Orality in Philosophical Epistles

Mathilde Cambron-Goulet

Letters have a special status as written texts. Though writing allows their publication and preservation, letters are often thought to belong to a specific addressee in a specific spatio-temporal context, so that, except for their ability to travel through space, their material character is judged irrelevant to their study. But the characteristics of letters, both personal communications and written documents, have an influence on their reception and transmission. I would like here to question the opposition between written texts and oral performances in ancient philosophical letters through a study of their pragmatics. After a few remarks about the corpus, I will first examine how the material qualities of epistles assimilate sending a letter to a performative act. Afterwards, I will examine the pedagogical benefits expected from epistolarity and its use for teaching purposes. Then, the reception and transmission of letters in philosophical circles will be addressed, for they were shared and read in common. This inquiry will consider the nature of philosophical letters and the tension between orality and literacy in epistolarity.

Remarks

First, we should define the corpus to be considered.¹ “Philosophical letters” is a loose category, so I will consider letters from authors known as philosophers,

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¹ I have studied the following: letters attributed to Plato, Diogenes, Crates, Epicurus, Synesius; Arrianus’ *Letter to Lucius Gellius*; Seneca’s letters to Lucilius; Iamblichus’ letter to Macedonius; a selection of letters from Cicero (containing philosophical material: see Guillaumont 2002) and Gregory of Nazianzus; Pseudo-Demetrios, *On style*; Pseudo-Libanius and Julius Victor’s handbooks. The canonical Christian letters from the New Testament were also included in my corpus, as they show many similarities with philosophical letters regarding performances and circulation of the text, but will mostly appear as footnotes to keep the main text consistent.
and letters that show philosophical content, though composed by authors not usually studied as philosophers. As letters from different historical and geographical contexts will be treated synchronically, the following nuances should be considered.

First, it is evident that some of the letters that I will examine are fictitious, spurious or pseudonymous. Even in antiquity, letters were thought to be easily forged, which caused suspicion about the authenticity of philosophical letters (Plut., Lyc. 19.13). Potential forgeries should not, however, discredit all ancient epistolary exchange as implausible. While their authorship requires careful study, epistolary exchanges between philosophers probably existed. Besides, pseudonymous and fictitious epistles should be treated as epistolary genres in their own right rather than dismissed as forgeries.

Second, epistles became a literary genre around the third century BCE. Hence Plato’s authentic letters, being older, differ from later pieces. However, they were not necessarily private either: open letters with a public content were more likely to be kept and copied. There was little interest in preserving trivial letters—besides, they were considered odd though their existence was acknowledged (Plut., Alex. 42.1; Dem. 29.4; Brut. 5.4) and some have come down to us. Hence determining whether a letter is private or public may help

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2 “Letter” is a loose category (Gibson and Morrison 2007).
4 Rosenmeyer (2001: 31–32). The first instance is found in Iliad 6.167–170. See Theophrastus, Characters 23.4; 24.13; Plutarch, Lysander 20.3–5; 39.4; Sertorius 27.3–5; Agesilaus 20.4–5; Pompey 49.12; Xenophon, Cyropaedia 4.5.5; 8.2.4, etc. Private epistolary exchange became common in the fourth century BCE (Mossé in Hartog 2001: 1089 n. 37), but private messages on ceramic shards appear as early as the sixth century BC (Pébarthe 2006: 81–86).
5 Wes (1972: 261–262) and Casevitz (2004) discuss the authenticity issue. The use of epistles on various supports is attested in Herodotus (5.35) Thucydides; (1.131); Plutarch (Lysander 14.9; 19.9–12; Agesilaus 10.9; 15.7; Aristides 10.1; Marcellus 4.5; Sertorius 23.4).
9 But in an anthology one could note useful epistolary formulations (Calvet-Sebasti 2004: 67–69). Actual letters were found on papyri: see Cribiore and Bagnall (2006). However, qualifying letters as “trivial” implies an axiological judgement that disregard them, and not only as “literary discourses.”