

Fortuna Ficta Iuvat: Fabricated Narrative in the Letters of Pliny

In her discussion of Pliny the Younger's first Vesuvius letter (6.16), Renata Copony catalogues the numerous inconsistencies one finds upon a close reading of the text, including the arrival of a note from Rectina begging the Elder to rescue her from imminent danger. Copony concludes that Pliny, as narrator, invented the Rectina episode in order to present his uncle (and his uncle's death) as a *primum exemplum* of his Stoic character by illustrating the Elder's *humanitas* (Copony 1987, 217-219). I find Copony's initial argument very compelling, and agree that Rectina's note, when examined within both the narrative and historical sequence of events, must be an invention of Pliny. However, Copony's analysis only included the first Vesuvius letter. When we expand our analysis to include letter 6.20, we discover parallels between the two texts which corroborate Copony's assessment of Rectina's letter as a fabrication, but not necessarily one intended to highlight the Elder Pliny's *humanitas*.

In this paper I will first briefly discuss the inconsistencies of Rectina's note, incorporating modern volcanological studies. I will then show that Rectina's note of 6.16 has a direct parallel in letter 6.20, namely the sudden arrival of the "Spaniard" on the second day of the eruption. Nicholas Jones has already drawn attention to the linguistic parallels between letters 6.16 and 6.20 (2001, 40-46), but he fails to note the striking intratextual links between Rectina's note and the Spaniard. Jones notes, "With the arrival of the message from Rectina, Pliny reveals the dangerous nature of the mission had become evident to the Elder *prior* to his sailing away" (2001, 37). I argue, however, that the *purpose* of Rectina's message was to alert the Elder (of the narrative) to the danger of his mission before he set out, allowing him a chance to back down. Instead, he changes his plan (*vertit ille consilium*, 6.16.9) from a scientific mission to a heroic one. As Pliny states at the beginning of this letter, one of his purposes in sending this information

to Tacitus is to perpetuate the glory of his uncle (*nam video morti eius...immortalem gloriam esse propositam*, 6.16.1), but he must first prove that his uncle did things worth writing about (*facere scribenda*, 6.16.3).

Just as Rectina's note unexpectedly appears at a critical moment of the Elder's narrative in 6.16, we find the sudden appearance of the "Spaniard" in 6.20 as the perilous conditions in Misenum quickly accelerate. Pliny identifies this man as a friend of his uncle's who had recently arrived from Spain (hence, the "Spaniard," *qui nuper ad eum ex Hispania venerat*, 6.20.5). He is never actually named. The identity of Rectina has also baffled scholars, and the manuscript tradition only muddies the waters. However, if we consider the etymological symbolism of Rectina's name, and its connection to *rectio* and *rector*, it seems a fitting name for a woman whose message guides the Elder Pliny's mission, and whose appearance helps to guide our interpretation of the narrative.

Verbal echoes also invite comparison between the two passages. After Plinia draws attention to the eruption cloud, the Elder's first action is to ask for his sandals, then climb up to a higher position to study the phenomenon (*poscit soleas, ascendit locum*, 6.16.5). Rectina's letter arrives as he departs from the house: (*egrediebatur domo: accipit codicillos Rectinae*, 6.16.8). Conversely, when violent tremors rouse Pliny and his mother that night, they sit down in a safer area of the house, and Pliny asks for a book (*resedimus in area...posco librum*, 6.20.4-5). Pliny's (in)action is emphasized by the Spaniard's arrival in the next sentence, and he defines their reaction to the danger as marks of *patientia* and *securitas*. At one point the Elder also exhibits *securitas*, but he does so in order to alleviate his friend's fear (*timorem eius sua securitate leniret*, 6.16.12). When the Spaniard next appears in the narrative, Pliny and his mother have left the house, but stop to watch the *multa miranda* (6.20.8). He tries again to spur them into action

by reminding them that the Elder would wish for their safety, but they respond that they will not consider their own safety until they are sure of his (i.e. the Elder's).

If the arrival of Rectina's letter acts as the impetus to the Elder's courageous rescue expedition, the Spaniard's arrival seems to add nothing substantial to the narrative of 6.20, but rather seems to be one method by which Pliny highlights his own inaction in a time of crisis.

Bibliography

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