

Amanda WILCOX

Exemplary Grief: a 'technology of gender' in Senecan Consolation

In the Moral Epistles, Seneca promulgates rhetorical criteria that equate a man's style with his character, and in particular, with his manliness (Graver 1997). An effeminate style is matched to effeminacy in dress and manner, with Maecenas as prime exemplar (Ep. 114). Yet the ostensible topic of the letter in which Maecenas' effeminacy is identified and impugned is not gender, but literary style. Seneca frequently represents gender indirectly in this way. In this paper I address a similar case; that is, the constructive commentary on gender roles and on virtue which accompanies Seneca's use of exempla to advise and exhort the bereaved. Though grief is a misfortune to which all persons are vulnerable, it might be expected to elicit different responses and to afford different opportunities to demonstrate virtue for men than for women. However, although Seneca wrote prose consolations to both male and female addressees, in which he often matches the gender of an exemplar with the gender of his addressee, he prescribes a virtually equivalent virtuous response to grief for both genders. Yet what is at stake for either gender is very different, since while women may prove themselves manly in their grief—a revelation that is much to their credit—men who fail to control their grief reveal their manhood to be fraudulent.

In the consolation to Helvia, Seneca reminds his mother of women who by their virtue have entered the ranks of heroic men (16.5), while in the consolation to Polybius, he concludes the list of illustrious men who have endured grief nobly with an outburst against a negative exemplar, whose outrageous grief has not only effeminized but even dehumanized him (17.3). This monster is the emperor Caligula, whose response to grief is of a piece with his other moral failures. Thus, Seneca suggests that a person's response to grief, or at least its outward manifestation, can be used as a diagnostic tool for judging the entirety of their character. An effeminate response to grief is symptomatic, betraying an overall unsoundness of character. Likewise, a womanly exterior may conceal a hidden strength of character, only to be revealed by the adversity of grief. Seneca represents the moral component of manliness as trumping biology, suggesting the depth to which gender was a negotiable category in first-century Rome, at least from an ethical and rhetorical standpoint. Seneca's consolations designate an important realm of behavior and of values in which manhood could be simultaneously construed both as an achieved status and as a natural state. They point out how both real behavior and also its rhetorically encapsulated version, the exemplum, acted as a means of recognizing, defining, prescribing, and judging the essential gender of a Roman.

This paper also addresses a second, related issue. If a person's response to grief is revelatory of his essential (moral) gender, how does this rhetorical representation of gender as an outcome of character rather than biology intersect with a philosophical issue that was frequently entertained in ancient consolations; to wit, whether some amount or kind of grief is dictated by nature, or whether it is entirely an outcome of cultural expectations? In closing, I draw together the ancient philosophical debate on the nature or culture of grief with the modern feminist criticism of the essential nature of gender, to

suggest that the modern debate may not only interestingly resemble but also yield useful strategies for analyzing Hellenistic arguments about grief.