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PLINY AND HIS ELEGIES IN ICARIA

Pliny's *Ep*. 7.4 has justifiably troubled scholars. Responding to Pontius Allifanus' question as to how he began to write hendecasyllables, Pliny embarks on a brief retrospective of his poetic achievements (a Greek tragedy, elegies, hexameters of heroic tone, hexameters of erotic tone, a second group of elegies, polymetric poetry and, finally, hendecasyllables),[1] which eventually reaches a crescendo of excessive self-praise:[2]

postremo placuit exemplo multorum unum separatim hendecasyllaborum uolumen absoluere, nec paenitet. legitur describitur cantatur etiam, et a Graecis quoque, quos Latine huius libelli amor docuit, nunc cithara nunc lyra personatur. sed quid ego tam gloriose? quamquam poetis furere concessum est. et tamen non de meo sed de aliorum iudicio loquor; qui siue iudicant siue errant, me delectat. unum precor, ut posteri quoque aut errent similiter aut iudicent.[3] (Plin. *Ep*. 7.4.8–10)

Finally I decided to do as many authors have done and complete a separate volume of hendecasyllables; and I have never regretted this. My verses are read and copied, they are even sung, and set to the cithara or lyre by Greeks who have learned Latin out of liking for my little book. But I must not boast (though poets are allowed to talk wildly!), even if it is not my own opinion I am quoting but other people's – which pleases me whether right or wrong. I only pray that posterity will be right or wrong in the same way. (tr. Radice, Loeb)

Since Pliny's stance in this particular instance is far removed from that of *Ep*. 4.14, in which he comes across as not laying too much importance on his poetic

[1] For the 'little discernible progression' in Pliny's list, see R. Morello, 'Confidence, *inuidia*, and Pliny's epistolary curriculum', in ead. and A.D. Morrison (edd.), *Ancient Letters: Classical and Late Antique Epistolography* (Oxford, 2007), 169–89, at 178 n. 17. For Pliny's poetry in general, see S. Prete, 'Gli endecasillabi di Plinio il Giovane', *Aevum* 22 (1948), 333–6; id., *Saggi Pliniani* (Bologna, 1948), 14–31; F. Gamberini, *Stylistic Theory and Practice in the Younger Pliny*, Altertumswissenschaftliche Texte und Studien 11 (Hildesheim, Zurich and New York, 1983), 82–121; M. Armisen-Marchetti, 'Pline le Jeune et la poésie', *VL* 128 (1992), 26–36; D. Hershkowitz, 'Pliny the poet', *G&R* 43 (1995), 168–81; G. Aricò, 'Plinio il Giovane e la poesia', in *Storia letteratura e arte a Roma nel secondo secolo dopo Cristo: Atti del convegno (Mantova 8–9–10 ottobre 1992)* (Florence, 1995), 27–41; id., '*Leues libelli*. Su alcuni aspetti della poetica dei generi minori da Stazio a Plinio il Giovane', *CentoPagine* 2 (2008), 1–11; U. Auhagen, '*Lusus* und *Gloria* – Plinius' *Hendecasyllabi* (*Epist*. 4, 14; 5, 3 und 7, 4)', in L. Castagna and E. Lefèvre (edd.), *Plinius der Jüngere und seine Zeit*, Beiträge zur Altertumskunde 187 (Munich and Leipzig, 2003), 3–13; M. Citroni, 'Martial, Pline le jeune, et l'identité du genre de l'épigramme latine', *Dictynna* 1 (2004), 125–53; I. Marchesi, *The Art of Pliny's Letters: A Poetics of Allusion in the Private Correspondence* (Cambridge, 2008), esp. 53–96.

[2] Generally, for Pliny's self-praise in his letters, see especially N. Rudd, 'Stratagems of vanity: Cicero, *Ad familiares* 5.12 and Pliny's letters', in A.J. Woodman and J. Powell (edd.), *Author and Audience in Latin Literature* (Cambridge, 1992), 26–32; R.K. Gibson, 'Pliny and the art of (in)offensive self-praise', *Arethusa* 36 (2003), 235–54.

[3] All references to Pliny's letters follow the edition of R.A.B. Mynors, *C. Plini Caecili Secundi, Epistularum Libri Decem* (Oxford, 1963).

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work,[4] the apparent contradiction cannot but raise suspicions as to the earnestness of the boastful tone in letter 7.4. In her recent insightful book Ilaria Marchesi[5] has argued that the message of this letter should not be taken at face value; on the contrary, she believes that through an allusion to Hor. *Epist*. 2.2.87–90, where Horace speaks of the *furor* in the mutual flattery between poets, Pliny playfully 'deconstructs the seriousness of his own claim to fame' (87), which appears ironic, and thus 7.4 should be 'restored to its original value as a playful declaration of modesty' (88).[6] Consequently, in her words, '[t]he paradoxical quality of some of its claims and the presence of a probable intertext suggest a reading of 7.4 that might help to restore to the text the lighthearted, almost parodic tone it was probably intended to have when first drafted and received' (79).[7] As I shall argue here, such an interpretation is further reinforced by Pliny's reference to the elegies he composed in Icaria. Moreover, the probable humorous and self-deprecating intention of this reference has potentially wider interpretative consequences for many other passages in Pliny's collection, since it seems to indicate a different way to read an author who has traditionally been seen as lacking in humour.[8]

Listing his poetic works, Pliny declares that he has always had a fine relationship with poetry and that amongst his earlier works were a Greek tragedy he composed at the age of fourteen and Latin elegies he composed a few years later, when, during his return from his military service,[9] he found himself delayed on the island of Icaria as a result of adverse winds:

ais legisse te hendecasyllabos meos; requiris etiam quemadmodum coeperim scribere, homo ut tibi uideor seuerus, ut ipse fateor non ineptus. numquam a poetice (altius enim repetam) alienus fui; quin etiam quattuordecim natus annos Graecam tragoediam scripsi. 'Qualem?' inquis. nescio; tragoedia uocabatur. mox, cum e militia rediens in Icaria insula uentis detinerer, Latinos elegos in illud ipsum mare ipsamque insulam feci. (Plin. *Ep*. 7.4.1–3)

You say that you have read my hendecasyllables, and you want to know how a serious man like me came to write them; and I am not frivolous, I admit. To start at the beginning, I was always interested in poetry and wrote a Greek tragedy at the age of fourteen. What it was like I can't say – anyway, I called it a tragedy. Later on I was weatherbound in the island of Icaria while on my way home from military service, and wrote some Latin elegiacs with the sea and island for theme. (tr. Radice, Loeb)

[4] This stance is evident even in the self-deprecating humour in the imaginary or anticipated feedback which Pliny puts into the mouth of his addressee in 4.14.10: *nam si hoc opusculum nostrum aut potissimum esset aut solum, fortasse posset durum uideri dicere: 'Quaere quod agas'; molle et humanum est: 'Habes quod agas.'*, where the epistolographer implies that for him oratory appears more hopeful for glory than poetry; cf. also Plin. *Ep*. 8.21.4: *liber fuit et opusculis uarius et metris. ita solemus, qui ingenio parum fidimus, satietatis periculum fugere*, where Pliny admits that he has no great confidence in his poetic abilities.

[5] Marchesi (n. 1), 78–88.

[6] For Pliny's tendency to understate instances of self-praise and for his balanced self-presentation, Marchesi (n. 1), 79 n. 39 cites M. Ludolph, *Epistolographie und Selbstdarstellung: Untersuchungen zu den 'Paradebriefen' Plinius des Jüngeren*, Classica Monacensia 17 (Tübingen, 1997), 60–88 and 194–208.

[7] Cf. also Gamberini (n. 1), 97–103, who states that Pliny's hopes for glory from his poetry in *Ep*. 7.4 is 'not to be taken too seriously' (101–2) and adds that in Pliny's reference to himself as *poeta* in 7.4.10 'the intention is clearly humorous' (103).

[8] For a modest step in changing this view, see G.H. Thompson, 'Pliny's "want of humor"', *CJ* 37 (1941–2), 201–9.

[9] Pliny probably means his military tribunate in Syria; see A.N. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny: A Historical and Social Commentary* (Oxford, 1966), 405, who also cites *Ep*. 1.10.2, 3.2.5, 7.31.2 and 8.14.7.

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Marchesi correctly interprets Pliny's statement that he does not know which tragedy he wrote, but that it simply was a tragedy (*'Qualem?' inquis. nescio; tragoedia uocabatur*), as an expression of his intention to imply that its quality was such that the result was tragic, i.e. unsuccessful.[10] The epistolographer's statement that he proceeded to compose elegies in Icaria could be taken to carry the same implication. The place of composition is suggestive of a similar unsuccessful result.

Pliny's phrase *cum e militia rediens in Icaria insula uentis detinerer, Latinos elegos in illud ipsum mare ipsamque insulam feci* creates an elegiac atmosphere reminiscent of Ovidian heroines[11] or the cases of Propertius 1.17 and Tibullus 1.3.[12] The similarity with Tibullus 1.3, where the poet is detained on the Greek island of Phaeacia (modern Corfu) because of a serious illness and is thus unable to accompany Messalla further on his military expedition to the East, is especially interesting here, since Pliny seems to exploit the same elegiac context: the elegiac poet is detained against his will on a Greek island on his way to or from military service. However, Pliny playfully implies that though he tried to follow traditional elegiac models, as in his attempt at tragedy, his attempt at elegies resulted in tragic failure. This is adroitly implied through a hint at the fate of Icarus, the tragic son of Daedalus. According to the famous myth, both the Icarian Sea (part of the Aegean Sea) and the island Icaria were named after the mythical hero Icarus, who fell to his death after the wax attaching his man-made wings melted when he flew too close to the sun.[13] Thus, by stating that he composed elegies in Icaria, and in particular elegies in which the sea (*illud ipsum mare*) and the island (*ipsamque insulam*) that bear Icarus' name were focal points, Pliny invites the reader to draw a connection between his elegies and the ill fortune of this mythical persona, who constitutes an *exemplum* of a reckless and shattered ambition. In this way Pliny successfully insinuates that his attempt to compose Latin elegies and excel in the particular genre was a youthful act beyond his control that was bound to come to an unfortunate conclusion.

Let us not forget that even in ancient times the mythological example of Icarus was very popular in poetic references. Apart from the possible metapoetic interpretations in Ovid,[14] there is also the famous comparison of Horace with Icarus

[10] Marchesi (n. 1), 81. It is worth mentioning that this is not the only case in which Pliny appears unwilling to give the precise title of his poetic work. It is also evident in the case of his hendecasyllables, since Pliny in *Ep*. 4.14.8–9 makes quite a fuss about the plainness of his title for the work: *sed quid ego plura? nam longa praefatione uel excusare uel commendare ineptias ineptissimum est. unum illud praedicendum uidetur, cogitare me has meas nugas ita inscribere 'hendecasyllabi', qui titulus sola metri lege constringitur. proinde, siue epigrammata siue idyllia siue eclogas siue, ut multi, poematia seu quod aliud uocare malueris, licebit uoces; ego tantum hendecasyllabos praesto*. Just as the tragedy of *Ep*. 7.4 was just a *tragoedia*, these hendecasyllables are just hendecasyllables (not eclogues, idylls or epigrams). Incidentally, this tactic could be a playful allusion to his uncle's preface to the *Natural History* (esp. pr. 24–7), which also contrasts the chosen title with other, more colourful options; cf. e.g. Plin. *HN* pr. 26: *me non paenitet nullum festiuiorem excogitasse titulum*. I would like to thank the anonymous reader of *CQ* for these suggestions.

[11] Cf. Marchesi (n. 1), 84.

[12] Cf. Auhagen (n. 1), 10, with n. 33.

[13] For the myth, see e.g. Ov. *Ars am.* 2.21–96; *Met*. 8.183–235; Hyg. *Fab*. 40.4.

[14] See e.g. S.J. Green, 'Lessons in love: fifty years of scholarship on the *Ars amatoria* and *Remedia amoris*', in R.K. Gibson, S.J. Green and A. Sharrock (edd.), *The Art of Love: Bimillennial Essays on Ovid's Ars Amatoria and Remedia Amoris* (Oxford and New York, 2006), 1–20, at 16–19; A. Sharrock, *Seduction and Repetition in Ovid's Ars Amatoria 2* (Oxford, 1994), 87–195; C.F. Ahern, Jr., 'Daedalus and Icarus in the *Ars amatoria*', *HSPh* 92 (1989), 273–96; L. Morgan, 'Child's play: Ovid and his critics', *JRS* 93 (2003), 66–91, esp. at 77–82, who also

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in *Carm*. 2.20.13–16, in a poem in which the lyric poet foresees the immortality of his work:

> iam Daedaleo notior Icaro
> uisam gementis litora Bosphori
> Syrtisque Gaetulas canorus
> ales Hyperboreosque campos.

Soon, more renowned than Daedalus' Icarus, I shall visit as a tuneful swan the shores of the bellowing Bosphorus, the Gaetulian Syrtes, and the plains of the folk beyond the North Wind. (tr. Rudd, Loeb)

In this particular ode,[15] Horace, having depicted himself donning wings and transformed into a bird, appears to be flying to various parts of the world, thus comparing his poetic activity to flying.[16] Such is his confidence in his poetry that he believes that his reputation for what he has achieved will exceed that of Icarus, implying that he will fly more safely.[17] Even more interestingly, in *Carm*. 4.2.1–4, Horace claims that whoever dares to compete against Pindar will share Icarus' fate:

> Pindarum quisquis studet aemulari,
> Iulle, ceratis ope Daedalea
> nititur pinnis, uitreo daturus
> nomina ponto.

Anyone, Iullus, who strives to compete with Pindar relies on wings that have been waxed with Daedalus' skill, and is destined to give his name to a glassy sea. (tr. Rudd, Loeb)

The use of the example of Icarus in these lines to denote poetic ruin and failure is indicative of the way in which a literary allusion to the particular myth could be employed and sheds better light on Pliny's reference to his elegies in Icaria. Even if Pliny did find himself on this particular island, a fact about which there can be reasonable reservations,[18] and did compose elegies while there, the location itself allows the writer a playful setting in which to present his elegies as an example of an instance of youthful *audacia* which met with failure.

This interpretation could be further reinforced by Pliny's other allusive reference to flight/fame in *Ep*. 5.8.3: *itaque diebus ac noctibus cogito, si 'qua me quoque possim tollere humo'; id enim uoto meo sufficit, illud supra uotum 'uictorque uirum uolitare per ora'; 'quamquam o–': sed hoc satis est, quod prope sola historia polliceri uidetur*. In this famous letter, where Pliny expresses his views on history

cites (79 n. 57) E. Oliensis, 'Return to sender: the rhetoric of *nomina* in Ovid's *Tristia*', *Ramus* 26 (1997), 172–93, at 182–3 and 192 n. 18.

[15] For the interpretation of this ode, the commentary by R.G.M. Nisbet and M. Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace, Odes, Book II* (Oxford, 1978), 332–48 is still invaluable; see also D. West, *Horace, Odes II: Vatis Amici* (Oxford, 1998), 142–8.

[16] Ennius' famous epigram *uictorque uirum uolitare per ora* (Enn. *Epigr*. 2 V^3) is regarded as Horace's most probable model here; cf. Nisbet and Hubbard (n. 15), 336.

[17] It is worth noting that scholars in the past have suggested the correction of *notior* to *tutior*; cf. Nisbet and Hubbard (n. 15), 343–4.

[18] The lines in question are the only reference Pliny ever makes to his presence on the island; nowhere else does he suggest that he passed through Icaria. Besides, there are a number of alternative, briefer routes one could have taken returning from Syria. If his intention was to pass through Corinth, why should he travel as far as Samos and Icaria?

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and oratory, he reveals his ambition to excel in the field of literature and win immortality, admits that this goal could be better fulfilled through historiography,[19] but then appears reluctant to attempt the particular genre. Here again literary fame is assimilated to flight, Pliny seems unable to fly, and thus this reference could add another layer to Pliny's story of allusive self-deprecation in *Ep*. 7.4.

Since the phrase *numquam a poetice … alienus fui* (7.4.2) could recall Terence's *Heautontimorumenos* (77: *homo sum: humani nihil a me alienum puto*),[20] by alluding to Roman comedy directly before he lists his poetic achievements Pliny creates a comic atmosphere which enables the reader to recognize the light-hearted tone of the letter. As in the case of the tragedy, the reference to the elegies composed in Icaria, which focusses on the sea and the island that were named after Icarus, continues in the same tone. Thus, by the implied parody of his early poetic works, Pliny suggests from the start that the blatant self-praise of his poetry in the letter should not be taken at face value. In addition, in this way Pliny diminishes the expectations of his readers regarding his elegiac poetry[21] and implicitly undermines the approval of his new elegies by his friends later on in the letter (7.4.7: *transii ad elegos; hos quoque non minus celeriter explicui, addidi alios facilitate corruptus. deinde in urbem reuersus sodalibus legi; probauerunt*). As this approval constitutes a *iudicium alienum* which comes from his *sodales*, Pliny deconstructs such approval, thus facilitating his intention[22] to undermine the excessive praise of his hendecasyllables at the end of the letter (7.4.8–10) and to prevent a serious reading of his own claim to poetic fame. Furthermore, by describing 'his flirtation with the complete gamut of styles,'[23] Pliny quite humorously gives an indirect response to the question asked by the recipient of the letter, namely, how he, a *seuerus* and *non ineptus* man, was driven to write hendecasyllables, i.e. was driven to *ineptiae*.[24] *Varietas* constitutes a prime characteristic of such poetry[25] and Pliny artfully suggests that he has had experience in the composition of vari-

[19] On *Ep*. 5.8 and Pliny's embedded historiography, see esp. R. Ash, '*Aliud est enim epistulam, aliud historiam … scribere* (*Epistles* 6.16.22): Pliny the historian?', *Arethusa* 36 (2003), 211–25; for his interest in historiography despite his disclaimer, cf. also S. Tzounakas, '*Neque enim historiam componebam*: Pliny's first epistle and his attitude towards historiography', *MH* 64 (2007), 42–54.

[20] Marchesi (n. 1), 80–1.

[21] A sample of Pliny's elegiac poetry is given at *Ep*. 7.9.11, for which see G. Boccuto, 'Plinio *Ep*. VII 9, 11: un affermazione letteraria in distici elegiaci', *A&R* 36 (1991), 26–36, esp. at 32–6.

[22] This intention is ingeniously interpreted by Marchesi (n. 1), 84–8, who notes that 'Horace's intertext undermines the letter's integrity and prevents us taking 7.4 as a serious exercise in self-praise' (87).

[23] I borrow the phrase from Marchesi (n. 1), 86.

[24] This passage is a characteristic example of Pliny's wider tendency to assume astonishment in his addressees when he has stepped outside the sober comfort zone of oratory and inheritance law. In *Ep*. 4.14, for instance (cf. also *Ep*. 5.3), he feels the obligation to justify his choice of the particular poetic genre by recalling the examples of *grauissimos uiros qui talia scripserunt* (4.14.4) and later on (4.14.5) of Catullus' poem 16.5–8: *nam castum esse decet pium poetam | ipsum, uersiculos nihil necesse est, | qui tunc denique habent salem et leporem | si sunt molliculi et parum pudici*. In *Ep*. 1.6, too, Pliny already anticipates laughter from Tacitus; although no obviously poetic activity is described in that letter, its meaning is later to be converted in order to relate specifically and explicitly to poetry in *Ep*. 9.10's 'replay' of *Ep*. 1.6.

[25] Cf. e.g. Plin. *Ep*. 4.14.2–3: *accipies cum hac epistula hendecasyllabos nostros, quibus nos in uehiculo in balineo inter cenam oblectamus otium temporis. his iocamur ludimus amamus dolemus querimur irascimur, describimus aliquid modo pressius modo elatius, atque ipsa* ***uarietate*** *temptamus efficere, ut alia aliis quaedam fortasse omnibus placeant*; 8.21.4: *liber fuit et opusculis* ***uarius*** *et metris*.

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ous metres and literary genres since his youth. Besides, let us not forget that, as Pliny notes in *Ep*. 8.21.4 (*liber fuit et opusculis uarius et metris*. *ita solemus, qui ingenio parum fidimus, satietatis periculum fugere*), for all those with insufficient confidence in their *ingenium*, himself included, *uarietas* is the only way to avoid the *satietas* of the public. Again, the relevant letter 4.14 is very helpful here and sheds better light on *Ep*. 7.4 as regards this point; the examination of the two letters together corroborates the suggestion that Pliny does indeed seem to settle for light hendecasyllables as most suited both to his thirst for variety and to his modest *ingenium*, while this suggestion is supported even by *Ep*. 9.29,[26] although the latter does not explicitly refer to poetry. Meanwhile, by implying that the results of his attempts to compose a work in another literary genre (tragedy, elegy, epic) have been meagre, he effectively justifies his final choice of light hendecasyllables.

However, the light-hearted and parodic implications of Pliny's statements here should not be restricted to *Ep*. 7.4 or even to the stance he takes on his poetry. Such playful claims are to be found in many other cases and indicate that we should read the rest of Pliny differently and that we should expect to find clever, allusive humour characterizing even passages once read as examples of unappealing self-importance.[27]

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[26] Cf. esp. 9.29.1: *Vt satius unum aliquid insigniter facere quam plura mediocriter, ita plurima mediocriter, si non possis unum aliquid insigniter. quod intuens ego uariis me studiorum generibus nulli satis confisus experior*.

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