

Nos hic voramus litteras: Feasting on Letters with Pliny

This paper shows how Pliny the Younger's second book of letters, when encountered in the form in which Pliny himself arranged them, resembles a particular activity of elite Roman society: the *convivium*, or dinner party. In demonstrating this resemblance, I am indebted to Michael Trapp (2003) and Roy Gibson (2012) for their surveys of the changing approaches to epistolary theory in Classics, and to Emily Gowers (2003) for her book on the prevalence of food imagery and dining motifs across genres of Roman literature. However, I take chief inspiration from Mary Beard (2002: 120), whose article on the letters of Cicero calls for reading ancient letter collections in their original arrangements since the "inclusion or exclusion of just a single letter can, in fact, have a powerful effect on a collection as a whole." The comparison between Pliny's *Epistles 2* and the *convivium* holds only when these letters are read as a fundamental literary unit, and, with this fact in mind, it is notable that the fifth letter of this collection includes an analogy between giving a speech and hosting a dinner party.

Indeed, the thread of my argument starts in the middle of *Epistles 2.5*, when Pliny tells his friend Lupercus that, just as speechwriters try to claim a wide audience by varying the content of their speeches, *et in ratione conviviorum, quamvis a plerisque cibis temperemus, totam tamen cenam laudare omnes solemus* ("so, too, in the manner of *convivia*, although we may refrain from many foods, nevertheless we all are wont to praise the dinner as a whole", 2.5.7-8). Christopher Whitton (2013: 117) acknowledges the fittingness of this analogy, writing that Roman diners "might sample only some of the dishes offered; they came in succession, like the sections of a speech, rather than all at once." I take this point further, arguing that Pliny's analogy marks the *convivium* as programmatic for *Epistles 2*: readers of this collection may

gravitate towards some letters while merely sampling others, yet the letters themselves, like the dishes in a dinner, appear in a fixed sequence as part of a larger unit.

I begin my paper by introducing this passage from 2.5, after which I provide a brief overview (“menu”) of the twenty letters that make up *Epistles* 2: their length, recipient, general topic, and topical relationship to other letters in this collection. From here, Matthew Roller’s (2006) and William Johnson’s (2010) respective analyses of dining and reading in Imperial Rome help me to suggest broad similarities between these two activities. Then, I highlight the *convivium*’s social and temporal dimensions to argue that the image of letter writing-as-dinner hosting effectively traces the changes that occur when a single, private letter of particular provenance, recipient, and purpose, joins several other such letters to form a prepared public collection.

My focus on Pliny’s writing at the level of the letter-book contrasts with other scholarly approaches. For example, John Henderson (2002), in his book *Pliny’s Statue*, argues that Pliny envisions his letters as stand-alone works of art. Henderson helpfully demonstrates the care and attention which Pliny puts into his writing, yet the image which the statue evokes is that of a self-contained, static object. How does this correspond to groupings of letters which are prepared and read in a collection? The act of reading is nested in time, as single letters are of necessity read before some and after others. And Pliny’s arrangement itself of *Epistles* 2 suggests temporal patterns to the collection, with topics of conversation recurring from 2.1 to 2.20. Without the temporal dimension that the convivial framework provides, much of the pleasure that arises from reading these letters in a series remains unarticulated.

For textual editions, I use Whitton's edition of *Epistles 2*, referring to his critical apparatus and commentary for the letters in this collection. Additionally, relevant social and historical information from Adrian Sherwin-White (1966) supplements my analysis.

Works Cited

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