# HENDERSON'S PLINY

J. HENDERSON: *Pliny's Statue. The Letters, Self-Portraiture and Classical Art*. Pp. xiv + 226, ills. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002. Cased, £40. ISBN: 0-85989-720-6.

'Context makes meaning' is the archaeologically correct message of this most recent of John Henderson's monographic *jeux d'esprit* on the postures and pretensions of the Roman imperial élite. The titular statue, an antique bronze representation of an aged man, is Pliny's subject in Letter 3.6, addressed to Annius Severus in Como. Explaining the purchase as the form in which he has chosen to invest an allegedly unsolicited legacy, Pliny instructs his stay-at-home compatriot how to oversee its conspicuous dedication in the local temple of Jupiter with, of course, its donor's biographical coordinates inscribed on its marble base. On completing H.'s study, the reader will have viewed the statue in multiple overlaid contexts from which to draw the culturally mediated conclusion that the statue both 'IS' and 'IS NOT' Pliny, a you-could-have-guessed-it developed through H.'s characteristic technique of surrounding the focal object or text with a variety of perspectival explorations, here unfolded in five chapters, and introduced by a feature not present in earlier H. books: a plain prose summary of the contents attached to H.'s provocatively quizzical headings.

Plinian epistolography constitutes the primary context, but within this, the particular collocation of letters in Book 3. What initially caught H.'s attention was the juxtaposition of Pliny's single prolonged art ekphrasis in Letter 3.6 with the commemorative portrait in 3.5 of Uncle Pliny, now our principal source for the masterworks of Greek art, especially as commandeered or copied for the decoration of Roman buildings and gardens. Additionally, Book 3 had once inspired a very full commentary edition by the nineteenth-century Cantabrigian J. E. Mayor, whose wealth of cultural and 'lexicographical gleaning', as H. observes, 'blazons a thematic reading for his book and *its* book' and serves as 'a very significant cue for this book'. But a further point inspired by Mayor's own inscription of his work to the 'Nestorian *senex*' C. E. Georges, is the association of dedication with dedicator, and this is the quintessence of Pliny 3. Beginning with its description of the elder statesman, Vestricius Spurinna, in his vigorously green old age, and ending with the recently deceased Martial, the book is a veritable gallery of portraits, including most significantly Elder Pliny and Silius Italicus as framing pieces for the bronze fisherman, but among others, Spurinna's prematurely deceased son, Suetonius Tranquillus, and the Emperor Trajan himself. By far the longest portion of the study, this discussion extends its engagement with Pliny's text into a wide-ranging exploration of his social world.

From this book of portraits, Pliny himself emerges as chief context. At the outset of his study, H. remarks upon the scholarly paradigm shift that has changed the consensus view of the letters from a factual mine of cultural information to a favorite example of élite self-presentation. Although scarcely one letter of the ten books fails to add to the composite image, Book 3 is nonetheless pivotal in marking the critical transition in the writer's history from promising young magistrate to consular with a mixture of confidence and concern for social place. So Pliny's array of portraits, whose positions on the Spurinna–Martial axis H. regards as a deliberate aspect of their writer's self-promotion, function as a series of refracting mirrors that bend the Plinian characteristics of each subject back upon Pliny himself, inscribing his emergence as an

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elder statesman within a 'mighty consecration of gerontology'. Considering the intratextuality of the letters, H. is particularly strong in his illumination of thematic contrasts and connections. Notable segments are the annotated catalogue bibliography of the Elder Pliny's writings as a rehearsal of Roman history, and Silius Italicus' ethically troubled career. Among the most interesting is the discussion of Martial's flattering epigramatic tribute to Pliny, in which the lines Pliny has omitted cast as much, if not more, light upon his self-portrayal than the portion he quotes. Although placed in oblique relationship to the book's center, 'greatest hero' Trajan appears through the perspective of the panegyrical presenter. Consideration of how the panegyric letters as creative self-imitation frame motifs from throughout the book forms a bridge, one might say, between the epistolary Pliny in his study and Pliny the 'star of the courtroom'. Thus the ego-exposition of the chapter prepares for the ego-investment of the statue.

As the environment that, having produced Pliny, still partially defines his identity as native son, municipal Como also is a signifying context, lucky recipient of the statue yet equally blessed by the dedication which H. reads with a particular emphasis on the yoking of Greek image with Roman base to form a status reminder that, in spite of its 3 foot measure, 'stands up tall for what it stands for', the 'legacy of Pliny the clan name', nephew and uncle together representing 'the whole life of Roman Como the town'.

Only in Chapters 4 and 5 do we gain a full view of the statue, starkly naked bronze *senex* standing up and now standing out between the two Roman elders, Pliny and Silius, within the contextual aesthetiscape of Pliny's own artistic knowledge. The first consideration is of the material and stylistic substances of the statue, veristic, bronze, yet surely not Corinthian, illuminated by comparison with other patronal stabs at connoisseurship, including Trimalchio's failures. But Pliny's own style is a matter of importance here, and his response to the paradox of beauty in ugliness reveals how the statue itself writes Pliny. Shortest of all chapters, the conclusion finally addresses formal art historical issues citing a hypothetical parallel in the Louvre fisherman, which exists in so many versions and with identities ranging from Hellenistic peasant to dying Seneca—the epistolary Seneca having figured as a point of comparison in this book—and with reference to Rome's own valuation of verism as a manner of representing life, counterposing Greek (usually heroic) nudity, which shows all, with Roman modesty, which clothes almost all. While citing the fit between both fisherman images and R. R. R. Smith's constructed definitions of the Hellenistic strain of realism, H. remarks upon a gap of information paradigmatic of the various unknowns that confront us in any area of our ancient studies. So the hybrid combination produced by the act of fitting dedicatory base to statue results in an epitomizing connoisseurship and scholarship, two further contexts within which the statue must be read.

But the ultimate context of this quest for meaning—should my reader not have guessed it—is H. himself as represented by his particular analytical technique, which proceeds from talking around and about his subject to talking into and through its text. Certainly the Pliny who ghost-writes the free-wheeling translations is H.'s Pliny. Would our Roman have rendered *tirunculus* as 'kindergartner'? Yet with Mayor in the background to represent all the solemnity of the grave and diligent Elder P., the book both is and is not H., just as the statue is and is not Pliny. With a more sustained and continuous line of argument than the related excursus on Juvenal 8, *Figuring Out Roman Nobility* (Exeter, 1997), *Pliny's Statue* enlivens its searching reconstruction of social interactions with the quizzical insights and witty phrases we have come to expect from this writer. If eagle scout Pliny was never the *enfant terrible*, the goad in the side

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of his political establishment that this Cambridge don has famously been, still the Jr/Sr Pliny might stand as a turning point for a consular H.

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## TACITUS AND THE PARALLEL TRADITION: *HISTORIES* I

C. DAMON (ed.): *Tacitus:* Histories *Book I* (Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics). Pp. xiv + 324, maps. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Paper, £16.95/US$24 (Cased, £47.50/US$70). ISBN: 0-521-57822-1 (0-521-57072-7 hbk).

If a commentary is supposed to help a reader comprehend a text, then a commentator on Tacitus faces an extraordinary challenge. Tacitean style, terse and concise, often defies comprehension. We are fortunate that Damon rose to the challenge. Designed for advanced undergraduates and graduate students, this commentary puts an important text within reach. It remains to be seen whether D. achieves her stated purpose, 'to reintegrate *Histories* I into the corpus of teachable Latin texts' (p. vii), but hopefully this commentary will defuse the notion that Tacitus is too difficult for the classroom.

In addition to text and notes, the book contains three maps, a thirty-page introduction, four appendices, a select bibliography, and two indices. The notes refer to the maps intelligently and often; my students were grateful for the clarity and direction. The introductory material is also a fine summary of Tacitean style that leads the student to appreciate, rather than deplore, the craggy sentences ahead. The lexical, historical, and stylistic information contained in the notes contributes to the main theme of the commentary: the comparison of Tacitus with the parallel tradition for the Long Year in Suetonius, Plutarch, and Dio. Throughout the commentary, D. demonstrates her mastery of the parallel sources, and in this respect the notes are sensible and informative. Of particular interest is Appendix 1, 'Parallel Passages Showing Strong Verbal Similarities'. Two further appendices collate D.'s notes on parallel incidents and differences between Tacitus and the other three authors. Appendix 4, 'Notes Illustrating Differences between *Histories* I and the Parallel Tradition', has four subcategories: differences in context, tone or detail, chronology, and facts. These carefully prepared appendices lay the groundwork for students to discover what is distinctive about Tacitus.

I single out three exemplary sentences from the introduction that demonstrate D.'s sensitivity to Tacitean mentality, her mastery of the parallel tradition, and the uncanny ability to merge the two that marks this commentary out as exceptional. In preparing the student for the style of *Histories* I, D. comes to terms with why Tacitus is so difficult to read. Simply put, 'some of T.'s explanations rely heavily on the reader' (p. 10). D. then describes *how* Tacitus relies on the reader: 'Where Cicero would supply conjunctions and Caesar or Livy temporal indicators, T. leaves the reader to make sense of his juxtapositions' (p. 19). Finally, D. alerts the reader to what I consider a principal feature of Tacitean thought: 'Another measure of T.'s quality as an historian (and another source of differences between T. and the parallel tradition), is that unresolvable dubieties are declared as such' (p. 28).

These unresolvable dubieties are of two varieties: the inescapable and the deliberate.

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