

Chronology . . .

dramatic date of the *Octavia*: 62
composition and performance of the *Octavia*: 68*
fire at Rome and persecution of Christians: 64
death of Seneca: 65
death of Poppaea: 65
Jewish Revolt begins: 66
revolt of Julius Vindex in Gaul: (March) 68
death of Nero: (June 11) 68, the 6th anniversary of Octavia’s death
first Nero imposter: 69
accession of Vespasian: 69
fall of Jerusalem/ destruction of Temple: 70
second Nero imposter, Terentius Maximus: 79
third Nero imposter: 88
composition/ redaction of the canonical *Apocalypse* and the pseudepigraphical lit: 70-100

*Wiseman (2004, 264), following Kragelund (1982) and Barnes (1982), dates the play to 68 and imagines its first performance for Galba at the *ludi plebeii* on November 4th. (Galba arrived in Rome from Spain in October.) Boyle (2008, xvi) favors a date of composition “in the early Vespasianic years,” possibly in conjunction with Vespasian’s restoration of the Theater of Marcellus (Suet. *Vesp.* 19.1), but notes that the whole Flavian era (69-96) was an age of arch theatricality and unprecedented building—e.g., Vespasian’s Colosseum and Domitian’s Odeum—during which there would have been many reasons for composition (as a *damnatio memoriae* of Nero) and many occasions for performance (2008, xxiii-xxiv). Ferri argues that the *Octavia* is dependent on Statius’s *Silvae* and the Annalists and thus a specimen of the final throes of the rage for Senecan style (cf. Quint. *Inst.* 10.1.125-131), and thinks it was composed in the early 90s, under Domitian.

1. NERO AS BEAST (AND ANTICHRIST)—in the *Apocalypse*, the *Octavia*, and Judeo-Christian pseudepigraphical literature

a. Nero as Typhon in Octavia’s soliloquy [see text on other handout]

b. Typhon in Hesiod (*Theogony* 820-868) and the myth’s Near Eastern context. (See further West 1978 *ad loc.* and 1997, 303-305). Cf. Typhon’s multiple heads, theriomorphic, composite nature, and the cataclysmic/“apocalyptic” consequences of his fight with Zeus with the depiction of the beast(s) in the *Apocalypse* (*Rev.* ch. 13). For multiple heads (poluvkrano”) as signifying sovereigns, see *Orac. Sib.* 3.176; a remarkable passage from Philostratus (*Vit. Apoll.* 5.13) represents soothsayers during the time of Nero equating the birth of a three-headed baby in Sicily, first with Typhon, and then, duly corrected by Apollonius, as referring to the emperors Galba, Otho, and Vitellius.

Now when Zeus had driven the Titans out of heaven, the huge Earth bore as her youngest child Typhoeus, being united in intimacy with Tartarus by golden Aphrodite. His arms are employed in feats of strength, and the legs of the powerful god are tireless. Out of his shoulders came a hundred fearsome snake-heads with black tongues flickering, and the eyes in his strange heads flashed fire under the brows; and there were voices in all his fearsome heads, giving out every kind of indescribable sound. Sometimes they uttered as if for the gods’ understanding, sometimes again the sound of a bellowing bull whose might is uncontainable and whose voice is proud, sometimes again of a lion who knows no restraint, sometimes again of a pack of hounds, astonishing to hear; sometimes again he hissed; and the long mountains echoed beneath. A thing past help would have come to pass that day, and he would have become king of mortals and immortals, had the father of gods and men not taken sharp notice. He thundered hard and stern, and the earth rang fearsomely round about, and the broad heaven above, the sea and Oceanus’ stream and the realms of chaos. Great Olympus quaked under the immortal feet of the lord as he went forth, and the earth groaned beneath him. A conflagration held the violet-dark sea in its

grip, both from the thunder and lightning and from the fire of the monster, from the tornado winds and the flaming bolt. All the land was seething, and sky, and sea; long waves raged to and fro about the headlands from the onrush of the immortals, and an uncontrollable quaking arose. Hades was trembling, lord of the dead below, and so were the Titans down in Tartarus with Kronos in their midst, at the incessant clamor and the fearful fighting.

When Zeus had accumulated his strength, then, and taken his weapons, the thunder, lightning, and smoking bolt, he leapt from Olympus and struck, and he scorched all the strange heads of the dreadful monster on every side. When he had overcome him by belaboring him with his blows, Typhoeus collapsed crippled, and the huge earth groaned. Flames shot from the thunderstruck lord where he was smitten down, in the mountain glens of rugged Aidna. The huge earth burned far and wide with unbelievable heat, melting like tin that is heated by the skill of craftsmen in crucibles with bellows, or as iron, which is the strongest substance, when it is overpowered by burning fire in mountain glens, melts in the divine ground by Hephaestus' craft: even so was the earth melting in the glare of the conflagration. And vexed at heart Zeus flung Typhoeus into broad Tartarus. (trans. M. L. West)

c. Typhon in Ovid

Ovid, *Met.* 5.315-331: Typhoeus "casts the gods from their thrones," chasing them to Egypt where they hide as theriomorphs. Ovid is dependent here on Nicander's lost *Heteroeumena*, paraphrased in Antoninus Liberalis. (Passage below taken from the singing contest between the Muses and the Pierids.)

320 bella canit superum falsoque in honore Gigantas
ponit et extenuat magnorum facta deorum,
emissumque ima de sede Typhoea terrae
caelitibus fecisse metum cunctosque dedisse
terga fugae, donec fessos Aegyptia tellus
ceperit et septem discretus in ostia Nilus.
325 huc quoque terrigenam venisse Typhoea narrat
et se mentitis superos celasse figuris
"dux" que "gregis" dixit "fit Iuppiter, unde recurvis
nunc quoque formatus Libys est cum cornibus Ammon;
Delius in corvo est, proles Semeleia capro,
330 fele soror Phoebi, nivea Saturnia vacca,
pisce Venus latuit, Cyllenius ibidis alis."

She sang of the battle of the gods and giants, ascribing undeserved honour to the giants and belittling the deeds of the mighty gods: how Typhoeus, let loose from the lowest abode of the earth, terrified the heavenly gods, and how they all turned their backs and fled, until, weary, they found refuge in the land of Egypt and the seven-mouthed Nile. How even there Typhoeus, son of the earth, pursued them, and the gods hid themselves in lying shapes. "Jove thus became a ram," said she, etc. [Apollo becomes a crow, Bacchus a goat, Diana a cat, Juno a cow, Venus a fish, Mercury an ibis] (trans. Miller, rev. Goold, adapted)

d. Nero as Beast onstage*; cf. Suet. Nero 29.1:

Suam quidem pudicitiam usque adeo prostituit, ut contaminatis paene omnibus membris novissime quasi genus lusus excogitaret, quo ferae pelle contactus [cf. Tac. *Ann.* 15.44.6 *ferarum tergis contacti*], emitteretur e cavea virorumque ac feminarum ad stipitem deligatorum inguinal invaderet et, cum affatim desaevisset, conficeretur a Doryphoro liberto.

He so prostituted his own chastity that after defiling almost every part of his body, he at last devised a kind of game, in which, covered with the skin of some wild animal, he was let loose from a cage and attacked the private parts of men and women, who were bound to stakes, and when he had sated his mad lust, was finished off by his freedman Doryphorus. (trans. J. C. Rolfe)

*Bradley (1978, 164) suggests this passage is "an embellishment of one of the punishments suffered by the Christians in 64"; cf. Heb. 10:33, where the author refers to Christians being persecuted and made a spectacle of in the theaters (qeatrizovmenoi).

e. Nero as Belial/Beliar in Pseudepigraphical Literature

“for the angel of iniquity who rules this world is Beliar . . .” (*Ascension of Isaiah* 2.4)

Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah 4.1-13 (The Reign of Beliar)

1 Now, therefore, Hezekiah and Josab my son, [these are the days of the
2 completion of the world]. And after it has been brought to completion, Beliar
will descend, the great angel, the king of this world, which he has ruled ever
3 since it existed. He will descend from his firmament in the form of a man, a king
of iniquity, a murderer of his mother—this is the king of this world—and will
4 persecute the plant which the twelve apostles of the Beloved will have planted;
5 some of the twelve will be given into his hand. This angel, Beliar, will come
6 in the form of that king, and with him will come all the powers of this world,
7 and they will obey him in every wish. By his word he will cause the sun to rise
8 by night, and the moon also he will make to appear at the sixth hour. And he
9 will do everything he wishes in the world; he will act and speak like the Beloved,
10,11 and will say, “I am the LORD, and before me there was no one.” And all men
12 in the world will believe in him. They will sacrifice to him and will serve him,
13 saying, “This is the LORD, and besides him there is no other.” And the majority
of those who have associated together to receive the Beloved he will turn aside
after him. And the power of his miracles will be in every city and district, and
he will set up his image before him in every city. And he will rule for three
years and seven months and twenty-seven days. And many faithful and saints,
when they saw him for whom they were hoping, who was crucified, Jesus the
LORD Christ—after I, Isaiah, had seen him who was crucified and ascended—and
who believed in him, of these few will be left in those days as his servants,
fleeing from desert to desert as they await his coming.

Sibylline Oracles 3.63-74 (The Advent of Beliar)

ejk de; Sebasthnw'n e{xei Belivar metovpisqen
kai; sthvsei ojevwn u{yo", sthvsei de; qavlassan
65 hjevlion puroventa mevgan lampravn te selhvnhn
kai; nevkua" sthvsei kai; shvmata polla; poihvsei
ajnrwvpoi": ajll j oujci; telesfovra e[sset j ejn aujtw'/
ajlla plana'/ kai; dh; mevropa", pollouv" te planhvsei
pistouv" t j ejklektouv" q j JEbraivou" ajnovmou" te kai; a[llou"
70 ajnevra", oi{tine" ou[pw qeou' lovgon eijshvkousan.
ajll j oJpovtan megavloio qeou' pelavswsin ajpeilaiv,
kai; duvnami" flogevousa di j oi[dmato" eij" gai'an h{xh/,
kai; Belivar flevxh/ kai; uJperfiavlou" ajnrwvpou"
pavnta", o{soi touvtw/ pivstin ejnipoihsanto.

Then Beliar will come from the Sebastenoi [= Lat. *Augustani*; i.e., Nero]
and he will raise up the height of mountains, he will raise up the sea,
65 the great fiery sun and shining moon,
and he will raise up the dead, and perform many signs
for men. But they will not be effective in him.
But he will, indeed, also lead men astray, and he will lead astray
many faithful, chosen Hebrews, and also other lawless men
70 who have not yet listened to the word of God.
But whenever the threats of the great God draws nigh
and a burning power comes through the sea to land

it will also burn Beliar and all overbearing men,
as many as put faith in him.

2. NERO AND THE MYTH OF THE AGES—in the *Octavia*, Hesiod, Sibylline Oracles and other apocalyptic literature

a. **Seneca's soliloquy** (*Octavia* lines 377-437), wherein Seneca laments the fall from the Golden Age [see other handout]

b. **For the Myth of the Ages** cf. Hes. *W&D* 106-201; note the change to the *future tense* upon reaching the Age of Iron at 174 ff., and note 1) the Near Eastern origin of the myth, esp. *Daniel* 2:31ff. (West 1978, 172-177 and 1997, 312-319), and 2) the stylistic and thematic influence of Hesiod on the *Sibylline Oracles* in general, esp. Books 1, 2 and 3 (cf. Lightfoot 2007, 166). I note with interest that Probus, an ancient commentator on Vergil, read the phrase *Cumaeum carmen* at Vergil's *Eclogue* 4 (line 4) as a reference to Hesiod (whose family came to Ascra from Aeolian Cyme) and to his Myth of the Ages, doubtless because of the similarities between Vergil's Sibylline schematization of *saecula* and Hesiod's account.

3. MISCELLANEOUS CONNECTIONS WITH THE EAST

a. **Messianic expectations in Judaea.** Cf. Suet., *Vesp.* 4.5:

Percrebruerat Oriente toto vetus et constans opinio esse in fatis ut eo tempore Iudaea profecti rerum potirentur. Id de imperatore Romano, quantum postea eventu paruit, praedictum Iudaei ad se trahentes rebellarunt . . .

There had spread [note the pluperfect tense] over all the Orient an old and established belief, that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judaea to rule the world. This prediction, referring to the emperor of Rome, as afterwards appeared from the event, the people of Judaea took to themselves [and] accordingly revolted . . . (trans. J. C. Rolfe)

b. **All the Nero imposters came from the Eastern Empire and cavort with the Parthians . . .**

c. **Poppaea and Jospheus . . .**

—Josephus meets Poppaea through Alityrus, a Jewish actor and favorite of Nero (dia; filiva" ajfikovmhn jAlituvrw/, mimolovgo" d j h'n ou{to" mavlista tw'/ Nevrwni kataquvmio", jloudai'o" to; gevno" Jos. *Life* 16), in 64 while on embassy to secure the release of Jewish priests held as prisoners at Rome; elsewhere Josephus expressly calls Poppaea a "God-fearer," qeosebvh", a technical term for a Gentile sympathetic to the Jewish religion (cf. Jos. *Ant.* 20.189: Poppaiva/, qeosebh;" ga;r h\`n, uJpe;r tw'n jloudaivwn dehqeivsh/).

—Note, too, Josephus's prophecy to Vespasian (Suet. *Vesp.* 5.6):

Apud Iudaeam Carmeli dei oraculum consulentem ita confirmavere sortes, ut quidquid cogitaret volveretque animo quamlibet magnum, id esse proventurum pollicerentur; et unus ex nobilibus captivis Iosephus, cum coiceretur in vincula, constantissime asseveravit fore ut ab eodem brevi solveretur, verum iam imperatore.

When he consulted the oracle of the god of Mount Carmel in Judaea, the lots were highly encouraging, promising that whatever he planned or wished, however great it might be, would come to pass; and one of the high-born prisoners, Josephus by name, as he was being put in chains, declared most confidently that he would soon be released by the same man, who would then, however, be emperor. (trans. J. C. Rolfe)

d. Nero receives a horoscope, in the wake of Vindex's revolt in Gaul, about fleeing to the East and setting up a kingdom in Jerusalem (Suet. *Nero* 40.2):

Praedictum a mathematicis Neroni olim erat fore ut quandoque destitueretur . . . Sponderant tamen quidam destituto Orientis dominationem, nonnulli nominatim regnum Hierosolymorum, plures omnis pristinae fortunae restitutionem.

Astrologers had predicted to Nero that he would one day be left deserted . . . Some of them, however, had promised him the rule of the East, when he was cast off, a few expressly naming the sovereignty of Jerusalem, and several the restitution of all his former fortunes. (trans. J. C. Rolfe, adapted)

NOTE: Coins first minted between 5 and 14 CE in Antioch and subsequently appearing over two centuries bear the sign of Aries. (The depiction is of a leaping ram looking over his shoulder at a star overhead; an image of Zeus appears on the obverse.) According to Ptolemy (*Tetrabiblos* 2.3, but dependent on earlier astrological lore gleaned from Poseidonius), Aries is the sign representing Coele Syria, Palestine, Idumea, and Judaea. In a fascinating article, Molnar (1998)—a PhD in astronomy, not a Classicist or biblical scholar—convincingly reconstructs Nero's horoscope from instructions provided by the ancient handbooks, not only confirming Suetonius's report, but also shedding light on the Star of Bethlehem (Matt. 2:1-16), also located astrologically in Aries, which was seen as fulfillment of the prophecy of Balaam's ass (Num. 24:17) that "there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel." Nero's horoscope, in other words, recalled / corresponded to that earlier Messianic sign.

e. Suetonius's depiction of Nero as a second Cambyses:

—marries his sister Octavia (=stepsister and sister by adoption); the collocation *soror et coniunx* (an eastern detail in and of itself) appears 7 times in the *Octavia*: 46-48, 220, 284, 535, 658, 828, 909-10.

—kicks his pregnant wife (Poppaea) to death (Suet. *Nero* 35.3; Tac. *Ann.* 16.6.1; Dio 62.27.4)

—kills his brother (Britannicus) and sister (Octavia)

—madness (*passim*)

—overthrows the traditional gods and violates the customs of his subjects (cf. Tac. *Ann.* 15.45; Suet. *Nero* 32.4 and cf. 56.1, where Nero is called *religionum . . . contemptor*)

f. Onomastic numerology (isopsephy/gematria) applied to both Beast and Nero . . .

—Suetonius says that *multa Graece Latineque proscripta aut vulgata sunt*, e.g., Suet. *Nero* 39.2: neovyhfon: Nevrvn ijdivan mhtevra ajpevkteine ("a new tally: 'Nero'— 'he killed his own mother'" in which both the name Nero and the phrase following it have a numerical value of 1005; see Luz 2010, 299)

—"Gematria is one of the Sibyl's trademarks" (Lightfoot 2007, 388)—cf., e.g., the riddle at *Orac. Sib.* 1.141-145 which produces MONOGENHS UIOS QEOU. Various forms of the same kind of onomastic riddle appear in alchemical texts and on the 2nd or 3rd century grave marker of one Diliporis from Nicaea (Asia Minor) (Luz 2010, 314-316).

—The Number of the Beast in *Revelation* 13:18 . . .

cx" or eJxakovsioi eJxhvkonta e{x = 666, or, in some MSS, ci" = 616

Nevrvn Kai'sar in Hebrew is: **rsq !wrn** (nun+resh+vav+nun + koph+samek+resh) = 666

Nevrw Kai'sar (without terminal nun): **ῥσϚ ωρν** = 616

g. A Sibylline oracle (re)circulating at Rome after the Great Fire of 64; cf. Dio 62.18.3-4:

oJ mevntoi dh'mo" oujk e[stin o{ ti ouj kata; tou' Nevrwno" hjra'to, to; me;n o[noma aujtou' mh; uJpolevgwn, a[llw" de; dh; toi" th;n povlin ejmprhvsasi katarwvmenoi, kai; mavlisq j o{ti aujtou;" hJ mnvnmh tou' logivou tou' kata; to;n Tibeuviovn pote aj/sqevnto" ejqoruvbei. h\n de; tou'to

tri;" de; trihkosivwn peritellomevwn ejniautw'n
JRwmaivou" e[mfulo" ojlei' stavsi", [caJ Subari'ti"
ajfrosuvna . . .]

ejpeidhv te oJ Nevrwn paramuqouvmeno" aujtou;" oujdamou' tau'ta ta; e[ph euJrevsqai e[lege, metabalovnte" e{teron lovgion wJ" kai; Sibuvlleion o[ntw" o]n h\don: e[sti de; tou'to

e[scato" Aijneadv'n mhtruktovno" hJgemoneuvsei

kai; e[scen ou{tw", ei[te kai; wJ" ajlhqw"" qeomanteiva/ tini; prolecqevn, ei[te kai; tovtv uJpo; tou' oJmivlou pro;" ta; parovnta qeiasqevn: teletai'o" ga;r tw'n jloulivwn tw'n ajpo; Aijneivou genomevwn ejmonavrchse.

There was no curse that the populace did not invoke upon Nero, though they did not mention his name, but simply cursed in general terms those who had set the city on fire. And they were disturbed above all by recalling the oracle which once in the time of Tiberius had been on everybody's lips. It ran thus:

*Thrice three hundred years having run their course of fulfillment
Rome by the strife of her people shall perish.*

And when Nero, by way of encouraging them, reported that these verses could not be found anywhere, they dropped them and proceeded to repeat another oracle, which they averred to be a genuine Sibylline prophecy, namely:

Last of the sons of Aeneas, a mother-slayer shall rule.

And so it proved, whether this verse was actually spoken beforehand by some divine prophecy, or the populace was now for the first time inspired, in view of the present situation, to utter it. For Nero was indeed the last emperor of the Julian line, the line descended from Aeneas. (trans. Cary)

NOTE: This oracle first circulated in 19 C.E. under Tiberius (Dio 57.18.4-5) during a similar time of crisis. (The phrase about Sybaritic folly above comes from that earlier passage in Dio.) Tiberius's response was to "denounce the verses as false and make in investigation of all the books that contained any prophecies, rejecting some as worthless and retaining others as genuine," just as Augustus had once done upon becoming Pontifex Maximus in 13 B.C.E. (cf. Suet. *Aug.* 31.1)

Note further three things: **1)** the prediction of destruction (ojlei') through civil war (e[mfulo" stavsi") in the tenth *saeculum* (900 years), ten ages being the typically Roman/Etruscan and Sibylline scheme (Book 2 of the *Orac. Sib.* is organized in just this way); **2)** the imputation that the end of days is caused by *luxuria*—"rank excess" (cf. Subari'ti" / ajfrosuvna)—at Nero's court, which is also major theme in the *Octavia* (cf., e.g., 433-434: *luxuria victrix orbis immensas opes / iam*

pridem avaris manibus, ut perdat, rapit); note a related oracle in Athen. 12.520b, said to be Delphic, predicting the fall of Sybaris when its citizens treated a mortal man better than a god, which contains the phrase *e[mfulo" stavsi"*; **3**) the avoidance by the *dh'mo"* (*plebs urbana*) of mentioning Nero by name in oracles and lampoons; in *Octavia* there is a studied avoidance of mentioning any of the main characters by name (e.g., Octavia, Nero, Messalina, Agrippina, Acte, Poppaea), what I take to be an affectation of oracular style. One iambic lampoon on Nero—*Nevrwn jOrevsth" jAlkmewwn mhtroktovno"* (Suet. *Nero* 39.2) was actually mistaken as a Delphic oracle and attributed to the Pythia (Parke and Wormell 1956: I, 284; II, no. 597).

OCTAVIA AND THE EAST: PASSAGES FROM THE OCTAVIA

1. Nero as Typhon in Octavia's soliloquy:

	Iungentur ante saeva sideribus freta et ignis undae, Tartaro tristi polus, lux alma tenebris, roscidae nocti dies,	<i>adynata</i> (but note the imagery of cataclysm) . . .
225	quam cum scelesti coniugis mente impia mens nostra semper fratris extincti memor. utinam nefandi principis dirum caput obruere flammis caelitem rector paret, qui saepe terras fulmine infesto quatit	“would that Jupiter strike Nero . . .”
230	mentesque nostras ignibus terret sacris novisque monstris. vidimus caelo iubar ardens cometam pandere infesta face qua plaustra tardus noctis aeterna vice regit Bootes, frigore Arctoo rigens.	comets/lightning strikes (in 60 lightning strikes Nero's table— <i>Tac. Ann.</i> 14.22; in 62 statue of Nero struck— <i>Ann.</i> 15.22) . . .
235	en ipse diro spiritu saevi ducis polluitur aether, gentibus clades novas minantur astra, quas regit dux impius. non tam ferum Typhona neglecto Iove irata Tellus edidit quondam parens.	the peoples of the earth threatened further with astronomical/astrological disaster . . .
240	hic gravior illo pestis, <u>hic hostis deum</u> <u>hominumque templis expulit superos suis</u> civesque patria, spiritum fratri abstulit, hausit cruorem matris—et lucem vidit fruiturque vita noxiam atque animam trahit!	Nero <i>worse</i> than Typhon (note his sacriligious pillaging of temples); cf. line 89: <i>spernit superos</i> <i>hominesque simul</i> . . .
245	pro summe genitor, tela cur frustra iacis invicta totiens temere regali manu? in tam nocentem dextra cur cessat tua? utinam suorum facinorum poenas luat <u>Nero insitivus</u> , Domitio genitus patre,	
250	orbis tyrannus, quem premit turpi iugo morumque vitiis nomen Augustum inquinat.	renewed plea for Jupiter to strike down Nero

cf. lines 371-2, where the Chorus imagines Agrippina saying “Hic est, hic est fodiendus,” ait, “ferro, monstrum qui tale tulit.”

2. Nero and the Myth of the Ages in Seneca's soliloquy (note how his account culminates in the Iron Age with the stage entrance of Nero):

	Quid, impotens Fortuna, fallaci mihi blandita vultu, sorte contentum mea alte extulisti, gravius ut ruerem edita	“How the mighty have fallen”—Seneca the chastened philosopher . . .
380	receptus arce totque prospicerem metus? melius latebam procul ab invidiae malis remotus inter Corsici rupes maris ubi liber animus et sui iuris mihi semper vacabat studia recolenti mea.	Seneca wishes he were in exile again (i.e., had never been recalled) . . .

