

AUGUSTAN LOVERS 14

The Augustan Context

The Republic and Augustus

- 'The essence of the republican constitution lay not in its legalistic aspect. Rather, it was a system of values and traditional concepts that did not always keep up to pace with political reality' (Galinsky, 1996, 6)
- As Augustus consolidates his position, such values were rearticulated in a number of ways: legislation (*lex Julia*, 18 BC.), re-institution of cults/religious festivals (secular games held in 17BC)
 - ▣ ...but the preoccupation with values also shines through in the cultural output of the period, dependently and independently of Augustus' sponsorship
- 'The protection of property, the safety of the individual, the rejection of the [...] abuses of civil war, recourse to taxes as near as possible to the civic fiscal system so well outlined by Agrippa [...] this was [...] the enduring source both of its popularity and its legitimacy.' (Nicolet, 1984, 111)

Dating issues: time check

- Gallus: c. 35 BC
- Prop. 1: 28 BC
- Prop. 2: 26 BC
- Prop. 3: 24 BC
- Prop. 4: 16 BC
- Tib. 1: 27 BC
- Tib. 2: 19 BC
- Ov. *Am.* 1-3: Likely after 16 BC
- 2nd triumvirate: Mark Anthony, Octavian, Lepidus 43-33 BC
- Battle of Actium 31 BC
- Final defeat of the Parthian Empire 20 BC
- Secular games 17 BC
- Dedication of *Ara Pacis* 13 BC
- Augustus forum, incl. Temple of *Mars Ultor*, dedicated 2 BC

Why so tempting?

- Perceived similarities between 20th C dictatorships and Augustus' reign colouring mid 20th C scholarship:
 - ▣ Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 1939: a theme 'of some importance', not to be kept back for revision or rewriting 'in tranquillity'
 - ▣ Vergil interpretations of the 1980s: second voice theory (Harvard school)
- The cases of Gallus and Ovid:
 - ▣ Gallus, prefect of the imperial province of Egypt, died in 27/26 BC
 - ▣ Ovid, relegated to Tomis on the Black Sea coast in 8 AD, died 17/18 AD

Ovid's exile

- In his *Tristia*, Ovid names two reasons for this exile, 'carmen et error' (*Trist.* 2.207)
- The 'song' = *Ars amatoria*?
 - ▣ *Ars* is tongue in cheek and may have been taken the wrong way by Augustus, but the dating of the *Ars* makes this questionable
- The other reason? Something Augustus did not want widely known?
- However, Ovid's self-defence is amusingly ineffective (particularly the 2nd book of the *Tristia* ostensibly addressed to the emperor), and may even indicate that the exile is a literary game
 - ▣ Martial's allusions to the *Tristia* may strengthen this notion.

Ovid's exile

Ah me! If I'd not been damaged by recent events, I'd be many times secure in your judgement. These last events destroy me: one storm blast drowns the ship, so many times unharmed, in the ocean depths. It's no small weight of water that harms me, but all the ocean flood falls on my head. Why did I see anything? Why make my eyes guilty? Why was a mischief, unwittingly, known to me? Actaeon, unaware, saw Diana unclothed: none the less he became his own hounds' prey. Even fate must be atoned for, among the powers that be, to a wounded god chance is no excuse. On that day, when my unlucky error misled me, my house, humble, without stain, was destroyed. (Ov. *Trist.* 2)

- The description of what caused Ovid's exile is couched in literary terms – he likens himself to Actaeon (*Trist.* 2)
- *Trist.* 1.3 depicts the narrator leaving his home in ways very closely reminiscent of Verg. *Aen.* 2
- Throughout, the narrator draws on the character of Odysseus as a fellow sufferer (Cf. Rahn, 1956)
- Tomis and surrounds described in literary terms – a relatively affluent provincial town turned Scythian wilderness in Ovid's version
 - ▣ Cf. Williams, 2003.
 - ▣ Elegiac topoi abound: Cf. Nagle, 1980.
- Statements the narrator makes about his diminished ability to write Latin and poetry all proven false
 - ▣ Cf. multiple works by JM Claassen

Augustan values

- If we leave the issue of Ovid's exile aside as unsolvable, 'real life' evidence concerning Tibullus and especially Propertius gives no hint of discord
 - ▣ Maecenas only becomes Propertius' patron after the publication of the *Monobiblos*
 - ▣ Both are lauded by later poets (including – but not limited to! – Ovid)
- Bearing that in mind, we shall now look again at the values promoted or questioned in Roman love elegy

Disqualified judges?

- By their submission to the *puella*, we have seen that the narrators of elegy take a role that would itself brand them as outsiders
- Is the outsider's incomprehension of the niceties of Roman politics therefore to be expected?
- This fits well the context of poems like Prop. 1.6 and Prop. 3.4 (right)

Caesar the god plans war with wealthy India, to furrow with his fleet pearl-bearing seas. Big booty for his men. The world's end offers Triumphs. [...] When I see Caesar's axles heavy-laden with spoil and his horses often halt at the mob's cheers, and resting on a dear girl's bosom I start to watch and from their labels read the captured towns [...] Venus, save your offspring. Let this visible stock descended from Aeneas live for ever. The spoils be theirs whose hardships have deserved it; I'll be content to applaud on the Sacred Way.

Values of elegy?

- Key Roman values of this and any period were: *pietas*, simplicity, and fidelity
- These values are all represented in Propertius and Tibullus
- The elegists' rejection of wealth and a longing for simplicity, not to mention the aversion to girls greedy for gifts tie in with *topoi* of simplicity present across several genres in the same period:
 - Vergil's *Eclogues*
 - Horace's *Satires* and *Odes*
 - ...and this *topos* has roots that are far deeper

- Tib. 1.1.25-32:

If only, now at last, I can live content with little and not be handed over to the never-ending road, but avoid the summer rising of the Dog-star, in the shadow of a tree, beside the waters of a running stream! Not that I would be ashamed to wield a mattock sometimes or reprimand the slow oxen with a goad, nor would I be too civilised to bring home in my arms a lamb or kid abandoned by a careless mother.

- Cf. AP 16.227:

Throw thyself down here, wayfarer, on the green meadow, and rest thy languid limbs from painful toil; here where the pine also, tossed by the western breeze, shall soothe thee as thou listenest to the song of the cicadas, and the shepherd likewise on the hills, piping at mid-day by the fountain under the leafy plane-tree. Thus, having escaped the burning heat of the autumnal dog-star, thou shalt in good time cross the hill. Take this counsel that Hermes gives thee.

Luxury and simplicity: elegy

- Striking a balance between the riches flowing into Rome due to internal peace and to external conquest and the ideal of simplicity a challenge constantly on the Augustan minds
 - ▣ Cf. Verg. *Aen.* 4.261-276
 - ▣ Elegy an attempt to work out a way to deal with this (supposedly recent) change in Roman life?
- Elegy allows the coexistence of two diametrically opposed notions as it celebrates both luxury **and** simplicity by allowing the reader to acknowledge but temporarily distance her/himself from the pursuit of wealth

Luxury and simplicity

- Augustus' *Res Gestae* 19-21 outline extensive public building undertaken by Augustus:
 - ▣ **19.** I built the senate-house and the Chalcidicum which adjoins it and the temple of Apollo on the Palatine with porticos, the temple of divine Julius, the Lupercal, the portico at the Flaminian circus, which I allowed to be called by the name Octavian, after he who had earlier built in the same place, the state box at the great circus, the temple on the Capitoline of Jupiter Subduer and Jupiter Thunderer, the temple of Quirinus, the temples of Minerva and Queen Juno and Jupiter Liberator on the Aventine, the temple of the Lares at the top of the holy street, the temple of the gods of the Penates on the Velian, the temple of Youth, and the temple of the Great Mother on the Palatine.
- Suet. *Aug.* 73 highlights that simplicity in the private life was an important part of Augustus' image:
 - ▣ The simplicity of his furniture and household goods may be seen from couches and tables still in existence, many of which are scarcely fine enough for a private citizen. They say that he always slept on a low and plainly furnished bed. Except on special occasions he wore common clothes for the house, made by his sister, wife, daughter or granddaughters; his togas were neither close nor full, his purple stripe neither narrow nor broad, [...].

Elegy and fidelity: Moderation

- Elegiac love, contrary to its ostensive claims, is not about fidelity. Rather, the genre's functioning is based on infidelity, so how can the genre promote fidelity as a value?
- If we disregard the literariness of elegy, one answer could be: Elegiac love is never happy love...
 - ▣ ...nor, in terms of society, productive love
- Elegy contains 'an unresolved clash between the libertine elements and conservative elements of the elegists' discourse' (Gibson, 2007, 54)
- Gibson uses two poems sharing the same end line (in the Latin it is word-by-word) to illustrate this paradox:
 - ▣ Prop. 2.15.29f 'One's wrong to look for limits to love's madness; true love knows no bounds.'
 - ▣ Prop. 3.19.1-4 'You keep protesting to me about our [i.e. mens'] lechery; your sex, believe me, is more prone to that. You, when you break the bridle of scorned modesty, can't keep your mind's obsession within bounds.'

Elegy and fidelity: Moderation

- The stance of the elegiac narrator (particularly in Propertius) has been compared to that of Mark Antony
 - ▣ The early appearance of Propertius' *Monobiblos* makes this comparison more relevant for Prop. 1 than anywhere else
- This comparison is based on their shared preference for love and sex, nightlife and drink (cf. Plut. *Ant.* 9.5).
 - ▣ Cf. Griffin, 1977.
- But the dire evil which had been slumbering for a long time, namely, his passion for Cleopatra, which men thought had been charmed away and lulled to rest by better considerations, blazed up again with renewed power as he drew near to Syria. And finally, like the stubborn and unmanageable beast of the soul, of which Plato speaks, he spurned away all saving and noble counsels and sent Fonteius Capito to bring Cleopatra to Syria. (Plut. *Ant.* 36.1)
- Cf. Prop. 1.1 and how the narrator throws off the shackles of society: '...and taught me to hate chaste girls'

Antony and Propertius

- However, there is one important difference, that picks up on the contradiction between extreme liberalism and conservatism in elegy: nowhere is Anthony said to have appropriated the **moralistic discourse** that the elegiac narrators regularly offer.
- This is revealed already in Prop. 1.2, where the narrator argues against the dangers of luxury and cosmetics
- These anti-cosmetic poems draw on a wider moralistic discourse represented outside of elegy, for instance Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, where it is a strict husband who gives advice to his wife
- Prop. 1.2.1-8
- Why choose, my life, to step out with styled hair and move sheer curves in Coan costume? Or why to drench your tresses in Orontes' myrrh and sell yourself with foreign gifts and lose the charm of Nature for bought elegance, not letting limbs shine with their own attractions? This doctoring of your looks is pointless, believe me; love, being naked, does not love beauticians.

Propertius and Antony – or Augustus?

- While the comparison of Antony and the Propertian narrator is often tempting, we also need to note that Propertius also adopts the traditional post-Actium view of Antony and Augustus' victory at Actium (cf. 2.1.34)
- 'The elegist ends the poem as an Antony who apparently accepts the Augustan view of the conflict, and spits out venom [...] at the personal excesses of Cleopatra, both sexual and drunken. [...] [Plutarch's] Antony feels betrayed by Cleopatra, but he nowhere complains of her sexual or other libertine excesses.' (Gibson, 2007, 60)

Prop. 3.11:

Why be surprised that a woman manages my life, leading my manhood captive as her slave, and frame a shameful charge of cowardice against me because I can't snap the yoke and break my chains? [...] What of her who lately brought scandal on our arms, a woman even laid by her own slaves? As price of her foul marriage she demanded that Rome's walls and senators should pass into her power. Delinquent Alexandria, land most attached to guile, and Memphis, to our cost so often blood-stained, where sand denuded Pompey of three Triumphs, that stigma Rome will bear forever!

Inconsistency in elegy

- A curious footnote to the Propertius – Antony comparison: Augustus said to share the Propertian narrator's inconsistencies
 - ▣ Moral discourse
 - ▣ ...but numerous stories circulated about his own extra-marital affairs
- A linear reading strengthens reader appreciation of the Propertian inconsistency (cf. differences between Prop. 1.1 and 1.2, or within 3.11)
 - ▣ Inconsistency generally a feature of elegy
- Inconsistency a key source to humorous effects
- ...which takes us back to the notion of elegiac narrators as disqualified judges of the society around them

Values in elegy

- A niggling question: Is it a criticism of contemporary society to reveal that while praising one way of life as ideal, the narrators consistently lead their lives according to opposite tenets?
 - ▣ I.e. is it similar to present-day contempt for politicians?
- Such a reading would need to be supported by features in the text that encourage a comparison between narrators and prominent representatives of Augustan society

To take away from this lecture

- Roman values become paramount in the Augustan period: pietas, simplicity, fidelity
- Elegy engages with these concepts throughout, and may so be said to be 'Augustan' in the sense of being coloured by its historical context
- Political readings of elegy have always attracted a great deal of interest, but to present them plausibly, we need to be very aware of scholarly and individual bias