"INSINCERITY," "FACTS," AND "EPISTOLARITY": APPROACHES TO PLINY'S *EPISTLES* TO CALPURNIA

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> I do hate to tell about myself every day! As if I were the crops.
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> > Mrs. Carlyle, *Letters*

> A good letter is an exercise of the ego, a modest letter writer a contradiction in terms.
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> > Clifton Fadiman, *Any Number Can Play*

One of the "egos" from the ancient world we can convince ourselves we know best is that of C. Plinius Caecilius Secundus, the Younger Pliny. Indeed, he is in the company of Horace, Cicero, and Ovid in having inspired the likes of such works as *Pliny: A Self Portrait in Letters* (Radice 1978) and *Pliny on Himself* (White 1988). All of these authors—we cannot fail to notice immediately—wrote letters,[1] and if it is true that "more than kisses, letters mingle souls; / for, thus friends absent speak" (John Donne, *To Sir Henry Wotton*), the temptation to listen to those ancient Romans' words as if to those of long-lost friends reaching us through the mists of the centuries

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1 The epistolary works of the Younger Pliny are, to our knowledge, the first collection of letters pertaining to private affairs in ancient Rome that was published by the author himself. Cicero had planned to publish part of his own correspondence (*ad Att.* XVI.5), but died before accomplishing the task, leaving it to his secretary Tiro and T. Pomponius Atticus to perform.

proves almost irresistible for classical scholars. It is the generative impulse of classical scholarship, but is it the only way?

The aim of this article is to suggest a new approach to the reading of Pliny's *Letters*, one centred around the concept of "epistolarity" (which Janet Gurkin Altman defines as "the use of a letter's formal properties to create meaning"[2]), and, to that effect, an analysis will be offered of the three letters to Calpurnia (6.4, 6.7, and 7.5) and of 4.19 (in which Pliny talks in some detail of his wife). The basis of the concept of "epistolarity" here espoused is the abandonment of the opposition between "real" and "fictitious" letters, which is central to so much classical scholarship, in order to focus on Pliny's *Epistles* as instances of a specific (literary) genre, epistolary writing, and to analyse the set of formal and thematic features that combine to determine their affiliation, making them recognisable as letters. (This, of course, if we believe that these features go beyond the date and the initial and final greetings,[3] and if these features, "far from being merely ornamental, significantly influence the way meaning is consciously and unconsciously constructed by writers and readers," Altman 1982.4.)

To start with, though, it will prove fruitful to briefly analyse the ideological assumptions that underlie much of the best scholarship on Pliny's *Letters* (and on Roman epistolary writing in general), by examining the approaches adopted, in their almost contemporary works, by two influential scholars, A. N. Sherwin-White and Georg Luck, to one of Pliny's *Epistles* in particular (6.4 to Calpurnia), but with the intention of identifying the ideology that is the basis of all their work.

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2 Altman 1982.4. The epistolary reading of Pliny's letters offered in this article is very much indebted to Altman's identification of at least some of the characteristic features of "epistolarity." Unfortunately, most works on epistolarity do not deal with classical literature; exceptions are Kennedy 2002 (on the *Heroides*) and de Pretis 2002 (on Horace's *Epistles* 1).

3 Those very elements that Pliny himself (the date) and his translator Betty Radice (the greetings) have eliminated from the text of the *Epistles*.

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> My love, I have received your letter on April 19—it is in a
> bad style.
>
> > Napoleon Bonaparte

Sherwin-White's approach to Pliny is also discussed by Henderson elsewhere in this collection,[4] and, for the sake of our argument, it will be necessary just to underline how Sherwin-White's focus in his *Commentary* (1966) on the "facts" of Pliny's life on which each letter sheds light,[5] involves emphasizing the "informal" nature of the letters. When letters are related to each other, it is on the grounds of the "events" they seem to refer to,[6] whilst the remark "to this separation we owe Pliny's three letters to her" (Sherwin-White 1966.359) is not followed by an attempt to see the three letters to Calpurnia as being in a dialogue with each other from a thematic or literary point of view (despite the fact that, as we will see in more detail later, it is precisely the thematic and semantic dialogue that the three letters seem to establish with each other that induces us to see them as a coherent group, since there is nothing openly said that links them from a circumstantial point of view).

The basis of this attitude is not the fact that Sherwin-White is writing a commentary, but rather that he is writing a *historical and social* commentary, and, in this context, formality and literary affiliation are implicitly regarded as putting a strain on the letters' "authenticity," so that Guillemin's idea (1929) that, in the letters to Calpurnia, Pliny established the theme of conjugal love in Latin literature is substantially downplayed, although not totally rejected.[7] The "truth and accuracy" of Pliny's *Letters* are

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4 Henderson above, pp. 115–17.

5 In the case of 6.4, Calpurnia's illness and Pliny's commitments that do not allow him to follow her to Campania. Similarly, 6.4, the other letters to Calpurnia, and those about her are seen by some scholars, together with other epistles, as shedding light on Pliny's character (Bell 1990) and on his attitude to women (Spalding Dobson 1982, Shelton 1990), as well as on his marriage and even on the character of his wife (Maniet 1966).

6 References in the commentary to several other epistles are made in the context of a discussion of what might be keeping Pliny at home ("court cases . . . the imperial Council . . . politics," Sherwin-White 1966.359), and it is with the statement that Calpurnia's illness cannot be her pregnancy that Sherwin-White considers the two letters in Book 8 (10 and 11) in which Pliny refers to his wife's miscarriage.

7 "Of the letters to his wife . . . it is admitted [by Guillemin] that Pliny himself is creating the type out of various passages of Cicero and Ovid . . . Others might prefer to say that Pliny used the *obvious* literary language to discuss the *natural* topics of Calpurnia's absence and

indeed explicitly defended by Sherwin-White, in open opposition to Guillemin: "Because Pliny writes in the language of his predecessors on themes of Statius and Martial, the whole thing is taken to be a fiction. This seems a rather crude approach to the understanding of classical literature" (Sherwin-White1966.16). The fact that Pliny's *Letters* are refined documents is not denied, but the defence of the letters' "authenticity" is accompanied by an emphasis on their "informality" and "originality."[8]

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> Letter writing . . . is truly a communication with spectres,
> not only with the spectre of the addressee but also with
> one's own phantom, which evolves underneath one's own
> hand in the very letter one is writing.
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>   Kafka, *Briefe an Milena*

On the other hand, Pliny's refined style, and the fact that he published his correspondence himself, seem to invite scepticism about the "authenticity" of what he says on the part of Georg Luck (among others). In his article "Letter and Epistle in Antiquity" (1961), Luck compares 6.4 with *Oxyr. Pap.* 744,[9] a letter sent by a man called Hilario to his wife Alis on the 17th of June 1 B.C.[10] Luck writes (1961.82):

> [In Pliny's letter] everything is carefully thought out with
> the public in mind . . . This *artistic* objectivity . . . always

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illness" (Sherwin-White 1966.17, emphasis added); and, "[Guillemin] exaggerates the *formality* of the letters to Calpurnia, and their debt to Cicero" (Sherwin-White 1966.359, emphasis added).

8 This approach is also adopted in a subsequent article (Sherwin-White 1969.79: "*For the first time* in the ancient world a writer was applying the language of lovers to the relationship of marriage. . . . Pliny is *the first man known* to have written a love-letter to his own wife," emphasis added).

9 "Hilario to Alis, his sister, many greetings, and to my lady Berous and Apollonarion. Know that we are still in Alexandria. Do not worry if they really go home and I remain in Alexandria. I ask and entreat you to take care of the child. And as soon as we receive our pay I will send it up to you. If you chance to bear a child and it is a boy, let it be; if it is a girl, expose it. You have said to Afrodisias that I should not forget you. How can I forget you? I ask you, then, not to worry. Year 29 of [Augustus] Caesar, Payni 23" (trans. in Lewis and Reinhold 1990).

10 As Luck himself specifies, implicitly setting this document in opposition to the date-less letters of Pliny.

> presupposes the presence (albeit invisible) of a third reader
> . . . Pliny represents his "life," that is himself, his days, his
> thoughts, and his experiences, as he desires to be seen . . .
> [On the other hand, Hilario's lines are] the opposite of the
> artistic letter. The simple message of an unknown man to
> his wife has survived, by chance, for almost two thousand
> years, and even today speaks with *immediacy* . . . In these
> clumsy lines . . . is perhaps reflected a more delicate
> feeling than in the elegant prose of the learned Roman
> (emphasis added).

Luck's starting point is the assumption that, since the papyrus is less refined than Pliny's letter, it is more "immediate" (*unmittelbar*), and thus (if it is true that immediacy implies an unmediated access to the real feelings of the writer) more "sincere."[11] So Luck sees Pliny's artistic refinement as putting a strain on the letter's "sincerity," even though he does not openly employ the term.[12]

In examining Luck's position, it becomes particularly clear that an approach to Pliny, and indeed to all epistolary literature, involves a definition of "letter," even when this is not openly offered. In his article, Luck suggests a distinction, based on the work of the theologian Adolf Deißman at the end of the nineteenth century, between "letter" (an immediate, private kind of document, "pre-literary") and "epistle" (a more refined document, which often presupposes a "public" and is part of "literature"): "In the letter,

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11 We can dispute Luck's identification of simplicity and clumsiness with "sincerity"; Hilario's letter is less skilled but not necessarily more "sincere" than that of Pliny. He is obviously concerned with showing himself as a loving husband, as much as Pliny is. Writing always involves "anxieties" of some sort regarding the reception of what is written (on Pliny's anxieties in Book 1—albeit mainly in a social and political context—see Hoffer 1999). Why these anxieties should be greater for a learned man than for an uneducated one is not clear. We could also question the validity of a comparison between two documents that are 100 years apart, written in two different languages, in different areas of the ancient world, and by two men of extremely different social and cultural status, and wonder whether we should focus our enquiry on the similarities rather than on the differences between the two texts, i.e., those characteristics that allow precisely such a comparison to take place. As we will see in more detail later, such common ground is to be sought not in the opposition between a sincere vs. refined (or even real vs. fictitious) letter but in the common epistolary affiliation of the two texts.

12 The term is, on the other hand, openly employed by several scholars, e.g., by Guillemin 1929.140 (the letters display an "air de sincerité" which is but appearance), but also by Maniet 1966.178, who, interestingly, sees in Pliny's "reserve" in talking to his wife the best—although not decisive—proof of the authenticity of those letters (185).

the writer presents himself as he is; in the epistle, instead, he stylises completely a specific part of himself" (Luck 1961.78). In other words, the letter is a more "sincere" kind of document than the epistle, and, according to Luck, whilst that of Hilario is "a real letter," that of Pliny is an "epistle" (and thus an instance of "literary" writing). And yet, Luck also remarks that a learned man like Pliny "could not speak or write differently" (1961.82), so, in a way, Pliny could not write letters. Indeed, where can we locate the boundary between care for what one is writing and "artificiality"? Can a learned person (especially an ancient Roman man, imbued with rhetoric) write something "immediate" whilst "naturally" avoiding repetition? Which researched expression, among many, tips the balance toward "insincerity"? We are now proceeding *ratione ruentis acervi* (Horace *Epistles* 2.1.47), but we hope that the point has been made that the ultimate outcome of that sort of approach would be that learned people (at least in the Roman world) *do not write letters*. Moreover, Luck's interpretation pivots around the idealised picture of an uneducated ancient labourer—untainted by education and rhetoric, much like the noble savage of the Enlightenment—naively unburdening his heart on a fragment of papyrus, with a total absence of secondary motives. But, as J. W. Howland writes (1991.101):

> letters, while attempting to mirror the soul accurately, cannot provide any less-mediated access to the inner man than any other form of writing; letters, too, are the result of reflection and composition and cannot be "the thing itself," but always a re-creation.

The ideal of the completely sincere text, the verbal embodiment of its writer's heart, is ultimately a Romantic chimera. Deißman's (and Luck's) distinction between letter and epistle appears, thus, artificial, and a new and more comprehensive definition of "letter" becomes necessary, one that can accommodate Pliny's writings as well as Hilario's. Such a definition can be achieved through the analysis of a text's "epistolarity," as we will see in the next section, but first we must acknowledge that Sherwin-White and Luck represent the two major orientations in Plinian scholarship: the "documentary" and the "literary," the latter, as Federico Gamberini remarks,[13] having,

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13 Gamberini 1983.124. For a comprehensive bibliographical discussion of Pliny's scholarship, see also Aubrion 1989 (especially for the debate on the character of the correspondence, 315ff.).

on the whole, been favoured in the past, the former having become more popular in recent years. Sherwin-White looks for "facts," and appears somewhat uneasy with the idea that Pliny is creating or developing a missive document with literary characteristics. On the other hand, Luck just emphasizes the text's literary features, at the expense of its "immediacy." But we can see how the two scholars, although apparently drawing opposite conclusions, share the same ideological assumption that artistic refinement and literary features, on one side, and "authenticity" and "sincerity" on the other, are mutually exclusive.[14] The opposition between "sincere" and "artificial" (of Romantic origin, as we have said) is central to their analysis and leads to difficulties and contradictions[15] (like the endless discussion about the "authenticity" of Pliny's *Letters*, a problem which can ultimately never be resolved). These difficulties can only be eliminated by setting aside the opposition genuine vs. fictitious, as Gamberini does (although he does not reject it as theoretically artificial and ultimately impossible—which is the contention of this article—but chooses to assume both characteristics in his

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14 Thus scholars analysing letters will emphasize one set of characteristics and downplay the other, or vice versa. Such an ideological impasse is by no means confined to the scholarship on Pliny's *Letters*, as illustrated by Ebbeler 1998: "Even in a late-twentieth-century critical climate sympathetic to genres outside the epic, lyric and drama triumvirate and open to methodologies that challenge the conventions of textuality, Latin epistles (verse and prose) have seldom been treated as anything other than transparent social-historical documents. When they have been the object of critical attention, as in the case of Ovid's *Heroides*, their epistolary status is typically elided—and certainly not treated as integral to an interpretation of the text" (exceptions are Kennedy 1984 and the already mentioned Kennedy 2002).

15 Jal 1993, e.g., despite declaring as his aim to defend Pliny from the accusation of being "a superficial letter writer," writes (222): "Que conclure de cette analyse, sinon que le bilan n'est guère brillant? Qu'attendons-nous, nous, d'une lettre d'un grand écrivain? *Le contraire* ou presque *de ce que Pline semble* trop souvent *en attendre*, à savoir la simplicité, le naturel, la spontanéité et non la volonté de briller, sans parler, bien sûr, de l'intérêt du contenu. Que Pline ait pu servir de modèle à Symmaque ou à Sidoine Apollinaire, dont on sait qu'ils s'efforcent de l'imiter, n'est pas pour nous rassurer, quand on constate . . . la grande parte de préciosité et d'affectation que compte leur *Correspondance*" (emphasis added). The fact that Pliny's concepts of letter and letter writing (as well as those of other epistolary writers from antiquity) are different from those of many modern scholars is here clearly stated, although this is regarded as being something of a fault on Pliny's part rather than proof of the inadequacy of those modern definitions of the letter in dealing with Pliny's *Epistles*. Indeed, Ebbeler 1998 laments how ancient letters are insistently approached "the way that we approach modern letters," and how this "failure to historicize the genre" distorts our understanding. We could add that, even in reading modern letters, the search for sincerity is probably not the most fruitful one we could pursue, and in our postmodern age of deconstruction and intertextuality, it is possible to advocate a more complex view of the act of letter writing.

definition of the Plinian letter as "a complex blend of genuine and literary elements"[16]), in order to focus on the epistolary character of the letters as integral to the reading of the text, as advocated by J. Ebbeler 1998.

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> The letter, the epistle, which is not one genre but all the genres, literature itself.
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> Jacques Derrida, *Envois*

The remainder of this article will thus be dedicated to an analysis of some of Pliny's *Epistles*[17] centred around their "epistolarity," their "use of a letter's formal properties to create meaning" (Altman 1982.4). Two premises are necessary, however. Firstly, the epistolarity of a text is not scientifically measurable but a matter of interpretation, a tool that allows us new readings of that text. Secondly, the insistence on the epistolary affiliation of Pliny's *Letters* does not imply his conscious adoption of and adherence to a well-defined and coherent theory of the epistolary genre. It is commonly agreed by scholars that Pliny regarded his *Letters* as a minor literary achievement when compared to his oratorical works, although Henderson's idea, expressed in the present collection of essays,[18] that "the *Letters* are a creative self-dramatization, a literary stab at self-immortalization" is most probably correct.[19] Nevertheless, whether Pliny and his contemporaries regarded epistolary writing as a (major or minor) literary genre or not, there is no doubt that, in antiquity—and known to Pliny—there existed a wealth of discussion of the stylistic requirements of epistolary writing, starting from the Peripatetics (who saw in the letter half of a dialogue among friends[20])

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16 Gamberini 1983.124. Ludolph 1997 also thinks that the question of the letters' sincerity should be abandoned in favour of an investigation of Pliny's representation of his "epistolary I," although he ultimately emphasizes the literary character of the *Epistles*, and his approach is literary rather than epistolary.

17 All quotations from the letters will be taken from Radice 1969.

18 Henderson above, p. 115.

19 For Shelton 1987.121, "Pliny published his correspondence in order to produce an autobiography."

20 Cf. Demetrius *On Style* 223.

and continued, among others, by Cicero,[21] Ovid,[22] and Seneca,[23] who all stressed the colloquial nature of proper epistolary diction. Pliny himself offers in his *Letters* not only recurrent reflections on the relationship between letter writing and history writing,[24] but also reflections on the style of letter writing; Gamberini thinks (1983.122) that his definition of *litterae paulo curatius scriptae* (1.1.1) "was the technical denomination of a new type of letter," the type actually written by Pliny and many of his correspondents. There is, therefore, no doubt that the letter form was seen by Pliny and his contemporaries as a literary form with its own specific stylistic requirements, which can be defined, in our less prescriptive cultural framework, as its "specific properties generating meaning," that is to say, its "epistolarity."

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> Those who are absent, by its means become present; it is the consolation of life.
> Voltaire, "Post," *Philosophical Dictionary*

> The one good thing about not seeing you is that I can write you a letter.
> Svetlana Alliluyeva, *Twenty Letters to a Friend*

In the case of *Epistle* 6.4, the concept of "epistolarity" sets in a new light some characteristics that have met with especial suspicion on the part of some critics. Concerning the first sentence of the letter, Luck writes (1961.82):

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21 *ad Famil.* IX.21.1: "Verum tamen quid tibi ego in epistulis videor? Nonne plebeio sermone agere tecum? Nec enim semper eodem modo. Quid enim simile habet epistula aut iudicio aut contioni? Quin ipsa iudicia non solemus omnia tractare uno modo. Privatas causas, et eas tenues, agimus subtilius, capitis aut famae scilicet ornatius; epistulas vero quotidianis verbis texere solemus."

22 *Pont.* I.5.59–60: "Quod venit ex facili satis est componere nobis, / et nimis intenti causa laboris abest."

23 *ad Lucil.* 75.1: "Minus tibi accuratas a me epistulas mitti quereris. Quis enim accurate loquitur nisi qui vult putide loqui? Qualis sermo meus esset si una desideremus aut ambularemus, inlaboratus et facilis, tales esse epistulas meas volo, quae nihil habent arcessitum nec fictum."

24 The issue is analysed by Ash's paper in this volume.

> Could a loving husband write more beautiful and elo-
> quent words to his ill wife . . .? And yet, how everything is
> carefully thought out with the public, who will no doubt
> read them, in mind. Calpurnia must certainly have known
> that he could not go with her for professional reasons; she
> knew, above all, for what reason she had left.

And A. Maniet (1966.178): "Cette precision n'est pas destinée à Calpurnia."
And yet a strong definition *in the letter* of writer and addressee and their
condition is a typical feature of "epistolarity." Distance and absence require,
for communication to take place, that powerful images of the two correspon-
dents be cast into words and made to interact with each other. As Altman says
(1982.119):

> the *I* of epistolary discourse always situates himself vis-à-
> vis another; his locus, his "address" is always relative to
> that of his addressee. To write a letter is to map one's co-
> ordinates—temporal, spatial, emotional, intellectual—in
> order to tell someone else where one is located at a
> particular time, at the same time mapping the co-ordinates
> of the addressee in relation to oneself.

Thus 6.4 is not the letter of Pliny to Calpurnia; it is the letter of a Pliny who
had to stay in Rome to a Calpurnia who was ill and had to go away. This
situation is not merely the external event from which the letter originated, or
its pre-text; it is its setting and subject matter, and it defines its characters. So
rather than regarding these details as "otiose," as Maniet wants (1966.179),
an approach centred around epistolarity allows us to recuperate them as
fundamental sources of meaning in the text. Indeed, if we applied Luck's
critical eye to Hilario's piece of writing in the same way as he does to
Pliny's, in it, too, we could find some details that—from a "reality" point of
view—do not seem strictly necessary, like the epithet "his sister"[25] at the
beginning (Alis knew very well who she was), or the repetition "in Alexan-
dria" (by then Alis knew where Hilario was). But from an "epistolarity"
point of view, these details serve to map the co-ordinates of writer and
addressee, and are thus an integral part of the letter.

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25 Hilario could have married his sister, a common practice in Roman Egypt, but this could
    also just be an affectionate address (see Lewis and Reinhold 1990.323).

The privileged relationship between writer and addressee that finds its place in a letter is not confined to those details, it influences the way in which the writer constructs his or her own image all through the letter. As J. W. Howland says (1991.145 and 170): "letters are always written *to* someone, and we always keep our correspondent in mind when setting out to write"; and "since language in any form operates in a field between addresser and addressee, linguists would say that it is impossible to write a letter without an idea about the person to whom it is being written. No letter can transparently and impartially express the self." [26] It is a circular motion: the writer sets out to tell about himself/herself to the correspondent, but a correspondent who is not there and hence has to be recreated in the text; the addressee's image, in turn, influences the writer's image as he/she constructs it in the letter.

This process becomes particularly clear if we compare 6.4 (as well as the other two letters to Calpurnia) with another letter of Pliny's, 4.19, which is addressed to Calpurnia's aunt, Calpurnia Hispulla. In this epistle, Pliny's wife has moved from being the addressee to being the subject matter of the letter, and her "power" in the creation of the text is therefore considerably diminished. The whole letter revolves around the description of Calpurnia's behaviour as a wife, in a sequence of verbs that seem to suggest constant endeavour:[27] *evadere*, *amat*, *accedit*, *concepit*, *habet*, *lectitat*, *ediscit*, *adficitur*, *disponit*, *sedet*, *excipit*, *cantat*, *diligit*, *consueverit*. And yet, the effect on Pliny of all this activity is minimal, or rather no effect is mentioned at all, with the exception of the *certissima spes* of lasting happiness (4.19.5). The reason for this imbalance can be sought not in the "reality" of Roman marriage but in the text itself, or, more precisely, in the effect that the addressee (Calpurnia's aunt) has on it. It is to her and for her benefit that Calpurnia's image is created, both implicitly (because she is the addressee of the letter) and explicitly (because, in 4.19.6, Calpurnia is said to be "tuis

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26 Cf. also Altman 1982.88: "If pure autobiography can be born of the mere desire to express oneself, without regard for the eventual reader, the letter is by definition never the product of such an 'immaculate conception,' but is rather the result of a union of writer and reader. . . . The epistolary experience, as distinguished from the autobiographical, is a reciprocal one. The letter writer simultaneously seeks to affect his reader and is affected by him."

27 In her analysis of the epistle as a depiction of the ideal Roman wife, Shelton 1990.168 remarks how, in this one-sided relationship, whilst Pliny is active, Calpurnia is passive: "If she sings, the words are his." This can appear true from a sociological point of view, but, in the text itself, it is rather the failure on the part of Pliny to reciprocate his wife's active behaviour that characterizes the marriage as "one-sided."

manibus educatam, tuis praeceptis institutam . . ."); hence the focus on
Calpurnia's activities as a result of Hispulla's guidance. On the other hand,
Pliny's image is constructed in an exquisitely passive way, as the (worthy)
recipient of his wife's care and, through her, of Hispulla's herself. This
concept is reinforced at the end of the letter, with the sentence "me a pueritia
statim formare laudare, talemque qualis nunc uxori meae videor, ominari
solebas" (4.19.7), which reinstates Pliny's passivity (as a recipient of
Hispulla's care since childhood) and explicitly declares him worthy of care
(again, thanks to Hispulla!). Calpurnia's image is active but not "indepen-
dent": it is constructed not for its own sake, but as a function of Hispulla's
image, which emanates from Calpurnia's. Through Calpurnia's actions, it is
Hispulla who we see at work. Similarly, Pliny's passive image (as a recipient
of care) is constructed as a function of the depiction of the addressee of the
letter (as giver of care). The "power" at play, in 4.19, is that of Hispulla.

On the other hand, 6.4 is dominated by Calpurnia's power, or rather
by the power of her absence. The shift is caused by her move from being the
subject matter of the letter to being its addressee. The situation of 4.19 is
completely overturned: here it is Pliny who acts (what he mainly does is
worry), while Calpurnia's activity, apart from leaving, is framed as a wish on
Pliny's part (he asks her to write back). And yet her weight in the text is much
greater than in the letter to Hispulla, since Pliny's own image is constructed
in relation to her: first, in his frustrated desire to leave with her, then, in his
wish to know how she is doing in her retreat, then, in his anxiety about her
absence, and, again, in his imagining the worst, and, finally, in his request for
her to write. Nothing that Pliny does in this letter is independent of Calpurnia
(with the exception of the brief reference to his *occupationes* in 6.4.1, which
are nevertheless also seen only as an impediment to his joining his wife). The
fact that 6.4 is a *love* letter[28] explains the intensity of the *I-you* interaction in
the text, but this phenomenon is characteristic of all epistolary writing.

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28 It has already been stated at the beginning of this article that, despite the fact that the
     language of love and that of marriage are usually separate in Latin literature, the letters that
     Pliny writes to his wife are love letters (see Sherwin-White 1966.407). Guillemin
     1929.138–41 explores the literary influences on the letters to Calpurnia—those of elegiac
     poetry and Ovid are particularly important—and Verger 1997–98 illustrates how the
     elegiac theme of the *amator exclusus* is explored in 7.5; see also Shelton 1990.170–71.
     Shelton also notices how in 4.19 ("amat me, quod castitatis indicium est"), "Pliny's
     situation is the reverse of the plight of the love poets. For him, Calpurnia's love is proof of
     her *castitas*; for Catullus and Propertius, the lack of *castitas*—the infidelity and promiscu-
     ity—of Lesbia and Cynthia was proof that their mistresses did not love them" (166).

Another epistolary feature that is particularly apparent in 6.4, and even more in 6.7, is what Altman calls (1982.186) the "bridge/barrier" function of the letter: "Given the letter's function as a connector between two distant points, as a bridge between sender and receiver, the epistolary author can choose to emphasize either the distance or the bridge" (Altman 1982.13). The mediatory role that is appropriate to epistolary writing was well recognized in antiquity (see, e.g., Cicero[29]), and had already been explored in Horace's *Epistles*[30] and Ovid's *Heroides*.[31] In 6.4, the emphasis, from the beginning, is on the separation, on the absence of Calpurnia (the word *absentia* is used in 6.4.4), but the final lines of the epistle draw on the connective function of epistolary writing, as Pliny asks for letters to allay his worries. The sentence "Ero enim securior dum lego, statimque timebo cum legero*"* (6.4.5) clearly refers to the illusion of presence that the letter creates, an illusion that is immediately shattered as the letter ends. More subtly, at the beginning of the letter, Pliny laments not only that he could not leave with Calpurnia, but also that he could not follow her (6.4.1: *profectam e vestigio subsequi*). Nevertheless, something of Pliny does follow Calpurnia on her journey, and that is his letter, the very letter we are reading, which becomes a symbol and a substitute for the writer himself. As Altman remarks (1982.19):

> The letter as a physical entity emanating from, passing between, and touching each of the lovers may function itself as a figure for the lover . . . The letter as lover (metonymy of the self[32]) appears any time the letter is perceived as having the virtue of "falling into his hands when I cannot" (*Lettres portugaises*).

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29 *ad Famil.* II.4.1: "Epistularum genera multa esse . . . sed unum illud certissimum, cuius causa inventa res ipsa est, ut certiores faceremus absentis, si quid esset, quod eos scire aut nostra aut ipsorum interesset." Cf. Euripides' *Palamedes* (frg. 582 Nauck 428): "I was the one to devise these antidotes to forgetfulness: by my invention of consonants, vowels and syllables, I made it possible for people to learn to read, so that he who is absent overseas can even there know well what is happening back home; so that a dying man can speak through writing to his children, each heir to know his share of the wealth" (as translated in Humphrey, Oleson, and Sherwood 1998.527), where the mediatory role is attributed to the written word in general.

30 See de Pretis 2002.

31 See Altman 1982.13ff., Kennedy 1984 and 2002.

32 As opposed to the metaphor of the lover, which is his/her image as constructed in the letter.

This phenomenon is only implied in 6.4 and not explicitly referred to, but it constitutes the central theme of 6.7. Here, again, we find complaints about the separation and the request for letters. But the process is developed further, since the epistle opens by quoting Calpurnia's words (*Scribis . . .*), and the absence lamented is not that of the addressee but that of the writer himself (Pliny), in a total reversal of the earlier letter. Interestingly, it is Calpurnia who brings the metonymic substitution of letter for lover into the open when she is quoted as saying: "quod pro me libellos meos teneas, saepe etiam in vestigio meo colloces*" (6.7.1). We are now treading on dangerous ground, since the *libelli* have always been interpreted as repre-senting Pliny's literary (oratorical) works. Indeed, the connection with 4.19.2 cannot be missed, where of Calpurnia Pliny says: "Meos libellos habet lectitat ediscit etiam." No absence there, so the *libelli* are certainly Pliny's literary works, which Calpurnia is shown to like reading. And yet, if we forget 4.19 for a moment, the strong epistolary situation involved in the image of Calpurnia holding Pliny's *libellos* as a substitute for him cannot fail to impress us. This is what lovers do with the *letter(s)* of their absent loved one; this is what Pliny himself does, in the following lines, with Calpurnia's letters: "invicem ego epistulas tuas lectito atque identidem in manus quasi novas sumo*" (6.7.2; again, the letter in Pliny's hands is a metonymy for the lover, although less openly than in the case of Calpurnia). The word *libellus* can refer to epistolary writing if we rely on the *TLL*'s definition ("de -is ad alios certiores faciendos missis vel traditis, fere i. q. epistula*"), and we recall that it had already been used as a synonym for *littera* by Ovid.[33] We should not read 6.7 as if it were 4.19: the addressees of the two letters are not the same and, therefore, the *libelli* (and the whole epistolary situation) are also different.[34]

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33 *Heroid.* 11.2 ("oblitus a dominae caede libellus erit") and 17.145–46 ("quod tacito mando mea verba libello, / fungitur officio littera nostra novo"). Also the terms *littera* and *epistula* appear to have been regarded as synonyms in ancient Rome; see Cic. *ad Att.* I.20.1 ("nunc epistulae litteris his respondebo"), and Cic. *ad Att.* V.17.1 ("accepi . . . sine epistula tua fasciculum litterarum"). Some kind of distinction seems to be suggested in *ad Quintum fratrem* III.1.8 ("tuas litteras, quas pluribus epistulis accepi"), but clearly not in the modern sense of an informal vs. formal type of document.

34 Shelton 1990.170 offers a completely different interpretation of 6.7 (the *libelli* are, for her, Pliny's literary works): "There is no mention of reading the *libellos*, only of embracing them, as one might hold close an article of clothing of an absent lover. . . . Is [Calpurnia's] ability to read less endearing to [Pliny] than her fascination with his books as extensions of himself? . . . In her letter [. . . Calpurnia implied] that his literary genius was so essential

But what about 4.19? We cannot and must not ignore it completely, as we have done up to this point. Indeed, the relation of 6.7 to 4.19 is stressed by Pliny himself, precisely by employing in both letters the term *libellos* (*meos libellos* in 4.19.2, *libellos meos* in 6.7.1), as well as the verb *lectitare* (but, with exquisite *variatio*, whilst in 4.19.2 it is Calpurnia who reads, in 6.7.2, it is Pliny). Such repetition does not occur by chance: 6.7 is meant to resonate with 4.19, and, indeed, the *libelli* that Calpurnia holds in Pliny's absence are meant to remind us of the *libelli* of his works that she reads and studies at home. The context of the letter seems to suggest that the *libelli* of 6.7 could be his letters; the wider context of the collection and the relationship with 4.19 point to their being Pliny's literary work.[35] One set of written documents superimposes its connotations on the other, and the process takes effect in both directions, so that the identity of the *libelli* of 4.19 appears ambiguous: could they also comprehend—among the other works—Pliny's letters (not to Calpurnia this time, but to his other correspondents)? Here we do not mean to slip back into the vexed controversy about the circumstances of composition of the letters; we are merely suggesting that Pliny was not afraid of investing the letter form with literary connotations and enjoyed the enriching ambiguity that the superimposition of different epistolary situations contributed to his text.

The relationship between 4.19 and 6.7 that we have just discussed leads us to the last main epistolary issue that we will analyse in this article, that of epistolary closure and of the relationship of each letter to the other letters of the collection and to the collection as a whole.[36] "Epistolary

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an aspect of his attractiveness that his *libellos* could be embraced as she would wish to embrace him. Not surprisingly, Pliny in turn attempts to flatter her in 6.7 by saying something which he himself would wish to hear: he reads her letters (i. e., *her* literary work) again and again, and finds them charming." Such a reading seems to have completely missed the point that the images of writer and addressee that are constructed in the letter (whether they correspond to the reality of Pliny's life or not) are those of two lovers missing each other and writing to each other as the only way to (imperfectly) overcome their separation, and that, in this scenario, their letters become a (again, imperfect) substitute for the absent lover. Pliny does not praise Calpurnia for writing charming letters; her letters are pleasing to him because they are hers.

35 The fluctuation of meaning of the term *libellus* between the two letters should not be a problem, as it is accompanied (and perhaps emphasized) by an analogous semantic variation concerning the term *vestigium* between 6.4.1 (*te . . . e vestigio subsequi*) and 6.7.1 (*in vestigio meo conloces*).

36 On this issue, and on the peculiar kind of "narrative" created by epistolary writing, see MacArthur 1990.

endings," Altman says (1982.148), "move between two contradictory possibilities: (1) the potential finality of any letter—given its conventional mechanism for closing, for 'signing off,' and (2) the open-endedness of the form—in which the letter writer is always in dialogue with a possible respondent, and in which any letter appears as part of a potentially ongoing sequence." In the letters we are examining, the exchange is, on one side, with Calpurnia's (missing) letters; on the other, with the other letters of Pliny, those to Calpurnia and about Calpurnia especially, but also all the other letters of the collection.

Calpurnia's replies to Pliny's letters (like those of all his correspondents) are not included in the collection, but this does not prevent them from affecting Pliny's text; the ancient definition of the letter form as "half of a dialogue" indeed acknowledges the weight of the absent person in the creation of the letter and the ultimately provisional character of the writer's words. Since what he/she says is addressed to another, written for another, and influenced by another, the other person's missing reply is implied (at least as a possibility) in the text. Such a relationship can, of course, be made explicit by the author of the missive document, as Pliny does with his requests for an answer (6.4.5 and 6.7.3) and by quoting Calpurnia's letter in 6.7.1. In the latter document, the importance of Calpurnia's writing is indeed emphasized in as much as Pliny's text presents itself completely and exclusively as a reply, from its starting words (*Scribis te . . .*), down to the whole process of thought, which is dependent on Calpurnia's (quoted) words.[37]

Even more interesting is the interaction of each letter (which, in itself, is a unit, a finished document) with the other epistles of the collection. Such an interaction, as we have seen in the case of 4.19 and 6.7, is a complex phenomenon that enriches the meaning of each letter on one level and, at a higher level, conjures up a picture which is at once unitary and disconnected. It is the "epistolary mosaic," a metaphor that is dear to letter readers

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37 When talking of the "importance" of Calpurnia's words, we are not referring to the "reality" of her life, as a sociological investigation is inconsistent with the approach of this article. Cantarella 1996 shows how silence was one of the main cultural attributes of the (proper) Roman woman, and Shelton 1990.168 remarks about 4.19: "If [Calpurnia] sings, the words are [Pliny's]." Latin literature is indeed dominated by the male voice, and where women talk, like in the case of Sulpicia, their words are repeatedly attributed to men. But it is the epistolary situation involved in the letters to Calpurnia (6.7 in particular) that confers on her words (albeit reported by her husband) an importance that elsewhere they perhaps would not have known.

and well expresses the constant tension between continuity and disjunction
that characterizes an epistolary collection. Here, too, the author can choose
to emphasize the one or the other. When, e.g., letters addressed to the same
person and apparently related to the same events are not placed near each
other in the collection, but are separated by a number of letters that appear
unrelated to them (as is the case with the letters to Calpurnia), discontinuity
is clearly stressed. This has a "realistic" effect, as Pliny's request for a reply
in 6.4 is not immediately followed by another letter to Calpurnia but by two
letters to other addressees. When, then, 6.7 opens by quoting Calpurnia's
letter, not only is the illusion of a sequence immediately created, but also the
two intercalary epistles become a symbol of the time that has passed
between Pliny's sending his first letter, receiving an answer, and finally
replying with the second letter.

On the other hand, for such an illusion to be created there must also
be a strong element of continuity between the letters. Nothing tells us that
6.7 actually follows (from a chronological or even logical point of view) 6.4
(in 1.1, Pliny states that the order of the collection is casual[38]); nothing even
openly assures us that Calpurnia's absence which Pliny laments in one letter
is the same one he regrets in the other (and there is no mention in the second
letter of the illness that so worries him in the first one). And yet, the mere
fact that the two letters are addressed to the same person, in a similar tone,
and relate to similar situations, creates in the reader a strong and inevitable
impression of unity, which Pliny chooses to strengthen by placing the letters
very close to each other.[39] Even more, the continuity between 6.4 and 6.7 is
reinforced by the skilful use of language, as the first epistle ends with the
request for letters, and the second one starts by quoting Calpurnia's letter. If
we exclude the greetings at the beginning and the end, the last words of 6.4

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38 1.1.1: "Collegi non servato temporis ordine (neque enim historiam componebam), sed ut
quaeque in manus venerat." Of course, things are not so simple; cf. Ludolph 1997 on the
arrangement of the first nine letters of the collection and, for a completely different
perspective on the same letters, Hoffer 1999. For a bibliographical discussion of
interpretations of the order of Pliny's *Letters,* see Aubrion 1989.316ff. On the reasons
behind the arrangement of some of the letters, see also Mayer below, p. 233.

39 This impression of unity allows us to see in the group of letters to and about Calpurnia, and
despite our awareness that this is but an (epistolary) illusion, a "narrative" in the widest
sense. As remarked by MacArthur 1990, such an epistolary narrative, in view of its open-
endedness and provisional character (characteristics inherent in the letter form), can be
defined as "metonymic," as opposed to more strongly closural forms of narrative, which
MacArthur calls "metaphoric."

are *cum legero* (referring to Calpurnia's writing), the first one of 6.7 is *Scribis*: Pliny has indeed read (and thus can now quote); the *future* perfect of the first text has become the *present* perfect that generates the new letter. A further point of contact between the two letters is the iteration of the request to write, which, in both, comes at the end and is accompanied by the description of Pliny's swinging feelings (swinging between reassurance and worry in 6.4.5, between pleasure and pain in 6.7.3). Finally, the subtle appearance in 6.4.1 of the metonymy letter/lover, which is developed in 6.7, has already been discussed.

Whilst the contacts between the first two letters that Pliny addresses to Calpurnia are many, the link with 7.5 appears, at first sight, more tenuous, because this letter is separated from the preceding epistle by thirty-one letters. Still, in a collection of ten books, the distance is not that great, and not such that it annuls the already mentioned tendency on the part of the reader to seek continuity between documents. More importantly, the tone and language of the epistle are consistent with those of the two preceding letters, not in the sense that they are identical, but because we can detect a progression from the first letter to the second one to the third. We start with Calpurnia's illness and Pliny's requests for her to write (6.4), we proceed through more requests for letters (6.7.3), and we end with Pliny's illness (in 7.5.1 he is ill with love: *aeger* [40]). The progression is accompanied by an intensification in the usage of the themes and the language of love poetry,[41] from the elegiac *corpusculo* of 6.4.2, to the insistence on the metonymy letter/lover in 6.7, to the explosion of amatory motifs in 7.5, where Pliny takes on the *persona* of the *exclusus amator* (7.5.1: *similis excluso*). The third epistle, too, like the other two, ends with the opposition between worry and comfort, pain and pleasure, and this motif as well is intensified from letter to letter.[42]

The unity of the three letters is further emphasized by lexical repetitions, which are subtle and partly explained by the identity of the

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40 In elegiac poetry, love is an illness. On this issue, see Verger 1997–98.115 n. 4.

41 See note 28.

42 6.4.5: "Ero enim securior cum lego, statimque timebo cum legero"; 6.7.3: "licet hoc ita me delectet ut torqueat"; and 7.5.2: "requies in labore, in miseria curisque solacium." Moreover, it is possible to identify a hint of ring composition in the correspondence of *de occupationibus meis* at the beginning of 6.4 with *in foro et amicorum litibus* towards the end of 7.5 (which can serve as explanation of what Pliny's commitments in the first letter are).

themes explored but nevertheless significant, and connect the three docu-
ments in an intricate web of cross-references.[43] Lexical repetitions also
connect the three letters to Calpurnia with 4.19[44] and, once we notice this,
we also realize that 4.19 precedes 6.4 by thirty-five letters, a number which
appears surprisingly similar to the thirty-one that separate 6.7 and 7.5. The
four letters can thus be regarded as a unit, with the closely related 6.4 and 6.7
at the centre, and the (roughly) equally spaced 4.19 and 7.5 at the two
extremes. Whilst 4.19 offers a description of Calpurnia's activity on behalf
of Pliny, 7.5 is dedicated to the description of a restless, overactive Pliny
pining for his wife; whereas, in 4.19, it is Calpurnia who loves,[45] and no
explicit mention is made of Pliny's feelings for her, in 7.5, the lover is
Pliny,[46] and no mention is made of Calpurnia's feelings. Similarly, the
contrasting sensations of worry and relief associated with Pliny in 7.5.2[47]—
a common erotic situation—are already experienced by Calpurnia in 4.19.3.[48]
The progression of theme and tone we have detected in the three letters to
Calpurnia is not contradicted by 4.19 but actually reinforced, as Pliny's
image moves from that of a happy but substantially passive husband to a
worried one, to a restless lover, whilst Calpurnia's presence in his everyday
life gradually fades away, from the activity of 4.19, to her leaving in 6.4, to
her trying to recreate an illusion of presence in 6.7, to her empty rooms in
7.5.1.[49]

To conclude, the way in which 4.19 and 7.5 (but also 6.4 and 6.7, as
we have seen) resonate with each other enriches their meaning in a way that
we can regard as eminently epistolary, since open-endedness, a provisional
character, and a privileged relationship with "the other" are characteristic
features of the letter. Of course, interaction between separate texts takes

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43 *E vestigio* (6.4.1) and *in vestigio* (6.7.1); *desiderarem* (6.4.3), *desiderium* (6.7.3), and
desiderio (7.5.1); *absentiae* (6.4.4), *absentia* (6.7.1), and *abesse* (7.5.1); *solacium* (6.7.1)
and *solacium* (7.5.2).

44 The already mentioned *meos libellos* (4.19.2) / *libellos meos* (6.7.1) and *lectitat* (4.19.2) /
lectito (6.7.2); but also *sollicitudine* (4.19.3) / *sollicitudine* (6.4.4), *vererere* (4.19.7) /
vereor (6.4.4), and *amore* (4.194) / *amor* (7.5.1), *consueverit* (4.19.6) / *consuevimus*
(7.5.1).

45 "Amat me . . . mei caritate . . . amore . . . diligit . . . amare me."

46 "Quanto desiderio tui tenear . . . amor . . . aeger."

47 "Requies in labore, in miseria curisque solacium."

48 "Qua illa sollicitudine cum videor acturus, quanto cum egi gaudio adficitur."

49 "Quibus horis te visere solebam, ad diaetam tuam ipsi me . . . pedes ducunt . . . similis
excluso a vacuo limine recedo."

place in every type of collection, and not exclusively among letters, but it is precisely the epistolary character of *all* literature (up to a point) that we can use to explain this phenomenon. As Altman writes, "Although epistolary literature seemingly constitutes a highly particular . . . subgenre . . ., there is a very real sense in which it metaphorically 'represents' literature as a whole."[50] Confusion (or, more correctly, a blurring of the boundaries) between epistles and literature, between literature and epistles, suits our reading of Pliny's approach to and exploration of the letter form. But the (imperfect) "epistolarity" of literature must not lead us to ignore the specific epistolarity of epistolary writing. The concept of epistolarity can add something to our understanding of all literature, but it could not serve as well in the analysis of other literary forms as in that of epistolary writing. That it is a fruitful interpretative tool in the reading of Pliny's *Letters* has, I hope, been shown.

Bristol, England

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50 Altman 1982.212. This issue is too complex to be discussed here in detail. Let us just recall how the relation between writer and addressee of a letter can be seen as mirroring that between writer and reader of any text, and how the anxieties about the destiny of the text that accompany a letter are paralleled by the anxiety that every author experiences about his or her literary work.