

## Going to Syracuse: Seneca's *Consolatio ad Marciam* 17.2ff.

When Seneca the Younger writes his *Consolatio ad Marciam*, he is drawing upon his own vast learning as well as his philosophical and rhetorical training in order to create a work that can break through the walls of grief surrounding Marcia. The treatise is meant to be therapeutic and to coax her from her bereavement to a more rational acceptance of her son's death. For the Stoics, reason (*ratio*) connects mankind with the divine and one can understand the workings of god through rational thought and meditation on the working of *natura*. One must exercise *ratio*, and it should help to curb emotional turbulence and sadness. Grief, according to Stoics and Epicureans, is cognitive in nature and, thus, reason can help to alleviate its effects (cf. Konstan 2013). Such reasoning, however, does not have to be made up of dry logical syllogisms or trite *exempla*, and Seneca has recourse to an evocative ecphrasis to help make his point.

In order to illuminate the human condition to Marcia, Seneca offers a description of a trip to the Sicilian city of Syracuse. This ecphrasis exemplifies the various troubles and pleasures one might find in life, from the clear pure waters of the spring Arethusa to the sexual and moral depravities of past tyrants. This paper offers a reading of Seneca's passage that highlights both its important position within the treatise and its literary, historical, and philosophical intertexts in order to show how they help to aid in the therapy at hand. Intratextually, this section helps to highlight the work of Fortune that was stressed earlier (e.g. 10.6, 16.5), and intertexts tie the physical space of Syracuse into the matrix of Greek and Latin letters (e.g. Plato's *Seventh Letter*, Vergil's *Aeneid*). While critics such as Bartsch (2007) have helpfully stressed the Stoic elements, the passage as a whole works within the consolation as a further way for Marcia to exercise her *ratio*. Throughout the treatise Seneca has encouraged a particular reading technique, a *ratio* in its

own right, and he has crafted this passage to operate in the text as one of the final techniques of self-reflection and self-care. Marcia is an educated addressee with interests in the literary and historiographical tradition (see Ker 2009 for her attentiveness to Vergil). The care that Marcia must take in understanding the various references that Seneca weaves into his description will cause her to move away from the false impulses that have led to her obsessive grief. The didactic nature of this section, then, much like didactic poetry (as analyzed in Tutrone 2020) can be seen as a psychagogic method of consolation. She should

When paired with the soul's final journey that closes the work (*ad Marc.* 23.1ff.), one can see how such a trip acts as a sort of *meditatio* for living a self-consciously meaningful (and rational) life and how Seneca tailors his description of Syracuse to hit upon topics germane to Marcia's interests and the consolation itself. Seneca's creative use of a city as *exemplum* and his suggestive ecphrasis allows him to encourage Marcia to move from thinking about her loss as the work of *Fortuna* and understanding it as actually a work of *Natura*. Stoic *ratio* will allow Marcia to reach this conclusion.

### Bibliography

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