Oratorical Performance in Pliny's Letters

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Introduction

Oratory forms a central aspect of Pliny's self-representation in his letters: from his well-documented emulation of Cicero, to the description of his own, largely successful, performances in the court and senate, we are continually reminded that this was the arena in which he excelled.¹ Yet time and again we are frustrated by a shortage of published speeches when we try to assess the success of Pliny's oratory on its own terms; that is, as a performative genre.² In the case of the one speech that does survive, Pliny's Panegyricus, the published version was a largely expanded and polished rendition of its original counterpart.³ Even though it offers valuable evidence for Pliny's stylistic qualities, the Panegyricus does not provide a typical example of his actual oratory; belonging to the genre of epideictic oratory, it is markedly different from the forensic and deliberative speeches which Pliny habitually delivered.⁴ To be sure, the discerning reader can trace his use of rhetorical figures, preferences and argumentative

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¹ On the centrality of oratory in Pliny's letters, see Weische (1989), Mayer (2003). Pliny's emulation of Cicero is discussed in Gibson and Morello (2013) 83–99. While the focus is on Cicero qua epistolographer, some comments on Pliny's admiration of Cicero's oratory are relevant.

² Thus, e.g. Fantham (1997) 124: “Pliny was atypical for his time: he represents the literary side of oratory and worked as hard on the written versions of his speeches after delivery as he had before the event, expanding them to clarify their content to an external audience and inviting his friends to criticise successive drafts. But this was not how the Romans judged oratory.”

³ By his own admission, it was “fuller and more elaborate” (spatiosius et uberius, 3.18.1).

⁴ Innes (2011) provides a useful overview of the epideictic features and arrangement of the
techniques in the *Letters*, which may be able to provide one route towards a fuller understanding of Pliny’s oratorical artistry. But this chapter will also suggest another method: it will begin by surveying the emphasis placed on oratorical delivery in Pliny’s letters before examining how he establishes himself both as a teacher and as an exemplary advocate. It will then move towards a more hypothetical reconstruction of his actual performances to demonstrate that the *Letters* enable us to understand more about the *topoi* and techniques Pliny used, the effects he sought to create, and how he interacted with his audience.

The attempt is necessarily speculative and certain problems of methodology arise in trying to gauge aspects of performance from Pliny’s *Letters*. Leaving aside unhelpful speculations on the relationship between the delivered and the published speeches, which need not concern us here, we may note that Pliny largely focusses on his triumphs rather than his failures.

One might object that he thereby skews the picture of the importance of delivery. For it is easy to imagine a scenario in which Pliny, elated by the proceedings of a successful (or even only partially successful) trial, could have attributed more than was strictly owed to his own personal performance. Yet, in some ways, the focus on his triumphant appearances is also conducive to the experiment because we can understand what Pliny felt had been particularly powerful in a given speech. Consequently, the aim of this chapter is not to ascertain precisely how Pliny actually delivered any given oration, but, rather, to demonstrate the imaginability of his performances. In so doing we can appreciate

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6 As many scholars have cautioned, the Pliny we see in the letters is a carefully constructed image of how he wanted to be seen: on Pliny’s self-presentation, see e.g. the (opposing) discussions of Leach (1990) and Riggsby (1995), reconciled by Henderson (2002 and 2003).

7 In 9.13, for example, Pliny describes the circumstances of the speech he had published *de Helvidi uttione* (‘About the vindication of Helvidius’); elsewhere referred to as the *In Certum* (‘Against Certus’). This was an attack on Helvidius’ persecutor, Publicius Certus, which Pliny had delivered in the senate, allegedly to great acclaim. The concession that Pliny did not actually achieve his desired result (to bring Certus to trial) is subordinated to the larger moral victory he claims for himself (*Et relationem quidem de eo Caesar ad senatum non remisit; obtinui tamen quod intenderam*, 9.13.22).

8 There were certainly external factors which determined the outcome of a trial, as Pliny himself admits at 5.20.3, discussed below (p. 186).