Latin Erotic Elegy
An anthology and reader

Edited by
Paul Allen Miller
LATIN EROTIC ELEGY

The first comprehensive elegiac anthology for several decades, this volume is an invaluable resource for all those studying elegiac poetry, and will also be important for courses on Augustan culture and gender in the ancient world.

The detailed introduction looks at major figures, the evolution of the form, and the Roman context, with a particular focus on the changing relations between the sexes. The texts that follow range from the earliest manifestations of erotic elegy in Catullus, through Tibullus, Sulpicia (Rome’s only female elegist), Propertius and Ovid.

The accessible commentary explores the historical background, issues of language and style, and the relation of each piece to its author’s larger body of work. The volume closes with an anthology of critical essays representing the main trends in scholarship; these illuminate the genre’s most salient features and help the student understand its modern reception.

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This text is designed primarily for students and teachers of advanced undergraduate and MA level classes, although scholars may find it useful as well. The Introduction provides a general overview of the genre of Latin erotic elegy in its historical and literary context. The commentary is designed to aid students in understanding both the language and the poetry. Discussion of textual matters and of sources has been limited to those cases where it is necessary for linguistic or artistic intelligibility. The critical anthology at the conclusion of the volume is designed to allow the student both a greater comprehension of the poems themselves and of the history of the debates surrounding them. The essays chosen, while they are all important, have been selected on the basis of their representing certain trends in scholarship on elegy rather than on any claim that they are intrinsically better than others that might have been chosen. Only essays that deal with the genre as a whole rather than single authors or poems have been used. Unfortunately, this means that many fine pieces of scholarship have been left out.

Citations have been kept to the bare minimum to aid in accessibility. Those wishing to do further reading should refer to the select bibliography at the end of the Introduction, which does not begin to reflect my debt to the previous scholarship in the field. The texts for the poems are all taken from the OCT editions, with the exception of Catullus where I have relied on Quinn and of the Heroides where I have used the Budé.
I owe debts of gratitude to many people and institutions. My thanks go first to my colleague Ward Briggs who suggested this project to me and then to Barbara K. Gold who introduced me to the elegists so many years ago. I should also thank Kevin Herbert whose love for Catullus first sparked my own. The manuscript could not have been prepared without the aid of my research assistant and student, Christel Brown, and of the secretary of the Comparative Literature Program at the University of South Carolina, Noreen Doughty. I owe a debt of gratitude to Micaela Janan of Duke University and Deborah Lyons of Johns Hopkins as well as to their students who used a draft of this text in their classes and provided invaluable feedback. Micaela, you were, as always, a helpful and supportive friend. I can’t thank you enough for countless favors large and small. Ellen Greene read over the final versions of the manuscript, provided insightful criticism and invaluable moral support. All remaining faults are my own. Of course, I would be and do nothing were it not for the love and support of my wife, Ann Poling, and of Sam, the only person who still asks me to play tag.

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INTRODUCTION

General

1. Roman erotic elegy is one of the most influential genres in the history of western poetry. It is not too much to say that our conception of romantic love as the passionate attachment of one person to another, to the exclusion of all other concerns – money, fame, social propriety – was first codified by the Roman elegists. It was from the elegists, and Ovid in particular, that the medieval poets of courtly love derived their most famous and influential conceits. Likewise, the love sonnets of the Renaissance poets from Petrarch to Shakespeare would be unimaginable without the elegiac predecessors from which they self-consciously drew. The sonnet tradition, in turn, established the conventions for romantic devotion and the life of love that have dominated western culture until at least the beginning of the twentieth century. In short, to study the elegiac poets is not just to study a genre of poetry practiced by a people long dead, in a tongue no longer spoken, and in a far away place. To study Latin elegy is to uncover the storehouse of themes and images from which our modern notions of love and commitment have been constructed.

2. The familiarity of this poetry’s themes and images, however, can be deceptive. We must be wary of assuming that the same gesture or image in one time and place has the same meaning when used again in another. The metaphor of love’s slavery, for example, is a much more abstract affair in a society such as ours, in which slavery is not a fact of everyday life, than it was for the ancient Romans. Elegy, then, is not only the common property of all the cultures that trace their origins to the ancient Mediterranean; it is also a discrete, time-bound phenomenon. Indeed, one of its great paradoxes is that, despite its extraordinary influence on literature for more than two thousand years after its birth, the genre lasted barely fifty years. Thus, Latin elegy not only continues to have a modern appeal, it is also inextricably bound to a particular context. Therefore, if we want to understand what erotic elegy meant to the Romans, we have to examine both the history of its development and of the social and political conditions that made it possible. In the
process, we shall discover not only how our present has grown from the past, but also how the past was radically different from the present.

3. The surviving erotic elegists are Catullus, Tibullus, Sulpicia, Propertius, and Ovid, all of whom were active in the last two-thirds of the first century BCE. The defining features of their poetry are relatively few in number. First, all elegies are written in elegiac couplets. The couplet consists of two different lines. The first is a dactylic hexameter, the meter used for epic verse. The second line is a pentameter that is largely dactylic in rhythm. We shall talk more about meter later in this introduction. For the present, it is sufficient to note that this was a common meter in ancient poetry, used by archaic Greek poets for everything from political advice to marching songs. In Rome, before Catullus, the elegiac couplet was used for epitaphs and short witty epigrams. Both forms were based on Greek practice, and the epigrams were either translations or close imitations of works by Alexandrian poets such as Callimachus.

4. One of the ways elegy differs from epigram is length. An epigram is a short poem of roughly two to ten lines. Its brevity demands rigorous concision on the part of the poet and allows little scope for narrative development. Roman erotic elegies vary in size, but are usually substantially larger than epigrams written in the same meter. The average poem of Tibullus runs about 75 lines. The typical elegy of Propertius in the first three books is around 35 lines, though that number grows to 86 in Book 4, while the poems in Ovid’s Amores average about 50 lines. Elegy’s greater length offers more opportunity for rhetorical and narrative elaboration, as well as for the creation of structural complexities, impossible to achieve in the more restrictive format of epigram. Likewise, whereas epigrams are, with certain exceptions, occasional compositions in which one poem’s relation to the next is _ad luce_, the elegists write books in which the reader can follow the course of a love affair from beginning to end. These stories are not as linear as was once believed, when critics strove to reconstruct the poets’ biographies from their poetry. Nonetheless, to cite only one example, Ovid’s Amores takes us from the moment the poet first falls in love to the end of the affair in three books that are arranged in roughly chronological order. Sulpicia’s poetry, as we shall see, while closer to epigram than elegy in terms of length, shares this focus on narrative complexity that is one of erotic elegy’s most distinguishing characteristics. Thus, one thing that all the elegists share is the way in which each poem in a book relates to another, creating a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. The nature of an anthology such as this will limit the degree to which this aspect of elegiac style can be fully appreciated, but we shall bring out the connections between texts in the notes.

5. The thematic principle around which all the elegiac collections are organized was the love affair. Each book of the canonical elegists was primarily devoted to a single beloved of the opposite sex. Like all generic laws, this is more a rule of thumb than an unalterable law of nature. Catullus’s
mistress, Lesbia, is the central focus of his most famous poetry, but much of that poetry is not written in elegiac couplets and much of what is written in the meter is on topics other than the poet’s affair. For this reason, Catullus is best considered not an elegist proper, but a precursor. Cornelius Gallus is the first true elegist, and all four of his books were devoted to his beloved, Lycoris. Unfortunately, while the figure of Gallus looms large in the poetry of Vergil, Propertius, and Ovid, his own poetry has all but disappeared. He rose to be the prefect of Egypt under Augustus, and when he became too bold in proclaiming his own accomplishments, he was forced to commit suicide. Hence, while there was no systematic effort on the part of the imperial regime to destroy his poetry, its preservation and dissemination were not encouraged. Little can be said of his depiction of Lycoris with any real assurance. Tibullus wrote two books of poetry. The first is devoted to Delia, but also features three pederastic poems (1.4, 1.8, and 1.9) dedicated to a certain Marathus. Tibullus here is following Hellenistic precedent in which erotic poetry written in elegiac meters was generally homoerotic in nature. Catullus did the same, writing erotic epigrams about his love for Juventius. Tibullus dedicates his second book exclusively to his travails with the ominously named Nemesis. Sulpicia’s slight œuvre recounts her love affair with Cerinthus. The first three books of Propertius are devoted to his love for Cynthia. In his fourth book, however, the historical limitations of the elegiac genre are becoming manifest. While love and Cynthia are not wholly absent, Propertius here embarks on a program of historical and political elegies in the Alexandrian mode. Ovid’s case is the most complex. The three books of the Amores recount the course of his affair with Corinna. However, Ovid’s engagement with erotic elegy does not end here. He also produces both the Heroides, a series of letters from amorous heroines recounting their misadventures in flawless elegiac verse, and the Ars Amatoria, a manual of seduction based on the conventions of erotic elegy. Augustus deemed the latter work sufficiently subversive that he cited it as one of the reasons for the poet’s exile to the Black Sea town of Tomis.

Ovid’s exile, however, points to a problem. How could love poetry be subversive? How could it be cited as a reason, even if as only a pretext, for exile? This is hard for us to understand in a society that takes the expression of individual emotion for granted and in which romantic love is seen as the foundation of the nuclear family. Such, however, was not the case in Rome or throughout the ancient Mediterranean. Indeed, the attempt to make heterosexual, romantic love the foundation of the family has been a uniquely modern and western experiment. Not only do elegiac love affairs focus on love outside of marriage; they call into question the basic power relations that lay at the heart of traditional Roman life. The defining characteristic of the focus on an exclusive or dominant love affair as the genre’s thematic center of gravity already casts it outside the mainstream of Roman cultural life. Love, in genres such as comedy and satire, 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. Love was tolerated so long as it was temporary and did not endanger another man’s fortune or legitimate sexual prerogatives. In Horace’s lyric poetry, which was written during the twenties BCE, the heyday of the elegiac genre, love is a pleasant diversion to be indulged in with a variety of Greek flute girls and *meretrices*. In epic, which elegy always defines as its generic opposite, amorous intrigues such as Aeneas’s with Dido are portrayed as endangering the very foundations of the state by distracting the hero from his divine mission.

7. In elegy, however, the beloved is always portrayed as the *domina* or *era* of the poet. Whereas Catullus uses both terms, the former would become canonical in the later tradition. Both, however, refer to the woman of the house or *domus*, the *matrona* who ruled its domestic slaves. She was their literal “mistress,” and it is from this metaphor that our own use of the term derives. The lovers, in turn, adopt the pose of the slave of love, *serus amoris*, in which they pretend to subject themselves completely to the will of their beloveds. This subjection is an abdication of the normal rights of masculine domination that went without question in Roman society. For a man to submit to the will of a woman was to accept the label of effeminate softness or *mollitia*. Moreover, the elegists go further still and cast themselves in the role of *praecceptores amoris*, teachers of love. They present themselves not only as sexual nonconformists but also as the advocates of a lifestyle that, if taken literally, threatens the very bases of traditional power relations between the genders.

8. Too much can be made of these declarations of masculine subjection. It is not always clear who had the upper hand in these relationships. Ovid and Tibullus, for example, write poems that show the lover using violence toward the beloved. Likewise, Ovid’s poems on Corinna’s abortion reveal that certain imbalances of power remained inherent in the sexual situation of most women in the ancient world regardless of the metaphors employed. Moreover, the male lovers in an elegiac relationship always retain the option of pursuing a conventional career in law, politics, the military, agriculture, or large-scale commerce. These were not options for their mistresses. The question, then, of who was free and who was a slave in these relationships is more complicated than the theme of *seruitium amoris* might make it appear. Casting yourself as the slave of someone who has very little real social power is a pretty risk-free proposition. Nonetheless, the elegists by questioning the nature of relations between the sexes and by envisioning their own subjugation to women—even if in an often ironic and humorous manner—present an interrogation of sexual norms unparalleled in Roman poetry.

9. Elegy not only defines itself as *mollis*, or soft, it does so in direct opposition to epic, which it terms *durus*, or hard. The sexual connotations of
such terms do not need to be belabored, but there is an elaborate pun here that is foundational to the genre: for *mollis* is a stylistic term as well as a sexual one. *Mollitia* represents the soft style of composition advocated by the Alexandrian poet Callimachus, as opposed to the harsh style of epic associated with Homer. The soft style eschews lengthy continuous narrative in favor of indirect forms of exposition. It avoids the harsh alliterations and enjambments characteristic of the Roman epic style represented by Ennius, in favor of smooth and flowing verse. It focuses on delicate psychological portraiture rather than broad description. Elegy is thus *mollis* because it portrays men subjected to women, because it defines itself thematically as the opposite of epic, and because it is composed in the soft style of Callimachus. This kind of elaborate word play, moreover, in which sexual and literary registers of language become conflated, is typical of the genre. When Ovid or Propertius speak of their *amores*, it is impossible to tell if they mean their loves, their love poetry, or both.

10. Elegy’s potential to unsettle traditional mores, the *mos maiorum*, the return to which was a major part of the political program of the emperor Augustus, was not limited to its depiction of men subjected to women. The situations depicted by the genre also threatened what were considered the legitimate relations of power and property that governed the commerce between men and women. Elegiac romance, like that of the medieval courtly lovers who would follow in its wake, is always by definition extramarital. Catullus describes his relationship with Lesbia as adulterous in poem 68. Ovid uses the term *uir* to refer to Corinna’s man. It is ambiguous and may mean her husband or her established lover. In either case, Ovid is stepping on what is acknowledged to be another man’s sexual territory and upsetting the balance of power. The relationship is *de facto*, if not *de iure*, adulterous. Likewise, in *Amores* 2.19 and 3.4 when Ovid is having a fling with a woman other than Corinna, he refers to her as an *uxor*, or wife, and to her *uir* as a *maritus*, or spouse. The cases of Cynthia, Delia, and Nemesis are less clear, but, as Copley pointed out half a century ago, one of the set pieces of the elegiac genre is the *paraclausithyron*, the song of the ‘locked out lover’ or *exclusus amator*. In these poems, the door is barred to the lover for one of three reasons: the *uir* has posted a *ianitor*, or door slave; the *domina* is with another lover; or, a *lena*, or madam, has locked the lover out for lack of funds. In all three instances, the relationship between poet and mistress is an irregular one that violates either the marital or proprietary rights of another.

11. This conflation of marital and property rights may seem strange to us, but it was not in Roman life. As Catullus tells the bride in his second marriage hymn, her maidenhood is only one-third hers, the other two-thirds belong to her parents. Marriage, while nominally consensual between the two parties, was in fact a political and economic transaction between families in which emotional ties played little if any role. This is not to say that spouses did not sometimes grow to have a real affection for one another, but
emotional satisfaction was not the primary concern in contracting a marriage. This can be clearly demonstrated by the high rate of divorce and remarriage among the upper classes in the last century of the republic, the same period that saw the rise of elegy. At this time, marriage was a tool of amicitia, a relationship of mutual obligation that might entail personal friendship or merely political alliance, between powerful aristocrats. The chief role of marriage was the production of legitimate heirs and the consequent cementing of economic and political relations between extended families or gentes. The nature of this peculiar institution is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than by the story of that paragon of Stoic virtue, Cato the younger, who, when his friend Hortensius was childless, divorced his wife Marcia so that she could marry Hortensius and produce legitimate heirs. He promptly remarried her upon Hortensius’s death.

12. Under such a system of interfamilial alliance, the property and the power relations marriage entailed could only be preserved if the women in question remained faithful to the men into whose control they were remanded. Only then could the legitimacy of heirs be insured. Thus, marita fides, or “marital fidelity,” was an expectation of women but not of men. The essential ethical obligation for men was not faithfulness but the respect of other men’s property, which included their wives and long-term sexual partners. Hence, Horace in Satire 1.2, “Against Adultery,” urges young men to release their pent up sexual energies on whatever slave boy or girl is handy, but not to grind another man’s grain. The elegists, however, claim it is they, not their dominae, who are faithful, thereby deliberately reversing normal sexual roles even as they undermine the very virtue in the name of which they assert their amorous servitude. The elegists, therefore, are doubly subversive. Not only do they invert the power relations between men and women by adopting the position of the seruus amoris they also trouble the power relations between men by threatening the property rights of other men over their women.

13. The deliberate ambiguity of the last statement reflects our ignorance of the identity and social status represented by the elegiac dominae. This issue has been at the center of many debates in recent years. It seems clear that Lesbia is meant to be a matrona, or aristocratic wife, and, on the basis of internal evidence and a statement by Apuleius, she has been identified as Clodia Metelli, the wife of the consul Metellus Celer and sister of Cicero’s arch-enemy Clodius Pulcher. Gallus’s Lycoris is universally conceded to be the actress Cytheris, who scandalized and titillated the provincial Cicero and who was also the mistress of Marc Antony before becoming Gallus’s paramour. Delia, Nemesis, Cynthia, and Corinna are, however, impossible to identify with any conviction. Different scholars have seen them as other men’s wives, other men’s concubines, and as courtesans on the make. The poetry gives indications of all these different statuses and makes a clear identification of who they were supposed to represent, let alone who they “really
were,” impossible to determine. In a period that witnessed an increasing anxiety about sexual mores, declining birth rates among the upper classes, and the first legislation criminalizing adultery in the history of the Roman state, such vagueness was perhaps desirable. Nonetheless, in all cases these relationships are portrayed as illegitimate and, if not directly adulterous, then involved in poaching on what could legitimately be seen as another man’s territory.

14. Sulpicia, the sole female elegist to survive, represents the exception. She neither submits to the rule of a domina nor threatens the property rights of others. Yet, if we grant the generally accepted identification of her as the niece and ward of Messalla Corvinus, then her poetry too becomes transgressive. As the daughter of one of Rome’s most honored aristocratic houses, her declaration of open love for a man not identified as her husband marks a clear departure from the expected rules of feminine conduct. As she herself writes, “pecasse iuvat” [“it is a pleasure to have done wrong”] (3.13.9). She does not portray herself as the traditional matrona-to-be whose chief concerns would be faithfulness to her husband’s household and the raising of his children, but as a lover. At the same time, she deliberately undermines the traditional power relations that defined love and marriage in male-dominated Rome, not by merely inverting those relations, as her male counterparts did, but by reconceiving love as a relation between equals: “cum digno digna fuisse ferar” [“Let me be said to have been a worthy woman with a worthy man”] (3.13.10).

**Historical background**

15. Sulpicia and the dominae portrayed in elegy are symptomatic of larger trends in Roman society. The literature of the period is full of anxious statements about the decline in the sexual morality of the upper classes, their increasing effeminacy, and the emancipation of their women. In the middle of the second century BCE, when republican Rome was at the height of its power with the end of the Third Punic War and as foreign treasure filled the coffers of the aristocracy creating greater social inequality and political disruption (Sallust, *Bellum Catalinae* 9–11), a series of female scare-figures begin to appear. These are powerful and sexually liberated women epitomized by Sallust’s portrait of Sempronia (*Bellum Catalinae* 25) and Cicero’s of Clodia Metelli in the *Pro Caelio*. In all cases, the portraits of these women are embedded in larger narratives of social decay and corruption. As such, they are best seen not as providing independent evidence regarding the lives of real Roman women, but rather as symptoms of a crisis in the way sexuality was conceived in relation to traditional republican norms. Such women represent less a new “reality” than traditional Roman thought’s inability to conceptualize such women as anything other than impossible monsters. These new figures of feminine power and masculine subjection, like the


dominae and serui amoris of elegy, point to a crisis in Roman society that produced a disruption in sexual and social norms and made the position of the elegist possible.

16. Any attempt to date such turning points in history is necessarily arbitrary. Every beginning always has its origin in some prior state of affairs. Still, one could do worse than to date the crisis in Roman life and culture that eventually made elegy possible to the land and grain reforms proposed by the Gracchi. In 133 BCE, Tiberius Gracchus, a landed aristocrat descended from Scipio Africanus, was elected tribune of the people. His most important act was the passing of a sweeping land reform that provided small allotments to Rome’s landless peasants and urban poor. In the wake of Rome’s wars of conquest and the successful conclusion of the Punic Wars, vast amounts of wealth and slaves had flooded into the capital. Much of that wealth took the form of land owned by the state, or public land. This public land was leased to private landowners who were supposed to pay a percentage of their harvest to the state in return for its use. Over time, however, the rich magnates who acquired this land and worked it with slaves came to regard it as theirs by right and ceased paying the fee. During this same period, many small farmers lost their livelihoods. They had been called up for military service and their families were unable to maintain their farms in their absence and so went into debt to the wealthy landowners living in the area. The result was that many of these small freeholders lost their land and were forced to move into Rome, creating a growing urban proletariat that was underemployed and a source of political instability. Moreover, the Roman army was not a professional fighting force but a citizen’s militia. To serve in it one had to be a property owner. The traditional image was that of the farmer-soldier who, like Cincinnatus, was called from his plough to defend the fatherland. The decline in the number of landowners thus represented a crisis. Rome, through its military success, was eroding the traditional base of its army at the same time as it was dispossessing the very class of small freeholders upon whose back its new wealth was built.

17. Tiberius Gracchus, whether for patriotic motives or through political opportunism, saw the redistribution of public land as a method to address this problem. His proposal would have allowed the aristocratic families who were squatting on this land to retain up to a thousand acres. Nonetheless, much of the senatorial class found the proposition an unbearable infringement on their traditional prerogatives and refused to consider the legislation. When Gracchus took the controversial step of presenting his proposal directly to the people, where it passed easily, his outraged opponents viewed this as an attempt to overthrow the state. After a series of complex and constitutionally questionable maneuvers on both sides, a gang of senators caught, cornered, and beat to death the tribune and more than one hundred of his followers. In 123 and 122 BCE, Tiberius’s brother Gaius was elected to the tribunate with the avowed purpose of carrying forward the program of
reforms cut short by his brother’s murder. One of his most important and controversial measures was the passing of a bill requiring subsidized grain sales to the urban poor. This would become the norm by the middle of the next century, but at the time it was viewed as an infringement upon the economic rights of the well-to-do. Another Gracchan reform was the proposal to extend full citizenship rights to Rome’s Latin allies. The conflicts between the senate and Gaius like those between it and Tiberius grew increasingly intense. Eventually, Gaius resorted to armed insurrection in the attempt to keep his opponents from overturning his reform program after he left office in 121. He and many of his supporters were killed in the attempt, and the senate promptly annulled his reforms. His brother’s land reform remained official policy until 91 bce, although the commission executing it was disbanded in 129.

18. The story of the Gracchi is important for the subsequent cultural, political, and sexual history of Rome on several counts. First, it marks the beginning of a century of civil strife that would eventually lead to Julius Caesar’s dictatorship (48 bce), assassination (44 bce), and to the emergence of his heir and nephew, Octavian, as the sole ruler of Rome (31 bce). The latter, as the princeps or first citizen, would be styled Augustus by the senate in 27 bce. Second, the story of the Gracchi reveals how a number of issues, which might seem unrelated to us, were deeply intertwined in the Roman imagination, for the questions both brothers addressed went to the heart of what it meant to be a Roman. How is the citizen body, and hence its army, able to reproduce itself in a situation in which its traditional bases of self-definition no longer obtain? How can the senatorial oligarchy respond to these changing conditions without undermining the very conditions that maintained its rule? How do we determine who is a legitimate Roman citizen and who is not? What the story of the Gracchi makes apparent is the ways in which issues of sexuality and population (the production of legitimate citizen soldiers), political power, and class conflict were interrelated throughout this period. What starts in 133 bce reaches its fullest fruition a hundred years later with the emergence of the principate and Augustus’s moral reform legislation, which was designed to promote legitimate childbirth and prohibit adultery among the upper classes. The latter, rather than being something radically new, was part of an ongoing political process designed to produce a stable citizen population that could maintain the state and the position of those who controlled it. Elegy was a product and symptom of this social, political, and cultural revolution. Propertius’s declaration in 2.7 that he would not marry and that no son of his would serve in Rome’s armies acquires its full meaning only when this context is understood. From this perspective, elegy and the conflicts of power, sexuality, and legitimacy it dramatized did not just happen to arise in the last half of the first century bce. Indeed, if elegy had not existed, someone would have had to invent it.
19. Finally, the story of the Gracchi is exemplary because of the role of their mother Cornelia. The daughter of Scipio Africanus, she was a well-educated and strong-willed woman who, due to the early death of her husband, was in charge of the upbringing of her two sons. Cornelia was not only an extraordinary mother but also an accomplished woman of letters whose published correspondence survived for more than two centuries after her death. She represents the rise of a new, powerful, and independent female figure who, while admired, nonetheless represented a challenge to the traditional hierarchies of gendered power in Rome. She was the positive image of a new Roman woman, of which Sempronia and Clodia represent the negative caricature. The existence of powerful, independent, and cultured women made the character of the *domina* believable as a literary construct and threatening as an object of desire.

20. The problems that the Gracchi had tried to address did not disappear with their deaths. The brothers were more symptoms of structural problems in Roman culture and politics than causes *per se*. Thus in 107 BCE, Marius was elected consul for the first of an eventual seven times. One of his first acts was to remove the property qualification for serving in the army. In effect, he was merely regularizing a situation that had increasingly become the case over the years, but by doing so and establishing a specified term of service he turned the army into a professional fighting force. The professionalization of the army eroded the traditional ideology that bound the soldiery to a republic in which they as landholders had a definite stake. Instead, they professed loyalty to their individual commanders, the sole authorities who had an interest in insuring that they received their just rewards, generally an allotment of land supplied by despoiling either foreign or domestic enemies.

21. In light of this changing military and political situation, the leadership of the senatorial oligarchy became beholden to the generals – Marius, Sulla, Pompey, Caesar, and eventually Octavian and Antony – to crush both their rivals and, if need be, popular resistance. The soldiers’ alienation from the traditional instances of state power was augmented by the practice of some of this senatorial elite of driving the families of these soldiers off their lands while they were away on campaign. The ruling class became increasingly fragmented as they were forced to line up behind various warlords, like Caesar and Pompey, and the factions they represented. At the same time, certain members of the elite, such as Clodius Pulcher, who claimed to represent the interests of the *plebs urbana* were engaging in new forms of political organizing. They sought to create alternative organs of power through the mobilization of *collegia*, or guilds of tradesmen, *uici*, or neighborhood councils, and the worshippers of nontraditional cults such as those of Isis and Bacchus. Thus, at this period in Roman history, power became more diffuse as it broke away from its traditional institutional basis even as it became more concentrated in the hands of the generals whose troops were the final arbiters of political conflict.
In this context, by the time of the assassination of Julius Caesar the republican constitution no longer existed. The return to it was impossible. The Augustan settlement would step into this breach. The Augustan program of moral revival and religious reconstruction was consistently presented in terms of a return to the virtues of the past, the *mos maiorum*, and the restoration of the republic (Augustus, *Res Gestae* 8, 19–21, 34). At the same time, it was laying the ideological groundwork for consolidating what was to be the most sweeping transformation of the Roman state since the expulsion of the Etruscan kings. Moreover, in spite of its self-proclaimed conservative nature, the regime did not scruple to appropriate concepts of sacred kingship and other ideas foreign to traditional republican political thought where it deemed them useful. Augustan imperial ideology was less a coherent, theoretical edifice than an *ad hoc* construction designed to meet specific needs. It was more concerned with power and stability than ideological purity.

To that end, the Augustan regime consistently presented the final round of the civil wars between Antony and Octavian, the two claimants to Julius Caesar’s legacy, as a battle to preserve Rome’s masculine integrity or *virtus* (derived from the word *uir*) against an onslaught from the effeminized East. Thus in Horace *Odes* 1.37, the chief opponent of Augustus at the battle of Actium (31 BCE) is not Antony, a Roman general, but his consort Cleopatra, an eastern queen surrounded by eunuchs. And while Horace’s portrait of Cleopatra is ultimately a good deal more nuanced than this thumbnail sketch might lead one to believe, nonetheless its echoes of official Augustan propaganda are unmistakable. This propaganda aimed to produce a revisionist history. Octavian was not to be presented as the bloody victor of a protracted civil conflict. He was not to be portrayed as the one-time ally of Mark Antony, who had willingly joined in the proscriptions that killed or despoiled thousands of their political opponents. He was to be the *pater patriae*, the establisher of peace, restorer of the republic, and defender of Roman *virtus*. In short, Augustus sought to portray himself as a bulwark against the very kind of irrationality, or *furor*, and effeminacy, or *mollitia*, that were the essence of elegy’s self-representation. Cleopatra too was an avatar of the *domina*.

The elegiac tradition

The roots of elegy, however, like those of virtually all the poetic genres, were not to be found in Rome alone, but also in Greece. Greek poetry set the standard for cultural achievement. This is not to deny the strong influence of domestic poetic forms on elegy’s unique evolution. Greek new comedy, as adapted by Plautus and Terrence, with its tales of young love run riot, expensive courtesans, and outraged parents, had a major influence on the themes and dramatic situations of elegy. Likewise, the uniquely Roman tradition of satire, starting with Lucilius (second century BCE), had established a poetic
precedent for the pose of frank personal revelation and autobiographical intent. Nonetheless, in Book 10 of the *Institutio*, when Quintilian says, “in elegy too we challenge the Greeks,” he is clearly setting Latin love elegy against the background of its Greek antecedents. In addition, when Catullus, Propertius, and Ovid speak of their literary predecessors Mimnermus, Antimachus, and above all Callimachus loom large.

25. The elegiac meter is as old as Greek poetry itself. The first recorded practitioner is Archilochus (seventh century BCE), but cognate meters in other Indo-European languages show it more ancient still. It was often etymologized to mean *ē e legein*, “to say woe, woe,” and from the beginning it appeared on funeral steles, but its use was much wider by the archaic Greek period. Until the fifth century, it is a frequent medium of political and military exhortation. The poet Theognis combines political commentary with poems of a frankly pederastic intent (although since the institution of pederasty was as much educational as sexual in archaic Greece one should refrain from making too sharp a distinction). By the end of the seventh century, Mimnermus had composed poems that were at some point collected in an edition termed the *Nanno*, possibly named for a courtesan. As best as can be judged from the five remaining fragments, while their style was elegant, their subject matter was largely concerned with history, mythology, and popular wisdom. The first elegiac poet clearly to devote a collection of poetry to his beloved was Antimachus of Colophon (c.400 BCE). His work, *Lyde*, named after his deceased mistress was nonetheless a compilation of mythological narratives, which, while serving as a memorial to his lost love, very little resembled the first-person narratives that were central to Latin erotic elegy. Antimachus’s collection of long narrative elegies on mythological themes does seem to have served as a precedent for the later Alexandrian poets, although Callimachus criticized it as fat and inelegant.

26. By far the most important influence on Latin elegy, however, was Callimachus (third century BCE). Catullus, Propertius, and Ovid list him as among their chief influences, and Tibullus, who refrains from making overt theoretical statements, alludes to him on several occasions. A brief introduction cannot do justice to his importance. The best that can be hoped for is to give a general idea of this complex and elusive poet, who was a scholar and librarian at the Museum in Alexandria. His poetry is characterized by learning, wit, and studied indirection. Unfortunately, most of his work survives only in fragments.

27. One of the longest extant examples of his verse is a translation by Catullus of a poem called the “Lock of Berenice.” A short excerpt gives a sense of its flavor. It tells how a tress cut from the hair of Queen Berenice of Egypt was miraculously transformed into a new constellation discovered by the royal astronomer to the court at Alexandria, Conon. Berenice sheared the lock as an offering for the safe return of her husband and brother, Ptolemy
III, from a campaign in Syria on which he had left immediately after their marriage.

That same Conon saw me shining clearly on the threshold of the sky, a flowing lock from the top of Berenice’s head, which she stretching forth her slight arms had promised to many of the goddesses, in that season when it had pleased the king, blessed with a new marriage, carrying with him the sweet traces of their nocturnal struggle, when he had borne off the young girl’s spoils, to lay waste to the Assyrians.

(66.7–14)

The precious imagery, the coy psychology of the pampered tress, the witty compliments to the royal couple, and the complex sentence structure are typically Callimachean. We are a long way from Homer, archaic Greek elegy, or a typical Roman panegyric of a triumphant general. In this passage, we see the thematic and stylistic mollitia that the Latin elegists so admired in the Alexandrian poet. At the same time, the conflation of the amorous with the soldierly in the evocation of the king and queen’s nocturnal struggle would become one of the signature motifs of Roman erotic elegy, the militia amoris or “soldiering of love.”

28. For all the convergences between the styles of Callimachus and those of his later elegiac followers, there are certain clear differences as well. Callimachus’s poem does not adopt the autobiographical pose that distinguishes the Latin elegists nor, despite its clear interest in the erotic, does it form part of a larger narrative of an amorous affair. The “Lock of Berenice” is from Callimachus’s most famous collection of poems, the Aitia or Causes. This four-volume anthology of learned elegies recounts stories that purport to give the origins or causes of a variety of cultural, religious, and natural phenomena. “The Lock of Berenice,” therefore, offers an explanation, however facetious it may be, of the origin of the new constellation discovered by Conon.

29. These poems are anything but dry and scholarly, however recondite their subject matter or abstruse their approach. They are the clever constructions of a court poet who appears in his poems as an opinionated narrator and polemical poetic theorist. Thus, the Aitia opens with a prologue in which the
poet defends himself against the charge that he is incapable of producing a single continuous narrative of epic proportions. His witty response is that Apollo had told him to make his sacrifices fat, but to keep his muse slender. This notion of the slender style, as opposed to the fat bombast of epic, became one of the most important ways Roman elegy defined itself in contrast to epic. Thus in 2.1, for example, Propertius speaks of his inability to write heroic verse in his narrow bed, a metaphor that cleverly identifies lovemaking with the production of verse in the Callimachean style. Likewise, at the end of Callimachus’s “Hymn to Apollo,” the poet concludes not with the god’s praises but with a swipe at his critics:

And Envy whispered in Apollo’s ear:
“I am charmed by the poet who swells like the sea.”
But Apollo put foot to Envy and said:
“The River Euphrates has a powerful current
but the water is muddy and filled with refuse.
The cult of Bees brings water to Deo
but their slender libations are unsullied and pure,
the trickling dew from a holy spring’s height.”

(Lombardo and Rayor 1988:10)

The contrast between the slender purity of the Callimachean style and the swollen flotsam of epic bombast could not be better expressed. More importantly, however, what is clear from both this passage and the prologue to the Aitia is that we have in Callimachus not an unobtrusive or self-effacing narrative voice, but the very clear assertion of a singular point of view. Hence, simplistic distinctions between subjective and objective elegy, which were once common in discussions of the ways in which the Latin poets differed from their Greek predecessors, have to be abandoned. This does not however mean that anyone would confuse the stance of the Callimachean narrator with the Latin poet’s pretense to writing confessional verse.

30. In the end, Hellenistic models for elegy, while important, are all partial at best. Where Antimachus’s Lyde possessed an erotic subjective frame for a series of narrative elegies, and Callimachus had presented an interventionist and opinionated narrator for the mythological tales told in the Aitia, no precedent for Catullus 68’s combination of “autobiographical” narrative and mythological exempla, nor for Catullus 76’s agonized internal dialogue, can be found in Hellenistic poetry. Likewise, the Latin elegiac poet’s complete subjection (seruitium amoris) to a single mistress (domina, era) is unprecedented in ancient Greek poetry of any era. Indeed, as I have argued before, Catullus represents the beginning of that uniquely interiorized voice that is commonly termed lyric poetry in the modern sense of the term and of which Latin erotic elegy is a subgenre. What Hellenistic literature offered at the end of the first century BCE was not a model to be slavishly copied by
the erotic elegists, but an alternative value system to the Roman republic’s traditional emphasis on domus, dignitas, and gloria, the mos maiorum. The Callimachean dedication to poetic excellence and the rejection of the common path were rhetorical tools the elegists deployed in their rejection of the traditional life of duty. Catullus and the elegists would exploit this resource, but from the unique perspective offered by a Roman cultural and political system that was at this time in the process of restructuring. Indeed, one of the great ironies of the relationship between Hellenistic poetics and the development of Roman erotic elegy is that the rhetoric of Alexandrian absolutism, which aided the elegists in their resistance to traditional republican ideology, may also have unwittingly prepared them for the emergence of Rome’s own monarchy, the Augustan principate.

**Meter**

31. The elegiac couplet in the hands of the Roman elegists is as much a stylistic as a metrical unit. The first line of each distich is a dactylic hexameter.* The second line has two parts, consisting of two and a half dactyls apiece:

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\[ | | | | | - \\
\[ | | | | | -
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In Catullan practice, the resolution of the dactyl (---) into a spondee (--) is occasionally found in the fifth foot, but becomes very rare thereafter. In general, Catullus’s elegiacs tend toward a heavily spondaic rhythm. The later poets have more dactyls per line, rendering their verse lighter and more fluent. Ovid in particular is fond of dactylic rhythms. His verse represents the culmination of a long line of stylistic development.

32. Catullus also has a high proportion of elision, giving a sense of emotional urgency to his verse but at times rendering the diction harsh. A couplet such as the following from Catullus would be unthinkable in Ovid, Tibullus, or Propertius:

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Nam quaecumque homines bene cuiquam aut dicere possunt aut facere, haec a te dictaque factaque sunt.
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For whatever good things men are able to say or do for anyone, these things have been said and done by you. (76.7–8)

* The rules for scansion can be found in any reference grammar.
The three elisions and predominantly guttural diction distinguish this couplet from the smoother composition found in the later elegists. In addition, while this passage may not be typical of Catullus’s versification, it is hardly the most extreme example in his corpus (compare 73.5–6, 75.3–4, 76.13–14, 87.3–4, or 116.7–8). Tibullus’s poetry, in contrast, features not only smoothly flowing diction but also the frequent use of devices such as internal rhyme (indicated by italics), to give the couplet a greater aural coherence:

\[
\text{Non ego divitias patrum fructusque requiro} \\
\text{quos tuit antiquo condita messis auo.}
\]

I do not seek the riches and crops of my ancestors, what the stored up harvest brought my ancient grandfather. (1.1.41–42)

Likewise, a Propertian distich, though less musical than its Tibullan counterpart, is noticeably more refined than its Catullan relative.

\[
\text{Tu mihi sola places: placeam tibi, Cynthia, solus.} \\
\text{hie erit et patrio sanguine pluris amor.}
\]

You alone are pleasing to me: may I alone be pleasing to you, Cynthia. This love will be worth more than even a father’s blood. (2.7.19–20)

In all three cases, however, the resources of the line are exploited for maximum, if differing, poetic effects, and the impossibility of spondaic resolution after the pentameter’s caesura, or break, marks the end of the couplet, sealing it as a complete metrical unit.

33. This recurring metrical refrain at once makes the elegiac couplet less fluid than its cousin, the dactylic hexameter, and allows even greater opportunities for rhetorical elaboration. There is a stanzaic quality to the couplet that becomes increasingly marked in later elegiac practice. Thus, while Catullus follows the Greek precedent and allows enjambment from one couplet to the next, his successors treat each couplet as a complete unit of sense, if not always of syntax. The emphasis on end-stopped couplets increases over the course of the genre’s development so that by the time of Ovid the pentameter invariably finishes with a disyllabic word, doubly marking the closure of the line. As the couplet develops, the hexameter becomes the line of assertion or declaration, while the pentameter becomes the line of
expansion, qualification, or continuation. Ovid embodies these tendencies in metrical and stylistic practice and marks their contrast with the epic hexameter’s gradually unfolding grandeur in the following couplet:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{sex mihi surgat opus numeris, in quinque residat;} \\
\text{ferrea cum uestris bella ualete modis.}
\end{align*}
\]

My work rises in six numbers, it falls back in five; farewell to you, iron wars, and to your meters (1.1.27–28)

This distich provides a brief conspectus of the poetics of the elegiac couplet in their fullest flower and is remarkable on several counts. The opening line describes an antithesis between the hexameter and the pentameter, even as it enacts the elegiac couplet’s rising and falling rhythm. That antithesis is then resolved in the pentameter where the poet bids farewell to epic and hence to the conflict between elegiac distichs and dactylic hexameters. At the same time, the nature of the elegiac couplet as a synthesis of epic meter and the pentameter is enacted by the word order’s interweaving of ferrea . . . bella with uestris . . . modis around ualete, in effect healing the breech marked by the caesura. The meters of “iron war” are bid farewell in the very moment that they reassert their coherence across the pentameter’s break. The disyllabic ending of the couplet marks its finality, while the use of the word modis or ‘meters’ reinforces semantically the metrical lesson the couplet has taught. Ovid’s verse represents the pinnacle of this stylistic achievement.

**Catullus**

34. As Catullus’s metrical practice was the least regular, his work is also the most diverse. Little is known about the poet’s background. Born in Verona in the late eighties, he is generally thought to have died around the age of 30, c.50 BCE. He was from a wealthy provincial family that was sufficiently prominent to host Julius Caesar while wintering during the campaign in Gaul. Catullus shares two qualities with all the later elegists except Sulpicia: he is an equestrian and of provincial origins. The equestrian order was just below the senatorial. Its members had to possess a net worth of at least 400,000 sesterces, sufficient to live off their income and rents without other employment. This economic fact is of no little literary importance. These were men with the means and the leisure to pursue poetry and learning as a full-time occupation, with no need for external remuneration. Before Catullus, professional poets had been drawn from the lower classes and were often of Greek or servile origins. To make a living, they had to produce the kind of poetry for which Roman aristocrats were willing to pay. In practice,
this meant made-to-order panegyrics of military and political triumphs or historical epics recounting the deeds of famous ancestors. The equestrian status of Catullus and his successors freed them from this necessity, at the same time as their provincial status made their entry into Roman politics unlikely. They were noni homines, men without consular ancestors. While it was possible for a talented nouus homo, such as Cicero or Marius, to claw his way to the top of the political heap and to achieve not only senatorial but consular status, it was rare. Thus all the elegists, like Catullus, were men of wealth, leisure, and learning, who were disengaged from the all-consuming political obsessions of the scions of the great aristocratic families. They were members of the first generation for which the duties of being a poet were compatible with those of being a free man.

35. Catullus traveled to Rome in his late teens or early twenties where he made the acquaintance of many of the most accomplished literary men of his age, people such as Licinius Calvus, Gaius Helvius Cinna, and Cornelius Nepos. Together they formed a loosely affiliated group referred to in modern scholarship as the neoterics. Although bound by no formal doctrine, they were all committed to the Alexandrian concepts of brevity, wit, polish, and learning in poetry, qualities summed up in two of Catullus’s favorite words, urbanitas and uenustas. Urbanitas was a quality of charm and sophistication that implied both learning and a refusal of pedantry. Its opposite was rusticitas, the quality of being a country bumpkin. Uenustas was seductive elegance. It refers to being under the sign of Venus. It thus has an erotic charge, but can refer to any behavior that has the capacity to enchant the beholder.

36. Catullus’s corpus comes down to us in three distinct sections. The polymetrics (poems 1–60) are short pieces written in iambic and lyric meters. They vary in subject matter from tender love poems to harsh invective. In one poem, Catullus will rejoice in the homecoming of his friend Veranius from Spain (c. 9), and in another threaten Furius and Aurelius with oral and anal rape (c. 16). This same section includes both a moving translation of Sappho 31 (c. 51) and a poem in which Julius Caesar’s henchman, Mamurra, is referred to as a gigantic, all-consuming prick, mentula (c. 29).

37. The carmina maiora or “longer poems” (61–68) occupy the central section of the corpus. The shortest (65) is 24 lines and the longest (64) is 408. The carmina maiora are written in a variety of meters, but 65–68 are in elegiac couplets. The carmina maiora contain Catullus’s only poems in dactylic hexameters, the miniature epic on the marriage of Peleus and Thetis (64) and a choral marriage hymn (62). Like the polymetrics, these poems vary in subject matter, but the overarching theme of marriage is a constant throughout. Poems 61 and 62 are thus marriage hymns or epithalamia. Poem 63 tells the tale of Attis’s ecstatic commitment to the great mother goddess, Cybele, in which he castrates himself in a mystical marriage that insures the returning fertility of the soil. The poem focuses on the morning after the ritual frenzy when Attis wakes to regret what he has done. Poem 64,
on the marriage of Peleus and Thetis, closes with an ironic epithalamium sung by the Fates. Poem 65 is an introductory missive accompanying poem 66, which as we saw earlier celebrates Queen Berenice of Egypt’s devotion to her brother and new husband, Ptolemy III. Poem 67 is a version of the paraclausithyron, but, rather than the song of the lover at the door, this is the song of the door itself recounting its mistress’s infidelity and the impotence of her husband. Poem 68 is by most accounts the first full-fledged love elegy in Latin literature. It continues the marriage theme by both portraying Lesbia’s adulterous liaison with Catullus as a marriage and by emphasizing that she was in fact married to somebody else. The carmina maior thus begin with ideal marriage and progress through ironic and perverse unions to adulterous ones.

38. The last section of the Catullan corpus is the epigrams (69–116). These are short poems written in elegiac meter. They range from two (85, 93, 94, 95b) to twenty-six lines (76), the last representing Catullus’s other main claimant for the title of a fully-fledged love elegy. The epigrams, like the polymetrics, vary widely in subject matter. Unlike the latter, they are less concerned with uenustas and urbanitas than with traditional Roman concepts such as amicitia (friendship, but also political alliance), fides (good faith), foedus (a formal agreement based on fides), officium (duty), and pietas (formal obligations to the family, the state, and the gods). All of these terms refer to the system of mutual obligations that bound Roman aristocratic males in complex webs of friendship, political alliance, and clientage. One of Catullus’s most revolutionary innovations was the systematic use of this vocabulary to describe his relationship with Lesbia. He uses this vocabulary to describe a relation of mutual respect and affection between a man and a woman that to this point had only been conceived as existing between men. Thus in one poem (72), Catullus famously compares his love for Lesbia to that of a father for his sons and sons-in-law. The epigrams are also distinguished by their analytical mode of presentation. In them, the poet often states an initial problem or premise and then draws what seem, to him at least, to be the necessary consequences. A good example is poem 92:

Lesbia mi dicit semper male nec tacet umquam
   de me: Lesbia me dispeream nisi amat.
quo signo? quia sunt totidem mea: deprecor illam
   assidue, uerum dispeream nisi amo.

Lesbia always speaks ill of me and is never silent about me: I’ll be damned if Lesbia doesn’t love me. Why do I say this? Because it’s the same with me: I run her down constantly, but I’ll be damned if I don’t love her.

In using this rhetoric, Catullus wittily combines a Roman bent toward the