

Jacqueline M. Carlon, *Pliny's Women: Constructing Virtue and Creating Identity in the Roman World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. x + 270. Cloth, \$85.

The book under review is yet another proof of the growing interest in Pliny the Younger, an author who, only some twenty years ago, seemed rather neglected by classical scholars. Since the late nineties, a number of book-length treatments of his work have appeared, including monographs by Ludolph (1997), Hoffer (1999), Beutel (2000), Henderson (2002), Méthy (2007), Marchesi (2008) and, most recently, Lefèvre (2009), as well as two conference volumes edited by, respectively, Castagna and Lefèvre (2003) and Morello and Gibson (as a special issue of *Arethusa* 36 [2003], 2). Here we have a book which, to my knowledge, is the first full-length study on Pliny's representation of women (another book, by Jo-Ann Shelton, is announced for January 2011 by Routledge).

Women play, at least by Roman standards, quite an important role in Pliny's correspondence. According to Carlon's own figures (p. 8), out of the 368 letters of the whole corpus (books 1–10) no less than 72 contain some references to women (see the table in *Appendix B*, pp. 223–226); within this group, women appear as the main or significant subject in 38 letters. In this rewritten version of a Boston University PhD thesis (supervised by Ann Vasaly), Jacqueline Carlon (henceforth, C.) shows how more or less detailed descriptions of, and references to, women in Pliny's correspondence serve what she identifies as the overriding goal of his literary pursuits, namely the securing of his own *aeternitas* (this key term is, characteristically, the last word of her book). Her treatment is based on the first nine books of Pliny's letters with book 10 and the *Panegyricus* used only as additional material: C. rightly believes that it is in the letters carefully selected, arranged and published by Pliny himself that his efforts to create and transmit to posterity his own image as a high-principled, courageous, and refined aristocrat are most visible. As she emphasizes, "every letter in the collection can be read as part of a subtle program to paint Pliny's own character" (p. 11). Which means, however, that a study of "Pliny's women" necessarily becomes a study, not (only) of his female characters, but of Pliny himself, deftly using references to women as a means of self-promotion.

The book consists, apart from the *Introduction* and *Conclusions*, of five chapters dealing with five groups of women as distinguished by C. from among Pliny's female characters. These are the women connected with the "Stoic" opposition to the Julio-Claudian and Flavian emperors, in particular Caecina Paetus' wife Arria the Elder and her granddaughter Fannia, the wife of Helvidius the Elder (ch. 1, pp. 18–67); the female members of the family of Corellius Rufus, Pliny's revered mentor (ch. 2, pp. 68–99); the women of Pliny's family (apart from his mother, who appears in just two letters, all of them are Pliny's relations by his marriages) and, in the same chapter, women who encountered some difficulties as either testators or heirs and who were providentially helped out of these difficulties by none other than Pliny, the "champion of the vulnerable" (ch. 3, pp. 100–137); three models of the ideal wife in three different stages

of life, Minicia Marcella, Pliny's wife Calpurnia, and, once again, the courageous Fannia (ch. 4, pp. 138–185); and, finally, some more morally equivocal female characters (e.g. the Vestal Cornelia and Ummidia Quadratilla) whose introduction enables the author to present himself as an “arbiter of virtue” (ch. 5, pp.186–213). Each chapter is structured in a similar way: after some introductory remarks there is a presentation of the historical and, especially, the prosopographical background of the women under consideration, followed by a careful analysis of the letters in question and, at the end, by some concluding observations not only summarizing the chapter's main points but also indicating their significance for the book's basic idea of Pliny constructing his own image through the women about whom he writes.

Quite obviously, sections dealing with the women's historical background take into account also the men associated with those women: so we have a detailed treatment of various members of the “Stoic” opposition in ch. 1 and a discussion of the identity of Corellia Hispulla's husband and son in ch. 2. Also, C. deals with the vexed question of the number of Pliny's marriages, cautiously concluding that most probably Calpurnia was his second, not third wife (pp. 104f.).¹ But C.'s most valuable and original observations are to be found in the sub-chapters discussing the letters themselves. Her method is rather traditional and philological (which, in this reviewer's opinion, is no reproach): we are given a series of close readings in which much attention is given to, e.g., Pliny's introduction of direct quotations (pp. 46f.), the function of passive periphrastics in his letters (p. 82), his use of words such as *festivus* and *amabilis* (p. 151), the infrequency of his beginning a letter with a person's name in the nominative (p. 205), or his use of first-person pronouns and possessive adjectives (p. 89 and the statistics tabulated in *Appendix C* on pp. 227–239). All this, of course, is not philological *l'art pour art*, but it serves the major purpose of better understanding Pliny's literary methods and aims; for instance, the examination of his usage of the value terms *castitas*, *sanctitas*, *gravitas* and *constantia* (which appear in his description of Fannia) enables C. to conclude that “Pliny elevates her character beyond that of every one else in the letters” (p. 178).

As said before, the women appearing in Pliny's correspondence are used to promote the writer's own image. C. points out, for example, that numerous references to the female members of the “Stoic” opposition are Pliny's main means of presenting himself as closely connected with the group and even, during Domitian's reign, imperiled on account of this connection (although she does not mention two other letters in which there are no references to women, but which also speak about Pliny's danger, 7.27.12ff. and 7.33). The same applies to the female relatives of Corellius Rufus whose death soon after AD 98 meant that Pliny, wishing to present himself in the correspondence as his protégé and successor, had to emphasize his association with Corellius' wife, sister and especially

¹ But it appears from his letter to Trajan, 10.2.2f., that there were two marriages under Domitian and that Calpurnia was, accordingly, his third wife; for this reading of the letter (against those who take *quos habere etiam illo tristissimo saeculo volui* as a parenthesis) see A.N. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny. A Historical and Social Commentary* (Oxford 1966), 559f.

daughter. As C. rightly observes, “[t]he Corelliae...offer an ideal channel through which Pliny may illuminate his Corellian connections” (p. 80). Even his love letters to Cornelia should be viewed from this perspective (pp. 165ff.; C. aptly notes the link between 7.5, Pliny’s “love elegy in prose,” and its immediate predecessor in the collection, 7.4).

But C.’s interpretations of Pliny’s letters would have been even more successful had she also taken into account, to a greater degree, other sources apart from Pliny himself. For example, when mentioning Cornelia listening to Pliny’s recitations from behind a curtain (4.19.3: *discreta velo*) it would have been apposite to cite Tacitus, *Annals* 13.5.1, featuring Agrippina, who witnesses senatorial debates on the Palatine *velo discreta*. Similarly, Pliny’s praise of the girl Minicia (5.16) might have been compared to what Quintilian says about his dead son (*Inst.* 6 *praef.* 10ff.), a passage described by B. Rawson as “one of the most moving literary accounts which survive from Rome” (*Children and Childhood in Roman Italy* [Oxford 2003], 355). And, finally, the picture we get in 7.24 of Ummidia Quadratilla’s grandson coming into possession of a house previously owned by Gaius Cassius would have been more explicit if we had been told that his crucial virtue of *severitas* was also Cassius’ characteristic (see Tac. *Ann.* 13.48 and his other appearances in the *Annals*).

Not all readings of Pliny proposed by C. are beyond objection. When discussing 7.19 she fails to note that Pliny clearly differentiates between *amabilis* (which goes back to *quam iucunda quam comis*) and *veneranda* (which goes back to Fannia’s earlier characterization in sections 4–6); the paraphrase “her charm and friendliness provoke both his love and respect” (p. 56) misses the point (for the idea see 3.3.1; 7.11.3; 7.24.5). Her interpretation of 4.10 does not take into account the important fact that it is not Pliny who “undertakes to write to Sabinus” (p. 128) but that Pliny simply answers a question posed in his own letter by Sabinus (Pliny’s first words are *scribis mihi*): thus it would be rash to speak about “Sabinus’ reluctance” to manumit Sabina’s slave and hand him a legacy; it is equally possible that he intends to free the slave but wants to know his fellow heir’s opinion first. Further, it is wrong to state that “it is the loss of *constantia* in the face of illness that propels both Corellius Rufus and Silius Italicus to commit suicide by starvation” (p. 155) – no, in both 1.12.9 and 3.7.2 *constantia* refers to the dying men’s steadfastness in their decision to part from life which means, of course, that they have not lost it. Minicia’s *constantia*, on the other hand, consists in her courage in facing illness. Lastly, it is difficult to accept C.’s conclusion that *alienissimi homines* of 7.24.7 are “no others than her pantomime actors” (p. 210). Here Pliny speaks about Quadratilla’s (distant) acquaintances who, during her fatal illness, eagerly visited the theater in the hope of receiving some legacy at her death. C. wrongly bases her interpretation on the phrase *theatralis operae corollarium*, which is used by Pliny figuratively and ironically.

Some other points: I cannot understand C.’s decision to use the term “Stoic opposition” without any reservation (such as placing the word “Stoic” within quotation marks); her claim that “the phrase is now in general use” (p. 21, n. 4) is simply wrong

(see M. Griffin, *Nero: The End of a Dynasty* [London 1984], 171ff. and the classic treatment by Ch. Wirszubski, *Libertas as a Political Idea at Rome during the Late Republic and Early Principate* [Cambridge 1950], 138ff.). Arulenus Rusticus did not write an eulogy of Helvidius, *pace* Suet. *Dom.* 10.3 (pp. 29f.). Aquilius Regulus was not Arulenus' accuser; from Pliny 1.5.2 it follows only that (a) he supported the accusation, (b) he published an attack on Arulenus after his death (and not a speech of accusation; pp. 38f.). It is now certain that the so-called *Testamentum Dasumii* does not mention Cornelius Tacitus but Cornelius Pusio; also, the identity of "Secundus" in this document is far from established, see W. Eck, *ZPE* 30 (1978), 277ff. (p. 102, n. 3 and p. 135). Quintus Veranius, a friend of Germanicus and one of Cnaeus Piso's accusers, and the homonymous consul of AD 49 and legate in Britain are two different people, probably (according to Syme) father and son (p. 111). Sabinus, the recipient of 4.10, is surely not the dead Sabina's son (had that been the case, Pliny would not have referred to her as "Sabina"). The *topos* of exchanging wedding goods for burial ones begins with Sophocles', not Euripides', *Antigone* (p. 155). On the stemma of the Corellii and Calpurnii in *Appendix A* (p. 222) a note "(cos. 88)" should refer to L. Minicius Rufus and not to L. Neratius Corellius Pansa (who was *cos. ord.* 122)

The bibliography is impressive (pp. 241–262) but, strangely, it lists mainly works which are *not* cited in the book; on my count, some 85% of more than 500 items from the bibliography appear neither in the text nor in the notes. That is not to say that they have not been used; probably, C.'s hastiness in preparing the book for publication is to blame. But even this impressive bibliography has some curious omissions, e.g. E.A. Hemelrijk, *Matrona Docta: Educated Women in the Roman Élite from Cornelia to Julia Domna* (London–New York 1999); A.J.L. van Hooff, *From Autothanasia to Suicide: Self-Killing in Classical Antiquity* (London 1990); D. Pausch, *Biographie und Bildungskultur: Personendarstellungen bei Plinius dem Jüngeren, Gellius und Sueton* (Berlin–New York 2004, with a sub-chapter entitled "*amor immortalitatis* und das epistolographische Selbstporträt," pp. 57ff.). Also, it is a pity that C. does not refer to the classic (and still important) works on Pliny's career by Mommsen and Otto.

Summing up: in spite of the objections raised above (some, but not all of which are minor), this is an important and valuable book which obviously contributes to our understanding of Pliny the Younger's literary output. It recommends itself also by the clarity of its presentation, its elegant style and, something this reviewer finds particularly welcome in a work dealing with "gender issues," its avoidance of modern (pseudo-) scholarly jargon.

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