

Refusing the *Recusatio*: Pliny's *Epistle 7.5* as Ironic Pseudo-Elegy

Pliny's *Epistle 7.4* has been investigated in explorations of Pliny's poetics (Edmunds, Hershkowitz), and *Epistle 7.5*'s references to the *exclusus amator* of Roman elegy have been recognized by many (DePretis, Sharrock, Shelton) but accepted uncritically as genuinely loving (Smith). In this paper, I analyze *Epistle 7.5* not as an earnest love letter but as a self-aware, highly literary pseudo-elegy, in which Pliny sets himself up as an *exclusus amator* before emphatically tearing down the façade with a declaration that he finds solace not in love but in the state and in work—the very things the elegiac *amator*, in a *recusatio*, typically renounces in favor of his beloved. *Epistle 7.4* primes the reader, by framing Pliny as a poet, to pick up on the subtler elegiac allusions present in *Epistle 7.5*. In constructing this pseudo-elegy, Pliny appropriates and then, I argue, pointedly rejects the persona of the elegiac *amator* to portray himself as the opposite: a proper, traditional citizen.

I begin by investigating Pliny's characterization of himself as a poet in *Epistle 7.4*. Pliny activates the genre of love poetry with his focus on hendecasyllables, amatory themes, and the claim that he has written his own elegies (*Latinos elegos...feci; transii ad elegos*). Readers are thus trained to interpret the next letter not as a general expression of love, but as a series of specific literary references to elegy. I next turn to the elegiac *topoi* in *Epistle 7.5*, some of which have been catalogued by de Verger: for example, nighttime vigils as a sign of love (*magnam noctium partem in imagine tua vigil exigo*) and the clear activation of the *exclusus amator* (*similis excluso a vacuo limine*). I add to these that Amor (*in causa Amor primum*) should be read as the personified Amor of Ovid and Propertius. Furthermore, Pliny's declaration that his feet lead him (*pedes ducunt*) to the threshold of his beloved may be read as a typical (Propertius

1.1.4, Ovid *Amores* 1.1.4) metapoetic reference to metrical feet, thus his elegies. This deepens the *exclusus amator* scene, as Pliny's elegies take him to his beloved's room the same way the *amator* tries to access the room of the *puella* by means of poetry rather than payment.

But this letter is not a sincere elegy, and Pliny intentionally undercuts his own appropriation of the *amator*. A generic necessity of elegy is that the *amator* never successfully secures a relationship with his beloved; otherwise, he could not keep writing poetry. Pliny shatters his persona as the elegiac lover by breaking from elegiac convention and reminding the reader that he is writing to his wife (*quod non consuevimus abesse; quibus horis te visere solebam*). At the end of the letter, Pliny declares that the only time he's free from torment is not when he's with his beloved—as would be expected for the elegiac lover—but when he's working in the forum for the public good (*in foro et amicorum litibus; in labore, in miseria curisque solacium*). His dedication to public work is the opposite of the programmatic *recusatio* of the *amator*. Pliny further invites comparison between himself and the elegiac *amator* by commanding that the reader judge what it means to assume this elegiac persona (*aestima tu, quae vita mea sit*) while simultaneously violating the essentials of the genre.

Pliny's prioritization of civic duty over a beloved, that is, his refusal of the *recusatio*, is a rejection of elegiac values in favor of hegemonic ones. Pliny, I conclude, aided by his characterization as poet in *Epistle* 7.4, presents himself in stark contrast to the elegiac lover, who refuses to serve the state and subverts traditional gender roles. Read in this light, *Epistle* 7.5 is not a sincere love letter to his wife, but rather a self-conscious and literary pseudo-elegy, the purpose of which is to reinforce Pliny's identity as a traditional, hard-working, elite gentleman.

Works Cited

- De Pretis, Anna. "'Insincerity,' 'Facts,' and 'Epistolarity': Approaches to Pliny's Epistles to Calpurnia." *Arethusa* 36, no. 2 (2003): 127-146.
- de Verger, Antonio Ramírez. "Erotic Language in Pliny, Ep. VII 5." *Glotta* 74, no. 1/2 (1997): 114-16.
- Edmunds, Lowell. "Pliny the Younger on his Verse and Martial's Non-Recognition of Pliny as a Poet." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 108 (2015): 309-60.
- Hershkowitz, Debra. "Pliny the Poet." *Greece & Rome* 42, no. 2 (1995): 168-81.
- Sharrock, Alison. "Uxorius: The Praise and Blame of Husbands." *Eugesta. Revue sur le genre dans l'Antiquité-Journal of Gender Studies in Antiquity* 3 (2013).
- Shelton, Jo-Ann. *The Women of Pliny's Letters*. Routledge, 2012.
- Smith, Mariah Elaine. "Composing the *puella*: Pliny the Younger's Elegiac Experimentation." *Illinois Classical Studies* 45, no. 1 (2020): 132-157.