It may seem to be stating the obvious to observe that a few collections of private letters play a disproportionately large part in the interpretation of many periods studied by ancient historians. Even a momentary consideration of the importance to the historian of the Mari or Amarna Letters, for instance, or of the correspondence of Cicero or the Pauline epistles will suffice to bear out the truth of such an observation.

What is not so obvious, and can therefore bear restatement, is the observation that letters, whether public or private, trivial or profound, constitute a unique form of evidence which presents special difficulties of interpretation not encountered elsewhere. For example, there is the problem of epistolary conventions, or sometimes the lack of them, for although the ancient letter writer like his modern counterpart was certainly bound by conventions of one type or another, these conventions were much less stable and rigid than those governing the form and content of the main literary genres such as history or oratory. The result is that in both style and content letters are the least homogenous group of literary products that we have from the Greco-Roman world. They range from quasi-public documents like Cicero, Ad Fam. v.2, in which style is everything and the writer’s every nuance is made to count, to such badly spelled and worse constructed letters as P. Oxy. XXXI 2602 or XXXIII 2682, in which individual sentiments are smothered in a welter of clichés.

Another problem with the interpretation of letters is to gauge correctly the mutual relationship of the correspondents. The amount of variation possible in this is infinite, for the relationship hardly ever depends solely on the status of the writer vis-à-vis the addressee. Other factors will also come into play, such as the circumstances in which the letter was written, or the status of any third parties mentioned. Even in a continuous correspondence in which both parties are represented, like that of Cicero and Atticus, where we can get some feeling for the parameters of the relationship, that relationship may nevertheless vary and change over a period of time in ways that are scarcely perceptible to an outsider. But where we are faced with a correspondence between two important personages whose relationship to each other is not apparent – and where that correspondence consists of a single letter – the difficulty of interpretation is that much greater.

Fronto’s letter to Avidius Cassius (Ad Am. I 6) is a perfect example of this latter situation. Both men were important figures in their day but they achieved

* I am grateful to Barry Baldwin and Brian W. Jones for their advice on a number of points in this paper.
fame in quite different spheres, Fronto as a teacher and orator, Cassius as a
general and revolutionary. We know a good deal about Fronto for we have much
of his own correspondence and although we lack his speeches we can get some
idea of him as a scholar of grammar and rhetoric from the account which Aulus
Gellius gives of him. 1 About Avidius Cassius, though, we have very little
information; even less after necessarily putting aside the gruesome exaggerations
of the Historia Augusta. The outlines of his family and career are known 2 but
the man himself remains shadowy. Even the motivation behind his shortlived
‘dream of empire’ (Dio lxxi.27.3) remains obscure, and this is the best
documented period of Cassius’ life.

Ad Amicos I 6 itself seems to have been written either soon after Cassius’ first
victories in the Syrian command in 164, or in connection with the more striking
victories over the Parthians in 165. 3 Fronto, who was recuperating in the
countryside from one of his frequent bouts of illness, had the good news from
his friend Iunius Maximus, the tribune to whom Cassius had entrusted the task
of conveying his laurelled despatches to Rome:

Iunius Maximus tribunus, qui laureatas Romam adtulit litteras, non
publico tantum munere strenue, sed privato etiam erga te officio amice
functus est; ita de laboribus et consiliis tuis et industria et vigilantia
praedicator ubique frequentissimus extitit. Ad me quidem minus valentem
cum in suburbanam villam venisset, numquam cessavit in vesperum usque
fabulas nectere itinerum tuorum et disciplinae ad priscum morem institutae
ac retentae; tum in agmine ducendo et manu conserenda strenuissimi vigoris
tui et consultissimae opportunitatis; prorsus ut nullus miles Plautinus de suis
quam hic de tuis virtutibus gloriose praedicaret, nisi quod Plautus de suo
militie cum lepore, hic de te cum amore et cum summa fide.

Dignus est quem diligas et suffragiis tuis ornes. Tuae propiae gloriae
addideris, quantum dignitati praedicatoris tui adstruxeris.

At first reading this letter seems as fine a tribute to his fighting qualities as
any general could wish for. Fronto appears to have covered every aspect of the
soldier’s art and implied that Cassius has excelled in them all.

On a second reading though doubts creep in. To begin with, Cassius can
hardly have appreciated the implication that Fronto had resented his own rest
and quiet being disturbed by the intrusion of the general’s tribune with Cassius’

1. The relevant passages are collected by C.R. Haines, The Correspondence of M. Cornelius
2. C. Avidius Cassius: PIR 2 A 1402; C. Avidius Heliodorus: PIR 2 A 1405. The SHA Avidius
Cassius has recently been analysed in some detail by B. Baldwin, Klio lviii (1976) 101-19;
his conclusions do little to increase one’s faith in the historical accuracy of this biography,
the longest in the Historia Augusta.
good news; but then Fronto always was rather self-centred when it came to matters concerning his own health. There is also the presence in the letter of words and phrases like *praedicator* (twice), *gloriose praedicaret*, and *fabulas nectere*, which might have caused a sensitive man to wish that the matter of his derring-do had never been mentioned. *Praedicare* and its derivatives could just as well be taken to mean ‘boasting’ or ‘bragging’ as ‘eulogizing’ (it is interesting to note that *m²* in the Fronto codex glosses *gloriose praedicaret* by *gloriatur*) while *fabulas nectere* could as easily be translated by ‘spinning yarns’ as by ‘telling tale after tale’ (Haines), were it not for the elegant veneer of praise with which Fronto invests the letter as a whole.

Finally, for Fronto to compare the emperors’ chosen general, even indirectly, to one of Plautus’ boasting soldiers is hardly complimentary. An allusion of this sort would not have been lost on Avidius Cassius either for he came from a distinguished literary background himself. His father Avidius Heliodorus had owed his advancement to his literary prowess, much to the disgust of less favoured contemporaries. Even if this had not been the case, the increase in military activity in the Antonine age had meant that the boasting soldier was once again a topical figure; the use that Lucian makes of the *miles gloriosus* in *Dialogues of the Courtesans*, 13, shows that this stock character was very much alive and well in second century literature. On the other hand we should make the observation that, since Plautus was a favourite author of Fronto’s, a comparison to a Plautine character may well be meant as a compliment, even if it seems to us at this distance in time to be a singularly ill chosen one.

Even so, after reading through *Ad Am. I 6* again, we can no longer be as sure as we were at first about Fronto’s attitude towards Cassius and his victories. What is clear however is that this is not a letter between close friends; there are too many ambiguities in attitude for that. Furthermore nowhere in the letter is Fronto’s praise of Cassius couched in direct and unequivocal terms. Instead, Fronto has chosen to eulogize Cassius indirectly by praising his tribune, Iunius Maximus. Yet his praise of Maximus is put in such a way as to undermine those very qualities he appears to be eulogizing in him. The impression is given that Maximus’ enthusiasm in his commander’s cause has been somewhat excessive (*praedicator ubique frequentissimus; numquam cessavit in vesperum usque fabulas nectere; nullus miles Plautinus – gloriose praedicaret*). One cannot help feeling that he has bored everyone to death talking about his general’s achievements and as a result the achievements themselves have been lowered in Fronto’s esteem.

It is a great pity that we know nothing more about this tribune Iunius

4. I have collected Fronto’s references to his own ill health in my paper ‘Was Marcus Aurelius a hypochondriac?’ *Latomus* (forthcoming).
5. See the comments in Dio lxix.3,5 and lxxi.22,2.
Maximus, for it is clear that he is the main link, if not the only one between these two important men.\textsuperscript{7} The fact that there are two letters addressed to him by Fronto (\textit{Ad Am.} I 23 and 26 = Haines II 244) suggests that Maximus may have been one of the orator's youthful protégés like the sons of Sardius Saturninus (\textit{Ad Am.} I 9; 10; 22 = Haines II 240 and 242) or the son of Squilla Gallicanus (\textit{Ad Am.} I 27 = Haines II 244). A relationship of this type would serve to explain Maximus' protracted visit to Fronto at his suburban villa, for Fronto's pupils were apparently in the habit of living in his house while being instructed by him, and an ex-pupil, now making his way in the world, might well take time during his leave to call upon his old master and \textit{contubernalis}.\textsuperscript{8}

If Maximus was an ex-pupil of Fronto's, and it is into this category of correspondent that he fits best, then Fronto may well have made use of Maximus' connection with Avidius Cassius to address himself to the general without there being otherwise an intimate relationship between them. \textit{Litterae commendaticiae} bulk large in the \textit{Ad Amicos} books for Fronto, like any modern professor, was constantly being badgered by students, friends and colleagues to write letters of recommendation for them. Now the writer of letters of this type often does not have control of the choice of addressee. The letter must go to whom the person being recommended wishes, not to whom the writer might have chosen to write had he been given a free hand. Even so the writer may still turn the correspondence to account by using the occasion to strike up an acquaintanceship of his own with the addressee. We can see Fronto attempting something like this in \textit{Ad Am.} I 8 = Haines II 190, written to one Passienus Rufus. Fronto had never corresponded with this man before, but he takes the opportunity when writing to recommend Aemilius Pius, probably one of his pupils since he is recommended on literary grounds, to suggest that Rufus and he should become better acquainted.

The existence of a letter from Fronto to Avidius Cassius therefore does not constitute proof in itself of a friendship or even a continuing correspondence between the orator and the general, while the letter's tone, as I have pointed out, could hardly be said to be evidence of a close friendship between them.\textsuperscript{9} \textit{Ad Amicos} I 6 accordingly seems best explained in terms of Fronto taking advantage of the opportunity afforded by an ex-pupil's appointment to Cassius' staff in order to address himself to the man of the moment. By making use of

\textsuperscript{7} Iunius Maximus: \textit{PIR}\textsuperscript{2} J 774. His identification with the \ldots \ldots s Maximus of \textit{CIL} VI 1991 = XIV 2393 is most uncertain.

\textsuperscript{8} Fronto speaks of his students as \textit{contubernales} or in (\textit{meo}) \textit{contubernio} in \textit{Ad Am.} I 3; 9; 10; 22; 27 = Haines I 278; II 240; 242; 244n.; 244.

\textsuperscript{9} A. Birley, \textit{Marcus Aurelius} (London 1966) 191, seems to me to be taking too much for granted in writing that 'Avidius Cassius sent one of his tribunes, Junius Maximus, to see Fronto.' There is no reason to think that Maximus' visit was on Cassius' account rather than his own. G.W. Bowersock, \textit{Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire} (Oxford 1969) 86, is more cautious: 'Avidius Cassius, a friend or at least a correspondent of Fronto.'
the particular freedom offered by the conventions of the *epistula commendationica*, Fronto has contrived ostensibly to congratulate Avidius Cassius upon his military success, but in reality to give the impression of enjoying a mutual relationship with Cassius as his equal, even though such a relationship probably never existed. One of the purposes of the *Ad Amicos* books, as a study of Fronto’s correspondents has shown, is to demonstrate their author’s familiarity with the most influential and distinguished figures of his day. So much the better therefore if he can offer his readers evidence that the general who has just defeated Rome’s traditional enemies, the Parthians, has all along been an intimate friend whose solicitude for Fronto’s health is second only to his concern for the security of the eastern provinces. *Ad Amicos* I 6 does not tell us much about Avidius Cassius but it can tell us a lot indirectly about Fronto himself.


11. Cf. Anthony Powell, *Temporary Kings, A Novel* (London 1973) 10: ‘... personal letters, even when deliberately composed with an eye to examination, official or unofficial, by someone other than their final recipient, give a unique sense of the writer’s personality, often lacking in books by the same hand. They are possibly the most revealing of all, like physical touchings-up of personal appearance to make some exceptional effect.’