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Pliny the Lover: by the book

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Abstract: This article proposes to re-examine what purposes the letters of Pliny the Younger to and about his wife Calpurnia serve in Pliny's quest for lasting fame. It shows that from their hybrid genre of elegiac epistolography to their seemingly intimate themes, these letters' form and content have aims that go beyond flaunting Pliny's perfect private and public life and his numerous talents, and that his writing to an absent wife is as much a pretext as a perfect backdrop to convey messages about himself and about his prose. This article concludes that Pliny stages himself as a lover to show his readers, by a mirror effect, how they should love him, and that his wife's behaviour and their conjugal relationship are ultimately transmuted into templates for the ideal reader's behaviour and the ideal relationship between Pliny and his readership.

This article examines the form and content of the letters written by Pliny the Younger to and about his wife Calpurnia: it explores how Pliny's literary self-centredness removes the historical Calpurnia and their relationship from the scene and how Pliny uses them as substrates onto which to graft his literary message. It concludes that Calpurnia is a pretext, and their relationship becomes a canvas onto which Pliny not only paints his self-portrait by flaunting his prose, his qualities of senator and *vir bonus*, and the prestige and fame he acquires through them, but through which he also exposes to his readers his expectations regarding their relationship with him. I will argue that in his letters to Calpurnia, Pliny identifies himself with his literary production, and identifies his relationship with his wife with his relationship with his readers. Ultimately, Calpurnia emerges from the letters as the paragon reader of Pliny and his prose.

Transitional objects

Calpurnia is Pliny's second or third wife, depending on the interpretation of his letters.¹ Sherwin-White attributes Pliny's choice of an 'unambitious marriage' to

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1 According to Sherwin-White (1966: 92) Pompeia Celerina, the recipient of 1.4, is the mother of Pliny's second wife, who would have died in 96–97. Pliny mentions his mourning for her in 9.13. Sherwin-White (1966: 128) sees in the mother-in-law of 1.18 the mother of Pliny's first wife. Pliny mentions a mother-in-law's money in 3.19.8 (*accipiam a socru, cuius arca non secus ac mea utor*), a visit to a mother-in-law in 6.10.1 (*Cum venissem in socrus meae villam Alsiensem*), and the relative of a mother-in-law in 10.51.1 (*Difficile est, domine, exprimere verbis, quantam perceperim laetitiam, quod et mihi et socroi meae praestitisti, ut adfinem eius Caecilium Clementem in hanc provinciam transferres*). For the possible dates of Pliny's marriages and the controversy over their number, see 10.2.2; Sherwin-White (1966: 128, 264, 296, 493,

Calpurnia to his 'common sense', for she is 'a provincial girl from his own circle, likely to have children.'² Pliny was in his late thirties–early forties when the marriage took place, and Calpurnia was probably in her teens.³ Three letters from Pliny to his wife were published,⁴ and seven other either mention her, or are about her.⁵

An element that recurs in the three letters to Calpurnia is the presence of literary material as a substitute for the lover's presence. The first letter is sent from Rome to Calpurnia who is ill and on a health retreat in Campania. For the greater part of the letter, Pliny complains about her absence, his suffering, and asks for comfort more than he encourages her in any way. It betrays his need for her, and its ending is depressing and self-centred; Pliny urges Calpurnia to write to him as often as she can:⁶

I fear everything, I imagine everything, and, as it is the nature of those who fear, I dream most of the things that I loathe most. I urge you to assuage my angst by one, or even two letters a day. Indeed I will feel reassured while I read, and I will fear again as soon as I have finished reading.

and esp. 559–560) argues for three marriages, and so does Syme (1968: 137), but more recent scholarship prefers the hypothesis of two marriages, e.g. Raepsaet-Charlier 1987: 177; Hoffer 1999: 232–233; Carlon 2009: 104–105; however, Shelton (2013: 96) still argues for three marriages. For Calpurnia and her family, see *PIR*² C 326; Raepsaet-Charlier 1987: 177; Syme 1991: 509–510; Shelton 2013: 97–104.

- 2 Sherwin-White 1966: 296. It is difficult to say whether the supposition that Calpurnia is 'likely to have children' comes from Pliny or Sherwin-White.
- 3 See the terms which Pliny uses when he writes about her miscarriage: *puellariter nescit*, 8.10.1; *fuit nulla sua culpa, aetatis aliqua*, 8.11.2; for women's age at marriage, see Hopkins 1965; Gardner 1986: 38–41; Shaw 1987; Treggiari 1991: 39–43; see also Hopkins 1966; Scheidel 2001: 33–34 nn. 133–137, 150–151; for men's age at marriage, see Saller 1987; for senators, see Syme 1987.
- 4 6.4, 6.7, 7.5.
- 5 4.1 to Calpurnius Fabatus, Calpurnia's grandfather, about their forthcoming visit to see him and his daughter Calpurnia Hispulla, Calpurnia's aunt; 4.19 to Calpurnia Hispulla about Calpurnia's qualities and the happiness of the couple; 8.10 to Calpurnius Fabatus and 8.11 to Calpurnia Hispulla about Calpurnia's miscarriage; 8.19 to Maximus where Pliny mentions his concern for his wife's ill-health; 9.36 to Fuscus Salinator, where Pliny mentions as part of his daily routine dinners with his wife or with his friends; 10.120, to Trajan, where he asks the emperor for the permission for his wife to use the imperial post to go back to Rome in order to assist her aunt after the death of Calpurnius Fabatus.
- 6 *Vereor omnia, imaginor omnia, quaeque natura metuentium est, ea maxime mihi quae maxime abominor fingo. Quo impensius rogo, ut timori meo cottidie singulis vel etiam binis epistulis consulas. Ero enim securior dum lego, statimque timebo cum legero*, 6.4.4–5. On women's letter-writing, its language, style, context, addressees and their social status, see Hemelrijk 1999: 188–206. The Latin text used for quotations from Pliny's *Epistulae* is the 1963 edition by Mynors. All translations are my own.

Pliny displays a fear of losing her, and describes himself as consumed by his fear of abandonment and need for reassurance. He asks her to write although she is ill, for the letter compensates for the absence of the loved one.

In the second letter, Pliny writes to Calpurnia:⁷

You write that my absence affects you quite a great deal, and that you have but one consolation, which is to hold my books as if they were me, and even often to put them at the place I usually occupy. It is pleasant for me that you regret my absence, and that you find comfort by this support. I for my part also read and read again your letters, and constantly take them again as if I had just received them.

While Calpurnia's missing Pliny is the proposed theme, and hence words of encouragement and affection are expected from him, it is diverted so as to result in an assessment of his pleasure at her longing for him, and in him being at the centre of the attention of both. Here the letters and books stand for the absentee, and are as tenderly handled as the loved one.

In the third letter, Pliny's feeling of loneliness is even more exacerbated, and while the literary material does not exactly stand for the beloved one, it is used as a distraction from the thought of the absentee, rather than as a replacement for her:⁸

It is unbelievable how much I yearn for you. The cause is firstly love, and secondly the fact that we are not used to being away from each other. Hence I spend the most important part of my nights awake, your image in my mind; hence during the day, at the times when I used to go and visit you, my feet lead me, literally, to your room; hence, lastly, miserable and disheartened, as if rejected I walk away from an empty room. The only time which is free from these torments is when I exhaust myself on the forum and with my friends' lawsuits. I let you appreciate what a life I have, I to whom work is rest, and to whom troubles and worries are solace.

The subject of the letter is Pliny and his feelings regarding the situation that he is facing more than his feelings for his wife; and indeed, through the three letters to Calpurnia we learn more about Pliny than about her. What is more, letters, books and work are three important components of the couple's relationship, not only as media which convey feelings, but also because they act as a compensation for the absent loved one, notably in the second letter, where it is understood that Pliny likes to be missed, and likes to be identified with his books.

7 *Scribis te absentia mea non mediocriter adfici unumque habere solacium, quod pro me libellos meos teneas, saepe etiam in vestigio meo colloces. Gratum est quod nos requiris, gratum quod his fomentis adquiescis; invicem ego epistulas tuas lectito atque identidem in manus quasi novas sumo, 6.7.1–2.*

8 *Incredibile est quanto desiderio tui tenear. In causa amor primum, deinde quod non consuevimus abesse. Inde est quod magnam noctium partem in imagine tua vigil exigo; inde quod interdum, quibus horis te visere solebam, ad diaetam tuam ipsi me, ut verissime dicitur, pedes ducant; quod denique aeger et maestus ac similis excluso a vacuo limine recedo. Unum tempus his tormentis caret, quo in foro et amicorum litibus conteror. Aestima tu, quae vita mea sit, cui requies in labore, in miseria curisque solacium, 7.5.*

The notion of the material substitute for the absent loved one also appears in the letter that Pliny addresses to a third party. To Calpurnia Hispulla, his wife's aunt, Pliny says of his wife's interest in literature:⁹

To that may be added her liking for literature, which her love for me generated. She has got my books, reads and reads them again, even learns them by heart.

Pliny adds:¹⁰

She also sings my verses and recites them to the sound of the lyre, without any master but love, which is the best of teachers.

In the same letter, he wrote earlier:¹¹

What anxiety affects her when she sees that I am about to plead, and what joy when I have pleaded! She arranges for messengers to report to her what approval, what applause I kindled, what success I win in the judgement. The same, when I give a lecture, sits apart behind a nearby curtain, and captures the praises of me with most eager ears.

In the first passage Calpurnia is showed delighting in handling Pliny's literary production: she possesses his books, reads them, learns them by heart; she recites his verses, puts them to music. She reveres Pliny's compositions more than if they were mere productions of her husband, but as if they were Pliny himself. Pliny seems to indulge in imagining Calpurnia in close relationship with his writings; this echoes the passage of the second letter which says that he likes to be identified with his books when she is away from him in Campania, where his books are kept in the place where he would have physically resided.¹² The second passage of the letter to her aunt goes even further in the distantiation: Calpurnia is being kept informed of the successes of Pliny in court and of the reception of his speeches through intermediaries rather than through Pliny's own recounting of it. What is more, even when she attends his public lectures, there is still something between her and him – a curtain – that makes her focus on what Pliny says rather than on Pliny himself.¹³ Pliny does not show her interacting with himself directly, but always via some literary medium, whether he and his wife are away from each other or not: he does not mention situations where they would be in each other's

9 *Accedit his studium litterarum, quod ex mei caritate concepit. Meos libellos habet lectitat ediscit etiam*, 4.19.2.

10 *Versus quidem meos cantat etiam formatque cithara non artifice aliquo docente, sed amore qui magister est optimus*, 4.19.4.

11 *Qua illa sollicitudine cum videor acturus, quanto cum egi gaudio adficitur! Disponit qui nuntiant sibi quem adsensum quos clamores excitarim, quem eventum iudici tulerim. Eadem, si quando recito, in proximo discreta velo sedet, laudesque nostras avidissimis auribus excipit*, 4.19.3.

12 6.7.1–2; see above p. 157.

13 About the curtain as a symbol of *pudicitia*, see Rousselle 1992: 315.

presence. The other occurrences of Pliny mentioning Calpurnia do not concern situations where their feelings for each other is the topic.¹⁴

Pliny chooses to show Calpurnia attending his lectures, reading his books and learning his compositions rather than being in direct contact with him. This association of Pliny's marriage and written material gives a very literary flavour to the description that he makes of his couple. People are replaced by writings, feelings are transmitted through written words, and handling them is a proof of love. Pliny publishes his feelings, which hence become public literature, and paraphrases rather than quotes directly his wife's emotions, which makes them leave the domain of verbal exchanges to become literary material. The letters are constructions, the aim of which is not to show Calpurnia herself but to show Pliny in his relationship with Calpurnia. The epistolographic setting – whether he created these letters from scratch, arranged them, or just selected them among others – within which he presents Calpurnia allows for a focus on Pliny and his activities: the supposed intimacy of the correspondence gives him the opportunity to show yet another aspect of his personality¹⁵ – which however still suits the global image that he wishes to give of himself –,¹⁶ and in addition to evincing his moral qualities of *vir bonus* and professional and political shrewdness of senator,¹⁷ his letters to Calpurnia are a way to communicate with the reader about his own prose.

Literary f(l)ame

Despite the apparent passion and seemingly intimate topic of the missives, the composition is very controlled. Each has a precise theme: Pliny's angst – about Calpurnia's health, but she has to comfort him (6.4) –, Pliny's absence – she misses him, and he likes it (6.7) –, and Pliny's loneliness – he loves and misses her (7.5).¹⁸ Pliny seems to experiment with the hybrid genre of elegiac letters in prose, the third one presenting the most recognisable form with its topos of the excluded lover.¹⁹

14 See 4.1, 8.19, 9.36, 10.120.

15 As the staging of other people in the letters effects, as Pausch (2004: 51ff., esp. 141–146) shows.

16 On Pliny's craving for fame, see Guillemin 1929: 13–22; Mayer 2003: 227–229, 233–234; on his ambition to please, see Aubrion 1975; on his desire to secure immortality and the help that he sought from Tacitus for that purpose, see Griffin 1999: 140–141; on his self-presentation and self-praise, see Rudd 1992; Ludolph 1997; Mayer 2003; Gibson 2003.

17 See Page 2015.

18 See De Pretis 2003: 139–140 on the 'epistolarity' of 6.7; 141 on the stylistic similarities between 6.7 and 4.19, the letter to Calpurnia's aunt about the former; 143–145 about the 'lexical repetitions' that emphasise the links that make 6.4, 6.7, 7.5 and 4.19 a 'literary unit' (144). On the amatory topoi of 7.5, see Ramírez de Verger 1998.

19 See Ramírez de Verger 1998: 115 and n. 5 on the *exclusus amator*; on the paraclausithyron, see Copley 1956; Williams 1985: 546–547; Griffin 1994: 54–55; Laigneau 2000. Sherwin-White (1966: 296) writes of Pliny's 'amatory style' for this letter. Guillemin (1929) had already noted the theme of the 'excluded lover' and that Pliny's tone was a combination of Ovid's style in the

When writing about the poetical talents of his friend Passennus Paulus, Pliny mentions the latter's *magna varietas magna mobilitas*,²⁰ literary qualities that Pliny himself seeks to evince. He adds that his friend *amat ut qui verissime*: Pliny himself, like Passennus Paulus, is versed in the art of creating larger-than-life literary emotions. It would have flattered Pliny's ego to imagine, or at least to portray, himself as a passionate man, brilliant in all situations, including the most intimate ones. Accordingly, he publishes the fact that he wrote risqué verses²¹ and justifies himself with the tone of someone who enjoys showing himself as multidisciplinary and being able to apply himself to a domain where he was least expected to thrive. Indeed, he says that erotic poetry is a genre that would appear to others as alien to his character²² and justifies at some length this activity as being practised by serious and famous writers, whose names he lists.²³ Discoursing on his poetic aspirations is also for Pliny the opportunity to mention on several occasions his ambition to try his hand at various literary genres. Speaking of his 'hendecasyllables', he says:²⁴

I sometimes narrate something soberly, sometimes extravagantly, and by this very variety I attempt to achieve that everybody finds something to please them, hopefully.

Elsewhere he relates, starting with his hendecasyllables as the topic of the letter, the stages through which his literary inclinations went during the course of his life. He mentions the writing of a *Graecam tragoediam*, *Latinos elegos*, *heroum* and *hendecasyllabos*,²⁵ about which he tells how he took to them after having tried various other metres.²⁶ Pliny's ambition to experiment with various genres

letters to his wife in the *Tristia* (e.g. 3.3, esp. 15–28; 4.3, esp. 33–62), and of Cicero's tone when he writes to Terentia of his care for her health (e.g. *Fam.* 14.2.2–3; see Guillemin 1929: 138–139). Sherwin-White (1966: 359) seems to agree with Guillemin when the latter 'remarks', as the former says, that Pliny established the theme of conjugal love in Latin literature, but Sherwin-White (1966: 359) believes that 'she [Guillemin] exaggerates the formality of the letters to Calpurnia, and their debt to Cicero. Pliny unlike Cicero has nothing to say about his business and public affairs to his wife; cf. *Fam.* 14.4.4–5, 5.1–2.' Hindermann (2010) shows that Pliny was influenced by the works of predecessors, notably Propertius 4.3, Ovid's *Heroides* and Statius's *Silvae* 1.2 and 3.5, and was thus not the first Latin writer to use elegiac motives in relation to conjugal relationships.

20 9.22.2.

21 4.14; 7.4.6 has an example of Pliny's 'naughty' verses.

22 *Nec vero moleste fero hanc esse de moribus meis existimationem, ut qui nesciunt talia doctissimos gravissimos sanctissimos homines scriptitasse, me scribere mirentur*, 5.3.3.

23 5.3.3–6; also 4.14.4–5; 7.4.1, 4–6, 8; 7.9.10–14, where Pliny justifies the writing of poetry, albeit a lighter genre, by citing famous precedents, especially Cicero. Cf. Apul. *Apol.* 11; Ov. *Tr.* 2.354.

24 *Describimus aliquid modo pressius modo elatius, atque ipsa varietate temptamus efficere, ut alia aliis quaedam fortasse omnibus placeant*, 4.14.3.

25 7.4.1–3.

26 7.4.3–9. On his hendecasyllables, see Prete 1948b; Gamberini 1983: 82–121 (on his poetry: 82–91; on poetry in his literary circle: 92–93; on its ethical value: 93–97); Auhagen 2003; on his

and to please various types of readers is in line with his literary purpose and character, and the writing of elegiac letters fits this ambition. Both his letters to his wife and his erotic verses are examples of Pliny's skill at tackling any genre, and both contribute to draw the picture that Pliny intends to leave to posterity, that of a multitalented man: beside the prominent political figure in active *negotium*, he is, in his time of *otium*,²⁷ a multidisciplinary writer, as the form shows, and an attentive husband and friend, as the content suggests.

The two letters to Calpurnia whose themes are conjugal love (6.4, 6.7) but which are not shaped in an elegiac form as recognisable as that of the paraclausithyron (7.5) still contain elements of literary artificiality, as we have seen. As for the second letter, where Pliny paraphrases Calpurnia,²⁸ we do not know whether Calpurnia actually wrote to Pliny what he says she wrote. But one can assume that the paraphrase of Calpurnia's words is intended for Pliny's readers at large, not for Calpurnia: she would indeed have known what she had written, and there would have been no point in reminding her of her own words at such length. Similarly, as Luck²⁹ and Maniet³⁰ both note, the first sentence of 6.4 (*proficiscentem te valetudinis causa in Campaniam*), by which Pliny reminds Calpurnia of the reason for their separation, is intended for the public eye. When writing to a friend, Pliny often resorts to this strategy of paraphrasing the content of the addressee's last letter, to let the reader know the context of the discussion that will follow.³¹ This is partly explained by the fact that Pliny's addressees might be abroad and might receive Pliny's letters weeks or months after their own letters had reached him; this is especially the case when Pliny writes to Trajan from Pontus-Bithynia.³² Whether or not the letter was actually sent to Calpurnia is of no importance since it has obviously been groomed for publication: in the form that we have it is more intended for the public than for its potential recipient.

verses as an apolitical activity, see Prete 1948a: 14, followed by Hershkowitz 1995 (on 4.14.10, *Habes quod agas* and poetry as a leisurely activity) and Leach 1990: 33–34; on the political stake of Pliny's verses, see Roller 1998. On Catullus's influence on Pliny's poetry, see Gunderson 1997; Marchesi 2008: 53–96. On Pliny's 'direct copying of Martial' in his book of verses, see Sherwin-White 1966: 3; see Martial 10.20 written in honour of Pliny, partly quoted by Pliny in 3.21 (verses 12–21; verse 3 mentions Pliny's name); on Pliny and Martial, see Pitcher 1999; Henderson 2002: 44–58. On the elegies that Pliny composed when stranded on the island of Icaria and his self-deprecating humour concerning their quality, see Tzounakas 2012.

27 Hindermann 2010: 48.

28 6.7.1; see above p. 157.

29 1961: 80–82.

30 1966: 178.

31 *Scribis* appears as the first word of letters 1.18, 4.10, 6.7, 6.25 and 9.40; in the first sentence of 7.30, 7.32, 8.7 and 9.7; and in 4.8.4 and 7.17.2.

32 10.20.2, 10.32.1, 10.40.3, 10.71.

The ideal reader

In his attempt to tackle a new genre, the elegiac letter, Pliny replicates the type of relationship that the elegiac poet has with his muse/mistress/work: a Propertius uses his Cynthia/the *Monobiblos* as a substrate onto which to graft his own self-presentation and his poetry, and his domination of the subject as well as that of his mistress allows him to ‘name and write his desire’, in the words of Greene, Cynthia thus becoming ‘a vehicle for his artistic fame and a function of his literary discourse’.³³ Pliny, like Propertius, while presenting his elegiac *persona* as the slave of love, of the object of his affection, and of the writing process which becomes a necessary valve and a medium replacing the absentee, leaves no more room to Calpurnia to express herself than Propertius to Cynthia, who changes mood as soon as Propertius needs another poetic angle of attack. Pliny, objectifying the historical Calpurnia to fit his elegiac demonstration, removes her even more from the scene and leaves even more room for his self-presentation and for the reinforcement of his represented control over his wife. The elegiac medium serves to restate Pliny’s mastery of literary genres and ideological positioning of genders, Calpurnia being muted by Pliny’s only apparent ode to her, and restated in her role as a foil for Pliny’s self-presentation and exposition of his literary skills, her position being thus reassessed as an inferior and subservient one.

At the centre of Pliny’s letter to Calpurnia’s aunt, in which he lists the virtues of his wife³⁴ and which is the most explicit and explanatory letter about his feelings for Calpurnia – or rather, about the feelings that he says she has, and which reflect his own desire – is the sentence *amat me, quod castitatis indicium est*:³⁵ after Pliny writes that his wife has grown to be worthy of her aunt and of her grandfather, he says that she is highly intelligent, most thrifty, and that she loves him, ‘which is a sign of her chastity’.³⁶ This echoes a sentence that Pliny uses when he lists the numerous qualities of Minicius Acilianus, a suitable match, according to him, for the daughter of Junius Mauricus’s brother: he says that Acilianus is good-looking, and Pliny believes that this information is important when a marriage is at stake, since it is, as it were, the reward for the girl’s chastity.³⁷ In both cases the issue is the attachment of the wife to her husband. Calpurnia’s love is believed by Pliny to be the guarantee of her chastity: she will not be unfaithful, because she loves him. Similarly, Acilianus’s potential wife, whose

33 Greene 1998: 46 and 38. See also Wyke 1995, who shows that narrative control is an issue that pertains to elegy beyond the mere poetic control of the subject by the narrator.

34 For Calpurnia’s virtues, see Shelton 2013: 111–115.

35 4.19.2.

36 4.19.1–2. Maniet (1966: 151–152) translates *castitas* by sense of shame, modesty, purity of morals, whereas Shelton (1990: 166) prefers the acceptation referring to sexual inexperience or sexual fidelity and accordingly infers that ‘Pliny believes’ that Calpurnia ‘finds sexual pleasure with him’; see also 2013: 112.

37 *Est ingenua totius corporis pulchritudo et quidam senatorius decor. Quae ego nequaquam arbitror neglegenda; debet enim hoc castitati puellarum quasi praemium dari*, 1.14.8.

chastity is implicitly expected and *de rigueur*, in exchange would enjoy a handsome husband. Girls are to stay chaste in any marriage, but Pliny seems to find it fairer when they have a motivating reason for it.³⁸ But the love that ensures Calpurnia's chastity is not based on Pliny's good looks:³⁹

it is indeed not for my age or my body [...] but for my glory that Calpurnia loves me.

Pliny chooses to display that Calpurnia's love is connected to his intellectual and literary production, and thus once again presents them as an intermediary between himself and his wife, a conveyor of feelings, and a motive for love.⁴⁰ He chooses, to explain his marital relationship, to place his career and intellectual activities at the core of his marriage.

Pliny's central position in the couple is even reflected in the letters about Calpurnia's miscarriage. In the letters that Pliny writes to Calpurnia's aunt and grandfather about the event, he keeps his comments at a level of discussion that concentrates on his interests – the interests of the traditional Roman man – rather than on hers. In the letter to Calpurnius Fabatus, he insists on the girl's naivety and the mistakes that led to the miscarriage, and offers words of comfort to the grandfather for the loss of an heir. He notes that it is better to lose the child than the mother, as other children can be produced; his wife's fertility has been proven and Pliny can still expect to beget an heir.⁴¹ But Calpurnia's emotional or physical distress are not mentioned. In the letter to the aunt, Pliny imagines Calpurnia Hispulla's anxiety at the news of her niece's miscarriage, and we are told that his wife is now back to her usual self, and back to him – *iam sibi iam mihi reddita*.⁴² we are back to Pliny. Her part of the story is staged so as to give the prominent place to his part, which he shows as exemplary: in the face of adversity, he is a perfectly adjusted character that deserves love and admiration.

Conclusion: behind the curtain and in the open

The letters' contents display Pliny's self-portrait of an exemplary figure as a prominent senator, busy barrister, caring husband, ardent lover, eager future father, while also displaying, by the form of his letters, his talents as a polyvalent writer who aims at writing canonical prose while at the same time innovating with the hybrid genre of elegiac prose letters.

38 Or, as Hoffer (1999: 191) puts it, 'The political benefits hinge on the woman's cooperative obedience, on her chastity, but we must be shown that the bride is not being used, and her cooperation is not being taken for granted, for the sake of male political expediency.'

39 *Non enim aetatem meam aut corpus, quae paulatim occidunt ac senescunt, sed gloriam diligit*, 4.19.5.

40 See above p. 156.

41 On Pliny's desire to have a child, 10.2.2.

42 8.11.2.

To buttress his self-portrait Pliny shows himself surrounded with exemplary people,⁴³ including several women,⁴⁴ among whom Calpurnia is the epitome of the perfect wife:⁴⁵ while Pliny is a role model as a writer and as a man of a wide range of moral and behavioural virtues, she is a role model for wives, an aspect that contributes to Pliny's exemplary self-portrait since he can evince good taste in his choice of wife and a certain talent in educating her.⁴⁶ In his self-promoting process Pliny endows her with a suitable, multifunctional and accordingly multifaceted *persona* of her own. She is not only the embodiment of a loving and helpful mate and literary figure, combining the traditional qualities of subservience to, and admiration for, her husband, the foil and witness to Pliny's political and judicial achievements, as well as an invaluable accessory and helper, but she also is the pretext thanks to which he can show himself an exemplary man and a literary innovator. Pliny's wife is endowed with a *persona*, just like Pliny is, which is part of the literary process that takes place behind the apparent intimate prose, and which obscures the real woman.

To convey the most flattering image of himself and of the environment under his control and management, Pliny uses a literary genre whose limitation, among others, is to drag into the picture of his world other very real individuals: the addressees of the letters and the readers of the published volumes. The former were contemporary with Pliny, and as such would have been in a position to judge the authenticity of the facts described in his epistolographic narratives; if the tangible and verifiable elements that were part of his self-presentation did not correspond to the reality known to those who would comment on, judge, and commend his writings, they would undermine Pliny's aim since his fame was eventually to rest not on the potentiality of his feats, domestic and literary, but on their actuality. Hence the picture that Pliny gives of his couple would still have to fit either what his contemporaries could witness, or at least the ideals they expected, in case they could not ascertain Pliny's and Calpurnia's reality.

Given that premise, we cannot disprove the existence of the loving feelings that Pliny displays as underlying his marital life. However, Pliny's aim in depicting them, or their ideal literary rendering, was not only to spill the outpouring of his heart, if at all, or to show the extent of his qualities as a lover – both loving perfectly and perfectly lovable – and corollary emotional adequacy, but also to provide a backdrop for his purely literary message and a channel, in the person(a) of his consort, through which to guide his readers. For Calpurnia, at a second level, is a role model for his readers.

Pliny's correspondence resembles less the letters of an exiled Cicero or Ovid than the latter's *Heroides*, which seem to inspire Pliny to write a reverse version

43 On this rhetorical device, the pseudo-focus, see Centlivres Challet 2013: 104.

44 See Centlivres Challet 2013: 75–78; Langlands 2014.

45 See Carlon 2009: 157–158.

46 See Centlivres Challet 2013: 88–90.

of it: while the *Heroides* can be said to be a form of epistolary elegy,⁴⁷ the Plinian *Epistulae* are elegiac letters. And while the first fifteen Ovidian poems voice the laments of heroines, the letters of Pliny voice the angst of a hero: Calpurnia is only a remote actress in the drama of which Pliny is the protagonist, the real hero who laments the absence of his beloved. But in the case of the Plinian exchange, the voice of the heroine is not heard, contrary to what is to be found in the Ovidian poems.⁴⁸

Pliny as a political⁴⁹ and domestic hero is paired with the elegiac hero. But while a Cynthia is an explicit muse, Calpurnia is not the one who actually inspires Pliny's prose. It is Pliny himself who inspires his own writings. While Cynthia is the *Monobiblos*, Pliny is the *Epistulae*. And Calpurnia is an essential component, not only of the creation of Pliny's monument to his own glory, but of its reception: she is the guide who shows the reader how to read Pliny, in her role of ideal reader. She loves the man, as he himself says, for his books and not for his looks; she handles his production, learning it by heart, putting it to music, keeping it close to her body, the way Pliny would want his readership to handle it, and as if his writings were him. Pliny's ideal loving relationship with his wife is the template for an ideal relationship with his readers.

Pliny's wish for *concordia* within his wedlock⁵⁰ extends to his relationship with his readers in the shape of an intellectual communion through his literary production and of his expectation of reciprocal feelings of affection: Pliny emerges as loving to write but also loving to be read and not keen on finding his readers' doors closed; the readers, in their moments of *otium*, should devote time and even energy to read and love Pliny.⁵¹ Calpurnia is shown as literarily active, not passive: she engages with the results of Pliny's intellectual activities in a way that goes beyond the relative passivity of reading. What is more, she is taught by no other master than love: Pliny's readers will grow similarly fond of his prose because of its intrinsic lovable qualities. Pliny is his own literary material, he is the *Letters*, to be loved and read, and Calpurnia, as the ideal reader, is a model for all readers: the Pliny lover, by the book.

47 Ovid himself claims to have invented, or renewed, a literary genre: *ars* 3.345–346; as Kenney (1996: 1 n. 3) notes, '*novavit* is ambiguous = either "invented" or "renewed", cunningly obscuring without explicitly disclaiming O.'s debt to Propertius' "Arethusa" (4.3) for the original idea.'

48 The Ovidian heroes also write of letters as transitional objects: e.g. 18.15–18, 217–218. Marchesi (2008: 84) notes that Pliny the writer of elegies sounds like 'an Ovidian forsaken heroine'.

49 Orentzel 1980; Strobel 2003; Strunk 2013.

50 4.19.5. For conjugal *concordia* in Pliny's time, see Centlivres Challet 2013: 108–111.

51 On the Plinian connection between *otium* and *studium*, see Gunderson 1997: 218–219.

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