

CHAPTER ONE

Letters and Letter-Writing in Ancient Rome

The art of general letter-writing in the present day is shrinking until the letter threatens to become a telegram, a telephone message, a post-card. Since the events of the day are transmitted in newspapers with far greater accuracy, detail, and dispatch than they could be by the single effort of even Voltaire himself, the circulation of general news, which formed the chief reason for letters of the stage-coach and sailing-vessel days, has no part in the correspondence of to-day.

Post 1922: 491

Emily Post's 1922 handbook on etiquette attributed the apparent dissolution of the art of letter-writing to the advent of modern, rapid modes of communication. Although she related this decline to the circulation of periodicals, Post also censured a more general degeneration in good taste, behavior, and intellectual acumen; and just plain apathy. Even worse, the decline in epistolary correspondence apparently contributed to a fracturing network of interpersonal relationships, previously maintained through written acts. Yet it wasn't just the decreased frequency of letter-writing that Post bemoaned, but the lowering of standards in content and aesthetics:

To such as these, to whom effort is an insurmountable task, it might be just as well to say frankly: If you have a mind that is entirely bromidic, if you are lacking in humor, all power of observation, and facility for expression, you had best join the ever-growing class of people who frankly confess, "I can't write letters to save my life!" and confine your literary efforts to picture post-cards with the engaging captions "X is my room," or "Beautiful weather, wish you were here." It is not at all certain that your friends and family would not rather have frequent post-cards than occasional letters all too obviously displaying the meagerness of their messages in halting orthography. (Post 1922: 491)

Post was attempting to preserve the artistic form and practice of letter-writing because she regarded the letter as a measure of intimacy, a vehicle for self-presentation, and a symbolic barometer for various cultural changes.

Post saw that letters are more than just a utilitarian mode of communication; they are a vital tool in the creation, maintenance, and preservation of interpersonal relationships, as well as a powerful symbol of cultural identity. She exaggerated the demise of early twentieth-century letter-writing, and one wonders how she would respond to current electronic communications – since email, Facebook, and text messaging have largely replaced not only the long, newsy handwritten letter of a bygone age, but even the more formulaic thank-you or sympathy note. This begs the question: is the letter still dying, ninety years later, or has it merely metamorphosized? In considering the epistolary practices of the near past – and even further the distant past – we must confront our own cultural milieu, which affects how we define and classify (if at all) our modern-day letters. Does an email constitute a letter? Or a text message? What role does the letter, handwritten or otherwise, exercise in today’s predominately electronic age?¹

The ancient Roman epistolary genre offers a useful approach for tackling such questions because it was expansive: it included purely utilitarian forms as well as more literary ones (verse or purely fictional letters). The broad range of ancient letter types, their various historical contexts, and their diverse functions offer lenses through which to view the “letter” in our own world and its roles in connecting us interpersonally – and globally. How do today’s epistolary forms function realistically and symbolically, how do they reflect our own values in the spheres of written communication and relationships, and what do they say about our desire to connect across the world? Has email facilitated more intimate relationships, shrinking time and distance through its instantaneity, or has it only created more distance, by depersonalizing words through the absence of tangibility – and of paper and ink? Does today’s text message or email replace real face-to-face contact in the same way ancient Romans imagined their letters doing? Moreover, how do instant electronic forms of correspondence conjure up deeper questions about what we choose to write and how, especially when the anticipation of a response is measured by a click – seconds or minutes rather than days, weeks, or even months away? The study of ancient letters tells us much about ancient Roman daily life, yet it also provides insight into our own world. Letters are treasure houses – *thesauroi* – for historical evidence such as of events and people, cultural institutions, literature, and ancient values. But recent scholarship has increasingly focused on letters as *literature*, valuable in its own right and worthy of close reading and appreciation.

This volume’s selections showcase the unique features that distinguish the epistolary genre from other types of literature. For example, ancient letter-writers represent a wide range of class and economic strata. Not only highly educated aristocratic men did compose letters, but also slaves, women, and even the illiterate (thanks to professional scribes). Letters thus exhibit widely varying degrees of linguistic competence and styles. The letter’s flexibility as a genre makes it particularly well suited to self-presentation and self-promotion: many writers exploit the letter as a way to enhance or solidify their



fame. Although most letters are specifically written to a particular recipient, their form allows authors an opportunity to “speak” to broader audiences. The letter thus exploits a dynamic interplay among author/letter-writer, recipient/addressee, and audience. Lastly, as a mode of communication frequently deigned to elicit a response from its reader-recipient, the letter represents a genre of power, capable of effecting change through the replies and responses of its readers. Such change may be manifested, for example, through the creation and maintenance (or dissolution) of relationships, through military or political actions, or through personal emotions. As Post had suggested about letters in the twentieth century, the ancient letter possessed the power to connect individuals through time and space, affirm and solidify social networks, and assert both political and cultural control across large geographical expanses. The letter is a speech act in written form, a conversation maintained across temporal and geographical distances, whether in the ancient Roman Empire or between the ancient and the modern world.

What Is a Letter? A Working “Meaning”

One advantage of an anthology like this one is that it encourages readers to form their own observations and to draw their own conclusions about the nature of Roman letters. Nevertheless, a general overview may assist close readings and thematic explorations of the texts that follow. The question “What is a letter?” was as difficult to answer in the ancient Roman context as it is today; letters resist precise classification and categorization, and strict definitions are limiting. The genre is so elastic, both in form and in function, that it is arguably most useful simply to offer some distinguishing features. At the most basic level, an ancient Roman letter is a written message between two individuals who are physically apart from each other and thus unable to communicate through speech or gesture. Letters may exist on an historical level – being actually sent and received, that is, exchanged between real living beings – or on a purely literary level – being exchanged between fictional characters created by an author. In addition, as noted above, we need to distinguish between letters that have survived physically, as archaeological remains – that is, as “primary, unprocessed correspondence” (Trapp 2003: 10) – and letters transmitted in published collections, through a manuscript tradition.

As a genre of writing, Roman letters display certain conventions of style and structure. For example, such features include a salutation and a valediction, although these elements aren’t required: they can be considered implicit in the letter’s purpose and delivery, much like the automatic salutations and valedictions embedded within emails and text messages today. Letters frequently include the explicit or implicit expectation of a response from the recipient (Letters 8, 38, 134, 200), while creating a strong, innate *ego-te* (“I” – “you”) relationship between sender/letter-writer and recipient/addressee. The sender can variously emphasize this relationship, and even strategically exploit it when necessary. The ancient epistolary theorist (Pseudo-)Demetrius describes the letter as a kind of written dialogue, one half of a conversation between



friends (Letter 215), but he carefully distinguishes between the oral, extemporaneous nature of spoken conversation and its written, epistolary counterpart – a format that is potentially more stylized, more permanent, and serves as an enduring “gift” to one’s friend. Demetrius’ comparison between oral and written also accounts for the many challenges inherent in conversing with a friend who is absent; notably clarity and eloquence are paramount, since written communication always risks misunderstanding and misinterpretation. The theorist Pseudo-Libanius also comments on the careful attention that goes into preparing a letter (Letter 216). He echoes Demetrius, asserting that the best letters should be written with “great art and precision” – which in turn comes only from truly understanding the nature of a letter and its conventions. He likewise describes a letter as a written conversation, so the sender should communicate “as if speaking to the recipient in person.” Seneca the Younger, writing many generations earlier, also emphasizes the conversational nature of letters in a letter to his friend Lucilius: “I want my letters – which have nothing artificial or foreign in them – to sound the same as when I’m talking with you, when we’re hanging out together or going for a stroll, you know, casual and natural” (*Moral Epistles* 2.75.1). Seneca’s letter, written in clear and eloquent prose, reinforces the point, and his remarks reiterate the theorists’ admonitions: letters should be conversational, maintaining a careful balance among precision, plainness, and elegance.

Letters were used not only out of necessity, for instance to bridge physical distance; writers might choose to engage in written exchange for a variety of other reasons, including to establish a written record, to avoid speaking about an embarrassing issue in person, or to fulfill a purpose otherwise considered inappropriate for a different literary genre. The “epistolarity” of a text – that is, its “use of the letter’s formal properties to create meaning” (Altman 1982: 4) – varies greatly across samples and presents significant implications for appreciating the ways in which Romans consciously employed the letter for more literary and symbolic purposes.² The open-ended, fluid nature of letters offered authors an appropriate – and valued – medium for creating autobiographical self-portraits, for reinterpreting past events in light of the present, and for attaining literary immortality. In substituting for face-to-face communication, the letter bridges a temporal and spatial gap, a function often noted by the sender. Letter-writers frequently make self-conscious references to the passage of time and to their physical separation from the recipient or other loved ones; in doing so they express a variety of ideas and emotions, such as complaints, wishes, hopes, and frustrations. Recollections of a past time or place, narratives of past events, and references to the logistical challenges inherent in sending and receiving letters also appear frequently. Moreover, as Altman has noted (1982: 13), authors may choose to emphasize or de-emphasize their separation from the recipient, depending upon their ulterior literary motives.³

The fundamental purpose of the letter, to communicate in writing what might otherwise be communicated orally, led to the categorization of epistolary types: letters of consolation, recommendation or requests, letters from exile, love letters, and ephrastic letters (descriptions of physical objects that the absent recipient cannot see



firsthand). Pseudo-Libanius outlines no less than 40 different types of letters and even includes sample letters as models. Such didactic manuals, perhaps written as guidelines for professional scribes or students (Poster and Mitchell 2007), echo Emily Post's etiquette manual from 1922 and more recent online and print publications offering guidance in epistolary composition and proper "netiquette" within various social contexts. Nevertheless, while these "types" highlight the letter's myriad functions, such divisions are contrived, since most letters serve multiple purposes simultaneously, intermingling different stylistic and literary features. The letter's flexibility, in function and style, means that the letter often incorporates characteristics from other literary genres, such as poetry, history, and philosophy.⁴ Thus letters may include features found in other familiar literary forms – say, in historical narrative or in poetry – or they may even embody a genre altogether – through verse, or by taking the form of a philosophical treatise. This innate literary inclusivity is what led a French philosopher like Derrida to declare that the letter is "not a genre but all genres, literature itself" (Derrida 1987: 48) – a sentiment that, in turn, has led Gibson and Morrison to posit: "Where are we to draw the boundary between letters and non-letters?" (2007: 3–4). Their case study, investigating certain Greek lyric poems that at one time scholars identified as epistles, throws into high relief the challenges of classifying ancient texts by genre.

To reinforce the point, this anthology includes not only selections formally identified as letters and pieces surviving within a purposefully collected and arranged letter collection (e.g., by Cicero, Horace, Seneca, Pliny), but also texts with more ambiguously defined boundaries or contexts, including, for example, epistle-like texts transmitted in other literary contexts (e.g., letters from Martial and Catullus, or letters embedded in Suetonius' biographies). As noted above, texts vary in their degree of epistolarity; within the published collection of Horace's (verse) *Epistles*, for example, some pieces appear to be less epistolary than others.⁵ Reading epistolary literature demands open-mindedness – a willingness to recognize conventional features identifying a work's epistolarity and to seriously accept an ancient work's "claims to epistolarity" (Gibson and Morrison 2007: 16). Indeed the boundaries of the ancient epistolary genre are as blurred as those between email, texting, and messaging today.

Length and Brevity

Length is a repeated theme among ancient theorists and letter-writers: brevity is the conventional expectation, perhaps developed out of practical considerations for the high cost of writing supplies, especially papyrus, and the letter's original function is to communicate brief messages. Demetrius himself explicitly advocates moderation: letters that are too long – or, worse, too pompous in style – lose their conversational quality and appear as little more than "treatises with 'Dear So-and-So' tacked onto them" (Letter 215). Pseudo-Libanius also promotes brevity, but not at the cost of clarity or content. Significantly, he observes that letters can offer enjoyment to the reader: extended narratives or stories are acceptable when they augment the pleasure



of reading, even if they cause a letter to expand. The pleasure that letters potentially offer suggests the role of letters as literature – an intellectual product that not only fulfills a utilitarian or obligatory purpose, but also entertains. This notion underscores Demetrius’ recognition of the letter’s function to serve as a “gift” to a friend, as noted above.

Aware that recipients would take notice of a letter’s length, ancient authors self-consciously referenced this feature by employing both rhetorical and symbolic means. Cicero, for example, occasionally apologizes for exceptionally brief letters at times when he despairs of fluctuating political tides or personal situations (Letter 27). In such contexts, his brevity conveys deeper messages about the political atmosphere and his position within it. Conversely, Pliny the Younger sometimes apologizes for a letter that might appear too long, preempting possible complaints from his recipient (Letters 129, 138). Since letters frequently imply the expectation of a response their length or brevity could serve as a gauge by which recipients assess the length of their own replies. The topos of length sometimes becomes a playful conceit, as an author might jestingly demand a long response, in compensation for the sender’s own expenditure of time and attention. Likewise, some authors chastise a correspondent or threaten to send only short letters to a recipient who has written either infrequently or tersely – all in playful retribution (Letter 117). While many of these exchanges are good-humored and friendly meant, they nonetheless hint at the reciprocal nature of letter-writing, in which length and frequency become methods for maintaining or calibrating relationships.⁶ There were certainly no strict guidelines for epistolary length, but the texts clarify that letter-writers were acutely aware of compositional length and its deeper implications. Self-conscious statements about length reflect deeper concerns over the expenditure of time, both in reading a (long) letter and in responding to it appropriately. Given the implicit expectation of a reply, letter-writers reveal a perceptive awareness of their recipients’ professional and social obligations and time constraints (or lack thereof), and thus of the potential onus or enjoyment that a short or a long letter is likely to bring. Notably, a writer’s awareness of and attention to letter length (and the recipient’s response to it) operate in a similar manner today, when such preoccupations revolve around email and other social media.

Autobiography and Self-Presentation

The letter is a fluid genre, which enables it to fulfill many different purposes and to reach many types of audience, thus empowering its authors with great freedom in experimentation and self-presentation. One exceptional advantage of the epistolary genre is its potential for autobiographical expression without the overt stigma of conceit often associated with formal autobiography. In one of his well-known letters to a friend, Cicero requests Lucceius to compose a history about him so he can avoid writing an autobiography – something that preserves one’s name for posterity but poses challenges of legitimacy (Letter 15). In short, letters offer a suitable backup plan



for people not landing a starring role in another's literary work. While the letter is ostensibly written to and for others, thanks to its *egocentric* structure, it can be carefully exploited to direct attention to and for the author. But with this potential comes risk. Once again, Post offers a suitable parallel from the modern era when she explicitly emphasizes the letter as a reflection of self:

The letter you write, whether you realize it or not, is always a mirror which reflects your appearance, taste and character. A "sloppy" letter with the writing all pouring into one corner of the page, badly worded, badly spelled, and with unmatched paper and envelope – even possibly a blot – proclaims the sort of person who would have unkempt hair, unclean linen and broken shoe laces; just as a neat, precise, evenly written note portrays a person of like characteristics. (1922: 448)

For Post, the visual, aesthetic presentation of the letter is as significant as the content, particularly since she saw poor, careless composition as going hand in hand with poor handwriting. Ancient letter-writers, too, comment upon the visual qualities of letters; for them, handwriting can function as a symbolic gauge of the expenditure of time, care, and attention and as a barometer of familiarity and intimacy. This makes sense, since regular correspondents would recognize each other's handwriting and would authenticate the writer as the legitimate author. Many authors occasionally apologize for a letter written in a scribe's hand and not their own (Letter 20) – a detail that would not have been missed by close friends, with whom they corresponded frequently. Their explanations normally focus on time constraints: pressing political or professional obligations necessitate a speedier method, accomplished by dictating to a scribe, rather than writing by oneself. Such apologies reinforce the general correlation between time, attention, and intimacy. Clearly, though, handwriting functioned as one aspect of epistolary self-presentation, beyond the letter's carefully crafted content. The visual appearance of the letter is important and symbolic.

Many upper-class Romans wrote daily – a task they regarded as a duty or burden. In light of this reality, the more time-consuming act of handwriting a letter becomes an additional way to communicate intimacy and reciprocity. Epistolary handwriting becomes a personal stamp, a signature, and sometimes a symbolic stand-in for the tangible, personal touch otherwise accomplished through a hug or handshake. Even purely fictional letters participate in the epistolary topos of handwriting personalization and emphasis on visual aspects of the letter, noting characteristics such as "ink blots" and "smears" as symbols of emotional distress, for example (Letter 71). These physical signs – whether merely rhetorical or real – further illustrate the epistolary genre's innate autobiographical stance, which is further illustrated through the use of pronouns, self-reflection, recollection, and self-conscious expression. In purely fictional letters this autobiographical posture operates not only at the literary level, where it can manifest itself through the fictional letter-writer's *egocentric* persona, but also at the authorial level, where the fictional correspondence is both a product and a reflection of the author and his literary expertise.



Materials and Delivery

Letters sent and received between real people (or fictional letters purporting to be sent and received) embody a variety of tangible forms, some of which are found in the archaeological evidence. These “unreprocessed” primary letters survive in the form of wax tablets, wooden tablets, ostraca (pottery shards used for inscribing names on them), and papyri (Muir 2009: 8; Hallo-aho 2009: 3–13). Letters, especially those from an emperor, could also take the form of inscriptions on stone or bronze, intended for an entire community (Letter 85). The unreprocessed letter material of the least permanent kind was the wax tablet, which was often employed for brief messages across short distances. Senders used a pointed instrument called a stylus to make impressions in wax, which had been set into a thin wood tablet; no ink was used (see Figure 1.1; Figure 1.2). The tablet might have a hinged wooden cover designed to protect the inscription, which made the whole object look much like a diptych. Wax tablets were an impermanent, portable medium for letters, since the recipient could reuse the same tablet to send back a reply simply by warming up the wax, smoothing



Figure 1.1 Ancient Roman writing materials: wax tablet, stylus, and papyrus scroll. Ancient Roman fresco. Location: Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, Italy. Source: Scala / Art Resource, NY



Figure 1.2 The baker Terentius Neo and his wife holding a papyrus scroll, a stylus and wax tablet. Ancient Roman fresco. Location: Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, Italy. Source: Vanni / Art Resource, NY

it over and re-inscribing the surface; they were particularly well suited for conveying dinner invitations or similar social requests.

Leaf tablets – such as those discovered at Vindolanda, the Roman military fort in Britain (see Figure 4.3) – could also be used for letter-writing. These tablets, dating from the first to the second century CE, were generally very thin and about the size of a postcard. Ink was used to write directly on the wooden surface, and the tablets were then folded to protect the writing inside (Bowman 1998: 15).⁷ Papyrus, another material for letter-writing, was typically more expensive and varied in size and quality (see Figure 1.1; Figure 1.2). Pliny the Elder, for example, notes that quality was graded according to factors such as strength, whiteness, and writing surface (Pliny, *Natural History* 13.24). Surviving examples, most of them coming from the city of Oxyrhynchus in Egypt, show that the letter could be written in columns, and sometimes in more than one hand; if the sender had used a scribe to write the letter, s/he might add a concluding note or valediction in his/her own hand (a “subscript,” as in Letters 1, 198).⁸ The papyrus letter would then be folded lengthways (or rolled) and secured with a tie and a seal. Papyrus seals could serve as signatures, a symbol of authority and legitimacy, especially for high-ranking individuals or emperors. While initially most papyrus documents comprised scrolls, later on codices developed wherein papyrus (or parchment) was cut and assembled in a manner similar to that of modern books; this format became especially popular during the first and second centuries CE, when Christians nearly universally adopted the codex, preferring it to the papyrus (or parchment) roll (Roberts and Skeat 1983: 37–45).

Surviving epistolary evidence proves that letter-writing was not exclusively reserved for emperors or the upper-class (literate) elite but was used by everyday individuals across a wide section of society, including the middle class, slaves, citizens, foreigners, men and women, rich and poor (see Figure 1.2). Extant examples illustrate a variety of scripts (capital, lower-case, and cursive), in both Greek and Latin, and they showcase different levels of handwriting quality and literacy. They survive in varying degrees of completeness and legibility, often posing significant challenges to papyrologists and paleographers attempting to decipher and transcribe the texts and to philologists attempting to establish their content and meaning.

The address of the recipient(s) was typically written on the outside of the letter. The specificity of the address and/or its accompanying directions could vary considerably, depending on the courier’s familiarity with the recipient and the intended destination (Muir 2009: 10). Not only do we find real-life examples of addresses in the archaeological evidence (Letter 205, 210), but even literary passages allude to the discursive way letters might have been addressed. Horace’s playful *Epistle* 1.13 (Letter 66; cf. Letters 98, 104) functions as a letter within a letter, giving directions to Vinnius on where to deliver Horace’s poetry to Augustus (r. 27 BCE–14 CE) and on the proper, respectful manner in which it should be delivered.

Because Rome had no official postal system for delivering private letters, senders like Horace or Ovid relied on slaves, paid professional couriers, or people who just happened to be traveling to the intended destination. Wealthy Romans might designate a specific group of slaves especially for this role (*tabellarii*, “tablet men”; Casson 1997: 219).



The delivery of a private letter could be a haphazard endeavor, where success depended on the whim of a courier's pace, on travel routes, and on unpredictable factors such as weather, road conditions, and other impediments like wild animals or bandits. Still, as Casson (1997: 221) explains, letters dispatched within relatively short distances could travel quite quickly; he cites, for example, Cicero's correspondence between Rome and Naples as taking approximately four or five days. Yet not all couriers were trustworthy or reliable, and letters could easily fall into the wrong hands or be intercepted. It seems that a shortage of reliable, trustworthy deliverers was a common occurrence and could cause delays. Other times an over-zealous courier might badger a recipient to prepare a response on short notice (Letter 40). Letters across long distances faced much longer travel times and delays, especially if the courier had to wait for a ship heading the right direction. Given the many extenuating factors, travel times were inconsistent: a letter from Rome to Athens could take anywhere from three to seven weeks (Casson 1995: 221).

Many letters explicitly note the logistical challenges of delivery. Complaints about crossed, missing, or late letters and untrustworthy deliverers are frequent (e.g., Letters 7, 177). Such frustrations naturally affect a letter's content by expressing complaints, but they also do so by withholding certain information or by using coded references, repeating the news, or showing misunderstandings and miscommunications. This lack of control, the time lapse in communicating important news, and the long period of awaiting a response influenced the ways in which writers maintained relationships and corresponded across time and space. Without a formal mail delivery system, private senders and recipients were frequently compelled to adjust their letter-writing activities.

When it came to official correspondence – for instance, letters between the emperor and administrators or military personnel, or even letters from the emperor to a provincial city – a slightly more formal system developed. Official correspondence by the emperor and other administrators likely relied heavily on dictation and secretaries. In governing effectively, emperors faced a substantial epistolary burden.⁹ The Roman Empire's geographical expanse was vast, and letters were the main vehicle for keeping tabs on matters of imperial administration, the maintenance of borders, finances and taxes, and military activity. The emperor's enormous epistolary responsibilities were, however, mitigated by an official secretary whose job focused on imperial correspondence. The Emperor Claudius (r. 41–54 CE) established a number of imperial secretarial positions, including that of epistolary secretary (the secretary *ab epistulis*), which significantly contributed to the bureaucratization and centralization of imperial administration. This post had already existed in a military form during the late republican period; however, it did not receive official recognition as a title until the early empire.¹⁰

In fact there were two epistolary secretaries: the Greek epistolary secretary and the Latin one. This possibly indicates an administrative adaptation to the need of writing letters in Greek for the Roman East and in Latin for the Roman West.¹¹ During Claudius' reign loyal freedmen were appointed for the most part; but, beginning with Domitian (r. 81–96 CE), equestrians – a generally wealthy upper middle class – also held the



position. The epistolary secretary was likely responsible not only for transcribing letters dictated by the emperor, to which the emperor might then add a subscript, but also for composing letters (and answering them) at his own discretion (Millar 1967: 14). This means, then, that the secretary himself could make decisions on certain imperial administrative issues, thereby functioning not just as a letter-writer, but as a significant imperial minister.

On especially important issues the emperor might exert more oversight, providing a verbal response that the secretary then drafted into his letter. In these cases the letter sometimes represented a cooperative compositional effort (Sherwin-White 1962: 114–25). Still, even then it is difficult to separate with certainty the emperor's own words from those of his secretary. Regardless of the emperor's degree of autonomy in composing a letter, the epistolary secretary sat at the center of imperial governing, keeping abreast of happenings around the empire; and, as the title indicates, he played a significant role in epistolary correspondence. Even with the help of secretaries, at least until the Severan dynasty (195–235 CE) the emperor continued to be directly and personally involved in imperial administration, and the correspondence required to govern it effectively; he was not a distant and far removed ruler, but rather one who pressed palms and dealt directly with individuals of all social classes (Millar 1967: 18).

The significant role of these secretaries and the social prestige that accompanied their position are suggested in literary and epigraphical sources that explicitly name individuals who held the post. Before Claudius' establishment of the epistolary secretary as an official position, we hear of Augustus requesting the help of Horace, an equestrian poet, to assist in his private correspondence. This request is significant because it represents a forerunner of the secretaryship that became official later; but Horace did not accept. As Lindsay (1994: 459) has pointed out, Augustus' offer suggests that, by the first century BCE, he was feeling the strain of the heavy epistolary correspondence that was needed in order to maintain stable governance. His choice of Horace, who was a well-known poet admired within Rome's literary circle of Maecenas, suggests the importance Augustus placed on keeping up his epistolary obligations – and also his desire to do so well, through someone who was intellectually, linguistically, and stylistically exceptional.

Like Augustus, the Emperor Hadrian (r. 117–138 CE) also wanted a skilled literary man to serve as his secretary, and he chose the ancient biographer Suetonius, who was happy to fill the position (Wardle 2002: 462–480). The instrumental role that the secretary played – not only in writing letters, but also in serving in some capacity as a minister and advisor – is clear from the pride secretaries and their family members expressed; this sentiment was found in numerous literary texts and commemorative inscriptions.¹² Statius, a poet writing under the reign of Domitian, composed a poem at the request of Abascantus, the emperor's epistolary secretary; in it he celebrated Abascantus and his status as epistolary secretary (Zeiner-Carmichael 2007). Statius enumerates a range of letter topics and administrative concerns such as military commands, weather, and agricultural productivity. Abascantus' significance is further symbolized by the vast geographical distances the letters travel as they pass through his hands: his epistolary responsibilities aren't only pragmatic, but symbolically weighty.

The distinction Statius ascribes to the Abascantus' position as epistolary secretary must reflect a parallel reality: the job commanded prestige and fame by virtue of the duties it involved and the central place of its bearer within the imperial court.

The growing Roman Empire demanded the establishment of an official secretarial position for correspondence, yet it also required an infrastructure to facilitate the delivery of numerous regular letters associated with provincial governance. Again, these needs seem to develop concomitantly with the shift from republic to empire through an increasing number of annexed provinces. Suetonius credits Augustus with establishing the first mechanism for transporting official imperial correspondence (*Life of Augustus* 49.3). He explains that the system initially comprised rest stations positioned at modest intervals along major roads such as Via Appia (see Figure 3.1), which were staffed by young men; the letter (or verbal message) would be transferred from carrier to carrier until it reached its destination, much like an ancient Pony Express. Later, as Suetonius tells us, Augustus stationed vehicles such as carts and wagons, so that the same messenger could carry the dispatch from beginning to end, replenishing his animals or equipment along the way. This second phase had the advantage of allowing the original messenger to communicate directly with the recipient when questions or confusion about the message's origin or content arose. Moreover, the vehicles used to deliver messages could serve double-duty by transporting official administrators or goods. Suetonius' description emphasizes the need for increased speed as the impetus for the system's creation – which clearly had political, cultural, and social implications in terms of communications between the emperor and his addressee(s), as well as in terms of disseminating Roman power and culture more broadly. As Kolb (2001: 95) notes, the ensuing delivery system was not a postal service per se, but rather “an infrastructure for use by state officials.” Later, under the reign of Diocletian in the fourth century CE, it was given the name of “state delivery” (*cursus publicus*), a phrase often applied to the system, albeit anachronistically, before its official coinage.

Stations along the system supplied food, provisions, and accommodations; but, as a provincial edict from the Roman province of Galatia reveals, it was the onus of local people, who were only partially compensated for it, to keep the stations properly supplied (Kolb 2001: 97). Thus, it would seem, the system was only as efficient and effective as local cooperation allowed. And, as with the delivery of private letters, even official correspondence depended on the whim of the courier.¹³ The same edict from Galatia enumerates the types of people entitled to use official transportation vehicles and accommodations stationed along state delivery roads; these included government officials or other people on special official or military business. As Talbert (2012: 244) points out, however, the roads themselves were not reserved solely for official couriers, travelers, and transporters; they also continued to serve private individuals, and they must have been regularly crowded. Authorized users of the state delivery required an official certificate (*diploma*) from the emperor or one of his representatives, which specified the number of wagons or animals to be used for the journey, the itinerary, and the period of time for which the *diploma* remained valid (Kolb, 2001: 97).¹⁴

The issuing of *diplomata* must have been taken seriously even if its enforcement was difficult to uphold. Talbert (2012: 244) notes that authorities regularly coped with

fraudulent use of the state delivery infrastructure by unauthorized persons utilizing its official services (wagons, animals, accommodations). As a specially appointed governor of Bithynia-Pontus, Pliny the Younger writes a letter to Emperor Trajan (r. 98–117 CE) apologizing for issuing a *diploma* to his wife Calpurnia for unofficial family business, carefully noting the unusual personal circumstances and the infrequency of such and action. Pliny the Younger's letter and Emperor Trajan's reply (*Epistles* 10.120–1) are insightful: they reveal that the emperor regularly supplied governors with permits (*diplomata*) to issue on his behalf. Here, of course, Pliny has utilized one such permit in his possession for personal rather than official business. Yet the two letters emphasize in a gendered way the advantages the state delivery offered; for Pliny credits precisely his wife's use of the infrastructure to ensure her own prompt arrival during her family's time of need. Her timeliness (*celeritas*) guarantees the successful fulfillment of familial duty and devotion (*pietas*) – a highly respected Roman virtue. Trajan's response condones Pliny's prior decision and confirms that Calpurnia's *promptness* is an added bonus in her fulfillment of her familial duty. While these two letters upheld the gendered norms that prevailed at the time of their writing, they also illustrate the realities of long-distance epistolary correspondence. Even with an infrastructure like the state delivery to expedite delivery and travel, time lapses could be long, and responses could come too late. Thus we often see letter-writers anticipating or even preempting the responses of their epistolary recipients: they offer answers to imagined questions coming from them, they provide extra clarification and detail, in anticipation of potential confusion or follow-up questions, or, as in this case, they make belated approval second.

Finally, while these two letters prove that Pliny the Younger utilized the state delivery infrastructure, we have no definitive evidence clarifying the extent to which he used it for official correspondence with Trajan. Moreover, our literary evidence provides little information on the infrastructure's exact land routes, the types of messages it was reserved for, or how the system might have operated in relation to other imperial infrastructures, such as bridges, ports, and sea routes. We also lack evidence regarding the methods by which mail was packaged and delivered. In fact there is nothing compelling to suggest that the Romans, especially everyday citizens, conceived of their road system as an elaborate, highly orchestrated network of communication (Talbert 2012: 247). Nevertheless, the roads and seaways facilitating epistolary correspondence comprised an effective, if not always efficient, vehicle for imperial communication and governance. In his speech of praise to the Romans (*Regarding Rome*), the second-century CE Greek rhetorician Aelius Aristides suggests that mail delivery significantly bridged the gap between the emperor and his far-flung provinces. He extols the fact that the Roman emperor can govern wherever he is, relying on letters arriving almost as quickly as they are written, as if carried by "winged messengers" (*Regarding Rome*, 26.33). Aristides does not mention the *cursus publicus* (state delivery) as such, but his comments imply that the Roman emperor was able to govern effectively through letters. Roman imperial administration was thus clearly a portable operation, though Aristides' enthusiasm must be filtered through the rhetorical exaggeration characteristic of speeches given during this period. His praise nonetheless implies that



letters, and the Roman infrastructure, allowed Rome to rule “the world” effectively and efficiently and to share its culture and ideals with the surrounding provinces. In sum, state delivery – *cursus publicus* – was an infrastructure, an efficient delivery system whereby official letters, people, and goods could travel throughout the empire relatively successfully, with the help of rest stops and renewable supplies (Kolb 2001: 101). Yet, with all due respect to the empire, the absence of a true postal system meant that most letters were sent and received through a relatively informal system, which relied on sheer luck – among other things.

Audience(s)

Roads connect people, and hence correspondents. A letter, like a road, moves through time and space, joining not only individuals but larger groups, and often in very interconnected, web-like ways. A Roman man might send a letter with a copy of another friend’s letter enclosed; that friend may in turn copy the letters and send them on to others, and so forth. A letter from an emperor might take the form of a written inscription – an edict – publicly displayed in a city center, for all to see. Letters written by Christian leaders were often addressed to entire communities and purposely intended for copying and dissemination (Letters 97, 165). The letter’s inherent *ego-te* relationship also means that the letter-writer (or author – as the two aren’t always the same) can “speak” to an external audience outside of, or apart from, the immediately intended addressee or recipient; and this “dialogue” may occur within the same historical context or in vastly different ones – even years, centuries, or millennia later. The epistolary genre’s inherent, regular use of personal pronouns (“I,” “you”) encourages direct engagement between the letter’s reader (whether this is the intended recipient or not) and the text; it is a literary invitation that some letter-writers exploit to their advantage. When in his philosophical letters Seneca the Younger directs advice to his intended recipient, Lucilius, we, the external and much later readers, are implicitly invited either to assume Lucilius’ position as addressee and recipient or to imagine ourselves as the letter-writer (Seneca). In other words, the letter’s inherent *ego-te* centrality means that an external audience or a group of outsiders (like ourselves, construed as readers of all letters in this anthology) may engage with and participate in the epistolary text in a manner far more intimate and self-conscious than occurs in other literary genres. As the “*te*” (“you”) being addressed, we thereby define ourselves in relation to the “*ego*” (“I”) of the letter-writer, his/her message, and our own social context. In this way an ancient letter travels not only temporally (across time) and spatially (across geographical space) within its own, “real” historical context, but also beyond, reaching readers in other historical and cultural contexts. It is precisely this literary, interpersonal engagement, this ability to create connections through and across time, this epistolary invitation involving and reaching an audience beyond the immediate recipient that makes the experience of reading Roman letters enjoyable and personal. Yet, when we connect with the ancient world, we must guard against the uncritical assessment of letters as implicitly “true” or “honest”; we should not take



them as if they reflected the pure, unfiltered emotions and thoughts of the letter-writer any more than an email or text message does today.

The Romans' habit of copying, disseminating, and formally publishing letters means that they frequently envisioned an external audience. A writer's awareness of the possibility of his or her letters falling into the wrong hands, being copied, or surviving posthumously (with or without intention) prompted natural considerations in the composition, delivery, editing, and publication of letters. Altman (1982: 88) emphasizes the crucial role that the letter's internal reader – that is, the intended recipient (and the imagined external reader) – plays in the actual “generation of the text”; the letter represents a “union of writer and reader” and reflects the reciprocal nature of the epistolary act as one whereby the “letter writer simultaneously seeks to affect his reader and is affected by him.” This ever present idea of other eyes reading over the letter-writer's shoulder should caution us when we consider more complex issues of audience and epistolary classifications and our own inclination to label epistolary texts as strictly “real” or “fictional.” As has been shown earlier in this chapter, there is no watertight definition for a “letter,” and the boundary markers between letter types are blurry. Readers have a natural proclivity to view a letter's contents as a “mirror” of the writer's “honest” inner thoughts and emotions, but such a predisposition can be misguided. The ancient theorist Demetrius might well claim that “each of us writes a letter that is almost like an image of our own soul” (Letter 215), but what he means is that the letter is a reflection of how the letter-writer wants to present a specific image at a specific time. As Rosenmeyer (2001: 5) has noted, every letter-writing act, whether between actual historical people or imaginary ones, is innately fictional: “whenever one writes a letter, one constructs a self, an occasion, a version of truth.”

Student readers of this book might take a moment to think about Facebook. Do status updates represent reality or only the reality that the “author” wants his or her audience to perceived at a particular moment in time? Does the Facebook author have an immediate reader in mind or a wider, non-specific one? When we step back and think about it, the Facebook author presents an *image* of emotion or honesty, which may or may not be real. The content, tone, and style of a Facebook status update, even if it is a seemingly general statement, may in fact be consciously directed toward – and generated by – a specific “friend” (or “friends”) whom one has in mind; it constitutes, knowingly or unknowingly, an act of deliberate self-presentation designed to elicit a response, no matter whether this is articulated in a “comment” or in a “like.” Similarly, when we read letters from the ancient world, we should read the image of how the author presents him/herself at that specific moment in time to a specifically intended recipient and/or imagined external reader. So, whether we deal with so-called “real” letters that were actually sent and received, with collections edited and published by the author (or posthumously), with unprocessed papyri and inscriptions, or with purely literary letters, we must always tread carefully when it comes to attaching legitimacy to words as signifiers of “pure” emotion, truth, or authenticity. Every letter is a creation, an image of how the writer hopes to be perceived by the recipient – as well as by multiple audiences, imagined and unimagined, contemporary and future.



The caution we must exercise about not making too sharp distinctions between “real” and “fictional” must also be applied to other types of artificial classification, which ignore the complexities of the epistolary genre in its various social and literary contexts. Attempts to construct precise typologies – such as “public” letters versus “private” letters, or even “letter” versus “epistle,” as many twentieth-century scholars have done¹⁵ – are too constricting: no letter fits neatly into one single category. Moreover, such classifications limit our appreciation of the genre’s fluidity, its autobiographical tendencies, its ability to create literary personas, and its power to construct literary immortality for the letter-writer, the recipient, and those individuals referred to in the text.

Themes

The genre-based fluidity that inhibits our ability to distinguish strict categories of letters is precisely what allows us also to recognize so many different but interrelated themes within letters. If one reads sufficiently many letters of sufficiently different types, he or she easily discerns thematic parallels throughout the entire genre, despite variances in form and style. These themes recur not only in terms of content, but also in expression. Thus, for example, we find similar expressions of grief and consolation in letters about death and in letters about love and exile, where the loss, whether of a lover or of one’s homeland, is portrayed as an experience similar to one of death. Similarly, one can trace the theme of slavery throughout the letters, noting the various ways in which Romans conceive of slavery not only as an institution, but as a vehicle of discourse allowing authors to comment upon larger philosophical ideas and ethical principles.

The letters represented in this volume have been carefully selected to showcase such thematic interconnectedness. Student readers might explore, for example, friendship, travel, women, entertainment, literary production, death, exile, art, villas, illnesses – or other topics. And, while we can and should appreciate Roman letters as historical texts documenting ancient Roman life and culture, we can also enjoy them as literature, and we can do so through various approaches. Focusing on one specific author, noting certain features unique to individual writers and their contexts allows readers to become intimately familiar with individual style and purpose. A chronological methodology, in which one reads letters and authors in chronological sequence, offers an opportunity to trace the epistolary tradition and the development and reassertion of literary conventions over time. Tracing one or several different themes among different authors at different time periods can help us appreciate the similarities and differences in style and expression among letter-writers composing on the same topic; such a diachronic approach is particularly useful for close analysis, as in considering how letter-writers use a specific subject (death, slavery, art) for the purposes of self-presentation or for the creation of literary immortality. In reading ancient Roman letters we are encouraged to reflect on our own methods of communicating beyond the spoken word. Whether we do so in handwritten or in electronic forms, our desire



to connect with others, who are distant from us, is – and has been for thousands of years – one of the greatest motivators of human behavior.

NOTES

- 1 See, e.g., Olson 2006. In her analysis of email as an adapted epistolary form, J. Walker (2007: 242) notes the numerous (online) guides to proper emailing – or “netiquette” – that have recently surfaced, which are strikingly similar to Post’s etiquette handbook.
- 2 Cf. Rosenmeyer 2001: 1–16; also Gibson and Morrison 2007: 1–16, who build upon Altman’s seminal work.
- 3 See, for example, Altman’s discussion (1982: 13–14) of Ovid’s *Heroides*.
- 4 For a more theoretical approach, see, for example, Jenkins (2006: 1–13), who discusses the epistle as a symbol, i.e., “as one manifestation of writing-within-writing” (p. 10).
- 5 For a fuller discussion exploring issues of transmission and collections and the identification of texts as “letters,” see Gibson and Morrison (2007: 14–16).
- 6 This kind of compositional barometer is exactly what Post (1922: 491) suggested when she sardonically advised lazy letter-writers to send one-sentence post-cards rather than sloppily written letters: “It is not at all certain that your friends and family would not rather have frequent post-cards than occasional letters all too obviously displaying the meagerness of their messages in halting orthography.”
- 7 “These leaf tablets [. . .] were clearly the counterpart of papyrus in those areas of the empire where papyrus will have been difficult and expensive to obtain” (Bowman 1998: 15).
- 8 Trapp 2003: 8. See Hallo-aho 2009: 22–3 for the role of both professional and non-professional scribes.
- 9 For the emperor’s personal involvement in letter-writing, see Millar 1967: 9–19.
- 10 For a historical overview of the function of epistolary secretary, see Lindsay 1994: 454–68.
- 11 See Townend 1961: 175–81, who challenges traditional assumptions about secretarial organization; and cf. Millar 1992: 224–6.
- 12 For the imperial sway and rivalries among epistolary secretaries during the third century CE, see Anderson 1986: 65–6.
- 13 Ramsey (1925: 60–74) estimated that on average a courier traveled approximately 50 miles per day. Compare Eliot 1955: 76 ff.; also Casson 1995 and 1997.
- 14 “Travelers had to present their warrants [*diplomata*] when exchanging transport at way stations or to other inspecting officials as required” (Kolb 2001: 98). For an example of a military *diploma*, see Mellor 1978/9: 173–84.
- 15 For a fuller overview of epistolary classification, see Doty 1969: 183–99 and Rosenmeyer 2001: 5–12.

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