CHAPTER THREE

LUXURY AND THE CREATION
OF A GOOD CONSUMER

Eugenia Lao

It has become increasingly common in Plinian criticism to call the \textit{Natural History} an inventory, and for the most part the analogy has functioned for scholars as an \textit{entrée} to discussing the work’s imperialist ideologies.\(^1\) Scholars point out that Pliny’s presentation of nature in inventory form reveals the perspective of a conqueror, which sees the material world as filled with items to be catalogued and administered. The main significance of the \textit{Natural History}'s form, it has been thought, lies in the way it alludes to an instrument of government, and therefore to Roman military power.

Use in public administration, however, is only one application of a genre that appeared in ordinary life as a record of possessions. If we think of the inventory just as a document that helped people manage their economic affairs, how we view the significance of the \textit{Natural History}'s form changes. Now, we have a work that asks us to consider its contents as commodities, items that possess financial value. We have a work that represents its contents as part of an exchange economy, where things could be bought, borrowed, given, and sold. To make an inventory’s principal attribute its economic status, in other words, is to alter our conceptual frame, so that we become attentive to the work’s concern for matters of wealth, and the proper way to behave with it.

Plinian criticism has long recognized the importance of financial themes in the \textit{Natural History}, as can be seen from the extensive attention given to the work’s treatment of luxury. We now know a good deal about Pliny’s place in Roman moralizing discourse, and we have a sense of how his attitudes to luxury relate to Flavian political culture and interact with other aspects of his thinking.\(^2\) Although the scholarship has made luxury one of the best understood aspects of the \textit{Natural History}, one issue bears more examination. What we know of Pliny’s attitudes to

luxury is currently based on looking at his negative comments. While scholars do recognize that Pliny actively engages with luxury, the points of engagement have not been much studied in their own right. Elsewhere I have looked at how Pliny’s rhetoric of luxury includes his awareness of engaging with it, and how this awareness writes an ethical dilemma into the text. I will now consider further implications of Pliny’s efforts to deal directly with luxury.

The key to understanding the place of luxury in the thematics of the work, I believe, lies in Wallace-Hadrill’s intuition that knowledge about nature, or ‘science’ as he refers to it, functions as Pliny’s antidote to luxury. Wallace-Hadrill makes the persuasive case that the *Natural History* is built upon a tension between the pursuit of knowledge and the love of material consumption. Murphy has further clarified that connection by showing how Pliny thinks of knowledge as a commodity, evident from the financial metaphors used to describe intellectual activities. Knowledge is therefore linked to luxury through their shared status as different types of commodities.

The *Natural History* is a text in which we must perceive the presence of two economies, an economy of reified knowledge and an economy of real goods signified by the text. Financial ideology operates at both levels, driving authorial decisions as well as what Pliny says about material consumption. In this chapter I reconsider the *Natural History*’s dealings with luxury by taking into account the monetized status of knowledge in the text. I suggest that the interest Pliny takes in luxury is motivated by a desire to demonstrate financial ethics and to produce such ethical behavior among the lapsed members of society. His relationship to luxury is not simply a matter of voicing criticism. Rather, Pliny directly involves himself with correcting luxury’s false ideology. He does this by sharing practical information about purchasing luxury goods that bears the stamp of his views on proper market behavior—by imposing his financial code on consumers of luxury, in other words. But Pliny may be hoist by his own petard. At the end of the chapter, I look at how luxury has infiltrated the very domain of learning that he tries to serve as antidote, so implicating Pliny in the world from which he tries to distance himself.

---

6 Murphy (2003) looks at the ways in which financial ideology drives the composition of the *Natural History*. 