

**Jon Hall, *Politeness and Politics in Cicero's letters.***

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**Abstract:**

We have all wrestled at some point with the concept of politeness, since so much of our professional interaction is done via the written word. Whether as a newly-minted Ph.D. wondering how to address a senior scholar, as an instructor dealing with overly-chummy emails from students, or even in writing a book review, the struggle with the proper methods of address and how to raise concerns without resorting to personal attacks is omnipresent.

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**Article:**

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Given the necessity of considering politeness in so many aspects of our professional lives, Jon Hall's book on politeness in Cicero's letters should find a wide audience. In this philological study written in an easy yet academic style, Hall tackles a previously unexplored topic of 'polite discourse' (4) and provides an interesting examination of politeness theory and its application, and importance, in the aristocratic correspondence of Late Republican Rome. Throughout the book he clearly elucidates not only the linguistic and literary conventions of politeness, but also the political and social framework which made such conventions necessary, particularly the need for Roman aristocrats to preserve 'face.' Though Hall examines politeness from a socio-linguistic approach, the book is geared toward classicists, and the author does a satisfactory job in providing sufficient background for those without training in socio-linguistics. In his introduction, Hall draws attention to the fact that all forms of politeness are inescapably tied to the particular culture in which they appear, and a fundamental question for this book becomes 'what makes one remark more polite than another?' (5). He recognizes that Latin has no one word equivalent for the English 'politeness,' though 'verecundia, humanitas, and urbanitas cover the semantic meanings of the English term.' Hall borrows Brown and Levinson's definition that linguistic politeness is connected primarily with 'face,' 1 and that each person's desire to save it is

a key component to any social interaction, though he notes that Brown and Levinson focused more on oral rather than literary politeness. However, Hall posits that 'the language of letters reflects the type of language actually used by aristocrats in their meetings with each other' (21), and we would be better served to think of politeness as a social construct than the product of a literary education. Literary politeness is indeed highly stylized and conventionalized, and it is Cicero's conscientious deployment of polite language and conventions that indicates his great concern for preserving 'face,' both his own and his addressee's. Hall identifies three forms of politeness found throughout Cicero's letters: the politeness of respect, affiliative politeness, and redressive politeness. The politeness of respect derives from the attention to *verecundia*, or knowing one's place in the rigid Roman social hierarchy. It is highlighted by linguistic formality and restraint, and lacks colloquialisms. Affiliative politeness, on the other hand, is designed 'to reduce the social distance between writer and addressee' (14); code-switching is presented as example of this type of politeness. The third type of politeness Hall discusses is redressive politeness, the goal of which is 'to offer compensation for the face-threat (or intrusion)' (15) inherent in a request or refusal. Each of these types receives its own chapter in the text.

The first chapter, 'Doing Aristocratic Business,' examines methods of communicating the proper amount of respect in the framework of Cicero's positions as politician and patron, and how these methods are used in conjunction with affiliative politeness. Seven letters are the focus of this chapter (Fam. 2.4, 4.11, 5.8, 11.27, 13.33, 13.41, 15.14), though they generally provide the springboard for further discussion. A number of politeness strategies are discussed, including expressions of thanks, pledges of support, explicit assertions of pleasure, requests, assertions of goodwill, offering congratulations, polite wit and compliments, and commemoration of family ties. Hall highlights the inherent threat to *dignitas* involved in even these relatively mundane events, and that the highly conventionalized expressions of politeness in these situations are themselves expressions of respect. For example, Cicero's letter to M. Acilius Caninus (Fam. 13.33) highlights the 'availability of a familiar stock of vocabulary' (31) which facilitates composition and 'helps the interaction to proceed in a familiar and appropriate fashion' (32).

'From Polite Fictions to Hypocrisy' focuses on affiliative politeness and how the use of what Hall calls 'polite fictions' (28) is negotiated, in particular with relation to the ambiguity which often accompanies such fictions. It could be difficult to distinguish between genuine politeness and mere flattery or *blanditiae*, which Hall defines as 'overly effusive and manipulative language' (80). This task is made even harder by our separation from the social and cultural environment of ancient Rome and the tendency to view 'Roman politicians as a disturbingly dysfunctional bunch, calculatingly duplicitous in their dealings with each other and driven relentlessly by an egomaniacal will to power' (105). Polite fictions were often employed both in deference to the *dignitas* of others and as a means to promote the writer's agenda. But to assume that all

politeness was indeed a fiction would be to ignore the social construct of correspondence, and the ability of the addressee to read a letter not only at face value but also in conjunction with everything that he knew about the sender's politics, values, and personal character. However, as Hall takes care to point out, even these stylized expressions potentially could be taken the wrong way.

The third chapter, 'Redressive Politeness,' looks at the function of this type of politeness within the body of the letters. Particular attention is paid to redressive politeness in letters of request, refusal, and advice. Since each of these interactions was a sort of intrusion on either the addressee's time or his dignitas, and were integral parts of the patron-client relationship, Cicero's correspondence demonstrates relatively formulaic strategies to offset the 'threat to face.' (107). For example, Hall demonstrates how the use of *ut facis*, particularly when paired with an imperative, attempts to 'save face' by implying that the advice given is not a result of either 'inaction or ignorance' (129), and that the addressee should continue doing what he is already doing. As with affiliative politeness, the deeply-rooted concern with prestige and public status is demonstrated by both ritualized language and its frequency in the correspondence. When properly deployed, strategies of redressive politeness could even enhance the prestige of the writer, regardless of whether the request was denied or the advice discarded.

Chapter 4, 'Politeness in Epistolary Conflict,' scrutinizes the vocabulary and structure of letters between correspondents who were at odds. How does Cicero navigate 'potentially abrasive encounters' (135) within the confines of epistolary interaction? Cicero presents some basic guidelines in Book 1 of the *De officiis*, but this topic was effectively ignored by other writers. In that work he indicates that it is acceptable to become angry when personally attacked in a letter, but on the whole civility and restraint were expected even during blunt exchanges. In his discussion of Cicero's feuds with T. Fadius, Antonius Hybrida (*Fam.* 7.27 and *Fam.* 5.5, respectively), and especially App. Claudius Pulcher, Hall details how 'the importance of baring his [Cicero's] vituperative teeth when challenged' (167) formed a significant part of Cicero's epistolary strategy. Hall's depiction of how Cicero held to his policy of self-restraint even in the face of Appius' apparent disrespect to Cicero and borderline illegal actions as outgoing governor of Cilicia is particularly informative. Though Appius had apparently had insulted Cicero a number of times, including a perceived slur against Cicero's status as a *novus homo*, Cicero nevertheless ends *Fam.* 3.7 with aspects of 'affiliative facework' (150), and Cicero's bluntness should be seen as 'a deliberate and calculated show of aggression' (151). In his letters to Appius Cicero avoids entering into a full-blown *contumelia*, and this avoidance seems to have been of the utmost concern throughout the correspondence. How to proceed when genuine hostility existed between the two parties is addressed in the following chapter.

The final chapter, 'Politeness and Political Negotiation,' focuses on the aftermath of Caesar's assassination and demonstrates how the three types of politeness at issue in the book were manifested within the political correspondence of 44-43 BCE. Hall uses the letters of Brutus and Cassius to Mark Antony (Fam. 11.2-3) and the correspondence between Cicero and Munatius Plancus (Fam. 10.3-24) as the foundation of this chapter. A diplomatic tone and redressive politeness highlight the letters from the conspirators to Antony, yet the use of politeness strategies must be seen as a result of epistolary convention and a desire for self-aggrandizement. Though Antony's intransigence caused Brutus and Cassius to switch to surprisingly brusque language in their later letters, their initial restraint confirms the conventionalized nature of literary politeness. The letters between Cicero and Plancus rely on 'an especially lively and ebullient form of affiliative politeness' (186), perhaps as a product of the rapidly changing political alliances of the period. The 'polite fictions' inherent in affiliative politeness become harder to read in 44-43 BCE, given their inherent deceptive potential. Yet, for all their employment of politeness strategies during this period, Cicero, Plancus, Brutus and Cassius were employing these strategies from an inferior position, and that all the politeness in the world could not offset the military forces controlled by Antony. By highlighting just how useless literary politeness became in post-Caesarian Rome, Hall provides a rather touching postscript to his study.

The book is a handsome one, well-bound and as near as I can tell is free from typographical errors. The endnotes are generally short, usually providing bibliographic information or corresponding primary citations. While some may dislike the use of endnotes rather than footnotes, I feel that in this particular book footnotes would have been a distraction, as the argument rests more firmly on concrete examples from the correspondence than on supporting or refuting previous scholarship, though I am not implying in any way that Hall has cut corners with his research.

The supporting materials at the end (appendix, notes, bibliography, index locorum, and general index) are useful. Especially helpful is the appendix, which, though by admission not comprehensive (197), follows closely on the discussion presented in the first chapter and provides a succinct summary with relevant citations of many of the politeness strategies discussed throughout. Overall, Hall has written an informative and rewarding book. Though it will not radically alter the course of Ciceronian research, this book nevertheless succeeds in illuminating a relatively uncharted aspect of Cicero's correspondence, and as such it ought to find its way onto the reading list of anyone interested in Cicero's letters or the politics and social interactions of the Late Republic.

Notes:

1. Brown, P. and S. Levinson. 1987. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.