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The Literary, Political and Social Contexts of Latin Elegy and Lyric

Latin elegy and lyric respond immediately to their contemporary socio-political worlds, making it vital that we understand the events and cultural tides of this turbulent period of history before we can properly understand the poetry that is produced in and speaks to this revolutionary context. At the same time, Roman lyric and elegy are also heavily influenced by the older literary traditions of the Greeks and, in order to see what is innovative and exciting about the Roman poets writing in these genres, we first need to know something of this literary background. Only when we have a sense of these background contexts can we fully value the originality of this Latin poetry, appreciate why certain themes and motifs recur in these genres, and recognize not only the ingenuity and sophistication but also the playfulness and humor of this work (see Chapter 9). By holding in mind the important fact that the Roman lyric and elegiac poets all write to some degree under the shadow of the Greek and Roman poets who had preceded them, we are also able to enjoy more fully the rich intertextual allusions that are so characteristic of these two genres.

Literary Contexts for Elegy: Genre and Canon

The earliest extant examples of elegiac poetry date from soon after the time of Homer in the seventh century BCE. Surviving fragments suggest that it was used by early Greek poets to compose poems on all kinds of topics – including drinking songs and celebrations of battles. However, early elegy appears to have been associated in particular with short poems used as grave dedications and funeral epitaphs. The Roman love elegists like to remind us of this mournful connection between elegy and death, and we often find death itself as a theme in their poetry. The Roman elegists also make much of two possible etymological roots of elegy: the Greek word *elegeia* (ἐλεγεία),

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which is derived from the traditional Greek funerary lament *e e legein* (ἐ ἐ λέγειν) – to cry "woe, woe" – and from the related emotion *eleos* (ἔλεος) pity. Ovid, in an elegy written to commemorate the death of his elegiac predecessor Tibullus, draws an explicit etymological connection between elegy and lamentation (*Amores* 3.9.3–4):

> Flebilis indignos, Elegia, solve capillos!
> A, nimis ex vero nunc tibi nomen erit.
> (Weep, Elegy, and let down your undeserving hair!
> Ah, it is all too true that your name comes from this.)

Horace too declares in his *Ars Poetica* that: "the foremost theme of poetry in elegiac couplets is lament" (75–6). This connection between elegy and the theme of lament was a longstanding ancient tradition, then, and the Roman elegiac poets use it as a means to add themselves to an elegiac canon of such poetry stretching back hundreds of years.

One of the first elegiac poets, the fifth century BCE Greek poet Antimachus (writing around 400 BCE) was famous for his *Lyde*, an elegiac memorial to his dead mistress – now lost but apparently filled with "lamentations" and "full of unhappy heroic stories" (Hermesianax fr. 7/45). The Greek poet Philitas wrote a similar collection of elegiac poems memorializing his dead wife (or possibly his mistress) *Bittis*. And the poet Hermesianax followed this trend, with a collection of poems dedicated to and named after his mistress *Leontion*. This collection opens with the mythical poet Orpheus grieving for his own lost wife (1–14), and with the mythical poet Musaeus lamenting the death of his wife Antiope (15–20), thereby creating a tradition and canon for the elegiac genre that stretched back into the mythical mists of time. In fact, we can see Hermesianax as effectively establishing the genre of elegy as shown here by creating for it a kind of genealogy or family tree. Hermesianax identifies Mimnermus (author of *Nanno*, another collection of Greek love elegies written for and named after his mistress) as the founder or inventor of the genre, and he draws up a list of the other canonical elegiac poets of ancient Greece – of course, adding his own name to the end of that list (something we see the Roman poets Propertius and Ovid do later on, too).

The surviving "canonical" Roman elegists are clearly proud of this long history attached to their genre and frequently name-check these Greek predecessors in their poetry. The Roman poet Propertius names two of his most important influences as the Greek poets Callimachus and Philitas, declaring himself happy to have chosen elegy as his genre and "to have given pleasure along with Callimachus' little books, and to have sung, Coan poet [Philitas], in your meter" (3.9.43–4; see also 2.34.31–32). Propertius even styles himself as the new and improved "Roman Callimachus" (4.1.64: *Romani … Callimachi*) and describes himself as having taken the elegiac crown from Philitas (4.6.3). Propertius also prays to the ghosts of Callimachus and Philitas and describes himself as "the first to walk in [their] footsteps" (3.1.1–2). And, following in Propertius' own footsteps, Ovid expresses the same desire for connection with this traditional Greek elegiac canon. Ovid somewhat arrogantly declares that "There's a girl who says Callimachus' poems are rubbish (*rustica*) compared to mine" (2.4.19). And Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* 3.329–339 creates a new canon of great love poets which

begins with Callimachus and Philitas but now also includes the Roman poets Gallus, Propertius, Tibullus, as well as (of course) Ovid himself.

As the direct references to his name in the works of Propertius and Ovid suggest, the third century BCE poet Callimachus is hugely influential upon the Roman elegists (and upon Horace, too). Unfortunately, only fragments of his work survive, despite the Roman critic Quintilian describing him as the best – the *princeps* – of the ancient Greek elegists (10.1.58). However, we do know from Callimachus' great reputation in antiquity that he was an exceptionally learned and erudite writer (see Hunter 2006; Acosta-Hughes and Stephens 2012: 204–269). Callimachus wrote in various meters and genres but is best known for his long and multifaceted narrative poem in elegiacs, the *Aitia* or *Causes*, a series of mythological "origin stories" in which Callimachus himself takes on the role of a first-person speaker or narrator (as the Roman lyric and elegiac poets will also later do). Catullus is such a fan of Callimachus that he reworks into Latin a section of this long poem, known as the *Coma Berenices* or "The Lock of Berenice" (Catullus 66, reworking Callimachus fragment 110), but we need to look beyond such translation, allusion, and imitation if we are to understand the influence that Callimachus has upon Roman lyric and elegy. It is no exaggeration to say that Callimachus shapes the very DNA of Roman elegy and lyric. His influence runs deep in both genres, and ranges from the nostalgic, contemplative, and slightly melancholy first-person poetry that we encounter in much of Horace and Tibullus, to the sophisticated wordplay and witty politics found in Propertius and Ovid. We can see Callimachus' sway in the hostility towards epic that elegy and lyric both adopt, and in the labels that elegy especially chooses to define itself: epic (and its military focus) is *durus* or hard; in contrast, elegy (and its focus on love) is *mollis* or soft – the very same style that is favored by Callimachus himself.

The influence of Callimachus (and the continuing influence of the wider Greek and Hellenistic literary canon) can be tracked through to the last of the Alexandrian poets writing in the first century BCE, where the baton is handed over from Greece to Rome. We even know which poets were involved in this handover. The Greek poet Parthenius, who famously taught Greek to Vergil, composed a number of short elegiac poems, including an elegiac lament for his dead wife *Arete* (now lost) and an elegiac book of short, sad, love stories titled *Erotica Pathemata* or *Sufferings in Love*. Parthenius dedicated this book of poetry to his friend and fellow poet Cornelius Gallus – the poet who successive generations of Roman elegists would come to name as the founding-father of their own Latin canon of elegists.

Gallus, writing in the 40s BCE was evidently a popular elegiac poet – apparently publishing a five book collection of elegies under the title *Amores* – but he was also a popular soldier and politician, and this popularity seems ultimately to have led to his premature death (see Raymond 2013). Gallus served as Augustus' prefect in Egypt, but his many prominent successes there appear to have inspired the emperor's jealousy and Gallus was forced to commit suicide in 26 BCE. His poetry seems not to have been officially banned by Augustus, however, and helped to establish the reputation of the elegiac genre in Rome as politically bold and rebellious in spirit – although not actively "anti-Augustan" (see Kennedy 1992). Gallus' political fate did not deter his elegiac successors, fortunately. Propertius continued to compose and publish elegy, and in the same year that Gallus committed suicide Tibullus published his first book

of elegies. In the following year, Ovid began work on his own three-book collection of elegies – titled, like Gallus' work, *Amores*.

Too little of Gallus' own writing has survived for us to be able to do more than speculate on the content of his own elegies – although a combination of sorrow and love appears to be the theme of at least one surviving fragmentary line, in which Gallus declares himself to be "Sad, Lycoris, because of your misbehavior" (*Tristia nequit[ia … .]a, Lycori*). Yet his influence upon the shape of the elegiac genre in Rome is unquestionable. Propertius explicitly names Gallus – along with fellow Roman elegists Calvus (whose poetry similarly does not survive) and Catullus (who also writes lyric poetry) – as he ambitiously declares a connection between his own work and this venerable canon of earlier Roman elegists (2.34.87–94):

> haec quoque lascivi cantarunt scripta Catulli,
> Lesbia quis ipsa notior est Helena;
> haec etiam docti confessa est pagina Calvi,
> cum caneret miserae funera Quintiliae.
> et modo formosa quam multa Lycoride Gallus
> mortuus inferna vulnera lavit aqua!
> Cynthia quin etiam versu laudata Properti,
> hos inter si me ponere Fama volet.
> (So too did the poems of playful Catullus sing
> through which Lesbia is better known than Helen herself;
> and so too did the pages of learned Calvus confess,
> when he sang of the death of poor Quintilia.
> And just recently, how many wounds has Gallus washed in
> the waters of the underworld, dead because of Lycoris' beauty.
> Yes, Cynthia will live, praised by the verses of Propertius,
> if Fame grants me a place among these poets.)

In *Amores* 3.9, Ovid's elegiac tribute to the poet Tibullus following his death in 19 BCE, Ovid presents this same sequence of elegists – Calvus, Catullus, and Gallus – coming forward to greet Tibullus when he too arrives in the Elysian Fields of the afterlife (*Amores* 3.9.61–4). And in his autobiographical *Tristia* (which literally translates as "Sorrows" or "Sad Songs"), Ovid adds his own name to a distinctively Roman elegiac canon that begins with Gallus, then continues through Tibullus and Propertius, until it reaches Ovid himself (*Tristia* 4.10.51–4):

> Vergilium vidi tantum, nec avara Tibullo
> tempus amicitiae fata dedere meae.
> successor fuit hic tibi, Galle, Propertius illi;
> quartus ab his serie temporis ipse fui.
> (Vergil I only saw, and to Tibullus selfish Fate
> gave no time for friendship with me.
> He was your successor Gallus, and Propertius was his:
> after them, fourth in line, was me.)

By repeatedly representing themselves as the successors of *Roman* as well as of Greek poets, Propertius and Ovid together manage to establish Roman elegy as a distinctive

genre in its own right. Writing in the late first century CE, the Roman critic and rhetorician Quintilian could therefore proudly claim that (10.1.93):

> Elegia quoque Graecos provocamus, cuius mihi tersus atque elegans maxime videtur auctor Tibullus. Sunt qui Propertium malint. Ovidius utroque lascivior, sicut durior Gallus. (In elegy as well we challenge [literally – "we call out"] the Greeks; for me, its most concise and elegant author seems to be Tibullus, but there are those who prefer Propertius. By comparison, Ovid is more playful, just as Gallus is tougher/more serious.)

Quintilian's ranking of the Roman elegists has not always influenced popular or scholarly opinion of this canon, as we will see in the following chapters. Yet it reminds us just how successfully the Romans adopted and adapted this ancient Greek literary form, and how effectively they made elegy their own.

Literary Contexts for Lyric: Genre and Canon

In Homer we find bards reciting epic poetry accompanied by the lyre (*Odyssey* 8.66) and archaic Greek poets such as Alcaeus and Sappho are supposed to have sung their lyric poetry to live audiences accompanied – just as the name suggests – by the music of a lyre. However, it wasn't until much later, in the Hellenistic period (the historical period between the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE and the birth of the Roman Empire in 31 BCE), that lyric poetry came to be defined essentially by its meter. Or rather, by its meters – *plural*. For, unlike epic (which is defined as poetry written in hexameter verse) and elegy (which is written in couplets made up of paired lines of verse, namely a hexameter line followed by a pentameter line), lyric poetry uses lots of different meters. Some of these are named after the ancient Greek poets who originally composed the first known lyric poetry: Alcaeus, Alcman, Anacreon, Bacchylides, Ibycus, Pindar, Sappho, Simonides, and Stesichorus. In fact, these nine poets came to represent a formal lyric canon, and lyric poetry came to be quite loosely defined as *anything* written by these poets or in the meters they employed. This means that poetry described as "Greek lyric" verse covers a wide range of topics and embraces a wide variety of different styles. Some Greek lyrics celebrated the great achievements of famous men (for example, Pindar's victory odes), some were written to be sung by a chorus of young men or women in ceremonial situations (such as Alcman's *Partheneion*), and some expressed the intimate thoughts and emotions of the poets, who would sing in the first-person voice – telling of love and loss, and of their hopes and fears (such as the lyrics of Alcaeus and Sappho). Cicero may reportedly have complained that life was too short to read *all* the works of the Greek lyric poets (Seneca *Epistles* 49.5), but these Greek lyric styles would have a profound influence upon Roman lyric poetry, and the writings of Catullus and Horace – the only two Roman lyric poets whose work has survived – were decisively shaped by this Greek lyric tradition (see Chapters 2 and 3).

The earliest surviving Roman lyric poetry is found in Latin comedy and a few extant fragments of Latin tragedy – typically in the form of a song (Plautus' third to

second century BCE comedies) or a chorus (Ennius' second century BCE tragedies). It is not until the early first century BCE that we find the Latin poet Laevius apparently experimenting with a more personal, subjective style of lyric writing (familiar from the Greek lyric poets Alcaeus and Sappho) in his collection of *Erotopaegnia* (*Love Songs*). This work is now lost but seems to have included a lyric treatment of love stories from the mythic tradition. It is easy to see how such a collection might have influenced lyric (and, indeed, elegiac) poets in their later re-workings of such mythological stories, but the direct influence of the early dramatic lyric composition upon later lyric poetry is hard to assess. Nevertheless, these early theatrical, performative origins of Latin lyric should not be ignored. For they serve to remind us that Latin poetry was not simply or silently read in the Roman world, it was also *performed*.

Literary Contexts for Elegy and Lyric: Performance

In addition to expecting their writing to be read by others, the Roman lyric poets (just like the elegists) would typically have given oral performances of their poems. It is important to note that the sort of live *musical* performances that Alcaeus, Sappho, and the other canonical Greek lyric poets would have known had already disappeared by this time (having died out during the Hellenistic period) but there were plenty of opportunities for the Roman poets to perform their work in person. Horace's *Carmen Saeculare* would certainly have been performed before a large public audience. And it is possible that the early public readings of some of Horace's sympotic "party poems," in which he refers to scenes of drinking and feasting (*Odes* 1.4, 1.7, 1.9, 2.7, 3.8, 3.29), may originally have taken place at a dinner party (*cena*) or some other convivial *recitatio* or poetry reading event – although these poems are definitely not mere party pieces (see Chapter 3). When Tibullus calls for "More wine" (*Adde merum*, 1.2.1) in the opening line of his second elegy, we are similarly invited to imagine a banquet or Roman *convivium* as the background setting for the poem's reading, where the wine would, indeed, have been flowing freely. Whether such convivial, sociable contexts for lyric and elegy are simply to be imagined or whether some performances actually took place in these communal settings, there is no question that Roman poets wrote their work to be read aloud – to be performed, either in private or in public (see McKeown 1987: 63–73; Gamel 1998, 2012). Ovid, for example, describes *hearing* his favorite poets (*Tristia* 4.10.41–50), and to reading his own poetry in public (*Tristia* 4.10.57). And Augustus' sister Octavia famously fainted when she heard Vergil read aloud an extract from his *Aeneid* in which her dead son Marcellus appears as a ghost.

In this light we may recall that a core part of the education of the Roman lyric and elegiac poets involved the study of rhetoric. Ancient handbooks on the art of rhetoric typically emphasize the importance of physical performance – including gesture, posture, voice, as well as costume – to aid the oral delivery of different styles of writing and (crucially) to produce the desired emotional affect upon an audience. Indeed, such rhetorical handbooks and training would have encouraged Roman poets and their readers to treat each poem as if it were a script to be acted out. We can see this

clearly in a poem such as Propertius 1.3, in which, as Mary-Kay Gamel points out, Cynthia's complaint at being woken from her sleep by her drunken poet–lover (Gamel 2012: 352): "can be performed as a fierce attack, a whining complaint, an overly tragic pose, or a moving lament. Each of these choices, valid in itself, affects the performer's and audience's interpretation of the poem's overall meaning. Cynthia's position, *in molli fixa toro cubitum* ('planting her elbow on the soft bed,' 34), is ambiguous, and the 'stage directions' carefully avoid specifying how these lines are to be delivered." As this example shows, Latin elegy (and, indeed, Latin lyric too) is not only open to very different interpretations – to different, even contradictory readings and performances – it is also a richly dramatic form of poetry which brings its characters and scenes vividly to life.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that elegy in particular should have a great deal in common with another dramatic medium: Roman New Comedy. Balancing out the genre's traditional focus on sadness and lament, Roman elegy draws upon several of the stereotypes and stock situations familiar from the world of comedy. The Roman comic playwrights Plautus and Terence provide plenty of such material for the elegists to re-use, but the Greek comic poet Menander (on whose plots Plautus and Terence base most of their own) is also a rich resource for the elegists. In fact, as Ovid makes clear in his *Amores*, it is Menander who defines the key *dramatis personae* which populate both Latin elegy and comedy (*Amores* 1.15.17–18):

> dum fallax servus, durus pater, improba lena
> vivent et meretrix blanda, Menandros erit.
> (While slaves are untrustworthy, fathers hard-hearted, bawds immoral,
> and while courtesans flatter, Menander will live on.)

These stock comedic characters are certainly all found in Ovid's *Amores*, together with the character role that is typically played by the elegiac poet himself – the *adulescens amator* or unhappy young lover. Ovid even uses this familiar character's stock catchphrase to declare his unhappiness with life and love: "*me miserum*!" – "poor me/woe is me!" (*Amores* 1.1.25, 1.14.51, 2.5.8, 2.11.9, 3.2.69, 3.11.44). The fact that this catchphrase comes from the world of comedy reminds us not to take the poet too seriously when he says this, however. And the fact that this same phrase (and variations thereupon) already appears repeatedly throughout the canon of Latin love lyric and elegy gives us the strong impression that Ovid is well aware that whenever he says "*me miserum*!" he is effectively speaking to a familiar lover's "script." Indeed, the phrase is already well used by Catullus (50.9, 76.19, 99.11) and features prominently in the opening line of Propertius' programmatic first elegy: *Cynthia prima suis miserum me cepit ocellis* ("Cynthia first captured poor me with her eyes").

The other comedy characters that Ovid lists in the *Amores* play similarly well-defined roles on the elegiac stage. The scheming and greedy elegiac *puella* is clearly based on the scheming and greedy *meretrix* or courtesan of New Comedy (see James 1998, 2012a). The *lena* (or madam) who occasionally manages her (e.g.,

Tibullus' Phryne of 2.6, Propertius' Acanthis of 4.5, and Ovid's Dipsas of *Amores* 1.8) is also a familiar figure from New Comedy (see James 2003). The poet-lover's rival (e.g., Tibullus 1.6, Propertius 2.8, Ovid *Amores* 1.4) – who is often portrayed as a wealthier man (*vir*) – is also a stock character from New Comedy. In fact, Roman elegy and Roman comedy share not only a common cast of characters and, occasionally, a common vocabulary and script; the two genres also share a common focus upon intimate, everyday scenes and domestic scenarios reflecting (albeit in stylized and fictionalized form) some of the socio-cultural realities of Augustan Rome (see Konstan 1986).

Cultural, Political, and Historical Contexts for Elegy and Lyric: Time and Place

In Kristen Ehrhardt's useful formulation, the space in which Latin lyric situates many of its poems is "a mixed place" (Ehrhardt 2018). It typically blends together aspects of both Greece and Rome, city and countryside, the Greek symposium and the Roman banquet (*convivium*). Gardens, groves, fields, and forests provide a largely rural background for Horace's *Odes* (sometimes pastoral, sometimes bucolic) although the characters who inhabit this space often seem to be slightly out-of-place in this Arcadian landscape – as if they are temporary visitors from the city rather than permanent residents.

In contrast, elegy predominantly stages its scenes and places its poetry within the physical and cultural context of the city (see Welch 2005; Harrison 2013). Its backdrop is contemporary Augustan Rome, and the lifestyles it represents are distinctly urban – and even urbane. Some scholars have characterized Latin love elegy as "pastoral in city clothes" (Veyne 1988: 101–115). But this description is misleading. It's true that Tibullus often fantasizes about a simple life in the countryside, but the great majority of his elegies are actually based in the city (the rural exceptions are 1.1, 1.3, 1.10, 2.1, and 2.3). Sulpicia, too prefers the city to the countryside and complains loudly when her uncle plans to take her out of Rome to stay at his country house (3.14 and 3.15). For all of the elegiac poets, the city of Rome is the place to be. Propertius and Ovid even take recognizable Roman landmarks and use them to set the scene in their poems. Propertius (2.31.1–2) complains that he is late for a date with his *puella* (his girlfriend Cynthia) because he has been delayed *en route* by the ceremonial opening of the porticoes of Augustus' restored temple of Palatine Apollo. He wryly advises Cynthia that Pompey's portico offers the perfect environment for her to flaunt her charms (2.32.11–16) – but also suggests some of Rome's other famous parks and gardens, porticoes, and colonnades, as places where *puellae* and their lovers like to hang out (2.23.5–6; see also 4.8.75–6). Ovid's *Amores* and *Ars Amatoria* similarly recommend a variety of places in the city that are suitable for romantic and erotic encounters. Indeed, Ovid seems particularly (and cheekily) keen on landmarks that have a special connection with Augustus and the imperial family: he recommends various "pick-up" spots throughout the city of Rome (*Ars Amatoria* 1.67–170), and recommends the Palatine portico of the Danaids (*Amores* 2.2.3–4) and the Circus Maximus (*Amores* 3.2). But he

also points out to those interested in an illicit affair *al fresco* the porticoes of Octavia and Livia (*Ars Amatoria* 3.391) as particularly good spots to pick up a lover.

Alongside these recognizable spatial markers for their poetry, the Roman elegists also use specific temporal markers. Identifiable historical events and dates are sometimes mentioned (e.g., the Augustan marriage laws, the Secular Games), and a few elegies represent what is known as "occasional poetry," celebrating a particular event such as a promotion, or a birthday (Tibullus 2.2, Propertius 3.10, Sulpicia 3.14 and 3.15). The combined effect of these features is to offer the impression that elegy represents reality, that the elegiac world is a mirror to the "real world" of Augustan Rome (see Kennedy 1993: 92–93). And, although we should see this reality effect for what it is (or rather, for what it is *not*), this phenomenon does invite us to look outside the poetry, to consider the wider historical and social world in which the ostensibly private and personal world of elegy is situated. Indeed, there are a number of ways in which lyric and elegy respond to the socio-cultural contexts in which they are produced, and the treatment of two themes are of particular importance to our understanding of these genres: *rei publicae* (politics) and *puellae* (girls).

Cultural, Political, and Historical Contexts for Elegy and Lyric: *rei publicae*

Let's take the theme of politics first – although this aspect of the Roman world will inevitably shape the context in which the Latin lyric and elegiac poets engage with their *puellae* too. The period of time for which both lyric and elegy flourish in Rome is relatively short. Catullus is writing in the late Republican era of the 60s and 50s BCE, largely under the First Triumvirate (a tense political alliance between Caesar, Crassus, and Pompey). Gallus is writing in the 40s BCE, which see the assassination of Caesar and give rise to the Second Triumvirate, a power-share between Octavian (the future Augustus Caesar), Antony, and Lepidus. Horace, Tibullus, and Propertius are all active in the 30s and 20s under Octavian/Augustus' early principate – that is, during the immediate aftermath of the bloody period of civil war and into the long period of relative peace and restoration led by Augustus. Indeed, it is tempting to see the emphasis on peace and recreation in lyric and elegy, alongside the explicit interest of these poets in making love not war, as a reaction of some kind against the horrors of the civil war period (see Harrison 2013: 133). Ovid joins the party a little later, and begins writing love elegy in the 20s, with the Augustan imperial regime now well established – although Ovid continues writing experimental elegy into the early decades of the new millennium and the reign of Augustus' adopted son and successor, Tiberius. Latin lyric and elegy prosper for an interval of about seventy years then, but this interval corresponds with one of the most turbulent and transformative periods in ancient history as Rome makes the difficult transition from Republic to Monarchy and Empire.

These seismic changes in Rome's political system inevitably make an impact upon the lyric and elegiac poetry being produced at the time. One of Catullus' lesser-known elegiac couplets captures nicely the poet's political stance (Catullus 93):

> Nil nimium studeo, Caesar, tibi velle placere,
> nec scire utrum sis albus an ater homo.
> (I'm not especially eager in my desire to please you, Caesar,
> or to know whether you are a white man or a black man.)

David Wray describes this as a poetic "performance" piece, an aggressive and uncompromising declaration of the kind of man that Catullus wishes to be (and to be seen as) – that is, the kind of man who is different in every possible way to Caesar (Wray 2001; see also Wray 2012 on this poem as a performance of Catullus' "poetics of manhood"). In these two short lines we witness a scathing put-down of Rome's leading figure, alongside a repudiation of the political life and a rejection of the military life that Caesar represents (and which were, at the time, the only two career options effectively open to men of status from "good" families). In his deliberate choice of vocabulary here, we see Catullus declaring that his own desires and interests lie elsewhere: Catullus doesn't care what Caesar thinks or what he may do, Catullus doesn't care about status and power, or sucking-up to powerful men – Catullus aims to please, to bring pleasure (*placere* – a term which carries erotic connotations in this elegiac context) and to answer his own desires in other ways. When Catullus says that he doesn't know if Caesar is *albus an ater homo* ("a white man or a black man") he is not expressing any particular concern with skin color or heritage; saying you don't know whether someone is black or white means you know nothing at all about them (the equivalent of saying "who is this guy anyway?"). This is a shorthand way of saying that they are complete strangers to you. And Catullus doesn't simply state these things, he *performs* them. The very act of rebuffing Caesar in this highly provocative and public fashion is itself a performance of the values that Catullus believes in. Catullus doesn't just *tell* us what he thinks about Caesar, he *shows* us. At the same time he shows us what kind of man and what kind of poet he himself wants to be.

Horace negotiates his own self-conscious performance of both poetics and masculinity very differently and in a very different sociopolitical context. Before embarking on a career in poetry, Horace was a soldier – a military tribune serving under Brutus during the civil wars of the Second Triumvirate, fighting *for* the allies supporting the anti-Caesarian Republican cause, and *against* Octavian (the future emperor Augustus) and Antony. In the civil wars Horace fought, therefore, on the losing side at the decisive and bloody battle of Philippi. In *Odes* 2.7 (dedicated to his friend and companion Pompey) he writes with seeming candor about his experience of this defeat. Here he confesses to cowardice in dropping his shield on the battlefield in order to save his skin – his bravery, his manliness, his virtue, broken (*fracta virtus*, *Odes* 2.7.9–14). Yet, this "confession" too can be seen as a performance of Horace's own "poetics of manhood". The canonical Greek lyric poets Archilochus, Alcaeus, and possibly Anacreon too (Horace's lyric role-models) had also written about dropping their shields on the battlefield: it is a familiar literary lyric trope. The historical "truth" of Horace's account of his experience of Philippi is further compromised by his claim that Mercury rescued him from the enemy ranks, wrapped in a thick mist – just as epic heroes are rescued by their divine protectors in Homer's *Iliad*.

This example of Horace's poetic engagement with the turbulent politics of the period gives us a good idea of his general approach to such affairs of state. He likes to

obfuscate, to hide political reality and personal opinion in a thick literary mist, so that we can never be entirely sure on which side his true political allegiances lie. This approach is clearly successful, because Horace manages to maintain a close relationship with Augustus for the rest of his long literary career (see Chapter 3). He writes under the patronage of Augustus' political right-hand-man, Maecenas. He is commissioned to write a panegyric poem in celebration of Augustus' *ludi saeculares* (literally, "the games of the century"), a long lyric piece known as the *Carmen Saeculare*, which was publicly performed as part of the games and in which Horace praises Augustus' many great achievements. We find similar praise for the *princeps* in one of Horace's so-called "Roman Odes" (3.6.) where he appears to speak on Augustus' behalf in encouraging the people of Rome to mend their immoral and irreligious ways and instead to follow the examples of their ancestors (the *mores maiorum*). Yet it is never clear where Horace's true political sympathies are placed. In the "Cleopatra Ode" (*Odes* 1.37), it is Antony who Horace figuratively wraps up in a cloud of mist and whisks away from the battlefield of civil war. The enemy in this poem is not a fellow Roman but an Egyptian queen, obfuscating the historical fact that Octavian/Augustus' greatest victory was achieved in a civil war, fighting a Roman rather than a foreign enemy. And, although the poem ends with the word *triumpho*, the poem's spotlight upon Cleopatra and her noble suicide subtly reminds us that she successfully escaped the humiliation of being paraded in chains in Caesar's triple triumph of 29 BCE. Horace, it seems, just like Mercury, is willing and able to rescue those who fight on the wrong side of Octavian/Augustus (on the complicated issue of Horace's "Augustanism" see especially Lowrie 2007).

Tibullus is a contemporary and friend of Horace. He too sees military service and, again like Horace, he apparently displays a quiet reluctance to engage directly with the politics of the period. There is, in fact, a noticeable silence on the subject, and barely any direct reference to Augustus in any of Tibullus' elegies. This is surprising, because Tibullus' literary patron was a powerful politician – Messalla Corvinus, at one time an intimate ally and trusted friend of the future Augustus. Messalla seems to have retired from public life sometime after 27 BCE, but before this retirement the *princeps* had appointed Messalla to the role of City Prefect and left him in charge of Rome while he himself was away touring the provinces. Messalla also led a successful military campaign for Octavian in Aquitania (accompanied by Tibullus) and was one of the very few Roman citizens to be granted the imperial privilege of a military "triumph" – a celebratory procession through Rome in 27 BCE. These achievements by Messalla are duly recorded by Tibullus (1.7) but the closeness of the relationship between his patron and the *princeps* otherwise leaves barely a trace within his poetry.

Yet this is not to say that Tibullus is disengaged from the contemporary world in his writings, or that the radical political and cultural changes introduced by Augustus leave no mark at all upon his poetry. On the contrary, Tibullus' efforts to distance himself from the new world order and its politics have a profound influence on the style and tone of his elegiac writing (see Chapter 4). In particular, Tibullus appears to be anxious about his role in this new world; his poetry repeatedly questions what it means to be a Roman citizen – and what it means to be a man. As Efi Spentzou explains (2013: 26): "There is in Tibullus' poems a puzzling, intriguing quality: a studied air of distance from the political centre and yet a constant and deep-seated

preoccupation with Roman duties, manhood and citizenship." In this respect, Tibullus is profoundly engaged with the sociopolitical world around him and his silence about Augustus actually speaks volumes (see especially Miller 2004).

There are other aspects of the new political regime that clearly influence Tibullus' elegiac writing. Tibullus opens and closes his first book of elegies with a forthright ideological rejection of war and imperial conquest, criticizing the desire for dominion and wealth that was driving Augustus' imperial ambitions for Rome at this time. In direct and pointed contrast to such ambitions, Tibullus declares his own desire for peace and for a simple life in the countryside (elegies 1.1 and 1.10). He even invites his readers to see a connection between his own rejection of the status quo and the recent civil wars (just in case we happen to have missed it). He alludes to his poor "inheritance" (1.1.41–2) and the fact that his family have lost some of their ancestral property to the taxes imposed by Julius Caesar as part of the land-confiscations of 41–40 BCE, which Caesar had used to dole out army pensions to those men who had been his supporters at the battle of Philippi. Tibullus does not always shy away from making political statements in his poetry, then, despite his withdrawal from the world of warfare and politics, and despite his reputation for softness and dreaminess (see Miller 2004; Spentzou 2013).

The merging of politics and poetry is far more prominent in Propertius, however. Here we see a particularly strong reaction against the bloodshed and violence of Rome's recent history of civil war, and an anti-war rhetoric and ideology that directly opposes war (*arma*) to love (*amor*). Like Tibullus, Propertius mentions the personal loss of ancestral property to the land-confiscations of the early civil war period (4.1.128–130). More poignantly, he also mentions the personal loss of a close relative named Gallus (not the poet Gallus) at the siege of Perusia in 40 BCE – one of the cruelest episodes of the civil war period (1.21 and 1.22). The long winter siege of the town of Perusia (neighboring Propertius' own hometown, he tells us) was broken by Octavian who, in a characteristic act of violent revenge, executed the town's leaders, slaughtered its men, and set fire to the town itself. Propertius' kinsman managed to escape Octavian's troops, only to be killed by bandits on the surrounding hillside, his bones left unburied, his death ultimately inglorious (see Spentzou 2013: 47–49). Propertius even dares to mention the battle of Actium (another example of Octavian's bloody civil war victories) and to implicitly criticize the grief and heartbreak that the civil wars brought to Rome. If everyone were to follow his own example and be content to lead a quiet life full of poetry, peace, love, leisure (and plenty of wine), Propertius claims that then (2.15.43–6):

> non ferrum crudele neque esset bellica navis,
> nec nostra Actiacum verteret ossa mare,
> nec totiens propriis circum oppugnata triumphis
> lassa foret crinis solvere Roma suos.
> (There would be no cruel weapons, no warships,
> nor would our bones be rolled in the sea of Actium,
> nor would Rome, all too often beaten down with triumphs against herself,
> be so tired of tearing out/letting down her hair in grief.)

Specific references to such real historical events and to civil war atrocities in which Octavian was directly involved seem to position Propertius as unambiguously anti-Augustan. Even when Propertius is taken under the wing of a new literary patron, Maecenas (a close personal and political ally of Augustus), the poet remains reluctant to write work that is sympathetic to the *princeps* or his regime. In the programmatic opening poem of his second book of elegies, in an address to Maecenas, Propertius initially appears to bow to pressure to write poetry which "commemorates your Caesar's wars and deeds" (2.1.25–6). However, as the poem continues, he offers a damning illustration of the particularly horrific wars and deeds committed by the young Augustus/Octavian (2.1.25–35):

> bellaque resque tui memorarem Caesaris, et tu
> Caesare sub magno cura secunda fores.
> nam quotiens Mutinam aut civilia busta Philippos
> aut canerem Siculae classica bella fugae,
> eversosque focos antiquae gentis Etruscae,
> et Ptolemaeei litora capta Phari,
> aut canerem Aegyptum et Nilum, cum attractus in urbem
> septem captivis debilis ibat aquis,
> aut regum auratis circumdata colla catenis,
> Actiaque in Sacra currere rostra Via;
> te mea Musa illis semper contexeret armis,
> (I would commemorate your Caesar's wars and deeds, and you
> [Maecenas] would be my next concern, second to mighty Caesar.
> For whenever I sang of Mutina or Philippi, where Roman citizens are buried,
> or I sang of naval battles and Sicilian refugees,
> or of the ruined hearths of Etruria's ancient people,
> or of the captured beaches of Ptolemaic Pharos,
> and if I sang of Egypt and the Nile, when it was dragged into Rome,
> flowing weakly with its seven streams captive;
> or I sang of the necks of kings encircled with chains of gold,
> or the prows of Actian ships sailing along the Sacred Way, then
> my Muse would always weave you [Maecenas] into these wars.)

The list of Augustus' military deeds that Propertius "commemorates" here is effectively a catalog of the many horrors the *princeps* committed to achieve his ultimate victory in the civil wars; the elegy sardonically "celebrates" Augustus' brutal triumphs over his fellow Roman citizens. Propertius claims he can't write of any of these deeds without also implicating Maecenas in the shame and guilt of such atrocities. He *could* compose an epic celebrating Augustus' achievements (2.1.41–2), but as a loyal follower of Callimachus he hasn't the "art" or the heart to write long epic verses about warfare. Nor, he claims, does he have the strength to trace Caesar's family tree all the way back to his Trojan ancestors just to avoid having to face up to Augustus' own decidedly unheroic history (as the poet Vergil has just done in his *Aeneid*). Yet the impression we get from Propertius' poem and its *recusatio* (a stylized "refusal" to write on a particular topic) is not that Propertius *can't* write epic but that

he simply *won't* write epic (or anything else) praising Augustus (see Cairns 2006; Heyworth 2007a).

Unlike his poetic predecessors, who had lived through and sometimes experienced at first hand the bloody breakdown of Rome's democratic government and its chaotic transition from Republic to principate, Ovid entered adult life at a point of relative order and stability in Rome's recent troubled history. Unlike Horace, who had fought against Octavian during the civil war, or Propertius, who lost his kinsman in the conflict, Ovid had no personal experience of the civil wars that had dominated life for the generation before him, and he knew no other political authority before Augustus. Also significant is the fact that Ovid seems to have written and published his poetry independently – that is, largely without the sponsorship of a literary patron. He tells us in his exile poetry that, as a young poet, he received some kind of support from Tibullus' patron Messalla and his son Messalinus (*Epistulae ex Ponto* 1.7), but there is nothing in his writing to suggest the influence of a politically motivated patron at work in the background. Arguably, these two factors set Ovid apart from his lyric and elegiac predecessors and offer us insight into the comparative irreverence for all things political that is the hallmark of Ovid's own poetry.

Other than this generally light-hearted approach to politics, Ovid's elegiac poetry does not have very much to say about Augustus himself. No doubt inspired by the genealogical connections invented between Augustus, Aeneas, and Venus as part of the *princeps'* personal re-branding (as celebrated by Vergil's *Aeneid* and the many monuments and coins promoting this mythology that Augustus issued during his reign), Ovid does have some fun with the idea that Augustus is the great-grandson of the goddess of Venus. He speculates on how the history of Rome might have played out if Venus had had an abortion, meaning that Aeneas and the rest of the Julian family had never been born (*Amores* 2.14.17–18) – an idea that is likely to have seemed no less shocking (and politically charged) to Ovid's contemporary Augustan audiences than it does today. Ovid also enjoys pointing out that the supposed family connection between the Julian clan and their eponymous ancestor, Aeneas' son Iulus Ascanius, makes Cupid one of Augustus' kinsmen. He begs the mischievously cruel god to copy the good example of his "cousin" or *cognati* Augustus Caesar (*Amores* 1.2.51) and to show the poet mercy as he parades him through the streets of Rome in a parody of a military triumph. The tone of this poem is largely playful, but there is a provocative note in the final elegiac couplet, where Ovid sarcastically reminds Cupid that Augustus is famous for showing mercy to those he has vanquished (1.2.52). As Propertius has already reminded us, in those many victories fought and won in the civil wars, the future Augustus was actually infamous for his cruelty and the *lack* of clemency or mercy he showed to those he had defeated. Similarly, there is also a politically informed intertextual allusion to Propertius at play in *Amores* 3.12.15–16, where Ovid claims that he had once briefly considered writing epic poetry about Thebes, about Troy, or about Caesar Augustus but that none of these lofty topics had sufficiently inspired his inspiration (*ingenium*). The one person and the one topic that ever inspired him to write poetry was a mere girl – a *puella* he calls "Corinna." The insult to Augustus is casually presented here, but in the context of Augustus' attempts in this

period to reform public morals and restore "old-fashioned" codes of sexual conduct to Rome, it is deliberately provocative (see Barchiesi 1997).

Cultural, Political, and Historical Contexts for Elegy and Lyric: *Puellae*

Augustus had ambitions not only to control the state and the public lives of Roman citizens, he also had ambitions to control their private lives. The Augustan marriage legislation, or *leges Iuliae*, first introduced around 18 BCE and re-introduced in a lighter form as the *lex Papia Poppaea* in 9 CE, was therefore one of the cornerstones of Augustus' principate. Made up of two laws (the *lex Iulia de maritandis ordinibus* and the *lex Iulia de adulteriis coercendis*), this legislation package apparently sought to promote marriage and the legitimate procreation of children. At the same time it also made adultery a criminal offence against the state – a serious crime like murder or treason. The laws were highly controversial, and several contemporary poets have comments to make about this unprecedented intrusion of the state into private affairs. Horace refers to the laws on a number of occasions (in fact, it is his *Carmen Saeculare* which helps historians to date the legislation to around 18 BCE) but his point of view on the topic seems to waver. In *Odes* 3.24 he is found calling upon Augustus to rein-in the decadent and immoral behavior of Rome's citizens, before pointing out that state intervention probably isn't the best way to tackle this social problem (35–6). But in *Odes* 4.15 (written after the legislation has been passed) we find Horace praising Augustus for his intervention and for ushering in a return to good old-fashioned family values (4.15.10–12). For the elegiac poets, though, the new marriage and adultery laws were definitely unpopular: Propertius has one of his characters (the *lena*) suggest that *puellae* should "smash the damnable laws of chastity" (*frange et damnosae iura pudicitiae*, 4.5.28); Ovid in his *Amores* (2.2) insists that his own adulterous affairs are no real crime; and in his elegiac *Ars Amatoria* he offers what might well be read as a "guide to the art of adultery."

The Augustan law on marriage set down a system of incentives and penalties (*praemia et poenae*) for marriage between citizens of all classes. Widows were expected to remarry within a year of their husband's death, and divorcees expected to remarry within six months of their divorce. Unmarried men and women were penalized financially and unable to inherit. And, in a particularly petty ruling, unmarried men over the age of twenty-five and unmarried women over the age of twenty were banned from attending certain public entertainments. The law also introduced a number of prohibitions, most notably forbidding members of the senatorial order to marry certain kinds of people – including freedmen, freedwomen, actors, actresses, and anyone whose father or mother was an actor or actress. The marriage law also prohibited any freeborn person, including senators, from marrying those whose status was deemed *infamia*: that is, prostitutes, pimps, procuresses, and any persons publicly prosecuted for adultery. Meanwhile, new adultery laws dealt with *extra*-marital relations. Under the *lex Iulia de adulteriis coercendis*, adultery, which had previously been dealt with as a private concern within and between families, was now made subject to public scrutiny and state involvement. Formally criminalizing adultery for the first time in Rome's history, this law

established severe penalties for those caught in the act (on the marriage and adultery laws see especially Gardner 1986; Treggiari 1991; Dixon 1992; Liveley and Shaw 2020).

These political moves by Augustus provide an important backdrop for the ways in which the women of elegy in particular are represented. The elegiac *puella* is probably best understood as a fictional construct (see Alison Sharrock 1991; and Chapters 9 and 10 in this volume). Catullus' Lesbia, Tibullus' Delia, Propertius' Cynthia, and Ovid's Corinna all conform to an elegiac stereotype: they are beautiful but vain, clever but calculating, jealous but unfaithful, passionate but cruel. Yet the most significant characteristic of the stereotypical *puella* is the fact that she does not belong to the group of respectable, marriageable, women as defined by Augustus' new marriage laws. Whether we are supposed to regard the women in Latin elegy as married women engaging in adulterous affairs with their poet-lovers (as appears to be the case with Catullus and his married lover, Lesbia) or whether we are supposed to see them as high-class courtesans or *meretrices* (as suggested by the occasional appearance of the *lena* – the procuress or "madam" – in Tibullus 2.6, Ovid *Amores* 1.8, and Propertius 4.5), these women are definitively not "marriage material." Indeed, that seems to be the point of the *puella*. She is for recreation and pleasure, not for procreation and marriage – as Propertius 2.7 (which appears to refer directly to Augustus' marriage laws) makes clear. As such, the decision to focus upon the *puella* as an object of love and desire, to make her the foundation upon which the elegiac poet builds his poetry and his life, represents an unconventional and even radical move.

In this context, it is important to remember that Roman culture does not equate erotic or romantic love with marriage or with modern, predominantly western, notions of "living happily ever after." As Paul Allen Miller reminds us, in the Roman world it appears that "Love … was a regrettable extravagance to be tolerated in young men. They could have their flings with a courtesan or *meretrix*, provided they did not despoil the family fortune, but were then expected to settle down in a traditional arranged marriage and pursue a career in law, the military, or politics" (Miller 2002: 3–4). These are the kinds of love affair we find in Roman comedy, and even in Roman lyric, while in Roman epic we find that those who do put love above duty tend to come to a bad end themselves and to threaten the safety of the Roman state (Vergil's Aeneas and Dido, for example). In choosing to celebrate their love for a *puella* over all else, then, the Roman elegists place their lifestyle choices in flagrant opposition to Augustus' attempts at social and moral reform.

In fact, in simply choosing to write elegy or lyric rather than epic, in wanting to sing the praises of a *puella* rather than of a *princeps*, to tell of *amor* rather than of *arma*, the Roman lyric and elegiac poets adopt a profoundly "counter-cultural" stance. Their writings, therefore, not only reflect but contribute to what is sometimes described as Rome's "cultural revolution" during this period (see Habinek and Schiesaro 1997; Wallace-Hadrill 2008). Thus, once we recognize and understand the current events and socio-political setting to this turbulent – even traumatic – period of Roman history, we can better understand the poetry that responds to this revolutionary context. And so, now that we know the backstory, we can turn to the poets themselves.

Guide to Further Reading

There are several studies that offer good starting points for understanding the social, political, and cultural contexts in which Latin lyric and elegy was originally produced, including: J.P. Sullivan, "The Politics of Elegy." *Arethusa* 5:1 (1972): 17–34; Judith Hallett, "Woman as Same and Other in Classical Roman Elite." *Helios* 16 (1989): 59–78; Catharine Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (1993); Karl Galinsky, *Augustan Culture* (1996); Thomas Habinek and Alessandro Schiesaro, *The Roman Cultural Revolution* (1997); Thomas Habinek, *The Politics of Latin Literature* (1998); Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Rome's Cultural Revolution* (2008); Efrossini Spentzou, *The Roman Poetry of Love: Elegy and Politics in a Time of Revolution* (2013); Stephen J. Harrison, "Time, Place and Political Background." In Thea Thorsen, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Latin Love Elegy* (2013), 133–150. Jasper Griffin's *Latin Poets and Roman Life* (1985) is a little dated now but is still useful background reading. D. O. Ross on *Backgrounds to Augustan Poetry: Gallus, Elegy, and Rome* (1975) is also still useful as an introduction to the elegiac genre, as is W. R. Johnson's *The Idea of Lyric* (1982) on lyric traditions. Other useful studies of genre and canon and the relationship between Greek and Latin lyric and elegy include George Luck, *The Latin Love Elegy* (1959); Paul Allen Miller's *Lyric Texts and Lyric Consciousness: The Birth of a Genre from Archaic Greece to Augustan Rome* (1994); Roy Gibson's "Love Elegy." In S. J. Harrison, ed., *A Companion to Latin Literature* (2006) and Richard Hunter's *The Shadow of Callimachus: Studies in the Reception of Hellenistic Poetry at Rome* (2006).