



CSCP Support Materials for Eduqas GCSE Latin

Component 2: Latin Literature and Sources (Themes) Love and Marriage

Pliny: Faithful unto death

For examination in 2024-2026

Teachers should not feel that they need to pass on to their students all the information from these notes; they should choose whatever they think is appropriate.

The examination requires knowledge outside the text only when it is needed in order to understand the text.

The Teacher's Notes contain the follow:

- An **Introduction** to the author and the text, although students will only be asked questions on the content of the source itself.
- **Notes** on the text to assist the teacher.
- **Suggested Questions for Comprehension, Content and Style** to be used with students.
- **Discussion** suggestions and questions for students, and overarching **Themes** which appear across more than one source.
- **Further Information and Reading** for teachers who wish to explore the topic and texts further.

Pliny Faithful unto death

Letters 6.24

Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, better known to us as Pliny the Younger (c.AD61-c.AD113) was a Roman politician from Comum. He is most famous now for the huge numbers of letters he wrote and subsequently published. These include a great deal of official correspondence with the emperor, gossip about well-known figures, and a great deal of commentary on life at the time for upper-class citizens of the Roman empire. His most famous letters are the eyewitness accounts he gave of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD79.

Pliny wrote this short letter to his friend and fellow senator, Calpurnius Macer, who perhaps also came from the area round Comum. The purpose of the letter, besides telling an interesting story, was to make the point that noble deeds – though they tend to be publicised only if they involve well-known people – can be done by ordinary people too. The couple described in this letter were unknown to Pliny, and so he only heard about the episode long after it occurred.

The Latin is lightly adapted.

Content note: this text describes a suicide. It may be appropriate for teachers to inform their Head of Department and Welfare team that they are teaching a text with this theme and to ask for support or guidance.

Text

navigabam per Larium nostrum, cum amicus ostendit mihi villam atque etiam cubiculum quod in lacum prominet: 'ex hoc' inquit 'olim femina quaedam cum marito se praecipitavit. maritus ex diutino morbo ulceribus putrescebat. uxor ut corpus inspiceret exegit; neque enim quemquam fidelius indicaturum num posset sanari. vidit desperavit hortata est ut moreretur, comesque ipsa mortis, dux immo et exemplum et necessitas fuit; nam se cum marito ligavit abiecitque in lacum. 5

Notes

- Larium nostrum:** now Lake Como. Pliny's home town of Comum lay on its shore. The use of nostrum may suggest that Calpurnius Macer, Pliny's correspondent, also came from there: alternatively, the plural may be used simply to convey Pliny's affection for the place.

- 2 **etiam cubiculum:** this detail is carefully pointed out to foreshadow what will happen next.
- in lacum prominet:** wealthy Romans were fond of constructing their luxury villas right on the water's edge, and even, as here, projecting out over the water. This fact is important for what follows.
- ex hoc:** from the bedroom
- 3 the details in this letter lend credibility to the situation as described by Pliny. There is a real location, and the story is told in language which sounds believably like an **amicus** recounting a tale he has heard, in particular the use of **olim** and the fact that the couple are unnamed. Pliny's friend also seems keen to make the tale as dramatic as possible to engage and entertain.
- 4 **maritus ex diutino morbo ulceribus putrescebat:** the husband was suffering from septic sores and must have been in considerably distress and pain. The text emphasises this with the use of **diutino** and the vivid verb **putrescebat**. In words that have been removed from the examination text, Pliny explains that these sores were around the husband's genitals, possibly the result of sexually transmitted disease.
- 4-5 **uxor ... inspicere:** evidence that a wife would not necessarily expect to see her husband's naked body on a regular basis.
- 5 **fidelius:** doctors, when faced by a terminal illness, would sometimes attempt treatments and promise recovery in order to gain greater rewards from their patient. The wife may be pointing out that she has no (financial) incentive to lie to him, or perhaps she is simply assuring her husband that she will not hide whatever she sees.
- 6 **vidit desperavit hortata est:** the lack of conjunctions (*asyndeton*) is used to show the rapidity of the sequence of events: as soon as she saw, she knew it was terminal; no sooner had she realised this than she urged him to die.
- 7 **comesque ... mortis:** she would take her own life alongside him. Although **comes** suggests a secondary role for her, Pliny immediately corrects this with **dux immo:** she played the leading, not the secondary, role; **exemplum:** in fact she was a model for him to follow; **necessitas:** even a 'compulsion' because she forced his fate upon him.
- This list of three with repeated **et** (*polysyndetic tricolon*) creates the sense of all these descriptions piling up, moving us towards the brief but powerful conclusion.
- 8 **ligavit abiecitque:** the final moments are described briefly, mirroring the swift and decisive action.
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Suggested Questions for Comprehension

Read the entire text aloud, emphasising phrasing and word groups. Then reread each line or couplet, asking leading questions so that the class comprehend the meaning of the Latin text. It may be desirable to produce a written translation once the students have understood the Latin.

navigabam...prominet (lines 1-2):

- Where does Pliny say he was sailing? Who was he with?
- What did the friend point out to Pliny?
- What was the main feature about the bedroom?

'ex...praecipitavit' (lines 2-3):

- What person did the friend begin to speak about?
- What did the woman do? Where did she do this from? Who did she do this with?

'maritus...sanari' (lines 4-6):

- What had been happening to the husband? What was causing this?
- What did the wife ask her husband?
- Why did she say she should do this?

'vidit...necessitas fuit' (lines 6-8):

- How did the wife feel after she looked? What did she encourage her husband to do?
- In what was she his companion?
- What other descriptions of her are we given here?

'nam...in lacum' (line 8):

- Who did the wife tie herself to? What did she jump into?

Questions on Content, Style, and Culture

1. (lines 1-2) Describe what Pliny and his friend were doing in detail.
2. (lines 2-4):
 - a. Why does Pliny's friend start telling this story?
 - b. What parts of these opening lines do you think would have made Pliny interested in hearing the rest of the story?
3. (lines 4-6) Explain fully why the wife asks to inspect her husband's body.
4. (line 6):
 - a. What happened immediately after the wife inspected his body?
 - b. How does the style of writing here make this moment more exciting?
5. (lines 7-8):
 - a. What does the wife do next?
 - b. How does the style of writing emphasise her courage?
6. (whole passage) What qualities of a wife are being praised in this text?

Discussion

Themes: qualities of a wife, relationships between husbands and wives

Fidelity was a highly valued quality in a Roman wife, and in this text the woman is very much being praised for her courage and loyalty (rather than scrutinised for murdering her husband!). She also demonstrates courage in a manner appropriate for a Roman woman: she bravely carries out a terrible deed to alleviate the suffering of her husband. Discussion around these qualities could look at the ways in which the positive qualities assigned to married women are tied into what these women are providing for men and for society.

Pliny chooses to tell the story in surprisingly few words, perhaps being more interested in the moral that he draws from these events (not included in this extract) – that remarkable events can occur on one's doorstep, but one is unlikely to hear of them unless they involve someone well known. Do students agree with Pliny's conclusion?

This text can be challenging for students, with its positive description of what a modern reader may consider a murder-suicide. The Romans believed that suicide could be noble and the right thing to do in certain circumstances. In this text, the wife is being praised by the Romans for her overwhelming loyalty to her husband. It is important that students discuss and challenge the Roman point of view.

Further Information and Reading

Sherwin-White, A. N, (1966) *The Letters of Pliny: A Historical and Social Commentary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Radice, B. (1969) *The Letters of Pliny the Younger*, London: Penguin

Walsh, P. G. (2006) *Pliny the Younger: Complete letters* Oxford: Oxford University Press