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THE PORTRAYAL OF SENECA IN THE *OCTAVIA* AND IN TACITUS' *ANNALS*

ABSTRACT. Pigoń Jakub, The Portrayal of Seneca in the *Octavia* and in Tacitus' *Annals*

The paper examines the representation of Seneca in two literary works of the late 1st and early 2nd centuries AD, the anonymous tragedy *Octavia* and the *Annals* by Tacitus. In the *Octavia* Seneca appears as the emperor Nero's upright but unhappy teacher trying in vain to inculcate salutary advice to his master. There is no question of his being responsible for the crimes of Nero; the picture of him drawn in the play is wholly favourable. The portrayal of Seneca in Tacitus' *Annals* is more complex and nuanced, and only seldom does the historian give his own views about Nero's advisor. However, it would be wrong to suppose that Seneca is harshly criticised by Tacitus.

Keywords: Seneca the Younger; *Octavia Praetexta*; Tacitus; Nero; characterisation in literature; Roman literature (1st and 2nd cent. AD); Roman Empire

Seneca the Younger as a man, philosopher, statesman and writer, was judged by his contemporaries and posteriors in many various ways, arousing great emotions (both positive and negative) – and leaving few indifferent. I have written elsewhere about the way he was presented in the Roman literature of the Early Empire (from Seneca the Elder to Aulus Gellius).¹ Here, I would like to take a closer look at two texts particularly important in the history of the early reception of Seneca – an unknown author's tragedy *Octavia* (probably written right after Nero's death in June 68 or in the 70s of the 1st century²), and Cornelius Tacitus' historical work, the *Annals* (usually dated to the second decade of the 2nd century). Despite the time gap between these two texts, as well as the fact that they belong to two different literary genres, it would be useful, I think, to consider them side by side in one paper – if only for the fact that in no other

¹ Pigoń 2009–2012, 83–100.

² The question of dating is briefly discussed by A.J. Boyle (2008, XIV–XVI). The date of the play's composition is sometimes shifted to the rule of Domitian (81–96); thus Ferri 2003, 5–30 (with a detailed presentation of other hypotheses). Following an overwhelming majority of scholars, I assume that the *Octavia* is not (contrary to the evidence of the group A manuscripts) authored by Seneca himself. For an opposite view, see e.g. Giancotti 1983.

literary text of that period so much attention was paid to Seneca. Moreover, it is not ruled out that Tacitus knew the *Octavia* and some even scholars believe that he might have derived inspiration from this work in sketching his own picture of Seneca in the *Annals*.

I

The *Octavia* is the only entirely preserved Roman play which can be classified as *fabula praetexta* – a tragedy of indigenous subject matter portraying important historical events and introducing real characters on the stage (as opposed to mythological tragedies patterned on Greek works).³ The work presents the last days of Octavia, Claudius' daughter by Messalina and Nero's first wife whom he abandoned, and later killed, marrying Poppaea Sabina. These events took place in the year 62 over several months, but the anonymous author only places them within three days. One of the stage characters is the emperor's former teacher Seneca; he appears on stage in Act II, first in a monologue (377–436), and then talking to Nero (441–589).⁴ In total, the monologue and the dialogue take 209 lines, i.e. over 20% of the whole text. Significantly, both scenes featuring Seneca are placed precisely in the middle of the play; undoubtedly, the author was intent on highlighting this character. However, it is not a purely formal “centrality” of Seneca resulting from the structure of the text. What is more important is the fact that it is the conversation with his former teacher that stirs the emperor to action that will finally lead to Octavia's death (in earlier parts of the play, Nero's divorce with Octavia and marriage with Poppaea are referred to as something that may happen, but the emperor has not yet made a decision). Seneca's dialogue with Nero is therefore an important turning point in the plot.⁵

Let us take a brief look at the monologue. It is recited by a man who is full of forebodings both regarding his own fate and that of the entire humanity. Already in the first sentence, a rhetorical question to Fortune, there appears a motif of the fall (377–380):

Quid, impotens Fortuna, fallaci mihi
blandita vultu, sorte contentum mea
alte extulisti, gravius ut ruerem edita
receptus arce totque prospicerem metus?

³But the generic identity of the *Octavia* raises some doubts. For a full discussion, see Manuwald 2001, 261–305.

⁴A detailed analysis of both scenes featuring Seneca is the main topic of a book by F. Bruckner (1976).

⁵This (as well as the central position of both scenes featuring Seneca in the play) is pointed out by M. Armisen-Marchetti (1998, 198).

This obviously refers to the elevated position held by Seneca at the imperial court – he continues to be (at least seemingly) one of the most important persons in the state, but this rising to the heights of power is extremely dangerous, as it may end up in disaster any time. Therefore, carries on Seneca, he was much better off in exile in Corsica, where he could freely indulge himself in contemplating the world, watching the sky and the stars.⁶ However, the mention of the sky leads him to a further pessimistic thought – the cosmic catastrophe, the heavenly firmament falling down onto the earth and crushing wicked humanity (“tunc adest mundo dies / supremus ille, qui premat genus impium / caeli ruina”, 392–394). Thus, here we have again the motif of the fall (*ruerem* ~ *ruina*), this time one that is understood literally. An important point is that the author of the *Octavia* suggests the existence of a relationship between the destruction of the world and the moral condition of its inhabitants – the cosmic catastrophe is, in a sense, a punishment for human wickedness.⁷ A key word here is *impium*: people’s wickedness consists in their betraying *pietas* understood first of all (as can be inferred from what follows) as respect for close relatives, particularly the mother.⁸ Then Seneca admittedly takes on an apparently optimistic tone, mentioning people who will re-populate the reborn earth, and will be free from their predecessors’ defects; however, he only does this to present his own version of the story of the four ages of humanity,⁹ culminating with an unusually gloomy picture of his own times (429–434):

Collecta vitia per tot aetates diu
in nos redundant: saeculo premimur gravi,
quo scelera regnant, saevit impietas furens,
turpi libido Venere dominatur potens,
luxuria victrix orbis immensas opes
iam pridem avaris manibus, ut perdat, rapit.

⁶References to the *Consolatio ad Helviam*, a work written by Seneca during his exile in Corsica, are clearly visible here. Note in particular *Cons. ad Helv.* 8, 6: “dum mihi solem lunamque intueri liceat [...] quantum refert mea quid calcem?”; cf. *Oct.* 386: “caelum intueri, solis et cursus sacros.”

⁷Contrast Seneca’s own *Naturales Quaestiones*, also addressing the world’s destruction (by deluge) and a miserable moral condition of its inhabitants – but no relationship between the two is suggested (*Nat.* III 30). See Armisen-Marchetti 1998, 205–206.

⁸It may be assumed that the anonymous author suggests a parallelism between criminal actions of humanity and Nero’s misdeeds, particularly the murder of Agrippina (referred to in the part of the chorus directly preceding Seneca’s monologue); see especially “sed in *parentis* viscera intravit suae / deterior aetas” (416–417; cf. *Ov. Met.* I 138), which should be put together with “utero dirum condat ut ensem” (370). See Giancotti 1983, 234 ff.

⁹And so again the motif of the fall, although this time there are no such terms as *ruina* or *rue*. In describing the four ages of humanity, the author of the *Octavia* makes reference first of all to Ovid, although with significant modifications (the motif of Mother Earth). References to Seneca, *Epist.* 90, in particular section 37–38, are also important (e.g. “in commune rerum natura fruebantur” ~ *Oct.* 403: “communis usus omnium rerum fuit”). For the account of the four ages in the *Octavia*, see Gatz 1967, 77–79.

Therefore, the time in which Seneca came to live is a culmination of all iniquities long accumulated by previous generations. Let us look at a list of these iniquities: first *scelera* and *impietas* are mentioned (see footnote 8), followed by *libido* and *luxuria*; and finally *avaritia* is invoked through *avaris manibus*. All these iniquities are, obviously, particularly relevant to Nero,¹⁰ and the first three are strongly emphasised in the *Octavia* (*libido* pushes Nero to the relationship with Poppaea and to abandon his first wife; *impietas* was first revealed in the murder of Agrippina, and now in the actions against Octavia; *scelera* refer to practically any moves by Nero). It is not accidental that directly after these words, Nero appears on the stage (“sed ecce, gressu fertur attonito Nero / trucique vultu”, 435–436).

After appearing on the stage, Nero orders the praetorian prefect to make sure that two aristocrats Rubellius Plautus and Faustus Sulla are executed; we know from Tacitus’ *Annals* that just after the murder of Plautus and Sulla the emperor decided to divorce Octavia and marry Poppaea.¹¹ Seneca tries to convince the emperor not to take hasty steps against his close relatives: “nihil in propinquos temere constitui decet” (440). The phrase *in propinquos* plays a double function here – on the one hand, it applies to the aristocrats sentenced to death, particularly Plautus (whose family, on his mother’s side, descends from Augustus, and hence he is Nero’s distant relative), and on the other hand, it announces the theme of Octavia (for whom Nero is not only husband, but also, through adoption, brother).¹² There arises a discussion between the ruler and his former teacher; here, the author of the *Octavia* partly uses *stichomythia* (in lines 455–461 also *hemistichomythia*), and partly allows his characters to recite longer speeches. The conversation may be clearly divided into two parts. In the first part (440–532), Seneca endeavours to convince the emperor to be gentle in his actions, take into account the citizens’ good, respect moral law and the gods. The theme of the second part (533–589) is Nero’s marriage plans. Here, Seneca advises the emperor not to succumb to the call of an instant desire, since “probitas fidesque coniugis, mores pudor” (547) are much more valuable.

¹⁰In his biography of Nero, Suetonius begins his discussion of the ruler’s misdeeds (*scelera*) with mentioning *petulantia*, *libido*, *luxuria*, *avaritia*, and *crudelitas* (Nero 26, 1). *Crudelitas* is presented most fully (33–38), and the biographer documents first the crimes against family members (which would correspond to *impietas* in Seneca’s monologue), and then other manifestations of cruelty (which could correspond to *scelera*). For a catalogue of virtues and vices in Suetonius’ imperial biographies, see Wallace-Hadrill 1983, 142–174.

¹¹Tac. *Ann.* XIV 60, 1: “igitur accepto patrum consulto [namely a resolution of the Senate condemning Plautus and Sulla], postquam cuncta scelerum suorum pro egregiis accipi videt, exturbat Octaviam, sterilem dictitans; exim Poppaeae coniungitur.”

¹²For the time being, this is only an announcement; Octavia will become an object of the exchange between Seneca and Nero only later on, in the second part of their conversation (from line 533 onwards). However, Nero mentions her earlier and links her with other people whom he considers his enemies (469–471).

Furthermore, the people of Rome could not, according to the philosopher, accept the abandoning of Octavia (572–573).

Neither in the first nor in the second part of the conversation does Seneca manage to convince Nero. The entire scene shows numerous similarities – but also differences – to scenes of confrontation between the protagonist and their trusted adviser or attendant, known from Seneca's authentic tragedies. The best example here is an exchange between Atreus and the Attendant (*Satelles*) in *Thyestes* 176–335.¹³ In this play, the Attendant also strives to dissuade the ruler from a wicked deed (taking revenge on his brother); he also invokes such values as *pudor*, *cura iuris*, *sanctitas*, *pietas*, and *fides* (215–217; cf. *Oct.* 456, 459, 547, 573). However, he gives up as soon as he realises that Atreus cannot be persuaded; he only tries further on in the discussion (also in vain) to stop him from excessively cruel revenge. Seneca's attitude is very different;¹⁴ he expresses his stance clearly and consequently insists on it regardless of Nero's reaction. There is no doubt that the anonymous author of the *Octavia* wanted to present Seneca in the best possible light, and to prove that he bore no responsibility for his former pupil's crimes, as he had endeavoured to counteract these crimes as much as he could.¹⁵

The author of the *Octavia*, as we have already been able to observe, knows Seneca's output quite well.¹⁶ In the first part of the conversation between Seneca and Nero, the most important point of reference is the *De Clementia*,¹⁷ a philosophical treatise addressed precisely to Nero. The key notion *clementia* appears almost at the very beginning of the dialogue, when Seneca in reply to the emperor's remark that it is easy to be just when you are free from fear, states with emphasis: "magnum timoris remedium clementia est" (442). In his *De Clementia*, the philosopher wrote that *clementia*, whose consequence is the citizens' love for the ruler, ensures him safety: "...salvum regem in aperto clementia praestabit. Unum est inexpugnabile munimentum amor civium" (*Clem.* I 19, 6). It is worthwhile to see how Nero in the *Octavia* defies the arguments of his teacher. He invokes the requirements of *Realpolitik*: in the face of a threat from conspirators the only method to safeguard the ruler's security is repression and fear that he arouses in his subjects (456–458):

¹³For this scene, see Wesolowska 1995.

¹⁴The scenes from the *Thyestes* and the *Octavia* are put together and analysed by G. Manuwald (2003).

¹⁵This scene's apologetic message is emphasised by Giancotti (1983), who defends the authorship of Seneca.

¹⁶Although he sometimes misinterprets the philosopher's words by adjusting them to his own purposes, see Armisen-Marchetti 1998, 203 ff.

¹⁷See Préchac 1990, LXV–LXXI. A good comparative analysis of both texts is provided by G. Manuwald (2002), who comes to the conclusion that *clementia* in the *Octavia* is to a lesser degree than in Seneca related to the idea of monarchical absolutism.

Ne. Ferrum tuetur principem. Se. Melius fides.
 Ne. Decet timeri Caesarem. Se. At plus diligi.
 Ne. Metuant necesse est.

Nero appears here as an exemplary tyrant whom Seneca in his treatise *De Clementia* contrasts with the fair ruler.¹⁸ The latter also has to reach for a weapon, but he does this only to strengthen peace. For a tyrant, however, the reign based on fear is an end in itself (*Clem.* I 12, 3–4):

Interim hoc quod dicebam clementia efficit, ut magnum inter regem tyrannumque discrimen sit, uterque licet non minus armis valletur. Sed alter arma habet, quibus in munimentum pacis utitur, alter, ut magno timore magna odia conpescat, nec illas ipsas manus, quibus se commisit, securus adspicit. Contrariis in contraria agitur. Nam cum invisus sit, quia timetur, timeri vult, quia invisus est, et illo execrabili versu, qui multos dedit praecipites, utitur: “oderint dum metuant”,¹⁹ ignarus quanta rabies oriatur, ubi supra modum odia creverunt.

Seneca in the *Octavia* makes reference to Augustus, who guided by clemency, not giving in to anger, and abstaining from bloodshed, not only won his citizens’ recognition (and the title *pater patriae* conferred on him was an external mark of this recognition), but also deserved an apotheosis: “sic ille patriae primus Augustus parens / complexus astra est, colitur et templis deus” (477–478). The philosopher encourages the ruler to follow in the footsteps of his predecessor, all the more so as he is in a much better starting position than Augustus, who spent his youth in civil wars, while Nero assumed power peacefully with full acceptance of the citizens (an important term *consensus* is here used²⁰). The emperor’s reply to Seneca’s words is interesting. He uses a rhetorical *retorsio argumenti*, proving that the example of Augustus can be interpreted quite differently. Because Seneca inconsiderately mentioned Octavian, who had waged war for a long time until he got even with the enemies of his father Julius Caesar (“hostes parentis donec oppressit sui”, 481), Nero brings up the case of Brutus, one of those enemies: Caesar spared him his life, and he paid him back by joining the conspiracy. This demonstrates how illusory a protection *clementia* is for the ruler. Subsequently, Nero presents a short history of Roman history from the Ides of March to the battle of Actium and the death of Mark Antony –

¹⁸See Bruckner 1976, 46: “Die Antithese Tyrann – gütiger Princeps, die auch den Fürstenspiegel [scil. *De Clementia*] Senecas durchzieht, markiert in der OC die Positionen der Gegner im Bühnenagon zwischen Nero und Seneca.”

¹⁹These are famous words spoken by Atreus in Accius’ tragedy. According to Suetonius, Atreus’ dictum was approvingly quoted by Gaius Caligula (*Gaius* 30, 1), and paraphrased by Tiberius (*Tib.* 59, 2) – so Nero had examples to refer to. But interestingly, the emperor (as a historical figure) during his stage appearances performed the role of Thyestes rather than that of Atreus (Cass. Dio LXIII 9, 4; 22, 6).

²⁰See Manuwald 2003, 118 ff.

during these dozen or so years, Octavian was far from shunning bloodshed, and clemency for political opponents was totally alien to him (502–506):

Quantum cruoris Roma tum vidit sui,
lacerata totiens! Ille qui meruit pia
virtute caelum, divus Augustus, viros
quot interemit nobiles, iuvenes senes...

Nero is ironic, and scoffs at the far-from-reality picture of Roman history as invoked by Seneca: “haec summa virtus, petitur hac caelum via” (476); now it turns out that the *virtus* thanks to which heaven can be reached, has a totally different face. A sarcastic reference made to *pietas*²¹ is also significant (it must be remembered that this term plays an important role in the entire tragedy, and particularly in two scenes in which Seneca appears). The motif of (*im*)*pietas* returns at the end of Nero’s speech, when the emperor presents Octavian after his victories in the civil wars (523–529):

Illic sepultum est *impie* gestum diu
civile bellum. Condidit tandem suos
iam fessus enses victor hebetatos feris
vulneribus, et continuit imperium metus.
Armis fideque militis²² tutus fuit,
pietate nati factus eximia deus,
post fata consecratus et templis datus.

Thus, Augustus reached the heaven not because of his alleged *pietas erga cives* (the civil wars proved that it was not his particular concern), but because of Tiberius who deified the late ruler, and attached great importance to his cult (in which his filial *pietas* would manifest itself). Furthermore, in the speaker’s opinion, it was *metus*, and not *clementia*, that determined the nature of power exercised by Augustus after his victory – so Nero, when emphasising the merits of a reign based on fear, simply reaches for methods worked out by the founder of the principate.

Naturally, *exemplum divi Augusti* was often invoked in a more or less official ideological discourse of the Early Empire. Seneca himself would often refer to it, for instance in the *Apocolocyntosis*, where it is the speech of the Divine

²¹ *Pia virtute* can also refer to actions taken by Octavian to avenge the death of his “father”, Julius Caesar; see *RGDA* 2: “qui parentem meum trucidaverunt, eos in exilium expuli iudiciis legitimis ultus eorum facinus, et postea bellum inferentis rei publicae vici bis acie” (cf. *Tac. Ann.* I 9, 3, where *pietas erga parentem* is explicitly invoked). For various meanings of *pietas*, see (also in relation to Octavian) Korpanty 1975.

²² Cf. 456 (quoted above), where Seneca affirms that *fides* protects the ruler more effectively than *ferrum*. Nero’s utterance is, so to speak, an ironic commentary – *fides*, indeed, but that of armed soldiers, not citizens.

Augustus during a debate at Olympus that proves decisive in that Claudius will not become one of the Olympians. For us, however, it is Seneca's adducing this example in the *De Clementia* (to which, as we remember, the author of the *Octavia* repeatedly refers) which is most important. And it becomes clear that what Seneca the author speaks there about Augustus is in many aspects closer to the position of Nero than that of Seneca himself (as characters in the play). To be sure, also Seneca the author emphasises the clemency of the founder of the principate, his ability to win over the citizens' benevolence by forgiving, and his reluctance to bloodshed, but these characteristics were only displayed by Augustus as a mature, sedate ruler. Earlier, it was different (*Clem.* I 9, 1):

Divus Augustus fuit mitis princeps, si quis illum a principatu suo aestimare incipiat. In communi quidem rei publicae <clade> gladium movit. Cum hoc aetatis esset quod tu nunc es, duodevicesimum egressus annum, iam pugiones in sinum amicorum absconderat, iam insidiis M. Antonii consulis latus petierat, iam fuerat collega proscriptiois.

In this way, Seneca the author can demonstrate that Nero exceeds even the Divine Augustus, as he did not perpetrate any crime²³ (note that a similar argument is presented by Seneca the stage character: Nero assumed power peacefully, and did not have to fight as once Octavian had done). Seneca the author uses strong words in reference to Octavian's deeds before he assumed power; perhaps not so strong as Nero in the *Octavia*, but surely comparable (see also I 10, 4: "in adulescentia caluit, arsit ira, multa fecit, ad quae invitus oculos retorquebat"). As Miriam Griffin writes, "in the *Octavia* (477 ff.) Seneca is made to praise Augustus' clemency and to regard the early wars as a misfortune: it is Nero (504 ff.) who takes over the idea in *De Clementia* and goes on to depict the whole reign as based on fear."²⁴

On the other hand, Seneca the author agrees with Seneca the stage character (and not with Nero) in the assessment of Augustus' attitude after his victory in the civil wars. "Haec eum clementia ad salutem securitatemque perduxit" (*Clem.* I 10, 2): his reign was not based on fear and the power of weapons, as Nero asserted, but precisely on clemency. It is Augustus' clemency that he was perceived as the father;²⁵ it is once again his clemency that we are willing to perceive him as a god.²⁶

²³The dating of the *De Clementia* is highly disputable (between December 55 and December 56?). The main problem is whether Seneca may have written the above quoted sentence after the murder of Britannicus in February 55. Some scholars remove *duodevicesimum egressus annum*, assuming it is a gloss. The dating is briefly discussed by M. Griffin (1976, 407–411).

²⁴Griffin 1976, 212, footnote 2.

²⁵"Bene illi convenisse parentis nomen fatemur" (I 10, 3). Compare Seneca's words in the *Octavia* about the title *pater/parens patriae* (477).

²⁶"Deum esse non tamquam iussi credimus" (I 10, 3). Compare two different opinions on Augustus' deification in the *Octavia* – Seneca's (478) and Nero's (528–529).

Mentioning Augustus' apotheosis allows Nero (and the author of the tragedy) to pass on to the second subject of the conversation – the emperor's marriage plans. Nero states that he also (like Augustus) will join the circle of the gods if he gets rid of his enemies and ensures himself adequate progeny (530–532). This progeny, however, will not be given to him by Octavia, as claimed by Seneca, but by Poppaea,²⁷ a woman whose beauty is greater than that of Venus herself. While in the first part of the conversation the main intertext was the treatise *De Clementia*, here the main point of reference is the *Phaedra*.²⁸ In Seneca's tragedy the Nurse tries to convince her mistress not to yield to deceptive Amor and Venus, but Phaedra refuses to listen to her (129–273). Not otherwise in the *Octavia*: here also Nero is deaf to his teacher's arguments.²⁹

The motif that links the first and the second part of the exchange between Nero and Seneca is the ruler's freedom in making decisions, and its (possible) limits. The emperor is indignant when the philosopher questions his right to decide about his own marriage: “prohibebor unus facere quod cunctis licet?” (574). Seneca replies: “maiora populus semper a summo exigit” (575). A similar thought can be found in the treatise *De Clementia* (I 8): the situation of rulers is special, as, contrary to ordinary people, every word and action of theirs is widely known and commented upon by everyone. In a sense, power is captivity.³⁰ “Quam multa tibi non licent, quae nobis beneficio tuo licent?” *Licet* is the key word in the dialogue between Seneca and Nero in the *Octavia*: according to the philosopher, the emperor's *licet* should be subordinated to *debet*. It is with *debet* that Seneca begins this conversation (“nihil in propinquos temere constitui debet”, 440), and then in reply to Nero's assertion that it would be stupid not to realise how much one is allowed to do (“inertis est nescire quid liceat sibi”, 453), he points out that fame comes from what befits and not what is allowed (“id facere laus est quod debet, non quod

²⁷Then we learn that Poppaea is already pregnant (591; cf. 181). Perhaps (the historical) Nero delayed his marriage with Poppaea until he found out that she could give him progeny; see J.P.V.D. Balsdon's opinion, quoted by C. J. Herington (1961, 29, footnote 3). According to Balsdon, the only mention about Poppaea's pregnancy comes from the anonymous tragedy; “oddly, the historians do not say so.” But see Tac. *Ann.* XIV 61, 4: “an quia veram progeniem penatibus Caesarum datura sit?”. Claudia Augusta was born in late January 63, so at the moment of Octavia's death (9 June 62) Poppaea was probably only two months pregnant. See Kienast 2004, 99–100.

²⁸See Armisen-Marchetti 1998, 203. The anonymous author may be referring here (especially at 547–550) also to Seneca's now lost *De Matrimonio*.

²⁹*Phaed.* 195–196 (says the Nurse): “deum esse amorem turpis et vitio favens / finxit libido” ~ *Oct.* 557–558 (says Seneca): “volucrum esse Amorem fingit immitem deum / mortalis error”; *Phaed.* 218 (says Phaedra): “Amoris in me maximum regnum reor” ~ *Oct.* 567 (says Nero): “hanc esse vitae maximam causam reor.”

³⁰“Ista, inquit, servitus est, non imperium”. Quid, tu non experiris istud esse nobis, tibi servitutum?” For royal power conceived as “honourable servitude”, see Antigonus Gonatas in Aelian, *VH* II 20 with Volkmann 1967.

licet”, 454).³¹ Interestingly, several lines further, Nero will also use the verb *deceat*, but completely contrary to his interlocutor’s intentions: “*deceat timeri Caesarem*” (457, in the discussion quoted above). As we can see, Nero eagerly reaches for Seneca’s terms, motifs and arguments to use them against him. It is a quite characteristic rhetorical strategy.

Licet for the last time appears at the very end of the conversation, when Nero, clearly irritated by Seneca’s critical attitude, says: “*desiste tandem, iam gravis nimium mihi, / instare: liceat facere quod Seneca improbat*” (588–589; only in this passage the philosopher’s name appears). Therefore: “allow me to leave Octavia and marry Poppaea – despite the fact, or perhaps exactly because of the fact, that Seneca disapproves of that.” These words can be treated as a poetic commentary to the episode known from Tacitus’ *Annals* – after the death of the praetorian prefect Afranius Burrus, Nero, at the instigation of his new advisers, decides to remove Seneca from those having influence at the court (the historian writes that “*mors Burri infregit Senecae potentiam*”, *Ann.* XIV 52, 1). Tacitus places this episode in the same year 62 which saw Nero’s divorce with Octavia and her death, but at least several weeks earlier than those events.³² In the *Annals*, there is no mention of any involvement on the part of Seneca with Octavia – when Nero was divorcing her, the philosopher’s influence had already been a thing of the past.

When he for the last time addresses his former teacher, the emperor calls him “*iam gravis nimium mihi*” (588). This is something more than a poetic reference to the loss of political position – it is a hint of his coming doom. Earlier, Nero said that it would be stupid to leave alive “*cives principi et patriae graves*” (495) – since it is possible (again *liceat!*) just to put to death all those suspected of bad intentions.³³ Before that, the emperor ends his utterance about the enemies who need to be put to death (Plautus, Sulla, and Octavia) with a programmatic statement that “*quidquid excelsum est cadat*” (471). This way, the motif which, as we remember, played an important role in Seneca’s monologue, is also introduced in this scene. His *soliloquium* began with a complaint to Fortune that she had elevated him so that his fall could be all the more grievous (“*gravius ut*

³¹ Both *licet* and *deceat* appear in the treatise *De Clementia* in similar contexts as in the *Octavia*; see *Clem.* I 3, 3 (“*nullum tamen clementia ex omnibus magis quam regem aut principem deceat*”); 5, 5 (“*magnam fortunam magnus animus deceat*”); 5, 6 (“*non deceat regem saeva et inexorabilis ira*”); 16, 1 (“*haec clementia principem deceat*”).

³² See Schmidt 1985, 1440: “Der Dramatiker hat [...] die Chance gesehen, in der Besetzung der üblichen Mahner- und Warnerrolle mit Seneca statt mit einem anonymen Satelles oder einer Amme [...] gleichzeitig den Prozeß seiner Entmachtung und die endgültige Verfestigung von Neros autokratischer Haltung vorzuführen, und zu diesem Zweck die Chronologie leicht manipuliert; bei Tacitus geht die Trennung von Seneca der Scheidung um mehrere Wochen, wenn nicht Monate voraus.”

³³ Cf. Tac. *Ann.* XIV 3, 1 (Nero resolves to kill Agrippina): “*praegravem ratus interficere constituit*.”

ruerem / edita receptus arce", 379–380). One can say that the perspective of the ultimate catastrophe that will destroy Seneca bridges both scenes in which he appears in the tragedy.

II

Seneca is therefore presented in the *Octavia* in an absolutely positive light, as a man who, far from bearing any responsibility for Nero's crimes, does his best to dissuade the emperor from wicked designs. His failure is Nero's fault, not his. Seneca is a noble idealist who speaks and acts in accordance with his beliefs; he displays not a shadow of hypocrisy of which he was so often accused both in Antiquity and later. There is no doubt that the author of this tragedy was a great admirer of both the literary output of Seneca and his actions; he may have been one of his friends and disciples.³⁴

Tacitus' attitude towards Seneca is less clear-cut.³⁵ Few of today's scholars and readers of this historian would share the opinion expressed almost 130 years ago by Maximilian Zimmermann, a great admirer of both Seneca and Tacitus:

Quantum laudis Tacitus tribuerit Senecae, quantum virtutes eius miratus sit, ex Annalibus Taciti haud difficile est intellectu. Nam verborum alias parcissimus in morte Senecae enarranta diu versatur et accuratissime novissimos sermones atque extrema deficientis momenta describit effingitque animis legentium imaginem sapientis viri, qui sapientiam non solum praeceperit, sed moriendo etiam confirmaverit.³⁶

Some even believe that the author of the *Annals* was not only far from admiring Seneca's virtues, but also, in describing the philosopher's death, he presented him as a buffoon for whom even in the face of death theatrical effect was more important than honesty and truth.³⁷ Others, less prone to trace in Tacitus' historical

³⁴As is put by Herington (1961, 28), "he is someone who profoundly admires Seneca, and has soaked himself in Seneca's thought and style." Fabius Rusticus, a historian who, in Tacitus' words, "inclinat ad laudes Senecae, cuius amicitia floruit" (*Ann.* XIII 20, 2), is sometimes mentioned among possible authors of the *Octavia*; thus W. Richter (1961, 306). Other candidates include the philosopher Annaeus Cornutus and Lucilius, the addressee of the *Epistulae Morales*.

³⁵From among a great number of studies on Tacitus' portrayal of Seneca, I am only listing some, in chronological order: Dürr 1940; Alexander 1952; Henry, Walker 1963; Dyson 1970; Trillitzsch 1971; Abel 1991; Brinkmann 2002 (the most comprehensive work on this subject known to me; the author analyses particularly two episodes – the conversation with Nero and the scene of Seneca's death); D'Anna 2003; Schmal 2008; Ker 2012.

³⁶Zimmermann 1889, 4.

³⁷Thus recently Schmal (2008, 121) who concludes: "Sein theatralischer Tod paßt für Tacitus zu einem Menschen und Literaten, dem der schöne Schein immer wichtiger war als Wahrheit und echter Anstand". In this study, I am not dealing with the description of Seneca's death, and I would like to refer the reader to my *Meander* paper (Pigoń 2009–2012); it includes a discussion

narrative some deeply hidden ironies (so deeply hidden, indeed, as to be totally invisible for the majority of the readers), nevertheless clearly distinguish between the presentation of Seneca in earlier parts of the *Annals* (books XIII and XIV), where he is to some extent involved in the wickedness of Nero's reign, and his image in book XV, where Seneca appears first of all as a victim of the cruel ruler. This difference is often explained by a diversity of sources used by the historian; whereas in the earlier books he is supposed to have followed Pliny the Elder, an author unfriendly to Seneca, in book XV he shifted to Fabius Rusticus (see footnote 34).³⁸ Also, the question of the final revision (or the lack of it) of the last books of the *Annals* is sometimes brought up. Tacitus did not manage (some scholars believe) to give his work its final touch, and this is an explanation of some inconsistencies of Seneca's literary portrait. It turns out, however (as has been recently well argued by James Ker) that the historian is in full control of the narrative complex referring to Seneca, and builds individual references scattered across several books into a coherent whole by means of subtle verbal and thematic repetitions which highlight the most important elements of the characteristics.³⁹ So, if we are really dealing with inconsistencies, these are inconsistencies meant by the author, and they point out, it may be presumed, the fundamental ambiguousness of Seneca as a historical figure.

It is worth noting that Tacitus usually characterises Seneca by means of other persons (individuals or groups); evaluative expressions which the historian utters on his own behalf are only seldom used. Already the first remark about Seneca in the preserved part of the *Annals* is given from the point of view of Agrippina.⁴⁰ Then, there is an utterance about the philosopher's oratory skills, where Tacitus puts emphasis on how these skills were assessed by contemporaries (XIII 3, 1);⁴¹ Agrippina's sarcastic remarks about Seneca's *professoria lingua* (XIII 14, 3); accusations made by Suillius Rufus, who imputed to him erotic misdemeanours,

with Schmal's views. Also other issues discussed more broadly in that paper (e.g. the question of accusations made against Seneca by Suillius Rufus) will only be slightly touched upon here.

³⁸ Compare D'Anna 2003, 193–194, for a polemical reference to E. Paratore's views. According to D'Anna, “non sempre la valutazione tacitiana è chiara e nell'ambito di ogni libro degli *Annales* si alternano luci ed ombre” (this also holds true for book XV). The hypothesis that Pliny the Elder was Tacitus' main source for the figure of Seneca was formulated by A. Gercke (1895); not all the scholars agree.

³⁹ Ker 2012, particularly 309–313 (an excellent analysis of *Ann.* XII 8, 2).

⁴⁰ XII 8, 2 (Seneca recalled from exile and appointed Nero's teacher); see Ker 2012, 310: “in this passage we encounter Seneca only through the eyes of Agrippina.” Seneca was certainly mentioned in the missing part of the *Annals*, e.g. in connection with the catastrophe of the year 41.

⁴¹ “...quamquam oratio a Seneca composita multum cultus praeferret, ut fuit illi viro ingenium amoenum et temporis eius auribus accommodatum.” Cf. Quint. *Inst.* X 1, 125: “tum autem [i.e. when Quintilian was writing his *De Causis Corruptae Eloquentiae*] solus hic fere in manibus adulescentium fuit.” In the first decades of the 2nd century, when Tacitus' historical works were being composed, little remained from the enthusiasm for Seneca's style.

growing rich dishonestly, and first of all hypocrisy (XIII 42);⁴² a remark about criticism to which he exposed himself by writing to the Senate after Agrippina's death on behalf of Nero (XIV 11, 3, see below); further accusations, this time from the emperor's advisers (XIV 52); and finally, a rumour (*fama fuit*) that conspirators planned to kill not only Nero, but also Piso, and then proclaim Seneca emperor (XV 65).

Here, however, I would like to look at three passages in which the historian speaks about Seneca directly, without mediation of others. Let us begin with Seneca's *grand entrée* at the beginning of book XIII of the *Annals*, when Tacitus moves on to present Nero's rule. In the first chapter two political murders are mentioned; they were (Tacitus insists) commissioned by Agrippina without the knowledge and even against the will of the new ruler. One can suppose that it was just the beginning of purges. At this very moment, the praetorian prefect Burrus and Seneca step in (and both, importantly, owe their positions at the court precisely to Agrippina):

Ibaturque in caedes, nisi Afranius Burrus et Annaeus Seneca obviam issent. Hi rectores imperatoriae iuventae, et, rarum in societate potentiae, concordēs, diversa arte ex aequo pollebant, Burrus militaribus curis et severitate morum, Seneca praeceptis eloquentiae et comitate honesta, iuvantes in vicem, quo facilius lubricam principis aetatem, si virtutem aspernaretur, voluptatibus concessis retinerent. Certamen utriusque unum erant contra ferociam Agrippinae, quae cunctis malae dominationis cupidinibus flagrans habebat in partibus Pallantem... (XIII 2, 1–2)

A well-crafted arrangement of the first sentence (flanked by two predicates with the same verb: *ibatur* and *issent*) brings into relief the figures of Burrus and Seneca.⁴³ Tacitus mentioned both of them earlier and indicated the reputation they enjoyed in Rome, though in different fields (Seneca: “ob claritudinem studiorum eius”, XII 8, 2; Burrus: “egregiae militaris famae”, XII 42, 1). However, only in book XIII do Burrus and Seneca become active persons – it is them who contribute to the prevention of further bloodshed. The historian emphasises both their concord and distinct methods of influencing the young ruler; the prefect's *severitas* is juxtaposed with the philosopher's *comitas*.⁴⁴ These are the notions which, although seemingly contradictory, should complement each other; the Romans would speak with appreciation about people who combined in themselves both features.⁴⁵ Tacitus portrays Burrus and Seneca as realists who implement

⁴²For more details, see my *Meander* paper (Pigoń 2009–2012, 86–88, 93–94).

⁴³On Burrus, see Gillis 1963. In mentioning them both, Tacitus usually names Burrus first; see Dürr 1940, 45.

⁴⁴Note that *militares curae* refer to *militaris fama* from book XII, and *praecepta eloquentiae* to *claritudo studiorum*.

⁴⁵Cic. *Sen.* 10: “erat enim in illo viro comitate condita gravitas”; Nep. *Att.* 15, 1: “eius comitas non sine severitate erat”; Plin. *Epist.* VIII 21, 1: “ut in vita sic in studiis pulcherrimum et humanissimum existimo severitatem comitatemque miscere.”

a minimum programme: what they mean is that the emperor, whose character they probably know well, at least would not go beyond *voluptates concessae*, if setting him on the path of *virtutes* is no longer possible. An example of how this should be understood is demonstrated in the episode with a freedwoman, Acte, in which Seneca played a role (XIII 12–13). Both Burrus and Seneca conduct a shared action against Agrippina, and here they are more successful than in their efforts for Nero's moral condition. Remarkably, Tacitus does not criticise them for disloyalty to their former protectress. He deems it most desirable to curtail the influence of Nero's mother; a particularly strong expression referring to Agrippina's political ambitions (“cunctis malae dominationis cupidinibus flagrans”) is noteworthy.

The concordance of Burrus and Seneca *in societate potentiae* is rather untypical. The term *potentia* (which in Tacitus often, but not always, carries pejorative undertones⁴⁶) appears with relation to Nero's teacher twice more (XIV 52, 1; 56, 3).⁴⁷ It is worth paying some attention to the first instance, where (just like at the beginning of book XIII) Burrus is also invoked. The issue is Seneca's slumping influence at the imperial court after the death of the praetorian prefect in the year 62:

Mors Burri infregit Senecae potentiam, quia nec bonis artibus idem virium erat altero velut duce remoto, et Nero ad deteriores inclinabat. Hi variis criminationibus Senecam adoriuntur...

The phrase *bonae artes* leaves no doubt that Seneca's (and Burrus') role towards Nero was, in the historian's eyes, a positive thing.⁴⁸ This role is expressed by Tacitus with the noun *dux*, which resembles a phrase used in the previously analysed passage, *rectores imperatoriae iuventae*. These two passages are a bridge that binds the narrative complex concerning political actions of both advisers to the emperor. The phrase *infringere potentiam* was previously used by Tacitus with reference to Agrippina (XIV 1, 3), and there the diminution of her influence was a prelude to the murder. Seneca's case will not be very different.

Having reported the accusations made by Nero's advisers, the historian moves on to presenting the philosopher's attempt to acquire the emperor's formal consent for his resignation from a huge property, and withdrawal from public life. Seneca goes to see Nero, and delivers a speech to which the emperor replies – and it is clear for the reader that under a deep layer of mutual courtesies,

⁴⁶ *Potentia*, as opposed to *potestas*, denotes this kind of political influence which does not follow from the office held, it is not “constitutionally authorised.” See Cogitore 1991 (who, among others things, puts together *potentia* of Sejanus and Seneca: the former is negative while the latter positive).

⁴⁷ Cf. also XV 64, 4 (*praepotens*).

⁴⁸ At the beginning of the previous chapter, Tacitus also uses evaluative expressions: “sed grave-scentibus in dies publicis malis subsidia minuebantur, concessitque vita Burrus...” (XIV 51, 1).

compliments and praises quite different thoughts and emotions are hidden.⁴⁹ Nero fails to fulfil Seneca's request, the latter, however, moves away from state affairs, "instituta prioris potentiae immutat" (XIV 56, 3).

Finally, let us move to book XV and focus on a passage in which Seneca appears in the vicinity of Nero for the last time. This is the beginning of the narrative of the year 63. In Antium, a daughter of the emperor and Poppaea was born (she is the same baby whose conception was allusively mentioned in the *Octavia*: see footnote 27); all senators go there to pay homage, but Thræsea Paetus, known from his dissident attitude, is not admitted to the emperor.

Adnotatum est, omni senatu Antium sub recentem partum effuso, Thræseam prohibitum immoto animo praenuntiam imminentis caedis contumeliam excepisse. Secutam dehinc vocem Caesaris ferunt, qua reconciliatum se Thræseae apud Senecam iactaverit, ac Senecam Caesari gratulatum. Unde gloria egregiis viris et pericula gliscebant (XV 23, 4).

This passage is rather seldom referred to in discussions on Tacitus' portrayal of Seneca, but it deserves our attention, for more than one reason. To begin with, the way the historian gives the information is striking. In the first sentence, there is *adnotatum est*, which seems to point to some additional source, other than the *consensus auctorum* (cf. XIII 20, 2) that is usually followed by the historian.⁵⁰ Could this source be, for example, the (lost) biography of Thræsea Paetus by Arulenus Rusticus?⁵¹ In the second sentence there appears *ferunt*, and the reader may wonder whether the same source as that alluded in *adnotatum est* is involved here.⁵² The most important thing, however, is that in the last sentence Tacitus speaks on his own – as if he lent his authority to confirm the credibility of the previously given information. Of course, this sentence serves an important dramatic function in the narrative, announcing firstly Seneca's and then Thræsea's approaching death.⁵³ The words *pericula gliscebant*, placed at the very end of the episode, sound ominous (and it may be added that these perils

⁴⁹A detailed analysis of both speeches is provided by Brinkmann (2002, 14–90) (who points out, among other things, references to Seneca's treatise *De Beneficiis*). Another question is to what extent Tacitus attempted to convey the peculiarity of Seneca's style; see Grimal 1967.

⁵⁰For *adnotare* in Tacitus in the meaning of 'observare et observata eloqui' (Gerber, Greef, 1903, s.v.), see *Agr.* 22, 2; *Ann.* XII 25, 2; XIII 3, 2; XV 41, 2. But the verb may refer to the very witnesses of the event, who pointed out how Thræsea had been treated. Then, the only reference to a (written) source would be *ferunt*.

⁵¹See Tac. *Agr.* 2, 1. It is almost certain that Tacitus used Arulenus in his account of the trial and death of Thræsea Paetus; see Kearns 2011, 456.

⁵²In his commentary to the *Annals*, Koestermann deals with the source question only at *ferunt*, not at *adnotatum est*. He takes into account Arulenus, but also Fabius Rusticus (Koestermann 1968, 206).

⁵³Seneca will die in 65 and his death will be described at length in XV 60, 2–65. Thræsea will die in 66 (see XVI 34–35). For XV 23, 4 as a proleptical statement referring to the deaths of both men, see Pigoń 2004b, 99–101.

are a natural consequence of both politicians' fame; this motif is quite frequent in Tacitus⁵⁴). Particularly relevant to our purpose is, however, the phrase *egregii viri*, used by the historian to describe both Thræsea and Seneca. This is doubtless a praise which Tacitus utters on his own, and which is by no means diluted.⁵⁵ This sentence should not be disregarded by those scholars who claim that Seneca in Tacitus is subject to consistent, though usually not explicitly formulated, criticism.⁵⁶

A German commentator emphasises that it is “die einzige Stelle in den Annalen, an der Seneca und Thræsea in eine direkte Konfrontation gebracht werden.”⁵⁷ It is true. However, there is an episode in book XIV in which an indirect confrontation takes place, so to speak. After the murder of Agrippina, Seneca writes a letter to the senators on behalf of the emperor in which he presents an official version of the events (namely that Agrippina was preparing Nero's assassination, and she committed suicide when the plot failed), and makes accusations against the murdered woman. Tacitus summarises the letter, and proves absurdity of the charges, but at first he fails to mention that it is not Nero who wrote it.⁵⁸ This we learn only later: “ergo non iam Nero, cuius immanitas omnium questus anteibat, sed Seneca adverso rumore erat, quod oratione tali confessionem scripsisset” (XIV 11, 2).⁵⁹ Directly after this sentence, the historian presents the reaction of the senators who are outdoing one another in flattering Nero, and put forth ever more unusual motions condemning Agrippina. Almost all senators are active in this task, with one exception – Thræsea, who “silentio vel brevi adsensu priores adulationes transmittere solitus exiit tum senatu...”

⁵⁴ E.g. *Agr.* 5, 4: “nec minus periculum ex magna fama quam ex mala.”

⁵⁵ The verb *vir* combined with the adjective *egregius* appears elsewhere in Tacitus only once, at *Hist.* II 82, 2: “egregios viros et mox summa adeptos.” The historian relatively seldom uses *egregius* in reference to people, and if so, mostly in speeches; sometimes also with an ironic undertone (at *Ann.* XV 23, 4 there surely is no irony). A praise uttered on his own behalf is best seen at *Hist.* III 9, 3: “Vipstanus Messala [...] claris maioribus, egregius ipse et qui solus ad id bellum artis bonas attulisset.”

⁵⁶ As e.g. Dyson 1970 and Schmal 2008.

⁵⁷ Koestermann 1968, 206. For Thræsea in Tacitus' *Annals*, see e.g. Heldmann 1991; Devillers 2002; Pigoń 2004a.

⁵⁸ See Ker 2012, 320

⁵⁹ Seneca's authorship is rejected by W.H. Alexander (1954), but he is isolated here. The letter as Seneca's composition was known to Quintilian, who quotes one sentence: “salvum me esse adhuc nec credo nec gaudeo” (*Inst.* VIII 5, 18). *Confessio* in Tacitus surely refers to Nero (his responsibility for Agrippina's death), not to Seneca (his alleged complicity in this murder). As regards the complicity question, Tacitus only takes into consideration a possibility that Burrus and Seneca knew beforehand about the planned murder, but he is inclined to accept that they did not; the interpretation of the words “incertum an et ante ignaros” (XIV 7, 2) is crucial here. See Koestermann 1968, 306: “die Phrase *incertum an* [...] hat eher affirmativen als zweifelnden Charakter” (in connection with XV 64, 1); Borgo 2009, 36. On the other hand, the philosopher's complicity is accepted by Cassius Dio, a historian unfriendly to Seneca (LXI 12, 1).

(XIV 12, 2). So, we have two completely different attitudes – on the one hand, a diplomat who, faced with the necessity of giving his consent to the emperor's crime, is ready to make far-reaching compromises and agrees to participate in lying, and on the other hand, a brave dissident who refuses to take part in lying regardless of the consequences. It is one of Tacitus' paradoxes as a historian – but also Seneca's as a historical figure – that persons representing these two attitudes are then put together in the *Annals* and bestowed with what is, by Tacitean standards, a lavish praise: *egregii viri*.

This of course does not mean that for Tacitus Seneca was, from beginning to end, a positive figure – as he was for the anonymous author of the *Octavia*. His portrait in the *Annals* is nuanced and ambiguous. As an active participant of public life in Rome under Domitian, Tacitus knew well what price must be paid for compromises.⁶⁰

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⁶⁰ See *Agr.* 45, 1, a passage which Syme 1958, 25) calls "a passionate confession of collective guilt."

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THE PORTRAYAL OF SENECA IN THE *OCTAVIA* AND IN TACITUS' *ANNALS*

Summary

The paper examines the representation of Seneca the Younger in two literary texts written a few decades after his death, the anonymous tragedy *Octavia* (perhaps 68/69 AD, wrongly attributed to Seneca) and the historical work by Tacitus, the *Annals* (early 2nd cent. AD). These two texts give the most detailed picture of Seneca in Roman literature; although belonging to different literary genres, they show some interesting points of contact. In the *Octavia* Seneca is introduced as the emperor Nero's upright but unhappy teacher trying in vain to persuade his master that the best method of government is mildness and kindness towards one's subjects. (In particular, he seeks to discourage Nero from divorcing Octavia and marrying Poppaea Sabina.) There are some significant echoes of Seneca's writings, especially *De Clementia*, and, interestingly, it is the play's Nero, not Seneca, who is closer to the philosopher's argument in *Clem.* I 9–10 (cf. *Oct.* 472–529). The two key words of the Seneca–Nero exchange are *licet* and *decet* and the emperor manages to play Seneca's notion that "id facere laus est quod decet, non quod licet" against his teacher (cf. *Oct.* 454 and 457). In spite of this, the playwright's portrayal of Seneca is wholly favourable. The philosopher is unable to prevail upon the emperor, but this is by no means his fault; there is no question of his being responsible for Nero's crimes. Seneca courageously speaks his mind (and the Seneca–Nero scene ends with a foreshadowing of his being killed by the emperor); there is not even a hint of his hypocrisy and double standards, a reproach quite often levelled at him both in antiquity and in modern times.

The portrayal of Seneca in Tacitus' *Annals* is more complex and nuanced, but it should not be regarded as internally incoherent (due to the historian's shift from one source to another or to the lack of revision of the *Annals*). The complexity of Tacitus' picture of Seneca is, above all, the consequence of the fact that the teacher of Nero was, in the historian's eyes, a complex character. Interestingly, Tacitus presents him mainly through the eyes of others (Agrippina the Younger, Suillius Rufus, Nero's malicious associates, anonymous Romans, etc.) and only seldom reveals his own views about Seneca's actions and character. However, from a few passages where Seneca is introduced by Tacitus himself, without the mediation of other historical figures, it is possible to come to some important conclusions about the historian's attitude. In the paper, three such passages are analysed: *Ann.* XIII 2, 1–2; XIV 52, 1; and XV 23, 4. Especially significant is the last one, recounting an episode in which Seneca is linked to Thrasea Paetus. The phrase *egregii viri*, used here in reference to the both politicians, is, by Tacitus' standards, a lavish praise – and deserves not to be overlooked by those who think that the historian is highly critical of Seneca.