present aspects of the research that led to this book at conferences in San Diego, London and Exeter.

Benjamin Wolf helped me with the difficult Italian of some of the libretto texts; Valeria Valotto checked several of the English translations of Italian paratextual material; and Alessio Fontana offered sophisticated explanations of some of the Italian names of operatic characters. Sam Thompson took the time to read through a final draft of the entire work and eliminated a number of infelicities in the English.

I am grateful to the editors of the series 'Transformationen der Antike' and the staff at De Gruyter, especially Katrin Hofmann, for their efforts in giving this book such a suitable home. Special thanks are due to my father, Bernd Manuwald, who was kind enough to typeset the entire volume for me.

Needless to say that the remaining shortcomings are the author's own fault, but they should not prevent readers from discovering new aspects of an exciting section of musical and dramatic history as well as of the direct or indirect influence of the Roman literary genre of *fabula praetexta* in a perhaps unexpected area.

London, January 2013

Gesine Manuwald

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Aims and outline

The ancient drama entitled *Octavia* and transmitted in the corpus of Senecan tragedies (though almost certainly not written by Seneca himself) is the only completely preserved example of a Roman *fabula praetexta*, a Latin drama about incidents from Roman history: it dramatizes events at the imperial court in 62 CE, when the emperor Nero (reigned: 54–68 CE) dismissed his legitimate wife Octavia (daughter of Nero's predecessor Claudius and Nero's sister by adoption) and married his beloved Poppaea, even against the advice of his mentor, the philosopher Seneca.

Mainly because of its spuriousness and alleged dramatic inferiority, *Octavia* has suffered from greater neglect in modern scholarship than Seneca's eight clearly authentic tragedies.<sup>1</sup> While interest in the play has revived in recent decades (see ch. 1.2), its reception continues to be largely disregarded despite its inherent significance. For, as some scholars have recognized, *Octavia* constitutes the typological model for all later dramas on historical subjects:

The *Octavia*, however, was not less popular and influential than its companions, and has even a claim to especial attention inasmuch as it may be considered the remote ancestress of the Modern Historic Play in general and of the Modern Roman Play in particular. (MacCallum [1910] 1967, 11)

Whereas recent cinematic representations of life and death under the Roman empire have attracted considerable attention, the history of the dramatisation of Roman history from antiquity to the end of the 19th century is both more significant and, in recent times, more neglected. The original model for a Roman history play was a single script, surviving among the A manuscripts of Seneca's tragedies. It is called *Octavia* and it contains most of the elements that became standard ingredients of the later tradition: a corrupt imperial court; a love affair; an innocent young woman victimised; a brutal, murderous emperor; turbulent crowds of citizens; troops ready to take up arms at a moment's notice; the switching of scenes between the public spaces of the city and the palace interior; a paradoxical vision of urban civilisation cloaking vice and barbarity; the emotional atmosphere of tragedy; the theme of personal and political liberty endangered. (Wilson 2003, 1–2)

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1 Besides, the corpus of Senecan drama includes the tragedy *Hercules Oetaeus*, whose genuineness has also been doubted by many scholars.

Recently, first steps in the study of the reception of *Octavia* have been made: scholars have started to draw up lists of spoken and sung dramas likely to be influenced by *Octavia*<sup>2</sup> and to identify lines in English drama that go back to specific verses in the Latin play.<sup>3</sup>

That the Latin *Octavia* may have been important for operatic history was first explicitly suggested in 1969, when K. von Fischer argued that this drama was likely to have been a model for the first opera on the subject, *L'incoronazione di Poppea* of 1642/43 (to a libretto by Giovanni Francesco Busenello and with music attributed to Claudio Monteverdi).<sup>4</sup> After initial scepticism, this view now seems to have entered mainstream musicological scholarship, as exemplified by the description in the *Cambridge Companion to Monteverdi* (2007):

While he does at least cite Tacitus, Busenello fails to mention a number of his other sources, namely Suetonius (*The Lives of the Caesars*, 6, 8) and Dio Cassius (*Roman Histories*, 61–2), which he drew upon for this characterisation of Seneca, and the anonymous tragedy *Ottavia* (then ascribed to Seneca himself), which not only offers the prototype for the relationship of two nurses to their mistresses (as in Busenello's Arnalta and Nutrice to Poppea and Ottavia respectively), but provides a template for the stichomythic debate between Nerone and Seneca in Busenello's Act I, scene 9, as well as for Ottavia's final lament, 'Addio Roma'. (Rosand 2007b, 236)

Independently, the impact of *L'incoronazione di Poppea* and the influence of its presentation of the story on later operas have been recognized:

Seit Monteverdis ‚Incoronazione di Poppea‘ (Venedig 1642) gehörten die Figuren des Nero, der Poppea, der Agrippina, der Octavia, des Kaisers Claudius zu den beliebtesten Opern- und Dramenhelden der Barockzeit. (Wolff 1943b, 8–9)

Dieses Thema [sc. Nero] spielte bei der Entwicklung der Oper im 17. Jahrhundert eine wichtige Rolle: 1642 gelangte in Venedig Claudio Monteverdis „L'incoronazione di Poppea“ zur Aufführung, erstmalig kam statt antiker Mythologie ein historischer Vorgang auf die Musikbühne; ... (Stompor 1978, 43)

..., the characters and story were familiar to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century opera, the best-known earlier representation being Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*; ... (Harris 1989, xlii)

Yet, consequences have not been drawn from these observations, which raise the question of the respective roles of an influential operatic precedent and of ancient sources (i.e. *Octavia* and historiographical accounts) for later operas, especially since looking back to antiquity was a characteristic feature of *dramma per musica* in the late 17th and early 18th centuries.<sup>5</sup> While recent monographs on

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2 See Wilson 2003, 2; Manuwald 2005 [2007], 152–153; Boyle 2008, lxxv–lxxix, lxxxvi.

3 See Boyle's commentary (2008) *passim*.

4 Even earlier Gianini (1906, 136) and Bustico (1909, 6–7) suggested more generally that the Latin *Octavia* was a model for dramas on Nero, both spoken and musical ones, and that the status of classical studies was important for the development of the Nero theme.

5 See also Strohm 1997, 2; Ketterer 2009, 1–2.

the reception in opera of themes from both Greek and Roman antiquity exist (Ewans 2007; Ketterer 2009),<sup>6</sup> there is not yet a specific study of the development of a narrative from ancient history (or a story based on ancient sources) throughout the history of opera. This is especially surprising with respect to the story under discussion since “[o]f all the characters of Roman history, Nero is second only to Caesar in the attention he has attracted from modern dramatists and musicians”.<sup>7</sup> Nero’s multi-faceted career and the extraordinary deeds he committed seem to have exerted particular fascination.

Hence further investigation is called for: as a contribution to more insights into the impact of the Latin *Octavia* (within the framework of the reception of the figure of Nero) and thus, paradigmatically, into the transformation of classical material in opera, this study assembles all musical pieces involving Nero and / or Octavia (as well as Poppaea, Agrippina, Seneca and / or Claudius) among the main characters that could be identified and looks at these operatic plots against the background of the treatment of their story in ancient texts as well as in terms of the influence of operatic themes and set-ups that were initiated by *L’incoronazione di Poppea*.<sup>8</sup> This analysis will show how subject matter from antiquity has been continuously taken up and transformed over the centuries. Concentrating on the genre of historical opera, in which the Nero topic flourished particularly within specific periods, yields a well-defined sample marked by shared characteristics (supplemented by a few significant cases in other performative genres); thereby the transformation of ancient material can be studied from the start of a (modern) genre, since *L’incoronazione di Poppea* is regarded as the first historical opera.

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6 For observations on ‘ancient Rome in early opera’ see Ketterer 2009, 1–21.

7 See Walter (1955) 1957, 268; also Porte 1987, 425–426.

8 That the operatic history of the events connected with Nero is only roughly known is indicated by the fact that musical dictionaries typically do not contain an entry for ‘Seneca’ (see also Schubert 2004, 371 and n. 9) and that the author of a well-informed study on Seneca in opera states that he is not aware of any other opera featuring Seneca as a character besides *L’incoronazione di Poppea* (Schubert 2004, 397). Yet the significance of this story on the operatic stage has been recognized by Ketterer (1999, 1: “The immorality and misadventures of the Emperor Nero and his court were subjects visited several times in the first six decades of Venetian opera.”). – The development of the dramatic treatment of the story of Nero in spoken drama too is still under-researched (see Mundt 2005, 615, on Lohenstein: “Mit der folgenden Zusammenstellung soll dem Leser ein Überblick über die dramatische Bearbeitung des Nero-Stoffes vor Lohenstein vermittelt werden (...). Als Bezugsgestalt wurde Nero gewählt, da die beiden hier zu behandelnden Stoffkreise (Ermordung Agrippinas; Rolle der Epicharis innerhalb der Pisonischen Verschwörung) mit seiner Person in untrennbarem Zusammenhang stehen und die zu unserer Thematik bislang vorliegende stoffgeschichtliche Literatur ebenfalls auf die Gestalt Neros zentriert ist (spezielle Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Agrippina- oder Epicharis-Stoffes gibt es meines Wissens nicht). In meiner Darstellung sind alle Nero-Dramen vor Lohenstein erfaßt, die mir bekannt geworden sind (nach den Erscheinungsdaten zeitlich von 1603 bis 1660 reichend). In Anbetracht der unzulänglichen Forschungslage sind Zweifel daran, ob die Liste der hier besprochenen Stücke vollständig ist, durchaus erlaubt.”).

From the beginning, operas on Nero and on those around him included events not narrated in *Octavia*, and they combined incidents from different phases of Nero's reign into one play (such as Seneca's death in 65 CE added to Nero's dismissal of Octavia and coronation of Poppaea in 62 CE in *L'incoronazione di Poppea*), though the historical incidents chosen vary. Hence it has to be checked in each case whether *Octavia* and / or ancient historiographical accounts might have been used as sources. Besides, there are operas that deal with Nero, but have little or no resemblance to *Octavia* with respect to the main plot, since they focus on other sections of Nero's reign. These operas have been included because they too show structural analogies with *Octavia* as well as with earlier operas based on *Octavia*'s content and thus contribute to illustrating different types of relationships to the ancient sources.<sup>9</sup>

The fact that there was an ancient dramatic precedent for a piece involving figures such as Nero, Octavia, Poppaea, Seneca or Agrippina might explain the choice of subject for what is seen as the first opera on a historical event, *L'incoronazione di Poppea* in 1642/43.<sup>10</sup> Operas focusing on Nero and his relationship to several

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9 Obviously, distinctions between the different status of individual texts have to be made: see Strohm 1985, 34 (with reference to Händel): "In the first place, chronologically and with regard to the literary texts, we must distinguish between predecessors and sources, i.e. between texts which Handel did not use and may never have known and those which he actually used. (Further distinctions must then of course be made with regard to *what* he knew about any projected text, whether it was only the fact of its having been set and performed or whether he was also aware of the occasion and the circumstances – whether he was acquainted only with the libretto or also with the music etc.)." – Further, Ewans stresses the difference between the use of particular source texts and general knowledge about antiquity with reference to myths (2007, 5: "The first extant operatic adaptation of a Greek source text (as opposed to operas based on a Greek myth), *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria*, at once raises one of the principal issues.", 29: "In *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria*, Monteverdi laid down the parameters for all further serious operatic adaptations from Greek tragedy and epic. This is the first surviving opera to be based not just on a Greek myth but on a Greek text; ..."); similar considerations apply to plots based on ancient history.

10 Smith (1971, 11) tentatively suggests that *Sant'Alessio*, to a libretto by Giulio Rospigliosi (later Pope Clement IX, 1600–1669) and set to music by Stefano Landi (1587–1639), which was first performed at the Palazzo Barberini in Rome on 18 February 1632, may be regarded as a historical opera before *L'incoronazione di Poppea*. Since the opera deals with the life of the fifth-century Saint Alexius, it may rather be classified as a hagiographical or Christian opera. – There is an earlier piece that includes the character of Nero: *La gara musicale comedia*. Di Monsignor Urbano Giorgi rappresentata in musica nella gran sala dell'imperial palaggio di Vienna il 9. Luglio M.DC.XXXIII. Per le solenni feste solite a celebrarsi ogn'anno per il giorno della nascita dell'Augustissimo Ferdinando Secondo, per commandamento della sac: ces: maesta dell'Imperatrice (libretto presumably by Lodovico Bartolaia [or Bertolaia], with the following cast: La Poesia Prologo – Nerone Cesare Imperatore – Cantor Tebano con sua Comitiva – Cantor Persiano con sua Comitiva – Cantor Partenopeo con sua Comitiva – Cantor Arcade – Cantor Incognito – Cantor Etiopo – Cantor Ibero – Cantor di Calechutte – Cantatrice Assiria con sua Comitiva – Vespilla Sonatrice d'Arpa – Cantatrice Fenicia con sua Comitiva –

women along the lines of the Latin *Octavia* then continue into the early decades of the 18th century (in Italy and Germany).<sup>11</sup> Later operas (mainly in Italy, Germany and France), up to the early 20th century (besides a few earlier ones), also feature Nero as a character, but tend not to use his relationship with Poppaea and his repudiation of his wife as presented in the Latin *Octavia* as the main basis for the action: the plots of these works often centre around Nero's accession to the throne, his treatment of the early Christians or his suicide, or they use his character as a backdrop to experiences of other individuals.<sup>12</sup> There is also an opera named after the emperor Claudius, in which Claudius is the main character and Nero is less prominent (Aureli); since Nero does appear and the opera uses some of the plot structures found in the Nero-Octavia story, it has been added to show the development of characteristic motifs and to demonstrate how they can be applied and transferred.<sup>13</sup>

Nero in the context of the main historical characters appears in set-ups that bear some resemblance to the plot structure and / or themes in the Latin *Octavia* (to a greater or lesser extent) in the following pieces (listed with their librettists / composers; dates in brackets after the title refer to the first performance and / or print of the respective versions):<sup>14</sup>

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Cantatrice Germanica – Rubina Fanciulla Romana – Carasio Maggior Duomo di Cesare – Perseno familiare di Cesare – Lattantio Servitor del Cantor Arcade – Choro de' Cittadini Romani). While this play builds on Nero's well-known interests in music and song and the artistic competitions held at his court, it is not based on specific historical events, but rather presents various aspects of a singing contest, in praise of the culture at the contemporary court. Therefore, despite the inclusion of a historical character, it cannot actually be regarded as a historical opera and therefore does not form part of the series of works studied here.

- 11 Gianini (1906, 136) already notes that the first period in which dramas on Nero proliferated was the second half of the 17th century, when most of them were written for musical accompaniment. Bustico (1909, 7) identifies two main phases for spoken dramas on Nero: the second half of the 15th century and the end of the 19th century. Fluch (1924, 10, 11–13) identifies the period from the middle of the 17th century to the middle of the 18th century as a flourishing period for Nero operas in Italy and Germany and sees a large amount of works on Nero again in the 19th and early 20th centuries. – In view of the number of successors of *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, the statement “The story itself [i.e. of *L'incoronazione di Poppea*] remains highly unusual even after three centuries.” (Smith 1971, 32) is surprising.
- 12 Sartori's catalogue (1991b, 221; 1992, 440) lists a work entitled ‘*Il Nerone. Tragicommedia*’, including the piece ‘*Il vecchio ringiovanito*. Intermezzi per musica da rappresentarsi nel Teatro di Tordinona nel carnevale dell'anno 1781’ (Roma 1781; music by Marcello Bernardini, known also as Marcello da Capua [1730/40–after 1799]). The intermezzi are extant, but do not include any reference to Nero (characters: Mirina – D. Crepazio – Aurette – Ceccone).
- 13 Claudius is an absent presence in some of the other Nero operas discussed, since his death is mentioned or people attend to his ashes. He appears as a character in *Agrippina* by Vincenzo Grimani and Georg Friedrich Händel, alongside Nero (ch. 2.13). In another opera named after Claudius, *Die verdammte Staat-Sucht, oder Der verführte Claudius* (1703) by Hinrich Hinsch (c. 1650/60–1712) and Reinhard Keiser (1674–1739), Nero is not included as a character.
- 14 For other lists of works on Nero see ch. 1.4 and notes. – Some early 20th-century overviews of works on the Nero theme (e.g. Mühlbach 1910, 7–14; Towers 1910, 451, 466, 510; Fluch 1924,

- (1) Giovanni Francesco Busenello (1598–1659) / Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643) [and possibly other composers]: *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (1642/43)
- (2) *Nero, Der Verzweifelte Und dadurch Das bedrengte Reich Befreyende* (1663)
- (3) Aurelio Aureli (fl. 1652–1708) / Giovanni Antonio Boretti (c. 1638–1672): *Claudio Cesare* (1671/72)
- (4a) Giulio Cesare Corradi (d. 1701/02) / Carlo Pallavicino (c. 1640–1688): *Il Nerone* (1678/79)
- (4b) Giulio Cesare Corradi (d. 1701/02) / Carlo Pallavicino (c. 1640–1688); adapted by Paul Thymich (1656–1694) / Nicolaus Adam Strungk (1640–1700): *Nero* (1693)
- (5) *Nero, Der verzweifelte Selbst-Mörder* (1685)
- (6) Giuseppe Contri (dates not known) / Giovanni Battista Bassani (c. 1650–1716): *Agrippina in Baia* (1687)
- (7) Giambattista Neri (c. 1655–1726) / Antonio Giannettini (1648–1721): *L'ingresso alla gioventù di Claudio Nerone* (1692)
- (8a) Matteo Noris (d. 1714) / Giacomo Antonio Perti (1661–1756): *Nerone fatto Cesare* (1692/93)
- (8b) Matteo Noris (d. 1714) / Alessandro Scarlatti (1660–1725): *Nerone fatto Cesare* (1695)
- (8c) Matteo Noris (d. 1714), adapted by Antonio Piantanida (impresario of the 'Ducale' until 1700) / Paolo Magni (c. 1650–1737): *L'Agrippina* (1703)
- (8d) Matteo Noris (d. 1714) / Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741) [and others]: *Nerone fatto Cesare* (1715)
- (9) Matteo Noris (d. 1714) / Carlo Francesco Pollarolo (c. 1653–1723): *Il ripudio d'Ottavia* (1699)
- (10a) Francesco Silvani (1660–1728/44) / Giuseppe Antonio Vincenzo Aldrovandini (1671–1707): *La fortezza al cimento* (1699)
- (10b) Francesco Silvani (c. 1660–1728/44) / Tomaso Giovanni Albinoni (1671–1751): *La fortezza al cimento* (1707)
- (10c) Francesco Silvani (c. 1660–1728/44) / Francesco Mancini (1672–1737): *La fortezza al cimento* (1721)
- (10d) Francesco Silvani (c. 1660–1728/44) / Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741) and Giovanni Antonio Guerra (dates not known): *La tirannia gastigata* (1726)
- (10e) Francesco Silvani (c. 1660–1728/44) / Giuseppe Bencini (fl. 1723–1727): *Il Nerone* (1727)
- (10f) Francesco Silvani (c. 1660–1728/44) / Egidio Duni (1708–1775): *Nerone* (1735)
- (11) Friedrich Christian Feustking (1678–1739) / Georg Friedrich Händel (1685–1759): *Die durch Blut und Mord Erlangete Liebe / Oder: Nero* (1705)

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10–11) list a few more Italian and German dramas and operas from the 17th to 19th centuries besides many, but not all of the operas given here. It has proved impossible to track down these further pieces: they might be re-performances of existing librettos under different titles; besides, errors in these lists cannot be excluded as they contain mistakes or ambiguities in connection with other items. Pucci (2011, 62) talks of at least 28 operas on Nero from the 18th and 19th centuries; but it is unclear how different versions and settings are counted.

- (12) Barthold Feind (1678–1721) / Reinhard Keiser (1674–1739): *Die Roemische Unruhe. Oder: Die Edelmuechtige Octavia* (1705)
- (13) Vincenzo Grimani (1652/55–1710) / Georg Friedrich Händel (1685–1759): *Agrippina* (1709)
- (14a) Agostino Piovene (1671–1733) / Giuseppe Maria Orlandini (1676–1760): *Nerone* (1721)
- (14b) Agostino Piovene (1671–1733) / Giuseppe Vignati (d. 1768): *Nerone* (1724/25)
- (14c) Agostino Piovene (1671–1733) / Giuseppe Maria Orlandini (1676–1760); text and music adapted by Johann Mattheson (1681–1764): *Nero* (1723)
- (15) ‘Dottore Graziano Cimbaldi da Bologna’ / *not identifiable*: *Nerone detronato dal trionfo di Sergio Galba* (1725/26)
- (16) Francesco Saverio Salfi (1759–1832) / Angelo Tarchi (c. 1760–1814): *La congiura pisoniana* (1797)
- (17) Jules Barbier (1825–1901) / Anton Grigor’yevich Rubinstein (1829–1894): *Néron* (1879)
- (18) Attilio Catelli (1845–1877) / Riccardo Rasori (1852–1929): *Nerone* (1888)
- (19) Arrigo Boito (1842–1918): *Nerone* (1901 / 1924)
- (20) Joan Manén (1883–1971): *Acté* (1903 / 1908); *Neró i Acté* / *Nero und Acte* (1928)
- (21) Henri Cain (1859–1937) / Jean(-Charles) Nouguès (1875–1932): *Quo vadis?* (1908/09)
- (22) Giovanni Targioni-Tozzetti (1863–1934) / Pietro Mascagni (1863–1945): *Nerone* (1935)

These operas have been supplemented by a few Italian, German and French works for the stage, mainly from the early period, which show close interaction with processes in opera; some of them, for instance, have directly influenced particular operas. They consist of two pieces defined as ‘opera scenica’ (Biancolelli; Lazarino), one described as ‘opera tragica’ (Boccaccio), one called ‘drama tragico’ (Leva), one termed ‘tragedia’ (Alfieri), one identified as ‘tragédie’ (Legouvé), two called ‘Trauerspiel’ (Lohenstein) and another one described as ‘commedia’ (Cossa), i.e. plays intended for dramatic performance without musical accompaniment. Besides, there are two ballets (Panzieri; Pallérini), which can be regarded as a variant of opera in the sense of dramatic action accompanied by music. Those dramatic compositions have been placed in a separate chapter to mark the difference in genre. At the same time, taking those pieces into account makes it possible to view the development of the plot structure in opera within the context of potential mutual influences with respect to closely related genres and to analyse the introduction or spread of particular motifs more comprehensively. The stage works discussed are the following ones:

- (1) Daniel Casper von Lohenstein (1635–1683): *Agrippina* (1665) – spoken drama
- (2) Daniel Casper von Lohenstein (1635–1683): *Epicharis* (1665) – spoken drama
- (3) Nicolò Biancolelli (fl. 1650): *Il Nerone* (1666) – spoken drama
- (4) Camillo Boccaccio (d. 1701): *Il Nerone* (1675) – spoken drama
- (5) Fernando Leva (fl. c. 1680): *Il Nerone o sian Le smanie amorose di barbaro dominante* (c. 1675–80) – spoken drama

- (6) Sebastiano Lazarino (fl. c. 1680): *Gli sponsali per l'impero, ovvero Il Nerone imperante* (1682) – spoken drama
- (7) Vittorio Alfieri (1749–1803): *Ottavia* (1783) – spoken drama
- (8) Gabriel-Marie Jean-Baptiste Legouvé (1764–1812): *Épicharis et Neron, ou Conspiracy pour la Liberté* (1794) – spoken drama
- (9) Lorenzo Panzieri (175?–182?) / Giovanni Ayblinger (1779–1867): *La morte di Nerone* (1815/16) – ballet
- (10) Pietro Cossa (1830–1881): *Nerone* (1871) – spoken drama
- (11) Antonio Pallerini (1819–1892) / Costantino dall'Argine (1842–1877): *Nerone* (1877) – ballet

Even though the pseudo-Senecan *Octavia*, having introduced the Nero theme to the stage, can be regarded as the ancestor of all musical and dramatic plays on the subject, none of the librettists or dramatists seems to mention this play as a source. Therefore, because of the intricate history of *Octavia*'s reception, its blending with historiographical accounts, the possibility of both direct and indirect transmission of the historical basis due to intermediaries that may have given the story a specific interpretation, the impact of preceding dramatic treatments as well as numerous intertextual connections between all those works in a variety of directions, describing the influence of the Latin *Octavia* is not a straightforward task.<sup>15</sup> Hence one must consider questions such as whether and how the operas relate to each other, how the topic has been adapted to the respective periods and places and what these differences and similarities might reveal about key characteristics of the Roman play (and the story as such) and their appeal to later periods.<sup>16</sup> Since the distribution of librettos and the careers of some of the librettists are insufficiently known,<sup>17</sup> it is difficult at times to determine precisely the chains of influence. Still, an overview of common motifs and their frequency, juxtaposed with features specific to a limited number of pieces, will suggest some conclusions on structural parallels and the development of characteristic features.

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- 15 See also Boyle 2008, lxxxvi: “*L'incoronazione di Poppea* was the first opera devoted to a historical subject of any kind. That the topic was Nero, his divorce and remarriage in 62 CE, and that this topic was to form the subject of several European operas signal the contemporary cultural importance both of Tacitus and of *Octavia* itself – despite the librettists' apparent silence on the latter. ... Although the relationship of the post-Busenello operas to *Octavia* or *L'incoronazione* still awaits full examination, it would not be an exaggeration to claim most, if not all, of the above [i.e. list of opera titles] as in some sense the intellectual progeny of the sole surviving *fabula praetexta*, the lyric qualities of which seem to have been destined to give rise to something like *L'incoronazione*. The recent description of *Octavia* as ‘Grand Opera’ may be considered profoundly proleptic.”
  - 16 Research into the adaptation of the Nero story in other literary genres is confronted with similar problems, for instance as regards the influence of French works on the German poet Daniel Casper von Lohenstein (1635–1683; see ch. 3.1; 3.2).
  - 17 See similar issues faced by Porte (1987, 582) in compiling a list of poetic works on themes from ancient Rome since 1800.

The main body of this study consists in the discussion (in chronological sequence) of the identified operatic pieces featuring Nero (ch. 2). That chapter is preceded by an introduction that provides information about the literary and historical background and context: the present section on the scope and aims of the study (ch. 1.1) will be followed by a brief presentation of the ancient sources, particularly the drama *Octavia*, and their reception in the Renaissance, i.e. in a period decisive for the rediscovery of ancient sources and their use in new works (ch. 1.2). Since the Nero theme entered the operatic stage in Italy and then in Germany in the 17th century and the operas most closely related to *Octavia* were performed there in the 17th and 18th centuries, a short presentation of features of 17th- and 18th-century opera in Italy and Germany will then be given (ch. 1.3). To put the development in musical theatre into context, a few comments on the artistic reception of the Nero theme in other literary and performative genres besides opera will be offered (ch. 1.4). This establishes the framework for the detailed presentation of individual operas (ch. 2). As a complement works of other performative genres in which Nero plays a major role are looked at in the following chapter (ch. 3). On the basis of the study of the relevant operas (and works of other genres) it will be possible to draw conclusions, to sketch the development of the Nero-*Octavia* subject in opera over time (in relation to other performative genres) and to assess the respective role of the Latin *Octavia* and historiographical accounts in this process (ch. 4). Overviews of the distribution of key motifs in the works analysed and of the characters appearing in those works (which doubles as an index) are given as appendices (app. 1 + 2).

The analysis of musical works presents all pieces starring Nero in chronological sequence, in order to illustrate developments, even though the similarity to the Latin *Octavia* varies (ch. 2). The section on each opera (ch. 2.1 etc.) opens with factual details on the opera's performance(s), a brief overview of the librettist's life and education and information on the composer(s) wherever relevant facts could be established ('*Background*').<sup>18</sup> This is followed by information on the bibliographical details of the identified libretto prints (including reprints and revised versions; see below), references to modern printed editions or electronic versions, to discography where available and to scholarship on the work, the librettist and / or the composer. In many cases a number of different libretto prints could be recognized, but it proved impossible to physically get hold of all of them; those editions and prints that have been identified, but have not been examined are marked by a preceding asterisk ('*Bibliographical informa-*

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18 Sketches of theatrical and operatic life in individual cities, of operatic conventions as well as of biographies and characteristics of librettists and composers are heavily indebted to *Oxford Music Online*, which gives access to *The Oxford Dictionary of Music*, *Grove Music Online* and *The Oxford Companion to Music* (<<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>>). The respective entries and their authors will be acknowledged at the appropriate places (for brevity's sake author's names are followed by 'at *OMO*', and full references are listed in the bibliography).

tion'). The next subsection provides the list(s) of characters for the various libretto prints and gives a summary of the plot for easy reference (sometimes of different versions), in view of the fact that some of the plots are rather complex and the presentation of subtle differences in the shaping of the basic story is important for an assessment of each piece and its intertextual position ('*Synopsis*'). This leads up to an analysis of an opera's main themes, its dramaturgy and its specific characteristics in relation to what is attested in ancient sources (with full references given for each opera), to previous operatic (and dramatic) treatments and contemporary conventions ('*Analysis*'). The same structure (*mutatis mutandis*) is used for pieces of other performative genres (ch. 3.1 etc.).

Since the present work is conceived mainly as a literary study on reception, emphasis is placed on librettos and librettists rather than on the music, composers, musicians, performers or stage and costume designers.<sup>19</sup> As has recently been reiterated, the "complexity of opera" and the "genre's multi-media nature require[s] an interdisciplinary approach".<sup>20</sup> Music is obviously important to opera, but it is only "one element in a complex synthesis of means of artistic expression", with others also deserving attention;<sup>21</sup> and librettos, as pieces of literature, have an existence in their own right.<sup>22</sup>

The concentration on the libretto texts finds further justification in the genre's original name '*dramma per musica*', which classifies opera as a form of drama. There is evidence that in the early modern period librettos were read at home, like other dramatic literature, and that they were published in collected editions, in addition to being printed in connection with performances.<sup>23</sup> This treatment of librettos shows that they were seen as independent literary works, interacting closely with developments in spoken drama. This sets the precedent for looking at librettos mainly within a dramatic context and with respect to their intertextual relations.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, the fact that librettos could exist independently, at least in the 17th and 18th centuries, makes the situation more complex: because for opera productions there was demand for novel versions, and it was most efficient simply to provide new scores when needed, popular librettos circulated and were set to music by different composers or groups of composers on different occa-

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19 On the libretto as a literary genre and a literary text see Smith 1971; Fuld 1994; Gier 1998; Plachta 1998; on the Venetian libretto see Mehlretter 1994; on 17th-century Italian librettos see Fabbri 2003.

20 Piperno 2007, 138–139. – On the history of scholarship on opera and its broadening focus towards becoming a truly interdisciplinary field see also Montemorra Marvin 2006; Johnson 2007.

21 Montemorra Marvin 2006, 1.

22 See Plachta 1998; on 'opera as drama' see already Kerman (1956) 1988.

23 See e.g. Strohm 1997, 1.

24 See similarly Ketterer 2009, 20. – On the independent literary value of libretto texts see Plachta 1998.

sions and for different venues. Each version was adapted to the conditions and fashions at the particular times and places of performance, which may involve the omission or substitution of scenes (or transposing the music according to the abilities of the singers and musicians available); such changes are sometimes obvious from the lists of characters or from information on title-pages or in prefaces to the respective prints.<sup>25</sup>

The comparison of the different textual versions of a single opera is an interesting topic in itself, but goes beyond the scope of the present work. Since the basic story seems to have remained virtually the same, typically only one version (usually the earliest one) will be analysed. Focusing on the characteristic elements of each opera plot should be sufficient for the purposes of examining the shaping of the Nero story.<sup>26</sup> For the convenience of readers, in cases of less faithful translations of librettos into other languages or more significant variations in later adaptations, summaries of the plots of several versions will be given for the synopsis, with the main differences indicated.

An attempt is made to document the popularity and spread of individual pieces; hence full bibliographical details of the identified versions (including brief notes where appropriate) are given in the '*Bibliographical information*' subsections. They are arranged according to composers as far as these can be ascertained, since the attribution to composers is sometimes missing or uncertain, nor is it always clear to what extent a piece is a remake rather than a reprint.<sup>27</sup>

Since this study sketches the development of a specific story and its protagonists from antiquity into modern opera, it cannot discuss the broader question of how librettists and composers deal with ancient material and adapt it to their times more generally.<sup>28</sup> Yet, demonstrating the transformations of a single item over the course of time and the practices at work in a specific instance provides an illustration of more widespread processes.

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25 On the multiple creations on the basis of the same libretto and on different concepts of 'originality' see Gronda in Gronda / Fabbri 2000, XVII–XVIII; also Piperno 1998, 51; 2007, 149.

26 For a similarly pragmatic decision to privilege the earliest printed versions see Ketterer 2009, 19–20.

27 Quotations from the prints of librettos and dramatic texts in their original languages are given with the orthography and punctuation of the sources consulted without modernization. Translations into modern English have been added, which should help to identify any deviations from contemporary usage.

28 On this issue see Ewans 2007, with reference to operas based on Greek myth; Ketterer 2009, with reference to operas based on Roman themes.

## 1.2 Basis: the ancient sources and their reception in the Renaissance

The emergence of operas on topics taken from ancient history is connected with a general renewed knowledge of classical texts and the scholarly engagement with them since the Renaissance. Due to the intellectual and educational circumstances in this period, subject matter from the classical world was so familiar to a considerable section of the educated public that it could be exploited for a form of contemporary entertainment, and it was in this context that a tradition of Nero operas was inaugurated. Even though over the course of time further ‘sources’, for instance earlier operas on the same story or versions of it in other genres (e.g. the novel *Quo vadis?*; ch. 1.4; 2.21), became influential, and the background knowledge of the public changed, the main concepts continued to take their starting point from the ancient basis, albeit to a varying extent.

In the ancient world the story of Nero’s life and death, or selected aspects thereof, was narrated both in the pseudo-Senecan drama *Octavia* and in historiographical accounts, taken as the basis for later remakes of ‘history’.<sup>29</sup> In addition to offering particularly rich material, the description of Nero’s career thereby stands out among the stories about historical figures from antiquity that were taken up by later writers: in this case there exists a dramatic model for at least part of the story, since the pseudo-Senecan *Octavia* offers a paradigmatic structure and shows that events from Roman history can be presented in a dramatically effective manner. The impact of this classical drama can be felt from the first opera on the topic onwards (*L’inconorazione di Poppea*). Equally from the start, more events from the period of Nero’s reign than are mentioned in *Octavia* were incorporated into Nero operas. Information on those could be found in the works of ancient historiographers, mainly in the early second-century CE writings of the Roman authors Tacitus and Suetonius and also in the later history of the Greek historian Cassius Dio: their accounts provide further details on the sequence dramatized in *Octavia* as well as on other events throughout Nero’s entire career. That all these sources in combination could be relevant for later dramatic versions of the Nero story can be seen from the subtitle of Matthew Gwinne’s (1558?–1627) *Nero* (1603), one of the first historical dramas in England, which says about its sources “*collecta è Tacito, Suetonio, Dione, Seneca*” (‘assembled from Tacitus, Suetonius, Dio and Seneca’).

By their recurrence to ancient sources, depictions of Nero since the early modern period differ from medieval representations of Nero, where he appears in

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29 For modern biographies of Nero (based on the examination of all available evidence) see e.g. Grant 1970; Griffin 1984; Shotter 1997; Malitz 2005; Krüger 2012. – In current classical scholarship the reports transmitted from antiquity are approached with the necessary caution; it is acknowledged that they are not neutral ‘sources’, but have been shaped by the attitude and aims of their writers (on the sources on the Neronian period and their respective bias see e.g. Grant 1970, 254–257; Griffin 1984, 235–237; Shotter 1997, 106–110).

a variety of narratives and chronicles. Those works tend to give Nero a novel pseudo-historical function, for instance as the opponent of the Christians, or to tell a number of anecdotes, such as Nero opening his mother's body to see how he was born or his desire to get pregnant, which eventually produces a frog, based on material found in the *Legenda aurea* by Jacobus de Voragine (c. 1263/67).<sup>30</sup>

Generically, *Octavia* is the only completely preserved classical play that deals with events from Roman history, thus the only example of the Roman literary genre of *fabula praetexta*.<sup>31</sup> *Octavia* is now believed to be spurious (written by an unknown author) and is dated to the time after Nero's death, to the reign of Galba or Otho, the early or the late Flavian period or the time of Trajan (i.e. between 68 and 117 CE).<sup>32</sup>

*Octavia* dramatizes events that can be dated to 62 CE: in this year Nero (37–68 CE) repudiated his legitimate wife Octavia (39/40–62 CE), daughter of the emperor Claudius, who was later exiled and then killed, and married his long-time beloved Poppaea (30/32–65 CE), after having removed the opponents of this connection, killing his mother Agrippina (15–59 CE) in 59 CE and sidelining the influential advisers Afranius Burrus (d. 62 CE) and Seneca (c. 1 BCE – 65CE) in 62 CE. The plot of *Octavia* and its distribution over individual scenes can be summarized as follows (Fitch 2004, 501–503, with additions):<sup>33</sup>

*Scene*: Octavia and her Nurse lament her plight and the destruction of her family. The Nurse urges submissiveness toward Nero for safety's sake, but Octavia cannot overcome her repugnance toward him. – *Ode*: The chorus of citizens recalls how the Roman People long ago deposed tyrants; as a parallel to those tyrants' crimes, they recount how Agrippina was murdered on Nero's orders. – *Scene*: Seneca regrets his recall from peaceful exile [i.e. in Corsica in 41–49 CE, from where Nero's mother Agrippina recalled him as a mentor for her son], and charts the increase in human wickedness, which has now reached a zenith. On cue, Nero appears, ordering two executions. In the ensuing dialogue between Seneca and Nero the former argues that Nero would be more secure by showing mercy and thereby gaining popularity, but Nero insists that power must be maintained by terror and ruthlessness. Seneca warns that the People will not tolerate Nero's plan to divorce Octavia and marry Poppaea; Nero spurns the advice and sets the morrow as the wedding day. – *Scene*: Agrippina's ghost appears early on the wedding day to blight the marriage and prophesy Nero's downfall. – *Scene*: Octavia leaves the palace, hoping but doubting that she can survive the divorce. – *Ode*: The chorus decides to protest violently against Poppaea's

30 On representations of Nero in the Middle Ages see Fluch 1924, 7–8; Konrad 1966; Kern / Ebenbauer / Krämer-Seifert 2003, 420–424.

31 On this literary genre see e.g. Manuwald 2001; Kragelund 2002.

32 For various, more recent views on the date see Kragelund 1982; 2005, 69–78; Ferri 2003, 5–30; Smith 2003; Bonnet 2006; Boyle 2008, xiii–xvi.

33 See Fitch 2004 or Boyle 2008 for bilingual editions of *Octavia*, including the Latin text and a modern English translation.

preferment. – *Scene*: Next morning, Poppaea recounts an ill-omened dream she has just had; her Nurse attempts to interpret it favourably. – *Ode*: A secondary chorus of Poppaea's supporters likens her beauty to that of mythical paragons. – *Scene*: A messenger reports that the People are overthrowing statues of Poppaea and planning to attack the palace. – *Ode*: The secondary chorus warns that the rioters cannot hope to overcome the power of the Love god. – *Scene*: An enraged Nero determines to punish the riot by burning the city and begging the masses [i.e. an allusion to the fire of Rome in 64 CE]. He upbraids the Prefect for merely quelling the uprising, and orders him to deport and execute Octavia as its supposed instigator. – *Ode*: The chorus laments that the People's support can doom those it favours. – *Scene*: A lyric interchange between Octavia, who resigns herself to death, and the chorus, which recall the fates of other women of her family, and comments on Rome's destruction of its own.

While various questions of detail, such as problems of the text, possible act-divisions, issues of staging, authorship or date of composition, are still being debated among classical scholars, it is obvious from the main plot (and this alone is important in the present context) that *Octavia*, focusing on an event from recent Roman history (from the perspective of the poets and the original recipients), is closely related to its historical and cultural context by virtue of its topicality. In featuring motives and consequences of a love affair at the imperial court, *Octavia* demonstrates that, in such a context, they have immediate political repercussions: Nero's dismissal of Octavia deposes the rightful empress and the last representative of the Julio-Claudian line; at the same time Nero intends to have children with Poppaea and thereby to inaugurate a new dynasty. This is one of the reasons why the Roman populace, represented by the choruses, protests against these plans, since they threaten the traditional and established dynasty. Additionally, Seneca warns Nero that the position of an emperor demands a particularly responsible behaviour: rulers should take the needs of the People into account and not succumb to their own desires. Nero is unaffected by these admonishments and carries through his plans for his personal satisfaction, which leaves Octavia in distress and causes her exile and eventual death.

What is characteristic of the dramatic structure and message of *Octavia* is the combination of the presentation of a tyrant who is preoccupied with satisfying his desires by a marriage with his beloved with a plot that illustrates the political repercussions of such behaviour for the populace. This becomes particularly obvious in the dialogue between Seneca and Nero and also in comments by the first chorus; this connection is visualized clearly when the People react to Nero's repudiation of Octavia and his planned marriage with Poppaea in open rebellion and measures are taken against them. In the dialogue between Seneca and Nero, Seneca sketches a kind of constitutional monarchy as an alternative to Nero's tyrannical rule, which would allow for both the involvement of the People according to Republican tradition and a central government aiming for the welfare of the community. That Seneca is not isolated with his views is demonstrated by the behaviour of the prefect: he has been ordered by Nero to punish the rebels, but he

insists in conversation with Nero that killing the leaders is sufficient. Nero, however, ignores and dismisses any arguments by Seneca or the prefect: he does not hesitate to have Roman citizens, including his own mother, killed; he is concerned with punishing the People, whom he regards as impious and guilty of crimes. Hence Nero announces that Rome will soon go up in flames. This allusion to the fire of Rome in 64 CE is included as a threat for the future, so that the temporal and historical coherence is maintained and all events actually taking place during the stage action refer to 62 CE, with preceding or future ones just mentioned.

In accordance with its subject matter the main protagonists in *Octavia* are historical individuals. Besides, the play includes figures not historically attested, such as the nurses, who support Octavia and Poppaea respectively, the prefect and a messenger. These characters are fictional as individuals, but fit in with the historical framework in terms of their function. The mixture of historical and non-historical figures is partly a consequence of giving dramatic shape to a historical event and is a characteristic also found in Nero operas.

After a long period of neglect,<sup>34</sup> there has been an upsurge of interest in *Octavia* over the last couple of decades, which has led to several new editions, commentaries, studies and also one modern production at San Diego State University in spring 2006.<sup>35</sup> This performance proves that *Octavia* can be staged. It is, however, uncertain whether *Octavia* was ever given a full-scale production in antiquity. A fairly recent hypothesis claims that the play was first shown in the presence of Galba in the Theatre of Marcellus at the opening of the Plebeian Games on 4 November 68 CE and envisages a production of *Octavia* as it might have been staged in a Roman theatre in the first century CE in a section entitled 'Grand Opera'.<sup>36</sup> Such a precise dating cannot be ascertained for lack of evidence. Yet the implicit description of *Octavia* as an 'opera' interestingly connects the play with its later history.

As for *Octavia*'s reception, the questions of authorship and date have been scholarly problems since at least the 14th century, when Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406) voiced doubts on whether Seneca was the author of the tragedies and

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34 This was also caused by the presumed dramatic inferiority of the piece: see even the fairly recent assessment by Seita 2001, 103: "Tranne qualche momento non privo di drammaticità, nel complesso la pretesta à fallita. L'anonimo poeta s'era proposto l'obiettivo d'equiparare le figure storiche della sua opera a quelle che vediamo protagoniste di grandiosi miti in tragedie greche e latine. Senza dubbio, era un progetto ambizioso, ma l'esito non è stato all'altezza delle intenzioni per le modeste capacità letterarie dell'autore."

35 On the history of scholarship see Wilson 2003. – Modern works on *Octavia* include: Schmidt 1985; Sullivan 1985, 59–73; Sallmann 1998; Schubert 1998; Manuwald 2001, 259–339; Seita 2001; Ferri 2003; Smith 2003; Wilson 2003; Beck 2004; Codoñer 2004; Fitch 2004; Kragelund 2005; Bonnet 2006; Boyle 2008; Salles 2008.

36 See Wiseman 2001, 10, 14; 2004, 264–265.

*Octavia* in one of his letters (15 October 1371), after Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374) had already expressed uncertainty concerning this point (*Familiarum rerum libri* 24.5.17, 1 August 1348). However, as for the approach to and reception of individual plays in the Senecan corpus, there seems not to have been a noticeable distinction on the basis of different authorship in the medieval and early modern periods.<sup>37</sup> Poets, librettists and performers do not appear to have been worried by scholarly problems surrounding *Octavia*, but rather to have appreciated its dramatic construction and the precedent it set for turning ‘history’ into ‘drama’.

*Octavia* is the typological ancestor and starting point for all plays on historical subjects in the tradition of European theatre; not only is there just a single Roman play of this type, but there is no preserved Greek model either, apart from Aeschylus’ *Persae*.<sup>38</sup> Besides, Latin dramas seem to have been more influential than Greek ones in the early modern period because they were more easily accessible to a greater number of individuals. The impact of *Octavia* is already felt in one of the first Humanist tragedies: *Octavia* is said to have inspired Albertino Mussato’s (1261–1329) Latin tragedy *Ecerinis* (Padua 1315), which deals with an almost contemporary national subject, the fate and actions of the tyrannical ruler Ezzelino III da Romano (1194–1259). This drama is based on the Senecan corpus as a model in theme, style and metre; the dramatic presentation of contemporary politics and history as well as aspects of dramaturgy are reminiscent of *Octavia*.<sup>39</sup>

For the Renaissance period it is obvious that both scholarly and dramatic interest in Latin drama extended to *Octavia*: the Italian translation of the Senecan dramatic corpus by Lodovico Dolce (1508/10–1568) contained all ten pieces (*Le tragedie di Seneca tradotte da M. Lodovico Dolce*, Venezia 1560);<sup>40</sup> equally, the English translation of the *Tenne Tragedies* ascribed to Seneca (*Seneca, his tenne Tragedies, translated into Englysh*, London 1581) included *Octavia*, rendered into English by Thomas Nuce (c. 1545–1617).<sup>41</sup> In the same period *Octavia* was performed at Christ Church, Oxford, in 1588.<sup>42</sup> At this time the chronicle play had become popular in the wake of Thomas Legge’s (c. 1535–1607) *Richardus*

37 However, scholarship has focused on Seneca’s genuine tragedies (for studies on the reception of the tragedies see e.g. Jacquot 1964; Lefèvre 1978; Braden 1985; for an overview of the reception of Seneca see Morford 2010).

38 MacCallum (1910) 1967, 11: “And if this was true of the series as a whole, it was also true of the play, which, whatever may be said of the other nine, is certainly not by Seneca himself, the poorest of them all, with most of the faults and few of the virtues of the rest, *Octavia*, the sole surviving example of the *Fabula Praetexta*, or the Tragedy that dealt with native Roman themes. The *Octavia*, however, was not less popular and influential than its companions, and has even a claim to especial attention inasmuch as it may be considered the remote ancestress of the Modern Historic Play in general and of the Modern Roman Play in particular.”

39 See Boyle 2008, lxxvi (with further references).

40 See Rosand 2007a, 177–178.

41 See MacCallum (1910) 1967, 10–19.

42 See Boas 1914, 196, 389.

*Tertius* (performed at St John's College, Cambridge, in 1579), the first representative of its kind and one of the first history plays in England, and Christ Church had recently seen the production of Richard Eedes' (c. 1555–1604) *Caesar Interfectus* in 1582.

Matthew Gwinne's *Nero* (1603),<sup>43</sup> a slightly later university drama, a *tragoedia nova* written in Latin, applied the interest in historical drama to the Nero theme, on the basis of classical sources, both historiographical and dramatic;<sup>44</sup> the drama was presented as an improved substitute for the pseudo-Senecan *Octavia*.<sup>45</sup> Gwinne's drama was soon followed by tragedies on Nero in English: *The tragedie of Claudius Tiberius Nero, Rome's greatest tyrant*, by an anonymous author (1607); *The Tragedy of Nero*, by an anonymous author (1624); *The tragedy of Nero, Emperor of Rome*, by Nathaniel Lee (1675).

By the 1600s texts of the entire Senecan tragic corpus had become available in Europe (demonstrated by various editions since the late 15th century, in the wake of a large amount of late-medieval manuscripts), and translations into a number of European vernacular languages (including Italian) as well as commentaries had been published. Besides, Seneca's works had entered the school curriculum in a largely Classics-dominated education; this is reflected in numerous Neo-Latin treatises and school dramas in several European countries.

43 *Nero. Tragædia nova. Matthæo Gwinne Med. Doct. Collegij Diui Joannis Præcursoris apud Oxonienses Socio collecta à Tacito, Suetonio, Dione, Seneca* was entered in the Stationer's Register on 23 February 1603 (printed: London 1603; second edition: 1639), intended to be performed at St John's College, Oxford; another printed edition appeared later in the same year (modern edition: Matthew Gwinne, *Nero* (printed 1603). *Prepared with an Introduction by Heinz-Dieter Leidig*, Hildesheim / New York 1983 [Renaissance Latin Drama in England 13]; Latin text and English translation also available at: <http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/Nero/>, edited by D.F. Sutton [1997 / 2008]). – The full title acknowledges the play's debt to Seneca, which in this case is almost certain to include *Octavia* (see also Leidig 1983, 7). This is suggested, for instance, by the presence of Seneca as a character on stage, the appearance of the shadow of Agrippina and, above all, by the dedicatory poem (see n. 45 below).

44 Gwinne was the first Englishman to bring Nero on the stage (see Walter [1955] 1957, 268).

45 See the dedicatory poem, prefacing the drama, by John Sandsbury of St John's College, Oxford (Iohannes Sandsbury Ioannensis): *Lipsi, Neronem nunc habe, votis tuis / Oculisque dignum: quique puerilem putas / Octaviam illam, quam rudis mundus iubet / Senecae imputari, Iuste, praestentem loco / Substítue: Seneca sic enim iratus iubet. / Μετεμύχῳσιν ille millenam miser / Sensit, querelas antequam posset suas / Lingua referre propria; tandem tamen. / Ex ore Gwinni pristinum servat decus. / Gagere, Buchananane, nec Beza invade. / Videte; talis Seneca qui Gwinnus fuit. / Qui iudicas, fatere; qui nescis, tace.* – 'Lipsius, now you have a Nero worthy of your desires and your eyes. Since you think that *Octavia* which the unlearned world bids us ascribe to Seneca to be puerile stuff, Iustus, you can substitute the present work in its place. For thus commands angry Seneca. This poor man has experienced his thousandth soul-migration before being able to give his own tongue to his complaints. But at length let him retrieve his former glory through Gwinne's mouth. Gager, Buchanan, Beza, be not envious. Observe: Gwinne is as Seneca was. You who have judgment, confess it. You who are ignorant, keep still.' (trans. D.F. Sutton, adapted).

Senecan drama remained an important model for Renaissance tragedy. The famous Italian librettist Pietro Metastasio (1698–1782) even wrote an original tragedy modelled on Seneca (on a topic from *L'Italia liberata dai Goti* [1547/48] by Gian Giorgio Trissino [1478–1550]) at the age of fourteen. An earlier important figure is Giovanni Battista Giraldi (Cinzio) (1504–1573), who, among other works, wrote nine tragedies (some on figures from antiquity), whose style is reminiscent of Senecan tragedy. The growing interest in the character of Seneca and its philosophical doctrines due to the Neo-Stoic movement, promoted by the scholar, philosopher and political theorist Iustus Lipsius (1547–1606), who edited Seneca's works (Antwerpen 1605), as well as the subsequent 'Tacitism' ensured the continued popularity of *Octavia* (and of the historical period it represents) among the works of the Senecan corpus until a widespread neglect of Senecan tragedies in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The intellectual and ideological context in the late 16th century and beyond also favoured the reception of the historian P. Cornelius Tacitus (c. 55/56–120 CE). The accounts of Tacitus (and of other ancient historiographers) supplement and enrich the portrait of Nero and his wives that may be gained from *Octavia* (or vice versa). They provide information, for instance, on the following events in Nero's career that are taken up by some of the operas: Nero's accession to the throne with the help of his mother Agrippina after the death of his predecessor and adoptive father Claudius (54 CE); his increasingly problematic relationship with his mother and his arrangements to have her killed (59 CE); the fortune of Poppaea's former husband Otho, provincial governor and later emperor (in 69 CE); the influential role of freedmen and prefects at the royal court; Nero's relationship to foreign rulers such as the kings Mithridates, Tigranes or Tiridates; the fire of Rome, perhaps caused by Nero, and the subsequent prosecution of the early Christians (64 CE); the so-called Pisonian Conspiracy, when a number of noblemen under Piso's leadership conspired against Nero (65 CE); Seneca's Stoic suicide, after he had withdrawn from the imperial court because of his diminishing influence on Nero and had received the death sentence from the emperor (65 CE); Poppaea's death because Nero kicked his pregnant wife in the stomach (65 CE).

The main source for most of these events consists of the relevant books of Tacitus' *Annales* (c. 110–120 CE). This chronological presentation of the early Principate deals with Nero from book 13 onwards until the text breaks off during the account of the year 66 CE in book 16. Book 13 is devoted to the so-called *quinquennium*, the first five 'good' years of Nero's reign, while he was still under the influence of his advisers Seneca and Afranius Burrus. Books 14–16 turn to the terrible events in the subsequent years of Nero's rule, which are narrated partly as almost self-contained stories: these include the murders of his mother Agrippina and his wife Octavia (book 14), the fire of Rome and the prosecution of the Christians (book 15), the Pisonian Conspiracy and Nero's brutal retaliation

against the senatorial aristocracy, triggering, among others, the deaths of the writers Seneca, Lucan and Petronius (books 15–16).<sup>46</sup>

Although Tacitus had little impact in the late-antique and medieval periods, he came to be an important author during the Renaissance and beyond; he was regarded as a repository of information that revealed the workings of high politics at court. Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375) is the first humanist to demonstrate knowledge of Tacitus' writings: he seems to have used Tacitus' account of Seneca's death for his commentary on Dante's (c. 1265–1321) *Divina Commedia*. After medieval manuscripts of Tacitus' works had been discovered and the *editio princeps* had been published in 1470, most of Tacitus' writings were readily accessible. Tacitus' popularity is shown by a huge number of editions, commentaries and translations published between c. 1580 and 1680.

In this period of 'Tacitism', Tacitus was admired as a stylist, moralist, historian and observer of politics; he was appreciated for his psychological description of individuals, his interest in causes and motives of events and his analysis of politics. Iustus Lipsius (1547–1606) in particular was instrumental in promoting the recognition of Tacitus' historical works as significant texts: Lipsius produced an edition of Tacitus' works in 1574 and published a commentary on *Annales* in 1581. These books, in combination with Lipsius' work on Seneca, his endorsement of Neo-Stoicism and Tacitism as well as his treatises influenced by this ideological framework, helped to focus attention on Tacitus. Lipsius' role is demonstrated by Matthew Gwinne dedicating his *Nero* (1603) to him (see above).<sup>47</sup>

Another well-known source for details of Nero's career, particularly those not included in Tacitus' account such as Nero's third wife Statilia Messalina (from 66 CE), the uprising of the provincial governor and later emperor Galba to displace and eventually to succeed Nero (68 CE) and Nero's death, after he had fled from Rome to the countryside and had been abandoned by almost all his servants (68 CE), was the collection of biographies of emperors from Caesar to Domitian by C. Suetonius Tranquillus (c. 70–140 CE).

Suetonius has exerted an enormous influence on the biographical tradition since the Middle Ages, both as a model and as a source, and has been widely read since the Renaissance.<sup>48</sup> His works were frequently edited and commented on in

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46 On 'the figure of Seneca in Tacitus and the *Octavia*' see Taylor 2010, who, taking up earlier discussions, suggests that Tacitus, in composing the relevant sections of his history, was influenced by the dramatic shaping of events in *Octavia*; on Poppaea in Tacitus see Holztrattner 1995.

47 On the reception of Tacitus in the early modern period and on 'Tacitism' see e.g. von Stackelberg 1960; Etter 1966; Burke 1969; Schellhase 1976 (with an overview of previous scholarship on pp. ix–xii); on Neo-Stoicism in the circle of Lipsius see Morford 1991; on Tacitus in 17th-century Venice see Questa 1996.

48 For a brief overview of 'Suetonius and his influence' see Townend 1967.

this period: they saw two *editiones principes* in 1470, soon followed by numerous further editions; commentaries appeared from the 16th century onwards. Both Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374) and Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375) used Suetonius' works for their writings. Suetonius' biographies were convenient for writers dealing with early Roman emperors, since they offer a large amount of details concerning the lives of the emperors.

Suetonius' material is not organized chronologically (according to years) as the narrative in Tacitus (and also in Cassius Dio); he rather presents details arranged according to themes, though that still conveys the impression of a development of the figures described. In contrast to Tacitus, Suetonius (*Nero* 16.2) mentions Nero's persecution of the Christians among the positive points and the fire of Rome among the negative ones (*Nero* 38), so that the two issues are not connected. Suetonius' biography includes a description of Nero's constant efforts to appear as an accomplished singer and actor (*Nero* 20–25), an aspect that is disregarded in *Octavia*. While there are corresponding bits of information also in Tacitus (*Ann.* 14.14–16), Suetonius' report is more detailed (similarly with regard to Nero's sexual licentiousness towards men and women). That Nero, seeing the fire of Rome, put on his stage costume and sang the 'Sack of Troy', as Suetonius narrates (*Nero* 38.2; also Cassius Dio 62.18.1), is qualified as a rumour by Tacitus (*Ann.* 15.39.3). Equally, the view that Nero himself was responsible for setting the city on fire, as the *Octavia* poet suggests (*Oct.* 831–833) and Suetonius claims (*Nero* 38.1; also Cassius Dio 62.16–18), is reported more cautiously by Tacitus (*Ann.* 15.38.1).<sup>49</sup>

Of the later Greek sources the most important is probably the historiographical work of Cassius Dio Cocceianus (c. 155–235 CE). This Greek historian, who spent part of his life in Rome as a senator and a holder of other magistracies, wrote an annalistic history of Rome in originally 80 books, covering the period from the Trojan ancestor Aeneas to 229 CE, while this presentation is influenced by his experiences with imperial rule in his time. The sections on Nero do not survive in Cassius Dio's original narrative. They are substituted by excerpts of Byzantine writers who used Cassius Dio, Ioannes Xiphilinus in the eleventh century and Ioannes Zonaras in the twelfth century (books 61–63). These sources were only accessible to those who could read Greek until the Latin translation by Wilhelm Xylander (1532–1576) of 1558; thus by the time the first operas were written, this historiographical work was also available in Latin.

The historical sources agree in providing a rather negative portrait of Nero, as an unrestrained lover of members of both sexes, a debauched individual, a disloyal and unscrupulous family member, a self-styled artist, a cruel tyrant and an irre-

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49 On Suetonius' biography of Nero see e.g. Lounsbury 1991.

sponsible politician. This depiction of the emperor broadly matches his portrait in *Octavia*, although not all of these aspects are highlighted in the play. This portrayal has informed later treatments in various literary genres, with the noteworthy early exception of *Encomium Neronis* (publ. 1562) by the great Renaissance polymath Girolamo Cardano (1501–1576).<sup>50</sup>

The considerable number of editions, translations and commentaries of the classical texts mentioned indicate that there was an interest in ancient Rome and its ideas on government and philosophy at least from the early Renaissance onwards. Scholarly engagement with the relevant texts filtered through to basic knowledge about Roman history among literary people and audiences, even if not all of them would have read all the texts in the original. At any rate librettists must have engaged with the material in one way or another, and they have produced compositions that are not completely historically incongruous. They were obviously in a position to try their hands at dramatizing Nero's career, for which *Octavia* provided the basic model.

### 1.3 Background: features of 17th- and 18th-century opera

Since the development of the Nero theme in musical drama is part of the history of opera, this section offers a brief sketch of some essentials, focussing on the features and places that are particularly important with respect to operas on Nero. The first operatic version of the Nero story was performed in Venice, the birth-place of proper operatic activity; Venice therefore is the obvious starting point. Nero operas are then found elsewhere in Italy and in Germany, remaining limited to those two countries for the most part.

After various types of performances that combined poetry with musical elements, dancing, costumes and stage decoration, presented to select audiences on particular occasions, had become popular at many European courts (for instance, *Masques* in Britain or court operas in Italy since around 1600), it was in Venice in 1637 that for the first time in Europe a dedicated venue open to everyone paying the entrance fee was created for the presentation of a musico-dramatic form that came to be called opera.<sup>51</sup> Due to this city's unique economic, social and political structure, Venice became a major centre of operatic activity and development

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50 Latin text and German translation in Eberl 1994; Italian translation with notes in Dell'Utri / Cigada 1998. For a brief discussion in English see Eberl 1999.

51 To date the appearance of 'opera' precisely is notoriously difficult. The genre is generally assumed to have emerged in Florence in the late 16th century. The piece *L'Orfeo* (a *favola in musica* in a prologue and five acts), with a libretto by Alessandro Striggio (1573?–1630) and music by Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643), performed in the Palazzo Ducale in Mantua on 24 February 1607, is often regarded as the first major 'opera' (a court opera).

throughout the 17th and 18th centuries; over the course of time it exerted an influence on opera all over Europe.<sup>52</sup>

The evolution of opera in Venice could build on the fact that there were an infrastructure and an economic model for offering performances to the public. Since Venice did not have a princely court, the most influential individuals were the ruling patricians, who were also wealthy merchants. Beyond trade and banking, their economic enterprises extended to the arts: even before the emergence of opera, these noble families had begun to erect theatres for spoken performances. Consequently, leading families, such as the Tron, Vendramin, Grimani, Giustiniani and Contarini, became the most important backers of opera, while their respective financial means and attitudes were different. Beyond the obvious desire to enhance family prestige and to support the arts, their interest was also commercial: they invested in opera houses in a period when this art form was becoming popular. The fact that opera production was therefore run as a commercial enterprise in a competitive market meant that it had to take account of the tastes of the populace, the interests of different sections of the audience, the owners of the theatres and perhaps the dedicatees of the librettos.

The ‘first Venetian opera’, performed in 1637 upon the inauguration of the world’s first public opera house,<sup>53</sup> was *Andromeda* (to a text by Benedetto Ferrari [c. 1603/4–1681] and music by Francesco Manelli [1595/7–1667]); it was presented by a travelling troupe led by Benedetto Ferrari at the newly opened ‘Teatro Tron di S. Cassiano’, belonging to the Tron family. In 1639 a second venue, the ‘Teatro di SS. Giovanni e Paolo’, was opened for opera (by Giovanni Grimani); this was also inaugurated by Benedetto Ferrari and his company, while a second company under the direction of Francesco Cavalli (1602–1676) continued to perform at the ‘Teatro Tron di S. Cassiano’. The opening of the ‘Teatro di SS. Giovanni e Paolo’ initiated a long tradition of dominance by the Grimani family in Venetian operatic life: they embraced this new venture and actively pursued the creation and expansion of venues. Responding to increased demand, Giovanni

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52 This section is indebted to Rosand at *OMOb* and 1991; see also Kimbell 1991, 95–177; Rosand 2006a; for a concise sketch and a detailed chronological catalogue of operas (with references) see Selfridge-Field 2007; for the practical aspects of opera production in 17th-century Venice see Glixon / Glixon 2006; on the political, social and artistic history of Venice in this period see also Wolff 1937; McNeill 1974; Fabbri in *ENO Guide* 1992, 60–64; Selfridge-Field 1993; Muir 2007; on the ‘rise of opera’ and its intellectual background see also Donington 1981; Muir 2006; Rosand 2006b; on the beginnings of opera and its relationship to ancient (mythical) drama see Strohm 2010. – On Italian opera in the 18th century see Piperno 1998; Butler 2009; on the conventions of *dramma per musica* see Rosand 1991, 322–360; 2006a; on Italian *dramma per musica* in the 18th century see Strohm 1997, 1–29. For a list of Italian libretti prior to 1800 (with factual details) see Sartori 1990–1994; see also Allacci (1755) 1961; for Venetian librettos from 1637 to 1769 see the collection in the library of the University of California, Los Angeles, and its record on microfilm by Irene Alm (1993); for a selection of reprints see Brown 1979.

53 On the question of whether Venetian opera was actually ‘public’ or whether various systems of patronage operated see Glixon / Glixon 2006, 295–322 (with further references).

Grimani's sons Giovanni, Carlo and Vincenzo had a further venue, the 'Teatro di S. Giovanni Grisostomo', built in 1678. This institution was the largest, most luxurious and most ambitious in Venice, fitted out with lavish stage equipment and engaging singers of the highest quality.

The enthusiasm for the new genre of opera is indicated by this building activity, the erection of purpose-built opera houses in addition to the existing theatres: between 1637 and 1700 at least sixteen venues were built, and the number of operas produced ran into hundreds. Musical drama became a regular seasonal event: the main opera season was that of carnival, which ran from the feast of St Stephen on 26 December to Shrove Tuesday in the following spring (later extended); each opera house normally produced two operas of different character for the season. Eventually, a complex calendar of openings of new productions throughout the season was maintained by Venice's main venues, since a number of them were in operation at the same time.

So, although drama to musical accompaniment came to Venice later than to other Italian cities, it met with immediate and unprecedented success because of the particular conditions in this city: regular demand, reliable financial backing, a broad and predictable audience as well as an open and intellectual society. Yet the development was not linear: after operatic activity had flourished for about fifteen years since its inception, it started to decrease; from the end of the 1640s to the mid-1670s there were rarely more than two venues open in the same season, each presenting one or two operas (each opera being performed about 20 times on average). However, in the last twenty years of the 17th century operatic business gained momentum again, and about eight to ten operas were produced each year in four or five venues. This level remained fairly constant until the mid-18th century, when the spread of comic opera led to more and cheaper productions.

The decades around 1700 were a particularly active and vibrant period in musical and dramatic history. Significant changes taking place at the time may be described as a gradual evolution from late-Baroque drama towards a classical style, which affected both text and music. A new kind of opera libretto was emerging in which, among other things, characters make decisions based on reason or on moral issues that are more important than their amatory interests (exemplified in the librettos of Apostolo Zeno [1668–1750] and then in those of Pietro Metastasio [1698–1782]). From about 1700 virtuoso singers began to be dominant figures in the theatre and, accordingly, the names of the singers acquired increasing relevance; from that time onwards the cast of the first performance is frequently recorded in libretto prints.

Early Venetian operas tended to have mythical subjects, often based on the works of the Roman poet Ovid or on stories connected with Troy.<sup>54</sup> Inaugurated by *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (1642/43), operas on historical events were added.

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54 On the use of subject matter from ancient Rome in opera see Strohm 2008a.

That this tradition started with a story taken from the ancient world may be due to the special status and particular relevance of classical material at the time, which influenced both the character of the genre and the topics chosen for individual works. Plots based on episodes from Roman history or mythology remained popular, particularly in the period from about 1660 to 1730.<sup>55</sup> From the 1660s onwards, when historical operas became more common, librettists started to point out that the plots consisted of a combination of a historical basis taken from ancient sources, fictional additions and changes they had introduced, while they maintained, in the tradition of Aristotle (*Poet.* ch. 9), that the resulting plot was plausible even if not entirely historically accurate.<sup>56</sup>

Even though many stories were set in a world different from that of contemporary audiences, the form of presentation and the themes addressed reflected current social and political concerns; most operatic plots had a link to the history of Venice.<sup>57</sup> Often the subject matter taken from history or legend was connected with topical political issues by means of parallels or contrasts. For instance, heroes from any period of history tended to be depicted in positions of power or as displaying characteristic types of behaviour, which allowed audiences to identify with the figures on stage or to set themselves against them. In particular, even a republican society, as it existed in Venice in the 17th and 18th centuries, enjoyed watching tyrants and struggles between morality and vice at an imperial court on stage, so as to compare and contrast themselves with the circumstances shown.<sup>58</sup> Tales about Roman emperors were popular. The story of Nero and his wives proved especially suitable, since it can be made to show conflicts about political power in a number of respects: it presents a powerful male who regards his personal love relationships as more important than the welfare of the community, triggering reactions from the populace; and there are arguments and struggles over power within the family, between members of different generations or on account of love affairs. The events include a whole range of figures with

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55 See Vecchi 1976, 301: “Quanto all’argomento del dramma, è da notare che i temi di storia romana entrano di frequente nel repertorio melodrammatico del Seicento, come dimostrano le opere stesse scritte da Pertti per Venezia, specialmente i soggetti relativi a Nerone: dal grande Monteverdi in poi, fino al più recente dramma di G. C. Corradi, messo in musica da Carlo Pallavicino e rappresentato nel Teatro di S. Gio. Grisostomo l’anno 1679. La storia, comunque, vi è pretesto per tessere intrecci vari, cui il nome e la dignità dei personaggi devono dare autorevolezza e parvenza di realtà e di vicenda vissuta.”; Bianconi 1987, 186–189; Fabbri 2003, 203, 213; Strohm 2008a. – Religious history was never used as a source for opera librettos in Venice.

56 See Kimbell 1991, 135. – According to Kimbell, an influential figure in this process was the librettist Nicolò Minato (1630–1698), who set out these categories, for instance, in the preface to the opera *Artemisia* (1656; set to music by Francesco Cavalli [1602–1676]).

57 See Selfridge-Field 2007, 55.

58 Ketterer (2009, 23), however, comments that “the choice of Neronian history ... was not the most obvious for a Venice otherwise occupied in celebrating its own mythic origins”.

telling characteristics and references to key issues of good governance, which could easily be transferred to the Venetian Republic.

Because in Nero's case political issues are connected with the emperor's love relationships, these incidents feature several women in major roles; this facilitated adapting the story to the dramatic conventions, which required more or less equal numbers of male and female characters.<sup>59</sup> That in *Octavia* as a Roman *fabula praetexta* the role of gods is toned down (in comparison with mythical stories) facilitated its adaptation in the form of operas to a Christian environment, where the presence of pagan gods on stage required justification, as demonstrated by some of the librettists' prefaces. Additionally, some of the occupations inserted into the plot, such as making music or attending performances, reflect contemporary behaviour, which enabled audiences to empathize with the characters on stage.<sup>60</sup>

Over the course of time standard elements of the plot and the presentation of operas established themselves, with regard to, for instance, conventions applying to subject matter, dramaturgy, music, text and stage-design.<sup>61</sup> The most common type (and most general term) of musico-dramatic works in 17th- and early 18th-century Venice was *dramma per musica*, nowadays often referred to by the broad term 'opera' (besides particular varieties such as *tragedia per musica*, *pastorale*, *festa teatrale*, *scherzo* / *divertimento comico*, *melodramma per musica*, *dramma giocoso*, *opera bernesca*). A *dramma per musica* typically contains three acts and features (at least) two pairs of lovers. The lovers' adventures involve separation through a series of complications and eventual reunion. The action proper may be prefaced by a prologue spoken by mythical or allegorical characters, providing information on the opera's plot or aims. The first act presents the basic situation for the main plot (and any subplots) and tends to end in confusion; the second act further complicates the confusion, which reaches its climax during the third act and is resolved near the end, even as late as the final scene, to conclude with a happy ending. The first two acts frequently finish with dancing of some kind. In addition to confrontations, conflicts and love affairs between members of the same class, there are frequent scenes involving a mixture of social classes, such as the nurse giving advice to her 'foster-child', or featuring comic characters of lower social status.

A number of standard elements or scene structures appear in many operas (with variations), for example scenes with characters sleeping and dreaming,

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59 On this convention see Selfridge-Field 2007, 57.

60 On some of these issues see Rosand 2006; Heller 2007.

61 Yet one should bear in mind Strohm's (1985, 123) cautious remarks: "I also believe that there is no such thing as an all-embracing convention of Italian Baroque opera. The 'general patterns' mentioned above are already a dangerous abstraction; they vary from place to place, and change with the years, so that we have a dynamic, rather than a static unity of procedures, whose details are marked by contradictions and, indeed, individual choices."

figures appearing in disguise (e.g. dressed as someone of the opposite sex), letters getting into the wrong hands, overheard conversations, light servant scenes with ridicule and mockery or trickery and deceit. There is lavish use of machinery and other stage equipment as well as dancing; the cast is larger than in court operas to ensure an impressive production. As a result of a certain amount of standardisation, the challenge for producers was to create something new out of familiar, tried and tested elements and thus to maintain the audience's interest. Nero operas include elements such as multiple love affairs, comic characters, mocking scenes (for instance, of philosophers), sleep scenes or fishing scenes, temporary disguise of the identity of characters, appearances of ghosts and supernatural beings, play within the play (possibly including comments on opera and drama), happy ending (sometimes in contrast to the historical record), ballets, dances, sumptuous stage settings, elaborate costumes and spectacle assisted by stage machinery.<sup>62</sup>

In terms of practicalities, the arrangement of productions was the business of an impresario, who worked with the owners of the venue, the librettist, the composer and the performers; between these men there existed complex practical and political relationships, which are not entirely clear and may have differed according to the circumstances for each opera.<sup>63</sup> Originally, especially in Venice, all operas were new productions. A librettist could be commissioned or offer a ready-made text, which was then set to music by a composer, often at short notice; in some cases there was interaction between the two artists, in others they seem not to have known each other. The composer could be required to attend rehearsals and be available for last-minute adaptations. Alongside the performances, libretto texts were often printed, frequently dedicated to dukes, earls or other noble and public figures, which adds another entity to the complex web of connections between people interested in an opera's production. As a consequence, librettos enjoyed an independent existence of their own, did not remain as ephemeral as opera scores or performances and could reach an audience beyond those present in the theatre; after the performances some librettists edited the texts for publication or for editions of their collected works. The printed versions often included, besides the dedication, an 'Argomento' and / or an address 'Al lettore', in which the librettists might talk about issues such as the plot, their intentions and aims, their ancient and more recent sources, the amount of fictional material, the choice of title or collaborators in the production of the piece.

It was unusual for the same opera to be produced in more than one season in the same venue. However, after the original run, librettos could travel to places outside Venice, where they were set to music again. This was the easiest way of

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62 On the adaptation of stories from ancient Rome to contemporary conventions and concerns see also Ketterer 2009, 3, 7, 10. – Only Busenello's version has a proper mythical prologue. Generally, prologues were not as common in Venice as they were elsewhere and tended to be relevant to the plot (see Clover 1985, 289).

63 For further details connected with these issues see Glixon / Glixon 2006.

creating something new for the respective place and allowed for the necessary alterations for the revival, required by the availability of musicians and singers and by the set-up of performance spaces. Most early Italian operas on the Nero theme were produced in Venice (with its many venues) in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. The more popular and successful operas were restaged outside Venice in theatres throughout Italy (e.g. Naples, Bologna or Milan) and sometimes also abroad. As was common practice at the time, operas were regularly adapted to the particular conditions and requirements of each venue, including new music if necessary.<sup>64</sup> Although the social and political context of opera performances outside Venice could be rather different, this seems not to have interfered with adopting the Venetian repertoire.

Beyond Italy, first performances of Nero operas are mainly attested for Germany: since for a long time Venice had been a cultural hub and an important trade centre, it had connections not only with many places in Italy, but also with courts and cities abroad. Perhaps owing to the alliance with the Habsburgs and to military connections of some German courts, it seems to have been in close contact with central Europe. For instance, composers and other individuals involved in the opera business such as impresarios or musicians moved around and were active at courts and in cities in north and north-eastern Germany as well as in Venice. This situation must have facilitated a regular and swift exchange of libretto prints and scores as well as of performance conventions and musical styles. Several musicians and composers gained experience in Germany before going to Italy, such as Georg Friedrich Händel, whose later works exploit themes and melodies that he had originally encountered in Germany.

Most of the German Nero operas were composed for the opera in Hamburg, the first public opera house outside Italy (1678), a purpose-built structure on a grand scale, based on the architectural model of the 'Teatro di SS. Giovanni e Paolo' in Venice. In the 17th and 18th centuries the 'Oper am Gänsemarkt' in Hamburg was one of the leading and most progressive opera houses in Germany, and it seems to have imitated Venetian conventions to a great extent.<sup>65</sup> The period from 1678 to 1738 saw the performances of nearly 300 different plays.

The city of Hamburg was the only major German town that had survived the Thirty Years War almost unharmed; it therefore enjoyed an enormous prosperity

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64 On the diffusion of opera in Italy (including changes to librettos) see Bianconi 1987, 190–204.

65 On German opera in the 18th century see Maurer Zenck 2009. – On opera in Hamburg see e.g. Schulze 1938; Wolff 1957; Brockpähler 1964, 193–211; Zelm 1975, 24–28; Buelow 1978; 1993; Marx 1978; 1981; Meyer 1980, vol. 4; Zelm 1981; Bianconi 1987, 220–237; Dean / Knapp 1995, 38–47; Koch 2000, 22–23; Warrack 2001, 34–62; Drauschke 2004, 14–15; Jahn 2005; Schröder 2006; Gauthier 2010. For information on Hamburg librettos see Marx / Schröder 1995; for a selection of reprints see Meyer 1980; on the libretto and musical style see Lynch 1979.

of a large middle class, being a centre of travel and commerce as well as of diplomacy and intelligence. Hence the opera house attracted a mixed and cosmopolitan audience, consisting of all ranks of local society, along with foreign visitors. The Hamburg opera was not a true 'citizen opera', since it was initiated and supported by the aristocracy. Still, opera in Hamburg was a business aiming for profit, run privately by respected members of the upper classes. The city council exerted a kind of censorship, making sure that librettos did not contain material that might be politically or religiously contentious. In fact, operatic life in Hamburg had started with an extended vehement argument among religious leaders and town officials about the moral decency of opera and theatre, and thus whether such performances were justified, until in 1688 a definition of opera was found that allowed both sides to accept the opera business.

Because the opera house was open to everybody in principle, there was a guaranteed audience; at the same time its diverse composition and the resulting different interests influenced the subjects of operas as well as the relative share of educational, entertaining and presentational elements: a relatively high percentage of entertaining elements is often attributed to the role of dukes and patricians, whereas educational aspects and political themes are thought rather to gear towards middle-class citizens, reflecting their everyday experiences. Overall, a mixture of a display of heroic attitudes, elaborate spectacle (including dancing), broad farce as well as moral or political messages seems to have been the form of opera preferred by audiences in Hamburg. Such preferences are also obvious in the selection and adaptation of foreign operas.

The various and partly conflicting expectations of members of the audience could clash with the literary aims of librettists; still, there was significant artistic freedom in the choice of topics. Moreover, although Hamburg did not have a university until the nineteenth century, it could boast a large and strong intellectual community, based on the well-known Latin schools in the city, likely to have constituted the bulk of the audience. Accordingly, librettists could expect an educated public, and operas shown in Hamburg covered a wide range of subject matter, taken from Greek mythology, Roman legend, Biblical stories or historical plots from Italian, French, Spanish and German sources. After a period of predominance of mythical operas (up to c. 1704), due to the influence of Venetian opera, dramas drawing on historical subjects became popular in Hamburg during the first decades of the 18th century. A particular characteristic of Hamburg was that the repertoire also featured operas on contemporary local history as well as plots based on stories from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.<sup>66</sup> Still, a large number of operas dealt with ancient or medieval history. Most of the operas included comments on current political circumstances; however, those were not made directly, but via the representation of mythical or historical figures.

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66 See e.g. Marx 1978, 22–23; Meyer 1980, 4.65–66; Buelow 1993, 197; Schröder 2006, 197.

The vibrant musical life in the city, which was not restricted to fixed times within the year as the carnival in Venice, attracted a number of famous librettists, composers and musicians. The important role of Hamburg in this period is further demonstrated by the fact that librettists working there had literary aspirations and prefaced the prints of their librettos with extensive introductions. In these they might talk about the subjects and sources of their operas, their chosen way of presentation, their views on opera against the background of ancient poetics of the theatre as well as of Italian, French and English models in spoken theatre and opera. These prefaces seem to address the audience as a whole; in fact, however, they presumably appeal to the more educated classes and are intended for study at home (in the tradition of learned commentaries on works of other literary genres) instead of being read during the performance. This context produced, for instance, Barthold Feind's (1678–1721) *Gedancken von der Opera* ('*Thoughts on Opera*') (1708), the most influential and most important theoretical treatise on German Baroque opera from this period.<sup>67</sup>

As the published librettos show, conventions for opera titles were gradually established in Hamburg: initially, a title was based on the name of the opera's protagonist, usually specified by an adjective indicating the person's main characteristic (e.g. Feind / Keiser, *Die edelmuechtige Octavia*). Gradually double titles became more common, combining an interpretation to the story with the main character's name (e.g. Feustking / Händel, *Die durch Blut und Mord erlangete Liebe, oder: Nero*).<sup>68</sup> Other conventions and elements close to requirements were shared with those of contemporary Italian opera: operas consist of love intrigue and visual spectacle, display comic elements and lead to a happy ending. The texts were mostly in German, but they often included arias in Italian (since Hinrich Hinsch's and Reinhard Keiser's *Claudius* of 1703).

A few of the Nero operas were adapted for the German town of Leipzig:<sup>69</sup> travelling theatre companies used to perform at the annual commercial fairs in Leipzig and, by the end of the 17th century, there was some musical theatre at the university. Since Leipzig (like Hamburg) did not have a resident court, the opening of an opera house was not triggered for that reason. Hence the initiative came from individuals producing operas: in 1693 the 'Kapellmeister' Nicolaus Adam Strungk (1640–1700) managed to obtain permission from the new elector at Dresden, Johann Georg IV, to arrange for an opera company to perform at Leipzig during the fairs. Strungk had extensive experience in opera due to previous stays in Vienna, Hannover and Hamburg. He had a new theatre built in Leipzig, the 'Opernhaus am Brühl': it opened on 8 May 1693 during the Easter Fair

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67 For an English version see Bianconi 1987, 311–326; on Feind and his theoretical writings see Hsu 1976; Flaherty 1978, 53–65; Gauthier 2005.

68 See Schulze 1938, 19–20; Zelm 1975, 24.

69 On the Leipzig opera see e.g. Brockpähler 1964, 251–259; Stauffer 1993; Bauman / Härtwig at *OMO*.

with a performance of his own *Alceste* in the presence of the elector. In the same year 1693 Strungk's *Nero* was shown in Leipzig's new opera house (ch. 2.4).

From the start, opera in Leipzig was linked to the annual fairs, which provided favourable conditions. Hence, the opera ran successfully for about a couple of decades until it gradually started to decline and was eventually closed in 1720. During its creative period local composers, local performers and mostly German texts became characteristic of the Leipzig opera with its audience of wealthy citizens, university students and fair visitors. The surviving librettos show a preference for both mythical and historical themes as well as comic subjects; the music to most of the repertoire is lost.

#### 1.4 Ubiquity: the artistic reception of the Nero story

This study focuses on librettos of Nero operas and thus covers a substantial section of the reception of the ancient sources on Nero and Octavia, but obviously still only some of it: exciting details that survive from antiquity on the period of Nero's reign as well as on his love affairs, his tyrannical deeds and his personality have established Nero as a convenient protagonist for numerous works of a wide range of literary and performative genres, such as novels, dramas or films. Some notes on these will contribute to sketching the continuing and widespread reception of the Nero theme, since the librettos, being part of this development, not only interact with ancient sources and earlier librettos, but are also linked to other manifestations of the reception of this topic (as the examples of other performative genres paradigmatically presented in ch. 3 show).

The popularity of the Nero story is illustrated by figures for relevant dramatic pieces (including operas and other kinds of stage performances):<sup>70</sup> a total of almost 100 dramatic pieces dealing with Nero has been identified in world literature.<sup>71</sup> Even though such figures are not entirely accurate, particularly since they

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70 For a list of "Ouvrages lyriques, chantés, musicaux, sur des thèmes romains de 1800 à nos jours" see Porte 1987, 582–615.

71 At the beginning of the 20th century the following list was drawn up: 26 items in Italy, 14 in France, 13 in Germany, 12 in England and 'America', 7 in Spain and Portugal, 1 in Belgium, 2 in Denmark, 6 in Sweden, 4 in Russia and 4 in Greece; out of these, operas, musical plays and melodramas account for 12 of the Italian pieces, 6 of the German ones, 1 of the English / American ones and 2 of the Russian ones (Mühlbach 1910, 7–9). Later counts of dramas, operas and ballets have yielded the following result: 4 pieces in England, 1 in Spain, 11 in Italy, 2 in France, 6 in Germany in the 17th century, 12 pieces in Italy, 3 in France, 1 in Spain, 2 in Germany in the 18th century, 13 pieces in France, 14 in Italy, 7 in Germany, 3 in Spain, 1 in England, 3 in Greece, 3 in Russia, 4 in Sweden and 1 in Denmark in the 19th century (Walter [1955] 1957, 268–270; see also Jakob-Sonnabend 1990, 186–187; Flury 2001, 157). Gianini (1906, VII–X) gives 39 dramatic works in Italy, including spoken and musical dramas, from Busenello to Boito; as he (1906, 135) notes, Nero has been portrayed in all sorts of dramatic

depend on the underlying definitions and the accessibility of material, they give an indication of the spread of the Nero story. The numbers indicate that the engagement with events connected with Nero flourished in literary and musical genres during extended periods, particularly in the 17th, 19th and 20th centuries, and in a wide range of countries, languages and formats. While the topic was taken up in most European countries and in the USA, there is a clear dominance of musical pieces in Italy, followed by Germany and France.

In terms of genre, besides opera, the material is particularly prominent in spoken drama, but also appears in tales, novels, romances, poetry, pantomimes, brief musical compositions, ballets and films. In the genre of spoken drama the Nero story took off at about the same time as in opera or slightly earlier (starting with Matthew Gwinne's Latin *Nero* in 1603, soon followed by Nero dramas in English).<sup>72</sup> Since the 19th century the newly popular genre of the novel has been catching up, with a significant number of works in the second half of that century and a large number of works in total. At the end of the 19th century there were even circus shows on the subject of Nero.<sup>73</sup>

Nowadays, the most common shape of new adaptations is in the form of films for cinema or television, an art form that was obviously not included in earlier studies and surveys.<sup>74</sup> In this genre too Nero is one of the most popular Roman emperors, and there are dozens of films from the early 20th to the early 21st century in which the figure of Nero plays a main role.<sup>75</sup> Although these may look very different from 17th-century operas, they share the characteristic that the story is given a dramatic shape with dialogues and musical accompaniment. What is noteworthy is that again the Nero story is present at the start of the genre: within a few months of the creation of moving images, a short piece appeared in

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forms. Callegari (1891, 3–15 = 1125–1137, 334–338 = 1457–1460) lists 43 dramas, operas and similar works up to the 19th century and 69 further ones for the 19th century, some of which, however, are no longer traceable or have been lost. Bustico (1909) mentions at least 42 operas and dramas on Nero from Italy and at least 12 from other countries. For a brief discussion of dramas and operas featuring Nero see also Engel 1901; Fluch 1924; for an overview of spoken dramas on Nero in the early modern period up to Lohenstein (ch. 3.1; 3.2) see Mundt 2005, 615–627; for a summary of the development of the Nero theme see Frenzel 2005, 669–672.

72 These dramas include, for example, Jean Racine's *Britannicus* (1669), which deals with the early stages of Nero's reign and his accession to the throne. This drama, like two earlier Agrippina dramas (Thomas May, 1628; Daniel Casper von Lohenstein, 1665), is not named after Nero, while most dramatic pieces have Nero's name in the title (on Nero in Italian drama see Gianini 1906).

73 See e.g. Wyke 1997, 119; Pucci 2011, 62.

74 For a list of novels and films on Nero see Aziza 1999; for lists of literary works, particularly novels, mainly from the 20th century, comic strips and films on Nero see <http://www.peplums.info/pep13a.htm>.

75 For overviews of films starring Nero see Solomon 2001, 79–80; Lindner 2007, 112–113; esp. Pucci 2011; for discussion see Wyke 1997, 110–146. On 'Nero as performer' in opera and film see Dahm 2009.

which Nero was shown trying out poison on his slaves (*Néron essayant des poisons sur des esclaves*, 1896). The first experiment in the screening of Roman history (in Italy) was a one-reeler entitled *Nerone* (1909), which features Nerone killing his mother, rejecting his wife and persecuting the Christians.<sup>76</sup> This choice of topic and the way in which it was initially presented may be explained by the fact that the new genre of historical film emerged from the tradition of historical novels (including the bestseller *Quo vadis?* [1895] by Henryk Sienkiewicz) and plays as well as other performance types in the 19th century, all featuring Nero. Only somewhat later was a characteristically cinematic format for the depiction of Nero and his story developed, often dated to Enrico Guazzoni's *Quo vadis?* (1912), whose presentation employed specific cinematographic techniques.

Since the same versions of the Nero story or similar motifs (such as complications arising from the presence of foreign kings at Nero's court in Rome) appear in different genres, inter-medial exchanges between them or adoptions of special motifs from one genre to another have taken place; yet it is impossible to determine the sources or the chain of influence in each instance. Equally it is often uncertain to what extent later poets and scriptwriters have made direct use of the ancient texts. Hence the material may have come directly or indirectly from the ancient sources (or a combination of the two), it may have been mediated by earlier works in the same or other genres, and the shaping of the plot or particular ways of presentation in influential pieces might have played a role.

In some cases, however, specific inter-medial exchanges can be identified: for instance, the drama *Nerone* (1871) by Pietro Cossa (ch. 3.10) provides the basis for two *Nerone* operas, those by the librettists Attilio Catelli (1888; ch. 2.18) and Giovanni Targioni-Tozzetti (1935; ch. 2.22). A particularly telling example of cross-generic reception is the development of the *Quo vadis?* story: the novel *Quo vadis?* (1895) by Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846–1916) was soon turned into a Spanish zarzuela (a kind of operetta) *¿Quo vadis?*, first performed in Madrid on 28 December 1901 (published in 1902), to a text by Isidro Sinesio Delgado García (1859–1928) and music by Ruperto Chapí (y Lorente) (1851–1909). Later the material was developed into a five-act opera entitled *Quo vadis?* (1908/09; ch. 2.21), to a libretto by Henri Cain (1859–1937) and music by Jean(-Charles) Nougues (1875–1932). Several films and TV series followed.<sup>77</sup> With the recent musical *Quo vadis?* (first performed in Trier in 2005) by Gerold Theobalt (b. 1957; libretto and texts of songs), Manfred Knaak (music) and Konstantin Wecker (b. 1947; songs) (after an idea by Gerhard Weber and Peter Oppermann),

76 See <http://www.silentera.com/PSFL/data/N/Nerone1909.html>; [http://movieshive.com/movie/Nerone\\_\(1909\)](http://movieshive.com/movie/Nerone_(1909)).

77 On the versions of 1912, 1925, 1951, 1985 and 2001 see Scodel / Bettenworth 2009.

the history of the adaptation of the novel has returned to the musical genre, while its character has developed with the times.<sup>78</sup>

As in the case of opera, works on Nero in other genres cover the whole range of events associated with Nero's character and his reign. The way in which the story is presented or has been modified is informed by the contemporary framework, so that connections to the time of composition can be seen or be pointed out and tastes and expectations of audiences in each context are satisfied.<sup>79</sup>

Like the opera librettists, authors of works of other genres featuring Nero build on the essential historical characters, while shaping the story with poetic freedom or even laying claim to such a procedure. Hence they may combine historical events from different periods in Nero's reign and connect them in novel ways for the purposes of their own versions; they may also add fictional or pseudo-historical characters to the historical basis, thereby creating new plot elements, multiplying love affairs or changing historically attested family relationships.<sup>80</sup> Just as in opera, these pieces tend to combine situations at the imper-

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78 On this musical see [http://www.theatertexte.de/data/ahn\\_und\\_simrock/702487174/show](http://www.theatertexte.de/data/ahn_und_simrock/702487174/show). – The drama *The Sign of the Cross* (1895) by Wilson Barrett (1846–1904) has a plot that resembles that of the contemporary novel *Quo vadis?*, although the ending is different; this piece too gave rise to a film adaptation under the same title (1932, directed by Cecil B. DeMille [1881–1959], screenplay by Waldemar Young [1878–1938] and Sidney Buchman [1902–1975]).

79 At the end of the 20th century (1994) Peter Lund (b. 1965) and Niclas Ramdohr (b. 1967), in an operatic piece entitled *Nero Kaiserkind – eine Art Oper* ('Nero, imperial offspring – a kind of opera'), have presented the story as a mixture of historical soap opera, including parallels to present-day problems, and of a study in deep psychology, explaining Nero's fortune by his inborn nature and his upbringing (see [http://www.theatertexte.de/data/litag\\_theaterverlag/4184321/show](http://www.theatertexte.de/data/litag_theaterverlag/4184321/show); <http://peter-lund.de/stuecke/nero/kurz.htm>; <http://peter-lund.de/stuecke/nero/leseprobe.pdf>).

80 See e.g. Ernst Eckstein, *Nero. Ein Roman*, 3 vols., Leipzig 1889 (English translation: *Ernst Eckstein, Nero. A Romance*. Translated from the German by Clara Bell and Mary J. Safford, 2 vols., New York / London 1889), in the preface 'Zum Eingang' (vol. 1, p. VI): "Noch sei hier erwähnt, daß die Ereignisse, die sich in Wahrheit auf einen erheblich längeren Zeitraum verteilen, aus leicht ersichtlichen Gründen zusammengedrängt worden sind. Auch sonst finden sich kleine Abweichungen von der Chronologie, die nicht über Gebühr auffallen werden. Für diese und andere Punkte – insbesondere für die innere Motivierung der geschichtlichen Vorgänge – nehme ich selbstverständlich ganz die gleiche Freiheit in Anspruch, die der Dramatiker, einem historischen Stoff gegenüber, längst als sein unbestreitbares Recht betrachtet. Uebrigens wird ein genaueres Studium der einschlägigen Literatur den Beweis liefern, daß gar manche „Kühnheit“, die den Leser anfänglich überrascht – so z.B. die Intimität der Poppäa Sabina mit der Phönicierin Hasdra, die Beziehungen Seneca's zu dem Fanatiker Nicodemus, die Genesis der Christenverfolgung u.a. – nicht so ganz in der Luft schwebt, sondern durch die Berichte der alten Autoren und die neue und neueste Kritik vielfach getragen wird." – 'It need not be mentioned here that the events, which actually are spread over a much longer period of time, have been compressed for easily discernible reasons. Generally, one will find minor deviations from the chronology, which should not be noticeable too much. With regard to these and other details – in particular the internal motivation of the historical developments – I claim the same liberty

ial court in different phases of Nero's career; while Nero is the dominant personality and there is a focus on his relationship to the people around him, the general political situation and the effect of Nero's rule on the populace are also included, which is demonstrated, for instance, by Nero's treatment of the early Christians or the fire of Rome.

Even though Nero bears certain characteristics that mark him out as 'Nero', this figure does not appear in a uniform manner (just as in the operas). For a variety of aspects from different phases of his life are highlighted and / or combined: Nero can be presented as a brutal tyrant, who does not care for the lives of human beings and even has his own mother killed, who sacrifices the city and the livelihood of its inhabitants for the sake of his building programme, who abandons and selects women according to his passions and impulses or who appears as an artist eager for applause, but also, at the end of his life, as a helpless and destitute individual who does not have the courage to kill himself without assistance. The name of Octavia, who was brought to the fore in the first dramatic version, the classical Latin play *Octavia* (rather than Nero), is mentioned in the title of a significantly smaller number of pieces, but there are both dramas and novels that do so.

Besides the emperor Nero as protagonist and the women with whom he is attested to have had relationships (Claudia Acte, Octavia, Poppaea Sabina, Statilia Messalina), his mother Agrippina as well as his tutor and adviser Seneca are among the characters who appear in different set-ups in pieces of all genres beyond opera. Agrippina, due to her desire for power, her efforts in bringing Nero on the throne and her devious tactics to achieve her goals, is often a significant figure in the plot. By contrast, Seneca's role frequently is not particularly prominent. Yet he was involved in Nero's political activities during the first part of his reign, he was regarded as the author of the drama *Octavia*, and he appears in this piece as the moral counterpart to Nero. In line with this, Jean-Marie Souriguère de Saint-Marc (1763–1837) opens the print (which, however, does not give the author's name) of the tragedy *Octavie* (1806) with an address to Seneca, where he characterizes the subsequent play as a tribute to Seneca, apologizes for his audacity and explains that he has ventured to bring Seneca on stage together with Octavia and to set the philosopher's Stoic wisdom against his unworthy pupil.<sup>81</sup>

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that the dramatist, when dealing with a historical subject, has regarded as his unassailable right for a long time. Besides, closer study of the relevant literature will produce proof that some 'audacious' elements, which may startle the reader initially – such as, for example, the intimacy of Poppaea Sabina with the Phoenician woman Hasdra, Seneca's relationship with the fanatic Nicodemus, the genesis of the persecution of the Christians – are not entirely hanging in the air, but are frequently confirmed by the reports of the ancient authors and by recent and most recent criticism.'

- 81 See [Jean-Marie Souriguère de Saint-Marc], *Octavie, Tragédie en cinq actes et en vers*, Représentée sur le Théâtre Français, le 9 Décembre 1806, Paris 1806, address 'A Sénèque' (pp. i–iv): "Ombre illustre d'un grand homme, reçois ce faible et respectueux tribut de mes veilles.