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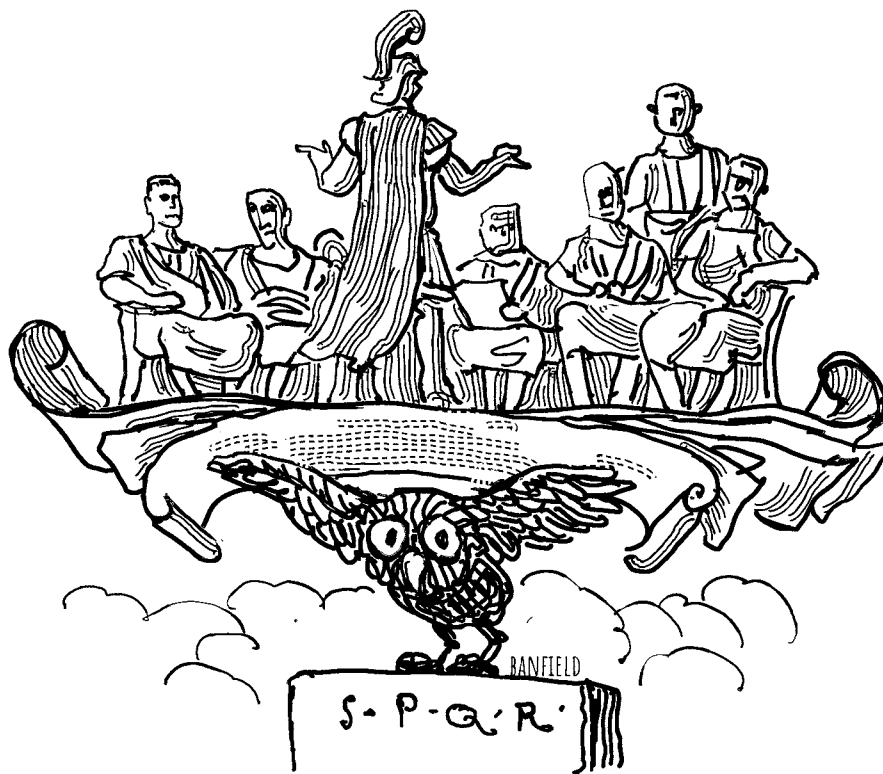
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Book Review by Joseph Epstein

LEND ME YOUR EARS

The Roman Republic of Letters: Scholarship, Philosophy, and Politics in the Age of Cicero and Caesar, by Katharina Volk.
Princeton University Press, 400 pages, \$35



“CAPTIVE GREECE HAS CONQUERED her rude conqueror,” wrote Horace, the assumption here being that, through Greece’s vastly richer culture, adopted over time by the Romans, Greece ultimately defeated Rome. Philosopher for philosopher, historian for historian, playwright and poet for playwright and poet, there is little doubt that Greek culture was deeper than, and in almost every way superior to, that of the Romans. No Roman philosopher was anywhere near the equal of Plato and Aristotle. Nor could Rome produce playwrights of the quality of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Juvenal couldn’t lay a glove on Aristophanes. Livy was nowhere near Thucydides, Herodotus, and Xenophon, though Tacitus, true enough, was of their company. The *Aeneid* was no *Iliad*, and Horace not quite the poet Pindar was. Romans with the wherewithal repaired to Athens to put the polish on their own education.

Yet the Romans were distinctive in having an upper class, their senatorial class, that not only had a serious interest in culture but found the time, alongside its political duties, to produce it, especially in the last years of the Roman Republic. (While the Roman

senate was in session, it was said, Cato read from a book hidden under his toga.) This Roman cultural efflorescence is the subject of Katharina Volk’s *The Roman Republic of Letters: Scholarship, Philosophy, and Politics in the Age of Cicero and Caesar*. Surveying Roman political and intellectual life between 63 B.C. and 43 B.C., the year after the assassination of Julius Caesar, her interest, as she notes, “is in what my protagonists ‘were thinking’ at the time. If in the end a somewhat larger diachronic tale does emerge, I believe it will be less abstract and messier and more diverse than other stories that have been told before.” A professor of classics at Columbia University, Volk hones in on the fact that “some of the most important political actors in this time of turmoil also engaged in significant scholarly activity”—and often did so with a sense of communal effort.

THIS ROMAN COMBINATION, THE MIXTURE of high-level politics and serious scholarship, is unique. Certainly it does not show up in contemporary American politics, where pretensions to scholarship, or even to intellectual activity, are rare if not invisible. In recent decades, when

speechwriters and staff do much of the work of American political figures, gauging the intellectual quality of our politicians is no easy task. Think of John F. Kennedy, who did have such pretensions but whose *Profiles in Courage*, winner of the 1957 Pulitzer Prize for biography, turned out to have been researched and written by others. Ask not who authored *Profiles in Courage*, but ask instead who merely “authorized” it. About the only American politician over the past half-century or so with intellectual distinction was Daniel Patrick Moynihan, though he wrote chiefly on current-day domestic politics.

Volk takes up the scholarly and philosophical contributions of Julius Caesar, Marcus Terentius Varro, and Publius Nigidius Figulus, but it is Cicero who dominates her pages. Although Cicero was unfortunate in life—a life that featured many political disappointments and ended with his beheading by Mark Antony’s henchmen, who then nailed his head and hands up for display in the forum—he has had a strong posthumous run, owing to so much of his work having survived. Not only do we possess more of his writings and speeches than those of any other Roman but more than 800 of his letters are extant. “The

Ciceronian corpus,” Volk writes, “provides a large portion of our evidence for the intellectual life of the period.”

IN LIFE AND AFTER DEATH, CICERO HAS never been without his critics. Perhaps the most devastating has been the 19th-century German historian Theodor Mommsen. For Mommsen, Cicero was a trimmer and a coward whose writings are negligible. “He was in fact so thorough a dabbler,” wrote Mommsen, “that it was pretty much a matter of indifference to what work he applied his hand.” He had, according to Mommsen, “no conviction and no passion.” Just as in the pages of his *History of Rome* for Mommsen Julius Caesar can do no wrong, Marcus Tullius Cicero can do no right.

Volk’s estimate of Cicero is more balanced. “Already during his lifetime,” she writes, “he was considered Rome’s greatest orator and famous for his verbal mastery. Cicero was a prolific writer, producing a vast corpus of speeches, poetry, philosophy, rhetorical works, and personal letters, moving at the forefront of his period’s intellectual developments and crucially shaping the course of western literature and thought.” Yet, as she also allows, “Cicero the eloquent writer and ‘intellectual’ cannot be separated from Cicero the doomed politician.”

Some of Volk’s best pages are on the unequal rivalry between Cicero and Caesar. Cicero, after much hesitation, joined Pompey against Caesar in the civil war that ended in Pompey’s defeat at Pharsalus. Caesar, who wished to establish a reputation for clemency, forgave Cicero, yet there was little on which the two could not fail to disagree. Caesar dismissed Cicero as “a mere intellectual.” Cicero later turned out to be among the greatest apologists for Caesar’s assassination.

Even the subsidiary characters in the days of the late Roman Republic are interesting. One thinks of Atticus, Cicero’s friend and correspondent, who, as Volk notes, saved Cicero’s letters, but whose own letters to Cicero have disappeared. A fuller portrait appears in Gaston Boissier’s splendid *Cicero and His Friends* (1897), in which one learns that Atticus was among the most prosperous of Roman landowners, though he had exiled himself to Athens. There he divested himself of all interest in an active political life, thus placing himself outside the dangerous arena that was Roman politics, a divestiture perhaps made philosophically all the easier by his Epicureanism. Atticus is said to have been a brilliant conversationalist, whose learning, as Boissier puts it, was “too extensive...ever to become tedious.” He rendered Cicero many services,

both financial and literary. The affection that passed between the two men was deep, and never thwarted by betrayal on either side. In every way a remarkable man, Atticus nonetheless draws a slightly condemnatory final word from Boissier for his self-protective withdrawal from public life: “[H]e was the most adroit of men of that time; but we know that there are other forms of praise that are more valuable than this.”

UNLIKE ATTICUS, CICERO WAS LURED lifelong by politics and came to believe that virtue received its best workout in the gymnasium of public life. In *De re publica*, he wrote: “For all men who have persevered, aided, and increased the fatherland there is a certain place reserved in heaven, where, blessed, they enjoy eternal life.” After quoting this passage, Volk notes that for Cicero “it is politicians who go to heaven, not philosophers.”

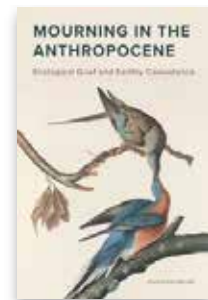
Cicero himself had served as consul of Rome in 63 B.C., the year he thwarted the Cataline conspiracy (an attempted coup by a disgruntled soldier who had lost the previous year’s election). That Cicero did not come from a political or senatorial family makes his climb through the ranks, from quaestor to praetor to consul, all the more impressive. He was doubtless the greatest orator of his day and had everything needed for a grand political life, except judgment. He had come in on the side of Pompey, approved afterward the assassination of Caesar, and spoken out against Octavian and Antony, ending in his death. Yet few figures did more to shape Roman culture than Cicero.

Volk calls Cicero a Skeptic in his outlook, though she adds that his Skepticism “does not prevent Cicero from holding a view, or from selecting positive aspects of a variety of philosophies; it does, however, prevent him from accepting any doctrine sight unseen or merely because it comes as part of and parcel of a particular philosophical system.” After citing the Roman contempt for Greek philosophy, she goes on to categorize her various cast of characters: Cato as a Stoic, Atticus and Cassius as Epicureans, etc. Julius Caesar’s philosophy, like much else about him, is unknown. “For all his significance,” Volk confesses, “Caesar remains an enigma.” But then, perhaps Caesar needed no philosophy, his ambition standing in for it just as his belief that he descended from the gods (from Venus, in particular) allowed him to do without religion, feeling himself a god.

What is new in Professor Volk’s treatment of Roman philosophy is that she sees much of it as a form of group therapy. Phi-

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losophy, in this view, is most useful for consolation. “The basic thesis the consoler is trying to prove to the consoled is that the apparent present evil is not in fact an evil at all,” she writes, “a line of approach based on the typical intellectualism of most ancient philosophy, according to which rational understanding will automatically lead to emotional adjustment.” Cicero, who lost a beloved daughter and himself stood in need of much consolation, advised: “These, then, are the tasks of the consoler: to completely eradicate the distress, or to calm it, or to remove it as much as possible, or to suppress it and prevent it from developing further, or to redirect it to something else.” At a minimum, philosophy was a helpful distraction in dark times. “In the late Republic,” Volk writes, “philosophy thus crucially informed, not Roman politics as such, but Roman politicians.”

THE ROMAN REPUBLIC OF LETTERS TAKES up the debate over proper Latin prose style during the period. The debate was chiefly between Cicero, who favored ornate or elevated style, and Julius Caesar, who favored plain or common usage. Neither may be said to have won, but the verbal mastery of each, in Volk’s words, “would turn out to be most influential in shaping the Latin language for millennia to come.” As for prose writing, legend had it that Caesar wrote his *Commentarii* by dictation while on horseback.

Almost as an afterthought, Volk touches on the careers of Marcus Terentius Varro

and Publius Nigidius Figulus. Varro, a true polymath, was considered the most learned man in Rome. Cicero wrote to Varro, praising him for having “laid open the age of our fatherland; the division of time-reckoning; the laws of rites and priests; the practices of war and peace; and the names, types, purposes, and origins of dwellings, regions, and places, and of all divine and human matters. And you have thrown much light on our poets and on Latin language and literature in general.” In later years Augustus appointed Varro to organize the first Roman library.

Varro was more the antiquarian than the historian, a distinction Volk borrows from Italian classicist Arnaldo Momigliano who explained: “(1) historians write in a chronological order; antiquaries write in a systematic order; (2) historians produce those facts which serve to illustrate or explain a certain situation; antiquaries collect all the items that are connected with a certain subject, whether they help to solve a problem or not.”

THIS SAME DISTINCTION APPLIES NICELY to Katharina Volk’s *The Roman Republic of Letters*, which is more an antiquarian, I should say, than a historical work. Through her great learning, Volk fills in little-known or hitherto undiscussed issues, questions, and problems in Roman history, though the book doesn’t provide the satisfaction of a continuous story.

Finally, she briefly considers the career of Nigidius Figulus, a senator best known in his

day as a reader of the signs and omens of the gods. The role of the gods in the ancient world is very much a mixed one. For many in the ancient world their importance was decisive; others allowed that the gods existed but believed they could not care less about the fate of human beings. Caesar apparently did not hold with omens.

As for Nigidius, according to Volk, “he comes across as a kind of ‘Roman *Dr. Faustus*,’ a seeker for arcane wisdom ready to apply his theoretical insights to the practical exigencies of his own life and times.” Nigidius went in for divination, whether through extispicy (reading the entrails of sacrificial animals) or divining omens from thunder, eclipses, meteors, and other such phenomena, discovering portents everywhere. At a time when Roman senators often consulted astrologers, he was a man much in demand. He is supposed to have predicted to a fellow senator that the man’s recently born son, a boy named Octavian, would one day be master of the world.

One might smile condescendingly at the Romans’ ostensible naïveté for believing in such diviners, augurers, and false prophets. But then, don’t we in the modern world employ such people ourselves—only we call them economists.

Joseph Epstein is an essayist, short story writer, and the author, most recently, of Gallimaufry: A Collection of Essays, Reviews, Bits (Axios Press).

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