

Concatenantur sibi epistulae nostrae

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Sara Fascione



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71121 Foggia, Via Genoveffa De Troia 35

Sito web: www.ilcastelloedizioni.it

e-mail: info@ilcastelloedizioni.it

Direttore editoriale: Antonio Blasotta

Editing: Alba Subrizio

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'Hidden structures' in Symmachus' letter collection

SARA FASCIONE

(Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II)

According to a common opinion, Symmachus' epistolary *corpus* would offer to its readers a monotonous repetition of refined but banal conversations, abused epistolary *topoi*, letters of recommendation, exchanges of greetings and pleasantries of various kinds¹. This idea is strengthened by the inconsistency in arrangement criteria between books 1-7, where letters are collected in groups by addressee according to Cicero's precedent, and books 8-10, where letter order follows a principle of variety of addressees and themes, like in Pliny.

Despite the clear differences between the books, they are all organised according to the same principle of thematic variety, which gives cohesion to the collection as a whole. The *varietas*, of course, far from being a chaotic sequence of letters, is regulated by patterns repeating with consistency; the internal architecture of the collection re-

¹ See against this opinion Marcone 1983, 56, who invites his readers to avoid considering Symmachus' letters as «foglie secche senza fiori o parole senza contenuto». Cf. Matthews 1975, 7.

veals the presence of ramifications innervating the whole collection both in books 1-7, which have been prepared for publication by Symmachus², and in the section 8-10, probably put together in a much later period³. This complex 'hidden' structure connects the various parts of the *corpus* at different levels, creating linkages between entire books, between letters within the same group, between groups within the same book, between letters in different groups or even in different books.

As known, the addressees of the first section of the collection are selected and distributed on the basis of their origin or closeness to a specific political and cultural context⁴. For this reason, the position of individual groups

² Whether book 1 was collected and published by Symmachus before the editorial intervention of Memmius on books 2-7, or also books 2-7 had been prepared for publication by Symmachus before his death, and then just offered for circulation among friends by Memmius, is still topic of debate: see Salzman-Roberts 2011, liv-lxvi; Sogno 2016, 175-184. Book 1 seems to be a perfect unit for its balanced structure, the display of erudition through allusions, the choice of sophisticated terms and expressions, and the date of composition of its letters (which were all written before 385 – see Kelly 2015, 214-217; Cameron 2016, 72 ss.); according to the judgment of modern scholarship, books 2-7 have been more roughly put together, the difference being attributed to the 'work in progress' status of the preliminary collection of books 2-7, gathered by Symmachus before his death but not perfected, or to Memmius' less careful arrangement: Seeck 1883, xxii-xxxix; Matthews 1974, 67 ss.; Callu 2002, xiii-xiv.

³ Scholars mainly agree that books 8-10 were collected and included in Memmius' edition well after the death of the author, namely in 6th century Ostrogothic Italy. The hypothesis has been first advanced by Roda 1979, 43 ss. For Callu 2002, xiii-xiv the publication of the last books cannot be attributed to intellectuals living in Ostrogothic Italy.

⁴ A similar pattern is present in Sidonius Apollinaris' letter collection. When organising his collection, Sidonius follows broad chronological criteria to outline his career from his urban prefecture to the bishopric; within this main structure, he gathers letters in clusters basing on geographical, political or cultural factors: on the use of *dossiers* in Sidonius' letters cf. Mathisen 2013, 235-247; van Waarden 2016, 22-23. One relevant precedent in this respect can be found in Cicero's *ad familiares*: for example, Cicero's book 6 puts together letters

by addressee is determined by precise criteria following a broad chronological pattern which replicates the main political changes occurring in the years 370s-402. For instance, book 1 and 3 gather exchanges with people connected to Ausonius and the imperial court in Trier⁵, offering an epistolary narrative of the period of reconciliation between the senatorial aristocracy in Rome and the court of Treviri from the death of Valentinian I to the consolidation of Theodosius' power. Book 4, on the other hand, with its letters to Stilicho and to people close to him, marks a shift in the power games in continuity with Theodosius' politics⁶.

Thus, the overall arrangement of books 1-7 follows a clear logic, where a broader characterization of their historical background overlaps with the narrative of Symmachus' 'family saga'; this is done through a system of symmetries that can be attributed to a consistent, though maybe incomplete editorial project⁷. The basic design of this section highlights the milestones in the family history of the Symmachi-Nicomachi⁸. The collection opens with the exchange between Symmachus and his father, at the beginning of the first book⁹; these letters praise Sym-

concerning the situation of the exiled supporters of Pompey, while book 16 is devoted to the characterisation of Tiro.

⁵ Bruggisser 1993, 25-30, Pellizzari 1998, 22-29 and Kelly 2015, 214-217 have examined the context of composition of these two books. It is worth noting that both in Pliny and in Symmachus book 1 and 3 are linked by relevant similarities. In his first and third book, Pliny organises his letters in thematic groups of three (cf. Bodel 2015, 68-69); Symmachus' books 1 and 3 collect letters referring to the same socio-political context, i.e. the court of Trier and Ausonius' circle.

⁶ Cfr. Marcone 1987, 17 ff.

⁷ This system of symmetries has been identified by Peter 1901, 147; Sogno 2006, 61 f.; Cameron 2011, 370; Sogno 2016, 179 ff.

⁸ Cf. Sogno 2006, 61: each book, with the exception of books 2 and 6, corresponds to a specific phase of Symmachus' life.

⁹ Letters 1-12 of Symmachus' book 1, which also include a letter by

machus' ancestors, and highlight how learned, powerful and rich the Symmachi are. The second book is completely devoted to Nicomachus Flavianus, the author's dearest friend. Going on towards the seventh book, however, the political rehabilitation of Nicomachus Flavianus *iunior* after his father's suicide and Memmius' career become increasingly central themes. From book 4 onwards, the attention gradually moves to the younger members of the family, who make their way into the political world and perpetuate their fathers' legacy, with the burdens and privileges associated to it.

This continuity between the old and the new generations is emphasized by the overall structure of the book-unit 1-7. While the collection, as mentioned, opens with the letters addressing Symmachus' father, book 7 is introduced by the epistles to Memmius, his son, a young man who is successfully advancing in the *cursus honorum* (*epist.* 7,1-14); in letter 7,1, the author looks with pride at Memmius' success and brilliant future career, presented as an outstanding achievement for both (*Symm. epist.* 7,1,3 *Sume alacer paterni sermonis auspiciam et deinceps officii parilis in nos esto munificus. ... Optato igitur laetare processu et propagatos tibi annos vitae atque honoris interpretare (longiora enim fiunt, quae differuntur) nec dubites utrique nostrum prospexisse Fortunam, ut et tuus magistratus iuuetur praesentia patris et ego festorum tuorum coram defruar voluptate*). A similar pattern connects the second book, addressing Nicomachus Flavianus *senior*, and the sixth one, where the only addressees are Flavianus *iunior* and his wife, Symmachus' daughter. Like in *Symm. epist.* 7,1, letter 6,1 deals with the relationship between generations: in this case, Symmachus encourages the son-in-law to keep the memory of his father alive¹⁰.

Avianus Symmachus addressing his son (*Symm. epist.* 1,2).

¹⁰ *Symm. epist.* 6,1,3 *Vivat modo et in patris celebri memoria solacium*

However, the balancing system connecting the first and the seventh book is not exclusively related to the theme of the continuity of family traditions, but goes further in affecting letter order within the general architecture of the work. Symmachus' epistolary *corpus* reveals very limited information about the relationship between pagans and Christians in the late fourth century¹¹. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the only two epistles referring to people explicitly mentioned as Christian over more than nine hundred letters are respectively in the first and in the seventh book and present remarkable similarities. They are both letters of recommendation for bishops, Clemens in 1,64 and Severus in 7,51; they are praised for their irreprehensible conduct and deeds, which make them worthy of respect despite their religious affiliation (compare *epist.* 1,64,1 *Commendari a me episcopum forte mireris. Causa istud mihi, non secta persuasit; epist.* 7,51 *Habeant fortassis aliae commendationes meae interpretationem benignitatis: ista iudicii est. Trado enim sancto pectori tuo fratrem meum Severum episcopum omnium sectarum adtestatione laudabilem*)¹². Furthermore, these are the only two open mentions of Christian bishops in Symmachus' epistolary *corpus* and the only two explicit references to Christian religion; the latter is qualified in both cases with the term *secta*, which, what is more, Symmachus uses only here and in *rel.* 3¹³.

tuum et in tua salute paterna reparatio.

¹¹ Cf. Cameron 2016, 112.

¹² The characterisation of the two bishops is positive; Symmachus expresses a similar appreciation for Damasus in *rel.* 21,6. On Symmachus' representation of Clemens cf. Fascione 2021a.

¹³ The term has no negative connotation: in *rel.* 3,3 and in *rel.* 3, 19 *secta* is used respectively with reference to the Roman traditional religion and to all religions: cf. *rel.* 3,3 *Certe dinumerentur Principes utriusque sectae, utriusque sententiae: pars eorum prior caerimonias patrum coluit, recentior non remouit; 3,19 Faveant Clementiae vestrae sectarum omnium arcana praesidia et haec maxime, quae maiores vestros aliquando iuverunt.* Furthermore, in *Symm. epist.* 8,28 *inter sodales Apollinis ac*

The principle of symmetry shaping the general architecture of the collection also affects letter order within the individual groups by addressee, like in book 3. In the correspondence to Naucellius, the theme of the old age interlaces and alternates with observations on the addressee's language and style, as well as with the motif of the journey. The seven epistles (3,10-16) are arranged according to a clear symmetrical pattern: the *incipit* of 3,10 expresses Naucellius' desire to receive longer texts from Symmachus (*epist.* 3,10 *Expectas a me litteras largiores*), while 3,16 is a reply to his request for a more frequent exchange (*epist.* 3,16 *Fortasse arguas diuturnum silentium meum. Nolo adplices hanc moram neglegentiae*); the second, fourth and sixth letter deal with the theme of old age, those in the second and the sixth position both address the motif of the *gravitas* in style¹⁴.

The six letters addressing Gregorius Proculus (3,17-22) follow a similar pattern. The thematic variety is here realised through alternation rather than through symmetry: the letters in the first, third and fifth position deal with political issues, while those in the second, fourth and sixth place focus on the features of the epistolary exchange with the addressee. The opening text of the group, *epist.* 3,17, marks the beginning of the correspondence between Symmachus and his friend on the occasion of Gregorius' election as quaestor. Here the author sets the parameters for their future exchange, which will require *adsiduae scriptorum familiarium vices*¹⁵, and introduces the two main themes characterising the entire group, the *cur-sus honorum* and the duties of epistolary friendship. The

Dianae sectator utriusque numerabere the term *sectator* playfully qualifies the addressee Maximus as a disciple of Diana and Apollo.

¹⁴ The structure of the exchange is analysed in Fascione 2020, 267-268.

¹⁵ *Symm. epist.* 3,17,2.

motif of public engagement and office holding is further developed in 3,19 and 21, respectively dealing with Syagrius' election to consulship¹⁶ and with a delegation to the newly elected consul, which Symmachus is not going to join¹⁷. On the other hand, the topic of the duties of epistolary friendship is addressed in the letters 18, 20 and 22: after accusing Gregorius of not having sent him *aliquid verborum familiarium* when he had been designated for delivering an official speech¹⁸ (*epist.* 3,18), in 3,20 the author, annoyed by the prolonged silence of the friend, refuses to invent new words for the pleasure of the friend (*non meditabor nova verba, non excogitabo sententias*); in letter 3,22 Symmachus finally forgives the addressee and praises his writings for their *inventionum prudentia, ... novitate sensuum vel antiquitate verborum*¹⁹.

Once again, the regular alternating scheme gives coherence to this small and apparently chaotic letter group. Even the choice of matching the two main topics aims at creating cohesion throughout the six epistles, as they highlight the complete range of duties of the good Roman senator, that is, to entertain relations of courtesy with friends and actively participate in political life. Furthermore, the representation of the two correspondents and of their approach towards their duties is perfectly specular: they both have disregarded their duties and the other's

¹⁶ Symm. *epist.* 3,19,1 *Germani mei vicaria potestate gaudeo, tamquam mihi decus honoris accesserit. Vestro quoque in eum favore delector, tamquam aliquid ipse praestiterit. Cum quo inlustrem virum Syagrium fides certa est operam bonae frugis adnism.*

¹⁷ Symm. *epist.* 3,21,1 *Vellem te legato uti apud optimum consulem purgandae atque excusandae absentiae meae, si scirem quod tu mihi in ea re primus ignosceres.*

¹⁸ Symm. *epist.* 3,18,1-2 *Restat, quod minime volo, ut fatearis amicitiae negligentiam. Nam officia si plerumque deseras, occupatio est, si semper, oblivio... Et certe interfuit sollicitudinis tuae exerere aliquid verborum familiarium, cum mihi de scriniis tuis profecta delegaretur oratio.*

¹⁹ Symm. *epist.* 3,22,1.

expectations, since Gregorius has neglected the epistolary exchange with his important friend, and Symmachus has not taken part in the delegation to the consul Syagrius.

The technique of linking letters through thematic continuity acts on multiple levels, affecting letter order within individual groups by addressee as well as connecting letters of different groups. For example, the motif of the contrast between *novitas* and linguistic *vetustas* is developed in *Symm. epist.* 3,11 (*Symm. epist.* 3,11,2 *Stet igitur inter nos ista pactio, ut me quidem iuuet vetustatis exemplar de autographo tuo sumere, te autem non paeniteat scriptorum meorum ferre novitatem*), 3,22 (*Quae enim pars litterarum tuarum uel inventionum prudentia caruit vel novitate sensuum uel antiquitate verborum?*) and 3,44 (3,44,1 *Concedo in leges tuas et ἀρχαῖσμιδὸν scribendi non invitus adfecto. Tu tamen fac memineris illud potius simplex nonnullis videri, quod sequentis aetatis usus recepit. Vis ut epistulis nostris more maiorum nuda nomina praeferantur? Si tibi vetustatis tantus est amor, pari studio in verba prisca redeamus, quibus Salii canunt et augures avem consulunt et decemviri tabulas condiderunt*), according to a clear progressive sequence which highlights this specific topic as particularly relevant for the understanding of the book as a unit²⁰. In 3,11, the author congratulates Naucellius for his archaizing writings, which are in open contrast with the *novitas* characterising the eloquence of their contemporaries, including Symmachus²¹. The motif of the *novitas-vetustas* reappears, as mentioned, in 3,22 to Gregorius²² and in 3,44, where Siburius' archaism is presented as a violation of the epistolary practice

²⁰ On archaism in Symmachus' circle of addressees see Cracco Ruggini 1981, 488-494; Cracco Ruggini 1986, 107; Haverling 1995, 219-220.

²¹ By praising Naucellius' archaism Symmachus echoes Fronto: cf. Fascione 2021b.

²² *Symm. epist.* 3,22,1 *Quae enim pars litterarum tuarum uel inventionum prudentia caruit vel novitate sensuum uel antiquitate verborum?*

and of the language of his times. According to this reading, one would expect to include also letter 88 in the series; I admit, however, that here linguistic archaism is not mentioned. This interruption of the 'chain' could perhaps be attributed to the incomplete state of the collection in books 2-10, probably lacking the formal care that the author had dedicated to book 1 before its publication.

As mentioned, if the editor of books 1-7 has collected the letters by addressee, in the wake of Cicero and Fronto, the last three books of Symmachus' epistolary *corpus* are arranged according to visibly different criteria, closer to Pliny's precedent. However, the same principle of ordered thematic variety encountered within the individual correspondences to Naucellius and Gregorius is extended and applied with consistency, and according to similar patterns, to the entire book 8. Its 74 letters form different thematic clusters which create a perfectly balanced architecture thanks to the internal connections and a consistent main narrative line.

A system of correspondences between the first and last epistle gives unity to book 8. Letter 8,1 opens with *compertum habeo*, the other with *certum habeo*; one mentions *munus litterarum* (8,1 *ideo mirari me ac stupere confiteor cur tanta virtute atque humanitate praeditus iampridem circa me munere litterarum [causis occupationis]abstineas*), the other *munus amicitiae* (8,74 *Merito amicitiae munus adripui; quod si pari lance reddideris, studium meum incitamento religionis acuetur*); the last sentence in 8,1 opens with *quod etsi*, 8,74 ends with *quod si*²³.

Furthermore, at the beginning of the book (letters 2 and 3), Symmachus locates himself in Campania, where he is enjoying the pleasures of the summer season. In 8,3, the author informs the addressee that he is going to take

²³ Cf. Fascione 2020, 268.

his way back to Rome before the winter cold²⁴. On several occasions throughout the book, we can find references to Symmachus' stay in Campania and to his distance from the city; however, the further the reading proceeds, the more the reader's attention is directed towards what is happening in Rome and towards the events concerning the career of Flavianus *iunior* and Memmius. Letters 60-64 are insistent requests for news from Rome; in letter 70, the author announces the forthcoming journey back to Rome which had been anticipated in 8,³²⁵; the book closes with Symmachus' effort in promoting Memmius' success in Rome (71-73)²⁶. The narrative sequence replicates in a circumscribed unit the path outlined at macroscopic level in books 1-7: it opens with a journey to Campania²⁷ (letter 1-12 in book 1) and with the depiction of Symmachus' life and career in the first books, and closes with the establishment of a new generation and a new political order. This is done with total disregard to the original context of composition of the letters; the reader is lead to focus on the story instead of considering the identity of the individual addressee and the dating of the individual letters, which are not relevant and are left in the background when considering the book as a whole.

²⁴ Symm. epist. 8,3 *Ipse bonae valetudinis compos revisere patriam fortuna suffragante constitui, priusquam labor itinerum processu adultae hiemis augeatur.*

²⁵ Symm. epist. 8,70 *In bono statu valetudinis sumus et relegere <iter in> Urbi propinqua meditamur.*

²⁶ Symm. epist. 8,71 *Praefato divinitatis favore, urbanae praeturae fasces filius meus Symmachus kalendis Ianuariis sortietur. Praesentia tua ornari eius officium participata petitione deprecimus; 72 Divinitatis honore praemisso filius meus Symmachus kalendis Ianuariis praeturae urbanae accipiet magistratum. Quaeso ut praesentia tua festa nostra cohonestet Sed quia spes datur Symmacho meo integrandae paulatim bonae valetudinis, redit animus ad amicitiae munia, ut si quem tibi taciturnitas mea metum fecerat, securitas sermonis absolvat.*

²⁷ On Symmachus' depiction of Campania see Polara 1995.

This main narrative arc encloses smaller sequences where contiguous texts are clustered to give continuity and creating cohesion. Beyond the presence of recurring terms in the letter group 5-10²⁸, there are several thematic links connecting the other epistles into contiguous micro-units. The couple 11-12 develops the same theme with the same argumentations (Symmachus apologises for having rarely written to a friend, explaining that true affection is in the substance, not in formal exchanges). *Symm. epist.* 8,13 and 14 have the same structure but contrasting themes: in the first letter, the addressee Apollodorus is presented as free from any public duty, and Symmachus wishes him a pleasant return home (*reditus felix*)²⁹; in the second text, the friends Caecilianus and Probianus are too busy with public duties, and again Symmachus wishes them to be soon free and to embark on a pleasant journey (*iter felix*)³⁰.

This recurring pattern of couples and triplets underlies almost the entire book. In the above-mentioned cases, the common structure, the use of same argumentations or the repetition of individual terms are the main clustering devices. Nonetheless, sometimes the connection is more subtle, like in the group 21-29. In letter 21, Symmachus states that he is on a journey heading to the celebration for Stilicho's consulate; then, he invites Lucillus to the praetorian games for Memmius. In 29, the author thanks Salvius for having conferred to Flavianus *iunior* the hon-

²⁸ This element has already been highlighted by Seeck 1883, xcii-cxciii; Callu 2003, 117; Roda 1981, 63-64. According to Seeck, these letters have been written in the same period; this would explain the terminological similarities: cf. Seeck 1883, xcii.

²⁹ *Symm. epist.* 8,13 *Mea cum filio sanitas ope divinitatis in solido est; tibi ut salus valida et reditus felix secundet tam nostra vota quam tua merita praestabunt.*

³⁰ *Symm. epist.* 8,14 *Praestabit caelestium favor ut mandatis patriae absoluti iter felix ad ludorum nostrorum sollemne relegatis.*

or of an excellent position through Stilicho's intercession; within this frame, 22 and 23 are linked by the common reference to Homer and Homeric myths³¹, letters 24-26 are variations on the theme of epistolary *brevitas*³²; moreover, 8,27-28 are brief *consolationes* respectively for Censorinus, who has been attacked by pirate raids, and for Romanus, mourning the death of a friend.

The juxtaposition between different topics is only apparently lacking in coherence. *Symm. epist.* 8,21, mentioning the consul Stilicho, is followed by 22, developing the argument that great men must be praised even by people of lower rank or talent³³. The sequence between the two texts is not accidental and aims to extend Stilicho's praise beyond the boundaries of the letter which explicitly mentions him. This allusive technique will be used in a similar way, but with totally opposite results, by Sidonius Apollinarius, in his own book 8: immediately after the ironic panegyric for the Visigothic king Euric in letter 8,9, Sidonius places a letter to Ruricius, stating that it is characteristic of the most eloquent men to demonstrate their exceptional abilities when the subject of their praise is sterile³⁴.

A similar strategy emerges in the group 27-29. In 27 Symmachus comforts his friend by saying that, since happiness never lasts forever, men just have to hope for the best (*spes ... adsumenda meliorum*); in 28, Romanus is consoled for the loss of a mutual friend (*Symm. epist.* 8,28

³¹ *Symm. epist.* 8,22,2 *Nihil ex hoc derogabitur operis tui gloriae; nam et Homerum novimus a dissimilibus praedicari*; 8,23,2 *Principium voluptatum de Formiano sinu nascitur, quae civitas quondam Laestrygonum populo fertur habitata*.

³² *Symm. epist.* 8,24,1 *Convenit tamen brevitatis huic paginae, quia relatu digna praecerpsi*; 8,26,1 *Ipse copiam redde brevitati, quia familiares paginas eos oportet extendere, quibus non est necesse geminare*.

³³ *Symm. epist.* 8,22,2 *Nihil ex hoc derogabitur operis tui gloriae; nam et Homerum novimus a dissimilibus praedicari. Careret quippe fama magnorum virorum celebritate, si etiam minoribus testibus contenta non esset*.

³⁴ Cf. Fascione 2019, 365 ff.

Meminisse te scio quod me quoque idem de amico dolor percussit; sed iam nobis sermonum vices debent esse solacio. Scribo igitur ut respondere cogaris et a funestis cogitationibus redeas in officia viventium. Fecerat religiosa causa ne prior scriberes: non eris tam inreverens, ut provocatus abstineas). Therefore, reference in the following letter to Flavianus and to his rehabilitation after the tragic death of Symmachus' dearest friend, Nicomachus Flavianus *senior*, cannot be fortuitous (Symm. *epist.* 8,29 *Promptius igitur te diligo, postquam hoc votum bonae mentis inspexi, et quamvis ipse domino pectoris mei excellentissimo viro scriptorum gratiam pro Flaviani fratris tui honore retulerim, nihilominus tamen quaeso ut etiam <tu> magnitudinem gratulationis meae apud auctorem tanti beneficii digneris adstruere*). The success of the son-in-law after a troubled period is a consequence of what has been claimed in letter 27 about hope that must never die despite the adversities of fate.

This scheme is further replicated at the end of the book. In 8,69 Symmachus bitterly writes that, since he has been deprived of any possibility of political action, he has no choice but to hope for his son's progress (8,69 *Dii dabunt incrementa annorum parvulo meo... Interea frequentibus epistulis desidiam meam stimula. Unum quippe hoc litterarum genus superest*); the three following letters, from 70 to 73, conclude the entire book by showing Memmius' success in the studies and in politics.

As emerges from this brief analysis, the arrangement of book 8 follows a complex structure. The same regulated variety dominating book 3 is present also here, but in a different way. If the design underlying the correspondences with Naucellius and Gregorius is mainly based on principles of symmetry, antithesis and alternation, here we have diptychs and triptychs, which sometimes connect to each other to form a wider, consistent architecture. This is another relevant similarity between Symmachus' book

8 and the organising criteria used in the second half of the fifth century by Sidonius; he too clusters letters to different addressees in micro-groups of two or three texts within a wider structure. The analogies between the two late antique letter writers are even more significant when considering that Symmachus' books 8-10 are mostly believed to have been put together and published between the end of the fifth century and the beginning of the sixth century³⁵. In absence of further elements proving this assumption, the mentioned similarities may be considered as evidence of the fact that the closing section of Symmachus' work probably originated in the same cultural context of Sidonius' writings.

In conclusion, Symmachus' epistolary *corpus* is covered by a system of hidden structures which creates cohesion between letters and books, even if they are arranged according to different criteria. The shared unifying principle, the *varietas*, is used to highlight specific topics by creating contrasts, symmetries and continuity. The final result is a mosaic³⁶, where each piece can be appreciated both when it is considered individually and when it is seen as part of a larger unit. The organised variety creates a complex and well-ordered system of interlacing and overlapping structures; it is used by the editor of the collection with full awareness to draw the stories of the fourth-century orator and of his addressees while depicting their world in the background.

In this respect, the arrangement in Symmachus' letter collection is similar to that of Seneca's and Pliny's epistolary works. In both cases a consistent narrative logic, outlining respectively Lucilius' spiritual growth and the evolution of Pliny's career through the juxtaposition of

³⁵ Cf. note 3.

³⁶ For the comparison between mosaic techniques and poetic forms, with particular reference to Late Antiquity, cf. Roberts 1989, 76-91.

the epistles, is overlaid by an intricate net of relationships between books, groups of letters, individual letters or parts of them³⁷. This guarantees “the concurrent presence of all ideas”³⁸, where different themes intertwine and continually re-emerge to depict the context of the main events; by so doing, they become part of the main message of the work.

This way of arranging the topics both in a diachronic and in a synchronic sense can be easily detected in Pliny’s collection, which outlines at the same time the story of Pliny and that of the *nobilitas senatoria* struggling with the crisis of the most fundamental Roman values. Pliny masterfully realizes what Cornelius Nepos had already observed about Cicero’s letters to Atticus: although the collection is not a work of historiography, it offers an account of his time, fragmented in the details provided in each letter (Nep. *Att.* 16,2-4³⁹). This is valid also for Symmachus’ work. The alternation of themes according to a complex structural system is precisely the device that he, or his editor, uses to depict his world, with all its facets and contradictions.

e-mail: sara.fascione@unina.it

³⁷ On this aspect see the chapter *Le Epistole di Seneca: criteri dispositivi* in this book.

³⁸ The expression is used by Mazzoli 1989, 1862 with reference to arrangement criteria in Seneca’s letters.

³⁹ Nep. *Att.* 16, 2-4 *Quamquam eum praecipue dilexit Cicero, ut ne frater quidem ei Quintus carior fuerit aut familiarior. Ei rei sunt indicio praeter eos libros, in quibus de eo facit mentionem, qui in vulgus sunt editi, undecim volumina epistularum ab consulatu eius usque ad extremum tempus ad Atticum missarum; quae qui legat, non multum desideret historiam contextam eorum temporum. Sic enim omnia de studiis principum, vitiis ducum, mutationibus rei publicae perscripta sunt, ut nihil in his non appareat et facile existimari possit prudentiam quodam modo esse divinationem.* Gibson 2012, 57 points out that the passage is evidence of the fact that letter collections were read in antiquity as sources on the political and social history of a specific period.

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