

## Grief and Gender in Seneca's *Consolatio ad Marciam*

*Consolatio ad Marciam* is among Seneca's best-known consolatory works. Seneca's interest in the topics of grief and consolation is closely linked with his Stoic orientation and its firm philosophical belief that confronting the fear of death requires, above all others, one's engagement with philosophical reflection and practice. The philosopher was also interested in the formidable consequences of death. His consolatory works address extensively the grief that follows the loss of a beloved person and discuss the best ways to confront it. *Consolatio ad Marciam* is an excellent illustration of Seneca's grief-handling strategies from the vantage point of philosophy and gender.

Despite Seneca's close relation to Stoicism, modern scholars, such as Olberding (2005) and Manning (1981), note that his devotion to Stoic principles is not rigid and discuss the influence of other philosophical schools in his work. By contrast, Konstan (2015) traces back Seneca's view of emotions to the Aristotelian teachings on virtues. Building upon this debate, my discussion of Seneca's strategies on handling grief further confirms his tendency towards philosophical eclecticism but also registers an ambivalence towards the proper philosophical course for overcoming grief. In particular, I discuss the way in which Seneca negotiates the contribution of the Stoic notion of *apatheia* ('apathy') and the Peripatetic idea of *metriopatheia* ('moderation') to his distinctive model for handling grief (e.g., by comparison to his Republican predecessors, most notably, Cicero in *Tusc.* 3 or *Att.* 12.14, 18). Interestingly, Seneca urges his audience/readers to eradicate their passions, their grief included. At the same time, he also suggests that one should handle passions in an overall moderate and more disciplined way.

My discussion of his overall strategy in the *praecepta* highlights how Seneca displays ambivalence in his use of philosophical principles from Stoicism and the Peripatetics for handling grief through detailed analysis of excerpts primarily from *Consolatio ad Marciam*, and more briefly from some of his other works.

My focused reading of the *Consolatio ad Marciam* sets out to elicit, moreover, Seneca's attitude towards gender and grief. The very structure of the consolatory speech sets out programmatically the significance of gender. Rather than following the regular order of such works, which begin with *praecepta* and are followed by *exempla*, *Consolatio ad Marciam* inverts this order, foregrounding the significance of *exempla* to mark the import of gender (*Dial.* 6.2.1-2). This consolation is addressed to Marcia, a bereaved mother who lost her son. Seneca displays examples of how famous mythical and historical Roman women handled grief with respect to their particular circumstances. From the very beginning of his consolation, Seneca hints at his bias concerning women's attitude towards grief, calling attention to "the weakness of the female soul" (*infirmitas muliebris animi*, *Dial.* 6.1.1) which makes them more vulnerable to *vitia* ('faults'), grief being one of them. Nonetheless, he elevates the conduct of Marcia's female counterparts who have shown the kind of bravery that is equal to that of men (*dolorem laboremque ex aequo ... patiuntur*," *Dial.* 6.16.1).

Seneca next cites Octavia and Livia, the sister and wife of Augustus, respectively, as a pair of opposing examples. Each of them had lost a son, but each dealt with their grief in a completely different way. The former was devastated by her mourning and withdrew from public and private life. The latter displayed manlike courage, while she spoke and listened with pleasure to stories about her dead son. The philosopher goes on to mention more examples of women who handled their grief in an exemplary fashion, similar to Livia, Cornelia (the mother of the

Gracchi and the wife of Livius Drusus). Both of them faced grief with a “brave heart” (*magno animo*, *Dial.* 6.16.3-4). Besides these maternal examples, he also “recruits” two female heroines, Lucretia and Cornelia, who showcased “manlike” bravery. In fact, the philosopher points out that the latter was treated as a man due to her *audacia* (‘courage’) (*Dial.* 6.16.2). As a counterpoint to the female way of managing grief, Seneca provides a few examples of men as well as their attitude towards grief (e.g., Pulvillus’ initial silent acceptance of his son’s death, Paulus’ *magno animo*, or Caesar who *dolorem vicit*, *Dial.* 6.13-14). My discussion concludes with some observations on Seneca’s views on how women and men should confront grief based on his *praecepta* and their previous philosophical analysis.

#### Select Bibliography

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