

BOOK REVIEW

The Gift of Correspondence in Classical Rome: Friendship in Cicero's Ad Familiares and Seneca's Moral Epistles. By AMANDA WILCOX. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012. Pp. xi + 223. Hardcover, \$34.95. ISBN 978-0-2992-8834-1.

Dear Amanda (if I may),

Convention has long dictated how one reviews a book. But much as you have shown Seneca to be antithetical to conventions of social practice in his letters, so too will I depart from expectations.

Your brisk book efficiently demonstrates how Cicero and Seneca utilize their letters as gifts which enmesh them in a nexus of social relations: friendship, community, obligation, debt. Cicero you view as the model *par excellence* for the sociopolitical use of letters to build and exploit relationships. Seneca then modifies the genre to question those very relationships, proposing instead the life of philosophy.

I applaud the book's accessibility. While you garner your inspiration and theoretical underpinnings from Bourdieu and Mauss, your analyses focus squarely on primary texts; at the close of chapters you draw connections to theories of gift-exchange. Non-classicists will find plentiful translations and introductions.

To wit, your Introduction presents such background material as the practice of letter-writing, biographies of Cicero and Seneca, and the basics of gift-theory. Your account of the correlation between the exchange of letters and the economy of gifts may, however, be somewhat brief at two pages. A more substantial unpacking of the concepts may pay off for us throughout the remainder of the book. Nonetheless I recognize that you resist overburdening readers unfamiliar with these theorists; for the curious, the relevant works are cited.

The body of the book proper divides neatly in two: the first half (Chapters 1–4) explicates Cicero's use of letters as social technology, while the second (Chapters 5–8) focuses on Seneca's dismantling and repurposing of the mechanisms.

In the first half ("Cicero: The Social Life of Letters") you describe the tactics with which Cicero builds his social network. Chapters 2 and 4 focus on subtypes

of epistles, letters of consolation and recommendation, respectively. In these types, either the letter itself or the recommendee is the gift that binds Cicero and his addressee. Chapters 1 and 3 discuss *topoi* of letters. Chapter 1 treats euphemism, which allows interlocutors to elide the threatening or obligatory nature of letters; your attention to this Bourdieuan euphemism strikes me as an important contribution. In Chapter 3 you highlight the thematization of absence for the purpose of friendship, building upon Janet Gurkin Altman's work (*Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus, Ohio, 1982)) on intimacy in the epistolary genre. As Altman has noted, letters simultaneously recognize, bemoan, and perpetuate the distance between correspondents. And distance, so we are told, makes the heart grow fonder.

The second half ("*Commercium Epistularum*: The Gift Refigured") demonstrates how Seneca appropriates for philosophy the very genre Cicero had used for sociopolitical purposes. Seneca, you argue, uses the technologies against themselves to critique the networks and friendships Cicero modeled. Euphemism doesn't work as its effectiveness makes debtors and slaves of us interlocutors (Ch. 5). True friendship, unlike the political *do ut des*, is not to be found in social exchange (Ch. 6) or the generic tropes of *consolationes* (Ch. 8). Even the fixity of identity ("I," "you," "friend") are interrogated in Seneca's rehabilitation of interpersonal relations (Ch. 7). Security comes not from the insistent Ciceronian reiteration of one's position and identity, but rather from disengaging from the rat race altogether. It is ironic, as you note, that Seneca espouses such in letters (115).

In all this Cicero is the expert, and Seneca the upstart. Cicero sets the standards for the proper deployment of epistolary tactics. And Cicero's prominence in the sociopolitical life of Rome is the proof that lies in the pudding and the putting on of appropriate airs, genres, and faces. And yet I wonder whether Cicero is *merely* the Bourdieuan virtuoso. He is, as Jon Hall shows (*Politeness and Politics in Cicero's Letters* (Oxford, 2009)), also one to mock and modify epistolary convention. Although a static Cicero better foregrounds Seneca's dialectical relationship with him, I feel that Cicero's own relationship to letter-writing was more fluid and complicated. Indeed, you note that you don't treat the letters *Ad Atticum* because their friendship was not ideal by Ciceronian standards (15), but could these letters evince a more complex relationship with the function of letters in friendship?

To some final matters of format. Your text is laudably free from errors—I only noticed one, perhaps merely an odd translation of *visne tu* as "Do you not you wish" (53).

Amanda, your contribution brings a fresh perspective, informed by anthropological theory, to these epistles, and highlights not only Seneca's inheritance, but also his rejection, of Ciceronian epistolary purpose and practice. A scholarly book is something of a gift of knowledge one bestows upon the world, one for which the repayment is not so much financial as metaphorical. So that I may begin making payments on the intellectual debt as interest compounds, I've found an apt line from our man Seneca, who himself purloined it from Epicurus: *haec ego non multis, sed tibi; satis enim magnum alter alteri theatrum sumus.*

Fare well.

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