

SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

Shakespearian Consolations

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I

*sunt verba et voces, quibus hunc lenire dolorem
possis et magnam morbi deponere partem.*¹

Honest plain words best pierce the ear of grief.²

OF ALL THE GENRES which came down from classical antiquity to the Renaissance, the *consolatio* had the greatest relevance to everyday life. The common experiences of human suffering and loss make us all at one time or another either consolers or consoled. In such times of need men and women in the period between Plato and Kant (at least) could turn to a literary form occupying that ever-fruitful ground between philosophy and rhetoric, intended specifically to help the sufferer come to terms with grief. In his *Tusculan Disputations*, the most comprehensive treatment of everything to do with grief, loss, death, and consolation to have survived from antiquity, Cicero could list seven types of consolation practised by Greek writers:

there are definite words of comfort habitually used in dealing with poverty,
. . . with a life spent without obtaining office and fame, . . . with exile, ruin

For Kenneth Muir.

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¹ Horace, *Epistles*, 1.1.34: 'There are spells and sayings whereby you may soothe the pain and cast much of the malady aside', tr. H. R. Fairclough, Horace: *Satires, Epistles and Ars Poetica*, Loeb Classical Library (rev. ed., London 1929). Where possible I have used the Loeb translations.

² *Love's Labour's Lost*, 5.2.763. All Shakespeare quotations follow the line-numbering of the Riverside edition by G. Blakemore Evans (Boston, 1974), but not always its text.

of country, slavery, infirmity, blindness, every accident upon which the term disaster [*calamitas*] can be fixed. (3.34.81)³

Such *scholae*, as Cicero called them, usually had to be composed quickly, for a specific occasion, and adapted to the situation of the addressee. By the time Erasmus came to write his influential treatise *De conscribendis epistolis* in 1522 he could enlarge that list considerably:

Now although consolation is reserved above all for cases of bereavement and exile, one may devise other themes on diverse matters that bring distress, such as bodily disease, poor or uncertain health, old age, an ill-omened marriage that it is useless to regret, the monastic order, the priesthood (or any other way of life of which the person committed to it is becoming weary), family misfortune, inferior social standing, irksome poverty, unpopularity, the loss of property through some mischance, services rendered to an ungrateful person, children who dishonour their parents by a wicked life, plague, war, and countless other things.⁴

While there is more than a touch of display in that list, assuring a plentiful *copia verborum*, it shows that the *consolatio* can always be adapted to new historical and social conditions. Whoever composes one in our time could no doubt add several new topics.

The *consolatio* was not a major genre, but it spread remarkably widely, and its full importance has not yet been recognized. The classical period has been best treated,⁵ as one would expect, and there have been notable contributions to its understanding in the patristic writers,⁶ the Middle

³ *Tusculan Disputations*, tr. J. E. King, Loeb Classical Library (2nd, rev. ed., London, 1945). Hereafter abbreviated as *Tusc.D.*

⁴ 'On the Writing of Letters', tr. Charles Fantazzi in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, Vols. 25 and 26 (*Literary and Educational Writings* 3 and 4), ed. J. K. Sowards (Toronto, 1985), consecutively paginated: Vol. 25, pp. 155–6. Hereafter abbreviated as *CWE*.

⁵ Older studies which still prove useful are Carolus Buresch, 'Consolationum a Graecis Romanisque scriptarum historia critica', *Leipziger Studien zur classischen Philologie* 9 (1886): 1–170, and Constant Martha, *Etudes morales sur l'antiquité* (3rd ed., Paris, 1896), esp. pp. 135–89, 'Les consolations dans l'antiquité'. The best modern survey is Rudolf Kassel, *Untersuchungen zur griechischen und römischen Konsolationsliteratur* (Munich, 1958).

⁶ On the patristic *consolatio* see Charles Favez, *La consolation latine chrétienne* (Paris, 1937); Sister Mary Melchior Beyenka, *Consolation in Saint Augustine* (Washington, DC, 1950); Pierre Fabre, *St. Paulin de Nole et l'amitié chrétienne* (Paris, 1949); J. Duhr, 'Une lettre de condoléance de Bachiarius (?)', *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 47 (1952): 530–85; Jane F. Mitchell, 'Consolatory letters in Basil and Gregory Nazianzen', *Hermes* 96 (1968): 299–318; Robert C. Gregg, *Consolation Philosophy. Greek and Christian 'Paideia' in Basil and the Two Gregories* (Philadelphia, 1975); and J. H. D. Scourfield, *Consoling Heliodorus. A Commentary on Jerome, 'Letter' 60* (Oxford, 1993). These last two works offer the best discussion of the genre in English.

Ages⁷ and Renaissance.⁸ Its specific relevance to literary works has been less well recognized,⁹ and its significance in Shakespeare has been only patchily registered.¹⁰ One problem, simultaneously an advantage to users and an obstacle to historians, has been its flexibility as a collection of *topoi*, consolatory arguments that can be deployed as the occasion demands, but lacking any definite form. Some commentators bemoan this fact, others simply accept it and organize their own treatment accordingly, reconstituting, as it were, the source material from which writers began.¹¹

This lack of definite form means that the *consolatio* has proved hard to distinguish from other genres. The most important type of consolation (not explicitly mentioned by Cicero, perhaps because he recognized it as the central form from which all others descended) was the *consolatio mortis*. The earliest surviving genre to address the fundamental situation of consoling survivors for the loss of loved ones was the funeral speech, the

⁷ For the Middle Ages see the magisterial work of Peter von Moos, *Consolatio. Studien zur mittelalterlichen Trostliteratur über den Tod und zum Problem der christlichen Trauer*, 4 vols. (Munich, 1971). The first volume is the historical-analytical part, with documentation and further detailed discussion in the second volume following. The third consists of an invaluable anthology of classical and medieval texts, arranged according to an overall analysis of the genre's typical structure and arguments: would that such a tool were available for the Renaissance! Volume 4 includes extensive bibliographies and indices, offering the user all manner of help. See also his earlier essay 'Die Trostschrift des Vinzenz von Beauvais für Ludwig IX (Vorstudie zur Motiv- und Gattungsgeschichte der *consolatio*)', *Mittelalterliches Jahrbuch* 4 (1967): 173–217; and P. Albert Auer, O.S.B., *Johannes von Dambach und die Trostbücher vom 11. bis zum 16. Jahrhundert* (Münster i.W., 1928).

⁸ See, e.g., P. O. Kristeller, 'Francesco Bandini and his consolatory dialogue upon the death of Simone Gondi', in Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters* (Rome, 1956; 1969), pp. 411–35; and George W. McClure, *Sorrow and Consolation in Italian Humanism* (Princeton, NJ, 1991).

⁹ See, e.g., Sister Mary E. Fern, *The Latin Consolatio as a Literary Type* (Ph.D. Diss., St. Louis, Mo., 1941); Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, tr. W. R. Trask (Princeton, NJ, 1953), pp. 232–61, on Antoine de Sale's *Réconfort de Madame du Fresne* (c.1460); Michael H. Means, *The Consolatio Genre in Medieval English Literature* (Gainesville, Fla., 1972).

¹⁰ The best account is still Benjamin Boyce, 'The Stoic *Consolatio* and Shakespeare', *PMLA* 64 (1949): 771–80. Much less valuable is John L. Tison, Jr., 'Shakespeare's *Consolatio* for Exile', *Modern Language Quarterly* 21 (1960): 142–57. Other studies of specific plays will be mentioned below.

¹¹ See, e.g., O. Schantz, 'De incerti poetae Consolatione ad Liviam carminum consolatorium apud Graecos et Romanos historia', Ph.D.Diss., Universität Marburg, 1889, which defined six traditional *argumenta*: '*patientia et constantia; consolatio per exempla; mors mala solvit; memoriae decus; funerum magnificentia; immortalitas*' (p. 19); Sister Mary Evaristus, 'The Consolations of Death in Ancient Greek Literature', Ph.D. Diss., Catholic University of America, n.d. [c.1918]; J. Estève-Forriol, 'Die Trauer und Trostgedichte in der römischen Literatur untersucht nach ihrer Topik und ihrem Motivschatz', Ph.D. Diss., Universität München (1962), subject to the criticisms of P. von Moos (*op.cit.* in n. 7), Vol. 1, pp. 20–1.

logos epitaphios,¹² the great model being Pericles' funeral oration as reported by Thucydides (2.35–46). Many of the later essays in this genre were never actually delivered as speeches, but composed for reading, as in the orations of Isocrates, Dyo Chrysostom, Aelius Aristides and Libanius. In time rhetoricians developed a systematic treatment of the *logos epitaphios* and such related forms as the funeral song (*epikêdeion*), lamentation (*threnos*), and monody.¹³ All of these genres included three basic elements, treated in various proportions, a lament, an encomium of the virtues of the deceased, and the consolation proper. The *logos epitaphios* had a continuous tradition up to Shakespeare and beyond,¹⁴ while the related verse form of elegy (also *epicedium*) had a great revival in the Renaissance.¹⁵ These forms overlap with, but do not define the *consolatio* tradition. The *logos paramuthetikos* proper (the etymology implying to talk to, stand by someone, with the intention of relieving or soothing their suffering) should be defined as a personal communication addressed to a specific sufferer, usually named in the title, on the occasion of a recent misfortune. Many other factors are involved, as we shall see, but I agree with Father Auer that the *consolatio* is a work containing arguments of comfort in which the *consolator* is conceived of as being

¹² On the *logos epitaphios* see, e.g., Richmond Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs* (Urbana, Ill., 1942); George Kennedy, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece* (London, 1963), pp. 154–61; and Nicole Loraux, *The Invention of Athens. The Funeral Oration in the Classical City*, tr. A. Sheridan (Cambridge, Mass., 1986). On Roman funeral oratory see C. Martha, 'L'Eloge funèbre chez les Romains' (*op. cit.* in n. 5), pp. 1–59; M. Durry, 'Laudatio funebris et rhétorique', *Revue de philologie* 16 (1942): 105–14; and W. Kierdorf, *Laudatio funebris: Interpretationen und Untersuchungen zur Entwicklung der römischen Leichenrede* (Meisenheim am Glan, 1980).

¹³ See, e.g., Joachim Soffel, *Die Regeln Menanders für die Leichenrede* (Meisenheim am Glan, 1974); and *Menander Rhetor*, ed. and tr. D. A. Russell and N. G. Wilson (Oxford, 1981), 161–5, 171–9, 201–7, with the notes and literature cited.

¹⁴ On patristic funeral oratory see Gregg (*op. cit.* in n. 6); Scourfield (*op. cit.* in n. 6), pp. 26–31; and *Funeral Orations of Saint Gregory Nazianzen and Saint Ambrose*, tr. L. P. McCauley *et al.*, with an introduction by Martin R. P. McGuire (Washington, DC, 1953). For the medieval period see von Moos (*op. cit.* in n. 7), and for the Renaissance see John McManamon, *Funeral Oratory and the Cultural Ideals of Italian Humanism* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1989), and V. L. Saulnier, 'L'oraison funèbre au XVI^e siècle', *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et de Renaissance* 10 (1948): 124–55, an admirably documented survey.

¹⁵ On the elegy see Leicester Bradner, *Musae Anglicanae: A History of Anglo-Latin Poetry 1500–1925* (New York, 1940); Ruth Wallerstein, 'The Laureate Hearse: The Funeral Elegy and Seventeenth-Century Aesthetic', in Wallerstein, *Studies in Seventeenth-Century Poetic* (Madison, Wis., 1950), pp. 1–148, with a collection of texts, pp. 345–70; A. L. Bennett, 'The Principal Rhetorical Conventions in the Renaissance Personal Elegy', *Studies in Philology* 51 (1954): 107–26; G. W. Pigman III, *Grief and English Renaissance Elegy* (Cambridge, 1985); and J. W. Binns, *The Intellectual Culture in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. The Latin Writings of the Age* (Leeds, 1990).

present to the *consolandus*, either in person (in a dialogue) or in letter form.¹⁶

If we end up defining the form of the *consolatio* according to its situation, any attempt to define its content will have an equally indirect outcome. Since the *consolatio mortis* was the most frequently used form, many writers felt themselves obliged to come to terms with the problem of death, discussing the nature of body and soul, the possibility of an after-life, and how it might be related to our behaviour in this world. If it led some writers to eschatology, all of them (at least in the classical period) found it natural to discuss misfortune in terms of both psychology and ethics. The emotions aroused by the person contemplating death or any other great loss include fear, hope, courage; the emotions produced in the person who has experienced the loss include grief and despair. Where modern therapists might regard loss and grieving as essentially psychological reactions, in the classical world they always had an ethical component. In that period a person dealing with such limit situations could imitate those modes of behaviour traditionally classified as virtues (courage, fortitude, patience, magnanimity), or else manifest their opposites. Further, both fear in advance and grief after the event involve value-systems: loss of money or worldly goods cannot be put in the same scale as the loss of a loved one, or freedom, or virtue.

The multiplicity of issues raised by the experience of loss means that the *consolatio* touches on, sometimes centrally, major issues within philosophy and thus inevitably reflects differences between philosophical schools. In the treatment of death, for instance, arguably the most important texts for later *consolatores* were Plato's *Phaedo* and *Apology*. In a much-quoted passage in the *Apology*¹⁷ (40c–41b) Socrates reasons that

Death is one of two things. Either it is annihilation, and the dead have no consciousness of anything, or, as we are told, it is really a change—a migration of the soul from this place to another. Now if there is no consciousness but only a dreamless sleep, death must be a marvellous gain. . . . If on the other hand death is a removal from here to some other place, and if what we are told is true, that all the dead are there, what greater blessing could there be than this, gentlemen?

Imagining the excitement of meeting the first poets, 'Orpheus and Musaeus, Hesiod and Homer', and of being able to question such heroes of epic and myth as Agamemnon, Odysseus, or Sisyphus, Socrates asks,

¹⁶ Auer (*op.cit.* in n. 7), pp. 260–1.

¹⁷ Quotations are from Plato, *The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New York, 1961). The *Apology* and *Phaedo* are translated by Hugh Tredennick, and the *Republic* by Benjamin Jowett.

'would that be an unrewarding journey?' Plato develops this inversion of values, where death is seen as a 'gain', more fully in the *Phaedo*, with its considered arguments for the immortality of the soul, the true life of the philosopher being one devoted to knowledge, despising pleasure, and an afterlife in which good and evil will be separated out between heaven and hell. The philosopher, in that famous formulation, is one who looks forward to death, 'rehearses' or 'practises' for it (*Phaedo*, 67d–e).

Quite the opposite view was held by the materialists, among them Democritus and Epicurus, who taught that the body and soul are both composed of matter which, after death, returns to the general flux out of which new bodies will be created. Democritus argued that death should not be feared because it brought an end to all sensation, an argument elaborated by Epicurus, one of whose main goals was to assuage 'the major disturbances in men's minds', particularly in regard to death and the afterlife. On these topics, he observed, people 'anticipate and foresee eternal suffering as depicted in the myths, or even fear the very lack of consciousness that comes with death as if this could be of concern to them'. And 'they suffer all this, not as a result of reasonable conjecture, but through some sort of unreasoning imagination; and since in imagination they set no limit to suffering, they are beset by turmoil . . .'. The way to achieve 'peace of mind' on this issue, Epicurus held, was to believe that

death is of no concern to us, since all good and evil lie in sensation and sensation ends with death. . . . Death, the most dreaded of evils, is therefore of no concern to us; for while we exist death is not present, and when death is present we no longer exist.

Whereas 'men in general sometimes flee death as the greatest of evils, sometimes long for it as a relief from the evils of life', the wise man 'neither renounces life nor fears its end'.¹⁸ Epicurus' rejection of death as a source of fear was given greater currency by Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, which argued in the famous passage concluding Book III that '*nil igitur mors est ad nos*'.¹⁹ But of course Epicurus was the object of fierce criticism by the Stoics and later eclectics, notably Cicero, Seneca, and Plutarch, who

¹⁸ See Democritus, fr.297 Diels-Kranz: 'Some men, not knowing about the dissolution of mortal nature, but acting on knowledge of the suffering in life, afflict the period of life with anxieties and fears, inventing false tales about the period after the end of life': tr. K. Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Oxford, 1948), p. 118; Epicurus, 'Letter to Herodotus', 81; 'Letter to Menoeceus', 124–125; also 'Principal Doctrines', II, X–XIV; 'Vatican Sayings', XXXI: in Epicurus, *Letters, Principal Doctrines, and Vatican Sayings*, tr. Russel M. Geer (Indianapolis, Ind., 1964), pp. 33, 54–5, 60–1, 68.

¹⁹ See *De rerum natura*, III. 830–1094, and Traudel Stork, '*Nil igitur mors est ad nos*. Der Schlussteil des dritten Lukrezbuches und sein Verhältnis zur Konsolationsliteratur', Ph.D. Diss., Universität Saarbrücken, 1970.

are also, as it happens, the three most important authors of surviving consolations, all of whom (some vacillations aside) shared the Platonic belief in the soul's immortality.

Next to eschatology, the other important divisions of philosophy on which the *consolatio* drew were ethics and psychology, dealing with the major emotions of fear and grief. Like all emotional states, philosophers taught, these could be experienced correctly or incorrectly. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*²⁰ Aristotle defines fear as 'the expectation of evil', and concedes that 'we fear all evils, e.g., disrepute, poverty, disease, friendlessness, death' (1115a 7ff). A courageous man will fear some of these, such as disrepute (since to do so is to manifest a 'sense of shame'), but not 'poverty or disease or generally any evil that does not spring from vice or is not due to oneself' (12ff). The great exception to that ethical scheme of responsibility for one's actions is death, which Aristotle agrees to be 'the most fearful thing of all . . . for it is the end, and once a man is dead it seems that there is no longer anything good or evil for him' (25ff). Yet even here an ethical response can be made. The 'courageous man' for Aristotle is not one without fear: 'he will fear what is fearful, but he will endure it in the right way and as reason directs for the sake of acting nobly: that is the end of virtue' (1115b 11ff).

In the Greco-Roman world, the experience of grief was closely linked with psychology. To simplify a complex issue,²¹ the great differences between philosophical schools on this issue derived from their conception of the soul. In general, systems which conceived the soul as having several parts could tolerate grief, while those based on a monistic notion of the soul had to outlaw it altogether. Plato's notion of a partitive soul, as outlined in Book Four of the *Republic*, divides it into rational and irrational parts, the latter being divided further into the irascible and the appetitive, the three parts properly existing in a state of balance (*Rep.*, 439c–444d; *Tusc.D.*, 1.10.20). But at times the irrational appetites could fight against each other, creating a 'civil war' in the soul, at which point reason, 'the ruling principle' should put down 'the revolt of one part against the whole' (440a, 444b). Plato evidently classifies grief as one of the lesser disturbances, as we see from Book Ten, where Socrates suggests that the 'good and reasonable man', experiencing the misfortune of 'the loss of a son or anything else that he holds most dear', will inevitably feel pain but will be 'moderate in his grief'. He may release his suffering when alone, but in public he will obey the 'reason and law' that 'declares . . . it

²⁰ I use *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. Martin Ostwald (Indianapolis, Ind., 1962).

²¹ For helpful commentary see J. M. Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 22–36, 256–72; Gregg (*op. cit.* in n. 6), ch. 3: 'The Problem of "Appropriate Grief"' (pp. 81–123).

best to keep quiet as far as possible in calamity'. Indulging our grief prevents reason from coming to our aid, which should make the soul 'devote itself at once to the curing of the hurt and the raising up of what has fallen, banishing threnody by therapy' (603c–604d). In Plato's thinking grief is never to be indulged, but its moderated expression is permitted (*Laws*, 5.732c, 7.800d; *Menex.*, 247c ff). Plato's linking of ethics and psychology helped establish two key attitudes in the *consolatio*, the opposition between *ratio* and *affectus*, and the concept of therapy silencing threnody.

Plato's partitive psychology was, however, rejected by the Old Stoa (Zeno, Cleanthes, Chrysippus), who equated the soul as a unit with reason, any other attributes being alien to it. Zeno therefore described *pathos* as 'an irrational and unnatural movement in the soul', while Chrysippus (as reported by Cicero) regarded *lupe* (distress) 'as being a dissolution of the whole man, which can be entirely rooted out when we have disentangled its cause' (*Tusc.D.*, 3.26.61). J. M. Rist has shown that the Stoics recognized three rational (and hence stable) dispositions of the soul, 'joy, wishfulness and a sense of precaution', so that the *apatheia* they recommended could never have endorsed a state of 'total impassivity' but was rather an attempt to eradicate the *pathe*, conceived of as 'pathological disturbances of the personality', or 'serious mental illnesses'.²² This enlightened modern view seems correct, but the fact is that the Older Stoics' *apatheia* was soon equated with 'insensibility' (*indolentia*), and attacked by both the Peripatetic and Platonist schools. Here again the three surviving authorities on the classical *consolatio*—Cicero, Seneca, Plutarch—all agreed with Plato, advocating a moderation of the emotions (*metriopatheia*).

Turning now to the *logos paramuthetikos* proper, we can observe the influence of eschatological, ethical and psychological themes on these texts, whether surviving or lost. The earliest philosophical consolation of which we have record is Aristotle's lost *Eudemus* (c.354 BC), a dialogue which immortalized the memory of his friend, killed in a battle. This early work was evidently close to Plato's *Phaedo*, for the Neo-Platonists used it alongside that dialogue as representing Plato's doctrine of the soul's immortality. As Werner Jaeger reconstructs it, Aristotle based his argument on Plato's concept of the soul living out this life in the chains of corporeality, like a fugitive in a foreign country longing to return home, death alone offering 'the peace and security of the heavenly plains'. As a consolation this work offered the only 'genuine comfort, . . . a living faith in that reversal of the values of life and death which Plato accomplished

²² Rist (*op. cit.* in n. 21), pp. 24–7.

in the *Phaedo*.²³ The Platonic Academy also produced works related to death and consolation. Plato's pupil Xenocrates, head of the Academy from 339 to 314 BC, wrote a work *On Death*, while his pupil Crantor (c.330–268 BC) wrote by all accounts the outstanding classical *consolatio*, the *Peri penthous (On Grief)*, an epistle to his friend Hippocles on the death of his children. Cicero described Crantor's treatise as a 'small, but golden book', and the quotations that he and other emulators (notably Plutarch) took from it help us to reconstruct some of its arguments.²⁴ It seems to have been less concerned with the immortality of the soul, more with the bereaved and how their sorrow should be treated, arguing the positive view of death as freeing us from the 'uncertain fortune' of human life (in Plutarch's transcript), including 'defectiveness of soul, diseases of body, loss of friends by death, and the common portion of mortals' (*Apol.* 104C). Crantor's treatise also included a vigorous refutation of Stoic *apatheia* and a justification of moderate grieving. The other famous work to have disappeared is the *Consolatio*²⁵ that Cicero wrote to himself after the death of his beloved daughter Tullia, in 45 BC. In the *Tusculans* Cicero wryly recorded how he had failed to emulate the Stoic *sapiens* in bearing adversity. Having summarized various philosophical remedies for grief, he writes that in his *Consolatio* 'I threw them all into one attempt at consolation; for my soul was in a feverish state and I attempted every means of curing its condition'. It was a book, he adds in the following day's discussion, 'which I composed (for I was no 'wise man') in the midst of mourning and grief', doing violence to his nature by trying to apply all possible medicines while still at the high point of suffering (*Tusc.D.*, 3.31.76; 4.29.63).

Although the *Consolatio* is lost, some of its substance has survived in the *Tusculan Disputations*,²⁶ which is not itself a *consolatio* but contains

²³ Aristotle. *Fundamentals of the History of His Development*, tr. Richard Robinson (2nd ed., Oxford, 1962), pp. 39–53. As we know from Cicero (*Tusc.D.*, 3.10.21; 5.9.25) Theophrastus (c.372–c.288 BC), Aristotle's pupil and successor as head of the Peripatetic school, wrote a work called *Callisthenes* or *On Bereavement*.

²⁴ Cicero, *Acad.* 2.44. For (largely unsuccessful) attempts to reconstruct Crantor's treatise see Buresch (*op. cit.* in n. 5), pp. 39–57, and Horst-Theodor Johann, *Trauer und Trost. Eine quellen- und strukturanalytische Untersuchung der philosophischen Trostschriften über den Tod* (Munich, 1968), subject to the criticisms of P. von Moos (*op. cit.* in n. 7), Vol. 1, pp. 21–2.

²⁵ For a useful survey of attempts to reconstruct this work see K. Kumaniecki, 'A propos de la "Consolatio" perdue de Cicéron', *Annales de la Faculté des lettres et sciences humaines d'Aix* 46 (1969): 369–402. The latest and best is by Claudio Vitelli, *M. Tulli Ciceronis Consolationis Fragmenta* (Florence, 1979).

²⁶ On the place of this work in the later *consolatio* tradition see Neil Hultin, 'The Rhetoric of Consolation: Studies in the Development of the *Consolatio Mortis*', Ph.D.Diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1965.

so many arguments and examples that anyone composing a *consolatio* (including, I think, Shakespeare) could use it as a source. This work, Cicero's major philosophical treatise, takes the form of discussions on five consecutive days at Tusculum, Cicero's villa, between the interlocutors M (*Marcus*, or *Magister*) and A (*Auditor*, or *Adolescens*). The most important parts for the *consolatio* tradition were Books One (on despising death) and Three (on the alleviation of distress), lesser use being made of Books Two (on enduring pain), Four (on the remaining disorders of the soul), and Five (on virtue as being sufficient for a happy life). Cicero's method is eclectic rather than systematic, bringing together arguments of varying weight and origin to urge that death is not an evil but a deliverance, a freeing of the soul for immortality. If Book One is largely Platonist, Book Three reflects later controversies, siding now with the Stoics now against them, drawing on Peripatetic arguments, and (mostly) refuting Epicurean ones. Although rejecting the extreme Stoic concept of *apatheia* Cicero describes the 'distress' (*aegritudo*, 'the idea of a serious present evil') felt by the bereaved in terms not greatly different from the notion of *pathos* as a disease (e.g., 3. 20.22–3), and devotes much attention to removing it (3.23.55–34.84). This long sequence, together with that of remedies for other psychological disturbances (4.27.58–38.84) made the *Tusculans* an invaluable handbook for consolers. Cicero's aim was to show 'how efficacious is the medicine applied by philosophy to the diseases of souls' (4.27.58), and in writing this book, he tells us in the final sentence, he has also performed a *consolatio sui*: 'I cannot readily say how much I shall benefit others; at any rate in my cruel sorrows and the various troubles which beset me from all sides no other consolation [*levatio*] could have been found' (5.4.121).

Cicero's letters, although not originally intended for publication, also contain examples of the *logos paramuthetikos*, such as the one to Titus in 46 BC consoling him on the loss of two sons, or the one that Servius Sulpicius Rufus wrote to Cicero in March 45 on the death of Tullia—two marvellous compositions, combining genuine sympathy with concise but effective arguments.²⁷ The epistle, naturally enough, was the form taken by the majority of surviving consolations. In classical, Christian, and indeed modern times a personal visit to the bereaved counts as the most effective form of consolation, but a personal letter can be an acceptable

²⁷ Cicero, *Epistulae ad Familiares*, V.16 (to Titus) and IV.5 (from Servius). See the excellent translation by D. R. Shackleton Bailey, *Cicero's Letters to his Friends*, 2 vols. (Harmondsworth, 1978), i.320–2, ii.15–18, with Cicero's reply of mid-April 45, IV.6 (ii.18–20).

substitute.²⁸ The consolations of Seneca, among the most influential examples of the form, were all letters, but the *epistula* has now grown to the size of a *libellus*, probably intended for publication. These were *De consolatione ad Marciam* (a woman still grieving three years after her son's death), *ad Polybium* (a state official, on the death of his brother), and *ad Helviam matrem* (Seneca's own mother, to console her for his exile on Corsica, written between AD 37 and 41).²⁹ In addition, several of the *Epistulae morales* addressed to Lucilius were *Consolationes*: no. 63 (on the death of Lucilius' friend Flaccus), 93 (on the death of the philosopher Metronax), and 99 (on the death of Seneca's friend Marullus).³⁰ The consolatory tradition in the Middle Ages and Renaissance drew on other Senecan epistles for discussions of such topics as death, fortitude, and tranquillity. Many other Latin works in this genre could be cited, but since my aim here is merely to introduce the works that Shakespeare is likely to have known, either in their original form or as absorbed into later versions of the *consolatio*, I shall pass them by. He could well have known the two examples of the genre included in Plutarch's *Moralia*, famous in antiquity and in the Renaissance, widely available in Latin (and in English after 1603, in Philemon Holland's translation), the *Consolatio ad uxorem* (on the death of their daughter), and the *Consolatio ad Apollonium* (on the death of a son), which is the most extensive and instructive classical document to survive.³¹

²⁸ On the primacy of a visit see Cicero, *Ad Fam.*, IV.5–6; Plutarch, *Ad Apollonium*, 101F–102A; Gustav Stählin, 'Trost und Tröster in der ausserbiblischen Antike', in Gerhard Friedrich (ed.) *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, Vol. 5 (Stuttgart, 1952), pp. 777–85, at 778–9, 780; Gregg (*op. cit.* in n. 6), p. 61; von Moos (*op. cit.* in n. 7), Vol. 1, pp. 58–9, 74.

²⁹ These three 'dialogues', as they used to be called (numbered in the older catalogues 6, 11, and 12) are translated by J. W. Basore in the Loeb edition of Seneca's *Moral Essays*, 3 vols. (London, 1932), Vol. ii, and are hereafter abbreviated as *Marc.*, *Pol.*, and *Helv.*. Of the large secondary literature see especially Hans-Herwarth Studnik, 'Die *Consolatio mortis* in Senecas Briefen', Ph.D. Diss., Universität Köln, 1958; Karlhans Abel, *Bauweisen in Senecas Dialogen* (Heidelberg, 1967); J. E. Atkinson, 'Seneca's "Consolatio ad Polybium"', *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, II.32.2, ed. W. Haase (Berlin, 1985): 860–84; additional literature in Scourfield (*op. cit.* in n. 6), p. 93 note.

³⁰ See the Loeb text, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, tr. R. M. Gummere, 3 vols. (London, 1925), hereafter abbreviated as *Ep.mor.*, and Hildegard Cancik, *Untersuchungen zu Senecas 'Epistulae morales'* (Hildesheim, 1967).

³¹ See Plutarch, *Moralia*, 101F–122A (*Ad Apollonium*) and 608B–612B (*Ad uxorem*), abbreviated as *Apol.* and *Ux.*: in the Loeb edition of the *Moralia* (15 vols.), respectively vols. 2 (tr. F. C. Babbitt, London, 1956) and 7 (tr. P. H. de Lacy and B. Einarson, London, 1959). The first of these treatises was formerly regarded as spurious, in part because of the unusually long quotations, but Babbitt defended its authenticity with the argument that it represents 'the original rough draft of the letter', in which Plutarch had recorded the full context of the quotations 'so that later the lines he might finally choose to insert could be

The last two classical works that Shakespeare may have known, since they were widely disseminated in the Renaissance, are both dialogues, of unknown authorship. The *Axiochus* was long attributed to Plato, but modern scholarship has dated it to the first century BC (somewhere between Crantor's *Peri penthous* and Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*), showing it to be an amalgam of Platonist, Orphic, and (anti-) Epicurean teachings.³² In it Axiochus, gravely ill and fearing death, is consoled by Socrates with a congeries of arguments put together, as Jacques Chevalier showed, in the manner of a rhetor, not a philosopher.³³ The topics included: that earthly life is only a sojourn in a foreign land; that the death of the body frees the soul for eternal life; that our existence here is full of pain and misery; that the soul's immortality is proved by the great undertakings of the human race, showing a divine spirit (*pneuma*) to be present in the soul; that the souls of the just have a life of joy, while the unjust pay for their misdeeds in a life of torment. Undistinguished and eclectic though it may be, the *Axiochus* had four different Latin translations in the Renaissance, was many times reprinted, and also appeared in French, Italian, Spanish, and English. Also popular, for equally obscure reasons, was a dialogue *De remediis fortuitorum*,³⁴ attributed to Seneca, in which *Sensus* delivers a series of laconic complaints ('Morieris'; 'Peregre morieris'; 'Iuvenis morieris'; 'Aegroto'), to which *Ratio* responds with a series of equally brief arguments. The extremely concise format of this work has been explained as being either an epitome of a longer work or the outline for a treatise yet to be written, but it seems more like a deliberate stylistic effect (and certainly affected Petrarch in that light, giving him the format for *De remediis utriusque fortunae*, in which the four Stoic passions, *Spes*, *Gaudium*, *Metus* and *Dolor* each present their complaints, which *Ratio* answers at great length). Jonson and Marston certainly used it; I am not convinced that Shakespeare did.

smoothly interwoven with the text' (*loc. cit.*, pp. 105–7). This hypothesis was accepted and confirmed in the helpfully annotated edition by Jean Hani, *Plutarque: Consolation à Apollonios* (Paris, 1972). The centrality of the *Ad Apollonium* to the *consolatio* tradition is shown by the fact that Rudolf Kassel (*op. cit.* in n. 5, pp. 49–98) selected it for detailed commentary as the norm text summing up virtually every *topos* used elsewhere.

³² See Jacques Chevalier, *Etude critique du dialogue pseudo-platonicien l'Axiochos* (Lyons, 1914; Paris, 1915), and the helpful text, translation and commentary, Pseudo-Plato, *Axiochus*, by Jackson P. Hershbell (Chico, CA, 1981). The earlier English translation by E. H. Blakeney (London, 1937) is still worth consulting.

³³ Chevalier, *op. cit.* in n. 33, pp. 17, 85, 132.

³⁴ See Ralph Graham Palmer, *Seneca's De Remediis Fortuitorum and the Elizabethans* (Chicago, 1953), which includes the text and Robert Whytinton's 1547 translation.

Although consolation played an important part in Biblical, patristic, medieval, and early humanist writings, I have found no evidence that Shakespeare used any of these traditions, and shall pass them over, moving on to the sixteenth century. Here all the classical *consolatio* texts, many of which had been lost during the Middle Ages, were available, some in commented editions, and many broken up and absorbed into florilegia or neo-Stoic treatises. Since the high mortality rate, especially with the ravages of epidemics in urban areas, meant that the need for consoling the sick and bereaved was as great as ever, handbooks appeared in large numbers. As Gunther Franz has shown,³⁵ one popular work, Huberinus' *Wie man den Sterbenden trösten und im zusprechen solle*, had 125 editions in a dozen languages between 1529 and 1579, being almost matched in popularity by the *Seelenarznei (Medicina animae)* of Urban Rhegius. These two Lutheran works, offering Christian consolation to the sick and dying, were republished together with Holbein's 'Dance of Death' (*Imagines mortis*) in many languages, with an enormous dissemination. In Tudor England, similarly, according to one recent study, there were over seventy books of consolation in circulation,³⁶ presumably not including genres which touch on the *consolatio*, such as *ars moriendi* treatises. While there seem to be fewer dialogues in the sixteenth than in the fifteenth century, one can point to examples both Christian, such as Thomas More's *A Dialogue of Comfort agaynst tribulacion* (1534), and neo-Stoic, such as Lipsius' *De constantia*.³⁷ The funeral oration and the collected tributes on the death of a famous or promising person continued to flourish, while Cardano's well-known autobiographical work *De consolatione* appeared in English as *Cardanus Comforte* (1573, 1576).³⁸

The consolatory epistle remained a major genre, gathering new life from the treatises on epistolary rhetoric. The most famous of these, Erasmus' *De conscribendis epistolis* (1522), incorporated a model consolatory

³⁵ Huberinus-Rhegius-Holbein. *Bibliographische und druckgeschichtliche Untersuchung der verbreitetsten Trost- und Erbauungsschriften des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Nieuwkoop, 1973). For Holbein's work see, e.g., Hellmut Rosenfeld, *Der mittelalterliche Totentanz*, (3rd ed., Köln, 1974).

³⁶ See A. D. Beach Langston, 'Tudor Books of Consolation', Ph.D. Diss., University of North Carolina, 1940.

³⁷ More's *Dialogue* has been edited by L. Martz and F. Manley in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More* (New Haven, CT, 1976). For Lipsius see the translation of *De Constantia* (1584) by John Stradling, *Two Bookes of Constancie* (1594), ed. Rudolf Kirk and C. M. Hall (New Brunswick, NJ, 1939).

³⁸ The 1576 edition is available in the facsimile series 'The English Experience' (Amsterdam, 1969). In 'Hamlet's Book', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 6 (1934): 17-34, Hardin Craig argued that Cardano provided the source for many passages in the play. Few other readers have found the parallels convincing.

letter that Erasmus had written for his pupil Alexander Stewart in 1509 and subsequently published as *Declamatio de morte* (1518).³⁹ Erasmus demonstrates in this treatise his great virtue as an educationalist, the wish to communicate everything that could be of help to the reader and future writer, combining theory, examples to be imitated, and a collection of sources. He begins his treatment of the *epistula consolatoria* with a brief general discussion, including many quotations from Cicero (pp. 149–50); then follows a model letter consoling a friend who has been ‘exiled to distant lands, leaving behind his wife and young children’ (pp. 150–55). A second model letter consoling a friend on the death of his son (pp. 156–64: first published as the *Declamatio*, and modelled on Jerome’s famous 60th Epistle, to Heliodorus), is followed by an anthology of quotations from the *consolationes* of Cicero and Pliny (pp. 164–71). Erasmus’ handbook on letter-writing was enormously popular in the sixteenth century, running to over a hundred editions, and becoming staple fare in the Elizabethan grammar school.⁴⁰ It was also drawn on, with or without acknowledgement, for widely-read English compilations, such as Thomas Wilson’s *Arte of Rhetorique* (1553) and Angel Day’s *The English Secreterie* (1586), among others.⁴¹

The new popularity of the epistle during the Renaissance was due as much to the revival of rhetoric as to the example of the humanists,⁴² and the *consolatio* duly figures in the handbooks on poetics and rhetoric. Both disciplines are fused in this period, with a prescriptive intent directed more towards writers than readers.⁴³ Composition of the elegy, as discussed by Scaliger or Puttenham, therefore involved considerations of the proper ways to represent grief. Sometimes poets were expected to console the survivors, as Puttenham wrote, seeking ‘by their arte to remove or

³⁹ See *CWE* (*op. cit.* in n. 4), pp. liii, 5. The *Declamatio* was published in a volume which also included Erasmus’ translation of Lucian’s *Peri penthous* (‘On Mourning’), and appeared in an anonymous English translation as *A treatise perswadynge a man patientlye to suffre the deth of his frende* (London, n.d.; c.1531).

⁴⁰ On its dissemination see *CWE* 25, p. lii, and for commentary on its use in Elizabethan grammar schools see T. W. Baldwin, *Shakspeare’s Small Latine & Lesse Greeke*, 2 vols. (Urbana, Ill., 1944), Vol. 2, pp. 239–53, 279–87, 312–14, 336–7, 340–1.

⁴¹ See Pigman (*op. cit.* in n. 15), pp. 16–23, and 131–5 for documentation of the *consolatio* in other sixteenth-century epistolary treatises, such as Macropedius’ *Methodus de conscribendis epistolis* (1543) and various English collections. For Wilson see *The Arte of Rhetorique*, ed. T. J. Derrick (New York, 1982), pp. 145–84, 582–9; for Day, see the Scholar Press facsimile edition, *The English Secreterie* (Menston, 1967), pp. 200–23.

⁴² See the admirable survey by John Monfasani, ‘Humanism and Rhetoric’, in Albert Rabil, Jr. (ed.), *Renaissance Humanism. Foundations, Forms, and Legacy*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia, Pa., 1988), Vol. 3, pp. 171–235.

⁴³ See Brian Vickers, ‘Rhetoric and Poetics’, in C. B. Schmitt and Q. Skinner (eds) *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 715–45.

appease' sorrow. An elegy, then, could have a therapeutic function, 'one short sorrowing the remedie of a long and grievous sorrow'.⁴⁴ In rhetoric, traditionally closely linked with moral philosophy, the handbooks emphasized the importance of *consolatio* in normal life situations. So Henry Peacham, in *The Garden of Eloquence* (1593), one of the best-organized Renaissance rhetoric books, discussed the figure '*Paramythia*, in latine *Consolatio*', as 'a forme of speech which the Orator useth to take away or diminish a sorrow conceived in the minde of his hearer', attaching a series of caveats for users. First, consolation should not be offered to 'hypocrites and scorers of God's judgements', where correction rather is needed. Secondly, consolation should not be 'ministered out of season, as either too soone, when the wound is new made, . . . the sorrow newly begun, and the affections confounded' (confused). Thirdly, it should not be 'unproper and impertinent to the cause and necessitie to which it is applied'. Lastly, the offered consolation should not be 'weake by reason of the foundations consisting only in Philosophy and humane wisdom, which do many times rather increase sorrow than diminish it': a Christian should draw on the superior resources of religion. These cautions observed, Peacham praised this literary device as being of great use, 'and most necessarily required in this vale of misery, where mens harts are often fainting, and their mindes falling into despaire, for so great are mens losses in this fraile life and so little is their fortitude to beare them, that they fall downe in their weaknesse lying still opprest under their heavy burthen, never able to rise againe, without the strength of comfort and consolation: . . . Against this weaknesse, consolation ministereth strength and restoreth men to life and joy, that were dying in misery and sorrow'.⁴⁵

From many different sources, then, Shakespeare and his contemporaries could learn about the *consolatio* and its functions in life, and thence in literature. The whole of classical, patristic, and Renaissance teaching was available to them, often in popular handbooks that have long disappeared from view. To give but one example of the syncretic, eclectic survival of this tradition in the late sixteenth century, I shall cite the compilation of Philippe de Mornay, a Huguenot theologian and statesman, well known in England from his visits there in 1572 and 1577–78, who had links with the Sidney family. In 1576 he published a Christian Stoicizing treatise called *Excellent Discours de la Vie et de la Mort*, translated into

⁴⁴ Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesie*, ed. G. Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge, 1939; 1970), p. 48.

⁴⁵ *The Garden of Eloquence* (1593); facs. ed. W. G. Crane (Gainesville, FL, 1954), pp. 100–1. In the 1579 edition the treatment is much briefer: see the Scholar Press facsimile edition (Menston, 1971), Sig. L₁^v-L₂^r.

English by Edgar Aggas in 1576 as *The Defence of Death*, and by the Countess of Pembroke in the following year as *A Discourse of Life and Death*.⁴⁶ For the second edition (Geneva, 1581) de Mornay, emulating Erasmus, added an anthology of his own source material, which was rendered into English in 1607 as *Six Excellent Treatises of Life and Death*. This comprised a translation (abridged) of the pseudo-Platonic *Axiochus*;⁴⁷ an excerpt from Cicero's *De senectute*; 'Collections out of Seneca's works, touching Life & Death', that is, passages from seventeen of the *Epistulae morales*, together with excerpts from *De tranquillitate animi*, *De brevitae vitae*, the *Consolatio ad Polybium* (1.4), and *De providentia*. De Mornay then switched from classical to patristic sources with Cyprian's sermon *De mortalitate*, a treatise of Saint Ambrose 'touching the benefit & happinesse of Death', adding excerpts from the Bible and some 'Prayers, and Meditations concerning Life and Death'.

The de Mornay anthology well illustrates the range of examples of the *consolatio* available to ordinary readers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is hard to be precise about Shakespeare's knowledge of this tradition, so widely diffused, and if T. S. Eliot's remark still holds, that 'Shakespeare acquired more essential history from Plutarch than most men could from the whole British Museum',⁴⁸ it is also true that Shakespeare had access to many books now only available in the British Museum. If we wish to estimate his originality in terms of his dialogue with tradition, we must trace back attitudes and assumptions which now seem obscure. The challenge is, to reconstruct the mental world in which he lived.

⁴⁶ For a useful modern edition, sorting out the tangled bibliography of this work, see Mario Richter, *Il 'Discours de la vie et de la mort' di Philippe du Plessis-Mornay* (Milan, 1964). The Countess of Pembroke's translation (reissued in 1592, 1600, 1606, and 1607) has recently been edited by Diane Bornstein: *The Countess of Pembroke's Translation of Philippe de Mornay's 'Discourse of Life and Death'* (Detroit, Mich.: Michigan Consortium for Medieval & Early Modern Studies, 1983). On Du Plessis-Mornay see J.-E. d'Angers, 'Le stoïcisme en France dans la première moitié du XVII^e siècle', part IV, *Etudes Franciscaines* 3 (1952): 5–19, at pp. 11–14.

⁴⁷ Another translation (this time complete) of the *Axiochus* appeared in 1592, the title-page ascribing it to 'Edw. Spenser'. For discussion of its authorship (Anthony Munday seems a more likely candidate) and for more information on De Mornay, see R. Gottfried (ed.) *Spenser's Prose Works* (Baltimore, 1949: Vol. 9 of the *Variorum Works of Edmund Spenser*), pp. 19–38 (text), 269–77 (commentary), and 487–96 (Appendix: sources and critical discussion). See also G. D. Monsarrat, 'Samuel Daniel, Seneca and Mornay', *Notes and Queries* 227 (1987): 420–22.

⁴⁸ Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London, 1951), p. 17.

II

In its essential form the *consolatio* has three focal points: the deceased, the survivor(s), and the consoler. Around these three foci an enormous body of literature accreted over the two millennia we have been surveying. Reading through this literature the modern reader is struck by the repetitiveness of arguments and examples, the way in which every generation of writers comes back to the same situations, the same *topoi*. But these writings were never meant to be read as a corpus, and whoever treats them as such in the pursuit of literary or intellectual history should not complain about repetition. Each *consolatio* is produced for a specific occasion of loss and grief, and since those situations repeat themselves endlessly in human life it is inevitable that the same reactions will recur, both in those who suffer and those who console. To some historians it has seemed as if the genre lacked any form whatsoever, was merely a repertoire on which users could draw at their own pleasure.⁴⁹ To others the genre cannot be taken seriously, since the arguments themselves are often commonplace. Yet, as a Dutch scholar has observed, we should not 'underrate their social value. It is precisely the commonplaces, which, if rightly administered, hold most power to soothe and console'. The fact that their truth has been 'tested by generations' is what makes them useful as 'an escape from individual misery'.⁵⁰ It is the sufferer's recognition that these arguments speak to him, here and now, that makes them suddenly fresh and soothing.

Yet the repetitiveness still constitutes a problem for the historian, who (I assume) tries to fulfil a contract with his readers to organize the research he has undertaken into a clear and economic form, silently omitting whatever false steps or dead ends encountered, and not overloading the argument with unnecessary examples. Having so briefly sketched in the persistence of the *consolatio* over two thousand years, constantly revived and renewed to meet the needs of an untold number of readers, I shall now try to outline its major topics with a comparable brevity. (In order to make cross-reference easy, I shall number the *topoi*, as [1].) And since the special interest here is what Shakespeare did with the genre, I shall focus on those elements that might have interested him most.

Of the three fundamental foci, let us begin with the deceased. In some *consolationes*, as we have seen, the dying man (or person soon to die) himself acts as consoler to his surviving friends. I accept this as a version

⁴⁹ Kassel (*op. cit.* in n. 5), p. 50 (citing Max Pohlenz); von Moos (*op. cit.* in n. 7), Vol. 1 pp. 54–5, 445; Gregg (*op. cit.* in n. 6), p. 14, 44, 47, 50, 81–2.

⁵⁰ F. M. Diekstra (ed.), *A Dialogue between Reason and Adversity. A Late Middle English Version of Petrarch's 'De Remediis'* (Assen, 1968), p. 51.

of the essential three-way form (deceased, mourner, consoler) since it still distinguishes the *consolatio* from the *ars moriendi*, a form which, as Kristeller puts it, 'is not intended to comfort the dying person or his relatives but rather to give religious instruction for the right conduct in the event of death'.⁵¹ The role of the deceased in the *consolatio* is primarily as representing a source of anxiety to the mourners, in such questions as 'do the dead suffer? Have they any sensation of their decomposing bodies? Are they punished after death? Do they live on in the soul?' Writers of consolations knew Plato's arguments for the immortality of the soul and the existence of Hades, and usually accepted the first, rejecting the second. In the *Tusculans* Cicero endorses the Epicurean conception of the body's insensibility after death (1.1.24–5), but also Plato's account of the soul being immortal and divine (1.22.53–1.25.60). Although following Plato here, Cicero takes the Stoic line⁵² in poo-pooing any notion of a Hades punishing evildoers after death (1.5.9–1.6.12; 1.16.36–7), even though he subsequently quotes Socrates' description in the *Apology* of the sequence death, judgment, heaven, hell (1.40.97–41.99).

Consistency is evidently less important to Cicero than providing comfort. His aim in Book I, he tells us, like that of so many users of the *paramuthetikos logos*, is 'to avoid the thought that we shall be wretched after death' (1.34.83), and he subsequently describes this whole Book as 'a speech delivered against death' (2.4. 11: *oratio contra mortem*). His main argument, the Stoic position [1], is that 'death is not merely no evil but positively a good' (1.8.16; 1.11.23) or even 'the highest good' (1.31.76; 1.46.110). In the *Phaedo* this inversion of values was supported by philosophical reasoning; in the *consolatio* tradition it rather involves a mode of arguing close to the epideictic branch of rhetoric, mingling praise of one side of the case with dispraise of the other. The terms in which Cicero presents some issues show all too clearly the rhetorical nature of such argumentation. Now (silently) propounding the Epicurean case that 'death does not appertain to either the living or the dead', for 'the dead do not exist, the living it will not touch', he cites one popular argument (indeed a permanent *topos* [2] from Homer's *Iliad* onwards) for lessening

⁵¹ Kristeller (*op. cit.* in n. 8), 'Bandini', p. 420. See Nancy L. Beaty, *The Craft of Dying: A Study in the Literary Tradition of the 'Ars Moriendi' in England* (New Haven, CT, 1979).

⁵² Rist observes that 'the Stoics apparently dropped any kind of doctrine of punishments to be meted out after death', the rare references to divine retribution being this-worldly, in the form of punishment meted out to the evil man's children or descendants (*op. cit.* in n. 21, p. 258). Seneca also took the Stoic line in rejecting the poets' 'fanciful descriptions of death and judgment' (*Marc.* 19.4). On the question of the soul's survival after death, however, Seneca was inconsistent, affirming it at one point (*Marc.* 6.25–6), denying it elsewhere (*Marc.* 19.5; *Ep. mor.* 54.4, 99.29–30). See Scourfield (*op. cit.* in n. 6), pp. 22–3 and notes.

its terrors: 'those who minimize it are for making it closely resembling sleep' (1.28.91–2). To 'minimize' or to 'augment' are indeed rhetorical procedures, but they can be effectively used to 'alleviate the grief or mourners'. Just as we can 'lighten the burden' of poverty 'by pointing out how small and few natural needs are' (3.33.55–6), so in dealing with those who have endured suffering we should emphasize the admirable side, 'and not point out the inconvenience' under which they laboured (3.33.79). Death can also be made to seem less terrible, he writes (following Plato's example in the *Apology*), by describing it not as a fall into the unknown but as a journey [3] to a definite goal, 'a haven and place of refuge' which 'leaves us no further care, no anxiety for the future' (1.49.118–19; 1.40.96), a *topos* echoed, among others, by Seneca (*Marc.* 11.2; *Pol.* 9.6–7, 11.2–4) and Plutarch (*Apol.* 107D, F).

The most frequent argument to minimize death is to present it as natural and inevitable [4].⁵³ Cicero underlines 'nature's law, that, as our birth brings the beginning of all things, so death brings us to the end of all' (1.38.91). If we follow 'the principle of accounting nothing evil which has been bestowed by nature upon all mankind' (1.42.100), then death cannot be evil. Bringing home to the mourner that 'all that has happened is natural to human life', he writes, can have a 'very great effect . . . in imparting comfort' (3.23.55–7). He advises all consolers to emphasize 'the common lot of life' (*de communi condicione vitae*), having observed 'the comforting effect of the phrase "You are not the only one" ("*non tibi hoc soli*")', which remains reliable and beneficial 'in spite of the constant use' (3.32.77–33.79). 'This is a very well-worn form of consolation (*consolatio maxime pervulgata*)', he writes to a friend who has lost two sons, but one 'which we should always have on our lips and in our own minds' (*Fam.* 5.16). Others writing in the *consolatio* tradition agreed, as we can see from its frequent use by Seneca and Plutarch.

If death is to be praised as a positive experience, then, according to the laws of epideictic rhetoric, life must be dispraised. Concluding the first book of the *Tusculans*, Cicero recalls, as an example of 'the epilogue usual with rhetoricians', a speech delivered by Alcidamas, a pupil of the Sophist Gorgias, a *laudatio mortis* (it might better be described as a *vituperatio vitae*). Alcidamas, 'an ancient rhetorician of the first distinction, actually wrote an encomium on death which consists of a list of the evils to which mankind are exposed; he has failed to give those deeper arguments which

⁵³ As Hermann Wankel has shown, "Alle Menschen müssen sterben". Variationen eines Topos der griechischen Literatur', *Hermes* 111 (1983): 129–54, this *topos* was used not only for consolation but also to urge people to perform their duty, or strive to the highest of which they were capable.

the philosophers bring together, but he has not failed in wealth of eloquence' (1.48.116). These dispraises of life constitute the *topos de miseriis humanae condicionis* [5], which produced so many catalogues of human misery, sometimes arranged chronologically. So in the pseudo-Platonic *Axiochus* Socrates recalls a discourse that Prodicus (another Sophist) spoke 'against the state of life'. The speech begins (in an anonymous Elizabethan translation):

what parcell (quod he) or our life is not full of wretchednes? dooth not the babie even taken from the mothers wombe poure out plenty of teares, beginning the first step of life with grief? neither afterward hath it once any breathing or resting time from sorrow, being either distressed with povertie, or pinched with colde, or scortched with heate, or payned with stripes . . .

Having endured the indignities of schooling, the young man reaches a stage of life beset with so many miseries that in comparison

all these former troubles may seeme but childish and indeed babish trifles. For hereupon dooth a troope of evils accrew, as by the exploites of warfare, the bitternesse of wounds, the continuall labour, skirmishes; and then closely creepeth on olde Age, in which are heaped all the harmes that pertaine to mankinde. . . . Nature ever . . . snatching and pulling from this man his sight, from that his hearing, from som both two senses. And if any fortune longer than commonly is seene in this life to linger, Nature weakening his powres, dooth loose, lame, and bow downe all partes of his body. But they whose bodies in old age long flourisheth in minde, as the saying is, become twise children.⁵⁴

In such chronological catalogues of the Seven (Miserable) Ages of Man it was common to emphasize the newborn baby's tears. So Seneca, arguing that we find 'reason for tears' everywhere in life, rhetorically asks, 'Do you not see what sort of life Nature has promised us—She who decreed that the first act of man at birth should be to weep?'⁵⁵

The other form taken by these catalogues of life's miseries was to run together a selection of unpleasant states or experiences from which the

⁵⁴ *Axiochus* 366D–367B; tr. 'Edw. Spenser', ed. Gottfried (cit. in n. 46), pp. 30–1. D. S. Hutchinson has recently suggested this speech as a source for Jaques' 'All the world's a stage' (*As You Like It*, 2.7.139–66): see 'The Cynicism of Jaques: a new source in Spenser's *Axiochus*?', *Notes and Queries* n.s. 237 (September 1992): 328–30.

⁵⁵ Seneca, *Pol.* 4.2. (For other uses of this *topos* in Seneca see *Marc.* 11.3, 18.7, 22.3, 22.7, 24.4; *Pol.* 9.6, 11.1.) Editors also cite the passage in Lucretius, 5.222ff: 'The human infant, like a shipwrecked sailor cast ashore by the cruel waves, lies naked on the ground, speechless, lacking all aids to life, when nature has first tossed him, with pangs of travail from his mother's womb upon the shores of the sunlit world. He fills the air with his piteous wailing, and quite rightly, considering what evils life holds in store for him'; tr. R. E. Latham (Harmondsworth, 1951), pp. 177–8.

deceased is now blessedly free [6]. Writing to Marcia, Seneca reminds her that

Death is a release from all suffering. . . . Your son has passed beyond those boundaries within which there is servitude; a great and everlasting peace has welcomed him. No fear of want assails him, no anxiety from riches, no stings of lust, that through the pleasure of the body rends the soul; envy of another's prosperity touches him not, no reproaches ever assail his unoffending ears. . . . At last he has an abiding-place from which nothing can drive him, where nothing can affright him. (*Marc.* 19.5–6)

Death frees the slave, lightens the captive's chains, and releases those in prison (20.2). Seneca reminds Polybius, also, that his dead brother 'no longer fears' anger, disease, suspicion, envy, fear, and 'the fickleness of fortune' (*Pol.* 9.4).

Other *topoi* were invoked on behalf of the deceased, although none had a comparable resonance. If death is an eternal condition, we can conceive of life as being just a loan [7]. This argument could be usefully extended to deal with the frequent laments that *consolatores* had to face over *mors immatura*. So Cicero urged:

Let such follies then as thinking it is wretched to die before our time be pushed aside as old wives' fables, which they pretty nearly are. What 'time', pray? Nature's? Why, she it is who has granted the use of life like a loan, without fixing any day for repayment. What is there then for you to complain of, if she calls it in when she will? Those were the terms on which you had accepted the loan. (*Tusc.D.*, 1.39.93)

Indeed, he later warns, 'in repining at the repayment of the gift you have received as a loan, you are longing for what is not your own' (3.17.36). Seneca repeated this lesson (*Marc.* 10.1ff), as did Plutarch (*Apol.* 106F–107A, 116A–B). Another *topos* for dealing with a premature death was to argue that the earlier people die, the more suffering they are spared, the less evil they can commit [8]. It can be deemed good fortune to die at a given point rather than live on, Cicero bitterly observes from his own experience, since one can be spared much wretchedness (*Tusc.D.*, 1.34.84–36.86). 'Think how great a boon a timely death offers', Seneca urges Marcia, 'how many have been harmed by living too long' (*Marc.* 20.3; also 12.3, 22.1). On this topic, Plutarch adds, 'words of consolation are so readily found that they have been perceived by even uninspired poets' (*Apol.* 110E), and he elaborates an appropriately Platonist case that an early death preserves the soul from the evils of this life (*ibid.*, 111E, 113D–F, 115F, 120B).

These, then, are some of the arguments concerning the deceased used in classical times to console their surviving friends and relatives. In

attempting to console, as Cicero describes it, 'we must, as it were, shore up in every way those who are toppling over and unable to stand because of the extent of their distress' (*Tusc.D.*, 3.25.61). Out of consideration for the mourners' distraught state immediately after the death, the *consolatio* tradition advised consolers to wait awhile before applying their curative words [9]. It is necessary, Cicero writes, 'in dealing with diseases of the soul, just as much as in dealing with bodily diseases, to choose the proper time'. To illustrate his point, Cicero cites a much-quoted passage from Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* (377ff) which describes speech as 'physician to wrathful heart', provided it be applied at the right time, 'and crushes not the wound with heavy hand' (*Tusc.D.*, 3.31.76). Seneca ostentatiously observed this injunction, informing his mother that he had refrained from intruding on her grief 'while its violence was fresh, lest my very condolences should irritate and inflame it' (*Marc.* 1.2). This is the time, also, when the consoler is expected to communicate his sympathy to the stricken friend. Both reactions are shown at the beginning of Plutarch's 'Letter of Condolence to Apollonius':

I felt for you in your sorrow and trouble, when I heard of the untimely passing from life of your son, who was very dear to us all. . . . In those days, close upon the time of his death, to visit you and urge you to bear your present lot as a mortal man should would have been unsuitable, when you were prostrated in both body and soul by the unexpected calamity; and, besides, I could not help sharing in your feeling. For even the best of physicians do not at once apply the remedy of medicines against acute attacks. . . . (*Apol.* 101F–102A)

We find similar considerateness, along with warm expressions of sympathy, in some moving letters to and by Cicero (*Fam.* 4.5, 4.6, 5.16).

Once the immediate suffering is over, however, and sympathies expressed, the classical *consolator* set about his task with a vehemence that surprises modern readers. Cicero's account of the consoler's duty is typical:

These therefore are the duties of the comforters: to do away with distress root and branch, or allay it, or diminish it as far as possible, or to stop its progress, and not allow it to extend further, or to divert it elsewhere. (*Tusc.D.*, 3.31.75)

Cicero's vigorous verbs describing the consoler's proper treatment of grief (*tollere*, *detrahere*, *supprimere*, *traducere*) are varied by Seneca in his consolations (*vincere*, *reprimere*, *opprimere*), but to the same goal of 'repressing and controlling sorrow', an emotion that is so wild and stubborn that it must finally be crushed (*Helv.* 1.2, 16.1, 17.1). Similarly Plutarch begins his condolence to Apollonius by describing it as intended 'for the mitigation of grief and the termination of mournful and vain

lamentations', and concludes hoping that it has helped him to 'put an end to mourning, which is the most distressing of all things' (*Apol.* 102B, 121E). Cicero described *aegritudo*, the idea of 'a serious evil' (under which he placed mourning and other forms of grief) as 'loathsome, wretched, execrable, to be avoided' at all costs (*Tusc.D.*, 3.6.12).

Such disapproval of grief clearly reflects that dual tradition, psychological and ethical, guiding classical notions of virtuous and rational behaviour. Responses to suffering were divided, even among the moderates. One positive reaction was to argue (as Plato had done) that to be able to experience sorrow is a defining part of human nature [10]. In his treatise *Of Grief* Crantor attacked the Old Stoa's position to such effect that both Cicero and Plutarch transcribed the passage. In Cicero's version Crantor rejected the Stoics' "'praise of that sort of insensibility (*indolentia*) which neither can nor ought to exist'". Even in illness "'the capacity for feeling'" is an integral sign of humanity far preferable to *apatheia*, a state only attained "'at the cost of brutishness in the soul and callousness in the body'" (*Tusc.D.*, 3.6.12–13). Plutarch gave a fuller account, adding the reinforcing observation that a "'harsh and callous indifference (*apatheia*) . . . will rob us of the kindly feeling which comes from mutual affection and which above all else we must conserve'" (*Apol.* 102C–D). Cicero willingly acknowledged with Crantor the naturalness of grief, stating that 'our souls have a strain of tenderness and sensitiveness of a kind to be shaken by distress as by a storm' (*Tusc.D.*, 3.6.12). In consequence he devotes much space to attacking his old enemy Epicurus for his belief that distress can easily be alleviated by turning the mind from vexation to 'the consideration of pleasures' (3.15.33–16.35).

If it is natural to feel sorrow, another positive attitude legitimizing grief is to argue that releasing sorrow is positively healthful [11]. So Seneca writes that 'Tears fall, no matter how we try to check them, and by being shed they ease the soul' (*Ep.mor.*, 99.15). This concession made, however, all the writers in the *consolatio* tradition agreed that only a moderate display of grief was permitted [12]. Plutarch recorded Crantor's (Platonist) warning that "'to be carried beyond all bounds and to help in exaggerating our griefs I say is contrary to nature, and results from our depraved ideas. Therefore this also must be dismissed as injurious and depraved and most unbecoming to right-minded men, but a moderate indulgence of grief (*metriopatheian*) is not to be disapproved'" (*Apol.* 102D–E; cf. *Tusc.D.*, 3.29.71). This urging of moderation often took extreme forms, as in the many sarcastic variations on the *topos* of grief as being unmanly, effeminate [13]. The *consolatores* used this *topos* to shame those 'suffering' from grief into a reminder of properly virtuous behaviour. For Cicero it is manly to endure a twitch of pain 'resolutely, and calmly', normal for a woman to

'cry out', indeed weeping and wailing are by definition womanish (*Tusc.D.*, 2.20.46, 2.21.48; also 2.22.51–2, 2.23.55, etc.). Nothing is 'more disgraceful for a man than weeping' (2.24.57), and if it is 'sometimes, though seldom . . . allowable for a man to groan aloud', a woman should never shriek (2.23.55), and all ostensive displays of mourning are 'odious' (3.26.62). Seneca and Plutarch repeat the effeminacy of weeping argument in a detail which can only seem tedious, or offensive to the modern reader.⁵⁶

Other reinforcing arguments that we find less objectionable include the common *topos* that tears are idle, useless [14], since they cannot bring back the dead (*Tusc.D.*, 3.27.64, 28.66, 32.77). Seneca repeats that tears won't recall the dead (*Marc.* 6.2ff; *Pol.* 2.1, 4.1) and so are 'useless' (*Pol.* 5.2–4, 18.6; *Ep.Mor.* 99.4), and Plutarch agrees (*Apol.* 105F, 117F, 118B, 121E). Less sympathetic to our mind, but still a reputable argument rather than just a pejorative label, is the accusation that the mourner is really grieving for him or herself [15], not actually concerned for the dead. Excessive grief, Cicero warns (*Tusc.D.*, 1.46.111), seems like self-love, a diagnosis that Seneca develops. His consolation to Marcia juxtaposes two historical examples of women, one positive (Livia), who bore grief with self-control, one negative (Octavia), whose obsessive yielding to sorrow was narcissistic (*Marc.* 2.3–4). Does your sorrow concern 'your own ills', he questions Marcia, 'or the ills of him who is gone?' (*ibid.*, 12.1). More pointedly, he advises Polybius to often ask himself "'Am I grieving on my own account, or on account of him who has departed? If on my own account, this parade of affection is idle, and my grief, the only excuse for which is that it is honourable, begins to show defection from brotherly love when it looks toward personal advantage'" (*Pol.* 9.1). Seneca is well aware of the dangers of the *dulcis tristitia* we indulge in when we 'muse in memory upon those whom we have lost' (*Ep.Mor.* 99.19).

The hectoring tone of the *consolatio* was obviously designed to shock the mourner into a recognition of his or her unbalanced emotional state, and to restore the reign of reason [16]. Having sufficiently confronted them with a mirror image of their degraded state, the *consolator* would then remind them that, as Cicero argued, it is in our power to lay aside anxiety and distress just by the operation of our reason, once we realize 'that it

⁵⁶ Seneca, *Marc.* 7.3 ('women are wounded more deeply than men, savage peoples more deeply than the peaceful and civilized, the uneducated, than the educated': a *topos* much expanded by Plutarch, *Apol.* 112F–113B); *Pol.* 5.4–5, 6.3–4, 15.5, 17.2 (the injunction to mourn 'neither with too much bitterness and wrath, nor in a weak and womanly fashion; for it is not human not to feel misfortunes, and it is not manly not to bear them'); *Helv.* 16.1–2, *Ep.Mor.* 63.13, 99.1–2; Plutarch, *Apol.* 102E, 112B–C ('ignobleness and cowardice of your soul'), 114E; *Uxor.* 609E–F.

gains us no advantage and that indulgence in it is useless'. Giving in to distress is merely 'an indulgence due to an act of will' (*Tusc.D.*, 3.28.66–70). Since excessive mourning derives from a false *opinio* that this is how human beings ought to behave, the Stoic *consolator* tried to persuade sufferers to recall the powers of *ratio* and to look at their situation differently (a tactic which accounts for the recurrence of so many intellectualist verbs in the imperative, such as 'think, reflect, recall . . .'). Seneca elevates reason to absolute power over both emotions and vices: 'Reason lays low the vices not one by one, but all together; the victory is gained once and for all' (*Helv.* 13.3). Reason can easily control grief (*Pol.* 6.2, 18.6), provided that the mourner co-operates in a change of attitude. 'Look at the matter thus', Seneca advises Marcia, 'you lost your son in accordance with a fixed plan' (*Marc.* 21.5). For Plutarch also, 'reason is the best remedy for the cure of grief, reason and the preparedness through reason for all the changes of life' (*Apol.* 103F, 112C, 118C).

At this point the *consolatio* links up with the general teaching of classical philosophies on the good life. The great mark of virtue and prudence is to prepare against adversity [17]. The wise man, who has 'previously pronounced judgement on human affairs for their uncertainty and fatuity', Plutarch writes, will never be caught off guard by his enemies or ill-fortune (*Apol.* 112D). We should anticipate evil before it arrives, Seneca advises, since preparation for distress lessens it (*Marc.* 9.1–5; *Helv.* 5.2–3). Cicero shares this Stoic belief that 'foresight and anticipation have considerable effect in lessening pain', advising that 'we have on the tip of our tongues . . . the words "nothing should seem unexpected"' (*Tusc.D.*, 3.14.29–30, 16.34, 23.55, 24.58, 28.67). In addition to prudence, the rational man or woman suffering adversity will practise other appropriate virtues, such as fortitude and patience [18]. Cicero repeatedly emphasizes that patient endurance can overcome pain and all other misfortune (2.7.18, 14.33, 20.46; 3.24.57; 4.28.60; 5.26.74), a principle reiterated by Seneca: 'many have sweetened bitter fortune by enduring it patiently' (*Marc.* 12.5; also 5.5, 10.6; *Pol.* 5.4–5, 17.1; *Helv.* 13.2; *Ep.Mor.* 99.32), and Plutarch (*Apol.* 103A, 117A, 118C).

In the literature of counsel against adversity exempla played an important role. Seneca used his comparison between courageous Livia and self-indulgent Octavia to attack another unwelcome form of excessive sorrow, the desire for solitude [19]: Olivia's narcissistic grief caused her to opt out of life, 'companied ever by darkness and solitude' (*Marc.* 2.1–3.3). Cicero also disapproved of those who, believing the mistaken *opinio* of the need 'to show the deepest possible sorrow at the death of relations . . ., seek out solitude' (*Tusc.D.*, 3.26.63), although he had done so himself on Tullia's death (*ad Att.* 12.23). The major function of examples

(historical, mythical, or even literary) was to provide instances of bearing grief with a self-control or dignity that could be imitated [20]. Cicero laid down the rule that 'in convincing a sufferer that he is able and ought to bear the accidents of fortune, it is helpful to recount the examples of those who have done so' (*Tusc.D.*, 4.29.63). One frequent occasion for consolation was the experience of parents who had lost their children, an especially painful event but one which gave rise to many examples of fortitude. Cicero cites three instances of Roman fathers not displaying any grief on the deaths of their sons, having recorded other examples (no doubt as a self-reproach) in his *Consolatio* (3.28.70); Plutarch added more (*Apol.* 118D-119D). To be reminded of fellow-sufferers, Seneca wrote, provides 'the solace that comes from having company in misery' (*Marc.* 12.5), as illustrated by the maxim *solamen miseris socios habuisse malorum* (the thought is classical, its formulation medieval).⁵⁷ Instancing examples had a further effect, that of making one's own miseries seem smaller compared to other, greater ones [21]. Look around, Seneca advises Marcia, 'everywhere you will find those who have suffered greater losses than yours', yet there is 'not a single home so wretched that it could not take comfort from knowing one more wretched' (*Marc.* 12.4). Modern readers may wonder what *solacium* it could be to the mother who had lost one child to be reminded of Niobe, who had lost all fourteen, but her case was often cited (*Tusc.D.*, 3.26.63; Seneca, *Ep.Mor.* 63.2; Plutarch, *Apol.* 116C). In classical antiquity, at all events, it was evidently an effective argument. Plutarch found it obvious

that he who tries to console a person in grief, and demonstrates that the calamity is one which is common to many, and less than the calamities which have befallen others, changes the opinion of the one in grief and gives him a similar conviction—that his calamity is really less than he supposed it to be. (*Apol.* 106C)

To 'change the opinion' was, after all, the whole aim of the *consolatio*.

When the rule of reason had been re-established, the philosophical *consolator* was ready to offer guidance on the more mundane questions of adjusting to normal life again. One proof that the emotions were now under control would be that the mourner could, by a conscious act of will, recall the deceased person's virtues, remember the happy times they had spent together [22]. Seneca used this injunction frequently, reminding Polybius that his dead brother's high reputation survives him (*Pol.* 2.2-3.3), and urging him to prolong his memory by writing a memorial (18.2, 7). The deceased's good deeds live on, he declares (*Marc.* 24.1; *Ep.Mor.*

⁵⁷ Stählin (*op. cit.* in n. 29), p. 782.

93.2, 99.3), and we should recall our past happiness with them, for 'a great part of those we have loved . . . still abides with us. The past is ours, and there is nothing more secure for us than that which has been' (*Ep. Mor.* 99.4; 63.4). Survivors must also be reminded of the blessings they still enjoy [23], children, relatives, friends, other instances of good fortune (*Marc.* 5.3, 10.4; *Pol.* 12.1; *Helv.* 18–19). In some cases the consoler would recommend that a husband might seek a new wife [24], for example, since losses can be replaced, substitutes found. Seneca consoles Lucilius on the death of his friend Flaccus with the advice: 'You have buried one whom you loved; look about for someone to love. It is better to replace your friend than to weep for him' (*Ep. Mor.* 63.11–12).

As for daily life and its activities, Seneca reminds Polybius (secretary to the emperor Claudius) that he has a station in the world to maintain (*Pol.* 6.1–3), and ongoing duties to perform (7–8). For people not fully engaged in practical life, the consolers could recommend various therapeutic activities, such as music [25], sleep [26] (Horace, *Epod.* 13.17ff), wine [27], even fairy-tales.⁵⁸ But the activity most often recommended was more serious, namely the pursuit of liberal studies, especially moral philosophy [28]. Seneca reminds Polybius that he has always loved the liberal arts, studies which exalt prosperity and lessen calamity, constituting 'the greatest adornments and the greatest comforts for man', and he urges him to 'encircle yourself with them as bulwarks for your mind', protecting it from sorrow (*Pol.* 18.11). Seneca advises his mother, too, that *studia liberalia* are the best refuge against misfortune: 'Philosophy is your most unfailing safeguard, and she alone can rescue you from the power of Fortune', for 'only philosophy or an honourable occupation can turn from its distress the heart that sorrows from affection' (*Helv.* 17. 3–5, 18.8). Among the philosophical texts specifically cited for consolatory reading were Plato's *Phaedo* and Crantor's lost treatise.⁵⁹ From the expression of grief to the reading of philosophy, then, the classical *consolatio* mapped out a path for settling the mind.

III

The *consolatio* had a more or less continuous history over the fifteen hundred years separating Plutarch from Shakespeare, and underwent numerous changes of emphasis. Although many of the classical *topoi*

⁵⁸ Stählin, *ibid.*, pp. 780–1, notes that in modern Greek *paramuthi(on)* denotes a fairy-tale which a mother or nurse tells the child in order to soothe and console it.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 780.

persisted, the context in which they were used was open to change according to the philosophy, theology, social or political value-system then dominant. In Judaism, as every reader of the Old Testament can see, Jehovah acquired an attribute not given to any pagan deity, that of providing consolation for human suffering by His deeds, through holy Scripture, and by the utterances of his prophets.⁶⁰ In the New Testament the consoler's role is one common to all members of the faith, but specifically embodied in the person of Christ. His resurrection and the promise of heaven that this offers all true believers dramatically reduced any need for *consolatio* against worldly mishap.⁶¹ To the early Church Fathers, still very close to classical culture, Christ's redemptive power made the customary reactions of grief and mourning a merely pagan reaction to death, one to be attacked. The later patristic writers could take a more inclusive view, writing *epistolae consolatoriae* in the manner of Crantor or Seneca while reserving Christian topics for their most decisive arguments.⁶²

In the Middle Ages *consolatio* was proportionally more a Christian than a lay activity, making great use of patristic models and gradually losing touch with the classical tradition. Following the fragmentation of classical culture in the Dark Ages, and the arbitrary survival of authors and texts, many of the key philosophical works on death and suffering had been lost: Plato's *Apology* and *Phaedo*; the pseudo-Platonic *Axiochus*; Cicero's letters and *Tusculan Disputations*.⁶³ The forms taken by medieval Christianity also changed the place of *consolatio* within the whole picture of life and death. On the one hand *contemptus mundi* attitudes were vastly developed, producing an at times macabre insistence on human mortality and decay; on the other hagiographic writings describing the deaths of saints and martyrs in exemplary, triumphant terms were intended to remove all fear of death.⁶⁴ The ultimate consolation was Christian, that descent into human frailty would be transcended by the ascent to heaven.⁶⁵

The *de contemptu mundi* tradition persisted in Renaissance thought, but was met by a counter-tradition, first formulated in Petrarch's *De*

⁶⁰ See, e.g., C. G. Montefiore, *Ancient and Greek Encouragement and Consolation in Sorrow and Calamity* (Privately printed; 1917): copy in the Warburg Institute, London.

⁶¹ See Stählin (*op. cit.* in n. 29), pp. 784–5.

⁶² See, e.g., the literature quoted in n. 6: Favez, pp. 157–67; Beyenka, pp. 16–18; Gregg, pp. 153–7, 194–214; Scourfield, pp. 23–5.

⁶³ Von Moos (*op. cit.* in n. 7), p. 47.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, on the hagiographic tradition, pp. 203, 236, 247, 330–31, 365, 374; on *memento mori*, pp. 207–8, 448.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 446–7; also Favez (*op. cit.* in n. 6), pp. 107, 148, 155ff; Gregg (*op. cit.* in n. 6), pp. 219–64.

remediis utriusque fortunae (Book 2, chapter 93), asserting the dignity and excellence of man.⁶⁶ A favourite topic for the humanist oration, this attitude again changed the balance of emphasis but complemented rather than replaced the Christian promise of resurrection triumphing over death. At the same time virtually the whole classical tradition of the *consolatio* was revived, all its *topoi* varied and emulated. One especially important issue for Italian humanists was the permissibility of grief, with a large body of writers opposing the Old Stoa's insistence on *apatheia*, and arguing for grief to be freely expressed as a therapeutic action which also demonstrated shared humanity.⁶⁷

That swift overview of a long and complex stretch of history is justified here given the fact that Shakespeare appears to have made no use of any forms of *consolatio* outside the classical tradition. There are no traces in his work of the Christian promise of resurrection, such as we abundantly find in contemporary poets (Spenser, Raleigh, Donne). The two priests in his play who console sufferers, one real (the Friar in *Romeo and Juliet*), one pretended (the Duke in *Measure for Measure*), do not use Christian *topoi*. Shakespeare's avoidance of the theological *consolatio* may reflect the position of an Elizabethan dramatist subject to ecclesiastical censorship, or it may represent a personal conviction about the difference between a playwright and a pastor. At all events he avoids the Christian scheme, and ignores both the medieval extremes of *memento mori*, that loving dwelling on death and putrefaction, and the saintly *descriptio mortis*.

Shakespeare undoubtedly absorbed much of the classical tradition, but he always turned it to his own purposes. The strength of 'Topos-Forschung', as practised by E. R. Curtius and others, has been its demonstration of the continuity of ideas and attitudes across great intervals of time and changes of culture. Yet its matching weakness consists in not attending to the contexts in which the *topoi* recur, and the uses to which later poets put them. (Curtius, for example, gave a pioneering description of the *locus amoenus* convention in classical and medieval poetry, but failed to note that in the chivalric epic or romance the pleasant place is usually evil, a scene of temptation to which, if yielded, disastrous consequences pertain.)⁶⁸ It would be unjust to cast Shakespeare as a passive transmitter of

⁶⁶ See Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness. Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, 2 vols. (London, 1970), Vol. 1, pp. 173–321 on Petrarch's argument and its influence on fifteenth-century humanism.

⁶⁷ McClure (*op. cit.* in n. 8), pp. 12, 21, 33ff, 100, 114f, 118, 134.

⁶⁸ E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, tr. W. R. Trask (New York, 1953), pp. 195–200 on 'the pleasance' (*locus amoenus*). The treatment of the 'Topics of Consolatory Oratory' (pp. 80–2) is disappointingly sketchy.

traditional ideas. He certainly knew a wide range of classical literature, having absorbed the remarkably thorough training of the Elizabethan grammar school (magnificently reconstructed by T. W. Baldwin).⁶⁹ But he never merely endorsed either classical or Renaissance attitudes. In both traditions, for instance, the power to speak well was naïvely imagined to be a property reserved to good men. By making so many of his persuasive speakers manipulative and destructive (Volumnia, Cassius) or wholly evil (Richard III, Iago, Lady Macbeth), Shakespeare called in question the optimism of humanist rhetoricians.⁷⁰ Similarly with the *consolatio*: on some occasions he uses it in completely orthodox ways, obeying all the implicit or explicit conventions concerning place, time, the proper behaviour of *consolator* and *consolandus*. On others it is deliberately disarranged, applied to the wrong situations (well-meaning and malicious), pushed to its limits and beyond. -

Shakespeare evidently attached great importance to the human reaction of comforting those suffering. He uses the word 'comfort' and its derivatives more than two hundred times in his plays (compared to only three uses of 'consolation'), a preference that probably reflects the relative popularity of those words in the English language at this time, but may also record a liking for the stronger semantic implications of 'comfort' as 'giving strength'. The giving of comfort is an activity often performed in his plays, but one subject, like all other forms of human behaviour, to enormous variations of purpose. The classical tradition assumed that the consoler was genuinely concerned for the welfare of those suffering, so manifesting allocentric (other-based), not egocentric attitudes. To begin with a misuse of the genre, we can watch Shakespeare inventing a whole category of hypocritical consolers, consummate liars who only feign condolence.⁷¹ Further, in line with his conception of hypocrisy as manifesting extremely evil intentions to deceive and destroy, Shakespeare makes his hypocritical consolers actually comfort just those people whose sufferings they have caused.

In comedy neither the suffering nor the false consolation have serious outcome. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* Proteus, in love with Silvia, recognizes that he can only win her through 'some treachery used to Valentine', his rival (2.6.31ff), and so betrays to the Duke, Silvia's father,

⁶⁹ Baldwin, *op. cit.* in n. 41 above.

⁷⁰ See Brian Vickers, "'The Power of Persuasion': Images of the Orator, Elyot to Shakespeare", in J. J. Murphy (ed.) *Renaissance Eloquence* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1983), pp. 411–35.

⁷¹ See Inga-Stina Ewbank, 'Shakespeare's Liars', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 69 (1984): 137–68; and Brian Vickers, 'Shakespeare's Hypocrites', in Vickers, *Returning to Shakespeare* (London, 1989), pp. 89–134.

Valentine's plan to elope with her (3.1.4ff). Valentine is punished with exile, and Proteus shamelessly offers him a *consolatio* recommending the correct uses of reason, time, hope, and patience (3.1. 241ff). Proteus is indeed 'disqualified as a proper comforter',⁷² since he benefits from the injuries for which he offers consolation, but in the play's benign conclusion he is forgiven. More vicious is Dionyza in *Pericles*, jealous of Marina for overshadowing her daughter Philoten, who arranges the murder of Lychorida, Marina's nurse, as a first step to getting rid of Marina herself. When Marina enters, mourning Lychorida and gathering flowers for her grave, Dionyza hypocritically simulates the *consolator's* concern over the mourner's symptoms of distress, excessive weeping [12] and solitariness [19]:

How now Marina, why do you keep alone?
 . . . Do not
 Consume your blood with sorrowing; you have
 A nurse of me. Lord how your favour's changed
 With this unprofitable woe! (4.1.21ff)

Feigning concern over her health, Dionyza sends Marina off for a walk on the sea-shore with Leonine, who has orders to kill her. His plans are foiled, however, by the sudden appearance of pirates, who take Marina to Mytilene and sell her to a brothel-keeper. Marina survives, her virtue triumphant, while Dionyza, believing her dead, commemorates her with a hypocritical monument (4.3.28ff), including a patently glib epitaph (4.4.31ff). But once the truth of her evil comes out, Dionyza is burnt alive by the angry populace (5.3.96ff).

In tragedy the hypocritical consolers are more destructive. In *Othello*, Iago uses arguments from the *consolatio* to comfort several of those he destroys: Cassio (2.3.262ff), Roderigo (2.3.370ff), and Desdemona (4.2.89ff), always succeeding in appearing a friend and helper. Having killed Duncan, Macbeth feigns a hyperbolic *lamentatio* over his death (*Macbeth*, 2.3.92ff), but is seen through by the King's sons: 'To show an unfelt sorrow is an office / Which the false man does easy' (2.3.136ff). The most accomplished of these hypocritical consolers is Claudius, chief beneficiary from the murder of Hamlet's father, who consoles the son, first endorsing his grief as a sign of humanity [10], before reproving it on various grounds. (As we see retrospectively, and may glimpse here, Claudius' real motives are self-interested, to remove the embarrassment of Hamlet's mourning and to pass over the previous King's death.) Attacking Hamlet's grief, Claudius runs together many classical *topoi* and

⁷² Tison, *op. cit.* in n. 10 above, pp. 146–8.

even adds the proto-Christian one of obeying heaven's will. Hamlet displays 'unmanly grief' [13], showing 'A heart unfortified, a mind impatient' [18], displaying 'a fault to nature' [4], 'To reason most absurd' [16]. Claudius, arguing that we should accept 'what we know must be', echoes Seneca's advice to 'Accept in an unruffled spirit that which is inevitable' (*Ep.mor.* 99.22), and he even adds an *exemplum* of accepting the inevitability of death [20]: but unfortunately for him, 'the first curse' was on Abel, slain by his brother Cain.⁷³ Having unwittingly invoked what he subsequently describes as 'the primal eldest curse. . . . A brother's murder' (3.3.37–8), Claudius reverts to the *consolatio* convention for his conclusion. As Plutarch concludes his letter to Apollonius, 'Having collected and put together these extracts . . . with great diligence, . . . [I beg you] to put an end to mourning' (121E), so Claudius ends his fluent assembly of *topoi* by entreating Hamlet to 'throw to earth / This unprevailing woe', adding: 'think of us / As of a father'. (Compare Dionyza: 'you have / A nurse of me'.) The injunction to find a substitute for the person you have lost does indeed occur in the *consolatio* tradition, but it usually implies finding another spouse [24], or friend. No-one can replace a dead father, and it would be highly unnatural to attempt it. That Claudius should use this argument here shows either a remarkable lack of tact or supreme confidence in the success of his crimes. As the play unfolds, we realize retrospectively how outrageously he exploited the role of *consolator*. 'May one be pardoned and retain th'offence?' he asks in his anguished soliloquy (3.3.59). May one console the son whose father one has killed?

Claudius' hypocritical consolation falls into another Shakespearian category deflecting the genre from the role given it by the theorists, what I shall call 'the misdirected *consolatio*'. The unstated assumption behind the classical treatises is that the consoler is correctly informed about the cause of suffering. In Shakespeare, often ironically, consolers identify the wrong cause. Claudius imagines that Hamlet is sorrowing over his father's death, but the soliloquy ending this scene ('O, that this too too solid flesh would melt . . .': 1.2.129ff) tells us that the son is upset by another injury, not thought of by Claudius, namely his mother's failure to be loyal to her husband for even a month, jumping over the decent time of mourning in her haste to re-marry. Claudius could have saved his breath. The misdirecting of consolation, connected with mourning, recurs in *All's Well that Ends Well*, where the Countess and Lafew attempt to comfort Helena on the

⁷³ As the late George Hibbard pointed out, 'we do not yet know that he has himself committed this crime, but we ought to recognize the inconsistency of this fluent moralizer who, it appears, makes no distinction between natural death and murder': *Hamlet* (Oxford, 1987), p. 44.

death of her father with the traditional warning [12]: 'Moderate lamentation is the right of the dead, excessive grief the enemy of the living' (1.1.46ff). But when Helena is left alone we learn that she has already forgotten her father, being more upset at the thought of Bertram shortly leaving home (79ff). In *The Tempest* Ferdinand likewise forgets his father's death within a hundred lines of lamenting it, overcome with love for Miranda (1.2.488ff). Helena and Ferdinand have evidently followed the *consolatores'* injunction to find a substitute for the deceased [24], and the outcome in both cases is happy. The consequence of misdirected consolation in *Romeo and Juliet*, however, is tragic: Juliet's sorrow over Romeo's banishment is taken by her parents to be a response to Tybalt's death, and they give her the usual warnings [12, 14] against excessive and useless grief (3.5.69ff). Convinced that her sorrow is 'dangerous', they bring forward her marriage to Paris (4.1.6ff), a move to which the Friar responds with the sleeping potion, with all its disastrous consequences.

These summary reminders of crucial incidents in Shakespeare connected with the *consolatio* already show something of his freedom with the genre, turning it to uses never dreamed of by the theorists. One striking example of his ability to adapt particular *topoi* to a variety of dramatic contexts involves the notion of death as a release from the miseries of human existence [6]. In *Titus Andronicus* we find a perfectly orthodox application of it in Titus' seven-line epitaph over the coffins of his sons killed in battle:

In peace and honour rest you here my sons;
 Rome's readiest champions, repose you here in rest,
 Secure from worldly chances and mishaps.
 Here lurks no treason, here no envy swells,
 Here grow no damned drugs, here are no storms,
 No noise, but silence and eternal sleep.
 In peace and honour rest you here, my sons. (1.1.150-6)

(That is very close to the passage from Seneca's consolation to Marcia, quoted above.) A more extended use of the same *topos* is the famous dirge in *Cymbeline* over Imogen's seemingly dead body:

Fear no more the heat o'th' sun,
 Nor the furious winter's rages;
 Thou thy worldly task hast done,
 Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages . . .

Fear no more the frown o'th' great,
 Thou art past the tyrant's stroke;
 Care no more to clothe and eat,
 To thee the reed is as the oak . . .

Fear no more the lightning-flash,
 Nor th' all-dreaded thunder-stone.
 Fear not slander, censure rash;
 Thou hast finish'd joy and moan.

Shakespeare's awareness of the correct traditions within the *consolatio* is shown by the ease with which he blends this *topos* with that other timeless consolation, the 'common condition' of human mortality being shared by all [4]:

Golden lads and girls all must
 As chimney-sweepers come to dust
 The sceptre, learning, physic, must
 All follow this and come to dust. (4.2.258ff)

The lyric is so beautiful that one forgets that Imogen is still alive. Shakespeare has preserved the correct human response from the characters' point of view. The song of Guiderius and Arviragus is their spontaneous reaction to the loss of someone loved, whose rite of passage out of this world is to be attended with as many beneficent rituals as they can muster.

A total contrast to those uses of the *topos* comes in *Macbeth*. When Duncan's murder does not bring the glory and triumph that it had promised, but rather a miserable existence, husband and wife suffering 'the affliction of these terrible dreams / That shake us nightly', the topics of the *consolatio* seem to rebound on them. After his *lamentatio* about their nightmares Macbeth could be expected to produce a *solacium*. But what he actually says is:

Better be with the dead,
 Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
 Than on the torture of the mind to lie
 In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave.
 After life's fitful fever he sleeps well,
 Treason has done his worst; nor steel, nor poison,
 Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing
 Can touch him further. (3.2.18ff)

That view of death as a release from the miseries of life [6, 7] which we have seen expressed in the conventional context after real death (*Titus Andronicus*) or apparent (*Cymbeline*), is normally used to console people mourning a deceased friend or relative. Here it comes from the man who has actually murdered the deceased for his own profit, only to realise with envious longing the peace that the dead enjoy. Macbeth would have preferred any form of death, one imagines, to the emptiness and meaninglessness of life he comes to experience. In that celebrated soliloquy

devaluing life as 'but a walking shadow, a poor player, / . . . a tale / Told by an idiot . . .' (5.5.23ff) Macbeth again uses arguments intended to disparage life [5] as brief, fragile, and pointless, *topoi* normally used to console a living person grieving for the dead. Here they are spoken by someone who is, so to speak, both alive and dead, for whom they are not selections from a rhetorical-philosophical storehouse but a report on life as experienced. Shakespeare has preserved the form of the *consolatio* but put Macbeth into a context in which the soothingly pessimistic descriptions of life that it purveyed become literally true. The genre has its revenge on the man who misused it.

The consolatory *threnos* over Imogen's supposedly dead body highlights another peculiarly Shakespearian application of the *consolatio*, for deaths which are only apparent, or which, although expected, do not take place. In the next act of *Cymbeline* Imogen's husband Posthumus is in prison, awaiting execution, and also consoling himself with the topic [6] of death as the release from suffering:

Most welcome, bondage, for thou art a way
I think to liberty. Yet am I better
Than one that's sick o'th' gout, since he had rather
Groan so in perpetuity, than be cured
By the sure physician death, who is the key
T'unbar these locks. (5.4.3ff)

That a sufferer should be able to console himself just as he would console others is a practice recommended in the *consolatio* tradition: but Posthumus receives the added benefit of a professional consoler. The First Gaoler now appears, with another version of the advantages of death over the miseries of life [5]:

But the comfort is you shall be called to no more payments, fear no more
tavern bills, which are often the sadness of parting, as the procuring of mirth.
. . . O, the charity of a penny-cord, it sums up thousands in a trice; you have
no true debtor and creditor but it; of what's past, is, and to come, the
discharge. . . .
Posthumus. I am merrier to die, than thou art to live.
Gaoler. Indeed, sir, he that sleeps feels not the toothache. . . . (5.4.157ff)

That comic parallel to 'Fear no more the heat o'th' sun' shows how *consolatio* topics can be adapted to any level of society and education. It is noticeable that Shakespeare places the *communis condicio* topic in its pithiest, inevitably trite-sounding form, on the lips of older or garrulous characters, who must have had long practice in uttering it, such as Juliet's Nurse: 'Ah sir, ah sir, death's the end of all' (3.3.92); or Old Capulet :

'Well, we were born to die' (3.4.4); or Justice Shallow: 'Death, as the Psalmist says, is certain to all, all shall die' (2 *Henry IV*, 3.2.37f); or Feeble, with his version of the 'life as a loan' *topos* [7]: 'A man can die but once. We owe God a death. . . . And let it go which way it will, he that dies this year is quit for the next' (3.2.235ff).

This building-up of extended sections of drama around merely apparent deaths, or deaths expected which do not take place, can take on remarkable dimensions, as in two plays (to be considered later) which engineer major confrontations within a *consolatio*, *Much Ado about Nothing* and *Measure for Measure*. In the latter, Claudio's death, long expected and prepared for, does not happen, thanks to the machinations of the Duke, who also saves Barnardine (in a particularly ironic contrast, one prisoner had accepted consolation, the other rejected it). In the former, Hero's reported death is a pretence adopted to shame Claudio and all those who were party to the plot that slandered her virtue, and to make her loss more lamented. We know that the death is fictitious, but Leonato persists with the deception even after the truth of Don John's malice has been revealed, urging Claudio to 'Hang her an epitaph upon her tomb, / And sing it to her bones—sing it tonight' (5.1.275ff). Shakespeare duly devotes a whole scene (5.3) to this quasi-religious ritual, which presumably consoles both Leonato and Claudio. Another play in which death is fictitious, a pretence engineered for reasons of plot, is *The Tempest*. As a result of Prospero's stratagem of separating father and son until the dénouement, in one scene (1.2) Ferdinand is consoled for the death of Alonso, and in the next (2.1) Alonso is consoled for the loss of Ferdinand, both pretended. The second of these scenes is a more complex use of *consolatio*, to which we must return, but this may be enough to show that Shakespeare entered into the imagined dramatic situation with a fidelity to recording both the sufferings and misfortunes in everyday life, and the humane reaction of giving comfort.

IV

In the classical tradition (as in the Christian) to comfort those in affliction is a mark of a properly humane society. As Plutarch (quoting Crantor) wrote, the "'harsh and callous indifference"' embodied in the Stoic principle of *apatheia* is "'both impossible and unprofitable"', for it "'will rob us of the kindly feeling which comes from mutual affection and which above all else we must conserve"' (*Apol.* 102C). In some of Shakespeare's plays, however, notably the early histories, there is neither 'kindly feeling' nor 'mutual affection', and in consequence no consolation. In this society

torn by dynastic strife and personal ambition, the logic of violence means that those who are already suffering will not be consoled but humiliated further. If one scene can stand for the whole it should be the murder of York at the battle of Wakefield, a point where the increment of violence that has been gathering through the previous two plays bursts.

In the previous scene Rutland, York's young son, has been murdered by Clifford, and now the captured York is tormented by his captors, chiefly Queen Margaret, who forces on him a napkin stained with his son's blood, adding gloatingly:

And if thine eyes can water for his death,
I give thee this to dry thy cheeks withal.

(3 Henry VI, 1.4.79ff)

Crowning him with a paper crown she continues her taunts until York's defiance finally breaks down and he weeps, 'These tears . . . my sweet Rutland's obsequies', wiping his eyes with the blood-stained cloth. Prophecy that this will long be remembered as 'a piteous deed', York wishes on his tormentors the same perversion of *consolatio* that they have forced on him:

There, take the crown, and, with the crown, my curse;
And in thy need such comfort come to thee
As now I reap at thy too cruel hand!

(156ff)

Clifford and the Queen then stab him to death.

The sequence 'need' : 'comfort' is answered in these plays not just with the absence of consolation—as contemporary history daily shows, it would be naïve to expect such a thing in a country riven by civil war—but with further atrocities. Clifford's corpse is mocked and insulted, then decapitated (2.6.56ff), the boy prince Edward is first taunted, then stabbed to death by Edward, Clarence, and Gloucester (5.5.12ff). The absence of comfort or sympathy takes a special verbal form which might be called an '*anti-consolatio*', a response to suffering which utters words that actually cancel comfort. Such responses reverse the normal *consolatio* structure, where the *consolandus* is comforted for a suffering that is no fault of theirs, having been caused either by nature or by some secular authority that cannot be opposed. In these plays without comfort the sufferer is liable to be told that he or she is actually responsible for their suffering, due to a moral failing, some previous deed, or simply by virtue of being a member of the family of York, or Lancaster. An additional source of non-comfort in the history plays has been already glimpsed in York's death scene, namely the curse, which is often recalled at the appropriate time, either by the *moriturus* himself or by some unsympathetic bystander.

Richard III is Shakespeare's most thorough creation of a world without comfort, in which Queen Margaret embodies *imprecatio*, the opposite of *consolatio* in that it wishes disaster on its objects. The curses that she utters in the first act (1.3.111–302) are recalled by each of the unfortunates going to their death, Rivers, Grey, Vaughan (3.3.14ff), and Buckingham (5.1.12ff). Her own earlier suffering, both her husband and her son having been murdered, has made Margaret not only impervious to others' misery but delighting in it. This play shows how suffering can deaden an individual's concern towards the rest of humanity. The Duchess of York (Richard's mother) can give no sympathy to the newly widowed Queen Elizabeth, for instead of taking comfort at being joined in misery, according to *consolatio* theory [21], she is envious that Elizabeth is still better off (obviously no longer counting Richard as her son): 'Thou art a widow; yet thou art a mother, / And hast the comfort of thy children left' (2.2.55ff). Suffering can make people egocentric, vindictive and resentful. So Clarence's children upraid the widowed Queen:

Boy. Ah, aunt! You wept not for our father's death.

How can we aid you with our kindred tears?

Girl. Our fatherless distress was left unmoan'd;

Your widow-dolour likewise be unwept! (62ff)

This scene degenerates into a competition between the three injured parties as to whose suffering is greatest (79ff). The Duchess claims victory, but the Queen is soon in just as miserable condition, Richard having imprisoned the two princes in the Tower, herself reduced to appealing 'Pity, you ancient stones . . .' (4.1.97ff).

Perhaps the most unsettling lesson that *Richard III* gives to the well-meaning philosophers of consolation is the insight that sharing suffering with someone else does not automatically make you feel happier, or well inclined towards them. It is a point made again in that remarkable scene after the princes' murder, which begins with old Queen Margaret welcoming the general destruction wrought by Richard's ambition:

So, now prosperity begins to mellow

And drop into the rotten mouth of death.

Here in these confines slily have I lurked

To watch the waning of mine enemies. (4.4.1ff)

When Queen Elizabeth enters, now mourning her 'tender babes', she once again receives no sympathy from the Duchess of York, wholly absorbed with grief at her own loss (17ff), and in asides Margaret comments vindictively on them both. The two women sit on the ground to pour out their laments, at which point Margaret steps forward to claim the 'seniory' of grief:

If sorrow can admit society,
Tell o'er your woes again by viewing mine. (35ff)

To anyone familiar with the theory of *consolatio* there is a savage irony in her invocation of the *topos* that *solamen miseris socios habuisse malorum*. Margaret is not offering any consolation, of course, merely inviting them to tell over all their miseries, rubbing it in, we might say, bringing an irritant, not a solace. The exchange that follows (40–125) must be the longest scene of gloating in Shakespeare, as Margaret reviews the whole sequence of their miseries with a perverse delight in the symmetry of destruction. The old Queen describes herself as 'hungry for revenge / And now I cloy me with beholding it.' Those beholding the play also cloy, indeed surfeit at the relish with which Margaret itemizes how many others have been killed, as she sees it, 'to quit my Edward' (61ff).—As the 'I', 'me', 'my' and 'mine' recur, we realize that, far from inducing acceptance of one's own lot, to share suffering with another can lead to a crazy egoism. In Book Three of the *Tusculans* Cicero reported the view of Carneades (disagreeing with it, of course) that 'as for that kinde of comfort whych cometh of the rehearsall of others whyche have abyden the lyke gryeves, that he thoughte was good to comforte . . . onely those whyche were delyghted to heare other mennes sorowes' (3.25.60; tr. Dolman, Sig.Q₅^v). Cicero subsequently bracketed this 'rejoicing at other mens losse' with 'malevolence' (4.7.16; tr. Dolman, Sig.T₁^r), a vice incarnated in Margaret's climactic review of Elizabeth's sorrows (82–115), a triumphing over another's suffering that exposes the vicious selfishness of the revenge ethic. As with Euripides' devastating portrayals of the corruption and collapse of personality that occurs when victims get the chance to revenge themselves on their persecutors,⁷⁴ Shakespeare leaves us with no illusions about the redemptive power of suffering, or the consolation of knowing that someone else is worse off. No one who reads this play could ever again endorse that *topos* unthinkingly.

V

Even this summary discussion has shown the range of uses to which Shakespeare puts *consolatio*. Completely lacking in an anarchic society, perverted by hypocrites to tragic effect, it can also be applied to a mistaken cause of suffering, or one that never materializes: the announced death is premature, the corpse is still alive. If these instances all seem somewhat

⁷⁴ See Brian Vickers, *Towards Greek Tragedy* (London, 1973), pp. 81–3, 478–93.

marginal, exceptions or eccentricities, further surprises await those who expect Shakespeare to apply traditional *topoi* in a spirit of docile imitation. The fact is that even when he creates dramatic situations where none of these exceptions apply—cases where comfort *is* given, by genuinely sympathetic consolers, to a person whose suffering has been properly identified—then it still does not take the regular form prescribed by the classical theorists. In Shakespeare's plays it seldom happens that consolation has the desired result of making the sufferer accept his or her condition. Even when this does take place, it may be only temporary. In a striking number of cases consolation is simply refused, the main reason given being the sufferer's claim that his or her grief is too intense to be assuaged with words.

A simple example, relatively self-contained within the play concerned, is the scene in *Othello* when the Duke of Venice offers Brabantio 'a sentence' or two to reconcile him to Desdemona having eloped with Othello:

When remedies are past, the griefs are ended
By seeing the worst, which late on hopes depended.
To mourn a mischief that is past and gone
Is the next way to draw new mischief on.
What cannot be preserved when Fortune takes,
Patience her injury a mockery makes.
The robbed that smiles, steals something from the thief;
He robs himself, that spends a bootless grief. (1.3.202ff)

Well-meaning though the Duke is, he has violated a number of requirements of the *consolatio*: he has offered comfort too soon, while the suffering was still great [9]; he seems completely lacking in the sympathy that was supposed to accompany the message; and his words are too general, not adapted to the sufferer's specific situation. In reply Brabantio applies these pious generalities to a specific context, and one where the Duke's own fears are involved:

So let the Turk of Cyprus us beguile;
We lose it not as long as we can smile.
He bears the sentence well, that nothing bears
But the free comfort which from thence he hears.
But he bears both the sentence and the sorrow,
That to pay grief must of poor patience borrow.
These sentences, to sugar or to gall,
Being strong on both sides, are equivocal.
But words are words; I never yet did hear,
That the bruised heart was pierced through the ear. (210ff)

The Duke's 'free' (generous) comfort is worthless, indeed the whole genre is of no use to this man in this situation.

Romeo makes a similarly violent rejection, as Friar Laurence tries to reason him into seeing banishment as a lenient sentence for an offence bearing the death-penalty.

Friar Laurence. Thou fond mad man, hear me a little speak.

Romeo. O thou wilt speak again of banishment.

Laurence. I'll give thee armour to keep off that word,
Adversity's sweet milk, philosophy,

To comfort thee though thou art banished.

Romeo. Yet banished? Hang up philosophy

Unless philosophy can make a Juliet,

Displant a town, reverse a Prince's doom,

It helps me not, it prevails not. Talk no more.

Laurence. O then I see that mad men have no ears.

Romeo. How should they when that wise men have no eyes? (52ff)

Friar Laurence's vision of philosophy as the supreme *consolator* could have come from several sources, notably Cicero's *Tusculans*, which praises the 'fruitful . . . promise of philosophy', that the man who has obeyed her laws will be *contra fortunam semper armatus*, and guaranteed 'a good and happy life' (5.7.19). But Rolf Soellner has argued⁷⁵ that the 'mixed metaphor by which the Friar 'attributes to it the qualities of an armour (against adversity) and a milk (as a nourishment)' makes it most likely that Shakespeare recalled the second specimen *epistola consolatoria* (the one comforting an exile) that Erasmus wrote for his *De conscribendis epistolis*:

Optima consolatrix Philosophia, quae non unum aliquod malum inanibus fomentis lenire sed ad omnes fortunae incursus *animum armare* solet. Hujus ut ita dicam, *lacte* cum ab ipsis sis incunabilis enutritus, quid ego sus Minervam aut ululas Athenas?

[Philosophy is the best giver of consolation; for it does not relieve each trouble singly by useless palliatives, but arms the mind against all the assaults of fortune. Since from the very cradle you have been nurtured on her milk, as we might say, why do I set a sow to teach Minerva or carry owls to Athens?]

Friar Laurence's tactical error was to utter in advance the philosophers' *laudatio* of their own discipline, before he had even produced any of its arguments, so allowing Romeo to make a swift counter-attack. In the event, the comfort that he offers Romeo owes nothing to either classical or Christian traditions, being based on completely worldly ends—'get thee

⁷⁵ 'Shakespeare and the "Consolatio"', *Notes and Queries*, n.s. 199 (1954): 108–9. Soellner quotes from the *Opera Omnia* (Leyden, 1703–1706), I.428; his italics. The translation is by C. Fantazzi (CWE 25, p. 152), who notes that the phrase 'Optima consolatrix Philosophiae' also occurs in *Adagia*, IV.ix.61.

to thy love, . . . hence and comfort her' (146ff)—as an active accomplice in their love plots. This is another of Shakespeare's ironies at the *consolator's* expense.

John of Gaunt is also forced to offer consolation to an unwilling recipient, his son Bolingbroke, just banished for six years:

Gaunt. Thy grief is but thy absence for a time.

Bolingbroke. Joy absent, grief is present for that time.

Gaunt. What is six winters? They are quickly gone.

Bolingbroke. To men in joy, but grief makes one hour ten.

Shakespeare gives Gaunt the whole intellectualist repertoire of the Stoic *consolatio*, trying to induce that crucial shift of *opinio*:

Call it a travel that thou tak'st for pleasure. . . .

The sullen passage of thy weary steps

Esteem as foil, wherein thou art to set

The precious jewel of thy home return. . . .

Teach thy necessity to **reason** thus;

There is no virtue like necessity.

Think not the King did banish thee,

But thou the King.

(*Richard II*, 1.3.262ff)

'Go, say this', Gaunt exhorts, 'or suppose' that; 'imagine' this positive aspect, 'Suppose' that benefit deriving from exile, invoking the intellectualist imperative verb forms traditionally designed to bring about a change of attitude. Shakespeare makes Bolingbroke explicitly reject this strategy. Rather than calling this exile a trip 'thou tak'st for pleasure', he replies,

My heart will sigh when I miscall it so,

Which finds it an enforced pilgrimage.

There the word 'miscall' denies all the intellectualist assumptions.

As for Gaunt's injunction to 'suppose the singing birds musicians', as if the sufferer's imagination could turn wherever he wanders into a *fête champêtre*, such advice presupposes a belief in the mind's total ability to detach itself from its present conditions. As we know from the *Tusculans*, Epicurus indeed developed such a belief with his two-part theory for 'the ease of sorrow', involving first an *avocatio*, turning the mind away from grief, then a *revocatio* or 'recall' (a military metaphor) to pleasure. Cicero had rejected this theory as being against human nature, for 'it is not in our power, when we are pricked with misery, or mischance, to dissemble or forget it. For such chances teare, vexe, pricke, and enflame us. And fynallye, suffer us not to take anye quyet rest' (3.16.35; tr. Dolman, Sig. P₁^v–P₂^r). In his fifth book Cicero returns to this point, criticizing Epicurus for having ignored the whole Stoic-Peripatetic panoply of 'remedies

agaynst the suffering of griefe', namely the virtues of courage, 'shame of dishonesty', patience and fortitude [17]. Set against this coherent ethical system, Cicero mockingly observes, Epicurus claims to be 'contented onely with the remembraunce of his former pleasures. As if a man well nye parched wyth heate, so that he is no longer able to abide the sonne, should comfort himselfe with the remembraunce that once heretofore he had bathed himselfe in the colde ryvers of Arpynas. For truly, I see not howe the pleasures that are past may ease the gryeves that are present' (5.26.74; Sig. C₅^r–C₅^v). In the next section Cicero extends his attack on Epicurus' notion of the recall or anticipation of pleasure as the antidote to pain by arguing that virtue can in fact be trained not to give way to pain, as witness the endurance of Spartan boys, or Brahmin sages: 'What parte of Barbary is there more wylde or rude than India? Yet neverthelesse, emonges them those whyche are counted wyse men are fyrst bred up bare and naked. And yet suffer both the colde of the hil Caucasus, and also the sharpenes of the winter, without any paine. And when they come to the fyer they are able to abide the heate, well nie till they rost' (5.27.77; Sig. C₆^r–C₆^v).

Conflating both these passages (as Kenneth Muir briefly noted)⁷⁶ Shakespeare gave Bolingbroke this devastating response to the naïve belief in the power of *ratio* to redefine, purely intellectually, one's whole environment:

O, who can hold a fire in his hand
 By thinking on the frosty Caucasus?
 Or cloy the hungry edge of appetite
 By bare imagination of a feast?
 Or wallow naked in December snow,
 By thinking on fantastic summer's heat?
 O no, the apprehension of the good
 Gives but the greater feeling to the worse.
 Fell sorrow's tooth doth never rankle more
 Than when he bites, but lanceth not the sore. (294ff)

Gaunt capitulates, his *consolatio* exploded—'Come come my son, I'll bring thee on thy way', and Bolingbroke has the last word, a tearful complaint: 'sweet soil adieu!' Shakespeare formulated his objection to the *topos* of the power of *ratio* [16] in a manner that complements his critique of the supposed solace of thinking that other people are worse off than you are. The 'apprehension of the good / Gives but the greater feeling to

⁷⁶ 'Shakespeare among the commonplaces', *Review of English Studies* 10 (1959): 283–9, at p. 284 (acknowledging the assistance of J. C. Maxwell). I owe my knowledge of Muir's note and other little-known sources to the admirable bibliography by John W. Velz, *Shakespeare and the Classical Tradition. A Critical Guide to Commentary, 1660–1960* (Minneapolis, Mn., 1968). Would that this essential reference tool were regularly updated.

the worse'. This was not Cicero's point, of course, but once made it is difficult to answer.

Bolingbroke's rejection of comfort seems to carry a good deal of dramatic sympathy with it. Richard II's refusal to be consoled, two Acts later, is more ambivalent. In the crucial scene (3.2) where he returns to England, no longer an arbitrary tyrant but a patriotic ruler reunited with his kingdom, Richard receives news of a series of disasters by which Bolingbroke's rebellious forces gain decisive power. Throughout the scene the word 'comfort' and its cognates mark out the stages of the loyal counsellors' attempts to strengthen Richard to fulfil his kingly duties towards his realm. Salisbury prefaces his news of the Welsh army's defection to Bolingbroke with the warning: 'Discomfort guides my tongue / And bids me speak of nothing but despair' (65f). Richard's reaction is stunned silence, so Aumerle correctly plays the role of counsellor / consoler:

Comfort, my liege. Why looks your Grace so pale? (75)

When Richard has expressed his justified shock, Aumerle counters, as if in a ritual of *consolatio*:

Comfort, my liege. Remember who you are. (82)

The tactic of reminding a mourner of their public station and the need to behave accordingly, recommended by the theorists [23], has the desired effect here:

Richard. I had forgot myself. Am I not king?
Awake, thou coward majesty, thou sleepest! (83f)

Richard seems to have recovered his balance, and confidently announces to Scroop, the next messenger of woe, that his heart is 'prepared' against adversity, that education of the soul recommended by the Stoics [17]. Scroop's reply speaks the same Stoic language:

Glad am I, that your highness is so armed
To bear the tidings of calamity.

But Richard's assurance was merely verbal, and as Scroop discloses the next disaster—Bolingbroke's execution of the supporters on whom he had relied, Bushy, Green, and Wiltshire—the King's resolve collapses. When Aumerle asks for the whereabouts of York and his soldiers, Richard rejects any further hope, giving in to despair:

No matter where, of comfort no man speak.
Let's talk of graves, of worms, and epitaphs. . . .
For God's sake let us sit upon the ground,
And tell sad stories of the death of kings. . . .

Richard's long and plangent speech (134–77), celebrating the 'antic' Death 'within the hollow crown' of every king, uses another common *consolatio* topic, the *condicio universalis* of mankind [4]. In the mouth of someone who has just declared himself the Lord's anointed, however, the *topos* reveals disobedience to God, and a betrayal of duty towards his subjects. To accept worldly loss might be a sign of the *sapiens*, but for a King to say 'is my Kingdom lost? Why 'twas my care, / And what loss is it to be rid of care?' (93ff), is a dereliction of responsibility. Judged by the ethics embodied in the *consolatio*, Richard is lacking in all the virtues needed to confront adversity: as Cicero itemized them, *firmitatem animi, turpitudinis verecundiam, exercitationem consuetudinemque patiendi, duritiam virilem* (*Tusc.D.*, 5.26.74). Richard demonstrates the value of these virtues negatively, by not observing them. As Cicero comments, disapproval of such behaviour is educative, 'for when thou shalte thinke it a shame, for one that woulde be counted a man, to groane, crye, lament, and bewaile, then shalt thou have afore thine eyes, the beautye of stoutenes and honesty. According to the which, as long as thou shalte rule thy selfe, thou shalt undoubtedly perceyve, that gryefe wil yelde and give place to vertue' (2.13.31; Sig.K₇^r). The virtues needed, Cicero never tires of repeating, are patience, fortitude, *honestas* (2.14.33, 18.43, 22.53, 27.66).

Within the specific scheme of the *consolatio*, Richard is an instance of the rejection of comfort denounced by Cicero: 'they whych do not suffer theymselves to be holpen, do thereby provoke others to miserye' (3.30.73; Sig.R₄^r). He has yielded to what Seneca calls the *tristitia dulcis*, the sweet sadness of tears, in the symbolically significant seated position that we observed with the lamenting women in *Richard III*, proneness implying hopelessness or powerlessness (cf. *Tusc.D.*, 2.15.36). Carlisle tries to rouse him from this enervating state with a pithy argument from the *vita activa*:

My lord, wise men ne'er sit and wail their woes,
But presently prevent the ways to wail. (178f)

Once again Richard pulls himself together, 'stands up' (such a stage direction might be added here), and when Aumerle the good counsellor reminds him that they can still rely on York and his power, using the 'scolding' approach sometimes recommended for the *consolatores*, Richard is again full of courage: 'Thou chidest me well. Proud Bolingbroke, I come . . .' (188f). But at this fresh resolution Scroop reveals the crowning disaster, York's defection to Bolingbroke, and the King rounds on his counsellor / consoler Aumerle:

Beshrew thee cousin, which didst lead me forth
Of that sweet way I was in to despair.
What say you now? What comfort have we now?

By heaven, I'll hate him everlastingly,
That bids me be of comfort any more. (204ff)

In choosing the 'sweet way' of despair, Carlisle tells him, Richard is lending 'in your weakness strength unto your foe, / And so your follies fight against yourself' (180ff). Richard's self-division is the perverse effect of self-love, that narcissism denounced by the theorists of *consolatio* as a peculiarly disabling form of grief [15].

The two men who refuse consolation in *Richard II* are contrasted in ethical terms: Bolingbroke is justified, Richard not, for the King still has other duties, and other courses of action open to him. In *The Tempest* Alonso similarly rejects all comfort for the death of his son, but here the dramatic interest focuses on the counsellors, who are also contrasted ethically. The positive consoler is Gonzalo, urging Alonso to be 'merry', since 'our escape / Is much beyond our loss', if one were to 'weigh / Our sorrow with our comfort' (2.1.1ff). Balancing ills against joys is one of the recommended techniques of the *consolatio*, but as we have seen from other plays, Shakespeare was doubtful of its efficacy. Alonso, at all events, will not allow himself to be comforted: 'Prithee peace', he replies, and 'I prithee spare'. The scene is made more complex, and less like a serious consolation (which would be inappropriate in any case, since we know that Ferdinand is not dead) by the presence of Sebastian and Antonio, mocking Alonso's reception of this dutiful *consolatio*:

Sebastian. He receives comfort like cold porridge.
Antonio. The visitor will not give him o'er so. (10f)

Shakespeare uses the correct technical expression: the 'visitor' in Elizabethan parishes was the person who took nourishment and comfort to the sick, visit being the best form of consolation. Viewed from an unsympathetic position Gonzalo can seem a figure of fun, and as he visibly prepares his next batch of *topoi* Sebastian mocks him as 'winding up the watch of his wit'. And in fact, Gonzalo comes out with a typical consolatory *sententia*:

Gonzalo. When every grief is entertained that's offered,
Comes to th'entertainer—
Sebastian. A dollar.
Gonzalo. Dolour comes to him indeed, you have spoken
truer than you purposed.

This is the only time in Shakespeare that anyone mocks a consoler in the execution of his duty, but the mockers' amusement is bought at the expense of sympathy, either for Gonzalo or for the King.

Gonzalo's tactic, endorsed by the theorists (e.g. *Tusc.D.*, 4. 29.62) had been to avoid all mention of the main cause of suffering, Ferdinand's

It seldom visits sorrow; when it doth,
It is a comforter. (193ff)

Sebastian is transparently perverting that argument for his own evil ends, since Alonso's sleep will allow him to broach to Antonio his plot to kill the King. He is the last of Shakespeare's hypocritical consolers, who misuse the genre while planning or executing a murder. The seriousness of these crimes shows how central the *consolatio* can be in a humane society.

In that brief scene our attention shifted from the sufferer rejecting consolation to the motives of those offering it, the juxtaposition revealing the contrast between good and evil, and giving rise to a plot which Prospero's superior power can easily annul. In *Measure for Measure* the consolation scenes are more prolonged, more integral to the plot, producing confrontations which are considerably harder to appease. The process begins with the Duke, disguised as a Friar, telling the Provost of the prison where Claudio awaits death the following day that, 'Bound by my charity and my blest order', he comes 'to visit the afflicted spirits' and 'minister / To them' (2.3.1ff). The 'instruction' which he takes to Claudio has, however, nothing at all Christian about it. Where a Renaissance Christian, like an ancient Platonist, might be expected to console someone awaiting death with the promise of the soul's immortality, the Duke chooses the secular topos *de miseriis vitae humanae* [5]:

Be absolute for death; either death or life
Shall thereby be the sweeter. Reason thus with life:
If I do lose thee, I do lose a thing
That none but fools would keep; a breath thou art,
Servile to all the skye influences. . . . (3.1.5ff.)

The content of the Duke's speech is obviously entirely within the *consolatio* tradition. At the end of *Tusculans* Book One, 'de contemnenda morte', Cicero reiterated his 'wishe, that either men would hereafter desyre deathe, or at the least wise, ceasse to feare it' (1.49.117; tr. Dolman, Sig.H₈). Parallels have been suggested with Lucretius, whose Epicurean case against fearing death was linked with the consolatory tradition,⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Martin, 'Shakespeare, Lucretius and the Commonplaces', *Review of English Studies* 21 (1945): 174–82, at 179–80. See also T. Stork on Lucretius (*op. cit.* in n. 19), and John E. Hankins, *Shakespeare's Derived Imagery* (Laurence, Ka., 1953), for links with Seneca and Palingenius.

with Cicero,⁷⁸ and with the Senecanism of Du Plessis-Mornay.⁷⁹

The Duke's speech shares with the *consolatio* tradition its overall strategy, the intellectualist emphasis on bringing about a change of attitude: 'Reason thus', look at it this way (so unavailing for John of Gaunt to Bolingbroke). But recognizing this much makes one realize that the changes of *opinio* that the Duke is urging are extreme, and that the whole speech rather resembles the 'encomium on death' delivered by the rhetor Alcidas, as Cicero describes it, which consisted 'of a list of all the evils to which mankind are exposed' (1.48.116). As Rudolf Kassel pointed out, from the context of Cicero's reference it is likely that Alcidas' *laudatio mortis* was a version of the mock-encomium, like those notorious paradoxes praising baldness, or smoke.⁸⁰ It seems to me that the Duke's *schola* dispraising life also needs to be read as a mock-encomium, or even a parody of the *consolatio*. Organized as twelve negative statements which the person awaiting death should address to life, expressed as a series of categorical denials—'Thou art not noble—Thou'rt by no means valiant. . . . Happy thou art not. . . . Thou art not certain'—it systematically empties out every positive quality we could find in human existence. Some of its arguments are more or less logically respectable, such as life being a steady progress towards death (11–13), but others seem distinctly specious, easily refuted.⁸¹ To say that man is not valiant, 'For thou dost fear the soft and tender fork / Of a poor worm' (15–17), is to cite a single, special case, ignoring all the many other instances of human courage. To

⁷⁸ Ever since Warburton's 1747 edition of Shakespeare it has been recognized that the lines 'Thy best of rest is sleep; / And that thou oft provok'st, yet grossly fear'st / Thy death, which is no more' (17–19) derive from Book One of the *Tusculans*: *Habet somnium imago mortis, eamque quotidie induis, et dubitas quin sensus in morte nullus sit, cum in eius simulacro videas esse nullum sensum* (1.38.92): 'So here you have slepe the ymage of our deathe, whyche you do deyly put uppon you: and do you doubte whether there be any feelynge in death, since in the ymage and pycture of the same, there is none at all?' (tr. Dolman, Sig.G₃'). T. W. Baldwin, having pointed out that both passages have 'the same intricate structural pattern', denied that Shakespeare used Dolman's translation, which renders *eamque* as 'whyche', where Shakespeare has the literal 'And that' (*op. cit.* in n. 40, Vol. 2, pp. 601–3). There is no doubt that Shakespeare used Dolman's version elsewhere, and I would add another possible echo here, for the lines: 'thou art Death's fool; / For him thou labour'st by thy flight to shun, / And yet run'st toward him still' (11–13), with Cicero: 'Youre tyme wyll come, and that shortly, whether you drawe backe from it, or hasten towards it (for swyfte wynged tyme flyes apace) . . .' (1.31.36; tr. Dolman, Sig.F₃').

⁷⁹ Katherine Duncan-Jones, 'Stoicism in *Measure for Measure*: A New Source', *Review of English Studies* 28 (1977): 441–6, claims parallels with De Mornay's *Discourse of Life and Death* in the Countess of Pembroke's 1592 translation.

⁸⁰ Kassel, *op. cit.* in n. 5, pp. 10–11.

⁸¹ T. W. Baldwin (*op. cit.* in n. 40, Vol. 2, pp. 84–6) offered an elaborate analysis of the speech's form as conforming to the model *argumentatio* given in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, without considering its content or substance.

claim that people are never content with what they have (21–3) is a familiar theme to satirists, but is hardly a convincing argument for preferring death to life. Even the memorable lines

Thou hast nor youth nor age,
But as it were an after-dinner sleep,
Dreaming on both. . . .

fails to erase the individual's memory of a youth that seemed endless, and his observation (in others, if not yet himself) of an old age all too uncomfortably protracted. It is a bravura performance, an unremittingly clever argument, which demands to be highlighted in production as a brilliant verbal display. (Applause from the on-lookers might be in order.) Comparison with serious developments of the same *topos* elsewhere suggests that this (like the Friar's words after Juliet's supposed death) is a deliberately specious set-piece—since the Duke isn't really a Friar, and Claudio isn't going to die.

As we experience it in the theatre, the Duke's speech can seem inordinately long, delivering many more words than the occasion strictly requires. It is usually received with that dull reverence given to famous speeches in Shakespeare, but if we assume that the Duke is sincere then it can be read as a Shakespearian send-up of the unfeeling and sometimes glib arguments used by consolers who themselves stand under no immediate fear of death. In which case Claudio's docile acceptance of it may be a parody, too:

I humbly thank you.
To sue to live, I find I seek to die,
And seeking death, find life. Let it come on. (41–3)

That this is how people facing death, having heard the comforter's words of wisdom, were supposed to respond—at any rate according to the *consolatio* literature—is clear from Shakespeare's probable source (and, I think, satirical target) here, the pseudo-Platonic *Axiochus*. As we noticed earlier, the anthology of classical texts which de Mornay added to the second edition of his *Discourse on Life and Death*, including the *Axiochus*, appeared in English in 1607 as *Six Excellent Treatises of Life and Death*, to accompany the Countess of Pembroke's translation of the *Discourse* (reissued a year earlier by the same printer), with which it shares the same running title. (In suggesting that Shakespeare used this text I realize that, since *Measure for Measure* was first performed in 1604, any borrowings from it must have been made for a later revival. However, given that recent scholarship accepts the idea of Shakespeare's plays undergoing continuous alteration for the theatre during his lifetime, or even after it,

then my suggestion will not seem unlikely.) In this dialogue Axiochus, fearing imminent death, is comforted by Socrates, who takes for one of his models that celebrated speech by the Sophist Prodicus (quoted above), on the *topos de miseriis vitae humanae* [5]. Although it contains traditional references to the evils of old age (being blind, deaf, crippled), none of its linguistic details is echoed by the Duke. But Shakespeare seems to have noted the approving acceptance awarded to such persuasions in *consolatio* theory. Socrates records that Prodicus' speech 'produced so many reasons against the love of this life, as I was ready to have hastened my owne death; and after that my soule did nothing but desire death' (366C; Sig.A₁₂^v). Axiochus gives a similarly satisfied response to Socrates' final argument (370A–372A) for the immortality of the soul:

Thy discourse hath made mee change my mind; & I am now so far from
fearing death, that contrariwise I ardently desire the same. (372A; Sig.C₂^r)

Claudio, too, echoes this docile response to a purely verbal recommendation of death over life—which, to anyone of a sceptical disposition, may seem slightly incredible.

Claudio is the recipient of not one, but two consolations, and his response to the second casts a retrospectively ironic light on the first. Isabella also tries to persuade Claudio to accept his death sentence, but she has a particular reason for doing so, which we know but Claudio does not, namely that Angelo has offered her the alternatives, either her virginity (and with it, as a novice about to enter an order, her immortal soul) or Claudio's life. From the outset, then, we see her as another of those consolers who use the genre to further their own interests, not those of the sufferer:

O, I do fear thee Claudio, and I quake,
Lest thou a feverous life shouldst entertain,
And six or seven winters more respect
Than a perpetual honour. (73–6)

Not that Isabella comes anywhere near the evil of Claudius or Iago, of course, but still her arguments are directed more towards her own benefit than her brother's. Isabella also uses the familiar *topos* of the miseries of the human condition but notably feebly, in setting 'perpetual honour' against a merely 'feverous life' of such a short span. The rhetorical technique of augmenting one's own case by minimizing the opposition's has seldom looked so threadbare. Isabella then invokes the common stereotype [13] of manliness in the face of death:

Darest thou die?
The sense of death is most in apprehension,
the 'poor beetle' suffering as much pain as a giant (76–80).

Despite appealing to the argument of comparative suffering, Isabella has failed to remove Claudio's conviction that 'Death is a fearful thing', again showing the inefficacy of this philosophical argument. She has also exposed it at its weakest point, the reality of the individual's 'apprehension' of 'corporal sufferance', as Claudio now reveals:

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
 To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot;
 This sensible warm motion to become
 A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
 To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
 In thrilling regions of thick-ribbed ice;
 To be imprisoned in the viewless winds
 And blown with restless violence round about
 The pendent world; or to be worse than worst
 Of those that lawless and incertain thought
 Imagine howling—'tis too horrible. (114ff)

This famous scene reveals a number of anomalies when viewed in the context of the *consolatio*. Claudio's speech is evidently an answer to the Duke's discrediting of life, but—unlike any other such rejection in Shakespeare—it is not delivered to the consoler's face. One could justify this unique non-confrontation between the two speeches in dramatic terms, since it would challenge the Duke's authority head-on, which might weaken his otherwise omniscient stature; and it could prolong the scene into a debate if the Duke were to answer, as Friar Laurence does to Romeo, 'Let me dispute with thee of thy estate'. Setting aside the theatrical question (which can hardly be solved, in any case), in terms of the *consolatio* it is striking that the Duke, in choosing to discredit life [5], had neither urged the comfort of the soul's immortality, as a Christian would, nor tried to make death seem 'natural' [4], and so, unfrightening [1], as an ancient Stoic would. But then, in a matching eccentricity, Claudio's objection ignores the Duke's case, and instead of arguing the pleasures of life describes the terrors of death, as if to say that the Duke had neglected or ignored that argument. Such objections, in the consolatory works of Cicero and Seneca, are cited only to be refuted: Shakespeare allows this one to stand. One question this raises is whether Shakespeare has deliberately not co-ordinated argument and counter-argument? If so, had he noticed that the authors of consolatory works made life easy for themselves by their selection of arguments to discuss or ignore?

The final anomaly is the strangest. In the classical *consolationes* the state of the soul after death is defined by a dichotomy. As Cicero puts it (summarizing Socrates' arguments in the *Apology*), either the soul is material and perishes with the body, in which case the Epicureans are

right, that 'even with our life our sense is lost; and he that feeleth nothinge, neede not to passe, what chaunce betides him'. Or else the Platonists' beliefs 'put us in good hope (if that delights you) that our soules . . . abyde after death' and 'passe into the hevens, as a place appointed for them' (*Tusc.D.*, 1.11.24–5; tr. Dolman, Sig.C₄^r). Shakespeare has thought of a third possibility for Claudio, whose vision is so terrifying because it presents the soul as neither insensible nor disporting itself in heaven but enduring the indignities of physical corruption in full awareness, lying in the cold earth and rotting, able to feel it happening. This would be like being buried alive. Shakespeare could have taken the germ of this idea from some passages in the *Tusculans*, such as Cicero's accounts of 'those auncent fathers' who believed 'that there is in death feeling; and that a man by departing of his life, is not so utterly extinguished, that he should altogether peryshe' (1.12.27; Sig.C₅^r). Cicero's interlocutor had just expressed the fear 'leaste it be a grieve . . . that I must lacke sense' after death (1.12.26; Sig.C₄^v), but he might be glad to do so once he hears the later account of how it is that human ignorance of the physical whereabouts of the soul after death has 'fayned and invented hell and such terroures. . . . For our bodyes being layd in the grounde, and covered with earth . . . they thought the rest of our life should be led under ground' (1.16.36; Sig.C₈^v).

Shakespeare may well have recognized the prominence of this theme in the *Tusculans*, but he undoubtedly drew on the *Axiochus*. (The works are related in several ways, and as we know from study of his sources, he often moved laterally, conflating two or more versions of the same story.) After Socrates has comforted him with a number of traditional *topoi*, Axiochus objects that although he is aware of these arguments,

when it comes to the point, and to be apprehended indeed, all this bravery of wordes closely slinkes away, without so much as a cogitation thereon: and instead therof, a certain feare takes place, which surpriseth my minde, when I think that I must bee deprived of this light, of so much worldly goods, to lie and rot, I know not where, in a place where I shall not be seen or heard of any body, there to bee changed into wormes and loathsome creatures. (365C; Sig.A₈^v–A₉^r).

The closeness of phrasing leaves no doubt as to Shakespeare's source here.⁸² Socrates' reply, which provided Shakespeare with a basis for

⁸² For purposes of comparison I give the end of this passage in the 1592 translation by 'Edw. Spenser': 'that Tormentor feare, the messenger of dreaded daungers, dooth sundry wayes wound and gall my grieved minde, whispering continually in mine eare that if I bee once deprived of this worldly light, and bereft of goods: I shall like a rotten blocke lye in the darksome deapth, neither seene nor heard of any, beeing resolved into dust and wormes'; ed. Gottfried (*op. cit.* in n. 46) p. 29.—In De Mornay's French translation it reads: 'au lieu

expanding Claudio's counter-argument, is to point out that Axiochus' fears are contradictory:

You couple sense, and the state of death together; so that your wordes and deedes are one repugnant to the other: For you consider not that at one instant, you grieve for the losse of sense, and the putrefaction which you fear to feelee, together with the prevention of the delights of this life: even as if after death, you were to leade another earthly life, and to enjoy the senses which now you doe. (365D; Sig.A₉^r–A₉^v)

But the fact is that after death the body remaining 'is not that which we cal man, but rather a lump of earth and clay, without reason or sense' (365E; Sig.A₁₀^r–A₁₀^v). Death 'is hideous onely to those that forge feares to themselves' (369C; Sig.B₉^v–B₁₀^r), for, 'being dead you are no more; and he that is not, cannot perceive this privation: how can he therefore be grieved at a thing, whereof hee shall have no apprehension?' (370A; Sig.B₁₁^v).

Shakespeare observes Socrates' arguments but, in the critical reaction which he so often shows towards the *consolatio*, prefers not to follow them. Rather, he takes up precisely the contradiction between a belief in insensibility after death and a fear of what happens to the body, being 'changed into wormes and loathsome creatures', and develops what it would mean to experience 'putrefaction' while having full 'apprehension'. The Duke's brilliant verbal display has left absolutely untouched the fear that so many people have of death. The *consolatio* literature certainly emphasized the reality of such 'right heavy maysters', as Cicero described them, 'that is to wite, continuall terror, and dayly and nightly feare' of death (*Tusc.D.*, 1.21.48; tr. Dolman, Sig.D₇^v). Epicurus, as we have seen, recognized that people fear death 'through some sort of unreasoning imagination; and since in imagination they set no limit to suffering, they are beset by turmoil'. Certainly Claudio's vivid imagination has affected many who share these fears (as we know from Arthur Murphy's recollection of Dr. Johnson),⁸³ offering as it does the most extreme reaction to

de cela survient une certaine crainte qui tenaille mon esprit, quand je pense qu'il faut estre privé de ceste lumiere, de tant de biens de ce monde, pourrir & gesir je ne sçay où, en un lieu où je ne seray veu ni ouy de personne, pour y estre changé en vers & bestes monstueuses': *Excellens Traitez et discours de la vie et de la mort* (Geneva, 1581), Sig.E₅^r. I thank Jean Starobinski for helping me obtain a photocopy of this work.

⁸³ 'The contemplation of his own approaching end was constantly before his eyes; and the prospect of death, he declared, was terrible. For many years, when he was not disposed to enter into the conversation going forward, whoever sat next his chair might hear him repeating, from Shakespeare,

Ay, but to die and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot . . .'

Johnsonian Miscellanies, ed. G. B. Hill, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1897), I.439.

the Duke's avoidance of the reality of death. Nor does Shakespeare stop with the corpse in the grave, but goes on to imagine the 'delighted spirit', the hypersensitive soul, swept from one violent extreme of feeling to another, from 'fiery floods' to 'thick-ribbed ice', or whirled around in the 'viewless winds', random, undirected in their 'restless violence'. Commentators have long connected these lines with the classical notion of Hades as a place of punishment for sinners, and Shakespeare may have regarded as altogether too easy Cicero's dismissal of the traditional accounts of hell and its horrors as but the 'monsters of Poetes and Paynters'. 'These thinges perchaunce you feare', he says mockingly to his interlocutor, 'and therfore thinke death to be the greatest evell that may be' (*Tusc.D.*, 1.5.10–6.11; tr. Dolman, Sig.B₅^v–B₆^r). But many people continued to fear hell, all the more so after its graphic representation in post-medieval literature and art. Claudio's final vision is the 'lawless' thought of souls returning from the dead, with their senses and even their memories intact. Instead of the deep sleep 'after life's fitful fevers' promised by traditional *solacia*, here is suffering, with full perception, infinitely prolonged. Where the *consolatio* often concluded with the balancing of gains and losses, in order to make death preferable to life, Claudio's conclusion is the single definitive rejection of that whole school of thought:

The weariest and most loathed worldly life
That age, ache, penury, and imprisonment
Can lay on nature, is a paradise
To what we fear of death.

No indeed, as Cicero reluctantly admitted, some men 'get no relief from words of comfort' (*Tusc.D.*, 3.30.73).

Her consolation rejected, Isabella collapses into a hysterical outburst against Claudio ('O faithless coward! O dishonest wretch!') leading to the terrible conclusion: 'Die, perish . . . / I'll pray a thousand prayers for thy death, / No word to save thee' (135–46). This is the most painful instance in all of Shakespeare's plays of a failed consolation. Isabella's earthly and heavenly happiness, at this point, depend on her persuading Claudio to die quietly, so that the play's whole action now hinges on the power of a *consolatio* to allay the fears of death. She fails, but the Duke's failure is the more damaging, and he must know this, despite his subsequent assurances to Eschelus that, having 'discredited' Claudio's 'many deceiving promises of life', the prisoner 'is resolved to die' (3.2. 242ff). The Duke is able to reconcile Isabella and Claudio with his plot to trap Angelo, but at a later point in the action he has to console yet another man awaiting death, Barnardine, who is a living and breathing challenge to the whole *consolatio mortis* tradition, premised as it was on the common fear of death. Barnardine is the remarkable exception,

A man that apprehends death no more dreadfully but as a drunken sleep—
careless, reckless, and fearless of what's past, present, or to come; insensible
of mortality, and desperately mortal. (4.2.141ff)

The Duke plans to have Barnardine executed for his crimes, so that his head may be substituted for Claudio's, offering to 'give him a present shrift and advise him for a better place' (205ff). But when he announces to the condemned man his intention 'to advise you, comfort you, and pray with you' before 'the journey you shall go', Barnardine rudely rejects his offices, and the Duke is forced to concede that the *consolatio* is powerless with 'A creature unprepared, unmeet for death' (4.3.31ff). The significance of the Barnardine episode, J. W. Lever comments, is to 'assert the major truth, that no man's life was so worthless as to be sacrificed to another's convenience'.⁸⁴ In the context of this play, full of so many parallels and contrasts, that truth is double-edged, for it applies just as much to Isabella, ready to sacrifice her brother to retain her chastity. Luckily for her, perhaps, and for the Duke, the refusal of comfort by Claudio and Barnardine shows that, despite the handbooks' air of assurance, it is not that easy to persuade people to die.

VI

The other main reason given by Shakespeare's characters for rejecting consolation shifts the emphasis from the sufferers' grief to the consolers' ability to perform their office. In this aggressive formulation the sufferer accuses the would-be comforter of being disqualified from his or her *officium consolandi* since they don't know what they are talking about: not having felt this form of distress, they can neither understand nor console those suffering from it. When Friar Laurence says to Romeo, 'Let me dispute with thee of thy estate' he receives this rebuff:

Thou canst not speak of that thou dost not feel.
Wert thou as young as I, Juliet thy love,
An hour but married, Tybalt murdered,
Doting like me, and like me banished,
Then mightst thou speak, then mightst thou tear thy hair,
And fall upon the ground, as I do now,
Taking the measure of an unmade grave. (3.3.64ff)

This is of course a slightly ridiculous argument: the need to possess such qualifications in advance would rather reduce the number of possible

⁸⁴ *Measure for Measure* (London, 1965), p. xc.

Patience unmoved, no marvel though she pause:
They can be meek that have no other cause.
A wretched soul bruised with adversity
We bid be quiet when we hear it cry.
But were we burdened with like weight of pain,
As much, or more, we should ourselves complain.
So thou, that hast no unkind mate to grieve thee,
With urging helpless patience would relieve me;
But if thou live to see like right bereft,
This fool-begged patience in thee will be left.

(2.1.30ff)

King Philip. Patience, good lady, comfort, gentle Constance!
Constance. No, I defy all counsel, all redress,
 But that which ends all counsel, true redress,
 Death, death, o amiable lovely death. . . .
 Misery's love,
 O come to me! (3.4.25ff)

I am not mad; I would to heaven I were!
For then, 'tis like I should forget myself.
O, if I could, what grief should I forget? (48ff)

Pandulph. You hold too heinous a respect of grief.
Constance. He talks to me, that never had a son.
Philip. You are as fond of grief, as of your child.
Constance. Grief fills the room up of my absent child,

Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,
 Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words . . . ;
 Then, have I reason to be fond of grief? (90ff)

That is the element seldom given enough recognition in the *consolatio*, the total living presence of the lost person. Her son is murdered in the next scene, an event which only exposes the futility of her consolers' attempting to alter her attitude, with the massive change of values that this would imply. She dismisses them:

Fare you well; had you such a loss as I,
 I could give better comfort than you do. . . . (99ff)

Now, knowing what it feels like to lose a child, she would be qualified to offer consolation.

In *Much Ado about Nothing* Leonato has not actually lost his daughter, for the report of Hero's death is a mere pretence to bring Claudio to repentance, as we well know. All the same, Shakespeare writes a set-piece scene, over 40 lines long, in which his brother Antonio tries to dissuade Leonato from grieving, with the traditional argument [12] that excessive grief will destroy him (5.1.1–3), only to have his counsel rejected as 'profitless'. The sole 'comforter' that Leonato (like Romeo) will accept is one whose situation exactly matches his own, a father who has lost his beloved child. If such a man could 'patch' his own 'grief with proverbs', then he might learn patience from him (5–19). But Leonato dismisses that possibility in advance, there being

no such man, for brother, men
 Can counsel and speak comfort to that grief
 Which they themselves not feel; but tasting it,
 Their counsel turns to passion, which before
 Would give preceptual medicine to rage,
 Fetter strong madness in a silken thread,
 Charm ache with air, and agony with words. (20–26)

In his attempt to discredit consolation Leonato begins to grow sophistic: to reduce the language of comfort to mere 'words' or 'air' is the tactic of Falstaff trying to discredit honour, or Iago reputation. Shakespeare could have given Antonio a counter-argument at this point, but he only permits him a relatively feeble complaint, allowing Leonato to reiterate his argument that nobody has the strength or self-sufficiency to 'be so moral, when he shall endure' the same grief as the sufferer:

For there was never yet philosopher,
 That could endure the toothache patiently,
 However they have writ the style of gods,
 And made a push at chance and sufferance. (33–38)

An air of finality attaches to that speech, a logical development that seems to silence any further discussion: 'so much for all those who have tried to compose precepts for living, or attempted to oppose adversity and misfortune'.

Shakespeare is being provocative here, turning against the philosophers what Cicero describes as 'the auncient waye, fyrste used by Socrates, to dispute agaynst all mens opinions', namely when one speaker had argued his case then to 'hold the contrarye' (*Tusc.D.*, 1.4.8; tr. Dolman, Sig.B₄^v). So in his extended 'disputacion' with this ancient genre Shakespeare here allows Leonato to argue the case against *consolatio* but suppresses the other side. Once again he takes material from the consolatory tradition but edits it, leaving out the positive reply that the philosophers gave at length to such objections. In Book Three of the *Tusculans* Cicero specifically discussed the common complaint that those who consoled others for a specific loss were unable to console themselves, citing Oileus (in Sophocles' lost play *Ajax Lokros*) who had comforted Telamon on the loss of his son Ajax, but when he heard of his own son's death 'was even overcome with sorowe' (3.29.71; tr. Dolman, Sig.R₂^v–R₃^r). Cicero admits that this can happen, having earlier quoted the instance of Dionysius, 'a vayne and a light man', who had learned of Zeno the Stoic's injunction 'to be stoute against grieve', but completely failed his master. 'For having a payne in the raines of his backe, in his greatest gryefe he cryed out, that all those thinges were false whiche he had learned afore as concerning grieve'. When asked by his schoolfellow Cleanthes why he had changed his opinion Dionysius replied that 'if I should spend all my time in Philosophy, and not able to beare gryefe, it were a sufficient prooffe that it is an evell' (2.25.60; Sig.M₅^r). Not bothering to make the obvious comment that the fault may lie in the pupil, not in the philosophy, Cicero adds a positive example of the philosopher Posidonius, continuing to teach although 'grevously sicke' (2.25.61; Sig.M₅^v–M₆^r). The fact that some philosophers cannot 'cloke theyr owne miserye' when misfortune comes is merely another proof that human beings can be inconsistent (3.30.73; Sig.R₄^r). That philosophers could practise what they preached can be seen from many well-organized florilegia, under the heading *patientia*, which list several who had suffered adversity with dignity and patience, including, notably enough, Cicero and Seneca. Shakespeare uses this tradition, as we can see, but from time to time turns it against itself, seeking out its weak points, exposing the complacencies or unthinking assumptions on which it rests.

Shakespeare's most intense probing of this genre takes place in *King Lear*, which again presents the case against *consolatio* but also gives a triumphant vindication of it. That may seem a surprising judgment, given

the catastrophic nature of the sufferings depicted in that tragedy, but a reconsideration of it in the context I have built up will, I hope, justify my claim. The action, as it develops in the central acts, takes on the character of a pursuit, hunters and hunted, oppressors and oppressed. On the one side are the hypocritical children Goneril, Regan (with Cornwall) and Edmund, who have been given power and legitimacy by Lear and Gloucester, fathers who cannot distinguish truth from flattery, good from evil. On the other side are those who either gave their power away or were cheated of it, Lear, Gloucester, Cordelia, Edgar, and Kent. As critics have long noticed, the play seems to divide up into two conflicting worlds, a division which, I shall argue, corresponds to one between those who give consolation and those who withhold it. The two sides are explicitly juxtaposed at the moment when Lear goes out into the night and the storm:

Goneril. 'Tis his own blame hath put himself from rest,
And must needs taste his folly. . . .
Gloucester. Alack, the night comes on, and the high winds
Do sorely ruffle; for many miles about
There's scarce a bush.
Regan. O, sir, to willful men
The injuries that they themselves procure
Must be their schoolmasters. (2.2.290–304)

Lear's daughters speak with the total lack of sympathy of a Sebastian, or several characters in *Richard III*. In a later and similarly explicit juxtaposition Gloucester again represents humanity, this time contrasted with the hypocrisy of Edmund, who feigns sympathy but instantly betrays it. Gloucester is outraged at the 'unnatural dealing' of Goneril, Regan and Cornwall to his request to 'pity' Lear, who forbade him 'to speak of him, entreat for him, or any way sustain him' (3.3.1ff). Determined to look for Lear and 'privily relieve him', Gloucester engages Edmund as a helper to distract Cornwall, so that 'my charity be not of him perceived'. Edmund's response, out of Gloucester's hearing, is immediate:

This courtesy forbid thee shall the Duke
Instantly know.

Since it is now a crime to give succour, Edmund, having betrayed his father to Cornwall, goes off to bring him back to punishment, contemplating the possibility of a nice bonus: '[*Aside*]. If I find him [Gloucester] comforting the King, it will stuff his [Cornwall's] suspicion more fully' (3.5.21ff). The very act of giving or denying comfort now defines to which world characters belong.

King Lear differs from any other Shakespearian tragedy by the

intensity of suffering it contains and by the number of people who suffer. Both elements constitute a challenge to purely verbal consolation, since where the suffering is so physical—being naked in a tempest of wind and rain; being blinded; going mad—then words alone cannot help much. This point was recognized, however, in the moral philosophy on which the *consolatio* was based. The genre normally addresses an irrevocable loss, a *fait accompli* with which people must come to terms as best they can. But where a situation is still open to change and amelioration, philosophers taught, the duty to help is primary. As Cicero asked, ‘Why shouldest thou pitie a man rather than helpe him, if thou canst? Can we not be liberall without pitie? We ought not to sorowe for other men but, if we can, to ease others of sorowe’ (*Tusc.D.*, 4.26.56; tr. Dolman, Sig.X₁^v). In *King Lear*, while we have constant proof of human viciousness, we also find the spontaneous desire to help alleviate suffering, no matter at what discomfort or danger. No other Shakespeare play involving *consolatio* has so many instances of practical help. Lear is tended by the Fool, by Kent, by Gloucester, by Edgar (disguised as Poor Tom), and finally by Cordelia, all risking their lives in the process. They offer ‘friendship’, ‘fire and food’, ‘comfort’, ‘welcome and protection’. When Cornwall blinds Gloucester, one of Cornwall’s servants, ‘thrilled with remorse’ (pity), as we are later told (4.1.74), tries to defend the helpless victim and is killed in the attempt. Other servants of Cornwall find ‘some flax and whites of eggs / To apply to his bleeding face’ (3.7.106f); he is led to safety by one of his own tenants (4.1.15ff), until Edgar takes over and saves him from being murdered, from committing suicide, and from general despair.

This counter-movement of help, involving an allocentric not egocentric response to suffering, complements but cannot cancel out the violence and malice dominant elsewhere in the play. Such help is consoling, but it does not take the form of a *consolatio*. This expresses, I believe, Shakespeare’s recognition that with suffering of this magnitude words would be inadequate, deeds alone can offer comfort. Yet *King Lear* does include verbal consolation, risky though that enterprise is in such a world, mostly connected with the figure of Edgar. When Kent, Gloucester and the Fool help carry Lear to the litter that Gloucester has made ready, Edgar, left behind as Poor Tom, a naked Bedlam beggar who can hardly be relied on for such humane tasks, reverts to verse and to his normal voice to deliver a soliloquy commenting on the events that he and we have been experiencing. His thoughts fall into the stock pattern of the familiar consolatory *topos* [21], that seeing others’ suffering makes one’s own easier to bear. Edgar produces the appropriate *sententiae* predigested into rhyming couplets:

When we our betters see bearing our woes,
 We scarcely think our miseries our foes.
 Who alone suffers, suffers most i'th' mind. . . .
 How light and portable⁸⁵ my pain seems now,
 When that which makes me bend, makes the King bow—
 He childed as I fathered. (3.6.102ff)

This speech presents Edgar as a text-book *consolator*. He is consoling himself, as Cicero, Seneca, and Plutarch recommended (since only those who can console themselves know how to console others),⁸⁶ and he is doing so in the measured and detached tones of the *sapiens*, comfortably superior to his grief. Absent from the scene, for once, is anyone like Brabantio, to parody these couplets, or Leonato, to mock at those who offer 'preceptual medicine'. Shakespeare will shortly set this *consolatio*, like so many others, in a dramatic context designed to expose its limitations, but his plan does not involve any further interlocutor or opponent: Edgar will correct that picture himself.

Having become separated from the main party, when we next see Edgar he is still alone. So he has no need to reassume his role as Poor Tom, and can continue with his self-consolation, this time in unrhymed verse:

Yet better thus, and known to be contemned,
 Than still contemned and flattered. To be worst,
 The lowest and most dejected thing of fortune,
 Stands still in esperance, lives not in fear. . . . (4.1.1ff)

With its sententious style and efficient assemblage of *topoi*—in the assaults of fortune we are free from flattery; the self-sufficient wise man is indebted to no-one—this is still book-learning, conned by rote. Then experience intervenes:

But who comes here?
 My father, poorly led?

Edgar's assured philosophy is now in ruins:

O gods! Who is't can say, I am at the worst?
 I am worse than e'er I was. . . .

⁸⁵ Cf. *Axiochus* 367A on 'the discommodities' of youth, which, compared to those of later life 'will appeare to be but pleasant and supportable' (1607 translation, Sig.B₂^v).

⁸⁶ Plutarch writes that in dealing with our own misfortunes it is good 'to call to mind the arguments which most likely we have sometimes employed with relatives and friends in similar calamities, . . . always recalling the means through which we must cure the soul's distress': *Apol.* 118B–C. As he repeats in the consolation to his wife, 'it is reasonable that the arguments we have often used to others should be of seasonable aid to ourselves as well . . .': *Ux.* 608F.

And worse I may be yet. The worst is not
So long as we can say, this is the worst.

Shakespeare, we might say, has taken Edgar out of the philosophy schools, put him through a shock course in real life. His scale of benefits and disadvantages, so often manoeuvred by the *consolator* to achieve a more comforting balance, has collapsed, burst its own frame, opening out onto an as yet unknown area of suffering.

Yet, despite the scepticism of those who think that verbal consolation is ineffective, Edgar is equal to his task. At the end of the play he sums up his acts since meeting his newly-blinded father, recounting how he 'became his guide, / Led him, begged for him, saved him from despair' (5.3.185ff). Edgar's personal tending of Gloucester at times reminds one of the professional consoler or 'house philosopher' employed by some Roman emperors.⁸⁷ When Gloucester attempts suicide, wishing to shake off 'my great affliction', unable to 'bear it longer', desiring the 'comfort' and 'benefit / To end itself by death', Edgar prevents him and convinces him that 'the clearest gods' have intervened (4.6. 34ff). Edgar tells the audience: 'Why I do trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it', validating the whole notion of philosophy as the *cura animi* that is expounded in the *Tusculans* (which also condemned suicide: 1.30.74). Edgar is successful, too, for Gloucester vows to turn suffering against itself:

henceforth I'll bear
Affliction, till it do cry out itself,
Enough, enough, and die. (4.6.75ff)

'Bear free and patient thoughts', Edgar advises, summing up this episode of a *consolatio* that has for once been successful.

No repose lasts long in this play, however, at least not before death, and the very conception of suffering takes on a new dimension with the entry of mad Lear. Edgar and Gloucester forget their own woes in responding to Lear's:

Edgar. O thou side-piercing sight! . . . (85)
Gloucester. O let me kiss that hand.
Lear. Let me wipe it first, it smells of mortality.
Gloucester. O ruined piece of nature; this great world
Shall so wear out to naught. . . . (132ff)
Edgar. I would not take this from report—it is,
And my heart breaks at it. (141f)

⁸⁷ See, e.g., Samuel Dill, *Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius* (London, 1920) on 'The Philosophical Director' (pp. 289–333).

Edgar no longer has any store of consolatory couplets to cheer himself up at the sight of others' greater miseries. But a *consolatio* is delivered all the same, completely unexpectedly, by the mad King:

Lear. If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes.
 I know thee well enough, thy name is Gloucester.
 Thou must be patient; we came crying hither.
 Thou know'st, the first time that we smell the air
 We wawl, and cry. I will preach to thee. Mark.
Gloucester. Alack, alack the day!
Lear. When we are born, we cry that we are come
 To this great stage of fools.—This' a good block. . . . (176ff)

To anyone familiar with the philosophical tradition, who knows the topics *de miseriis vitae humanae*, and the use by Lucretius, Seneca, and others, of the new-born infant's tears as an instance of the sufferings to which man is born, their reappearance here has a stunning effect. That Lear's 'matter and impertinency mixed' should have hit on just the appropriate argument to console someone in great distress—like Gloucester, like Edgar, like himself—is Shakespeare's most inspired use of this classical genre.

The further, most moving idea it provokes is that here we have no 'candle-wasters' giving 'preceptial medicine', as Leonato put it, no detached *consolator* with his pre-digested *topoi* scolding some poor bereaved person. Now the consolers are themselves sufferers, comforting each other. That is to say, the qualification demanded by other characters in Shakespeare resentful of consolation, that the consoler should know their distress from first-hand experience, has been fulfilled. Shakespeare has set up a stringent condition for the *consolator*, and—in and through these tragic experiences—fulfilled it. Gloucester had earlier described Poor Tom as one 'whom the heaven's plagues / Have humbled to all strokes' (4.1.64f), and now, having dropped his disguise, Edgar describes himself as

A most poor man, made tame to fortune's blows;
 Who, by the art of known and feeling sorrows,
 Am pregnant to good pity. (217ff)

He is not alone, either. What differentiates *King Lear* from the harsh world of the early histories is that here, amid equally brutal acts, sufferers can still care for others.

In this play Shakespeare has taken *consolatio* out of the benign place that the theorists gave it, within a society where everyone is ready to perform the *officium consolandi*, and put it into one riven by the violent division between self-centred and other-centred behaviour. Gloucester is one of the victims, and when he comes to compare his sufferings with Lear's he finds no comfort in reflecting that the other chap is worse off

[21]. Rather, he is moved to a new degree of desperation, considering the advantages of being insane:

The King is mad: how stiff is my vile sense,
That I stand up, and have ingenious feeling
Of my huge sorrows! Better I were distract;
So should my thoughts be severed from my griefs,
And woes, by wrong imaginations, lose
The knowledge of themselves. (4.6.279ff)

Like Constance in *King John*, Gloucester would prefer the narcosis of madness to the burden of reason and perception. But whatever Gloucester's relapses, Edgar is always there to maintain his father's fortitude and defeat despair:

Edgar. What, in ill thoughts again? Men must endure
Their going hence, even as their coming hither;
Ripeness is all. Come on.
Gloucester. And that's true too. (5.2.5ff)

In sharp contrast to that lesson of patience, reviving the division between those who give and those who deny comfort with which the tragic action began, is Edgar's response to Edmund in the scene following. The harsher tones of moral responsibility for one's deeds, so frequent in the early histories, sound again as the legitimate son pronounces a judgment which, in a structural parallel to Gloucester's accepting Edgar's words in the previous scene, is accepted by his other, hypocritical, bastard son:

Edgar. The dark and vicious place where thee he got
Cost him his eyes.
Edmund. Th'hast spoken right, 'tis true. (5.3.173–7)

The value-system on which the *consolatio* rests, having been tested to breaking-point, still survives. After all the criticism expressed of it, the old idea that 'the mind much sufferance doth o'erskip, / When grief hath mates, and bearing fellowship', we now know, can be true if sufferers really do care for each other. Cicero described the 'most profit of all philosophy' as being 'the ease of grieffe of the minde, feare and desire . . .' (*Tusc.D.*, 1.49.119; tr. Dolman, Sig.J₁^r). In Edgar's consoling his father the offices of philosophy are validated, even if Gloucester was unable to cope with the impact of Edgar revealing his true identity (his heart burst 'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief'). Kent, too, broke down in tears on recognizing Edgar, 'finding / Who 'twas that so endur'd' (213ff), that quality recommended by the philosophers, in which Lear finally excelled them all: 'The wonder is he hath endured so long' (321). Reading

King Lear makes us realize the actual cost, and limits of, endurance. Albany says at the end:

What comfort to this great decay may come
Shall be applied. (5.3.298f)

We cannot imagine what comfort that might be; but at least a human being is willing to give it. For all of his critical examination of the *consolatio* genre, Shakespeare also practised it.