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Teaching Letters from Ancient Rome

The primary goal of the Classics teacher - at every level, working from translations or from the original languages - is to enable students to hear the living voices of the past. The sources that have come down to us are, of course, highly filtered, both by accidents of transmission and by the author's own craftsmanship and self-censoring: we see the picture he (or she) is rarely applicable) wants us to see. The one genre that would seem to come closest to the author's real voice is that of letters to friends (and sometimes enemies). This paper briefly surveys the resources available in translation and suggests some of the rewards both of reading actual letters and of recognizing epistolary elements in other genres, especially Catullus's poetry.

Though some must-read letters are widely available (such as Pliny's to Trajan about the Christian problem), the present state of letters in translation can be frustrating to the teacher. Cicero's in particular tend to be underrepresented in sourcebooks, either ignored or heavily excerpted, and D. R. Shackleton Bailey's magnificent collections are too voluminous to purchase for most courses. I am currently completing a sourcebook in translation, *Clodia: A Study in Roman Passion, Politics, and Poetry*, that may help to fill this gap: in presenting all the extant ancient sources on Clodia Metelli, it includes a substantial number of unabridged Ciceronian letters. These letters provide an important corrective to the sensational portrait of a ruthless, sexually rampant female that emerges from standard sourcebook treatments of Clodia and from the AP syllabus. Students are amazed to see the same man who branded Clodia a *meretrix* in the *Pro Caelio* later angling to buy her property for a shrine to his deceased daughter - a reversal that has much to say about Cicero's humanity, the reality behind his oratory, and the remarkable status of Clodia herself.

The epistolary style, though it is rarely recognized as such, also contributes to the immediacy and appeal of Catullus's poems, nearly all of which are addressed (so to speak) to particular readers/hearers. We find not only the expected billet-doux and Dear Jane letter, but the letter of recommendation, the invitation, the blackmail, the dunning notice, the sympathy note, the thank you note, and the cover letter, to name a few. This recognition of category can shed light on vexed questions of textual criticism and interpretation. For instance, Catullus's first poem immediately presents a textual/interpretive problem: is the poet praying to an unnamed patroness Muse or flattering the dedicatee? Reading this poem as a sort of "letter of recommendation" for the collection may help students - and teachers - approach the question of text and of tone so essential for understanding the charming new poet they are meeting.