

**CLCS4009: READING ANTIQUITY: A SURVEY OF ANCIENT LITERATURE**  
**LECTURE 20 (WEEK 9) WORKSHOP: PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE AND LETTER**  
**COLLECTIONS: PLUTARCH'S MORALIA**

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**WORKSHOP TASK**

**Read the letter below and consider the following questions (and be prepared to share your thoughts with the class):**

- What literary genre does Plutarch's *Consolation to His Wife* belong to?
  - What are the circumstances in which Plutarch wrote the letter? Why did he write the letter?
  - What are the purposes of the letter?
  - What specific points does Plutarch make in the letter?
  - What can we learn of attitudes towards death and funerals, gender, the roles of women and attitudes towards children from the letter?
  - Can you see any traces of Plato's philosophy and thought in the letter below?
  - Can you say any allusions to Epicureanism?
  - Does religion play any role(s) in the letter?
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**Plutarch, *A Consolation to His Wife***, translated by Donald Russell, in Sarah B. Pomeroy (ed.), *Plutarch's Advice to the Bride and Groom and A Consolation to His Wife: English Translations, Commentary, Interpretive Essays and Bibliography*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

*Plutarch to his wife, greetings*

[1] The messenger you sent to tell me of the child's death must have missed me on his way to Athens; I only heard of it from my niece when I got to Tanagra. I imagine the funeral is now over, and hope it has been done in the way that will make for least pain for you both now and in the future. If there is anything you wished to do but refrained from doing, waiting for my decision, but which you think will make things easier to bear, pray do it, without extravagance or superstition, for which I know you have no inclination.

[2] Only, my dear wife, at this sad moment, keep yourself, and me, calm. I know I can get the measure of what has happened; but if I see you grieving to excess, that will hurt me more than the loss. But I am no "child of oak or rock": you know that, you have shared with me the upbringing of all our children, all reared at home by ourselves, and you know that this child was beloved by me above all, because she was the daughter you wanted after four sons and she gave me the opportunity to give her your name. There is a special savour in our affection for children of that age; it lies in the purity of the pleasure they give, the freedom from any crossness or complaint. She herself too had great natural goodness and gentleness of temper: her response to affection and her generosity both gave pleasure and enabled us to perceive the human kindness in her nature. She would ask her nurse to feed not

only other babies but the objects and toys that she liked playing with, and would generously invite them, as it were, to her table, offering the good things she had and sharing her greatest pleasures with those who delighted her.

[3] But I cannot see, my dear wife, why this and other such things should have given us pleasure while she was alive but are now to pain and trouble us when they cross our minds. On the other hand, I am also afraid of throwing out the memory with the grief, as Clymene in Euripides, who says

I hate the crooked bow of cornel wood,  
And wish all sports away!

Because she is frightened of remembering her son, her grief being inseparable from his memory. But our daughter was the sweetest thing to fondle, to watch, and to hear; and we ought to let the thought of her also dwell in our minds and lives, for there is much more joy in it than sorrow – if, that is, we can expect benefit ourselves in time of need from the consolation we have often given others, and are not to lie down under it, repaying all these pleasures with grief many times as great.

[4] Those who were with you tell me, with admiration, that you did not put on mourning, or allow yourself and the servants to disfigure yourselves; nor were there any ostentatious or lavish funeral preparations: everything was done decently and silently, and in the presence of close friends. It did not surprise me that you, who have never tricked yourself out for theatres or processions and have always believed that expense was useless in pleasures, should also have maintained the same simplicity and modesty in time of sorrow. It is not only “in Bacchic revels” that a good woman should avoid corruption; she should also realise that the distress and emotional disturbance of mourning stands in need of control, not in order to resist feelings of affection (as is often thought), but to resist license. We freely indulge our affection in desiring, honouring and remembering the dead; but the insatiable craving for lamentation that leads to wailing and beating the breast is no less disgraceful than incontinence in pleasure, but is excused, apparently, by the fact that the disgrace is attended not by joy but by pain and bitterness. What is more irrational than to eliminate excesses in laughter and rejoicing, but open the floodgates of tears and lamentation, which all comes from the same source? Or for men to resist women in matters of perfumes and purples, but allow mourning hairstyles, black-dyed clothing, and sitting or lying in unseemly and uncomfortable vigils? Or (worst of all) to oppose and obstruct them if they punish maidservants excessively or unjustly but freely let them punish themselves brutally and cruelly in sadness and misfortune that calls rather for comfort and kindness?

[5] You and I, my dear wife, have needed that first conflict, nor, I believe, shall we need the other. Every philosopher who has been in our company has been amazed by the simplicity of your person and the unpretentiousness of your life. Every citizen in our temples, at our sacrifices, in our theatres, finds your simplicity a sight to behold. You have already displayed your stability in situations like the present at the loss of your eldest child, and again when our beautiful Chaeron left us. I remember that some stranger had travelled up from the sea with me when the news of the child’s death arrived, and entered our house with the others. When they saw such complete peace and quiet, as they subsequently told others to, they could not believe anything dreadful had happened, and thought the report must have been false; so soberly had you ordered the household at a time which gave so much license for disorder. Yet you had nursed Chaeron at your own breast, and endured surgery when your nipple was bruised. This indeed was noble and loving.

[6] Most mothers, though, take their children in their arms like toys when they have been cleaned and made pretty by others, and then, if they die, dissolve into vain, ungrateful grief, not out of affection (which is a good and reasoned thing) but because a large admixture of vanity in a small quantity of natural emotion makes the act of grieving wild, insane, and difficult to sedate. Aesop seems to have been aware of this. He says that when Zeus was distributing honours among the gods, Grief came and asked for his. Zeus granted the request, but only among men who chose and wished to honour Grief. And this is what happens in the early stages: everyone invites Grief in. But when he is established, and become a member of the family, he does not go away, however much they wish it. One should resist him at the door and not abandon the fort through mourning clothes or hairstyle or anything like that: these things, encountered daily and causing embarrassment as they do, produce a mean, narrow, timid frame of mind that sees no way out and finds no appeasement; surrounded and occupied with all this, because of Grief, the mind knows no laughter, no light, no kindly table. Neglect of the body follows, and distaste for unguents and baths and the other routines of life. What should happen is quite the contrary: the soul should be helped in her trouble by the strengthening body. The sharp edge of pain is dulled, and its tightness loosened, dissipated by the body's calm like the waves in fair weather; whereas, if squalidness and unkemptness result from a mean style of life, and the body cannot send up to the mind any message of comfort or goodness but only the bitter and unpleasant exhalation, as it were, of pain and sorrow, it is not easy to recover, even if you wish to. Such are the consequences of this kind of ill treatment of the mind.

[7] The most fearful danger of all, however, is one that I shall not fear in you: the "entrance of bad women", the cries and wailing with which they polish and sharpen the edge of pain and never let others reduce it, nor allow it to fade away on its own. I know the fight you fought lately to help Theon's sister, confronting the women who visited her with their howling and shrieking, truly "heaping fire on fire". When people see their friends' houses burning, they try to put the fire out with what speed and means they have; but when minds are ablaze, they bring fresh fuel to the flames. If a man has ophthalmia, they do not let all and sundry put their hands on him, nobody touches the inflamed eye; but a mourner sits there exposed to every passer-by to excite his flux and exacerbate his illness, which a little tickling and disturbance will scratch open into a horrible disfigurement.

[8] I know you will guard against this. Try, however, to take yourself away in thought to the time before we had this child, when we had no complaint against the future: compare the present time with that, for our circumstances are once again the same. If we treat the time before she was born as one of which we have less cause to complain, we shall appear to regret her birth. The intervening two years are indeed not to be expunged from the memory, but counted as pleasure because of the charm and enjoyment they gave us; we should not treat a small blessing as a great evil, nor be ungrateful for what is given because fortune did not add thereto what we hoped for. Fair words about the gods and uncomplaining serenity towards fortune always bear a good, sweet harvest. And in circumstances like these, he who most draws on the good things in his memory, and turns his thoughts to the bright and shining path of his life and away from darkness and troubles, either extinguishes his pain altogether or makes it dim and faint by the admixture of its opposite. Perfume always pleases the sense of smell, but it also has a medicinal value against bad smells; and similarly the thought of good things in bad times actually serves as a necessary aid to those who do not avoid the memory of good things or find fault with fortune for everything and in every way. It would be wrong for us to bring a false charge against our life, if it is like a book with a single erasure but is otherwise perfectly clean and without blemish.

[9] You have often been told that happiness depends on right thinking, which results in a stable frame of mind, and that the vicissitudes of fortune do not mean a great decline or any catastrophic landslide in one's life. But if we too, like common folk, must needs be guided by external circumstances, count the strokes of fortune and make ordinary people the judges of our happiness; do not heed the present tears and lamentations of your visitors – they come from a bad custom and everyone encounters them – but think instead how much you are envied by these same women for your children, your household and your way of life. It is absurd that others should be willing to prefer your fortune, even including the present bereavement, which so distresses us, while you, who really have it, grumble and complain, and cannot perceive in the very sharpness of your pain what delight there is in what is left to us. It would be absurd to behave like those who pick out the “headless” or “short-tailed” lines in Homer while paying no heed to all his marvellous poems, and count up maliciously and pedantically all the bad things in life while only forming an inarticulate, confused impression of the good. That is what misers do, who accumulate and then make no use of their accumulations but cry and moan when they are all lost. If you feel pity for her, because she died unmarried and childless, you can make yourself easier once again by reflecting that you have had a full share of these things: they are not the sort of blessings that are important to those who are deprived of them but trivial to those who do have them. She has come to painlessness; she does not need to cause us pain. What ill have we from her, if she now knows no pain? Deprivation even of great blessings loses its painfulness when the need is there no more. Your Timoxena is deprived of little things, for little things are all she knew and all she took delight in. How can she be said to be deprived of things her senses and her mind never conceived?

[10] You hear others say – many are convinced by them – that there is no evil or pain anywhere for the one who “suffered dissolution.” But I know that the traditional doctrines and the mystic tokens of the rites of Dionysus, known to us who share them, prevent you from believing this. You should think of the soul as immortal, and as like a captive bird. If it is reared a long time in the body and domesticated in this life by all its affairs and by long habit, then it comes back again into the world and does not cease from its involvement in passions and accidents in its successive births. Do not imagine that old age is abused and reviled for its wrinkles and gray hair and physical weakness; the worst of it is that it makes the soul stale in its recollection of the world beyond and anxious to hold on to this world, and so cramps and oppresses it, so that it retains the form that it was given in the body when it shared its fortunes. But a soul which <does not stay here long> in captivity leaps up towards its natural home...If you put out a fire and then rekindle it at once, it is soon fanned to flame and quickly takes hold ... <And so those souls fare best whose fortune it is> “soonest to pass the gate of Hades' house,” before they have acquired a deep love of this world and are drugged, as it were, into a state of softness and fusion with the body.

[11] The truth about these things is made even clearer by our ancient, traditional laws and customs. People do not pour libations over dead infants, nor do they perform any other of the normal rites of the dead for them. Infants have no part in earth or earthly things. Nor do people tarry at the burial or the tomb or the wake, or sit a long time beside the body. The law forbids this in the case of small children, holding it wrong <to show grief thus> towards those who have passed to a better and holier land and lot. But as disbelief is harder than belief in these things, let us fulfil our outwards observances as the law directs, but keep our inner health even more pure and undefiled and chaste.