

Cicero's Self-Fashioning of Control in Att.14-13B1-2

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Abstract: *The summer of 44 B.C. that followed the death of Julius Caesar was a time of political tension for Marcus Tullius Cicero. The future of his beloved Republic was unsure, and Cicero was confronted with the ambition and power of Mark Antony. The correspondences of Cicero's Att. 14.13 (composed the month after Caesar's death) illuminate Cicero's thoughts leading to the openly invective First Phillipic in the fall of that same year. This inquiry carefully examines Cicero's complex self-fashioning in an essential passage of the correspondence (14.13B.1-2) to show how Cicero resists compromising his authority and dignitas from a seemingly disadvantageous position.*

In the opening of his letter¹ to Mark Antony, Cicero attempts to comply with Antony's request² by voicing his displeasure with the air of Antony's petition through a subtextual criticism that plays with conventional letter styles and Roman epistolary practices.³ This inquiry will briefly examine Cicero and Antony's relationship to illuminate the background behind epistolary contact in Att. 14.13.⁴ The inquiry will then explore how Cicero tries to preserve his *dignitas*⁵ as he simultaneously fashions himself as an authority over Antony through the epistolary façade of a model letter⁶ and voices his compliance and displeasure.

The correspondences of Att. 14.13 were composed only a little more than a month after Caesar's assassination.⁷ The resulting political circumstances situate the feelings Cicero had for Antony. Cicero's Republic was under threat of civil war and Antony, seeking revenge for Caesar's murder and vying for control of Caesar's allies and sympathizers, was a central figure to this threat. Indeed, both men had different visions for Rome's future and sat in opposing camps.⁸ Antony, being consul, had significant power and support, and thus, describing the attached letters⁹ between Antony and himself, Cicero writes to Atticus, "*Ego autem Antonio*

¹ Cic. Att. 14.13B.

² That Cicero give his consent to Antony to call Sex. Cloelius back from exile. Cic. Att. 14.13A.

³ "Although no extant pattern book or manual on letter writing can be confidently dated as early as Cicero's time, it is likely that rhetorical writers had already articulated the rudiments of a theory of the letter by then because Cicero and his correspondents sometimes seem to appeal to one," White comments, citing Fam. 4.2.1 as proof. Peter White, *Cicero in Letters: Epistolary Relations of the Late Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 21.

⁴ This correspondence consists of three letters: (i) 14.13 Cicero's letter to Atticus which includes (ii) 14.13A, Antony's letter to Cicero, and (iii) 14.13B, Cicero's reply to 14.13A.

⁵ "An aristocrat's *dignitas* (like any individual's face) was not a stable, constant entity. It was always open to challenge and re-evaluation during the many (often public) encounters in which the aristocrat took part." Jon Hall, *Politeness and Politics in Cicero's Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 12, doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195329063.001.0001.

⁶ I.e. not necessarily a set of strict guidelines, but the form that Antony might expect from a simple, traditional response of compliance.

⁷ Caesar "was assassinated... on 15 March 44 [B.C.]." *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth, 3rd rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), s.v. "Julius Caesar (1), Gaius," by Ernst Badian, Oxford Reference Online. Meanwhile, Att. 14.13 was composed "26 April 44;" Att. 14.13A, "22 April 44;" Att. 14.13B, "26 April 44." Marcus Tullius Cicero, *44 B.C. 355-426 (Books XIV-XVI)*, ed. D.R. Shackleton Bailey, vol. VI, *Cicero's Letters to Atticus* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 29, 33, 55.

⁸ See *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, s.v. "Antonius (2), Marcus." See also *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, s.v. "Tullius Cicero (1), Marcus."

⁹ Cic. Att. 14.13A and 14.13B.

facillimum me praebui,” “as for me, I have shown all compliance to Antony.”¹⁰ Yet Cicero was not without his own standing at this time, and he clearly did not feel as Antony had shown him the respect he deserved in his letter.¹¹ Cicero makes his negative feelings towards Antony clear as he adds, “*ex ipsius litteris cognosces... quam dissolute, quam turpiter quamque ita perniciose*,” “you will see from his [Antony’s] own letter... how unscrupulously, disgracefully, [and] mischievously [he wrote to me].”¹²

This was not the first time Cicero had taken offense at Antony’s writing. Five years earlier than the subject of this inquiry, Cicero wrote to Atticus about letters he had received from Antony and Caesar.¹³ Cicero calls Antony’s letter “*odiosas*,” but does not attribute any descriptor to Caesar’s letter.¹⁴ Perhaps this is because Caesar does a better job employing what Jon Hall describes as “the conventional language of friendship [which] relies on the mutual maintenance of polite fictions— a kind of temporary social contract that allows relationships to run smoothly.”¹⁵ Thus, there are two important parts to these temporary social contracts, tone¹⁶ and the conventional language of friendship. These are important to introduce because they are the tools Cicero uses and twists in his opening of Att. 14.13 to create his response.

Cicero has a difficult task in trying to comply with Antony’s petition and also fashion¹⁷ himself as a character of *dignitas* and authority. Greenblatt writes, “any achieved identity always contains within itself the signs of its own subversion or loss.”¹⁸ For Cicero, “loss” is compliance, but this is inconsequential because “identity” is Cicero’s ultimate goal. Of course, identity for Cicero is defined in large part by the maintenance of his *dignitas*. Therefore, the signs of Cicero’s own subversion constitute the ‘outer’ layer of rhetoric in this letter (his compliant answer), and the signs of Cicero’s subversion of Antony lie within the subtext (his self-fashioning) in his attempt to preserve his *dignitas* and assert authority. Cicero exploits three typical epistolary elements¹⁹ in his attempt to shape his relationship to Antony and achieve this goal: (1) the distance between addressee and sender; (2) the friendship/relationship between the addressee and sender and the sender’s appreciation of the addressee; and (3) praise of the addressee’s letter by the sender.

Cicero may have been displeased that Antony did not see him in person²⁰ before he left Rome. Antony mentions their failure to meet in 14.13A, which Cicero employs in the first

¹⁰ Cic. Att. 14.13.6. All original text and translation in quotes from the letters are Shackleton Bailey 1966-8. Unspecified translations are mine.

¹¹ I.e. Cic. Att. 14.13A.

¹² Cic. Att. 14.13.6.

¹³ Cic. Att. 10.8.

¹⁴ Cic. Att. 10.8.10.

¹⁵ Hall, *Politeness and Politics in Cicero's*, 135.

¹⁶ For another example of tone’s importance see where Hall cites Cic. Att. 6.3.7 as an example that Cicero was irked by M. Brutus’ attitude in their correspondences: “To be sure (I write in confidence) Brutus has never sent me a letter... that did not contain something arrogant and uncivil.” Ibid. 4.

¹⁷ I.e. “a way of designating the forming of a self” in relation to culture through literature, or, in this case, epistolary writing. Stephen Greenblatt, “Introduction,” in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 2.

¹⁸ Greenblatt, “Introduction,” in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 9.

¹⁹ I.e. “hewing to a generic model... evident not only from the standardization of the salutation, opening, close, and dateline... but also from conventional utterances scattered through the body of letters,” White, *Cicero in Letters: Epistolary*, 21.

²⁰ “Late Republican Rome remained essentially, in anthropological parlance, a “face-to-face” society. That is, most social and business matters in the city were conducted and negotiated through personal encounters, rather than through more impersonal, bureaucratic media.” Hall, *Politeness and Politics in Cicero's*, 16.

sentence of his response. Just as in Fam. 5.1 and Fam. 5.2 when Cicero responds to his addressee Celer “with moralizing vocabulary similar to that used by Celer himself,” Cicero uses Antony’s vocabulary against him.²¹ Cicero inverts Antony’s opening sentence²² by echoing his use of “*coram*” when he writes, “*Quod mecum per litteras agis unam ob causam mallem coram egisses, non enim solum ex oratione sed etiam ex vultu et oculis et fronte, ut aiunt, meum erga te amorem perspicere potuisses,*” “For one reason and one only I would rather you had raised this matter with me in person than by letter. You could then have seen my affection for you not only in my words but in my eyes, written as the saying goes all over my face.”²³ The ‘om’ and ‘ah’ sounding homoioteleuton of the introductory clause (*quod* to *egisses*) creates an onomatopoeic yawn that carries a sense of boredom and suggests writing a proper letter is effortless for Cicero. This ennui is contrasted, and thus highlighted, by the hyperbole of the clause following it in which Cicero lists the ways by which Antony would be able to sense Cicero’s love for him if they were “*coram*” (*ex vultu et oculis et fronte*, from his expression, eyes, and brow). Cicero plays with the theme of, and Antony’s reference to, distance to show him “assertions of amor... entirely conventional in aristocratic correspondence and commonly used as a strategy of affiliative politeness” in order to teach him a lesson about aristocratic correspondence itself and express his sentiments about their correspondence in general.²⁴ To this end, Cicero’s first sentence employs didactic elements that give him authority as an expert and teacher of epistolary form.

If Cicero is fashioning himself as being in control of his *dignitas*, then his outfit is an *active* façade, i.e. this conventional language that contain flags like “*perspicere*” which actively call attention to themselves as veils. The verb “*perspicere*” is also noteworthy because it literally means to see or read through something, in this case to discern truth. Thus, seeing through the veil of *amor* that Cicero employs allows the reader to perceive the subtextual dialogue where Cicero commands how one reads the correspondence and his own person. These veils are analogous to what O’Gorman describes in her book on Tacitus’ *Annales* as “a surface which continually calls attention to itself as a surface, thereby predicating hidden depths and exciting the desire to plumb those depths, uncovering hidden truth.”²⁵ In his next sentence, which begins by claiming that he has always loved Antony (“*nam cum te semper amavi*”), Cicero continues to expand upon his “*amorem*,” inspired first by Antony’s zeal (“*primum tuo studio*”), then after “by obligation conferred.”²⁶ The last part of this sentence makes clear Cicero’s objective to claim love for Antony as more than just a conventional veil: “*tum his temporibus res publica te mihi ita commendavit ut cariorem habeam neminem,*” “and at the present time the national interest has commended you to my regard, so much so that no one is dearer to me.”²⁷ While on the surface, to use O’Gorman’s term, this sentence displays Cicero’s esteem for Antony, Cicero subtextually hints at his own authority.

That the “*res publica*” has pointed out Antony to Cicero so that he holds no one dearer is a loaded statement that encapsulates the adage ‘keep your friends close and your enemies closer.’ Whether this bold message is intended to slip under Antony’s nose for Atticus’ eyes or to be an indirect affront to Antony himself, this is certainly Cicero saying he, as an agent of the “*res*

²¹ Hall, *Politeness and Politics in Cicero's*, 159.

²² “*Occupationibus est factum meis et subita tua profectio ne tecum coram de hac re agerem.*” Cic. Att. 14.13A.1.

²³ Cic. Att. 14.13B.1.

²⁴ Hall, *Politeness and Politics in Cicero's*, 140.

²⁵ Ellen O’Gorman, “Introduction: Irony, History, Reading,” in *Irony and Misreading in the Annals of Tacitus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 78.

²⁶ Cic. Att. 14.13B.1.

²⁷ Cic. Att. 14.13B.1.

publica,” is watching Antony closely not out of concern for Antony, but for both his own and the state's interests. The reality of the subtext is assured by the addressee himself, for according to Cicero's *Second Philippic*, Antony (in a speech during the autumn of that year between Cicero's *First Philippic* and *Second Philippic*) “in his hopeless ignorance of civilized conduct and the usages of society he read [Att. 14.13B] aloud.”²⁸ Cicero fashions himself as a morally upright figure in control of his reader, for he is in a powerful sense teaching Antony a lesson about “the usages of society” by turning the tables on Antony's authority in his reply.

The last sentence in Cicero's opening is where the line between surface and subtext is most blurred as Cicero rounds out his introduction with a more defiant brazenness, but no less finesse. Cicero describes Antony's letter as “*vero... amantissime... honorificentissime scriptae*,” [literally] truly being written most lovingly and most flatteringly.²⁹ For the third time, Cicero uses a word rooted in the verb *amo* in “*amantissime*,” one of the two superlatives combined with the adverb “*vero*” that convey an exaggerated claim. Antony and Cicero both know that 14.13A is not overly gracious and polite; but Cicero's exaggeration suggests it does not meet the conventional standard of respectful formality that he expects and deserves to receive.³⁰ After again signaling his “veil of *amor*” Cicero counters Antony's entire letter in the rest of his final opening sentence.

“*Sic me adfecerunt ut non dare tibi beneficium viderer sed accipere a te ita petente ut inimicum meum, necessarium tuum me invito servare nolles, cum id nullo negotio facere posses.*”³¹

“[Your letter] has made me feel that I am not conferring a favour upon you but receiving one at your hands, when you put your request in the form that you do not wish to rescue my enemy and your friend against my will, although you would have no difficulty doing so.”

In the second half of this sentence, Cicero qualifies the preceding subtext of his hyperbolic expression by telling Antony that his letter appears too bluntly and artlessly as a command. Cicero takes offense at Antony's letter³² primarily because he views the tone of Antony's petition as more of an order than of a request. “*Fecisset nihilo minus me invite*,” “he would have done it just the same if I had opposed,” Cicero writes to Atticus.³³ The effect of this final sentence is a metaphor for Cicero's entire opening as his subtext emerges at the point of focalization in “*viderer*.” The verb's strict grammatical function is that Cicero seems to be receiving a favor, but the first person, passive verb also gives the reader an understanding that Cicero, i.e. his fashioned self, *is seen* above the surface of convention and formality.

Cicero paints a metaphor of transferred control that lets his reader see through conventional letter writing and behold him as an authoritative protector of the state. In his opening sentences Cicero portrays concern with traditional epistolary style, and then undermines this shell with his self-fashioned image of authority to preserve his *dignitas*. In this way, Cicero gives Antony the answer he seeks and expects, yet at the same time places him in a position of inferiority.

²⁸ Cic. Phil. 2.7.

²⁹ Cic. Att. 14.13B.2.

³⁰ For a discussion including the idea of worthiness cf. Hall, *Politeness and Politics in Cicero's*, 4.

³¹ Cic. Att. 14.13B.2.

³² Cic. Att. 14.13A.

³³ Cic. Att. 14.13.6.

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