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**Patrick Kragelund, *Roman Historical Drama: The Octavia in Antiquity and Beyond*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xiv, 475. ISBN 9780198718291. \$160.00.**

**Reviewed by Gesine Manuwald, University College London  
([g.manuwald@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:g.manuwald@ucl.ac.uk))**

### Preview

The dramatic genre of *fabula praetexta* ('Roman historical drama') is a specifically Roman form of drama and is to be regarded as an important element of Roman theatre and the Romans' presentation of their own history. Only a single representative, the anonymous drama *Octavia* from the imperial period, transmitted under Seneca's name, has been fully preserved; of other plays there are merely titles, fragments and testimonies. While *Octavia* has had its own history of reception, the dramatic genre of *fabula praetexta* for a long time was less studied. Recently it has found renewed interest in scholarship, in line with an increased attention to fragments, to the relationship between literature and history, and to the development of ancient drama. This has prompted the interest in *Octavia* to move beyond questions of authenticity, date and authorship. Still, so far there are hardly any treatments of Roman historical drama in monographs or extended articles; in overviews of Roman drama this genre gets mentioned, but is rarely discussed in depth. Thus, a new book, summarizing and developing recent insights as well as presenting key issues in context, is welcome. The author Patrick Kragelund has been interested in *Octavia* since his PhD (*Prophecy, Populism, and Propaganda in the 'Octavia'*, København 1982). This study was continued in a series of articles on *Octavia*, Seneca, Tacitus and the reception of Roman drama, in particular the piece 'Historical Drama in Ancient Rome: Republican Flourishing and Imperial Decline?', which, together with responses by a range of scholars, filled a special issue of *Symbolae Osloenses* (2002). The recent monograph thus is the fruit of decades of research. Kragelund shows himself impressively in command of the primary evidence and an extensive multi-lingual bibliography, though he makes 'no attempt at continuous, let alone exhaustive referencing' (p. 3 n. 1) and thus does not always engage explicitly with other scholarly views.

The elements of the book's title point to its three parts: 'Roman historical drama' refers to Part I, which provides an overview of the dramatic genre ('Part I: The Tradition': pp. 1–126); 'the *Octavia* in antiquity' relates to Part II and its detailed examination of the play ('Part II: The *Octavia*': pp. 127–360); 'and beyond' indicates the reception section in Part III ('Part III: The Afterlife': pp. 361–419). While the three parts are connected, they are presented as fairly independent discussions (p. 5: 'The study falls into three main sections, each of which I hope will offer readers an eye-opening look at different aspects of the genre.'). There are no separate introduction or conclusion, although the first section of Part I ('1. Recovering a Lost Genre', pp. 3–12) and the last section of Part III ('17.9. *Envoi*', pp. 416–419) function as such to some extent. This means, however, that there are no chapters explicitly

drawing the different parts together or indicating a detailed methodological framework.

Part I presents important aspects of the dramatic genre of *fabula praetexta*, discussing issues such as its characteristics, their development over time and in relation to other dramatic genres, the occasions and venues for performances, its political nature, its popularity in different periods, as well as some key exemplars. These aspects are not organized if by chronology or by individual works, but rather thematically. Obviously conclusions can often be only somewhat hypothetical, given the limited amount of evidence available. The emphasis of Part I is on the late Republican period. As it turns out, this survey is not meant to be a systematic overview or a comprehensive introduction to the genre; instead, it is intended to offer some context and present the author's views on matters he regards as essential, in order to lay the groundwork for Part II.

Part II consists of a detailed examination of *Octavia*. It begins and ends with discussion of generic questions and issues of staging as well as the possible identity of the writer and the time of writing. The chapters in between offer a scene-by-scene analysis of the play, paying particular attention to points of setting, staging and performance, structure and symmetry, as well as intertextual relationships. One of the basic contentions is that *Octavia* seamlessly continues the generic tradition of *fabulae praetextae* from the Republican period and that unusual dramatic elements (e.g. a plot extending over three days) can be explained as features of the dramatic genre.

Part III gives a glimpse of the reception of *Octavia* from about 1300, looking at manuscripts, editions, translations, commentaries and particularly Latin and vernacular dramas inspired by the Roman play. The overview presents a number of case studies, mainly examples of spoken dramas from countries such as Italy, Britain, France, Portugal, Spain and the Netherlands as well as the opera *L'incoronazione di Poppea*. The author points out that the influence of *Octavia* was greater than scholarship hitherto has acknowledged (although there has been work done on the reception of *Octavia*) and shows how dramatic motifs present in *Octavia* (like the dream scene) were taken up by later poets.

Kragelund is eager not only to 'present a synthesis' 'after a long series of specialized studies published at irregular intervals over the last three decades' (p. 5), but also to defend and rehabilitate historical drama and challenge received opinions. Although he is not able to provide new evidence, he argues that the available material has been viewed in a particular way owing to scholarly traditions, yet that this is by no means the only or the correct interpretation of the data. While this is a refreshing approach, it sometimes leads to a somewhat disparaging description of earlier scholarship and a desire to interpret all aspects of *Octavia* or the reconstructed generic tradition within the novel framework.

In view of existing research on Roman historical drama, Kragelund challenges the assumption of a 'republican flourishing and imperial decline' for the *fabula praetexta*. He believes that the view of the decline of dramatic performances in the imperial period is based on 'some – rarely questioned – underlying premises' (p. 96) and that the 'whole issue has traditionally been discussed in a manner characterized by an incautious and, indeed, excessive reliance on inferences based upon arguments *e silentio*' (p. 96). He acknowledges that there are few references to *fabulae praetextae* from the imperial period, but highlights that authors in the late Republican and early imperial periods mention performances of *fabulae praetextae* as something not unusual. On this basis he concludes that such references are sufficient to show that the tradition continued from the early Republican to the early imperial period (p. 21: 'To conclude: impressionistic as the evidence is, it also aligns remarkably with information which it seems unwarranted to reduce to a single curve depicting a period of flourishing followed by one of decline. From the sporadic record, all that seems

clear is that such activity spans almost 300 years. There may have been ups and downs, but the evidence defies any attempts at producing statistics.’).

Accordingly, Kragelund believes that there was a seamless development of the genre over the centuries and that performances continued into imperial times, when various ways of presentation co-existed, including recitations. Thus he makes a case against ‘a fundamental difference between the historical dramas of the Republic and the Empire, in so far as the latter are emphatically ‘anti-panegyric’ (and therefore unrelated to the early *praetextae*, some of which celebrated the *res gestae* of victorious generals)’ since ‘such a view fails to take into account changes in the attitude to heroism’ (pp. 130–131). This is a valid point; yet even though it can be argued that *Octavia* has ‘heroes’, they are not introduced to glorify the existing political system. Further, Kragelund sometimes conflates the issues of whether *Octavia* is a representative of the genre (adapted to the circumstances of the imperial period) and whether it can reveal details about the character of the genre generally or in earlier periods. He seems to assume that *Octavia* was written on the back of a generic tradition and that what makes the play differ from tragedies constitutes what it has in common with other *fabulae praetextae*. This is certainly likely, but is equally based on unproven assumptions, since the fragments surviving from other *fabulae praetextae* are not sufficient to illustrate all features of the genre.

In terms of dramatic presentation Kragelund supposes that *fabulae praetextae* did not observe the unities of time and place; he describes how this works in *Octavia* and mentions examples of fragmentary *fabulae praetextae* for which he posits the same phenomenon (esp. pp. 139–143). It is true that the plot of *Octavia* seems to extend over three days and it is most straightforward to imagine different locations for some of the scenes (at least several rooms in the palace). Moreover, Kragelund argues that the last scene is set in Campania, pointing to the wind direction given (pp. 183–186), though this may be too literal an interpretation. For the fragmentary *fabulae praetextae* the evidence is less straightforward: the plots inferred from the fragments, the underlying historical events, and the actions alluded to in the fragments indeed seem to cover different locations and longer periods of time in some cases; but it is unclear whether all stages were represented onstage or whether some were conveyed by messenger speeches, flashbacks, or foreshadowings, as the contexts of individual fragments can almost never be recovered. Since one can only imagine that in the Republican period *fabulae praetextae* were performed on the same stage as all other dramas, one would have to ask why, on the one hand, writers of Republican *fabulae palliatae* made an effort to explain the setting as well as the whereabouts and movements of characters, especially if they return to the stage through a different entrance/exit from the one through which they had left, and why this would not have been a concern to writers of *fabulae praetextae*, who were addressing the same audience and their viewing conventions.

With respect to the authorship and date of *Octavia* Kragelund accepts that the author has to remain anonymous, but is more confident as regards establishing a date of composition. He feels that ‘narrowing down the time of writing to the brief reign of Nero’s immediate successor, the Emperor Galba (June 68 – January 69)’ is possible (p. 307), a date proposed previously by scholars, including Kragelund. Against suggestions of a date later in the first century CE, he argues for closeness to the events presented because of ‘a remarkable familiarity not only with the official discourse of the Claudian and Neronian period, but also with Seneca’s writings’ (p. 307). Still, narrowing the date to such a brief timeframe is problematic, and in any case the criticism of the emperor in the play may suggest a Republican tradition.

Since the reception of *Octavia* has not yet been systematically studied, Kragelund’s presentation of examples based on the consultation of a large number of early modern dramas is helpful. Again, he is keen to unearth *Octavia* as a drama in its own right from the neglect it has suffered in modern reception studies, and therefore to assign it

a dominant role in the development of early modern drama. While its impact indeed should not be underestimated, it may not be possible to prove its influence on all historical dramas and all dream scenes as it were, and one should also make allowances for an indirect tradition. Still, Kragelund shows potential links for a number of examples, especially from Italy and Britain, going beyond those identified so far.

Having reached the end of the volume, readers might feel that the titles of the book and of individual chapters promise more or at least something different from what is offered, since one might be led to expect a comprehensive and systematic overview. If one accepts that Kragelund offers a selective discussion determined by his agenda, anyone interested in ancient drama and its afterlife will find much of relevance. Even if not everybody will agree with all the theories brought forward or restated in context, scholars will have to engage with them and be prompted to revisit their own views and the case for them in relation to these proposals. Clearly, stimulating debate by summarizing the evidence and exploring different models of interpretation can only be a good thing, especially in an area where there is still more to discover.

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BMCR, Bryn Mawr College, 101 N. Merion Ave., Bryn Mawr, PA 19010