

THE END OF OCTAVIA

Perhaps the saddest of the abundant sad events in the benighted reign of Nero was the fateful, and fatal, end of his wife Octavia. Her painful death, in exile, has often been compared in recent times with the death of her brother Britannicus, and also, to a degree, with that of her stepmother Agrippina. But the parallels are most closely drawn from the relationship of each with Nero. Son, stepbrother, husband, above all he proved to be a monster, and there must have been few who doubted whether they, or, indeed, anyone else would ever see Octavia alive after she had been sent into exile. The premonition proved soon to be all too accurate. The young woman died, under compulsion and in agony, not long thereafter. It was an end quite different from those of earlier imperial women who had been exiled for crimes or arrogance, all of whom were much older than she, had played some significant role in the affairs of state, who were linked to powerful people and who had at least known some love. I refer to the elder Julia, her daughter Julia, and the elder Agrippina. Two of these three were confined to the island Pandateria. So also was Octavia. A sentence to that island had proved to be a death sentence in the past, at least in the sense that the exile would never return to her former status.

With none of these women could Octavia have been compared. Young, inexperienced in public life, married to a man who clearly resented her, pushed aside at the instance of a greater favorite, Poppaea Sabina, who yearned for the position and honors of empress, Octavia proved an easy sacrifice.

Tacitus' narrative is extremely compact and swift, as if to mimic the final stage of Octavia's life. There could have been few people who did not anticipate her death, which the dread name "Pandateria" boldly forecast would soon follow. This link to the elder Julia and the elder Agrippina places Octavia in significant company. Too young to have left any significant mark on her husband and on the state, the identity of her place of exile with theirs proves a potent link.