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What Has Octavia Ever Done to Seneca? Reconsidering Octavia Minor as an *Exemplar* in *Consolatio ad Marciam*¹

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This article examines Seneca the Younger's critique of Octavia Minor's unceasing grief in his *Consolatio ad Marciam*, a rarity amongst the usually more sympathetic portrayals in other ancient sources. The study reconsiders the rhetorical, political, and didactic motives behind Seneca's critique. Through comparison with historiographical and poetic sources, including the pseudo-Ovidian *Consolatio ad Liviam*, it reassesses the singularity and possible invention of Seneca's account within the Julio-Claudian narrative as a cautionary, didactic *exemplum* with political and diplomatic implications.

Keywords: Seneca, Octavia Minor, *Consolatio ad Marciam*, *Consolatio ad Liviam*, Julio-Claudian narrative,

Introduction

What has Octavia Minor ever done to Seneca the Younger? Nothing in particular, it turns out, as these pages will show. Yet, the following question arises: why does Seneca depict Octavia in such a negative light in his *Consolatio ad Marciam*? His criticism of her unrestrained grief for her son is, after all, the only blatantly negative portrayal that has come down

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to us from antiquity. The situation is as follows. In 23 B.C.E, Marcellus, the young son of Octavia Minor and her first husband, Marcellus, fell ill and died.² This loss not only took Octavia's son but also her influential status as the mother of, at that time, the presumptive heir, a role now transferred to Livia Drusilla, who indeed would become the mother of the next emperor.³ This event generally explains why Octavia becomes virtually obscure within the Augustan family. But little information about her activities and whereabouts in those decades has been handed down to us. Aside from the fact that her brother granted her funerary honours,⁴ little—not even the exact date of her death—is known about her in those silent years.

And yet, Augustus' sister and wife seem to have run roughly parallel lives. In 9 B.C.E., Livia loses her young son Drusus, who was equally promising; yet, she is generally remembered as bearing the loss with greater dignity. It is in this context that Seneca vehemently criticises Octavia, whilst praising Livia in order to instruct Marcia, the daughter of the historian Cremutius Cordius. The work in question, the *Consolatio ad Marciam*, is now accepted as the earliest of his extant writings, generally dated to the rule of Gaius (37-41 C.E.).⁵ The addressee of this *Consolatio* was Marcia, still mourning the death of her son Metilius three years earlier. To exhort her towards action and public duty, Seneca presents Octavia and Livia as two parallel mourning practitioners: Marcia must choose between them, but Seneca does not leave any doubt as to the "correct" answer. In this context, Seneca's didacticism and exemplarity as a mode of instruction are particularly illuminating for examining this alluring passage. It becomes, as we will see below, an important thread in the narrative of *Ad Marciam*. As Spurio Venarucci (2022) 153-154 shows, Seneca presents himself as the ideal middle ground—and indeed as an *exemplum* to follow—in the face of his father's death in

² Tutrone (2023) 69, Cenerini (2024) 213-228, and Mayer (2024) 300-310 provide recent biographies of the imperial sister; for Marcellus, see Harrison (2017) 69-82 and Tutrone (2023) 72-73.

³ For an overview on Livia, see Tutrone (2023) 70-72.

⁴ See recently Hope (2020) 278.

⁵ A Gaian date is generally accepted: Zainaldin (2021) 426-427 provides a thorough overview of the possible dates, ranging from, e.g., Manning (1974) 72 n. 1 and (1981) 1-24 (who follows previous editors with a date around 40 C.E.—this is also the view of Wilson (2013) 113 n. 49), whereas Jenkins (2009) 3 n. 12, on the other hand, entertains the possibility of a Tiberian date, around 34-37 C.E. Hine (2014) 3 considers it the first surviving full-length consolation.

Epistle 78. Thus, Seneca can be cast as a suitable instructor to help Marcia overcome her grief. The didactic function of juxtaposing the two imperial women's behaviour in mourning will be the focus of this article. Seneca's portrayal of Octavia warrants complication for two preliminary reasons. As mentioned above, Seneca's *Consolatio* is the only extant source that directs such overt criticism at Octavia. Praise of her is more common; Plutarch's *Life of Antony* reflects his constant admiration for her in his biographical narrative, otherwise (in)famous for its deterrent subjects.⁶ Secondly, the pseudo-Ovidian *Epicedion Drusi*, also known as the *Consolatio ad Liviam*, offers a more nuanced view: in this work, Octavia emerges as a recent precedent for Livia, but not as a cautionary example. Jenkins⁷ offers a reading of Livia as *princeps*, focusing on Livia's mourning and the *Consolatio ad Liviam*.⁸ By contrast, this article centres on Octavia and the Senecan *Consolatio*. In doing so, it reconsiders Octavia's and Livia's appearances in the *Consolatio* and reassesses the function and effect of Seneca's criticism of Octavia's alleged excessive lament, structured in three parts. First, this article surveys a variety of accounts, ranging from historiography to poetry, of the death of Marcellus and its impact: these diverge significantly from Seneca's portrayal. The central section juxtaposes the two mourning mothers, Livia and Marcia, as opposing *exempla* in the opening of *Ad Marciam*. The third part examines these representations in light of the *Pseudo-Ovidian* counterpart. Finally, the conclusion turns to Seneca's treatment of the imperial sister, exploring the (political) motivations underlying his representation.

The tradition of the death of Marcellus: sources and context

Before turning to Seneca's treatment, we ought to consider the death of Marcellus and the stakes it entailed. If one accept the view that Augustus precalculated a dynastic design, one can imagine that

⁶ See, e.g., *Ant.* 31 and 35.

⁷ Jenkins (2009) 1-18.

⁸ See Wilcox (2006). Jenkins (2009) 9 uncovers an uneasy, more nuanced paradox of Livia's gender expectations: "Nicolas Purcell (1986) has argued that this passage [lines 41-50] demonstrates hostility of its author towards Livia, but I think rather that the author is grappling with the real difficulties of representing Livia's *auctoritas* in language appropriate to her gender: by stressing Livia's feminine restraint, he paradoxically emphasises her newly exercised 'male' powers of influence and even intimidation."

he and his advisors were actively devising strategies to establish a durable foundation for the emerging principate.⁹ Heirless himself—his daughter Julia was never a viable successor—Augustus turns his gaze to his male relatives.¹⁰ His nephew Marcellus emerges as a promising candidate with exceptional potential before his untimely death, as Velleius Paterculus succinctly records.¹¹ Marcellus' memory is consistently one of praise, marked by tragically wasted promise. For Velleius, *sane*, there is no doubt about his suitability for imperial rule. Tacitus also briefly mentions the younger Marcellus and his reputation for promise and precociousness, in the context of Augustus' early attempts to secure a line of succession.¹² Subsequently, however, Agrippa assumed the role of the most probable contender, until Tiberius eventually succeeds Augustus, eventually even marrying Marcellus' widow, Julia the Elder.¹³ Dio leaves little doubt concerning his views of Augustus' succession plans. While Octavian himself seemed to have little hope of recovery during his illness, Dio maintains that Octavian did not officially appoint a successor. It was expected, however, that his young nephew was the most eligible candidate.¹⁴ To the public's surprise, however, no such arrangement came to pass. While the freedman-physician Musa eventually managed to restore the emperor to health, young Marcellus was not so fortunate, despite receiving the same treatment. Augustus, in turn, granted his nephew a public funeral, a resting place in the family mausoleum, and a theatre that bore Marcellus' name.¹⁵ In brief, these are just a few sources that reflect the impact of Marcellus' death and the promise he embodied: this was indeed a most unfortunate

⁹ Opinions vary: one of the main opponents of this view is Gruen (2005) 38, 43.

¹⁰ Dynastic lineage and succession were often linked to "the emperor's person and personal experience": see Hekster (2015) 5-8, 26-38.

¹¹ *Historia Romana* 2.93.1-2: *M. Marcellus, sororis Augusti Octaviae filius [...] magnificentissimo munere aedilitatis edito decessit admodum iuvenis, sane, ut aiunt, ingenuarum virtutum laetusque animi et ingenii fortunaeque, in quam alebatur, capax.* (Marcellus, the son of Octavia, the sister of Augustus, died [...] having displayed a magnificent public show for his aedileship, when he was only a youth. Certainly, as they say, he was a youth of noble character, with good cheer in spirit and nature, and fit for the lot for which he was being brought up). The text is Shipley (1924); the translation is my own.

¹² Tacitus *Ann.* 1.3.1.

¹³ Plutarch *Ant.* 87.2-3, Suetonius *Aug.* 63, Tacitus *Ann.* 1.3.1, D.C. 54.6.5, See Gruen (2005) 38, 42 and Wardle (2015) 409-410.

¹⁴ D.C. 53.30.1-2.

¹⁵ D.C. 53.30.4-6.

loss. Such occasions, especially the theme of *mors immatura*, lend themselves particularly well to elegy and elegiac renditions in epic.¹⁶

Propertius recognised this opportunity, eulogising Marcellus in the third book of his elegies within the tradition of mourning untimely death.¹⁷ Gone are the longings for Cynthia: Propertius now enters the civic realm, inscribing Marcellus into the elegiac genre. After ten lines of evoking the gloomy scenery of Baiae, the site of Marcellus' death, the narrator mourns the youth and his unfulfilled promise:

*Quid genus aut uirtus aut optima profuit illi
mater, et amplexum Caesaris esse focus?
aut modo tam pleno fluitantia uela theatro,
et per maturas omnia gesta manus?*
(Propertius 3.18.13-16)

Of what use has been his progeny, or his excellence, or
his noblest mother to him, and his having embraced the hearths of Caesar
Or even the sails fluttering recently in such a crowded theatre,
and all the things achieved by his precocious hands?¹⁸

The wistful *quid...profuit illi?* construction stresses that neither his lineage nor his mother ultimately could prevent his premature death. The Propertian Octavia's role is decidedly maternal and exemplary: *optima* (Propertius does not spare any superlatives for Octavia) *mater* and Marcellus appear in a parallel position, yet the lines simultaneously reflect their inevitable separation. The enjambment created by the hyperbaton *optima ... mater* reinforces this rupture once more, though one might also read the construction as a longing embrace, all in vain, in these lines.¹⁹ Furthermore, the uncertainty of the manuscript is particularly striking: the variations of *maturas* or *maternas* activate

¹⁶ Waszink (1949) already connects *mors immatura* and Propertius 4.11, the elegy to Cornelia, which Lowrie (2008) reads through the lens of exemplarity: Cornelia emerges as an *exemplum* herself through a mixture of genres such as the grave epigram and the speech genre (specifically a *laudatio funebris* that she unconventionally delivers for herself).

¹⁷ Propertius 3.18. Harrison (2017) and Wallis (2018) offer thorough overviews of the Marcellus tradition; see also Hope (2020).

¹⁸ The text is that of Heyworth and Morwood (2011); the translation is my own.

¹⁹ See Wallis (2018) 180 for more about the pentameter and the context of the "praise of the maternal family." This line may also evoke the epic trope of failed embraces in the underworld.

different interpretive paths.²⁰ Despite Octavia's undoubtedly influential position in Marcellus' early career (which Ovid hints at in *Ars Amatoria* 1.69-70),²¹ any suggestion of nepotism would have been insulting to both the mother and her late son. *Maturas* appears to be the more plausible reading, especially in light of the sources mentioned above, which emphasise Marcellus' youthful initiative and ambition cut short by premature death.²² Nevertheless, the Propertian elegy thus shows considerable compassion for the bereft mother for whom the loss was great indeed, whilst placing it in the tradition of the *mors immatura*.

Propertius was not the only poet to eulogise Marcellus or to lament his lost potential: Virgil famously concludes his *Heldenschau* with the mournful vision of Marcellus' sad spirit in *Aeneid* 6.854-886. There he appears alongside his ancestor Claudius Marcellus, a particularly illustrious exemplar (*Aen.* 6.855-856).²³ The connection between these two Marcelli comes to life when Aeneas inquires about the younger Marcellus. Virgil joins the tradition of portraying Marcellus as a youthful individual of exceptional promise and potential, even as a spirit in the underworld.²⁴ Moreover, Virgil casts this untimely death—a painfully common occurrence in the *Aeneid* as it is—not only as a profound

²⁰ According to Heyworth and Morwood (2011), the corruption of *maturas* to *maternas* in some manuscripts can be attributed to the close presence of Marcellus' *mater* just a few lines above. Wallis (2018) 180-181 n. 47 approves the emendation to *maturas* as "precocious" by Heyworth and Morwood "precisely because the transmitted adjective is 'repetitious,' and 'unsuited to the encomiastic context'."

²¹ *Ars. Am.* 1.69-70: *Aut ubi muneribus nati sua munera mater / addidit, externo marmore diues opus.* ("Or where the mother added her own gifts to those of her son, work rich in foreign marble."). The text is Kenney 1994; the translation is my own. There is no doubt concerning the identity of Octavia and Marcellus here, but the narrator allows the reader to interpret the use of *muneribus* as either the Theatre of Marcellus or the library that Octavia dedicated to Marcellus, or both.

²² One of the reviewers suggested bringing out the connection between the *maturas* ... *manus* and *mors immatura* more directly.

²³ See Freudenburg (2017).

²⁴ Virgil *Aen.* 6.860-866: *Atque hic Aeneas (una namque ire uidebat / egregium forma iuuenem et fulgentibus armis, / sed frons laeta parum et deiecto lumina uultu) / 'quis, pater, ille, uirum qui sic comitatur euntem? / filius, ane aliquis magna de stirpe nepotum? / qui strepitus circa comitum! quantum instar in ipso! / sed nox atra caput tristi circumuolat umbra.'* (And now, Aeneas asks (for he perceived that a youth was walking together with Marcellus, a youth, distinguished in his beauty, with glittering weapons, but his countenance was hardly cheerful, and his eyes were downcast): "Father, who is the one who accompanies that man walking in that manner? Is he his son or another scion out of his great lineage of descendants? What murmuring 'round their attendants! What a great presence in him! But gloomy night with a sad shade flies 'round his head."). The text is Mynors (1969); the translation is my own.

personal tragedy but also as a national loss with lasting implications for Rome's legacy.²⁵ The public dimensions of this death and the subsequent grief, then, found their way into the poetry of the time. The *Aeneid* itself famously collapsed the boundary between narrative and audience, as well as mind and body. In one tradition, Virgil's recital of the end of *Aeneid* 6 and particularly the line "tu Marcellus eris" causes Octavia Minor to faint, as she is unable to bear the lugubrious cameo of her son.²⁶ While the historicity of this anecdote remains contested, it nevertheless attests to the imagined intensity of audience engagement with the text and its performance, especially Octavia as Marcellus' grieving mother.²⁷ At the same time, such a reaction is not exactly an embodiment of how the Stoic sage would bear such emotion.²⁸ It is plausible that this source or tradition was available to Seneca at the time of writing the *Ad Marciam*, yet its provenance and historical circumstances remain unclear.

Before turning to Seneca's depiction of Octavia in the *Ad Marciam*, I end this brief survey with a glance at the opposite end of the representational spectrum. Notably, Plutarch's Octavia is an entirely exemplary character. Outside of *Marcellus* 30.6, however, Plutarch makes little of the death of Marcellus or Octavia's grief. In *Marc.* 30.6, he merely mentions that Marcellus died during his aedileship and that Octavia dedicated a

²⁵ Verg. *Aen.* 6.868-871, 882-883: 'O gnate, ingentem luctum ne quaere tuorum; / ostendent terris hunc tantum fata nec ultra / esse sinent. nimium uobis Romana propago / uisa potens, superi, propria haec si dona fuissent. [...] heu, miserande puer, si qua fata aspera rumpas, / tu Marcellus eris. [...]') "O son, do not ask about the great grief of your people; The Fates will show such an eminent youth to the world, yet they will not allow him to exist beyond that point. The Roman progeny would seem too powerful to you, gods above, if these gifts were perpetually lasting. [...] Alas, boy who must be pitied, if you could only shatter adverse fates, **you shall be Marcellus!** ..."). The text of this selection is Mynors (1969); the translation is my own.

²⁶ Don. Auct. Suetonius *Vita Vergili* 32-33: *Cui tamen multo post perfectaetque demum materia tres omnino libros recitavit, primum, quartum et sextum, sed hunc notabili Octaviae adfectione, quae cum recitationi interesset, ad illos de filio suo versus, "tu Marcellus eris", defecisse fertur atque aegre fociata.* ("But, not until much later when he had finally some material, Virgil at last recited three books in their entirety to Augustus—the second, fourth, and sixth—but the latter with a remarkable effect on Octavia, who, as she was present at the recitation, is reported to have fainted at those famous verses about her son, "You shall be Marcellus," she was revived only with difficulty.") Text from Rolfe 1914; the translation is my own.

²⁷ Servius *ad Aen.* 6.861 claims that Octavia and Augustus had been weeping and does not mention any type of swooning. For recent treatments of the Octavia episode, see Ziogas (2017), Hallett (2020), and Hope (2020) 276-281.

²⁸ See Tutrone (2023) 48-51 for the teaching and healing of Marcia and the concept of female weakness in Stoicism; see also Wilcox (2006) 73-74 and Linares Huertas (2023) 1025.

library (presumably as part of the Porticus Octaviae) in his name. Yet, in the *Life of Antony*, Plutarch provides a wealth of material concerning Octavia's moral exemplarity.²⁹ There, Plutarch casts her as the virtuous positive foil in opposition with Cleopatra, in what resembles a mini-*synkrisis*. Thus, her person lent itself well to exemplary pairings. Octavia appears in multiple configurations: now a virtuous contrast to Cleopatra, then as a less favourable one to Livia. This polarity is particularly noteworthy given that Seneca alone presents Octavia so negatively, whereas the pseudo-Ovidian counterpart creates a more neutral dynamic. Having considered the broader context and the range of responses to and evaluations of Marcellus' death in various genres—including its political implications and Octavia's grief—we now turn to the Senecan passage in question.

Seneca the Younger's criticism of Octavia in *Consolatio ad Marciam*

As noted above, Seneca's *Ad Marciam* is remarkable in the tradition surrounding Octavia and Marcellus, as it is the only source to direct such scathing criticism at Octavia. Nowhere else in the extant literature is Octavia portrayed in a more negative light. Interestingly, the *Ad Marciam* itself has been subject to scholarly critique, particularly for its alleged lack of "organisation and coherence."³⁰ Zainaldin (2021) 427-428 follows Wilson (2007) 92 and Master (2019) 77 in emphasising the genre's instability and fluidity.³¹ Tutrone (2023) 64-96 has recently emphasised the work's didactic function, rooted in the exemplary and therapeutic aims of the text and genre: in attempting to console Marcia after the death of her son Metilius, Seneca draws on familiar strategies of exemplarity.³² Throughout his works, Seneca demonstrates his deliberateness in choosing and employing his exemplary methods. His

²⁹ See *Ant.* 31, 35, 51, 53, and 87. My forthcoming monograph extensively covers this dynamic between Octavia and Cleopatra.

³⁰ See Zainaldin (2021) 417 on the "harsh judgement" in the work's tradition.

³¹ On the genre, see Lillo-Redonet (1998), Manning (1981), Ker (2009) 94-95, Torre (2018) 84 n. 14, Master (2019) 76-77, and Zainaldin (2021) 426-429.

³² For exemplarity and the *consolatio* genre, see Shelton (1995), Wilcox (2006), Hine (2014), 3-4, Gloyne (2017), Linares Huertas (2023) 1025-1027, 1036, Tutrone (2023). Bexley (2022) 119-124, 143 has focused on the moral-didactic function of Achilles and Hector in Seneca's *Troades*. Seneca's interest in exemplarity thus also extended to his tragic works. Indeed, his tragedies have undergone didactic readings, such as *Hercules*

rhetorical strategies become particularly apparent through a combined reading of *Ep.* 94 and 95, which reveal that Seneca would opt for *praecepta* or *decreta* depending on his needs and aims.³³ In *Marc.* 2.1, Seneca himself justifies his replacement of *praecepta* by *exempla*, which might make the road to recovery easier and faster, as Seneca suggests in *Ep.* 6.5.³⁴ After these three years of mourning, Marcia's situation might be a matter of urgency in Seneca's view. Instead of starting with *praecepta*, he consciously adapts his strategy by first presenting the *exempla* meant to persuade Marcia to halt or at least moderate her grieving.³⁵ Seneca thus demonstrates his meticulous attention to his own employment of *exempla* and *praecepta*. Shelton³⁶ affirms the unusual nature of these dual *exempla*: they are female and contemporary (even personally acquainted with Marcia). Herein, this tendency departs from Seneca's more common use of historical models, who tend to be more akin to his addressees and who tend to be reinforcing models of admirable behaviour.³⁷ Wilcox (2006) 73-87 uncovers the uneasy paradox of gender and virtue in Seneca's *Consolationes*: Roman matrons are expected to conform to public, masculine ideals of *virtus*, and any deviation from these expectations invites censure. Octavia is no exception. In *Ad Marciam*, she is cast as the negative exemplar, as if by lot, whereas Livia emerges as the ideal matron to emulate.³⁸ The resulting polarity is "stark" enough to have

Furens (Rose 1979). Correa (2021) 129-131 explores the themes of time and death as opportune moments for Seneca to revert to moral instruction and exemplarity.

³³ Schafer (2011) 33 interprets the *Epistulae Morales* as a literary case study of moral education, in which context *exempla* are particularly effective; Schafer (2011) 50 also demonstrates that Seneca's commitment to virtue and educational method are "varied and pluralistic." *Ep.* 94 and 95 serve as particularly illustrative examples of Seneca's theory of moral instruction. Roller (2015) demonstrates Seneca's pliability in choosing and defending his rhetorical methods; Lepisto (2020) 29 examines Seneca's defense of *praecepta* in *Ep.* 94 and the didactic aims they serve; see Fraño and Novosád (2023) on Seneca's use of shame in his didacticism.

³⁴ See Schafer (2009) 91 and Roller (2015) 153 on the phrase *longum iter est per praecepta, breve et efficax per exempla* in *Ep.* 6.5.

³⁵ For his "break of tradition," see Ker (2009) 94-95, Manning (1974) 76 n. 1, Master (2019), 83-84, and Tutrone (2023) 65-66.

³⁶ Shelton (1995) 170-171.

³⁷ Manning (1981) 36 notes that, though rare in the literature of the early empire, Seneca tends to use roughly contemporary *exempla*, see also Shelton (1995) 170-171, Langlands (2004) 121-122, Jenkins (2009), Gloyne (2017), and Tutrone (2023) 67. For the distinction between *vetera* and *nova exempla* in *Polyb.*, see now Russo (2024) 63-84; for a comparison with *Marc.*, see Russo (2024) 83 n. 111.

³⁸ For earlier parallels and similar diction of proper grieving practices, see Cicero's *de*

prompted Wilcox (2006) 85 to schematise “a series of opposing pairs,” including the following binaries: positive, public, and visible (Livia) versus negative, private, and invisible (Octavia). Such juxtaposition leaves little room for nuance. It is at this point in the text that Seneca, now shifting in the first person, explicitly contrasts the mourning practices of the two imperial women:

*Duo tibi ponam ante oculos maxima et sexus et saeculi tui exempla: alterius feminae quae se tradidit ferendam dolori, alterius quae pari adfecta casu, maiore damno, non tamen dedit longum in se malis suis dominium, sed cito animum in sedem suam reposuit. Octavia et Liuvia, altera soror Augusti, altera uxor, amiserunt filios iuvenes, utraque spe futuri principis certa.*³⁹

(*Marc.* 2.2-3)

Two of the greatest examples of your own gender and era I will place before your eyes: the example of one woman who gave herself over to being carried away by grief; and of the other, who, despite being afflicted by a similar misfortune, and an even greater loss, nevertheless did not give her own sorrows long rule over herself, but quickly restored her mind to its former state. Octavia and Livia, the former Augustus’ sister, the latter his wife, both lost their sons—mere youths, with each having certain hope of becoming *princeps*.

Seneca’s rhetoric here presents a (correct) choice through the presentation of two alternatives as *exempla* (*alterius feminae... alterius*), later prompting Marcia explicitly to choose between them (*elige itaque, utrum exemplum putes probabilius*, *Marc.* 3.3). Seneca thereby illustrates the “proper” mode of mourning by juxtaposing “two of the greatest examples” available to Marcia: they are women of the same generation as she is, and thus more likely to apply to her situation.⁴⁰ By contrast, Seneca later introduces a cast of positive female exemplars to avoid appearing partial by providing exclusively male exemplars, thus tailoring his *exempla* to his female addressee’s specific situation (*Marc.* 16.1). These female *exempla* of Roman fortitude include Lucretia and Cloelia (*Marc.* 16.2) and two Cornelias from the same lineage (*Marc.*

Amicitia 8-11. Although now lost, Cicero’s *consolatio ad se* must have been composed in the wake of his daughter Tullia’s premature death.

³⁹ The text is from Reynolds (1977); the translation is my own.

⁴⁰ Cf. Shelton (1995) 170 n. 30.

16.3-4).⁴¹ This collection consists of exemplars who are historical and positive. The rhetorical strategy here differs from the earlier juxtaposition of Livia and Octavia: rather than teaching through stark moral contrast, Seneca reinforces a series of positive behaviours firmly grounded in the Roman tradition. Moreover, while the inclusion of Cornelia might be expected given her reputation, it is still suggestive: of the two women, Octavia was particularly closely associated with the quintessential *univira*, even if she was married twice.⁴² Her evocation thus subtly reactivates Octavia's presence and possibly revisits Octavia's reputation, offering a more nuanced dimension to the *exempla*. Additional subtle traces of bias emerge. First, the reader will only learn later in *Marc.* 4.1-2 that Livia, also known as Julia Augusta, was Marcia's personal friend (*Non dubito quin Iuliae Augustae, quam familiariter coluisti, magis tibi placeat exemplum; illa te ad suum consilium vocat*).⁴³ As with the *Epistulae Morales*, it has been an accepted view that these works are not only written for their addressee but also for a wider readership.⁴⁴ A reader unfamiliar with Marcia would not have been aware of the personal connection between Marcia and Livia, and this delayed revelation thus subtly influences how these *exempla* were perceived. Carefully withholding this information is therefore an artful rhetorical move, as Seneca only slowly reveals the pretence of impartiality.⁴⁵ While Seneca acknowledges the rivalry between the two women, he also suppresses a different tradition: Dio reports that Livia was suspected of poisoning Marcellus as a dynastic manoeuvre to advance Tiberius' political advancement.⁴⁶ If Seneca subtly alludes to this rumour, which

⁴¹ In *Helv.* 16.6, Seneca conjures the mother of the Gracchi and quintessential Roman matron, Cornelia, as an *exemplum* to console his mother. Thus, he presents only one woman to be emulated, and one who lived generations before her. Cornelia's situation, however, is presented as graver and less directly applicable. See Shelton (1995) 171 and Tutrone (2023) 153-160 on Cornelia as an exemplar in *Marc.*

⁴² See Tutrone (2023) 70 for on the associations between Octavia and Cornelia.

⁴³ See Shelton (1995) and Tutrone (2023) 64 for this seemingly minor detail.

⁴⁴ See Hine (2014) 3-4 and Tutrone (2023) 112.

⁴⁵ Chirico (1990) 143-164 demonstrates the various rhetorical figures that contribute to Seneca's agile eloquence in *Marc.*

⁴⁶ Some accused Livia of poisoning Marcellus (D.C. 53.33.4), which thus places her in the tradition of *matronae veneficae*. Manning (1981) 38 observes the anachronistic lapse between Marcellus' death in 23 B.C.E. and Tiberius' accession in 14 C.E. Marcellus is not the only victim ascribed to Livia, as even Augustus is fair game for such rumours. For Livia, then, one may detect this pattern, whereas this source is a one-time occurrence for Octavia.

is unlikely, Octavia's animosity towards her sister-in-law appears less irrational, and Livia's apparent virtue seems more ambiguous.

A similar rhetorical manoeuvre appears later in the text, where Seneca introduces a noteworthy oscillation in the portrayal of the two women. First, Seneca represents the matrons as equally afflicted in their misfortune (*pari adfecta casu*), only to assert shortly after that Livia suffered the greater loss (*maiore damno*)—a puzzling claim, as the two women both lost their young, promising sons.⁴⁷ Yet, overcoming a more grievous loss is, rhetorically, a more admirable feat, just like defeating a more formidable enemy is more worthy of praise. By the end of this passage, however, the parity is restored: the kinswomen and their offspring's promise have become equal again (*utraque spe futuri principis certa*). Thus, through these oscillating assessments, the correct behaviour has become a matter of *utra* and *utrum*: which woman, which model to emulate. As the above example suggests, Seneca engages in some remarkable rhetorical acrobatics; unsurprisingly, perhaps, as the principal aim of the text may just as well be persuasion as consolation, as Shelton (1995) already demonstrates.⁴⁸ Even so, Seneca concludes that the women had equal grounds for grieving, because of the considerable promise that each youth embodied. Vain hope in the face of premature death is a constant in the evaluations of Marcellus considered above and will continue to play an essential role in the assessments of Drusus, both here and in the *Consolatio ad Liviam* below.

Given the strict decorum imposed on women in the context of Roman commemorative practices, women who were mourning the dead were expected to navigate a delicate balance. While it was proper and even necessary to observe a beloved's passing, excessive displays of mourn-

⁴⁷ The interpretation of Tutrone (2023) 68 is worth citing: "It is hard to understand why Seneca considers Livia's loss greater than that of Octavia – especially because Livia's other son, Tiberius, ultimately succeeded Augustus, whereas Marcellus was Octavia's only son (Manning 1981, 36). The most convincing (albeit partial) explanation is that Drusus was older and more famous than Marcellus at the time of his death, for he had already achieved the consulship as well as several military victories (Favez 1928, ad loc.) ... In this respect, no help can be found in Wilcox's 2006, 86, comment that 'it may well have been easier for a status-conscious Roman aristocrat of either gender to overcome grief for a child who had distinguished himself in military service than for one who died out of the limelight.' This explanation would in fact support the view that Octavia suffered a *maius damnum*."

⁴⁸ Lowrie (2008) 165-166 applies Quintilian's definition of the *exemplum* (IO 5.11.6) to Propercius 4.11: *exempla* are useful for those aiming to persuade.

ing elicited disapproval.⁴⁹ The highest slice of society would have led as particular models and thus received specific scrutiny. A strong desire for self-control and self-possession pervades the passage. On the one hand, Livia's attitude corresponds to the Stoic ideal: in this passage, she does not loosen the reins of control for one moment, although Seneca will later qualify this view. Octavia, on the other hand, is represented as a picture of perpetual passivity.⁵⁰ Seneca faults the duration of Octavia's mourning, which Marcia risks imitating if she does not follow Seneca's advice.⁵¹ Yet, Seneca concedes that Octavia's grief was warranted to an extent, or so it seems in his representation of Octavia's loss. In line with the sources considered in the first part of this article, Seneca praises Marcellus in terms that recur in the source tradition of the youth:

[...] *Octavia Marcellum, cui et auunculus et socer incumbere coeperat, in quem onus imperii reclinare, adolescentem animo alacrem, ingenio potentem, sed frugalitatis continentiaeque in illis aut annis aut opibus non mediocriter admirandae, patientem laborum, uoluptatibus alienum, quantumcumque imponere illi auunculus et, ut ita dicam, inaedificare uoluisset, laturum; bene legerat nulli cessura ponderi fundamenta.* (Marc. 2.3)

[...] Octavia lost Marcellus, to whom both his father-in-law and his uncle had begun to turn for support, on whom the burden of the empire had begun to rest—a youth bright in spirit, powerful in character, but of frugality and temperance that are to be admired not mildly [*i.e.*, very much] in a youth of his years and means, unyielding in his exertions, averse to revels, and willing to endure whatever his uncle might wish to assign to him, or I should I say, build on him. The uncle had chosen him well as the foundation, one that would yield to no burden whatsoever.

Seneca assigns to Marcellus' noble qualities that stemmed from his *animus* and *ingenium*, traits that appear innate and independent of external

⁴⁹ See especially Hope (2020) 273. Kubler and Stevens (2017) 252, 257-259 attribute the cultural-political role of "guardians of memory" to Roman matrons: their lament was a type of preserving and commemorating for the generations to come. Gillespie (2020) 59-84 demonstrates the importance of memory and memory preservation in the age of Augustus. Shelton (1995) 1987-1988 and Ziogas (2017) 453 interpret Octavia's attitude of refusing any reminders of her son as counterproductive and even destructive to Marcellus' commemoration, yet Octavia's grief can be read as a type of commemoration itself. See Linares Huertas (2023) 1030-1031 on the importance of the commemoration of the deceased in the *consolatio* genre.

⁵⁰ See Shelton (1995), Wilcox (2006) 85, Tutrone (2023) 67.

⁵¹ Shelton (1995) 171-172.

influence. As we have seen, Velleius Paterculus lists Marcellus' aedileship among the youth's achievements, suitable for a promising member on the rise in the imperial family. Seneca expresses his own praise, *non mediocriter*, emphasising Marcellus' innate qualities and abilities, which would ideally serve as the enduring foundation of the Julio-Claudian *gens*. Marcellus' temperance in turn recalls his mother's representations, whose patience and mediating character would become legendary, in part because of Plutarch's portrayal of Octavia at *Tarentum* in *Ant.* 35. As character traits were often regarded as hereditary in ancient thought, one might assume that Octavia's upbringing influenced Marcellus' noble character to some degree.⁵² Yet unlike Plutarch, Seneca withholds such grace. Indeed, he moves directly from praising Marcellus to blaming Octavia, nestling this juxtaposition firmly between Livia's praise that is to follow. While Seneca's assessment of Marcellus and Drusus (in *Marc.* 3.3) is similar and consistent within the source tradition, their mothers received divergent treatments. Seneca claims that the duration and intensity of Octavia's grief were so excessive that she harmed both her own well-being and that of her household:

Nullum finem per omne uitae suae tempus flendi gemendique fecit nec ulla admisit uoces salutare aliquid adferentis; ne auocari quidem se passa est; intenta in unam rem et toto animo adfixa, talis per omnem uitam fuit, qualis in funere, non dico non [est] ausa consurgere, sed adleuari recusans, secundam orbitatem iudicans lacrimas mittere. Nullam habere imaginem filii carissimi uoluit, nullam sibi de illo fieri mentionem. Oderat omnes matres et in Liuiam maxime furebat, quia uidebatur ad illius filium transisse sibi promissa felicitas. (Marc. 2.4-5)

Octavia put no end to her weeping and mourning throughout her entire lifetime and never permitted any voices [that aimed to] bring any type of comfort; she never even allowed herself to be distracted, attentive to one thing alone and imprinted on this grief with her entire mind. So she was during her entire life, just as during the funeral. I do not say that she did not dare to rise up herself, but she was refusing to be alleviated in her sorrow, judging the loss of her tears as a second loss. She wished to have no image of her most beloved son, nor any mention of him to occur. She disliked all mothers and was particularly infuriated with Livia because it seemed that the good fortune formerly expected for herself now had passed over to Livia's son.

⁵² See Gagné (2013) for ancient views of hereditary traits.

The passage is saturated with absolutes and superlatives: *nullus* and *omnis* dominate Seneca's assessment of Octavia's death—it is not until later that Seneca himself pleads for moderation (*Marc.* 3.4: *Si ad hoc maximae feminae te exemplum adplicueris moderatius, mitius...*). This Octavia *never* moderated her mourning after the funeral, nor did she accept consolation; she remained *exclusively* consumed by her sorrow and loathed *all* mothers, *especially* Livia. In Seneca's view, she was not unable "to rise up," rather, she simply refused to do so. This refusal seemed even more reproachable in Seneca's belief system. At this point, he inserts himself into the narrative. Shelton (1995) 177-178 identifies the element of choice on the Senecan Octavia's part: according to him, Octavia simply did not want to adopt a different attitude. *Voluntas* is essential for Seneca and the Stoics, for whom emotions and dealing with them were a matter of will and choice. Seneca's focus on this choice—and Octavia's unwillingness—may have exacerbated his perception of Octavia's control of her emotions, expressed here through exaggerated, generalised accusations. Moreover, the description of Octavia's behaviour here stands in direct contrast to the moderation displayed by the 'weeping sage' in *Ep.* 99, where Seneca presents the *sapiens* as capable of both feeling emotions and maintaining *decorum* in the face of grief. This ideal description leans closer to the image of Livia presented in *Marc.* 3.2, 3.4, and 4.2, whereby she becomes a parallel to the sage. By extension, we might venture that this Octavia becomes the opposite of the sage by displaying behaviour that would be typical of the imprudent.⁵³

The next paragraph reveals that Seneca particularly criticises Octavia's retreat from public and private duties alike; Shelton (1995) and Wilcox (2006) specifically focus on this gendered division of spheres and how it shapes the contrasting exemplarity of the two women. Seneca's superlative and absolute rhetoric continues as he now shifts to Octavia's neglect of her brother and offspring:

Tenebris et solitudini familiarissima, ne ad fratrem quidem respiciens, carmina celebrandae Marcelli memoriae composita aliosque studiorum honores reiecit et aures suas aduersus omne solacium clusit. A sollempnibus officiis seducta et

⁵³ Cf. *Ep.* 99.21: *Est aliquis et dolendi decor; hic sapienti seroandus est et quemadmodum in ceteris rebus, ita etiam in lacrimis aliquid sat est; imprudentium ut gaudia sic dolores exundavere.* ("There exists a certain decorum for grieving; this ought to be preserved by the sage, just as in other matters; in this way even in tears some quantity may be enough; it is typical of the imprudent that sorrows, like joys, overflow.") The text is from Gummere (1925); the translation is my own.

ipsam magnitudinis fraternae nimis circumlucentem fortunam exosa defodit se et abdidit. Adsidentibus liberis, nepotibus lugubrem uestem non deposuit, non sine contumelia omnium suorum, quibus saluis orba sibi uidebatur. (Marc. 2.5)

Most familiar to the shadows and solitude, she would not even pay attention to her brother; she rejected the poems which had been composed in order to commemorate Marcellus, and all the other honours paid to him by literature, and closed her ears against all types of solace. In solitude and retired from her appointed duties, she—as it were—buried herself and removed herself, having exceeding hatred for the excessively flourishing prosperity of her brother. Although her children and grandchildren surrounded her, she did not put aside her mourning attire, not without offence to her own relations; she seemed bereaved to herself, even though they were alive.

Ziogas⁵⁴ asserts that Seneca presents Octavia as transforming herself into a phantom: she became so acquainted with shades (reminiscent of Propertius' Baiae in 3.18) and seclusion that she metaphorically buried herself, and with her, any memorials of her son.⁵⁵ Seneca represents her not only as a neglectful sister, but also as a mother who is prematurely mourning her surviving children and grandchildren.⁵⁶ The issues of will and choice are again central here. At this juncture, Seneca renders Octavia as more active and autonomous, but does so to her detriment. This active stance aligns with Seneca's belief system, informed by Stoic voluntarism: thus, the problem lies in Octavia's choice in how she manages her emotions.⁵⁷ Seneca's own doctrine informs the way he thinks Octavia should behave. In this context, Octavia's bodily response to Virgil's recital of *Aeneid* 6, recorded by Suetonius by way of Donatus, would thus not be entirely relevant. For, her swoon could be interpreted as a "pre-emotion" in the Stoic view, classified as

⁵⁴ Ziogas (2017) 452-453.

⁵⁵ Ziogas (2017) 452-453 likens Octavia to the "fury Allecto or the frenzied Amata," and observes that Octavia's mourning turns her in a ghost as well, which gives rise to various connections to the underworld; Seneca "may have exaggerated Octavia's grief for his own purposes," namely, consoling Marcia with Octavia's negative *exemplum*.

⁵⁶ A stark contrast with her regular reputation for supervising her household in childrearing and education, although little is known about Octavia's activity between 23 B.C.E and her death.

⁵⁷ On "will" and *voluntas* in Seneca, see Inwood (2005) 132-165; *velle* often emerges as the operating word for practicing self-command; *Ep.* 34.3, 71.36, and 99.15-21 illustrate this doctrine particularly well. See Reydam-Schils (2023) 66 for a recent overview of Seneca's "language of the will" and the agency associated with emotions.

an “involuntary psychosomatic reaction,” which therefore warrants a different type of response and management.⁵⁸

While her fabled swoon may thus not count as a direct obstruction to Marcellus’ commemoration (even if she has been reported to have disrupted Virgil’s recital), her overall attitude did, according to Seneca. In his account, Octavia suppresses any literary endeavours presented to commemorate Marcellus. Commemoration was an important duty of the bereaved, and Shelton (1995) and Tutrone (2023) 74-75 read Octavia thus as a hindrance to Marcellus’ memory. Seneca suggests that, if not for Octavia, there would have been more elegies of this subject, in addition to *Aeneid* 6 and Propertius 3.18. This hypothesis may be true: Plutarch, in *Publ.* 17, records the existence of a letter or book composed by a certain Stoic Philosopher Athenodorus of Tarsus for Octavia, which is no longer extant. In this theory, more works may have been subjected to this fate.⁵⁹ Mayer follows Bowersock⁶⁰ in supposing that the book in question may have been “a consolatory essay upon the death of Marcellus.” Seneca does not mention or seem to know any such particulars, given the absence of such an attempt by his Stoic colleague. By contrast, in *Marc.* 4.2, Seneca does mention that Livia benefited from the guidance of court philosopher Areus of Alexandria, who was imperative for healing from her grief.⁶¹ It is unclear if Octavia was similarly offered Areus’ assistance. Including Livia’s successful healing under the Stoic Areus as he did, which thus demonstrated the effectiveness of his philosophy, would certainly not have hurt Seneca’s agenda in the composition of his didactic *Consolatio* and its specific philosophical school. In other words, one wonders if Seneca did not include the example of Athenodorus or a possible interaction with Areus because neither was able to benefit Octavia and thus Seneca’s *Consolatio* for Marcia. She will remain an Octavia for as long as she does not adjust her behaviour to that of a Livia, so Seneca warns in *Marc.* 3.3. This gap may be an example of rhetorical skill on Seneca’s part: it may express his understanding of when and where to remain silent in order

⁵⁸ See Ziogas (2017) 452 on this point.

⁵⁹ See Ker (2009) 95 n. 30; Wilson (2013) 106 n. 26 also notes the possible existence of “an otherwise lost literary consolation to Livia composed by Arius Didymus.” See also Hope (2020) 294 n. 70.

⁶⁰ See Mayer (2024) 300 and Bowersock (1965) 34.

⁶¹ *Marc.* 4.2. See Shelton (1995) 177-180 and Tutrone (2024) 85-86.

to push forth his persuasive agenda.⁶² For, Seneca appears to be selective in offering parallels between the two women. Here, he only offers a one-sided story of successful therapeutic philosophy thanks to Areus without mentioning a direct parallel for Octavia. Elsewhere in the *Consolatio*, however, he does opt for explicit juxtapositions. Consider *Marc.* 3.3, where Seneca urges Marcia to make a choice (*elige itaque...*). Right before this exhortation, in *Marc.* 3.2, he presents Livia as a correct model of commemoration, crucial in the proper treatment of the dead, as discussed above. Here, after deeming the funeral as a demarcation of the end of her grief—unlike Octavia’s incessant mourning—Seneca’s Livia remains relentless in preserving Drusus’ memory, regardless of her own sorrows.⁶³ This continuous commemoration is reminiscent of the tradition associated with Cornelia of the Gracchi, who is remembered in similar terms and appears as such in *Marc.* 16.3-4, as discussed above.⁶⁴ Octavia, by contrast, reappears as the deterrent exemplar that Marcia risks becoming unless she follows the therapeutic path recommended by Seneca.⁶⁵ Seneca thus warns Marcia in the future tense, as he models Marcia’s path after the parallels of Octavia’s past, which

⁶² Indeed, Wilson (2013) 114-115 identifies the consolatory genre, in its vulnerability, as a particularly suitable space for veiled political statements.

⁶³ *Marc.* 3.2: *Non desitit denique Drusi sui celebrare nomen, ubique illum sibi priuatim publiceque repraesentare, libentissime de illo loqui, de illo audire: cum memoria illius uixit, quam nemo potest retinere et frequentare qui illam tristem sibi reddidit.* (“She did not stop honouring Drusus’ name or displaying his image for him everywhere both privately and publicly and both speaking and hearing about him most willingly: she lived with his memory, which no one can retain or revisit who has rendered it saddening to oneself.”) See Tutrone (2023) 79 on this “instructive Stoic paradox.”

⁶⁴ In a later source, in *Gracch.* 40 (19), Plutarch focuses especially on Cornelia’s magnanimity in speaking of her sons without any visible grief or lamentation.

⁶⁵ *Marc.* 3.3: *Si illud prius sequi uis, eximes te numero uiuorum; auersaberis et alienos liberos et tuos ipsumque quem desideras; triste matribus omen occurreris; uoluptates honestas, permissas, tamquam parum decoras fortunae tuae reicies; inuisa haerebis in luce et aetati tuae, quod non praecipitet te quam primum et finiat, infestissima eris; quod turpissimum alienissimumque est animo tuo in meliorem noto partem, ostendes te uiuere nolle, mori non posse.* (“If you wish to follow the former example, you will remove yourself from the number of the living; you will drive away the children of others and your own and even the one child whom you are now missing; you will present yourself as a sorrowful omen to mothers; you will reject honourable, permitted pleasures, as if little becoming for someone of your fortune; you will cling to the light, hateful to you, and you will be most hostile to your age, because it will not soon be the downfall and the end of you; because I note the better part of what is most shameful and incongruous for your character, you will demonstrate that you do not want to live and that you cannot die.”) See Shelton (1995) 185-186 on Seneca’s aspirational contrast between the past and present Marcia.

functions as a cautionary tale for Marcia. In short, Seneca's cunning rhetoric includes and omits wherever the means are best served. At some moments, his consolation strategy calls for juxtaposing Octavia and Livia; at others, the picture is decidedly more one-sided. In the final part of this article, another possibility of pairing Livia and Octavia will be considered.

The Pseudo-Ovidian counterpart: *Epicedion Drusi* or *Consolatio ad Liviam*

Regardless of Seneca's agenda and motivations, the fact remains that Livia and Octavia exist in this *synkrisis*, in which Livia is depicted as morally superior. Remarkably, the topic of the propriety of their mourning does not only occur in Seneca's *Ad Marciam*: a tantalising piece handed down in the *Appendix Ovidiana*—the *Epicedion Drusi* or *Consolatio ad Liviam*—presents a similar juxtaposition yet with a different outcome as Octavia emerges as a model or at least precedent in mourning for Livia.⁶⁶ The text itself exhibits numerous similarities to the Senecan *consolationes* (especially *Epic. Drusi.* 441).⁶⁷ As with Seneca's address to Marcia in the *Ad Marciam*, the narrative voice directly salutes Livia, attempting to console her in light of her loss of her son

⁶⁶ The date of this text has been disputed: see Schrijvers (1988) 383, Schlegelmilch (2005) 165-178 (who notes the similarities between this *consolatio* and *Tristia* 4.2 and Seneca's *Dial.* 6 and therefore proposes a date from 33 until 38 C.E.), Jenkins (2009) 1-2, 18 n. 5 (on its dramatic date of 9 B.C.E and its likely composition under Tiberius), Peirano (2012) 208-214 (who concludes that "the suspicious resemblance to Ovid's late poetry, written after his exile in AD 8"; the resemblance ignites the "authenticity debate."), Ursini (2014) 116 n. 4 believes in a date note before 13 C.E. and notes similarities with Seneca. Heyworth (2020) 241 provides a most helpful overview of different theories of dates and authorship of the *Consolatio* and concludes: "the *Consolatio ad Liviam* has a notional date of c. 8 B.C.E. Despite the profusion of references to individuals who are prominent in subsequent decades, nothing has been found that conflicts with the notional date, whereas the positive handling of Julia and the fleeting mention of Drusus' children argue against significantly later publication; and Tiberius' retirement to Rhodes in 6 BC sets an early limit" (233). See also Pfuntner, Hexter, and Haynes (2020) 390-424 and 494-500.

⁶⁷ Mountford (2019) 11-17 examines the *consolatio* mainly to depict Maecenas as Livia's consoler. For the similarities, see Jenkins (2009) 3-4, 7, e.g., on the death of Drusus and the importance of the funeral, its description as *funus simillimum triumpho*, and the resemblance to an *adventus*. The piece in general shows several similarities with, e.g. *Odes* 3.14, Horace's personalised account of Augustus' *adventus* from the Cantabrian campaigns, in which Marcellus also participated.

Drusus the Elder.⁶⁸ This individual employs the customary tropes, which are also present in *Ad Marciam* (Drusus' military merits, the preciousness of life and how it ought to be used, and a limit imposed on mourning so as to return to one's duties).⁶⁹ While the direct address between son and mother is to be expected, in the case of Livia, the narrative voice assumes a considerable, even surprising, level of familiarity with the imperial consort. Moreover, herein lies not the only difference: while Seneca hails Livia and Octavia as indirect exemplars to instruct Marcia, the narrative voice here directly advises and exhorts Livia, the grieving mother, in an at times boldly corrective manner.

The first verse immediately addresses Livia's partial loss of her title of 'mater' (for she still is mother to Tiberius, as the *consolatio* repeatedly reminds her). The entire piece focuses on nomenclature and transformed family dynamics with its recurring references to *mater* and its variants (often in connection with *luctus*).⁷⁰ The *consolatio* is remarkably repetitive in its sentiments, which may be characteristic of its didactic tone and purpose. Similarly, the *consolatio* includes various calls to action at Livia's address. Indeed, within the first ten lines (ll. 7-8), the narrator reminds the emperor's consort that there exists a certain propriety in mourning and that emotions ought to be checked.⁷¹ Thus, a different picture of Seneca's staunch Livia emerges: one who is almost unable to bear her grief and to carry on without repetitiveness or without the help of her kinsmen.⁷² Consoling and restoring Livia to her

⁶⁸ Jenkins (2009) 10 notes that this author seems to have hailed from the *Ordo* of the *equites*.

⁶⁹ For the corresponding tropes in *Marc.*, see Tutrone (2023) 75-77.

⁷⁰ *Epic. Drusi* 1-6: *Visa diu felix, 'mater' modo dicta "Neronum," / Iam tibi dimidium nominis huius abest; / Iam legis in Drusum miserabile, Livia, carmen, / Unum qui dicat iam tibi 'mater' habes, / Nec tua te pietas distendit amore duorum, / Nec posito filii nomine dicis 'uter.'* ("For long, you seemed fortunate, as you were just called 'mother of the Neros.' Now half of this title is missing for you; now you are reading a sad poem for Drusus, Livia, as you now only has one person who call you 'mother'; neither does your piety distract from your love of the two; nor, when the name of your son is mentioned, do you inquire 'which one.'") The text is that of the *LCL*; the provided translations below are my own.

⁷¹ "*Et quisquam leges audet tibi dicere flendi? / Et quisquam lacrimas temperat ore tuas?"* (*Epic. Drusi* 7-8).

⁷² Markus (2004) 127 already notes the stark difference between this depiction of Livia (negatively portrayed as another Niobe) and that of Seneca the Younger: this Livia's *luctus publicus* is dramatic and excessive, rather resembling Seneca's emotional Octavia. See also Purcell (1986) for the importance of Livia in Rome especially around Drusus' funeral.

previous activity are thus the principal aims of the work, with her and Drusus (and to a lesser extent Tiberius) as the central figures.

The *Consolatio* is remarkable in itself as it, as Jenkins (2009) reminds us, is the only instance in which the author imagines a speech of Livia's. In line with Livia's other poetic appearances in Horace's *Odes* 3.14 or Ovid's *Fasti* 6.638, her speech here "[mixes] ... the feminine with the political," according to Jenkins.⁷³ In other words, here we are granted a glimpse of what a *consolatio* might be without the Stoic framework that supports Seneca's *Ad Marciam*. That is not to say that philosophical influences are entirely absent: certain moments may strike the reader as positively Lucretian.⁷⁴ The *Consolatio* cannot, however, offer an entirely unbiased view. The speaker's attitude veers towards panegyric overall, even if one wonders about the sincerity of the poetic voice: the praise about the abundance of her offspring (ll. 81-2) seems misplaced.⁷⁵ While this *Consolatio* is unable to provide a definitive answer regarding Seneca's manipulations in the *Ad Marciam*, juxtaposing the two pieces does offer a fuller picture of the genre and the employment of Livia and Octavia as instructive exemplars.

Livia is, as opposed to the approach in Seneca's *Consolatio*, not directly paired with Octavia. By contrast, Octavia is in fact hailed as a precedent (and, might one venture as far as to say, exemplar) for her sister-in-law.⁷⁶ During Octavia's first appearance, the speaker points out that the Augustan *domus* is all too familiar with loss and grief.⁷⁷ Livia might thus turn to her own household for fortitude and motivation in the face of this particularly public loss, one that extends beyond Augustus and his family as it also touches his subjects.⁷⁸ Indeed, this first appearance

⁷³ See Jenkins (2009) 12.

⁷⁴ She questions *hic pietatis honos* (line 133), as the gods seem to have abandoned her by bereaving her of her son; see Jenkins (2009) 12.

⁷⁵ See Jenkins (2009) 13, 17 on this recurring theme of 'fertility and fecundity' and a two-fold solution.

⁷⁶ See *Epic. Drusi.* 59-76 (Witlox (1934) 43-46; and Schoonhoven (1992) 105, *Epic. Drusi.* 299-300 (Witlox 1934: 111 on the presence of Antonia Minor), and *Epic. Drusi.* 441-444 (Witlox (1934) 151, Schoonhoven (1992) 195).

⁷⁷ "*Caesaris adde domum, quae certe, funeris experts, / Debit humanis altior esse malis.*" (*Epic. Drusi.* 60-1).

⁷⁸ "*Ille vigil, summa sacer ipse locatus in arce, / Res hominum ex tuto cernere dignus erat, / Nec fleri ipse suis nec quemquam flere suorum / Nec, quae nos patimur vulgus, et ipse pati; / Vidimus erepta maerentem stirpe sororis: / Luctus, ut in Druso, publicus ille fuit; / Condidit Agrippam quo te, Marcelle, sepulcro, / Et cepit generos iam locus ille duos; / Vix posito Agrippa tumuli bene ianua clausa est, / Percipit officium funeris ecce soror.*" (*Epic. Drusi.*)

of Octavia coincides with the public nature of her brother's grief by which her own mourning is implied. The plural subject of *patimur* and *vidimus* with *vulgus*⁷⁹ in apposition turns her lament into a spectacle, not uncommon for public occasions during the principate. When Octavia appears explicitly, she is no longer her son's mourner but is now the one who receives extraordinary funerary rites for a woman of her time. In the beginning of the *consolatio*, Augustus is the exemplar who gracefully bears his numerous sorrows.⁸⁰ Towards the end of the *consolatio*, the Augustan *domus* replaces the Homeric catalogue of mourning precedents (ll. 419-440). The speaker offers more relevant figures to emulate, who are again Livia's own family members:

*Prisca quid huc repeto? Marcellum Octavia fleuit
Et fleuit populo Caesar utrumque palam.
(Epic. Drusi. 441-442)*

Why do I repeat ancient (i.e., mythical) stories here?
Octavia wept for Marcellus,
and Caesar wept for them both openly in front of the people.

This rhetorical question strikes a similar chord to that of the opening of Seneca's section on Livia and Octavia: he uses these two examples

61-70) "He himself, our guardian, set consecrated on top of the citadel, was deserving to overlook the matters of humankind from a safe place, and not to be wept for by his family members, nor to weep for any of his own family, or to endure himself what we, the *plebs*, endure: we have seen him mourning for his sister's offspring snatched away: that grief, as in Drusus' case, was shared publicly; he buried Agrippa, and in the same tomb as you, Marcellus, and that place already contained his two sons-in-laws; barely was the door of the tomb entirely closed when Agrippa was laid to rest, when—behold—his sister [already] receives her own funerary service."

⁷⁹ A sentiment echoed in *Epic. Drusi*. 203: *omnis adest aetas, maerent iuuenesque senesque*. For the speaker's relation to the *Publikum*, see Schlegelmilch (2005) 153-154.

⁸⁰ One might compare this depiction with Augustus' appearance in Sen. *Polyb.* 15.3: *Divus Augustus amisit Octaviam sororem carissimam et ne ei quidem rerum natura lugendi necessitatem abstulit, cui caelum destinaverat, immo vero idem omni genere orbitatis vexatus sororis filium successioni praeeparatum suae perdidit; denique ne singulos eius luctus enumerem, et generos ille amisit et liberos et nepotes, ac nemo magis ex omnibus mortalibus hominem esse se, dum inter homines erat, sensit.* ("Divine Augustus lost his most dear sister Octavia and nature did not even remove the necessity of mourning for him, who had been destined for heaven, for indeed having been vexed by every kind of bereavement, he lost his sister's son who had been prepared for his succession; in short, lest I list every one of his losses in detail, he lost his son-in-law, his children, and his grandchildren, no one felt more that he was a man among mortals, while he lived among men.") See Russo (2024) 73 n. 53 on the passage.

because they are the leading ladies from the same generation as that of Marcia, above. Yet, the speaker's exemplars are even more intimately known to Livia, which may complicate the effectiveness of the examples provided. Even so, the speaker justifies this choice by stressing the timeliness and actuality of the examples offered. This comment ought to be read in light of the tradition of exemplarity and its didactic function. This self-reflexive question thus connects these two texts further, as both Seneca and pseudo-Ovid are preoccupied with finding the most suitable and effective examples for their addressees. Moreover, as this *repeto* construction recalls *referam* in *Epic. Drusi*. 299-300,⁸¹ the two passages become connected and gently assert Octavia's status as the mother of Antonia. Drusus' mourning wife herself exhibits model behaviour, as the poetic voice informs her, and could therefore be read as a third figure in the constellation of mourning exemplars.⁸² What stands out in Octavia's appearances is that her mourning is nowhere perceived as negative or excessive; this representation is a considerable difference from Seneca's assessment. Her mode of mourning is neutral and appropriate with a hint of exemplarity, as the narrator summons her as a precedent twice in the work. After Octavia's final appearance in the *Ad Liviam*, a soon to be cured Livia is now called to public action.

Conclusions

In short, this article has juxtaposed the source tradition on Marcellus' death as well as the Senecan and pseudo-Ovidian *Consolationes*. It may leave one to wonder why Seneca seems to diverge from the other sources in presenting Octavia in such a negative light. Ziogas (2017) 452 rightly posits that "Seneca has his own agenda, namely, to console Marcia for the death of her son, and most likely exaggerates Octavia's grief for his own purposes," but believes that "we can hardly dismiss this passage as his invention," since "Seneca must have relied on a tradition about Octavia's excessive grief in order to maximize the effect of his *exemplum*." Here, like Hope (2020), I disagree. The lack of other sources may point towards Seneca's invention for his didactic

⁸¹ See Witlox (1934) 111 and Peirano (2012) 234-236 for the exemplary function that Antonia, just like her mother Octavia, performs. Ficca (2014) 141 examines the myths that feature in the *Consolatio* and notes the powerful effect of this near-realistic and near-contemporaneous appearance of Octavia and the evocation of Marcellus' death.

⁸² For Antonia in the *Consolatio* (and as *princeps*), see Jenkins (2009) 5, 15-16.

purposes, as Tutrone (2023) believes. Seneca's reproach complicates the generally spotless reputation of Octavia and diverges in its tone and assessment, where his account of Marcellus' merit and promise is consistent by contrast. And what is one to make of the following tradition of Marcellus' aftermath? Tacitus (*Ann.* 4.44.6-16), Plutarch (*Marc.* 30.6), and Suetonius (*Aug.* 63.1) record that Octavia was involved in re-arranging the dynastic links: depending on the source, she agrees to or persuades to arrange a re-marriage between Agrippa—her son-in-law through Marcella the Elder—and Julia—the late Marcellus' widow. And, perhaps most importantly, Octavia still receives a state funeral. Her suggested misconduct appeared not to have been grave enough for her brother to banish her to the margins upon her death—he might have been capable of such a deed, as he was less forgiving in response to the transgressions of his daughter and granddaughter. Moreover, as already mentioned, Seneca specifically singles Livia out as Marcia's friend. The assessment may then not be entirely objective because of possible favouritism at play and indeed may have made the *exemplum* more effective.⁸³ It would also have been plausible that Seneca is treading more carefully around the topic of Marcia's friend and the *femina princeps* for diplomatic reasons, as, for instance, Jenkins 2009 and Wilson 2013 suggest. Indeed, one wonders whether Seneca would have chosen the same side if it had not been Livia's offspring who succeeded her husband.⁸⁴ The possibility of a Tiberian or Gaian date of composition also complicates this delicate topic, as underlying political and historical motivations may be at play here. For, even if Livia may have died decades earlier, Seneca would still have to uphold a certain decorum in speaking of the mother of the emperor or the latter's successor. It therefore would have been safer to cast Octavia in this unfortunate role. More specifically, praising Livia may moreover function as implicit praise for her great-grandson Gaius, who lived in her household and delivered her *laudatio funebris*, which thus served to preserve her memory properly, in contrast to the obstructive behaviour of Octavia in Seneca's portrayal.⁸⁵ Lastly, while very few sourc-

⁸³ See Shelton (1995) 170, 177-178 for the friendship between Marcia and Livia, the former's "model-mentor-guardian."

⁸⁴ See Gloyn (2017) 27 and 144-145 on the emphasis on Livia as Claudian and Octavia as Julian, which thus has dynastic implications.

⁸⁵ Both reviewers encouraged further exploration of Gaius' relation to Livia and especially his delivery of his *laudatio funebris* for his great-grandmother; Tutrone

es featuring Octavia may have survived postdating Marcellus' death, various works and poems eulogising his death are extant. While one could argue that there would have been more material if not for Octavia's alleged suppression of these works, there is no dearth of poetry as it is. Because of the reasons above, one might conclude the following as to what Octavia has ever done to Seneca: nothing in particular. Instead, her figure, regardless of the "veracity" (Hope (2020) 284) and unretrievable truth of her behaviour and deeds, may have served as a helpful didactic tool on how not to behave, in a way akin to that of her *quondam* husband Mark Antony in Plutarch's *The Life of Antony*.⁸⁶ It is in this capacity that she appears and functions in the parallel *Consolationes* examined in this article, in which she becomes a lesson to heed and an exemplar to consider. For all its effectiveness as a didactic tool, however, Seneca's depiction of Octavia would later be transformed in Renaissance drama, where Octavia emphatically becomes Cleopatra's foil, now reimagined as a positive, neo-Stoic exemplar.⁸⁷ Thus, it was Seneca's model of exemplary polarity that remained constant, just like the consolatory precepts he espoused.

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(2023) 5 interprets Gaius' general absence as "*adulatio ex silentio*" and offers a helpful summary of the relationship between Livia and Gaius: "It was Gaius who delivered Livia's funeral oration from the rostra when Tiberius – who clearly regarded his mother's presence as cumbersome – refused to pay his last respects to the dowager empress (Tacitus *Ann.* 5.1–2). After Agrippina's banishment the young Caligula lived with Livia (*in Liviae Augustae proaviae suae contubernio mansit*, Suet. *Cal.* 10.1), and after Tiberius' death he ensured the payment of all the bequests requested by the Augusta – which Tiberius had annulled (D.C. 59.2.4)" (Tutrone 2023: 71–2). See also Wilcox (2008) for Gaius/Caligula as "Nature's monster" and a paradoxical exemplar in Seneca's moral epistemology; interestingly, Wilcox (2008) 457 considers Gaius in *Polyb.* 17.3–6, where he appears as a negative exemplar of inconsistency in the face of losing his sister Drusilla, thus leaning closer to Octavia's representation in *Marc.*

⁸⁶ See, e.g., Duff (1999) and (2004) for the "deterrent" function of this *Life*.

⁸⁷ See Bruce (2009) for Octavia's metamorphosis as a neo-Stoic exemplar of constancy in Renaissance closet drama, as well as in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*.

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