

“WE FORTUNATE SOULS”: TIMELY DEATH AND PHILOSOPHICAL THERAPY IN SENECA’S *CONSOLATION TO MARCIA*

JAMES L. ZAINALDIN



Abstract: This article reexamines the function of the topos *opportunitas mortis* (“the timeliness of death”) in Seneca’s *Consolation to Marcia*. I argue that Seneca does not use this consolatory topos in a purely conventional way, but rather in order to advance a complex and philosophically dynamic persuasive strategy. In particular, close attention to the recurrence of the topos in the final part of the work allows us to follow Seneca’s manipulation of both Epicurean and Stoic philosophical principles for the purpose of consoling Marcia. The use of principles from both schools reveals Seneca’s pedagogically sensitive approach to philosophical therapy in the *Consolation*.

1. THE TOPOS *OPPORTUNITAS MORTIS* AND THE PERSUASIVE STRUCTURE OF THE *AD MARCIAM*

SENECA MIGHT SEEM TO BE TILTING at windmills by the time he has come to the attempt to persuade Marcia that the early death of her son Metilius is not only no evil for Metilius or for herself, but in fact something to be welcomed. “Think of how much good a timely death contains” (*Ad Marc.* 20.4 *cogita quantum boni opportuna mors habeat*), he exhorts her, as he applies his philosophical medicine to restore her grief-stricken mind to health.¹ Twice more in the last part of the essay (22.1–3, 26.2), Seneca pleads the case for the good fortune or happiness (*felicitas*) of the fact that Metilius died while still a young man. In all three places, his argument depends on the notion that death may be regarded a blessing if it spares a person harms that would have followed in life. Startling as it might first seem, this belief was both ancient and widespread in Greco-Roman antiquity, and remains recognizable in spite of the variety

¹The Latin text of Seneca’s *Ad Marciam de consolatione* used throughout this paper is that of Reynolds 1977 (OCT). In citing the *Dialogi*, I eschew the abbreviation “*Dial.*” and instead cite by the common titles of the works. All translations are my own.

in its presentation and development.² Sophocles, for example, gives early and eloquent voice to the thought,³ and Aristotle debates a version of the theme familiar to us from Herodotus' story of Solon and Croesus.⁴ In the Roman period, a diverse group would make use of the idea, from Cicero, Virgil, Propertius, and Ovid to (?ps-)Plutarch, Tacitus, Ambrose, and Jerome, among others.⁵ Many of these instances occur in consolatory settings, where the notion is justifiably regarded as a *topos*; it has been conveniently dubbed *opportunitas mortis* ("the timeliness of death") after a Ciceronian expression.⁶

If we take this rich tradition into account, Seneca's plea to Marcia might appear a conventional use of an idea conventional to consolation. That interpretation would at least agree with one popular view of Seneca's *Ad Marciam de consolatione*, which sees little originality in the work, and often even less consistency. The essay, written to the daughter of the celebrated historian Aulus Cremutius Cordus probably in the reign of Gaius⁷ to console her for the death of her son Metilius,⁸ is the oldest

²Some bibliography on the theme, with further examples apart from those cited in the following notes: Favez 1928, xxxv–xxxvi; Kassel 1958, 82–3; von Moos 1971–2, vol. 3, 158–9, 283–4; Manning 1981, 124; Lillo Redonet 1997, 344–7, 349–51; Ficca 1999, 106–7; Rose 2013, 433–5.

³*TrGF* 4.845 σὺ δ' ἄνδρα θνητὸν εἰ κατέφθιτο στένεις, / εἰδὼς τὸ μέλλον οὐδὲν εἰ κέρδος φέρεῖ; That is, death might not be worthy of grief if the future would not have brought gain. Such sentiments are common in tragedy, though given how widespread the theme is in other contexts (see below), it cannot be regarded as generically tragic itself.

⁴Solon (Hdt. 1.31–2) makes happiness (ὄλβος) in life dependent on a good death (cf. 1.32 τελευτήσῃ εὐχαρίστως τὸν βίον); as Aristotle observes (*Eth. Nic.* 1100a17), a possible interpretation of the claim is that death allows us to call a person blessed ὡς ἐκτὸς ἤδη τῶν κακῶν ὄντα καὶ τῶν δυστυχημάτων. See further *Eth. Nic.* 1100a10–1101a19.

⁵Cic. *Brut.* 4, *De or.* 3.12 (cf. below, n. 53), *Fam.* 4.5.3, 5.16.3–4, *Tusc.* 1.84–6 (cf. below, section 3), Prop. 2.13.45–50, Ambr. *Exc. Sat.* 1.3, Hier. *Ep.* 60.15.1, 60.17.1. For Virgil, Ovid, and Tacitus, see below, section 3; for (?ps-)Plutarch, below, n. 52.

⁶*Brut.* 4 *illius* (sc. *Hortensii*) *uero mortis opportunitatem beneuolentia potius quam misericordia prosequamur*; cf. also *De or.* 3.12.

⁷A notice that Cremutius Cordus' writings were republished under Gaius (Suet. *Calig.* 16.1, with Sen. *Ad Marc.* 1.3) establishes the *ante quem* (only Bellemore 1992 contests it); that Seneca was in Rome during its composition (*Ad Marc.* 16.2) precludes the exile years 41–9, but Marcia's age makes a date after 49 unlikely (*pace*, e.g., Herrmann 1929). We are thus left with Gaius' reign as the most probable period: for fuller discussion, see Giancotti 1957, 45–73 (after 37); Abel 1958, 610 and 1967, 159–60 (before 41, probably 37 or 38); Griffin 1976, 397 (between 39 and 41); Grimal 1978, 266–9 (39–40); Manning 1981, 1–5 (40, or possibly thereafter).

⁸Some accord a political purpose to the *Ad Marciam* of equal or greater importance than the consolatory aim: cf. Stewart 1953; Fillion-Lahille 1989, 1613–15; Bellemore 1992;

extant of Seneca’s prose works. Its richly varied and interesting contents and its evidentiary value for understanding ancient consolation have not always saved it from harsh judgment, however. One common charge is that Seneca has simply piled up consolatory figures and arguments in the *Ad Marciam* with little regard to their organization or coherence.⁹ He is sometimes excused by the claim that he wrote in a genre which sacrificed philosophical consistency for emotional effect.¹⁰ The cogency of this defense is undermined by the fuzziness of the notion of an ancient “genre” of consolation as such,¹¹ but even if it were true, it would be a weak exculpation to make Seneca a prisoner of his literary form. While there can be no doubt that Seneca relies on traditional consolatory strategies, further contentions of unoriginality or incoherence (or sometimes sheer ineptitude) must now be thrown out or else heavily qualified:¹²

Wilson 2013, 95, 113–14. There is no reason why this literary form could not sustain political intentions (cf. the *Ad Polybium*), but the exaggerated version of the claim for the *Ad Marciam* has the unwelcome effect of drawing our attention to the margins of the work, besides simply failing to account for the main part of its contents. Closer readings have led to the conclusion that we are dealing with a “genuine” or “pure” consolation: Abel 1967, 19–20; Manning 1981, 4–6; Stowell 1999, 6 (cf. Master 2019, 79 n. 1). On the audience, cf. below, n. 48.

⁹Cf., with various emphases, Steyns 1907, 35, 86; Albertini 1923, 54–5, 247; Favez 1928, xlix–lii; Grollios 1956, 15, 18–19, 55; De Vico 1969, 137–8; Chirico 1990, 143–5; Classen 1999, 92. The view remains alive and well into the 21st century: Wilson 2007, 92 speaks of an “extraordinarily self-contradictory series of arguments” and claims that “Seneca uses as many as possible of the tropes of consolation, without pausing to make them consistent with one another.”

¹⁰Philosophical eclecticism and/or inconsistency a native feature of consolatory writing: Favez 1928, xxiv–xxv; Kassel 1958, 47–8; Manning 1974, 77–8 and 1981, 14, 19, 110; Scourfield 1993, 22–3; Holloway 2001, 64, 152; O’Keefe 2006, 393–4; Baltussen 2009, 89–91; Donato 2012, 8, 23–7; Kaufman 2014, 275. Some support themselves with Cic. *Tusc.* 3.76 *sunt etiam qui haec omnia genera consolandi* (sc. of Cleanthes, the Peripatetics, Epicurus, the Cyrenaics, and Chrysippus) *colligant—alius enim alio modo mouetur—, ut fere nos in Consolatione omnia in consolationem unam coniecimus*; but cf. Stowell 1999, 25–9 on the limits to the evidentiary value of the passage.

¹¹See now especially Scourfield 2013 and cf. Wilson 2013 on Seneca. As Master 2019, 77–8 puts it, “[c]onsolation is less a genre with a fixed form and more a set of *topoi* to be arranged and deployed depending on the context of the loss suffered by the addressee and the thematic goals of the author” (cf. Scourfield 1993, 17). See also the Latin abstract of Małunowiczówna 1967–8, 78. But even if the generic unity of consolation is deemphasized, general studies remain useful for identifying commonplaces and tracing the influence of specific philosophical theories: cf. Buresch 1886; Fern 1941; Grollios 1956, 20–60; Kassel 1958; Scourfield 1993, 15–23; Holloway 2001, 56–74; Zimmermann 2008.

¹²Seneca’s use of traditional material is amply documented in the commentaries on the *Ad Marciam* (especially Favez 1928; Manning 1981) as well as by Grollios 1956, 20–60.

the *Ad Marciam* has been rescued from many of the faults alleged by early interpreters, and recent generations of scholars have been apt to think highly of Seneca's creative development of traditional themes and to see apparent philosophical "inconsistencies" as evidence of a rhetorically functional adaptation of Stoic doctrine.¹³ In this paper, I will offer a reassessment of Seneca's use of the topos *opportunitas mortis* that will contribute to these sympathetic readings of the *Ad Marciam* and deepen our understanding more generally of Seneca's distinctive approach to philosophical therapy.

The *opportunitas mortis* theme plays an important role in the last section of the *Ad Marciam* (19.3–26). Seneca has by this time banked a considerable amount of persuasive capital with his addressee, having guided Marcia from exempla (2–5) through precepts (6–11) to reflection on the appropriateness of the grief she feels at her loss (12–19).¹⁴ Now (19.3ff.) he turns to the most challenging point of all in the consolation: a bracing attack on the idea of an early death (*immatura mors*) as an evil and, indeed, a revaluation of it as something that can be good. Here is the harsher medicine that Seneca had promised at the outset, the reopening of old wounds to purify and cauterize them.¹⁵ In what follows, his con-

¹³A turning point was Abel 1967, 13–46, whose analysis of the consolation revealed its careful evolutionary structure from the point of view of a "practical" therapeutic strategy applied to Marcia. Abel was, however, prepared to sacrifice philosophical consistency to argue his view (*ibid.* 17; cf. 25, "Nicht der Gedanke als solcher ist dem Schriftsteller wichtig, sondern seine tröstende Kraft in einer bestimmten Phase des Heilungsprozesses"). Commentators since have tended to appreciate the persuasive and artful organization of the essay. Many have also argued that the *Ad Marciam* as a whole can be interpreted within the framework of an orthodox Stoicism (i.e., that departures from Stoicism are merely apparent): Grimal 1978, 329–43; Fillion-Lahille 1989, 1607–12; Grimal 1991, especially 232–4; Donini 1995, especially 195–204; Setaioli 1997; Stowell 1999; Setaioli 2006–7, 341, 353–4 and 2013; Gloyn 2017, 14–47; cf. Bartsch 2007, 83–7. For other admiring approaches that place less emphasis on the Stoic character of the consolation see Manning 1974 and 1981; Shelton 1995; Delgado Santos 2005; Olberding 2005; Wilson 2013; Master 2019.

¹⁴The basic structure of the *Ad Marciam* is fairly clear from the contents and internal signposts, although the emphases vary in different accounts: cf. Albertini 1923, 53–4; Favez 1928, lxx–lxx; Grollios 1956, 15–19; Abel 1967, 15–46; Manning 1981, 8–11; Delgado Santos 2005; Hine 2014, 4. While most mark off 26 as the *peroratio*, in this paper I group it with the preceding sections, both for convenience and because it clearly represents an organic development from 19.3–25.

¹⁵Cf. *Ad Marc.* 1.8. Commentators have remarked in particular on the difficulty of the consolation *de immatura morte*: Kassel 1958, 81; Abel 1967, 36–7; cf. Stowell 1999, 104–5. For medical imagery in the *Ad Marciam* and consolation more generally, cf. Grollios 1956, 20–4; Kassel 1958, 5, 20–1, 30–1; Abel 1967, 24–5; Manning 1981, 27–8; Ficca 2001, 165–9. The medical analogy is less significant in the final part of the *Ad Marciam*, as the focus

solatory strategy conforms to the therapeutic method he has articulated shortly before: in order to afford relief, we must consider “first what is to be cured, and then how [it is to be cured]” (19.1 *primum quid curandum sit, deinde quemadmodum*). In the case of psychological distress, this *quid* is false opinion: “it is our belief which tortures us,” as Seneca adds, “and each evil is only so great as we have reckoned it” (*opinio est . . . quae nos cruciat, et tanti quodque malum est quanti illud taxauimus*).¹⁶ Marcia suffers because she imagines, wrongly, that Metilius’ death is an evil. The *quemadmodum* of the treatment is thus clear: she must be made to see that *mors* is not the ill that she thinks it to be; once freed from this source of distress, her grief will wither away. It is to this task that Seneca turns in the final part of the consolation.

As has long been seen, this final and challenging section of the *Ad Marciam* can be divided into roughly two parts on the basis of the philosophical assumptions that Seneca presents.¹⁷ In the first part (19.3–22), he expresses the broadly Epicurean view that death is an annihilation of the self and that accordingly “the person cannot be wretched who does not exist” (19.5 *nec potest miser esse qui nullus est*). His arguments here concentrate on the good things that Metilius experienced in life and especially on the evils from which the extinction of his consciousness spared him; there is no examination of the fate of the soul after death because the soul is assumed no longer to exist. In the second part (23–6), the soul reenters the picture and broadly Stoic assumptions replace the Epicurean premises. Now the soul is imagined to survive the demise of the human body and to travel from earth *ad superos*, “to those above,” whom (in a Stoic vision of the afterlife) it will join in contemplating the divine secrets of the universe. The Stoic line is maintained through the remainder of the essay and indeed comes to a crescendo in the vision of the ekpyrotic conclusion and rebirth of the universe related by the shade of Marcia’s father, Cremutius Cordus.

shifts from Marcia and her emotions to the question of Metilius’ death, but it still continues to provide a therapeutic framework.

¹⁶Cf. 7.1 (of Marcia’s grief) *plus est quod opinio adicit quam quod natura imperavit*. The view that false belief (*opinio*, δόξα) is responsible for psychological distress and that emotional pain can be ameliorated by emending erroneous judgment is Stoic. It appears often in Seneca and in other Stoic contexts and is connected especially with Chrysippus. For the primary sources and discussion, see Grollios 1956, 40–3; Manning 1981, 54; Donini 1995, 201–3; White 1995, especially 228–34; Stowell 1999, 60–72 and *passim*; Graver 2002, 90–3 (on Cic. *Tusc.* 3.22–7).

¹⁷See concisely Manning 1981, 109; the philosophical stances in each part are discussed in greater detail below, sections 2 and 4.

The juxtaposition of the Epicurean and Stoic views in this last part of the consolation (19.3–26) has invited the charge of philosophical inconsistency or even self-contradiction. Seneca has been defended from this accusation on the grounds that he was conforming to a consolatory tradition in which the consoler was expected to show that there was no basis for believing that the departed had come to harm whether or not the soul continued to exist.¹⁸ This interpretation has a piece of the truth, but it does not, as I will argue, do full justice to Seneca’s philosophical therapy in the last quarter of the *Ad Marciam*. For Seneca does not regard the Epicurean and Stoic views as equivalent or deploy them merely as parts of a “Socratic dilemma” intended to cover alternative possibilities (even if they do by and large accomplish this consolatory desideratum).¹⁹ Rather, the shift from the Epicurean to the Stoic view of the soul reflects an evolution in philosophical approach that accords with the persuasive movement of the consolation. This evolution itself is no generic feature of consolation, but instead an expression of a pedagogically sensitive mode of philosophizing that is typical of Seneca’s thought. A ready parallel is found in the *Epistulae morales*, where Seneca does not hesitate to use *sententiae* from Epicurus in the early books (I–III = *Ep.* 1–29) when he believes that they will help Lucilius make progress. As Lucilius advances into philosophy, however, Seneca’s pedagogical approach also changes, and by book IV (*Ep.* 30ff.), he has dropped the practice of sharing Epicurean *flosculi* and taken a new tack in his Stoic instruction.²⁰ I argue

¹⁸The dilemma is called “Socratic” after the alternative Plato has Socrates propose in the *Apology*: 40c5–9 δυνόν γάρ θάτερόν ἐστιν τὸ τεθνάναι· ἢ γὰρ οἷον μηδὲν εἶναι μηδὲ αἰσθησὶν μηδεμίαν μηδενὸς ἔχειν τὸν τεθνεῶτα, ἢ κατὰ τὰ λεγόμενα μεταβολή τις τυγχάνει οὐσα καὶ μετοίκησις τῆ ψυχῆ τοῦ τόπου τοῦ ἐνθένδε εἰς ἄλλον τόπον. In what follows (40c9–41c7), Socrates argues that neither alternative is to be feared. This dilemma is widely used in consolatory settings, including by Seneca himself: cf. *Prou.* 6.6, *Ad Polyb.* 9.2–3, *Ep.* 65.24, 71.16. See further Favez 1928, xxxviii–xxxix; Benoit 1948, 41–2; Kassel 1958, 76–7; Abel 1967, 29; Hoven 1971, 114–15; Manning 1981, 109–10; Powell 1988, 239 (on Cic. *Sen.* 66); Lillo Redonet 1997, 358–62; Setaioli 1997, 328–32 (330 n. 55 for further literature); Stowell 1999, 124–5; Setaioli 2013, 472–3.

¹⁹Note that Seneca thus does not in fact present the alternatives in the form of a logical dilemma, although he could have done so (cf. Favez 1928, xxxix; Manning 1981, 109). What is given instead, a simple juxtaposition, may allow us to interpret the two sets of premises in terms of a dilemma but does not foreclose other possibilities. Not all commentators in fact agree that the dilemma is relevant here: cf. especially Stowell 1999, 124–32; also Grimal 1978, 337–8; Setaioli 2013, 483.

²⁰For the evolution in pedagogical approach in these books, see especially Wilson 2001; 174–86; Wildberger 2014; also Griffin 1976, 352–3; Mazzoli 1989, 1872–3; Schiesaro 2015, 240–1. A crucial turning point is *Ep.* 33, in which Seneca refuses Lucilius’ request for further quotations. On Seneca’s use of Epicurus in general, see Setaioli 1988, 171–248.

that a similarly dynamic philosophical persuasion informs the therapy of the last part of the *Ad Marciam*, and that Seneca’s strategic approach to treating Marcia’s grief can be appreciated through his manipulation of the seemingly conventional topos *opportunitas mortis*.

I will argue as follows. First (section 2), I characterize the development of the theme *opportunitas mortis* in its two main occurrences in the *Ad Marciam* (20.4–6, 22.1–3). Both instances of the topos are grounded in the assumption that death is an annihilation of the self (19.4–6). Since death is properly neither good nor evil, and the soul does not survive to experience anything further, whether a person died *felix* or not is simply a matter of judging whether death spared him from ills that would have followed. The Epicurean principles entertained in this part of the consolation thus serve to strengthen Seneca’s case that Metilius should be regarded as *felix* for his early death. Seneca further buttresses his presentation of the topos with arguments concerning the measure of a good life. Next (section 3), I show how the traditional character of the topos in large part explains its persuasive value. In particular, the familiarity of some conventional features of the *opportunitas mortis* theme would make it easier for Marcia to accept the plausibility of the notion that death is not evil, and that it may even be a good. The therapeutic utility of the topos is indeed enough to justify Seneca’s temporary adoption of an Epicurean viewpoint to support it. However, the same features which make the topos effective for consolatory purposes also invite doubts about the ascription of *felicitas* to Metilius that it is intended to justify. These concerns cannot be eradicated on the basis of the analysis presented in 19.3–22. Instead (section 4), they require a deeper examination of *felicitas*, one that is predicated on the adoption of a Stoic view of the survival of the soul in a celestial afterlife (23–6). The topos *opportunitas mortis* appears a third and final time in the mouth of the shade of Cremutius Cordus (26.2), whose prosopopoeia becomes a vehicle for a Stoic account of the hereafter. Here, we learn that it *is* correct to say that Metilius was *felix* because of the timeliness of his death, but *not* for the conventional reasons proposed in the first two appearances of the topos. Indeed, we discover that all the apparent goods and evils in life that were supposed to explain the *felicitas* of Metilius’ death have no real value at all—and hence cannot account for his happiness. Rather, it is a (Stoic) understanding of the destiny of the cosmos and the human soul that will allow us to call Marcia’s son “happy” or “fortunate” (26.7 *felicem*) for his early departure. So were the first two appearances of the topos pointless? Hardly: they play an important preliminary role in unsticking Marcia from her tenacious belief in the evil of death and preparing her

for a more radical view of the situation that will remove any remaining doubts about Metilus' *felicitas*.

2. THE TIMELINESS OF DEATH ON EPICUREAN PRINCIPLES

In *Ad Marc.* 19.4–6, Seneca establishes the premises for an approach to death that he will leave unrevised in the following three sections (20–2). Although some of the beliefs set out here are the exclusive property of no single philosophical school, the position that he develops is on the whole undeniably Epicurean in character.²¹ In 19.4, he polemicizes against the “fables” (*fabulae*) of the underworld’s torments: “the poets produced these for amusement and have disturbed us with idle terrors” (*luserunt ista poetae et uanis nos agitauere terroribus*).²² In 19.5, he sets out certain core principles regarding *mors*: it restores us to a prenatal state of nonexistence;²³ it is properly a “nothing” (*nihil*), and hence itself neither

²¹The passage is Epicurean: Abel 1967, 29; Manning 1974, 79–80, *id.* 1981, 109; Donini 1995, 203; Setaioli 1997, 326–8, 331–4, 356 and 2013, 471–2. For source material regarding the Epicurean attitude towards death, see conveniently Long and Sedley 1987, vol. 1, 149–54. Some of the ideas are shared by other schools or are commonplaces in consolatory settings, however. For more on Epicurean and other resonances, see the following notes 22–6. Grimal 1978, 337–8 and especially Stowell 1999, 124–32 maintain that there is no real commitment to Epicurean principles in this passage, arguing that the dissolution of self which Seneca mentions (cf. 19.5 *nullus est*) refers only to the body or body-soul composite. Given the richly Epicurean context of the whole passage (see below), it seems a stretch to place such a fine interpretation on the word “*nullus*.”

²²Although almost all philosophical schools repudiated traditional (Greek poetic) conceptions of the underworld and its punishments, this polemic was connected especially with the Epicureans: the *locus classicus* is Lucr. 3.978–1023 (with Kenney 2014, who compares *Ad Marc.* 19.4 in his introductory n.). Seneca explicitly maintains the association elsewhere: *Ep.* 24.18 *non sum tam ineptus ut Epicuream cantilenam hoc loco persequar et dicam uanos esse inferorum metus, nec Ixionem rota uolui*, etc. (for a similar rejection of the subject, cf. Cic. *Tusc.* 1.10–11). Cf. also Fantham 1982, 268–70 on Sen. *Tro.* 390–2. See further Hoven 1971, 112; Manning 1981, 110–11; Setaioli 1997, 326–7 and 2013, 417.

²³19.5 *mors . . . nos in illam tranquillitatem in qua antequam nasceremur iacuumus reponit. si mortuorum aliquis miseretur, et non natorum misereatur*. Similarly, *Ad Polyb.* 9.2 *in eum restitutus est locus in quo fuerat antequam nasceretur*. Again, the idea is not Epicurean in origin: cf., e.g., Eur. *Tro.* 636 τὸ μὴ γενέσθαι τῷ θανεῖν ἴσον λέγω; Hyp. *Epit.* 14.15–16 εἰ μὲν ἔστι τὸ ἀποθανεῖν ὁμοιον τῷ μὴ γενέσθαι, κ.τ.λ.; Bion, Kindstrand F 67 (*Sent. Vat.* 160) Βίωv ἔλεγε δύο διδασκαλίας θανάτου εἶναι, τὸν τε πρὸ τοῦ γενέσθαι χρόνον καὶ τὸν ὕπνον; Teles, Hense p. 61.2–4. But it was integrated into Epicurean thought and developed especially in this context: cf. [Pl.] *Ax.* 365d, Lucr. 3.832–42, 972–5, Cic. *Fin.* 1.49. See further Kassel 1958, 79–80; Manning 1981, 112; Setaioli 1997, 333.

good nor evil;²⁴ the subject (soul) does not survive death, and there is thus no further experience after death of either good or evil.²⁵ In 19.6, he vaunts the “great and eternal peace” (*magna et aeterna pax*) which has received Metilius and placed him “where nothing may stir him, nothing terrify him” (*unde nil eum pellat, ubi nihil terreat*).²⁶

Seneca does not, as I argue, express these Epicurean principles for their own sake as a probable account of the fate of the soul after death: rather, they have a more limited and specific role to play in the therapeutic strategy of the following sections (20–2). In particular, the Epicurean viewpoint is adopted provisionally in order to support a series of arguments about the *felicitas* of Metilius’ death, which include the occurrences of the topos *opportunitas* and certain other considerations (see below). These consolatory arguments are not essentially Epicurean, but they are strengthened philosophically and rhetorically by the assumption of the

²⁴ 19.5 *mors nec bonum nec malum est; id enim potest aut bonum aut malum esse quod aliquid est; quod uero ipsum nihil est et omnia in nihilum redigit, nulli nos fortunae tradit*. The drift of the argument is strongly Epicurean: cf., e.g., Epicur. *Ep. Men.* 124 συνέθιξε δὲ ἐν τῷ νομίζειν μηδὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς εἶναι τὸν θάνατον· ἐπεὶ πᾶν ἀγαθὸν καὶ κακὸν ἐν αἰσθήσει· στερήσις δὲ ἐστὶν αἰσθήσεως ὁ θάνατος; *KD* 2 ὁ θάνατος οὐδὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς· τὸ γὰρ διαλυθὲν ἀναισθητεῖ, τὸ δ’ ἀναισθητοῦν οὐδὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς; Lucr. 3.830–1 *nil igitur mors est ad nos neque pertinet hilum / quandoquidem natura animi mortalis habetur*; Cic. *Fin.* 2.100 *scripsit (sc. Epicurus) mortem nihil ad nos pertinere*. Yet as scholars have also noted, Seneca’s accounting of death as *nec bonum nec malum* recalls the Stoic treatment of it as an ἀδιάφορον: *Ep.* 82.10 *tamquam indifferentia esse dico (id est nec bona nec mala) morbum, dolorem, paupertatem, exilium, mortem*; cf. also *SVF* 1.190, 3.117, 3.127. See further Manning 1981, 112; Chirico 1990, 155–6; Donini 1995, 202; Stowell 1999, 129.

²⁵ 19.5 *mala enim bonaque circa aliquam uersantur materiam: non potest id fortuna tenere quod natura dimisit, nec potest miser esse qui nullus est*. Similarly, *Ep.* 99.29–30 *seuerius ista plaga curanda est. illud potius admone, nullum mali sensum ad eum qui perit peruenire; nam si peruenit, non perit. nulla, inquam, res eum laedit qui nullus est: uiuit si laeditur. utrum putas illi male esse quod nullus est an quod est adhuc aliquis? atqui nec ex eo potest ei tormentum esse quod non est (quis enim nullius sensus est?)*, etc. (for the Epicureanism of this passage, see Manning 1974, 81; Wilson 1997, 53–4). See the previous n. for some relevant Epicurean primary sources; the whole analysis of course depends on the materialistic account of the soul which sees the soul, and all sense along with it, destroyed at death (cf. Lucr. 3.417–62, 624–33, 806–29, collected at Long and Sedley 1987, vol. 1, 69–70).

²⁶ The conclusion that Metilius’ death has placed him beyond all evils follows from the Epicurean thesis regarding annihilation of his soul. But the attempt to show that death liberates a person from various ills is of course a more general consolatory *agendum*: cf. especially *Men. Rhet.* 414.8–16 (on the παραμυθητικός λόγος) καὶ ὅτι βελτίων ἐστὶ τάχα ἢ μετᾶστασις τοῦ τῆδε βίου, ἀπαλλάττουσα πραγμάτων [ἀδικῶν], πλεονεξίας, ἀδικου τύχης . . . ἐξέφυγεν ἀνιὰρὰ τοῦ βίου. See further Favez 1928, xxxv–xxxvi; Jacoby 1931, 88; Abel 1967, 40–1; Manning 1981, 112–13; Scourfield 1993, 198–9. For Seneca’s use of *pax* in application to the peace enjoyed in death, see *TLL* 10/1.871.17–30 (Keudel).

Epicurean thesis about the non-existence of the soul after death. The expression of the Epicurean viewpoint is therefore subordinated to the persuasive approach in this part of the *Ad Marciam*; it should be seen less as the independent presentation of one horn of the Socratic dilemma than as a temporary expedient for the sake of Marcia's therapy. Nor should it bother us that the Epicurean premises are only provisional, because the whole set of arguments based on them is in fact merely propaedeutic, as we shall see. Marcia is not intended to rest with the Epicurean principles, only to entertain them so long as she makes progress towards quelling her grief; by the time she has obtained what benefit she can, she will be ready for a fresh approach capable of expunging any remaining doubts. So let us consider how the Epicurean position supports Seneca's therapy in this phase of the consolation.

A crucial conclusion that Seneca draws from the Epicurean position regards the circumstantial value of death. While death may be nothing *in itself* (19.5 *nihil ipsum*), and hence not capable of being *essentially* a good or evil, this is not necessarily to say that death has no significance whatsoever. To the contrary, as a limit to the experiences of life, death may acquire a kind of incidental value derived from the circumstances of a person's end: that is, death may be unwelcome if it removes us from goods we do or would possess, but it can also be a boon if it removes us from evils we do or would undergo. It is of course the latter view, of death as a constructive possibility, that Seneca will develop at length in 20–2, elaborating the conception of *mors* as “the dissolution of all grief and pain” (19.5 *dolorum omnium exsolutio*) and “the limit beyond which our evils do not come” (*finis ultra quem mala nostra non exeunt*). In 20.1–3 he offers a powerful eulogy of death, praising it as that which “seals in our happiness” (20.1 *felicitem includit*) and “repels disasters” (*calamitatem repellit*). The radical possibility of death as a limit to misfortune even becomes the condition for a choice-worthy life (20.2–3): it gives us a power of our own in the harsh “kingdom of fortune” (10.6 *regnum fortunae*) into which we have come, allowing us to enjoy what is good and not to suffer what is evil.²⁷ The ecstatic culmination: “Life, I hold you

²⁷For this point, cf. especially 20.2 *haec (sc. mors) est, inquam, quae efficit ut nasci non sit supplicium, quae efficit ut non concidam aduersus minas casuum, ut seruire animum saluum ac potentem sui possim: habeo quod appellem*. This line of thought leads Seneca to an appreciative reflection on the value of suicide (20.3 *non est molestum seruire ubi, si dominii pertaesum est, licet uno gradu ad libertatem transire*), something not necessarily in agreement with Epicurus' thinking (cf. Englert 1996, 86–95; Warren 2004, 199–212) but of a piece with Stoic thought and Seneca's attitude toward the matter expressed elsewhere. For Seneca's treatment of suicide in general, see Griffin 1976, 367–88; Englert 1996, 75–86;

dear by the favor of death!” (20.3 *caram te, uita, beneficio mortis habeo*). The Epicurean position thus underpins a rapprochement with *mors* cast in the paradoxical terms of which Seneca is so fond.

In 20.4–6, the topos *opportunitas mortis* makes its first appearance in order to cash in on the Epicurean principles and illustrate the conception of death as a *finis* to the evils of life.²⁸ Seneca asks Marcia to “think of how much good a timely death has, to how many people it was an injury to have lived longer” (20.4 *cogita quantum boni opportuna mors habeat, quam multis diutius uixisse nocuerit*).²⁹ He goes on to offer three examples in a rhetorically forceful presentation; I condense and summarize here.³⁰ Pompey, if his sickness at Naples had carried him off, “would have died the undisputed leading citizen of the Roman people” (*indubitatus populi Romani princeps excesserat*).³¹ As it was, the “addition of a slight amount of time” (*exigui temporis adiectio*) foreclosed any chance of a happy ending: it was either death by Egyptian assassin or life at the pleasure of a monarch.³² Cicero “could have died happy” or “fortunate” (20.5 *felix mori potuit*) before the proscriptions of the triumvirate and the civil strife which followed.³³ “It would have gone well” (20.6 *bene actum foret*) for Cato if he had died at sea, but “the addition of only

Hill 2004, 145–82; Inwood 2005, 305–12; Ker 2009, 247–79; Edwards 2014, 331–9. As Manning 1981, 114 notes, Cremutius’ suicide (cf. *Ad Marc.* 1.2–4, 22.4–8, 26.3) “must make this assessment of death’s advantages attractive not only to Seneca but also to his addressee.”

²⁸Favez 1928, I thought that 20.4–6 would be better placed somewhere in 21–2, where Seneca explicitly takes up the question of death in relation to the length of a person’s life. But as Manning 1981, 114–15 notes, it is perfectly apt here in order to illustrate the preceding remarks (20.1–3) that death may be a boon if it spares us from evils.

²⁹Ficca 1999 (cf. *ead.* 2001, 62–6) claims that 20.4–6 is not a genuine example of the topos *opportunitas mortis* (especially 1999, 107–8): rather than offer material for consolation (so she argues), the passage develops the notion of a sort of ideal death, which (as she maintains) is distinct from biological death and represents the demise that a person *would* hope for if the full course of his life were clear to him. Despite the interest of Ficca’s reading, it is weakened by the fact that she takes the argument out of context and is unable to explain the relevance of this analysis of *mors* for Seneca’s therapeutic approach to Marcia.

³⁰For the Ciceronian background to the anecdotes, see below, n. 46.

³¹Pompey’s sickness in Naples in 50 BC: Cic. *Tusc.* 1.86, Vell. Pat. 2.48.2, Plut. *Vit. Pomp.* 57.1, Juv. 10.283–6, App. *BC* 2.28.

³²Cf. 20.4 *uidit Aegyptium carnificem et sacrosanctum uictoribus corpus satelliti praestitit, etiam si incolumis fuisset paenitentiam salutis acturus; quid enim erat turpius quam Pompeium uiuere beneficio regis?*

³³Seneca says that an opportune moment for Cicero to die would have been after his suppression of Catiline, but that even after Tullia’s death (20.5 *si denique filiae suae funus secutus esset*) he could still have been spared further misfortunes.

a few years” (*annorum adiectio paucissimorum*) saw him flee Rome at the loss of its liberty.³⁴ These examples give Seneca grounds to draw the conclusion for Marcia that “an early death therefore brought no evil to [Metilius]: rather it spared him the experience of all evils” (*nihil ergo illi mali inmatura mors attulit: omnium etiam malorum remisit patientiam*).³⁵ The concluding statement is strongly reminiscent of the view articulated earlier that death, *qua* annihilation of self, is a release from our ills (cf. 19.5 *mors dolorum omnium exsolutio* ~ 20.5 *omnium . . . malorum remisit patientiam*), incidentally reminding us that the Epicurean principles established there remain operative.

In the following sections (21–2), Seneca narrows down to the question specifically of Metilius’ youth: “he died too quickly, and before his time” (21.1 *nimis tamen cito perit et inmaturus*), he imagines Marcia interjecting. The subject of the timeliness (or untimeliness) of death has of course already been raised in the development of the notion of *opportuna mors* in 20.4–6. Now Seneca goes into greater detail. Following a discussion of the adequacy of the span of Metilius’ life (21; we will return to this below), he quickly brings back the topos of *opportunitas mortis* (22.1–3). As he urges Marcia, the pertinent question is not whether Metilius could have lived longer, but “whether it was to his benefit to live longer, or if death rather did well by him” (22.1 *an diutius illi expedierit uiuere, an illi hac morte consultum sit*). From here he goes on to argue that “death is to be hoped for by those who are happiest” or “most fortunate” (*felicissimis optanda mors est*), because life is uncertain, inconstant, and bound for what is worse—only death puts us beyond the ills that we will suffer. This attitude towards the future is an expression of a dark view of human life that recurs at several points in the *Ad Marciam*.³⁶ In

³⁴ Seneca says in particular *M. Catonem si a Cypro et hereditatis regiae dispensatione redeuntem mare deuorasset uel cum illa ipsa pecunia quam adferebat ciuili bello stipendium*, etc. (20.6). For the former occasion, on which Cato traveled to Cyprus to annex the island allegedly bequeathed to Rome in 80 BC by Ptolemy Alexander II, see Manning 1981, 118; more fully, Oost 1955.

³⁵ *Illi* must refer to Metilius, despite the fact that he has not been mentioned since 19.6 (*excessit filius tuus*, etc.); the return to him is abrupt (cf. Manning 1981, 120; Hine 2014, 41), but functions to bracket off the discussion in 20.1–6 before Seneca makes a fresh start in 21. This concluding sentence thus also shows that Seneca’s praise of death and development of the topos are subordinated to the goal of changing Marcia’s opinion about Metilius’ condition.

³⁶ Cf. especially 11.1 *quid opus est partes deffere? tota flebilis uita est* (with Manning 1981, 67 for consolatory *comparanda*). Often this pessimistic view is connected with the capriciousness of fortune: cf., e.g., 10.5 *in regnum fortunae et quidem durum atque inuictum peruenimus, illius arbitrio digna atque indigna passuri*; also 19.5, quoted above, n. 24.

the present instance, Seneca works hard to substantiate the claim that Metilius could not have avoided all the ills that would follow: age would waste his beauty, and the passage through life would corrupt his upright character and spoil his virtues (22.2);³⁷ accidents, mishaps, disasters, and disease awaited him, as well as the unjust persecution which has punished those who have retained their noble spirit (22.3).³⁸ Hence Marcia should know that “they are treated with best” (*optime cum iis agi*) whom *natura* allots only a short time before returning them to her safety: thus “if it is most fortunate not to be born, next best is, I think, to perish at a young age and swiftly be restored to our original state” (*si felicissimum est non nasci, proximum est, puto, breui aetate defunctos cito in integrum restitui*). The notion that death restores us to our original condition recalls the Epicurean principle assumed before, that death is a return to the repose we enjoyed before birth (19.5 *in tranquillitatem in qua antequam nasceremur iacuimus reponit* ~ 22.3 *in integrum restitui*). However, the passage as a whole also reminds us of the limits of Seneca’s Epicureanism here: the calamitous view of human existence which forms its backdrop is Seneca’s own contribution, as is the antinatalist thesis, explicitly rejected by Epicurus, with which he concludes it.³⁹

If construed together, the two occurrences of the topos effectively develop an argument that Metilius’ early death was *opportuna* and that he should be counted *felix* for it: an early death is a boon for those whom

³⁷ 22.2 *quis tibi recipit illud fili tui pulcherrimum corpus et summa pudoris custodia inter luxuriosae urbis oculos conseruatum potuisse tot morbos ita euadere ut ad senectutem inlaesum perferret formae decus? cogita animi mille labes; neque enim recta ingenia qualem in adulescentia spem sui fecerant usque in senectutem pertulerunt, sed interuorsa plerumque sunt, etc. For the point about old age, cf. [Sen.] *De remediis fortuitorum* Roszbach p. 101.18–19 “iuuenis moriar.” *fortasse me alicui malo fortuna subducit, ut nulli alii, certe senectuti.**

³⁸ 22.3 *adice incendia ruinas naufragia lacerationesque medicorum ossa uiuis legentium . . . post haec exilium (non fuit innocentior filius tuus quam Rutilius), carcerem (non fuit sapientior quam Socrates), uoluntario uulnere transfixum pectus (non fuit sanctor quam Cato), etc.*

³⁹ Epicurus specifically rejects Seneca’s claim here (at *Ep. Men.* 126 cast as καλὸν μὴ φθῆναι, φθῆντα δ’ ὅπως ὄκιστα πύλας Αἰδαο περήσαι); cf. above, n. 27. But note that Seneca’s conclusion is ancient and common in consolatory settings (Kassel 1958, 38; Abel 1967, 29 n. 57; Manning 1981, 129–30): it suffices to mention Thgn. 425–8, Soph. *OC* 1124–7, Arist. fr. 44 Rose = 65 Gigon, Cic. *Tusc.* 114–15 (mentioning Crantor), (?ps-)Plut. *Ad Apoll.* 115b2–e1 (whence the Arist. fragment; also mentioning Crantor). The idea often appears in connection with the myth of Silenus and Midas, the former having counseled the king that ἄριστον . . . πᾶσι καὶ πάσαις τὸ μὴ γενέσθαι, second best τὸ γενομένου ἀποθανεῖν ὡς τάχιστα (Arist. *apud* Plut. *Ad Apoll.* 115e4–7); see further Easterling 2013, 193–6. On Seneca’s juridical metaphor *in integrum restitui*, see Chirico 1990, 151–2.

it would spare from grievous harm, had they continued in life (20.4–6); Metilius was certain to have suffered grievous harm if he had continued in life (22.1–3); his early death was therefore a boon. Marcia should not grieve for Metilius if she recognizes that his death, which came as a limit to future ills, preserved rather than destroyed the happiness that he had enjoyed (cf. 20.1 *felicitem includit . . . calamitatem repellit*). The whole argument may stand by itself, but it is made more effective by the conclusion drawn from the Epicurean principles articulated in 19.4–6: since death *per se* is neither good nor evil, and there is no sensation or experience after it, the whole question whether someone died well or not depends on the condition of their life (present or conjectured in the future).

In a moment we will examine the persuasive value and limitations of the theme *opportunitas mortis* more closely (section 3), but it would be worthwhile to point out how Seneca employs other kinds of philosophical argument to strengthen the conclusions suggested by the *topos*. One example, sandwiched between its two appearances (21), is the notion that length of life is irrelevant to its quality. While such a claim is made also by Epicurus, Seneca sticks more closely to a Stoic version of the argument here (again suggesting the limits of his Epicurean interests). As the Stoics maintain, any span of time can be enough to live well if it allows a person to live as he or she ought; for the proper measure of life is progress towards virtue, not the addition of years.⁴⁰ In 21, Seneca expresses this thought with a pregnant notion of “adequacy” (cf. *satis*): “by a single measure is the period of our life long: if it is enough” (21.3 *uno modo multum est quod uiuimus, si satis est*). In recapitulating the idea later, he will make the moral dimension explicit, asking Marcia to “begin to measure [Metilius] by his virtues, not by his years: he lived long enough” (24.1 *incipi uirtutibus illum, non annis aestimare: satis diu uixit*).

This Stoic view recurs several times in Seneca’s philosophical oeuvre,⁴¹ nowhere more significantly for present purposes than in the ninety-third letter, a consolatory reflection to Lucilius on the death of the

⁴⁰ E.g., *SVF* 3.54 (four testimonia), *Ben.* 5.17.6, *Ep.* 73.13–14, 74.26–7, 93 (handled below). Cf. also Cic. *Fin.* 3.45–6, concluding as follows (46): *Stoicis non uidetur optabilior nec magis expetenda beata uita, si sit longa, quam si breuis, utunturque simili: ut, si cothurni laus illa esset, ad pedem apte conuenire, neque multi cothurni paucis anteponerentur nec maiores minoribus, sic, quorum omne bonum conuenientia atque opportunitate finitur, nec plura paucioribus nec longinquiora breuioribus anteponent*. As Kassel 1958, 83 observes, the Epicurean view is alike save that it substitutes pleasure for virtue; cf. *Ep. Men.* 126 ὡσπερ δὲ τὸ στίον οὐ τὸ πλείστον πάντως ἀλλὰ τὸ ἥδιστον αἰρεῖται, οὕτω καὶ χρόνον οὐ τὸν μήκιστον ἀλλὰ τὸν ἥδιστον καρπίζεται.

⁴¹ See previous note, adding *Breu.*

philosopher Metronax.⁴² The theme of the entire piece is the notion that it is *how* one lives that is decisive for the quality of life, not *how long*: “we should not take care that we live long, but that we live adequately” (*Ep.* 93.2 *non ut diu uiuamus curandum est, sed ut satis*), he counsels Lucilius. He continues: “Life is long if it is full, and it is filled once the soul has rendered its own good to itself and handed over to itself power over itself” (*longa est uita si plena est; impletur autem cum animus sibi bonum suum reddidit et ad se potestatem sui transtulit*). The Stoic character of the argument is not so fully developed in the *Ad Marciam*, but the gist of the position is clear (*Ad Marc.* 21.3 *satis*, 24.1 *satis diu* ~ *Ep.* 93.2 *satis*). In its context in the consolation, the claim that the span of a person’s life should be assessed by its (moral) adequacy, not its absolute length, is mutually corroborating with the appearances of *opportunitas mortis* it abuts. Pompey, Cicero, and Cato could have died happily before they did because each man had already lived long enough for meritorious action;⁴³ the “addition of time” (*adiectio temporis*) did not make their lives more complete, but only exposed them to harm (20.4–6). Likewise, Metilius’ years were sufficient for him to acquire the excellence of character denied to most: further life was superfluous and could have only imperiled his happiness (22.1–3).⁴⁴ The argument is fully compatible with the Epicurean premises assumed in these sections, retaining as it does a focus on experience *within* life as a criterion for a *felix mors*, and works together with the two instances of the topos to convince Marcia to drop her false belief that Metilius’ death was grievous simply because he was young.

3. THE TRADITION: OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS

In order to understand why Seneca is willing to entertain the (admittedly circumscribed) Epicurean position sketched above (section 2), we need to consider the persuasive value of his use of the topos *opportunitas mortis* more closely. For the topos is not taken up for the sake of the Epicurean principles, but rather the opposite: it is because Seneca thinks

⁴²As a *senex*, Seneca visited Metronax when the latter was lecturing in Naples (*Ep.* 76.1–4); Metronax is unknown apart from these two appearances in the letters (cf. Griffin 1976, 360, 445).

⁴³Note thus that Seneca is careful to stipulate for each man that the earlier death which would have made him happy came *after* his celebrated achievements: Pompey his military career, Cicero his suppression of Catiline, and Cato his mission to Cyprus.

⁴⁴Metilius’ virtues are presented indirectly in 22.1–3. Seneca enumerates them more fully at 12.3, 23.3, 24.1–3.

an effective appeal can be put to Marcia through the topos that he goes along with the Epicurean view, which as we have already seen (section 2) stands to strengthen the theme. So what recommends the topos? Above and beyond the literal, argumentative function sketched in the preceding section, Seneca's deployment of the theme has a cogency that is directly related to its traditional character. We have already remarked (section 1) that the basic theme elaborated in 20.4–6 and 22.1–3 is found in many forms throughout Greek and Latin literature.⁴⁵ It is apparent that Seneca is writing with an eye to these precedents, but it is hardly a case of tradition for tradition's sake, or of being constrained by a generic approach to consolation. Rather, he finds precisely in the conventional nature of the topos an effective means to advance the principal thesis of the last part of the *Ad Marciam*, that death is no evil and indeed is often something to be welcomed. For example, the hypotheticals concerning Pompey and Cicero (20.4–5) are plucked from Cicero's *Tusculanae disputationes* (1.84–6), where Cicero develops them to the same end that Seneca does.⁴⁶ But Seneca's engagement with precedent is even more significant here: by his time, the unhappy circumstances attached to these men's deaths had become a stock theme for reflection and debate in the declamatory tradition, in which Roman pupils were invited to contemplate various alternatives for Cicero's or Pompey's ends.⁴⁷ The experience of the contemporary audience of the *Ad Marciam* in reasoning counterfactually about the deaths of these Republican heroes would also have made it easier for them to appreciate the possibility that their deaths could have been a boon to them.⁴⁸ There may furthermore lurk a political point in

⁴⁵ See especially nn. 2–6.

⁴⁶ 1.84 (Cicero speaking of himself) *et domesticis et forensibus solaciis ornamentisque priuati certe si ante occidisset, mors nos a malis, non a bonis abstraxisset*; 1.86 (of Pompey's sickness at Naples) *utrum igitur, si tum esset extinctus, a bonis rebus an a malis discessisset? certe a miseris . . . qui, si mortem tum obisset, in amplissimis fortunis occidisset, is propagatione uitae quot, quantas, quam incredibilis hausit calamitates!* Note too that these examples come in a section of the *Tusc.* in which Cicero has temporarily adopted the (Epicurean) premise that the soul does not survive death (cf. 1.82). While Cato's death figures at *Tusc.* 1.74, that instance cannot but remotely be regarded as the inspiration for Seneca's example (*pace* Manning 1981, 115).

⁴⁷ Pompey: Quint. *Inst.* 3.8.33, 3.8.55–7; Cicero: Quint. *Inst.* 3.8.46, Sen. *Suas.* 6–7, *Contr.* 7.2. The latter's death was an especially significant topic among the declaimers: see now Keeline 2018, 102–46 (with further literature).

⁴⁸ The men mentioned by Seneca were obviously famous enough that Marcia could have been expected to know well the tragedies of their deaths, but since she would not have had the benefit of a declamatory education, my suggestion raises the question of the audience of the *Ad Marciam*. As scholars have observed, Seneca clearly had in mind a larger

Seneca’s choice of figures that would add further credibility to his appeal, especially in the eyes of Marcia.⁴⁹

Another and even more significant element of tradition in the theme which Seneca exploits is the conventional ascription of *felicitas* to those whom death is thought to spare from grievous woe. *Qua* element of the topos, the ascription does not presuppose any deeper, philosophical conception of “happiness” or “good fortune,” but depends rather on the ordinary usage of the word *felix* (which the apparent oxymoron with *mors* sharpens)⁵⁰ and on an immediate and empathetic identification with the subject. So Virgil makes Evander, lamenting the death of his son Pallas, address his departed wife as “fortunate by [her] death not to be saved for present grief” (*Aen.* 11.159 *felix morte tua neque in hunc seruata dolorem*). Ovid likewise has Hecuba call Priam “fortunate by his death” (*Met.* 13.521 *felix morte sua*) not to survive the sack of his city and witness the sacrifice of his daughter Polyxena. The audience might be expected to agree without much reflection that the deceased were fortunate not to outlive their children, and indeed that it would have perhaps gone better for Evander and Hecuba had they followed their spouses earlier.⁵¹ Putting the word *felix* in the mouth of the surviving spouse only serves to heighten the pathos and emphasizes the timeliness of their partner’s

readership when he produced the work, including men: note thus the occasional second-person plural forms (9.4 [*recc.* wrongly *nostrum*], 10.1, 11.1) and masculine participles (9.3, 17.1, 18.2, 18.4). On the audience, see further Abel 1967, 22; Manning 1981, 6–7; cf. Wilson 2013, 112–15. Virtually all consolations from antiquity anticipate multiple audiences, as is true even for so personal a letter as Plutarch’s to his wife on the death of their child: see Baltussen 2009, especially 85–8. For the significance of Marcia’s gender in the consolation, see Alonso del Real 1997; Lillo Redonet 1998; and especially Wilcox 2006. Marcia’s gender becomes less relevant in the final phase of the consolation, because Seneca turns from the problem of her grief, and thus also of the appropriate female response to bereavement, to more abstract considerations about death and the afterlife; gendered differences impinge less on the latter issue (both men and women may cling to false beliefs about death), but Seneca does not of course forget whom he is addressing (cf., e.g., below, n. 74).

⁴⁹As an anonymous referee suggests, the allusions to Cato, Cicero, and Pompey seem politically charged—a kind of death-of-the-Republic roll call which might suggest that to live under Caesar is to live in a late and unfortunate era. There would be special significance in this idea for Marcia, whose father of course was persecuted and driven to suicide by Tiberius’ infamous henchman Sejanus (cf. above, n. 27, and also the literature below, n. 70).

⁵⁰For the effect of *felix* so used, cf. *TLL* 6/1.445.53–60 (Ammann), “cum acumine dictum de rebus adversis.”

⁵¹It was regarded as particularly tragic and unnatural for a parent to survive his or her child: for much material, see Bömer 1969–86, vol. 6, 331 (on Ov. *Met.* 13.521); Courtney 2013, 420 (on Juv. 10.240).

departure.⁵² Other situations apart from bereavement also justify the ascription: Tacitus does not hesitate to call his father-in-law Agricola *felix* not only for the “splendor of [his] life,” but also for the “timeliness of [his] death,” which spared him the savagery of Domitian’s later years (cf. *Agr.* 45.3 *tu uero felix, Agricola, non uitae tantum claritate, sed etiam opportunitate mortis*).⁵³ Further examples might be adduced,⁵⁴ but those given above will suffice to illustrate the conventional nature of attributing *felicitas* to those whom death saves from future woes.

The tradition is even more significant than the preceding analysis might suggest, however, because such ascriptions tap into a much broader, basically non-philosophical Roman discourse about *felicitas*.⁵⁵ This discourse manifests itself in a wide variety of literary settings through formulas such as *felix qui* (“happy is he who . . .”), which are used to pick out the factors taken to be constitutive of the “good fortune” or “happiness” of a class of persons. Perhaps the most famous instance is Vergil’s *felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas* (*G.* 2.490 “happy is he who has been able to learn the causes of nature”), an example which in the specific depth of its allusion is not however representative of the pattern more generally.⁵⁶ Like the *felix morte* theme just considered, such *felix qui* expressions are usually philosophically undetermined (or under-determined), relying for their persuasive force on the context and content of the utterance. The pattern thus appears widely in elegy and epic, in declamation and epistle, and in many other literary forms besides; time and again it is used to express popular moral notions (happy is he to enjoy youth, not to be exiled, not to mourn his children, etc.), but it may also be turned to such diverse situations as a lover’s lament or the bleak

⁵² Although it should be noted that Priam is in fact more often handled as a negative rather than positive example of the *opportunitas mortis* topos, i.e., he would have been fortunate to die even earlier than he did: cf. Cic. *Tusc.* 1.85, (?ps-)Plut. *Ad Apoll.* 113e8–114c1 (for the synkrisis of Priam and Troilus in Plut., cf. Cic. *Tusc.* 1.93). (?Ps-)Plutarch concludes his remarks on Priam with a neat formulation of the topos *opportunitas mortis*: 114b8–c1 ὄντων οὖν σοι παμπόλλων παραδειγμάτων περι τούτων ἐννοήθητι τὸν θάνατον οὐκ ὀλίγους ἀπαλλάττειν μεγάλων καὶ χαλεπῶν κακῶν, ὧν, εἰ ἐπεβίωσαν, πάντως ἂν ἐπειράθησαν.

⁵³ Tacitus is alluding here to Cic. *De or.* 3.12 (Woodman 2014 *ad loc.*), where Cicero does not however use the word *felix* (he says Crassus was *diuino consilio et ornatum et exstinctum*).

⁵⁴ E.g., *CIL* VI 23137 = *CIL* I² 1347 = *CEL* 15 *famaque bona exsitus(ue) honos(to) felix*, Val. Max. 5.3.2d, both examples noted by the *TLL* (above, n. 50) and aptly compared by Horsfall 2003, 136 on Verg. *Aen.* 11.159 (quoted above).

⁵⁵ I wish to thank an anonymous referee for the suggestion to flesh out this larger tradition and for supplying some of the references.

⁵⁶ For the Greek precedents (δλβιος ὄς, κ.τ.λ.) of this “hieratic formula” (Mynors 1990 *ad loc.*) as well as other relevant material, see Norden 1913, 100 n. 1.

inversion of values in civil war.⁵⁷ The formula appears not infrequently in Seneca’s writings.⁵⁸ The basic value of these *felix qui*-type expressions is to reconstruct plausible intuitions as timeless moral truths of a sort, thus also assimilating a specific person’s condition to a more general condition deemed valid for all people. The *felix morte* tradition reviewed above is indeed just one example of this move.

Seneca’s repeated use of the adjective *felix* (cf. 20.5, 22.1, 22.3) in reference to Metilius embeds his development of the topos *opportunitas mortis* in the *felix qui* tradition more broadly and the *felix morte* or *felix opportunitate mortis* tradition more narrowly. These traditions in turn help to set Seneca’s conventional ascriptions of *felicitas* to Metilius in their proper rhetorical context: the common-sense appeal of the ascription, which in part explains the widespread recurrence of the topos in non-philosophical settings, also suggests its value for encouraging Marcia to recognize that death is not the unequivocal evil that she thinks. The crucial step is to assimilate Metilius’ case to a broader discourse about *felicitas* and death which has a certain moral force vis-à-vis the traditions sketched above. If Marcia is willing to acknowledge the intuitive plausibility of the popular view expressed in the *opportunitas mortis* topos, she will also be compelled to admit the conclusion that death may come as a good under the right circumstances. Seneca’s use of the theme is thus an effective way of sweetening the medicine that will purge Marcia of her false and morbid belief that Metilius’ death is an evil. From the point of view of Seneca’s persuasive strategy in this part of the *Ad Marciam*, we can also see that Marcia is less immediately assenting to the Epicurean premises articulated in 19.4–6 than to the arguments, not essentially Epicurean, which they support—on the whole an easier ask. This is not to say that the Epicurean background is superfluous, of course; as we saw above (section 2), the principles lend cogency to the claims of these sections (19.3–22). But in order to understand the provisional nature of the Epicurean viewpoint, it is important to appreciate that the Epicurean content remains firmly subordinated to the presentation of the familiar topos through which Seneca makes his case. To be sure, the persuasive strategy is entirely in accord with Seneca’s method in other works, where he does not hesitate to use figures, analogies, and exempla familiar to his Roman audience as the primary vehicle for his arguments.

⁵⁷ A partial conspectus of relevant passages: Verg. *A.* 2.345, Prop. 1.12.15, 2.34.71, Ov. *Am.* 2.5.9, 2.10.29, *Met.* 10.329, *Pont.* 2.2.91, *Tr.* 5.1.30, [Verg.] *Ciris* 28, Luc. 4.393, 9.126, Stat. *Silu.* 5.2.152, *Theb.* 10.615, [Quint.] *Decl. Mai.* 12.14, 17.13, *Decl. Min.* 290.4, 344.7, 377.9.

⁵⁸ E.g., *Ben.* 3.38.3, *Ep.* 11.9, 39.3, *Tro.* 162, [Sen.] *Herc. O.* 228.

Yet in spite of the significant contribution made by the *topos opportunitatis mortis* to the argumentation of 19.3–22, it is not fully conclusive for Seneca’s consolatory purpose. A number of objections might be formulated to the argument put by the *topos* as it stands; here I will focus on one concern to which Seneca himself will soon return (below, section 4). This worry is related to the conventional ascription of *felicitas* to those whom death spares from future ills: while the notion might on the one hand appeal to Marcia as an intuitive and widely subscribed view, on the other it would fail to dispel a more recalcitrant skepticism about the significance of the claim. The basic problem is that the notion of *felicitas* remains unexamined; neither the Epicurean position assumed at the outset (19.4–6) nor any other part of 19.3–22 is elaborated sufficiently to give us the moral criteria that would allow us to evaluate the essential character of “happiness” or “good fortune” (*felicitas*) and thus to ascribe it with certainty to Metilius. In what precedes we simply took it as a hypothesis that Metilius’ experiences in life and his prospects for the future were such as to make his death timely because *felix*. But to make this conclusion irresistible, we would need to have an account of *felicitas* that would allow us to answer more persistent inquiries: How is it that we know of Metilius that he had in fact lived happily up to the time of his death? On the other hand, how do we know that any particular ills that he would have met had he continued in life would have made him unhappy?

Now, there is a common-sense plausibility to the idea that the life which Metilius enjoyed was *felix* for a number of reasons that Seneca elaborates throughout this and other parts of *Ad Marciam*: he was handsome but modest, wealthy but without avarice; he had rapidly acquired honors; he was temperate and prudent; and so on.⁵⁹ Again, there is a common-sense plausibility to the idea that the ills that Metilius might have encountered had he continued in life, such as pain, disability, and dishonor, would have impaired his *felicitas*.⁶⁰ But however reasonable the ascription of *felicitas* might seem on these and other grounds, it remains at best probable and *prima facie* without an account of the factors in virtue of which someone might be regarded as truly *felix*. Here the conventional and philosophically under-determined notion of *felicitas* loses its persuasive force and indeed becomes a hindrance. To reframe our worries: Can we really say that one or the other or several of the apparent goods that Metilius was thought to possess made him *felix*?

⁵⁹ See the passages cited above, n. 44.

⁶⁰ These are enumerated most fully in 22.1–3 (cf. nn. 37–38) but are already implicit in the first appearance of the *topos* at 20.4–6.

And can we really say that one or the other or several of the apparent evils that death spared him from would have made him *infelix*? Without having these questions answered to her satisfaction, Marcia might accept the premise that a person *could* die young and still die *felix*, but might also doubt that Metilius’ own death was thus opportune. On the basis of Metilius’ apparent goods and the (likely) apparent evils he faced, Seneca has presented strong but still only plausible, not certain, grounds for convincing her of this fact. In this sense, the idea of *opportunitas mortis* might rattle the *opinio* that torments Marcia, but its efficacy is limited: it is simply not radical enough to eliminate her false belief completely.

4. THE TIMELINESS OF DEATH ON STOIC PRINCIPLES

Seneca’s elaboration of the topos with the aid of the Epicurean viewpoint brings a significant challenge to the epistemic error which sustains Marcia’s grief. The effort is salutary because it helps Marcia make progress towards correct and healthy belief, but it is in fact only propaedeutic. Now that Marcia has grasped the conventional appreciation of *opportunitas mortis*, Seneca will go on to offer a fresh approach to the topos, based on Stoic principles, which promises to resolve any lingering doubts. Let us consider this shift in philosophical viewpoint now. Following the second appearance of the topos (22.1–3) and remarks on Cremutius Cordus’ suicide (22.4–8), Seneca’s consolatory strategy undergoes a marked change. The Epicurean view of death as annihilation is abruptly dropped and a new set of assumptions is adopted. The transition is seamless: in summarizing 19.3–22 and anticipating what follows, he simply says, “besides this fact, that the whole future is uncertain and quite sure to get worse, the path to those who dwell above is easiest for souls that have been swiftly parted from human association” (23.1 *praeter hoc quod omne futurum incertum est et ad deteriora certius, facillimum ad superos iter est animis cito ab humana conuersatione dimissis*). The *anima* that survives death and migrates to a better life in the afterworld will remain the focus in the remainder of the work (23–6). We learn that the origin of the soul is in the heavens (23.1); it is eternal (cf. 24.5 *ipse quidem aeternus*);⁶¹ it descends into the human body, whose earthly bonds blunt and deaden its natural excellence (23.1–2 and especially 24.5); after death, it is purified and departs “intact . . . leaving nothing of itself behind on earth” (25.1 *integer . . . nihilque in terris relinquens sui*). In the hereafter, the soul

⁶¹ On this point, see the qualifications below, n. 85.

joins a “blessed gathering” (25.2 *coetus sacer*); with other “happy souls” (*felices . . . animas*), it “looks down” on the earth that it has left behind (23.2, 25.2 *despicere*) and, rejoicing in the light of the heavenly bodies kindred to it, learns the “secrets of nature” (25.2 *arcana naturae*) not, as when earthbound, “by conjecture,” but “by truth” (*ex coniectura . . . ex uero*). The soul will remain here until it is ultimately caught up in the fiery destruction and rebirth of the universe (26.6–7).

The philosophical vision that Seneca adopts in the last part of the work shows a certain degree of syncretism.⁶² There is a strong Platonic coloring in the dualistic view that makes the soul the true self and the body merely the fleshy prison that binds and corrupts it as it strives to return to its divine home.⁶³ Further complicating the picture is Seneca’s evident debt to Cicero’s *somnium Scipionis*, itself philosophically pluralistic but drawing much on Plato.⁶⁴ Yet Seneca’s framework is basically Stoic, revealed for example in the physical explanation for the ascent of the soul from the body after death,⁶⁵ the conception of the immanence of divinity,⁶⁶

⁶² Here we might mention the old argument that the conclusion to the *Ad Marciam* is based closely on Posidonius, as first proposed by Badstübner 1901, 1–18 and defended again by Abel 1964. While Posidonius may have influenced Seneca here, it is far too drastic to make him the single source: see further Manning 1981, 133–5, 142–3; Setaioli 1997, 339–40.

⁶³ The relevant passages in *Ad Marc.* are 23.1–2, 24.5, 25.1. Seneca quotes Plato at 23.2 (*inde est quod Platon clamat*, etc.) in support of the view that the philosopher spends his life practicing for death in the sense that he looks forward to the separation of the soul from his body (cf. Pl. *Phd.* 63a10–64a9, 67d12–e2). In the *Phaedo* there is also developed at length the notion of the body as an earthly prison which impairs the soul, and which the soul seeks to flee in order to realize its true nature: cf. 62b2–b6, 66b3–67b2, and especially 79c2–84b8. As for the notion that the soul is the true self, cf., e.g., *Alc.* I 130c5–6 ἡ ψυχή ἐστὶν ἀνθρώπος, *Phd.* 115c4–116a1, *Leg.* 959a4–b7, [Pl.] *Ax.* 365e6–7. On the Platonic elements, see Manning 1981, 136, 142–4; Setaioli 1997, 338–9; Stowell 1999, 140–3; Setaioli 2013, 470–1, 475–6.

⁶⁴ This debt is by no means limited to the prosopopoeia delivered by Cremutius Cordus (26) but is evident also in the philosophical views set out in the preceding sections (23–5). See Favez 1928, xliii–xliv; Benoit 1948, 48 n. 46; Manning 1981, 133 and *passim*; Setaioli 1997, 339–42 (nn. 120 and 128 for further literature); Stowell 1999, 132–4; Armisen-Marchetti 2007; Maggiulli 2011, 169–71; Setaioli 2013, 475–9, 481–3. For Cicero’s philosophical sources in the *somnium*, see still Boyancé 1936.

⁶⁵ Seneca says of those who have died young: 23.1 *antequam obdurescerent et altius terrena conciperent liberati leuiores ad originem suam reuolant*, etc.; cf. also 24.5, 25.1–2. While the dualism is Platonic (above, n. 63), the picture of the soul’s ascent is Stoic (as Manning 1981, 136–7 notes), as Panaetius’ account reported by Cicero at *Tusc.* 1.42–43 makes clear. Panaetius has the soul, which is composed of *inflammata anima* (1.42; cf. Pease 1955, 1033 on Cic. *Nat. D.* 3.36 *animus . . . ex igni atque anima temperatum*), rush upwards towards its *naturalis sedes* (1.43), only coming to a halt *cum . . . sui similem et leuitatem et calorem adeptus <est>*, i.e., among the heavenly bodies. See further Stowell 1999, 114–24.

⁶⁶ So 25.2, where the souls of the departed spend their time rejoicing in the light of the stars that are kindred to them and contemplating the *arcana naturae*; this picture is very

and especially in the doctrine of ekpyrosis given such prominence in the final sections of the consolation.⁶⁷ Moreover, none of Seneca’s borrowings commit him to contradictions on Stoic principles, and indeed they often are formulations of ideas entirely familiar to Seneca’s Stoic thinking.⁶⁸ While it would not be misleading to call Seneca’s approach “Stoico-Platonic” in light of its variegated philosophical texture, the description “Stoic” alone would do better to reflect the facts both that the Platonizing elements are always kept within the boundaries of orthodox Stoicism (never the other way around) and that the conclusion of the dialogue prioritizes an emphatically Stoic knowledge of the fate of the universe (as we will see below).⁶⁹

Despite the shift in viewpoint from Epicurean to Stoic, the agenda remains the same in 23–6: to root out the false *opinio* concerning death that tortures Marcia. The assumption of the soul’s survival after death allows Seneca to deploy several new consolatory strategies intended to show that Metilius’ death was no evil (23–5). Here we will pass directly to the final section of the dialogue (26), which revisits, and revises, the theme of *opportunitas mortis* developed in 19.3–22. The concluding section takes the form of a prosopopoeia: Cremutius Cordus, Marcia’s deceased father,⁷⁰ is summoned to address her “from that celestial height” (26.1 *ex illa arce caelesti*) where his soul now reposes.⁷¹ A little earlier, we were told that Cremutius, along with “the Scipios and Catos” and other “despisers of life and those free by the favor of death” (25.2 *Scipiones Catonesque . . . contemptores uitae et <mortis> beneficio liberos*),⁷² had been the one to welcome Metilius’ *anima* into the heavenly sphere. Now he will play the

differ from the transcendence of divinity in Platonic doctrine. For the immanence of Stoic divinity, cf., e.g., Cic. *Tusc.* 1.45–7, Sen. *Ad Polyb.* 9.3, *Ep.* 102.28, *QNat.* 1.pr.12–13. See further Benoit 1948, 46; Manning 1981, 133, 146–7; Setaioli 1997, 347–8, 353–5 and 2006–7, 353–4.

⁶⁷ See below and n. 84.

⁶⁸ “Si tratta peraltro di diffusi motivi che ricorrono in molte parti degli scritti senecani” (Setaioli 1997, 339; see especially n. 118 for relevant material in Seneca, as well as Manning 1981, 137).

⁶⁹ “Stoico-Platonic” is the description of Manning 1981, 109. Emphasizing the supremacy of the Stoic principles are Grimal 1978, 341–3; Setaioli 1997; Donini 1999; Stowell 1999, 144; Setaioli 2013. On Stoic attitudes towards the afterlife, see generally Hoven 1971.

⁷⁰ For the significance of Cremutius’ prosopopoeia, see now Master 2019, who points out (89 n. 1) that the speech recapitulates the main points from the consolation; also Guttilla 1972–3; Stowell 1999, 157–64 and *passim*; Maggiulli 2011; Tzounakas 2017, 80–2.

⁷¹ For Seneca’s vagueness in describing the location of the soul, cf. *Ad Polyb.* 9.8 *in eum emicuit locum, quisquis ille est qui solutus uinculis animas beato recipit sinu* (with Benoit 1948, 46 n. 48; Manning 1981, 148; Setaioli 1997, 341 n. 127; Gloyn 2014, 471–2).

⁷² *mortis* is a conjecture found among the *recentiores*; for the expression *mortis beneficio*, cf. *Ad Marc.* 20.3 (quoted above, section 3). Gertz suggested *beneficio suo*, comparing *Ep.* 20.7, 53.11, 80.1. See the app. crit. of Reynolds *ad loc.*

role of celestial cicerone for Marcia, giving her a glimpse of the wonders of the cosmos that he and Metilius enjoy. As the mention of Scipio makes clear, the prosopopoeia is a nod to Cicero's *somnium Scipionis*.⁷³ In the first instance, Cremutius plays the role for his grandson Metilius that the elder Africanus played for his own grandson Scipio. Yet he further acts as an escort for Marcia, whose double grief for father and son interpolates her into their relationship.⁷⁴

At the outset of his address, Cremutius blames Marcia's "long grief" (25.2 *longa . . . aegritudo*) on her "ignorance of the truth" (*ueri ignoratione*), which causes her to imagine falsely that Metilius was dealt an injury by his death (cf. *inique actum cum filio tuo*). To the contrary, dying placed him beyond the ills that he could have faced. Cremutius develops this theme as follows (26.2):

"nescis quantis fortuna procellis disturbet omnia, quam nullis benignam facilemque se praestiterit nisi qui minimum cum illa contraxerant? regesne tibi nomen felicissimos futuros si maturius illos mors instantibus subtraxisset malis? an Romanos duces, quorum nihil magnitudini deerit si aliquid aetati detraxeris? an nobilissimos uiros clarissimosque ad ictum militaris gladii composita ceruice firmatos?"

"Do you not know how great the tempests are by which fortune demolishes all things, how she makes herself kindly and complaisant to none except those who had to contract with her least? Should I name for you the kings who would have been very fortunate (*or* very happy) if death had removed them in a timelier fashion from the evils which threatened? Or the Roman leaders from whose greatness nothing would be lost if you subtracted some part of their life? Or the most noble and brilliant men who set their neck and braced themselves for the blow of the soldier's sword?"

It is impossible not to read this passage as a recapitulation of the topos *opportunitas mortis* as developed earlier. Fickle *fortuna* is still the foe (cf. 22.1–3). The counterfactual reflection on those whom an "earlier" or "more opportune" (*maturius*) death would have aided reprises 20.4–6: though Seneca mentioned no *reges* by name (still, we might think of a

⁷³But as Armisen-Marchetti 2007, 71 points out, the addition *Catonnes* (i.e., both elder and younger: Abel 1964, 223) indicates the Stoic coloring of Seneca's appropriation of the *somnium* ("l'expression place la scène familiale sous le double patronage des héros du *Songe*, les Scipions, et du Portique, les Catons").

⁷⁴See Gloy 2017, 26–33, who argues that, relying on a theory of οἰκειωσις, Seneca attempts to make Marcia's relationships with Cremutius Cordus and Metilius parallel for therapeutic purposes.

Croesus),⁷⁵ for *Romani duces* we have already met Pompey and Cato, and we must believe that Cicero is intended among those *ad ictum militaris gladi composita ceruice firmatos*.⁷⁶ Again, the attribution of the “greatest fortune” or “happiness” (cf. *felicissimos*) recalls the superlative attributions in 22.1–3 (where *felicissimus* appears *bis*; cf. also the positive *felix* at 20.5). Even the auxiliary Stoic argument (21) that virtue, not length of years, is the measure of life is reprised in the antithesis here between *magnitudo* and *aetas*.⁷⁷ Cremutius clinches the point just shortly after: in a household in which two generations (Marcia’s father and grandfather) died under the blows of misfortune, “why is he mourned longest who dies most fortunately?” (26.3 *cur in domo nostra diutissime lugetur qui felicissime moritur?*).⁷⁸

At first blush it might seem that Cremutius has brought us no further than the position to which the earlier uses of the topos *opportunitas mortis* did. How do we know that Metilius’ life is comparable to the *reges*, the *Romani duces*, the *nobilissimi clarissimique* (26.2) whom death would make *felix* by sparing them from future ills? The limitations of the philosophically under-determined ascription of *felicitas* which hampered the earlier analysis of the topos appear to remain. Yet, thanks to the Stoic premises now established, the sequel will in fact bring to the problem a resolution impossible on the earlier account that depended on Epicurean principles. The crux is the celestial perspective now assumed of the soul in its afterlife and given eloquent expression by the shade of Cremutius. Thus, almost immediately after the recurrence of the topos, he inverts the situation by turning the scorn of the *superi* onto the terrestrial world below: “we are all joined into one and, since we are not surrounded by deepest night, we see that nothing among you is desirable (as you think it

⁷⁵ Cf. above, n. 4, for the story in Herodotus. In Seneca, Croesus is also proverbial for a reversal of fortune that made him live too long: *Tranq.* 11.12 *Croesum . . . qui rogum suum et accendi uiuus et extinguere uidit, factus non regno tantum, etiam morti suae superstes*, etc.

⁷⁶ Cf. Livy’s account of Cicero’s death preserved in the Elder Seneca’s *Suasoriae* (6.17): *prominenti ex lectica praebentique innotam ceruicem caput praecisum est. nec satis stolidae crudelitati militum fuit*, etc. See further *TLL* 3/948.45–50 (Probst), and cf. *Plut. Vit. Cic.* 48.5 ἐσφάγη δὲ τὸν τράχηλον ἐκ τοῦ φορείου προτείνας, κ.τ.λ. For Cicero’s death in the declamatory tradition (where his outstretched neck is often mentioned), see above n. 47. The allusion was first suggested by Favez 1928 *ad loc.* Note that the MSS read *formatos*; Gertz conjectured *deformatos*, but the Neapolitan editor’s *firmatos* (printed by Reynolds) is superior.

⁷⁷ There is a pun with *magnitudo* here which depends on the play between its applications to “extent of time” (*OLD* s.v. 3b) and to “greatness of rank or reputation” (s.v. 8).

⁷⁸ We know nothing of the circumstances of the death of Marcia’s *auus* apart from what Seneca says here: 26.3 *ille in alieni percussoris uenit arbitrium*.

to be), nothing lofty, nothing brilliant—rather all is insignificant, oppressive, and vexing, witness to only a tiny fraction of our own light!” (26.3 *coimus omnes in unum uidemusque non alta nocte circumdati nil apud uos, ut putatis, optabile, nil excelsum, nil splendidum, sed humilia cuncta et grauia et anxia et quotam partem luminis nostri cernentia!*). The heavens in contrast to the earth hold neither strife nor secrets: here the minds and hearts of all men are laid bare, and they have their ethereal existence in common (25.4). The cheapness of corporeal existence is revealed by the vast temporal sweep of the gaze of Cremutius and the other souls above, which exposes the evanescence of mortal affairs. The “actions of one age” and “deeds among a pitiful few” (25.5 *unius . . . saeculi facta . . . et inter paucissimos gesta*) evoke no interest when “one may look upon so many ages, the course of so many epochs, the sequence of all the years which are” (*tot saecula, tot aetatium contextum, seriem, quidquid annorum est, licet uisere*). How indeed can human works be esteemed by Cremutius and others of the *coetus sacer* when they foresee the rise and fall of kingdoms that have not yet been and the collapse of great cities (cf. *surrectura . . . ruitura regna . . . et magnarum urbium lapsus*)? The pettiness of mortal struggles, of their sorrows and their triumphs, is thrown into sharp relief on the immense canvas of the ages.⁷⁹

While Cremutius’ cosmic perspective owes much to that of the *somnium Scipionis*,⁸⁰ it is important to recognize that this point of view has become native to Seneca’s thought more generally.⁸¹ He makes use of it throughout his philosophical oeuvre in order to place *res humanae* into their proper context, especially brilliantly for example in the late work *Quaestiones naturales*.⁸² Aided by (Stoic) knowledge of the physical and temporal structure of the universe, the human intellect may catch a glimpse of the totality of being that reveals the transience and insignificance of human doings and the immanent divinity of nature, to which our souls in truth belong. In its context in the *Ad Marciam*, Cremutius’ withering gaze proves destructive of the consolatory conclusions suggested

⁷⁹ A similar view of the insignificance of human affairs in the grand scale of space and time is presented at 20.1–3, lacking, however, the focus on the divine majesty of nature—unsurprisingly, we should add, given the Epicurean viewpoint assumed in the section.

⁸⁰ The insignificance of human affairs in comparison with the wonders of the celestial realm is the key theme of *Rep.* 6.20–25 (cf. also 6.17).

⁸¹ Master 2019, especially 88–92, has recently stressed the importance of this perspective for the *Ad Marciam*; cf. Stowell 1999, 157–64.

⁸² Cf. especially *QNat* 1.pr, which has been compared to the concluding sections of the *Ad Marciam* (e.g., Traina 1986, 320, Setaioli 1997, 353–4, *id.* 2013, 481–2); also *Breu.* 15.4–5. For a fuller study of Seneca’s use of the “cosmic viewpoint” in the *QNat.*, see Williams 2012.

by the earlier occurrences of the topos *opportunitas mortis*. As we saw, the analysis of the topos based on Epicurean principles in 19.3–22 invited an ascription of *felicitas* dependent on the (apparent) goods that Metilius possessed in life and especially the (apparent) evils that he avoided (sections 2–3). The doubts entertained by the unexamined character of this ascription (section 3) are now vindicated through Cremutius’ eyes, which reveal all mortal affairs to be “insignificant, oppressive, and vexing” (26.3). In cosmic view, none of what Metilius enjoyed in life could qualify as a good, nor could anything he might have experienced had he continued in life qualify as an evil.⁸³ The particulars of Metilius’ life (or that of any other human) are simply irrelevant in the grand scale of existence assumed by Cremutius. It would be absurd to think that the achievements and hardships of Metilius’ insignificant span of time on earth are meaningful when held against the untold ages his soul has spent and will spend in its celestial home, where “not surrounded by deepest night” as it was on earth (26.3), it will behold the truth of things. It may seem odd that Seneca would thus have Cremutius demolish the grounds for ascribing *felicitas* to Metilius based on his earlier uses of the topos. But the destructive move is not the final word in the consolation; it is rather a necessary step in corroborating the conclusions that were before only provisional, because they were based on an adoption of Epicurean principles that itself was only provisional. The Stoic view of the afterlife will afford a more secure basis for affirming Metilius’ *felicitas* and thus for eliminating the basis for Marcia’s prolonged grief.

In one sense, the remedy has already been suggested through the conception of the “better state” into which Metilius has been transformed (cf. 25.4 *mutatos in melius*): having joined the sacred host in their full knowledge and unfettered contemplation of the mysteries of nature, he has achieved the goods which he could never have attained in his mortal form. But that is not where Seneca leaves the issue: the true, and ultimate, resolution to the question of Metilius’ *felicitas* in death is offered in the concluding passages of the *Ad Marciam*, in which Cremutius’ cosmic view is consummated in his narration of the destiny of the universe. “For the consolation of [Marcia’s] loss” (25.6 *solacio . . . desiderii tui*), Cremutius now relates to her the “common fate” (*commune fatum*) of the entire

⁸³ It is not wholly out of place to think of the Stoic theory of ἀδιάφορα in connection with Cremutius’ view of terrestrial life, but the emphasis here is somewhat different; individual mortal action and attainment of virtue are not discounted, but they play no conspicuous role in this picture, which throws all the emphasis onto the value of theoretical knowledge. Cf. Stowell 1999, 105–10.

cosmos. What follows is a dramatic description of Stoic ekpyrosis (26.6), the fiery destruction of all things that presages the rebirth of the universe (cf. 26.6 *se mundus renouaturus*) in the cycle of ages (διακόσμησις). This conflagration is not saved for humans alone, but touches all matter in every part of the cosmos; the dissolution of earth is only the beginning, followed by the collision of the stars and the conflagration in which “everything that now shines in its place will burn in one fire, all matter aflame” (*omni flagrante materia uno igni quidquid nunc ex disposito lucet ardebit*).⁸⁴ The final words of Cremutius’ speech recapitulate this ekpyrosis from the perspective of the celestial host which Metilius has joined; I quote them here, followed by the final sentence of the consolation delivered in Seneca’s own voice (26.7):

“nos quoque felices animae et aeterna sortitae, cum deo uisum erit iterum ista moliri, labentibus cunctis et ipsae parua ruinae ingentis accessio in antiqua elementa uertemur.”

felicem tuum filium, Marcia, qui ista iam nouit!

“We, too, fortunate souls with a share in what is everlasting, whenever it seems best to God to bring this about again, will be returned to our primordial elements as all things collapse, a small addition to a mighty ruin.”

Fortunate is your son, Marcia, who now knows those things!

The end of Cremutius’ speech and Seneca’s concluding exclamation reiterate the ascription of *felicitas* to Metilius that is so important in the consolatory strategy of the final part of the *Ad Marciam* (19.3–26). However, the basis for this ascription is radically different from the first two appearances of the topos *opportunitas mortis* (20.4–6, 22.1–3) and even the third and most recent instance (26.2). This final *felicitas* has nothing to do with obtaining or avoiding any particular things in life—it depends rather on the place of the eternal soul in the (Stoic) order of things and on a (Stoic) knowledge of that order.⁸⁵ Cremutius thus counts

⁸⁴In the lead-up to the fiery destruction, the earth is said to be shaken by earthquakes (*tremores*) and overwhelmed by floods (*inundationes*) that extinguish all animal life; these are not the final destruction but only its presages, occurring within the world-cycle. For the doctrine of ekpyrosis in Seneca and associated events (e.g., floods), see Gauly 2004, 237–47; Wildberger 2006, vol. 1, 56–9 (with nn. in vol. 2); Limburg 2007, 151–5.

⁸⁵Seneca’s claim that the soul has a share in eternity (cf. *aeterna sortitae*) so close to his admission that it is destroyed in the ekpyrosis has flustered scholars. Stoic thinkers differed on the length of the survival of the soul after death—Cleanthes allowed all souls to survive to the ekpyrosis, Chrysippus only the wise (*SVF* 1.522, 2.811)—but none allowed that any soul existed beyond that point. Seneca might simply be thought to be inconsistent (cf. Favez 1928, xxxvii–xxxviii; Manning 1981, 152), but various solutions are available:

Metilius among the “fortunate souls” (*felices animae*) who will return to their “primordial elements” in the ekpyrosis, ready for the rebirth of the cosmos;⁸⁶ Seneca reiterates the ascription in his own voice to conclude the consolation, calling Metilius “fortunate” (*felicem*) precisely for his knowledge of his place in the universe and of its fate. This final, challenging perspective may destroy the grounds assumed earlier for Metilius’ *felicitas*, but it does so only to replace them with a more redoubtable justification for the belief that his death was timely: his early departure is fortunate because it hastened him to an understanding of the universe intrinsically valuable in itself and in which the proper value of all other things becomes clear. This claim stands where the earlier fell because *felicitas* is now referred to an absolute standard, located in the Stoic premises assumed from 23 onwards, that was lacking in the previous analysis of Metilius’ death based on Epicurean principles. There is no room for further counterfactuals or relative measures of the quality of his life: Marcia’s son has obtained through his death the only thing that really matters. Metilius is become one with the “fortunate souls” above, at one stroke fulfilling his destiny and making an “addition” (*accessio*) of his own to the destiny of the cosmos now revealed to him.⁸⁷

5. THE PERSUASIVE STRUCTURE OF THE FINAL PHASE OF THE *AD MARCIAM*

As we have observed (section 4), Seneca’s final position on the *felicitas* of Metilius’ death seems to undermine our confidence in the consolatory argument supported by the earlier appeals to the theme *opportunitas*

the individual soul is eternal *qua* element of the immanent world-soul persisting through conflagrations; the individual soul is eternal in the sense that it recurs eternally through cosmic cycles (cf. Long 1985, 29–30); the individual soul is eternal in the way that it grasps or participates in an eternal knowledge of the structure of the cosmos (Stowell 1999, 165); *aeternus* refers to “un’immortalità limitata ad un unico periodo cosmico” (Setaioli 1997, 346 and 2013, 477; cf. Benoit 1948, 43 n. 26); the ascription of eternity is a trace of the influence of the *somnium Scipionis* that does not however override Stoic principles (Setaioli 1997, 346–7 and 2013, 477). For other passages where Seneca speaks of the eternity of the soul, see Hoven 1971, 120; cf. also *Ad Marc.* 24.5.

⁸⁶Heightening this attribution of happiness or good fortune to Metilius’ soul is the fact that the words *nos quoque felices animae et aeterna sortitae* form a near-hexameter, plausibly argued by Dunn 1989 to recall *felices animae*, etc., at Verg. *A.* 6.669. (For another point of contact between Virgil, *Aeneid* 6, and the conclusion of the *Ad Marc.*, cf. Manning 1981, 144–5; Setaioli 1997, 341–2; Stowell 1999, 150–1.)

⁸⁷On the happiness brought by this cosmic self-awareness, cf. Abel 1967, 43–5; Stowell 1999, 124, 167–8, 216–17.

mortis (20.4–6, 22.1–3; see sections 2–3). The recurrence of the topos in Cremutius Cordus' mouth (26.2) invites us to reflect on this disagreement, inasmuch as Cremutius recalls the reasons offered earlier for counting Metilius' death "fortunate" (*felix*) only to supplant them. How are we to understand the different justifications maintained in these two parts of the consolation, 19.3–22 and 23–6? As suggested above (section 1), one traditional response would be to emphasize the philosophical inconsistency of Seneca's practice in the *Ad Marciam*. Less charitable commentators might view the inconsistency as evidence of Seneca's incompetence. More charitable readers could argue that Seneca appears to be adhering to generic conventions in consolatory writing and that the juxtaposition of the contradictory Epicurean and Stoic views is intended to persuade Marcia that there is no reason to grieve Metilius' death as an evil, whether or not she believes in the existence of his soul after death.⁸⁸ We need not reject the last suggestion completely, but it does not by itself offer an adequate account of Seneca's philosophical therapy.

As I have argued, Seneca does not in fact accord equal philosophical weight to the Epicurean and Stoic alternatives proposed in 19.3–26, as becomes evident through his manipulation of the topos *opportunitas mortis*. The first two appearances of the theme, strengthened by Epicurean principles, offer a plausible justification for ascribing *felicitas* to Metilius, but cannot provide a sure proof (sections 2–3). The third and final appearance of the topos gives way to a view of the universe in which the ascription of *felicitas* is guaranteed on the Stoic principles now assumed, because the *felicitas* is bound up with (Stoic) knowledge of the fate of the soul and of the cosmos (section 4). The consolatory argument that death is no evil is maintained throughout: it is only that the *prima facie* and provisional conclusions of the earlier sections are later made completely stable through a different, and more authoritative, philosophical view of the situation. This philosophical evolution—*not* mere juxtaposition in a dilemma, as scholars have often urged—does not suggest that the initial use of Epicurean principles and the topos *opportunitas mortis* is unmotivated, or that it is motivated only by a generic approach to the material. To the contrary, this presentation has a crucial persuasive value in the consolation.

The argumentation based on the first two appearances of the topos is a propaedeutic effort to cause Marcia to give up her recalcitrant false opinion and imagine the possibility of a more positive role for *mors*

⁸⁸ See above, n. 18.

in human life (section 2). It is effective for this purpose in large part because of its conventional nature, which compels Marcia to admit that it is implausible to believe that death is always an evil (section 3). This objective is important, but is only an intermediate step in Seneca's therapy: once Marcia's mistaken belief is shaken and she is prepared to think about death in a new way, Seneca may press on to the conclusive arguments which aim to establish Metilius' *felicitas* beyond any doubt (section 4). The cost of such proof is the assumption of a more extensive and complex set of (Stoic) philosophical premises. But Marcia is, we might expect, prepared now to follow the involved argumentation that promises to eliminate her final traces of doubt (23–6): she has been trained by the gradually more difficult arguments offered throughout the whole consolation (1–18), and especially by the claims of 19.3–22, which condition her to think creatively about *mors* and ready her for the most challenging but also most authoritative position, that of the Stoic truth of the universe.⁸⁹ Ultimately, Marcia's knowledge of nature not only banishes her grief, but allows her a glimpse of the common fate to which “we fortunate souls” are all destined.⁹⁰

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA
e-mail: james.l.zainaldin@gmail.com

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⁸⁹ On the persuasive structure of the *Ad Marciam* more generally, see the refs. *passim* above, nn. 13–14.

⁹⁰ I am grateful to Kathleen Coleman, Jonathan Master, Katherine Van Schaik, and Garth Tissol for reading and offering advice on this paper. Thanks are also due to the anonymous referees for their stimulating criticisms and suggestions. Finally, I thank the Harvard Department of the Classics and the Loeb Classical Library Foundation for supporting this work.

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