

# Pliny's "Role Models of Both Sexes": Gender and Exemplarity in the *Letters*

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Throughout the first nine volumes of his *Letters*, Pliny the Younger represents himself and his friends admiring and emulating as role models numerous exemplary individuals found among his own contemporaries<sup>2</sup>. In a letter addressed to his older friend and colleague Cornutus midway through the collection (5.14), he makes it plain with the phrase *in utroque sexu* ("of either sex") that this modern canon of exempla includes women as well as men<sup>3</sup>. Cornutus and Pliny are described as having cemented their own friendship and intimacy through sharing a lifelong love for all the exemplary models (*aemulandi*) of their own day, of both sexes:

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1 — I am grateful to Eugesta's anonymous readers for their helpful comments, and to Alex Dressler who kindly read a draft of this article and whose many suggestions I found immensely simulating and useful.

2 — On this feature of the work see Gazich 2003; Bernstein 2008; Carlon 2009: 182-3; Gibson and Morello 2012, Chapter 4, especially 115-123, 126-135. Throughout the *Letters*, Pliny is often depicted at the heart of this process, both in terms of taking others as models for himself and of providing a model for younger men (see further Bernstein 2008).

3 — On Pliny's relationship with Cornutus and Cornutus' representation in the *Letters* (in addition to 5.14, he is mentioned or addressed in 2.11, 2.12, 4.17, 7.21, 7.31, 9.13), see Gibson and Morello 2012: 154-7.

*una diligimus, una dileximus omnes fere, quos aetas nostra in utroque sexu aemulandos tulit; quae societas amicitiarum artissima nos familiaritate coniunxit*<sup>4</sup>.

Together we love, and have loved, almost all those of either sex whom our own age offered for emulation, and this sharing of friendships has joined us together in the closest intimacy," (5.14.4)<sup>5</sup>.

The *Letters* are packed with portraits of such exemplary individuals<sup>6</sup>, and a survey of these bears out this claim of inclusivity; among the individuals who are singled out as role models and exempla in the *Letters* women have a significant presence. In recent years there has been substantial scholarship both on the praise of individual Roman women for which the *Letters* are notable, and on the preoccupation of the *Letters* with exemplarity<sup>7</sup>. In this article I will bring these two strands together in order to focus on Pliny's innovative portrayal of women as moral exempla, as role models and figures who have something to teach others about virtue. I will argue that within the exemplary framework articulated in Pliny's *Letters* the difference between the sexes is systematically played down at the level of abstract virtue (if not at the level of social role); indeed Pliny deliberately subverts traditional gender tropes the better to convey his new emphasis on the moral equivalence of the sexes. Women and men are represented as sharing the same moral qualities. Female and male exempla are represented as having the same rhetorical force. Pliny's treatment of female exempla substantially develops possibilities already evident in earlier epistolary works, sets him apart from his friend Tacitus and his teacher Quintilian, and may have been influential on subsequent authors, and even perhaps in the lives of Roman men and women.

Pliny's close contemporaries Quintilian and Tacitus, whom he knew personally, shared his preoccupation with exemplarity and the educative function of outstanding individuals as ethical role models. Both men articulate this in works that were published around the same time as the first two books of Pliny's *Letters*<sup>8</sup>. There is a point of difference, however;

4 — All Latin texts are taken from the Teubner editions.

5 — All translations from the Latin are my own.

6 — John Henderson describes Pliny as creating in his *Letters* a catalogue of modern exempla (Henderson 2002: 90 for Pliny "pasting in each slip"); cf. Méthy 2003: 210-11. The most prominent living or recently dead exempla in the *Letters*, who are identified as exemplary and also characterized in some detail are: Corellius Rufus (1.12), Pompeius Saturninus (1.16), Titius Aristo (1.22) Verginius Rufus (2.1), Vestricius Spurinna (3.1), Fannia (7.19) and Titinius Capito (8.12). In addition, for people identified as exemplary in passing: 2.7, 2.9, 3.2, 3.11, 4.12, 4.15, 4.21, 6.6, 6.8, 6.23, 6.24, 8.5; there are also laudatory character sketches at: 1.10, 1.12, 1.14, 2.13, 3.3, 4.3, 4.17, 6.26.

7 — On women in Pliny see especially the recent monographs Carlon 2009 and Shelton 2012; on exemplarity see Gazich 2003, Méthy 2003, 2007 and Bradley 2010.

8 — The chronology is not exactly known, but the letters published in Pliny's first two books

while Pliny states that he emulates exemplary figures of both sexes, Tacitus and Quintilian refer only to exemplary men. Tacitus' *Agricola* (published in about 98 CE) opens by expressing its aim "to hand down to posterity the deeds and behaviour of famous men," (*clarorum virorum facta morisque posteris tradere*, Tac. *Agr.* 1.1). The ethical value to the community of handing down stories about the deeds of great heroes is portrayed as central to Tacitus' biographical endeavour just as it is to Pliny's epistolary endeavour, but the heroes are specified by Tacitus as *clari viri* (famous men). It is perhaps also significant that Tacitus mentions almost immediately by name the great male heroes of the Stoic opposition, Thrasea and Helvidius<sup>9</sup>, but he makes no mention of their female associates Arria the Elder or her granddaughter Fannia (the latter Thrasea's daughter and wife of Helvidius), who have such prominence in Pliny's *Letters*<sup>10</sup>. This despite the fact that Arria was a well known exemplum of the time, as we can see from Martial *Epigram* 1.13 (published in c. 86, perhaps a decade or so earlier) and from a gravestone inscription mentioning her that dates from around the beginning of the second century<sup>11</sup>. If Tacitus wanted women to be part of his exemplary system in his biography of *Agricola*, he had ample opportunity to introduce their names here where they belong historically, but he did not do so at this point in his literary career<sup>12</sup>.

A handful of years earlier, Pliny's teacher Quintilian had made it clear in his textbook on rhetoric and oratory that historical exempla were viewed by him as the most important way for a Roman to learn about morality and shape himself as a virtuous person:

*sed magis etiam, quae sunt tradita antiquitus dicta ac facta praeclare, et nosse et animo semper agitare conveniet. quae profecto nusquam plura maioraque quam in nostrae civitatis monumentis reperientur. an fortitudinem, iustitiam, fidem, continentiam, frugalitatem, contemptum doloris ac mortis melius alii docebunt quam Fabricii, Curii, Reguli, Decii, Mucii aliique*

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were probably written between late 96 and 100. On the dating of letters and issues concerning their publication see Gibson and Morello 2012: 266 with further bibliography and also Chapters 1 and 2 passim and especially 19-20. Quintilian published his *Institutio Oratoria* in about 95 CE and Tacitus published the *Agricola* in about 98 CE; these works are therefore probably roughly contemporary with volumes 1 and 2 of Pliny's *Letters*.

9 — Tac. *Agr.* 2: *legimus, cum Aruleno Rustico Paetus Thrasea, Herennio Senecioni Priscus Helvidius laudati essent, capitale fuisse.*

10 — On these see Carlon 2009: 18-67.

11 — ILS 6261. Arria's story is also told later by Cassius Dio (60.16).

12 — In his later works, *Histories* (published c. 108-9 CE) and *Annals* (written in about 117 CE), Tacitus includes considerably more material about exemplary women (for a list see Centlivres Challet 2013: 78-80), and it is possible that this reflects the influence of Pliny's *Letters*. I would not want to put too much weight on this idea, but the relationship between the treatment of female exemplarity by Pliny and by his contemporaries, and the possibility of Pliny's influence, merit investigation; see further the conclusion to this article.

*innumerabiles? quantum enim Graeci praeceptis valent, tantum Romani, quod est maius, exemplis.*

...but it is more important that the famous deeds and words of antiquity are known and kept always in mind, and these are certainly to be found nowhere in such quantity and of such high quality as they are in the monuments of our own city. For who will teach fortitude, justice, loyalty, continence, frugality, and contempt for life better than the Fabricii, the Curii, the Reguli, the Decii, the Mucii and innumerable others? Valuable as are the Greek philosophical teachings, the exempla of the Romans are even more so, (Quint. *Inst.* 12.2.29-30).

However, Quintilian lists here only the names that evoke *male* heroes of old, and includes no explicit suggestion that women would form part of the canon of exempla<sup>13</sup>. While I would not wish to suggest that Pliny necessarily had this very passage from Quintilian in mind while he wrote many of his letters, it is notable that several of the admirable qualities that are listed by Quintilian here as best learned from ancient stories - fortitude, justice, loyalty, continence, frugality, and contempt for pain and for life - are for Pliny manifestly modelled in his own contemporaries as well as in historical examples, and that both his historical and his contemporary exempla include women<sup>14</sup>. Fannia is described as an *exemplum fortitudinis*<sup>15</sup>, and loyalty and contempt for life are the qualities manifested by Arria and the anonymous woman from Lake Como, both of whom take their own lives for the sake of their husbands.

In contrast to Quintilian and Tacitus (in his earlier work, written before the *Letters*), Pliny not only writes about individual women among his contemporaries as exempla, and refers to traditional female exempla such as Arria, but he also, on more than one occasion, explicitly includes women in his general references to the earlier historical exemplary tradition. For instance, introducing the well-known letter 3.16 about Arria the Elder, Pliny uses the phrase *facta dictaque virorum feminarumque* ("the deeds and words of men and women", 3.16.1). Here he expands the usual formulation that we saw used at the start of the *Agricola* so that it includes

13 — While female members of a family may of course in theory be included in a plural family name such as those listed here (and among the "innumerable others"), the particular heroes of old whose deeds are conjured up by this list of names are all masculine (Fabricius, Manius Curius Dentatus, Regulus, Mucius Scaevola, Decius Mus father and son) and there is no invitation to the reader, as far as I can see, to imagine their female relatives among them.

14 — The question of the extent to which Quintilian's work informs the letters of Pliny the Younger when it comes to thinking about practical ethics and exemplarity deserves further study. For a brief mention see Gazich 2003: 141; he says that unsurprisingly we can see the presence of Quintilian throughout the letters, and that Pliny is following Quintilian's ideas about exempla.

15 — Pliny's own wife Calpurnia is praised for the quality of *frugalitas*, although she is not explicitly presented as an exemplum for anyone else.

women as well as *clari viri*<sup>16</sup>. It is also likely to be significant that when Pliny refers to the work of his contemporary Titinius Capito, who has also written about exemplary figures of the past, Pliny describes Capito's subject as the celebration of specifically male heroes: *claros viros* (1.17.3) and *illustrium virorum* (8.12.4). By contrast, as we have seen, Pliny's own work is self-consciously inclusive of both sexes.

Meanwhile, in *Ep.* 7.19 Pliny compares his friend Fannia to traditional exemplary heroines by using the phrase *ut illas quae leguntur*, ("like those well-known women who are read about," 7.19.7). It is up to readers to decide to whom we think Pliny is referring here: we might think only as far as Arria and the loyal wives of her generation, we might recall Porcia or Cornelia of a previous era, or we might let the reference take us right back to the earliest days of Rome, to women such as Lucretia and Cloelia. The point is that with this generalizing term *illas* (the demonstrative pronoun is a common way of referring to well-known exempla)<sup>17</sup>, Pliny is pointedly evoking a tradition of female exemplarity, which pluralises female exempla just as the generalising plural usually pluralises male exempla. I know of no other such use of the plural in relation to female historical exempla in Roman literature. The use of the plural together with the lack of mention of specific names conveys a sense of the abundance of examples. Within this context the female Fannia's qualities of *fortitudo* and *gravitas* are not to be seen as anomalies, as an unusual instance of a woman intruding into the realm of men<sup>18</sup>, but rather as comfortably part of a long tradition of female heroism. These two references in Pliny's letters make women visible in the exemplary tradition both past and present in a way that his predecessors and contemporaries do not.

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To be sure, there are many Roman women whose stories are handed down in earlier Latin texts as part of the exempla tradition – Cloelia, Lucretia, Porcia, Cornelia and so on – and their significance is not negligible. However, they make up a small proportion of the total and tend not to be included in generalisations about exempla. Rather they are often represented as exceptional among the ranks of heroic men<sup>19</sup>. They

16 — The formulaic phrase *clari viri* (sometimes also *viri illustres* or *viri fortes*) used to refer to the exemplary heroes of the past is too commonly used for it to be possible to list individual references.

17 — Cf. the use of *illi veteres* at *Ep.* 8.6.2. On the use of *ille*, *illud* etc. to refer to well-known exemplary material see the useful discussion of Morstein-Marx 2004: 68–118; cf. Méthy 2003: 206.

18 — See further my discussion below on the way that courageous women are not represented as unusual in Pliny's letters, in contrast to the previous tradition.

19 — See Vidén 1993.

also tend to fulfil a different rhetorical and moral function from male exempla; they are not portrayed as role models for men, but rather, while male exempla inspire, female exempla spur men on through fear of the humiliation of being beaten by a woman, or are deployed in arguments where their rhetorical effect rests on the assumption of female inferiority and moral differentiation between the sexes.

The idea that virtue is gendered and that women as a sex are naturally inferior to men had been a feature of Roman moral thought for over a century<sup>20</sup>. There is a particularly clear articulation of this in Book 2 of Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*, where Cicero also highlights the etymological connection between *virtus* (virtue, courage or manliness) and *vir* (man, hero)<sup>21</sup>. This linguistic gendering of moral value is regularly exploited by Latin authors as a means of emphasizing the masculinity of virtue and the exceptionality of female virtue or courage, especially through punning on the term *virtus*<sup>22</sup>. Women who perform great deeds are often described as transcending their sex, and as having a masculine spirit within their weak and womanly body<sup>23</sup>. Indeed women are often described as embodying in some way the spirit of their great male relatives when they achieve great things, in a formulation that draws together two key ideas: that women are to be defined only in relation to their male relatives and that greatness must really be masculine, as if the men are acting through the women, who are only the vessels for the male virtues<sup>24</sup>. And in the exempla about loyal wives who go into exile or kill themselves out of loyalty to their husbands, (on which tradition Pliny's stories about Fannia, Arria and the wife in 6.24 draw), the masculinity of the women in question is often represented in other sources through literal gender transgression, in which, as part of the story, they must cut off their hair and dress up as men<sup>25</sup>.

20 — See Langlands 2004: 118-9.

21 — Cic. *Tusc. Disp.* 2.43 for this particular etymological description, and the discussion of endurance and virtue of 2.30-67 also makes regular allusions to the gendering of virtue and female inferiority (e.g. at 2.37, 2.46); on this see also Nussbaum 2002: 323, n. 22. See also Altman 2009 for the view that this does not represent Cicero's own attitude and that he is concerned on the other hand to explore the feminine element of virtue.

22 — E.g. in writers before Pliny: Cic. *Sext. Rosc.* 147: *cum esset mulier, virtute perfecit*; Livy 2.13.1: *honorata virtute feminae*; Val. Max. 3.2.2: *uiris puella lumen uirtutis praefereudo*; Val. Max. 6.1.ext.3; Sen. *Cons. ad Marc.* 1.1. Cf. Sen. *ad Marc.* 1.5. and Val. Max. 3.2.15, 3.7.ext.8 where female moral inferiority is implicit. See further Santoro L'Hoir 1992, Vidén 1993 and Langlands 2004 on gender hierarchy in Roman moral language.

23 — Examples of this in Pliny's imperial predecessors include: *cuius uirilium animus maligno errore fortunae muliebre corpus sortitus est* (Val. Max. 6.1.1); *sub specie feminae virilem animum gerebat* (Val. Max. 8.3.1); *uirilis animi femina* (Vell. Pat. 1.3.3); *nihil muliebris praeter corpus gerens* (2.74.3).

24 — See Hallett 1989 for this persistent trope in Latin literature, with examples; instances from Valerius Maximus include: 4.3.3, 4.6.5, 8.3.3 and cf. 3.2.15.

25 — See Parker 1998 for insightful discussion of this tradition, and especially p. 168 on the masculinization of exemplary women. Parker does not, however, attempt a diachronic study of the

In contrast to other literary sources, however, Pliny never puns on the word *virtus* in this way at all, and no woman is ever described as *virilis* or masculine in any way. Indeed, Pliny does not use the term *virtus* in the sense of “manly courage” or “courage” but rather in the more generic sense of “virtue” and most often uses it in the plural, to describe a group of moral qualities; in the singular it is most often used by him in the context of outstanding behaviour that merits honour and glory<sup>26</sup>. Neither, indeed, is *muliebris* (“womanly”, “weak”) ever used in the letters as a term of abuse, or to denote moral weakness, as it is often elsewhere<sup>27</sup>. In Pliny’s accounts of loyal wives, no woman ever dresses up as a man or appears to transgress her gender boundaries, as they do elsewhere where the motif of the Loyal Wife is found<sup>28</sup>. Nothing that is said about any of the women described as outstanding in Pliny’s *Letters* suggests that they are acting in a masculine way, or transcending their female gender. They are outstanding among their sex only in the same way that Pliny’s male exempla are outstanding among theirs: in their admirable virtue.

Pliny’s *Letters* do not deploy, then, any of the gender *topoi* that are familiar to us from earlier sources describing exemplary women. In particular, Pliny’s depiction of exemplarity is free of two of the most conspicuously gendered aspects that we find in other authors: first, the idea of the unnaturalness of female virtue (that displaying virtue potentially disrupts the gender of a woman, rendering her masculine), and second the idea that the force of a female exemplum for a male reader comes from the assumption of female inferiority, so that it functions as an “argument from the greater.” Indeed, only a few years before Pliny published his first volume of *Letters*, Quintilian had used this moral hierarchy between male and female in his rhetorical handbook, the *Institutio Oratoria*, precisely as an illustration of the use of “unequal examples” (*imparia*) to argue “from the greater to the lesser.” On the principle that *virtus* is more amazing in a woman than in a man, an exemplum of a *woman* performing a courageous act carries more force than a similar exemplum with a male protagonist:

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motif, and the only source that he discusses that dates from earlier than Pliny’s *Letters* is Valerius Maximus’ chapter on conjugal love (4.6). References to the motif there are: *Hypsicratea quoque regina Mitridatem coniugem suum effusis caritatis habenis amavit, propter quem praecipuum formae suae decorem in habitum virilem conuertere uoluptatis loco habuit: tonsis enim capillis equo se et armis adsuefecit, quo facilius laboribus et periculis eius interesset* (Val. Max. 4.6.ext.2) and *commutataque ueste* (4.6.ext.3). The motif is also found in later sources including Appian and Cassius Dio; for references see Parker 1998.

26 — On this see also Méthy 2007: 118-9.

27 — Often, but e.g. at Cic. *Tusc. Disp.* 2.21, 2.23, 2.24, 2.38; Livy 3.48, 25.37; Sen. *ad Helv.* 16, *ad Polyb.* 6.2; Vell. Pat. 2.87; Val. Max. 3.2.15.

28 — The contrast is clear if one compares the exile anecdotes that Pliny tells about Fannia at *Ep.* 7.19.4-5 with the exemplary anecdotes related by Valerius Maximus in Chapter 4.6.

*ad exhortationem vero praecipue valent imparia. admirabilior in femina quam in viro virtus. quare, si ad fortiter faciendum accendatur aliquis, non tantum adferent momenti Horatius et Torquatus quantum illa mulier, cuius manu Pyrrhus est interfectus, et ad moriendum non tam Cato et Scipio quam Lucretia; quod ipsum est ex maioribus ad minora.*

When it comes to exhortation, indeed, unequal exempla are particularly powerful. Virtue is more remarkable in a woman than it is in a man, therefore, if we need to incite someone to behave bravely, the cases of Horatius and Torquatus will carry less weight than that of the woman by whose hand Pyrrhus was killed, and if we need to incite someone to give up their life, Cato and Scipio carry less weight than Lucretia; that, in essence, is the argument from the greater to the lesser," (Quint. *Inst.* 5.11.9-10).

When Pliny cites women as exempla in his *Letters*, on the other hand, we find no trace of this sense of hierarchy between male and female exempla, or of the idea that female exempla might have a different rhetorical force from male exempla. When Pliny writes about Fannia as an exemplum, he does differentiate between the ways that men and their wives will respond to her example. He refers to her first as a general model for wives, and then as an *exemplum fortitudinis* for men, when, worrying about her imminent death, he asks:

*eritne, quam postea uxoribus nostris ostentare possimus? Erit, a qua viri quoque fortitudinis exempla sumamus, quam sic cernentes audientesque miremur ut illas, quae leguntur?*

Will there be any woman after this whom we can point out to our wives? Will there be another woman from whom we men too can take examples of fortitude, whom we can admire as we watch and listen to her, just like those heroines we read about? (7.19.7).

The differentiation in social roles for men and women does mean that certain aspects of Fannia's example will be more appropriate for some members of the community than for others. For wives, perhaps, she provides a useful model and inspiration for how to be a wife; for men it is more helpful to think of her as modelling particular virtues that are relevant to them. Yet when Pliny says that he and his fellow men take Fannia as an exemplum, there is no suggestion in the letter that there is anything uncomfortable for men about this. Indeed the further implication of the final four words of this passage, *ut illas quae leguntur*, is that Pliny and his male friends are accustomed to admiring women as exempla. Her exemplum is not represented as an *exhortation* to men, berating them for failing to live up to the standards set by a woman, as is the case, for

example, in Seneca's citation of the exemplum of Cloelia in his *Consolatio ad Marciam* 16. There, Seneca offers Marcia female exempla as proof that women are capable of virtue, but his evocation of Cloelia's statue nevertheless cleaves to the exhortation model, whereby female virtue is shaming (*exprobat*) for men because women ought to be morally inferior to men according to the conventions of gendered virtue:

*equestri insidens statuae in sacra uia, celeberrimo loco, Cloelia exprobat iuuenibus nostris puluinum escendentibus in ea illos urbe sic ingredi, in qua etiam feminas equo donauimus.*

Sitting on her equestrian statue on the Sacred Way, in the busiest part of town, Cloelia taunts our youths as they go up to take their cushioned seats for proceeding in such a way in a city in which we have granted equestrian statues even to women<sup>29</sup>.

In Pliny's letter *virī quoque* ("men too") is perhaps a gentle allusion to the trope of gender difference signalled by Seneca's *etiam feminas* ("even women")<sup>30</sup>, but it turns the traditional formulation on its head. Traditionally the idea is that in exceptional circumstances *even women* are capable of virtue. Here that rhetorical sense is not operational at all. The force of Seneca's citation of Cloelia rests on the idea of female inferiority. Fannia's exemplarity does not. Cloelia's actual deed (escape from being held hostage under a treaty between Porsenna and the Romans) is considerably less impressive per se than the deeds of her male contemporaries Horatius Cocles and Mucius Scaevola, alongside whom she is often cited. Fannia's achievements, on the other hand, do not differ significantly in kind from the men who displayed resistance alongside her; she stands up to persecution, insists on speaking the truth, refuses to betray family members and suffers exile just as they do. Fannia is offered as an exemplum on a par with male exempla, not as an unequal exemplum of different rhetorical weight<sup>31</sup>. Pliny does not suggest in any way that the fact that Fannia is a woman makes her endurance and bravery in the face

29 — Sen. *ad Marc.* 16; see Langlands (2004) on exemplarity and gender in Seneca's work, especially 123-5 on this passage. For women shaming men with their prowess see also Cic. *de Off.* 1.61 and Val. Max. 8.3.3 on Hortensia with Parker 1998: 172, n. 34.

30 — Cf. Livy 2.13 on Cloelia: *ergo ita honorata uirtute, feminae quoque ad publica decora excitatae.*

31 — Indeed, Pliny's praise portrait of Fannia in *Ep.* 7.19 can be read as the twin of *Ep.* 1.22 where we find a remarkably similar portrait of Titius Aristo, another friend whose death Pliny is expecting and dreading. The parallels between the two include concern not to cause distress to family members and the courageous endurance of illness, as well as the embodiment of ancient virtue. The close similarity of the two letters further supports my argument that there is little differentiation between male and female exempla and that Pliny is comfortable giving them equal weight.

of persecution embarrassing for men; she merely exemplifies her moral qualities in an inspirational fashion, just as a man would do.

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Importantly, nothing in the language used of any of Pliny's exemplary women suggests that their behaviour is inappropriate for their sex. In addition, Pliny deliberately alludes to and then modifies established gender tropes, in order, I suggest, to draw attention to the fact that he, in contrast, is *not* gendering virtue. Let us take, for instance, the twin clichés of the masculine spirit in a weak female body and of the male relative living through the female relative. In his description of Fannia, suffering nobly from illness at the end of her life, Pliny seems to allude to these tropes, yet to transcend both. For in the formulation *animus tantum et spiritus viget Helvidio marito, Thrasea patre dignissimus* ("only her courage and her spirit flourished, most worthy of her husband Helvidius and her father Thrasea," 7.19.3) it is not the spirit of Helvidius and Thrasea that continues to thrive in Fannia's decrepit body; rather it is Fannia's own spirit. It is a spirit that is indeed most worthy (*dignissimus*) of these men, but it is not theirs; Fannia is not ventriloquizing the men in her life, rather she is manifesting her own parallel qualities. In this respect I disagree with Carlon who writes that Pliny portrays "Fannia in rather masculine terms as an embodiment of her father and husband" (Carlon 2009: 56). I would argue that what we see here is Pliny subtly but deliberately shifting the shape of the traditional formulation. In addition, while usually in Latin literature women are shown to take on the attributes of their male relatives, in Pliny's *Letters* men also take on the attributes of their female relatives, thereby rendering the traditionally unidirectional relationship a reciprocal one, where men are no longer prioritized over women<sup>32</sup>. Moreover, when Pliny describes Fannia's spirit as remaining strong while her body weakens, he is alluding to the cliché of the strong male soul in the weak female body<sup>33</sup>. Yet Pliny emphatically (and I think that in the context of the gendered tradition we must find emphasis here) does *not* say that her *animus* and *spiritus* are male and her body is female. Rather, her spirit is strong because she is an admirable and courageous person; her body is weak because she is ill. Pliny has again taken a gender cliché and reworked it into ungendered terms.

32 — For women taking on the attributes of their male relatives see Hallett's classic article on women as "Same" in Roman culture (Hallett 1989); for men taking on the attributes of their female relatives see Centlivres Challet 2012.

33 — See n. 23 above.

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In his treatment of exempla in the *Letters*, however, Pliny does not merely put exempla on display for his readers, he also uses some of his letters to explore the very concept of exemplarity and its social and literary implications. Indeed, in Pliny's *Letters* exempla appear in every conceivable form and function, from the legal precedent to the rhetorical illustration to the moral inspiration<sup>34</sup>. This very variety and exhaustiveness seems to me to support the idea that the author is deliberately playing around with and reflecting on this traditional rhetorical and ethical form. Some of richest discussion of exemplarity centres on female exempla, further emphasizing their significance in the collection<sup>35</sup>. As will already be clear, one of the most significant features of Pliny's exemplarity is its emphasis on living exempla, and on people whom Pliny knows well. Traditional historical exempla (and traditional values) are also accorded status<sup>36</sup>, but the most effective exempla are those one finds living in one's own community, and can observe and admire in person. And these contemporary exempla tend to take the form of biographical portraits rather than of memorable moral anecdotes, the latter being the form in which Roman exempla had traditionally circulated through literature and oral transmission<sup>37</sup>. Exemplary anecdotes *are* deployed in the *Letters* to be sure<sup>38</sup>, but the dominant mode here is one where *exemplum* signifies not a snappy anecdote about a heroic deed performed at a moment of crisis, but rather a particular living contemporary who is evoked as exemplary

34 — See Büttler 1970: 85-94 for a useful summary.

35 — For instance, in this article I have drawn extensively on *Ep.* 7.19 where Pliny explores among other themes the importance of having exemplary figures before one's eyes. In *Ep.* 3.16 and *Ep.* 6.24 Pliny tackles from two angles the problem of the vexed relationship between virtue, praise and fame through the case studies of two heroic women of the previous generation. The framing idea of *Ep.* 3.16 is that: "the most famous and well-known exemplary deeds are not necessarily those which are the greatest in terms of virtue," (*alia clariora, alia maiora*). See also Méthy 2003 on the letter as part of Pliny's project of reworking traditional exempla for new ends. *Ep.* 6.24 uses the story of a heroic woman from Lake Como to explore the theme "what a difference it makes by whom a deed is done; the same deeds, depending on whether the fame or obscurity of those who perform them, are either praised to the skies or suppressed entirely." *quam multum interest quid a quoque fiat! eadem enim facta claritate vel obscuritate facientium aut tolluntur altissime aut humillime deprimuntur.*

36 — For the value of historical examples see 1.17.3-4, 1.22.2, 2.1.7, 7.33.9, 8.6.2, 8.12. For *antiquitas* as associated with virtue in Pliny's letters, see 1.14.4, 1.22.2, 2.9.4, 3.1.9, 4.3.1, 5.1.11, 7.33.9, 8.14.4. Cf. Gibson and Morello 2012: 127, n. 75.

37 — On exempla as memorable narratives see Roller 2004. The tradition tends to oscillate between understanding exempla as narrative and understanding them as heroic people. An individual's name evokes a narrative or set of narratives; on the other hand an anecdote partially characterises an individual, perhaps associating him with a specific virtue or cluster of virtues.

38 — Every now and then, as in the cases of Corellius Rufus (1.12) and Fannia (7.19), Pliny does deploy memorable anecdotes or *bons mots* within a characterisation to illustrate the characteristic qualities of the individual. Usually illustrative anecdotes, where used, are not especially memorable and pertain to the person's support of Pliny: e.g. 2.18-9 and 4.17.

through a character sketch, a list of virtues, and possibly a description of lifestyle<sup>39</sup>.

This motif of living role models and exempla is not a new one in Latin literature by any means. The idea that one must learn how to live by observing and imitating admirable figures, especially one's elder male relatives, is common in earlier literature, and particularly in those genres which deal with real people and contemporary society. In Horace's fourth satire, Horace's father is described as delivering his son's moral training through reference to contemporary figures as exemplars of vice and virtue; his own father, at his side and guiding him with his commentary on the world around him, is of course Horace's best role model (Hor. *Sat.* 1.4.105-143). In his *Letters to Lucilius* Seneca states how important it is to be in the presence of one's role models, emulating their excellence but also shaping one's behaviour in the knowledge that they are looking on critically (Sen. *Ep.* 6). However for Seneca (and earlier authors such as Cicero and Valerius Maximus) the power of rhetoric and the imagination to conjure up the "presence" of someone who is not really there is such that dead exemplary heroes of the past can, in the end, play this role just as well as real life exemplars<sup>40</sup>.

This is not the case for Pliny. Pliny emphasizes in his *Letters* the particular power of knowing exemplary figures first hand, the importance of close personal connections within his community, the strong presence of love and affection that bind people together within exemplary relations. In the context of his post-Domitianic desire to resuscitate memories of recent heroism that have been repressed, and to regenerate exemplary memory<sup>41</sup>, he also values his exemplary friends as repositories of knowledge about the past, and as living connections to that past. Fannia, for instance, is able to pass on to Pliny new stories about her famous grandmother Arria (3.16), as well as embodying the memory of her own history of persecution, exile and resistance. Pliny expresses several times his anxiety about the consequences of losing such figures – both men and women – from the community<sup>42</sup>. He represents the imminent deaths of both Titius Aristo (1.22) and Fannia (7.19) not only as personal losses, but even more importantly as ethical losses with repercussions for the

39 — In addition to the case of Cornutus cited at the start of this article we find descriptions of the exemplary lifestyle and daily routine of Verginius Rufus (1.12), Spurinna (3.1), Pliny the Elder (3.5), Pomponius Bassus (4.23) and finally Pliny himself (9.36).

40 — E.g. Cicero's conjuring of the ancestors to admonish Clodia (Cic. *Cael.* 33-4) or Val. Max. 6.2.8 playing on the idea that the living and dead are interchangeable. Cf. Dressler 2012: 172 for the paradoxical position of Seneca's insisting "on the value of living with exempla even as he tells us...that living with exempla is not necessary."

41 — On Pliny's exemplary programme see Gazich 2003; on the political and historical connections of his exemplary figures see Carlon 2009, Gibson and Morello 2012.

42 — 1.12, 1.22, 7.19, 8.14, 9.22.

wider community. With Aristo the community will lose a living *thesaurus*, an encyclopaedic storehouse of knowledge about private and public law, about exempla and about antiquity, as well as a man whose lifestyle of old-fashioned simplicity (*priscae frugalitatis*, 1.22.5) is an inspiration. Of Fannia's loss, Pliny writes: *doleo enim feminam maximam eripi oculis civitatis, nescio an aliquid simile visuris*. "for I grieve that such a great woman is to be snatched away from the eyes of the community, I don't know whether you will see another one like her," (7.19.4) and later he elaborates on the loss, worrying (in the passage already cited above) whether they will be able to find another model like her once she has gone: *eritne quam postea uxoribus nostris ostentare possimus? erit a qua viri quoque fortitudinis exempla sumamus, quam sic cernentes audientesque miremur, ut illas quae leguntur?* ("Will there be anyone after this whom we can point out to our wives? Will there be another woman from whom we men too can take examples of fortitude, whom we can admire as we watch and listen to her, just like those heroines we read about?" 7.19.7). Although she may join the ranks of these literary "readable" exempla in the history books, as a living woman Fannia is something rather different and rather more powerful, as Pliny represents it here. Her living presence offers something to the community that a dead exemplum cannot. Pliny's anxiety about her being snatched away from the eyes of the community – *oculis civitatis* – is that once she is gone there will no longer be the same opportunity to watch and listen to her (*cernentes audientesque*), and to use her as an example (*exempla sumamus*), and her force as an exemplary figure diminishes dramatically. The implication is that to function most effectively as a motivational and didactic model of behaviour and virtue, Fannia needs to be *present*, in person<sup>43</sup>.

Women's presence within Pliny's *Letters* may be partly explained, therefore, by the fact that women play significant roles in the real world of Pliny's community, as family members, patrons, friends, survivors of the Domitianic era. However this is also a matter of genre. The Latin literary genres which deal predominantly with contemporary society and real living individuals (such as letters, consolation and eulogy) tend to be those in which there is most representation of individual women as praiseworthy and virtuous. Cicero's *Letters* are an important literary precedent for Pliny<sup>44</sup>, and despite Cicero's very gendered treatment of moral excellence elsewhere<sup>45</sup>, in his correspondence he regularly praises members of

43 — It is of course ironic that the catalogue of exempla that Pliny himself is creating through his *Letters* is a literary one, and he presumably counts on his *Letters* preserving something of their living presence in literary form.

44 — For Pliny's adoption of Cicero's letters as a model for his own see Gibson and Morello 2012: 74-103.

45 — See n. 21 above.

his own family, and of the families of his correspondents, for their virtue<sup>46</sup>; his daughter Tullia is even described more than once as possessing the quality of *virtus*<sup>47</sup>. So in working up his catalogue of exempla and exploring the idea of exemplarity Pliny is developing the potential of the epistolary genre – including its potential to celebrate exemplary women – and endowing a motif that had been present in much earlier works with a new substance and significance. Pliny appears to be using his letters to create new, modern exempla who can take their place in the traditional exemplary canon (as we saw in the case of Fannia above) and help to shape future generations in their turn, reconnecting the exemplary links in the chain that had been broken under Domitian's rule<sup>48</sup>.

There are more men represented in this way in Pliny's *Letters* than there are women, to be sure, although precise statistics are hard to ascertain, since references to exemplary individuals take many forms and some are more fully drawn than others, so there are various ways one might count the exempla in the letters. Carlon's analysis is judicious and conservative; she counts five positive male contemporaries, two negative exempla (Pallas and Regulus) and two historical exempla (Verginius Rufus and Cornutus Tertullus)<sup>49</sup>. Against this modest group of men one might compare, as female exempla, Fannia (7.19), and the young Minicia Marcella (5.16)<sup>50</sup>. Although they are not in this same mode of contemporary living exempla, it is also worth mentioning here two further exemplary women, figures from the previous generation, who can be compared to the male historical figures such as Verginius Rufus and Cornutus Tertullus: Arria the Elder, who receives extended treatment in 3.16, and the woman from Lake Como (6.24). We might expand the scope to include the more fleeting mentions of exemplary figures such as Calpurnia Hispulla, the aunt of Pliny's wife, addressed as an exemplum of *pietas* (4.19.1, *exemplum pietatis*), Macrinus' wife, a woman of singular exemplarity who combi-

46 — E.g. Marcellus' mother and wife are both described as *gravissimae atque optimae feminae* (*Fam.* 15.7.1, *Fam.* 15.8.1); Domitius Ahenobarbus' mother is *optimam feminam tuique amantissimam* (*Fam.* 6.22.3) Crassus' wife is *praestantissima omnium feminarum* (*Fam.* 5.8.2); P. Vatinius' wife is *feminam primariam* (*Fam.* 5.11.2). For these references see Santoro L'Hoir 1992: 34 on the use of the term *femina* as a mark of respect and part of a formal greeting in Cicero's correspondence.

47 — *Cic. Att.* 10.8; *Att.* 11.17; *Fam.* 14.11. On Cicero's characterization of Tullia as virtuous see Treggari 2007: 160, Späth 2010. On Cicero's representation of Tullia's virtue and its possible relationship to his understanding of *humanitas* as a virtue with "feminine aspect" see Altman 2009: 413, with Altman 2008. I thank Alex Dressler for these references.

48 — Gazich 2003.

49 — Carlon 2009: 56, n. 42.

50 — His wife Calpurnia is also praised for possessing qualities – *frugalitas*, *castitas* and *acumen* – that mark her out, in Carlon's analysis, as an ideal wife; however, she is not presented as an exemplum. Similarly, Ummidia Quadratilla, grandmother of Pliny's protégé, is given a nuanced obituary in which she is praised for her *reverentia* (7.24.5) in not exposing her grandson to her pantomime actors (see Carlon 2009: 204–211 for an acute analysis of the context and content of this letter.)

ned a whole range of the greatest virtues (8.5.1) or Spurinna's wife, also described (like Macrinus' wife) with the phrase *uxorem singularis exempli* (3.1.5) but with no further elaboration, or even the *puellas honestissimas*, the daughters of Helvidius who have died in childbirth (4.21), or the *optimae matri* of Calpurnius Piso who appears alongside his brother (5.17.5); if so, however, we must range these women against a far greater number of admirable men who are similarly mentioned<sup>51</sup>.

It is fair to say, of course, that in the world evoked by Pliny's *Letters* there is strong gendering at the level of the social role, and that women's sphere of influence and activity are shown to be severely limited in comparison with that of men. Carlon has shown convincingly how, read as a collection, Pliny's *Letters* can be seen to depict a coherent tripartite model of the ideal wife, developed particularly through the case-studies of Minicia Marcella, Calpurnia and Fannia. As Carlon argues, in his articulation of this ideal Pliny draws on a long tradition in Roman moralizing literature, within which the wife has value only in terms of her relationship with her husband, and as a credit to him<sup>52</sup>. Indeed, almost all the women who are depicted as exemplary in the *Letters* appear in their roles as good wives, and the anecdotes told of Fannia's exiles, and the deaths of Arria the Elder and the anonymous woman from Lake Como, all draw on an established theme of the exemplary tradition that Holt Parker has labelled "Loyal Wives"<sup>53</sup>. However, even at the level of the social role there is more parity than one might expect. As many women appear in their roles as good daughters, mothers or grandmothers<sup>54</sup>, just as men appear as fulfilling their familial roles. Gender parity is evident too within Pliny's strategy of self-representation; Carlon's monograph argues persuasively that all positive depictions of women in the *Letters* are designed to reflect well on Pliny through their association with him. Nevertheless, it is also the case that when one places the male figures depicted in the *Letters* under the same scrutiny, all the positive descriptions of men function in the same way, as Carlon herself shows: all Pliny's protégés, mentors and friends are drawn so as to reflect well on Pliny and to help him secure the eternal glory that he desires.

If there is some differentiation in social role, then, at the abstract level of virtue, on the other hand, the parity between the sexes is soundly established. Since, as we have seen, women are praised in the *Letters* predominantly in their role as wives, some scholars have tended to assume

51 — For references see n. 6 above.

52 — On Pliny's representation of women as wives see Carlon 2009, and on women as defined by and given value through their relationship to men see also Hallett 1989, Shelton 1990, Parker 1998, Shelton 2012.

53 — Parker 1998.

54 — Centlivres Challett 2013: 84-5.

or to argue that the virtues associated with these women are particularly feminine and associated with the role of the ideal Roman wife<sup>55</sup>. In fact, however, in Pliny's *Letters* there is no clear differentiation between the sexes when it comes to the attribution of particular virtues. This is clear from the recent detailed analyses of the references to individual moral qualities in the *Letters* undertaken separately by Carlon and Méthy. The two scholars did not have the opportunity to read one another's work, and they approach the analysis of the data from different perspectives; nevertheless their conclusions both support this claim. Méthy's analysis focuses on what Pliny's deployment of moral terms can tell us about his ethical outlook and especially the distinction he draws between moral and social values (Méthy 2007: 117-141), while Carlon is investigating the significance of the virtues attributed to the four women whom Pliny characterizes as "ideal" in his letters: Minicia Marcella, his wife Calpurnia, her aunt Calpurnia Hispulla and Fannia (Carlon 2009: 148-182). Carlon is careful to compare the characterization of these women to the similar characterization of men in Pliny's letters, enabling an accurate discussion of the gendering of terms, and she shows that all the virtues attributed to women are also attributed elsewhere to men; Méthy draws no distinction between the sexes and it is clear from her discussion that most of the moral qualities that Pliny values are attributed in his letters to both men and women. For instance, the specific virtues that Pliny lists in connection with Fannia are the list of *castitas*, *sanctitas*, *gravitas* and *continentia*, and then later *fortitudo*, of which she is described as an *exemplum*<sup>56</sup>. The term which modern scholars are most tempted to gender here is *castitas*, which is often translated into English as chastity and described as a particularly female virtue associated with sexual purity<sup>57</sup>. In fact, like *sanctitas*, *castitas* is not exclusively used in relation to sex. Furthermore, it is used in Latin literature generally as often of men as it is of women<sup>58</sup>, and this is certainly the pattern in Pliny's *Letters*. In addition to its attribution to Fannia, it is listed as one of the cluster of virtues possessed by the men Titius Aristo (1.22,) and Maturus Arrianus (3.2)<sup>59</sup>. The argument that

55 — Cf. Shelton 2012: 277 "laudable feminine behavior."

56 — *Quae castitas illi, quae sanctitas, quanta gravitas quanta constantia!... eadem quam iucunda, quam comis, quam denique – quod paucis datum est – non minus amabilis quam veneranda!* (7.19.4-7). For an excellent discussion of these virtues and their significance in the description of Fannia see Carlon 2009: 175-182.

57 — Even Carlon, whose discussion of *castitas* is judicious and who discusses its use of men as well as women, does nevertheless say "Castitas takes on a more specific sense when assigned to women" (Carlon 2009: 177).

58 — On *castitas* and *sanctitas* see Langlands 2006: 30.

59 — *Nemini tamen istorum castitate pietate iustitia, fortitudine etiam primo loco cesserit* (*Ep.* 1.22.7); *castitate iustitia gravitate prudentia* (*Ep.* 3.2.2). The other mentions of the quality of *castitas* in the *Letters* are slightly different; in *Ep.* 3.3 it is one of the key qualities, together with *pudor*

qualities of charm and sweetness are gendered, (attributed to Fannia, for instance, as *iucunda comis* at 7.19.7) can be easily refuted by adducing the numerous passages where men are described in similar terms<sup>60</sup>.

Erring in the other direction, scholars sometimes label qualities such as *fortitudo*, *gravitas* or *patientia* as “masculine” virtues, but this too is misleading. In fact, it is notable, though easy to miss (many have done so) that in these letters we find no explicitly gendered language or imagery when it comes to describing the virtues and the deeds of the women. The most egregious example of unfounded gendering of Pliny’s *Letters* is probably that of Malaspina 1995, which argues that Arria is characterized as a *femina virilis*. However, even Carlon, whose analysis of the representation of women and men within the letters is most careful and accurate, concludes: “The qualities emphasized by Pliny [in his ideal wives] are overwhelmingly masculine traits – for example *gravitas*, *sanc-titas*, and *constantia*... no wool workers appear among Pliny’s ideal wives; rather they are all women of masculine fortitude who are deserving of their grandfathers, fathers and husbands” (Carlon 2009: 185). This is a perfectly tenable position, given the long Latin tradition of gendering virtues in this way; yet it rests on projecting onto Pliny’s work a gendering of virtue that is noticeably (to my mind) absent from the text itself; in fact, unlike other ancient authors, he never suggests that some virtues are more appropriate for one sex or the other.

This parity between the sexes is highlighted by a contrast with the way that Pliny *does* differentiate virtues, on the other hand, in relation to other social distinctions such as age and social class. For instance, the quality of *prudentia* (foresight or wisdom) is one that is explicitly associated with old age and maturity<sup>61</sup>. On a couple of occasions Pliny plays around with this association when he attributes the quality to younger people; in both cases he makes a point of its anomaly, in the case of Minicia by qualifying it by the adjective *anilis* (“of an old woman”) *Ep.* 5.16.2, and in the case of Iunius Avitus (*Ep.* 8.23.) by joking that his “*prudentia*” lay in

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and *severitas*, that is required for the tutor who will teach Corellia’s rather attractive teenage son, and in *Ep.* 4.19 Pliny writes that his own wife Calpurnia shows proof of her *castitas* by loving him (there is an interesting discussion of this Shelton 1990). See also Carlon 2009: 176 for *castitas* in Pliny’s *Letters* used of men as well as women.

60 — E.g. Euphrates, *vitae sanctitas summa, comitas par* (1.10), Arrius Antoninus, *severitas* and *gravitas* tempered with *comitas* and *iucunditas* (4.3.2); *ut in vita sic in studiis pulcherrimum et humanissimum exstimo severitatem comitatemque miscere* (8.21); *gravitas* equalled by *comitas* (9.9). The word *amabilis* (lovable) is used in the *Letters* only of Minicia (5.16.1) and Fannia (7.19) and it is notable that it is also a term used by Cicero in a letter to describe Atticus’ baby daughter (Cic. *Att.* 5.19), although it is not otherwise a gendered term, and interestingly Cicero uses it in his philosophical works to describe the appeal of *virtus* itself (Cic. *de Nat. Deo.* 1.121, *de Amic.* 28, 51, 98).

61 — Cf. its use in *Ep.* 3.1.10, where it is the fruit of Spurinna’s old age. On virtue and social status see Méthy 2007: 151-160.

acknowledging that his elders were more endowed with *prudencia* than he (8.23.3)<sup>62</sup>. That Pliny is prepared to play around with age differentiation in this way makes it all the more striking that there is no similar gender differentiation. I think therefore we are justified in finding it significant that Pliny never suggests either that a particular quality is more suitable for a man or for a woman, or that courageous women are manifesting qualities that are more usually associated with men.

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Part of the context for this new incorporation of women within the exemplary tradition and the new gender parity in the representation of virtues may well be a shift that we also find in the *Letters* in the understanding of virtue generally. Méthy has recently argued that in his *Letters* Pliny is "overtly privileging personal qualities over collective values, and the individual over society"<sup>63</sup>, and that he values above all the quality of *humanitas*, where emotional experience and sensitivity are crucial qualities for a person to possess<sup>64</sup>. In addition, Pliny tends to locate virtue in the kind of arenas of activity where women can and do participate (such as imperial politics – trials, inheritance, court manoeuvring, dynastic strategy – patronage, family relationships, intellectual pursuits and political resistance) rather than in the traditional areas of the battlefield or the senate house from which women were largely excluded<sup>65</sup>.

Furthermore, Pliny's depiction of exempla as individualistic and multiple make it easier for women to be included in the ranks of exemplary figures. Diversity of situation is one of the importance characteristics of Pliny's exemplary corpus<sup>66</sup>. In the *Letters* we find many different exemplary figures who inspire Pliny or others and who provide other people with illustrations of how to live well and models of behaviour that others can emulate. When it comes to the age-old Roman debate about whether it is best to choose one exemplum on which to model oneself or to draw on a number, synthesising their virtues for oneself, Pliny tends towards the

62 — See Carlon 2009: 152 on *prudencia* as the quality of a mature person; cf. Pliny's similar deployment of the term *gravitas* discussed at Méthy 2007: 136.

63 — Méthy 2003: 215. My translation from the French.

64 — Méthy 2007: especially 207-272. See e.g. *Ep.* 8.16.4 for Pliny on grief and humanity; it is all very well being a philosopher, but being immune to grief makes you inhuman. "To be human is to feel the pain and experience it, to resist it, yes, and to admit solace; not to have no need of solace at all": *hominis est enim adfici dolore, sentire, resistere tamen et solacia admittere, non solaciis non egere*.

65 — As one of the anonymous reviewers points out to me, it may also be that the new prominence of women as exempla is associated with changes in political self-definition in the early empire, when connections to family members whether on the maternal or paternal side become increasingly important.

66 — Méthy 2007: 444-5.

latter position<sup>67</sup>. Various letters advance the idea – found, for instance, in Cicero *de Officiis* – that exemplarity works best when one is similar to one’s model both in personal characteristics and in situation<sup>68</sup>. Pliny’s own engagement with the model of his uncle Pliny the Elder is illustrative of this. Pliny the Elder provides a good exemplum for Pliny the nephew for writing history, not least because he is a family member, a *domesticum* exemplum, and Pliny may be referring directly to Cicero *de Officiis* when he says: *invenio autem apud sapientes honestissimum esse maiorum vestigia sequi* (“I find that wise men think that the best thing of all is to follow in the footsteps of one’s ancestors,” 5.8.4)<sup>69</sup>; but his situation is not quite close enough, and so the exemplum must be modified for the nephew’s purposes. Pliny makes it clear that imitation of ethical models is vital, but that there needs to be a degree of adaptation and creativity within this imitation in order for it to work for the person imitating<sup>70</sup>. Within this situation sensitive, multiple-model system, one need not identify fully with one’s model, but can identify with certain aspects of him or her as a person and of their situation. This model therefore makes it perfectly comfortable for men to find individual women exemplary, and vice versa, without this providing a challenge to their own gender identity.

The question remains how far Pliny is consciously innovating and how far he is reflecting social or ideological change; either way more analysis is needed of the relationship between the articulation of virtue, exemplarity and gender in Pliny’s *Letters* and in the literary works of his contemporaries. We have seen that Pliny’s treatment of these themes seems to mark a departure from Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* and Tacitus’ *Agricola*, but did it have any effect on Tacitus’ subsequent treatment of the gendering of virtue and exemplarity in his later works, the *Histories* and the *Annals*, or upon Greek writers of following generations, such as Plutarch and Appian (who also display a keen interest in the exemplarity of women)? For instance, when Tacitus famously declares at the start of the *Histories* that the period of civil war of disruption preceding the Flavian era was

67 — For earlier contributions to this debate see e.g. *Rhet. Ad Her.* 4. 5.7, Sen. *Controv.* 1. pr. 6.

68 — Cic. *Off.* 1.109-112, 122; on the description and function of situational ethics within Roman thought see Langlands 2011, with particular reference to Cicero *de Officiis* and Valerius Maximus.

69 — On the familiar Roman idea of taking one’s own ancestors as models see further Baroin 2010.

70 — Cf. 1.23.4, where Pliny offers his own behaviour as exemplary but also acknowledges that it may not be right for the others to imitate his own actions because of a difference in role and situation: *sed tu plurimum interest quid esse tribunatum putes, quam personam tibi imponas*, (“it makes a lot of difference what you think a tribunate is, and what role you impose on yourself”). See also the alternative choices made by two exemplary figures, Corellius Rufus (1.12) and Titius Aristo (1.22) in the face of severe illness (for a discussion of these two letters as representing different choices see Méthy 2007: 202-3).

not so barren of virtue that some exempla could not be found, he begins his illustrative list with heroic women: "mothers who accompany their exiled children, wives who follow their husbands into exile"<sup>71</sup>. Might there be a note sounded here of Plinian ethics? Of especial interest too is the afterlife of Pliny's emphasis on the "living exemplum" and on the need for multiple such figures in one's moral education. This model is very strong, for instance, in Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, written about sixty years later, and it would be interesting to explore the possible relationship between these texts. Most significant in the light of the argument of this article is the representation of exemplarity in the letters of Jerome; these take Pliny's *Letters* as a literary model, particularly in creating exemplary portraits, including many of women, explicitly to be taken as ethical models by his reader<sup>72</sup>. The relationship between Pliny and Jerome when it comes to ideas about women, virtue and exemplarity is one that would certainly be worth further exploration.

A question one might pose from a modern feminist perspective is how far Pliny's literary representation of women as on a par with men on the level of abstract virtues had any ramification for the lived experience of real-life Roman women. It is impossible to pronounce definitively on this, of course, and any claim that Pliny's approach represents feminist progress is open to the same critiques that Martha Nussbaum has levelled at Musonius Rufus' "incomplete feminism"<sup>73</sup>. A crucial limitation to the "feminism" of such authors is "the failure to understand the extent to which human dignity and self-respect require support from the social world," (Nussbaum 2002: 302). As with Musonius, there is no sense that Pliny is attempting to bring about radical social change in order to overturn the status quo of male domination. Women are still valued primarily from male perspective and, as we have seen, there remains a clear differentiation between men's and women's social roles, although Nussbaum's comment about Musonius is also relevant to our understanding of gendered social roles in Pliny: "We must point out... that Musonius... is talking about real-life women and making practical suggestions for actual lives, rather than doing ideal political theory," (Nussbaum 2002: 301). Moreover, Nussbaum points to the absence of women's voices

71 — Tac. *Hist.* 1.3: *non tamen adeo virtutum sterile saeculum ut non et bona exempla prodiderit. comitatae profugos liberos matres, secutae maritos in exilia coniuges*; Hallett 1989: 67 makes the useful comparison to another contemporary source Suet. *Tib.* 2, where both male and female exempla (both good and bad) are juxtaposed in Tiberius' ancestry. Further on Tacitus' treatment of exempla see Hunink 2004 and Turpin 2008 according to whom Tacitus (like Pliny) is seeking to create "a rhetoric of exemplarity joining his own day to the past," (Turpin 2008: 365).

72 — See Cain 2009: especially 18-9, 103, 130; for female exempla in Jerome's letters see *Eps.* 23, 24 and 38 and the preface to 65.

73 — Nussbaum 2002 on Musonius in the context of the Greek Stoic tradition of female equality with men and especially 300-313 for an assessment of Musonius' "feminism."

in Musonius' work (311-313). In Pliny's *Letters*, by contrast, women are "heard" in their role as addressees or as characters within the letters; indeed Arria has the most direct speech of any person in the letters (3.16).

One does not want to be unduly optimistic about the possibility that Pliny was either reflecting or effecting social change, especially since, as I have mentioned above, such description of the virtue and excellence of close female family members and acquaintances is already found nearly a hundred and fifty years earlier in Cicero's letters<sup>74</sup>. However dwelling for a moment on the difference between Cicero and Pliny will help to clarify what is innovative and significant in real terms about Pliny's approach here; while in Cicero we find *only praise* of women, Pliny interweaves with the praise exemplary motifs, and thereby transforms real women into models for both men and women in his own community and for posterity. In his treatment of women not merely as praiseworthy but also as worthy of emulation by men as well as by women, Pliny invokes the literary and cultural form of the moral exemplum, which is designed precisely to make a real intervention in people's lives, changing the way that people both think and behave<sup>75</sup>. We know from research in the social sciences today how important female role models are for the promotion of women's aspiration and personal development<sup>76</sup>. If we assume that some Roman women would have read Pliny's *Letters*, which seems a fair assumption since the *Letters* are clearly written for wider publication, then there is certainly the possibility that the references to female exempla found there would have enabled them to develop their own moral and social aspiration and potential. In addition, cross-gender role-modelling, such as we see in Pliny's *Letters*, where men take women as models and vice versa, is also an effective means of challenging both restrictions around gender-specific roles and socially entrenched ideas about the gender-appropriateness of specific qualities or the innate capabilities of men and women. Moreover, exempla are themselves a means of reifying abstract values, and of bridging the gap between the abstract and the real, between the moral generalisation and the life of the individual. Pliny wanted his exempla to make a real difference in people's lives, and if he was successful in this at all the difference that they made is likely to have been one that encouraged the dismantling of gender differentiation, at least to some degree.

74 — See n. 45 above.

75 — Langlands 2008; Bell and Hansen 2008; Dressler 2012, esp. 145, 150, 158, 160.

76 — See for instance Sealy and Singh 2010, Gayer and Therwath 2010. I thank my social science colleagues in the School of Psychology and the Centre for Leadership Studies at Exeter, and all the participants in the *Heroes and Leaders Workshop on Exemplarity and Identity* in Exeter in March 2013 for sharing their work-in-progress on this subject and for stimulating discussion.

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