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Recent Scholarship on the Imperial Reception of Cicero

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Abstract

This article reviews two monographs recently published on the subject of Cicero's reception in the imperial period: Keeline's 2018 *The Reception of Cicero in the Early Roman Empire* and La Bua's 2019 *Cicero and Roman Education*. As Cicero's *Nachleben* is assuming a position of increasing salience in classical studies, this review contextualizes these two volumes within over a century of scholarship on the subject. Keeline's book demonstrates the critical importance of the schoolroom in shaping almost every aspect of Cicero's posthumous reception, while La Bua's methodically elucidates how Cicero's speeches were taught and read in the classrooms of the empire. The article concludes with an argument for a new approach to studying the reception of Cicero in this period.

Keywords

Cicero – reception – declamation – imperial literature

Thomas J. Keeline. *The Reception of Cicero in the Early Roman Empire. The Rhetorical Schoolroom and the Creation of a Cultural Legend*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018. xii, 376 pp. Pr. £ 90.00 (hb). ISBN 9781108426237.

Giuseppe La Bua. *Cicero and Roman Education. The Reception of the Speeches and Ancient Scholarship*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019. xiii, 394 pp. Pr. £ 90.00 (hb). ISBN 9781107705999.

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Si ti[bi] Cic[e]ro do[let], vap[u]labis. (If Cicero rankles you, you'll get a beating).

Reconstruction of fragmentary Pompeian graffito. *CIL* IV.4208

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Should a man, let alone a politician and let alone an artist, whose personal failings are inextricably bound up with those of his age, expect to receive a fair hearing from the generation that succeeds his own? If the authors of the two works under review realized when they commenced their investigations that this question, deep and worthy though it may have seemed, would be one of the more urgent issues of the day when their books rolled off the printing press of Cambridge University, they give little indication of that fact. The debates over the toppling of statues, over Retaining and Explaining, over the razing of the pale, male and stale canon seem, from today's vantage point at least, almost quaintly absent from the introductions to two studies that engage closely, carefully and captivatingly with the issue of Marcus Tullius Cicero's centrality to the world of imperial Rome in general, and to its classrooms in particular.

What we have instead are two books that deal with a fact, rather than a moral conundrum: Cicero, in a number of guises, *was* an established pillar of Roman culture in the age of the emperors, and this centrality can be most fully understood by studying how Cicero's works and persona were employed in the world of Roman education. In both of these volumes, the reader is shown just how quickly Cicero's treatment at the hands of the schoolmasters translated into the contemporary public and literary sphere, and just how profoundly the image of Cicero that was passed down to later generations, including our own, has been shaped by the years he spent as a school text.

Anthony Grafton has described Ciceronian reception as following the pattern of a sine curve—an alternating series of peaks and troughs that spans from the 21st century back to the early imperial period:

From the early imperial period onward, Cicero's contentious life and vast literary production provoked admiration and criticism in nearly equal proportions: Seneca, who would enjoy great authority in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, viewed him critically, but Quintilian—whose treatise on rhetoric would have an enormous influence when the full text was recovered in the 15th century—admired him unreservedly and took him as an absolute model.¹

Grafton's overview of the place of Cicero and Ciceronianism in the Classical Tradition adduces a wide variety of sources: from St Jerome to Mommsen; from John Adams to George W. Bush. Whether he was being venerated for his genius or castigated for his posing, the centrality of Cicero to the formation of our literary canon, if not our entire culture, is clear.²

It is also clear from the above quotation, however, that Grafton's survey of post mortem interest in Cicero passes over the crucial first hurdle of reception—how his reputation was shaped in the years that immediately followed his death. Plutarch's famous story of Augustus' grandson scrabbling to conceal the fact that he was perusing some Samizdat Cicero suggests that the particular circumstances of his murder at the hands of the Triumvirs' assassins made his uninterrupted presence in the canon of Latin literature far from certain.³

Although there has not been a complete lack of scholarship on the formative stage of Cicero's posthumous reception, these years have received a comparatively short shrift. Until very recently, such studies have tended to be scattered far and wide and focused largely on individual moments, rather than attempting to see what they might add up to.

There are a few exceptions to this rule. The revised edition of Zielinski's study of Cicero's *Nachleben*, although anxious to provide the full scope of Ciceronian influence on the millennia that followed his death, does not simply skim over

1 Grafton 2010, 195.

2 For major works on Ciceronian reception beyond the early empire, see: Sabbadini 1885; Zielinski 1912; Baron 1938; Bolgar 1963; Rolfe 1963; Clarke 1964; Murphy 1974; Vos 1979; Ward 1983, 1995; Freedman 1986; Mouchel 1990; Henderson 1992; McLaughlin 1995; Jones 1998; Rowland 1998; Cox 1999; Fumaroli 1999.

3 Plu. *Cic.* 49.5.

the first few decades of his reception.⁴ One of Zielinski's goals in writing his study of Cicero's afterlife was to fight back against the likes of Mommsen and Drumann, who had portrayed Cicero as a pedantic and corrupt politician, out of sorts with the world in which he found himself.⁵ Zielinski relies on the early years of Cicero's reception to show that such interpretations of Cicero's life were nothing new, but in fact were merely recycled criticisms from the early empire.

After Zielinski's pioneering work, 20th-century studies of Cicero's early imperial reception were confined to articles on individual moments of intertextuality. The few holistic studies of Ciceronian reception in this period tend to be interested in the later centuries; one might pick out Highet, Bolgar and Clarke as important contributors to English-language studies of Cicero's place in the classical tradition.⁶ Richter's contribution to Gerhard Radke's *Cicero. Ein Mensch seiner Zeit* is perhaps the most accomplished successor to Zielinski, albeit one hampered by the short space in which it is forced to operate.⁷

Thanks to the relatively recent trend of producing 'companions' to Cicero, there is now a pair of recent, English-language overviews of Cicero's early reception. Alain Gowing's chapter in Catherine Steel's *Cambridge Companion to Cicero* does not ignore these early years of Cicero's *Nachleben*, but he does label them collectively as "a century of silence".⁸ Gowing's concern lies chiefly in later years with Seneca the Younger and Quintilian. George Kennedy's account of Ciceronian reception in James May's *Brill's Companion to Cicero* has a different perspective.⁹ It is considerably more wide-ranging than Gowing's, taking in the full-scope of Ciceronian reception rather than just the imperial period, albeit with a focus on rhetoric and oratory that suits the broader *Companion's* focus. Unlike Gowing's chapter, Kennedy does not treat the first century of Cicero's reception as one of relative silence. On the contrary, he pays close attention to Seneca the Elder's declamatory texts in order to emphasize how Cicero's later reception was conditioned by his treatment at the hands of the two generations that came after his death.

Alongside these companions, four book-length treatments of Cicero's reception in the empire have been published. Of these, only Emanuele Narducci's 2003 *Aspetti della fortuna di Cicerone nella cultura latina* focuses on the first formative century of Cicero's reception.¹⁰ The chapters by Setaioli and Narducci,

4 Zielinski 1912.

5 Mommsen 1856-1885; Drumann 1834-1844.

6 Highet 1949; Bolgar 1963; Clarke 1964.

7 Richter 1968; see also Weil 1962.

8 Gowing 2013.

9 Kennedy 2002.

10 Narducci 2003a. The other three are: Van Deusen 2013; Altman 2015; and Manuwald 2016.

on Seneca the Younger and Lucan respectively, lay some of the groundwork for Keeline and La Bua's studies, as does Degl'Innocenti Pierini's essay on Cicero's reception in the Augustan and Tiberian ages.¹¹

For all this scholarly attention, however, Robert Kaster's relatively short contribution to Wendell Clausen's 1998 *Festschrift* remains the most significant intervention in this field of study, and is a major influence (in one way or another) on the two volumes under review.¹² This article, 'Becoming "CICERO"', asks precisely how Cicero the man was transformed into 'CICERO' the cultural icon. Kaster's study focuses on Seneca the Elder's account of the Ciceronian declamations and uses these rhetorical exercises to show how Cicero gradually morphed into a kitsch by-word for eloquence. The concise form of Kaster's article prevents him from putting this element of Ciceronian reception in the context of the broader rhetorical and literary culture of imperial Rome. The challenge of doing so is the one taken up by Keeline and La Bua.

Keeline's study of the reception of Cicero in the early empire takes a broad chronological view of this period, pushing his analysis of Cicero's reception down to the early second century AD. However, central to his thesis is the first phase of this process, and the crucial role played therein by Cicero's immediate adoption as a school text. His seven chapters fall into two clear halves: first, he establishes how the character of 'Cicero' was fashioned in the imperial schoolrooms, then he shows how this school-mediated image was in turn received by later authors.

In the first four chapters, Keeline charts the development of the most prominent features of Cicero's reception in this period and (crucially) how these features were given specific form by their development in the rhetorical classrooms of the early empire. This process begins from a strikingly novel position: a reconstruction of how one particular Cicero speech (the *Pro Milone*) would have been taught in schools. The impression that is created, one of teachers ruthlessly mining the texts to create standalone exempla of persuasive speech, is developed over the next three chapters. Here, Keeline discusses key recurring themes in early imperial discussions of Cicero: the decline of public speech; the politics of Cicero's murder; the praise- and blameworthiness of his political career. In each chapter, he shows how these discussions (whether they appear in historiography, poetry or imaginative reconstructions of the speeches delivered by Cicero and his contemporaries) take their lead from lines of interpretation developed first and foremost in the schoolroom.

11 Setaioli 2003; Narducci 2003b; Degl'Innocenti Pierini 2003. The book also contains a study of Cicero's influence on Vitruvius: Romano 2003.

12 Kaster 1998.

To take a simple example, chapter 3 begins with a man named ‘Popilius’, allegedly Cicero’s assassin.¹³ Although it is overwhelmingly likely that Popilius is a fictional character (one invented in the declamation halls where the topic of Cicero’s death was frequently used as a jumping-off point for discussions of free speech, ingratitude and reputation), Keeline shows just how thoroughly he wormed his way into the historical and biographical traditions surrounding Cicero’s death, appearing as he does in Brutteditus Niger, Plutarch, St Jerome, Valerius Maximus and Cassius Dio.¹⁴ A more difficult, and thus more rewarding, example can be found in Keeline’s treatment of how imperial authors confronted the theme of Cicero’s exile in chapter 4.¹⁵ The treatments of this episode found in Valerius Maximus, Aufidius Bassus, Velleius Paterculus and Cassius Dio are all shown to be based on the highly revisionist readings of Cicero’s exile created by the declaimers.¹⁶ Nowhere to be found, Keeline argues, is the despondence and mania of Cicero’s exilic correspondence, instead these imperial writers give pride of place to a narrative of noble self-sacrifice and triumphant rebirth that has been assembled from classroom dissections of Cicero’s self-propagandizing *post reditum* orations.

Following these thematic deep dives, Keeline presents three chapters each comprising a case study of a later Latin author, showing at length how they responded to the schoolroom Cicero they inherited from their predecessors. The first of these focuses on Seneca the Younger, close reading of whose few explicit discussions of Cicero (and his many pointed absences) reveals an independently-minded Latin author keen to “reject Cicero and all his empty promises”.¹⁷ The next chapter moves onto another recusant, Tacitus. In Keeline’s reading of the *Dialogus*, Tacitus presents a sustained challenge to the dominant Ciceronian strain in Roman imperial rhetoric (exemplified by his older contemporary Quintilian), arguing that his *exemplum* of eloquence is regrettably incompatible with the rule of the emperors. Following these two nattering nabobs of negativism, Pliny the Younger is brought on to close the show. Keeline’s Pliny is a stylist far more willing to place himself in a line of apostolic succession stretching back to Cicero. Through close reading of Pliny’s correspondence, both in the letters’ echoes of Cicero and in their direct references to him, Keeline presents a man who paid close attention to Quintilian’s neo-Ciceronian teachings and strains every muscle to bring his *vox* back to life.

13 Keeline 2018, 102-105.

14 Sen. *Suas.* 6.21; Plu. *Cic.* 48.1; Hier. *Chron.* p. 158 Helm; Val. Max. 5.3.4; Cass. Dio. 47.11.1-2.

15 Keeline 2018, 164-177.

16 Val. Max. 1.7.5; Sen. *Suas.* 6.23; Vell. Pat. 2.45.1-3; Cass. Dio. 38.18-30.

17 Keeline 2018, 197.

If that suggests a Pliny drunk on his own self-importance, the image is moderated somewhat by his awareness of just how large a pair of shoes he is trying to fill. The analysis of one of Pliny's letters to Maturus Arrianus, for example, lays bare the anxiety of influence that underlies this dynamic.¹⁸

There are many positive things to say about this study, and alongside the praise one might render for the breadth of scholarship Keeline has inhaled to support his readings and the sensitivity he applies to these texts when teasing out their nuances, I would feel negligent as a reviewer if I were to pass over what a pleasure this book is to read. The quality and clarity of Keeline's prose is remarkable, and constitutes the best possible vehicle for touring a set of authors who were all engaged in the pursuit of rhetorical excellence. No true Ciceronian, of course, would assume that praise for style equates to disregard for content, but for the avoidance of doubt I will also praise explicitly the quality of the scholarship contained within these pages. Keeline's inclusion of the pseudepigraphical tradition in his discussion of the declamatory texts concerning Cicero's life and death is transformative, bringing a fresh perspective to an area of study whose lessons seemed to have been fully learnt some time ago.¹⁹

This monograph does, however, have a weakness, one that can be traced back to that least loved of the rhetorical canons—*dispositio*. The two halves of this book are unhappily welded together, leading to a study somewhat less than the sum of its parts. The intention is clear enough: by splitting his study between the development of a classroom Cicero and the later reception of that figure, Keeline can appeal both to scholars of Roman rhetorical education and those interested in the Republican influence on imperial literature. It may be that no book could fully satisfy the appetites of the educationalists and (for want of a better word) the receptionists, but this reviewer, at least, felt while reading the first half of the book that areas of deep interest were kept artificially narrow by the author's laser-like focus on the Cicero of the classroom. Can it really be right, for example, for a study entitled *The Reception of Cicero in the Early Roman Empire* (indeed, a study that devotes 12 uninterrupted pages to the great man's Consulship) to sport a single reference to Sallust's *Catiline* in the index locorum? I shall return to this theme at the conclusion of my review, but I will make it clear at this point that I struggle to accept the idea that the story of Cicero's reception (or, indeed, the reception of any figure) should be so heavily dependent upon how he was taught in schools.

18 Plin. *Ep.* 4.8; Keeline 2018, 305-308.

19 Keeline 2018, ch. 4, esp. 148-151.

I suspect, however, that the educationalists will be rather happier with the result, and I simply hope that they do not put the book down after the first four chapters. Keeline's study of Quintilian's addiction to Cicero, for example, is not complete without his interrogation of how Tacitus responded to that in his *Dialogus*.²⁰ On the education front, one would wish to see a bit more of the evidence behind the first chapter's central hypothesis that the education system of ancient Rome was so conservative that material from the 5th century AD can be used to fill in gaps about that of the 1st century BC. In addition, the reader would benefit from a more detailed study of the formation of the specific canon of Cicero's speeches that came to be used in the classroom, since this is fundamental to the story Keeline wishes to tell about the version of Cicero that came to dominate in the imperial period. Happily, the second book under review is keenly interested in both of these areas.

La Bua's study of Cicero's centrality to Roman education covers almost exactly the same period as Keeline's, but rarely treads the same ground. An explanation for how this has been achieved can be found in the reasoning behind his decision to begin the story slightly earlier, and to end it slightly later.²¹ The object of La Bua's book is not so much the abstract concept of 'Cicero' that was discussed and debated in Roman schoolrooms, his study is instead rooted in the physical—the concrete texts that were read, written and studied in the empire's classrooms. For this reason, the first chapter begins in Cicero's lifetime, tackling the question of what it took for Cicero's ephemeral spoken words to be committed to the page in the first place. He argues that Cicero was essaying something new by publishing his speeches, insisting on a relatively novel equivalence between speaking well and writing well.²² What came to be studied in the classrooms, then, was not some happy survival, a recording device accidentally left on while Cicero was in full flow. Instead, La Bua argues forcefully that Cicero emended and corrected his speeches for publication in the pursuit of a lasting memorial to his literary flair and to his aristocratic values. Their inclusion in the educational canon was the ultimate and intended goal of publication.

As noted, La Bua does not just begin his study earlier than Keeline, he ends it later as well. His second chapter takes up the story of how Cicero's speeches were transmitted from the moment of their author's involuntary cephalotomy to the creation of the earliest surviving Medieval manuscripts bearing

20 Keeline 2018, ch. 6.

21 That is, if one excludes the epilogue (336-342) to Keeline's book, a whistle-stop tour bringing the story of Ciceronian reception as far as Robert Harris's 2015 novel, *Dictator*.

22 La Bua 2019, 33-42.

his words. The most vital task performed by this chapter is the establishment of a detailed analysis of how the canon of Ciceronian speeches that reached the Middle Ages came to be formed. The importance of establishing the reliability of texts circulating under Cicero's name is shown to have been an almost immediate concern after his death, and the later role played by Statilius Maximus in this process is well illustrated.²³ Diving deeply into the testimony of Asconius and the Bobbio scholiast, this chapter argues a point vital for the thesis of Keeline's book: the process by which a swirling morass of Ciceronian and pseudo-Ciceronian words were whittled down over the centuries that followed their author's death into a fairly narrow but reliable canon of orations was one overwhelmingly steered by the considerations of the schoolmasters. That is to say, of all the qualities that marked out a piece of *Ciceroniana* for survival on a scrap of Medieval parchment, the most decisive was its viability as a rhetorical exemplum that could be used in the curriculum of a liberal education.

Having established the centrality of education to Cicero's survival in the first half of his book, La Bua turns in the second half to analysing the centrality of Cicero to Roman education. In the third chapter, he surveys the broad sweep of evidence of Latin education from the beginning of the Principate to the early Middle Ages, underlining as he goes the dynamics of how Cicero's exemplarity was upheld over the centuries. In the fourth, he delves into the specifics of the various ways in which Cicero was taught from generation to generation. La Bua reveals in this analysis just what was required to maintain a single author at the centre of a syllabus for several hundreds of years. He argues that the story of Cicero's treatment at the hands of the schoolmasters and their pupils was one of alternating praise and censure. What emerges from this study is a very detailed exposition of a well-known argument—that Cicero's dubious historical exemplarity proved an awkward match with his established role as the gold standard for pure Latin. Thus, from the declamation halls of Augustus' early reign to the marginalia of Medieval manuscripts, La Bua is able to point to equal measures of high flown praise for Cicero's eloquence and vitriolic abuse aimed at the rhetorical or political positions he had taken up for various speeches. It is clear from this analysis that Cicero's established position as the acme of Latin eloquence never resulted in his acceptance as an historical role model. However, it is also clear from the heat generated by the debates over Cicero's exemplarity that his status as the touchstone for good Latin was far from one of inert acceptance. The fight for Cicero's pre-eminence was litigated and re-litigated in successive generations, a process to which La

23 La Bua 2019, 66-70.

Bua's careful and considered readings of the textual footprint of these debates bear witness.

The appearance in successive years of two books dedicated entirely to the subject of imperial Rome's reception of Cicero is a testament to the vitality of this area of study. Confronted with such an *embarras de richesse*, one hesitates to assume the role of Oliver, standing before the master's table asking for some more. Nevertheless, it must be asserted that there *is* more to be said on this subject, and that some of the conclusions detailed above ought to be rejected to open up this area for further study.

In particular, we should be wary of proceeding too far down the path of asserting that the entirety of Cicero's reception can ultimately be reduced to a study of the imperial schoolroom. While both of these volumes show very clearly that the preponderance of explicit discussions of Cicero that have survived from the imperial period come from the classroom, this reviewer at least is not fully convinced that we should, as a result of this, either insist that the other explicit discussions of Cicero are simply better disguised appearances of his schoolroom self, or that we should necessarily privilege these explicit citations over the subtler references to Cicero and his works that we find in other, less obviously educational texts.

Regarding these less obviously educational moments of Ciceronian reception, Keeline could stand accused of wanting *le beurre et l'argent du beurre* in his decision to argue that all Ciceronian reception is, essentially, the reception of the schoolroom Cicero.²⁴ By doing so, he is able to forswear the burden of sketching out the entirety of Ciceronian reception in the early empire on the grounds that his interest is purely in how Cicero was taught in this period. Nevertheless, he still allows himself some fun playing with interesting imperial readings of Cicero that are not especially redolent of the blackboard, and he does this on the grounds that these moments of reception are just developments of the model these authors would have learnt at school. La Bua's volume, as is clear from its subtitle ("the reception of the speeches and ancient scholarship"), largely avoids this trap by remaining rather more focused on the concrete Ciceronian texts and how they were taught. Nevertheless, he too treats himself to a digression on the subject of how Virgil, Sallust, Catullus *et alii* interacted with Cicero's legacy in their texts.²⁵ Both of the volumes under review insist upon viewing Cicero's reception through the window of the classroom, but neither can quite resist the appeal of looking at how Cicero was

24 Keeline 2018, 336: "Not every ancient writer is limited to this classroom construction of Cicero, of course, but for everyone it is foundational."

25 La Bua 2019, 100-106.

treated by those who just read him because they wanted to. That is to say, how he was received by the poets, the historiographers and the philosophers (in other words, the artists) of that period.

To put that critique in rather less confrontational terms, what Keeline and La Bua have produced are two extraordinarily sensitive, scholarly and serious studies of the *institutional* reception of Cicero, but that aspect of Cicero's *Nachleben* is not its totality, it is simply its most visible textual facet. One need not strive too hard in search of parallels to highlight the limitations of such institutional studies, and the necessity of moving beyond them. Shakespeare, Austen, Robert E. Lee—all three are heavily studied in schools, and attempts to teach them generate an enormous volume of printed paper. Is this textual trace, though, the sum total of their reception in the 20th and 21st centuries? Would a study of successive school editions of *Macbeth* tell the full tale of the importance of that play in the modern world? Would the full range of Civil War documentaries on Netflix show you the entirety of the Confederacy's legacy in today's United States?

The next stage in the study of Cicero's reception is to move from the steady ground of the explicit citations made by those whose job it was to teach Cicero, and to begin looking for his ghostly and uncertain presence in the texts that were written by authors who read Cicero simply because they wanted to read Cicero. Only by taking those uncertain steps can we begin to appreciate the full technicolour variety of Cicero's afterlife.

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