



The limits of friendship

Cicero drew the line at support for Caesar

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SOUVENIRS OF CICERO

Shaping memory in the *Epistulae ad familiares*

FRANCESCA K. A. MARTELLI

256pp. Oxford University Press. £59 (US \$90).

LAELIUS DE AMICITIA CICERO

Edited by Katharina Volk and James E. G. Zetzel

248pp. Cambridge University Press.

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How far is a bridge *too far*? When a tyrant – fledgling or full-grown – calls on loyalty for actions that contravene the public interest or involve storming a nation's political sanctuary, what is a friend to do?

It is a pertinent question in contemporary and especially American politics, with the president making no bones about expecting members of his circle to rank loyalty to him above other concerns. But it is also a long-standing question, at the heart of an exchange of letters in 44 BCE between Marcus Tullius Cicero, the writer and former Roman consul, and his friend Gaius Matus, who also happened to have been the friend of Julius Caesar, recently assassinated. It is from there that the shadow fell.

Matus mourned the death as that of a friend, first and foremost. In the eyes of Caesar's briefly triumphant opponents, his wearing his heart on his toga was bad enough; but he made things worse by wondering out loud whether the dictator's death was, in fact, for the better of the Roman Republic. Caesar, at least, had never tried to prevent Matus from expressing his feelings: so who were the tyrants, now?

Cicero, no opponent of the assassination, was among Matus' critics, referring to his behaviour, despite their friendship, as "utterly deplorable". Sadly, however, this was not said to his face, as would have been proper of a friend critical of a friend, but rather behind his back in conversations with others. Cicero's position was compromised further: had he himself not once called Caesar his "alter ego", the best anyone could hope for in a friend? Where were those sentiments now that he had rejoiced at seeing the "tyrant's" corpse?

Dilemmas such as these gave Cicero ample reason to ponder the nature of friendship: how it originated, its different types and how it was maintained. This he did in the autumn of 44 BCE, a few months

after Caesar's assassination, when he wrote a trim philosophical dialogue (*Laelius*, or *On Friendship*), which would inspire reflections on the topic for centuries – including those of Michel de Montaigne in the sixteenth century and Alexander Nehamas as recently as 2016. *Laelius* has now received a new edition and commentary from the able hands of Katharina Volk and James E. G. Zetzel (in the Cambridge "Green and Yellow" series of classical texts, ostensibly aimed at upper-level students, but used much more widely than that). It was long overdue – previously, anyone wanting detailed explanatory notes on the text had to squint at the Gothic font of Müller-Seyffert's commentary from 1886 (as I did when a student in Kiel) – and it is all the more timely because of a renewed interest in Cicero's philosophy.

This treatise is dedicated to Cicero's life-long friend Atticus: from "a most affectionate friend to a friend on the subject of friendship", as the preface declares. But behind this dedication lies a cabinet of mirrors: Cicero claims that the content of the dialogue dated back to a discussion in 129 BCE between Gaius Laelius (who had been a close friend of the destroyer of Carthage, Scipio the Younger) and his sons-in-law: Gaius Fannius and Cicero's teacher, the lawyer Quintus Mucius Scaevola – who is supposed to have reported the contents of the discussion many years later. All the same, despite the historic setting, Cicero trusts that Atticus will recognize himself in the lead speaker, Laelius. Knowing Cicero's correspondence with Matus, I cannot quite shake the feeling that the slippery nature of the dialogue represents the slippery nature of Cicero as Matus' friend.

As so often with Cicero's philosophical works, the *Laelius* is heavily indebted to Greek philosophy, which had developed a threefold typology of friendship: the good, the pleasant and the useful. Laelius limits his discussion to the concept of "good" friendship for the most part, but adds another trinity, differentiating between friendships of "the truly wise", of "good men" and "of everyone else" (as Volk and Zetzel paraphrase them). In typical Roman style, the "truly wise" are dismissed (or, rather, left to "the Greeks" to discuss) so that the conversation can focus more pragmatically on the good men who can be found in Roman history – even though contemporary complications, including Cicero's own political entanglements, repeatedly pull the discussion down to address the all too ordinary (making it all the more Roman in the process).

For it is mostly in that "ordinariness" that the thornier issues arise, which take up two thirds of the discussion. If a friendship (*amicitia*) springs from a spontaneous feeling of goodwill (*amor*), as Cicero asserts through the character of Laelius, it then

"Cicero with his friend Atticus and brother Quintus, at his villa at Arpinum" by Richard Wilson, c.1771–5

“Had Cicero himself not once called Caesar his alter ego, the best anyone could hope for in a friend?”

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needs to grow and be tested through shared experiences: the journey towards being one another's alter ego is stony, steep and time-consuming. In consequence, the older friendship is the more valuable, as it has stood that test of time.

Cicero's recent experiences with those trials suffice these reflections on how to grow and guard a friendship. He even has Laelius address the question of what a friend should do if asked to "commit a crime ... specifically against the republic". The answer: disappoint the friend and, what's more, he (the dialogue is concerned only with male friendships) should not have asked such a "favour" in the first place! Friendship cannot ever be pleaded to justify crimes. If such a crisis reveals the true nature of the so-called friendship, it will have to be dissolved – slowly, Cicero recommends, by way of an increasing desuetude rather than a sudden rupture, until, one day, one realized that one had fallen out of touch. In raising these issues, the *Laelius* helps us to understand some of the ancient debates surrounding the assassination of Caesar.

Distance is a natural catalyst in this process of dissociation. Conversely, if one desires to maintain a friendship, despite spatial separation, letters will supply the lifeline. Cicero wrote letters prolifically, sometimes several a day, close to 1,000 of which have come down to us. Most famous are those *Ad Atticum* (sixteen books of letters "To Atticus"). Slightly less well known are those known as *Ad familiares* ("To Acquaintances"), another sixteen books of correspondence between Cicero and his contemporaries, including Matus, which cast a captivating light on Roman life as lived – for the most part – by male members of the elite (even though one book comprises a selection of Cicero's letters to his slave and later freedman Tiro). These were selected and arranged after his death, not in chronological order (as in *Ad Atticum*), but largely thematically. Modern readers have often felt frustrated by the absence of chronology. But, as Francesca K. A. Martelli emphasizes in her thought-provoking *Souvenirs of Cicero*, the arrangement may also illuminate the artistic designs and sociopolitical preoccupations of whoever it was who edited them after Cicero's death. What if, she asks, instead of lamenting the apparent disorder, we attempted to make sense of the organization of this collection as it has come down to us, in the books as they are now divided and arranged?

Friendship is a dominant theme in these letters, and especially in the thirteenth book (where I counted forty-one uses of the word family). This book mainly comprises letters of recommendation, the ancient equivalent of job references, and is not often considered particularly engaging. But its first letter is different and offers a key. Cicero writes to Gaius Memmius asking him to return the house of the philosopher Epicurus in Athens, which he had purchased, to the Epicureans, the philosopher's school. We are confronted with this image of a house and its larger household, Martelli argues, to help us see the many individuals we encounter in this particular book of letters as a "virtual" house(hold). As an opening letter, she suggests, it is a particularly apposite editorial choice, as the view Epicurus held of friendship – that friends are *useful* to us – is confirmed by the many *useful* letters between friends in convenient places.

As this last remark suggests, the image of real Roman friendships that arises from the collection in general and its thirteenth book in particular differs strikingly from the idealized vision of Cicero's treatise on friendship. In fact, Martelli wonders if this corrective contrast may have been one of the intentions of the anonymous editor(s) of the collection.

The relevance for us of both the philosophical treatise and the lively letters is undiminished. Cicero's insistence in the *Laelius* on the non-limitlessness of friendship echoes eerily in present times. So, too, a volume of collected letters imagined as a virtual house of friends would appear to be just a step away from those virtual platforms that have housed friendships old and new, firm and fleeting, over the last twenty-plus years of social media. *Plus ça change.* ■