

Jerome's Passion for Letters
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Beyond the Vulgate Bible itself, the passage of Jerome perhaps best known to classicists is *Epist. XXII* (Ad Eustochium), in which Jerome recounts how he turned away from pagan literature. Previously unable to refrain from reading Plautus and Cicero and disdaining the dreadful style (*sermo incultus*) of the scriptures, Jerome had a vision, brought on by a life-threatening illness, in which he found himself standing before a heavenly judge. The judge's stern rebuke that Jerome was a follower not of Christ but of Cicero ("*Ciceronianus es, non Christianus*") and the subsequent spiritual lashing Jerome received were sufficient warnings to keep him away from pagan literature for years to come. Hagendahl's *The Latin Fathers and the Classics* provides an exhaustive examination of the pagan literature that influenced Jerome; responding to reviews he expanded upon the list of influences in a later article. While accepting with enthusiasm many suggestions of Jerome's indebtedness to Virgil, Lucretius, and other weighty texts, he rejected the suggestion of Godel that one could find a solid echo of the *Ars Amatoria* in the letter to Eustochium. Godel's suggestion that we consider the relationship between Jerome's "*si pes laxa pelle non folleat*" (*Epist.* 22.28.3) and "*nec vagus in laxa pes tibi pelle natet*" (*Ars.* 1.516) provoked a harsh response. "Do such trivialities actually imply literary dependency?"

I will argue that they do indeed. Jerome's description of his illness, in fact, is heavily laden with the terminology of elegy, and his suffering arose from his passion for pagan literature. Jerome presents his vision of the trial as proof of the dangers of over-familiarity with pagan letters, which he labels an *adulterium linguae*. Doubtless scholars may have an instinctive reaction that reliance upon elegy would be wholly inappropriate in a didactic letter on chastity, yet I would argue that Jerome evokes elegy precisely because of its effectiveness in painting passion — whether for letters or love — as illness.