

Writing to Power: Tyrants in Fictional Epistolography
March 2, 2010, Haverford College

John Paul Christy
The University of Pennsylvania
christy@sas.upenn.edu

Finding letters in Greek literature

Homer, *Iliad* 6, Bellerophon and *sêmata lugra*

Herodotus, *Histories* , 1.123-4, Harpagus and the hare

Euripides, *Hippolytus* , Phaedra's suicide note

Euripides, *Palamedes* , Odysseus forges a signature

Lucian and the lingering memory of letters gone wrong

ἔνθα μοι καὶ Ὀδυσσεὺς προσελθὼν λάθρα τῆς Πηνελόπης δίδωσιν ἐπιστολὴν εἰς Ὠγυγίαν τὴν νῆσον Καλυψοῖ κομίζειν. . . . πρότερον δ' ἐγὼ λύσας τὴν ἐπιστολὴν ἀνεγίνωσκον τὰ γεγραμμένα. ἦν δὲ τοιάδε· Ὀδυσσεὺς Καλυψοῖ χαίρειν. Ἴσθι με, ὡς τὰ πρῶτα ἐξέπλευσα παρὰ σοῦ τὴν σχεδίαν κατασκευασάμενος, ναυαγία χρησάμενον μόλις ὑπὸ Λευκοθέας διασωθῆναι εἰς τὴν τῶν Φαιάκων χώραν, ὑφ' ᾧν ἐς τὴν οἰκείαν ἀποπεμφθεὶς κατέλαβον πολλοὺς τῆς γυναικὸς μνηστῆρας ἐν τοῖς ἡμετέροις τρυφῶντας· ἀποκτείνας δὲ ἅπαντας ὑπὸ Τηλεγόνου ὕστερον τοῦ ἐκ Κίρκης μοι γενομένου ἀνηρέθην, καὶ νῦν εἶμι ἐν τῇ Μακάρων νήσῳ πάνυ μετανοῶν ἐπὶ τῷ καταλιπεῖν τὴν παρὰ σοὶ δίαϊταν καὶ τὴν ὑπὸ σοῦ προτεινομένην ἀθανασία. ἦν οὖν καιροῦ λάβωμαι, ἀποδρὰς ἀφίξομαι πρὸς σέ.

[As I was leaving] Odysseus came to me in secret, unbeknownst to Penelope, and gave me a letter for Calypso, to take to the island of Ogygia. . . . But before I delivered the letter, I opened it and read it. It contained the following: 'Odysseus to Calypso, greetings. Know that when I long ago built my raft and sailed away from you, I suffered a shipwreck and was barely saved by Leukothea, and was delivered to the land of the Phaeacians; I was sent home by them, where I found many suitors wooing my wife and living it up on our goods. I killed all of them, but afterwards was slain by Telegonus, the son I had with Circe, and now I am on the Isle of the Blest, much regretting how I left the life with you and the immortality you offered me. If I find the opportunity, I will run off and come to you...'

(Lucian, cont.)

ταῦτα μὲν ἐδήλου ἢ ἐπιστολή, καὶ περὶ ἡμῶν, ὅπως ξενισθῶμεν. ἐγὼ δὲ προελθὼν ὀλίγον ἀπὸ τῆς θαλάττης εὗρον τὸ σπήλαιον τοιοῦτον οἶον Ὅμηρος εἶπεν, καὶ αὐτὴν ταλασιουργοῦσαν. ὡς δὲ τὴν ἐπιστολὴν ἔλαβεν καὶ ἐπελέξατο, πρῶτα μὲν ἐπὶ πολὺ ἐδάκρυσεν, ἔπειτα δὲ παρεκάλει ἡμᾶς ἐπὶ ξένια καὶ εἰστία λαμπρῶς καὶ περὶ τοῦ Ὀδυσσέως ἐπυνθάνετο καὶ περὶ τῆς Πηνελόπης, ὅποια τε εἶη τὴν ὄψιν καὶ εἰ σωφρονοίη, καθάπερ Ὀδυσσεὺς πάλαι περὶ αὐτῆς ἐκόμπαζεν· καὶ ἡμεῖς τοιαῦτα ἀπεκρινάμεθα, ἐξ ὧν εἰκάζομεν εὐφρανεῖσθαι αὐτὴν . . .

The letter made clear these things, and about us, that we were to be welcomed as guests. I found the cave, just as Homer describes it, a little way off from the sea, and I found her inside working at the loom. After she took and read the letter, she cried for a while, but then she invited us to her hospitality. And we feasted splendidly, and she asked about Odysseus and about Penelope, what kind of woman she was to look at, and if she was as modest as Odysseus had long ago described her. And we answered her in the way we guessed would make her happy... (*Verae Historiae* , 2.29.2-4; 2.35.6-36.8)

Platonic *Epistle* 2

Πλάτων Διονυσίῳ εὖ πράττειν:

...πέφυκε συνιέναι εἰς ταῦτόν φρόνησις τε καὶ δύναμις μεγάλη, καὶ ταῦτ' ἄλληλα αἰεὶ διώκει καὶ ζητεῖ καὶ συγγίγνεται· ἔπειτα καὶ οἱ ἄνθρωποι χαίρουσιν περὶ τούτων αὐτοῖ τε διαλεγόμενοι καὶ ἄλλων ἀκούοντες ἔν τε ἰδίαις συνουσίαις καὶ ἐν ταῖς ποιήσεσιν. οἷον καὶ περὶ Ἱέρωνος ὅταν διαλέγωνται ἄνθρωποι καὶ Πausανίου τοῦ Λακεδαιμονίου, χαίρουσι τὴν Σιμωνίδου συνουσίαν παραφέροντες, ἃ τε ἔπραξεν καὶ εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτούς· καὶ Περίανδρον τὸν Κορίνθιον καὶ Θαλῆν τὸν Μιλήσιον ὑμνεῖν εἰώθασιν ἅμα, καὶ Περικλέα καὶ Ἀναξαγόραν, καὶ Κροῖσον αὐτὸν καὶ Σόλωνα ὡς σοφοὺς καὶ Κῦρον ὡς δυνάστην. καὶ δὴ ταῦτα μιμούμενοι οἱ ποιηταὶ Κρέοντα μὲν καὶ Τειρεσίαν συνάγουσιν, Πολύειδον δὲ καὶ Μίνω, Ἀγαμέμνονα δὲ καὶ Νέστορα καὶ Ὀδυσσεά καὶ Παλαμήδη. . .

Plato to Dionysius, welfare:

...

It is natural for wisdom and great power to come together, and they are always pursuing and seeking each other and commingling. Also these are things that people delight in discussing themselves in private conversation and hearing others discuss in their poems. For example, when men talk about Hieron or about Pausanias the Lacedaemonian they delight to bring up their meeting with Simonides, and what he did and said to them; and

(Platonic *Epistle* 2, cont.)

τούτων δὲ τ ο ὗς μὲν εἰς διαφορὰν, τοὺς δ' εἰς φιλίαν ἀλλήλοις ἰόντας,
τοὺς δὲ τοτὲ μὲν εἰς φιλίαν, τοτὲ δ' εἰς διαφορὰν, καὶ τὰ μὲν
ὁμονοοῦντας, τὰ δὲ διαφορομένους ἄδουσι. πάντα δὴ ταῦτα λέγω τόδε
βουλόμενος ἐν δείξασθαι, ὅτι οὐκ, ἐπειδὴν ἡμεῖς τελευτήσωμεν, καὶ οἱ
λόγοι οἱ περὶ ἡμῶν αὐτῶν σεσιγήσονται· ὥστ' ἐπιμελητέον αὐτῶν
ἔστιν.

and as the poets say, some of these were at odds with each other, and some were friends, while others again were sometime friends and sometime foes, sometimes in agreement, other times in disagreement. I say all these things to show you that when we are dead, the stories about us will not go undiscussed, so we should have a care for them. (*Epistle* 2, 310E5 - 311C3)

Platonic *Epistle* 3

κἀγὼ τὸ μετὰ ταῦτα ὃ ἐπήρει μοι εἰπεῖν οὐκ εἶπον, φοβούμενος μὴ
σμικροῦ ῥήματος ἔνεκα τὸν ἔκπλουν ὃν προσεδόκων, μὴ μοι στενὸς
γίγνοιτο ἀντ' εὐρυχωρίας. ἀλλ' οὖν ὧν ἔνεκα πάντ' εἴρηται ταῦτ' ἐστί·
μὴ με διάβαλλε λέγων ὡς οὐκ εἶων ἐγὼ σε πόλεις Ἑλληνίδας ἐρρούσας
ὑπὸ βαρβάρων οἰκίζειν, οὐδὲ Συρακουσίους ἐπικουφίσαι βασιλείαν
ἀντὶ τυραννίδος μεταστήσαντα.

I refrained from giving a reply that occurred to me [while I was in your presence], fearing that a little word might narrow the prospect of sailing home, to which I was then looking forward with confidence. Now the reason for all I have said is this: don't slander me by saying that I would not allow you to resettle the Greek cities destroyed by barbarians, or to relieve the people of Syracuse by changing your tyranny into a kingship. (*Epistle* 3, 319c-d, trans. Morrow).

Ἴσοκράτης Διονυσίῳ χαιρεῖν

εἰ μὲν νεώτερος ἦν, οὐκ ἂν ἐπιστολὴν ἔπεμπον, ἀλλ' αὐτὸς ἂν σοι πλεύσας ἐνταῦθα διελέχθην: ἐπειδὴ δ' οὐ κατὰ τοὺς αὐτοὺς χρόνους ὃ τε τῆς ἡλικίας τῆς ἐμῆς καιρὸς καὶ τῶν σῶν πραγμάτων συμβέβηκεν, ἀλλ' ἐγὼ μὲν προαπείρηκα, τὰ δὲ πράττεσθαι νῦν ἀκμὴν εἴληφεν, ὡς οἶόν τ' ἐστὶν ἐκ τῶν παρόντων, οὕτω σοι πειράσομαι δηλῶσαι περὶ αὐτῶν. οἶδα μὲν οὖν ὅτι τοῖς συμβουλεύειν ἐπιχειροῦσι πολὺ διαφέρει μὴ διὰ γραμμάτων ποιεῖσθαι τὴν συνουσίαν ἀλλ' αὐτοὺς πλησιάσαντας, οὐ μόνον ὅτι περὶ τῶν αὐτῶν πραγμάτων ῥᾶον ἂν τις παρῶν πρὸς παρόντα φράσειν ἢ δι' ἐπιστολῆς δηλώσειεν, οὐδ' ὅτι πάντες τοῖς λεγομένοις μᾶλλον ἢ τοῖς γεγραμμένοις πιστεύουσι, καὶ τῶν μὲν ὡς εἰσηγημάτων, τῶν δ' ὡς ποιημάτων ποιοῦνται τὴν ἀκρόασιν.

Isocrates to Dionysius, greetings:

If I were younger, I would not be sending you a letter, but I would sail to you and converse with you in person; but since it happens that the fruitful period of my life and that of your own affairs have not coincided—since I am already advanced in age, and with you it is the right time for action—I will try to explain to you my views about the situation as well as I can under the circumstances. I know, to be sure, that when men attempt to give advice, it is far preferable that they should come in person rather than send a letter, not only because it is easier to discuss the same matters face to face than to give their views by letter, but also because all men give greater credence to the spoken rather than to the written word, since they listen to the former as to practical advice and

(Isocrates, *Letter 1*, cont.)

οὐ μὴν ἀλλ' ἐπειδὴ σὺ μέλλεις αὐτῶν ἔσεσθαι κριτῆς, πολλὰς ἐλπίδας ἔχω φανήσεσθαι λέγοντας ἡμᾶς τι τῶν δεόντων: ἡγοῦμαι γὰρ ἀπάσας ἀφέντα σε τὰς δυσχερείας τὰς προειρημένας αὐταῖς ταῖς πράξεσι προσέξειν τὸν νοῦν. καίτοι τινὲς ἤδη με τῶν σοὶ πλησιασάντων ἐκφοβεῖν ἐπεχείρησαν, λέγοντες ὡς σὺ τοὺς μὲν κολακεύοντας τιμᾶς, τῶν δὲ συμβουλευόντων καταφρονεῖς. ἐγὼ δ' εἰ μὲν ἀπεδεχόμην τοὺς λόγους τούτους ἐκείνων, πολλὴν ἂν ἡσυχίαν εἶχον: νῦν δ' οὐδεὶς ἂν με πείσειεν, ὡς οἶόν τ' ἐστὶ τοσοῦτον καὶ τῇ γνώμῃ καὶ ταῖς πράξεσι διενεγκεῖν, ἂν μὴ τις τῶν μὲν μαθητῆς, τῶν δ' ἀκροατῆς, τῶν δ' εὐρετῆς γένηται, καὶ πανταχόθεν προσαγάγηται καὶ συλλέξηται, δι' ὧν οἶόν τ' ἐστὶν ἀσκήσαι τὴν αὐτοῦ διάνοιαν. ἐπήρθην μὲν οὖν ἐπιστέλλειν σοὶ διὰ ταῦτα. λέγειν δὲ μὲ λ λ ω περὶ μεγάλων πραγμάτων καὶ περὶ ὧν οὐδενὶ τῶν ζώντων ἀκοῦσαι μᾶλλον ἢ σοὶ προσήκει.

Nevertheless, since you are to be the judge in this matter, I am very hopeful that I will turn out to be **saying** something valuable, because I think you will **disregard all the difficulties I just mentioned** and will focus on the issues themselves. And yet, certain persons **who have been in your presence** before have tried to scare me, saying that you honor flatterers, but you hate those who are offering you advice. If I had believed their words, I would have held my peace; but as it is, no one was able to convince me that it is possible for a man to surpass others in both judgement and action, unless he becomes a student, a **listener**, and a discoverer, and has collected from every possible corner the things which will allow him to practice his own understanding. It was for these reasons that **I was induced to write to you. I am going to speak** to you about important matters, and about these matters there is no one more fitting to **hear** them than you. (Isocrates, *Letter 1*, 4-5)

Galen on a culture of forgery

πρὶν γὰρ τοὺς ἐν Ἀλεξανδρείᾳ τε καὶ Περγᾶμῳ γενέσθαι βασιλεῖς ἐπὶ κτήσει παλαιῶν βιβλίων φιλοτιμηθέντας, οὐδέπω ψευδῶς ἐπεγέγραπτο σύγγραμμα. λαμβάνειν δ' ἄρξαμένων μισθὸν τῶν κομιζόντων αὐτοῖς συγγράμματα παλαιοῦ τινος ἀνδρὸς οὕτως ἤδη πολλὰ ψευδῶς ἐπιγράφοντες ἐκόμιζον. ἀλλ' οὗτοι μὲν οἱ βασιλεῖς μετὰ τὸν Ἀλεξάνδρου γεγόναι θάνατον, ὁ δὲ Πλάτων ἀνωτέρω τῆς Ἀλεξάνδρου βασιλείας ἐγγράφει . . . μηδέπω πεπανουργευμένων τῶν ἐπιγραφῶν, ἀλλ' ἐκάστου βιβλίου τὸν ἴδιον γραφέα διὰ τοῦ προγράμματος δηλοῦντος.

For before the kings of Alexandria and Pergamon became so ambitious to possess ancient books, authorship was never falsely attributed. However, after the ones who collected the writings of a given ancient author for these kings first received a reward for this, they immediately collected many works, which they falsely inscribed. But these kings lived after the death of Alexander, and Plato wrote before Alexander the Great . . . when these men had not yet treated the inscriptions dishonestly, but when each book displayed its particular author in a clear statement. (Galen, *In Hippocratis de Natura Hominis Commentaria* , Kühn 15.105)

(Letters of Chion of Heraclea)

Χίων Μάτριδι χαίρειν.

Ἐπὶ μὲν τῷ συμπεῖθεσθαι τὸν τύραννον οἷς περὶ ἐμοῦ πρὸς αὐτὸν ἔλεγες, συγχαίρω τῇ πατρίδι, γράψω δὲ καὶ αὐτός, ὡς συνεβούλευσας, ἀπάγων αὐτὸν ἀπὸ τᾶληθοῦς ὡς μάλιστα ἔνεστι. τοῦναντίον γὰρ ἂν ποιῶν ψευσαίμην τοὺς ἐμαυτοῦ πολίτας καὶ φίλους ὧν ἐξ ἐμοῦ ἤλπισαν, καὶ ταῦτα οὐκ ἀξίους ὄντας ἀπατᾶσθαι. τὸ δὲ ὠμὸν εἶναι τὸν τύραννον τελέως καὶ χαλεπὸν ὠφελιμώτερον ἔγωγε ἡγοῦμαι τῇ πόλει ἢ τὸ δημοκοπεῖν αὐτὸν καὶ προκαλύπτεσθαι δόξαν μετριότητος. . . .

ἔπεμψα δέ σοι καὶ τὸ ἀντίγραφον τῆς πρὸς τὸν Κλέαρχον ἐπιστολῆς, διθυραμβικωτέραν ποιήσας ἐπίτηδες αὐτήν, ἵν' ἡμῶν καταφρονῆ ὡς λογομανούντων τελέως.

Chion to Matris, greetings:

I rejoice along with my city that the tyrant has been fooled by what you said about me. I'll write to him too, as you recommend, leading him as far away from the truth as possible. If I told the truth, I would disappoint the hopes of my fellow citizens and friends, and they don't deserve to be cheated like that. I've come to the conclusion that it's in a city's best interest for a tyrant to be utterly cruel, rather than for him to curry favor with the masses and pretend to be moderate. . .

I'm enclosing a copy of the letter I sent to Clearchus; I made it extremely convoluted and enthusiastic, so that he might despise me as a harmless windbag. (*Chion of*

Sallust, *epistula secunda ad Caesarem de re publica*

Scio ego, quam difficile, atque asperum factu sit, consilium dare regi aut imperatori, postremo cuiquam mortali, cuius opes in excelso sunt: quippe quum et illis consultorum copiae adsint; neque de futuro quisquam satis callidus satisque prudens sit. Quin etiam saepe prava magis, quam bona consilia prospere eveniunt: quia plerasque res fortuna ex lubidine sua agitat.

I know how difficult and dangerous a job it is to give advice to a king or general, or to anyone really whose power is superior. For those people usually have no shortage of counsellors, and no one man can be wise or clever enough with regard to the future. What's more, bad advice often has a better outcome than the good, since fortune drives most things according to its own desires.

Suetonius, *vita Horatii*

Augustus epistolarum quoque ei officium optulit, ut hoc ad Maecenatem scripto significat: "Ante ipse sufficebam scribendis epistulis amicorum, nunc occupatissimus et infirmus Horatium nostrum a te cupio abducere. Veniet ergo ab ista parasitica mensa ad hanc regiam, et nos in epistulis scribendis iuvabit." Ac ne recusanti quidem aut suscensuit quicquam aut amicitiam suam ingerere desiit. Exstant epistulae, e quibus argumenti gratia pauca subieci: "Sume tibi aliquid iuris apud me, tamquam si convictor mihi fueris; recte enim et non temere feceris, quoniam id usus mihi tecum esse volui, si per valitudinem tuam fieri possit." Et rursus: "Tui qualem habeam memoriam, poteris ex Septimio quoque nostro audire; nam incidit ut illo coram fieret a me tui mentio. Neque enim si tu superbus amicitiam nostram sprevisi, ideo nos quoque *anthuperephanoumen* ."

Augustus offered him the post of secretary, as appears in this letter of his to Maecenas: "Before this I was able to write my letters to my friends with my own hand; now overwhelmed with work and in poor health, I desire to take our friend Horace from you. He will come then from that parasitic table of yours to my imperial board, and help me write my letters." Even when Horace declined, Augustus showed no resentment at all, and did not cease his efforts to gain his friendship. We have letters from which I append a few extracts by way of proof: "Enjoy any privilege at my house, as if you were making your home there; for it will be quite right and proper for you to do so, inasmuch as that was the relation which I wished to have with you, if your health had permitted." And again: "How mindful I am of you our friend Septimius can also tell you; for it chanced that I spoke of you in his presence. Even if you were so proud as to scorn my friendship, I do not therefore return your disdain."

vita Horatii (cont.)

post sermones vero quosdam lectos nullam sui mentionem habitam ita sit questus: "Irasci me tibi scito, quod non in plerisque eius modi scriptis mecum potissimum loquaris; an vereris ne apud posteros infame tibi sit, quod videaris familiaris nobis esse?"

Expressitque eclogam ad se, cuius initium est:

Cum tot sustineas et tanta negotia solus,
Res Italas armis tuteris, moribus ornes,

Legibus emendes: in publica commoda peccem,

Si longo sermone morer tua tempora, Caesar.

Furthermore, after reading several of his "Talks," [the Emperor] complained that no mention was made of him: "You must know that I am not pleased with you, because in so many of the writings of this type you do not talk with me above all. Are you afraid that your reputation will suffer because you seem to be my friend?" And so he obtained from Horace the selection whose first lines are:

Seeing that you carry so many great responsibilities on your own,
Protecting Italy's realm with arms, providing it with morals,
Reforming it by laws, I would be sinning against the common good,
Caesar, if I wasted your time with long discourse.

(*vita Horatii* , cont.)

Venerunt in manus meas et elegi sub titulo eius et epistula prosa oratione quasi commendantis se Maecenati, sed utraque falsa puto; nam elegi vulgares, epistula etiam obscura, quo vitio minime tenebatur.

Some elegies bearing his name have come into my possession, and a letter in prose, which purports to be a recommendation of himself to Maecenas, but I think that both are fakes; for the elegies are common, and the letter is moreover obscure, which was by no means one of Horace's faults.

Ovid, *Epistulae Heroidum* 15.1-8
Sappho Phaoni

Ecquid, ut adspecta est studiosae littera dextrae,
Protinus est oculis cognita nostra tuis?

an, nisi legisses auctoris nomina Sapphus,
hoc breve nescires unde veniret opus?

Forsitan et quare mea sint alterna requiras

carmina, cum lyricis sim magis apta modis:

flendus amor meus est; elegiae flebile carmen;

non facit ad lacrimas barbitos ulla meas.

Select Bibliography

- Altman**, J. 1982. *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* . Ohio State University Press.
- Bentley**, R. 1699. *A Dissertation upon the Epistles of Phalaris, Themistocles, Socrates, Euripides and Others. Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning* , 2nd edn. London.
- Beschorner**, A. and S. **Merkle**. 1994. "Der Tyrann und der Dichter," in N. Holzberg, ed., *Der griechische Briefroman. Classica Monacensia* 8. Tübingen. 116-68.
- Deissmann**, A. 1923. *Licht vom Osten* , 4th ed. Tübingen.
- Gudeman**, A. 1894. "Literary Frauds among the Romans." *TAPA* Vol. 25. 140-164.
- Holzberg**, N. 1994. *Der griechische Briefroman: Gattungstypologie und Textanalyse*. *Classica Monacensia* 8. Tübingen.
- Hunter**, R. 2002. "The Sense of an Author: Theocritus and [Theocritus]," in **Kraus**, C. S., and **Gibson**, R.K. eds., *The Classical Commentary: Histories, Practice, Theory*. *Mnemosyne Suppl.* 234. Leiden.
- Oliensis**, E. 1998. *Horace and the Rhetoric of Authority* . Cambridge.
- Rosenmeyer**, P. A. 2001. *Ancient Epistolary Fictions* . Cambridge.
- Russell**, D. A. 1988. "The Ass in the Lion's Skin: Thoughts on the Letters of Phalaris." *JHS* 108. 94-106.
- Speyer**, W. 1971. *Die literarische Fälschung im heidnischen und christlichen Altertum: Ein Versuch ihrer Deutung* . München.
- Syme**, R. 1964. *Sallust* . UP California.
- 1972. "Fraud and Imposture." *Pseudepigrapha* 1 (*Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique* , Fondation Hardt 18). Geneva. 3-17.
- Wohl**, V. 1998. "Plato avant la Lettre." *Ramus* 27. 60-93.