

*The Women of Pliny's Letters*. By JO-ANN SHELTON. Women of the Ancient World. New York: Routledge, 2013. Pp. xiv + 436. Hardcover, \$150.00. ISBN 978-0-415-37428-6.

Pliny mentions 30 women by name and 40 unnamed, making his *Letters* a “significant source of information” (1) about the lives of mainly upper-class Roman women from the mid first to second centuries ad. Routledge’s “Women of the Ancient World” series has previously centered on biographies,<sup>1</sup> but Shelton’s book is the first to explore a range of women in the work of one author. From Pliny’s epistles we gain insight into Roman households and family life, and women’s involvement in court cases, property ownership, religion, social networks, and politics. Pliny’s typically positive *exempla* provide a “beneficial counterpoint” (1) to the more negative pictures of women in contemporary works by Juvenal, Tacitus, Suetonius and Martial.

The book’s goal, which accords with the series’ premise, is to “bring these women to the foreground, to examine their activities and relationships, and to illuminate their lives by viewing them in the context of the period in which they lived” (1). Given our often limited knowledge of these women, however, Shelton admits that the “biographies” she constructs must be “only very incomplete accounts” (1).

Shelton’s biographical portraits in the first two chapters, “Arria the Elder and the Heroism of Women” and “Arria’s Family and the Tradition of Dissent,” are heavily prosopographical (some of it necessarily speculative) and contain much information about the careers of the women’s associated men. We often know little about the women independently, however, and the vicissitudes of a father’s, husband’s or son’s career could impact a woman directly, particularly if he were exiled or killed.

Shelton argues that some elite women were more than bystanders to the political turmoil of the first and second centuries: Arria Maior (whose husband Aulus Caecina Paetus was convicted of conspiring against Claudius) committed suicide to goad on her hesitant husband before Claudius had him executed (*Epist.* 3.16);

<sup>1</sup> Either of individuals (e.g. Elizabeth Carney, *Olympias: the Mother of Alexander the Great* [New York: Routledge, 2006]), or of women in a small family group (e.g. Susan Treggiari, *Terentia, Tullia and Publilia: the Women of Cicero’s Family* [New York: Routledge, 2007]).

her daughter Arria Minor (wife of Thrasea Paetus, one of Nero's most vocal critics) and granddaughter Fannia (wife of C. Helvidius Priscus, who was banished by Nero and then exiled and executed by Vespasian) carried on the family tradition of political dissent and were banished by Domitian for abetting biographies of their husbands (*Epist.* 3.11, 7.19, 9.13). Even if they could not take part in politics or be serious writers, women could "undertake projects that enhanced the accomplishments of the men in their families" and "they might strive to be remembered for engaging in dangerous activities that supported male ambitions" (73).

But this book is not solely a catalogue of women's activities drawn from Pliny's *Letters*. Shelton confronts two fundamental, intertwined problems: first, of drawing evidence about women from male-authored texts; and second, of assessing Pliny's portraits in light of his political and social motivations for presenting his material as he does.

On the range of opinion from Suzanne Dixon's skepticism about the possibility of recovering genuine female voices to Anthony Barrett's belief that some reality can be unearthed,<sup>2</sup> Shelton sides with Barrett, stating that "it is possible to discover a reality in our sources, even where the appeal to stereotypes and ideals is pervasive" (4).

Shelton is at her sharpest when addressing the problem of Pliny's "filter." She argues throughout that Pliny's reports of female behavior were informed by wider Roman values, that he controlled his information and released only what he wanted people to read, and that he often used his associations with certain women for self-promotion. For example, chapter 2 contends that Pliny was keen to advertise (particularly in the post-Domitianic period) his connections to people such as Fannia and Arria Minor who had opposed Domitian (e.g. *Epist.* 3.11, 7.19 9.13), but he perhaps overstated both the length and depth of his ties to them, and his supposedly valiant efforts to aid them at the time.

In chapter 3, Shelton points out that Pliny portrays himself as a wise counselor, respected author, generous friend, and loving husband, but it is hard to know what his relationship with his wife, Calpurnia, was really like (103). He wanted the world to know that he was happily married and that his wife's behavior conformed to cultural expectations (*Epist.* 4.19), a perhaps idealized—and controlled—domestic picture that reflected well on Pliny, his choice of bride, and his keeping of

<sup>2</sup> Suzanne Dixon, *Reading Roman Women: sources, genres, and real life* (London: Duckworth, 2001). Anthony Barrett, *Agrippina: sex, power, and politics in the early empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

his house (97–104, 111–115). We can draw from the *Letters* something of what these women actually did, something of what men thought about female behavior, and something of what Pliny wanted us to think about him.

After the first two chapters on the family of Arria Maior, topical arrangement governs the remainder: wives (chapter 3); mothers, nurses and stepmothers (chapter 4); grandmothers, aunts and mothers-in-law (chapter 5); daughters and sisters (chapter 6); and “women outside the family” such as Vestals (*Epist.* 4.11, 7.19), Christians (*Epist.* 10.96), slaves, freedwomen and concubines (chapter 7). Scholars interested in these roles in Roman society will want to consider Pliny’s information, and Shelton’s analysis of his presentation. The clear writing style, generous explanations, and translated Latin make the book student-friendly. There might be an overabundance of general, background or historical information for scholarly readers, but students will appreciate Shelton’s clarity.

MOLLY M. PRYZWANSKY

*Duke University and North Carolina State University, mmpryzwa@ncsu.edu*