Introduction

mihi nisi praemium aeternitatis ante oculos,
pingue illud altumque otium placeat.

Pliny, *Epistulae* 9.3

That life of rich and profound ease would be pleasing to me if the reward of immortality were not before my eyes.[1]

As it became an institution in its second century, the principate forever transformed the lives of Rome's elite, leaving little room for dissent and an empire that would shortly cease to pine for the glory days of the republic. Fame was not to be achieved by deliberating legislation in the senate; great military victories on the battlefield were few, and those became triumphs not for the general but for the emperor, who celebrated them all, even if he had never appeared on the battlefield. Indeed, what glory there was for a man lay in becoming a member of the senate, when the emperor chose to recognize and reward his talent. Further honor might come in the awarding of office, culminating in the receipt of one or more consulships, a hollow office whose only assets were the cachet of the title and the opportunity to offer thanks to the emperor in oratorical form – the *gratiarum actio*. But the memory of a speech or of service to the state was fleeting, easily replaced by that of the next powerful orator or adviser. How then was a man to secure lasting fame?

[1] All translations are those of the author.

Pliny the Younger's literary models provided him an answer: his uncle and adoptive father, Pliny the Elder, whose deeds Tacitus immortalized in his *Historiae*,[2] and Cicero, whose political and rhetorical successes and whose service to the state were recorded in writing, both his own and those of historians. Pliny could secure his *aeternitas* through the publication of his speeches and through a new genre – a collection of letters, whose careful selection and arrangement would offer its readers a vivid portrait of Pliny and make him an exemplar of moral rectitude and proper comportment. Cicero had, after all, won lasting fame with his speeches (as well as his own proscription and execution) and had intended to publish a collection of his letters. So Pliny published his speeches, but alas, only the *Panegyricus* survives, a unique type of rhetoric that is hardly representative of Pliny's oratorical skill.[3] But he also set about to accomplish what his predecessor had not lived long enough to do, in a way that Cicero, known for his own persistent self-aggrandizement, would surely have appreciated – publishing a carefully polished collection of correspondence.

Modern sensibilities preclude the kind of open self-promotion in which the Roman elite so readily participated. While we quietly revel in kudos heaped upon us by others and even manipulate conversations to provoke praise, we are quite averse to open self-aggrandizement. But how could an orator establish his credentials in a court of law, as Cicero so often did, without informing the judges of his qualifications, his service to the state, his integrity? Pliny the orator merely extended the rhetorical technique of ethopoeia to epistolography, creating "correspondence" whose purpose may well have included the communication of ideas and the maintenance of relationships with its addressees, but which, when collected, refined, and published, became the medium through which Pliny created a lasting monument to his virtue.

Despite their intense focus on Pliny's character (or perhaps because he needs to set himself within a milieu that makes his self-characterization credible), his letters are filled with information about

[2] As the portion of the *Historiae* that would include the death of the elder Pliny is not extant, we can only assume from Pliny's letters to Tacitus regarding the eruption of Vesuvius that he would have appeared within its account.

[3] While Pliny's *Panegyricus* is not treated within this study except in passing, it does offer significant support to the analysis of the exemplary wife in Chapter 4.

social relations and economic concerns in Roman society of the late first and early second centuries C.E. As a result they have been mined extensively as a source for details not only of Pliny's life, including his relationships with Trajan and Tacitus, but also of the daily activities of the senatorial class, the mechanisms of imperial administration, and the workings of the Roman judicial system. Indeed, scholarship that focuses on this period of imperial history has long relied on the positive nature of Pliny's assessment of Roman society as a counterbalance to Juvenal's vitriol and Tacitus' overwhelmingly negative view of the principates of the Julio-Claudians and Flavians.

Nowhere has Pliny's upbeat and idealized presentation of his immediate milieu been more cited than in efforts to reassess the disparaging evaluations of female behavior offered by his contemporaries. Yet most citations of Pliny's work that refer to women are short passages, extracted from their generic context, which seemingly ignore the autobiographical nature of the *Epistulae* and the political and social capital that their publication might have produced for their author. Women in the letters have been referred to individually and in discussions of Roman marriage or motherhood, but little attention has been given to the importance of women in the wider context of Pliny's corpus.[4] The few works of scholarship that do focus on the appearance of women in Pliny's letters have been severely limited in scope, largely ignoring Pliny's purpose in choosing particular women for inclusion in the *Epistulae*.[5] This study presents a comprehensive examination of

[4] Articles by Bodel (1995) and Sick (1999) focus on Minicia Marcella (*Ep.* 5.16) and Ummidia Quadratilla (*Ep.* 7.24), respectively. Arria the Elder (*Ep.* 3.16) is possibly the most cited of Pliny's women in general works on Roman women (e.g., Königer 1966), and references to individual letters and characters abound in books that explore women's roles in Roman society (e.g., Dixon 1988). A comprehensive work on Pliny like Bütler's (1970) does include consideration of the women in Pliny but only as they pertain to the topics he discusses – illness, friendship, the power of the exemplum, among others.

[5] For example, Dobson 1982 and Vidén 1993: 91–107. Dobson offers a brief and somewhat naive discussion of Pliny's attitude toward women, reaching the conclusion that Pliny believes women to be the moral and intellectual equals of men. In this short article, Dobson cites thirty-six of Pliny's letters, virtually all of those in which women have any significant presence, but no letters are analyzed in depth. Dobson's analysis is hindered by piecemeal citation of the letters, the lack of any attempt to identify the women as individuals, and disregard for the autobiographical nature of the letters. Like Dobson, Vidén (in a chapter dedicated to Pliny in her survey of women in Roman literature) finds evidence of economic and social equality among

the women in the letters, focused particularly on their identities and the ways in which they serve Pliny's primary goals – preserving his *gloria* and securing *aeternitas*.

Pliny's Life and Career

As Anthony Birley (2000) notes, there is now scholarly consensus on most of the details of Pliny's biography. Birley recounts the facts, at length and with great attention to the salient sources, so thoroughly that repetition here is unnecessary. Although some pertinent facets of Pliny's life are examined more completely in the subsequent chapters, a brief sketch will suffice for the moment.

As Pliny makes clear from his letters to Tacitus regarding the eruption of Mount Vesuvius (6.16 and 6.20), at the time of the disaster in 79 C.E. Pliny was a young man of seventeen, living with his mother and enjoying the intellectual guidance of his uncle, the Elder Pliny,

the men and women of Pliny's time. Vidén mentions a number of letters in passing, focusing on a handful that offer somewhat developed depictions of women. Most notable among these are 7.19 (Fannia), 3.16 (Arria), 5.16 (Minicia Marcella), 7.24 (Ummidia Quadratilla), 4.19 (Calpurnia), and 7.11 (Corellia). While Vidén studies Pliny's financial and legal interactions with women and his putative *amicitia* with some of them, she fails to consider in depth the family connections of the women Pliny chooses to discuss or address in his correspondence. Without this prosopographical background, the reader cannot determine whether Pliny's relationships with individual women were independent from those he may have maintained or wished to cultivate with the men connected to them.

Only Maniet (1966) and Shelton (1990) have examined in any detail the appearance of women in Pliny, but their work, too, is limited. Both trace Pliny's concerted effort in his letters to present the positive attributes of Roman wives. Shelton examines a number of Pliny's letters in which the qualities of a good wife are discussed. Foremost among these are the three that Pliny addresses to Calpurnia (6.4, 6.7, and 7.5) and his letter to her aunt in praise of Calpurnia (4.19). Other letters that are important to her argument are 5.16, 6.24, 7.19, 8.5, 8.11, and 8.18. Maniet's concern is to demonstrate that Pliny's affection for his wife is genuine and distinct from that which he feels for his friends. Shelton (1990: 186) recognizes that Pliny intends for the women he mentions, particularly his own wife, to serve as exempla of proper feminine behavior, but she explores neither Pliny's motivation for such an optimistic portrayal nor the reflection that his characterization of his wife might cast upon his construction of his autobiographical image. Elsewhere Shelton (1987) does make clear the importance of her belief that Pliny published his correspondence in order to produce an autobiography and that each letter can be viewed as a segment of such an undertaking. Although Shelton's work is valuable, it considers only Pliny's presentation of women as wives, and it focuses, naturally, on one woman – his wife, Calpurnia – largely overlooking the other idealized women in the letters.

whose prolific scholarship Pliny discusses at length in *Epistulae* 3.5. The death of his uncle was but one in a series of losses that would strip Pliny of all his immediate family – father, sister, uncle, and finally mother – leaving him, by the time the letters were assembled (and likely even when they were written, if we may count them as "authentic" correspondence), with only far-removed memories of those who shaped his early life. Those early losses combined with the death of at least one wife, and perhaps two, leave Pliny with few easy options for creating in the letters a complete picture of himself as a proper Roman man, whose behavior needed to be open to scrutiny not only in service to the state and others but in the close company of his family. This dearth of kin is made even more acute for Pliny by his lack of children. Pliny the son, Pliny the brother, Pliny the father are all roles difficult to define in a script missing so many players. Honoring the few familial ties he has and creating new ones by assuming the places of deceased or ineffective men become critical avenues for Pliny's self-representation. It is not surprising, then, that women related to those men, as well as those related to Pliny by marriage or bound to him by *amicitia*, are key components for him in developing a comprehensive picture of his character.

Like many members of Rome's elite in the late first century, Pliny was of equestrian origins, elevated to senatorial status to help fill the dwindling elite ranks of Rome. His adlection to the senate, like that of his contemporary Tacitus, occurred during the reign of Domitian, before the dreadful concluding years of the emperor's reign. Pliny must have shown an early talent for accounting, as much of his career involved dealing with state finances in various capacities. In doubt is the timing of his first service in such an office, as prefect of the Military Treasury. Birley argues for a one-year term in the years 96–97 and appointment by Nerva, whereas A. N. Sherwin-White and Sir Ronald Syme prefer a three-year term in 94–96 and appointment by Domitian.[6] There is tenuous evidence on each side of the debate,

[6] A. Birley 2000: 10–15. Syme (1979c: vol. VII, 562) remarks that it is exceptional careers with rapid advancement that tend to appear in our sources and that "normal" intervals between terms of offices might vary substantially. Sherwin-White (1966: 73) comments that the office was of triennial duration and that Pliny himself remarks that he held no office in 97 – thus his preference for 94–96 for Pliny's service in the prefecture.

and its definitive resolution seems unlikely without new evidence. The difference between the two dating possibilities is not insignificant to an assessment of Pliny's character: if Domitian continued to reward him by choosing him for office, then Pliny's declarations of his own precarious position during the later years of the despot's reign and his condemnation of Domitian after his death are disingenuous at best. The issue of Pliny's peril and his actions on behalf of his "friends" who were executed or exiled in 93 is taken up at length in Chapter 1 and offers a reassessment of his involvement with the condemned.

Pliny's next treasury appointment is more securely dated, as he served with Cornutus Tertullus in the office of prefect of the Treasury of Saturn for the better part of three years from 98 to September of 100, when both men were rewarded by Trajan with the suffect consulship. Pliny's honors continued in the years that followed, culminating with a special assignment to represent the emperor as *legatus Augusti* in Bithynia-Pontus, where his financial skills were particularly needed to deal with what appears to be significant incompetence if not malfeasance in the province's prior administration. The tenth book of the *Epistulae*, which was not published by Pliny and so falls outside the scope of this study, offers remarkable documentation of the difficulties Pliny encountered in addressing both old and new matters in the province, as well as great insight into the burdens of imperial rule for both legate and emperor. Pliny did not live to return to Rome from this final service to the emperor.

To judge from inscription evidence and Pliny's own remarks in the *Epistulae* and the *Panegyricus*, his was a life of regular service to the emperor, to his hometown, and to justice in the courtroom as both prosecutor and defender – a life that was enriched by periods of withdrawal to the countryside and his villas, where he read, revised his speeches, wrote poetry, and corresponded with friends. Demurring to write history, he chose instead to supply Tacitus with historical accounts, to recall the settings of his speeches, and to explicate exempla of model Roman men and women in epistolary form.

The *Epistulae*

It is now universally agreed that the arrangement of Pliny's letters is far from incidental, as he claims in his first letter. Indeed, each of the

letters is carefully located, and various types are distributed throughout the first nine books.[7] Only the letters of book 10, certainly published after his death and without his editing hand, can be said to remain unrevised and assembled without any purpose other than to juxtapose Trajan's responses to Pliny's inquiries.

Although there is little consensus as to the form of publication, whether in pairs or triads of books or even as single books, John Bodel (n.d.) has nicely demonstrated that a final nine-book structure was surely Pliny's intent for the handpicked letters, and thus any study of the corpus must take into account where letters appear in relation both to the work as a whole and to one another.

In comparison to the letters of Cicero, whose addressees are often prominent political figures of his time, the recipients of Pliny's missives are remarkably nondescript, with the obvious exception of the historian Tacitus. Fewer than half of the hundred or so addresses can securely be identified as of senatorial rank, and a substantial percentage remains unknown outside of Pliny.[8] It is considerably easier to identify the six women who receive letters from Pliny, as they are quite closely associated with him – his wife, her aunt, his mother-in-law, his mentor's sister and daughter, and a relative by marriage.[9] Letters addressed to women are widely dispersed in the first eight books, appearing in all but book 5. Their broad distribution suggests careful placement by Pliny. Despite the fact that women constitute so small a number of recipients, women do, in fact, have a substantial presence in Pliny's letters, appearing in 15 percent of the letters and all nine books.

[7] Sherwin-White (1966: 43–44) offers a typology for the letters in his commentary, assigning them to eight categories: public affairs, character sketches, patronage, admonitions, domestic, literary, scenic, and social courtesy. Like all such attempts, Sherwin-White's classification is somewhat arbitrary, but it does serve to illustrate the diversity of the letters, both within books and across the collection in its entirety.

[8] There is difficulty in securing a precise number of recipients, as the nomenclature Pliny uses is not consistent. By Sherwin-White's (1966) count there are 101, but A. Birley (2000: 21) suggests as many as 105. Jal (1993: 212) notes that, at 101, Pliny would have precisely as many addressees in approximately one-third as many letters as Cicero did. The potential coincidence of numbers is meant to point out the diversity of Pliny's recipients rather than to draw any direct correlation between Pliny's work and that of Cicero.

[9] Excluded from this group is Cottia, the wife of Vestricius Spurinna, to whom Pliny directs a letter of condolence on the death of her son (3.10). In this case, she is co-recipient along with her husband, and so the letter does not qualify as one addressed only to a woman.

In the complete corpus of 368 letters (a number that includes the correspondence with Trajan in which women have brief mention but no significant presence), 72 letters contain some reference to women. Thirty-four of those letters offer only passing mention of a wife, sister, mother, mother-in-law, stepmother, or daughter. There remain 38 letters, all found in the first nine books, which include 247 letters in total: of these, 18 focus upon women, 9 are addressed to women, and 11 include women prominently though not as their main subject. Still, the number of women constitutes less than 10 percent of the hundreds of individuals named in the letters, an indication that their particular identities are less important than their roles in the lives of their male relatives, almost none of whom go unnamed. Their relatively small number strongly suggests that the corpus as a whole presents a selective rather than comprehensive view of Pliny's relationships with women and that he has purposefully chosen the women he mentions and addresses.

The Question of Self-Representation

Scholars have largely abandoned further consideration of many long-standing questions regarding the *Epistulae* of Pliny the Younger, including efforts to determine their date or dates of publication or their "authenticity" – that is, were they actually sent to their addressees and, if so, how substantial was their subsequent revision – as well as attempts to reconstruct Pliny's villas. Instead, much recent work has focused on Pliny's letters as a vehicle for presenting himself as a model, both for his contemporaries and for posterity. While the reader must wait until the final book of Pliny's nine-book collection for the bald statement by the author that he desires nothing so much as to secure his fame by always having something *clarum … et immortale* in mind (9.3), recent examinations have made clear that the function of the letters in his self-representation begins with the very first letter of the collection, where he asserts that the arrangement of the letters is entirely incidental, implying that they recount ordinary, everyday events in his life and thus properly represent his behavior and character.[10]

[10] Henderson (2003) has commented upon the impossibility of distinguishing between Pliny's dual roles of reporter and editor – giving the correspondence

Of course, the very nature of personal correspondence makes it an ideal medium for the presentation of its author's character. Through it, he can not only recall but also shape the events of his life and his interactions with friends, family, and the famous, revealing both by direct statement and by implication his innermost thoughts and feelings whenever he wishes to do so. Letters open a door through which the reader may look into the author's heart and mind, to know his nature by direct observation rather than oblique report. Yet even the most casual of written communication is fashioned to some extent by its author for the eye of his reader; even a simple note of thanks may express both real gratitude and the writer's desire to be seen as a polite and genuinely grateful recipient.[11] A collection of various types of correspondence by the same author can thus provide a series of vignettes from his life, each of which adds to a pastiche of his character traits.

As Elizabeth Meyer (1999) has demonstrated, Cicero fashioned his character in individual letters, as he had in his speeches, to suit the particular purpose of a letter and the nature of its recipient. As noted, Cicero had planned to assemble a number of his letters for publication – not, of course, without editing them: *eas* [*epistulas*] *ego oportet perspiciam, corrigam; tum denique edentur* (*Att.* 16.5.5). Although we cannot know the nature of the intended collection, Cicero's penchant for self-promotion surely would have assured that its contents highlighted only those traits that he considered worthy of a great statesman.

Despite some clear allusions to and echoes of his predecessor's letters in some of Pliny's corpus, just how extensive his contact was with Cicero's correspondence is open to debate and, with the exception of Pliny's letters to his wife (see Chapter 4), largely beyond the scope of this study. John Nicolson (1998), however, has nicely demonstrated that, while Pliny compares himself to the great republican orator repeatedly, references in Pliny's work to Cicero's letters are quite limited, suggesting that Pliny was familiar with only a few examples and possibly, even then, only excerpts from them.

Other literary predecessors had certainly employed the epistolary medium as a means of self-characterization, albeit with considerably

and Pliny's self-portrait layers of complexity that make the work a highly literary mosaic.

[11] See particularly Altman 1984.

more subtlety than Pliny. The *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium* of Seneca most assuredly offer a portrait of their author's character, including justification of his role in Nero's reign and his accumulation of wealth, for both of which we may be sure he suffered severe criticism. Although Seneca's letters seem more apology than self-promotion, there is little doubt that they were intended to change the way in which his life and work were remembered – promoting his greatest strength as philosophical reflection rather than political manipulation. An author's character is evident even in verse epistles – Horace, steeped in philosophy, or Ovid, repentant in exile and counting on his missives to intercede for him with the emperor, to replace his absent person with their poetic power. Yet, with the poets the reader is always acutely aware of the literary nature of the hexameter and elegiac couplet. Pliny chooses a different approach, creating a new literary medium, clothed as everyday correspondence, to present his character.[12]

Although Pliny begins his collection of letters with the claim that they have been assembled randomly, as they came into his grasp (1.1), it is now widely accepted that Pliny's letters were at least edited before publication. Some may even have been written specifically for inclusion in the corpus. Indeed, the seeming anonymity of so many of his addressees makes such pretense easily believable, as he writes to so many ordinary people about everyday concerns. Pliny himself, moreover, acknowledges the letter's power to represent its author (4.13, 6.17), to oblige him (3.1, 7.1), and to offer a guide for others to follow (4.24). Pliny was also aware that even without the premeditation assumed in arranging an epistolary collection, letters were not exclusively a means of private communication. Individual letters might be intended for circulation or reading in an open forum, and some – though meant to be held in confidence – might well have been shared with others. The unplanned transmission of the contents of letters is well illustrated by Pliny's recollection of the reading of a letter before Domitian in which Modestus condemned Regulus and which caused the latter's

[12] On the letters as a literary enterprise whose intent was to create a persona like that of Horace, see Ludolph 1997. For an examination of the letters as an artistic construct, whose words shape Pliny's character like the hands of a sculptor, see Henderson 2002b. Both are a welcome break from the traditional scholarship on Pliny with its historical focus, and each compels readers of Pliny to be more aware of the many ways in which Pliny crafts his self-presentation.