

## PLINY AND *GLORIA DICENDI*

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If you approach the younger Pliny through a standard selection of his letters, or as the subject of a short essay in a literary history (e.g., von Albrecht 1997.2.1146–57, Conte 1994.525–29, or Goodyear 1982.655–60), or in a sketch of his life (say, Sherwin-White 1969), you will not find him given his due in one respect, namely, as an orator. Yet it was his oratory that secured him his place in the Roman élite and upon which he hoped to base enduring fame. I want to argue that the *Letters* are designed to keep our attention fixed upon Pliny as orator and to provide as well a sort of insurance policy for the oratory. Pliny was aware that his forensic speeches would be unlikely to command as much interest as Cicero's, but they were, after all, the sum total of his achievement. So he devised clever ways of enhancing interest in his oratory through the *Letters* (which were arguably not in themselves to be the vehicle of his posthumous renown). I propose, then, that we re-imagine Pliny as what he was on his own terms, an orator.

Pliny's standard image is not, at least to the contemporary sensibility, all that beguiling. He seems to trumpet his own achievements too much for our taste—though Sherwin-White 1966.104 rightly traces this sort of self-advertisement back to Aristotle's Magnanimous Man, who claims his due of praise, in order to show that Pliny was, in this as in so many other ways, thoroughly traditional. (Roy Gibson's essay in this volume addresses itself to this issue.) As a member of the Roman élite, and perhaps all the more as a *nouus homo* ("new man," i.e., newcomer to the senate and magistracies), Pliny believed that the reward of exceptional *uirtus* ("excellence in performance") was *gloria*, a widespread and long-lasting renown accorded by one's fellow citizens for remarkable service to the state. One of the most striking features of the letters, a feature always remarked upon, is Pliny's unslaked appetite for fame. Anne Marie Guillemin quite properly

dedicated a chapter to it (1929.13–22), and she pointed out that Pliny was not content with merely contemporary renown, it had to be renown that would last. In a word, he wanted *gloria*.

But Pliny was aware of obstacles in his path. I want for a moment to widen the scope of my observations at this point, because I believe that *gloria*, as a fundamental value of the Roman élite, needs more investigation (which I hope to provide myself in the coming years). The terms in which that value was defined had, at least from the time of the elder Cato, been subject to reappraisal, and what constituted *gloria* could never be taken for granted, least of all under the principate, when all the traditional avenues to glory were under reconstruction. Let me briefly explain. Cicero—whose late, two-book work *de Gloria* is, alas, lost—perhaps gives us a précis of its tenor in the second book of his *de Officiis*. He there acknowledges two avenues to *gloria*: arms and oratory. By the time he came to think about glory as an aspiration, he could see that military success had proven dangerous to the state where not disastrous to the individual (recall the fate of Crassus, beheaded by the Parthians after his defeat at Carrhae in 53 B.C.). Cicero, not surprisingly, urges more strongly the claims of oratory, particularly forensic oratory, in the service of the state. The principate changed all that. The success of a general—now only *dux* (“leader”), not *imperator* (“commander-in-chief”)—was circumscribed by the emperor under whose auspices he commanded. The most conspicuous deprivation was the triumph, now restricted to the imperial household. Tacitus will make much of this in the case of Agricola or Corbulo. But Pliny, too, deplored the fact that a great man like Verginius Rufus still had no monument ten years after his death (*Epistles* 6.10). So the *gloria* of the *uir militaris* (“professional soldier”) was comparatively diminished (not that soldiers ceased to serve the state meritoriously and be rewarded with statues and inscriptions for their deeds).

The same could be said for oratory, and, indeed, Tacitus said it quite plainly in the *Dialogus*. The political trials of the Ciceronian age, conducted before huge crowds in the forum, were no more. The main forensic arena, where Pliny performed for so long (*Epistles* 6.12.2), was the Centumviral Court, about as exciting as the Chancery Division of the British legal system. Here lies the central obstacle to Pliny’s quest for glory: he has not the full means to secure it. He was no *uir militaris*, and however good he was as an orator—and he rivaled Tacitus in prestige—his cases were generally too slight to command even his own interest, let alone posterity’s, and he knows it (*Epistles* 2.14.1).

Since the late republic, however, a third way to *gloria* had been

opening up, namely literary composition. But this was, perhaps, still a second or third best, though one increasingly important for the élite under the principate. Pliny will try his hand at forms of composition other than oratory, namely verse (we recall his disinclination to attempt the labour of history, *Epistles* 5.8). But he was aware that his versifying was slight, and he tended to see it as a handmaid to his oratory; he noted, for instance, the number of great orators who also wrote verse, and he seems to have taken it up in imitation of them (5.3, 7.4). When all was said and done, he had to found his claim to *gloria* upon his oratory, and so he took care to publish as much of it as he thought would secure his reputation with posterity (some seven named speeches are referred to in the letters, as well as a good number of unspecified ones). So it is as an orator that I want us to re-imagine him. I hope I am not pushing here at a door too far open already, but I do not have the impression that Pliny's persona as an orator is given its due. Alfons Weische is the only writer I know who agrees with me in emphasizing the centrality of oratory to the picture Pliny presents in his letters (1989.381–82). This is not really surprising, since all but one of his speeches are lost, and that one, the so-called *Panegyricus*, is deemed unreadable, despite Pliny's own testimony to its success in his day.

Now that brings me back to the letters. We know of the success of the *Panegyricus* not so much because it has been transmitted to us, but because Pliny himself wrote letters describing his revisions and recitations of the work (3.13 and 18) which make clear to us how enthusiastically it was received by contemporaries. Indeed, the vast majority of the letters are concerned with Pliny's role as advocate. We constantly see, and even hear, him in court. Tactfully he draws attention to the reception of his oratory among his contemporaries. What I want to suggest is that the letters, as a consciously shaped body of revised or newly composed correspondence, are designed to focus on and secure an interest in Pliny as orator. The letters are, in effect, an insurance policy. Let me try to substantiate this claim briefly.

(i) Pliny uses the letters to draw attention to his own success as a pleader. It was not entirely fair of me to say that Pliny blows his own trumpet. He is more artful than that.<sup>1</sup> One of his ploys is to report what others say or do to show their regard for him as an orator. Here are a few examples to add to the ones just mentioned, which indicated the interest of contemporaries in the *Panegyric*:

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1 See Gibson's paper in this volume.

- a. A visit to a rhetorical school shows “quantum apud illos auctoritatis ex studiis habeam” (2.18.2: “the extent of the prestige I have among them from my oratorical pursuits”).
- b. Pliny could point to a young man who had stood for seven hours so as not to miss a word of his pleading (4.16.3).
- c. Pliny has been asked to provide corrected editions of his *libelli* (“pamphlets”) which Maecilius Nepos has collected and wants to take abroad with him (4.26).
- d. There were some who sought their own “nomen et fama ex studiis” (“notoriety and repute from oratorical pursuits”) by adopting him as a model (6.11.3).
- e. Epistle 8.13 records that Genialis has been reading Pliny’s *libelli* with his father.
- f. One friend, Sardus, may have praised Pliny’s oratory in a treatise, for which he is thanked (9.31, with Sherwin-White’s note).
- g. Epistle 9.23 relates the following story: Tacitus, one day at the races, fell into conversation with a man he didn’t know who was seated beside him. This man, presumably a visitor to Rome, asked if Tacitus were Italian or from the provinces; he teasingly replied that the visitor knew him very well from his activity as an orator, *ex studiis* (we have seen the phrase a number of times already). He could therefore be only one of two people, said the visitor, either Tacitus or Pliny.
- h. Epistle 6.7.1 is my favourite: Pliny is gratified to learn that his young wife Calpurnia puts copies of his speeches in bed with her when he is away. The *libelli* are a surrogate for her husband!

On top of all this can be added, of course, the letters recording the desire of friends for his support in court (4.17) or of provincials and the senate to have Pliny conduct the prosecution of greedy governors (1.7, 3.4). The case of Marius Priscus is crucial here (2.11 and 12).

(ii) With great skill, he uses letters to complement the speeches by giving something of the flavour of the occasion, the background, or the result—in short, just the things the speech itself could not contain. Pliny becomes, in effect, a sort of commentator, his own Asconius. By describing the circumstances under which his own speeches were delivered, he involves his readers in the occasion, if only at second hand. The letters to Arrianus on the trial of Marius Priscus (2.11, 12), to Cornelius Ursus on the trials of Julius Bassus (4.9) and of Varenus Rufus (5.20, 6.5, and 13), or the

one to Tacitus on the support Pliny gave Herennius Senecio in the trial of Baebius Massa (7.33), are all good examples of his vivid narrative of events in the senate (from which, of course, lesser mortals were necessarily excluded). The circumstantial letter thus makes its reader an audience for the speech in an imaginative way: “non legere tibi sed interesse iudicio uidereris” (6.33.7: “You won’t seem to be reading but to be actually present at the trial”). Pliny is quite candid about his epistolary strategy—*detegam artes* (6.33.7: “I’ll disclose my stratagems”)—he tells Cornelius Ursus, concerning his defence of Varenus, that he won’t explain why his plea was justified, albeit unprecedented, so that we shall have to look to the published speech for an answer (5.20.7–8). But we also note that the letter says what the speech cannot, namely that the plea was successful (5.20.2: *egi . . . non sine euentu* [“I got the verdict I wanted”] and 7). Or again, in his letter to Romanus with which he delivers a copy of the speech for Variola, he says: “haec tibi exposui . . . ut ex epistula scires, quae ex oratione non poteras” (6.33.7: “I’ve set this all out for you . . . so that the letter gives you information the speech could not”).

Quadratus, on the other hand, had actually asked for details about the circumstances—“quaeque extra libros quaeque circa libros” (“What wasn’t in the speech and what it involved”)—of a speech he has read, an attack some ten years before upon Publicius Certus in vindication of Helvidius Priscus. That is just what Pliny can provide in a letter, and a very long one at that, as he notes at the end (9.13); for what people, including himself actually said, he refers us to the published speech (9.14, 18). On another occasion, a consul elect for A.D. 108, C. Vettienus Severus, asked Pliny how he should set about composing his own official thanksgiving to the emperor, and this gives him a chance to revisit the circumstances in which the *Panegyricus* was excogitated. Thus, in many instances, published letter and published speech become fully complementary. As reading a letter was meant to whet Ursus’s appetite for a speech, so a published speech prompted Quadratus’s interest in the circumstances of its original delivery. Pliny perhaps hoped that we, posterity, after learning of the speeches by reading the letters, might be prompted to seek them out.

(iii) A third stratagem found in the letters is the anticipation of possible indifference to a speech by which Pliny himself, however, set some store. We noticed above that he was all too alive to the paltriness of many of his civil cases. By writing a letter about one that he believed really important, his defence of Attia Variola (6.33), he aimed to draw some attention to what might otherwise escape posterity’s notice amid its general lack of

enthusiasm for that sort of oratory. He claims that this speech is unusual and significant (the Centumviral Court met in plenary session to try the case), and that it really gave him an opportunity to rival Demosthenes. Sidonius Apollinaris, if he wasn't merely guessing, couldn't resist such a blurb, and said that the speech was indeed better than the *Panegyricus* (8.10.3).

(iv) In some cases, a letter serves as a substitute for a speech which could never have been published. I mean by that that what Pliny had to say was too brief for a booklet (*libellus*), but it nonetheless served to demonstrate his skill as a pleader. The best example of this is *Epistles* 7.6, where he records that a single sentence from him was sufficient to defend his client; indeed, he goes out of his way to recollect a previous occasion on which a word, hardly more, spoken in time, saved the day. (Perhaps these cases show that, at need, even Pliny could conform to the contemporary fashion for forensic crispness.) Letter 8.14 is similar: Pliny there brings together his arguments and produces a piece of forensic display which carried the day in the senate. It wasn't actually ever a full-scale speech, but Pliny can present it as such in the letter. He achieved what my friends at the British Bar call a "TPA" (= triumph of pure advocacy), and uses the letter to preserve the fact.

(v) Finally, the arrangement of the collection points the reader in the right direction. If we took the letters more seriously as works of art (which is not to deny that some of them were originally in some form real letters), we would notice their arrangement in their books with the same attention we accord to the organization of Augustan poetry books. Consider the second letter of the first book: Maturus Arrianus had asked to read a speech being prepared for publication; Pliny discusses its models and its manner, and he refers to previously published speeches that are still being read, albeit the bloom of novelty is withered. This letter ought to be seen as programmatic (and if it were a poem it surely would be): when Pliny starts the series of letters, he already has something to show in the way of published speeches, and they remain popular, as Pliny is at pains to assure us. So further publication is justified, and our interest in his oratory is, he hopes, aroused.

Or let us reflect upon the positioning of the last letter of the third book, 21, on the death of Martial: Sherwin-White suggests (1966.263) that the letter was placed here to secure variety in the sequence (i.e., not too close to the seventh, on the death of another poet, Silius Italicus). I'd prefer to suggest that it is placed last in the book because of its reference to "gloria et laus et aeternitas" (§6: "the glorious distinction of eternal praise"). The part of Martial's epigram on Pliny that Pliny quotes (the last ten lines) relates to

his oratory: how it rivals Cicero's and will appeal to *saecula posterique* ("future generations"). This is just what Pliny most hankered after, and the letter keeps before us the image of Pliny as successful orator in the great tradition.

The opening of the ninth book is, likewise, most carefully planned. The first letter, to Maximus, urges publication upon him (Pliny even-handedly promotes his friends' literary aspirations). Then, in the second, he obliquely notices the great success his publication of these very letters is having: someone demands even longer ones from him. In the third, he reopens his obsession with immortality, and, as we by now know very well, it is upon literary achievement that he based his hopes. Finally, in the fourth, he gets to his usual topic, a speech being prepared for publication. Later in the book, letters ten and eleven make a pair: Pliny tells Tacitus in the tenth about his poetry and oratory, in the eleventh to Geminus (already noticed), he is referring to his speeches (or just possibly, his letters) on sale in Lyons. The final sentence is interesting: consensus of approval makes him feel that he has accomplished something. Letters 13 to 16 form quite a tract of literary, but chiefly oratorical, interest: he describes the circumstances of one speech in 13, in 14, reiterates to Tacitus his hopes for fame amid posterity (he has worked for it!), in 15, he is revising speeches, and, in 16, is at work on some new poems. These collocations suffice, I hope, to indicate the care Pliny has taken to engage his readers and show us his unrelenting devotion to his craft, with oratory in the forefront.

I spoke of his craft, and one topic the letters really harp on is the revision of the speeches both for recitation and for publication (1.2, 8, 2.5, 3.18, 4.5, 9, 26, 5.8, 12, 20, 6.33, 8.3, 9.4, 28). He stresses in 9.10.3 that it is hard work revising for publication (cf. 9.15 for the same note). We, posterity, are surely meant to appreciate the trouble taken to secure our interest. And that is exactly what Pliny emphasizes in a final note to Tacitus, 9.14: they both deserved well of posterity for the care they have taken with their literary productions. Posterity would prove ungrateful in ignoring them!

It is time to draw this argument to a close. The letters concerned with Pliny's activities as an orator are numerous; I have only been able to refer to a handful of the more significant. Some are simply references to pleading or speaking in the senate. But a substantial proportion concern revision, recitation, and publication. I suggest that this is both a carefully planned campaign of advertisement and an insurance policy. Pliny was conscious of the fragility of fame. He deplored the neglect of the tomb of Verginius Rufus, and was rightly worried that, if a man of his prestige could

be so soon ignored, posterity might not remember a Pliny as he wanted to be remembered: “quatenus nobis denegatur diu uiuere, relinquamus aliquid, quo nos uixisse testemur” (3.7.14: “Inasmuch as long life is denied us, let us ensure we leave behind something to testify to our having existed”) and “ne tantus ille labor meus . . . mecum pariter intercidat” (5.8.6: “Lest that considerable effort on my part . . . perish along with me”). The letters were not in themselves a bid for fame, at least not originally; by the ninth book it is clear to Pliny that he was on to a winner (cf. 9.11), but, as usual, he is conscious that the letters, like his speeches, don’t match up to Cicero’s for intrinsic interest (9.2). So his hopes for them would have to be as tempered as his hopes for his verse or even for his oratory. But oratory was still the “great game” at Rome, serious, traditional, a public service; Aper in Tacitus’s *Dialogus* makes this point ably. On oratory, one’s claim to *gloria* could reasonably rest if only one could ensure a continued interest in one’s speeches. The letters are, among other things, an extraordinarily adroit strategy for securing and sustaining that interest in Pliny the orator.

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