

Patterns of Grief: Roman *Consolationes* and Elite Mourning of Children

In 1960, Philippe Ariès argued that childhood was a construction of the early modern period. There may be no better refutation of this theory in the Roman world than the examination of the care expended on the deaths and memorials of children. While there is enormous evidence for the non-elite recognition of children (King, Strubbe), this paper will focus on a way that the Roman elites dealt with the passing of a young person: formal letters of *consolatio*, or consolatory letters. In this paper, I will attempt to reconstruct the elite Roman reaction to the loss of a child, and reason for which *consolationes* were employed. As defined by Wilcox 2012, consolatory letters typically acknowledge and attempt to sympathize with the loss of the one grieving, and offer standard, philosophical advice towards an improvement of their mindset; however, these letters also feature “markedly eristic rhetoric. A consoler will remind his addressee of his duty and adduce relevant examples of self-control, not hesitating to include himself among them” (12). My paper will attempt to answer the following question: what led elite Romans to write letters of consolation to one another, and what benefit was derived from such letters by both the grieving family and by their community?

Previous scholarship on *consolationes* has tended towards a rather narrow view of their function. Wilcox well summarizes current thought when she argues that even letters to friends and allies could be competitive in nature, and that consolatory letters participate in the sort of “social striving” that may strike modern readers as too harsh (237). While this is certainly true, I seek to show in this paper that *consolationes* are not only sites for political grappling. Instead, I want to examine the function of the exchange of consolatory letters beyond their eristic overtones. A tri-fold pattern emerges here: acknowledgement of the bereaved’s loss (1); of mourning, often portrayed as exceeding the boundaries of the culturally appropriate (2); and

of acceptance and encouragement to move on and return to normal life after the loss (3). I argue that consolations sent to one in mourning primarily take up the first and third features, acknowledgement and acceptance, and that letters written by those grieving tend to focus on the second, grief, with some attention reluctantly paid to the inevitability of moving on. Letters written to soothe others' mourning generally do not focus much on the dead themselves, but the well-being of the living mourner; alternatively, letters written by those grieving are more likely to recall memories and the personality of their lost loved one. I follow Baltussen in arguing that the sending and receiving of letters of consolation provides a psychological outlet for the discussion of feelings of sadness and grief, and I emphasize that the receipt of a letter of consolation is a reaffirmation of membership of an individual in an elite group, a reminder of stasis and reliability in a world shattered by personal loss.

I use this paper as a case study, and I look at letters by Cicero, Plutarch, and Fronto. In each case, I will examine one letter sent in consolation to another, and one letter detailing personal grief. While this by no means is a comprehensive study of all the letters by these authors, or all the letters of Roman male elites, I intend to use this small sample to illuminate the pattern of acknowledgement, mourning, and moving on as typical and necessary features of the Roman practice of *consolatio*.

Bibliography

Ariès, Philippe. 1960. *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime*.

Baltussen, Han. 2009. "Personal Grief and Public Mourning in Plutarch's 'Consolation to His Wife'" in *The American Journal of Philology*. vol. 130. no. 1: 67-98.

- King, Margaret. 2000. "Commemoration of Infants on Roman Funerary Inscriptions." in G.J. Oliver, ed., *The Epigraphy of Death: Studies in the History and Society of Greece and Rome*. Liverpool University Press: 117-154.
- Mander, Jason. 2013. *Portraits of Children on Roman Funerary Monuments*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McIntyre, Gwynnaeth. 2013. "Deification as Consolation: The Divine Children of the Roman Imperial Family" in *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*. vol. 62. no. 2: 222-240.
- Parkin, Tim. 2013. "The Demography of Infancy and Early Childhood in the Ancient World" in *The Oxford Handbook of Childhood and Education in the Classical World*. Judith Evans Grubbs, Tim Parkin eds. Oxford University Press: 40-58.
- Strubbe, Johan H.M. 1998. "Epigrams and consolation decrees for deceased youths" in *L'Antiquité Classique*. vol. 67: 45-75.
- Wilcox, Amanda. 2005. "Sympathetic Rivals: Consolation in Cicero's Letters" in *The American Journal of Philology*. vol. 126. no. 2: 237-255.
- Wilcox, Amanda. 2012. *Wisconsin Studies in Classics. The Gift of Correspondence in Classical Rome: Friendship in Cicero's Ad Familiares and Seneca's Moral Epistles*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.