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Reading the Letters of Pliny the Younger: An Introduction. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012. xii, 350 pp. Pr. \$99.00. ISBN 9780521842921.

We live in an age of proliferating Handbooks and Companions, Encyclopedias, Introductions and the like, on an astonishing range of classical subjects, including of course authors, texts, and genres. Quality, nature, and purpose vary widely; there is much overlap and fierce competition; intended audiences range from curious beginners to advanced scholars. Inevitably these are large multi-authored volumes, where the focus and value of the individual essays may or may not be under the control of the editors. One consults them with a sense of deep gratitude and frustration.

Gibson and Morello's volume offers a wonderful alternative model: there is nothing quite like it. It is indeed an Introduction, with something to offer to both the absolute beginner and the advanced Plinian, and to all stages of familiarity between. The main text is structured into eight interlocking chapters, which are carefully balanced in different ways and laced with repeated references backward and forward. Let us start with a catalog of the book's virtues.

Dense and complex, the text is yet a distinct unity. It comes to us from two distinguished Latinists who have thought and written about Pliny for fifteen years. They have hosted conferences on him and relevant subjects, and the impressive list of scholars whom they thank for their help is a veritable Who's Who of Plinian, not to say Silver Latin, studies. Yet this is very much the product of two minds working in tandem, and they indeed offer no clue in the Introduction as to who is responsible for which part. That information they reveal only in the last chapter of the work (p. 236), but even then they are reticent and rather confusing, for a purpose which has probably dawned on the reader by then. Re-examining the preceding text—which is precisely what they want us to do—it is hard to find any stylistic tics to distinguish one author from the other.

Within this unity there is a remarkable diversity, an admirable catholicity of interests and methods. The authors' own (similar) tastes are clear, but they are open to every approach. Letters are read and reread individually, and as grouped by subject, by treatment, by correspondent, and as part of larger chains, even constructions, within and between books, backwards and forwards. Intratexts within the correspondence are examined closely, sometimes word by word, sometimes through echoes and approaches. Intertexts are laid out and evaluated, especially with the works of the usual suspects, Cicero and Seneca, Ovid and Martial. Major themes are introduced and then elaborated and refined as we learn what made Pliny tick, what was urgently important for

him to state and restate. And over the eight chapters we gain a deepening appreciation of the complexity and sophistication of his text, its self-aware definition of itself, its “steely self-confidence”.

What particularly enriches their reading of the Letters is their willingness to engage with historical approaches, both recognizing their validity and attempting to integrate them into their literary reading. They are accordingly sensitive to the sociology of courtroom and salon, of great men and ‘less successful friends’, of intimacy and restraint, of age and youth, of war and peace. They are familiar with the physical evidence: the major inscriptions along with the most authoritative interpretations; the latest archaeological information about the villas at Laurentum (not quite identified) and Tifernum Tiberinum; the landscape around Lake Como. And they seek to blend the physical into their readings of the Plinian texts, always stimulating if not always convincing the reader.

At the same time they are fully aware of the value of basic *Realien* to readers looking for quick orientation and to their own larger enterprise. One appendix has a timeline in three columns which list political events, events in Pliny’s life, and events in his ‘circle’: these are accurate and up-to-date, running from c. AD 58 through to 117. Another appendix offers a catalog of books One through Nine, letter by letter, with addressees and a one-sentence summary of the contents of each. And a third presents “bibliographical help” on some 31 “popular topics in the *Letters*”, from “Addressees, family and friends of Pliny”, through “*Otium* (leisure) and Pliny”, down to “Women in Pliny (incl. Calpurnia)”. Here a selection of letter numbers is offered for each topic, followed by bibliographic suggestions to “Start with”, “Further items”, and “See also” (which refers the reader to related topics).

Indeed another great virtue of the book is its concern for the reader. The authors repeatedly stress the value of rereading the collection, of approaching the letters in different contexts and concatenations, of treating key themes with different methods. Pliny’s Letters, as they assert early on, are not a mosaic but a kaleidoscope. Hence there is much reference to earlier and later discussions within their own text. Each chapter begins with a summary of its course and its intentions, and each is divided into titled sections to guide the reader (unfortunately not included in the table of Contents). Dotted disarmingly here and there are assessments of the strength or weakness of their own arguments or conclusions. And most attractive are the generous appreciations of valuable work by other scholars—Marchesi, Hoffer, Henderson come to mind, but also Sherwin-White, Syme, and others, all cited in the Index. The evaluations are always positive, and the authors always add something original of their own. One soon realizes that in *Reading Pliny’s Letters*, dense, layered, complex, its authors are offering us a self-consciously Plinian work.

But where Pliny's larger enterprise is only to be learned by reading the collection through, and then rereading it, Gibson and Morello set out their grand design immediately in their Introduction: everything the reader really needs to know is contained on pages 2 to 4. The book will cover a range of methods of reading: the whole collection from 1.1 through to 10.121; or a single book; or favorite letters; or groups and cycles with shared themes, addressees, or recurring characters. The methods to be applied in each of the eight chapters are then briefly laid out, the first three of which concentrate on Pliny's artistry (although the authors do not make this explicit), while the last five discuss some of the key topics of the Letters.

Chapter 1, "Reading a life: *Letters*, Book 1", tackles the questions raised by an autobiography which is not one, but rather a sequence of 'pools' of time in which later fragments may be dropped. Book One, with letters ranging from late 96 through to 100, is an optimistic paean to literary and social rebirth. It is only from subsequent books that we gradually realize how much has been suppressed of Pliny's life in those years, the political and military uncertainty, the private misfortunes. The craftsmanship with which Pliny introduces this information in later books and ties it back to Book One makes us see the latter with fresh eyes.

From this example of how reading the whole collection may illuminate a part, we move to the architecture of a single book with Chapter 2, "Reading a book: *Letters*, Book 6". The authors begin with a close reading of the first three and the last three letters of a 34-letter book, "throw[ing] critical caution aside" to argue, persuasively, for a symmetry of theme and treatment as bookends. Reading the letters in sequence allows themes to emerge and develop: *negotium* (vs. *otium* in Book 7), Trajan (vs. Domitian in 7), and a haunting sense of desire for absent friends. Here the real significance of what seem to be 'filler' letters is brought out. Here also we see how some letters in 6 function as links in narrative chains between books, both public (Bithynian affairs) and private (Calpurnia). The concluding section is a wonderful example of how this works: Pliny's *bête noire* Regulus has died (6.2) and the authors tease out the ripple effects of his death, as Pliny presents them, both in 6 and in its relation with earlier books, its effects on his own career, on his role as mentor to the next generation, on the courts and on oratory itself.

In Chapter 3 we move to "Epistolary models: Cicero and Seneca", though there is very little Seneca. In both close readings and topical analyses, we are shown Pliny's "competitive engagement" with Cicero, explicit and implicit from the start, under what are "almost headings": as orator and lawyer, as poetic patron, in career, in versifying, in literary revision, and at last, at the end

of the collection, in epistolography. First we are shown Pliny's close emulation of his predecessor (who is barely named) and then, with a twist of the kaleidoscope, his 'enrichment' of his model, as he competitively inserts himself as a third way between Cicero's public life and the more scholastic model of Seneca.

Chapter 4, "Pliny's elders and betters: The Elder Pliny, Vestricius Spurrina, Corellius Rufus, Verginius Rufus (and Silius Italicus)" is a fresh reading of Pliny's relations with the older men whom he holds up as models. Silius Italicus is obviously the one bad model, not a Regulus, but passive and untalented. What startles the reader here is, first, the authors' demonstration that along with the deep respect and gratitude that Pliny feels for the other four men, who did so much to shape and foster him, we find him sharply aware of the limitations of at least two of them, now dead, as exemplars—the excessive studiousness of one, the excessive caution of another. But more importantly, his careful portraits of the virtues of his mentors contribute to an "emerging narrative" of Pliny himself as an example for future generations—and a sense of both competition and inferiority when it comes to that other *exemplum*, still alive, Tacitus.

From his elders to "Pliny's peers: Reading for the Addressee", Chapter 5, which explores the boundaries and varieties of friendship. After valuable observations on the "markers of friendship"—linguistic, topical, emotional—we focus on five friends, all close in different ways. Three of them remain rather colorless, but the ubiquitous Voconius Romanus emerges clearly as Pliny's literary *alter ego*. Much has been written on Pliny's fascinating relationship with the fifth man, the most frequent addressee in the entire corpus, and hardly an intimate: the overwhelming figure of Tacitus. Gibson-Morello's seven pages are superb. What has always seemed to be fawning should really be considered careful self-positioning, offering himself as equal to but different from the great man, and in the end just this side of critical of him.

With Chapter 6, "*Otium*: How to manage leisure" we begin to move to one of the grand themes of *Reading the Letters*. Again, close readings and thematic concerns rub shoulders, as do individual letters and whole books (here Book 7, following the *negotium* that underlies Book 6). The thrust of the chapter, which is occasionally a hard if rewarding slog, is that productive leisure, as distinct from work and obligations on the one hand, and mere idleness on the other, must be worked into an active and variegated routine. The most productive leisure was of course devoted to literature. Pliny's central tenet is one of time management: routine and variety must be combined to lead the best life, bringing profitable order in life's chaos: 7.9 is essentially a programmatic statement. And as a corollary, the authors argue seductively that Pliny indeed

developed the letter as the prose genre most appropriate to show life's variety and repetitiveness, and to demonstrate the value of order and control.

Chapter 7, "Reading the villa letters: 9.7, 2.17, 5.6", adopts the approach least congenial to the authors, the 'anthology', plucking individual flowers out of the meadow, although here we profit by the fundamental common subject and by the attempt to bridge the gap between literature and place. This is the least coherent of the chapters and in several parts the least convincing. Thus, the discussion of the villas Tragedy and Comedy on Lake Como ends with unper-
suasive connections with the Choice of Herakles and Ovid *Amores* 3.1. The analogy of the two villa descriptions with literary *ecphrases* seems undernourished. The memory of Pliny the Elder is argued to be a subtle thread woven through book 5, but it is just not there. The location of the Tifernum villa, near, but not at, the top of the hill, reflects Pliny's position in society. And so forth. The archaeological detail is splendid, the sense of place is admirable, but the brave engagement of history and literary theory never quite becomes a marriage.

With Chapter 8 we return to "The grand design: How to read the collection". The first two-thirds of it more than justifies this title, circling back through the book to remind us of Pliny's craftsmanship and subtlety, how individual letters are embedded in their environments; how books reveal symmetry between beginning and end; how dominant themes and clusters and persons reappear and develop over the collection; how neatly books One and Nine are balanced; how Pliny's constant rethinking demands the same of us; how he constantly recalibrates the *varietas* of the work to form a "managed miscellaneity", the letters imitating life; and most impressively, how slippery is his use of time, as he develops an ever more confident *persona* with a clear practical philosophy of the well-ordered life and a claim, in Book 9, to be "the equal in reputation of Tacitus". But then, curiously, the authors offer the tentative, quixotic, and quite unconvincing argument that "one might" read Book 10, the correspondence with Trajan, mostly about Bithynia, as the crowning book of the collection, upon which follows a coda ("only suggestions"), drawing in for comparison Ovid's treatment of his exile on the other side of the Black Sea. All very confusing, but then if Pliny is allowed to rethink and add to his work, up to the very end, so should Gibson and Morello be. Their final sentence repeats their basic point: to understand Pliny's "grand design", we must read his letters from beginning to end, and then start back at the beginning again.

Pliny is not a profound thinker, nor is he a great artist. He will always attract readers with his lapidary prose, his unforgettable scenes and portraits, his miniature masterpieces. What this book adds, profiting by the scholarship of the

last two decades and adding its own insights on every page, is a deeply satisfying picture of an immensely sophisticated craftsman. May the freshness of its approach serve as an *exemplum* for introductory 'readings' of other classical subjects.

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