

Tullius Tironi suo: Tiro as Epistolary Recipient

The sixteenth book of Cicero's correspondence *ad Familiares* contains letters to and about his freedman M. Tullius Tiro, normally designated by scholars a "confidential secretary" but charged with a multitude of other responsibilities as well. Hutchinson's pioneering study of the literary features of Cicero's correspondence, particularly its "skilled control of language to a persuasive end" (1998: 21), has inspired detailed investigations of the rhetoric employed in an array of epistolary settings, including the texts of Book 16. In contrast to earlier sentimental readings (e.g. McDermott 1972) that took Cicero's protestations of affection for Tiro at face value, two recent studies attentive to the psychodynamics of slaveholding examine his letters and those of other family members and arrive at less sanguine conclusions about the messages the Cicerones were sending to their cherished (ex-)slave. Mary Beard finds that the correspondence, despite many expressions of warmth, is permeated by a language of "dependence, hierarchy and servitude" (2002: 136). For Erik Gunderson, who reads the epistles to Tiro alongside those to Terentia in Book 14 and discovers marked similarities between them, Cicero's concern for the health of the recipient, whether wife or freedman, masks anxiety over his own political weakness. In the eleven letters from 50–49 BCE sent to Tiro while he lay ill at Patrae, nagging queries about his return, couched in emotionally loaded phrases, take on disquieting overtones of passive-aggressive behavior with the former sexual vulnerability of the slave an ominous subtext.

Have we, however, decoded these messages correctly? Building on Oliensis' insight (1997) that the client's deference to his patron is structurally analogous to the lover's abasement, Stroup's analysis of the social function of Republican-era texts suggests that in homosocial exchanges eroticized discourse was a bonding trope (2010: 144–55, 229–34). Richlin identifies

the “language of sentimental friendship” as characteristic of relations between masters of oratory and former apprentices, serving to negotiate imbalances of power. Among elite Roman males tensions inherent in training attractive, charismatic youths to be one’s eventual rivals and replacements were not suppressed but instead displaced onto effusive terms of endearment (2011: 105–7).

Cicero personally attended to Tiro’s education (*Fam.* 16.3.1 [SB 122] *me, magistrum tuum*; 10.2 [SB 43] *docui...te*). Hence Richlin observes that the name Tiro (“recruit”) is “somewhat thought-provoking” (103). The amatory terminology in letters addressed to him may be figurative as well as literal, operating in a pedagogical alongside an affective register. Even when it verges on the downright sexual, as it does at the close of Quintus Cicero’s epistle *Fam.* 16.27.2 [SB 352], *tuosque oculos, etiam si te veniens in medio foro videro, dissaviabor*, it could recognize the fulfilled promise of a brilliant student. Similarly, the bantering references to servitude so distasteful to Beard may have rung differently in the ears of elite men acculturated to distancing sensitive matters through hyperbole rather than euphemism.

There is of course no way of proving that hypothesis. Yet it is a reasonable inference that the letters of Book 16 came from Tiro’s private archive; at the very least, they were personally selected by him and likely even arranged by him into their meaningful manuscript order centering on his own manumission. Why did he choose these particular letters as opposed to innumerable others? Some are important historically and a few illustrate the value of Tiro’s services to various family members. Several, though, are ephemeral notes—including those in which Cicero pleads for his company and Quintus makes problematic jokes. They must have been preserved because he found them worthy of keeping and, given the limited scope of the collection, should also carry great illustrative weight. If we find glaring instances of

manipulative or tactless expression in what Beard has pronounced “one of the most important texts on slavery to have survived from the ancient world” (2002: 134), the fault in communication may lie not with authors or addressee but with us.

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