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Ancient Letters. Classical and Late Antique Epistolography [book review]

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Why write letters? That is, apart from functional necessity, what features make the letter-form especially attractive to authors and readers? The diverse essays in this worthy volume take a variety of approaches to this question, discussing literary epistles in Greek (Alciphron, Aelian) and Latin (Cicero, Horace, Seneca, Pliny, Fronto, Marcus Aurelius, Ausonius, Paulinus, Jerome, Augustine, and Patrick), as well as examples of documentary papyri and technical and scientific writings.

The volume is an outgrowth of a conference on Ancient Letters in July 2004; yet all its essays have made the transition from lecture piece to substantial article in fine style, and evince a learned engagement with the ongoing scholarly discussion of epistolary literature. Specialists engaged in their own considerations of these ancient authors and topics will no doubt find these essays informative and provocative; scholars and students looking for an introduction to the field of ancient epistolography would be well served to peruse this volume, both for the variety of approaches it contains, and for the learning evident in its essays and the numerous avenues for further inquiry it suggests.

After the first essay on documentary epistles, the contributions proceed more or less chronologically from Cicero to Patrick. Such a progression has the advantage of grouping related papers, many of which do complement and contextualize arguments found in others. Since several authors are treated by more than one contributor (e.g. Cicero, Seneca, Pliny, Alciphron), the collection's essays become richer the more essays one reads. This interactivity contributes to the value of this collection, although it comes, perforce, at the expense of the range of ancient authors discussed in the volume.

Roy K. Gibson and A.D. Morrison open the collection by posing that perennial question: "What is a Letter?" They entertain two contrasting approaches: on the one hand, Trapp's "phenomenology" of the letter, which attempts to circumscribe basic contextual and formal characteristics shared by (most) epistles (a written message, overtly addressed from sender(s)

to recipient(s), etc.); on the other, Derrida's expansive view that the letter is not *a* genre, but "all genres, literature itself." Derrida's catholic definition eliminates any possibility of genre criticism and the potential insights it offers, while the stability of the taxonomical approach is eroded by the unavoidable circularity that comes in establishing the set of texts that give rise to the definition (i.e. 'an epistle is an epistle because it shares the characteristics of epistles'), and leaves unexplored texts that fall at "the boundary between what is a letter and what is not quite a letter" (3). Gibson and Morrison proceed to consider two examples of 'borderline' letters: 1) various Greek poems, once classified as letters, now thought not to be so; and 2) Cicero's *De Officiis*. Rather than "attempting to construct either a more generous (or more watertight) definition of the letter" (13), they correctly suggest that genre should be approached as "a kind of spectrum" that will encourage appropriate connections between texts universally regarded as epistles and more marginal examples. That is, they invoke the Wittgensteinian idea of the 'family-resemblance concept', which enables "full awareness both of the importance of their epistolary character, and their connections to other non-epistolary texts" (15). The lack of fine precision in categorizing the genre, then, becomes a virtue, freeing the critic from the quest to identify moments of generic 'rule-breaking'. Instead it encourages more natural, less pedantic, readings in line with how genre is experienced 'in the wild'--as a complex of expectations, more or less strongly felt, rather than an externally generated mental checklist to which a text is consciously referred. The quality of almost all of this volume's essays is testament to the value of this approach.

1. G.O. Hutchinson's "Down among the Documents: Criticism and Papyrus Letters" aims to bring "documents properly into the discussion of ancient letters" (36) by sketching how literary analysis can supplement and illuminate the prosopographical and socio-economic questions more traditionally raised with respect to these texts. Hutchinson's insightful reading of *P. Oxy* 2190, a letter from a teenage student of rhetoric to his father, demonstrates how an appreciation of rhetorical strategies allows the reader to decipher otherwise mysterious events and to elucidate the character of the author, who in this letter strives to create an image of himself as a serious student (the better to avoid censure from dad). At first glance, the letters from Pappnuthis to his parents and his brother (*P. Oxy* 3396-7), with their "ubiquitous misspellings, limited vocabulary, and unambitious sentence-structure" (28), seem like less likely candidates for critical analysis. But here Hutchinson illustrates how access to the original documents, unmediated by the medieval manuscript tradition, reveal important information about writer and context, and how, even in apparently simple letters of this kind, "a rhetorical impulse is apparent" (32). Indeed, scholars would profit from recalling Hutchinson's injunction that "widely diffused tactics are as illuminating as idiosyncrasies" (35). The chapter helpfully includes four black-and-white photographs of the papyri under discussion.

2. As readers of John Henderson have come to expect, the quirky, ludic prose and unconventional argumentation of his contribution defy easy (or laborious) review. In brief, Henderson provides an alternately vexing and stimulating reading of the "pulsating textuality" (37) of Cicero's *Ad Qfr.* 3.1 ("To Quiffer"). Will many readers be flummoxed by this essay? Almost certainly. Is it worth experiencing? Probably, as it postulates an *unfamiliar* persona for Cicero, and, for all the grimacing and forehead-furrowing it provoked, there are many pearls within. A text and characteristically idiosyncratic translation of *Ad Qfr.* 3.1 is appended to the end of the chapter,¹ as is a bibliography specific to Cicero and topics relevant to this letter.

3. In "Cicero's 'Stomach'", Stanley Hoffer investigates the epistolary function of "repeated, marked, and allusive" phrases employed by Cicero and his correspondents. As Hoffer finds, these "epistolary 'leitmotifs'" (101)--which include quotations, proverbs, nicknames, epithets, metonymic use of dates, and significant diminutives--play an important role in structuring and coloring Cicero's epistolary correspondence, "appearing at the start or end of letters or topics, recalling a prior letter in echo style, or dismissing a topic which has transgressed the acceptable epistolary limits of length or emotion" (100). For Hoffer, the abundance of these 'leitmotifs' in Cicero compared to other texts suggests that these letters provide a glimpse of the actual patterns of (elite) conversation, albeit conversation stylized by, among other modifications, expanded quotations and more formal structuring--"not simply a conversational style, but a conversational adapted to intimate epistolary use" (106). Hoffer's essay is replete with informative examples and interesting observations, although its organization compromises its clarity. Hoffer provides a detailed account of one of its 'leitmotifs', Cicero's use of *stomachus*, before adequately explicating the nature and scope of these 'leitmotifs' in the essay's second half. I suspect many readers untutored in the conventions of scholarship on ancient epistles (and even some who are) will be confused by terminology that is only rarely defined and frequently too expansive (e.g. "epistolary categories"). Most of these difficulties are resolved in the second half of the essay, and, with a survey of these phenomena and a definition of terms, Hoffer's identification of the dual function of Cicero's *stomachus* is less confusing and more convincing: it serves to indicate suppressed political indignation and signal good-humor in awkward or ambiguous epistolary moments.

4. When treating verse and philosophical epistles, the contributors have an opportunity to speak directly to the volume's overarching question of "why letters?" In a rich and illuminating essay, Morrison explores how the 'letteriness' of Horace's epistolary collection "relates to and complements the didactic, instructive element of the book and vice versa" (108). In particular, Morrison highlights how the letter-form contributes to Horace's constitution of the *Epistles* "as a correction of the *De Rerum Natura*, as overcoming, or trying to overcome, some of the deficiencies of Lucretius' poem" (113). Central to this epistolary "correction" is the creation of a narrator who, while still didactic ("there is a lot of telling the addressees to do things in *Epistles* 1" [111]), nevertheless presents a persona quite different from the aggressive, paternalistic, and somewhat exasperated Lucretian narrator. Horace's narrator, in contrast, is concerned with ethics over physics, raises questions rather than pontificates, and is shown "backsliding" into behavior he has cautioned against--all modes of self-presentation at home in the letter-form. This transformation of the didactic narrator assists Horace's design of fashioning himself as a "Socrates to Lucretius" (pre-Socratic) Empedocles" (116). This (Socratic) narrator also addresses a different audience. In the place of the singular, obstinate "didactic *nepios*", the *Epistles* sport a wide range of addressees--the better to suggest "the wider applicability of the ethical lessons" (128). This is an excellent essay, suffused with erudition and thoroughly engaged with current scholarship on Epicurus, Lucretius, Horace, and epistolarity.

5. If Morrison's discussion of Horace's *Epistles* illustrates how the formal characteristics of the epistle can be used to craft narrative personae, Inwood's "The Importance of Form in Seneca's Philosophical Letters" demonstrates how the genre's inherent limitations can shape philosophical discourse. In place of a straightforward investigation of texts that influenced Seneca's *Epistulae Morales* (although the roles of Epicurus, Cicero, and Horace are concisely treated), Inwood

asks, "what expectations was Seneca willingly bringing on to himself when he chose to cast a major intellectual labour in this form?" (137). As with Morrison's treatment of Horace's *Epistles*, the answer rests in part with Epicurus' (now-fragmentary) epistolary corpus. Inwood stresses that while Seneca's collection stretches the boundaries of good epistolary practice according to ancient theorists, the *Epistulae Morales* share many similarities with Epicurus' collection. Reading Seneca in the context of Epicurus suggests that his openness to Epicureanism in the *Epistles*, a cause of much consternation through the years, may be "a tribute to a generic model and a deliberate indication of the target of Seneca's literary rivalry" (146), rather than a discrete philosophical stance. At the same time, Inwood suggests that Seneca's oft-remarked hostility towards logic and physics--two areas deemed in antiquity to be ill-suited to the letter--may show Seneca "flaunt[ing] before the reader his awareness of generic constraints--and play[ing] with the reader as well" (141).

6. I suspect that for many readers of this review, the form and language of letters of recommendation need no introduction. Roger Rees' essay explores several salient features of recommendations in the epistolary corpora of Cicero, Pliny, and Fronto. Rees elucidates an irony of ancient letters of recommendation, noting that "a form we might expect to serve the ambitious of others--was at least as much about the promotion of the author as it was about the subject" (156). Thus Cicero's letters of recommendation are clustered together in Book 13 of *Ad Fam.* to "heighten appreciation of the influence he was still able to wield" in the darkening days of 46-45 BCE; Pliny, on the other hand, distributes his recommendations throughout several books, a persistent reminder "of Pliny's influence as a patron across a broad chronological stretch" (152). In contrast to modern recommendations, the qualities (and even identity) of the recommended subject often played but a minor role in the recommendation; rather the recommender more frequently appeals to the obligations of *amicitia* both explicitly and through the well-documented vocabulary of this fundamental Roman social relationship ("our best textual evidence for the process of Roman patronage in action" (159)). By the time of Pliny and Fronto, however, letters of recommendation frequently admit use of epideictic conventions, with a consequent "tendency towards amplification of the character of the subject" (164). Rees traces how the uneasy place of panegyric within recommendation caused anxious recommenders to inoculate themselves against the charge of flattery by acknowledging the tropes of the "discredited" genre (167).

7. Two of the collection's essays treat Pliny's epistolary practice: Ruth Morello's, "Confidence, *Invidia*, and Pliny's Epistolary Curriculum" and William Fitzgerald's "The Letter's the Thing (in Pliny, Book 7)." Morello expertly describes Pliny's unorthodox attempt to promote an inclusive culture of literary appreciation. Building from Hoffer's explication of Pliny's manifold 'anxieties', Morello traces how Pliny self-consciously adopts a diffident narratorial persona to encourage his friends' literary activities and, in particular, to further his didactic project of teaching "correct behavior to auditors and critics" (173), who above all should be frank but friendly in their criticism.² In the second section of her paper, Morello describes Pliny's response to the failure of proper criticism and the *invidia* it risks injecting into the "positive and productive economy of literary interactions" that he seeks to foster (180). For readers more familiar with the intensely political, personal, and unavoidable *invidia* evident in Cicero's letters, *invidia* in Pliny is strikingly more literary than political, only rarely connected to Pliny himself, and ultimately superable--provided those in his social circle would embrace the literary inclusiveness he

advocates. As much of Pliny's didactic program operates in the context of performance and criticism, the article includes valuable observations on these topics as well.

8. Fitzgerald's contribution approaches Pliny and his epistolary collection from the perspective of a different 'anxiety': Pliny's obsession "with his survival into posterity and the *gloria* that would ensure it" (191). Fitzgerald frames his discussion by engaging one of the fundamental anxieties for readers (and writers) of letters: is the letter merely a substitute for (more vivid) face-to-face interaction, or, in its ability to offer considered, 'perfect' communication, does it offer "the distillation of the self in the presence of the other"-- "is [the letter] the thing itself or an adjunct, substitute, or signpost" (193). In Fitzgerald's reading, the letters of Book 7 themselves play with this tension, both reporting on activity but also participating in and affecting the lives of Pliny and his correspondents. For example, in one letter (*Ep.* 7.13), Pliny dismisses Ferox's complaint that he is not engaged in literary pursuits by claiming that Ferox's elegant letter proves that he is engaged in intellectual activity: "the letter both is a report and the thing itself" (195). An interesting discussion of the nature of elite *studia* in the *Letters* (and how its intermittency mimics that of epistolary discourse) leads Fitzgerald to consider Pliny's self-representation as a member of the heroic opposition to Domitian, in particular as seen in the final letter of Book 7, in which Pliny recounts an anecdote of his resistance that he hopes Tacitus will include in his *Histories*. Fitzgerald connects this letter to the ghost stories of 7.27, which he argues are not simply pretexts for recounting the story of Carus' condemnation of Pliny, but help contextualize Pliny's own anxieties about the plausibility of his opposition to Domitian (208).

9. In "The *Epistula* in Ancient Scientific and Technical Literature, with Special Reference to Medicine", D.R. Langslow ventures away from the confines of *belles lettres* into the less familiar, but no less worthy, field of scientific letters. Langslow provides a detailed survey of the types of ancient scientific and technical texts (some Latin and less Greek) that demonstrate greater and lesser affinities with epistolary conventions. As Langslow acknowledges, the state of our knowledge of such texts does not permit definitive conclusions, but many of Langslow's tentative observations and further questions are intriguing. For example he notes how epistolary medicine shows a strong tendency to focus on certain topics (e.g. dietetics, visiting the sick, etc.), as well as sports a didactic tenor--unlike other technical genres, which are occasionally dedicated to peers. When considering the question of "why a letter?" Langslow perceptively notes that the choice of epistle as genre can be motivated by the bottom line: "publication, if in the slightly different sense of selling copies of the text" (229). This market impulse explains the 'updating' of names in some pseudepigraphic collections (e.g. Diocles becomes Hippocrates), as well as the seeming mania among post-classical editors to label even the most unlikely texts *epistula*.

10. Didacticism and medicine, or more correctly health, are also concerns of Freisenbruch's (playfully titled) "Back to Fronto: Doctor and Patient in his Correspondence with an Emperor". Freisenbruch argues that the obsessive focus on personal illness in the correspondence of Marcus Aurelius and (especially) Fronto is not simply a further example of the somatic preoccupation of many writers in the Second Sophistic; rather, it reinforces the "special, exclusive nature" of the relationship that they self-consciously fashion in their correspondence and is "intimately bound into the teacher's discourse of authority over his pupil" (237). The correspondence therefore serves Fronto as a field for self-promotion--as Fitzgerald observed it

likewise served Pliny.³ What is at stake in this "neurotic" epistolary discourse" (248), with all its talk of the body and its failures? Freisenbruch views it ultimately as "a concerted effort to overturn that boundary between absence and presence...to the extent that their own health can be measured by, and is interchangeable with, the health of the other" (253). When Freisenbruch points to the numerous instances where the very receipt of a letter detailing the health of the sender is enough to sicken the recipient (*Ad M. Caes.* 5.22) or cure him (*Ad M. Caes.* 1.3), it is impossible not to think that here we have a vivid example of Fitzgerald's assertion that "the letter's the thing", in which letters function as "an almost infectious (or inoculatory [sic]) extension of one's self" (24). Several of this essay's themes lead this reviewer to consider how the scholarly discussions of other genres may provide useful insights and comparanda for epistolary practice. For example, when Freisenbruch states, not without justification, that "no other genre or category of writing has the confrontation between 'private' and 'public' more at its heart, the dilemma of how much one's 'self' to put on the line" (238), the same could be (and has been) said, in another context, of elegy. Such associations are seductive, especially in light of Fronto's (and his correspondents) obsession with illness and how it can circumscribe the potency of the self.

11. Two essays treat Greek letters exclusively. The first, Jason König's rich and stimulating essay, "Alciphron's Epistolarity", documents how the formal aspects of the epistle, and Alciphron's manipulation of them, reinforce the themes of "precarious or failed aspiration" that suffuse his four epistolary books (258). On the surface, Alciphron seems like fallow ground for such a reading, since unlike so many writers of documentary and literary letters who anxiously muse on the potential failures of the letter to communicate their desires, Alciphron's characters "are for the most part blithely unaware of any such possibility" (259) and "tend to oscillate between an acute awareness of the precariousness ... of their aspirations and an absurdly hopeful lack of awareness of those things" (267). Although the unanswered letter is the norm in ancient letter collections, König notes several compelling patterns of response and, more importantly, non-response that underscore the self-conscious artificiality and (false) reality of Alciphron's collection. Thus, Book 3 (*Letters of Parasites*) is the only book in which no responses appear, and "the parasites themselves are correspondingly the characters most prone of all to unrealistic fantasy" (268). A total of six responses appear in Books 1 and 2, but each rejects the request of the original letter, often insultingly. Book 4, in contrast, shows courtesans' communication between themselves and their lovers, often about related events in a manner that gives the "impression of sustained communication" (269). This impression of real epistolary communication is reinforced by the fact that many of the characters in Book 4 bear the names of historical figures. These contrast with the "absurdly unrealistic...and appropriate" names of fishers, farmers, and parasites found in the rest of the collection (277), which, as König notes in the paper's penultimate section, take the proper name, the very thing that should "guarantee that we are hearing the real voice of the letter writer" and instead "parades his characters' artificiality and geographical boundedness" (278). König ties these themes to "the difficult question of why Alciphron could have expected his readers to care about this work", suggesting that Alciphron's obsession with artificiality "means to draw a connection between the artificial fantasies of himself and his sophistic readers, and the evanescent fantasy visions which his characters themselves construct" (281). If this answer is not fully persuasive (and König makes clear that this rich topic requires further discussion), his question is certainly one that scholars could profit from remembering.

12. As Owen Hodkinson points out in "Better than Speech: Some Advantages of the Letter in the Second Sophistic", it is a commonplace among ancient epistolographers and theorists that the epistle is "an unsatisfactory form of communication: inferior to dialogue, necessitated by distance, not chosen" (289). And the potential failures of the letter--and the creative purposes to which epistolographers put this anxiety--are a common thread running through many of this volume's essays. Looking at several letters by Alciphron and Aelian, Hodkinson astutely emphasizes that the distance enforced by an epistle can also be an advantage when communicating: letters permit the statement of something "one either *could* not, or would *rather* not, say in person" (291); they signal the importance and/or confidentiality of the message; and they grant the opportunity for the arguments of an interlocutor to be heard in full--an especially useful device for giving voice to characters of lower social standing (such as the amorous daughter in Alciphron *Ep.* 1.11). Like König, Hodkinson comments on the role that responding letters can have in subverting these supposed advantages and introducing "a game of competing genres or literary registers" (298), as in Alciphron an epistle in a 'high' style (evocative of oratory or lyric) is often rejected by a response containing rude, comical language. Hodkinson's opening speculation on the development of the literary epistle from "*real* letters" (284), leads to a useful caution against uncritically calling groupings of letters, 'collections'. By implying "a later activity to 'ready-made' letters" (288), Hodkinson argues that the term trivializes the creative aspects of fictional corpora and mischaracterizes pseudepigraphic letters written for inclusion in existing corpora. In place of 'collection', he advocates instead the use of "epistolary book", with its association to poetic *libri*.

13. Throughout this volume, authors touch on the importance of epistolary exchange in mediating (and moderating) social relationships, particularly through the adoption and manipulation of certain conventional epistolary personae. Ebbeler's essay provides a lucid and persuasive account of how the epistolary code of father-son letters illuminates two tension-filled correspondences: those of Ausonius and Paulinus; and Augustine and Jerome. In the letter-exchange of Ausonius and Paulinus, Ebbeler illustrates how Ausonius and Paulinus willingly adopt the roles of figurative father and son. After Paulinus has moved to Spain and communication between the two seems to break down, Ausonius reminds Paulinus of their figurative bond (with hints of eroticism). Paulinus' responses in *Carm.* 10 and 11 take pains to acknowledge Ausonius' figurative role as father, even as he calls for Ausonius to understand that his Christian devotion requires allegiance to another Father as well. For Ebbeler, Paulinus' elaborate responses to Ausonius, in which he embraces his proper epistolary 'role', demonstrate that he had no desire to break with his tutor and friend over their supposed religious differences, and suggest that it was only Ausonius' death that cut short their correspondence. The father-son code operates in a quite different manner in the notoriously testy epistolary exchange of Augustine and Jerome. Rather than blaming "Jerome's infamously prickly personality for the difficulties" (316), Ebbeler shows how Augustine's presumption of equality in his first letter to Jerome precipitated Jerome's gruff ripostes, in which "Jerome pointedly refuses to see Augustine as a spiritual *frater*" (319). By refusing to play the role of 'son' to the older and more famous Jerome, Augustine has violated epistolary, and therefore social, conventions, and Jerome makes it clear that only by embracing this expected dynamic can Augustine appease him and rehabilitate their dysfunctional discourse.

14. The final contribution, Andrew Fear's "St Patrick and the Art of Allusion" takes Patrick's

Epistola ad Milites Corotici as its subject (the text and translation of which are helpfully appended after the chapter). As Fear notes, in antiquity the open letter was not a sign of "impotent protest," as it often is in modern contexts, but a powerful tool used to establish and perpetuate authority among not only the explicit audience but also a wider group of addressees (328). Patrick's open letter uses an array of literary devices, including biblical allusion and paraphrase, to speak past its explicit addressees, Coroticus' soldiers, to more crucial targets: Patrick's fellow Britons, and in particular, members of the British Church (331). Fear argues that recognition of the open letter form can clarify many of the unexpected details and digressions that riddle the letter. This approach is all to the good and plausibly explains numerous oddities in the *Epistola*. But is it really the case that "the wider audience of the open letter... are normally in this sub-genre mere passive readers" (335)? Adopting this view leads Fear to overstate Patrick's variance from generic expectations--he "is happy to break the rule that there should be a single addressee for an open letter" (335)--and leads to contradictions. For example, he claims that "normally the wider audience of an open letter are simply witnesses to the author's views, but here Patrick makes them direct addressees of his words" (332); yet this wider audience is never, in fact, explicitly addressed, as Fear takes pains to point out, when praising the political acumen of Patrick's studied ambiguity: "these targets, though forcefully suggested to the reader's mind, are never made explicit" (336).

A combined bibliography (long a wish of this reviewer for collections of this type), an index locorum, and a general index of adequate granularity complete the volume. The physical construction of the volume is sturdy and of the quality one would expect from Oxford. Likewise, typographical errors are rare and trivial. Taken as a whole, this is a welcome and valuable book that will no doubt nurture the burgeoning scholarly discussion of Classical epistolography.

Notes:

1. A taste of Henderson's translation: "The spot in colonnage they say you specify *for turning into minipatio* get my vote as is: (a) spot don't seem enough room for an m-p, (b) not normally done thing, except in units including jumbo patio, (c) couldn't have rooms off+ that type of annex. Now it'll find room for, oh, genteel vault or ace suntrap" (*Ad Qfr.* 3.1.2).
2. Hoffer, S.E. 1999. *The Anxieties of Pliny the Younger* (Atlanta).
3. For more on the relationship between Fronto and Marcus Aurelius, see Amy Richlin's *Marcus Aurelius in Love* (2006).

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