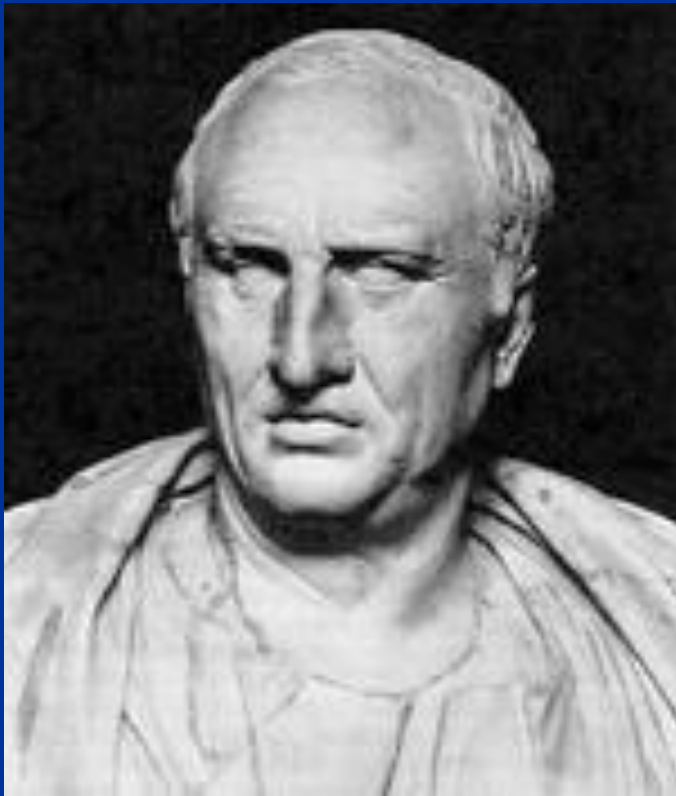


CLCS4009

READING ANTIQUITY: A SURVEY OF ANCIENT LITERATURE

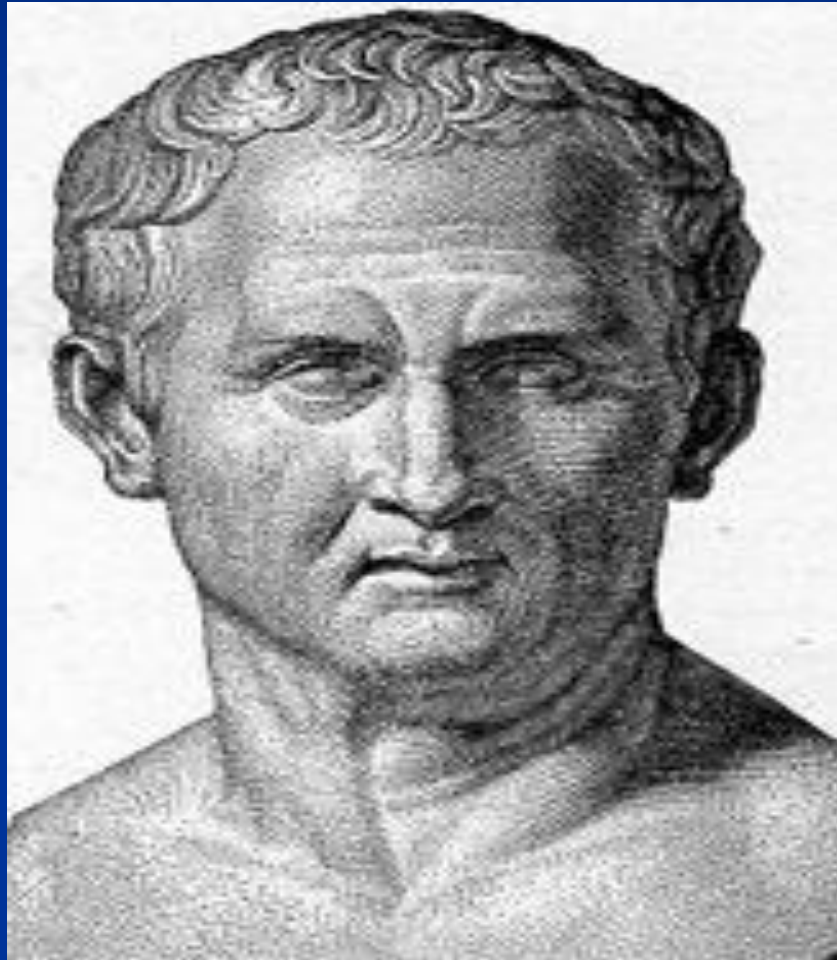
Lecture 23:

Raising Rome: Philosophical
Discourse and Letter
Collections (Cicero, Seneca
and Pliny)



Dr. Crystal Addey

Marcus Tullus Cicero



Lecture Overview

- Philosophical texts in Rome:
 - Cicero's philosophical writings (1st C BC)
 - Seneca's letters (1st C AD)
- Letter collections in imperial Rome:
 - Cicero's letters (1st C BC)
 - Seneca's letters (1st C AD)
 - Pliny the younger (1st/2nd C AD)

Philosophical Discourse in the Republic

- Handbooks and teaching texts were frequent in the Republic
 - Agriculture (in the widest sense)
 - Politics and law
 - Language and literature
 - Architecture and medicine
- Along with texts on rhetoric, philosophical texts begin to appear in the 1st Century BC
 - Cf. Lucretius *De Rerum Natura* here
 - Interest stems from contact with the Hellenistic world in the 2nd C BC: these are now areas that the educated Roman needs to know

Cicero's Philosophical Writings

- Preceded by a series of texts and handbooks on rhetoric from early on in Cicero's career
- Philosophy becomes Cicero's focus during periods of political and legal inactivity, esp. 46-44 BC (Caesar's dictatorship) (although he received education in philosophy as a young man).
- The preferred format is dialogue form
 - Plato is a key forerunner, both in terms of form and content
 - Cicero translates part of *Timaeus*; includes mythography in Platonic manner: the 'Dream of Scipio' at the end of *De Republica*
 - ...but the dialogue was also the preferred form for Xenophon, and even Aristotle was praised for his dialogue

Cicero's dialogues

■ Varied format

- Fully fleshed out settings in:
 - *De Republica* (historical setting) and in *De Natura Deorum*, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, *Brutus* (famous contemporary characters as interlocutors, sometimes with Cicero himself playing a part)
- More stylised setting in the *Tusculan Disputations*:
 - M = magister
 - A = auditor

And lately when you left us, having many of my friends about me, I attempted at my Tusculan villa what I could do in that way; for as I formerly used to practise declaiming, which nobody continued longer than myself, so this is now to be the declamation of my old age. I desired any one to propose a question which he wished to have discussed, and then I argued that point either sitting or walking; and so I have compiled the scholæ, as the Greeks call them, of five days, in as many books. (Cic. *Tusc.*

Philosophy in Letters

- Greek precursors: Plato (probably a false attribution but giving an important predecessor nonetheless), Aristotle, Epicurus (some extant)
- Horace's *Letters (Epistulae)* – verse letters on philosophical topics (e.g. patronage and ethics)
 - These letters also evoke the tradition of satire; differences in the characterisation of the narrating *persona*

Seneca's Letters to Lucilius

- Philosophical letters dressed as real letters to the young Lucilius
 - From the outset intended for publication
 - Faking a sense of real correspondence with reactions by the narrator to comments in Lucilius own letters:
 - *Therefore, Lucilius, do as you write me that you are doing: hold every hour in your grasp. Lay hold of today's task, and you will not need to depend so much upon tomorrow's. (Sen. Epist. 1)*
- NB: Only part of Seneca's philosophical writings: philosophical dialogues and philosophical themes in the tragedies, too!

Writing for posterity...

- The letters cannot be securely located in time
- All information needed to read the letters included in Seneca's text: i.e. few outside references or un-deciphered in-jokes
 - Seemingly realistic anecdotes serve to underline the philosophical precept: the narrator makes an exemplum out of his own life
 - In line with stoic thought on the need for withdrawal from bombardment with impressions to reach inner harmony (harmony with oneself)
 - Very different from Cicero's letters

So I shall pay you my reply in advance but without doing what the eloquent Cicero tells Atticus to do: 'Even if you have nothing to say, write whatever comes into your head.' For there will always be something for me to write about, even if I pass over all the kinds of news with which Cicero fills his letters: which candidate is having problems, who is competing on borrowed funds and who on his own; which candidate for the consulship puts his faith in Caesar, which in Pompey - and which in his own treasure chest; what a merciless usurer Caecilius is, who cannot be made to lend a penny to his friends at less than one per cent a month. But it is better to consider one's own troubles rather than another's - to scrutinize oneself, see for how many pointless things one is a candidate, and not vote for any of them. This, my dear Lucilius, is a noble thing, which brings peace and freedom - to canvass for nothing, and to pass by all fortune's elections. (Sen. Epist. 118.1-3)

Seneca's letters

- The collection does not make a full presentation of all aspects of Stoic philosophy
- Instead, they suggest a series of problems all humans may encounter: poverty, wealth, happiness, friendship, death, freedom, etc., and often, different letters will approach them from different angles
- Unlike Lucretius (under influence from Epicurus), Seneca sees no conflict between literary form and philosophical content:

Seneca, Epistle 59

I find metaphors in your writing, but not uncontrolled and so self-defeating. I find there the use of images. If anyone denies us the right to employ images in our prose by decreeing that they are allowed only in poetry, then he seems to me unfamiliar with our early prose authors whose language was not yet governed by the need to please good opinion. In expressing themselves naturally with a direct view to proving their point, they are full of these forms of comparison. I consider such devices indispensable, but not for the same reasons as do the poets. They work as a buttress for human weakness and they are effective in engaging both author and audience with the central issue at hand.

■ Follow-up reading on Seneca's combination of style and philosophical teaching: Wilson, 2008, 62-68

Pliny the younger

*You have constantly urged me to collect and publish the more highly finished of the letters that I may have written. I have made such a collection, **but without preserving the order in which they were composed, as I was not writing a historical narrative.** So I have taken them as they happened to come to hand. I can only hope that you will not have cause to regret the advice you gave, and that I shall not repent having followed it; for I shall set to work to recover such letters as have up to now been tossed on one side, and I shall not keep back any that I may write in the future. Farewell. (Plin. 1.1)*

Pliny's Collection: Letter 1

- Letter 1 programmatic:
- The letters presented will claim to be literary showpieces and have 'polish'
 - Cf. Callimachean literary tastes
 - ...but it is also not *serious* literature to the narrator's mind
- Chronology is supposedly not the structuring principle:
 - ...but most letters are presented in a roughly chronological order
 - ...but the chronology is broken up to include a variation of topics in each book
- Cf. organisation of Cicero's letters

Pliny between Seneca and Cicero

- Like Seneca's letters, most of Pliny's text is made understandable to outsiders
 - ...but would the insider have more fun?
- Like Seneca, the narrating self comes close to the role of an exemplum
- Like Cicero, the Plinian narrator values active participation in Roman life
 - Public roles
 - Public protest: retrospectively associates himself with opponents of Domitian
- 'Pliny's letters can be read as offering a systematic self-portrait of their author. The emphasis is not, however, on Pliny's inner life but rather on the exemplary manner in which he fulfils a range of social and political roles.'

(Edwards, 2005, 280)

Pliny 1.15 and its literary context

What a fellow you are! You promise to come to dinner and then fail to turn up! Well, here is my magisterial sentence upon you. You must pay the money I am out of pocket to the last farthing, and you will find the sum no small one. I had provided for each guest one lettuce, three snails, two eggs, spelt mixed with honey and snow (you will please reckon up the cost of the latter as among the costly of all, since it melts away in the dish), olives from Baetica, cucumbers, onions, and a thousand other equally expensive dainties. You would have listened to a comedian, or a reciter, or a harp-player, or perhaps to all, as I am such a lavish host. But you preferred to dine elsewhere, -- where I know not -- off oysters, sow's matrices, sea-urchins, and to watch Spanish dancing girls! You will be paid out for it, though how I decline to say. You have done violence to yourself. You have grudged, possibly yourself, but certainly me, a fine treat. Yes, yourself! For how we should have enjoyed ourselves, how we should have laughed together, how we should have applied ourselves! You can dine at many houses in better style than at mine, but nowhere will you have a better time, or such a simple and free and easy entertainment. In short, give me a trial, and if afterwards you do not prefer to excuse yourself to others rather than to me, why then I give you leave to decline my invitations always. Farewell.

Pliny 1.15 and its literary context

- The bantering tone of the letter represents the tone of chatter at the dinner party
- The letter itself is steep in literary tradition: it relates to the genre of satire in particular
 - Descriptions of food and eating are common in satire: situations that reveal codes (and breakages thereof) for human behaviour... ...and the need for a satirist to improve it

...or about style?

- In satire, the choice of foodstuffs is often used as a metaphor for choice of literary style: it is possible to read 1.15 as a metaliterary statement
 - It is, after all, addressed to a character already associated with Pliny's literary programme
- However, the meal is also representative of the attitude to life the narrator wants to present:
 - A full appreciation of the simple things in life, with a non-austere avoidance of luxury
 - Also shows how the narrator fits in in public life: he does not have to be a scrounger

Self-biography as teaching text or more?

- ‘The elder statesman’s invitation may be imbued in the experience of the world of politics and social climbing, but what it offers is a casual escape from it.’ (Gowers, 1993, 273)
- We might say that what Pliny is interested in here is both showing off and offering *comitas* (‘the spirit of social affability’)
- It is tempting to speculate on the need of this social quality in the upper echelons of Roman imperial society

To take away

- **When does letter become literature?**
 - Cicero's letters: history of origin and impact different
- **Roman authors take considerable interest in the letter's pliability in terms of genre**
 - Teaching letters, auto-biography, verse letters...
 - Intertextuality in letters belonging to one genre with other letter texts