PLUTARCH’S LITTLE GIRL.¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses Plutarch’s consolation to his wife on the death of their infant daughter. It examines the ancient consolatory tradition and precedents for grief over the death of a child, and compares some Victorian examples. The questions to be examined are: Why would a consolation on the death of an infant have been written? Why would a bereaved father write (and publish) such a formal consolation instead of comforting his wife more personally? The paper concludes that the sad father is comforting himself while both celebrating his wife and erecting a monument to his child by the best means he was master of, literature – in other words, the consolation serves as both ius mutantis and as the little girl’s lasting memorial.

Introduction

This paper discusses Plutarch’s formal consolation to his wife Timoxena on the death of their infant daughter, a toddler of about two, who had carried her mother’s name. It examines the essay (Moralia 608a-612b)¹ in the context of the ancient consolatory tradition. It further sets the consolation against ancient precedents for grief over the death of a child, also contrasting it with some Victorian effusions. This contrast serves to establish a sociological basis of comparison, as infant mortality in both the ancient world and the 19th century was higher than today. The questions the paper examines are: Why would a consolation on the death of an infant have been written? (somewhat unusual for the ancient world where custom virtually forbade mourning for

¹ A shorter version of this paper was read at the Conference of the British Classical Association, at Leeds University on 3 April 2004. Thanks to participants for discussion. The incisive comments of two anonymous readers helped to curb my sentimentality and to sharpen my insight. I hope they will condone my occasional disregard of their advice. Sincere thanks to Dr Mariellen Schneider for help with the preparation of my manuscript.

infants), and also Why would a bereaved father write (and publish) such a formal consolation instead of comforting his wife more personally?

Plutarch was apparently away from his native Chaeronea when the little girl died, and news of her death reached him only after he reached the house of one of their sons at Tanagra. The son’s daughter conveyed the sad news. Even then Plutarch was apparently unable to cover the eighty kilometres home immediately, a journey of at most two days. Instead, he wrote his wife this long, formal letter, which was subsequently published.1

The format of the letter

The letter is relatively short, when compared with the Consolation to Apollonius (ascribed to Plutarch) or Seneca’s three consolations (to Marcia, the daughter of Cremutus Cordus, to his mother Helvia, to Polibias). It employs many of the usual features and topics of a formal consolation, a stylised genre familiar from the Greek philosophical discussions of Crantor onward. It advocates strict limitation of demonstrations of grief, lauding Plutarch’s wife, the bereaved mother, for her fortitude.

If the physical volume of the essay is quantified by measuring the amount of space devoted, in turn, to allusions to the deceased infant, to her mother’s admirable character and to consolatory topics, one could say that the essay is 50% conventional, 22% relates to praise of the mother, and only 28% of its text is devoted to the baby herself, and that in mere allusion to the deceased. The customary /aeu motu/ occurs in a compressed format, encompassing an even smaller proportion of the text. The ratio of the first and third elements may be considered normal, both in the light of the conventions of the consolation tradition and in the fact that the child had lived for such a brief time that there could be no great scope for praise of her accomplishments.2 It should be noted that more than one-fifth of the whole is devoted to the ostensible addressee of the missive, Timozena senior.3 More on this issue later.

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1 The essay is summarised in Barrow 1967:19-20. Kidd in Waterfield & Kidd 1992: 360 surveys theories on why Plutarch would have written formally when he was so close to home, and no longer at Athens, where his wife’s first notification of the baby’s death had missed him.

2 Kidd in Waterfield & Kidd 1992:362 shows that this small portion of praise of the deceased also serves ‘to illuminate his wife’s pure and intense love for and pleasure in’ the baby.

3 This is a very brief consolation, but it seems to follow the normal pattern. Seneca’s three consolations devote even less space to the deceased. See below for summaries of two of the three, showing emphasis on the addressees. See Kassel 1958:49-98 for a
Consolation on the deaths of progeny

Although in the natural course of events, parents could expect to be outlived by their children, the opposite was often the case. Plutarch himself lost two sons (Mor. 609d), as did Pericles (Plut. Per. 36.9; Mor. 118e). Crantor's prototypical 'On Grief' was written to comfort his friend Hippocles on the deaths of his children. Fathers had frequently to endure the death of an adult son in war and in the turbulent public life of Republican Rome or the Greek East. Parental fortitude in the face of loss was considered the supreme virtue of a laudable life. Monuments to such losses abound. Augustus Caesar had to bear the loss of his two youthful grandsons, Lucius and Gaius, on whom all his hopes of a dynasty had been pinned. The younger Pliny (Ep. 3.16) equates the fortitude displayed by Arrita, the wife of Caeceina Paetus, at the death of her son with her more-often lauded bravery in setting him an example of heroic suicide.

It was fairly common, given the precarious nature of pregnancy and childbirth in the ancient world, for parents to need consolation on the death of an adult daughter who had succumbed during parturition. Of such letters, the most famous in Latin is perhaps the consolation on the death of his daughter offered to Cicero by his friend Servius Sulpicius (Fam. 4.5). Cicero also famously indulged in Soliloquies of various kinds. He divorced his second wife, it is said, on the pretext that she had shown insufficient grief at the death of her adult step-daughter. His own Consolation is apparently lost, but his Tusculan Disputations pick up the themes of death and loss. For a while he contemplated erecting a shrine as monument for Tullia; monetary considerations (and other interests) apparently put paid to his scheme.

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1 One was called Charon. Elythen 1996:79 suggests the name 'Sodarus' for the eldest boy.
2 An extreme example is Brutus the Liberator who is said by Livy 2.33.1-5.9 to have killed his own sons, as traitors to the Republic.
3 Strubbe 1998 collates the inscriptions on private monuments with the sentiments expressed in public decrees in which cities would commiserate with members of their aristocracy on the death of a family member. He notes that in the course of a thousand years (6th century BC to 4th century AD) such inscriptions gained in emotional content, in the end reflecting current consolatory commonplace. Strubbe identifies only two such decrees as relating definitely to the death of a very young child.
4 Gic. 12.25 changes Amicus with finding a suitable property on which to erect it; this apparently never happened. The idea of a 'shrine' (lanum) rather than a 'monument'...
simultaneous death of Tullia's baby that Cicero might at any stage have felt, is not recorded, and there is no record of any consolation offered him on the loss of his grandchild.

Consolation on the deaths of infants

The question now arises: How did the deaths of infants affect the ancients in general? Cicero may have been applying the admonition he quotes at Tusc. Disp. 1.93, that people did not always consider babies' deaths untimely nor did they even mourn them. Plutarch (Numa 12.2) notes that Numa strictly rationed mourning for infants in archaic Rome. In similar vein, Strabbe (1998) notes that in the Hellenistic East a frequent consolatory theme in epitaphs on the death of a child was that the child had reached the summit of perfection, and so its death could not be considered untimely. Yet infant deaths were frequent (see below) and must have affected their families to varying degrees.

Giannopoulos, discussing paediatric medicine in the ancient world, refers to Aristotle’s explanation of the Greek custom of naming a child only during its second week of life in the light of the extremely high rate of mortality during the first week. The first two years were usually fraught with uncertainty. The second-century Roman Fronto reports the loss in their infancy of five children, each at the time an only child (quintum ovem ipsum immaculatum somper unicum, De hop.

continued to attract him. This was first mooted in Att. 12.18.1 on 11 March 45. The course of his thinking (weighing of various options regarding both format and location) until its final abandonment may be traced by reading (in this order) Att. 12.19.1; 12.12.1 (first mention of Tullia's apotheosis); 12.20; 12.21; 12.22.3; 12.23; 12.25; 12.27; 12.29; 12.34; 12.35.1; 12.36.1; 2; 12.37.2; 12.37a.1; 12.38a; 12.40.4; 12.41.2; 4; 12.42; 12.43.3; 12.51; 12.52.2; 13.1.1; 13.12.4; 13.18.1; 13.26; 12.29. After 13.34 (July 26) the issue does not recur. I am indebted to Dr. M. Schnecker for these references. The issue of Tullia's apotheosis is exhaustively discussed by Boyance 1944, who sees it as symptomatic of a contemporary increase in belief in the immortality of the soul. Clausen 1996:224 comments on the comfort the bereaved parents could have drawn from each other if Cicero's marriage to Terentia had remained sound.

10 Dixon 1988:104. See Eyben 1996a: 103 for the postulated length of time allowed for mourning of the very young. Cf. discussion below of Mor. 61.2a, where Plutarch repeats this comment.

15 Giannopoulos 1930:15. The first week is usually accompanied by weight loss, often leading to the death of a frail infant. Naming of boys took place on the 9th day, of girls, who were considered to be stronger, on the 8th. See Wiedemann 1989:17 for further discussion.
For the deaths of such babies consolation was seldom offered. Formal consolation on the death of even an older infant was unusual, not because older babies did not also often die, but particularly because the mortality rate was so high that custom forbade excessive grief at the death of any infant, a fact repeated by Plutarch at Mor. 612a. An exceptional consolation on the death of an infant is Seneca’s consolation to his mother Helvia, ostensibly on the death of his own baby son, who had died in his grandmother’s arms. Yet Seneca’s essay Consolatio ad matrem Helviam is in fact more about himself, and is couched as a ‘voice from the grave’ comforting Seneca’s mother on the ‘being death’ (that is, the exile) of her adult son. The death of the infant is almost incidental.

There may have been various reasons, beside the high mortality rate, for literary exhortations to limit grief at the death of a baby. An infant may have been considered as ‘less of a person’ than an older child, having spent less time with its parents, and hence being less of an object for mourning. Herodotus curiously recommended that the Greeks should adopt the custom of keeping a child apart from its father until the age of five, so as to spare the father undue mourning in the event of its death. In practice, however, such an expedient could have had the opposite effect. The poignant comment to M. Aurelius by Fronto on the death of a grandchild he had not seen, is extremely touching (De sep. usw. 2). Fronto is particularly affected because he cannot visualise the little face (2.6). The consolatory tradition also made much of the concept that death is not an evil, and early death is to be welcomed, but Fronto rails against a tradition that would regard the very briefness of a child’s life as a source of

\[1\] That means that each died in its infancy, before a second child was born. Only the sixth survived, Gratia, the mother of the baby whose death is the topic of the letter.

\[2\] In a paper read at a Roman Studies Conference held at the University of Natal, Durban, South Africa, in 1992, David Scourfield compared the apparent gap between expression and experience of grief with a statistical analysis of consolatory letters (15 out of 48 letters cited were to parents on the deaths of their children) and epitaphs on tombstones, which seldom commemorate very young children. Scourfield commented that loss of an older child was often considered more serious than the death of a spouse, citing the example of Quintilian’s loss of his young wife, who was like a child to him, and of his sons of five and nine (Inst. 6.3-6) The loss of each seemed to the bereaved Quintilian in its turn worse to bear. At the same conference Dr Fabian Opedo of Cape Coast University, Ghana, indicated the existence in Ghanaian culture of similar conventions about the suppression of grief for the death of the very young and obligatory commiseration for the deaths of adults.

\[3\] A greater part of the letter is devoted to bewailing the harm that the loss of a son means to Fronto’s son-in-law Victorinus than to indicating sympathy for Fronto’s own daughter Gratia, who, he is sure, will be comforted by her excellent husband. Fronto’s emotionality may perhaps be ascribed to the fact that he had also recently lost his wife (\textit{Ad Verum} lap. 29).
comfort, even a reason for not mourning, at its death. He denies that the early departure from this world of such a child can ever serve as a remedy for the parents’ continued longing for the departed child (non parentibus desiderandi remedium, ibid. 5).

Monuments to children

In practice we do have many sources commemorating the deaths of young children, fewer on the deaths of infants. Even the deaths of humble young people sometimes elicited a memorial. Two of Martial’s most charming poems (Epigr. 5.34; 10.61) commemorate the death of a little slave girl, who died just six days shy of her sixth birthday. The earth on the little grave of Erotion (‘Lovey’ or ‘Thandil’) is admonished to lie lightly on the little corpse, which, in life, had tripped so lightly over it.

This, however, is a literary fancy.14 Sepulchral inscriptions give a truer picture of death and grief in the ancient world. A collection of Latin sepulchral topics listed by Lier (1903-4) has a separate category for those inscriptions that specifically state that parents are inscribing what should have been inscribed by children, as in Si non fata rerum praeventa tua faciunt / mater in loco titulus debuit asele legi (‘If the laws of the Fate had not been perverse, the word ‘mother’ should have been read first in this inscription’).15 Lier makes the point that the Romans took the format of such inscriptions from the Greeks, so that another inscription, Quum desit faveret filium parentibus / marit parentes suae foventem filiam (‘The sad parents did for their daughter whatever was required of a daughter to do for her parents’, ibid. ‘Bch 169’), may be related to the epigram of Dittinus (A.P. 7.261): ἐπε τε ἐκ παῖδος μητέρο τεχεῖν.

Strabbe quotes in translation a Greek monument to a little girl: ‘Stranger, this tomb hides a dear little girl, sweet as honey, the delicate flower of the three Graces, the little Tryphera, source of never-ending tears. After having given much joy to her parents, she has met the bitter daemon.’16 Such a flowery inscription was the exception, but that children were the objects of great affection is not to be doubted, and is attested by inscriptions in Lier’s collection such as Mater monimentum fuit natiu filio / ex qua nihil unquam delitit nisi cum est non fuit (‘His bereaved mother erected this monument for her son, about whom the only thing she has ever regretted is the fact that he was no more’, Lier ‘Bch 152’). This may be compared with an inscription from the tomb of a woman about

14 See Kassel 1958:80-82 on literary discussions of immatura morte.
15 Lier 1903:484-46, with source reference ‘Bch 140, 1482, 1483’. It should be noted that these ‘children’ were probably not infants.
whom her husband could attest *ex qua vir doctus non sequam nisi mortem* ('About whom her husband was never saddened except for the fact of her death', Hier 'Bch 161').

There is a lack of consensus on the prevalence of literary consolation for the deaths of children in the ancient world, and the evidence often seems conflicting. I have above referred to Cicero and Plutarch himself as sources for the restrictions placed by custom on such a practice and on mourning for very young children. The Greek papyri offer many instances of informal consolation (usefully collated by Chapa in an Oxford doctoral dissertation, 1993, published 1998). Chapa’s collection lists many informal letters from the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, roughly contemporaneous with Fronto’s complaint or Plutarch’s more formal missive, also many written by women, with names ranging from Graeco-Egyptian, to Roman, to Jewish. Chapa discusses occurrence in the papyri of more letters relating to the deaths of children than of adults, especially in cases where the writer and the mourner are not related, stating, ‘The loss of a child was a great misfortune for parents and more grievous than the loss of an adult.’ He hazards the guess that the greater frequency of such condolences corresponds with the high rate of infant mortality in the ancient world. This seems a reasonable postulation, but it needs to be tempered by taking cognisance of the customary views quoted above. The mostly Egypt-based writers of those letters may have been reflecting a specific, local sub-culture of condolence for infant deaths, or perhaps they were simply more honest. Like Fronto on his grandson, these letters seem to acknowledge that parents (and grandparents) loved their progeny, and needed comforting for their loss.19

18 Gill 1996:347 quotes as the Aristotelian norm for disinterested friendship and personal ethics the attitude of a mother and father to a child, showing (p. 166) that Medea’s children were the ‘most concrete expression of the interlocking’ of her life with Jason’s.
Infant mortality and the question of affection

Equally conflicting evidence regarding the effect of infant mortality on parental affection needs interpretation. Different scholars have diametrically opposite views on the matter. M. Golden has taken into review different assumptions about demographic determinism in ascertaining parental grief in his book on children in Classical Athens.22 He sets the rate of infant mortality within the first year at between 30% and 40%,23 with this vicious circle as corollary: ‘If babies were going to die, why waste too much effort on them?’ Noting, like Strubbe, that epitaphs for infants under two never called their deaths ‘untimely’. He counters the corollary with the observation that modern anthropological studies show that, where children are at high risk, great care is taken in child minding, which is shared by many adults, resulting in the “burden of loss” being “widely distributed”.24 Burial of very young infants within the house or its walls may be a form of sympathetic magic, but could also indicate unwillingness to give up the child. Even in societies where infanticide is legal, he notes that those that have been kept, are cared for and mourned when they

22 Golden 1990:82-83.
23 Wiedemann 1989:11-16 compares infant mortality rates of the ancient world with some modern third world countries in the sixties, which ranged from 160 per thousand live births (Tanzania) to 259 (Zambia). He speculates from inscriptions in Rome and North Africa that only older children were afforded (expensive) tombstones, so that it is almost impossible to know how many may have died before 40 days. He concludes that one third of all born live were dead by age 10 years. From Ulpius’ ‘life tables’ he extrapolates even more drastic figures, with infant deaths in the Roman world as 350 per thousand live births, 40% reaching the age of 5 years, 40% reaching age 20, and concluding (p. 16) that every couple had to produce five children in order to leave two self-propagating adult children (Comelia, mother of the Gracchi, raised only three of twelve children). Hence, too, the frequency of adult adoption to ensure inheritance in the Roman world. Patterson 1998:49 considers life expectancy to have been the ‘key factor’ in determining the format of ancient Greek families, with small primary families extended also by remarriage and adoption. Bradley in Pomerosy 1999:184 sets mortality by age 10 at 50%, Sourfiled in his Durban paper (1992) at 53%.

An anonymous reader has commented that Greek New Comedy mostly features nuclear families, yet also took infant exposure for granted, with this arguing against Golden’s assumption that sharing of the ‘burden of loss’ by an extended family may be postulated about the Greek world. Against this, one could argue that Roman familial structures (where even adult sons and their children remained under the patripotestatis of the patriarch) would more easily have lent themselves to such extrapolation from modern evidence.
die.\textsuperscript{53} Golden concludes that the ‘weight of evidence’ indicates that the Athenians loved their children and grieved deeply at their deaths.\textsuperscript{24} From his arguments one may extrapolate a general trend in later eras in the Greek world, when circumstances were not much different.

Against this Wiedemann (1989) says of parents in the early Roman empire that ‘parents were less willing to invest emotionally in their children, especially in babies’, leaving them in their first year to nurses, lest they (the parents) became ‘too attached’. He argues that there was not even a Latin word for ‘baby’ (\textit{infans} means ‘someone who cannot speak’, that is a legal minor).\textsuperscript{25} For Wiedemann, attitudes started changing only during the Christian era, (infanticide, to Christians, was ‘muster’)?\textsuperscript{26} and, whereas, for pagans, the death of a child was ‘a life wasted’, for St Augustine, a child’s life could be considered complete, the child also a candidate for salvation.\textsuperscript{27} Wiedemann interprets this postulated change from the classical to late-antique attitudes, where even an unborn child was considered in Jewish and Christian communities as part of the religious community, as perhaps ‘an expression [of] a social process which in the first three centuries was affecting all city communities within the empire.’\textsuperscript{28}

Taking into consideration the evidence from the literary sources, papyri and inscriptions noted above, the apparently conflicting arguments of Golden and Wiedemann may, \\textit{mutatis mutandis}, be reconciled and applied to Plutarch’s first-century Greek society, which lay under the sway of Rome. In the Greek world parents, it would seem, had always demonstrated love for their children as babies, even when custom frowned upon investing too much affection in infants, but, by the 1st century, tradition was being tempered by new attitudes that allowed for more open display. Such attitudes would have reflected, in part at least, prevalent religious beliefs, particularly those that related to the concept of immortality.

The influence of religious beliefs in parental attitude to the deaths of infants may be further explored by comparison of the first-century Greek world with a later era in which infant mortality rates were not much different from those of the ancients, and in which the assumption of the ‘complete-nest’ of even an infant’s life, as noted by Wiedemann, also prevailed. Anthologies of consolatory poetry and prose were compiled, particularly in the United States,

\textsuperscript{53} See Lycuncus 5.8-19.4 on decisions about exposure of infants.
\textsuperscript{24} Golden 1990:89.
\textsuperscript{25} Wiedemann 1989:17.
\textsuperscript{26} Wiedemann 1989:36.
\textsuperscript{27} Wiedemann 1989:105.
\textsuperscript{28} Wiedemann 1989:204.
during the 19th century to comfort parents on the loss of their infants. The editor of one of these (Schenck 1865) in his preface explains that his intention was to show that 'infant salvation is a fact in Calvinist teaching', and thereby to console sorrows parents, remembering from his own youth the family burial plot with a 'row of five infant brothers and a sister'.29 Schenck quotes the comforting thought by Flavel, 'Better to weep for ten children dead than for one living'.30 The poems and inscriptions featured in this anthology carry motifs that could equally have come from ancient Greek or Roman infants' graves,31 such as Charles Wesley's:

He to rest is early gone
be to paradise is still?
I shall go to him, but he
never shall return to me.32

and the anonymous

Weep not – not for the babe that sleepeth here
my tears bestow, my sorrows give–
Pass on, and weep with grief sincere
for those who innocence outlive.33

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29 The greater fragility of male infants is a fact, even today. This seems clearly to have been the case in the example named, but many babies died. Schenck 1865:214-17 quotes one Leroy G. Hailey on an approximately 50% infant mortality in urban U.S.A., which this Christian author interpreted as the 'salvation of half our race in a body by calling them away from the world in infancy'. Earlier Morgan 1831 had given a similar figure for children up to the age of seven. Both these authors operated in the east-coast area of the U.S.A. Similar figures are obtained elsewhere. The nineteenth-century family graveyard of the French missionary Pellissier at Bethulie, South Africa, has a row of about six graves of infants, none of whom seems to have survived more than its third year.

30 Schenck 1865:296.

31 Strubbe 1998:50 quotes two similar concepts as frequent consolation themes in the Hellenistic East, ‘those beloved of the gods, die young’ (cf. Menander Rhetor 583 Juckel) and ‘the departed child now lives with the gods’.

32 Schenck 1865:286. Another poem by Wesley (in Schenck 1865:153) celebrates ‘the short life of a blessed infant’, arguing that many others will, at the last trump, envy its short and blameless life. Similar arguments (futility of grief, mortality of all on earth, the continued goodness of Providence, and his omnipotence, the avoidance of future grief and the completeness of the life-span allotted the deceased) were offered in a sermon by Morgan (1831) to comfort a particular set of parents summoned Robinson on the death of their small boy. These could just as well have been taken from the pagan tradition of consolation of the bereaved.

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This theme, we shall see below, also features in Plutarch’s assessment of his own infant’s death, where not Christian, but Dionysian, assurance of immor-
tality serves as the greatest source of comfort.

The death of Plutarch’s baby: an absent father and a grieving mother

So little Timostrata died while her father was travelling. We have seen that he was only about 80 km far from home, at Tanagra, when the message reached him, blunted out by his granddaughter (who must have been older than her infant aunt).\textsuperscript{31} Apparently his wife had thought Plutarch was at Athens, but messages sent to him there had missed him. For some reason the bereaved father could not immediately hasten home to Chaeronea in order to arrange, or even to attend, the simple obsequies. It would not have taken him longer to reach home (thirty-six hours, perhaps two days of more leisurely travel) than it would have
taken a letter to reach his wife by messenger. He starts his letter of consolation on a domestic note, praising his wife’s sensible arrangements and giving her free permission to do anything else that she deems requisite (608b).\textsuperscript{32} He offers no explanation as to why he cannot now come home, but seems to assume that his wife does not expect it of him. He clearly was a ‘hands-on’
father, as may be deduced from his description of his former delight in the little girl (608d-f).\textsuperscript{33} His continued absence at this time does appear a little odd to modern sensibilities.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{31} Scheneck 1865:296.
\textsuperscript{32} The identity of this child’s parentage has been variously conjectured as an older son or daughter from an earlier marriage, an elder son or daughter of Plutarch and Timostrata the Elder, or even a niece or nephew, daughter or son of Plutarch’s sister, but this is an issue that does not require (impossible) clarification here. See Kild in Waterfield & Kidd 1992:360 and Burrow 1967:20-21.
\textsuperscript{33} Koorthooij 1999 comments on the phenomenon of the death of small sarcophagi for children in the Greek East, whereas these were frequent in the Roman milieu. He raises the question ‘[H]ow were the bodies of the immortals disposed of here?’\textsuperscript{36} Altham 1997 cites De fides amar 494a and Censorin. praef. 139d on Plutarch’s belief in the paramount importance of the father in child-rearing.
\textsuperscript{34} Pomeroy 1999:76 postulates that he wanted to give his wife time to control her grief before returning home. I have not seen it suggested elsewhere that his role of Delphic priest would have prevented his attendance at the funeral, for fear of ritual pollution, but this seems to me the most reasonable explanation. Callen & Reif 2002a cite R. Parker, *Maximus: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford 1983) 36 on the fact that in the Classical era priests for this reason avoided all funerals. There seems no reason to suppose that this would not still have been the case in Plutarch’s time, although the same authors (2002b) point out that in contemporary Rome the death of
The letter is, however, not a private missive with perhaps to-be-expected exclamations of shock and grief, in the vein of Fronto’s slightly later epistle (in Latin) about the death of his grandson, cited above. It is a formal document, couched very much in the terms of the stock consolation on the death of a loved one, carrying the kind of arguments current since the days of Crantor. It offers, as we saw, consolation on the death of an infant against the customary assumption that such a death should not be mourned. We have noted that it concentrates almost more on the bereaved mother than on the dead baby.

Consoles were most often written to assuage excessive grief, particularly grief that endures indefinitely.28 In this Plutarch’s letter to his wife differs from the consolation he (or a contemporary) wrote to his friend Apollonius on the death of his son, which was sent as the final contribution in a series of acts of condolence over the period in which the boy’s condition had continued to worsen (Ps.-Plut. Ad. Apul. 10f-102a). The Plutarch family’s bereavement is recent, and there is no indication that it was other than sudden. The father is helping his wife through the initial phases of their common mourning, not trying to wind up a long drawn-out process of commiseration.29 The question remains: If Plutarch could not come in person to comfort his wife, why did he not write more personally and less formally? Given the strength of literary tradition and the nature of Plutarch’s other literary endeavours, one could counter that it would have been easier for the bereaved father to keep to a standard format, and that this would not preclude true feeling.30 His thoughts could run on more easily in well-trodden paths while he himself was in a state of turmoil. The mere fact of rehearsing well-known arguments could serve as balm to his wounded soul. Yet a further question obtrudes: Why did Plutarch publish what he had written? Is nothing private?31

The tradition adapted

Traditionally, a consolation to the bereaved had four parts: the sorrow and sympathy of the writer, eulogy of the departed, reflections on human mortali

a pre-pubescent child was not considered as polluting members of the household, if the obsequies had been carried out with sufficient speed.
29 This aspect was stressed by an anonymous reader, who emphasises that Plutarch criticises excessive grief, not grief per se.
30 The assumption that ‘formality precludes true feeling’ is a modern, romantic fallacy. True feeling can, for example, shine through the most formalised and struc-turally rigid poetry.
31 Kild in Waterfield & Kild 1992:359-60 suggests that Plutarch found it cathartic to write down his thoughts even though he was already close to home.

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(such as the freedom from mortal bondage induced by death, the healing power of time, the mutability of Fortuna) and the need for restraint in mourning practice (based on refutation of the concept of death as an ‘evil’). These four components could be further extended by recourse to a host of *topoi*, such as the inability of the writer himself to offer consolation, so over-come is he by grief; the argument that the deceased has escaped greater woes, or is in a better place; an exhortation to limit grief lest it should naturally fade away; the consolation that good memories afford; the fact that death is the common lot of all humanity, and that the beauty and inner goodness of the departed live on in the memories of those who knew him or her.

Most of these, and other, themes feature here, as well as praise of the infant charms of the lovely little girl, the joy of whose father’s memories brings her before us as in some way a still-living entity. On her more below. First some observations on the structure and more conventional consolatory aspects of the essay: what the father has to say about the death of one so young as to have had no opportunity to transgress, a truly good little soul, as yet little contaminated by the evils of living too long in the flesh (611c).

The structure of the epistle

The consolation, as a formal essay, bears comparison with Seneca’s three consolatory diatribes, particularly the two addressed to women (*Ad Marciam, Ad matrem Volumni*). The structure of the *Ad Marciam* is analysed by Claassen as falling into eight sections, starting with an exordium comprising initial *capitatio benevolentiae* and an exposition of the author’s approach; next, two *exempla* of reactions to grief, one positive and one negative; then Stoic commonplace on the immutability of Fate, followed by general precepts such as the need to temper grief, the conventionality of excessive grief, deliberate pre-emption of the assuagement of time, the predictable fuddiness of Fortuna, the externality of possessions, birth as the first step towards death, and the mutability of life. The fifth section relates to Marcia herself, alluding in turn to her bereavement, the community of fellow sufferers (with, as historical *exempla*, the Stoicism of other bereaved parents), the even-handedness of Fortuna and

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42 The standard work on all aspects of the tradition is still Buresch 1886, to which may be added Morav 1917, Kassel 1958, Johann 1968, a very thorough work which treats these *topoi* categorically in separate chapters, Esteve-Forriz 1962, and, more recently, its application by Scottofied 1993 to Jerome’s consolation of Heliodorus, Bonnet’s commentary 1999:75–77 and Strubbe’s analysis 1998.

43 Marcia, daughter of the Stoic Mucius Cordus, lost a son, age unspecified, but presumably already an adult.

44 Claassen 1993:91.
the universality of the human condition. Then follow the argument that grief is unnecessary for the living and futile for the dead, and further precepts refuting the idea of death as evil, allusion to Fate’s allotment of the time and place of death, her son’s freedom from future ills and his past achievements. Next comes discussion of other ills of life, leading to an excursion on the suicide of Marcia’s father. The final part of the seventh section comprises laus mortui that ends with an affirmation of the immortality of the soul. The penuria is couched as a proopopoeia (appearance in person) by her father Cremuus Cordus himself, exhorting Marcia to contain her grief, to endure good and bad as Fortuna grants it, to keep mortality in mind, and to realise that the whole universe will end in a cyclic conflagration.

From this one can deduce that the format of a consolation required both a display of consolatory commonplace and personal application of these commonplaces. Plutarch’s letter shows a similar alternating structure, which can conveniently be divided into ten parts, an encomium stating the circumstances under which the bereaved father is writing, followed by nine different sections, each consisting of a traditional consolatory topos and its application to the Plutarch family, as follows:

1. Greetings, followed by the father’s narrative about hearing of the baby’s death, and approval of the measures his wife has taken (608a-b).
2. An exhortation to limit her grief, leading to laus mortui — the parents’ delight in the baby’s sweet nature is no cause for dismay (608c-d).
3. An exhortation to cherish good memories (608b), preceded by the commonplace that forgetfulness annihilates both bad and good memories (608c), leading to commendation of Timoxena Senior for not putting on mourning (608f), followed by laus maternis, praising the mother’s good sense (609a).
4. An excursion on the unreasonableness of excessive mourning and self-castigation (609b-c), application to Timoxena Senior, as her own encomium in steadfastness at the times of loss of their other children (609d) and her total involvement with these children while alive (609c).
5. Aesop’s fable about the apportioning of grief (609e), leading to the precept of self-discipline and care of both body and mind in times of grief (610a-b), with encomium the wife’s experience of the unreasonableness of lamentations at a bereaved friend’s house, that she had helped to end (610c), followed by commendation of her present attitude in not allowing others to rake open her wounds (610d, first part).

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6. The central precept of the consolatory tradition – that death is not an evil (with the argument frequent in Greek philosophy, that life is no different now than it was before the object of lamentation was born); active advocacy of seeking the equanimity enjoyed before the baby’s birth,\(^5\) with the personalised comment that the birth of the little darling should never be considered negatively (610d \textit{continued}), followed by further reference to the child’s sweet nature, Fortune’s boon (610d), remembrance of which would serve to alleviate pain, just as the scent of perfume alleviates foul odours (610f).

7. The maxim that memory of good things alleviates the bad leads to renewed exhortation to ignore the lamentations of visitors (611a) and to remember that she still is the object of envy to many who are far less blessed than she, illuminated with an \textit{exemplum} from literary criticism: \textit{critics of Homer who seek only his \textit{vita}, lose out on much that is good, followed by refutation of the central complaint allowed a young girl doomed to die before marriage, that little Timoxena was ‘unmarried and childless’, with the argument that Timoxena the mother had in abundance both these prerequisites for the happy life of a Greek woman (611c).

8. Another consolatory precept: the baby is in a place where there is no more pain, adapted to the age of the deceased: the baby has had such a small range of experience in her short life that her spirit can now have little to regret at being deprived of what it never knew about (611d).

9. Affirmation of the infant’s immortality, based on belief in the Dionysiac rites (611e), with the corollary that, because the infant has died so young, her little soul had not yet become warped by contact with the world, and could return joyously to its former state (611f), with proof for the widespread nature of this belief adduced from the fact that custom forbids the normal funerary rites and litanies for young children, and any mourning for such infants, who are considered to be in a better place (612a).

10. A short and cogent \textit{perennis}. ‘As it is harder to disbelieve than to believe, let us behave as the laws command’ (ἔτει ὅ ὁ ἁπατήτειον χαλεπότερον ἔσται αὐτός ὁ τὸ πιστεύει τὸ μέν ἐκτὸς ὁτιας ἀλήθειας προστάτευσαν ἄραμεν, 612b).

With this final argument, and by use here of the first person plural, the bereaved father ties himself closely into the family context, making more personal what has up to this stage perhaps seemed a rather cold-hearted disassociation from the mother’s predictable grief. Plutarch as father, too, is practising what he has preached to his wife. The fact that he has to resort to dumb acquiescence to the prescriptions of custom, at the end of his rational argumentation against mourning, shows Plutarch the father attempting to act as a physician healing himself by whatever means he can.66

And these means are literary effort. Beside the solace the father derives from its composition, the whole epistle is a salute to both Timoxenas, both mother and daughter.

Mother Timoxena’s character: a husband’s pride

A large part of the epistle is, as we have seen, a monument to the author’s wife as practitioner of all the virtues Plutarch extols in his Advice to bride and groom. It must be conceded with Stadler that there is a discrepancy between Plutarch’s admiration for his own wife and the kind of submission he recommends that a bride should exhibit.67 The space devoted here to the ostensible addressee of the missive, Timoxena Senior, is not as unusual as may seem at first glance. Again looking at Seneca as model, we find that, in the case of Marcia, the captatio benevolentiae with which the epistle begins extends at length the virtues of Marcia, its intended addressee (Ad Marc. 1.1.1-4). Seneca’s letter to Polybius is notoriously more concerned with the addressee than with his deceased brother, the ostensible object of the essay.

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67 Stadler in Pomery 1999:173. See Hawley in Pomery 1999:126-27 on the degree to which Plutarch’s depiction of both wife and little daughter reflect traditional techniques of idealisation. McNamara 1997 argues that Plutarch in the two essays redefined feminine virtue in an attempt to solve the problem dwelt upon by philosophers of his age, that women sometimes appeared as more ‘moral’ than their husbands. Nikolaidis 1997:28 stresses that Plutarch ‘had a much higher opinion of women than any of his predecessors and a far more sensitive attitude toward them than the Stoics.’ He suggests (p. 88) that Plutarch was ‘to some extent a precursor to feminism.’ Against this Wakar 1998 derives, from virtually the same sources, a picture of Plutarch as almost ‘Vicarious’ in his attitude to the sexual relationship between men and women. Bloomquist 1997:90, 95 n. 59 gives a middle view, stressing that Plutarch adopts the Roman ideal of the strong, virtuous matron, of which his wife is the prime example. Cf. Cox 2000:155 on Greek women as active agents with well-protected rights.
Even more explicitly, the *Ad natum Helviae de consolatione*, written when Seneca was in exile, involves the addressee herself or members of her close family in *example*. Claassen analyses the latter essay into seven sections.48 Seneca’s *epistulae familiae* portrays Helvia as the veteran of many attacks by Fortuna (*Ad Marc. 3*). If Helvia means to sit in judgement on Fortuna, it may be shown that she has no ease against Fortuna, having experienced both good and bad fortune. She is her own *example*, having borne six previous bereavements well. As veteran of suffering she now has no reason to be wretched (4.1). Past endurance of hardship should bolster her in her bereavement, of both the baby and himself, her stay and support. Her independence of spirit and generous nature would aid her in grappling with Fortuna and limiting her mourning (15-16.6). As *example* are cited mothers of adult sons: Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi, Rutilia mother of Cotta (16.7). Although she had no opportunity to pursue a liberal education, she is capable of application to study even now, the traditional means of assuaging grief (17). Helvia must count her blessings in the persons of her other sons, her grandchildren and her sister (18, 19). Seneca’s *pro patria* (20) ends on a stylised *laus animi* that shows the virtues of a self-sufficient mind that can roam across the universe at will, and can even approach understanding of the Divine. This mind, presumably, is that of the philosopher-author and not his addressee mother, but it sets the tone for the kind of eulogy, praise of the metaphysical, with which Plutarch, too, winds up his letter of comfort, which is clearly aimed, as we have noted, at himself as much as at his wife.

So, Plutarch’s extensive discussion in the *consolation* of his wife’s actions since the death of the baby and praise of her sensible nature and excellent arrangements are not so unusual. The personality of Timoxena Senior that emerges from these pages is most attractive. She is clearly a strong-minded woman with whom her spouse enjoys a happy co-equal partnership, a woman capable of enduring grief and of comforting others, hardly a woman that needs the apparently cold comfort of a formal condolence from the man with whom she obviously has a relaxed and intimate relationship. She is a careful mother and tends her children herself, breast-feeding when they are babies, and continuing to have intimate daily contact with them (609e). Hence she now has no reason for regret, nor any cause for excessive grief, such as is often indulged in by impetuous mothers who, too late, mourn in excess those children whom they neglected while alive.

Yet, in spite of the very large space devoted in various passages to Plutarch’s wife, *laus mulieris* by a doting spouse cannot be the only aim of this formal document. That the father is writing to comfort himself as well has

48 Claassen 1999:93, 94.
also been suggested above. Could there, however, be a third aim, in some way related to the others?  

Baby Timoxena – the apple of her father’s eye

Short as her little life was, and limited as her scope of experience could only be, the little girl sparkles from her father’s consolation to her mother as a unique young personality. From her father’s words in his opening paragraphs emerges a little character that seems to have escaped displaying the temper tantrums and obstinacy that beset toddlers during their second to third years of life, when discovery of the separateness of their beings from those of their caregivers leads most infants into the quagmires of emotional display that are generally termed ‘the Terrible Twos’. It must be conceded that absolute monsters often are lauded to the skies after their deaths, so that this rose-tinted picture of the exceptional sweetness of character of the departed infant must be taken less as fact than as an illustration of the bereaved father’s subjective devotion to the child. Yet from his tone of reminiscence and the manner in which common memories are evoked of the little creature’s exceptional character, the objective conclusion may be drawn that Baby Timoxena was, at the least, unusually well-behaved for her age.

The doting father speaks with sad pride of the affectionate nature of the little creature that had made it possible for him to call her by her mother’s name (608c), and of the fact that affection for such young children is particularly pleasing as it is totally unalloyed. Little Timoxena’s small pleasures may have been slight, but she generously would share what she enjoyed with others, often urging her wet-nurse to offer the breast to her little playmates, and even to her toys and dolls (608d). As anyone who has had dealings with any two-year old would agree, this is an example of extreme, almost unnatural, unselfishness. Far more usual would be Fronto’s Minimus, about whom his

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62 The present author is not unaware of all the pitfalls of modern literary theory that question the assumption that the reader can recreate the force that drove a particular author to pen a particular passage. See, for instance, discussion of authorial intent by Winkler 1983 and the more recent work of Don Fowler 2000. Yet the reader, while, perhaps, according to the theorists, constructing meaning as she reads (which construction is based on all her previous readyably experiences) may still observe the indisputable fact of the existence in a certain format of an author’s thoughts, and is therefore, I contend, allowed to hazard a guess as to why the author chose that particular format (genre) and chose to fill it with the particular content (that his readers would in subsequent ages re- or deconstruct for themselves).  
63 Kassel 1958:52 speaks of the proud father’s fond depiction of her infant philanthropy as ‘eine überraschende Schülersung’.

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proud grandfather, writing some seventy-five years later, says (\textit{AD\ 141}, 1.12) that his favourite word is ‘Da!’ (‘Gümmel’).\textsuperscript{31}

The memory of how wonderful Timoxena was to cuddle, how curé to look at and listen to, must serve, the sad father here says, to encourage both parents to enjoy remembering her. More joy than sadness should emanate from such reminiscences (609a). In similar vein the stock argument of the inefficacy of railing against Fortune takes on new life with the positive in-junction to credit Fortune for giving the parents, for two whole years, ‘such a gift and such joy’ (χαῖρες καὶ ἐπιλάμβανες, 610c). The father’s stress on the perfection of this gift is a practical application of one of the traditional 

Yet the next point the father notes is the potential argument that the little two-year-old ‘departed this life unmarried and childless’ (ἀνέφθε ταῖς καὶ ἀναιμοδοῖς, 611c) and hence was to be mourned as someone whose life’s task had not been fulfilled. This strikes a ridiculous note to the modern ear, but the argument, frequent in the consolation tradition, would normally have led to the commonplace that she was spared the anxieties of marriage and child-bearing.\textsuperscript{32}

However, such a refutation could not be applied with baby Timoxena herself as exempla, her sunny character having been what it was. She had never caused her parents a moment of anxiety, until this last act of her life, her unexpected death. As in the epitaphs quoted above, her departure from life brought great pain. The father rather suggests that, in her mother’s enjoyment of these ornaments of a woman’s life, the baby may be considered to have lived a full life, albeit vicariously.

Plutarch’s next argument is again common to the consolatory tradition. Baby Timoxena is in a place where no pain is felt and so her parents should not feel pain on her behalf (611d). The same passage goes on to cite a related argument, quoted above: as her range of experience was so small, Timoxena herself cannot now feel deprived at missing what she herself could not have known about. This argument reflects the 

\textsuperscript{31} Elyoen 1996:101 considers that Plutarch is idealising ‘what to a child is just a game’ as ‘an expression of magnanimity and generosity’, adding as comment, ‘My child, beautiful child!!’; Bradley in Fornieri 1999:185 stresses that Plutarch’s comment was most unusual for an age that took little interest in the vagaries of childhood. The same may be said of Plutarch’s letters about his grandchildren. Elsewhere (1998) Bradley argues that sensitivity to children in Roman circles was an early Hellenistic import.

\textsuperscript{32} So De Lacy & Einarsson ad loc. Ed. Kassel 1958:82-83 for other literary examples.
Dionysian Mysteries, reminds his wife that they can draw comfort from the belief that the little girl's spirit has not been totally dissolved, to which he adds the observation that her sojourn on earth had been so brief that her little soul had not yet been tainted by the mundane (611a). As with his assurance of the baby's immortality, this argument, we have seen, can mutatis mutandis be interpreted as part of the consolatory stock-in-trade of the nineteenth-century Christian comforters of bereaved parents cited above. The argument is, however, particularly comforting within a belief system that subscribes to the view of immortality as being cyclic. Baby Timothea's good little soul has escaped taint, and will therefore escape the burden of future rebirth into miserable life. Firm in the beliefs propounded by the Dionysian system, the father can assure his wife that the soul of their little darling is happily released and, because it has not been warped by too-long contact with this world, it can return joyously to where it had come from at birth (612f).

So, we have seen that religious belief played an important part in the kind of comfort that Plutarch can offer his sad wife. What then, we may ask, of contemporary social customs? These would have tied in very closely with contemporary religious beliefs. The essay ends, as we have seen, with a reference to the fact that contemporary custom does not allow for funeral rites and libations to be offered on the deaths of young children, and forbids mourning as 'impious', as the deceased are deemed to be in a better place (612a). The sad father's final words in the short permuta, quoted above, admonish himself as much as his wife: 'As it is harder to disbelieve than to believe, let us behave as the rules command', (612b). It is generally assumed that Plutarch is referring to the parents' own religious belief in the Dionysian concept of immortality, but he may be referring to 'trusting the precepts of contemporary social custom' (so Waterfield ad loc). Whichever interpretation of the Greek is preferred, this final scrap of comfort may be read in the context of the doubts and yearnings of any bereaved parents anywhere, who strive to reconcile their belief in a good and benign Providence with the sad fact of the loss of a greatly beloved child.33

33 Fronon (De sop. am. 2.5) refuses to be comforted by either of these arguments, pointing out that, whether the departed are in a better place or not, and no matter that their souls will live for ever, 'while we are still alive we are bereft of our darlings' (curtiores nostris done vivimine carnem).
34 Waterfield’s translation (1992:374) gives a slightly different interpretation to the Greek τε ἀποκρύπτων and its opposite: Since mistrusting these laws is more problematic than trusting them, let us make sure that our external actions conform to their injunctions …
35 I disagree with the comment by Russell 1973:78 that Plutarch displays a ‘curious hesitancy’ and that his belief in immortality seems here ‘restained and uncertain’

46
Conclusion

In fine, beside the tempering of grief that the triumph of hope over death in religious thought can bring, there is perhaps not much of comfort that can be said about a little girl whose life was so short that the sad parents can have few of her achievements to cherish in their memories. Yet those dear small traits of a remarkably sweet infant that the father lovingly recounts have given us, almost two millennia on, a clear picture of Timoxena minima as we have of her strong-minded mother.

And there we may find the final raison d'etre of this formal consolation that the sad father offers his equally-saddened wife. Plutarch did not write this formal epistle to his spouse as cold comfort in the place of the warm, intra-familial support that a husband should offer his wife in trying times (as, for instance, Fronto is sure that her husband Victorinus will provide for the bereaved Gratia). We can have no doubt that such support was also given and lovingly received. In an era when introspective autobiography had not yet been inaugurated as literary genre (it is generally accepted that Augustine's fifth-century Confessiones formed the prototype), the formal epistolatio was the genre that most readily could produce a publishable literary document that would still strike a personal note. It could serve to illustrate the bonds between its three protagonists: the first-person author as console, the second-person addressee as consoled and the deceased as admirable object of no-longer attainable desire. By this means the author could combine the functional working-through of his own grief with laus uxor, praise of his spouse, and with laus mortis. No matter that it was not customary to celebrate infant personalities by literary means. The epistle was, in the third place, also aimed at telling the world about the wonderful infant the Plutarch family had lost.

So Plutarch's writing of such a formal document apparently helped him to contain his own grief within manageable bounds. It needed to be published, to show the world the admirable qualities of his excellent wife, the elder Timoxena. But finally, its publication could also serve as a lasting memento to a lovely little girl. By writing this essay, the bereaved father was in fact erecting a monument to his little darling by the best means he was master of, literature.

characterising ‘a truly Academic absence of dogma’. In the context of bereavement the father’s exhortation sounds like a natural step in the process of final acceptance. Blank 1977:65-84 gives a more nuanced view of Plutarch’s beliefs. Kidd in Waterfield & Kidd 1992:13 suggests that his consistent aim was to reconcile philosophy and religion.

After almost two thousand years the consolatory memorial is still there to be read by others. One would have to be stony-hearted and flint-natured not to admire Baby Timoxena’s sweet nature and winning ways, those small gifts that her doting parents had, sadly, enjoyed only so briefly. The Dionysian rites may perhaps no longer ensure little Timoxena’s immortality, but a father’s loving description has created a monument for his charming little girl that is aretê paraenesis.

Bibliography
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