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DOMITIAN'S LIGHTNING BOLTS AND CLOSE SHAVES IN PLINY*

Abstract: Pliny's portrayal of his public life under Domitian has often come under fire from both those who approach Pliny's Letters from a historical perspective and those who study them as a literary production. This article reevaluates Pliny's experiences in five significant areas: public speaking, amicitia, political promotion, threats of political persecution, and survival and reconciliation. In all of these circumstances, Pliny is found to be an honest narrator of his own political struggles under Domitian and an eloquent voice for his generation's endurance.

Although Pliny consistently portrays his political life under Domitian as fraught with peril, his account has fared rather poorly when scrutinized by scholars. Pliny's self-assured earnestness has won him critics both old and new. His old critics have generally operated along historical and biographical lines, questioning Pliny's chronology at times and points of fact at others. Syme, summarizing Pliny's career under Domitian beginning with the year 93, is illustrative:

The praetor avows only one other action in this momentous year. He visited Artemidorus in the suburbs when an edict removed philosophers from the city. That called for courage, so he avers. The thunderbolts had fallen in near vicinity to his person (3.11). Pliny survived unscathed. Indeed he prospered, for all his declaration that he now called a halt to this career (*Pan.* 95.3f). The inscription contradicts. Pliny was one of the prefects put in charge of the *Aerarium Militare* (presumably from 94 to 96, inclusive). That fact discredits another allegation: the incriminating document from the hand of Mettius Carus (his opponent in the prosecution of Massa) found among the state papers after the assassination of Domitian (7.27.14). Finally, by an astute stratagem in 97 (the attack on Publicius Certus), Pliny gained the *Aerarium Saturni*, which led in a straight run to a consulship.¹

* I would like to thank the editor and the anonymous referees who provided many helpful comments. A version of this paper was presented at the 2011 CAMWS conference in Grand

Syme presumes quite a bit from his initial claim that Pliny held the prefecture of the *aerarium militare* in the years 94–96, dates for which there is no conclusive evidence.² By claiming that Pliny's statements about feeling threatened under Domitian are unwarranted, Syme seems to begin with the *a priori* interpretation that Pliny was a collaborator. Syme then relies on the Comum inscription (*CIL* 5.5262), lacking dates but including Pliny's otherwise unknown prefecture at the *aerarium militare*, to argue that Pliny's career advanced under Domitian, a direct contradiction of what Pliny claims (*Pan.* 95.3–4). Further, Syme repudiates Pliny's assertion that charges were laid against him. There is a circularity to the logic here. Rather than use the textual evidence and the epigraphical evidence in concert to reconstruct Pliny's *cursus honorum*, Syme uses the epigraphical evidence in support of his interpretation so that he can deconstruct the textual evidence.

Syme's argument has won wide approval, and scholars now cite it as fact with little recognition that the actual dates of Pliny's career under Domitian are unclear.³ The *communis opinio* for some time now has held that Pliny overstates his relationship with the opposition and the dangers he faced under Domitian.⁴

Rapids where I received a number of useful comments. I would also like to thank Evan Ward and John Appeldorn, my research assistants.

¹ Syme (1991) 564–5. The points touched upon here by Syme (Pliny's praetorship, the prefecture of the *aerarium militare*, the charge of Mettius Carus, and his attack on Publicius Certus) will all be discussed below. Though more sympathetic to Pliny generally, Sherwin-White (1969) 84 subscribes to essentially the same interpretation of Pliny's political career. For the relationship between Sherwin-White and Syme as it pertains to Tacitus and Pliny, see Griffin (1999) 144–6.

² Some of the best scholarly minds over the last century and a half have taken up the question of Pliny's *cursus honorum*, which is among the best known in the imperial period, but also seriously deficient in specific dates. Scholars include Mommsen (1869) 31–139; Otto (1919); Harte (1935) 51–4; Syme (1958) 658–9 and (1991); Sherwin-White (1966) 72–82, 763–71; and Birley (2000) 5–17. The only conclusive statement that can be made with respect to the dating of Pliny's *cursus honorum* under Domitian is that the evidence is inconclusive.

³ Two recent examples: Flower (2006) 263–4 claims that Pliny was a "close advisor to Domitian" on the basis that Pliny held the praetorship in 93 and the *aerarium militare* from 94–96, while omitting reference to the scholarly controversy surrounding these dates; Gibson and Morello, (2012) 34–5, 272–3 still assume Syme's dates and based upon them call into question Pliny's honesty, though they do cite Birley (2000) 5–17, who gives the best recent analysis of Pliny's career.

⁴ Merrill (1903) xxiii–xxiv; Traub (1955) 227–8; Syme (1958) 65, 77, 81–3 and (1983) 123 n. 12; Sherwin-White (1966) 426; Shelton (1987) 129–32 and (2013) 9–13; Ludolph (1997) 44–9; Walsh (2006) 315, 327, 347.

Giovannini and Strobel have even charged Pliny with being fully complicit in Domitian's crimes.⁵

Recently a more literary approach to reading and critiquing Pliny's *Letters* has come to the fore, one which understands the letters as carefully fashioned products of self-representation.⁶ The merit of this approach is that it returns to Pliny some artistic license and recognizes the letters as rhetorical constructions, a fact often overlooked by Pliny's earlier critics.⁷ This interpretation generally asserts that Pliny reported his associations with the opposition to Domitian merely to create a certain image of himself that elides potential negative behavior and highlights laudable action. Yet this does not tell the whole story either. If Pliny's *Letters* are read exclusively through the lens of self-representation, there is the hazard of assuming that Pliny was free to "make up" his past. Yet external, contemporary evidence did exist in the form of histories, letters, speeches, people, and public records which could curb the temptation to over-embellish, (if this evidence exists no longer, then that is no fault of Pliny's). There should be little impulse to return to the practice of reading Pliny merely to find historical detail to the exclusion of literary value, yet the recognition that Pliny is a literary artist employing rhetorical strategies cannot be divorced from the historical dimension of Pliny's *Letters*, particularly those on political life under Domitian. The two approaches to Pliny are not at odds with one another; rather both methods need to be applied judiciously to reading and understanding Pliny's *Letters*.

Lastly, Pliny suffers by comparison with Tacitus. The historian admits in his earliest work his own complicity in the condemnation of prominent dissidents (Ag. 3.2, 45). This admission and Tacitus' generally cynical and gloomy

⁵ Giovannini (1987) 236–9, followed by Flower (2006) 265, argues that as prefect of the military treasury Pliny would have assisted Domitian in confiscating the wealth of his fellow senators to fund the legions. Strobel (2003) 312 writes, "Im historischen Urteil erscheint der jüngere Plinius nicht nur als ein Mitläufer und Opportunist. Er war ... jedenfalls ein williger Helfer, wenn nicht sogar ein Täter..."

⁶ Leach (1990) 14–39; Ludolph (1997); Radicke (1997) 447–61; Hoffer (1999); Gibson and Morello (2003) and (2012); Carlon (2009) 19–20.

⁷ A summation of this viewpoint is provided by Gibson and Morello (2003) 109: "... Pliny had for too long been a quarry for critics prospecting for *Realien*, who mined the rich seams of the letters for 'information' on all aspects of Roman social, agricultural, and legal life or imperial government;" they add that the historical approach needs to be "balanced out by more 'literary' approaches, particularly those of critics who showed a more modern awareness of how Pliny 'salted his mine' by constructing and controlling in a highly crafted epistolary mosaic ... the representation of himself and his world." For the best recent literary studies of Pliny, see Marchesi (2008); Gibson and Morello (2012).

personality have struck a chord with modern scholars' expectations of how a survivor of Domitian's tyranny should react. Pliny's generally positive and optimistic personality matched by his willingness to document his own travails under Domitian seems out of step.⁸ Not until Book Eight (8.14) does Pliny make an admission analogous to Tacitus'.

While recognizing the motivation of self-representation in addition to other literary motivations and accepting the historical information contained in Pliny's writings, I hope to steer a middle course with the purpose of rehabilitating Pliny's side of the story. Thus, I will consider Pliny's writings as evidence of the precarious nature of political life under Domitian, not just for Pliny but also for the political class of his generation. I seek to provide an argument for viewing Pliny's experiences under Domitian, not just as self-representation, but also as the representation of a political generation of survivors, who would have recognized their own experiences in his writings. Pliny's rhetorical abilities only enhance the capacity of the *Letters* to speak as a text that reveals the hazards of political life for the individual and the collective. Pliny's *Letters* reflect life for a generation of senators who outlived not just Domitian and his victims but even, in Tacitus' words, themselves (Ag. 3.2).

This article strongly emphasizes the reception of Pliny's writings by his first audience, his contemporaries, who would have placed a limit on rhetorical embellishment and a check on claims of veracity. The opposition to Domitian came from recognizable, well known senators who had held high office. Surely, many of Pliny's senatorial colleagues were at least acquainted with members of the opposition. Pliny, like his colleagues, had to walk a fine line between the need to maintain amicable relations with the *princeps* in order to further one's political career or even to survive, and the independence needed to honor the ties of *amicitia* with dissidents and to preserve one's own sense of dignity. A handful of letters reveal Pliny's efforts to maneuver through these treacherous shoals. I will be examining Pliny's personal struggles in five particular areas: public speaking, *amicitia*, political promotion, accusations of treason, and survival and reconciliation. Naturally, these categories overlap in significant ways; for example, public speaking in defense of a friend was a demonstration of the ties of *amicitia*, and the result of this public speaking could result in a charge of treason.

⁸ Too much has been made of the difference in personality between Tacitus and Pliny, much of which stems from generic dictates. For the oversimplification of their personalities, see Traub (1955) 228; and Syme (1958) 77, 113; for correctives, see Griffin (1999) 139–58; Gibson (2003) 252; Strunk (2012) 178–92.

The first two categories, public speaking and *amicitia*, were activities that could affect the next two categories, political promotion and accusations of treason. I delineate them, however, to highlight the various ways a senator could run into trouble with the regime and to recognize the diversity of material in Pliny's *Letters*.

The Dangers of Public Life and Public Speech

As Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio all make clear, public life and public speaking in particular were risky endeavors under the Principate and its fickle *principes*.⁹ Pliny records his own harrowing experience of public speaking under Domitian in letter 1.5, famous for Pliny's portrayal of his keen repartee with the *delator* M. Aquilius Regulus.¹⁰ Pliny records how he avoided making an incriminating statement in the Centumviral Court when Regulus asked his opinion on the exile Mettius Modestus (1.5.5–7):

Ecce tibi Regulus “Quaero,” inquit, “Secunde, quid de Modesto sentias.” Vides quod periculum, si respondiissem “bene;” quod flagitium si “male.” Non possum dicere aliud tunc mihi quam deos adfuisse. “Respondebo,” inquam “si de hoc centumviri iudicaturi sunt.” Rursus ille: “Quaero, quid de Modesto sentias.” Iterum ego: “Solebant testes in reos, non in damnatos interrogari.” Tertio ille: “Non iam quid de Modesto, sed quid de pietate Modesti sentias quaero.” “Quaeris” inquam “quid sentiam; at ego ne interrogare quidem fas puto, de quo pronuntiatum est.” Conticuit; me laus et gratulatio secuta est, quod nec famam meam aliquo responso utili fortasse, inhonesto tamen laeseram, nec me laqueis tam insidiosae interrogationis involueram.¹¹

⁹ For a small sample, see Tac. *Ag.* 2–3, 42, 45; *Ann.* 1.12–13, 3.49–50, 4.34–35, 14.48–49; Suet. *Dom.* 10–11; Dio 67.12.2–13.4.

¹⁰ During Nero's reign Regulus had attacked Q. Sulpicius Camerinus, M. Licinius Crassus Frugi, and Sergius Cornelius Salvidienus Orfitus (*Ann.* 16.12.2; Suet. *Nero* 37.1; Dio 62.27.1; Pliny *Ep.* 1.5.3). Regulus would also later incite the attack on Arulenus Rusticus and Herennius Senecio, against whom he published a polemic (Plin. *Ep.* 1.5.1). Curtius Montanus describes Regulus as an example of *nequitia*, wickedness, a word that is not used elsewhere in Tacitus (4.42.5); notably, Pliny also uses the same word for Regulus (*Ep.* 2.20.12) and only once elsewhere of the behavior of the *delator* Catullus Messalinus (4.22.6). See also Rutledge (2001) 192–8; Birley (2000) 37–8; Méthy (2007) 141–51; for this much-discussed letter, see Bartsch (1994) 63–5; Hoffer (1999) 55–91; Lefèvre (2009) 50–60.

¹¹ The Latin text is from Mynors (1963).

Lo and behold, Regulus said, "I ask, Secundus, what is your opinion on Modestus." You see the danger if I had responded "favorable." the disgrace if I had responded "unfavorable." I am not able to say anything other than that the gods were with me then. "I will respond," I said, "if the Centumviral court is going to pass judgment on him." Then he spoke again, "I ask what you opinion on Modestus is." Again I replied, "It has been the custom that witnesses be interrogated about the accused not the condemned." A third time he said, "Now I do not ask about Modestus, but what your opinion on Modestus' loyalty is." I said, "You ask what my opinion is. But I do not think that it is even legitimate to ask about someone on whom sentence has been passed." He fell silent. Praise and congratulations followed me, because I had not betrayed my reputation by some useful yet dishonest response and because I had not ensnared myself in the trap of an interrogation so insidious.¹²

As Pliny portrays it, Regulus is trying to get him to make a treasonous statement or a response detrimental to his reputation. Such were the snares Romans placed for each other in the courtroom, and from which Pliny was proud to have escaped.

This case, which featured Pliny and Arulenus Rusticus arguing on behalf of Arrionilla, wife of Timon, involved an important circle of dissidents. Pliny's association with Arulenus Rusticus, a prominent dissident under Nero and the Flavians, is notable.¹³ Arrionilla, the defendant in the case, might have been related to the dissidents Thrasea Paetus and his wife Arria.¹⁴ The exchange with Regulus focuses on Mettius Modestus, a senator exiled by Domitian, presumably for treason.¹⁵ Pliny is surrounded by dangerous associations, both dissidents and collaborators.

It could be argued that by naming such dissident luminaries and reporting his confrontation with Regulus, Pliny is merely trying to represent himself as a fellow traveler with the Domitianic opposition. As Bartsch points out, Pliny is retelling

¹² All translations are my own.

¹³ For Arulenus Rusticus, see Pliny *Ep.* 1.14.2; 2.18.1; 3.11.3; 5.1.8; Tac. *Ag.* 2, 45; *Ann.* 16.26; Suet. *Dom.* 10; Dio 67.13, 16; Syme (1991) 568–87.

¹⁴ For the identity of Arrionilla, otherwise unknown, see Sherwin-White (1966) 97, who speculates that she married into the family of Thrasea and Arria; Birley (2000) 39; Carlon ((2009) 33–4) and Shelton ((2013) 157) both argue that if there were a familial connection to Arria, then her name would have most likely been Arrianilla.

¹⁵ Sherwin-White (1966) 97, 446 suggests *maiestas not impietas*.

the story in the first person and in hindsight, both of which may cast doubt on the exact veracity of his statements.¹⁶

Pliny recounts how Regulus, fearing reprisals from his opponents including Pliny (1.5.8–17), sought out men such as Caecilius Celer, Fabius Justus, and Vestricius Spurinna to help him reconcile with Pliny (1.5.8). Pliny's reference to these senators serves several purposes. Indeed, it demonstrates the urgency of the fear Regulus felt, but it also makes Pliny's account a public account. If anyone doubts Pliny's version of events, these three respected senators could be consulted to verify Pliny's account. Pliny often includes this "seal of veracity" to his letters, that is, some independent source, either a person or a public document, which can substantiate what Pliny writes. Pliny also does this by writing that he would wait to consult with Junius Mauricus, the brother of Arulenus Rusticus, before taking action against Regulus (1.5.15–16). Pliny's practice seems to have been to confer with the family members of the victims before proceeding with attacks against their persecutors. This authenticates Pliny's actions, which were taken with the approval of the families, as in the case of Publicius Certus (9.13), or presumably discouraged by them, as in the case of Regulus, whom Pliny decided not to challenge.

Veracity aside, the letter is still quite valuable, for it demonstrates the ease with which an appearance in a court of law could result in the uttering of words favorable to an enemy of the regime and open to an uncharitable interpretation by the regime or its satellites. Whether Pliny was an associate of these dissidents or he just happened upon this case, the snares were there all the same. If Pliny was a fellow traveler, then he was willing to take political risks with prominent dissidents; if he was rather in the wrong place at the wrong time, then presumably other senators found themselves in similar straits and facing similar risks too. Indeed, the matter arises innocently enough; Pliny is merely trying to cite the decision of an earlier magistrate, who in this case had since been exiled (1.5.5).¹⁷ The political implications of the exchange and the potential dangers for those involved are taken for granted by Pliny, his addressee Voconius Romanus, and other readers, as well as Regulus and those in attendance at the Centumviral Court.

¹⁶ Bartsch (1994) 66. But there is no cogent reason to question the historicity of the scenario Pliny describes.

¹⁷ Sherwin-White (1966) 97 posits that the case may have involved a provincial property that Modestus had jurisdiction over while legate in Lycia.

Public speaking was the lifeblood of Roman politics, and Pliny's predicament was not unique to him, though he may have recorded the clearest surviving example under the Principate of maneuvering out of a difficult and dangerous situation. In this regard, the letter is a historically important document, even if Pliny embellishes the details, of the pitfalls facing a Roman senator and how they could be avoided.

The Demands of Amicitia

While letter 1.5 reveals the difficulties of public speech, it also shows Pliny's attempt to honor his ties of *amicitia* to Arulenus Rusticus, with whom Pliny had been on friendly terms since his youth (1.14.2–3), Arrionilla, whom he was defending, and even Mettius Modestus, whom he wanted to avoid slandering. Pliny further explores the hardships of maintaining the bonds of *amicitia* in letters 3.11 and 7.33, in which he wrangles with the question of how to proceed when one's friends run afoul of the regime. Letter 3.11 is best known for Pliny's mention of his connections to the opposition and his own near escape from Domitian's thunderbolts, to which Syme expressed his skepticism in the quotation at the start of this paper (3.11.3):

Atque haec feci, cum septem amicis meis aut occisis aut relegatis, occisis Senecione Rustico Helvidio, relegatis Maurico Gratilla Arria Fannia, tot circa me iactis fulminibus quasi ambustus mihi quoque impendere idem exitium certis quibusdam notis augurarer.

And I did this when seven of my friends had either been executed or exiled. Senecio, Rusticus, and Helvidius were executed; Mauricus, Gratilla, Arria, and Fannia were exiled. As if scorched with so many lightning bolts thrown around me, and with certain sure signs, I was anticipating that the same end impended also over me.

The thing Pliny did was visit the banished philosopher Artemidorus, who was forced out from Rome during Domitian's expulsion of the philosophers sometime between 89 and 96 (Dio 67.13.3; Eus.-Jer. *Chron.*; Gel. 15.11.3–5; Suet. *Dom.* 10.3).¹⁸ Letter 3.11 thus portrays Pliny honoring his ties of *amicitia*

¹⁸ For the problematic dating of the expulsion of the philosophers and its significance for dating Pliny's praetorship, see Mommsen (1869) 31–139; Otto (1919); Harte (1935) 51–4; Sherwin-White (1966) 239–45, 763–71; Syme (1991) 551–67; Birley (2000) 10–14. The consensus, based on the late antique chronographers, is that there were two expulsions of philosophers, one

with the philosopher Artemidorus, whom Pliny had known since he was a young man serving as military tribune in Syria (3.11.5). Pliny was clearly in a dilemma: Artemidorus was banished and in need of funds and friends, yet for a praetor to visit an exiled philosopher was surely a potentially dangerous undertaking. Our epistolographer writes that he did the right thing by supporting Artemidorus with an interest-free loan, just as other wealthier friends were deserting the philosopher (3.11.2). My concern here is not the same as Pliny's—to show that Pliny is an upstanding fellow amidst scoundrels—but rather to highlight the ethical predicament that Pliny and Artemidorus' wealthy associates all shared. Some of them might have done the right thing; some of them might have done the wrong thing, but what is certain is that Pliny's letter documents the actual dilemma most Roman elites would have had to face under Domitian.

A word does need to be said in Pliny's defense, not with regard to his political stance, but rather his paranoia.¹⁹ Syme, in the passage quoted in the introduction, suggests that visiting a banished philosopher did not require the courage Pliny implied. This is a case where scholarly distance obscures rather than clarifies. Pliny held a prominent position at a time when many had been exiled and several executed; he must have felt, as Tacitus records many did (*Ag.* 2.2–3), that his every move was subject to imperial scrutiny. Tacitus is replete with examples of intimidation and the threat of violence against senators; there is no evidence to suggest that Pliny would have been exempt from such pressures.²⁰ Suetonius records that Domitian executed at least ten consular senators (*Dom.* 10.2–4). The execution of even one senator must have had a profound impact on the members of so small a body as the Roman Senate.²¹ We need only to consider

from Rome c. 88–90 and then one from Italy c. 93–96. Harte dates Pliny's praetorship to the earlier expulsion, while Sherwin-White accepts only one expulsion in 93, the year of Pliny's praetorship. For the purposes of this paper, the specifics of the expulsion(s) of the philosophers and the date of Pliny's praetorship are not crucial. What is significant is that the dates are inconclusive, and therefore, bold conclusions that build on this evidence in contradiction to Pliny's writings should be recognized as standing on a shaky foundation.

¹⁹ That Pliny was never personally in any real danger has become a commonplace of modern scholarship, as has the corollary point that Domitian only put a "few" troublesome senators to death. See Waters (1964) 76; Shelton (1987) 126, 129; Giovannini (1987) 230–1. There has been a reasoned attempt to re-evaluate Domitian's abilities as *princeps* (see Rogers (1960) 22; Pleket (1961) 296–315; Syme (1983) 121–46), but being a competent *princeps* is not mutually exclusive of political repression, which the primary senatorial sources for Domitian record with unanimity.

²⁰ For fear in Tacitus, see Heinz (1975).

²¹ For the nature of the Roman Senate, see Talbert (1984).

the impact of an execution on a similar institutional body in a modern Western society to understand the fear a Roman senator might have felt.²²

Further, our sources stress the randomness and unpredictability of Domitian's persecution, and hence its terror (Tac. *Ag.* 2–3, 40–46; Suet. *Dom.* 11; Dio 67.1). We should find Pliny's writings more striking if they made no mention of his associations with dissidents or showed no concern for his personal survival. Moreover, there was little to nothing to be gained politically by fabricating relationships with the Domitianic dissidents after the fact; those recalled from exile were in a poor position to threaten or advance Pliny's career under Nerva and Trajan. Further, they would be able to contradict his claims if they were fraudulent. Pliny reveals that his relationships with dissidents like Arulenus Rusticus, Junius Mauricus, Arria and the philosopher Artemidorus go back further than Domitian's reign of terror and continue well after it in the latter cases (1.5.2, 5; 3.11.5; 7.19). To be sure, there was something to be gained socially,²³ but Pliny himself admits to having done nothing particularly worthy of *gloria*; he merely is making a claim to have done nothing disgraceful, *flagitium* (3.11.4). So whether Pliny was on Domitian's short list of enemies or not, letter 3.11 records the legitimate fear he and Artemidorus' wealthy friends all felt, and to call such palpable fear unjustified is rather specious, especially from such a safe distance.

Later in the *Letters*, Pliny recounts to Tacitus another experience that tested the bonds of *amicitia*; this time he is paired with Herennius Senecio²⁴ in the extortion trial of Baebius Massa on behalf of the province of Baetica in late 93 (7.33).²⁵ Letter 7.33 is of literary importance as it augurs the immortality of Tacitus' *Historiae*, and scholars are quick to highlight Pliny's pleading for a space in Tacitus' writings.²⁶ Nonetheless, the letter gives further insight into the dangers of fulfilling the duties of *amicitia*. Pliny and Senecio were jointly appointed by the Senate to take up the case on behalf of the province against Massa. Why the Senate considered Pliny and Senecio appropriate prosecutors is difficult to ascertain, as is the degree to which Pliny and Senecio might have lobbied for the

²² Perhaps the attempted assassination of U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords on January 8, 2011 and the subsequent calls for civility provides the closest, recent analogue.

²³ For the social advantages, see Sailor (2008) 10–35.

²⁴ For Herennius Senecio, see Plin. *Ep.* 1.5.2; 3.11.3; 4.7.5, 11.12; 7.19.5; Tac. *Ag.* 2, 45; Dio 67.13.2; Syme (1991) 568–87.

²⁵ Massa was accused but not condemned at the time of Agricola's death in August 93 (Tac. *Ag.* 45.1–2; Sherwin-White (1966) 444–7).

²⁶ Traub (1955) 227; Shelton (1987) 133; Radicke (1997) 463; for a thoughtful study of Pliny's self-praise as it relates to this letter, see Gibson (2003) 235–54.

opportunity. Presumably, the Senate thought Pliny and Senecio would make a good team, and indeed they did since Massa was convicted and his possessions were taken over by the state (7.33.4). When Senecio learned that the consuls were open to hearing appeals against confiscating Massa's possessions, he approached Pliny about making a request not to relinquish the property (7.33.4–5). Pliny admits to some reticence in continuing their advocacy for Baetica, but when Senecio expressed his intentions to fulfill his obligations to his native country, Pliny would not let him go it alone (7.33.6). Pliny's sense of obligation to Senecio put him in danger, as Massa accused Senecio of acting with the hatred of an enemy (7.33.7, *inimici amaritudinem*).²⁷ Pliny, who was not mentioned by Massa, came to Senecio's defense by indicating that Massa's omission suggested that he and Pliny were in collusion (7.33.8). This statement apparently took the heat off Herennius Senecio and earned Pliny the praise of his peers and superiors (7.33.8–9). There are a number of similarities to letter 1.5: Pliny is paired with a prominent dissident in a legal action; they are threatened verbally by a known *delator*; Pliny uses his verbal dexterity to counter the *delator's* thrust and consequently wins the praise of those present and those who later hear the story, including in the case of letter 7.33 the future *princeps* Nerva (7.33.9). The most significant difference in letter 7.33 is that Pliny's words were not solicited by Massa, nor were they uttered for Pliny's own safety, but rather they were spoken in an effort to extricate Herennius Senecio from Baebius Massa's trap.

Pliny is careful throughout the letter to vouch for the veracity of its contents. He points potential doubters, and Tacitus, to the public record (7.33.3). This was no idle gesture, for Pliny could assume that Tacitus would consult it. For readers less inclined to archival research, there were survivors to consult. At the close of the letter, Pliny writes that he even has a letter from the Emperor Nerva, written before he was *princeps*, commending him for his actions. Certainly, for Pliny's contemporaries Nerva was an irreproachable source. Here he provides Pliny with another seal of veracity.

There was nothing unique to Pliny that dictated the events narrated in 7.33, except perhaps Pliny's quick-witted response. The Senate was a small and privileged body; the mutual familiarity of its members must be taken for granted. Only a few degrees of separation could have intervened between even the most

²⁷ This is not the accusation that condemned Senecio, who was accused by Mettius Carus, the close friend of Baebius Massa. Sherwin-White (1966) 446 points out that Massa's charge is either *praevaricatio* or *calumnia*, which could be raised by a defendant at the end of a trial as a procedural point.

hostile of enemies. Guilt by association would have been a charge open to just about all senators; Pliny dispassionately writes in letter 5.1.8 that there were some for whom friendship with Gratilla and her husband Arulenus Rusticus was the basis for an accusation (*et erant quidam in illis quibus obici et Gratillae amicitia et Rustici posset*).²⁸ Whether Pliny was a member of the radical opposition, a *delator*, or even a flatterer makes no difference. For as the sources indicate, dissidents, *delatores*, and *adulatores* were all potential targets for imperial displeasure.²⁹ The question then becomes not whether Pliny should have been worried but rather whether anyone did not need to worry.

Difficulties of Political Promotion

If one honored the demands of *amicitia*, for instance by providing legal defense or monetary assistance to the enemies of the regime, then the risk of impeding one's own political career increased, as Pliny mentions several times throughout his writings, particularly in letter 4.24 and in the closing of his *Panegyricus* (90.6, 95). The advancement of Pliny's career under Domitian, particularly after his praetorship, is the thorniest patch of Pliny's *cursus honorum*. Syme, despite Pliny's claims to the contrary, asserted in the passage quoted at the start that Pliny did indeed advance unhindered under Domitian and held the prefecture of the *aerarium militare* from 94 to 96. This claim demands careful scrutiny.

In epistle 4.24, Pliny reflects on an earlier case he argued before the four panels of the Centumviral Court, leading him to ponder where his former associates are now (1). Some are dead, some exiled, still others are occupied with administrative matters (2–3).³⁰ Pliny then muses on the ups and downs of his own career, which he describes as occurring in alternating periods of success and danger (4–5):

²⁸ Tacitus' portrayal of the dangers of *amicitia Germanici* (*Ann.* 4.17–22, 46, 52), association with Sejanus (*Ann.* 5.6–8), and the Pisonian conspirators (*Ann.* 15.48–16.35) are perhaps the most notable examples outside Pliny; see Martin and Woodman (1989) 144.

²⁹ The reaction of the Principate towards dissidents has been well documented (MacMullen (1966) 1–94); less frequently cited is the equally harsh response to many adulators and *delatores*, on whom see Tac. *Ann.* 6.4.1, 30, 38.2, 39.1, 47.1; 12.59; 13.42–43; Dio 65.16.3; Rutledge (2001) 302–6.

³⁰ Gibson and Morello (2012) 69–70 point out that Pliny has foremost in mind Regulus, his old adversary in the Centumviral court. They also note that Pliny is staking a claim to pre-eminence in the court now that Regulus is dead.

studiis processimus, studiis periclitati sumus, rursusque processimus: profuerunt nobis bonorum amicitiae bonorum obfuerunt iterumque prosunt.

By my oratory, I have advanced, been endangered, and again have advanced: friendship with honorable men benefitted me, then imperiled me, and again now benefits me.

Pliny alludes here to the political complications that arise through oratory and *amicitia* with dissidents. He also claims that his career was hindered under Domitian in the *Panegyricus* where he admits promotion by Domitian until the time when he began persecuting the opposition, at which point Pliny's career was checked (*Pan.* 95.3–4).³¹ Skeptics abound.³² The argument for not taking Pliny at his word comes not from his own writings, but from surviving inscriptions indicating that Pliny held the *praefectus aerarii militaris* (*CIL* 5.5262 = *ILS* 2927, 5.5667), an office Pliny never mentions in his letters.³³ For Pliny's detractors, the Comum inscription is the smoking gun that proves Pliny was involved in a cover-up to avoid revealing his promotion under Domitian.

Yet, there are reasons to question the evidentiary weight given to the Comum inscription by Syme and others. We need to remember that inscriptions have a rhetoric of their own and possess no greater intrinsic claim to truth than the literary records. Eck has argued that most senators of the imperial period had themselves written the *cursus honorum* that was then used for inscriptions.³⁴ Eck, followed by Gibson and Morello, also points out that Pliny's name appears in the

³¹ Plin. *Pan.* 95.3–4 *vos modo favete huic proposito et credite, si cursu quodam propectus ab illo insidiosissimo principe, ante quam profiteretur odium bonorum, postquam professus est substiti, cum viderem quae ad honores compendia paterent longius iter malui; si malis temporibus inter maestos et paventes, bonis inter securos guadentesque numeror; si denique in tantum diligo optimum principem, in quantum invisus pessimo fui* (Only approve of this undertaking and believe me. If I advanced in my career under that most deceitful *princeps* before he publicly declared his hatred of good men, after he professed it I stopped my career. Once I saw what short cuts opened the way to office, I preferred a longer journey. If in bad times, I was numbered among the despondent and frightened, in good times I am now counted among the untroubled and joyful. Lastly, I delight in the best *princeps* as much as I was hated by the worst.)

³² Syme (1958) 77, 82 and (1991) 551–67; Sherwin-White (1969) 84; Giovannini (1987) 233, 239; Shelton (1987) 130 and (2013) 12; Bartsch (1994) 166–9; Ludolph (1997) 44–9; Griffin (1999) 157–8; Strobel (2003) 303–14; Walsh (2006) 327; Lefèvre (2009) 20; Gibson and Morello (2012) 9–35, 265–73.

³³ For the inscription, see Alföldy (1999) 221–44; Eck (2000) 225–35.

³⁴ Eck (2009) 79–92, esp. 87–8.

nominative in the inscription, which reads like Pliny's *res gestae*.³⁵ There is a strong likelihood that Pliny himself or someone very close to him was responsible for the text and its inscription. If these scholars are correct, and they probably are, then Pliny did not hide the fact that he held the prefecture of the *aerarium militare*, rather he had it carved into stone.

In addition, I would like to suggest that too much has been made of Pliny's omission of the office. The prefecture of the treasury was surely an honor, but not a necessary office, and certainly not the crowning achievement of any senator's *cursus honorum*. In fact, it seems that the only time Romans mentioned holding the post was in inscriptions.³⁶ Pliny never mentions his office of *curator Tiberis*, which one might think he would boast of to demonstrate the favor of Trajan, and throughout books 1–9 he mentions his prefecture of Saturn only once in passing (5.14.5). Pliny is not engaging in some deceitful cover-up; he simply does not speak much about those positions that fall outside the traditional *cursus honorum*. When it pertains to the offices of the *cursus honorum*, he is very forthright about his service under Domitian (*Ep.* 7.16; *Pan.* 95.3). Consequently, when Pliny writes that his career was impeded, he is referring to holding the consulship, the only office that would matter to a senator of praetorian rank.³⁷

Moreover, the chronology of Pliny's career is reconcilable with his writings. As Birley argues, there is no reason that Pliny could not have held the prefecture in 96–97 under Nerva, or as Harte and Kuijper argue, earlier than 93.³⁸ Sherwin-White objects that Pliny was at leisure in 96 based on his reading of Book One of the *Letters*.³⁹ Gibson and Morello, however, have shown that Book One stresses themes of optimism and calm.⁴⁰ Here, Gibson and Morello have shown the importance of understanding Pliny's literary and rhetorical concerns, which often trump our historical concerns. Among the important events omitted from Book

³⁵ Eck (1997) 98–9; Gibson and Morello (2012) 272.

³⁶ Kuijper (1968) 62; Vidman *PIR*² P 490 (205), who writes *officium hoc non tanti fuit*, (this matter is not of such great importance).

³⁷ Otto (1919) 53, correctly points out that Pliny's claim to have held no further office after his praetorship is a *suggestio falsi* since there was little likelihood that Pliny would have been considered for the consulship between his praetorship in 93 and the assassination of Domitian in 96. Pliny may employ a rhetorical sleight of hand, but not a lie.

³⁸ Harte (1935) 51–4; Kuijper (1968) 62–6; Birley (2000) 14–16.

³⁹ Sherwin-White (1966) 75–8, 768. Birley (2000) 15–16 refutes this assertion based on the lack of precise dates for the letters of Book One and our ignorance regarding the amount of leisure time afforded to the prefect of the military treasury.

⁴⁰ Gibson and Morello (2012) 24–33.

One are the assassination of Domitian, the death of Nerva, and the adoption of Trajan. We only learn late in the *Letters* that Pliny was quite active and suffered personal hardships while the state tottered on the brink of civil war, none of which is apparent from Book One. If Pliny omits these matters, both positive and negative, is it really surprising that he might have omitted mention of the prefecture of the *aerarium militare*?

Lastly, if it must be conceded that Pliny held the prefecture from 94 to 96, the nature of that appointment is not without ambiguity. If Domitian offered the position of prefect, who was Pliny to refuse? Giovannini does accept the possibility of Pliny's acceptance based on fear of reprisals, but then suggests that this would be an act of cowardice hard to excuse.⁴¹ Giovannini proposes an admirably high standard of courage, but perhaps it is enough to point out that rejection would surely have put Pliny in a dangerous position, which only the most ardent and courageous of the opposition would take up. Whether Pliny was a coward or not is open to debate, but he certainly was no fool; acceptance at least offered the opportunity to serve the state. Moreover, Domitian's selection of Pliny does not imply only favor. There is more than one way to read such beneficence. A common practice of tyrants, past and present, is the enforced complicity of would-be detractors.⁴² Thus for someone like Pliny, who clearly did have connections with the opposition, imperial favor could be a means of curtailing speech and ensuring compliance, and to third parties it could give the impression that Pliny was now a supporter of the regime or at least a hypocrite. Pliny himself recognizes this in the *Panegyricus* where he writes that men prayed to be forgotten by an emperor like Domitian rather than to be advanced (90.6). As demonstrated by the *cursus honorum* of the opposition, high office is little indication of political opinion or imperial favor, and certainly no surety of personal safety; after all prominence, not obscurity, incurred imperial wrath.⁴³

All this aside, dating Pliny's prefecture of the *aerarium militare* to 96–97 is the makes the most methodological sense. This dating requires no *a priori*

⁴¹ Giovannini (1987) 239.

⁴² For an example of one senator who paid the price for his unwillingness to become complicit in the crimes of Nero's regime, see Tacitus' portrayal of Thrasea Paetus (*Ann.* 13.49; 14.12, 49–51; 15.23; 16.21–35); Strunk (2010) 119–39.

⁴³ With the exception of Herennius Senecio, who refused to pursue the *cursus honorum* beyond the quaestorship, all the prominent members of the opposition held the praetorship and/or consulship and usually served in their highest office under the *princeps* who condemned them.

assumption about Pliny's political allegiances, and it harmonizes both the literary and epigraphical evidence.

Charges of Treason

To have one's career impeded is one thing; it is quite another to be the direct target of the *princeps'* hostility as the result of public speech or *amicitia* with public enemies of the regime. Beyond the possibility of a stymied political career, Pliny reveals the anxieties he felt over his own survival, and on a number of occasions he suggests that he too was nearly accused of treason and was saved only by the death of Domitian. Pliny's assertions have raised as much controversy as his statements on the delays in his career. As cited previously, Pliny claimed to have certain indications that he himself was threatened under Domitian's reign (3.11.3). In the *Panegyricus*, Pliny also asserts that thunderbolts were hurled in close proximity to him – *utrumque nostrum ille optimi cuiusque spoliator et carnifex stragibus amicorum et in proximum iacto fulmine adflaverat* (90.5 That robber and murderer of every best man with his breath scorched us by the slaughter of our friends and by lightning bolts cast in our proximity).

Pliny is most specific on this matter in letter 7.27 where he writes that in Domitian's private papers discovered after his assassination were charges prepared against Pliny himself by Mettius Carus (7.27.14).⁴⁴ Letter 7.27 is a highly entertaining epistle on ghosts, in which Pliny includes the story of his servants being mysteriously shorn in their sleep, which leads to the following conclusion (7.27.14):⁴⁵

Nihil notabile secutum, nisi forte quod non fui reus, futurus, si Domitianus sub quo haec acciderunt diutius vixisset. Nam in scrinio eius datus a Caro de me libellus inventus est; ex quo coniectari potest, quia reis moris est summittere capillum, recisos meorum capillos depulsi quod imminebat periculi signum fuisse.

Nothing worth noting followed, except by chance that I was not accused, though I would have been, if Domitian, under whom this happened, had lived longer. For on his desk was found a document

⁴⁴ Dio (67.15.3–6) also makes reference to Domitian's secret accounts, the discovery of which led to his assassination.

⁴⁵ Both Fitzgerald (2007) 206–8; and Baraz (2012) 116–30 explore the relationship between the ghost stories and the charges laid against Pliny, both of which may be matters of questionable plausibility.

about me brought by Carus. From this it is possible to conjecture, since it is the custom for the indicted to grow out their hair, that the cutting of my servants' hair was a sign that the danger which was hanging over me was forestalled.

Syme feels that this testimony is discredited by the Comum inscription. Yet Pliny's claims of endangerment stem credibly from his involvement in the prosecution of Baebius Massa, in which he had participated along with Herennius Senecio, as recounted in letter 7.33. In fact, Pliny's close arrangement of three letters involving Pliny, the opposition, and Baebius Massa and Mettius Carus suggest that Pliny the literary artist is trying to communicate something about Pliny the politician. By means of a triptych, Pliny introduces Mettius Carus (7.19.4–5) as a dangerous *delator*, who attacked not only the men of the opposition but also their wives; he then suggests that he too was endangered by Mettius Carus (7.27.12–14); in letter 7.33, Pliny demonstrates why he might have incurred the disfavor of Mettius Carus—his quarrel with Carus' associate Baebius Massa, whom Pliny along with Herennius Senecio prosecuted.⁴⁶

The facts of the case do lend some credence to Pliny's claims. He had successfully prosecuted Baebius Massa, an infamous *delator* and pillager of the provinces, whom Tacitus describes as deadly to every good man and a recurring cause of evil throughout the reign of Domitian (*Hist.* 4.50.). Furthermore, Tacitus (*Ag.* 45.1) and Juvenal (1.35–6) confirm the connection between Baebius Massa and Mettius Carus, Pliny's would-be accuser (7.27.14) and *delator* par excellence (*Juv.* 1.30–6; *Mart.* 12.25). Lastly, his co-advocate in the Baebius Massa case, Herennius Senecio, did incur the wrath of the condemned Massa and was subsequently accused by Mettius Carus, convicted of treason by the Senate, and executed. It is difficult, even disingenuous, to claim that a participant in such events should have nothing about which to worry. Baraz argues that Pliny “desperately needs his audience to believe his story.”⁴⁷ But Pliny does not need his audience to believe his story: by the time letter 7.27 was published Pliny was a consular and an augur; his career had reached its apex and by any estimate he was

⁴⁶ I would like to thank the anonymous referee who brought this to my attention. Baraz (2012) 127–8 notes the relationship between 7.19 and 7.27 but does not mention 7.33. Gibson and Morello (2012) 14 n. 23 point out the many letters in Book Seven that pertain to Pliny's career under Domitian.

⁴⁷ Baraz (2012) 129.

a successful politician, orator, and author.⁴⁸ As Tacitus indicates (*Ag.* 3.2), many of the survivors of Domitian's reign felt that they outlived even themselves. Pliny's letter 7.27 simply provides the particular evidence for Tacitus' general assertion. If many of his generation found the reign of Domitian a frightening and harrowing experience, why should Pliny be any different?

Survival and Reconciliation

When all the dust had settled, there was still the question of how to interpret the old regime and its opponents, as well as the actions of the survivors. Pliny is sometimes compared in this regard unfavorably with Tacitus, who at least admits his guilt in the condemnation of opponents to Domitian's regime and expresses some contrition (*Ag.* 45.1).⁴⁹ Yet Pliny too records his complicity and his inability to effectively mitigate the harm done to his friends.

In 7.19, Pliny notes that he tried to be a source of consolation for Fannia, the widow of Helvidius Priscus, and others in exile, and when they returned, he attempted to avenge them.⁵⁰ In this letter to Neratius Priscus, Pliny concedes that he has not done all he could have to help his beleaguered friends and that he still has debts to pay (*non feci tamen paria atque eo magis hanc cupio servari, ut mihi solvendi tempora supersint*, 10). Fannia has fallen ill, and Pliny is concerned that she will not survive. The lines are not as strong as Tacitus' words in the *Agricola*, but still Pliny does strike a tone of regret that seems to speak beyond the immediate concerns of Fannia's illness.

Pliny expresses his remorse over the lost years under Domitian much more forcefully and with a style indeed reminiscent of Tacitus in letter 8.14, written roughly around 105.⁵¹ Pliny addresses the letter to the famed legal expert Titius Aristo seeking advice on senatorial matters. The letter is significant here, not for

⁴⁸ For the difficulty of dating the publication of Pliny's letters, see Sherwin-White (1966) 37–8, 52–6, who suggests that books 7–9 might have been published as late as 109–110.

⁴⁹ Carlon (2009) 19; Traub (1955) 228; Syme (1958) 77. *Ag.* 45.1: *mox nostrae duxere Helvidium in carcerem manus; nos Maurici Rusticique visus <adfligit> nos innocenti sanguine Senecio perfudit* (Soon our hands led Helvidius to the prison; the faces of Mauricus and Rusticus shamed us; Senecio stained us with his innocent blood).

⁵⁰ Pliny's actions on behalf of those exiled include his consultation of Junius Mauricus about Regulus before the former's recall (1.5.15–16), his advice about the children of Arulenus Rusticus (1.14, 2.18), and the attempt to prosecute Publicius Certus (9.13). See Sherwin-White (1966) 426.

⁵¹ For a thorough and eloquent study of this letter, see Whitton, (2010) 118–39, who highlights the letter's literary allusions, most emphatically to the *Agricola*, and stresses the unifying themes of the letter, Pliny's third longest. For the date of 8.14, see Sherwin-White (1966) 46.

its ostensible topic—the death of the consular Afranius Dexter—but for its digression on the Senate under Domitian. Pliny the consular is compelled to write to the non-senator Aristo because the Senate has yet to recover its understanding of procedure lost during its servitude under Domitian (*priorum temporum servitus ut aliarum optimarum artium, sic etiam iuris senatorii oblivionem quandam et ignorantiam induxit*, 2).⁵² Even by 105, the return of *libertas* had yet to blossom fully (3). After reviewing the traditional education of an aspiring senator (4–6), Pliny catalogues the trials of his generation, which was unable to receive this traditional education (7–10). Whitton points out how Pliny portrays life under Domitian as exile, which he achieves largely through allusion to other exiled authors, specifically Cicero, Ovid, and Seneca.⁵³ Pliny recounts the degradation and humiliations the Senate endured under Domitian (8). He then adds that the senators themselves, himself included, participated in the ensuing evils until they were broken in spirit—“Once we became senators and then accomplices of these evils for many years, we saw and suffered the same evils, by which our character was dulled, broken, and crushed even for the future” (*eadem mala iam senatores, iam participes malorum multos per annos vidimus tulimusque; quibus ingenia nostra in posterum quoque hebetata fracta contusa sunt*, 9). If these words are less contrite than Tacitus’ at *Agricola* 45.1, they are so only by degree and not in spirit. Certainly, Pliny’s words here are not “irrelevant,” as Sherwin-White categorizes them.⁵⁴ Writing with the “associative plural,” Pliny recognizes the collective guilt the individual members of the Senate acquired during Domitian’s reign, and he makes no attempt to exempt himself from the indictment; in fact, the indictment is all the stronger for his self-inclusion in it.⁵⁵

Once Domitian was assassinated, the Roman elite was confronted with the question of what to do about those who had been condemned and those who had been collaborators with the former regime.⁵⁶ Pliny was clearly looking for some opportunity to rehabilitate the memory of those executed under Domitian.

⁵² 8.14.2 “The servitude of an earlier age has led to a certain forgetfulness and ignorance of senatorial procedure just as of the other most honourable practices.” Whitton (2010) 123 draws attention to the allusion here, *priorum temporum servitus*, to Ag. 3.3 where Tacitus writes *memoriam prioris servitutis*.

⁵³ Whitton (2010) 128–30.

⁵⁴ Sherwin-White (1966) 461 on 8.14.7–10.

⁵⁵ For the term “associative plural,” see Sinclair (1995) 53–5.

⁵⁶ In Book Four of his *Histories*, Tacitus records the bitter senatorial debates over how to handle the *delatores* who inflicted so much suffering under Nero (4.1–11, 38–53). His account of 69–70 was most likely informed by what he witnessed in 96–97.

In letters 1.5 and 9.13, Pliny records his own thoughtful preparations for bringing to justice those responsible for the deaths of his colleagues Arulenus Rusticus and Helvidius Priscus the Younger.

Pliny's actions are most famously recorded in letter 9.13, wherein he recounts his efforts in the Senate on behalf of the late Helvidius Priscus the Younger and his speech, *De Helvidi Ultione*, against Publicius Certus, the *delator* primarily responsible for the conviction of Helvidius Priscus the Younger. Giovannini offers the puzzling assertion that Pliny was prompted to defend Helvidius Priscus because he had been close to Domitian.⁵⁷ Pliny's consultation with Anteia, Helvidius' widow, indicates that he was proceeding with the approval of the family. Giovannini's assertion does not seem to fit with this approach. For why would Helvidius' family consult with Pliny if he had profited from the persecution of men like Helvidius? There is no reason to doubt Pliny's stated motivations, which he lays out in three stages. Pliny writes that his initial motivation was to prosecute the guilty, avenge the victims, and advance personally (2). He further adds that he shared *amicitia* with Helvidius, his stepmother Fannia, and grandmother Arria (3). Lastly, Pliny mentions that he was motivated above all by the desire to set the public record to right, to expose the shameful nature of the crime, and to establish a precedent (*sed non ita me iura privata, ut publicum fas et indignitas facti et exempli ratio incitabat*, But my private responsibilities did not so much rouse me as public justice, the shameful nature of the deed, and a concern for precedent, 9.13.3).⁵⁸ To Pliny's credit, he undertook this attack against Certus prior to his consulship; the political risks were not negligible. Syme overlooks this point in his accusation that Pliny undertook the attack only to further his career, which Pliny freely admits as a motivation (2). Attacking a senior colleague was a time-honored tradition of Roman politics and not without its dangers.⁵⁹ Cicero, Pliny's model, provides the most famous example.

In attacking Certus, Pliny was aiming at someone slightly higher up the *cursus honorum*; both were of praetorian rank, but Certus was about to be named consul

⁵⁷ Giovannini (1987) 233.

⁵⁸ Pliny's expressed motivations align with Thræsea Paetus' three recommendations for taking up a case, which Pliny records in 6.29.1–2: cases which concerned friends, for those without an advocate, or those that established a precedent; Pliny adds a fourth type of case: those that would bring *gloria* (6.29.3). The point is worth highlighting since both letters, 6.29 and 9.13, are addressed to Ummidius Quadratus; 9.13 provides the specific example for the general claims Pliny makes in 6.29.

⁵⁹ Gallia (2012) 130–1.

for 98. Whether Pliny's speech was primarily responsible or not, Certus was denied the consulship, and when he vacated his position as prefect of Saturn, *praefectus aerarii Saturni*, Pliny succeeded him in the office (22–3).⁶⁰ Pliny writes that Certus fell ill and died shortly after the speech was published in 98, adding that on his deathbed Certus dreamed of Pliny coming at him with a dagger (24–5), a rather compelling image indeed.⁶¹

In this letter too, Pliny places a seal of veracity on his letter. He writes that he consulted the widow of Helvidius, Anteia, as well as Fannia and Arria, before proceeding, and then did so with their blessing. The events which Pliny goes on to record are indeed quite favorable to the author, and no doubt he has written them with an eye to his own posterity. Yet, Pliny could only embellish so much, for the meeting of the Senate in mid-97 would have been part of the public record and many of those present would have been amongst Pliny's senatorial readers. Moreover, the speech was published, and although it was undoubtedly elaborated, it must have borne a reasonable likeness to the speech delivered in the Senate. Again eyewitnesses, both supporters and opponents, could be called upon to verify Pliny's account.

Undertaking such public attacks was a controversial matter, as Pliny indicates from the responses he received in the Senate during and after his speech, which ranged from support and concern for Pliny's well-being to outright opposition (7–21). Pliny writes that during his speech someone shouted, "Let those of us who survived be safe" (*salvi simus, qui supersumus*, 7). This outcry would not be unexpected, as Hayner in her study of societies recovering from atrocity and terror has shown.⁶² Many simply prefer, with good reason, to forget the past rather than confront it. Yet many also feel with equally good reason that the crimes of the past and their perpetrators must be acknowledged as such.⁶³ It was not only Pliny but also Avidius Quietus and Cornutus Tertullus who spoke in favor of recognizing Publicius Certus' crime (*flagitii manifestissimi*, 16). Cornutus, who was the guardian of Helvidius' daughter, spoke for the family, which was petitioning for Publicius Certus at least to be branded with the censor's mark. Fabricius Veiento, the Domitianic *delator* who survived and prospered under

⁶⁰ Sherwin-White (1966) 498–9.

⁶¹ Pliny seems to be describing a common genre of dreams, for Dio comments that Domitian had a dream just before his assassination of Arulenus Rusticus coming at him with a dagger (67.16.1). For dreams in Pliny generally, see Baraz (2012) 105–32.

⁶² Hayner (2001) 183–6.

⁶³ Hayner (2001) 10–14, 133–7.

Nerva and Trajan (Plin. *Ep.* 4.22.4), was the most spirited defender of Publicius Certus (13). All of these reactions are to be expected from a society that has just endured political repression and violence. To suggest that Pliny is merely presenting all of this to put himself in a positive light goes against what we know about societies working through transitional justice; all of the voices that Pliny records in this letter are commonplace in such situations.⁶⁴

Pliny was not the only senator to contemplate an attack on the Domitianic *delatores*; Pliny writes that in the early days of the restored freedom, *reddita libertas*, many had taken down their lesser enemies (4). Nor was this the only time that Pliny considered an attack on one of the former regime's henchmen. In letter 1.5, Pliny was contemplating charges against Regulus, who seemed quite concerned with the possibility.⁶⁵ Pliny, as was his manner, was awaiting the return of the exile Junius Mauricus before deciding on a course of action (15–16).

Not all senators shared Pliny's sentiments on the victims and perpetrators of the prior regime. Some felt diametrically opposed to Pliny's political opinions about Domitian and his supporters; some might have agreed in principle but preferred to let the past be the past, (apparently the opinion of Nerva and Trajan, as neither Regulus nor Publicius Certus were criminally punished). Yet Pliny was certainly not alone in wanting some restorative justice and a recognition that past wrongs were wrongs.

Conclusion

The scholarly consensus, particularly since Syme, concerning Pliny's career has been based on a foundation of circular logic. There is an *a priori* assumption about Pliny's political life under Domitian (i.e. that he was a collaborator), which is then used to justify a chronology of his *cursus honorum*, which is further employed to discredit the statements in his writings. This in turn justifies the claim that Pliny was a collaborator. In essence, it concludes, usually implicitly, that Pliny is a liar and seeking to cover up his true activities under Domitian.

This article has tried to employ Ockham's razor by revealing the flaws in this logic through emphasizing the public nature of Pliny's pronouncements and the educated audience for which he was writing, both of which provided an impediment to falsification of Pliny's past. Rather than a charlatan trying to hoodwink his audience, Pliny is a spokesman for a generation of senators who

⁶⁴ O'Donnell et al. (1986); Kritz (1995); Hayner (2001).

⁶⁵ For the responson between 1.5 and 9.13, which helps create a sense of ring composition to Books 1–9 of the *Letters*, see Murgia (1985) 199; Whitton (2010) 119–20.

survived the ordeal of Domitian's tyranny. Moreover, there is available a reasonable and simple, alternative interpretation of Pliny's political life that harmonizes Pliny's autobiographical statements with his *cursus honorum*. Although it is novel, the interpretation provided here is founded upon sound historical and literary methods, which reconcile the best historical evidence with the literary record rather than unnecessarily and readily resorting to speculation that is too clever by half.

If indeed Pliny were a collaborator or close advisor of Domitian and participated in his crimes, then Pliny's portrayal of the victims and of his own actions are not merely embellished self-representation, but rather a sadistic and violent perpetuation of the victims' suffering, an act that seems quite out of keeping with Pliny's personality and the very type of activity he abhors in others such as Regulus. To take the collaborationist reading of Pliny's career to its full conclusion would necessitate reading the *Letters* as nothing less than the manipulative delusions of a criminal. Of course, we have never read Pliny's writings that way, nor should we. The general spirit of the *Letters* is a humanism, not without its flaws, imbued by the author with a concern for his fellow-citizens, love for his wife, respect for his peers, duty towards the state, and malice toward few.⁶⁶

Undoubtedly, Pliny portrays himself in these letters as acting honorably and with the best of intentions. In a collection of letters carefully edited for publication, readers should expect nothing less. In this regard, we can read these letters as careful self-representation on Pliny's part and not naively as the unadorned, historical truth. However, while publication may encourage a certain amount of self-aggrandizement, it also provides a serious check on extreme embellishment. Few would want to read the letters of a hypocrite, and many living at the time of publication could check Pliny's versions of events against their own memory and the historical record, as Pliny suggests to Tacitus in letter 7.33. If the letters are to be effective as literature, as they were surely meant to be, they must speak to the experiences of Pliny's contemporaries, many of whom lived through similar moments of doubt, fear, anger, and even triumph. This results in a strange paradox—the literary value of Pliny's *Letters* is increased by his ability to record with verisimilitude his experiences and the experiences of his generation. As such, Pliny's letters provide modern readers with not only a rich literary text but also an invaluable personal account of political life under

⁶⁶ For the *humanitas* of Pliny, see Lefèvre (2009) 169–221.

Domitian and the difficult choices that confronted those who lived through such trying times.

In conclusion, Pliny was no liar. Admittedly, he wrote in a way to put himself in the best possible light—a statement that is likely true of most authors. Still, Pliny was a sympathizer and friend of the opposition to Domitian and was reasonably concerned for his safety. When he, like Tacitus, decided to break the silence on political matters imposed by Domitian, he chose to valorize the victims, to express his own fears, and to give eloquent voice to those who had been denied one for so long.

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