“Salve atque vale, aselle.” Satire and Consolation in Laura Cereta’s *In asinarium funus oratio*

QUINN GRIFFIN

*The humanist Laura Cereta of Brescia (1469-1499) produced during her lifetime one collection of letters and a Latin dialogue entitled In asinarium funus oratio (Oration on the Funeral of a Donkey). In this dialogue, Cereta herself appears as the chief interlocutor, consoling the donkey’s owners with a blend of ancient philosophies. This paper will further the understanding of Cereta’s Oratio in three ways: first, by placing it in the context of the humanist and classical genres of dialogue, consolation, and satirical encomium; second, by considering the relevance of the donkey to the work as a whole; and finally, by exploring Cereta’s reception of classical authors in the context of her consolation. The paper argues that Cereta’s blending of genres and use of a donkey as the subject of her oration work to create a safe space for the humanist woman to showcase her rhetorical talents.**

1. Introduction

The humanist Laura Cereta of Brescia was born in 1469 to a moderately wealthy family. She received an education from her father before being sent to study in a convent, after which she resumed her studies with an unnamed private tutor. Unlike most other women academics of the period, Cereta continued to study after her marriage to the merchant Pietro Serina in 1484, which ended in his death less than two years later, and maintained a correspondence with humanist scholars and religious figures until her death in 1499.

Within her short lifetime, Cereta produced a collection of these letters and one longer work entitled *In asinarium funus oratio* (*Oration on the Funeral of a Donkey*), written in 1485. In this dialogue, Cereta herself appears as the chief interlocutor, consoling the donkey Asellus’ acquaintances with a blend of philosophy and rhetoric heavily influenced by

* This paper is a continuation of two talks: “Philosophy and Consolation in Laura Cereta’s Dialogue on the Funeral of a Donkey”, Kentucky Foreign Language Conference, Lexington, KY, 24 April 2015; and “Laura Cereta’s *In asinarium funus oratio*”, Society for Classical Studies, San Francisco, CA, 8 January 2016. Many thanks to the panel organizers and audiences for their helpful feed-back; and to my reviewers for their suggestions, especially those regarding manuscript readings and translation issues.

classical sources. Cereta's *oratio* has been published in a modern edition by Albert Rabil, who bases his text on the two available manuscripts. The work has since been translated, alongside many of Cereta's letters, by Diana Robin, who also offers a brief analysis of the work's style and content, noting vocabulary and plot elements that recall Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, in addition to other classical parallels.¹

2. Genre and Context

Though Cereta refers consistently to this work as an *oratio* in her letters, the piece actually takes the form of a dialogue. Her decision to use the word *oratio* is perhaps indicative of her self-described role as the *oratrix* of the piece; while the two other characters participate in mourning and eulogizing the donkey, it is Cereta who directs their efforts. After invoking the Muses and digressing into several philosophical asides on the nature of the donkey's soul, Cereta invites each of two interlocutors (the donkey's owner Soldus and his slave Philonacus, neither of whom express any particular relationship to Cereta) to speak in turn, responding to each with words of consolation.

The form of Cereta's work is in keeping with Renaissance trends regarding the genre of dialogue. The dialogue was a popular format in the humanist era: one has only to look to Petrarch's *Secretum*, Bruni's *Dialogi ad Petrum Paulum Histrum*, Valla's *De vero falsoque bono*, and the works of Pontano for other examples. These works were inspired in part by the dialogues of Cicero and Seneca, but often diverged from the straightforward Ciceronian model, in which the ultimate goal was to uncover the true nature of a topic, and borrowed instead from the Lucianic tradition of satirical dialogue.² As Marsh argues:

¹ These manuscripts are: Venezia, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, ms. Lat. XI 28 (4186), f. 11r-24v (incomplete), and Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, ms. Vat. lat. 3176, f. 5r-14r. The modern editions and translation appear in: A. Rabil (ed.), *Laura Cereta. Quattrocento Humanist* (Binghamton, NY, 1981), 118-134; and D. Robin (tr.), *Laura Cereta, Collected Letters of a Renaissance Feminist* (Chicago, IL, 1997), 180-202.

² D. Marsh, *The Quattrocento Dialogue. Classical Tradition and Humanist Innovation* (Cambridge, MA, 1980). For the development of non-Ciceronian styles of dialogue in the Quattrocento, see also V. Cox, *The Renaissance Dialogue. Literary Dialogue in its Social and Political Contexts, Castiglione to Galileo* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), 23.

Unlike the Ciceronian model, the humanist dialogue intentionally seeks to create ambiguities [...] which demonstrate both the range of rhetorical inquiry and the instability of traditional criteria.³

Cereta's work reflects the trend Marsh identifies. For example, while she presents many possibilities as to the donkey's afterlife in the course of consoling her audience, she never reaches a conclusion as to his soul's fate. Rather, the many possibilities she mentions serve to showcase her own knowledge of ancient philosophy and destabilize the audience's understanding of the donkey's afterlife.

Cereta's work is also consistent with the humanist reaction to the classical genre of philosophical consolation, most importantly the works of Cicero, Seneca and Boethius, as well as the pseudo-Ovidian *Consolatio ad Liviam* and the letters of Paul.⁴ Humanist responses to the genre of consolation did not merely copy these sources. Rather, the humanists expanded on ancient and Christian traditions of consolation "to include an increasingly secular canon of ills that included not only the familiar tragedies of bereavement, fear of death, and illness, but also those more esoteric [topics]."⁵ In so doing, they tended to draw from a variety of genres and philosophical schools in order to console their intended audiences. Petrarch is emblematic of many of these trends, portraying himself as a *medicus animorum* who blends "the remedies of the love poet, the consolations of the philosopher, the admonitions of the priest, and the salves of the doctor" in his treatise *De remediis utriusque fortunae* (*On Remedies for Good and Ill Fortune*).⁶

Cereta, too, uses a variety of strategies to console her audience. Her character emphasizes two methods in particular partway through the dialogue:

Enitar ipsa nunc pro causae nervis ea complecti quae possint figuris suis et suasabili argumento vestros animos ad arbitrium a dolore subvehere. (499-502)⁷

³ Marsh 1980 (as in n. 2), 14-15.

⁴ See G.W. McClure, *Sorrow and Consolation in Italian Humanism* (Princeton, NJ, 1981).

⁵ McClure 1981 (as in n. 4), 155.

⁶ McClure 1981 (as in n. 4), 18.

⁷ All references to Cereta's *Oratio* correspond to the line numbers in Rabil's edition (as in n. 1), which I have checked against both manuscript copies. All translations are mine.

I myself should now strive for the sake of our chief cause to embrace what might be able to lift your minds from grief to reason – figurative speech and persuasive argument.

When using persuasive argument, Cereta's character turns to philosophical questions such as the nature of the soul; when using figurative speech, she borrows metaphors from Seneca and other authors. In addition to these two strategies Cereta also draws on Pliny and other authors to create a humorous encomium to the donkey, drawing on a third source of comfort for her audience: the memory of Asellus' good character.

In creating this encomium, Cereta's *oratio* also engages with the genre of the eulogy or funeral oration. This was an extremely common genre, as evidenced by McManamon's *incipitarium* of Renaissance funeral orations and panegyric literature, which spans over one thousand pages.⁸ The subject of Cereta's funeral oration, however, places her work in the context of two more specialized genres. Eulogies for animals, usually favorite pets, were common from antiquity into the Renaissance. Lesbia's sparrow, eulogized by Catullus (*Carm.* 3); Corinna's parrot, memorialized in Ovid's *Amores* 1.6; as well as the eulogies of Martial for the dog Issa (*Epigr.* 1.109) and Statius for the parrot Psittacus (*Silv.* 1.4) were favorite models for Medieval and Renaissance writers composing memorials for their own pets, or those of wealthy patrons like Isabella d'Este, whose dog Aura's death in 1511 inspired an elaborate funeral and a series of epitaphs and letters of condolence from several poets and scholars including the eminent Pietro Bembo.⁹

The tone of Cereta's work, however, is not as sincere as these efforts. In this respect, it evokes the more specific sub-genre of the satirical encomium, or adoxography, which was practiced in antiquity by Lucian in *The Fly* and other works, and continued by humanists such as Leon

⁸ J.M. McManamon, *An Incipitarium of Funeral Orations and a Smattering of Other Panegyric Literature from the Italian Renaissance (ca. 1350-1550)* (www.luc.edu/media/lucedu/history/pdfs/Incipit_Catalogue.pdf).

⁹ For a full discussion and several more examples of such pet eulogies, see K. Walker-Meikle, *Medieval Pets* (Woodbridge, 2014), 34-36, 96; and G. Kompatscher Gufler, F. Römer, S. Schreiner (ed.), *Partner, Freunde und Gefährten. Mensch-Tier-Beziehungen der Antike, des Mittelalters und der Neuzeit in lateinischen Texten* (Wien, 2014), 15-42.

Battista Alberti, Theodore Gaza and Erasmus.¹⁰ Though humorous, and sometimes read or composed for entertainment, these works share a serious purpose: the showcasing of the author's rhetorical prowess. What better challenge to one's rhetoric than to praise something as lowly as a fly? The mundane subject matter may also have shielded the author from certain types of criticism. While serious encomia written to real individuals have the potential to be politically charged, Pease notes that "praise or blame of the inanimate or that which lay beneath envy appeared eminently safe to ancient writers, even as the novelty of such topics attracted more attention and admiration for their work."¹¹

Similarly, the satirical encomium functioned as an arena in which humanists could showcase their rhetorical talents while protecting themselves from criticism. The humanist *ioco-seria* genre in fact became so popular as a form of entertainment in the later Renaissance that Dornavius (Caspar Dornau) produced in 1619 an enormous collection of satirical encomia entitled *Amphitheatrum sapientiae Socraticae ioco-seriae*.¹² The compendium includes encomia by ancient and humanist authors organized by subject: *musca*, *arana*, *corvus*, etc. There are eleven entries under *asinus*, including a brief poem by Philip Melanchthon (*Gigantes clamore asini dissipati*) and a longer prose encomium by Cornelius Agrippa, though none appear to have influenced Cereta (and many in fact postdate her work).

¹⁰ On ancient and Renaissance satirical encomium, see respectively A.S. Pease, "Things without Honor", *Classical Philology* 21.1 (1926), 27-42; D. Marsh, *Lucian and the Latins. Humor and Humanism in the Early Renaissance* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1998); and M. van der Poel, "Humanist Rhetoric in the Renaissance: Classical Mastery?", in W. Verbaal, Y. Maes, J. Papy (ed.), *Latinitas Perennis* (Leiden, 2006), 119-138, at 131-132. The adoxography began as a stylistic exercise among the Sophists and continued in the same vein among the humanists. Alberti's *Canis* responds to Gaza's encomium of a dog (see for an analysis of the work M. McLaughlin, "Ritratto dell'artista da cucciolo rinascimentale. Struttura e fonti del *Canis* di Leon Battista Alberti", in Id., *Leon Battista Alberti. La vita, l'umanesimo, le opere letterarie* (Firenze, 2016), 71-96); and his *Muscae encomium* (Praise of the Fly) is inspired by Lucian's work on the same topic. Cf. also Erasmus' 1509 *Praise of Folly*. For vernacular contributions to the genre and its spread outside of Italy, see A.H. Tomarken's two works: *Smile of Truth. The French Satirical Eulogy and its Antecedents* (Princeton, NJ, 2014); and "Flea Encomia and Other Mock Eulogies of Animals", *Fifteenth Century Studies* 11 (1985), 137-148.

¹¹ Pease 1926 (as in n. 10), 30.

¹² Hanau, 1619 [USTC 2135408, 2136916], which was reissued by R. Seidel (Goldbach, 1995).

3. Gender and Voice

Cereta's *oratio* is unique among these examples of dialogue, consolation and encomium not just for its blending of the genres. Cereta also makes a bold choice in assigning the lead role in the dialogue to herself. Cox notes that Quattrocento Italy was infected by "an insatiable appetite for self-images,"¹³ citing the unique context for social development in the Italian city-states as a potential source for the obsession. In this way Cereta's choice is consistent with her literary context. Yet it was in no way typical for a woman author to portray herself as a character in a dialogue.

This is not to say that it was entirely unheard of for a woman to offer wisdom or consolation in a literary work by this time; Boethius in his *De consolatione philosophiae* personifies philosophy as a woman, while Dante relies on Beatrice in his journey to the higher realms. But these figures are larger-than-life, semi-divine even, and are written by male authors. Cereta, in contrast, represents herself, a real woman, as possessing the skills to entertain, console and challenge her audience and her interlocutors.

Cereta was ahead of her time in this regard. As Cox has also argued, female participants did not appear in a published humanist dialogue until 1505, in Pietro Bembo's *Gli Asolani*; and his characters were fictional.¹⁴ In fact, most women characters appearing in dialogues, even those written by women, were fictional. As Smarr argues, this was intentional on the part of the authors, who found that "the dialogue's enclosed dramatic quality permitted women to project a discussion onto invented characters distanced from the female writer."¹⁵ This distance was desirable to women authors due to the scrutiny they endured from their readers, men and women alike, many of whom felt that it was impossible, or at least inappropriate, for women to pursue intellectual renown. Attempts to undermine women's writing often center on these ideas in the humanist period; for instance, some detractors of Cereta (including her contemporary Cassandra Fedele) claimed that her works were written by her father, while other female humanists were said to be

¹³ Cox 1992 (as in n. 2), 24.

¹⁴ V. Cox, "The Female Voice in Italian Renaissance Dialogue", *Modern Language Notes* 128.1 (2013), 53-78, at 56.

¹⁵ J. Smarr, *Joining the Conversation. Dialogues by Renaissance Women* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2005), 295.

unchaste – as in the case of Isotta Nogarola, who was slandered with rumors of incest.¹⁶

Cereta is then self-conscious throughout this work that she is a woman stepping into a vulnerable role as author, interlocutor, consoler, and philosopher within her own dialogue. She addresses these issues in several ways. As noted by Rabil, she often uses the feminine suffix *-trix* when referring to her own occupation, leading to neologisms and rare forms;¹⁷ for instance, in this dialogue she is an *oratrix* (504), a word that may be used to refer to a female suppliant, related to the verb *oro*, but which may also be the feminine of the word *orator*. In a sense, Cereta does present herself as both. She states the fear that she will be banned as an orator within the first twenty-five lines of the dialogue, not terribly strange given the tendency towards false modesty in the tradition of rhetoric, but nonetheless significant given the rarity of women characters in dialogue, as noted above.

Cereta lets her anxieties play out in the dialogue through her character's interactions with Philonacus the slave. After relating his memories of Asellus, he praises Cereta, comparing her to Demosthenes (475-496). Cereta's character, however, believes that Philonacus is mocking her with his hyperbolic praise:

Ab mea dicendi ieiunitate prorsus abhorrens, quo agreste meum ingenium et stilum ipsum femineo sexu languentem atque gestus omnis incultos sub viscario laudis fraudatae tentavit. (510-513)

Shuddering from my deficiency at speaking, he tests with the bait of false praise my rustic *ingenium*, my pen – sluggish because of my female sex – and my entirely uncivilized gestures.

¹⁶ For Fedele's insinuations, see Cereta's letter addressed to Bonifacio Bembo, or, according to Tomasini, Laurentio Capreolo of Bresica (Letter 66 in ms. Vat. lat. 3176, f. 51r-52r; letter 55 in ms. Marc. Lat. XI 28 (4186), f. 85r-87v; Letter 53 in Giacomo Filippo Tomasini (ed.), *Laurae Ceretae feminae clarissimae Brixienensis Epistolae iam primum e manuscriptis in lucem productae a Iacobo Philippo Tomasino, qui eius vitam et notas addidit* (Padova, 1640), 117-122). For the anonymous accusation of incest against Isotta Nogarola see A. Segarizzi, "Niccolo Barbo patrizio veneziano del sec. XV e le accuse contro Isotta Nogarola", *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 43 (1904), 39-54. For other examples of responses to women humanists see L. Jardine, "Women Humanists", in A. Grafton, L. Jardine (ed.), *From Humanism to the Humanities* (Cambridge, MA, 1986), 29-57; and M. King, A. Rabil (ed.), *Her Immaculate Hand* (Asheville, NC, 2000), 11-32.

¹⁷ Rabil 1981 (as in n. 1), 113.

The concerns that Cereta's character expresses here foreshadow the critical reception of the *oratio* during Cereta's lifetime. In 1488, she composed a prologue to her collection of letters in honor of Cardinal Ascanio Maria Sforza, a potential patron. Here she claims that her decision to write the dialogue was a prideful mistake that earned her the resentment of her contemporaries:

Malui favori plebis placere quam mihi. Sic incitata stimulis famae, sensim in prodigum errorem scripturae carpebar. Hinc primo calamo super Aselli cadavere consolata sum gemitorios ululatus in funere. Haec una atque humilis oratio multorum sibi conflavit invidiam. Qui livoris dentes tanquam gladios in me, velut trepidantem inter lupos agulam, diriter inhumaniterque pararunt.¹⁸

I preferred to please the goodwill of the plebs rather than myself. Incited in this way by the goad of fame I was gradually pulled into a grave error in my writing. Hence, I first soothed the mournful cries over the body of Asellus at his funeral with my pen. This one oration, however humble, stirred up the envy of many, who harshly and inhumanely turned the teeth of jealousy like swords against me, trembling like a lamb among the wolves.

In spite of Cereta's attempts to present herself as a modest speaker with only a "rustic *ingenium*", as above, it appears that Cereta's audience was still threatened by her learning and eloquence. Nor did the fact that she deploys both in the service of a humble donkey protect her from the *invidia* of her critics.

4. The Donkey

The subject of Cereta's funeral oration is Asellus, the "Little Donkey". On the most basic level his character functions as a pretext for Cereta's consolation, as his generic name would suggest. Yet as the work unfolds, Cereta uses the transformative potential of the donkey to create both an opportunity and a model for her audience's philosophical progress, drawing on the long literary tradition surrounding the animal.

A key aspect of the satirical encomium's humor is the juxtaposition of the high-register genre of the praise poem with a low-register subject such as an animal or insect. The donkey is a particularly apt choice for

¹⁸ Tomasini 1640 (as in n. 16), 3-4.

such a pairing, as the animal is itself associated with a long list of contradictory characteristics. In his work on Giordano Bruno, Ordine has compiled an extensive history of the donkey in classical through sixteenth-century literature, identifying this “coincidence of opposites” as a common theme in representations of the animal. I summarize here the elements of this trend as identified by Ordine, with my own additions noted:¹⁹

Benefic/demonic: The donkey appears alongside both beneficent and dangerous figures. Donkeys are associated positively with Dionysus, Silenus, Demeter, Priapus and Cybele, among others, for their association with fertility. I would add from the Christian tradition the story of Balaam's ass, in which God speaks through a donkey (Num. 22.21-35); and Donatello's bronze, *The Miracle of the Mule*, in which a mule kneels before the sacraments.²⁰ However, the animal also appears in connection with Hades and the Egyptian god Set, a symbol of evil; and demons such as the *empusae* are often pictured as having donkey legs (as in Aristoph. *Ran.* 294).

Powerful/humble: Homer compares Ajax to a strong donkey (Hom. *Il.* 9.558-565); Samson kills one thousand enemies with the jaw of a donkey (Jud. 15.14). I would add that Mary is conveyed to Bethlehem on a mule. Yet donkeys are also beasts of burden subject to a master, often abusive. I note Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* 9, in which Lucius sees donkeys put to work at the mill; and Ovid's *Amores* 2.7.15-16, where the author compares himself to a donkey after being nagged by his mistress.

Wise/Ignorant: The donkey's large ears indicate an ability to hear over long distances, as described by Apuleius' character Lucius (Apul. *Met.* 9.15). Cicero (*Pis.* 30), however, uses *asinus* to address an ignoramus: “Quid nunc te, asine, litteras doceam? Non opus est verbis sed fustibus” (“What now, you ass, shall I teach you your letters? There is no need for words, only beatings”).

Human/Bestial: The donkey may embody the wise man's struggle against his animal nature.²¹ I would add that this opposition is often

¹⁹ N. Ordine, H. Barański (tr.), *Giordano Bruno and the Philosophy of the Ass* (New Haven, CT, 1987), 9-17.

²⁰ See L. Hobgood-Oster, *Holy Dogs & Asses* (Urbana, IL, 2008), 65-67.

²¹ N. Ordine, “Simbologia dell'asino. A proposito di due recenti edizioni”, *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 141 (1984), 116-130, who at 119 comments: “L'uomo

expressed through the donkey's reputation for physical lust. For example, Semonides in his *Race of Women* (44-50, in Stob. *Fl.* 73.61) identifies a "donkey woman", who is a slave to bodily appetite in addition to being lazy and stubborn; and Apuleius' Lucius in Book 10.19-22 of the *Metamorphoses* copulates with a woman who lusts after the large phallus he obtains as part of his transformation into a donkey.

These trends continue in the Italian Renaissance, perhaps peaking after Cereta's lifetime in the work of Giordano Bruno, whose *Eulogy of the Ass* (*In lode de l'asino*) espouses a "holy asinity" or patient anticipation of a union with God, uninterested in the distractions of study or art.²² The sixteenth century would see several other works focused on the *asinus*, such as Cornelius Agrippa's *Ad encomium asini digressio*, which again uses the donkey as a model for the "inspired ignorant".²³

Cereta, too, capitalizes on the opposing qualities of the donkey in her work, alternating between a lofty and lowly view of the animal. Cereta opens the dialogue from a lofty perspective, addressing her audience in the style of a pastoral eulogy or epic, both high-register genres, in a somewhat opaque Apuleian prose that serves to heighten the satirical tone of the piece. She begins with an invocation to the Muses: "Hodie si pastoria lugendi materia ad hos funebres planctus consulisset Musas agrestes [...] animus" ("If today my mind had consulted the rustic Muses on pastoral material for mourning at these funeral lamentations", 2-3). The content and form of the reference – a paralipsis accomplished within a past contra-factual – introduce two of the major themes in the work. First, the invocation establishes Cereta's character as an ambivalent orator. Throughout the dialogue, she frequently expresses uncertainty about her topic and her abilities; claims to have little knowledge of the authors and texts that she repeatedly cites as her authorities; and refuses to commit to a single genre, tone, or philosophical school.

The second theme introduced in the invocation is the recurrence of elevated language and imagery drawn from pastoral and epic. These parallels only serve to highlight the discrepancy between the high-

saggio deve anche saper percorrere lo spazio della *feritas*; ed è proprio nell'asino che si incarnano le due nature: quella umana e bestiale."

²² Ordine 1987 (as in n. 19), 61-62.

²³ M. van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa. The Humanist Theologian and his Declamations* (Leiden, 1997), 109.

register tone of genres and the humble nature of the donkey. The *Musas agrestes* of the invocation echo Vergil's *Eclogue* 6,²⁴ effecting a bucolic tone which Cereta continues when she invites the donkey's owner Soldus to begin a call and response with the audience:

Incipe igitur, saucie senex. [...] Dic, ne te poeniteat, dic lugubre carmen. Respondebimus alterni. Cantabimus armentales heroas dicemusque nemorum deos et ducti circum funeris pangemus maestiter exequialis aerumnas. Surge. Aggrediamur. Tange demonstratam ex sarmento detrito citherulam. Move plectra ficticia, et volutatas industria tua comesasque voces ab gutture frigutienti resorbe. (33-40)²⁵

Begin then, sick old man. [...] Speak, lest you should repent it; speak the sad song. We will respond in turn. We will sing of the heroes of the herd and we will speak of the gods of the groves, and, being led forth, we will sadly sing the hardships of the funeral. Rise; let us begin. Touch the indicated cythera made of worn-out brushwood. Move the man-made plectrum, and swallow again your voices, turned over and worn out by the effort from your stuttering throat.

The pastoral and epic overtones heighten the register of her work, recalling the military context of *Aeneid* 1.1; so too her later description of the donkey's corpse. The convocation takes place where Asellus' body was stripped of its hide; the narrator gestures to his saddle hanging from a tree ("ecce fraxino pendet bastus") and notes that the audience can still see his fresh blood on the ground (91). The donkey's body itself is referred to as *spolium*, a word used both for the remains of an animal and the spoils of war; and he is lifted on a spear, *hasta*. The scene is heavily influenced by Vergil's *Aeneid* 11.1-16, in which Aeneas dresses an oak tree with the gear of the fallen Italian warrior Mezentius. Placing the donkey in the position of the fallen hero sets him up for a comedic fall as the characters recall the more animal aspects of his nature.

²⁴ Verg. *Buc.* 6.8: "agrestem tenui meditabor arundine Musam."

²⁵ Note that Rabil's edition gives *exaequales* where the Vatican manuscript reads *exequalis*. The words *cythara* and *sarmentum* are probably drawn from Pliny the Elder's *Natural Histories* (both words are used throughout; see, for example, 7.82 and 1.54). *Cithera* is attested as an alternate spelling for *cythara* in the Renaissance: see R. Hoven, *Lexique de la Prose Latine de la Renaissance* (Leiden, 2005), 145. The diminutive in *-ula* is a typical stylistic quirk of Cereta's. Though rarely attested, the combination appears once in William of Rubruk's thirteenth-century travel diary: *Recueil de voyages et de mémoires* (Paris, 1839), 241.6 ("tenens citherulam in mano").

5. Consolation and Reception

After establishing a heightened, bucolic tone for her work, Cereta begins her consolation by invoking several philosophical authors and schools as authorities on matters related to animal souls. She then turns to metaphorical speech drawn from Seneca's consolations to Marcia and Polybius in order to recall her audience to reason; and finally composes an encomium to the donkey that is meant to comfort the audience by ensuring that his good qualities will be remembered.

Each of Cereta's philosophical references introduce a new possibility regarding the fate of the donkey's soul after his death, balancing the emotional appeal of pastoral eulogy with the rational appeal of philosophy. Her allusions prompt the audience to consider a variety of metaphysical issues such as the immortality of the soul, reincarnation, and the nature of the afterlife. Implicit in the discussion of these issues is the idea that mourning is useless, no matter what explanation the reader might accept for the fate of the donkey's soul.

Cereta makes her first philosophical reference after the invocation of the rustic Muses, continuing in the ambivalent style of the opening:

Hodie si [...] certum haberet animus quasnam sedes asinis fata posuerint, vel si doctam me fecisset celebris illa quaestio maiorum, quam de animarum circuitione sub obitu iterato Pythagoras Porphyriusque monstrarunt, declamarem miserioris aerumnae contiones et guttatim humectarem vobiscum haec ora lacrimulis. (2-7)

Today, if [...] my mind held certain as to what resting place the fates have designated for donkeys, or if that famous inquiry of our ancestors had taught me what Pythagoras and Porphyry demonstrate concerning the revolution of souls during repeated deaths, I would declaim quite a miserable discourse of woe and, drop by drop, wet this face with tears along with you.

The presentation of this reference in a contra-factual clause is in keeping with the speaker's overly modest persona; even as Cereta denies any knowledge of her sources, she fulfills the conditions of her statement by continuing to speak, implying that she *does* have knowledge of the authors in question. Cereta was likely aware of Pythagoras and his doctrines through Book 15 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Here Pythagoras describes how souls move from beast to human form and back again (*Met.* 15.143-175). She may also have drawn from Book seven of Pliny

the Elder's *Natural History*, which describes the same concept, and is referenced in other areas of the text. Rabil suggests that Porphyry is familiar to Cereta from Augustine's summary of his views in *City of God* 10.29. The following section of this work yields an even more compelling parallel:

Nam Platonem animas hominum post mortem revolvi usque ad corpora bestiarum scripsisse certissimum est. Hanc sententiam Porphyrii doctor tenuit et Plotinus; Porphyrio tamen iure displicuit. In hominum sane non sua quae dimiserant, sed alia nova corpora redire humanas animas arbitratus est. Pudit scilicet illud credere, ne mater fortasse filium in mulam revoluta vectaret. (10.30)

It is absolutely certain that Plato wrote that the souls of humans are returned to the bodies of beasts after death. Plotinus too, Porphyry's teacher, held this opinion; Porphyry, however, rightly rejected it. He thought reasonably that human souls return to human bodies, not the bodies they have left, but other new bodies. That is to say, he was ashamed to believe it, lest a mother reincarnated in the form of a mule might perhaps carry her son.

The passage introduces the first question regarding the donkey's soul: where will it go now that he has died? Cereta's reference brings up the possibility of transmigration, though perhaps not to a human form, if she agrees with Porphyry.

The next allusion leads to a larger question: is the donkey's soul immortal? Cereta writes:

At cum Theocritus et Stoici atque Peripatetici de animarum immortalitate videantur ambigere, horum auctoritate satis appetitur fides, quod iumenti flatus inanis sit perpetuis umbris addictus. (21-24)

Since Theocritus, the Stoics and the Peripatetics seem to have debated as to the immortality of souls, my belief is satisfied enough with their authority that the insubstantial soul of a beast of burden is destined for the eternal shades.

This is a troubling reference. While the Stoics and Peripatetics would agree that animals do have souls, it is unlikely that either would advocate for their immortality, as Cereta implies with *perpetuis umbris*. Seneca, the likely source for Cereta's knowledge of Stoicism, specifically discusses the function (and therefore existence) of the *animus* in animals in *Ep.* 121. Though animals are not rational, they do have an

animus; while the animal “does not know what an animal is, it senses that it is an animal” (“et quid sit animal, nescit, animal esse se sentit”, *Ep.* 121.11).²⁶ Aristotle similarly holds that animals have a soul (ψυχή) in his work *On the Soul* (*An.* 2.1-3), available in Latin translation throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Neither the Stoics nor the Peripatetics, however, were known for espousing the idea of an immortal soul in the Christian sense.²⁷

Cereta clarifies her views in her discussion of the Stoic belief that the soul would not experience death consciously. Here, Cereta asks whether the donkey might be able to hear after death, and concludes:

Verum in hanc spem haec ita sentiendi Plinius et Seneca me parum adducunt, qui substantias separatas, nedum evanescentes spiritus, in illa tranquillitate reponi voluere post mortem, in qua a sensu ante vitam interquiescebant otiosae. Haec indita est brutis omnibus una mortalitas morte mortalior. (56-60)

Truly Pliny and Seneca give me too little hope of knowing about these things, since they think that materials separate [from the body] – let alone impermanent souls – wish to be placed again after death into the same state of tranquility in which they rested, senseless, before life. This one mortality, deadlier than death, happens to all animals.

Cereta’s reference to Pliny can be traced to Book seven of the *Natural History*, which contains a similar idea: “Everything is the same on the final day as it was before the first; there is no more sensation either for the body or for the mind than there was before birth.”²⁸

Cereta’s “separate materials” perhaps refer to the Stoic conception of the body and soul as separate entities, which Seneca explains in letter 92 by metaphor:

²⁶ For a full discussion of the Stoic views on animal souls, see A.A. Long, “Soul and Body in Stoicism”, in Id., *Stoic Studies* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), 224-249.

²⁷ For a concise discussion of the Renaissance response to the question, see P.R. Blum, “The Immortality of the Soul”, in J. Hankins (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2007), 211-233.

²⁸ Plin. M. *NH* 7.55: “Omnibus a supremo die eadem quae ante primum, nec magis a morte sensus ullus aut corpori aut animae quam ante natalem.”

For nature has surrounded the soul as if with a cloak; [the body] is its covering. Who would ever judge the clothing by the wardrobe? The sheath does no good or ill to the sword.²⁹

The soul and body are therefore two distinct entities; and when they are separated by death, the soul cannot experience sensation without the body. Similarly, Seneca uses the metaphor of the lamp in letter 54 to draw an analogy between the time before birth and the time after death: "I ask, would you not say that it was stupid, if someone said a light was worse off after it had been extinguished, than it was before it was lit?"³⁰

The relevance of this lack of sensation becomes clear after Cereta's character hears Soldus' first display of grief. She advises him: "Neque enim sunt flenda mortalia, cum mortuos suspiria nil relevent" ("Nor should mortal things be mourned, since sighs do nothing to relieve the dead", 219-220). Cereta's statement is supported by the metaphysical content of the first half of the dialogue; whether the donkey experiences a Stoic afterlife without sensation, or a Platonic rebirth, the cries of the living will have no effect on him.

Cereta's audience, however, is not consoled by the metaphysical content of her oration. In fact, their melodramatic responses add to the mocking tone of the work, as when Soldus proclaims "O dies, o dolor omni dolore vehementior!" ("Oh the day, oh the grief stronger than any grief!", 189-190) and then states his desire to die so that he may see Asellus in the underworld:

Sic visam tenebrosa in Tartara et manes et umbras. Quis falsum habet, quin primis in faucibus Aselli forte ventum inveniam, qui me senium indolentem sponte suscipiat? (198-200)

Thus I will see the shades and the ghosts in shadowy Tartarus. Who thinks it is untrue that I will find the spirit of Asellus first at the gates, who would receive me willingly, a grieving old man?³¹

²⁹ Sen. *Ep.* 92.13: "Nam hoc quoque natura ut quandam vestem animo circumdedit; velamentum eius est. Quis autem umquam vestimenta aestimavit arcula? Nec bonum nec malum vagina gladium facit."

³⁰ Sen. *Ep.* 54.5: "Rogo, non stultissimum dicas, si quis existimet lucernae peius esse, cum extincta est, quam antequam accenditur?"

³¹ Soldus' description of Asellus (rather than Cerberus) waiting at the gates of Tartarus perhaps pokes fun at usual descriptions of the underworld. Lucian similarly satirizes ideas about the afterlife in his satirical work *De luctu* (Cerberus appears in sections 4 and 11).

Soldus' hyperemotional responses prompt Cereta's character to resort to another technique – metaphorical speech – to recall him to reason. Though she does not cite her sources, she gives the reader a clue when she refers to Soldus as a “rational animal”, using the same vocabulary found in Seneca's letters:

Si miserior te planctus, si acerbis aculeus, liceat potius tui causa lugere, qui rationale et deo dignum animal ex hac mortalitate effugis via praecipiti. (270-272)

If a more wretched lamentation, or the sting of bitterness conquers you, it is permitted rather to mourn for your own sake, since you, who are a rational animal and one worthy of God, are fleeing from this mortality on a headlong path.

Cereta's appeal echoes Seneca's “rationale enim animal est homo” (*Ep.* 41.8), with the addition of a reference to a Christian God. The statement is meant to refocus Soldus' grief; it is not his circumstances that are lamentable, but his reaction to them. Cereta therefore directs her efforts in this section towards helping Soldus regain control over himself, using metaphorical language drawn from Seneca's letters and works of consolation. While Cereta does not draw directly from these texts, she maintains Seneca's core vocabulary and use of nautical imagery.

For both authors, the helm of the ship is the source of moral direction. The individual must guide it with the help of philosophy through the storms of Fortune to arrive at death, the only safe port. We can find Seneca identifying the helm (*gubernacula*) and the pilot (philosophy, or the philosopher herself) in the letters and the *Consolation to Marcia*:

[Philosophia] sedet ad gubernaculum et per ancipitia fluctuantium derigit cursum. (Sen. *Ep.* 16.3)

[Philosophy] sits at the helm and directs a course through uncertainties as we waver.

Turpis est navigii rector, cui gubernacula fluctus eripuit, qui fluviantia vela deseruit, permisit tempestati ratem. (Sen. *Marc.* 6.6.3)

He is a shameful pilot, who lets a wave steal the helm of the ship, abandoning the billowing sails and giving the vessel to the storm.

Cereta adapts this idea when her character asks Soldus, “Ubi ad rectum vivendi cursum gubernacula tui consilii?” (“Where is the helm of your

judgment towards the right way of living?", 265-266). Yet the image of the boat on a stormy sea does not apply to Soldus alone. Cereta also uses the metaphor to re-contextualize the life and death of Asellus in the style of Seneca, who identifies death as a safe harbor for those tossed about by fortune, as shown here in his consolation to Polybius and his letters:

In hoc tam procelloso et ad omnes tempestates exposito mari navigantibus nullus portus nisi mortis est. (Sen. *Polyb.* 11.9.7)

For those sailing in such a tempestuous sea, exposed to every storm, there is no harbor except death.

Scopulum esse illum putamus dementissimi; portus est, aliquando pendens. (Sen. *Ep.* 70.3)

We stupidly think [death] to be a dangerous reef; it is a harbor, and at some time it must be sought.

Cereta makes a similar comparison when describing Asellus' life, telling Soldus:

Consolari deberes quod propterea longior ipsius peregrinatio iam finiit [...] non flet genitor, si quando sospes natus ad portum post naufragium enavit. (273-276)

You ought to have been consoled that his rather long journey is finally finished [...] A parent does not cry if a child swims safely into port after a shipwreck.

Finally, Cereta further describes the donkey as one "longos fatigationum fluctus expertum" ("having endured extended waves of exhaustion", 278-279) echoing Seneca's tendency to describe misfortune in terms of waves, storms and shipwrecks, as in his consolation to Polybius:

Pendemus et fluctuamur et alter in alterum illidimur et aliquando naufragium facimus. (Sen. *Polyb.* 11.9.6)

We waver, fluctuate and are dashed into one another, and eventually we are shipwrecked.

After presenting these Senecan metaphors, Cereta adopts another of Seneca's strategies, as seen in his *Consolatio ad Marciam* (24), asking the bereaved to take comfort in the good qualities of the deceased:

Ad tollendos nunc omnis animi scrupulos peraeque et praemonet,
quod is ipsus [*sic*] Asellus antecellens alios plurima certe fecit, quae
ad memoriam in posteros transmissa docti cantabunt. (595-598)

This too equally advises for the lifting all troubles from our mind:
namely, that Asellus distinguished himself before others and surely did
many things which, being transmitted to the memory of posterity,
learned people will sing about.

The encomia delivered by Cereta and Philonacus the slave, however, establish a striking contrast with the seriousness of purpose displayed here, again highlighting the satirical nature of the piece. Asellus' accomplishments constitute an impossible combination of exaggerated and opposing traits that undercut the lofty tone established by Cereta's earlier evocation of pastoral and epic. Philonacus' eulogy portrays Asellus as strong but gentle, intelligent yet foolish, fit for both lofty and humble tasks. He notes that his voice soothed babies to sleep, while his giant ears used to predict rain; that he conveyed both his sister decked in finery to her wedding, and little boys from muddy work in the field; that he once got drunk on fermented grapes; and that he once went of his own volition to the blacksmith for new shoes (350-370). Several of the classical references noted by Ordine also appear in Cereta's exposition on the donkey's history as an animal; her character mentions, for instance, the donkey's association with Priapus and Silenus and the use of a donkey to carry a Roman bride's dowry (545-549), as well as obscure medical uses for parts of the donkey's body that are drawn from Pliny's *Natural History*.

Cereta's encomium takes a more serious turn when her character offers a description of two stars called the "Little Donkeys" or *Aselli*.³² She places the description in context with a reference to Plato, likely drawing on the *Republic*, which had been translated into Latin at least four times in the fifteenth century, most notably by Ficino.³³ In the Myth of Er, the character Er reports that when the dead choose new lives, "there is a reversal [of fortune] for many of the souls, of both the good and bad," due both to their lack of philosophical reflection and to

³² Plin. M. *NH* 18.353; see also Robin 1997 (as in n. 1), 198 n. 39.

³³ See J. Hankins, A. Palmer, *The Recovery of Ancient Philosophy in the Renaissance* (Firenze, 2008), 10-11.

chance.³⁴ After listing several examples of how the donkey is useful to people in both life and death, Cereta reports a moralizing version of Plato's ideas, focusing on the bad fate of pleasure-seekers. She then connects the idea to the constellation of the Little Donkeys through the idea of transformation after death:

His visus est Plato sensisse congruentius versari animas eorum qui turpitudinis incentivo servientes voluptuarie ex hac vita decesserunt. Quid ultra? *Asellos* prioris aevi religio sub duabus autumnalibus stellulis, in capite cancri fulgentibus, et digito in caelum et sua nomenclatura monstravit, quasi senserit illos e tantis vitae poenis ad curam humani laboris habendam in caelum esse translatos. (553-560)³⁵

More aptly than these [examples], Plato seems to have thought that the souls of those who serve the incentive of sordid pleasure experience a reversal when they depart from this life. What is more, the religion of the prior era demonstrated this by naming the two autumn stars that shine on the head and claw of Cancer in the sky *Aselli*, as if they knew that they had been transferred into the sky from the great hardships of life so that they could care for human suffering.

Just as Plato's souls experience a reversal after death, so too the *Aselli* are raised from mundane personal suffering to divine contemplation and supervision when they die. This kind of transformation is also evident in the story of Apuleius' Lucius.³⁶ Diana Robin has already demonstrated that the donkey's story parallels that of Lucius in the *Metamorphoses* at several moments; and that Cereta's style and vocabulary often imitate Apuleius, in a nod to their shared topic.³⁷ In addition to these parallels,

³⁴ Plato *Resp.* 619d: Διὸ δὴ καὶ μεταβολὴν τῶν κακῶν καὶ τῶν ἀγαθῶν ταῖς πολλαῖς τῶν ψυχῶν γίνεσθαι.

³⁵ *Voluptuarie* is a post-classical equivalent of *voluptarie*.

³⁶ Apuleius' works circulated widely in the Renaissance; Petrarch, Boccaccio and Salutati show familiarity with his works, and the first print edition of the *Metamorphoses* appeared in 1469, the year Cereta was born. For a full discussion see R.H.F. Carver, *The Protean Ass. The Metamorphoses of Apuleius from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Oxford, 2007), especially Chapter 3, "Asinus Redivivus" (108-160).

³⁷ Robin 1997 (as in n. 1), 181, notes that the stories of Philonacus the slave echo the content of Ap. *Met.* 7. I would add that Philonacus' reported trial of the donkey for the crime of stealing someone's wine is a potential parallel for Lucius' mock trial for the "murder" of two wine skins in *Met.* 3. Robin also notes that Cereta imitates Apuleius' style and vocabulary throughout the oration, a choice that is significant given the strong feelings of many humanists as to the proper Latin author to imitate; and the fact that she most often prefers to imitate Cicero in her letters. See J.F. D'Amico, "The Progress of

Cereta explicitly mentions Apuleius later in the dialogue, writing, “huius lineamentis Apuleius circumvestiri se voluit” (“Apuleius wished to surround himself in the clothes of this [animal]”, 548-550). This reference to Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* suggests a source not only for the details of Asellus’ life, but for the larger significance of Cereta’s donkey.

Lucius experiences a transformation that goes beyond his physical change into the form of a donkey. Throughout the course of the work, Lucius also experiences personal development; he is at first driven by curiosity and lust, and finds himself obsessed with gaining access to magic. Lucius is only cured by the goddess Isis after having these qualities tempered by his experiences as a donkey, as he describes here:

Nam et ipse gratas gratias asino meo memini, quod me suo celatum tegmine variisque fortunis exercitatum, etsi minus prudentem, multi-scium reddidit. (Apul. *Met.* 9.13-14)

But now I recall my donkey-self with the greatest thanks, because being tossed about by wavering fortunes while hidden in that disguise gave me much knowledge, though I was less than prudent.

It is this capacity for positive change that makes the figure of Asellus an appropriate subject for Cereta’s consolation. His character not only heightens the satire of the piece by embodying opposing characteristics and highlighting the discrepancy between genre and subject; the donkey also embodies the very process that the mourners attain to: progression from an ignorant state characterized by animal grief, to a state of understanding and acceptance.

6. Conclusions

Cereta’s character affirms the success of her work in the closing moments of the dialogue, stating in a satirically upbeat fashion: “Ecce, iam persuasi omnes se sibi restituunt” (“Look, everyone has been persuaded. They have been restored to themselves”, 639) and advising for a final time: “Lenit ratio sola maerore” (“Reason alone can soften grief”, 658). It is this statement that links both of her strategies for consolation. In using persuasion, Cereta asks her audience to apply *ratio*,

Renaissance Latin Prose. The Case of Apuleianism”, *Renaissance Quarterly* 37 (1984), 351-392, for a discussion of the three main schools of thought.

Humanistica Lovaniensia 67.1 (2018), 69-89

reason, rather than emotion, to their responses to the death of Asellus, by proving that he cannot plausibly benefit from the mourners' displays of grief. When her metaphysical inquiries do not have the desired effect, she further illustrates the process of regaining control over one's emotions by appealing to the nautical imagery of Seneca's Stoic consolations. Together, the strategies allow the audience to accept her arguments and make the transition from irrational grief to rational acceptance, moving, like the donkey, between these two opposing states. This is the skill that Cereta ultimately showcases throughout the dialogue: the ability to mine classical sources for useful material and apply the content to a new purpose. She demonstrates this capacity even in the final line of the work, where we find a variation on Catullus' farewell to his brother,³⁸ now applied to the humble donkey Asellus: "Salve atque vale omnia resonuere" (675).

Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI
griffiqu@gvsu.edu

³⁸ Cat. *Carm.* 101.10: "Frater, ave atque vale."