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# PLINY THE BOOK-MAKER

Betting on Posterity in the *Epistles*

*Edited by*  
ILARIA MARCHESI



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UNIVERSITY PRESS

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# Contents

<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	vii
<i>List of Contributors</i>	ix
Introduction	1
<i>Ilaria Marchesi</i>	
1. The Publication of Pliny's Letters	13
<i>John Bodel</i>	
Introduction	13
The manuscript tradition and forms of publication	
in Pliny's day	20
The introductory epistle and Book 1	42
Books 1–5	57
Book 9	74
Books 7 and 8: Formal balances	86
Books 7 and 8: Thematic connections	93
Conclusion	103
Note on Chapter 1	104
Appendix to Chapter 1	105
2. Grand Designs: Unrolling <i>Epistles</i> 2	109
<i>Christopher Whitton</i>	
3. Pliny Book 8: Two Viewpoints and the Pedestrian Reader	146
<i>Ruth Morello</i>	
4. Not Dark Yet . . . : Reading to the End of Pliny's Nine-Book Collection	187
<i>Roy Gibson</i>	
5. Uncluttered Spaces, Unlittered Texts: Pliny's Villas as Editorial Places	225
<i>Ilaria Marchesi</i>	
<i>References</i>	255
<i>General Index</i>	277
<i>Index of Passages Discussed</i>	279



## *List of Abbreviations*

- ANRW H. Temporini and W. Haase, eds, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, Berlin, 1972–.
- CAH 11<sup>2</sup> A. K. Bowman, P. Garnsey, and D. Rathbone, eds, *The Cambridge Ancient History*, 2nd edn, vol. 11: *The High Empire, AD 70–192*, Cambridge, 2000.
- CEL P. Cugusi, ed., *Corpus Epistularum Latinarum Papyris Tabulis Ostracis Servatarum* (Papyrologica Florentina 23), Florence, 1992–.
- CIL *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, Berlin, 1863–.
- ILS H. Dessau, ed., *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*, Berlin, 1892–1916.
- PIR<sup>2</sup> E. Groag, A. Stein, L. Petersen, and K. Wachtel, eds, *Prosopographia Imperii Romani Saeculi I, II, III*, 2nd edn, Berlin, 1933–.
- RE G. Wissowa, W. Kroll, K. Mittelhaus, and K. Ziegler, eds, *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Stuttgart, 1894–1978.
- RP 1–7 R. Syme, *Roman Papers*, Oxford (vols 1–2, E. Badian, ed., 1979; vol. 3, A. R. Birley, ed., 1984; vols 4–5, A. R. Birley, ed., 1988; vols 6–7, A. R. Birley, ed., 1991).
- SB D. R. Shackleton Bailey, *Cicero: Epistulae Ad Familiares*, 2 vols, Cambridge, 1977.





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**Roy Gibson** is Professor of Latin at the University of Manchester. With Ruth Morello he is co-author of *Reading the Letters of Pliny the Younger: an Introduction* (2012), and co-editor of *Pliny the Elder: Themes and Contexts* (2011) and *Re-imagining Pliny the Younger* (2003). With Chris Whitton, he is co-editor of *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: the Epistles of Pliny the Younger* (2015).

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# Introduction

*Ilaria Marchesi*

*Posteritati suae interfuit.*

Pliny *Ep.* 2.1.1

In addition to his *Panegyricus* for Trajan, Pliny left us ten books of correspondence. Nine of them are addressed to his *familiares* on more or less mundane matters, one to the Emperor on matters of public interest. Naturally, what we now read as an orderly collection, the *Epistles*, was not always that. According to the authorial fiction in the short text that we today read as the opening epistle of Book 1, the *Epistles* began as individual pieces of correspondence that the author, a busy lawyer and civil servant at the turn of the second century CE, had graced with a little more editorial attention than normal. These books of carefully edited, organized, and published correspondence have, in other words, an internal history. How, in what order and through what stages, why, and indeed at what cost, did these pieces of writing become first a book of collected epistles, then a growing multi-volume edition, and finally a nine- (or even ten-) book organic whole? Neither the opening gambit of *Epistles* 1.1—in a way, the cover-letter for the whole work—nor any other item in the collection addresses these questions. Unlike many epistolary corpora from antiquity, we know that these texts received the editorial attention of their author. What we don't know, however, is when that process took place and what it entailed. Similarly, and just as importantly, we are left to ask what consequences this making of the book may have for our understanding of the *Epistles*. This collection of essays attempts to investigate precisely these questions.

Varied in approach, focusing on different areas of Pliny's epistolary collection, and adopting diverse styles of inquiry, the essays gathered in this volume converge on the study of the 'making' of Pliny's 'book' and on the reading strategies that the resulting product invites readers to deploy. As they investigate the traces that the formation process left in the texts of the *Epistles*, all the essays also reflect on the roles that Pliny designed for his audience and, in a way, model themselves on it. In Pliny's *Epistles*, the readership is just as multi-layered as the process that produced the collection, including the named addressees of the letters, the contemporary readers among which these texts are circulated in collected form, and an ideal 'posterity' to which the book is entrusted as to a final audience. This is the public Pliny's texts at once project and construct: an imagined community of literate readers, trained by the *Epistles* themselves in the art of detecting the subtle signs connecting the individual *tesserae* in the mosaic of the collection, and ultimately proficient in negotiating their meaning.

The unusual format of this collection—an extensive study followed by four shorter chapters—represents the culmination of several interwoven threads of research, the layout of which it is perhaps best to trace from the start. The project had its origin in a one-day conference organized by Lisa Mignone at Brown University in October 2010, at which two of the papers were first presented. Its roots, however, run deeper. The Brown meeting helped bring into focus the fact that, although they were approaching the issue of Pliny's editorial strategies from quite different angles, the papers could engage in a dialogue because they relied on a shared set of procedures. This was a combination of working assumptions, argumentative strategies, and detailed local observations that the speakers had developed in the wake of John Bodel's unpublished essay on Pliny's work as editor of his own letters. That paper, which Bodel had circulated among colleagues in various stages of development, had provided students of Pliny with a common ground for understanding his collection as a complex literary artifact, one that invited contemporary and future readership to play an active hermeneutic role.<sup>1</sup> On that

<sup>1</sup> Four recent volumes appeal more than once to the seminal arguments in Bodel's essay, while referring to it as forthcoming or unpublished: Marchesi 2008; Carlon 2009; Gibson and Morello 2012; and Gibson and Whitton, 2015. In order to preserve the stylistic integrity of the piece, the original American spelling and style has been preserved in Chapter 1.

occasion, in other words, it became clear that Bodel's essay had acted as the trigger for an approach to Pliny in which philological and cultural-historical arguments might be pressed into service in reconstructing the carefully layered process of signification active in his *Epistles*. Bodel's essay now finds its home, together with the research that has in some ways grown out of it, in this volume.

What Bodel uses to reconstruct the phases in publication which moved Pliny's collection from a *monobiblos* to a nine-book edition, spanning several intermediate stages, are the traces of a process of authorial 'book-making' that are still legible in its final product. As we shall see, Bodel's arguments are primarily based upon the form in which Pliny's books have come down to us (with partial indexes of correspondents) and the modes of publication of short miscellaneous collections of occasional works in his day (in various individual *libelli* or collectively, in rolls or in codices, with prose prefaces or introductory epistles). Equally central to his observations, however, are literary-critical arguments about significant placements, thematic and verbal correspondences across books, and intertextually poignant analogues for Pliny's literary aspirations.

The remainder of the essays collected here are in tune with Bodel's reasoning on the phases of publication of Pliny's work and with one another. Moving beyond Bodel's field of inquiry, they investigate not simply the mechanics of Pliny's activity as editor of his own texts, but also the effects that this work has on the reception of those texts. What in the first essay is an attention to the clues deposited on the many layers of internal correspondences in the complex semiotic organism of the *Epistles* becomes in the new analyses the willingness to assign significance, along with thematic and stylistic links, to such elements as letter addressees and numbering, verbal echoes, and poetic allusions. These are all elements that may be shown to serve as connectors for the epistles, in the reading practice of an engaged audience—one composed, that is, of readers who advance from one individual letter to the next, while maintaining a constant awareness of the collection as a whole. All contributors have accepted the challenge created by Pliny's activities as self-editor and have become that engaged posterity to which his editorial work was ultimately addressed. By investigating the nature and modalities of this process they have become the critical and responsive audience that Pliny's collection, no less than Bodel's essay, projects and constructs.

There are two more areas of critical discourse in which this volume is rooted. In the questions it broaches and in the methods it adopts, *Pliny the Book-Maker* continues in the wake of, and contributes momentum to, the wider re-orientation of Pliny studies that has been underway for the last fifteen years and has seen the shift in focus from (crudely put) socio-historical data-mining campaigns to a more explicitly literary engagement with Pliny's texts. Pliny's collection is increasingly perceived as an organic work, one for which arguments can and should stretch beyond the confines of individual books and mobilize all textual and para-textual elements defining the individual epistles. In paying attention to numerical distribution, recurring addressees, thematic anticipations, and even lexical bridges between individual pieces in the collection, the essays in the present volume advocate, each in its different way, the same understanding of Pliny's nuanced strategies of authorial self-presentation and the 'literariness' of the *Epistles* themselves. Together they invite readers to recognize and appreciate the subtler signals of intratextual connection linking letters and books to one another.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, considering these and other patterns as traces of Pliny's editorial strategies and publication tactics allows these essays to shift some of the interpretive weight from modern specialized readers to the original reading context. Seen in the light of the author's dialogue with his audience, these techniques may actually be shown to be more than the simple consequence (or, worse, a mere by-product) of our contemporary formalist readings. Once they are recognized as functional in the author's editorial strategy to make each book into a coherent whole and in turn the whole collection into an artistic unity, the elements of what one may call the 'art of structural allusion', which feature prominently in contemporary readings of Pliny's epistles, appear ever more likely to have existed from the start. If they are an integral part of the original composition technique—a strategy which can be historically and culturally contextualized, as we shall see—there are fewer chances that these features are the result simply of a modern concern.

<sup>2</sup> Different in many ways, but perhaps with a similar interest in exploring this 'other' side of Pliny, are Ludolph 1997; Hoffer 1999; Henderson 2002a; Castagna and Lefèvre 2003; Gibson and Morello 2003, Méthy 2007; Ash 2013, in addition to the monographs listed in the previous note.

In the attention they pay to the wide array of inter- and intratextual markers undergirding Pliny's collection, the essays here also respond to the current critical interest in the history of the ancient book. Recent studies of editorial practice, 'publishing' strategies, and dissemination patterns of collected texts in Greco-Roman antiquity have converged on seeing the ancient book as a semantically charged, over-determined unity, a literary object whose meaning depends as much on the ordering of its parts and the dialogue between them as on the interpretation of each of its components in isolation. Taken together, these essays thus contribute to the debate over the nature of classical book-making, by insisting that similar—if not, perhaps, the same—mechanisms as those that structure the ancient book of poetry may be seen at work in the genesis of prose-collections, Pliny's in particular.<sup>3</sup> As the result of a process of editorial selection, ordering, editing, copying, and distributing—in short, as the product of a multi-layered compositional process—the letters in Pliny's collection may, and perhaps should, be read with the same attention as ancient poetry collections are studied. This kind of closer reading may actually yield similarly rich results. Attention to form has never been an exclusive domain of poetry; especially not in Roman culture, a culture in which different genres and modes of writing ultimately relied on a common definition of literary textuality and on a similar set of techniques to achieve it.

\* \* \*

One task of an introduction to such a volume is to introduce the pieces that follow and the interconnected strains of thought that they develop. In the case of the essays collected here, product as they are of ongoing dialogue among their authors, this is a particularly easy task. For its role as catalyst for the discussion Bodel's initial essay may serve as a *fil rouge*, the common thread upon which to organize this

<sup>3</sup> The bibliography on the semantic importance of the book is vast. On Hellenistic poetry books, the models in many ways for Roman collections, see Gutzwiller 1998; Barchiesi 2005; Hutchinson 2008; Acosta-Hughes 2002 and 2011. On the *Catullus-frage* and Catullus' book as a case study of organizational semiosis at the core, if not at the start of Roman collection-publishing, see Dettmer 1997; Claes 2002; Skinner 2003; and, most recently, Du Quesnay and Woodman 2012. On Augustan poetry collections and their role as models for classicizing editions, see at least the *Arethusa* 1980 special issue, Anderson 1986; Barchiesi 2001. Finally, on the book-making of Pliny's contemporary, Martial, see Citroni 1988; Fowler 1995; Scherf 1998; Roman 2001; and Fitzgerald 2007a.



survey. First, however, I should perhaps devote a few words to Bodel's study *iuxta propria principia*, addressing its role in the question of the publication of Pliny's epistles.

Bodel's primary contribution is that it gets the scholarly debate unstuck and propels it beyond the impasse reached in the late 1980s. The history of the critical debate may be summarized briefly. Sherwin-White's dating of the individual books, which included a devaluation of the ninth book as an incoherent series of often trivial notes, was resisted in part by Syme, who pointed to strategically placed letters, all coherently addressing the issue of fame and survival with posterity (some of them, significantly, in dialogue with Tacitus). Syme's revised dating of the publication phases of the collection came, in turn, to be challenged by Murgia's counter-hypothesis, which advocated a consideration of Books 1–9 as a meaningful and coherent unity, a work published by Pliny himself and one whose relation to the previous, partial and superseded editions was to remain undetermined.<sup>4</sup> Bodel's paper challenges these two negative assumptions and invites us to consider at the same time the coherence that the nine-book form imposes on the collection, together with the traces of the previous stages in that progress. The key to addressing Pliny's phases of composition and strategies of publication of the work is, for Bodel, the mapping of internal correspondences across letters. Particularly important are the instances of subtle foreshadowing, both within individual books and across groups of books. Based on the system of signals prospectively referring the reader from one unit in the collection to others, Bodel argues that Pliny's collected epistles developed from a single-book edition, through intermediate groupings, to its final, authorial, nine-book form.

Any argument that relies on a subtle (and evasive) body of evidence is doubtless destined to meet with only partial agreement. Yet, quite apart from its conclusions, this essay provides important lessons in methodology. By identifying several new connections between epistles, Bodel's research paved the way for the close readings of Pliny's epistles which consider further strata of signification present in the letters, beyond their subject and theme. An example is his reconstruction of two coexisting arrangements of letters in Book 1. For

<sup>4</sup> See Sherwin-White 1966; Syme 1985b (= *RP* 5.483ff.); Murgia 1985 (most recently taken up in Edwards 2008). Detailed argumentation and extensive relevant bibliography may be found, of course, in the body of Bodel's essay in Chapter 1.

Bodel this book is organized according to a scheme based on the combination of stylistic and thematic features in the individual letters; this system, however, is complicated by another one, based on the alternation of singularly marked addressees. The first arrangement, for the discovery of which Bodel credits Merwald's 1964 dissertation, allows readers to see the book as a balanced sequence of three interlocked micro-cycles, each introducing variations in the rhetorical development of interconnected themes. The concentric and interlocking thematic frames Merwald identified encompass the themes of mutual editing of literary works (*emendatio*), intellectual leisure (*otium*), the pursuit of culture and refinement (*studia*), the praise of the learned (*laudatio docti*), and the bonds of friendship (*amicitia*). Interspersed with these, however, and marking crucial junctures in the overall disposition, are two letters that feature Regulus (1.5 and 1.20), which, as Bodel notes, lie five letters from start and end of the book respectively. This second arrangement is, thus, coextensive and interlocking with Merwald's, providing a supplementary and yet essential reading pattern for Book 1. This new model is also marked by a subtle but important factor: the alternation of two individual addressees, Septicius Clarus and Tacitus, the only individuals to receive more than one epistle in the book. Clarus receives 1.1 and 1.15, Tacitus the interlocking pair 1.6 and 1.20, in each case a diptych on the related topics of *desidia* and *studia*, one more serious, one more playful. These two responding groups of epistles frame the book, and they do so by using a five-letter interval system of signposting which draws the reader's attention to the careful arrangement of addressees, topics, and compositional style in the collection.

This final observation on the structuring role played by the spacing of epistles reinforces the notion that the internal disposition of the book is a meaningful factor in compositional design. The same attention to design in the macro-textual disposition of elements within the book, and in particular the question of centres, underlines the argument Christopher Whitton develops in his essay (Chapter 2) on structure and design in Book 2.<sup>5</sup> Whitton's chapter hinges on a set of observations about the way Book 2 retrospectively interacts with its antecedent and, projecting Pliny's collection beyond the confines of a

<sup>5</sup> For further intersections with the argument developed here, see also the observations on the double framing of the collection developed in Whitton 2010, 2012, and 2013a. The focus on Book 2 is reinforced in Whitton 2013b.

single volume, eventually prepares the reader for the addition of other elements to the growing epistolary corpus.

One of the crucial vindications in the article is that modern (book-format) readers should make an effort to appreciate the feel for centres that ancient (scroll-format) readers did have—be it the centre of a book, or of a section, or even of an epistle within it. While this entails no depreciation of the charged areas of the beginning and ending of individual units in Pliny's collection, Whitton's study of these intermediary gravity centres produces a twofold set of results. On the one hand, his attention to centres in the book triggers the appreciation of small-scale concentrically framed 'architextures' in epistles that turn out to be carefully (and just as concentrically) designed. A case in point is, for instance, *Epistle* 2.17, the first villa letter, to which Whitton devotes considerable interpretive energy. On the other hand, attention to the centre of the individual book produces an appreciation of Pliny's 'grand designs', his consideration of the rhetorically balanced disposition of micro- and macro-elements in the letters. These designs are delicate objects. They are always in tension with the fragmentary quality of the material they subsume, as Whitton's investigation of *Epistle* 2.5 as meta-epistolary text suggests. They are also inevitably shifting, since they depend on the different possible approaches readers take to the book and the individual items in it. Pondered reading and sequential reading unsettle the reader's sense of the collection, as apparently happens with the gradual darkening that Whitton detects in Book 2 and reads as a presage of the crepuscular quality of Book 9.

Ruth Morello's essay on sequential reading in Book 8 (Chapter 3) is also concerned with tonal shifts, but on a smaller scale. Morello takes as her starting point a unique diptych, the two letters on Calpurnia's miscarriage (8.10 and 8.11), which are clearly designed to form a significant unit. She tackles Pliny's different affective and tonal framing of the same 'fact' for two different addressees, Calpurnia's grandfather and aunt, as a crucial instance of the Book's overarching call to readers to position themselves morally and emotionally in relation to the issues presented in the letters: the variance is far from being just an exercise in epistolary etiquette or rhetorical deftness. In Morello's compelling analysis the letters open up to reveal, in their tonal opposition, literary antecedents in the elegiac canon: the paired contrasting poems about Corinna's abortion in Ovid (*Amores* 2.13–14) and Cynthia's illness in Propertius (2.28a–28b). In the

reversal of ethical responses they elicit from readers, who are asked to move from blame to compassion, these intertexts also give the mis-carriage letters a central role in Pliny's ethical exploration. This exploration is a hermeneutical training-ground for Pliny's readers too: in Morello's reading, Book 8 becomes the terrain on which Pliny invites readers to take what she calls a 'pedestrian', gradual, and shifting approach to the issues he raises in his letters—above all the negotiation of social disparities.<sup>6</sup> Pliny does not simply invite his audience to appreciate the deft rhetorical pursuit of relativist approaches to the real, but also exposes the moral implications of one's individual actions and role in society. He often does this through meaningful juxtapositions: by paying attention to these, Morello's essay invites appreciation of the many trails of language, images, and themes connecting individual items in the sequential disposition of the letters. The result is a more precise, more articulate sense of what was entailed in Pliny's observance of the principle of *varietas*.

In taking one step further into the true ending of the collection, Roy Gibson's piece (Chapter 4) examines Pliny's strategy of content distribution and suggests that the links uniting Books 1 and 9 may be made to bear semantic weight. Building on Bodel's re-evaluation (and valuing) of the authorial strategies detectable in its last unit, Gibson targets the specific function of the final book in the collection. He sees it as embodying a retrospective invitation for readers to revisit and progressively re-evaluate the tone and substance of the entire corpus, with a new awareness of essential pieces of information which are allowed to appear only in its final instalment. Whereas Bodel focuses on the prospective value of intratextuality, Gibson emphasizes the reverse role it may play, and presents Book 9 as an unanticipated corrective to Book 1. Common to both approaches is the sense that the invitation to re-reading that Book 9 imposes on the optimistic narrative of Book 1 amounts to a deliberate sign of completion, marking the closing movement of the collection.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> On sequential reading (applied to a section of Book 6, but with considerations valid beyond its confines), see chapter 2 in Gibson and Morello 2012: 53–68.

<sup>7</sup> For the pointed argument about tonal darkening in the collection, see Gibson 2011b; for the role of addressees, see also chapter 5 in Gibson and Morello 2012: 136–68.

Bodel uses the detection of the carefully constructed symmetries between themes and formal features of epistles occupying the same prominent position—letters 1–3—in Books 1, 7, and 9, to argue in favour of seeing a conjunct publication of Books 7 and 8, with Book 9 as a later, final addition. Gibson takes the same awareness of the existing links between themes, situations, and verbal echoes, and invests them with the role of tone-setting retrospective indications for the reader. In the wake of the system of correspondences thus established, Gibson extends also to *Epistles* 9.13, 9.19, and 9.27 the function of re-orienting correctives. These letters are designed to bind the two book-ending units in Pliny's collection together, making the collection into a whole. For Gibson, these letters dealing with the turmoil of the early years after Domitian's demise—the chronological territory of the first book of the epistles—together imbue the end of the *Epistles* with a more sombre and reflective hue. The facts now added to their dossiers, for instance, cast an ambiguous light on Verginius Rufus (in 9.19), for his position in the year of the four emperors, no less than on Pliny himself, the revenge-exacting 'prosecutor' of Publicius Certus (in 9.13). The final retrospection comes to balance the optimistic light that scholars have tended, perhaps too easily, to assume brightens not just the opening but the whole of Pliny's collection.

One last element in Bodel's essay is worth mentioning for the effect it has had on one more essay collected here: his observations on Pliny's naming practices across books as an index of book-grouping and collected circulation. In the overall argument, they are used to suggest the existence of a five-book intermediary edition of the letters, but they are open to a wider application. According to Bodel, the fact that Regulus is formally named (*praenomen* and *cognomen*) in *Epistle* 6.2, after references to him had been shortened to the simple cognomen in the intervening epistles (one of which is addressed to the same recipient as 6.2), suggests that Book 6 had been released independently from the coherent conglomerate of Books 1–5. In another area of his reconstruction, Bodel similarly advances the notion that Pliny could refer one or more of his addressees to previous items in his collection as texts that were already in the public domain. The case in point is the reference that 9.19 makes to 6.10, and Bodel uses it as an indication that Books 6–8 were most likely added serially to the collection, never resulting in a larger unit.

Pliny's collection contains attestations of the circulation of the epistles as a finished literary and editorial product, but discloses no detail in the history of its actual making. Bodel's attention to precisely this kind of tantalizing evidence has triggered my inquiry into the social and cultural restrictions that Pliny accepted and enforced when (not) talking about the actual making of his book (Chapter 5). While keeping in focus the internal dynamics of the publication process and the subtler signals that the editing process produced in the texts, my concluding essay is concerned with the dissection of a different object.

What interests me is the curious connection that appears to exist in his letters between the discourse on villas, in particular their architectural features, and that of literary creation, in particular the urgency of producing publications. The argument points to a double absence that accompanies both discourses and their intersections: the near-total silence Pliny maintains on the editorial process leading to the formation of his collected epistles and the almost absolute absence of furniture from the description he produces of his villas.<sup>8</sup> Opening up the focus to include Pliny's often silenced, and yet inescapable, dialogue with Martial on matters of literary endurance and the material side of it, my essay suggests that Pliny and Martial may be taken as opposite polarities when it came to the sociological connotations of publishing one's own work. As highly self-aware and active editors of their respective collections, they worked in almost parallel fashion, and with substantial chronological overlap, but with radically diverging assumptions about the materiality of what they were producing. In their contrasting attitudes toward the literary representation of the objects of daily life, I argue, we may see how differently they reacted to the possibility of representing their activity as publishing authors. In comparing Martial's openness and Pliny's reluctance to discuss the material aspects of the process of cultural production, my essay attempts to give a sense of what it meant—in terms of social, cultural, and literary negotiations—to publish one's own work at Rome at the turn of the second century CE. To put it another way: what kind of well-choreographed balancing act was needed to ensure that one's work would garner immediate market

<sup>8</sup> From a different, but related point of view, see also Marchesi 2013, exploring the Pliny-Martial-Regulus connection in the transition between Books 3 and 4 of the *Epistles*.

availability and success with its historical contemporary audience, while guaranteeing its long-lasting appeal with a future hypothetical one?

While the footnotes to these introductory pages have provided some external framework for each essay contained in this volume, pointing to the micro-context of the individual scholar's research in which they arose, the body of the argument has concentrated on the internal connections linking them to John Bodel's work and to one another. As the reader will be able to appreciate, the interconnections also extend to individual chapters. The shared interest of several essays in the darkening of the collection has been already noted. To that one may add that epistles such as 2.17 on villas seem to have elicited a curiously strong interest, for instance, in both the second and last essay in this volume. Similarly, the symmetrical placement of letters from both ends of individual books is a feature stressed no less in Whitton's than in Gibson's essay. Finally, the implicit dialogue Pliny establishes with Martial's epigrams, especially on the differing attitudes toward Saturnalian leisure and licence and the cultivation of literature in the midst of or isolation from the festive atmosphere of that holiday, recurs across at least three chapters. We find it in Whitton's exploration of the progressively narrower and narrowly focused spaces of *Epistle* 2.17, in Morello's argument on 8.7, one of Pliny's light-hearted epistles to Tacitus, and in my essay on villa rooms, their scant degree of furnishing, and the literary works whose production is imagined to take place there. These are only some of the examples of the varied types and the various levels of interweaving among the essays. There are, in other words, multiple forms of coherence that balance the variety intrinsic to their individual approaches. It is certainly possible that other, subtler and perhaps more revealing webs of interconnections will be more evident to the reader than to the editor of this collection. But that is exactly the kind of openness that the editor of a work on Pliny as editor should hope for.

# The Publication of Pliny's Letters

*John Bodel*

*In Memoriam Charles E. Murgia*

## INTRODUCTION

C. PLINIUS SEPTICIO SUO S.

Frequenter hortatus es ut epistulas, si quas paulo curatius scripsissem, colligerem publicaremque. Collegi non servato temporis ordine (neque enim historiam componebam), sed ut quaeque in manus uenerat. Superest ut nec te consilii nec me paeniteat obsequii. Ita enim fiet, ut eas quae adhuc neglectae iacent requiram et si quas addidero non supprimam. Vale.

(Pliny, *Ep.* 1.1)

In introducing his literary correspondence to the public, the younger Pliny professed to have gathered the letters 'as each had come into his hands', without regard to the order of their composition. Ostensibly intended to preface only a first book or group of books published, Pliny's modest disclaimer now stands at the head of a nine-volume collection of his private correspondence, where it naturally seems to refer to the entire corpus. The dates at which the letters were composed and published have long been of interest to historians, since they concern persons and events important in the political history of the period; more recently the intertextual connections they exhibit with contemporary authors have been shown to implicate much of the literary history of the era as well.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Marchesi 2008: 97–206; Woodman 2009: 32–5; and Whitton 2010 (Tacitus); Power 2010 (Suetonius); Marchesi 2013 (Martial).



Mommsen long ago exposed part of Pliny's conceit by showing that the datable letters within each book fall within narrow limits and that the books themselves are arranged in sequential order.<sup>2</sup> The chronological framework that Mommsen then went on to erect on this foundation, however, which assumed that all the letters in a book belonged to the period defined by the earliest and latest datable letters and that each book was published shortly after the date of its latest letter, was overly rigid, so that a generation of critics assailing the structure at vulnerable points succeeded in undermining confidence in the soundness of the whole.<sup>3</sup> It was not until Syme and Sherwin-White had shored up Mommsen's edifice nearly a century later that Pliny's arrangement of his material within and among individual books could be investigated on a sound basis.<sup>4</sup>

Following Mommsen, Sherwin-White established 'book-dates' for each of the nine volumes of private correspondence based on the range of securely datable letters included in each book. Working from this general outline, he was then able to show that Pliny aimed for balance and variety within individual books. This aim for balance within each book became for Sherwin-White a guiding rule when it came to considering Pliny's method of compilation, which in turn impinged heavily upon his consideration of the sequence of publication. The presence of three obituaries (of Silius Italicus, Larcus Macedo, and Martial) in Book 3, for example, he found 'surprising on grounds of distribution and variety if Pliny was already planning a fourth volume', since Book 4 is light on *exitus illustrium*, with only one (4.21); this overload of a single type, he believed, showed that in Book 3 'Pliny had nearly exhausted his stock of good letters.'<sup>5</sup> At the same time, he imagined that certain letters on topics already represented in the volume being compiled might have been held over for publication in a later volume. As a result, related letters on

<sup>2</sup> Mommsen 1869: 366–88. Where not otherwise indicated, source references are to Pliny's *Epistulae* and dates are CE.

<sup>3</sup> Chief among the critics of Mommsen were Peter 1872 and Otto 1919: 17–43, whose scepticism long held the field.

<sup>4</sup> Syme 1958: 660–4; Sherwin-White 1966: 20–69, esp. 50–6. Despite much uncertainty about detail, the chronological sequence of the book-dates has never been disproved, nor has the integrity of the basic framework been compromised: see Gibson and Morello 2012: 16, 19–20, on what Gibson 2012: 62 calls the macro-chronology of Pliny's letters, in which the books follow a chronological sequence but the letters within individual books do not.

<sup>5</sup> Sherwin-White 1966: 52–4 (cf. 32, 50); see below, p. 70 n. 151 in this chapter.

a particular theme are sometimes distributed over more than one book, so that a nexus of serial links seemed to join different sections of the correspondence.<sup>6</sup> Syme had already raised the possibility of authorial revision and editing in the case of paired letters such as 3.14, on the murder by his slaves of the praetorian senator Larcus Macedo, and 8.14, involving the alleged implication of the household of the consul Afranius Dexter in his demise in 105, and other signs of artistic arrangement have been detected elsewhere in the correspondence.<sup>7</sup>

Interpretation of these phenomena hinges on the sequence of publication of the various books—or groups of books, for it has long been apparent that some, at least, of Pliny's volumes were released conjointly in blocks of two, three, or more.<sup>8</sup> The questions that have dominated discussion since Mommsen's day are: how many volumes at one time, in what configurations, and when? Not surprisingly, in view of the tenuous nature of the arguments that can be advanced on the basis of a few fixed dates, the answers that have been

<sup>6</sup> Sherwin-White 1966: 27–52. See now also Marchesi 2008: 22–7; Gibson and Morello 2012: 16, 19–20.

<sup>7</sup> Syme 1958: 663. According to Syme, Mommsen assumed without cause that the nine books of letters were issued individually and in quick succession, beginning in 97, and 'did not see that he had to prove it' (662). Syme himself supposed that 'the author, when editing (and supplementing) his previous output, was able to arrange the material in the light of subsequent events'—thus begging several questions that more recent readings have shown to be open and problematic. The clue for Syme was the ominous warning appended to the earlier anecdote (*nec est quod quisquam possit esse securus*, 3.14.5) that seemed to portend the later incident. He did not observe that the letters appear in identical positions within their books. See further below, pp. 55–6, on the placement of the letters concerning Regulus; note also Merwald's early effort (1964) to discern structural order in the arrangement of letters throughout the nine books and Ludolph 1997 on Pliny's 'parade' letters (1.1–8). Since the publication of Marchesi 2008, which demonstrated Pliny's practice of linking adjacent letters on disparate themes through allusion to a common source, interest in the topic has flowered: note e.g. Power 2010: 141–51, on 5.5, 5.8, and 5.10, linked through Vergil; Whitton 2010, on 8.13–15 and the centrality of 8.14, linked through slavery; Gibson and Morello 2012: 53–68, on 6.1–17. Note also Gibson 2012, on the ordering of ancient letter collections, esp. 67–9 on 'the Plinian model' of artistic variety and significant juxtaposition.

<sup>8</sup> Mommsen conceded the possibility of joint publication in the case of Books 1 and 2 (1869: 373 n. 1) and considered it likely with Books 8 and 9 (388). Asbach 1881 was the first to propose a more systematic publication of the correspondence by groups of books (1–3, 4, 5–6, 7–9). Peter's well-known theory of a publication in triads (1901: 105–9) is refuted by Sherwin-White 1966: 52–4, who cautiously advances a more flexible scheme (1–2 [together or separately], 3, 4–6 or 3–6 or 4–7, 7, 8–9 or 7–9); cf. Gibson and Morello 2012: 19 and n. 42. For other proposals see the **Appendix** to this chapter.

returned to these questions are nearly as numerous and diverse as the scholars who have addressed themselves to the problem. Difficulties of all sorts abound, but nowhere have the uncertainties that hamper reconstruction of the original sequence of publication proved more vexing than with the later books (7–9), where the customary difficulties of establishing a relative and absolute chronology are compounded by our ignorance of the year in which Pliny embarked on his mission to Bithynia (the generally accepted *terminus ante quem* for publication of the last book) and the apparently uneven quality of the material included in the selection.

The paucity of clear references to contemporary events led Mommsen to despair of his rigidly sequential chronology and to posit a joint publication of Books 8 and 9—his one firm retreat from the position that Pliny produced each book independently.<sup>9</sup> Sherwin-White remarked the scarcity of letters on political subjects and suggested that Pliny may have been running short of suitable material: in Book 7 the balanced distribution of topics characteristic of the early volumes (1–4) is only precariously maintained; in Book 8 private domestic themes predominate, and the sole representative of a type of letter frequently found in the earlier volumes, a detailed exposition of a contemporary *cause célèbre* (8.14, the companion piece to 3.14), concerns an event two years earlier than the book-date of 107–8. In Book 9 the scheme breaks down entirely; contemporary material of genuine interest is scarcely to be found, and a number of inconsequential notes resurrected from the remnants of Pliny's older correspondence are pressed into service in order to fill out the roll. Sherwin-White concluded that Pliny may have compiled the last two, or perhaps three, books in a hurry, shortly before he departed for Bithynia, whether that was in 109, 110, or later.<sup>10</sup>

In 1985 Syme adduced new inscriptional evidence to fix a *terminus post quem* of late 108 or early 109 for the composition of at least some letters in the last two books. At the same time he drew attention in passing to a concentration of letters in Book 9 on Pliny's favorite theme of fame, particularly as it concerned the parity of his literary reputation with that of Tacitus; perhaps, Syme suggested, 'the author may have been saving up these items for his concluding book'.<sup>11</sup> In the same year Charles Murgia challenged the interpretation of Pliny's

<sup>9</sup> Mommsen 1869: 388.

<sup>10</sup> Sherwin-White 1966: 37–41, 49–50, 56.

<sup>11</sup> Syme 1985b: 183 (= *RP* 5.487–8), citing 9.14, 9.19, 9.23, 9.27, and 9.31.

last book as a miscellany of material drawn from the entire period covered by the published correspondence. While accepting in substance Sherwin-White's view of the original composition of the earlier books, Murgia argued that when Pliny came to the final installment, he did not publish a single book containing a mixed assemblage of new, old, and reworked material but a comprehensive edition comprising versions (possibly revised, rearranged, or reselected) of the first eight volumes along with a new final book designed to cap the collection. According to Murgia, the letters as we now have them represent the arrangement of this omnibus edition and were meant to be read as a unified corpus; about the form and contents of the original volumes, and hence also about their original dates of publication, we can have no reliable information.<sup>12</sup>

If correct, Murgia's thesis has wide implications not only for our understanding of Pliny's literary methods but also for the political and literary history of the period covered by the private correspondence, roughly the years 98 to 109. In principle, at least, the date of any reported event, or the direction of any presumed literary borrowing or influence in the first eight books that is determined solely by the presumed book-date of the volume in which it appears, comes under doubt. Murgia was mainly concerned with establishing the literary relationship between the *Dialogus* and certain of Pliny's letters, especially in Book 1, that seem to exhibit signs of stylistic borrowing from Tacitus; the composition of Pliny's collection was of interest only insofar as it justified the reliance on any single letter or group of letters to fix chronological *termini* for Tacitus' work.<sup>13</sup> Murgia does not, in fact, maintain that any of the letters we now find in the first

<sup>12</sup> Murgia 1985: 197–202. Stout 1954 had already suggested that 'if [the private] letters had been published in units of one or more books at a time, [Pliny] may have brought them together and published them as a collection about 109 or 110' (1); elsewhere (53) he assumed the existence of a 'nine-book corpus published under [Pliny's] own supervision'.

<sup>13</sup> At issue is the date of Tacitus' *Dialogus*: against the *communis opinio* of a publication sometime between 102 and 107, Murgia 1980 argued that the work was published, or at least informally circulated in a completed form, early in the reign of Nerva. That date, if correct, has interesting implications for the author's possible literary aspirations (cf. Barnes 1986), but in a literary world in which friends regularly exchanged draft manuscripts, too much remains uncertain about the direction of any presumed literary influences to date one insecurely datable work against another, and Murgia's arguments have found little favor: see Häußler 1987: 84 n. 6; Brink 1994; and Mayer 2001: 22–7; cf. Woodman 2009a: 331, '102?'. For the same reason, a recent and attractive argument that Tacitus, when writing *Agricola* (securely datable to 97/98),

eight books underwent substantial revision between initial publication and the form in which it has come down to us, nor, in the end does he believe the sequence of book-dates worked out since Mommsen's day to be seriously compromised. But the process of pruning and possible reselection that Murgia envisages, with its consequent implication that certain letters now in our corpus may have been placed in their current positions only in the comprehensive edition, whereas others originally appearing in the initial publications of the individual volumes (such as introductory or dedicatory epistles at the start of each new installment) may have been omitted when the correspondence was reissued as a unified corpus, raises important questions about the literary character of Pliny's collection, questions that call for a more comprehensive investigation than Murgia was able to provide. For if it is true that 'Books 1–9 are meant to be considered as a unit' and that 'each book is dependent on others for full understanding',<sup>14</sup> then we shall be doing Pliny a serious disservice if we persist in regarding the composition of his collection as merely tangential to his literary aims.

What principles informed Pliny's organization of his material within and among the nine books, and what, if anything, can be deduced about his artistic goals from any patterns of arrangement that may emerge? Despite a recent swell of interest in intertextual and thematic relations among letters within (and occasionally across) books, and in the internal organization of individual books, the overall architecture of the collection—how the various pieces of the structure were fitted together—has thus far attracted little attention. Barchiesi has noted how a significant juxtaposition of addressees in the first (1.1) and last (9.40) letters (Clarus/Fuscus) invites the reader to regard the entire nine-book opus as a unified collection, and Marchesi has further observed how the names mirror the trajectory from dusk to dawn that both the final letter (literally) and the entire collection (metaphorically) evoke, even as the pairing nods to one of Pliny's main epistolographic models, Horace (*Epist.* 1.4, Albius; 1.10, Fuscus).<sup>15</sup> Gibson and Morello find in another letter of Pliny's last book (9.4), a brief cover note outlining an approach to reading the

had read a published version of Pliny's Book 1 (Woodman 2009b: 34) can be considered plausible, but is not decisive.

<sup>14</sup> Murgia 1985: 201.

<sup>15</sup> Barchiesi 2005: 330–2; Marchesi 2008: 249–50. For 'Clarus', see now also Gibson 2011b.

speech it accompanies, a guide also to how we are meant to read the collection of letters: as a long work to be taken in parts, with many new beginning and endings, so that any part can be enjoyed both as a new beginning and in the light of what precedes—both for its autonomy, in other words, and for its ‘quasi coherence’ within its context.<sup>16</sup>

These observations are useful in confirming Murgia's argument that Book 9, by recalling the first book, was meant to cap the multi-volume collection, and in pointing the direction for our reading of it as an allusive and metaphorically ‘poetic’ work designed to be appreciated for its integrated structure. But they do not indicate how we are meant to regard the book-by-book partitioning of the work, or how to reconcile the shape of the final assemblage with the presumed sequential stages of its construction. In Pliny's thinly coded guide to reading his work (9.4), Gibson and Morello focus on the interconnectedness of the pieces (*quasi cohaerentia*, 9.4.2) and take Pliny's allusions to false starts and endings (*saepe incipere*, *saepe desinere*) to imply that the work ‘could be picked up or left off at any point’.<sup>17</sup> In the immediate context, in reference to a speech, that makes sense, but if we are to read Pliny's protreptic as advice also to the reader of his letters, it seems more likely, in the context of a multi-volume collection, that Pliny's reference to multiple beginnings and endings points to the individual books, or groups of books, that articulated the work. If the final product was to be seen as a well-proportioned, fully coherent structure, Pliny nonetheless seems to hint that individual elements of its design, and the various stages of its construction, like the artfully varied wings and porticoes of his country houses, were to be enjoyed both as discrete units and for their place within the whole.<sup>18</sup>

Investigation of the phases of publication of Pliny's collection must to a large degree remain speculative, since the nature of the evidence renders all but the most basic observations insusceptible of proof, and

<sup>16</sup> 9.4.1 *Vereretur ne immodicam orationem putares, quam cum hac epistula accipies, nisi esset generis eius ut saepe incipere saepe insistere uideatur... Poteris ergo, undecumque coeperis ubicumque desieris, quae deinceps sequentur et quasi incipientia legere et quasi cohaerentia...* Gibson and Morello 2012: 238–43: ‘just as Pliny breaks up a long, formless day into a series of manageable and coherent tasks, or a complex speech into readable sections, so we are invited to break up our reading task’ (242).

<sup>17</sup> Gibson and Morello 2012: 241.

<sup>18</sup> For Pliny's villa letters as metaphorical blueprints, see Gibson and Morello 2012: 200–33.