

## BOOK REVIEW

*Roman Letters: An Anthology*. Edited and Translated by NOELLE K ZEINER-CARMICHAEL. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014. Pp. xix + 199. Paper, \$29.95. ISBN 978-1-4443-3951-2.

Noelle Zeiner-Carmichael's anthology offers an excellent introduction to Roman letters and epistolography. The book's preface clearly lays out its goals: to provide modern and accessible translations of Roman letters to a non-specialist or undergraduate audience in a compact and easy-to-use format. This book succeeds in meeting these goals, as it introduces its audience to a wide array of ancient letters—both prose letters and poems with epistolary features—and to the challenges of studying them.

The initial chapter of *Roman Letters* ("Letters and Letter-Writing in Ancient Rome") provides general information about ancient epistolarity and serves as a thematic introduction to the letters in this collection. Beginning with advice from Emily Post on epistolary etiquette in 1922, Zeiner-Carmichael poses questions meant to engage students with many of the important issues surrounding epistolography: What is a letter? What makes a letter literature? Using contemporary examples (is an email a letter?), she stresses open-mindedness when examining epistolary literature and its features. This chapter then discusses several aspects of letter-writing in antiquity and common themes found in ancient letters: length and brevity, autobiography and self-presentation, materials and delivery, audience(s), and themes. The comments in this chapter do not force any particular interpretation on the audience, but provide a solid framework with which to examine the chapters that follow.

The three subsequent chapters break up the letters into three main time periods ("The Roman Republic," "The Augustan Age," and "The Roman Empire") and are followed by a short concluding chapter featuring excerpts from ancient epistolary theorists. Each of the main chapters follows the same format: Zeiner-Carmichael provides a brief introduction to each ancient author and the circumstances under which they write. Then the letters of that author follow, many of which appear with very brief introductions to explain any historical figures or

events referenced in that particular letter. At the end of each chapter we find suggested secondary scholarship for further reading on each ancient author. The letters are numbered consecutively throughout the text for ease of use in a classroom setting, although each letter also contains its ancient citation (e.g. “87 Seneca to Lucilius (*Ep.* 1.4)). Each ancient author’s letters appear either in chronological order (e.g. Cicero) or as they appear in an author’s collection (e.g. Horace or Propertius). This arrangement often makes for exciting reading, as we trace, for example, the reactions of Cicero or Ovid to living in exile.

The second chapter of *Roman Letters* (“The Roman Republic: 70 BCE – 27 BCE”) concentrates on Cicero’s correspondence but also contains the letter of Catiline embedded within Sallust’s *Bellum Catilinae* and three poems of Catullus with epistolary features. Cicero, however, remains the main focus of this chapter, and we read a wide variety of letters written by or addressed to him. Chapter Three (“The Augustan Age: 27 BCE – 14 CE”) opens with several letters from Augustus, preserved in Suetonius’ *Lives*, then proceeds to selections from Horace’s *Epistles*, Propertius 1.1 and 4.3, and a range of epistolary poems from Ovid (*Her.* 1 and selections from the *Tristia* and *Ex Ponto*).

Chapter Four (“The Roman Empire: 14 CE – third century CE”) provides the greatest range of ancient letter-writers: the emperors Tiberius and Claudius, Seneca the Younger, Paul the Apostle, Jude, Martial, Statius, Pliny the Younger and Trajan, John the Elder, Fronto and Marcus Aurelius, letters from Vindolanda, and several examples of papyri. The range of this chapter comes from not just the number of authors, but also from the medium of letter-writing, from inscriptions, to tablets and papyri, to the more familiar literary letters. *Roman Letters* concludes with a fifth chapter (“Epistolary Theorists”), containing brief selections from (Pseudo-) Demetrius and Pseudo-Libanius.

All the letters in this translation are translated into clear, accessible, and easy-to-read prose. Zeiner-Carmichael explains that while she prioritizes the accessibility of these translations, she aims for a middle ground between completely free and strictly literal translations. While many translations may help illuminate ancient concepts for modern readers (e.g. Clodius Pulcher dressing in ‘drag’), others may jar a reader accustomed to a more literal approach (e.g. Cicero’s *amici* described as the ‘Cicero Bandwagon’).

*Roman Letters* contains several helpful features, including images that appear throughout the text (e.g. ancient frescoes, statues, and mosaics or photographs of the Vindolanda tablets). The maps at the beginning of this book are useful, since

many letters include a note on where each was composed or reference events happening throughout Rome's empire, although some of the maps' place names can be difficult to read. In addition to its general index, the book contains a valuable concordance of its texts. *Roman Letters* also has an accompanying website through Wiley Blackwell ([www.wiley.com/go/romanletters](http://www.wiley.com/go/romanletters)), which contains additional letters by Cicero, Horace, Ovid, Fronto, Martial, Statius, Ignatius, and Pliny the Younger.

One of the major advantages of this text is its flexibility: while the introductory chapter provides excellent suggestions for themes to trace in these letters or ways to interpret them, Zeiner-Carmichael does not force readings on her audience, and the letters themselves are presented without commentary or interpretation. As a result, teachers remain free to adapt *Roman Letters* to their own classrooms and lessons, and students are able to develop their own ideas about ancient letters and to discover themes on their own.

I noticed more than a dozen typos and inconsistencies (e.g. 'Vergil' and 'Virgil' on the same page) within *Roman Letters*, in the translations and general introductions. While noticeable to a close reader, such occurrences should not distract the reader or make a detrimental impact on classroom use.

Trapp (2003) remains an important resource for the study of ancient letters, and while it may have a broader scope and contains original Latin and Greek text, *Roman Letters* provides more depth for each author and remains more appropriate for the generalist classroom.<sup>1</sup> Although I have not personally used this anthology in a class, I am confident that *Roman Letters* will be an excellent resource for courses studying ancient letters or Roman culture more broadly.

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<sup>1</sup> Trapp, M., ed. 2003. *Greek and Latin Letters: An Anthology with Translation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.