

## XVII.—The Problem of Octavia Minor and Octavia Maior

MARY WHITE SINGER

MORGANTOWN, WEST VIRGINIA

There were two Octaviae: Octavia *maior*, half sister of Augustus, and Octavia *minor*, his full sister. The question is which was the wife of Mark Antony. The answer is contingent upon which of two Gaii Marcelli had previously married her. Most scholars choose the younger, but without satisfactory proof. This paper strengthens the evidence through a fuller use of the ancient sources, especially a neglected statement of Dio. Arguments of Gardthausen are reconsidered and those of Drumann are accepted and supplemented.<sup>1</sup>

## I. THE PROBLEM

The two sisters of Augustus are often confused by ancient and modern writers, some maintaining that it was Octavia *maior*, his half sister, who was Antony's wife. The majority of recent scholars agree upon Octavia *minor*, the full sister,<sup>1a</sup> but none offers satisfactory proof for a question which, though complex, is solvable. Much of the difficulty has arisen because the ancient writers usually refer to Antony's wife merely as Octavia, sister of Augustus and widow of Gaius Marcellus, as if the emperor had only one sister.<sup>2</sup> The problem is further complicated by the fact that there were two consuls (cousins) named Gaius Marcellus, one holding office in 50 B.C., the other in 49.<sup>3</sup> Thus there are really two interdependent questions: (1) Was it Augustus' half sister or his full sister who was married to Antony? (2) Which C. Marcellus had earlier married this wife of Antony?

<sup>1</sup> See *TAPhA* 78 (1947) 435.

<sup>1a</sup> Among those who believe that Antony married Octavia *minor*, the full sister, are V. Gardthausen, *Augustus und seine Zeit*, 2, 1 (Leipzig, 1891) 102–103, note 13; Drumann-Groebe, *Geschichte Roms*, 2 (Leipzig, 1902) 334; 4 (Leipzig, 1908) 250–251, note 10; G. Ferrero, *The Greatness and Decline of Rome*, 3 (trans. by A. Zimmern and H. J. Chaytor, New York, 1909 [?]) 255–256, note; and R. Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford, 1939) table 3. Two early scholars, Weichert and Moll, who held that it was Octavia *maior*, are mentioned below (note 5). G. Baker (*Augustus: The Golden Age of Rome* [New York, 1937] 182, 298) and A. Weigall (*The Life and Times of Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt* [rev. ed., New York, 1924] 129, 287), seemingly unaware that there were two sisters, state that Antony married the half sister of Augustus.

<sup>2</sup> For references to Antony's wife see App. *B.C.* 5.64; Dio 48.31.3; Plut. *Ant.* 31.1–2; etc.

<sup>3</sup> For evidence that the two consuls were cousins, not brothers, see F. Münzer in *RE* s.v. "Claudius" no. 216, col. 2734.

The final element of confusion is supplied, characteristically enough, by Plutarch (*Ant.* 31.1) who, speaking of the betrothal of Octavia, widow of C. Marcellus, to Antony, affirms: 'Οκταυία γάρ ἦν ἀδελφὴ πρεσβυτέρα μὲν, οὐχ ὁμομητρία δὲ Καίσαρι. ἐγεγόνει γάρ ἐξ Ἀγχαρίας, ὃ δὲ ὕστερον ἐξ Ἀτίας. Plutarch does clearly say that this Octavia was the daughter of Ancharia, the first wife of C. Octavius, and hence only the half sister of the emperor. But it certainly seems that he has either confused the two sisters or, more likely, failed to realize that there were two.<sup>4</sup> This passage, together with the existence of the two Marcelli, has caused endless controversy. The words ἀδελφὴ πρεσβυτέρα . . . Καίσαρι have been interpreted in two ways: (1) merely that Octavia was the sister of Caesar (Augustus) and older than he, or (2) that she was the elder of two sisters. A careful reading of the entire passage shows only the first interpretation to be correct. The second represents a natural mistake on the part of anyone possessing the knowledge that there were two Octaviae, and several reputable scholars have been guilty of this error.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> In another passage (*Marc.* 30.6) Plutarch refers to Octavia as sister of Augustus and wife of C. Marcellus. This might indicate that he thought there was only one Octavia. In any event, he has nowhere mentioned that there were two.

<sup>5</sup> Among the scholars who speak at all definitely on this point the present author has found none who has realized that the usual interpretation of the Plutarch passage is incorrect. It is principally his translators who have given the correct rendition, whereas most of the participants in this "maior or minor" controversy have unconsciously or otherwise adopted the second, incorrect version.

B. Perrin (*Plutarch's Lives* in Loeb Classical Library, 9 [New York, 1920] 205) translates: ". . . Octavia was a sister of Caesar, older than he, though not by the same mother. . . ." A. Clough (*Plutarch's Lives*, revision of Dryden's translation, 5 [New York, n.d.] 80) translates similarly; also Ricard (*Plutarque, Les Vies des Hommes Illustres*, 4 [Paris, n.d.] 289). Martha Brier (*Plutarch's Lives of Caesar, Brutus and Antony* [New York, 1903]) ambiguously, not to say inaccurately and ungrammatically, renders it: ". . . Octavia, the eldest sister of Caesar. . . ."

Drumann (*op. cit.* 4.250, note 10) mistakenly believes that Plutarch is calling Antony's wife the elder of two sisters. Apparently E. Ciccotti (in Ruggiero, *Dizionario epigrafico*, 1.884) and Gardthausen (*loc. cit.*) have made this same mistake. Baker (*loc. cit.*) and Weigall (*loc. cit.*) — writers in a more popular vein — simply refer to the triumvir's wife as the half sister of Augustus, without further comment.

Two early workers in the field, Weichert (*De Lucii et Cassii Parmensis Vita et Carminibus*, Grimma [1836] 348-354) and E. Moll (*Zur Genealogie des julisch-claudischen Kaiserhauses*, Gymn.-Progr. Buchsweiler [Colmar, 1879] 9-14), also misinterpreted the passage in question, and, in an effort to reconcile Plutarch with the other sources, were led to compose purely hypothetical stemmata. They proposed that Octavia maior, daughter of Ancharia, was the wife of C. Marcellus, consul of 49, then the wife of Antony; while Octavia minor, daughter of Atia, was the wife of the consul of 50 — an obviously neat, if unwarranted solution. The neatness, as well as the

## II. THE EVIDENCE AND SOLUTION

Plutarch, in the passage just quoted, is the only ancient author to define the exact relationship of Antony's wife to Octavian, and as such his statement is prime evidence. However, in view of the foregoing comments, and as will appear from what follows, it can scarcely be used as a deciding factor. It is Suetonius who furnishes the most definite evidence. He says: . . . mortem obiit [C. Octavius] superstitibus liberis Octavia maiore quam ex Ancharia, et Octavia minore item Augusto, quos ex Atia tulerat (*Aug.* 4.1).<sup>6</sup> This statement clearly distinguishes the two Octaviae, a thing not elsewhere done by the ancient writers. In another place Suetonius (*Caes.* 27.1) refers to Octavia, wife of C. Marcellus, as the granddaughter of Julius Caesar's sister (sororis suae neptem). This could not refer to Octavia *maior*, the daughter of Ancharia, but only to Octavia *minor*, the daughter of Atia, who in turn was the daughter of Caesar's sister Julia (*Suet. Aug.* 4.1; *Vell.* 2.59.2). The two passages quoted from Suetonius taken together indicate that Octavia *minor* was the wife of a C. Marcellus. This is supported by Cicero, our only contemporary source, in his statement that in December, 44 (the date of the Third Philippic) a C. Marcellus had as his wife the daughter of a woman from Aricia. This passage, which out of context seems to be a cavalier way to refer to Octavia, if Octavia it be, actually offers significant and rather definite proof. Cicero is rebuking Antony for derogatory remarks about Octavian's ancestry, among others the sneer that his mother was from Aricia. Cicero retorts that very fine women came from Aricia, such as the wife of Lucius Philippus and Marcellus' mother-in-law.<sup>7</sup> Since we know that Philippus married Atia after the death of C. Octavius

tenability of this theory, was destroyed by an inscription discovered after the appearance of Weichert's and Moll's works (see below, p. 271 and note 13).

M. Hammond (in *RE* s.v. "Octavius, -a," no. 96, col. 1859) even thinks that Plutarch identifies both Octaviae as the daughters of Ancharia, this also being possible, though gratuitous, since Plutarch neither confirms nor denies it.

<sup>6</sup> Dio (54.35.4) affirms that at his sister's death Augustus had her body placed in state in the shrine of Julius. This is further evidence that the emperor had a full sister who, like himself, was related to Julius Caesar through Atia, their mother.

<sup>7</sup> *Phil.* 3.17: Sed hoc clarissimi viri viderint, L. Philippus qui habet Aricinam uxorem, C. Marcellus qui Aricinae filiam: quos certo scio dignitatis optimarum feminarum non paenitere. For some interesting material on Aricia in this connection see K. Scott, "The Political Propaganda of 44-30 B.C.," *MAAR* 11 (1933) 12-16.

On the date of the Third Philippic see Schanz-Hosius, *Geschichte der römischen Literatur*, 1 (Munich, 1927) 441.

(Suet. *Aug.* 4.1), and furthermore, since the subject of the entire paragraph is the Julian line, the two "women from Aricia" must be one and the same, i.e., Atia herself. And if the reference is to Atia,<sup>8</sup> then Marcellus would be the husband of Octavia *minor*.

The following inscription honoring Octavia, sister of Augustus, was found at Pergamum: ὁ δῆμος ἐτείμησεν | 'Οκταουίαν τὴν Καί|σαρος μὲν ἀδελφὴν, | [μ]ητέρα δὲ Σέξτου | Ἀπποληίου τοῦ | σωτῆρός τε καὶ εὐερ|γέτου.<sup>9</sup> One Octavia, then, was the mother of Sextus Appuleius, consul in 29, and therefore wife of the *flamen* of the same name.<sup>10</sup> It is possible from the standpoint of chronology, since we do not know the exact date of her birth — we do know that it was not later than 66<sup>11</sup> — that the same Octavia who was the wife of Marcellus then of Antony had been first married to Appuleius. However it is hardly credible from another standpoint: though Antony's wife was an important public figure, the ancient writers never mention such a marriage to Appuleius, nor do they speak of any children by him when discussing her own by Marcellus and Antony, or the latter's other children of whom she took care.<sup>12</sup> The inscription, *pace* Gardthausen and Ferrero, obviously does not prove that it was the younger Octavia who was married to a C. Marcellus and to Antony.<sup>13</sup> It only proves that one Octavia was married to

<sup>8</sup> To be sure, Ancharia too could have come from Aricia; we do not know her birthplace or anything else about her (*RE* s.v. "Octavius, -a," no. 95, col. 1858). However, she certainly was not a Julian and Cicero would not have had her in mind in this passage.

<sup>9</sup> *IGRP* 4.323 = *OGIS* 2.462 = *ILS* 2.2.8783.

<sup>10</sup> Evidently the *flamen Iulialis* referred to in *CIL* 8.24583; see *RE* s.v. "Octavius, -a," no. 95, 1858 and *PIR* 1<sup>2</sup>, no. 960. For Sex. Appuleius, the son, consul in 29 and proconsul of Asia about 17, see P. Rohden, in *RE* s.v. "Appuleius," no. 17 and *PIR* 1<sup>2</sup>, no. 961.

<sup>11</sup> We know that she was married to Marcellus before or in 54 (Suet. *Caes.* 27.1). Roman maidens reached the necessary maturity for marriage with the end of the twelfth year, fourteen being the average age for marriage (Friedländer, *Darstellungen aus der Sittengeschichte Roms*, 1 [Leipzig, 1921] 273; 4 (1922) 133-137). If Octavia was only twelve at the time of her marriage to Marcellus, and if the event took place in 54 (the latest possible date), she was born in 66. It does not seem likely that she would have been born many years before 66; being a relative of Caesar, she was doubtless married young. For further arguments and discussion of her birth date see M. W. Singer, *Octavia Minor, Sister of Augustus: An Historical and Biographical Study* (unpublished Ph.D. diss., Duke Univ., 1944) 12-13.

<sup>12</sup> On her children see Plut. *Ant.* 87; 57.3 and Dio 48.31.3-4.

<sup>13</sup> See Gardthausen, *loc. cit.*, and Ferrero, *loc. cit.* (above, note 1). Ciccotti, *loc. cit.* (above, note 5), is also guilty of this error in logic.

This is the inscription mentioned above (note 5) which upsets the neatness of the stemmata proposed by Weichert and Moll, with each sister married to one of the

Appuleius, and makes it most unlikely that this one was also Antony's wife.

Thus far, then, we can conclude only that Octavia *minor* was the wife of one C. Marcellus; but we do not know whether she was also Antony's wife. Let us go on to the second question: which C. Marcellus had earlier married Antony's wife? Drumann presents good arguments for the theory that it was the consul of 50. He reasons thus. First, whichever Marcellus was the former husband of Antony's wife was alive near the beginning of the year 40, for when Octavia was married to Antony in that year, her husband had not been dead ten months (Plut. *Ant.* 31.3; App. *B.C.* 5.64; Dio 48.31.3-4). Secondly, the consul of 49 does not appear to have survived the second year of the civil war between Caesar and Pompey (49-48). He is mentioned frequently up to a certain point and then no more. References are made to his being in command of some of Pompey's forces during the first part of the war, but he is not mentioned in the accounts of its final phases, nor is he mentioned at any time thereafter — not even in connection with certain events with which he would logically have been mentioned had he been alive. Thus it seems probable that he was killed during the war.<sup>14</sup>

An important bit of evidence has apparently been overlooked by many scholars studying the problem: Dio states that C. Marcellus, consul in 50, was allied to Julius Caesar by marriage.<sup>15</sup> From all that we know about Caesar's relatives, only marriage to the younger Octavia would make Marcellus related to him;<sup>16</sup> the elder sister had no Julian connections.

Marcelli (above, note 5). Gardthausen (*loc. cit.*) gives the following reference for the inscription: *Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen von Pergamon 1880-1881*, pp. 50-51. Hence the inscription was discovered much later than the publication of Weichert's work in 1836, and just after the appearance of Moll's in 1879.

<sup>14</sup> Drumann-Groebe, *loc. cit.* (above, note 1).

<sup>15</sup> Dio 40.59.4: τῷ Καίσαρι . . . ἐξ ἐπιγαμίας προσήκων. This is cited by Hammond, *loc. cit.* (above, note 5), but no real point is made of it. It is also used both by Weichert (*loc. cit.* 350) and Moll (*loc. cit.* 14), but not in the present connection.

<sup>16</sup> Caesar's only legitimate child, Julia, had already died in 54, leaving no children. (See Münzer in *RE* s.v. "Julius, -a," no. 547.) He had two sisters named Julia, the younger being the grandmother of Octavia *minor*. Of the elder sister's descendants we have the names L. Pinarius and Q. Pedius, both of whom Suetonius (*Caes.* 83.2) calls her "*nepotes*." The exact relationship of these two men to Julia cannot be determined. As F. Münzer points out ("Aus dem Verwandtenkreise Caesars und Octavians," *Hermes* 71 [1936] 226-230), Pedius, consul in 43, was too old to be the grandchild of Julia or the grandnephew of Caesar. Münzer suggests that he must have been Julia's son, though Pinarius may have been her grandson. (See also R. Syme, *The*

If we interpret Dio's statement to indicate that the consul of 50 was the husband of Octavia *minor*, and accept Drumann's theory that the Octavia whom Antony married was first married to this same consul, then it follows that Octavia *minor* was Antony's wife. Obviously, Drumann's reason, being an *argumentum a silentio*, cannot be accepted as final, but our case is strengthened by additional arguments. As Drumann further observes, and as we have already pointed out, the ancient writers usually refer to Antony's wife as Octavia, the sister of Augustus and widow of C. Marcellus, without indicating whether it was the younger or the elder sister. This would have been a serious omission on their part, if the elder also was married to a Marcellus, especially a Gaius Marcellus. Thus he concludes that the writers knew only one Octavia as the wife of a Marcellus and that this was the younger one mentioned by Cicero. And, if only one Octavia was the wife of C. Marcellus, then she was also the wife of Mark Antony; for we know that Augustus' sister whom Antony married was the widow of C. Marcellus.<sup>17</sup>

It should be pointed out that the younger Octavia, rather than the elder, is the natural choice for Antony's wife, if only because she was the full sister of Octavian. It will be remembered that when Octavian and Antony made the treaty at Brundisium, Octavia's brother offered her in marriage to Antony for the purpose of binding his rival's fortunes as closely as possible with his own (App. B.C. 5.64; Plut. *Ant.* 31). And it is also natural and logical that Octavia *minor*, whose grandmother was a Julian, should have earlier been married into an old and illustrious family like the Marcelli.<sup>18</sup> And by the same reasoning it is natural that Octavia *maior*, whose mother was a nobody and whose father was only of equestrian rank (Suet. *Aug.* 2), should have been married to a person of minor importance like Sextus Appuleius.<sup>19</sup>

*Roman Revolution*, 128, note 4.) It is assumed that Suetonius is using "*nepotes*" to mean "grandchildren"; the other two possible meanings ("descendants," "nephews") will not fit the passage very satisfactorily. Thus the usually accurate Suetonius would for once be in error.

<sup>17</sup> Drumann-Groebe, *op. cit.* 4.251.

<sup>18</sup> See *RE* s.vv. "Claudii Marcelli." At the time Octavia *minor* was married to Marcellus (54 or earlier [Suet. *Caes.* 27.1]), the fact that she was Octavian's sister would obviously have had nothing to do with her being married into an important family, for Octavian was then only a child (Suet. *Aug.* 5.1; Plut. *Ant.* 31.1).

<sup>19</sup> The fate of the elder Octavia is not known, though Gardthausen, *loc. cit.* (above, note 1), suggests inconclusively that she probably died early. See *RE* s.v. "Octavius, -a," no. 95. An early death would help to explain why only one Octavia is usually mentioned. On Appuleia Varilla, the granddaughter of Octavia *maior*, see Tac. *Ann.* 2.50.

Thus, although actual evidence for one point in our arguments is lacking (viz., when the consul of 49 died), almost certainly Octavia *minor*, full sister of Augustus, and widow of C. Marcellus, consul in 50, was the wife of Mark Antony. If at best this type of reasoning is no better than its sources, and if not all of the lines of thought can be carried to completion, nevertheless, only one of the statements contradicts any of the others (i.e., that of Plutarch, who is not noted for accuracy in such details). The mathematical probability that this accumulation of data should not lead to the correct solution is indeed slight.