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The Lost Art of Consolation

After a stratospheric year as Consul, Marcus Tullius Cicero was on top of the Roman world. Five years later, that world had turned on him. He was ostracized, pressured into exile, his property confiscated or destroyed. He spent a year and a half wandering, aimless and adrift. A decade later, his wife left him. He immediately married again, but badly, and only for the money.¹

Rock bottom, though, had yet to come. In 45 BCE, his beloved daughter Tullia died from complications of childbirth. She was only 32.

Familiar questions began to haunt him. *Is there life after death? Are our loved ones in heaven? How could things go so wrong?* And, perhaps most pressing of all, *Is there any way to recover from something as earth-shattering as the death of a child?*

The problem, as every ancient thinker emphasizes, is Fortune: luck, chance, randomness, circumstances beyond our control. Looking back three

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and a half centuries later, the Christian convert Lactantius was impressed by how courageously Cicero had fought back all his life—right up to the moment he couldn't any longer:

In his *Consolation*, Marcus Tullius says he always fought Fortune and won, in thwarting his enemies' attacks. She didn't break him even when he'd been chased from home and homeland. Then, though, when he lost his dearest daughter, he shamefully admits that Fortune has defeated him: "I give up," he says. "It's over."²

The death of a child can do that. It can make a person fall to pieces. As Cicero put it elsewhere (*Tusculan Disputations* 3.61),

People whose grief is so great that they're falling to pieces and can't hold together should be supported by all kinds of assistance. That's why the Stoics think grief is called *lupe*, since it's a "dissolution" of the whole person.

In the text to which Lactantius refers, the *Consolation*, Cicero did something he later boasted no one had ever done before. "I hacked Nature," he declares, "and talked *myself* out of depression."³

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The idea of a *self*-consolation is familiar from many later writers, from Marcus Aurelius to Augustine to Boethius. At the time, however, it was something new in world literature, equal parts philosophy and motivational speech. It seems history's greatest speaker put all his powers of persuasion to convince an audience of one—himself—to get past his grief and move on.

And, says Cicero, it worked.



Effigiem oris, sermonis, animi mei

She's exactly like me—face, speech, heart and soul.

—Cicero, *Letter to Quintus*, 1.3/3.3

Who was Tullia Ciceronis? As far as we can tell, she was an extraordinary woman who was born into extraordinary circumstances. Yet her life was not the fairytale it should have been.

Born in 78 BCE, Cicero's only daughter found herself widowed at age 20. She remarried at 22, then divorced and remarried again at 27, to a bad husband. That third marriage produced one stillbirth, little love, and a second divorce a few years later—while Tullia was pregnant. In January 45, at the age of 32, she gave birth to a boy, but the baby did not

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live. The next month, Tullia herself died of complications at her father's country villa.

Throughout this life of disappointments, Tullia radiated strength and resilience. Cicero repeatedly praised her fortitude, and even chose a strange word to describe it: *virtus*, greatness or manfulness—a word which, thanks to its root in the word for a man or hero (*vir*), had never been applied to a woman before. Cicero saw his daughter as a hero, a saint. When she died, therefore, he was sure she was in heaven—was *up* there, looking down, happy, safe, and waiting for him. That she, and eventually he, would live forever.

All this sounds very Christian, and it is, in no small part because the Christian notion of heaven is indebted, like Cicero, more to Platonic philosophy than to the Judaism from which it sprang. Regardless of our religion, though, these thoughts will be familiar to all of us who have lost a loved one. It has always been so. In the face of unremitting misery, as the Enlightenment thinker Voltaire asked in his *Homily on Atheism*,

what position does there remain for us to take? Is it not the one taken by all the scholars of antiquity in India, Chaldea, Greece, Rome, that of believing that God will cause us to pass from this

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unhappy life to a better one, which will be the development of our nature?⁴

Moreover, like so many bereft parents, Cicero resolved to build a shrine to his beloved daughter. Unlike most, however, he wanted the “shrine” to be an *actual* shrine—a church, we would call it today—with Tullia herself literally worshipped as a god. He began making plans to make it happen.

But it never came to pass. Perhaps such plans were just a part of his grieving process.



Fortis Fortuna adiuvat.

Fortune favors fortitude.

—Roman proverb

(Terence, *Phormio* 203, cited by Cicero)

“Stoicism,” says Peter Breggin, “is a philosophy for someone going down in an airplane.” When Cicero needed help, he was going down in an airplane. He turned to the wisdom of ancient Greece for answers.

In the weeks following Tullia’s death, Cicero read and reread classic philosophical treatises on coping with grief. By his time, “consolatory literature” was an established genre. The finest examples to reach us are three letters by Seneca, a Stoic, and

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two by Plutarch, a Platonist, but those all lay generations in the future. In Cicero's time, the greatest guide to bereavement—cited several times in the text translated here—was a treatise by Crantor of Soli (d. 276 BCE). That treatise is lost today, but traces of it appear in later consolatory literature by Plutarch and Cicero himself, especially his *Tusculan Disputations*, which he wrote very soon after the *Consolation*.⁵ And we know enough about Crantor's treatise to realize its coping strategies and grief therapies are nothing like practices commonly recommended today.

Grieving today is collective and often analyzed as a series of stages. For Crantor, as for the Stoics who refined his ideas, it is a matter of individuals finding the inner strength to accept reality—or comforting illusions—and moving on. Cold logic will convince us that death is part of life, indeed better than life, and that we're nothing special: tragedy and loss are inherent in the human condition. Others have survived it before us, which means we can, too. Resilience, endurance, and individual effort, therefore, are the way forward.

These ideas may sound harsh and alienating. For Cicero, they were his path out of despair. After studying these models, he sat down and wrote his *Consolation* in just a matter of weeks. He had a first

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draft by March 11, 45 BCE, and a final draft just a week or two later. His essay would go on to become one of the great masterpieces of the ancient world, a new standard and source of solace and relief for centuries.



The reputation of your works is immense; your name is on everyone's lips; but your serious students are few, whether because the times are unpropitious or because men's wits are dull and sluggish, or, as I think more likely, because greed diverts our minds to other ends. Thus some of your books have perished, I suspect, within the time of men now living; and I do not know if they will ever be recovered. This is a great grief to me. . . . Here are the names of your lost books: the *Republic*, *On Familiar Matters*, *On the Military Art*, *In Praise of Philosophy*, *On Consolation*, *On Glory*. . . .

—Petrarch, *Letter to Cicero*, 24.4
(December 1345), trans. Morris Bishop

Cicero's *Consolation* was lost in antiquity. At some point during or after the fourth century, it disappeared, leaving us no more than a dozen quotations by other authors.

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In 1583, however, as the Renaissance was coming to an end in Italy, a new book quietly appeared in shops in Venice. It contained the text translated in this volume, and its title page carried a sensational announcement:

The *Consolation* of Marcus Tullius Cicero, the book whereby he consoled himself on the death of his daughter, newly rediscovered and published.

Was it real? A forgery? A prank? Nobody knew, and nobody would say. The book contained no introduction and offered no explanation of where this treasure came from.

And its contents were astonishing. The text contained all the known fragments of Cicero's lost *Consolation* and innumerable points of contact with other relevant texts in the same consolatory tradition. It included many examples of famous Romans who endured grief, examples that Cicero had made inquiries about in contemporary letters to his friends. Much of the content matches what we find in the *Tusculan Disputations*, a text Cicero began writing very soon after. And the style itself is highly Ciceronian.

Skeptics emerged immediately, but to all appearances the text was real. For centuries it was

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included among Cicero's collected works, albeit with a note indicating that many believed it was a forgery. Most scholars have come to agree with this, but defenses appeared sporadically. In 1999, a computer program was finally devised to assess stylometrics—that is, the relative frequency across a range of texts of “function” words, like *et* (and) or *in* (in) or *est* (is), to determine authenticity.⁶ The computer crunched the numbers and determined that the text was probably not authentic.

It is not authentic. Despite all that effort, amazingly, in four and a half centuries no one ever bothered to fact-check a block quote attributed to Plato in section 57. Anyone who had would have learned, as did I, that it comes not from Plato but from Marsilio Ficino's popular *Life of Plato*, first published in Italy in 1477 and frequently reprinted during the Renaissance.⁷ It is not clear whether that false quotation was a blunder, or (as I think) a deliberate trap, akin to the “trap streets” that cartographers include on maps to protect their intellectual property. Either way, the case is closed.

Who *did* write our treatise, then? Suspicion has traditionally devolved on the Modenese historian Charles Sigonius (Carlo Sigonio, 1524–1584). After reviewing all the evidence, I'm not so sure, though it does seem likely he knew who did—and refused to say.⁸

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It doesn't matter, though, because not all fakes are fake in the same way. *This* fake is not a fabrication, but a *recreation*. It is Cicero refined and distilled and concentrated. Some parts are taken almost verbatim from Cicero's other works, and his spirit and thought infuse the entire text. Not a word is inconsistent with his philosophy.

Furthermore, it's clear that the forger combed every single one of Cicero's philosophical essays, as well as the entire consolatory tradition, in assembling this essay. One can imagine the forger copying relevant passages onto notecards, spreading them out on a table, and then carefully assembling them into a coherent whole. The result is akin to the best historical fiction of Robert Harris.

Scholars today estimate the original *Consolation* was only around 20–40 pages long, which is to say, no more than a third to half the length of our fake one. Yet the themes it covered were identical: the therapeutic value of philosophy, the value of role models, competing views of the human condition, and belief in the immortality of the soul—especially Tullia's soul.⁹ In that regard, our *Consolation* offers us a more accurate view of what Cicero probably wrote than any academic article on the topic ever could.

The resulting text is nothing short of a masterpiece of recreation and imitation. It seems to

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experiment with a stream-of-consciousness style that reflects Cicero's wavering mindset. It also offers one of the most forthright reflections on the plight and hardships of women to be found anywhere before the nineteenth century.

It is no wonder, then, that despite its origins, many have found this text a source of enormous relief, and, as Cicero intended, consolation.

A Note on the Text and Translation

The Latin text is based on Klotz 1876, though I've repunctuated it as I did in *How to Tell a Joke*. I have also suggested a few emendations (in sections 86, 122, 125, 139, 144, 189, 208, 214, and the deletion in 99). In 89, 90, and 99, I adopt emendations suggested by other scholars that are not reported by Klotz. The genuine fragments of Cicero's *Consolation* are printed in **bold** and numbered according to Vitelli's edition of 1979.

The only prior English translation is that of Blacklock 1767. Among the five French translations I discovered, I am indebted to that of Mangeart 1840 for several insightful interpretations and turns of phrase.

The subheadings in the translation are my own addition. Otherwise, notes in this edition are kept

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to a minimum; readers will find a “secret decoder ring” of all the source quotations I could find—many of them handled with incredible virtuosity—and other lagniappe at <http://classicsprof.com/ciceros-consolatio/>

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