

High and Low (*Neg*)*Otium*: an Examination of Bucolic Elements in Pliny's *Epistulae*

This paper examines the intended effects of Pliny the Younger's frequent engagement with the pastoral landscape and how he weaves in aspects of such poetry by both Vergil and Calpurnius Siculus primarily through the addition of recognizable vocabulary and themes within the genre. As is typical of bucolic poetry, Pliny primarily employs the landscape in order to distance himself as the author from urban concerns and grant himself license to write freely about the proper way of engaging in literature. Pliny's addition of pastoral elements throughout the collection generates an argument for the necessary balance between different forms of *negotium*, between those necessitated by his identity as a senator and those enabled by the idyllic landscape in the form of *studia*.

Although limited work has been conducted regarding the presence of bucolic elements within Pliny's letters, the primary precursor to this paper is the work of Marchesi (2008). She demonstrates through ample evidence of allusion to the poetic genre throughout the work that much of the collection represents Pliny's experimentation with other literary genres, particularly as he weaves poetic elements into his work. Although Marchesi does examine aspects of the infusion of bucolic elements in the work by analyzing the direct quotations Pliny makes such as *G.* 3.8-9 in *Ep.* 5.8 as well as explicit thematic references such as *Ecl.* 3.74-75 in *Ep.* 1.6, this paper engages in a more systematic analysis of the ways Pliny employs pastoral coloring throughout the collection.

Pliny's most frequent use of the bucolic landscape is by the establishment of a *locus amoenus* such as that described in *Ep.* 1.3.1. Curtius (1953) identifies the archetypical *locus amoenus* as containing grass, trees, and water, a tendency first observed in Hom. *Od.* 13.102,

5.63, and 7.112ff. *Ep.* 1.3.1 includes each of these elements in its interrogative ekphrasis with the grove of plane trees evoking Plato's *locus amoenus* in *Phdr.* 229, the bodies of water in the lake and canal, and the grassy promenade. The beginning of the letter effectively establishes an intentionally typical *locus amoenus*, evoking prior poetic traditions. Isidore of Seville explains in his *Etymologiae* that Verrius Flaccus claims '*amoenus*' is derived from the prefix '-a' and '*munus*,' translating to 'without duty.' By Verrius' etymology, the term '*locus amoenus*' refers to places in which no business is conducted. Pliny certainly had access to Verrius' lost *De Significatu Verborum*, in which the etymology is discussed, as Verrius' *De Orthographia* and *Res Memoria Dignae* seem to have been important models for Pliny the Elder's '*Dubii Sermonis Octo*' and *Naturalis Historia* respectively. Rather than asserting that the countryside is an idealized space defined by its lack of *munus* as suggested by Verrius, Pliny rather asserts in the rest of 1.3 that the type of *munus* or *negotium* a person must engage in rather merely shifts when they move from the city to the countryside. The low and humble (*humiles et sordidas*) duties of the cities are transformed in the countryside to high and rich (*alto...pinguique*) pursuits in the form of *studia*. Through the usage of *sit* in the line, echoing *Aen.* 6.129, *otium* and *negotium* as well as *labor* and *quies* are not contrasted to one another, but rather equated in the idealized areas outside the walls of the city.

Further instances of Pliny utilizing a bucolic setting to defend *otium* can be found in the hunting metaphor in 1.6 and the ekphrasis of Pliny's Laurentine Villa in 2.17. This juxtaposition of the urban and rustic landscapes generates the notion of two forms of *negotium* between the civic and social obligation of the city and the free literary pursuits of the countryside. Although most authors attempt to draw a stringent distinction between the confines of *otium* and *negotium* as well as *quies* and *labor*, Pliny removes the distinction between the two and equates the time

spent at ease in the countryside not to a time of relaxation, but rather a time of altered, yet continued business in the form of the creation of literature. Just as the senators and jurymen of the urban landscape work hard at their social duties, so too do the philosophers and pastoral herdsmen of the idyllic landscape work at honing their craft and the creation of beautiful songs as Pliny aims to achieve through his time there.

Works Cited

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