Writing to Power: Tyrants in Fictional Epistolography
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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 Ὀδυσσεύς προσελθὼν λάθρᾳ τῆς Πηνελόπης δίδωσιν ἐπιστολὴν εἰς Ὡγυγίαν τὴν νήσον Καλυψοῖ κομίζειν. . . . πρότερον δ’ ἐγὼ λύσας τὴν ἐπιστολὴν ἀνεγίνωσκον τὰ γεγραμμένα. ἦν δὲ τοιάδε· Ὀδυσσεύς Καλυψοῖ χαίρειν. Ἔσσθι με, ὡς τὰ πρώτα ἐξέπλευσα παρὰ σοῦ τὴν σχεδίαν κατασκευασάμενος, ναυαγία χρησάμενον μόλις ὑπὸ Λευκοθέας διασωθῆναι εἰς τὴν τῶν Φαιάκων χώραν, ὑφ’ ὑψωμενομένου κατέλαβον πολλοὺς τῆς γυναικὸς μνηστῆρας ἐν τοῖς ἡμετέροις τρυφῶντας· ἀποκτείνας δὲ ἅπαντας ὑπὸ Τηλεγόνου ὑστερον τοῦ ἐκ Κίρκης μοι γενομένου ἀνηρέθθην, καὶ νῦν εἰμι ἐν τῇ Μακάρων νῆσῳ νῆσῳ πάνυ μετανοῶν ἐπὶ τῷ καταλιπεῖν τὴν παρὰ σοὶ δίαιταν καὶ τὴν υπὸ σοῦ προτεινομένην ἀθανασίαν. ἢν οὖν καιροῦ λάβωμαι, ἀποδρὰς ἀφίκομαι 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...'
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 Διονυσίως εὖ πράττειν:

...πέφυκε συνιέναι εἰς ταύτὸν φρόνησις τε καὶ δύναμις μεγάλη, καὶ ταῦτ’ ἄλληλα ἀεὶ διώκει καὶ ζητεῖ καὶ συγγίγνεται· ἔπειτα καὶ οἱ ἄνθρωποι χαίρουσιν περὶ τούτων αὐτοὶ τε διαλεγόμενοι καὶ ἀλλων ἀκούοντες ἐν τε ἰδίαις συνουσίαις καὶ ἐν ταῖς ποιήσεσιν. οἷον καὶ περὶ Ἱέρωνος ὅταν διαλέγωνται ἄνθρωποι καὶ Παυσανίου τοῦ Λακεδαιμονίου, χαίρουσι τὴν Σιμωνίδου συνουσίαν παραφέροντες, ἄτε ἔπραξεν καὶ εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτοὺς· καὶ Περίανδρον τὸν Κορίνθιον καὶ Θαλήν τὸν Μιλήσιον ύμνεῖν εἰώθασιν ἃμα, καὶ Περίκλεα καὶ Ἀναξαγόραν, καὶ Κροῖσον αὖ καὶ Σόλωνα ως σοφοὺς καὶ Κῦρον ως δυνάστην. καὶ δὴ ταῦτα μιμούμενοι οἱ ποιηταὶ Κρέοντα μὲν καὶ Τειρεσίαν συνάγουσιν, Πολύειδον δὲ καὶ Μίνω, Ἀγαμέμνονα δὲ καὶ Νέστορα καὶ Ὀδυσσέα 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 they are accustomed as well to talk over and over again of Periander of Corinth and Thales of Miletus, and of Pericles and Anaxagoras, and of Croesus also and Solon as wise men, with Cyrus as potentate. The poets follow their example, and bring together Creon and Tiresias, Polyeidus and Minos, Agamemnon and Nestor, Odysseus and Palamedes...
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)
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).
Ἰσοκράτης Διονυσίῳ χαίρειν
εἰ μὲν νεώτερος ἦν, οὐκ ἂν ἐπιστολὴν ἔπεμπον, ἀλλ᾽ αὐτὸς Ἰσοκράτης ἐπιστείλατο κατὰ τοὺς αὐτοὺς χρόνους ὅ τε τῆς ἠλικίας τῆς ἐμῆς καιρὸς καὶ τῶν σὺν πραγμάτων συμβέβηκεν, ἀλλ᾽ ἐγὼ μὲν προαπείρηκα, τὰ δὲ πράττεσθαι νῦν ἀκμήν εἴληφεν, ώς οἷον τ᾽ ἐστίν ἐκ τῶν παρόντων, οὔτω σοι πειράσομαι δηλώσαι 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 ῥᾴδον ἂν τις παρὼν πρὸς παρόντα φράσειν ἢ δι᾽ ἐπιστολῆς δηλώσειεν, οὐδ᾽ ὅτι πάντες τοῖς λεγομένοις μᾶλλον ἢ τοῖς γεγραμμένοις πιστεύουσι, καὶ τῶν μὲν ώς εἰσηγημάτων, τῶν δ᾽ ώς 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 to the latter as an artful composition.
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 τούς ἐν Ἀλεξανδρείᾳ τε καὶ Περγάμῳ γενέθαι βασιλεῖς ἐπὶ κτήσει παλαιῶν βιβλίων φιλοτιμηθέντας, οὐδὲν ψευδῶς ἐπεγέγραπτο σύγγραμμα. λαμβάνειν δ’ ἀρξαμένων μισθόν τῶν κομιζόντων αὐτοῖς σύγγραμμα παλαιοῦ τινὸς ἀνδρὸς οὕτως ἢδη πολλὰ ψευδῶς ἐπιγράφοντες ἐκόμιζον. ἀλλ’ οὗτοι μὲν οἱ βασιλεῖς μετὰ τὸν Ἀλεξάνδρου γεγόνας θάνατον, ὁ δὲ Πλάτων ἀνωτέρω τῆς Ἀλεξάνδρου βασιλείας ἐγεγράφει . . . μηδὲν πεπανουργευμένων τῶν ἐπιγραφῶν, ἀλλ’ ἑκάστου 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)
Χίων Μάτριδι χαίρειν.
Επὶ μὲν τῷ συμπείθεσθαι τὸν τύραννον οἷς περὶ ἐμοῦ πρὸς αὐτὸν ἔλεγες, συγχαίρω τῇ πατρίδι, γράψω δὲ καὶ αὐτός, ώς συνεβούλευσας, ἀπάγων αὐτὸν ἀπὸ τάληθος ὡς μάλιστα ἐνεστὶ. τούναντίον γὰρ ἂν ποιών ψευσαίμην τοὺς ἐμαυτοῦ πολίτας καὶ φίλους ὥν ἐξ ἐμοῦ ἤλπισαν, καὶ ταῦτα οὐκ ἄξιοι ὄντας ἀπατᾶσθαι. τὸ δὲ ψύχον εἶναι τὸν τύραννον τελέως καὶ χαλεπὸν ὠφελιμώτερον ἔγωγε ἡγοῦμαι τῇ πόλει ἢ τὸ δημοκοπεῖν αὐτὸν καὶ προκαλύπτεσθαι δόξαν μετριότητος. . . .
ἐπεμψα δέ σοι καὶ τὸ ἀντίγραφον τῆς πρὸς τὸν Κλέαρχον ἐπιστολῆς, διθυραμβικωτέραν ποιήσας ἐπίτηδες αὐτήν, ἵν' ἡμῶν καταφρονῇ ὡς λογομανοῦντων 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 Heraclea, Letters 15.1-2, 8)
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 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."
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.
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.
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