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First Impressions in Seneca’s *De Consolatione ad Helviam* and *Medea*

By Allyson Zucker

Although consolations and tragedies entail drastically different rhetorical techniques and writing styles, Seneca attempts to persuade his mother in *De Consolatione ad Helviam* and to convey to a larger audience in his tragedy, *Medea*, that things are not always what they appear to be at first glance. Seneca’s stoic nature lies in the intersection of these two works—in the seemingly unrelated characters of Helvia and Medea. By analyzing Seneca’s word choice, it is possible to cross-reference Seneca’s works beyond even these two passages to explore this theme of a reversal of first impressions.

In *De Consolatione ad Helviam*, Seneca consoles Helvia that constant misfortune can actually prove to be good fortune. *Unum habet adsidua infelicitas bonum* “constant misfortune has one good thing,” (2.3) he declares: it strengthens those it assails. In his consolation to his mother, Seneca imparts his philosophy that things are not always what they seem to be at first glance; incessant suffering may actually be an enduring blessing. Similarly, in *Medea*, Seneca suggests that Medea was not necessarily what she seemed to be at first. He writes, *Quod fuit huius pretium cursus?* “What was the *pretium* to this path?” (361). *Pretium* can be interpreted in two seemingly contrary ways: it can refer to a prize, a cost, or some intersection of the two. This paradox parallels the intersection of misfortune and good fortune Seneca explores in *De Consolatione ad Helviam*.

Seneca invokes the imagery of wounds to reiterate this
theme that events, people, and emotions tend to elicit a reaction contrary to one’s first impressions. He writes that wounds plerumque contrariis curari “[are] commonly treated by opposite methods” (2.2). Here, Seneca is justifying his harsh consolation by admitting that while it may seem cruel to remind Helvia of all her previous hardships, his words are actually kind and ultimately healing. In broader terms, Seneca is reinforcing his philosophy that there are often underlying meanings and consequences that are not always obvious. Perhaps Seneca is suggesting that the two definitions of pretium are not mutually exclusive. Emotions and events are twofold: cruel and kind, beneficial and costly. Similarly, the wound imagery in Medea is twofold. Jason’s love for his children is ultimately the cause of their death and his misery. Seneca reveals this dichotomy through wound imagery as well when Medea says aside, Sic natos amat?...vulneri patuit locus, “Thus he loves his children?...The place for the wound is open” (549-550). In both works, Seneca uses wound imagery perhaps to relate the fragility of one’s expectations to the fragility of one’s body so that the reader can understand this philosophy in a physical, palpable way.

Even though the similarities are apparent, what about the context of the stories of the two women makes this comparison significant? In both cases, there is a buildup of misery, a momentum to misfortune. In De Consolatione ad Helviam, Seneca admits that Fortune relentlessly assails Helvia: Nullam tibi Fortuna vacationem dedit a gravissimis luctibus “Fortune gives you no break from grave struggles” (2.4). The most recent wound, however, is the most grave. Similarly, Medea’s forthcoming crime is the most wretched. En faxo sciant quam leuia fuerint quamque vularis notae quae commodaui “Let them know how light, of common type, they arranged crimes were” (905-907). All the detestable crimes of Medea’s past—murdering her own
brother, depriving her father of the golden fleece, and deceiving the daughters in Corinth to kill their father—pale in comparison to the most abhorrent crime yet to come. The contexts of both passages reveal Seneca’s philosophy that misery has a temporal arc. The lesser sufferings must precede the greatest suffering of all: in *De Consolatione ad Helviam*, mourning a living son and, in *Medea*, infanticide.

In *Medea*, Seneca also conveys this duality of emotions, people, and events through his word choice. The ambiguity of the term *pretium* relates to the ambiguity of the value of time. More specifically, *pretium* refers to an economy of time. Time holds immeasurable value, and it is difficult to put a price on its cost and utility. *Pretium*’s association with economic interactions further emphasizes the irrationality of measuring time and actions in contrast to the rational way sellers and consumers buy and sell priced goods in economic markets. Seneca implies that there is a time for pain, and a time for consolation, a time for hate, a time for love—none of which can be measured, predicted, or calculated in a rational sense. If these seeming opposites can be encrypted in the meaning of one word, they can also exist simultaneously. Seneca reinforces this notion of an economy of time in his *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*. He writes, *Quem mihi dabis, qui aliquod pretium tempori ponat, qui diem aestimet, qui intellegat se cotidie mori?* “What man can you show me who places any value on his time, who reckons the worth of each day, who understands that he is dying daily?” (1.2.1). Time has immeasurable worth, and while it may appear to be indefinite, everyone must die at some point.

Seneca employs consolatory rhetoric and dramatic dialogue to convey his philosophies, namely that one way to cope with hardships in life is to expect the unexpected, to recognize that things are not often what they seem to be. Seneca is suggesting that it is actually beneficial to meditate
on misfortune in order to prepare oneself for the future and avoid the shock when seemingly good fortune deteriorates to misfortune. It is not surprising, then, that Seneca accepted Nero’s decree to commit suicide with a brave indifference.

References

Note: This paper was originally written for Professor James Ker’s Fall 2013 course LATN 309: Seneca.