

CLCS4009: READING ANTIQUITY: A SURVEY OF ANCIENT LITERATURE
SEMINAR 4 (WEEK 11): WRITING ROME: THE LETTERS OF CICERO, SENECA
AND PLINY

SEMINAR TASK

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

- What are the main subjects and concerns discussed in each of these letters?
 - How “philosophical” are each of these letters?
 - Compare and contrast the scopes and purposes of the letters: what similarities or differences can you see between them?
 - To what extent is each of the letters concerned with public and private spheres of life?
 - What evidence is there that the letters were sent to actual recipients?
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CICERO, *LETTER TO ATTICUS* 42 (II.22)

Rome, August (?) 59

Oh, how I wish you were in Rome! No doubt you would have stayed if we had expected all this to happen. Then it would be easy enough for us to keep Little Beauty in hand or at least we should be able to find out what he is up to. Now the picture is as follows: he rushes wildly up and down, without any definite programme, threatening numbers of folk with this, that and the other. Apparently he will take whatever line chance puts in his way. When he notices how the present regime is detested he makes as though to attack its authors; then again, when he remembers their power and ruthlessness and the armies behind them, he turns upon the honest men. Myself he threatens sometimes with violence, sometimes with the law courts. Pompey has spoken to him, strongly, as he himself informed me (I have no other witness), telling him that he, Pompey, would be branded as a traitor and a villain if I were brought into jeopardy by one whose weapons he had himself furnished in allowing his transfer to the plebs. But both Clodius himself and Appius had given him their words in respect of me. If Clodius did not honour his pledge, he, Pompey, would so react that the pre-eminent importance of our friendship in his eyes would be obvious to all. To this an dmore of the same kind, said Pompey, Clodius at first made very considerable demur, but in the end capitulated and gave an assurance that he would take no step contrary to Pompey’s wishes. But since that conversation he has continued none the less to use most offensive language about me. Even if he did not, I should not trust him a yard and should make all preparations, as I am doing.

My present mode of life is such as daily to increase my popularity and resources. I keep absolutely clear of politics, devoting myself industriously to my cases and forensic work, which I perceive to be a fine road to the favour not only of those who use my services but of the general public as well. My house is thronged with visitors, people come up to me, recalling my Consulship and professing active good will. I am becoming so sanguine that

there are times when the impending struggle seems to me something that I ought not try to avoid.

Now I need you advice and affection and loyalty. So make haste. All will be plain sailing if I have you here. Much can be done through our friend Varro, and more reliably with you to apply the spur, much extracted from Publius himself, much leaned which it will be impossible to hide from you, much – but it is absurd to enumerate this and that when I need you for everything. Of one thing I should like you to be convinced, that all will come straight for me once I set eyes on you. But everything depends on your coming before he starts his term of office. I think that Pompey, under pressure from Crassus, may waver, but (?) if you are here, able as you are to gather from Publius himself through Lady Ox-Eyes how far they are to be trusted, I shall either escape unpleasantness or at any rate shall know where I stand. You don't need me to entreat or urge you. My wish, the hour, the importance of the issue – you see what they demand.

Of the political situation I have nothing to tell you except the cordial hatred of all men for our all-powerful rulers. No change however is to be hoped for. But as one can easily perceive, Pompey himself is sick of it all and bitterly unhappy. I cannot well foresee the probable outcome, but some sort of eruption seems inevitable.

I am returning Alexander's book – a careless fellow and not a good poet, but he has his uses. I have been glad to welcome Numerius Numestius into my circle and found him a responsible, discreet sort of person who deserves your recommendation.

Pliny, 1.1 To Septicius

You have frequently pressed me to make a select collection of my Letters (if there be any which show some literary finish) and give them to the public. I have accordingly done so; not indeed in their proper order of time, for I was not compiling a history; but just as they presented themselves to my hands. And now what remains but to wish that neither you may have occasion to repent of your advice, nor I of my compliance? If so, I may probably inquire after the rest, which at present lie neglected and not withhold those I shall hereafter write. Farewell.

Pliny, 1.2 To Arrianus

I foresee your journey hither is likely to be delayed and therefore produce a copy of the speech which I promised in my former letter, begging you would, as usual, revise and correct it. I desire this the more earnestly, as I was never, I think, animated with the same warmth of zeal in any of my former compositions; for I have endeavoured to imitate your old favourite Demosthenes, and Calvus who is lately become mine. When I say so, I mean only with respect to their manner; for to catch their sublime spirit, is given along to “the choice selected few, whom fav'ring Jove befriends” [Aen. 6.129]. My subject indeed seemed naturally to lead me to this (may I venture to call it?) emulation, since, it was, in general, of such a nature as demanded controversial eloquence, even to a degree sufficient to have awakened (if in truth it is possible to awake) that indolence in which I have long reposed.

Seneca, Letter 56

It is clear to you, I know, Lucilius, that no one can lead a happy life, or even one that is bearable, without the pursuit of wisdom, and that the perfection of wisdom is what makes the

happy life, although even the beginnings of wisdom make life bearable. Yet this conviction, clear as it is, needs to be strengthened and given deeper roots through daily reflection; making noble resolutions is not as important as keeping the resolutions you have made already. You have to persevere and fortify your pertinacity until the will to good becomes a disposition to good. So you needn't go in for all this long-winded protestation or say any more on the subject – I'm well aware that you've made a great deal of progress. I realize the feelings that prompt you to put these things in your letter, and there is no pretence or speciousness about them. But – to give you my honest opinion – at this stage, although I have great hopes of you, I do not yet feel quite confident about you. And I should like you to adopt the same attitude: you've no grounds for forming a ready, hasty belief in yourself. Carry out a searching analysis and close scrutiny of yourself in all sorts of different lights. Consider above all else whether you've advanced in philosophy or just in actual years.

Philosophy is not an occupation of a popular nature, nor is it pursued for the sake of self-advertisement. Its concern is not with words, but with facts. It is not carried on with the object of passing the day in an entertaining sort of way and taking the boredom out of leisure. It moulds and builds the personality, orders one's life, regulates one's conduct, shows one what one should do and what one should leave undone, sits at the helm and keeps one on the correct course as one is tossed about in perilous seas. Without it no one can lead a life free of fear and worry. Every hour of the day countless situations arise that call for advice, and for that advice we have to look to philosophy.

Someone may say: 'What help can philosophy be to me if there is such a thing as fate? What help can philosophy be if there is a deity controlling all? What help can it be if all is governed by chance? For it is impossible either to change what is already determined or to make preparations to meet what is undetermined; either, in the first case, my planning is forestalled by a God who decrees how I am to act, or, in the second case, it is fortune that allows me no freedom to plan.' Whichever of these alternatives, Lucilius, is true – even if all of them are true – we still need to practise philosophy. Whether we are caught in the grasp of an inexorable law of fate, whether it is God who as lord of the universe has ordered all things, or whether the affairs of mankind are tossed and buffeted haphazardly by chance, it is philosophy that has the duty of protecting us. She will encourage us to submit to God with cheerfulness and to fortune with defiance; she will show you how to follow God and bear what chance may send you. But I musn't pass on here to a discussion of the problem what is within our control if there is a governing providence, whether we are carried along enmeshed in a train of fated happenings, or whether we are at the mercy of the sudden and the unforeseeable. For the present I go back to the point where I was before, to advise and urge you not to allow your spiritual enthusiasm to cool off or fall away. Keep a hold on it and put it on a firm footing, so that what is at present an enthusiasm may become a settled spiritual disposition....