The Art of Writing (and Collecting) Letters: the Case of Pliny’s and Symmachus’ Ep. 7.9

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Introduction

Although the Roman senator Q. Aurelius Symmachus (ca. AD 340-402) bequeathed a collection of over 900 letters, the search for allusions to earlier letter-writers in his letters has never been very successful. Although scholars used to argue that his collection of ten books was a deliberate imitation of Pliny’s collection, most scholars have now rejected this hypothesis. It is now accepted by most scholars that Symmachus published a first book and likely planned to publish another six books, which were posthumously published by his son Memmius.1 To this original collection of seven books, later generations added another three books to bring the number up to ten, which might indeed have been done in imitation of Pliny’s collection.2 It has long been recognized that Symmachus must have had some knowledge of Pliny’s letters, but the evidence is scarce. In his 1891 doctoral dissertation on Symmachus’ letters, Wilhelm Kroll listed all the resemblances that he could find between Pliny’s and Symmachus’ letters, but, as Gavin Kelly has demonstrated, only a few are convincing allusions.3 Kroll’s clearest finding of intertextuality, ep. 2.35 alluding to Pliny’s epp. 3.20 and 9.2, has been discussed by Alan Cameron in some

1 This hypothesis was first put forward by Roda 1981, 58-79 and was most elaborately defended by Salzman 2011, lviii-lix; see also Cameron 2011, 366-370; Kelly 2016, 198-199; Sogno 2017, 179-182. The argument of Salzman 2011, lxiv-lxvi that Symmachus’ original seven-book collection was inspired by the Hebdomades of Varro has led to some discussion: see Sogno 2017, 181-182 for a rebuttal and Salzman 2018 for a reaction.
2 Cameron 2016, 475.
3 Kelly 2013, 267-268.
On a whole, however, there seems to be ‘little evidence to suggest a significant and continuing intertextual relationship between Pliny’s letters and Symmachus's oeuvre.’ In this miscellaneum, I would like to argue for a hitherto unremarked allusion to Pliny in one of Symmachus' letters. As I hope to demonstrate, this allusion reveals a deeper engagement in Symmachus' letter collection with Pliny's letters than has so far been acknowledged.

1 The Art of Writing Letters

In ancient letter collections, it is not uncommon to find one or more letters in which the author comments on the art of letter writing. Among Cicero's letters, there is the famous Fam. 2.4 to Curio, in which Cicero distinguishes two types of letters, one of which is 'intimate' and 'comic' (familiare et iocosum) whereas the other type is 'austere' and 'serious' (severum et grave). The choice for either style depends on the matter at hand. Examples of meta-epistolary comments can also be found in Seneca's letters to Lucilius. In ep. 75, Seneca defends his somewhat unrefined writing style against Lucilius' complaints. According to Seneca, the reason that his letters seem to lack refinement is because they resemble real-life conversations: “I prefer that my letters should be just what my conversation would be if you and I were sitting in one another's company or taking walks together,—spontaneous and easy; for my letters have nothing strained or artificial about them” (Qualis sermo meus esset si una desideremus aut ambularemus, inlaboratus et facillis, tales esse epistulas meas volo, quae nihil habent accersitum nec fictum). In the Greek world, one could point to Gregory of Nazianzus, who gives his grand-nephew Nicobulus instructions on how to compose letters. In Gregory’s eyes, a letter should be characterized by ‘conciseness’ (συντομία), ‘clearness’ (σαφήνεια), and ‘charm’ (χάρις).

In his ep. 7.9, Pliny also comments on the art of letter writing. In this long letter, Pliny gives his addressee and pupil Pedanius Fuscus Salinator advice on the best way to study during his spare time. Besides translating Greek into Latin and vice versa (7.9.2-5), revising old speeches (7.9.5-6), writing poetry

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4 Kroll 1891, 90-94; Cameron 2016, 475-478.
5 Kelly 2013, 269.
6 Cic. Fam. 2.4.1.
8 Gr. Naz. ep. 51. On this letter, see most recently Storin 2018, 110-111.
9 For this letter, see Sherwin-White 1966, 412-413; Gibson and Morello 2012, 81-83; Keeline 2013; Whitton 2018, 272-322.
and reading (7.9.15-16), Pliny also urges Fuscus to practice his letter writing skills:

7 Scio nunc tibi esse praecipuum studium orandi; sed non ideo semper pugnacem hunc et quasi bellatorium stilum suaserim. Ut enim terrae variis mutatisque seminibus, ita ingenia nostra nunc hac nunc illa meditacione recoluntur. 8 Volo interdum aliquem ex historia locum adprensas, volo epistulam diligentius scribas. Nam saepe in oratione quoque non historicum modo sed prope poetica descriptionum necessitas incidit, et pressus sermo purusque ex epistulis petitur.

Although Fuscus has a clear preference for forensic oratory, Pliny advises him to also read every now and then works of history and to practice his letter writing—which is apparently too much affected by a bombastic rhetorical style. Pliny underscores the need of variation by comparing the human ingenium to the soil while playing with the double meaning of recolere: like different seeds are sown in the earth, so Fuscus must cultivate his talents by different activities. Mastery of different styles of writing will make Fuscus a more well-rounded rhetor overall.

In Book 7, the last book of his original collection, Symmachus provides his son Memmius with a similar advice on letter writing.11 Given its restricted length, the letter can be quoted here in full:

1 Scintillare acuminibus atque sententiis epistulas tuas gaudeo; decet enim loqui exultantis iuvenalem calorem. Sed volo ut in aliis materiis aculeis orationis utaris, huic autem generi scriptionis maturum aliquid et comicum misceas: quod tibi etiam rhetorem tuum credo praecipere.

11 On this letter, see Peter 1901, 141 and Sogno 2007, 99-100.
Nam ut in vestitu hominum ceteroque vitae cultu loco ac tempori apta sumuntur, ita ingeniorm varietas in familiaribus scriptis neglegentiam quandam debet imitari, in forensibus vero quatere arma facundiae. 2 Sed de his non ibo longius. Perge interim quo te aetatis impetus et naturae ardor impellit. Mei voti caput est ut bene valeas et supra annos tuos litterarum dote ditescas. Vale.

1 I am delighted that your letters sparkle with the sharpness of your sententiae, for it befits the ardour of youth to speak rather exuberantly. But I want that you would reserve the barbs of oratory for other matters and instead mix into this genre of writing some old-fashioned and comic elements: I believe in fact that your teacher of rhetoric also gives you the same advice. For as with the style of dressing and in all other refinements of life, people choose what is appropriate to the place and time, in the same way a multi-faceted talent must imitate a certain nonchalance in letter-writing, whereas it should brandish the weapons of eloquence in matters pertaining to oratory. 2 But I won’t go on any longer about this topic. For now, go, wherever your youthful enthusiasm and the passion of your nature drive you. My greatest wish is that you are doing well and may grow beyond your years in the richness of your talent for letters.12

To Symmachus’ taste, Memmius’ letters are too exuberant (exultantius) and contain too many elements of the rhetorical style (acuminibus atque sententiis).13 Instead, Memmius should keep the style of his letters lighter, even somewhat nonchalant (in familiaribus scriptis neglegentiam quandam), and reserve abundant and refined eloquence for oratory. Symmachus compares the use of different styles to human life, especially clothing: one picks what fits the place and the occasion (loco ac tempori apta). Likewise, the author must adapt his style of writing to the genre.

2 The Art of Collecting Letters

There are some similarities between Symmachus’ letter and those of his predecessors. Symmachus’ opinion that the style of a letter must contain something

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12 Symm. Ep. 7.9. The (slightly modified) translation of ep. 7.9.1 is from Sogno 2007, 99-100; the translation of ep. 7.9.2 is my own.

13 For acumen as a characteristic of the oratorical style, see e.g. Cic. De Or. 1.28.128, 2.29.129; for sententiae, see e.g. Cic. De Or. 1.8.31; Quint. Inst. 8.5.3-8.
‘comic’ (*comicum*) echoes Cicero’s prescript to Curio that the familiar type of letters should contain humorous elements (*iocosum*). Further, like Seneca, who defended the unrefined style of his letters in his letter to Lucilius (*inlaborsus et facilis*), Symmachus advises his son to keep the style of the letter somewhat unpolished (*in familiaribus scriptis neglegentiam quandam*). In the case of these two letters, it is impossible to tell whether Symmachus is deliberately alluding to Cicero and Seneca or only reflecting standard epistolographical precepts that he would have learnt in school. The fourth-century rhetor Julius Victor, for instance, ends his *Ars Rhetorica* with a chapter on the art of letter writing, in which he uses Cicero’s distinction between the *epistula negotialis* and the *epistula familiaris*.

However, the debt of Symmachus’ letter to Pliny’s letter to Fuscus is clearer, both on the level of content and vocabulary. Both Pliny and Symmachus are concerned that the rhetorical preference of their pupils affects their letter writing too much. Both Pliny and Symmachus start their advice with *volo* followed by two subordinate clauses (*volo … adprendas, volo … scribas / volo ut … utaris, (volo ut) … misceas*). Both emphasize the importance of *varietas* for our *ingenia*; to support their claim, both use a comparison that is structured in the same way (*ut … ita*) and compares the *varietas* of the *ingenium* with everyday life; both use ‘to cultivate’ in a more literal sense and as a metaphor for training the mind (cultivation of the fields in Pliny’s letter, cultivation of one’s outer appearance in Symmachus’); in both letters, the difference between the rhetorical style and the style of friendly letters is underscored: letter-writing requires a lighter and more informal style (*diligentius / maturum aliquid et comicum; neglegentiam*), whereas the rhetorical style is more bombastic, and both Symmachus and Pliny use military terminology to describe the latter style (*pugnacem hunc et quasi bellatorium stilum / arma facundiae*). Finally, despite the difference in meaning, Pliny’s *Scio nunc tibi esse praecipuum studium orandi* perhaps also finds an echo in Symmachus’ *tibi etiam rhetorem tuum credo praecipere*. Thus, Symmachus seems to have chosen Pliny’s letter to Fuscus as a model for his own instructions on letter-writing to Memmius.

Symmachus does not imitate Pliny in the length of his letter. While Pliny at the end of his long letter has to admit that he has gone on for longer than is proper for a letter (*tam immodice epistulam extendi, ut dum tibi quemadmodum*

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14 It is also possible that Symmachus alludes here to Cic. Or. 78. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this observation.

15 Iul. Vict. Rhet. 27. Not much is known about the teaching of letter-writing at schools in Antiquity. For a concise overview, see Malherbe 1988, 6-7.

16 Imagery of war and combat is a common element of Latin rhetoric. See Fantham 1972, 155-158 for a discussion of martial metaphors in Cicero’s *De Oratore*. 
studere debeas suade o, studendi tempus abstulerim), Symmachus keeps his own letter within the limits (Sed de his non ibo longius). Herein, Symmachus, well-known for his concise letters, remains faithful to his own writing-style.

The most stunning intertextuality, if one may use this term for it, is the position of Symmachus’ letter in the collection. Symmachus’ letter to Memmius is the ninth letter of the seventh book, precisely the same position that the letter to Fuscus takes in Pliny’s collection. Two reasons make it likely that this is not coincidental. First of all, the formation of Symmachus’ letter-collection, like Pliny’s, was a conscious project by Symmachus, Memmius, or both. As has been pointed out, Symmachus’ collection as a whole shows the traces of careful design, most obviously the ring compositional arrangement of the books. Whereas the first book begins with letters to Symmachus’ father, the seventh book opens with letters to his son. Similarly, Book II contains only letters to Symmachus’ friend Nicomachus Flavianus, while the sixth book is in its entirety devoted to letters to Flavianus’ son. This care for order on the level of the letters and the books makes it far more likely that the inclusion of a letter that alludes to a letter by Pliny on the exact same position in the collection was a deliberate choice as well. Secondly, one could point out that other ancient letter collections also demonstrate an awareness of numbers. For instance, Roy Gibson has pointed to an example of numerical intertextuality in the collection of the fifth-century Gallic author Sidonius Apollinaris that is not unlike the allusion of Symmachus’ ep. 7.9 to Pliny’s ep. 7.9. In Pliny’s entire collection, there is only one place where the same addressee has been placed twice in sequence, i.e. epp. 2.11 and 2.12, which are both addressed to Arrianus. As Gibson argues, Sidonius noticed this and placed a letter to Rusticus in position 2.11 and a letter to Agricola as letter 2.12 in his collection. The names Rusticus, ‘the countryman,’ and Agricola, ‘the farmer,’ are nearly synonymous in meaning, and, so Gibson argues, in this way Sidonius’ collection reflects Pliny’s (only) two letters to the same correspondent in exactly the same position. Like Sidonius some eighty years later, Symmachus/Memmius included a similar jest in their collection, revealing their intimate knowledge of Pliny’s letter

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18 On Symmachus’ concise writing style, see Peter 1901, 140; Matthews 1974, 61; Sogno 2017, 182-183.
19 Sogno 2006, 62; Cameron 2011, 370.
20 Sidonius clearly modelled his letter collection after Pliny’s: not only does Sidonius’ collection consists of nine books, just as Pliny’s collection of private letters, Sidonius included 147 letters in his collection, exactly 100 less than the number of letters in the first nine books of Pliny’s collection. For this observation, see Gibson 2013, 336-337.
collection. The idea behind this subtlety is not difficult to understand: the position of the letter in which Symmachus teaches his son how to write letters is nothing less than a wink to the real ‘master’ of the art of epistolography.

3 Conclusion

To conclude, the case of the two letters 7.9 shows that Symmachus’ letter collection might reveal a deeper interaction with Pliny’s letter collection than has usually been acknowledged. Although parallels have often been sought on the level of the individual letter, we should bear in mind that Symmachus and his son would have read Pliny’s letters in a collection. Symmachus’ ep. 7.9 (as well as Gibson’s earlier findings in the letter collection of Sidonius) shows that intertextuality on the level of the collection is something we should more thoroughly investigate.22

Bibliography


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