

SARAH C. STROUP, *Catullus, Cicero, and a Society of Patrons: The Generation of the Text*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. xiv + 308, ISBN 978-0-521-51390-6.

In Cicero's defense of Plancius, the orator spoke ruefully of his discovery, on returning from his Sicilian quaestorship, that for Roman politics nothing that happened outside Rome mattered. Although he felt that he had done vast amounts for the benefit of Rome, nobody in Italy knew where he had been. And so, he concluded, "Once I realized that Romans had pretty bad hearing but sharp eyes, I stopped thinking about what people would hear about me; I made sure that from then on they would see me in person every day. I lived in their sight, I hugged the forum; neither my doorkeeper nor sleep kept anyone away from me" (*Planc.* 66).

This self-deprecating tale receives a decidedly odd interpretation in Sarah Culpepper Stroup's new book (125): "In the passage above, Cicero seems to imply that an audience that once had a highly refined aesthetic taste for oratory now hungers only for a surfeit of visual stimulation. Although the emphasis here is on what the people might hear about Cicero and not what they hear from him, the implication is nevertheless that his voice is no longer as powerful as the physical presence of his body alone: *the reputation of his oratorical ability*, he quips, is not as important as *the fact that he is seen* [S.'s italics]." All Cicero is saying here is "out of sight, out of mind," but S. claims it has something to do with his voice and the popular gaze, although she seems to know that her interpretation is improbable at best. S. has interesting things to say about some particular texts, but she all too often picks an arbitrary and unlikely explanation—often asserting rather than arguing for her preference—as the basis for interpretations which are inevitably no better than the evidence on which they are based. And almost nowhere in this book is the evidence adequate for the sweeping interpretations of Roman literary culture that S. presents.

For S., the literature of the 50s and 40s BCE is fundamentally different from earlier Roman literature; and that is certainly true, on the basis of the surviving evidence. On the other hand, S.'s underlying hypothesis, that a major element of difference lies in the changed context of literary production, that the largely vertical structure of patronage in earlier literature was replaced by a more horizontal social pattern, what S. calls 'a society of patrons' (upper-class men dedicating literary works to one another to gain reciprocal addresses, social and literary circulation, and thus reputation and success), is both inaccurate and insufficient, and S. can make her case only by a series of omissions and distortions. There is, in the first place, a basic question of fact: does the structure of literary production change, and in what ways? We do indeed know of more writers—we simply have more of more writers—of higher social class in the first century BCE than

in the second. But even before the generation of Cicero, there is not just Lucilius, but Cato; and before Cato there are senatorial historians, who happen to write in Greek rather than Latin. Fabius Pictor was not a nonentity. Nor, for that matter, was Ennius, according to some recent accounts. We know very little about the social relations of writers before Cicero, because we have very little evidence. While it is clear that writers in the first century whose works survive were of higher social status than the extant writers from earlier periods, that is because the bulk of earlier surviving texts are comic scripts, and writing for the theater was distinctly lower-class.

Secondly, there is no reason to believe that vertical relationships of patronage ceased, or that the alleged society of patrons took over, in the period after Sulla. S.'s literary history (and political history, for that matter) is peculiar at best. She emphasizes (10-1) Sulla's and Lucullus' mutual dedications of their memoirs to one another as an Early Clue to the New Direction, noting that Catulus and Lucullus, among others, "were strongly associated with literary production and appreciation"—although Cicero himself changed the form of the *Academica* in part precisely because he knew that, philosophically speaking, Catulus and Lucullus were dead from the neck up. Lucullus dedicated his memoirs to Sulla because Lucullus had been Sulla's quaestor, not his literary agent. S.'s picture of Roman literature is very selective; she relies on a small sample of texts—and avoids the messiness of fragments—as evidence for an argument that goes far beyond her evidence. Ultimately she presents a rationale for literary production that is both overly simple and very unsatisfying.

The discussion of *Planc.* 66 cited above comes from the beginning of the second of three parts of S.'s book, each of which examines the transformation of literary production from a different direction. In part I, she claims that three key terms (*otium*, *munus*, *libellus*) appear in the works of Catullus and Cicero "in order to mark elements of textual production and function" (34). In part II, she seeks social causes, particularly in Cicero: as the forum and public display became progressively more fraught and dangerous, C. transferred the display of oratory to the composition of privately circulated dialogues, notably *De oratore* and *Brutus*, designed for this circle of equals and simultaneously portraying the homosocial performance of literary society. The final section deals with what S. calls the materialism of the text: the presence, in both Catullus and Cicero, of self-conscious references to written form, the material representation of speech as text. All this change, S. rightly observes, anticipates the literary manners of the early principate, where texts become animate (as in Ovid and late Horace), where the exchange of texts becomes a social necessity (as in Pliny and Martial), and where patronage, in the presence of an over-arching imperial patron, is increasingly fraught and public performance of oratory is insignificant. She ends with a brief nod to Tacitus' *Dialogus*, in which Maternus' recitation of his *Cato* replaces the public performance of oratory.

When S. stresses the importance of looking at the Roman literature of the 50s and 40s BCE across generic boundaries, she is making a useful point. Along the way she has some acute things to say about Cicero, above all in pointing out

the close literary relationship between the (apparently public) orations and the imitation of rhetoric in the dialogues; her analysis of the opening of *De oratore* is ingenious. Even here, however, her approach is flawed by its narrowness and insistence on a single (dubious) interpretation. S. compares the relationship of Crassus and Antonius to Sulpicius and Cotta to the quasi-ritual structure of the *tirocinium fori*; that is worth exploring, but it is more complicated than S. admits. In the first place, she pays no attention to the fact that Sulpicius and Cotta were already senators at the dramatic date of the dialogue and therefore much more experienced than 16-year-old tiros; more importantly, she ignores not only the fact that Cicero's early dialogues involve not two generations but three and concern not a quasi-ritual but the general theme of the transmission of learning and of the *mos maiorum* but also the emphasis Cicero places (in the opening of book 3) on the tragic ends of these characters—not just the death of Crassus, but the violent transformation and death of Sulpicius in 88 and the exile and long-delayed career of Cotta, who became consul only 16 years after the dramatic date of the dialogue. *De oratore* does embody Roman social rituals, possibly including a version of *tirocinium*; but it is also Platonic in its creation of an ideal commonwealth of letters—and equally Platonic in its recognition that it is a tragic and long-lost ideal. But while S. is interested in the social scene of *De oratore*, she has no visible interest in its content: its ambitious response to Plato; its synthesis of Hellenistic and Aristotelian rhetoric; its attempt, like that of *De re publica*, to harmonize Greek theory and Roman traditional practice. S. recognizes that *De oratore* is a monumentally original and important text, but for the wrong reasons: all she sees in it is her society of patrons, not the single grandest surviving intellectual production of the Roman republic.

Just as Cicero is reduced to a source for social interaction, so too Catullus is diminished in her approach. She deals with a very small set of poems, sometimes with good readings, but sometimes badly distorted. With c.10, (“Varus me meus ad suos amores / uisum duxerat e foro otiosum”), a good reading of the dramatic situation of the poem is badly damaged by an interpretation of the opening lines (*uisum* as past participle rather than supine; *e foro otiosum* taken closely together) that bears little resemblance to normal Latin—and her notes make it clear that she is aware of the difficulties, but simply chooses to ignore them. In general, her readings of narrative poems of Catullus often tease out the nuances of drama (poems 12, 65 and a few others) that might be missed. But these worthwhile interpretations are parts of doubtful arguments: her understanding of *munus* as a reference to literary production in the context of her ‘society of patrons’ arbitrarily requires the theft of the napkin to be a poem rather than an event (73-6) and the apple of poem 65 has to allude to Callimachus’ *Acontius and Cydippe* (83-4). She is interested in Hortensius and poem 65; but she has nothing at all to say about c.61, a patronage poem if ever there was one.

Even setting aside specific unconvincing arguments, the broader frameworks she constructs are not remotely plausible. *Otium* is indeed not uncommon in both Catullus and Cicero as a marker of literary leisure (“time to write,” 38), but it is not always that; and S.’s convoluted attempt to turn *otium* into text through

the intermediary of Greek *schola* (leisure to lecture) founders on the fact that while *schola* does refer to verbal acts (not texts, despite S.'s claims, until Plutarch), *otium* does not, at least before Ovid<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, while *munus* may refer to a dedicatory gift of a text, S.'s claim that it *always* entails the expectation of a text in return (69) is simply wrong, and she cites the evidence that refutes her claim: in Catullus 68, "confectum carmine munus" (68.149) shows that the *munus* is not identical with *carmen*, and the fuller couplet reveals that the gift of a poem is an exchange *pro multis officiis*—certainly not poetic obligations. When S. returns to this passage in a different context (228), she knows that the exchange is not purely poetic; when she is trying to make a case for the literary meaning of *munus*, she does not.

To write about literary patronage requires some understanding of both the social world of the Roman upper classes and the history of Latin literature, but S.'s book displays neither one. She begins her chapter on "The problem with liberal performance" with the following astonishing statement: "In the final years of an increasingly display-driven Roman Republic, forensic oratory was the only profession of ritualized and secular public display that was both suitable for the privileged classes and fixed within the system of literal-political and civic hierarchy" (117). Display indeed mattered in the late Republic, but in addition to oratory, there was law; and throughout Rome's history, military achievement was always the main avenue to glory and *dignitas*. What about the *cursus honorum* itself? the major priesthoods? Upper-class Romans had to be able not to make fools of themselves when they spoke in public, but great oratorical ability, then as now, was uncommon. Senators did not have 'professions'; they displayed their merits in many ways: triumph or *supplicatio*, the curule chair, taking the auspices: not just in a contio or in the senate or a court. Display was important, but so was achievement. Cicero's astonishing range of literary production, including oratory, was (as Catherine Steel has argued in *Reading Cicero*, London 2005) at least in part to keep his name before the public for political ends—precisely because he did not deploy the methods that most Roman senators used to achieve and retain glory.

S.'s central idea of the 'society of patrons,' moreover, makes no sense. What she means is a group of social equals who serve as one another's patrons, in the sense that they receive and return the dedication of books. This group, according to S., was something like the central clearing house in the 50s and 40s for literary fame and reputation. But Roman patronage was in reality a hierarchical relationship involving exchanges between social superiors and inferiors, and not even S.'s imaginary 'society of patrons' was genuinely a group of equals: there were real social inequalities that would have been of paramount importance to some of the people she inadequately catalogues in her appendix. Cicero became consul, but he was still a new man from a country town: he was, as Catiline said, *inquilinus civis urbis Romae*. In the social caucus-race, he was ahead of Nepos or Catullus but well behind a Caesar, descended from Aeneas and Venus, or a Marcus Brutus,

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Gareth Williams for advice on this.

descended from the first consul of the republic and the tyrant-slayer Servilius Ahala. Cicero found Brutus an unpleasant snob; Brutus may have regarded dedications by Cicero as old-style patronage from a social inferior. Atticus he will have respected; Cicero, no. Cicero's correspondence repeatedly shows how snobbish he was, and how often he was snubbed by the old nobility; it reveals the careful footwork necessary in this society, the constant awareness of status and obligation. S. pays virtually no attention to the letter to Luceius (*Fam.* 5.12), which ought to be a prize exhibit<sup>2</sup>. And although she discusses the dedicatory letter to Varro (*Fam.* 9.8) about the *Academica*, she pays no attention to the complex letters about the composition and dedication of the dialogues, no attention to Cicero's extremely grumpy letters about Brutus' *Cato*, no attention to the real delicacy of social relations in late-republican Rome. Cicero knew better, and so did Catullus. 'Society of patrons' is a misnomer; what S. means is 'mutual admiration society'; the literary world she envisages might usefully be compared to what Saul Bellow in a letter called *The New York Review of Each Other's Books*.

To object to S.'s title is not simply to carp at her language. She implies a group with common interests and common tastes—or at least a group that shared a pleasure in seeing their names at the head of a book or poem, any book or poem. That in turn implies not just a homogeneity of persons, but a homogeneity of texts—or rather, it simply ignores everything in the text that follows the dedication. The failure to consider the content of Cicero's works, like the failure to consider more than a few poems of Catullus in constructing his literary/social motivation, is as disastrous to her case as S.'s choice to limit her argument to evidence gleaned from Cicero and Catullus alone.

S.'s point that one should look at Cicero and Catullus together is worthwhile: they belong in the same literary context. But in this she is much less original than she claims: Wiseman, whom she wrongly disparages (4 n.4), has offered numerous and important treatments of the literary world of the late republic, and Douglas Minyard—not in her bibliography—made a fine start, from a different perspective, in his *Lucretius and the late Republic: an essay in Roman intellectual history* (Leiden 1985)<sup>3</sup>. But Minyard and Wiseman see more in the

<sup>2</sup> Two outstanding books on Cicero's correspondence appeared too late for S. to use them: J. Hall, *Politeness and Politics in Cicero's Letters* (Oxford 2009) and P. White, *Cicero in Letters* (Oxford 2010). Hall's earlier article on the letter to Luceius, however, appeared in *Classical Philology* 93, 1998, 308-21.

<sup>3</sup> Or, slightly older, W. S. Anderson's *Pompey, his Friends, and the Literature of the First Century B.C.* (Berkeley-Los Angeles 1963). A few of the gaps in S.'s bibliography. In discussing *otium*, she omits M. Kretschmar, *Otium, studia litterarum, Philosophie und Bios Theoretikos im Leben und Denken Ciceros* (Würzburg 1938); not easy to find, but still a basic work on her topic. In discussing Catullus' attitude to the political world, she ignores Ross's fundamental analysis in *Style and Tradition in Catullus* (Cambridge, Mass. 1969). Major works on the intellectual milieu of the late Republic are simply missing: W. Kroll's *Studien zum Verständnis der römischen Literatur* (Stuttgart 1924) or C. Moatti's *Raison de Rome* (Paris 1997). As far as Cicero's dialogues are concerned, she seems unaware either of Rudolf Hirzel's magisterial *Der Dialog* (Leipzig 1895) or Klaus Bringmann's more recent *Untersuc-*

late Republic than Cicero and Catullus. S. eliminates pretty much everyone else for one reason or another: Varro is too fragmentary, and Lucretius was clearly not part of the Mutual Admiration Society—even though his addressee Memmius is also an inhabitant of Catullus' world. The question is not whether one can profitably examine Cicero and Catullus in tandem—one certainly can, and should—but whether they form, even in the context of our limited evidence, an adequate or coherent sample. Are other writers like them (as far as we can tell) or different? Is the pattern of homosocial dedications dominant? Is it new? We know of too many (lost) writers who simply do not fit the social pattern.

Even if S.'s Mutual Admiration Society existed in the late Republic—as they probably do in all literary microclimates—there is no sign that it dominated literary production or played a major role in (to use S.'s terminology) “the generation of the text.” To argue that this organization mattered at all, one needs to show that it affected, or was affected by, a significant portion of the cultural production of the period. S. seems to start by making that claim, but there is rapid slippage: by p. 7, where S. begins to justify the many things her book is not about, *the* organization of literary production has become *an* organization of literary production—a fairly trivial claim as the basis for a book—and within a very short distance it becomes clear that if she would like it to apply to a great deal of Cicero, she has to work very hard to make it relevant to more than a few poems of Catullus—and that it applies to hardly anything else. By the end of the book, her argument largely concerns two, admittedly very important, works, both by Cicero, *De Oratore* and *Brutus*; and even for them, the argument elucidates only very small parts of very complex and ambitious works. The argument she makes about Cicero's dialogues—that they replace his oratory and that they simultaneously replicate and create the Mutual Admiration Society which substitutes for the public audience which no longer exists, that by dramatizing and portraying the social world of the Roman aristocracy they bring into being the literary milieu that they imagine—is a useful one, but it is extraordinarily limited.

In fact, if S. looked a little harder, she would find that dialogue itself was not as novel as she thinks, and that the dramatizing of social settings went back to the late second century, when the jurist Marcus Brutus wrote a legal dialogue in three books, each set at a different one of his villas. It may go back to the Satires of Ennius and Lucilius. Dialogue and the representation of the Roman aristocracy was a basic element in a set of texts that almost certainly influenced Cicero in the shaping of his dialogues, Varro's *Logistorici*, semi-philosophical works

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*hungen zum späten Cicero* (Göttingen 1971). Among the many failures to acknowledge how much others have seen before her, I note that the relationship of the style and presentation of the dialogues to epideictic oratory (which S. seems to think she has discovered) was superbly elucidated by Elaine Fantham in *Comparative Studies in Republican Latin Imagery* (Toronto 1972). For an expensive book published by Cambridge University Press, the indices are also seriously inadequate, and there are too many typographical errors, particularly in Latin quotations. The bibliography also attributes the works of Thomas Habinek to Erik Gunderson and of Gareth Williams to Peter White.

given as titles, partly in jest, the names of great Roman aristocrats: *Sisenna de historia*, *Orestes de insania*, *Marcellus de exilio*.

This last, moreover, points to some of the weaknesses of S.'s discussion of the *Brutus*, which is much less compelling (as is her treatment of *De Oratore*) than that of John Dugan in *Making a New Man* (Oxford 2005). S. looks primarily at the personification of *Eloquentia*, which is indeed important. But S. simultaneously exaggerates the pervasiveness of the personification of *Eloquentia* (Dugan is much more careful here) and misreads the dialogue as a funeral oration for Eloquence. But Eloquence is not dead: the personification is a young woman whose guardian (Hortensius) has died and who now requires a *tutor*—Brutus—to protect her interests. In the context of the late spring of 46, when *Brutus* was completed, that is a political statement, not simply an elegant personification. *Brutus* was in part a response to Brutus' own treatise *De Virtute* (which S. wrongly connects [249] to *De Finibus*) in which Brutus had described a visit to the exiled Marcellus on Lesbos, and apparently claimed that *virtus* needed no political arena. *Brutus* is an emphatic rejection of that: it is Cicero's first attempt, of many, to use his writings to draw Brutus back to his republican roots. Varro's *Marcellus de exilio* obviously belongs in this context—the attempt to come to terms with political impotence under Caesar, not a search for literary and social glitter. But with *Brutus*, as with so much else she discusses, S. simply ignores content as well as context.

One can infer a reason for the tendentious and generally thin (not to say emaciated) description of intellectual life in the late republic in S.'s work: she seems to believe that the function of writing is, purely and simply, to elevate one's name, to be visible to one's literary peers, to establish a coin of text that can circulate and become known. What these texts contain is irrelevant: they need a dedication to a social equal that will elicit countervailing dedications in return; the only content that seems to matter is the author's name and the name of the dedicatee. In her introduction (3), S. compares Catullus and Cicero to modern academics, and makes it seem as if she regards her own book as the same kind of currency that she finds in ancient dedications, a currency that buys one's fifteen minutes of fame. It is no accident that she repeatedly describes the workings of literary society as game, display, and performance; it is more disturbing that she seems to compare the need for publicity and reputation to the making of a modern academic career. In nineteenth century Oxford Thorold Rogers wrote an epigram about two of his mutually supportive colleagues<sup>4</sup>:

Ladling butter from alternate tubs,  
Stubbs butters Freeman, Freeman butters Stubbs.

The academic rat-race arouses (and deserves) cynicism, and perhaps ancient *grammatici* were as careerist as modern professors. But to transfer that kind of crass mutual admiration society to writers who genuinely have something to

<sup>4</sup> I owe my knowledge of Freeman and Stubbs to E. J. Champlin.

say is a serious, and sad, misreading, and it makes Yeats's *Scholars* look good in comparison:

Lord, what would they say  
Should their Catullus walk that way.

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