Self-Presentation and Agriculture in Plin. *Ep*. 5.6

The Younger Pliny's *Ep*. 5.6, the longest of his letters, has traditionally been and remains a promising subject of study for those interested in the facts of the Roman villa and life there (e.g., Förtsch 1993, and cf. Gibson and Morello 2012:225–233 and bib.), of the biographies of the Younger and Elder Plinii, and of the social and economic history of Roman Italy (e.g., Sherwin-White 1968). This is in spite of reservations about the extent to which it is possible or worthwhile to reconstruct accurately the 'real' property on which Pliny's account was modeled (the problem is surveyed in Gibson and Morello 2012 ch.7, and cf. Bergmann 1995 on Förtsch 1993 and Du Prey 1994). But quite apart from what we make of the *Realien*, fruitful new approaches to the study of *Ep*. 5.6 are opened by two (not mutually exclusive) trends in recent scholarship on Pliny: increasing interest in strategies of authorial 'self-presentation' (*Selbstdarstellung*) (for Pliny, see, e.g., Leach 1990), and careful attention to the literary and stylistic features of the *Letters* (e.g. Coleman 2012, Keeline 2013). Studies of the latter type have been especially effective in demonstrating Pliny's sensitivity to and command of a wide variety of stylistic registers.

In this paper I examine a passage in *Ep*. 5.6, Pliny's description of the agricultural operations of his property (5.6.8–12), that well exemplifies the value of continued research along the recent lines of interest mentioned above. While this passage has received some comment from the standpoint of social and economic history (Sherwin-White 1968), it has not yet been appreciated for the way that in both substance and language it alludes to and engages with the written agronomic tradition at Rome. A close look at 5.6.8–12 shows that Pliny's description of his farm evokes the Roman agronomic tradition in two ways: 1) by including those enterprises that the agronomists since Cato had recommended for a profitable and self-sufficient farm; 2) by

describing those enterprises in language that belongs to or suggests the lexicon and register of the Roman agronomists' writings. In connection with the first point, for example, we may notice the diverse set-up of Pliny's farm that includes timber forests (*siluae caeduae*), wheat (*messem*), vines (*uineae*), plantations of trees for vines (*arbusta*), and meadows (*prata*) with the best fodder crops (*trifolium aliasque herbas*). We should compare these items with what we find in Cato's list of profitable enterprises in *De Agri Cultura* (*Agr*. 1.7, cf. Varro *Rust*. 1.7.9), which gives a rough idea of the operations that were held to be either lucrative in themselves or necessary for the upkeep of a self-sufficient farm (cf. White 1973:450–1). Only the olive is conspicuously absent from Pliny's account, an omission he had already explained by pointing to the area's climate unsuitable for its cultivation (5.6.4). As for the second point, we might observe the clustering of *per-* compounds redolent of agricultural diction (*percoquunt*, *perfringunt*, *perdometur*), or the appearance of technical terms of agriculture (e.g., *caeduae, pingues*, *glaebis*).

Pliny's language and remarks on his farm have the effect not only of evoking the agronomists' treatment of the same topics, but also of inviting the reader to compare Pliny's operations with those of the ideal farmstead depicted in the agronomists' writings. To return again to the subject of authorial self-representation, the agreement between Pliny's villa and the ideal villa of the agronomists effectively displays Pliny's economic savvy and casts him in the role of the industrious and virtuous farmer (*bonus agricola*) who was an important feature of the Roman imagination (cf. generally Reay 2005, Spanier 2010)

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