

BOOK REVIEW

Reading the Letters of Pliny the Younger: An Introduction. By ROY K. GIBSON and RUTH MORELLO. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. iv + 350. Hardcover, \$99.00. ISBN 978-0-521-84292-1.

Organized in eight chapters and supplemented by a map, four appendices, references, an index of passages, and a general index, this highly informative book is devoted to the process of unpacking Pliny's *Letters* as an artistic product, a cultural document, and a reading experience. What makes this introduction so interesting and engaging is the way in which it meets the twofold goal of covering a range of reading methodologies to Pliny's correspondence and a selection of its key themes and topics. Each chapter combines a (different) subject with a (different) approach and thus exemplifies a number of interpretive possibilities that Pliny's *Letters*—both individually and as a collection—offer to the reader.

In good didactic (and pedagogical) fashion, Chapter 1 ("Reading a Life: Letters, Book 1") chooses the most popular approach, i.e. reading Pliny "for his life," and applies it to the first book. The chapter elucidates how biographical and narrative gaps as well as the use of metaphor are part of an artistic concept by means of which Pliny shapes a meta-text in Book 1. By uncovering the high degree of complexity of Pliny's text, this chapter makes the reader realize that Book 1 offers first and foremost an elite member's autobiographical *perspective*, not narrative, on a new political era.

Chapter 2 ("Reading a Book: Letters, Book 6") studies the arrangement of Pliny's *Letters* for evidence of artistic design. Although this approach is primarily applied to Book 6, it introduces the reader to structures that create coherence not only on the book but also on the collection level. As to the latter, the chapter points to a narrative cycle that stretches across several books and illuminates how the interaction between Book 6 and the cyclical narrative are meant to make a particular point (about Pliny).

Reading "by cycle" then is the approach that Chapter 3 ("Epistolary Models: Cicero and Seneca") applies to Pliny's *Letters* for exploring their literary context. Though Seneca and Ovid do not remain unmentioned, the chapter is mostly

concerned with the question of how Pliny positions his work and his epistolary *persona* vis-à-vis Cicero. Based on both textual and intertextual evidence, the chapter highlights Pliny's innovative contributions to the genre, his ambivalent attitude toward his most eminent predecessor, and the artistic manifestation of this enormously stimulating, yet also limiting hate-love for Cicero.

Further examining the ways in which Pliny wishes to present himself to the reader and once again applying the approach of reading Pliny 'by cycle,' Chapter 4 ("Pliny's Elders and Betters: The Elder Pliny, Vestricius Spurinna, Corellius Rufus, Verginius Rufus [and Silius Italicus]") focuses on the cyclical narratives devoted to those who acted as his good or bad role models (or both). Chapter 5 ("Pliny's Peers: Reading for the Addressee"), in turn, focuses on so-called friendship narratives, i.e., cycles of letters about or addressed to a number of Pliny's peers.

Turning to a key theme of the *Letters*, Chapter 6 ("Otium: How to Manage Leisure") explores how Pliny defines his concept of *otium* vis-à-vis his epistolographical predecessor Seneca and, more broadly, vis-à-vis the elite's concern with time management. Alternating between sequential readings and the study of individual letters, the chapter illuminates in which ways Pliny both agrees and disagrees with the Senecan tradition and how he establishes his personal version of *otium* in his *Letters* as well as in elite culture.

Adopting the anthologist's approach, Chapter 7 ("Reading the Villa Letters: 9.7, 2.17, 5.6") focuses on the three best-known letters on Pliny's villas. While this chapter is specifically concerned with exploring an essential aspect of Pliny's discourse on *otium* and implicitly on himself, it first and foremost demonstrates the interpretive benefit gained from integrating varied, seemingly exclusive, approaches (e.g. archaeological, historical, and literary) to the villa letters. In addition, Chapter 7 stresses the significance of Book 9 and of *Letter* 9.7 in particular for providing important reading guidance to the earlier villa descriptions by Pliny himself.

Chapter 8 ("The Grand Design: How to Read the Collection") is concerned with closure and the significance of Books 9 and 10 in this regard. Roughly divided in halves, the chapter first makes a well-argued case for reading Books 1–9 as one unit and then considers the interpretive potential of Book 10 as an integral part, continuation, and even climax of the *Letters*-text.

The eight chapters are complemented by four appendices that provide a "Pliny timeline," a catalog of contents and addressees of Books 1–9, bibliograph-

ical help on popular topics in the *Letters*, and a list of the collection's main characters.

This co-authored volume has many strengths. Above all, it is a very stimulating read, offering food for thought about approaching and exploring Pliny's *Letters*. Moreover, it is written with great clarity and with an eye for a well-balanced presentation. Roughly of equal length, each chapter contributes to a varied, yet thematically coherent introduction. Diversity is achieved by the fact that each author gives a different overall meaning to Pliny. This change of perspective(s) may pose a challenge to the reader and may at times result in re-reading a chapter or at least parts of it—but that is exactly the *modus legendi* that Pliny recommends to the reader of his *Letters*.

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