Adopting the Emperor: Pliny’s Praise-giving as Cultural Appropriation

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Pliny the Younger’s speech of thanks to Trajan for the suffect consulship of 100 CE was delivered in the Senate on 1st September; later, Pliny revised and expanded the speech and made it the subject of a private recitation (Ep. 3.18.4–5). Unless it underwent further revision, it is likely that this is the version transmitted to us as the Panegyricus. This long and elaborate work has few modern admirers but the feedback his recitation received was very different, if Pliny is to be believed: in his letter to Vibius Severus, Pliny tells of the occasion:

cepī autem non mediocrem voluptatem, quod hunc librum cum amicīs recitare voluisset, non per codicillos, non per libellos, sed ‘si commodum’ et ‘si valde vacaret’ admonīti—numquam porro aut valde vacat Romae aut commodum est audire recitantem—foeōssimis insuper tempestatibus per bīduum convenerunt, cūmque modestia mea finem recitatiōnem facere voluisset, ut adicerem tertium diem exegerunt. 5 mihi hunc honorem habitum putem an studiis? studiis malo, quae prope extincta refōrentur

But I took particular pleasure that when I had wanted to recite this speech to my friends (invited not by notes or letters, but ‘if convenient’ and ‘if you can spare the time’—although the time can never really be spared and it is never convenient to attend a recitation in Rome), and what’s more the weather was quite terrible, they came for two days, and

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1 It is not clear that Epistles 3.13 and 3.18 refer to the same version. The version which accompanied 3.13 to Voconius Romanus may have been the initial textual version after the live delivery; Sherwin White 1966: 245–6. For some recent discussions of the speech, see Roche 201b, and on the issue of ‘versions’, esp. Noreña 2011a: 40–41.
2 Panegyricus is not Pliny’s name for the speech—see below and Rees 2010: 17–18.
when my modesty thought to bring the recitation to an end, they insisted I add a third day. Should I think this honour is due to me or to intellectual activity?—to intellectual activity, I think, which is being revived after its near extinction. (Pliny Ep. 3.18.4–5)

Readers of his letter collection will be familiar with Pliny’s capacity for disingenuousness, and will note, as he cuts his own figure, how he effectively insinuates himself into the new literary climate to be enjoyed under Trajan—

studīs? studiis.\(^4\) Nor is Pliny fashioning himself as a maverick but as part of a community of supporters of Trajan who enjoy a good speech—he is amongst amici. And if we pause to deconstruct the letter—ostensibly sent to Severus who had clearly missed the recitation and, if correctly identified as non-senatorial, would have been excluded from the original delivery\(^5\)—we might suspect that one function of the letter was to facilitate circulation of the revised text, but that a major ambition of the letter’s publication was to seek to control the speech’s wider reception by intimating the reception it had enjoyed to date.\(^6\)

We have no details about the guest list at the recitation; nor can we know how accurate an account of events Pliny is giving, and given the disparity in enthusiasm for the speech between the Trajanic and modern eras, we might wonder about these allegedly enthusiastic and supportive amici. But if we put aside the scepticism that is prompted by the likelihood that Pliny had much to gain from his speech’s reputation, and accept the ‘fact’ of this private, well-attended, extended recitation in Rome, who do we imagine can have been there? And what could their sensibilities and interests be such that they would give up so much time to hear Pliny recite his work?\(^7\)

It is well known that in socio-economic terms, the group to whom Pliny’s speech would have most appealed would, no doubt, have been senatorial, since it is their political perspective that the Panegyricus represents.\(^8\) For example,

\(^6\) We do not know if Vibius Severus appreciated the copy of the speech; see Marchesi 2008: 205; see also 3.13, with Gibson and Morello 2012: 242–3.
\(^7\) Marchesi 2008: 198–205 discusses connections between 3.18 and 4.28, which is also addressed to Severus. On the prosopography and socio-economic status of Pliny’s friends, Syme 1960, 1968, 1985a.