

Introduction

*Rem, tibi quam noscis aptam, dimittere noli;
Fronte capillata, post haec occasio calva.*

Don't let slip away what you know is right for you:
Opportunity has hair at the front, but is bald in the back.¹
Distichs of Cato 2.26

“Let's take the instant by the forward top.”
All's Well, V.iii.39.

The image is striking: Opportunity (or Occasion) personified as a figure with long hair in front, but bald in the back. It is easy to visualize and to remember.² Shakespeare's knowledge of the figure most likely came from the *Distichs of Cato*,³ and indeed he was so taken with it that he used it in three plays: *Much Ado about Nothing* (“he meant to take the present time by the top” I.ii.15–16), *Othello* (where Emilia reports that Othello said “To take the saf'st occasion by the front”, III.i.52), and *All's Well* (see above). The figure was so well known in the sixteenth century that it was even used as a printer's mark.⁴ That a figure from the *Distichs* should have been this familiar is unsurprising: they were the first Latin text encountered by every student of Latin for over 1000 years.

Students remembered and knew them well. There are allusions to and quotations from the *Distichs* from our earliest medieval texts: already in Columba-

1 Unless otherwise stated, all translations in this book are my own. Wherever there is significant discussion of one of the *Distichs*, a Latin text is supplied, along with an English rendering. In aiming primarily to convey the wisdom of the *Distichs*, the translation privileges fluency and readability over strict fidelity to the original.

2 The image has a long pedigree: it must have been well known even before the fourth century BCE, when the sculptor Lysippus used it in his Turin Relief and the Trogir Fragment. Thinking of a copy of one of them, Posidippus (*Anth. Gr.* 16.275.7–10) explains the image: Ἡ δὲ κόμη τί κατ' ὄψιν; —Ὑπαντιάσαντι λαβέσθαι, νῆ Δία. —Τάξόπιθεν πρὸς τί φαλακρά πέλει; —Τὸν γὰρ ἅπαξ πτηνοῖσι παραθρέξαντά με ποσσὶν οὕτως ἔθ' ἱμεῖρων δράζεται ἐξόπιθεν (“Q: Why does it have hair at the front? A: So that someone who comes up against it can grab it, by Jove. Q: And why is it bald in the back? A: Because no one who was once overtaken by me on my winged feet will now seize me from behind, even though he wants to.”) On depictions of Opportunity through the ages, see especially Rüdiger 1966.

3 Another possible source is Phaedr. *Fab.* 5.8 (= Perry 530 = Gibbs 536), though the use of the *Distichs* as a first Latin reader—Phaedrus usually came after them in curricula—makes it the more obvious choice.

4 On the printer's mark, see Boas 1931.

nus of Saint-Trod and Eugenius of Toledo in the seventh century, in Alcuin's *Praecepta vivendi* in the eighth, and in many, many others in the centuries that followed. Indeed, according to Richard Hazelton, "It would be pointless to cite the references to Cato that appear after the twelfth century; they are to be found literally everywhere"—and his point can stand for earlier centuries too.⁵

The work of "Cato" was highly regarded through the medieval period: a panegyric of Charlemagne compared the king and emperor to Cicero and Homer, but its highest compliment was that "he outdid the renowned sayings of Cato" (*inclita ... superat ... dicta Catonis*).⁶ Indeed the *Distichs* were a yardstick for measuring eloquence and intelligence: in Chaucer, among the many references to the collection, a carpenter is disparaged with the words "He knew nat Catoun for his wit was rude."⁷ They were also a measure of wisdom and forethought: in *Piers Plowman*, Reason's horse-servant is called "Catoun." It is unclear whether Langland meant the name to stand for Cato, the author of the *Distichs*, or for the text itself, and the ambiguity demonstrates nicely that the Cato-type was the embodiment of the *Distichs*' lessons.⁸ Indeed, the new Cato-type began to take on a life of his own. For example, the *Catwg Ddoeth*, a collec-

5 Hazelton 1957, 159, n. 5. The task was taken up by Manitius 1892, 164–171, whose hundreds of references cover to the end of the thirteenth century. For another list, see Pietsch 1902, 6–10. Columban of Bangor is not to be confused with Columbanus of Saint-Trod, to whom the poems previously considered the work of Columban are now attributed: see Howlett 1995, 216–223. Eugenius of Toledo's *Carmen* 38, a hexameter poem, was sometimes thought to be the fifth book of the *Distichs* and was presented in manuscripts as such. The poem is moralizing and improving like the maxims, but different in form—it is not in couplets—and no one now doubts its attribution to Eugenius. According to Nève 1926, 9, Raymond de Bezières' fourteenth-century translation of the Hindu *Kalila and Dimna* quotes many times from the *Distichs*, and he even opens his work with *Cum animadverterem quamplurimum...*, the opening words of the *Epistula*, on which see the next chapter. There is a text of his translation in Hervieux 1899, 378–775.

6 *Carmina Angilberti* 6.72. The panegyric, attributed to the Abbot of St. Riquier, is found in Duemmler 1881, 368. Charlemagne himself was to cite DC 2.31 in his protest against the Nicaean Synod, *Opus Caroli contra Synodum* III.26, ll. 9–12, which is available in Freeman 1998, 463. Boas 1952, 142, does not transmit the quotation accurately: Charlemagne uses the second person throughout.

7 *Miller's Tale* A3227. Other references to the *Distichs*, which come from Brunner 1965, are found in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* B4130–4131, 4161–4167; *Tale of Melibee* B2370, B2415, B2495–6, B2678–9, B2873, B2791–3, B2794; *Merchant's Tale* E1377–8; *Canon's Yeoman's Prologue* G688–9. On Chaucer's use of the *Distichs*, see Hazelton 1956, xxiii–xxxvii, Holton 2008, and Connolly (forthcoming).

8 Reason's Horse appears in C.4.17. The ambiguity of the reference is mentioned by Burrow 1990, 141, n. 9. Brunner 1965, 2: a quotation in Latin from DC 1.21 appears after C.8.336. On Langland's use of the *Distichs*, see also Hazelton 1956, xxxvii–xliv, and Breen 2010, 195.

tion of Welsh sayings, arose from the similarity of the name *Catwg*, a native wisdom figure, with that of Cato.⁹ For centuries, the *Distichs* were considered the work of the wise “Cato”, a characterization that led to and was reinforced by the conflation in the medieval period and later of Cato Censorius (or Elder) and Cato Uticensis (or Younger) into one Cato-type, a paragon of wisdom and virtue.¹⁰

Chaucer was not alone in assuming that every (educated) person had read the *Distichs*. *Carmina Burana* 19, which opens “*Si legisse memoras / ethicam Catonis*” (“If you recall reading the wisdom of Cato”) and quotes from the collection, makes clear the assumption. The fact that the *Distichs* and their author were “pagan”—a fact that Langland seems to have recognized in his otherwise Christian poem—makes the assumption all the more surprising.¹¹ Yet the *Distichs* were so entrenched in the essential reading material of the medieval and early modern periods that in Spanish, for example, “primer” or “reader” was rendered “catón,” a term also used for political readers through the nineteenth century, such as Alonso Rodríguez’ *Catón Político Christiano*.¹²

With the emergence of vernacular European languages, the *Distichs* provided inspiration, most notably for the form and content of European works of wisdom, including the medieval *Proverbs of Alfred*.¹³ And with the rise of Hu-

⁹ Constantine 2008, 120.

¹⁰ The connection was not made universally: the Medieval *Accessus ad auctores*, which included an introduction to the text, did not firmly attribute the *Distichs* to either of the two historical Catos, but instead acknowledged that while some attributed it to the Elder Cato, others named it for its “wise” (*catus*) material. See Wheeler 2015, 129–134. On the development of the Cato-type, see Carron 2009.

¹¹ Galloway 1987 notes Langland’s ability to blend Cato with the wider Christianity of the poem, though Breen 2010, 25, observes that the blending was not always successful.

¹² On the political catón, see Delgado 1990, 372–373.

¹³ On the *Proverbs of Alfred*, see Arngart 1952. Other texts influenced by the *Distichs* include, in the English tradition, the Anglo-Saxon *Fæder Lārcwidas*, “How the Wise man taught his Son,” *Instructions to his Son* by Peter Idley, *Ratis Raving* and its companion piece “How the Good Wif taught Hir Douztir,” and Heywood’s sixteenth-century *Dialogue of Proverbs*. The list comes from Habenicht 1963, 4–6. The *Llibre de bons amonestements* was also inspired by the earlier Italian *Dottrina del Schiavo de Bari*, on which see Glaser 1954, 93, and Aguiló i Fuster 1951. In Spain, the *Distichs*’ influence is felt in the works of the Arcipreste de Talavera (see Díaz de Bustamante 1999, 22–23) and in vv. 1015–1095 of the Catalan troubadour Guylem de Cervera’s long poem of the thirteenth century (Thomas 1886, 97–108, and Bizzarri 2002, 127–148). Fray Anselmo Turmeda’s *Llibre de bons amonestements*, which was the most popular first reader for Catalans from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, was heavily influenced by the *Distichs*; likewise the *Libro maistrevole* of Giovanni Antonio Tagliente (1524), a teaching manual of elementary Italian for adults, on which see Grendler 1989, 158–159, and Jacobson Schutte 1986. Finally, on

manism, the *Distichs* became an inspiration—despite their wholly hexameter form—for epigrammatists, including Constable, More, and Jonson in England, and even inspired the Calvinist Theodore Beza to produce his own *Cato Censorius Christianus*, a collection of verses that, like the *Distichs*, criticized sloth, greed, and intoxication, among other vices.¹⁴

In the early modern period, the influence of the collection was felt widely and in multiple genres, including drama, *Hamlet* providing a nice example.¹⁵ Indeed, the *Distichs* were so well known and their influence so widespread, that it becomes hard to know whether a writer was inspired directly or indirectly by the maxims, a fact that Cervantes reflects upon (*Don Quixote* 2.33): “Todo cuanto aquí ha dicho el buen Sancho—dijo la duquesa—son sentencias catonianas, o, por lo menos, sacadas de las mismas entrañas del mismo Micael Verino” (“‘Everything that the good Sancho has said here,’ said the duchess, ‘is Cato-nian maxims, or at the least taken from the very soul of Micael Verino’”).¹⁶ Verino, a short-lived Florentine poet, had produced well regarded distichs modeled on the *Distichs*. Cervantes’ use of and obvious familiarity with the collection was such that he was even believed—erroneously—to have produced an edition of it.¹⁷

Around this time, the fame of “Cato” and his *Distichs* were spreading to the New World. In Peru, the Andean lord Guaman Poma de Ayala, author of a 1615 Andean history that equates the Incas and Romans temporally and culturally, mentions that in his culture’s past, “boys and children were instructed and taught with chastisement as Cato of Rome did, who provided good examples and taught his children, so they were well brought up.” We know that hundreds of copies of the *Distichs* were crossing the Atlantic in the seventeenth century, and Guaman Poma probably read the collection himself, maybe even as a child.¹⁸ Copies of the *Distichs* were heading not just to the Spanish colonies, but also the fledgling United States, where just over a century later, Benjamin Franklin would be inspired by the *Distichs* as he compiled his *Poor Richard’s*

the popularity in medieval France of precepts, a genre influenced by the *Distichs*, see Roussel 1994.

¹⁴ On the *Distichs*’ influence on later epigram, see Crane 1986, especially 165–169, 180, and 185–186. On Beza’s *Cato Censorius Christianus*, see Green 2009, 157.

¹⁵ On Shakespeare and the *Distichs*, see further Falk 1967 and on *Hamlet*, Barker and Chadwick 1993, 329, n. 12.

¹⁶ The translation comes from Lathrop 2005, 632.

¹⁷ On Cervantes and the *Distichs*, see Glaser 1954 and especially Taylor 1999.

¹⁸ The translation and discussion of the text come from MacCormack 2007, 63; the original can be found in Murra, Adorno and Urioste 1987, 59.

Almanack, and his translation would be the first of any Classical text produced in North America. Through Chaucer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, and now Franklin, the *Distichs* were firmly entrenched in the consciousness of Europe and the Americas, where they remained through the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries.

No one quotes the *Distichs* anymore, and scarcely anyone—beyond a few scholars—even reads them. Despite their ubiquity for so many centuries across Europe and in the New World too, a good many Classicists today have either never heard of them or never read them. The *Distichs* are no longer read in elementary Latin classes and have therefore fallen out of most people’s consciousness;¹⁹ moreover, a moralizing text that lacks an author or date and is written in simple Latin does not appeal to many philologists, while its unsystematic thought independent of any philosophical school renders it uninteresting to philosophers. Finally, some of those modern scholars who have looked at the collection have poured scorn on it, and only a few have deemed it worthy of their scholarship.

While the *Distichs* have loomed large and been admired in Western post-Classical education and literature, a fact acknowledged by scholars in those fields, the Loeb Classical Library—presumably reflecting a general attitude among Classicists—relegates them to the “Minor Latin Poets” volumes (1934). The entry for “Cato Dionysius” in Smith’s *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology* (1849) summarizes the differing attitudes towards the collection:

The language has been pronounced worthy of the purest era of Latin composition, and declared to be a specimen of the worst epoch of barbarism. The adages themselves have been extolled by some as the dignified exposition of high philosophy; by others they have been contemptuously characterised as, with few exceptions, a farrago of vapid trash.

Nevertheless, this is a good time to be working on the *Distichs* for several reasons. First, reception has become increasingly important to Classics for intellectual and pragmatic reasons; second, scholarship on wisdom literature is burgeoning. Third, the *Distichs* offer rich insights into Roman social history. For, as the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* 4.17.24 tells us, “A saying is a pronouncement taken from life and it demonstrates briefly what is done or ought to be done in life” (*sententia est oratio sumpta de vita, quae aut quid sit aut quid esse oporteat in*

¹⁹ I know of only one Classics course taught in North America that includes the *Distichs* in the syllabus: Edan Dekel’s “Ancient Wisdom Literature,” taught at Williams College. Domach 2013, an M.A. thesis, is among the most recent student work on the *Distichs*.

vita, breviter ostendit), and therefore the *Distichs*, like other wisdom texts, “reflects the values of its era. It is, in fact, a distillation (from the modern point of view, an adulteration) of many of the ideas and sentiments found in Augustan and Silver Latin literature.”²⁰

Beginning with the foundational work of Archer Taylor and Barrett Jere Whiting in the 1930s on proverbs in their socio-linguistic context, scholars of wisdom texts moved from simply cataloguing wisdom expressions and tracing their users to instead analyzing them as the products of particular societies and substantiations of belief.²¹ Martin West’s work on Hesiod as a writer of wisdom and John Barns’ work on Greek gnomologia preserved on papyrus in Egypt have drawn Classicists’ attention to scholarship on wisdom. More recently Nikolaos Lazaridis’ linguistic analysis of Greek and Egyptian proverbs, which demonstrates how their interrelationship reflects Greco-Egyptian cultural exchange, bears witness to the importance and productiveness of that scholarship. In addition, good editions of several wisdom texts have appeared over the twentieth century, including Jäkel’s edition of the *Sententiae Menandri* and, most importantly for this study, Boas’ fine edition of the *Disticha Catonis*.²²

Essential to any scholarship on ancient wisdom texts is Teresa Morgan’s study of *Morality in the Early Roman Empire*, which draws on proverbs, fables and *gnomai* of the first two centuries CE to reconstruct a popular Roman morality and to produce “a map of the ethical landscape.” Morgan succeeds in demonstrating the use of minor literary texts of this sort to social historians who are attempting to recreate the lives of ordinary Romans. I hope that the present study will complement and add to hers.²³

As I explain in Chapter 1, the text as we currently encounter it has at its heart 144 hexameter couplets. These are the *Distichs*—the two-liners—and they are the focus of this study. Chapter 1 serves as an introduction for Classicists

²⁰ Hazelton 1957, 162, referring to wisdom texts.

²¹ Scholars of Anglo-Saxon wisdom texts have been pioneers: see especially the work of Tom Shippey.

²² An exception is the *Sententiae Publilii Syri*, excerpted from the Roman Republican playwright’s mimes, which were last edited in the nineteenth century and have received treatment in only one monograph, Giancotti 1967, despite Archer Taylor’s observation of their neglect back in 1934 (Taylor 1934, 9). The most recent brief treatments are Panayotakis 2010, 27, n. 52, and 50–56, and Bradley 2016 and 2019. A new translation for the Loeb Classical Library is anticipated (Bradley 2016, 663).

²³ Morgan 2007. Morgan’s dating of the *Distichs* to the third century CE led her to omit consideration of it. Reichert 1956 presents snapshots of various aspects of Roman life derived from wisdom sayings; however, his work is impressionistic and unsystematic.

and scholars of later literatures to the *Distichs*—their form, content, and authorship—and argues for a new dating in the first century CE. It proposes, contrary to the historical and current consensus, that the *Distichs* were associated by their author not necessarily just with Cato Censorius, but perhaps in addition with Cato Uticensis, in order to increase their appeal among the reading public of the first century CE.

Chapter 2 considers the long tradition of wisdom literature, in particular that of paraenetic literature. It isolates the key characteristics of paraenetic texts: they are composed of a series of brief texts written in a literary style, phrased as instructions and/or reflections, and arranged thematically or alphabetically, that concern a wide range of topics and are authored by or attributed to a figure of wisdom. The *Distichs* demonstrate most of these characteristics, and their familiarity to ancient readers in search of wisdom as a paraenetic collection would have added to their appeal. But the *Distichs* lack arrangement and are written in hexameter couplets, a form that no other text of the genre uses exclusively.

Chapter 3 demonstrates that the author of the *Distichs*, far from being a barbarous writer, was a skilled poet who used the binarism of the hexameter couplet form and the maxims' content to maximize the impact of their messages. Finally, it proposes that the author intended for his work to be read by both adults and children.

Chapter 4 explores the collection's treatment of friendship. Friendship is a common theme in the collection, where it is presented not so much as a source of comfort and pleasure but rather as a bulwark against more powerful foes, as well as personal enemies of similar status. The importance of friends is clear in a society that the collection characterizes as paranoid, defensive, and suspicious. Advice on money—how and when to spend or save it—is the focus of Chapter 5. The *Distichs* reveal alternative attitudes to money to those found in elite writers, such as Cicero and Seneca, and make clear Romans' everyday anxieties about want. The concentration of maxims about money makes possible a sustained treatment of Romans' attitudes towards money, wealth, and personal financial management.

These two chapters explore the interrelationship of the maxims and Roman social history, in particular convergences with, divergences from, and additions to what we already know of Romans' thinking on two key topics: friendship and money. The first of these topics is well explored in the scholarship; it will be instructive to see what the *Distichs* might add to it. The second has been relatively less explored, and my discussion will demonstrate how the *Distichs* might contribute to new work that is beginning to consider it. I have limited myself to

examination of two topics for reasons of space, but I am hopeful that these chapters might inspire others to use the *Distichs* for their work on many other topics besides. In chapters 4 and 5, I set the maxims in their Roman context and put them in conversation with contemporary or near-contemporary texts in order to gain a better understanding of attitudes towards the topics. These chapters will also offer the first modern extensive exegeses of the maxims.

The translations and transformations of the *Distichs* in the medieval period and beyond form the basis of Chapters 6 and 7. Editions, commentaries, and translations of the *Distichs* secured the collection's survival, and these chapters demonstrate how scholars and publishers collaborated to meet the demands of educators, pupils, and a wider consumer public across Europe and the New World to read and understand a text used for centuries as the first reader in Latin. It also demonstrates that the *Distichs* could be packaged and repackaged to meet the various needs of different audiences across time and space. The title of Chapter 6, which treats editions and commentaries, is to the point: the German "Fortleben" expresses more strongly than does English "survival" (or the oft used import "Nachleben") the fact that the *Distichs* enjoyed a wide and constant readership from the medieval period through to the eighteenth century. Chapter 7 turns to the enormous range and variety of translations and adaptations of the *Distichs*. Both chapters should be of interest to Classicists and those interested in the reception of Classical texts.

The *Distichs* are a *Roman* text, composed by a Roman for Romans perhaps in the first century CE. Read as a Roman text, the *Distichs* have much to tell us about contemporary Roman society, in particular how Romans, as a group, agreed it should properly function and the ways or circumstances in which it failed to do so. While wisdom collections are often attributed to or associated with a wise individual, the wisdom supposedly originating with that individual is more likely the product of society as a whole. Instead, therefore, of regarding each maxim in the *Distichs* as an instruction or reflection that "Cato" might have given or said, or even as the product of the Author's peculiar social outlook, rather we should consider each a "sententious generalisation," as Cavill puts it: a statement that encapsulates in memorable form the received wisdom on a topic of broad social import.²⁴

²⁴ Cavill 1999, 9. The *Distichs* rely on generalizations for their broad appeal, and those generalizations are useful for us as reflections of Roman thought about Roman society. As MacMullen 1974, viii, notes, "At times it is possible to catch people of the past doing their own generalizing for us. They may do this in fiction, when authors try to present a situation that would easily be believed by their readers, and weave in details felt to be applicable throughout their

While scholars in the field of Classics have continued to pay little attention to wisdom texts—with the notable exceptions of Teresa Morgan, Nikolaos Lazaridis, André Lardinois, and Robert Knapp²⁵—over the last two decades, scholars of Near Eastern and Old English literature have produced work that not only analyzes such texts in and for their social context, but also applies stimulating methods that lead to productive readings. Particularly important for my approach in Chapters 4 and 5 are studies of Old English texts that were inspired by mid-twentieth century work in folklore studies and anthropology. The studies of Paul Cavill, Tom Shippey, and Susan Deskis have been especially helpful.²⁶

own world. Or they may do this in predictions, as astrologers, dream-diviners, and seers: to stay in business, such practitioners had to deal in probabilities. Or again, we can apply a sort of ‘association test’ to written sources of all kinds, through the study of pairs of words or pairs of ideas: ‘rich and honored,’ ‘rustic and cloddish,’ ‘paupers and criminals.’”

25 Especially Morgan 2007, Lazaridis 2007, and Lardinois 1997 and 2001. Knapp 2011 draws on a wealth of evidence, including wisdom texts, as well as Jewish and Christian texts, from the first and second centuries CE to create a portrait of non-elite Romans that he summarizes thus (p. 11):

Marriage is a good thing; monogamy is the norm. Loyalty in marriage is important. Wives are to be faithful, available and alluring; husbands chaste. Men reject the philosophic view that sex is a distraction done for procreation and without enjoyment. Chastity is valued, but does not extend to the point that male homosexual relationships and occasional male infidelity are unacceptable. Visiting prostitutes is a neutral activity, as is discussed elsewhere. Divorce is possible and acceptable. Lying, cheating, and stealing are in principle bad. Honesty in dealings within kinship groups and with socioeconomic equals or superiors is expected; however, business with others exists in an ambiguous state which allows ‘sharp dealing’ and deceit for personal gain. Fair and just treatment of all is good, although ‘fair’ is based on a distributive concept of justice. Acquisitiveness is a positive virtue; excessive acquisitiveness, i.e. avarice, and taking possessions that are not rightfully yours, is bad. For the more philosophically inclined, self-sufficiency is a moral commonplace.

Self-confidence is a positive virtue, while arrogance and boasting, i.e. self-confidence outstripping appropriate expression according to socio-economic status, is a bad thing; humility is a commonplace (the opposite of excessive pride). A strong sense of self-worth is good. A person has the obligation to protect his standing (honor); almost any action is justified by this. But at the same time there is a sentiment for self-restraint, which is a common topos in popular philosophy. Drunkenness, for example, is frowned upon. Murder is bad. Minding one’s own business is yet another common topos; gossip and being a busybody are bad. Taking care of those in need within your family, e.g. widows, is good. Looking to the welfare of those more distant from you is not good. Beyond immediate family, friends are highly valued. Indeed, friendship is another constant topos of popular philosophy and culture.

26 See especially Cavill 1998 and 1999, Shippey 1976 and 1994, and Deskis 1996. Lardinois 1997, 213, observes that postwar scholarship on *gnomai* now regularly considers them in their

Paraenetic texts encapsulate what a society collectively knows—they are part of “the social stock of knowledge,” as Cavill puts it²⁷—and as collections of statements of what that society knows it should do or tends to do, these texts help to define a society for itself. They also codify, institutionalize, and legitimate the relationships that a society agrees structure how its members interact (which in turn might make its members interact in that way). They are the result of a society’s attempts to understand needs, desires, and experiences that are universal to humans, but that must be fitted to the cultural context of that society. The expression of the texts might appear universal, and an author might try to suggest that they are tried and tested and have authority apparently beyond the society of their target audience; yet they remain texts to be understood primarily within that society.

Aristotle tells us that the Greeks used statements of wisdom, such as those in the *Distichs*, as *bons mots* in social situations in order to insert a final judgment into a conversation in a witty and poetic way. He reveals to us that their effectiveness derives in part from the fact that so used, they offered an appeal to shared thinking.²⁸ Looking forward in time, physician Jean le Bon of Lorraine, a sixteenth-century French collector of proverbs, would declare proverbs—a subset of statements of wisdom—to be the “*voix de ville*” that “in any conversation might serve as the final arbiter and judge.”²⁹

For Romans, the *Distichs* would have been self-defining and self-affirming instructions and reflections. According to Cavill, “a maxim works by specifying the situation and involving the audience in a corporate statement of response.” That response is formulated as a general principle, and so a statement of wisdom gains axiomatic force.³⁰ *Vox populi, vox Dei*. In specifying and responding, the *Distichs* define the world of first-century Rome—i.e., what is good vs. bad, wise vs. foolish—and order it accordingly. Through ordering the world and applying society’s knowledge to its own ills, the *Distichs* state and solve its social problems. The *Distichs* are Rome’s remedy for itself.

To understand that society, a Roman reading—as opposed to a Greek, medieval European or modern American reading—is essential. It is true that the generalizing principles of the *Distichs*, which are all relevant to Roman society,

social and linguistic contexts: good examples include Hamblenne 1973 and Bradley 2019 on Publilius Syrus, and Christes 1979 on using Syrus and also Phaedrus to understand the lived experiences of enslaved individuals.

²⁷ Cavill 1999, 183, who is referring to Old English maxims.

²⁸ Arist. *Rhet.* 1395a10–12.

²⁹ I owe the reference and translation to Zemon Davis 1975, 240.

³⁰ Cavill 1999, 52. The quotation is from Cavill 1999, 111.

have been useful also to European and New World societies and might, if more widely read, remain relevant today.³¹ But as a Roman collection, they reflect habitual and typified behavior among Romans. To be sure, much of the same behavior was found in other ancient cultures, was also habitual and typical, and is also treated in non-Roman wisdom literature, as I demonstrate in chapter 2. Yet this collection remains Roman, and my emphasis on its Roman-ness is important: as the anthropologists Arewa and Dundes have noted, earlier scholars' work on wisdom texts and utterances has sometimes offered anachronistic and culturally inappropriate interpretations, since their understanding has derived only from their own context.³² It is heartening to reflect, however, that recent scholars in Classics have been sensitive to context, as the work of Teresa Morgan in particular demonstrates.³³

One might counter that a Roman reading of the *Distichs* is unnecessary or even inappropriate, since so many of its messages have ancient precedents.³⁴ The precedents are certainly there, and it would be odd if they were not: the *Distichs* would otherwise lack the tradition that is so important for wisdom statements' definition and authority. Moreover, no society is so culturally or morally unique that its wisdom would be wholly without precedent. Yet, as I demonstrate in chapters 2 and 3, the form of the *Distichs*, which is strikingly idiosyncratic and of which the Author is very aware, reminds us that every couplet he composed is original.³⁵ While a good number of the couplets may be (conscious or unconscious) re-workings of earlier sentiments, the *Distichs* were composed by one person at one particular time: a Roman most likely in the first century CE, as I argue in chapter 1. He chose the sentiments and, as a Roman, they are the product of his Roman environment and should be read in that context. Indeed, Classicists have also become aware that, while the Romans were

31 Holiday 2016 and Pigliucci 2018 are among recent volumes that interpret (and sometimes misinterpret) ancient wisdom and offer it as a guide for modern living. The *Distichs* might be similarly used.

32 Arewa and Dundes 1964, quoted in Cavill 1999, 106.

33 Morgan 2007.

34 For example, Otto 1890 includes DC 2.8 among a series of expressions of the same idea, s.v. *tempus* 5 (p. 343). For a full list of references to the *Distichs*, see under *Cato, distich*, p. 407. Otto's magisterial collection of Sprichwörter offers ancient analogs to some of the *Distichs*, many of them Greek; those that predate the *Distichs* might have been sources, as might the *fontes* that Boas includes in his edition. But it is impossible to determine the influences on the Author.

35 In DC 4.49, he takes credit for both the brevity and bareness of his verses, as well as their couplet form.

great inheritors, especially of the Greek tradition, their inheritances need to be analyzed within their new context. Harriet Flower notes, “As elsewhere in Roman culture, patterns and forms borrowed and adapted from the Greeks need to be interpreted as fully ‘Roman’ within their new social and political context.”³⁶

The *Distichs* help us to understand the Romans. As Biville summarizes,

Les proverbes et les sentences jouent aussi un rôle social capital, ils servent de repère d'identité culturelle, ils traduisent l'appartenance à une communauté (qui n'est pas seulement romaine mais gréco-romaine), l'adhésion à ses valeurs, l'ancrage dans ses traditions. Ils sont le symbole et la quintessence du monde qu'ils représentent.³⁷

The proverbs and sayings also play a role in social capital, they act as a benchmark of cultural identity, they express membership of a community (which is not only Roman, but Greco-Roman), adherence to its values, anchorage in its traditions. They are the symbol and the quintessence of the world they represent.

Paul Cavill has observed, in reference to Old English maxims, that “Ultimately it is the social context which makes sense of the poems, and the poems which make sense of the social context.”³⁸ The interrelationship of the *Distichs* and their context may lure a reader towards the danger of circular reasoning: the *Distichs* tell us about Rome, which can tell us about the *Distichs*. But as “traditional forms of expression which reflect a socially sanctioned world view” (Cavill again), the maxims offer us a Roman world view—and my purpose in chapters 4 and 5 is to study the *Distichs* in order to understand Rome and not the other way round.³⁹

With their imperatives and statements of wisdom, the *Distichs* promote social conventions or norms to the status of ideals, and the collection's ascription to “Cato” reinforces that idealization (even if one or both of the historical Catos would not necessarily have said or recommended these ideals). The notion that the *Distichs* can be read to understand Rome is further supported if one considers the power of social conditioning: a Roman's seemingly impersonal claim that “it is right to do X” could be reformulated “I am reporting that the society in whose culture I have been raised and socialized believes collectively that we should do X,” and so the instructions and injunctions of the *Distichs* that “you

³⁶ Flower 1996, 118.

³⁷ Biville 1999, 13, who offers an overview of the importance of *sententiae* in Latin literature and Roman thought on pp. 11–14.

³⁸ Cavill 1999, 183.

³⁹ Cavill 1998, 631.

should do X” could similarly be reformulated as “the society in whose culture you have been raised and socialized believes collectively that you should do X.”

As a text of the first century CE, the *Distichs* offer us an excellent opportunity to deepen our understanding of the beliefs and attitudes of Roman society during an important period. Yet there are limitations on their usefulness to us. First, their audience is limited: they offer advice to both children and adults, and so we might say that they were aimed at or spoke mostly to literate persons of all ages. Yet they offer advice only about enslaved individuals and wives, not to them.⁴⁰ We should imagine an audience of perhaps no more than free males, but of all ages.⁴¹

Second, while the *Distichs* describe the Roman world and offer solutions to its problems, they do not define every aspect of it nor offer a solution to every problem and cannot present a complete and unified picture of Roman society. Moreover, we cannot claim that there is an overarching moral or socio-political philosophy in the *Distichs* since the problems they identify and solutions they propose are not necessarily mutually compatible, and there are no programmatic statements of philosophy for the maxims. What we have instead is a series of commonplaces no less true, yet no more consistent than, for example, the sayings “too many cooks spoil the broth,” and “many hands make light work.”

Third, the *Distichs* are not always self-explanatory, and we should be aware of the fact that even those maxims that might seem obvious might be read differently by different readers—now and in the past.⁴² We need then to be self-aware readers, cognizant of the assumptions and prejudices that come from our age, gender, and geographical, cultural, and socio-economic context. We should also recognize that our experience of the *Disticha Catonis*—as an anonymous text comprising a letter, *sententiae* and maxims, introduced as though

40 Maxims about enslaved individuals: *DC* 1.8, 1.37, 3.10, 4.44; about wives: *DC* 1.8, 3.20, 3.23, 3.12, 4.47.

41 The composition of the *Distichs* in Latin presumably places their Author and readership in the Western part of the Empire, though a lack of internal or external evidence precludes us from being more precise.

42 Zemon Davis 1975, 243–244, notes that users of early modern French proverbs or maxims seem to have had no problem with the possibility that they might change their meaning with a change in speaker (or that they might be inconsistent or overlap with others). More broadly, Langlands 2018, 62–64, draws attention to the “multivalency” of exempla, fables, and other vehicles of moralizing, noting that it “describes not only their capacity to be reinterpreted and redeployed in different contexts and to acquire new meanings over time (what we might term ‘serial multivalency’) but also their capacity to generate multiple interpretations within a single reader at a single reading (what we might term ‘simultaneous multivalency’)” (pp. 62–63).

from a father to his son, and attributed to “Cato”—is not the only one: it is possible Roman readers may have known the author’s identity; they may not have read the letter and *sententiae* along with the couplets; they may not therefore have thought of the maxims’ speaker or source in the role of a father and themselves as readers in the role of his son; and finally they may have been differently affected by the Catonian connection. They may also have come across the couplets removed from their textual setting, perhaps quoted in another text. In addition, a couplet might be interpreted differently by similar readers, even by two free male literate Romans. Of course, we cannot survey free male literate Romans to discover their different readings of or reactions to the same couplet. Finally, we should beware of over-reading the *Distichs*: an academic’s take on a maxim might strike a Roman as amusingly over-analytical, which is how some scholars now regard the work of sixteenth and seventeenth-century French academics (or savants) on contemporary popular proverbs.⁴³ A light touch is needed.

A short text should produce a short book. As Charlotte Roueché has pointed out, there simply is not an audience for a book that offers an enormous commentary on a brief wisdom text.⁴⁴ Archer Taylor had noted that “The *Disticha catonis* [sic] inculcates many a moral principle in aphoristic form and even gave rise to a parody. Some proverbs trace back to the *Distichs of Cato*, but no one has yet appraised the value of that collection as a source of proverbs.”⁴⁵ And this book is limited to that task: it introduces the *Distichs* and, for the first time, considers them in their Classical context.

This book does not trace the “origins” of the maxims, or rather cite instances of a maxim’s particular idea back through Roman and Greek literature. That is an immense task perhaps better carried out as part of a collaborative project that uses digital text encoding, such as the Sharing Ancient Wisdoms project (SAWS), which is being carried out by a team from King’s College London and the Universities of Uppsala and Vienna.⁴⁶ Besides, a printed book is surely now the wrong medium for such Quellenforschung. My more modest task is to analyze the maxims in their socio-historical context—a task that requires reading between their lines. After all, as the preface to the *Distichs* warns: “*legere enim et non intelligere negligere est*” (“for to read and not to read between the lines is

⁴³ See Zemon Davis 1975.

⁴⁴ Roueché and Tupman 2011.

⁴⁵ Taylor 1934, 10.

⁴⁶ <http://www.ancientwisdoms.ac.uk/library/>, accessed 5/18/2022. Some of this task was undertaken by Otto 1890, who lists *fontes* for Roman sayings, an impressive work for its time.

not to read at all"). The collection will never again attain its earlier fame, but I hope that this book will at least make it better known among scholars of the ancient world and its reception.

