

This paper addresses the relationship between female power and matrilinear succession presented in the *Octavia*. Past scholarship has elucidated the predominance of matrilinear dynasties amongst the Julio-Claudians on a social-historical level (Wallace-Hadrill, Corbier), without delving into how the preoccupation with succession and the concept of procreation as an expression of female power is played out within the *fabula praetexta* of the *Octavia*. For, female conquest is expressed through words of domination in references to the bedroom, as well as historical and mythological exempla throughout the play, establishing two very different types of ‘conquest’. It is not that female power is always the cause of dynastic disaster amongst the Julio-Claudians, but rather that dynastic power depends primarily on matrilinear succession, thereby investing themes like birth and marriage, and places like the *thalamus* and the *aula*, with pointed political significance. This paper focuses on how these dynamics are played out in the terms *vincere* and *victrix*, and semantically-related words, and how they connect to and problematize the power dynamics of the imperial couple, as well as the spatial significance of the bedroom in the *Octavia*.

In relation to the elegiac theme of the *servitium amoris*, Poppaea plays the part of the elegiac female who becomes a *victrix*, as admitted by Octavia (131), the conqueror of Nero through her beauty (695), and thus the victor over the space of the bedroom. Her role contrasts sharply with that of Agrippina, who was the *victrix* of her enemies (155), as well as Octavia, whose Nurse paradoxically urged her to win Nero back through sweet submission (*blando vince obsequio* 84; cf. 177, 213). Poppaea’s elegiac position changes drastically after their marriage; as wife and empress, she is yoked to her husband, dominated by his rule, and bound by his embraces (*vincta* 716). In this transition, Nero has transformed from an elegiac *amator* in his actions towards Poppaea, to a *tyrannus* of both the citizens and his new wife, whose goals of conquest in love, once accomplished, very quickly turn to the production of an heir.

In a very different kind of conquest, Poppaea becomes the conqueror of the *exempla* placed before her throughout the *Octavia*. She is deemed worthy as a lover of Jupiter by the chorus (769); and, as her position parallels that of mythological lovers of Jupiter such as Leda or Danae, so too does Octavia’s position reflect that of Juno. However, in replacing Octavia qua Juno as the wife of her king, Poppaea surpasses all mythological women, goddesses and mortals alike, in her marital position and political status. In addition, Poppaea has, with her beauty, conquered even the face of Helen (*vincet vultus haec Tyndaridos* 775).

The two types of conquest present in the *Octavia* serve to highlight several aspects of female power in the play, as well as the close connection between the status of a *victrix* as compared to that of a *genetrix*. *Victrix*, as cult title of Venus, presents a clear dualism with *Venus Genetrix*, and the function of each within the *Octavia*. Words in the semantic field of *iuncta*, *vincta*, *victa*, and others present the concept of marriage as an act of both conquering and binding, and the language of domination questions who is the ruler of the relationship pre-marriage and after marriage, and who rules the spatial realm of the bedroom and court as a result. Poppaea, as a *victrix* with hopes of becoming a *genetrix* (as per Octavia’s prophetic language at 188), is powerful as a potential producer of Nero’s heir. By contrast, in the final Chorus of the play, Octavia fails to live up to the historical *exempla* of Imperial women who produced heirs for their household. With the knowledge that Poppaea will die childless as well, the play acknowledges her act of conquest over Nero, as well as its fleeting positive results.

Through this study of the language of domination and female power, I thus hope to highlight the predominance of female conquest and dynastic concerns in the *Octavia*, and illuminate the ever-present preoccupation for the production of a male heir during the reign of Nero.