

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88227-9 - The Art of Pliny's Letters: A Poetics of Allusion in the Private Correspondence

Ilaria Marchesi

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

THE ART OF PLINY'S LETTERS

In the first book on intertextuality in Pliny the Younger, Professor Marchesi invites a new reading of Pliny's collection of private epistles: the letters are examined as the product of an authorial strategy controlling both the rhetorical fabric of individual units and their arrangement in the collection. By inserting recognizable fragments of canonical authors into his epistles, Pliny imports into the still fluid practice of letter-writing the principles of composition and organization that for his contemporaries characterized other writings as literature. Allusions become the occasion for a metapoetic dialogue, especially with the collection's privileged addressee, Tacitus. An active participant in the cultural politics of his time, Pliny entrusts to the letters his views on poetry, oratory and historiography. In defining a model of epistolography alternative to Cicero's and complementing those of Horace, Ovid and Seneca, he also successfully carves a niche for his work in the Roman literary canon.

ILARIA MARCHESI is Assistant Professor of Classics and Comparative Literature, and Director of the Classics Program at Hofstra University. Recipient of the National Endowment for the Humanities Grant in 2005–2006 for her work on Pliny, she has published also on Horace and Petronius as well as the classical tradition in the Middle Ages.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88227-9 - The Art of Pliny's Letters: A Poetics of Allusion in the Private Correspondence

Ilaria Marchesi

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

THE ART OF PLINY'S LETTERS

A Poetics of Allusion in the Private Correspondence

ILARIA MARCHESI



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88227-9 - The Art of Pliny's Letters: A Poetics of Allusion in the Private Correspondence

Ilaria Marchesi

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521882279

© Ilaria Marchesi 2008

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2008

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-88227-9 hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88227-9 - The Art of Pliny's Letters: A Poetics of Allusion in the Private
Correspondence
Ilaria Marchesi
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	page vi
<i>Preface</i>	viii
Introduction	I
1 The semiotics of structure	12
2 <i>Sed quid ego tam gloriose?</i> Pliny's poetics of choice	53
3 The importance of being <i>Secundus</i> : Tacitus' voice in Pliny's letters	97
4 Storming historiography: Pliny's voice in Tacitus' text	144
5 Overcoming Ciceronian anxiety: Pliny's <i>niche/nike</i> in literary history	207
From dawn till dusk: four notes in lieu of a conclusion	241
<i>Appendix to chapter 5</i>	252
<i>List of works cited</i>	258
<i>General index</i>	272
<i>Index locorum</i>	275

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88227-9 - The Art of Pliny's Letters: A Poetics of Allusion in the Private Correspondence

Ilaria Marchesi

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgements

I hesitate to admit that I discovered Pliny as a subject worthy of study only in graduate school, in the context of a course on the history of the book with John Bodel. It was his inspired teaching that first provided the impetus for this book, and his generosity and supportive advice have accompanied this project to its completion. My first and greatest debt is to him.

Over the years many friends and colleagues have helped me think and write about Pliny's texts, by patiently reading and discussing my manuscript in its various incarnations. It would be impossible to express fully my gratitude to each of them here, but I would like to single out three of my early readers: Alessandro Barchiesi, Lowell Edmunds and Denis Feeney. To their supportive criticisms this book owes the courage to try and export into a study of Pliny's prose the delicate instruments usually reserved for poetic texts. To Roy Gibson and Gareth Williams goes my warmest gratitude for their painstaking readings and priceless suggestions. Roy's enthusiasm for renewing the study of Pliny has sometimes surpassed even my own, and has helped me overcome many fits of skepticism and self-doubt. To Tony Woodman, a reader extremely generous with his time and as skeptical as he is selfless, I owe the distinct pleasure of having been forced to rethink many arguments. *The Art of Pliny's Letters* is definitely a better book thanks to him. He still does not agree with many of the points I have made here, and should not be held in any way responsible for my obstinate disposition.

I am grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a research fellowship in 2005–2006, which allowed me to take one year off from teaching in order to work on the final revision of this book. I am also extremely grateful to Hofstra University for having facilitated my leave, and to Steven Smith, a colleague and now a friend, to whose care I entrusted the Classics Program during my leave. His enthusiasm, commitment and professionalism have given me the peace of mind to work on my book without worrying about the fate of our students.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88227-9 - The Art of Pliny's Letters: A Poetics of Allusion in the Private Correspondence

Ilaria Marchesi

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Acknowledgements*

vii

I would also like to thank the environment of American academia. A project like this would have never seen the light of day had I not been given the chance to study and to work in the United States after my training in Italy. The past ten years have offered me a remarkable series of opportunities to reinvent myself and my work at every step. In this time I have also benefited much from the generosity of Stephanie Cobb, Christian Dupont, Matt Fox, George Greaney, Kristi Grimes and Esther Marion. From the various vantage points of their disciplines they have not only helped to make my Italian-sounding prose more readable but also taught me the real meaning of the word collegial. To the combined efforts of all these people this book owes its strengths; its defects must be ascribed to my stubbornness.

It only remains to discharge the pleasant duty of the publishing member in any academic couple; that is, offering thanks to their spouse for their patience and support. To my husband Simone, who twelve years ago convinced me to look West from the shores of the Tyrrhenian Sea and imagine a life together beyond it, I say only one thing: may we be fortunate enough to continue sharing every word of it.

In the body of this book, I follow the standard system of abbreviations for ancient sources as detailed in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* and the *Greek-English Lexicon* of Liddell and Scott. For modern sources in the bibliography, I have spelled out all journal titles in full.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88227-9 - The Art of Pliny's Letters: A Poetics of Allusion in the Private Correspondence

Ilaria Marchesi

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

This book is about what makes Pliny's collection of private correspondence a literary work. While the epistles have previously been studied as a source of historical information, recent critical interest in Pliny has acquired a larger focus. Works such as Hoffer's on the anxieties of Pliny the Younger or the collective endeavor of the Manchester and Menaggio conferences on Pliny and his social, political and cultural worlds have illuminated Pliny's engagement with central issues of his times. These contributions, however, have largely been animated by an interpretation of the epistles that is exclusively instrumental: Pliny's texts have been read, in fact, as a witness to the author's strategic self-fashioning. If this partly new approach has the merit of advancing the critical debate beyond the earlier prevailing interest in his collection as a source of prosopographic evidence, it still insists on casting the epistles as a testimony to the life, however artificially and strategically constructed, of an individual. My work intends to reorient the reading of Pliny's letters by considering them not only as a tool for understanding the author or his times but also as the object to be understood. My central contention is that, while Pliny consciously embeds in his texts the self-portrait of a man of strenuous political activity and incessant cultural commitment, this portrait cannot be separated from the textual corpus that articulates it. Pliny's letters do not merely witness his cultural project; they constitute it. In other words, although in reading the letters we learn something about the person of the author and the intricate web of personalities that populate them, we should also expect to learn something about the letters themselves and the strategies through which they are constructed as self-sufficient, literary texts.

Pliny's letters are certainly documents that provide information on a reality located outside them: they contain useful data on Pliny's own economic, political and oratorical activities; they convey a picture of power struggles, relations and customs in his circle of friends; they record the lives of some of his contemporaries and the deaths of many of his elders;

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88227-9 - The Art of Pliny's Letters: A Poetics of Allusion in the Private Correspondence

Ilaria Marchesi

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

ix

they detail curiosities of the natural landscape he visited, the architectural virtue of the homes he inhabited, and the intricate paths he followed in his literary peregrinations. The letters have already been studied as pointers to an external reality (this is the heteronomous hypothesis guiding traditional socio-historical interpretations). They are, however, also open to a different approach, one which focuses on objects that do not lie outside but rather within them. This is the core of the autonomous hypothesis guiding my work: as well as illuminating the circumstances and the agent of their production, Pliny's texts are self-reflexively concerned with the construction of their own literary identity. In the way the epistles are arranged and collected, in the allusions they make to the literature of the past, in the dialogue they establish with it in the present, they talk about themselves, and their self-reflexive attention is what makes them literary. Like any letter that is intended to outlive its primary purpose of relating news about its distant place of origin or its sender, Pliny's epistles are more than mere testimonies. They are literary artifacts that function as ends in themselves.

My work concentrates on one of the techniques that Pliny used in order to help his texts achieve literary status, namely allusion. With this term I indicate the incorporation in a given text of verbal clusters the origin of which may be traced to a specific antecedent and for which a reason for insertion in the new text can be found. Allusions are the second voice in Pliny's text, the continuous, if subtle, counterpoint to his primary discourse. In particular, they are the peculiar vehicle he chooses to articulate his discussions of poetics. From my analysis, Pliny's epistolary corpus emerges as a carefully organized work that experiments with the boundaries of its own genre by allusively evoking and interacting with a variety of its literary antecedents, both prose and verse, both nearer and more distant in time. In the epistles I analyze, I regard the interplay with the discernible models as part of a strategy that strives to locate Pliny's corpus and its author in a relevant, albeit new, position within the entropic and shifting configuration of the literary genres in his age. In so doing, I study allusion more as a means than as an end.

I see Pliny making two distinct but coordinated usages of allusion. First, poetic allusion – especially to Virgil, Catullus, Horace and Ovid – is one of the tools through which Pliny structures his collection so that it may achieve the coherence of a unitary work that should be read and preserved from cover to cover (or from the first to the last roll), while maintaining its composite nature as a collection of fragments that have been produced and first enjoyed (but not consumed) independently. I concentrate on the allusive pairing of epistles that appear at opposite ends of the collection,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88227-9 - The Art of Pliny's Letters: A Poetics of Allusion in the Private Correspondence

Ilaria Marchesi

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

binding it together, or at key junctures within it, highlighting those junctures and reinforcing the forward movement of the reading. My contention is that Pliny's technique not only relies upon poetic material but is poetic in nature. It is in fact from the highly elaborate poetic collections of the Augustan age that he inherited (with a certain degree of modification) both the tools he uses and the goals he strives to achieve.

Second, but just as important, allusion appears as the principal tool of Pliny's earnest bid to have his letters join the authoritative corpus of literary texts. Through the redeployment of particularly memorable fragments extracted from the canon, Pliny simultaneously reinforces the canon and enters into a creative dialogue with it. His strategy is twofold: on the one hand, his interaction with the literature of his past is guided by a careful plan of reinterpretation; on the other hand, his engagement with the present is animated by a militant desire to intervene in it. My analysis is devoted to three main areas (three genres of writing, largely speaking) in which Pliny wishes his voice to be heard: poetry, oratory and historiography. These areas of interest are not of equal importance to Pliny: he has something to say about poetry (and his own very limited career in that field), but he knows that his chances of joining the ranks of the poets are slim, and his comments are mainly perfunctory. He has much higher investments, however, in the fields of oratory and historiography. On this double ground Pliny engages his antecedents and contemporaries alike in a refined, often allusive, cultural debate. The letters to Tacitus are the main starting point for my hypothesis. It is here that Pliny most clearly articulates his views both on oratory – the art to which he devotes his greatest efforts, and on historiography – a genre he allegedly and ambiguously leaves for his friend Tacitus to excel in.

Pliny's allusions thus serve multiple purposes. They promote the structural cohesion of his work and create internal resonances in his collection. By contributing to the work's philological endurance and its artfulness, they prepare the text for its reception into the canon. They are also the privileged vehicle of his request for admission to and direct intervention in that canon. Of course, the process of literary "canonization" of an author would not be completed if, in addition to the confirmation of the canonicity of past works and the intervention in the discursive practices of the present, it were not to include a projection of his (and his text's) future reception into the canon itself. Pliny's struggle with the overpowering figure of Cicero may be read as the third and final phase of the process. The last part of this book is devoted to Pliny's (partially) successful attempt at challenging the epistolary corpus of his model with his own diligently edited and promptly

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88227-9 - The Art of Pliny's Letters: A Poetics of Allusion in the Private Correspondence

Ilaria Marchesi

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xi

published collection of letters. Pliny's outlook on the future, I argue, is less bleak than has usually been presented: if he is resigned to having found all the other slots of the canon already taken, he knows that Cicero's collection of private correspondence has not yet achieved canonical status, and so treats the still fluid situation of the epistolary genre as an opportunity to be seized. However authoritative, Cicero's letters were not beyond the reach of Pliny's emulative game: epistolography was the only genre in which a Bloomian "ephebe" could challenge the predecessor's texts and eventually supplant them.

My work proceeds mainly through close readings of individual epistles or closely related clusters of them. The somewhat unsystematic character of my book is due to two related features of its subject. First, my work mirrors Pliny's desultory development of his arguments. Pliny works by juxtaposition of fragments and *tesserae*, rather than organized, clearly structured lines of argumentation. The search for coherence in Pliny's collection is frustrated by the author's own resistance to it. Pliny's epistles are neither a treatise nor a novel, nor even a dialogue in the classical sense; however, they are also far from being a chaotic assemblage of casually collected fragments. The epistles are suspended between the options of paradigmatic and syntagmatic reading. Pliny proceeds through the addition of heterogeneous elements, but he also connects these fragments on a deeper level. Continuity is built allusively rather than "organically"; it is of a secondary, meditated nature. In one sense, then, my book goes against Pliny's intentions, while in another it conforms to them. By collecting and organizing the themes he had disseminated and scattered among individual recipients and epistles, I try to construct coherent arguments out of Pliny's fragments (and, in this, to undo what Pliny had done). By bringing to the surface some of the organizational threads of the collection and by inviting modern readers to see connections where the author and his first readers might have seen them, I carry forward what Pliny had intended his readers' work to be.

Secondly, Pliny's letters are not simply the product of their author's design. They also offer themselves as mirrors of their audience. By addressing a varied range of subjects and deploying a language in tune with the interests of their primary addressees, they also select their public. Depending on their own interests and expertise, readers are attracted to individual letters or specific groups of them. In my case, personal familiarity with the literary debates on poetry, rhetoric and historiography has led me to focus on precisely these issues. Other readers' inquiries have been guided by their expertise in other disciplines. In this light, the variety of approaches to Pliny's letters is not at all surprising. From the most traditional political

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88227-9 - The Art of Pliny's Letters: A Poetics of Allusion in the Private Correspondence

Ilaria Marchesi

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii

Preface

and prosopographical investigations of Syme and Sherwin-White to the wide variety of perspectives collected in the Manchester and Menaggio proceedings, the emergent critical portrait of Pliny attests both the author's kaleidoscopic literary identity and the rich and polymorphic interests of his readers. As a writer who entrusted his bid for literary fame to a profoundly dialogic work, I believe that Pliny would not mind appearing to each reader as his own.