

The “Decline” of Eloquence in Pliny’s *Letters* and Tacitus’ *Dialogus*

Pliny’s *Letters* and Tacitus’ *Dialogus* are among the most significant documents on rhetorical and literary criticism of the Roman Imperial period. While several scholars have examined moments of intertext and allusions in Pliny and Tacitus’ works (Bruère 1954; Güngerich 1956; Murgia 1980, 1985; Brink 1994; Marchesi 2008; Edwards 2008; Griffin 2106), few studies have explored the thematic connections between the *Letters* and the *Dialogus* (Riggsby 1995; Dominik 2007). My paper pushes this approach further by investigating not only those epistles that Pliny addresses to Tacitus but his entire correspondence. I argue that Pliny’s *Letters* should not be conceived as an organic response to the issues that Tacitus singles out in his *Dialogus*. Rather, following the criterion of *varietas*, Pliny disseminates in his *corpus* disparate stylistic reflections on rhetorical problems that were commonly debated within the literary culture of the 1st – 2nd century AD. More specifically, Pliny devotes much attention to the comparison between ancient and modern eloquence, opting for the latter.

First, I argue that Pliny advocates against the decline of *ingenia*, one of the crucial questions of the *Dialogus* (Tac. *Dial.* 1). Pliny describes contemporary Rome as a society in which literary studies have never been so thriving (1.10.1, 1.13.1). His letters paint an *Urbs* filled with great orators, declaimers, and poets (4.17.4, 4.27.5, 8.12.1, 9.22.1), whose speeches and recitations receive great applause and acclamation (5.3.11), comparable to the illustrious figures of the past (6.21.1). The flourishing of *ingenia* provides plenty of models to imitate (5.14.4, 7.9.3, 7.20.4), including Pliny himself (6.6.6, 6.11.1, 6.33.1).

Next, I propose that Pliny complicates Maternus’ assertion that oratory decayed due to the absence of remarkable personalities, who gave the Republican orator abundant *materia* for his

speeches (Tac. *Dial.* 37). According to Pliny, contemporary events can instead provide plenty of *materia* for the flourishing of eloquence. Numerous letters feature momentous prosecutions, in which Pliny took up the role of *accusator* against powerful politicians, analogous to the great villains of the Republican age (2.11.1, 3.9.8, 6.21.1, 6.22.1, 6.33.2, 7.6.1). Pliny describes his rhetorical skills as eliciting an enthusiastic response from his audience, contradicting Maternus' statement that cases are pleaded in solitude (Tac. *Dial.* 39).

Finally, I consider the relationship between eloquence and monarchy, suggesting that Pliny does not view the status of oratory as dependent on the constitutional system (Tac. *Dial.* 41) but on the *benignitas* of the emperor (3.20.11). Eloquence, according to Pliny, did not deteriorate compared to the past (3.18.6), but Domitian's tyranny dulled *ingenia* and suppressed free speech (8.14.9), which was revitalized by Trajan's restoration of *libertas* (8.14.2). The effect of Trajan's benevolent attitude towards *παρρησία* consists in the resuscitation of public debate in the Senate. Pliny depicts a Senate characterized by frequent dissension (6.5.5, 8.13.19, 8.14.16), which represents the condition that made eloquence flourish under the old Republic (Tac. *Dial.* 40). The oratorical community that he depicts under Trajan is vivid and vibrant, and its personalities can live up to the standards of the glorious speakers of the old Republic.

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