

Janja SOLDÓ – Claire Rachel JACKSON (eds.), *res vera, res ficta: Fictionality in Ancient Epistolography*. Trends in Classics – Supplementary Volumes 149. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2023, VIII + 272 pages, ISBN: 9783111306995

The present volume aims to provide “paradigmatic snapshots which open up new ways of thinking about epistolary fiction” (p. 18), a promise that, one might say from the outset, it fulfills – and even surpasses – in both scope and depth. It begins with an introductory chapter that situates fiction within the context of Greek and Roman epistolography, followed by nine contributions that explore individual letters or collections, each offering unique insights into the fictional dimensions of ancient letter-writing. The book is organized into four thematic sections – (Auto)Biographical Fictions, Editorial Fictions, Pseudepigraphic Fictions, and Ekphrastic Fictions – that collectively illustrate the varied dimensions of fictional representation in ancient epistolography. Two useful indices help readers navigate the volume.

The introduction offers an overview of the scholarly debate surrounding ancient letter collections, tracing developments starting with Bentley’s dissertation on the *Letters of Phalaris* to the recent shift from concerns with authenticity to viewing epistolographic fiction as a “category of creative expression” (p. 3).¹ It addresses key topics, including the prevalent ancient practice of reading most letter collections now considered spurious as authentic products, the role of epistolographic handbooks, and the categorization and compilation of letters. Given the prominence of the term “fictionalization” in the volume’s title, some introductory remarks on this concept, along with a discussion of core approaches to defining “fiction”, would have been particularly beneficial for the reader.²

The first section on *(Auto)Biographical Fictions* opens with an especially compelling contribution by Roy GIBSON, who examines the interplay between epistolary artistry and biographical fact in Pliny’s letters. GIBSON argues that “the poetics of Pliny’s epistles are essentially different from those of Augustan poetry” (p. 26). While GIBSON identifies an organizational connection to the Augustan poetry book – demonstrating that Pliny adopts certain formats and techniques from this genre – he argues that, unlike the Augustan poets, Pliny lacked a codified literary program. In light of the abundant biographical material in his collection, Pliny, as GIBSON notes, adopted a “centrifugal” structure rather than the

¹ For this topic, see now also the articles in T.A. Drago – O. Hodkinson (eds.), *Ancient Love Letters: Form, Themes, Approaches*, Berlin/Boston 2023.

² For an overview of different modern approaches to defining fictionality, see, e.g., J. Grethlein, *Ancient Greek Texts and Modern Narrative Theory: Towards a Critical Dialogue*, Cambridge 2023, 20–26.

“centripetal” organization characteristic of Augustan poetic letters. The significance of GIBSON’s contribution extends beyond Pliny’s letters, revealing underlying assumptions about biography and fiction that are fundamental to the study of ancient letter collections in general.

Claire Rachel JACKSON’s analysis of the pseudonymous Letters of Euripides explores their classification as fiction, arguing convincingly for an “overarching rehabilitative structure” (p. 51) of the collection centered on the young men from Pella. She suggests the letters seek to invalidate existing biographical accounts of Euripides, marking their fictionality through a focus on reputation that “challenges prevailing biographical traditions” (p. 57). This claim, along with JACKSON’s assertion that “the Letters’ inauthenticity is inherent to the collection” (p. 67), raises questions about the authority of any biographical account of Euripides in antiquity and the Letters’ engagement with the Euripidean tragedies and his portrayal in Aristophanes’ comedies.

In her article on the *Epistulae ex Ponto*, Catharine EDWARDS analyzes how Ovid’s exile poetry foregrounds the materiality of the letter as a communicative artifact. This emphasis on the letter as a tangible object highlights the fictional nature of the book scroll as it circulated among readers. EDWARDS further examines textual connections between the *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*, illustrating how Ovid’s letter-poems, conceived as physical objects, underscore authorial absence as a defining feature of epistolary poetry.

The first contribution in the section Editorial Fictions by Michael TRAPP examines the prefatory letter attached to the writings of Epictetus and attributed to Arrian. TRAPP sees this inaugural letter as part of a “calculated shaping and ordering” (p. 92) present also in other aspects of the work, which provokes the reader to question the fictionality of both the letter and the text it introduces. Like a poetic *recusatio*, the letter encourages readers to observe the author’s virtues, and Trapp interprets it as a “self-conscious literary preface” (p. 99). The particular strength of TRAPP’s contribution lies in its second part (pp. 99–106), where he situates the letter within the broader context of Epictetus’ publication history and draws insightful intertextual comparisons to the *Letters of the Socratics*, opening up fresh perspectives on epistolographic fiction.

Serena CAMMORANESI examines the tension between the documentary aspects of Cicero’s *Ad Familiares* and various layers of authorial fiction, interpreting the letter collection as a product of later writers’ attempts to portray Cicero’s life during the Civil War. Although the letters are authentic documents by Cicero, their arrangement creates narrative arcs that blend fictionality with authenticity

to construct a cohesive account of his life. While CAMMORANESI offers detailed insights into individual passages, it would have been compelling to explore precisely what image of Cicero later editors intended to craft through their arrangement of the letters and how the collection fits within the reception of Cicero and the Civil War in imperial times.

This emphasis on the shaping of historical figures' images through letters is precisely a key aspect of Kathryn TEMPEST's article (especially pp. 150–156), which opens the section *Pseudepigraphic Fictions*. TEMPEST provides a compelling study of two letters of "Brutus" and their role in the literary context of the first century AD, convincingly demonstrating that *Cic. Brut.* 1.16 and 1.17 are indeed pseud-epigrapha. Through intertextual analysis, she explores how these two letters incorporate and shape elements of the hostile biographical tradition surrounding Brutus, particularly his portrayal as a parricide lacking self-control. TEMPEST examines the creation of Brutus' epistolary persona and the strategic use of post-Civil War material available to the author, suggesting that the letters were composed "by the 60s CE at the latest," possibly within a "declamatory classroom" (p. 158).

Janja SOLDO focuses on the pseudepigraphic correspondence between Seneca and Paul, examining its interplay with Seneca's *Epistulae Morales* and taking an innovative approach by interpreting the collection's implausibilities as markers of self-conscious fictionality. The text raises doubts about its own plausibility, which SOLDO identifies as a key element of pseudepigraphy. She convincingly argues that the author of the collection presents Seneca's letters as a continuation of the *Epistulae Morales* and as an extension of his epistolary friendship with Lucilius. SOLDO draws noteworthy parallels to letter-writing manuals, highlighting the author's "mastery of epistolary etiquette" (p. 166), though interpreting the collection itself as such a manual seems a bit far-fetched and may conflict with her view that pseudepigraphy relies on a strong element of make-believe (p. 162).

The first contribution in the section *Ekphrastic Fictions* by Ruth MORELLO offers a thought-provoking analysis of the fictionalizing elements in Cicero's authentic letters *Ad Familiares*. MORELLO argues that Cicero's imaginative projection of various outcomes and fictional futures serves as a political strategy amid his turbulent circumstances. The interplay of temporal layers and literary genres – evoking elegy, tragedy, and comedy – adds fictionalizing color that questions and dramatizes Cicero's literary persona, with the imagined future as the telos of Cicero's fictions, especially his political forecasting. Morello's compelling idea of interpreting "books 7 and 9 as an Odyssean 'other worlds' section of the collection" (p. 184) merits further investigation.

The final article of the volume by Emilia BARBIERO explores the ekphrastic strategies in Pliny's *Letters*, particularly focusing on the effect of vividness or *enargeia*. BARBIERO makes an important point by emphasizing that questions of authenticity and fiction are inherent to Pliny's text and that the technique of ekphrasis especially suits the epistolary medium by "creating presence in absentia" (p. 213). While the description of the moving waters at the spring of Comum (Ep. 4.30.1–2) effectively produces *enargeia*, as BARBIERO suggests, her argument is less convincing regarding the detailed and lengthy descriptions of villae – such as those of the *ager Laurens* (Ep. 2.17), Comum (Ep. 1.3), and the Tuscan estate (Ep. 5.6). Here, the vividness of the *ekphraseis* seems diluted by an overwhelming density of detail. This doubt is further reinforced by BARBIERO's observation that these passages exhibit what she calls "mimetic mimesis" (pp. 227; 232; 238), reminding readers of their fictive nature.

Though more a matter of personal preference than a shortcoming of the volume, it is notable, given the prevalence of fictitious Greek over Latin collections, that only two authors focus on Greek letters (Claire Rachel JACKSON, Michael TRAPP), while two contributions each are dedicated to Cicero (Serena CAMMORANESI, Ruth MORELLO) and Pliny (Roy GIBSON, Emilia BARBIERO). Overall, the volume represents a significant advancement in the study of Greek and Roman epistolography, not only by moving beyond the traditional dichotomy of authenticity versus forgery in ancient letter collections but also by establishing an interpretative framework that captures the complexity of epistolary fiction as a whole.

Tobias Hirsch
University of Technology Nuremberg
Ulmenstraße 52i
90443 Nuremberg, Germany
E-Mail: tobias.hirsch@utn.de