

Pliny the Younger: Selected Letters

Pliny the Younger served as an official of the Roman government under Trajan. He was also a prolific letter-writer, and as many of them survive he's an important and candid source for both public and private appraisals of the aristocratic Roman life of the first century CE.

4.19: To Calpurnia Hispulla

As you are an exemplary instance of tender regard to your family in general, and to your late excellent brother in particular, whose warm attachment you returned with an equal fondness: and have not only shewn the affection of an aunt, but supplied that of a lost father, to his daughter; you will hear, I am persuaded, with infinite pleasure, that she behaves worthy of her father, her grandfather, and yourself. She is incomparably discerning, incomparably thrifty; while her love for her husband betokens a chaste nature. Her affection to me has given her a turn to books; and my compositions, which she takes a pleasure in reading, and even getting by heart, are continually in her hands. How full of solicitude is she when I am entering upon any cause! How kindly does she rejoice with me when it is over! When I am pleading, she stations messengers to inform her from time to time how I am heard, what applauses I receive, and what success attends the cause. When at any time I recite my works, she sits close at hand, concealed behind a curtain, and greedily overhears my praises. She sings my verses and sets them to her lyre, with no other master but Love, the best instructor.

From these circumstances I draw my most assured hopes, that the harmony between us will increase with our days, and be as lasting as our lives. For it is not my youth or my person, which time gradually impairs; it is my glory of which she is enamoured. But what else could be expected from one who was trained by your hands, and formed by your instructions; who was surrounded under your roof with all that is pious and moral, and had learned to love me from your account of my character? For while you honoured my mother as if she were your own, so you formed and encouraged me from infancy, presaging that I should become all that my wife now thinks I am. Accept therefore of our mutual thanks, that you have given us to each other, and, as it were, chosen the one for the other. Farewell.

10.81: To Geminus

Numidia Quadratilla is dead, having almost reached her eightieth year. She enjoyed, up to her last illness, uninterrupted good health, and was unusually stout and robust for one of her sex. She has left a very prudent will, having disposed of two-thirds of her estate to her grandson, and the rest to her granddaughter.

The young lady I know very slightly, but the grandson is one of my most intimate friends. He is a remarkable young man, and his merit entitles him to the affection of a relation, even where his blood does not. Notwithstanding his remarkable personal beauty, he escaped every malicious imputation both whilst a boy and when a youth: he was a husband at four-and-twenty, and would have been a father if Providence had not disappointed his hopes.

He lived in the family with his grandmother, who was exceedingly devoted to the pleasures of the town, yet observed great severity of conduct himself, while always perfectly deferential and submissive to her. She retained a set of pantomimes, and was an encourager of this class of people to a degree inconsistent with one of her sex and rank. But Quadratus never appeared at these entertainments, whether she exhibited them in the theatre or in her own house; not indeed did she require him to be present. I once heard her say, when she was recommending to me the supervision of her grandson's studies, that it was her custom, in order to pass away some of those unemployed hours with which female life abounds, to amuse herself with playing at chess, or seeing the mimicry of her pantomimes; but that, whenever she engaged in either of those amusements, she constantly sent away her grandson to his studies: she appeared to me to act thus as much out of reverence for the youth as from affection.

I was a good deal surprised, as I am sure you will be too, at what he told me the last time the Pontifical games were exhibited.¹

As we were coming out of the theatre together, where we had been entertained with a show of these pantomimes, "Do you know," said he, "to-day is the first time I ever saw my grandmother's freedman dance?" Such was the grandson's speech! while a set of men of a far different stamp, in order to do honour to Quadratilla (I am ashamed to call it honour), were running up and down the theatre, pretending to be struck with the utmost admiration and rapture at the performances of those pantomimes, and then imitating in musical chant the mien and manner of their lady patroness. But now all the reward they have got, in return for their theatrical performances, is just a few trivial legacies, which they have the mortification to receive from an heir who was never so much as present at these shows.

I send you this account, knowing you do not dislike hearing town news, and because, too, when any occurrence has given me pleasure, I love to renew it again by relating it. And indeed this instance of affection in Quadratilla, and the honour done therein to that excellent youth, her grandson, has afforded me a very sensible satisfaction; as I extremely rejoice that the house which once belonged to Cassius,² the founder and chief of the Cassian school, is come into the possession of one no less considerable than its former master. For my friend will fill it and become it as he ought, and its ancient dignity, lustre, and glory will again revive under Quadratus, who, I am persuaded, will prove as eminent an orator as Cassius was a lawyer. Farewell.

7.54: To Marcellinus

I write this to you in the deepest sorrow: the youngest daughter of my friend Fundanus is dead! I have never seen a more cheerful and more lovable girl, or one who better deserved to have enjoyed a long, I had almost said an immortal, life! She was scarcely fourteen, and yet there was in her a wisdom far beyond her years, a matronly gravity united with girlish sweetness and virgin bashfulness.

With what an endearing fondness did she hang on her father's neck! How affectionately and modestly she used to greet us, his friends! With what a tender and

deferential regard she used to treat her nurses, tutors, teachers, each in their respective offices! What an eager, industrious, intelligent reader she was! She took few amusements, and those with caution. How self-controlled, how patient, how brave she was under her last illness! She complied with all the directions of her physicians; she spoke cheerful, comforting words to her sister and her father; and when all her bodily strength was exhausted, the vigour of her mind sustained her. That indeed continued even to her last moments, unbroken by the pain of a long illness, or the terrors of approaching death; and it is a reflection which makes us miss her, and grieve that she has gone from us, the more. Oh, melancholy, untimely loss, too truly!

She was engaged to an excellent young man; the wedding-day was fixed, and we were all invited. How our joy has been turned into sorrow! I cannot express in words the inward pain I felt when I heard Fundanus himself (as grief is ever finding out fresh circumstances to aggravate its affliction) ordering the money he had intended laying out upon clothes, pearls, and jewels for her marriage, to be employed in frankincense, ointments, and perfumes for her funeral. He is a man of great learning and good sense, who has applied himself from his earliest youth to the deeper studies and the fine arts, but all the maxims of fortitude which he has received from books, or advanced himself, he now absolutely rejects, and every other virtue of his heart gives place to all a parent's tenderness. You will excuse, you will even approve, his grief, when you consider what he has lost. He has lost a daughter who resembled him in his manners, as well as his person, and exactly copied out all her father.

So, if you should think proper to write to him upon the subject of so reasonable a grief, let me remind you not to use the rougher arguments of consolation, and such as seem to carry a sort of reproof with them, but those of kind and sympathizing humanity. Time will render him more open to the dictates of reason: for as a fresh wound shrinks back from the hand of the surgeon, but by degrees submits to, and even seeks of its own accord, the means of its cure, so a mind under the first impression of a misfortune shuns and rejects all consolations, but at length desires and is lulled by their gentle application. Farewell.

¹ The priests, as well as other magistrates, exhibited public games to the people when they entered upon their office.

² A famous lawyer who flourished in the reign of the emperor Claudius: those who followed his opinions were said to be Cassians, or of the school of Cassius.

5.34: To Nepos

I have constantly observed that amongst the deeds and sayings of illustrious persons of either sex, some have made more noise in the world, whilst others have been really greater, although less talked about; and I am confirmed in this opinion by a conversation I had yesterday with Fannia. This lady is a granddaughter to that celebrated Arria who animated her husband to meet death, by her own glorious example. She informed me of several particulars relating to Arria, no less heroic than this applauded action of hers, though taken less notice of, and I think you will be as surprised to read the account of them as I was to hear it.

Her husband, Caecinna Paetus, and her son, were both attacked at the same time with a fatal illness, as was supposed; of which the son died, a youth of remarkable beauty, and as modest as he was comely, endeared indeed to his parents no less by his many graces than from the fact of his being their son. His mother prepared his funeral and conducted the usual ceremonies so privately that Paetus did not know of his death. Whenever she came into his room, she pretended her son was alive and actually better: and as often as he enquired after his health, would answer, "He has had a good rest, and eaten his food with quite an appetite." Then when she found the tears she had so long kept back, gushing forth in spite of herself, she would leave the room, and having given vent to her grief, return with dry eyes and a serene countenance, as though she had dismissed every feeling of bereavement at the door of her husband's chamber.

I must confess it was a brave action³ in her to draw the steel, plunge it into her breast, pluck out the dagger, and present it to her husband with that ever memorable, I had almost said that divine, expression, "Paetus, it is not painful." But when she spoke and acted thus, she had the prospect of glory and immortality before her; how far greater, without the support of any such animating motives, to hide her tears, to conceal her grief, and cheerfully to act the mother, when a mother no more!

Scribonianus had taken up arms in Illyria against Claudius, where he lost his life, and Paetus, who was of his party, was brought a prisoner to Rome. When

they were going to put him on board ship, Arria besought the soldiers that she might be permitted to attend him: "For surely," she urged, "you will allow a man of consular rank some servants to dress him, attend to him at meals, and put his shoes on for him; but if you will take me, I alone will perform all these offices." Her request was refused; upon which she hired a fishing-boat, and in that small vessel followed the ship.

On her return to Rome, meeting the wife of Scribonianus in the emperor's palace, at the time when this woman voluntarily gave evidence against the conspirators—"What," she exclaimed, "shall I hear you even speak to me, you, on whose bosom your husband, Scribonianus, was murdered, and yet you survive him?"—an expression which plainly shews that the noble manner in which she put an end to her life was no unpremeditated effect of sudden passion.

Moreover, when Thrasea, her son-in-law, was endeavouring to dissuade her from her purpose of destroying herself, and, amongst other arguments which he used, said to her, "Would you then advise your daughter to die with me if my life were to be taken from me?" "Most certainly I would," she replied, "if she had lived as long, and in as much harmony with you, as I have with my Paetus." This answer greatly increased the alarm of her family, and made them watch her for the future more narrowly; which when she perceived, "It is of no use," she said, "you may oblige me to effect my death in a more painful way, but it is impossible you should prevent it."

Saying this, she sprang from her chair, and running her head with the utmost violence against the wall, fell down, to all appearance, dead; but being brought to herself again, "I told you," she said, "if you would not suffer me to take an easy path to death, I should find a way to it, however hard." Now, is there not, my friend, something much greater in all this than in the so-much-talked-of "Paetus, it is not painful," to which these led the way? And yet this last is the favourite topic of fame, while all the former are passed over in silence. Whence I cannot but infer, what I observed at the beginning of my letter, that some actions are more celebrated, whilst others are really greater.

³ The following is the story, as related by several of the ancient historians: Paetus, having joined Scribonianus, who was in arms, in Illyria, against Claudius, was taken after the death of Scribonianus, and condemned to death. Arria, having, in vain, solicited his life, persuaded him to destroy himself, rather than

suffer the ignominy of falling by the executioner's hands; and, in order to encourage him to an act, to which, it seems, he was not particularly inclined, she set him the example in the manner Pliny relates.

6.43: To Cornelius Minicianus

Have you heard—I suppose, not yet, for the news has but just arrived that Valerius Licinianus has become a professor in Sicily? This unfortunate person, who lately enjoyed the dignity of praetor, and was esteemed the most eloquent of our advocates, is now fallen from a senator to an exile, from an orator to a teacher of rhetoric. Accordingly in his inaugural speech he uttered, sorrowfully and solemnly, the following words: “O Fortune, how capriciously dost thou sport with mankind! Thou makest rhetoricians of senators, and senators of rhetoricians!” A sarcasm so poignant and full of gall that one might almost imagine he fixed upon this profession merely for the sake of an opportunity of applying it. And having made his first appearance in school, clad in the Greek cloak (for exiles have no right to wear the toga), after arranging himself and looking down upon his attire, “I am, however,” he said, “going to declaim in Latin.” You will think, perhaps, this situation, wretched and deplorable as it is, is what he well deserves for having stained the honourable profession of an orator with the crime of incest.

It is true, indeed, he pleaded guilty to the charge; but whether from a consciousness of his guilt, or from an apprehension of worse consequences if he denied it, is not clear; for Domitian generally raged most furiously where his evidence failed him most hopelessly. That emperor had determined that Cornelia, chief of the Vestal Virgins,⁴ should be buried alive, from an extravagant notion that exemplary severities of this kind conferred lustre upon his reign.

Accordingly, by virtue of his office as supreme pontiff, or, rather, in the exercise of a tyrant’s cruelty, a despot’s lawlessness, he convened the sacred college, not in the pontifical court where they usually assemble, but at his villa near Alba; and there, with a guilt no less heinous than that which he professed to be punishing, he condemned her, when she was not present to defend herself, on the charge of incest, while he himself had been guilty, not only of

debauching his own brother’s daughter, but was also accessory to her death: for that lady, being a widow, in order to conceal her shame, endeavoured to procure an abortion, and by that means lost her life.

However, the priests were directed to see the sentence immediately executed upon Cornelia. As they were leading her to the place of execution, she called upon Vesta, and the rest of the gods, to attest her innocence; and, amongst other exclamations, frequently cried out, “Is it possible that Caesar can think me polluted, under the influence of whose sacred functions he has conquered and triumphed?”⁵ Whether she said this in flattery or derision; whether it proceeded from a consciousness of her innocence, or contempt of the emperor, is uncertain; but she continued exclaiming in this manner, til she came to the place of execution, to which she was led, whether innocent or guilty I cannot say, at all events with every appearance and demonstration of innocence. As she was being lowered down into the subterranean vault, her robe happening to catch upon something in the descent, she turned round and disengaged it, when, the executioner offering his assistance, she drew herself back with horror, refusing to be so much as touched by him, as though it were a defilement to her pure and unspotted chastity: still preserving the appearance of sanctity up to the last moment; and, among all the other instances of her modesty, “She took great care to fall with decency.”⁶

Celer likewise, a Roman knight, who was accused of an intrigue with her, while they were scourging him with rods⁷ in the Forum, persisted in exclaiming, “What have I done?—I have done nothing.”

These declarations of innocence had exasperated Domitian exceedingly, as imputing to him acts of cruelty and injustice; accordingly Licinianus, being seized by the emperor’s orders for having concealed a freedwoman of Cornelia’s in one of his estates, was advised, by those who took him in charge, to confess the fact, if he hoped to obtain a remission of his punishment, and he complied with their advice.

⁴ “Their office was to attend upon the rites of Vesta, the chief part of which was the preservation of the holy fire. If this fire happened to go out, it was considered impious to light it at any common flame, but they made use of the pure and unpolluted rays of the sun for that purpose. There were various other duties besides connected with their office. The chief rules prescribed them were, to vow the strictest chastity for the space of thirty years. After this term was completed, they had liberty to leave the order. If they broke their vow of virginity; they were buried alive in a place allotted to that peculiar use.” Kennet’s *Antiq.* Their reputation for sanctity was so high that Livy mentions the

fact of two of those virgins having violated their vows, as a prodigy that threatened destruction to the Roman state. Lib. xxii., c. 57. And Suetonius informs us that Augustus had so high an opinion of this religious order that he consigned the care of his will to the Vestal Virgins. Suet. in Vit. Aug. c. 101.

⁵ It was usual with Domitian to triumph, not only without a victory, but even after a defeat.

⁶ Euripides’ *Hecuba*.

⁷ The punishment inflicted upon the violators of Vestal chastity was to be scourged to death.

Herennius Senecio spoke for him in his absence, in some such words as Homer's "Patroclus lies in death."

"Instead of an advocate," said he, "I must turn informer: Licinianus has fled." This news was so agreeable to Domitian that he could not help betraying his satisfaction: "Then," he exclaimed, "has Licinianus acquitted us of injustice"; adding that he would not press too hard upon him in his disgrace. He accordingly allowed him to carry off such of his effects as he could secure before they were seized for the public use, and in other respects softened the sentence of banishment by way of reward for his voluntary confession. Licinianus was afterwards, through the clemency of the emperor Nerva, permitted to settle in Sicily, where he now professes rhetoric, and avenges himself upon Fortune in his declamations.

You see how obedient I am to your commands, in sending you a circumstantial detail of foreign as well as domestic news. I imagined indeed, as you were absent when this transaction occurred, that you had only heard just in a general way that Licinianus was banished for incest, as Fame usually makes her report in general terms, without going into particulars. I think I deserve in return a full account of all that is going on in your town and neighbourhood, where something worth telling about is usually happening; however, write what you please, provided you send me as long a letter as my own. I give you notice, I shall count not only the pages, but even the very lines and syllables. Farewell.