

## Pliny's Elegiac Experimentation in the Calpurnia Letters

I examine the six letters that Pliny the Younger writes to and about his wife Calpurnia (4.19, 6.4, 6.7, 7.5, 8.10, and 8.11) as a case study for the ways in which Pliny experiments with genre within his *Epistles*. I begin from the premise that Plinian studies have suffered from a scholarly inheritance of examining the letters for history or *realia* at the expense of investigating Pliny's artistic compositional choices. Ilaria Marchesi argues for the importance of allusion and poetic techniques within the *Epistles*, focusing on Pliny's relationship with Catullus, Cicero, and Tacitus and also advocates for future work "to recognize and appreciate the subtler signals of intratextual connection linking letters and books to one another" (Marchesi 2008 and 2015). I respond to Marchesi's call by focusing on the letters to or about Calpurnia. Through a close examination of the Calpurnia letters, I will argue that Pliny's use of elegiac allusion in his characterization of his wife is an authorial decision which speaks to both his aesthetics and his work's compositional coherency.

Over the course of the six letters, Pliny gradually develops the idea of Calpurnia as an elegiac *puella* and of himself as the lover. The elegiac language of these letters has been previously recognized, notably Pliny's use of the image of the locked out lover in letter 7.5 (Sherwin-White 1966; see also de Verger 1997, Carlon 2009, and Morello 2015). Although the elegiac language itself has been noted in modern scholarship, there was been no attempt to explain why Pliny consistently employs elegiac allusion in his descriptions of Calpurnia. The choice to represent Calpurnia as an elegiac *puella*, I suggest, should be particularly striking considering that elsewhere Pliny seems to be at pains to represent himself, and therefore by extension his wife, as a consistently principled and morally proper individual. I shift the focus

away from individual letters and towards an examination of the letters as a coherent group and I consider their role in the aesthetic program of the collection.

I begin with letter 4.19, addressed to Calpurnia's aunt, which introduces the personality of Calpurnia to the reader. Pliny describes his marital bliss and he begins to set the stage for elegy by focusing on the role that poetry plays in their relationship. I show how he builds on this elegiac foundation in the three letters to Calpurnia in Books 6 and 7, describing her as a *puella* and himself as the lover. The final two letters are about Calpurnia's miscarriage. Addressed to Calpurnia's aunt and Grandfather, they reveal the extent of Pliny's commitment to his generic experimentation and structure through elegiac allusion because he raises the stakes by suggesting that Calpurnia's miscarriage is analogous to the elegiac *puella's* abortion. Pliny use of elegiac language and *topoi* creates a consistent persona for Calpurnia within the *Epistles*. I argue that Pliny deliberately and consistently describes his wife in elegiac terms as part of his compositional strategy. Beyond just her name, the concept of the elegiac *puella* helps to link the letters together as a cohesive thread throughout books four through eight. The elegiac connection builds upon each preceding letter and the letters cannot be interchanged or removed without affecting the reading of all the others. I further suggest that this case study may be useful for reconsidering the structure and aesthetic project of Pliny's letters more generally. Pliny uses reoccurring *personae*, historical figures, themes, and generic language to structure his diverse collection of letters into a unified text.

### Bibliography

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