

BOOK REVIEW

Pliny the Younger: Selected Letters. By JO-ANN SHELTON. Mundelein, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishing, 2016. Pp. xxx + 264. Paper, \$29.00. ISBN 978-0-86516-840-4.

Anyone who has studied the social history of Rome even cursorily in the last two decades will no doubt have encountered and enjoyed Shelton's excellent and indispensable sourcebook on that subject, *As the Romans Did* (Oxford, 1998). Her most recent volume, a compilation of several of Pliny the Younger's more memorable and interesting letters designed as an intermediate-to-advanced level Latin reader, succeeds just as brilliantly as her earlier work.

Everything in this book is thoughtfully proportional and apposite. There always seems to be the perfect amount of discussion and explanation; no more, and no less. Not only does the slender introduction provide all the background necessary to situate the historical and literary contexts in which Pliny wrote; Shelton is also especially vigilant and consistent about reminding readers as they progress through the book where else in the volume to turn for an expanded discussion of any given topic. An incredible amount of work must have gone into all this cross-referencing, and it results in perhaps the single most user-friendly student edition this reviewer has ever encountered. And while the letters proceed in the volume according to the traditional numbering system and arrangement dating back to antiquity, both at the beginning of the work and as needed throughout, Shelton recommends thematic groupings of letters that speak to similar themes (such as slavery, women and marriage, and politics).

Every letter is well-chosen and inherently interesting, and Shelton is to be lauded for her inclusion of references to letters even outside the current edition (as well as a wealth of other primary and secondary readings relating to them). But what make this book so very excellent are, first and foremost, its comprehensiveness and user-friendliness. Knowing that many teachers will either excerpt from the book and/or take the letters out of the traditional ordering scheme, Shelton keeps her grammatical notes deliberately thorough from the first letter in the volume right through until the very last. Given the amount of repetition and overlap, one might expect to find no small amount of cut-and-

pasting, yet somehow each note reads like it has been written anew with equal attention.

While epistolography is not a discipline that in and of itself requires an in-depth knowledge of vowel quantities (as would, say, poetry), the decision to include macrons in the comprehensive Vocabulary section at the back was a wise and welcome one (as was the one not include them in text of the letters themselves). Three simple but elegant maps, an appendix of inscriptions, two genealogy charts, a glossary of proper names found in the text of the letters, and two indexes—one on grammar and syntax, and the other subject-based—round out the ancillary materials that contribute to the overall usefulness of the book. The thoughtful balance struck by these and countless other almost imperceptible decisions of formatting throughout helps to achieve a nearly flawless intermediate reader.

If, in the end, the biggest flaw I could find was the incredibly minor disinclusion in the notes to Letter 1.1 of *num* in the listing of conjunctions after which the *ali-* in indefinite pronouns tends to “fall away” (along with *si*, *nisi*, and *ne*), then that in and of itself says a great deal about the superlative editing that went into this book - especially considering that another note on that same grammatical tidbit in the notes for Letter 4.13 *does* include *num* in the canonical list of four! In sum, I not only recommend this volume wholeheartedly and without reserve, but plan to start using it myself in both grammar-based and literature-based Latin courses at the earliest possible juncture. Students and teachers alike will value this edition for years to come.

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