

Assault and *exemplum* in Seneca's Consolations to Women

In his consolations to women Seneca the Younger inflicts physical assault upon his addressees. In the guise of a doctor intent upon curing Marcia and his mother Helvia of their grief, he burns them, cuts into them, and probes their wounds with his fingers (*Helv.* 1.2, 2.2, 3.1; *Marc.* 1.8). Among Seneca's *consolationes* this penetrative assault on the addressee is unique to those addressed to women. The male addressees Lucilius (*Ep.* 63), Marullus (*Ep.* 99), and Polybius (*Cons. Ad Pol.*), while subjected to harsh repudiation, are not, frankly, raped. Seneca's treatment of Helvia and Marcia is rendered more remarkable by his stated intent to treat them as men: he vows to hold them to masculine standards (*Helv.* 2.2; *Marc.* 1.1, 16.1), to the extent that he even uses masculine pronoun and adjective forms for Marcia (*Marc.* 6.3, 10.1, 18.1). Indeed, in the *consolatio* to Marullus Seneca repeatedly disparages Marullus for his effeminate grieving (*Epist. Mor.* 99.1, 99.2, 99.24). Amanda Wilcox' treatment of Seneca's *consolationes* to women has further demonstrated the malleability of gender in Seneca's therapy of these women's grief: *virtus* is no longer defined as a solely martial virtue, but also one which may be accomplished by women through the exercise of philosophy (Wilcox 2006). Their gender is convenient, but not integral. And yet these scenes of virtual rape are arresting as an instance in which Seneca clearly makes gender distinctions. This paper will explicate the significance of these heretofore under-examined scenes through Seneca's use of historical *exempla* and the Stoic redefinition of the concept of *patientia*.

In Stoic understanding *patientia* refers to the Stoic's ability to weather the vicissitudes of life, yet the term remains problematic for Stoics insofar as it retains its sexual valences of passive submission to sex (Kaster 2002). Thus *patientia* is a decidedly undesirable trait in masculine behavior. In fact the only demographic for which *patientia* is considered a virtue is women

(Kaster 2002: 140). Moreover, the female *exemplum par excellence* to whom Seneca refers in passing at *Consolatio Ad Marciam* 16.2 is conspicuous for her *patientia*: Lucretia.

I believe that Lucretia serves as an *exemplum* for Helvia and Marcia's assaults in the *consolationes*. Like Lucretia, both Helvia and Marcia bore an initial assault upon their body: Seneca refers to their grief as having "wounded" them (*Helv.* 2.2, 3.1; *Marc.* 1.8). Through their subjection to a second penetration, they, like Lucretia, may prove their virtue: Lucretia commits suicide by knife, Helvia and Marcia are to be cut, probed, and burned by Seneca. As Lucretia herself claimed, it is only through the second act of violation that the first may be undone. Seneca thus utilizes this highly gender-specific *exemplum* as an intertext for his assaults on Helvia and Marcia.

The ramifications of the *exemplum*, however, differ in Seneca from those in Livy. In Livy the feminine *exemplum* of Lucretia is used as the motivational force for male action: her rape is Brutus' *casus belli* (Joshel 1992: 120-4, Wilcox 2006: 80-1). But in Seneca the context of the *consolatio* genre gives the *exemplum* different ramifications. The *consolatio* is written in the second person, and addresses the recipient directly. Thus any reader of a *consolatio* is also identified with the addressee. Moreover, Catharine Edwards has also observed that in Seneca's descriptions of tortured bodies, the reader is always asked to share the perspective of the victim, not the assailant (Edwards 1999: 258). A reader of these *consolationes* therefore assumes the perspective of Marcia and Helvia, subjected to Seneca's assault, but thereby accomplishing virtue in the face of grief. Through these identifications the reader, too, is invited to become a Lucretia.

The concept of *patientia* bears witness to the philosophical payoff of this *exemplum*. Readers of the *consolationes* would have been predominantly men (Wilcox 75). Thus the

employment of the Lucretia provides an appropriate arena in which men may experience *patientia* as a wholly honorable practice.

Works Cited

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