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Ciceronian Reception in the *Epistula ad Octavianum*

Introduction

In stark contrast to Cicero's activity between March 44 and the early summer of 43, we know comparatively little about the last four months of Cicero's life, as we do not have his correspondence from this period. A document which purports to fill this gap is the so-called *Epistula ad Octavianum* attributed to Cicero. For reasons that will be outlined later, scholars are almost unanimous in doubting its authenticity. Due to its status as a 'pseudo-work', scholarly attention has been rare and often negative in tone.¹ In this article, having first introduced the contents of the letter, I argue that this scholarly neglect is unjustified. The letter merits careful consideration, I contend, not as an authentic Ciceronian document but as a sophisticated form of ancient Ciceronian reception which attempts to recreate in writing a portrait of the 'complete Cicero'.²

The text

The letter comes in at a modest five pages in Watt's *OCT*. 'Cicero' in this letter feels threatened by Octavian (who is referred to as having been elected consul), but he has not yet fled Rome, which points to a dramatic date between August

1 Lamacchia's work on the letter and Grattarola's 1988 commentary constitute the most substantial scholarly engagement with the text. For the disparaging rhetoric often used in the context of the letter, cf. Berns 1874, 177: "uereor ne quibusdam a uanis profectus esse initiis uideatur, qui ad eandem [sc. the *Epistula*] manus adiecerit, ut qui in perdita re perdidit operam"; Shackleton Bailey 1970, 198: "so slight, unmeritable a composition as the 'Epistle to Octavian'—a poor specimen of a deplorable, though not negligible, type"; Shackleton Bailey 2002, 339: "[this work] is in this sorry genre [of pseudo-letters]". The connection between the authenticity of an ancient text and its perceived aesthetic value is studied by Peirano 2012a.

2 My approach is similar to—though perhaps not as radical as—that of Novokhatko 2009, 111, who argues that the invectives by Pseudo-Sallust and Pseudo-Cicero may be regarded as *more* interesting if they are spurious—and thereby provide an insight into Roman rhetorical education—than if they are genuine.

and the end of November.³ In the text, we find Cicero inveighing against Octavian by making use of a basic rhetorical *dispositio*:⁴

1–2 *exordium*: Cicero describes how he needs to voice his complaints in a letter rather than in person, since Octavian's legions have made it impossible for him to enter the senate. Cicero adds that he will soon leave Rome and die.

3–4 *narratio*: Cicero recounts the events following Caesar's death in 44 BCE, Antony's dictatorship, the initial hope that Octavian would bring an end to it, and the honours bestowed upon Octavian by the Republic.

5–6 *conquestio*: in a flurry of rhetorical questions, Cicero implies that too much trust was put in Octavian. He also implies that he is to blame for this.

7 *narratio/conquestio*: as part of his emotional outpouring, Cicero continues his retelling of the history, Octavian's march on Antony which ended in the pact between them.

8–10 *peroratio*: Cicero concludes that he should have chosen Antony as his master instead of Octavian. In a comparison of the two, the former is said to be better than the latter in many regards. Cicero then describes how virtuous Roman ancestors will hear about the crimes committed by Octavian, and implies that they will be outraged by them.

Transmission, authorship, dating

We find our text in most of the manuscripts containing the *Ad Atticum* letters (called the Ω tradition) and in some of the manuscripts containing the letters *Ad familiares* (labelled the X tradition).⁵ The first scholar on record to claim its spuriousness is Victorius in his 1536 edition, but his assertion that *non pauci docti et ingeniosi uiri minime Ciceronis esse arbitrantur* suggests that more scholars shared his view at that time.⁶ Erasmus was not one of them: as will be shown later, he entertained no doubts regarding the authenticity of the text. From the seventeenth century onwards, no scholar seems to have considered the text a

3 A definite *terminus post quem* is 19th August 43, the day on which the senate elected Octavian consul (alluded to with [senatus] decreuit [...] *summum honorem ante tempus* in *Ad Oct.* 4; cf. also *Eph. Tull. ad loc.* The overall tenor of the letter and the phrase *perniciēs optimorum* (8) points to a dramatic date after the *Lex Pedia de interfecto Caesaris*, the exact date of which, however, is unknown (cf. Romano 1965, 598–599 and Lamacchia 1968, 3–4).

4 This schematic summary is based on Lamacchia 1968, 9–10.

5 The respective value of these two strands for establishing the text have been debated: Sjögren 1913 and Sjögren's 1914 Teubner edition generally assign more value to the former, but Watt 1958a and Lamacchia 1963 argue against this view. See also Rouse 1983a and 1983b.

6 Cf. Lamacchia 1967, 54–55.

genuine document,⁷ although Vallese expressed some hesitation. For him, Erasmus' testimony alone is reason not to consider the discussion regarding its authorship closed.⁸ By those claiming the spuriousness of this letter, the following arguments are adduced:

- Nonius Marcellus, a late antique Roman grammarian,⁹ mentions the existence of at least three books of letters from Cicero to Octavian (which he calls *M. Tullius ad Caesarem iuniorem*). It seems unlikely that only this letter was taken from that collection and ended up as part of the *Ad Atticum* and *Ad familiares* collection.¹⁰
- Some of the sentiments expressed in the letter cannot have been shared by the historical Cicero. It is unlikely, for example, that he would have called Antony a *uir animi maximi* (3) at any point during the final months of his life.¹¹
- The description of Cicero's death in *Ad Oct.* 2 is remarkably accurate: it suggests that it was written after it and on the basis of later descriptions, such as those given by the historians quoted in Seneca the Elder's *Suasoriae* 6.¹²
- The style of the letter, with its many rhetorical questions, exclamations, repetitions and parallelisms, is indicative of rhetorical declamation rather than of Cicero's letters.¹³ The 'schematic' nature of the letter also points to a declamatory origin: the representation of Octavian, for example, seems to be indebted to the 'generic' portrayal of tyrants in declamation, and the *exitus illustrium uirorum* in itself constitutes a well-known trope.¹⁴
- The language and *clausulae* of the letter, with obvious exception of the phrases which are taken over directly from Cicero's own works, indicate a certain 'lateness', perhaps even pointing to Late Antiquity as the moment of composition. This is the case especially towards the end of the letter, which would indicate that its author did not manage to maintain the veneer of Ciceronian Latin throughout the letter. Remarkable, for example, is the use of *popule Romane* in *Ad Oct.* 6, where Cicero would have used *Quirites*; the use of *praedicare* with the meaning of *praedicere* in the same paragraph;

7 Lamacchia 1967, 56–57.

8 Vallese 1970, 9.

9 Nonius is usually dated to the fourth century CE; cf. Zetzel 2018, 98.

10 Clift 1945, 115–116. Cf. Keeline in this volume on one of the letters in this collection (p. 31).

11 For this point, see Romano 1965, 594 n. 2.

12 See e.g. Casaceli 1971, 68.

13 E.g. Casaceli 1971, 66.

14 Lamacchia 1968, 6–7 and 1979, 426.

and finally the use of the pluperfect subjunctive where ‘classical’ Latin would prefer a perfect subjunctive (e.g. *dedisset* and *compulisset*, 9).¹⁵

If the letter is, in fact, a *pseudepigraphon*, why was it written? Recently, Peirano has reminded scholars of the ambiguity of that term, which is used to denote both a text that deliberately attempts to deceive the audience regarding its authorship *and* a text that is attributed to the wrong person by later readers.¹⁶ Both scenarios have been argued for in the case of our work.

In her scholarly work on the letter, Lamacchia takes the latter route.¹⁷ According to her, the work is the result of a late antique rhetorical exercise, in which a declaimer takes on the role of Cicero to showcase his talent. The closest parallels would be the texts of the declaimers quoted in Seneca the Elder’s *Suasoriae* 6 and 7,¹⁸ who also ‘act out’ a Cicero who resolves to die. In this scenario, the author of this text is not all trying to ‘forge’ a historical document: the text is only attributed to the ‘real’ Cicero by mistake much later in the tradition. Shackleton Bailey follows this approach in his succinct introduction to the text in his 2002 Loeb, dating the text to the third or fourth century CE.¹⁹

A second group of scholars has interpreted the letter as a piece of propaganda, written shortly after the events depicted with the aim to defame Octavian. Romano argues that the letter was written by the anti-Octavian faction in the senate when Cicero was still alive, or shortly after his death. In any case, he adds, the *terminus ante quem* must be the battle of Philippi in 42 BCE given that opposition to Octavian would not have served any purpose after it.²⁰ Casaceli, by contrast, sees it as a product of senatorial anti-Octavian opposition shortly after the siege of Perugia in 41–40 BCE.²¹ Grattarola dates the text to the first century BCE or the beginning of the first century CE,²² rejecting Lamacchia’s claims with the contention that the polemic in the letter exhibits a realism that one would not find in a work written several centuries after the events depicted.²³

15 For this point, see Lamacchia 1963, 238–241 and 1968, 20–22.

16 Peirano 2012b, 1–7; cf. also La Bua on *pseudepigrapha* in this volume.

17 Following Berns 1874, 178.

18 On which see Keeline and Bishop in this volume.

19 Shackleton Bailey 2002, 339.

20 Romano 1965, esp. 598–600.

21 Casaceli 1971, esp. 68–70.

22 Grattarola 1988, 27–33 for its dating.

23 Grattarola 1988, 7; a similar argument is made in Casaceli 1971, 69. Grattarola offers no counter to Lamacchia’s linguistic arguments for a later dating.

For the purposes of this chapter, the question of its authenticity is most relevant: one needs to agree that the work is spurious (and thereby constitutes Ciceronian reception rather than an authentic Ciceronian document) in order to accept my main argument. In my analysis I will, however, make the additional case that the kind of reception found in this letter seems to point towards a late antique date.

‘Total reception’

Later generations are often interested in particular aspects of the Ciceronian legacy at the expense of others, and it has even become a trope to say that history has known ‘many Ciceros’.²⁴ This process of selection and fragmentation starts in Antiquity itself. The aforementioned declaimers and historians quoted in Seneca the Elder, for instance, are interested in Cicero as a historical figure and a hallmark of rhetorical skill, but not necessarily in his philosophical output. Late antique Christian writers use Cicero’s philosophical works for their own purposes, but are less interested in his epistolary writings.²⁵

This letter, however, seems to be indebted to almost all aspects of Ciceronian reception, with the exception of his poetry. The language of the text is Ciceronian to the utmost: it features many tags from his works. Its speaker is the ‘historical’ Cicero, who is involved in what is considered one of the most memorable moments of his life, the events leading up to his death. ‘Cicero’ refers to earlier moments of his political career as well, e.g. when he refers to Rome as *per me conseruatam ut esset libera* (2), undoubtedly a reference to Cicero’s role in the Catilinarian conspiracy. Its being a letter reminds us of Cicero’s epistolary works. Its structure, rhetorical figures, and invective nature link it to Cicero’s speeches and rhetorical treatises, and the philosophical bent to the speaker’s arguments appear to be nods to Cicero’s philosophical works.

I will elaborate on each of these individual points of contact with Ciceronian models, but it is their cumulative effect which is most remarkable. Because the letter combines the different strands of the Ciceronian legacy, I will argue, we find in it juxtapositions of language and ideas which we would not even expect to find in one single Ciceronian work.

²⁴ For discussion of this ‘trope’ see e.g. Altman 2015b, 4–5; Springer 2018, XV–XVI; Ward 2018, 44. See also Bishop 2015.

²⁵ MacCormack 2013, esp. 256–261.

Ciceronian language

The phraseology found in the letter is the most obvious kind of reception.²⁶ From the very start of the letter proper (*si per tuas legiones mihi licitum fuisset*), we realize that ‘Cicero’ is speaking; many of his speeches start with a similar conditional clause introduced by *si*.²⁷ It seems likely that ancient readers of Cicero were as struck by this as later readers were: in his *Ciceronianus* (LB I 986D = 627 ASD I–2) Erasmus lampoons imitators of Cicero who start their works with such a *si* clause. The phrase itself seems inspired by *Phil.* 5.19 (*si per amicos mihi cupienti in senatum uenire licuisset*)²⁸—expressions from the *Philippics* are used often, which should not surprise us given their popularity in the rhetorical schools.²⁹ Soon, however, the intertextual references verge outside the orbit of Cicero’s rhetorical works: often, the text appears indebted to phrases from Cicero’s letters or philosophical works.³⁰ From this it appears that the author has clearly engaged with the Ciceronian oeuvre as a whole.

Moreover, there appear to be allusions to previous ‘reception moments’ of this theme, those quoted by Seneca the Elder. ‘Cicero’, for instance, announces his plans to leave Rome with *post etiam paulo temporibus ita postulantibus cedam urbe, quam per me conseruatam ut esset libera in seruitute uidere non potero* (“a little later on I shall leave Rome as well if conditions call for it; saved by me to be free, I shall not have the heart to see her in bondage”, 2).³¹ We might see this as a reflection of two phrases used by Livy, both of which are quoted in Sen.

²⁶ Cf. also Keeline 2018, 190–191 for this point.

²⁷ Examples are provided in the Erasmus passage adduced below and by Gamberale 1998, 56–57.

²⁸ As mentioned by Lamacchia 1968, 53.

²⁹ Lamacchia *et al.* 1979, 429–430; cf. also Bishop in this volume.

³⁰ A random selection of examples, all taken from Lamacchia (cf. her comments *ad locc.*): the construction *nihil aliud nisi* with *nisi* meaning *sed tantum* (as in 1) appears only to be used in Cicero’s letters; the phrase *quis huius urbis ac sedibus usque eo est inimicus* (2) is clearly taken over from *Fin.* 1.4; the phrase *in duobus autem malis cum fugiendum maius sit, leuius est eligendum* (8) appears to be indebted to *Off.* 3.3 (or to Jerome, cf. discussion of the intertextual references to the Church Fathers below, p. 130); *si non una cum corpore sensus omnis uno atque eodem consumptus est igni* (9) appears to be indebted to passages from *Tusculanae disputationes*. and *De senectute* (see analysis below). Cf. also Tandoi 1971, 205 for the author’s indebtedness to Cicero’s *De re publica*.

³¹ The English translation of the *Ad Oct.* quoted in this chapter is that of Shackleton Bailey 2002.

Suas. 6.17: *M. Cicero urbe cesserat* and the phrase *moriar in patria saepe seruata*, put into Cicero's mouth.³²

Because of its many Ciceronian tags, Lamacchia labels the text a “mosaico” and speaks of the “tecnica per così dire centonaria del compositore”.³³ Technically, of course, our text is not a cento proper: it is not in poetry and is not *entirely* composed of material from earlier texts. The dense form of intertextuality found in this text, however, does make one think of a particular late antique fascination with the fragmentation of texts and the re-assembling of new material with the help of these fragments.³⁴

Cicero, philosopher

This ‘amalgamation’ of the different genres in which Cicero wrote, however, happens on more levels than the purely linguistic. Consider, for example, the following passage, in which ‘Cicero’ imagines the Roman ancestors hearing about Octavian's crimes:

*Itaque si quid illae maiorum nostrorum sepultae reliquiae sapiunt, si non una cum corpore sensus omnis uno atque eodem consumptus est igni, quid illis interrogantibus quid agat nunc populus Romanus respondebit aliquis nostrum qui proximus illam aeternam domum discesserit?*³⁵

And so, if the buried remains of our ancestors have consciousness, if all sensation has not been consumed along with their bodies by one and the same fire, and they ask how the Roman People is faring at this time, what answer will one of us make, the latest to depart for that eternal dwelling?

This ‘philosophical aside’ marked in italics, mentioning an ‘Epicurean’ account of what happens to the soul after death, is not strictly necessary for ‘Cicero’s’ immediate rhetorical purposes. It could even be seen as weakening the argument: ‘Cicero’ leaves open the possibility that the ancestors do not in fact have consciousness, and that they are not at all affected by the matters of the living. Cicero handles things very differently when introducing Appius Claudius Caecus’ *protopopoeia* against Clodia in the *Pro Caelio*, the closest parallel in the Cicero-

³² Lamacchia 1968, 61.

³³ Lamacchia 1963, 229 and 232 n. 1: the link with Late Antiquity is made in Lamacchia 1979, 433 n. 8. Cf. Gamberale 1998 for a similar argument regarding the spurious *Pridie quam in exilium iret*.

³⁴ Cf. Roberts 1989, 57–58; McGill 2005, xv–xxv.

³⁵ *Ad Oct.* 9.

nian corpus. He asks whether Clodia would prefer Cicero to deal with her “in an old-fashioned manner” or “in a modern way” and continues:

Si illo austero more ac modo, aliquis mihi ab inferis excitandus est ex barbatis illis non hac barbula, qua ista delectatur, sed illa horrida, quam in statuīs antiquis atque imaginibus uidemus, qui obiurget mulierem et pro me loquatur, ne mihi ista forte suscenseat.³⁶

If in the old grim mode and method, then I must call up from the dead one of those full-bearded men of old—not with a trim modern beardlet that she delights in, but a rough one, like those we see on old statues and busts—to rebuke the woman and speak instead of me, so that she may not perhaps be angered with me.³⁷

Cicero then simply continues by relating Appius’ words: the philosophical question of whether or not he is still able to follow the events on earth after his death is not given any attention. Pseudo-Cicero, by contrast, makes a point of implying that there exist multiple explanations of what happens to the soul after death, and of not choosing one of these explanations as the right one. He partly takes on the identity of ‘philosophical Cicero’, who in his dialogues sometimes presents the viewpoints of multiple philosophical schools without making an explicit decision about the ‘correctness’ of these schools. He does so for the question of the immortality of the soul, at hand here, in the first book of the *Tusculanae disputationes*. After adducing arguments for its immortality (*Tusc.* 1.26–74), Cicero adds that others, and not merely Epicureans, have argued against it (1.77). Cicero then proceeds with his argumentation in a different way: *even if* the soul is mortal, death is not to be feared (1.82–116). This entertaining of two philosophical possibilities, I submit, is reflected in the letter.

Linguistic references help the reader in making the connection to Cicero’s *philosophica*. As mentioned by Lamacchia, the specific phraseology of Pseudo-Cicero’s words, *si non una cum corpore sensus omnis uno atque eodem consumptus est igni*, appears to be derived from two specific Ciceronian philosophical passages. In *Tusculanae disputationes* 1.98, Cicero translates Plato’s *Apology* 40c, in which Socrates presents two options in his address to the jury: *aut sensus omnino omnes mors auferat, aut in alium quendam locum ex his locis morte migratur* (“either [that] death takes away all sensation altogether, or that by death a passage is secured from these regions to another place”³⁸). Socrates then characteristically does not choose one of these options as the ‘right’ one, but instead claims that either scenario would be good for him. The second Ciceronian inter-

³⁶ Cic. *Cael.* 33.

³⁷ Translation Gardner 1958.

³⁸ Translation King 1927.

text presents a similar case: in *De senectute* 79–81, Cicero discusses the immortality of the soul with a translation of Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* 8.6.17–22, in which the 'wise' king Cyrus is dying and speaking to his sons. He presents the same two scenarios as Socrates does: either his soul is immortal, in which case his sons should cherish him "as they would a god". Alternatively, he continues, *sin una est interiturus animus cum corpore* ("if my soul is going to perish along with my body"³⁹), his sons should preserve his memory. Whether or not we wish to see these two intertexts as a direct 'allusions', they again make clear that indecisiveness regarding such matters is considered characteristic of philosophers.

We should compare a passage from paragraph 2 of our letter. Following the Ciceronian exclamation *per deum immortalium fidem* ("by the faith of the immortal gods")⁴⁰ we again find the qualification which appears to put in doubt Cicero's own words: *nisi forte frustra eos appello quorum aures atque animus a nobis abhorret* ("unless perchance I call upon them in vain and their ears and mind are averse from us"). This *nisi* clause can either be interpreted as a nod to the Epicurean doctrine that the gods have no interest in human affairs at all, or taken to mean that Pseudo-Cicero believes that the gods have averted their gaze in view of the recent events in Roman politics. Either way, we would again not expect a 'theological' statement such as this in 'regular' Ciceronian invective.

We should especially expect such reception of the 'philosophical Cicero' in Late Antiquity, when his works were mined for information regarding the views of the various pre-Christian philosophical schools.⁴¹ The late antique Vergilian commentator Servius often comments on Cicero's role in passing on this knowledge in comments such as the following on *quietos | sollicitat* (*Aen.* 4.379–380):

Cicero in libris de deorum natura triplicem de diis dicit esse opinionem: deos non esse; [...] esse et nihil curare, ut Epicurei; esse et curare, ut Stoici.⁴²

In his books on the nature of the gods, Cicero says that there are three different opinions regarding the gods: that they do not exist; [...] that they do exist but do not care about this

³⁹ Translation Falconer 1923.

⁴⁰ The expression does not appear in Cicero's oeuvre in this exact way of phrasing, but cf. *pro deorum atque hominum fidem!* in *Tusc.* 5.48; *pro deum hominumque fidem!* in e.g. *QRosc.* 23 and 50; and *di immortales!* in e.g. *Rosc. Am.* 37 and *QRosc.* 4.

⁴¹ MacCormack 2013, 256–258.

⁴² Serv. *Aen.* 4.379–380; translation is my own. For further examples of Servius' mentioning Cicero as a conduit for earlier philosophical reasoning in his commentary on the *Aeneid*, cf. e.g. his comments on *et Maia genitum* in 1.297; *quo sub caelo* in 1.331; *bis senos [...]* *cynos* in 1.393 (only in D-Servius); *mens agitat molem* in 6.727; and *sunt geminae somni portae* in 6.893.

world, as the Epicureans say; and that they exist and do care about this world, as the Stoics believe.

Note again how Cicero is portrayed as someone who does not pin himself down on one of these possibilities, just as Pseudo-Cicero leaves open multiple possibilities in the passage discussed previously.

For the philosophical and late antique bent to our letter, we can also adduce two coincidences with texts from the Latin Church Fathers. In the letter's first sentence we find *nulla remedia quae uulneribus adhibentur tam faciunt dolorem quam quae sint salutaria* ("no treatments applied to wounds are so painful as those that heal"). Cicero uses medical metaphors such as these in his speeches, but the closest parallel appears to be a passage from Augustine's *Homilies on the First Epistle of John* 9.4: *Plus dolet [uulnus] cum curatur, quam si non curaretur: sed ideo plus dolet accedente medicina, ut numquam doleat succedente salute*. The *sententia* from *Ad Oct.* 8, *in duobus autem malis cum fugiendum maius sit, leuius est eligendum*, might be a reflection of a phrase from *Off.* 3.3, *ex malis eligere minima* (which would again 'import' philosophical Cicero into the letter), but we may also note the similarity to a phrase from Jerome's *In Rufinum* 1.11: *Dura utraque condicio est, sed e duobus eligam quod leuius est*.⁴³ If we elect to see the passages from Augustine and Jerome as intertexts, it would mean that the text's 'Cicero' takes on an additional level of philosophical or theological sagacity.

In the light of 'philosophical Cicero' we should also interpret one of the main tenets of the letter: Cicero's claim that it is better to die than to suffer ignominy under Octavian's rule. These are found in sentences such as the following:

Quis tam expers humanitatis, quis huius urbis nomini ac sedibus usque eo est inimicus ut ista aut dissimulare possit aut non dolere aut, si nulla ratione publicis incommodis mederi queat, non morte proprium malum uitet?⁴⁴

Who is so devoid of human feeling and so inimical to the name and dwellings of our city that he can either pretend unawareness of what goes on or be indifferent to it or, if he cannot by any means bring healing to the public ills, would not avoid personal suffering by death?

Cicero's choice of death instead of ignominy may of course simply be seen as a variation of the standard trope, very popular in the rhetorical tradition, of the

⁴³ These intertexts are mentioned by Lamacchia 1968, 115–116.

⁴⁴ *Ad Oct.* 2.

brave man's lack of fear for death.⁴⁵ It is, however, also the topic of the entire first book of the aforementioned *Tusculanae disputationes*. There, for example, the reader learns that both Socrates (1.71) and Cato (1.74) preferred death over the life they would have to live otherwise (just as 'Cicero' does in this letter), and that many wise men awaited their death calmly (1.109–111).

At least one reader interpreted 'Cicero's' resolve to die in this letter in the light of the *Tusculanae disputationes*: Erasmus. In the prefatory letter to Vlatte-nius preceding his Basel edition of that work (1523, reprinted in 1536),⁴⁶ he writes that Christians should not shrink from learning from Cicero's works. Even though he was a pagan, he continues,

nulli dubium esse potest quin crediderit aliquod esse numen, quo nihil esse posset neque maius neque melius. Porro quid senserit de animorum immortalitate, quid de diuersa sorte praemiisque uitae futurae, tum quanta fuerit syncerae conscientiae fiducia, si non satis declarant tot eius libri, certe uel una illa epistola satis arguit, quam ad Octauium scribit, iam, ut apparet, destinata morte.⁴⁷

no one can doubt that he believed in the existence of some supreme power, the greatest and the best thing that can be. And as for his opinions on the immortality of the soul, on the different lots and different rewards in a future life and the great confidence inspired by a clear conscience—if these are not clear enough from all the books he wrote, that one letter at least quite proves the point, which he wrote to Octavius, apparently when his death had already been decided on.⁴⁸

Erasmus was not a naïve reader: he was one of the first scholars to impugn some of the letters written by Brutus in the *Ad Brutum* collection as *declamatiunculae*.⁴⁹ He did not issue the same verdict on this letter, I contend, because its author provided credibility to 'Cicero' by portraying him in line with his philosophical works, and especially one which he finished only a few years before the dramatic date of this letter.

⁴⁵ Cf. Lamacchia 1968, 6–7; cf. Bishop in this volume on this theme in the *Philippics*.

⁴⁶ Vallese 1972 studies this letter in the context of Erasmus' engagement with Cicero as a whole; cf. also the discussion in Del Giovane in this volume.

⁴⁷ Erasmus, *Ep.* 1390 Allen, 339, 58–65.

⁴⁸ Translation Mynors/Dalzell 1992.

⁴⁹ Cf. Lamacchia 1967, 55. It is unclear which letters of Brutus Erasmus meant exactly, but we can surmise that they at least included 1.16 and 1.17 (on which see below, pp. 133–134).

Cicero, rhetorician

The reader of this letter is reminded of Cicero's rhetorical credentials by the aforementioned intertextual references to his speeches, the *Philippics* in particular. Moreover, they will be struck by 'Cicero's' use of rhetorical figures, which are so obviously present to the reader so as not to need detailed treatment here.⁵⁰ These are employed, however, to an extent that is not found in Cicero's genuine works, as witnessed by the ten successive rhetorical questions in *Ad Oct.* 6 and the four successive exclamations in *Ad Oct.* 7. We could see this 'over-the-top' kind of rhetorical flourish characteristic of declamation in general, but nothing similar can be found in the declaimers speaking-as-Cicero in Seneca the Elder's aforementioned *Suasoriae* 6 and 7.

By his frequent use of rhetorical figures the author appears to be responding particularly to a late antique reception of Cicero. It has been noted that Cicero's mature rhetorical treatises, such as *De oratore*, *Orator*, and *Brutus*, were not often read in Late Antiquity. *De inuentione* and *Ad Herennium* (which was already considered a work written by Cicero in Late Antiquity),⁵¹ however, were both very popular.⁵² These two books can be said to have a slightly 'mechanical' approach towards rhetoric: book four of *Ad Herennium*, for instance, contains little more than an enumeration and short explanation of all the different figures which the orator has at his disposal. Someone reading this book without comparing, for example, Crassus' remark in *De oratore* that one should be careful in applying these figures, may easily arrive at a view of Cicero as a 'linguistic trickster' *par excellence*.⁵³ This view would be confirmed by texts such as Aquila Romanus' (third-century) and Julius Rufinianus' (fourth-century) *De figuris*: these are also little more than lists of rhetorical figures, many of which are supported by examples from Cicero's speeches. When put in this context, the excessive use of figures in this letter can be understood as a particularly late antique version of the 'rhetorical Cicero'.

⁵⁰ Cf. the overview by Casaceli 1971, 66.

⁵¹ In our extant sources, Jerome is the first to mention Cicero as its author, but there is no way of knowing for how long that view had been around (cf. Hilder 2015, 14).

⁵² Cf. MacCormack 2013, 262–263.

⁵³ Cf. Winterbottom 1982, 261 for Cicero's figures of speech and punning in later reception, often connected to his alleged lack of Atticism.

Cicero, politician

The author of this epistle betrays a keen interest in and considerable knowledge of this particular moment of Cicero's life.⁵⁴ This appears inconsistent with a late antique dating; there seems to have been comparatively little interest in Cicero's political biography during that period.⁵⁵ As late as the beginning of the fifth century CE, however, Orosius could write that it would not be worth his while to discuss the history of the Catilinarian conspiracy in depth:

Romae conscii coniurationis occisi sunt. Sed hanc historiam agente Cicerone et describente Sallustio satis omnibus notam nunc a nobis breuiter fuisse perstrictam sat est.⁵⁶

The accomplices of the conspiracy were executed at Rome. It is enough for us to have sketched its history briefly as everyone knows about these things which were done by Cicero and described by Sallust.⁵⁷

Orosius, then, considers his readers not only very much aware of this part of late Republican history, but also of the pivotal role which the historical Cicero played in these events (*hanc historiam agente*).⁵⁸ There seems to be one other Ciceronian 'life event' which also stays firmly on the radar of late antique historians (and presumably their readers): his death of the hands of the Second Triumvirate.⁵⁹

It does not seem out of place, therefore, for a late antique declaimer to choose this part of Cicero's biography for a rhetorical exercise. Nevertheless, it remains noteworthy that the author of this work appears to be aware of a remarkable number of historical details.⁶⁰ One wonders, therefore, whether the genesis of this work could be similar to that sometimes posited for letters 1.16 and 1.17 (both written by 'Brutus') in the *Epistulae ad M. Brutum*. Scholars who consider

54 Cf. n. 2 for the writer's attempt to embed the letter within a specific historical framework.

55 As acknowledged by Lamacchia *et al.* 1979, 431.

56 Oros. 6.6.5–6.

57 Translation Fear 2010.

58 It seems unlikely that *hanc historiam agente Cicerone* means "because Cicero wrote an account" as translated by Pagán 2004, 136.

59 Both Oros. 6.6.5 and 6.18.11, and Eutr. 6.15 and 7.2 only mention his role in ending the Catilinarian conspiracy during his consulship (but not even his subsequent exile) and his death. [Aur. Vict.] *De uir. ill.* 81, however, has slightly more (see also MacCormack 2013, 262). Cf. further Gasti 2018, esp. 64–70, on Cicero in the late antique epitomators.

60 Scholars have pointed to inaccuracies in these details as well, cf. Lamacchia 1968 and Gratrola 1988 on *Antonium hostem iudicatum* (7) and *si qui dabat prouincias Cassio et Brutis* (8).

them spurious⁶¹ argue that they constitute ‘rhetorical blow-ups’⁶² of views expressed in the genuine letters. That is to say, the forger used the genuine material for a rhetorical re-working of his own. In likewise fashion, it seems possible that the *Epistula ad Octavianum* was written on the basis of content from the then still extant three books of *Epistulae ad Caesarem iuniorem*.

Of the contents of these letters, however, we know next to nothing, except for the fragments quoted by Nonius Marcellus, about thirty of which are unequivocally from the letters between the two.⁶³ In Cicero’s letters to others, we also find references to their correspondence. The latest datable one appears to be found in letter *Ad Brutum* 1.10 (written mid-July 43), in which Cicero complains that Octavian has been subjected to bad influences:

Sed Caesarem meis consiliis adhuc gubernatum, praeclara ipsum indole admirabilique constantia, improbissimis litteris quidam fallacibusque interpretibus ac nuntiis impulerunt in spem certissimam consulatus. Quod simul atque sensi, neque ego illum absentem litteris monere destiti nec accusare praesentis eius necessarios qui eius cupiditati suffragari uidebantur nec in senatu sceleratissimorum consiliorum fontis aperire dubitavi.⁶⁴

But Caesar, who has so far been guided by my counsels and is a fine young man in himself, remarkably steady, has been prodded by certain persons with rascally letters and shiftily go-betweens and messages into a very confident expectation of the Consulship. As soon as I had an inkling of that, I wrote him letter after letter of warning and accused to their faces those friends of his who seemed to be backing his ambition, and I did not scruple to expose the origins of these criminal designs in open Senate.⁶⁵

To one of these aforementioned letters written by Cicero to Octavian we could attribute a phrase quoted by Nonius Marcellus: *amici non nulli <a> te contemni ac despici et pro nihilo haberi senatum uolunt*.⁶⁶ With the benefit of hindsight, this trust in Octavian appears very naïve, and this is what may have prompted

⁶¹ Cf. Keeline 2018, 148–150 for a recent portrayal of the *status quaestionis* regarding the spuriousness of these letters.

⁶² A term used by Shackleton Bailey 1980, 10; cf. 10–14 for a succinct overview of all the arguments adduced for its spuriousness.

⁶³ They can be found in Watt 1958b, 157–161, Lamacchia *et al.* 1979, 386–393 (edited by Agnès), and in Shackleton Bailey 2002, 318–327. There is disagreement regarding the exact number of fragments, since when Nonius cites from letters *ad Caesarem* it is not always clear whether the older of the younger Caesar is meant (see below for an example).

⁶⁴ *Ad Brut.* 1.10.3.

⁶⁵ Translation Shackleton Bailey 2002.

⁶⁶ This fragment (*Ad Caes. iun.* fr. 10) is quoted by Nonius as being from Cicero’s letters to Caesar. Both Shackleton Bailey and Agnès (in Lamacchia *et al.* 1979) *ad loc.* agree with the suggestion, first made by Müller in 1888, that the younger Caesar must be meant.

the writer of the spurious *Ad Brutum* 1.16 to make ‘Brutus’ inveigh against Cicero for his credulity.

At some unknown point after writing *Ad Brutum* 1.10, the historical Cicero must have realized that he had been wrong in trusting Octavian. When that had happened, it is quite conceivable that he wrote one or more letters to Octavian with words to that effect. Writing such a letter may indeed have been the only way in which Cicero, with his position in Roman politics marginalized, may have been able to voice his complaints. Such a letter may easily have ended up in the correspondence later edited by Tiro (if he is indeed the editor), and ultimately be the source for our letter.⁶⁷

Alternatively, if no genuine letter from Cicero to Octavian dating from this period was available to the author of this Epistle, it is still conceivable that he may have been interested in this particular moment of history. Indeed, as Peirano mentions in her aforementioned *Rhetoric of the Roman Fake*, Roman pseudo-authors show a particular interest in ‘filling in the gaps’ of knowledge left open by genuine texts.⁶⁸ In this light it is conceivable that a declaimer in Late Antiquity, when there was still an interest in this part of Cicero’s biography, wanted to ‘fill in’ a question to which the answer was lost or even never known: what his feelings were when he found out that Octavian had betrayed his trust.

The minutiae of the period were still available to any declaimer who had a text of Appian or Cassius Dio at hand. The author may also have had access to Livy’s books on this period or of Sallust’s *Historiae*, which must also have preserved many of these particulars.⁶⁹ The level of historical detail found in the letter, though remarkable, cannot be used as an irrefutable argument against a late antique dating.

Conclusion

The letter can be said to be ‘hyper-Ciceronian’: it encapsulates aspects of almost every part of his *oeuvre* and thereby constitutes a mosaic not just of Cicero’s language, but also of the various strands of his legacy. In this chapter, I have argued

⁶⁷ Weysenhoff 1966, 78–79, however, argues that none of Cicero’s letters to Octavian were in fact ever published, and that Nonius did not have direct access to them. We might see this in the light of Octavian’s attempt at rewriting the history of this period, for which see Keeline in this volume and especially p. 33 with n. 72.

⁶⁸ Peirano 2012b, *passim* but esp. 9–35 and 205–241, on reconstructing specific historical moments in pseudepigrapha.

⁶⁹ Cf. De Franchis 2015, 3 for the lost books of Livy in Late Antiquity.

that this type of reception seems most characteristic of Late Antiquity, a period which is particularly interested in mosaic-like forms of intertextuality. The letter's interest in the 'philosophical Cicero' and its portrayal of an especial kind of 'rhetorical Cicero' also bears the traces of a markedly late antique reception of Cicero. Lamacchia's linguistic and intertextual arguments also point towards that period.

Its dating ultimately remains a question of the balance of probabilities, but the letter deserves attention for more than just that question. As an attempt to reconstruct a picture of the 'whole Cicero', I contend, it is a remarkably complex document, of which scholars of ancient Ciceronian reception should take note.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Research for this chapter has been made possible by a VIDI grant of the Dutch Research Council (NWO), funding no. 276–30–013. I would like to thank my colleague Christoph Pieper for his advice and ideas.