



Augustan Lovers

Lecture 2: Falling in Love with Elegy

Prop. 1.1.1f

Cynthia prima suis miserum me cepit oculis

contactum nullis ante Cupidinibus

Cynthia first, with her eyes, caught wretched me /
smitten before by no desires;

- Programmatic opening
- Cast
- Attitude of narrator – and of beloved:
- While generalising about elegy is tricky, but we can trace several cornerstones of the genre in and from this line:

Features of Roman love elegy

- This is an **overview** only – more to follow
- First-person narrator using the real-life author's name to tell of his woeful love stories – but be careful! These are fictitious *personae and constructed literary characters*
 - Names given for Cynthia and the friend Tullus in Prop. 1.1; presented as real-life people contrasting with mythological examples
 - Prop. 1 reads like a love story told in retrospect

The well-to-do lover in Prop. 1.1

- The narrator deviates from his normal behaviour:
 - Ante (before) (l. 2); describes his behaviour as furor (mania) (l. 7) and a topsy-turvy world (adversos deos, l. 8) (adverse gods)
- Other things expected of him; *cursus honorum*:
 - *Donec me docuit castas odisse puellas
improbis, et nullo uiuere consilio*
 - Tullus reappears in Prop. 1.6, following the normal pattern for education of a young upper-class Roman; it is implied in 1.1 that the narrator is his equal (and should behave the way Tullus does)

The *puella* / beloved

- *Cynthia prima me cepit*
 - The female character is the subject of the sentence; she takes the active role while the narrator is the one acted upon
 - By Cynthia
 - By Amor
 - Roman gender norms: active and passive
- *Castas odisse puellas (hatred of chaste girls)*
 - Cynthia does not belong in that group? The beloved of elegy often appears to be a *hetaera*
 - In other elegies, it becomes more prominent that she is highly educated

Typical situations

- Slavery of love / reversal of gender roles
 - The narrator does not expect to be freed from his suffering
 - Love is described exclusively in terms of suffering (noctes amaras (l. 33); malum, l. 35)
- The shut-out lover (*exclusus amator*)
 - Unrequited love
- Eternal love; love as an ongoing state of being (*foedus aeternum*)
 - Uos remanete, quibus facili deus annuit amare
sits et in tuto semper amore pares. (l. 27f)
(Stay home, all you to whom God nods with easy ear, / and be paired in love forever true.)

Make love, not war

- One of the most prominent metaphors in the genre is that of *militia amoris*
- Love **as** war
 - Fortiter et ferrum saeuos patiemur et ignis, sit modo libertas quae uelit ira loqui (l. 27f)
(Bravely I will suffer knife and cautery, / given liberty to speak as anger bids)
 - Auxilia (remedies) in l. 26 has military associations
- Love **instead** of war
 - Emphasis on contrasts between friends outside of the elegiac world and the narrator

Unifying factors of the genre

- Motifs and themes shared
- Short collections of poems
- Similar structure of individual books (cf. Prop. 1 and Ov. *Am.* 1)
- Intense interaction with each other's texts – an 'in-crowd'
- Elegiac verse:
 - One hexameter, one pentameter:
 - *Odi et amo. Quare id faciam fortasse requiris?
nescio sed fieri sentio et excrucior* (Cat. 85)

How the ancients saw it

- Quintilian cites Gallus, Tibullus, Propertius and Ovid as writers in this poetic genre:

“We also challenge the supremacy of the Greeks in elegy. Of our elegiac poets Tibullus seems to me to be the most terse and elegant. There are, however, some who prefer Propertius. Ovid is more unrestrained than either, while Gallus is more austere.” (Quint. *Inst.* 10.1.93)

- Ovid names himself with Gallus, Tibullus and Propertius as elegists in *Ars* 3.535-38, *Rem.* 763-766 and *Trist.* 4.10.51-54
- Dates: Elegiac poetry books dating from 40 BC (Gallus) to late 20s BC (or early 10s, Ovid)

Gallus – the first elegist

- Cornelius Gallus born 69/68; committed suicide 27/26 BC following a political scandal
- Prefect in Egypt in 30 BC
- His elegies must be dated to before 39/38 BC – alluded to in Vergil's *Eclogues*
- Otherwise only fragments on papyrus scraps remain today; much discussion as to whether they are genuine or not

What do we know about his poems?

- About ten lines' worth of fragments – we rely mostly on Vergil's 10th *Eclogue*:
- A poet named Gallus (known to all!) roams in bucolic scenery, lamenting that his beloved Lycoris has left him for another man
- Employs the *militia amoris* metaphor
- Wishes for life-long love (*foedus aeternum*)
- Passivity on the side of the male lover/narrator: 'Gallus' cedes to Amor in the final lines of his speech
- The papyrus fragment refers to Lycoris as *domina*, feminine of master: the inverted gender roles typical for elegy present already in Gallus

Writing elegiac verse before Gallus

- Elegy as a metre known since mid 7th century BC
 - Already 'subjective' but dealing with a much wider range of topics: didactic, exhortations to battle
 - Also the metre of funerary epigrams (and later on erotic epigram), thus connected to lamentation
 - Pseudo-etymology: *Ei ei legein*

Literary backgrounds: Writing elegiac verse before Gallus

- Callimachean catalogue elegy brings to the fore the I of the narrator, and has immense influence on Roman elegy
 - Mythology, literary allusion, irony and wit
 - The preference of a shorter form before epic and the poetic discussion of this choice
- Notable overlap with Hellenistic erotic epigram sometimes featuring
 - the shut-out lover
 - a male lover of upper class falling for a prostitute

Transition to Rome: Catullus

- Series of love poems about the relationship between the narrator and 'Lesbia' not unlike later Roman love elegy
 - First-person narrator speaking in Catullus' name
 - The characters of the lovers very similar to those in Propertius, Tibullus and Ovid
 - Exploration of norms of gendered behaviour
- BUT Catullus poems also includes pieces on many other topics, and in many other metres!
- BUT the Catullan narrator does not retreat from mainstream Roman society as explicitly the elegists do – he keeps mentioning family ties, social responsibilities etc throughout

The Roman background: Comedy

- Roman New Comedy: Plautus and Terence (3rd and 2nd century BC); immensely popular
- Roman comedy often features male young leads very similar to the narrators of later elegy: young, upper class, and madly in love with unsuitable women
- Plautus especially places emphasis on the young lover's alienation from family and society and his rejection of war in favour of love
- Stock characters of the support cast also similar: bawds, messenger slaves, door keepers...

What the elegists (seemingly) thought

- There are no direct allusions to Roman comedy in Propertius, Tibullus or Ovid's *Amores* as 'forefathers' of the elegiac lover
- There are many allusions to Hellenistic elegy and Hellenistic epigram, as well as to Catullus' elegiac poems

To take away

- Roman love elegy has four canonical authors: Gallus, Tibullus, Propertius and Ovid
- Key features of the genre are:
- Book structure achieved despite fairly short poems
- A specific set of values cherished by the narrators, which invert patterns of normative society
- Advanced literary game-playing: you need to be a reader to 'get' elegy