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LITERARY TESTIMONY OF ILLNESS AND DEATH IN THE EPISTOLOGRAPHY OF PLINY THE YOUNGER

Abstract: In his literary letters, one of the first of its kind in Roman literature, Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus writes about various topics concerning the everyday life of Romans. His collection consists of stylistically revised (*epistulae curatius scriptae*/*litterae curiosius scriptae*) actual letters addressed to family members and friends, which the author personally selected and published. Although Pliny is considered an optimistic writer, the epistolary part of his work is often intertwined with topics related to various diseases and health conditions, aging, (premature) death, suicides, and as a counterweight to all this is the omnipresent desire for fame and immortality.

The aim of this paper is to shed more light on the phenomenon of illness and death from a literary aspect. We will explore relevant excerpts and provide a broader picture when looking at this topic. Literary creativity was Pliny's greatest pleasure and the path to immortality. His letters, full of piety for ancestors and care for descendants, should guide us nowadays.

Keywords: Pliny the Younger, literary epistolography, illness, death, immortality.

1. Introduction: Private Letters as Artistic Literature

Besides being the primary form of written communication in antiquity, letters evolved into a distinct genre of literary creation. Since the 4th century B.C., there existed the institution of the *open* letter, in which political proposals and opinions were expressed. Additionally, for promotional purposes, fictional and pseudonymous letters were written, while the letters of Alexander the Great, of which very few have survived, represented a kind of popular historiography.[1] Pliny the Younger is one of the first Roman authors who wrote and published *literary*, that is, stylistically edited actual letters, addressed to close individuals (*epistulae curatius scriptae/litterae curiosius scriptae*).[2] According to

[1] Cic. 1998: 20, preface by Dejan Matić.

[2] Plin. *Ep*. 1. 1.1. In addressing his friend Septicius, who had encouraged him to write, Pliny himself states that

the ancient definition attributed to Demetrius of Phaleron,[3] a letter is *a halved dialogue*, a conversation between two people physically separated (*sermo absentium*), and therefore, careful attention must be paid to the writing style, particularly in letters intended for publication. Thus, it could be stated that Pliny's actual recipient reflects a broad Roman audience. Given the high mortality rate in antiquity,[4] a significant number of letters were dedicated specifically to diseases and, consequently, to dying. From the perspective of funerary studies, archaeological and epigraphic evidence is rightly prioritized, although literary works represent a relevant source for studying this topic. Based on the analysis of relevant excerpts, we will attempt to examine how illness and death were perceived in Roman society and culture at the beginning of the Common Era and how these themes were addressed in the form of letters. For clarity and in order to follow the development of the author's thoughts, examples will largely be presented in the order in which they appear in the collection, although they will also be grouped by theme.

The epistolary portion of Pliny's work comprises 368 letters arranged into ten books. The first nine books were composed and published during the period from 79 to 109 AD, totaling 247 letters, while the tenth book, which includes the correspondence with Emperor Trajan during Pliny's tenure as governor of Bithynia and Pontus, was written between 111 and 113 AD and published posthumously. This book encompasses 121 letters from both correspondents and is distinguished from the others by its content and length. The reason for the inclusion of Pliny the Younger's official correspondence with Trajan alongside his private artistic letters lies in the fact that, at the turn of the era, no distinct boundary was drawn between official and private writings; both were received on the same interpretive level as art–*ars*.[5]

2. Immortality as a Motif in Pliny's Letters and Creative Work

According to the theoretical principles preserved through antiquity, literary letters were expected to be characterized by brevity, a clear and refined form, an elegant writing style, wit, and approachability, with a preference for addressing lighter topics suitable for this literary form. Additionally, they could present a historical event, a scientific problem, or offer moral instruction and encouragement in an engaging manner. Letters could serve as a form of entertainment for the recipient and, subsequently, for a broader reading audience. Pliny composed his letters within such theoretical frameworks. His style reflects the literary conventions of ancient epistolography, combining simplicity with elegance, enriched with descriptions and comparisons. He regarded letter writing as a type of scholastic exercise aimed at refining one's style.

The introductory letters, serving as a brief preface and an author's note to the entire collection, begin with a distinctive motif of immortal fame that intellectual work brings

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he has gathered and refined his letters, but that he does not adhere to their chronological order in their publication, since, as he notes, he was not writing a historical work.

3 Dem. Phal. *Eloc*. 223–224. More about the authorship of the definition and the development of epistolography can be found in the paper: Prtija 2022.

4 Hope 2007: 1.

5 Cic. 1998: 20, preface by Dejan Matić.

to its authors.[6] In ancient literature, from Homer onward, poets were aware of the enduring nature of their written works. Literary creation, as the greatest source of fulfillment, represented humanity's struggle against mortality even in Pliny's era.[7] Inspired by his friends' requests to write, he, in the third letter of the first book, advises the historian Caninius Rufus–who was documenting Trajan's wars with the Dacians–in a similar spirit:

> Why not assign those shallow and shoddy concerns to others, for it's time you did, and apply yourself to your books in this time of boundless and slothful retirement? Make this your business and leisure, your work and relaxation. Devote your waking hours to this, and your sleeping hours too. Create something and shape it, so that it becomes yours for ever.[8]

Like Horace and Ovid,[9] Pliny compares poetry to a monument, as everything else human in nature is fragile, transient, and subject to decay and oblivion.[10] As we shall see in many of his later letters, he is driven by a desire for fame among future generations: he wishes for his name to be remembered and for his work to be admired, just as he admires the great Cicero and his contemporary Tacitus.[11] The transience of human existence fills him with sorrow; even the deepest old age makes human life appear short and limited. Through noble deeds, diligent reading, and the pursuit of knowledge, one must extend one's existence so as to leave behind a testament to future generations that we once lived.[12]

These motifs permeate the entire collection of his letters, and we can conclude that they serve as both the foundation and inspiration for Pliny's literary endeavors. His writings predominantly depict leisurely daily life, current events in the courtroom and the city, descriptions of villas, learned discussions on oratory, and the works he writes. Since illness and death are inextricable parts of everyday life, it is through letters on these topics that we perceive Pliny's profound sensitivity, selflessness, and concern for others. Although this literary form contains very few artificial embellishments, empty phrases, or examples of text lacking substance, which makes writing a letter with lasting and universal value challenging,[13] Pliny's letters still abound with diverse emotions and personal reflections.

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6 Pliny's letters have literary and linguistic value (Plinije 1982: 11, preface by Branko Gavela), and with their diverse content, they also provide direct insight into a specific historical moment (Alade 2021: 253), deepening its context. To check how successful Pliny was in his intention to gain immortal fame through literary work, see the paper: Fort 2012.

7 Plin. *Ep*. 2.10; 9.3.

8 Plin. *Ep*. 1.3.3–4. This and all the following quotes are cited according to the publication: Plinius G. Younger, *Complete Letters*, trans. Peter Walsh, Oxford: University press, 2006.

9 Hor. *Car*. 3.30, 1; Ov. *Met*. 25.871. More on the comparison of literary creation with the construction of monuments as symbols of something lasting and imperishable: Đurić 2024.

10 Plin. *Ep*. 2.10.4.

11 *Ibid*. 1.5.8; 6.16.1; 8.20.

12 *Ibid*. 3.7.11–15.

13 Plinije 1982: 5, preface by Branko Gavela.

3. Pliny's Testimonies on Illness and Death

3.1. Marcus Aquilius Regulus

Senator, high priest, and notable orator Marcus Aquilius Regulus is one of the rare individuals about whom Pliny speaks negatively, writing hostile letters about him. Regulus was an infamous informant during the reigns of Nero and Domitian. Pliny mentions him as early as the first book, noting that Regulus rejoices in the death of his rival to the extent of reciting and publishing a book attacking him.[14] From this example, it becomes evident that certain Romans, like the aforementioned Regulus, did not hesitate to criticize their deceased enemies, sometimes going to great lengths by publishing malicious pamphlets against them. It can be said that the respect for the dead or any fear of them, embodied in the ancient adage *de mortuis nihil nisi bene* ("of the dead, speak nothing but good"), was present in Roman society of that era. Pliny relies on this sentiment when writing these lines, underscoring Regulus's lack of restraint in the given situation as a particularly negative trait. On the other hand, Pliny expresses respect for Regulus's deceased only son, remarking that this was the one misfortune his adversary did not deserve. However, he also laments that even in mourning his son, Regulus behaved with excess and ostentation:

> The boy had many ponies, some harnessed in pairs and others unfettered for riding; he also had dogs, larger and smaller, nightingales, parrots, and blackbirds. Regulus slaughtered all of them around his funeral pyre. This was no grief, but a mere display of it. [15]

In said ostentation, Regulus knows no bounds:

> He decided to mourn his son; he mourns like no other. He decided to have the greatest possible number of statues and portraits of his son made; he sets to work on this in every studio, and has him fashioned in colours, wax, bronze, silver, gold, ivory, and marble. Recently, he gathered a huge audience and declaimed a biography of his son. It was a mere boy's life, but he nonetheless declaimed it. He had a thousand copies transcribed and dispatched throughout Italy and the provinces. He wrote letters to the authorities, asking town councillors to choose from among them their most articulate member to read each out before the citizens. This was done.[16]

In one of his later letters, written after Regulus had already passed away, Pliny admits that he often wished to face him in court, as Regulus appreciated oratory and put great effort into his speeches. However, being fully aware of Regulus's less admirable traits, Pliny openly remarks: "But whatever the merits of this, Regulus did well to die, and would have done better to die earlier".[17] Despite this blunt statement, the letter is not an invective against his greatest adversary. On the contrary, it serves as a sort of tribute to Regulus as a skilled master of the written word who achieved significant success in oratory.[18] Based on these excerpts,

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[14] Plin. *Ep*. 1.5.2.
[15] Plin. *Ep*. 4.2.3–4.
[16] *Ibid*. 6.7.1–2.
[17] *Ibid*. 6.2.4.
[18] *Ibid*. 6.2.

we can conclude that Pliny treated the deceased with a sense of respect. Evidence of this is the fact that, after this letter, he never mentions Regulus again. Namely, true eulogies and Pliny's profound sensitivity will become apparent in the analysis of the letters that follow.

3.2. Voluntary Death

Illness and death were an everyday reality for the Romans, which can be concluded from the frequent presence of these themes in Pliny's epistolography. The first in a series of letters is about Corellius Rufus, who, at the age of thirty-three, fell ill with gout in his legs. In his youth, he managed the disease through moderation and a disciplined lifestyle, but as he grew older, the illness spread throughout his body. He fought with patience and self-restraint, but eventually decided to end his life through starvation (*abstinebat cibo*). Neither the pleas of his wife nor his daughter could stop him, nor even Pliny, who was called upon to help persuade him against this idea after he had fasted for several days. Pliny does not pass a moral judgment on the act of suicide,[19] but he outlines the reasons why Corellius should have remained alive, and even cautiously shows some understanding of his decision:

> Corellius Rufus has died–in fact, it was suicide, which aggravates my pain, as it is the most grievous form of death when it is seen to occur neither naturally nor inevitably. For whatever the circumstances of death by disease, the very fact of necessity is a great consolation, whereas in the case of those taken from us by suicide, our grief is irreparable, because we believe that they could have had a long life. In fact, Corellius was constrained by supreme reasoning, which for philosophers is the equivalent of necessity, and by conscious decision, yet he had numerous reasons for living–the highest rectitude, the highest repute, the greatest authority, and in addition to these, a daughter, a wife, a grandson, and sisters, and among all these cherished ones some true friends. But he was tormented by such a lengthy and harsh illness that these rewards for living were outweighed by reasons for dying.[20]

The sorrowful Pliny comforts himself by stating that Corellius was ill and old, having died at the age of sixty-seven, which, as he notes, is a long life even for the strongest of men. In this letter, it is clear that death was perceived as more tragic when it occurred to someone young and physically healthy, rather than in old age, following a prolonged illness.[21] Even after taking all of this into consideration, Pliny does not find solace, instead

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[19] Exploring the ethics of suicide in Pliny's letters, Alade concludes that in ancient Rome, suicide was not considered a mental or health issue that required medical assistance. The Romans even saw this act as a reflection of courage and honor, as they cared about how they would be perceived after their death. On the other hand, the Greeks did not view such an act with approval and did not organize the customary funerals for those who committed it. However, in the case of defeat in battle or war, they supported such a choice with the aim of protecting personal integrity and reputation, as well as the property they were defending. Alade 2021: 247–248; 253.

[20] Plin. *Ep.* 1.12.1–4.

[21] This is particularly emphasized in one of the letters Pl. *Ep*. 5.21.3: "But your further news is clearly not merely melancholy but also grievous, that Julius Avitus has died when returning from his post as quaestor, and that he died on board ship, far from his most affectionate brother, and far also from his mother and sisters. … The news is grievous also because this young man of such great talents has been snuffed out in his green years. He would have attained the highest eminence if his qualities had reached full maturity."
Also, *Ibid*. 7.30.1: "I am deeply pained by your loss of a pupil who, you write, showed outstanding promise. Of course, I realize that your studies have been hindered by his illness and death, for you are most attentive to

seeking an additional word or special comfort from his *absent correspondent*. The letters in which he reports the deaths of his friends often conclude with a request or reference to consolation. The motif of compassion and comfort is one of the most frequent themes in the collection of letters:

> So you must send me some words of consolation, but do not say, 'He was an old and sick man,' for I am aware of that. Make it something original and impressive, such as I have never heard or read before, for the consolations, such as I have heard and read, come to me unbidden, but are unequal to this great grief.[22]

The renowned advocate and consul, Silius Italicus, author of the epic *The Punic Wars*, also committed suicide by starvation (*inedia*) due to an incurable tumor. He died at the age of seventy-five, and as Pliny writes: "Until the day of his death, his life was happy and successful, except that he lost the younger of his two children. However, his elder son, the better of the two, is doing well and has, in fact, attained the consulship."[23]

It seems that it was not an uncommon occurrence for the sick to seek relief from their suffering in "voluntary death" (*mors voluntaria*), as Pliny calls it. Namely, his friend Titus Ariston had suffered for a long time, plagued by thirst and fever, and thus he gathered his friends to consult with doctors about the nature of his illness, deciding that he would seek an exit himself should the doctors declare the disease incurable. Although Pliny emphasizes that it was Titus's duty to heed the pleas of his wife, daughter, and even his friends, and to fight as long as there was hope for recovery, he does not condemn the thought of suicide:

> It is a tendency shared with many to hasten one's death under some impulse and emotional urge, but to ponder and weigh the motives for it, and then to adopt or abandon the decision to live or die as reason dictates, is the mark of a noble mind.[24]

Furthermore, in one of his letters, he states:

> The melancholy news is that Julius Valens is seriously ill. Yet this is not melancholy, since it is thought to be in his interest, for it is good for him to be delivered from his incurable illness with all possible speed.[25]

Since such cases of suicide were not uncommon, he sometimes expressed fear for his friends:

> This illness of yours, which is so persistent, frightens me, and, though I am aware of your supreme self-control, I fear that it may have an impact on your behaviour.[26]

However, in illness, one's best qualities emerge, for a person only desires to recover,

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all your obligations, and you show the most abundant affection toward all those of whom you approve."

22 *Ibid*. 1.12.13.

23 *Ibid*. 3.7.2.

24 *Ibid*. 1.22.10.

25 *Ibid*. 5.21.2.

26 *Ibid*. 7.1.1.

does not succumb to their weaknesses, is content with what they have, and is determined to live a happy life in moderation once healed:

> So I can briefly prescribe for you and for myself what philosophers try to teach in countless words and even in countless volumes: When restored to health, we are to persist in being what, when ill, we maintain that we will be.[27]

3.3. Attitude toward Meritorious Individuals

As is sometimes the case in today's time, creators in any field are often valued more after their death than during their lifetime; in praise of Pompeius Saturninus, it is written as follows:

> The fact that he is a living author ought not to prejudice his works. If he had flourished among men on whom we have never set eyes, we would be searching out not only his books but also his portraits. So are his distinction and popularity to wane because he is still with us and because we have had more than our fill of such writing? But it is wicked and spiteful to refrain from admiring a man wholly worthy of admiration, merely because it is our fortune to see and address and hear and embrace him, and bestow on him not only our praise but also our affection.[28]

Pliny also speaks highly of Titinius Capito's intention to erect a monument to his deceased friend Lucius Silanus in the city square:

> Loyalty and a sense of obligation are still observed among men, for there are some who maintain their friendship even with the dead. … For it is as noble and striking a gesture to erect a statue in the Forum of the Roman people as to be commemorated by one.[29]

Distinguished and meritorious Roman citizens could be buried at the state's expense. Pliny writes about the funeral of his guardian, Verginius Rufus,[30] a triple consul and commander of the Roman army in Germania. Clearly shaken, Pliny remarks that his public funeral provided the Roman people with a magnificent and unforgettable spectacle. The burial of such a man served as a great honor to the emperor and the era, as well as to public, judicial, and political oratory. This farewell was made even more majestic by the eloquent eulogy delivered by the consul and historian Cornelius Tacitus. Although Pliny laments his death as premature, and believes it to be close to a sin, since Verginius lived so gloriously and exemplarily that he will live on forever in the memory and conversations of people. It could be said that his death also stemmed from virtue. Namely, he had been preparing a speech in gratitude to the emperor for being elected consul for the third time. A heavy book fell from his hands, and when he bent down to pick it up, he slipped on the polished floor and fractured his hip. The injury did not heal properly, and due to his advanced age, he did not recover–but he still lived to the age of eighty-three.

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27 *Ibid*. 7.26.4.
28 *Ibid*. 1.16.8–9.
29 *Ibid*. 1.17.1–4.
30 *Ibid*. 2.1.

In one of his later letters, ten years after Verginius's death, Pliny complains to a friend that Verginius has been forgotten, that his modest monument remains unfinished due to neglect, and he ends the letter in a pessimistic tone, saying:

> Loyalty in friendship is so rare, and forgetfulness of the dead so habitual, that we ought even to erect our own monuments, and anticipate all the obligations of our heirs.[31]

In addition to grand funerals, honor was also expressed through triumphal statues. Pliny gives the example of the senator and consul Vestricius Spurinna and his prematurely deceased son Cotus, for whom statues were erected. These statues served as a reward for virtue and courage, and they provided comfort to the surviving family members. Spurinna had defeated the Germanic tribe of the Bructeri, and his son died during his absence. Although this was a rare occurrence, they erected a statue for the young man as well, in order to ascribe immortality to his short and difficult life and to ease the father's grief. Pliny sees a positive side to this act:

> As I see it, this distinction was not merely directed toward the memory of the dead man and to assuage the grief of his father, but also to be an inspiration to others. The establishment of such august rewards for our young men, as long as they are worthy of them, will incite our youth to practice the virtues. Our political leaders will likewise be encouraged to rear children, both by the joys they experience from those who survive, and by such glorious consolations from those who have been lost to them.[32]

Through the literary portrait of Vestricius Spurinna and a detailed description of his daily activities, Pliny provides a picture of an idyllic life in old age, which he himself aspires to:

> A well-ordered human existence gives me the same pleasure as the fixed course of the stars, especially so in the case of old men. The regimen that Spurinna most steadily maintains reflects this. With a sort of routine and fixed circuit, he undertakes in order those unimportant activities– unimportant, that is, except that they are carried out daily.[33]

Physical and intellectual activities alternated throughout the day according to a set routine, including walking, bathing, and sunbathing when the conditions allowed, playing ball, reading, and writing in *both languages* (Greek and Latin are implied), socializing, and sharing meals. As the vivid depiction of Spurinna's daily life suggests, the elderly should spend their days in the spirit of ancient *kalokagathia*, while for the young, Pliny shows a fatherly understanding and writes the following:

> A cluttered and disorganized mode of life is not at that stage inappropriate for the young, but for

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31 *Ibid*. 6.10.5.

32 *Ibid*. 2.7.5.

33 *Ibid*. 3.1.2. Unfortunately, Pliny did not live to a ripe old age; he passed away in his early fifties. His letters provide a valuable contribution to gerontological studies of the ancient world, as he wrote about the lives of elderly people in an unpretentious and realistic manner. More on this topic: Kebric 1983. The precise schedule of Spurinna's daily routine and Pliny's activities during their summer vacation in Tusculum can be found in the appendix of the paper: Winsor Leach 2003: 164–165.

> old people an entirely tranquil and well-ordered existence is apposite. For them, sustained activity is outdated, and ambition is degrading.[34]

One of the most touching letters in Pliny's collection is addressed to Vestricius and Cotia upon the death of their son Cotus. Writing a memorial for him, Pliny carefully and with chosen words asks the parents of the deceased young man to advise him on how best to execute this task:

> It is hard for you as yet to turn your mind to it in your grief. Yes, it is hard, but just as you would advise a sculptor or painter, when fashioning a representation of your son, what features he should emphasize or change, so you must mould and guide me in the same way, for I am trying to achieve a likeness not frail or fleeting, but one that is, in your opinion, immortal. The more authentic and fine and finished it will be, the longer it will survive.[35]

The fifth letter of the fifth book is a posthumous eulogy in honor of Gaius Fanius, a prominent Roman jurist and writer. Pliny highlights his virtues and laments his premature passing, as he did not have the time to complete the works he had begun, which were written thoroughly and diligently:

> For those at work on some immortal project, death seems to me to be always bitter and to come too early. For those who surrender to pleasure, and who live, so to say, for the day, each day forecloses their reasons for living. But for those who give thought to posterity, and prolong remembrance of themselves through their works, death at any time is too sudden, for it always cuts off some work which has been begun.[36]

3.4. Women Confronting Death

Women are sometimes the addressees[37] and main protagonists in Pliny's epistolography. Such letters often evolve into true panegyrics, such as the eulogy for Fania.[38] In addition to actual illnesses and deaths of women that he writes about, Pliny also speaks of famous examples *(exempla*) of female heroism from recent history. One notable instance is the bravery of Aria, the wife of Cecina Paetus, who participated in Scribonianus's conspiracy against Claudius. While Paetus was gravely ill, their son also fell ill and died. Aria managed the funeral rites in such a manner that her husband knew nothing of it. When he asked about their son, she replied that he was alive and improving, but once she left the room, she would burst into tears. When Paetus was condemned to suicide for his involvement in the conspiracy and hesitated to carry out the order, she took a dagger, drove it into her chest, and then handed it to her husband, saying the famous words: "Paetus, it

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34 *Ibid*. 3.1.2.

35 *Ibid*. 3.10.6.

36 *Ibid*. 5.5. 4.

37 Pliny writes very tenderly to his wife Calpurnia *Ibid*. 6.4; *Ibid*. 7.5; her aunt Calpurnia Hispulla *Ibid*. 4.19; *Ibid*. 8.11, as well as to the mother of his first wife, Pompeia Celerina *Ibid*. 1.4. He was also concerned for Cornelia Hispulla, the daughter of his mentor, Corelius Rufus. *Ibid*. 3.3; *Ibid*. 7.14. Sherwin-White 1969: 79 Emphasizes that Pliny was the first Roman to write love letters to his wife.

38 Plin. *Ep*. 7.19.

does not hurt!" (*Paete, non dolet!*).[39]

No less famous is the heroic deed of Pliny's fellow countrywoman, not as well-known as Aria, who also voluntarily departed from life along with her husband due to his severe illness:

> She urged him to die, and herself became his companion in death—or rather she led him, was his inspiration, and compelled him, for she roped herself to her husband, and threw herself into the lake.[40]

Although this practice was rare in Roman society, Pliny recounts the burial of the chief Vestal Virgin Cornelia due to her alleged violation of the vow of chastity. Emperor Domitian condemned her in absentia, without a trial, which, in Pliny's view, was a greater crime than the one for which she was being punished. According to custom, the Vestal Virgin was, while still alive, lowered into an underground chamber.[41]

On the other hand, what often occurred was death in childbirth, and this sad and bitter fate befell the sisters of Helvedius:

> I grieve, but my grief is within bounds. It is a cause for lamentation that girls of the highest calibre have been cut off by their fertility in the first flower of youth.[42]

The adjective "bitter" (*acerbus*) in a figurative sense was used to denote the death of a young person, akin to a fruit that has not ripened. In literary texts, the expression "bitter funeral" (*funus acerbum*) was used to signify any untimely death, but in inscriptions and legal documents, such as the municipal contract from Puteoli, the term specifically referred to two groups: free persons of any status and gender who died before the age of twenty-five, as well as slaves who died before or around the age of thirty, which represented the minimum number of years required for their manumission.[43]

One of the most poignant letters in Pliny's collection is dedicated to the death of Minicius Fundanus's younger daughter.[44] Deeply moved, Pliny describes the lovely girl as someone who deserved a long life and nearly immortality. Like Antigone, she died just before her wedding–a motif often found in literature:[45] "She was not yet fourteen, but had already embodied all the virtues of a mature woman."[46] Although the inscription on her tombstone, which Bodel suggests marks her grave,[47] states that Minicia lived for twelve years, eleven months, and nine days (*v(ixit) a(nnis) XII, m(ensibus) XI, d(iebus) VII*), Pliny refers to her as having lived fourteen. This age is commonly associated with the expected

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39 In examples from the past (*exempla*) that speak of people on their deathbeds, there is often a particular connection between their way of life and their last words: Pigoń 2005: 204.

40 Plin. *Ep.* 6.24.4–5.

41 *Ibid*. 4.11.

42 *Ibid*. 4.21.2.

43 Bodel 2016: 92.

44 Plin. *Ep*. 5.16.

45 Bodel 1995: 456.

46 Plin. *Ep*. 5.16.2.

47 CIL 6. 16631; Bodel 1995: 456.

time for marriage, marking the threshold from childhood to adolescence, and the beginning of psychophysical maturity. Scholars have debated whether this discrepancy is due to a manuscript error. However, since these are literary letters, the exact number of years is not the focal point; Pliny's intent is to emphasize the pathos of the girl's tender years, which were tragically cut short before she could reach an important life milestone.[48] As Bodel notes, from the time of Hippocratic followers and Solon, human life was often divided into *heptamades*, or periods of seven years. Thus, Pliny is not concerned with the precise number of years, but rather with highlighting that she never reached a key turning point in life. As seen in other examples, Pliny provides exact ages when the context demands it.[49] Furthermore, certain expressions, such as *non dum tot compleverat annos* ("he/she had not yet reached so and so years"), were common in epitaphs of the period of the Early Empire. Thus, they have shifted from the "language of the epitaph" into literary discourse, echoing a standardized and ritualistic funerary expression.[50]

The letter concerning Minicia's death is imbued with poignant descriptions of her bravery and the manner in which she confronted her grave illness, triumphing over it through her remarkable virtues:

> What love she showed to her nurses, her attendants, and her teachers, according to the duties of each! With what diligence and intelligence she applied herself to her studies! And how restrained and circumspect she was in her play! What self-control, endurance, and resolve, too, she showed in her final illness! She obeyed the doctors, encouraged her sister and her father, and when her physical powers failed her, she kept herself going with her strength of mind, which endured in her to the end, for neither her lengthy illness nor fear of death broke her spirit.[51]

Certainly, her death is profoundly tragic and heartbreaking, for it came far too soon: *O triste plane acerbumque funus!*[52]

The pathos of this letter is further heightened by the image of her father, Fundanus:

> I cannot describe in words the ghastly wound which pierced my heart when I heard Fundanus himself (for grief devises many trials) giving instructions that the money which he had intended to disburse on clothes, pearls, and jewels should be spent instead on incense, ointments, and spices.[53]

The letter concludes with a request for comfort to be offered to the inconsolable father, expressed through gentle and carefully chosen words:

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48 *Ibid*. 457.

49 Plin. *Ep*. 6.24.1: "Ummidia Quadratilla has died, shortly before her eightieth birthday. She retained her vigour until her final illness, and her body remained compact and sturdy, more than is the norm for a married woman. She left the most edifying will at her death."

50 Bodel 1995: 457. In a letter concerning his friend Macrinus, whose wife had passed away, he writes the following: "He lived with her for thirty-nine years without wrangling or animosity." The sentence in Latin reads: Plin. *Ep.* 8.5.1: *Vixit cum hac viginti novem annis sine iurgio sine offensa*. The term *sine iurgio sine offensa* and similar expressions are also derived from the funerary style.

51 Plin. *Ep*. 6.16.3–4.

52 *Ibid*. 5.16.6.

53 *Ibid*. 5.16.7.

> …for just as a wound still raw shrinks from the hands of healers, but then bears with them and begs for them unasked, so mental grief while fresh rejects and shrinks from any consolations, but then pines for them and becomes resigned to them, if they are proffered with sympathy.[54]

3.5. Pliny's Concern for Loved Ones

From the end of the fifth book, the illness of loved ones becomes an increasingly frequent theme in the letters. One such letter talks about the freedman Zosimus, whom Pliny praises highly, emphasizing his scholarship and integrity, but also highlighting his care and concern for those under his charge:

> … for a few years ago, when in the course of recitation he was straining himself to the utmost, he vomited blood. For this reason, I sent him to Egypt, and after a lengthy sojourn abroad, he recently returned restored to health. But subsequently, he put too much strain day after day on his vocal chords, and a cough gave him warning of his former weakness, and he again vomited blood.[55]

Concerned about Zosimus's health, Pliny sends him to his friend's estate in Forum Iulii, as the air there is fresh and the milk is the most suitable remedy for such a condition.[56] This and many other letters on similar topics are a treasure trove of timeless life wisdom: "*It is a rule of nature that nothing rouses and ignites love so much as fear of loss.*"[57]

Certainly, the letters regarding the death of Pliny the Elder and the description of the eruption of Vesuvius are among the most famous in the collection. These are letters sixteen and twenty from the sixth book, addressed to the historian Cornelius Tacitus, who asked Pliny to describe these events. In the first address to the recipient at the beginning of the letter, we notice the recurring motif of the aspiration for immortality:

> You ask me to describe for you the death of my uncle, to enable you to transmit a more truthful account for the benefit of posterity. I am grateful to you, because I realize that perennial glory is in store for the manner of his death if it is extolled by you.[58]

Pliny himself describes his uncle for eternity as a scholar who begins to investigate this extraordinary phenomenon, and then, with knightly courage, rushes to save those in danger at the foot of Vesuvius. In his battle with the hellish forces of nature, he loses his life on the shore of the sea:

> My uncle lay down there on a discarded sail and repeatedly drank cold water, which he had requested. Then flames and the smell of sulphur heralding the flames impelled the rest to flight and roused him. Leaning on two of his confidential slaves, he stood up and at once collapsed. I infer that his breathing was choked by the greater density of smoke, and this blocked his gullet, which was often frail and narrow, and often unsettled. When daylight was restored, two days after

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54 *Ibid*. 5.16.11.
55 *Ibid*. 5.19.6.
56 *Ibid*. 5.19.7.
57 *Ibid*. 5.19.5.
58 *Ibid*. 6.16.1–2.

> his eyes had closed in death, his body was found intact and unharmed. It was covered over, still in the clothes he had worn. It was more like someone sleeping than a corpse.[59]

Pliny's reputation as a cheerful writer[60] is primarily based on the content of the first six books of his letters, in which, aside from a few sporadic exceptions, lighter themes dominate. In the seventh book, he mentions for the first time that he himself is ill, his eyes inflamed, yet he humorously notes to his friend that, despite this, he noticed that the hen sent to him as a wish for a fast recovery was "nice and plump".[61] In this example, we can observe that even in difficult situations, such as this one, there was still room for humor– one of the more important characteristics of his literary style. Pliny is known for his intention to amuse and entertain the recipient, or reader, with jokes at his own expense.

The frequency of writing about illness and death reaches its peak in the eighth book, where almost a third of the letters are dedicated to these themes. Ronald Syme offers the explanation that the period covered by the seventh, eighth, and even ninth books might have been preceded by a series of poor weather conditions[62] or perhaps an epidemic connected to the Second Dacian War.[63] Pliny writes the following:

> I have accomplished the journey successfully, though with the one snag that one of my servants fell ill in the most oppressive heat. In fact, my reader, Encolpius, mainstay of my serious studies and joy of my relaxation, coughed up blood when his throat was irritated by the dust. … then, too, he is a self-controlled patient, we are exercised about him, and the doctors are attentive. Moreover, the healthy climate, the retirement, and the relaxation give promise of a cure as much as of leisure.[64]

It is possible that the pessimism that colors these three books was further triggered by Pliny's personal losses. Namely, his third wife, the young Calpurnia, had a miscarriage:

> She had a girl's ignorance that she was pregnant, and for that reason, she both failed to take the precautions which pregnant women should take, and did things which she ought not to have done. She has paid for her mistake with harsh realization, for her life was in the greatest danger.[65]

Two letters from the eighth book are of the same theme.[66] Pliny is deeply troubled by the poor health of his wife, as well as the illnesses and deaths of his loved ones and slaves. He finds solace in literature and in granting freedom to his slaves while they are still young, allowing them to write a kind of testament, which he safeguards and considers legally valid. However, he does not completely fall into despair:

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59 *Ibid*. 6.16.18–20.

60 More details on the topic: Strunk 2012: 178.

61 Plin. *Ep.* 7.21.4.

62 *Ibid*. 8.17.1: "Surely you are not enduring such harsh and stormy weather as we are? Here we have had continual storms and frequent flooding. The Tiber has left its channel and burst its banks further downstream to a considerable height."

63 Syme 1985: 182.

64 *Ibid*. 8.1.1–3.

65 *Ibid*. 8.10.1.

66 *Ibid*. 8.16; 19.

> … for it is part of being human to be assailed by grief and to have feelings, but to struggle against them and to acknowledge consolations rather than to have no need of them.[67]

Although a shift in tone and writing style can be noticed, it has not significantly affected the perception of Pliny as an "optimistic" writer. Instead, the final books are interpreted as "uncharacteristic" of his recognizable narrative style.[68] The theme of immortality is present even in the concluding books of the collection:

> Different people hold different views, but I regard as wholly blessed the man who enjoys the anticipation of a good and lasting repute, and lives in certainty of the survival of his name and future fame.[69]

In the ninth book, the grim references to illness and death are rarer, infused with a certain dose of optimism. Pliny consoles his friend with a eulogy in honor of the deceased and rejoices in the recovery of Paullus Psenus, the grandson of Propertius, who was also a talented writer.[70]

The tenth book, the largest in terms of the number of letters, consists of correspondence between Emperor Trajan and Pliny, who at the time was the governor of the province of Bithynia and Pontus. He had been gravely ill on several occasions, and as a result, he appealed to the emperor for civil privileges for the doctors who had attended to his health.[71] The following brief correspondence is a testament to the fact that health was regarded as the greatest blessing in ancient times, just as it is today:

> Well, then, just write that you have nothing to write, or nothing beyond the introductory greeting which our forebears used to use: 'If you are well, that's fine; I am well.' I am satisfied with that, for it's the main thing.[72]

4. Conclusion

Each book of Pliny's collection contains a mention of death or illness of at least one of his friends or acquaintances, and some contain several such references. Therefore, we can conclude that these topics were, at least for him personally, a focus of attention. While reflecting the writer's preoccupation with current events and individual situations, they also leave ample space for more general reflections and conclusions.

When considering the principles of ancient epistolography through excerpts from his collection, it is clear that the themes of illness and death were not only relevant but also particularly well-suited to the epistolary literary genre. A letter on said topic could meet stylistic requirements such as clarity and brevity, while also addressing thematic concerns like presenting examples from the past (*exempla*), offering moral lessons, and providing

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67 *Ibid*. 8.16.4.
68 Gibson 2013: 2–4.
69 Plin. *Ep*. 9.3.1.
70 *Ibid*. 9.9; 22.
71 *Ibid*. 10.5; 11.
72 *Ibid*. 1.11.1.

moral support. Such letters are imbued with motifs of comfort, encouragement, and sympathy, with Pliny at times writing and sending a letter as a kind of gift, since it was perceived as such in the ancient world. Furthermore, a letter represented an image of the author's soul and character, and within them, we not only learn more about the recipient, but also about the sender himself. When writing about someone's illness or death, Pliny evokes memories, expresses his thoughts and emotions, as his letters are often self-reflective. He articulates his own sorrow in response to the illness or loss of a friend, which P. Walsh describes as a "sense of deprivation," which is one of Pliny's most civilized characteristics.[73] We would further add that he also actively shares in the pain of others, empathizing with those who have lost someone close to them.

Moreover, we have noticed that, in isolated examples, but especially throughout the entire collection, one of the central principles of letter writing is particularly evident: the need to anticipate the recipient's reaction and emotion. An illustrative example is certainly his advice to Marcelinus on how to express condolences to their mutual friend Fundanus over the death of his daughter Minicia. In this paper, we have highlighted certain similarities between the ancient and the modern world–the illness and death of a young person were experienced with tragedy. However, even on such occasions, Pliny advocated for restraint in grief and perseverance, and through portraits of (celebrated) women, he depicted said examples.

The archaeologist and art historian Branko Gavela, in the introduction to the translation of Pliny's *Letters* by Albin Vilhar, compares Pliny's literary expression to the visual language of Scopas's figures and the compositions on the Pergamon Altar dedicated to Zeus Olympios.[74] From these cited examples, we can observe how Pliny's literary work, much like Scopas's sculpture, radiates an unmasked emotionality, reverence, suffering, and unrest. Through these brief literary essays, we observe that death was a daily presence, both as a tangible reality and as a thought process. Numerous life stories depict voluntary death as a form of liberation, while material traces set up in honor of the deceased serve as comfort for the living and protection from oblivion. Illness can influence a person's character, weakening or strengthening it, providing an opportunity for improvement.

Pliny's collection reminds and warns us of the altruistic values that should still guide us today. It is honorable and wonderful to help the sick, to remember the deceased, and to erect statues or monuments for the deserving. His letters are an example of sincere affection toward those to whom he writes, reverence for his ancestors, and care for future generations.

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[73] Walsh 2006: preface xix.

[74] Plinije 1982: 6, preface by Branko Gavela.

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МАРИНА АНДРИЈАШЕВИЋ
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ЛИТЕРАРНА СВЕДОЧАНСТВА О БОЛЕСТИ И СМРТИ У ЕПИСТОЛОГРАФИЈИ ПЛИНИЈА МЛАЂЕГ

Резиме

У својим литерарним писмима која су једна од првих те врсте у римској књижевности Гај Плиније Цецилије Секунд говори о разноликим темама из свакодневног живота Римљана. Римски државник Трајановог доба и литерата широког образовања, био је зачетник ове нове књижевне врсте настале под снажним утицајем античке реторике. Његову збирку чине стилски обликована (*epistulae curatius scriptae* / *litterae curiosius scriptae*) стварна писма упућена пријатељима и блиским особама, која је аутор лично одабрао и објавио. С тим у вези, можемо рећи да се у Плинијевом стварном адресату заправо огледа широки римски аудиторијум.

Циљ нашег рада био је да се на богатом и шароликом материјалу који ова збирка пружа додатно осветли феномен болести и смрти са литерарног аспекта. Премда Плиније важи за ведрог писца, будући да његова писма садрже описе лежерне свакодневице и учене доколице, екфразе велелепних имања и вила, епистолографски део његовог стваралаштва често прожимају теме везане за разне болести и стања, старење, (преурањену) смрт, (само)убиства, а као контратежа свему томе стоји свеприсутна жеља за славом и бесмртности. Већи број помена болести и смрти не треба да буди посебну позорност имајући у виду високу стопу смртности тога доба, а и свакако представљају део свачије свакодневице. Са друге стране, оно што смо ми могли закључити на основу анализе релевантних ексцерпата, болест и смрт јесу погодна тема за само литерарно писмо. Отворена, тј. јавна писма углавном су се писала у устаљеним стилским и садржинским оквирима, те нису служила само да информишу већ да поуче, посаветују и охрабре. Адхортативни мотиви сами по себи происходе из поменуте тематике.

Литерарно стваралаштво Плинију је представљало највеће задовољство и пут ка бесмртности. Његова писма, пуна пијетета према прецима и бриге према ближњима треба и данас да нам буду путоказ и прибежиште.

Кључне речи: Плиније Млађи, римска литерарна епистолографија, болест, смрт, бесмртност.

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