

Pliny the Younger and the Fall of the Republic

Although Pliny the Younger has generally been regarded as a strong supporter of the Principate and in particular of the *principes* Nerva and Trajan (Hammond 1938, Morford 1992), in large part because of his *Panegyricus*, he nonetheless expresses in his letters alongside his praise for Nerva and Trajan a genuine sense of discontent over the state of Roman political and literary life. Pliny's attitude runs counter to the commonly held understanding that imperial writers might have opposed and disliked individual *principes* while at the same time recognizing the merits of the Principate. Pliny in contrast suggests that although he admires Nerva and Trajan, he is still keenly aware of the failures within his society resulting from the Principate as a system of government.

Pliny's recognition of the failings of the Principate is not to be found merely in his latent anxieties (Hoffer 1999), but rather in full view throughout his letters. Pliny is certainly cautious in his wording and presentation, but also quite plainly expresses his concern over the deleterious effects and limitations the Principate places on Roman society in essentially two arenas: politics and literature. Pliny is most explicit in letter 3.20 wherein he writes of the election of consuls in the senate. After narrating the heated debate in the senate, which he unfavorably contrasts with elections under previous generations, Pliny ends the letter by remarking that the contemporary political environment provides fewer events worthy of discussion than in prior times (3.20.10). Pliny notes that this lack of political engagement stems from everything resting on the will of the *princeps*, who looks after every responsibility and care (3.20.12). Similar views are expressed in letters 3.7, 8.14, 9.2, and 9.13.

Pliny writes that the reigns of Nerva and Trajan have brought about a renaissance in letters (*Ep.* 1.13.1), and yet once this superficial claim has been made he readily admits that the contemporary literary scene is in a state of enervation (1.13.2-5). Nerva and Trajan have given writers the freedom to write what they please, but Roman literary society, just like Roman civic society, has been so weakened that no audience exists. Pliny makes the point clearly in letter 3.21 on Martial's death wherein he writes that among the many honorable practices of the past that have fallen into desuetude is the tradition of providing poets who sang the praises of cities and men with gifts of money or public office (3.21.3). Connecting the literary and political spheres, Pliny adds that now nothing is done which might deserve a poet's praise, echoing

Tacitus' lament that the history of the Principate does not offer glorious deeds to record, nor is the remembrance of the virtuous encouraged (*Ann.* 4.32.2, *Ag.* 1.1-4).

Although Pliny is a proud supporter of Nerva and Trajan and recognizes the benefits of peace, he is no blind adherent of autocracy. For throughout his letters, he expresses, politely and with civility, his discontent with the effects of one-man rule, which has enervated Roman political and literary life.

Bibliographical Citations

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Morford, Mark P.O. "*Iubes esse liberos*: Pliny's *Panegyricus* and Liberty." *AJP* 113 (1992): 575-593.