

# ANCIENT ROME – Cultural History

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Contents (Overview-Science-Philosophy-Religion-Art-Literature)

## OVERVIEW

**The beauty of Roman culture.** In Roman culture we meet beauty, design brilliance, discipline, religious fervor, taste for pleasure—at the dinner table or in bed—all of which reflect a human enterprise intent on surmounting the darker realities of daily life; we meet a *civitas*, a polity, in which by and large the wonders of order, discipline, and responsibility play large parts. We occasionally try out the word ‘practical,’ in an effort to characterize the Roman cultural achievement, but should be careful of any suggestion that the Romans were ‘pedestrian.’ The Roman gift for order in government, for architectural vigor and engineering brilliance, the evidences of city planning and road construction on hitherto unknown scales, the by and large consistent investment in *gravitas* and *dignitas* on the public level: all these traits raise the Roman cultural achievement far above the pedestrian.

**Conservative Roman culture.** If any portmanteau term rivals ‘practical,’ as a descriptor for the Romans, it might be ‘conservative’ or ‘traditional.’ One thinks of religion, in such a connection, and would be right in thinking that ritual and sacrifice, chiefly to somewhat transformed versions of Greek god-tales, were of persistent importance for the Romans, from the early Republic to the mature Empire, and that the Roman resistance to Christianity owed much to this ‘piety.’ The Roman army would not consider a military encounter unless augurs had first consulted the birds, and priests had performed the accustomed sacrifices.

**Orientation toward the past.** The seemingly limitless growth of new cities, as Rome’s Empire grew, configures around a ground plan based on that of Rome, with one or more major temples at its center. In education it was customary for the youngster to imbibe traditional tales which illustrated the *mores maiorum*, the customs and values of the ancestors, and when it came to the Roman’s sense of his own historical mission it was always oriented backward into the past, as we see in the historical accounts of Livy or the founding narrative of Virgil’s *Aeneid*.

**The Golden Age.** We may generalize that the Roman historians—Tacitus, Livy, and Sallust--were for the most part concerned with the past and its lessons, rather than with the future. Roman culture is rarely clambering for the future, or in any way concerned with the idea of ‘progress’; instead it was a theme, throughout Roman literature, that the Golden Age was far in the past, and that the age of the present was Iron, fallen and needy. It might even be added, when it comes to fashion, clothing, and dining, that the Roman was there too faithful to old patterns. He/she tended to value what was known from before. That such conservatism might have had much to do with poverty is quite possible, for with 95 % of the population of Rome living ‘under the poverty level,’ with mortality rates for infants running around fifty per cent, life expectancy from birth running at 28 years (the same as in ancient Greece), and with rampant diseases like malaria, the plebs as a whole was unlikely to be thinking farther into the future than the next meal.

**Political and religious opposition in Rome.** The conservatism of ancient Rome was rarely challenged on the political level—one thinks of the Spartacan uprising from the heart of the enslaved world, at the time of the Punic Wars—and in fact remained, until the time of Christianity and the Barbarian incursions, chiefly threatened by internal power struggles. The causes of the ultimate ‘fall’ of the Roman Empire, which is probably datable to the late fifth or sixth century, was a mixture of internal dissent with pressure from the outside. The well organized Christians, of the second and third centuries, were for the most part unready to do more than bring pressure against a structure which was already falling. Neither the Christians nor the multiple ‘barbarian’ forces, pressing on the Roman Empire from outside it, was intent on radical political reorganization. Someone like Saint Augustine, in *The City of God*, was of course envisaging a polity profoundly different from that of the Roman Empire, but not one which challenged or even intersected with the Roman.

**The technological in Rome.** It is of interest, to us today, to note that while ancient Rome was stable for its time, it remained so without great resort to innovation or technical advancement, which, like the Greeks too, the Romans viewed as essentially a form of manual labor, and thus not worthy of mature attention.

## Discussion Topics

It has been said that Roman religion is of a piece with Roman culture as a whole: practical, public, even military, and lacking (or not valuing) explorations of the inner life. It is equally often said that Christianity, reaching Rome already at the end of the first century A.D., brought a message of interiority that was fatal to Rome. What do you think of these assessments of the character of Roman paganism and Christian messianism?

Poverty was rampant throughout the Roman Empire; the average life expectancy was 28; only five percent of the population, by one estimate, was literate. Where, then, is the good life of entertainment, great dinners, sex in the city, fashion? There is a large disconnect here. Please try to come up with an assessment of the relation among/between the classes in Rome, and a judgment on whether the Roman government was responsibly interested in its citizens.

As the Roman Empire spread, covering almost half of the populated world in the first centuries after Christ, its communication issues got increasingly complex. How was it possible to pass news from Parthia to Northumbria to Libya? How did the Romans deal with this situation? Look into their very efficient pony express delivery system. Had they other ways of coordinating information from one part to another of the Empire?

On the face of it, we might think the educational system of ancient Rome was hardly complex enough to deal with the training of leading orators, engineers, bureaucrats, and military leaders. Is that a deceptive impression? Was on the job training sufficient to create good orators and statesmen? Engineers capable of building aqueducts? Or walls like the Hadrian's Wall in Britain? Please try to explain how the complex structures of a thousand year state were created on the basis of the *mos maiorum*, that value system of the elders which was prioritized in the schools.

## SCIENCE

**Overview** The science of the ancient Romans is on the whole practical, and directed toward achieving concrete results. It is true that the Romans made contributions to astronomy--for instance in updating their sundial technology and in distributing the latest sundial models in all major cities of the Empire--and through the cosmological speculations of such as Lucretius, following the Greek atomists. On the whole, though, the Romans' salient contributions to science were in fields like agriculture, medicine, engineering, and architecture, earth bound disciplines targeting the everyday well being of citizens

**Agriculture** As their Empire grew, so did the arable land available to the Romans for farming. The extensive fields and grazing lands of northern Greece, France, parts of the Near East meant that the Romans had ample opportunity to deepen and profit from agricultural science. The Roman farmer, at his best, was as able as today's Midwestern American farmer, to prepare his fields, to rotate crop usage, to select his seeds for the next season, to plough and harvest--using wheeled ploughs and grain harvesters--to irrigate, to prune, to graft, even to cross species, as in the well known example of crossing apples with pumpkins.

**Medicine** Prior to the advent of foreign medical theories, with the arrival of Greek physicians in the early third century B.C.E., Roman medical practice had been largely restricted to traditional herbal (and spiritual) curative techniques. The advent of Greek physicians opened the door to vigorous new medical theories--say theories of contagion among diseases, or of relations between disease and diet--while trained physicians, working in urban or military field hospitals, developed ever more sophisticated surgical techniques, and an armory of surgical tools which equipped them for delicate internal interventions.

**Engineering and Architecture** Rome, in the imperial period, was a forest of brilliantly crafted monuments--adulations of victors in wars--triumphal arches that soared over the spectator, elegantly decorated facades worked in

brick, vast unsupported amphitheaters, and masterfully structured show places like the Coliseum, where the circuses that amused the guy on the street took place, with their water organs, their devices for simulating thunderstorms, and their capacity to float opposing fleets, while slave-gobbling lions trotted along the proscenium.

## Readings

Scarborough, John, *Drugs and Medicine in the Roman World*, Philadelphia, 1996.

Conrad, Lawrence, *The Western Medical Tradition, 800 B.C. to A.D. 1800*, Cambridge, 1998.

## Discussion questions

The Romans made many strides toward the development of the hospital. Were they the first culture to innovate in this domain, or was there a hospital culture long before the Romans?

Where did the great engineers of ancient Rome get their training? Were they university trained, apprenticed into their profession, or imports from other countries?

We have mentioned the achievements of Roman agriculture. Did Roman agricultural practice evolve over the many centuries of the Roman state? Did growth in experience lead to change, or did individual agricultural geniuses move the science along?

## PHILOSOPHY

**Greece and Rome** The adage which says that Greece (meaning Greek culture and thought) conquered Rome even while the Roman military was overwhelming Greece, in the final two centuries of the classical era, applies in spades to the influx of Greek philosophy into early Roman thought.

**Lucretius** Lucretius (*The Nature of Things*, 50 B.C.E.) is an epic poem, in the same dactylic-hexameter meter we know from Homer and Virgil, and is an excellent instance of one of the greatest Roman philosophical texts highly dependent on Greek writing, in this case on the thoughts of Epicurus, the fourth century Greek moralist. Lucretius also thrived on the cosmological speculative physics of the Milesian (Asia Minor) philosophers. From those writers Lucretius formed or enriched his idea that the fundamental substance is atoms linking to one another in the void, and conjoining to form such random developments as organic life.

**Seneca and Stoicism** In the years following Lucretius (d. 55 B.C.) two of the finest Roman minds—Cicero (d. 43 B.C.) and Seneca (d. 65 A.D.)—drew their spiritual inspiration largely from the fund of Stoic ideas, a world view founded in late fourth century B.C. Athens, and destined to grow in strength throughout the Roman Empire. The basic thrust of this worldview was to promote self-control and the human peace that comes from co-operating with others, as well as from understanding how the world works. Cicero imposed a skeptical spin—‘our knowledge is limited—on this philosophy, while Seneca stressed control over the passions, and the dangers of sacrificing our independent judgments of things.

**Marcus Aurelius** To the modern reader, the most accessible of Roman philosophers is the Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180 C.E.), whose *Meditations* continue the Stoic trend of much Roman thought, while inflecting it with the standpoint from which he wrote—as a military commander on the front line, snatching a night time respite whenever he could, to write the text of his deeply human memoir, which he had no thought of publishing. Life lasts but a moment, he says, and we should coolly observe and enjoy our brief moment, meanwhile keeping our eye on the whole cosmos, and avoiding the delusions of vanity or flattery. While the world view of Marcus Aurelius still belongs to the Greek sphere, and is far from the Christian—lying ahead—it seems a harbinger of that one-god Platonism which was to shake Saint Augustine (354-430 C.E.) and to make of his *Confessions* a new kind of voice in the Roman world.

**Saint Augustine** Is it a philosophical voice we hear in Augustine? His speculations on God interweave with his reflections on memory, despair, guilt, hope. The fund of moral investigations that swarms through Roman Stoic and Epicurean thought, and that links Greek to Roman intellects, emerges in Augustine at the far end of considerations, intimate and sweeping, which will no longer be contained inside the framework of Greco-Roman thought.

## Reading

Farquharson, A.S.L., *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus*, Oxford, 2008.

Inwood, B., ed. *Seneca: Selected Philosophical Letters*, translated with introduction and commentary, Oxford, 2007.

## Discussion questions

Were the leading philosophies of ancient Rome all derived from Greek thought? What was the relation of Augustine's thought to the Greeks? Did he inherit many of his ideas from the Greek Neoplatonists who were a formative element in later Roman cultural development?

The philosophical perspectives dominant in Roman philosophy were largely ethical, centered on questions about how to live the good life. Is there an element of logic, metaphysics, or theory of history in the Roman intellectual tradition?

While it is true, as in the adage above, that the Romans were in some sense conquered by their Greek subjects, would we say that the Romans made something new and fresh from what the Greeks gave them? What would you see as the distinctively Roman contribution to world thought?

## Marcus Aurelius (121 A.D.- 180 A.D.; Emperor 161 A.D. -180 A.D.)

**Stoics and Epicureans.** We have been advancing through Roman literature by way of genres, and come at the end to philosophy, which requires a special prologue. At its peak, *Greek* philosophy, especially in Plato and Aristotle, had tried out systematic speculation, and established a power of rigorous dialectic with imagination which has left its mark on the formal study of philosophy to this day. But there were other themes in Greek philosophy, most influentially the schools of Stoicism and Epicureanism which came to flower in the third century B.C. These two branches of thought devoted their attention to the moral life, though not without concern for the ontological background of the universe in which human behavior is framed. Both the Stoics and the Epicureans, with their emphases on self-discipline, moderation, and toleration, exercised huge influence on Roman society and culture.

**The Meditations.** All this by way of direct approach to Marcus Aurelius, for whom Stoicism was an inspiration and staff of support throughout a hectically busy life at the top of the social/administrative ladder. Marcus' philosophy is embedded in a single book, which he called *To Himself*, and which we call the *Meditations*, and which is a living masterpiece of Stoic—and broadly human—wisdom. We will return to the book. Who was the man?

**The Life of Marcus Aurelius.** Marcus Aurelius was born in Ucubi, south east of Cordoba, Spain, to a family of wealth and distinction. His great grandfather had been a Senator, while Marcus' mother had inherited great wealth from her own father. This was already the formula for success, and Marcus, following the expectations of his class and educational aspirations, moved to Rome, where he spent his formative youth years in a upscale neighborhood, the Caelian Hill. (It will have struck us all, in this class, that Rome served as the magnet for all its future luminaries, though the leaders of Roman literary culture hailed widely from distant parts of the Empire.)

**Education.** In Rome Marcus was home-schooled, as were all young men of his class and expectation, Attracted by the ideal of the 'philosopher,' he went through a stage of dressing in dark rough cloaks, and sleeping on the ground—occupational traits of one kind of 'ancient philosopher'—until falling under the influence of Fronto, whom the Emperor Hadrian appointed tutor to Marcus Aurelius, and who—himself a wealthy and independent scholar---remained a prudent and affectionate guide to Marcus Aurelius throughout his life. Marcus was studious as well as active, and seemed destined for a superior role in practical political administration.

**Imperial succession.** In 138 B.C. the Emperor Hadrian chose Antoninus Pius to succeed him—Hadrian morbidly concerned with the decline in his health. As part of the succession deal, Hadrian stipulated that Antoninus should adopt Marcus Aurelius as his son. Pursuant to that deal Antoninus, taken as all were by the abilities of Marcus Aurelius, passed a law permitting his ‘son’ to assume the (very important) role of *quaestor*, before the age of twenty-four; and from there on the Emperor made all the necessary maneuvers required to prep Marcus as *his* successor. In 161 the death of Antoninus Pius opened the way for (a thoroughly reluctant) Marcus Aurelius, to become the last of the Antonine Emperors.

**The worries of ruling.** We are making our way back to a book, *The Meditations*, which Marcus Aurelius jotted down ‘to himself’ in intervals of camp and court life between 170 A.D. and 180 A.D. By the time Marcus was pushed to that brilliant literary survival tactic, his reign had become more than difficult, and more than a challenge to a man who, though a quick learner and a brilliant ‘ruler,’ had a strong withdrawal streak of the private intellectual in him. (Marcus’ reign had started well, but already in 162 A.D. Rome had been hit by devastating floods which had killed most of the livestock in the city, destroying whole settled areas, and setting off a long lasting famine which had to be countered by opening emergency grain supplies. Not much later the frontiers of the Empire fell under attack from a wide variety of Marcomanni, Quadi, Sarmatians, and Germanic tribes avid to get their pillaged share of the Imperial fruits. The worries of ruling soon beset Marcus Aurelius, who was above all conscientious, and the literary result is a world classic of Stoic wisdom and good sense. The end of his life was essentially the conclusion of this book, which, as you will see, was essentially his life turned inside out.

**Supreme self-help book.** You will have little trouble following the themes of this work, which highlight the importance of self-control, self-examination, indifference to petty behaviors, a sense of our cosmic setting, a refusal to be bullied by the seeming urgency of the moment. No self-help book, on the shelves at Barnes and Noble, can light a candle to the wisdom of the *Meditations*.

Here is a passage from Book One, in which Marcus is praising his father, for the virtues he learned from him:

*whenever any business upon some necessary occasion was to be put off and omitted before it could be ended, he was ever found, when he went back to the matter again, the same man that he was before. He was accurate in examination of things and in consultations, and patient in the hearing of others. He would not hastily give over a search into any matter, as one easy to be satisfied with sudden notions and apprehensions. He was careful to preserve his friends; nor at any time would he carry himself towards them with disdainful neglect, and grow weary of them; nor yet at any time would he be madly fond of them. He had a contented mind in all things, a cheerful countenance, care to foresee things afar off, and to take order for the least, without any noise or clamour.*

## Readings

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Hammond (New York, 2006.)

*A Companion to Marcus Aurelius*, ed. Van Ackeren (New York, 2012.)

## Discussion questions

What explains the great attraction of Marcus Aurelius to Stoicism and Epicureanism? Do those philosophies contain the potential for the kinds of insight Saint Augustine (as a Christian) will instinctively work from? Does the Stoicism of Seneca—you may want to research this—resemble that of Marcus Aurelius?

In what ways is Marcus Aurelius’ *To Himself* a response to the immediate pressures of his own life? What were those pressures? What finally was his attitude toward them?

Would you call Marcus Aurelius a philosopher, or a practical man of considerable wisdom? To answer this you would need to establish a working definition of ‘philosopher,’ which is not so easy. In Greco Roman times the philosopher was sometimes the sage, sometimes—as in Plato—the brilliant dialectician. What does ‘philosopher’ mean to us today?

## RELIGION

**Roman religious experience.** There are many areas of cultural production in which the Romans appear to lack some of the inner creativity of the Greeks—for that cultural comparison is hard to avoid, given especially the Roman penchant for incorporating elements of Greek culture, especially after the gradual Roman conquest of Greece, which is complete by the end of the second century B.C. One of those incorporative areas is the religious experience of the Romans, which by our time cultural opinion has agreed to consider ‘less creative’ than the Greek religious/mythical experience. That ‘agreed to’ carries a tweak, for the view of Roman culture as ritualized and plain—compared to the Greek—is one which has prevailed since the Romantic Movement of the 19th century and Romanticism, but which was not at all the view of the highly Latinate Renaissance. But let’s jump in. Let’s begin by considering what the Romans do with ‘Greek myths,’ as they absorb and transform them.

**Native Italic mythology.** Gradually, for different reasons at different times, the Romans grafted Greek mythical figures onto the stock of ancient Italic-Etruscan myth figures. Those myth figures are especially to be found in several major Roman texts: the archaic books (6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> cent. B.C.) of commentary and ritual legislation, concerning the Sibyl and the earliest transfer of royal power in Rome; the first books of Livy’s *Histories*, which narrate most of the founding tales of the Roman people, going back to 800 B.C.; Virgil’s epic poem, *The Aeneid* (29-19 B.C.), which relates the founding actions of the city of Rome, and the mating between Rome’s heroic founder and the daughter of the local Etruscan kingdom, Lavinia; the fourth book of elegies of the Roman poet, Propertius. In those varied texts, and in a book like Ovid’s *Fasti* (8 A.D.), which records the sacred feast and ritual days of earlier Rome, we come in touch with traditional myth tales of ancient Italic vintage: tales such as that of the Sabine women, which consecrates a stage in earlier Roman appropriation of new territory; the marriage of a ‘mythical’ king, Numa Pompilius, to a nymph, Egiria, from which any number of descendants and tales follow; the story of the courage of Horatius at the Bridge; the legend of Marcus Scaevola, whose fidelity to the Roman Republic was so great that he would plunge his hand into boiling water to affirm his loyalty. Onto all such early Italic accounts, and there are many, the Romans found themselves, as we have said, grafting Roman tales and religiously tuned hero cults.

**Development of the Roman pantheon.** Those tales amounted, with the passage of time, to traditional lore in which was embedded material of Hellenic background but of relevance to the efforts of the Romans themselves to create their own cultural state. Thus, adopting the procedures by which the Greek mythological universe was generated, the Romans early promoted a godly trinity of Mars/Quirinus/Vesta which was effectually worshipped by the person on the street in Rome, say in the third century B.C., but which was simply a way of paying homage to the military and at the same time home-protective (hence Vesta) qualities of the Roman experience. God-trios like this ultimately merged into Roman trinities like Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva, which were honored with official worship in great public centers of Roman cult.

**Tales of the gods.** While the tales of the Greek gods, on which the Romans also drew, were characteristically devoted to the complex social interrelations of the gods, the corresponding Roman god-tales were characteristically devoted to tracking, and abetting, the course of historical actions. Thus each of the actions going into the process of planting involves a prayer to the deity presiding over that particular action: Saturn, the ‘god of sowing,’ is adulated while the act of sowing the field takes place; Pales, the ‘god of the fields,’ is addressed in ritual prayer as the fields are ploughed; Pomona, ‘goddess of the fruit,’ is similarly adored and prayed to while the fruit is being invited to full development; and Ops, the ‘god of the harvest,’ is adored as harvest takes place. “Adored,” as these examples suggest, is a feeble attempt to characterize the type of piety in question here. The above examples are aimed at a single point: that ancient Roman religious worship intersected, at points, with the polytheism of the Greeks, but is notably different in being tied to ritual, prayer, and practical purpose far more tightly than were the Greeks’ tales of the gods.

**The meaning of Roman mythography.** In a sense, then, our overworked notion of the Romans' public cultural stance is carried out in their religious practice, much of which deploys itself in performative practice, abetting a desired end by inducing it in practice. For this reason we fall appropriately into the locution that the gods of the Romans 'stand for' this or that condition, like the action of the thunder, lightning, the power of eros, or the dynamism of the sea.

## Reading

*A Companion to Roman Religion*, Joerg Rüpke (New York, 2007)

## Discussion questions

How did the Romans combine native Italic religion with that of the Greek myths they inherited? Did the Romans make a conscious effort at

synthesis. Did any one leader exercise particular influence in a religious synthesis? In a wider sense, how do different religions or elements of those religions blend? (Take a look at the religious practices of the Roman Emperor Helagabalus—reigned 218-222 A.D.—who forced exotic Eastern religious ideals down the throats of the Romans. How does religious synthesis operate in his reign?)

In what sense is the prayer that accompanies planting what we might call 'performative,' carrying out the action it describes? In many cultures, including the Roman, agricultural harvest, in which the grains and fruits were collected, was a time when ritual dances, chants, and prayers rose from the ordinary men and women who were the life blood of the society. Does the official Olympian religion of Rome pay homage or relate to the nativist agricultural beliefs? To help grasp this complex issue review a great novel like Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean* (1885).

Could you call an epic poem like the *Aeneid*, which 're enacts' the founding of Rome, performative? In other words, could this entire epic creation, which culturally founded the new Empire of Augustus, be considered a religious text? If you see anything in this idea, can you think of other 'founding' texts which serve the same kind of 'religious performative' action? Does Homer, Milton, or Dante work create in this way?

ART

## Contents

OVERVIEW

VISUAL ARTS (Painting-Sculpture-Architecture)

PERFORMING ARTS (Dance-Music-Theatre)

OVERVIEW

**Greek influence** The visual arts, of ancient Rome, tend at their most characteristic to mass, weight—the Romans used concrete to good use, forming strong and lasting structures with it—and an impression of power. This, of course, is the broad sense left by Roman architecture and sculpture, the two Roman areas of decisive achievement, though of course Roman art was highly developed in other areas as well, like painting. Superficially resembling the Greeks in artistic expression, and during the early period avid for Greek sculptors, copyists, and models drawn from Greek art, the Romans slowly developed art styles that were distinctively their own.

**Temples** From the outset, temple structures were the most conspicuous expressions of Roman culture. The temple was a place of worship, a communal gathering space, and a public art-space in which the finest of architects could go on display. Display themselves they did, in splendid circular Etruscan-influenced structures like the Temple of Vesta in Roma (80 B.C.E.) or the *Fortuna Virilis* Temple from second century B.C.E. Rome, with its combination of Greek and Etruscan styles. The most elegant achievement of Roman temple architecture lay ahead, in the Pantheon

(118-125 C.E.), a circular temple with a broad pediment and with a startlingly ample *oculus*, or skylight, that flooded the interior with daylight.

**Monuments** Monumental structures of many varieties abound today in the still well preserved vestiges of ancient Rome. The *Coliseum* (80 C.E.) dominates the center of the old city, with its three stories of varying arch styles, and its amphitheatrical prospect over the city. Lengthy, and stylish aqueducts testify throughout ancient Italy to the Roman gift for practical infrastructure artistically blended with active urban settings. Structures like the Column of Trajan (106-113 C.E.) soar up from the city floor with their patriotic vertical (125 feet tall) history.

**Sculpture** Free standing sculpture (so often of Emperors or military luminaries), as well as relief sculpture, brought to its perfection the Roman skill at carving, and digging under the stone for its most expressive qualities. The marble Augustus of Prima Porta (20 B.C.E.) is a slightly more than life-sized self-commissioned impression of the Emperor, as a figure of dignity and withdrawal. His toga is imperial but noble, and his breastplate is decorated with emblems of pastoral peace, the condition he believed himself godsent to promote. He was following and establishing what was to be a Roman tradition of imperial portrait sculptures, designed to magnify the required traits. The portrait sculpture of the Emperor Constantine (325 C.E.) glistens with the far away spiritual look of the first Christian Emperor.

**Painting** Upper class Romans who could afford it decorated the walls of their summer villas, especially at the soon doomed cities of Pompei and Herculaneum, with brilliant paintings of land and nature scapes, and though much of this splendid work was destroyed by volcanic explosions the sumptuous achievement leaves us with a sense of the passionate sensibility that underlay much of the Roman achievement in art.

### Readings

Henig, Martin, *A Handbook of Roman Art*, New York, 1983.

Strong, Donald, et. al., *Roman Art*, New Haven, 1995.

### Discussion questions

The Romans are often characterized as a practical people, and contrasted in that with their more imaginative Greek predecessors. Does the Roman use of marble statuary and sculpture seem to you to reflect a practical spirit? How?

Many of the interior wall paintings from Pompeii are *trompe l'oeil* work, simulations (for example) of in depth rural scenes, which are actually painted on flat walls. Does this taste for artifice suggest an aesthetic sensibility which is far from 'practical'?

Does Greek art seem to have dominated the whole extent of Roman art? Does there come a point, in the development of Roman art, when it appears to have broken loose from its Greek forefathers, and to have discovered its own idiom?

### PAINTING

**Overview** Great in architecture and sculpture, the Romans (like the Greeks) were far less deeply invested in painting, though over the course of their long ancient achievement, they produced incidental paintings of great beauty. While our minds turn first to the wall paintings preserved by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, we can greatly enlarge that example. From the catacombs, from Nero's palace, from painted mummies in the Egyptian Fayuum, we have evidence of high painterly skill, while from Pompeii and Herculaneum we have more than that, moves toward perspective, in landscape work, which herald the future of western painting. We may be left, nonetheless, with the larger question--Why did painting remain a minor art in classical antiquity? Why did the Romans, for example, abstain even from that art of vase painting, at which their models, in fifth century Greece, excelled?

**The domus aurea** Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History*, recounts his observations of the construction of Nero's Palace after the destructions of 64 C.E. He is particularly fascinated by the painter Amulius. *More*



recently, lived Amulius, a grave and serious personage, but a painter in the florid style. By this artist there was a Minerva, which had the appearance of always looking at the spectators, from whatever point it was viewed. He only painted a few hours each day, and then with the greatest gravity, for he always kept the toga on, even when in the midst of his implements. The Golden Palace of Nero was the prison-house of this artist's productions, and hence it is that there are so few of them to be seen elsewhere."<sup>15</sup>

**Pompeii and Herculaneum.** By a disastrous accident of fate, we know a lot about a certain group of houses, which were smothered in ash and pumice by a devastating volcanic eruption from Mt. Vesuvius in 79 A.D. (The result of that smothering was this: for fifteen hundred years, while they were still undiscovered, the people and house objects of many sites in both Pompeii and Herculaneum were preserved in exactly the same stance, position, activity as they had been when the eruption occurred.) From the preserved rubble of some of those houses we have been able to see, and judiciously reconstruct, the wall decorations with which these (upper middle, at least) citizens surrounded themselves.

**House murals.** The wall murals which provided the milieu were of high artistic quality, colorful and artful. Over the two hundred years during which these paintings had been created there was a growth in technical sophistication which showed to what a level of lifestyle the well to do rose in the Rome of the first centuries before and after Christ. Art historians have analyzed the periods of development in question: from plaster-over-concrete walls on which were depicted simulated layers of marble and terracotta decorations—already a step into *trompe l'oeil*—to the most subtle illusionary paintings, in which the observer's eye enters a simulated portico and loses itself either in a fantastic lush landscape or in a maze of depicted columns and towers which enchants the eye. It is not until the nineteenth century, our art historians assure us, that such *trompe l'oeil* artifice was created in the West. Access to Janson's *History of Art* would be a convenient way to note a kind of genre detail, from one of those wall paintings at Herculaneum, that shows in fine detail what kind of illusionary skill the Roman painters of the time were capable of.

**A still life painting.** The tiny piece in question dates from around 50 A.D., and depicts a still life of a few peaches and a jar of water. The collocation of peaches with an intertwining vine establishes, on one side of the composition, a kind of natural—almost temple- ornamental—ionic column relief. Juxtaposing this floral motif, to its right, are a split open peach with visible seed, a small half peach (or is it some other fruit?) and a transparent pitcher of water. Off of the water, which half fills the pitcher, glint echoes of light, transparencies, which no evident source produces, but which seem to break forth from within the water itself, and to echo the zones of brightness in the fruit. This description falls short, by a mile. If you can access Janson go to 7.58, on page 218. If not, you will find illustrations of this piece in any art historical book which covers antiquity. This is a matter of detail. I chose it for simplicity and availability. But what you need to see is the degree of subtle intensity to which the Roman artist was able to go, in transforming domestic life for his clients.

**The Catacombs as Art Gallery** Between the third century C.E. and around 400 C.E., the catacombs of ancient Rome, where the fugitive Christians buried their dead, became a workshop for frescoes with Christian motifs. Much of this thematic painting--Adam and Eve, St. Paul as philosopher, Jonah thrown into the Sea, the Good Shepherd, an Agape Feast--is rough as would have to be expected, of work applied to damp walls in poor light. (Must one not think of the cave paintings at Lascaux, which were also created in dim light against damp walls?)

### Readings:

Boardman, John, *The Oxford History of Classical Art*, Oxford, 1993.

Schoenbauer, Norbert, *6000 Years of Housing*, (New York, 1981). Read widely on the ancient classical world, and let your attention wander over other period of history.

## Discussion:

How does the well to do Roman private house fit its environment?

What have we learned from Pompeii and Herculaneum, about the lifestyle of prosperous Romans of the first century A.D.?

What kind of artistic sensibility do you see reflected in the murals found

## SCULPTURE

**Greek and Roman sculpture.** We are all familiar with some of the 'idealized' sculptures of classical Greece—smooth and universalized male and female forms in gleaming marble, stemming from the fifth century brilliance of such as Praxiteles; and though we know Greek sculpture would continue to evolve, from that point on, into more realistic 'genre' sculpture in the Hellenistic period, we are hardly prepared for Roman sculpture. It is tempting to draw a parallel between the 'concrete revolution,' which underlay the massive constructive power of Roman public architecture, and the move toward sculptural realism, which we find pronounced already in early Republican sculpture. (A few examples: the Altar of Domitius, from the late second century B.C.E., with its band of 'little people' lined up, 'realistic as everyday,' to be counted in the census; the even earlier—late fourth century. B.C.E 'Brutus,' in whose face the stark inscriptions of experience are completely unhidden, the beard carved and rugged, the large sub nasal facial wrinkles deep and aggressive, the neck bull thick; the particularly verisimilar male sculptural portrait from the earliest first century C.E.—7.11 in *The History of Art, below*—with its hollow cheekbones, tightly wrinkled forehead, and tough creased chin.) That move into sculptural realism configures with a society which, from its earliest days, put a premium on experience, and subjected its administrative representatives to a minimum age requirement.

**Roman purchasers of Greek sculpture.** The historical development of Roman sculpture was not without its Greek, i.e. idealized, phases. Throughout the second century, B.C.E., while the Roman conquest of Greece was gradually taking place, it was the pleasure of Roman aristocrats to buy up Greek sculptures (often copies of classical versions) and to have them transported to their villas in Rome. It was from this tradition that the Romans acquired the habit of stationing monumental personal statuary around their city.

**Greek and Roman Sculptural Traditions.** On many levels, from that of the *populus* itself to that of the imperial administration, the Greek sculptural tradition was increasingly incorporated into the more robust Romanic version of personality. In this regard one can look, with interest, at the Funeral relief of the *Gessii*, dating from the middle of the first century B.C.E. In that somber relief we see a slave-master surrounded by two freedmen whom he has released from bondage, and who, though now deceased, are both grateful and free. The plebeian sincerity of the freedmen, as pictured there, totally undercuts the tradition of glorifying sculpture. At the other extreme, one can look again at the Augustus of Prima porta (20 C.E.) with its classicizing salute to the virility and martial power of this Emperor. In this complex sculpture, which is in some ways true Roman 'realism', we also see the Hellenistic charms of wonderfully rendered robes, a richly symbolic breastplate, and the symbolic cupid and dolphin at his right foot—indicators of his origins in myth. The Greek element will never be withdrawn from the staunch Roman sculptural tradition, just as Roman architecture continued through the centuries to embody Greek columnar forms and pedimental artifices.

**Roman sculptural traditions.** As Roman sculpture flowers into its majority, in the three and a half centuries after the *Imperium* was established (27 B.C.E.), the sturdy Roman tradition prevails, though in a

wide variety of forms. There is a great deal of popular relief sculpture, in the vein of the depiction of two freed slaves, above; for example the second century C.E. funerary relief of a butcher and his wife, rendering the plain nitty-gritty of everyday life; at the other extreme there are any number of sculptural tributes, scattered throughout every city and village of the empire, celebrating imperial as well as local leaders—a splendid bronze statue of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius on horse (second half of second century C.E.); a stylized portrait head of his wife, Faustina; the column of Trajan (110 C.E.) which recalls that Emperor's defeat of the Dacians, and does so by deploying a 650 ft. long narrative depiction of Dacian spoils and prisoners being transported back to Rome. It has to seem that each military victory is solemnized by an arch, a triumphal column, or a relief apotheosis. The Roman turn into the public, into showing (even more than telling) is prolifically illustrated throughout the course of Roman history.

**Romans as practical and public.** It is not, finally, a surprise that a culture which endured for almost a millennium deposited a vast number of both public monuments and decorative sculptures to serve as its memorial. What strikes us is that from the start Roman architecture and sculpture were very much about real events, real people, and the concrete historical setting in which these objects of art had their existence. We will be trying out a definition of the Romans as a 'practical people.' Will we simply mean that they were a gifted, worldly people making real works of art, in a this worldly culture which was of value to them?

### **Readings:**

Janson, H. W., *History of Art*, New York, 1962.

Zanker, Paul, *Roman Art* (Los Angeles, 2010). Read the whole book. This is an exemplary study of both the sculptural and domestic painting traditions in Rome.

### **Discussion:**

What did Roman sculpture owe to the Greek achievement? Do the Hellenistic 'genre sculptures'—which depict, say, old market people or young children--contribute to the realistic, 'veristic' tradition in Roman sculpture?

Why, in your opinion, were the Romans so intent on commemorating military achievements with triumphal arches? What does this sculptural/architectural response have to do with military success?

Do you feel the influence of Roman sculpture and architecture when you walk through a large Western capital city? New York? London? Where do you see this influence?

## **ARCHITECTURE**

**Overview** While drawing its models from the best of Greek architecture, Roman architecture, as it was distributed throughout the Empire, took the direction of the massive and forceful. and incorporated itself in public event or memorial. This is the trademark of the major structures of Roman civilization, from the second century B.C.E. to the fourth century C.E. This large scale structural power, of course, is not the whole story of the Roman architectural achievement. We are also familiar, for instance, with the Roman genius for city planning, facilities for water and sanitation delivery, for excellence in road construction, for hypocausts to heat houses in the chilly autumn, and public latrines to relieve bladders in the center of the city. All these civic architectural achievements are complemented by--on an elite domestic level--the Roman skill at what we would call interior decoration, and splendid examples of which we gaze among the ruins of Pompei and Herculaneum. interior domestic design. Above all, as we survey these many and various achievements of the Roman constructional mind, we remind ourselves of the astonishing

advances in material and construction culture, on which the Romans relied for their achievements in architecture.

**Grandeur and materials** It was the Emperor Augustus who claimed, at the end of his regime, that he had found Rome brick and left it marble. Be the details as they may, the point holds that the masters of the Roman city and Empire invariably wished to pride themselves on their achievements at beautifying their capital city. The details of how they did it are of course what matters. The keyword is cement, at the creation of which Roman engineers and architects became proficient in the later Republic. On the strong foundation of cement, which provided an escape from the antique round of bricks and stone, Roman engineers made themselves masters of such powerful architectural devices as the dome, the arch, the aqueduct, the sewage pipe system, the palisaded or colonnaded Town Hall, Imperial Palace, or Military Headquarters.

**The master achievements** To recall the range and ambition of Roman master construction, we need only think of the Coliseum, the vast *fora* which replicated in every major city of the Empire, such protective walls as Hadrian's in Northern England, the extensive system of truly functional roads, the two story arched aqueducts transporting water supplies into major cities, the extensive and substantial sewer systems built under major cities, the memorial arches and vertical columns memorializing the power deeds of Emperors, the giant villas which dotted the city of Rome: so many landmarks in the establishing of a potent material Roman footprint wherever the culture moved. That footprint is strong, visible, and public—in the sense of *there to be seen, used, and handled in public*. If for clarity we need any contrast, from other cultures, we might think of the most massive structures of mediaeval Europe (Gothic Cathedrals), Imperial China (multi-story pagodas), or India (private palaces, temple complexes) to recall how *inward looking* the major structures of many cultures remain. Roman architecture is rarely inward. *I am here, exactly what I am*, declares Roman architecture. The vigor with which this statement emerges fits somehow with the power of an achievement for which concrete is the drive.

**Roads and Transportation** Separate mention seems relevant, for the road transportation system which the Romans constructed from Hadrian's Wall in the north of England to the borders of the Hindu Kush mountains in India. The durability of this network bewilders the tourist today, who follows a roughish but quite drivable road north to the Scottish border, where Hadrian's Wall crosses his path. The engineer of today, studying the structural pattern of this Roman Road to the extreme north of Empire, wonders at the fine fit of the stone flooring, the careful grading of the margins, and the planned in vistas of sea and mountains.

**The Roman House.** The Roman house (*domus*)—and here we speak of the world of the middle class, not at all of the elite with their sumptuous villas or the urban (or rural) poor who had either makeshift or tiny crowded houses—enjoyed the advantages of the Mediterranean climate. The typical single family house was made of cement or stone, and laid out as a rectangle with a peristyle of columns running around the outside of it. The central room (*atrium*) was a rectangle in the midst of which spread a small pool, the *impluvium*, and immediately above which the roof was open. The presence of air and light was treasured, and formed the setting of family life. Around the margins of the *atrium* were the *cubicula*, the sleeping rooms (or sitting rooms or rooms for doing business.) At the back of the *atrium*, leading out into the peristyle, was the *tablinum*, or office of the man of the family; the place where business was transacted and accounts kept. If the family was solidly middle class there would be extensive gardens behind the house, further highlighting the flow of the house into and through nature.

**The rooms of the house.** The women's and children's rooms were kept strictly private, except to well known invitees or relatives, but the *atrium*, and indeed the entrance way to the 'typical' house, was easy of access. Front doors were regularly left open, certainly during the day, for there was normally a lot of going and coming from outside into the interior of the house, where the master (the *paterfamilias*) was accustomed to doing business. (The business in question was normally of a patron-client nature, the visitor entering the house to propose or discuss ongoing business plans, or to make introductions, rather as politics is carried on in an African culture.) Nor was the house itself typically segregated from the goings and comings of the community in which it was set. We mentioned the open front door. On all sides

of the house, in the streets surrounding it, were shops, carts, wagons, produce vendors, hustlers, people on their way to or from their own houses. In other words the 'typical' Roman house was in some ways far more open to the public than are houses in our (American, European) environments.

**Pompeii and Herculaneum.** By a disastrous accident of fate, we know a lot about a certain group of houses, which were smothered in ash and pumice by a devastating volcanic eruption from Mt. Vesuvius in 79 A.D. (The result of that smothering was this: for fifteen hundred years, while they were still undiscovered, the people and house objects of many sites in both Pompeii and Herculaneum were preserved in exactly the same stance, position, activity as they had been when the eruption occurred.) From the preserved rubble of some of those houses we have been able to see, and judiciously reconstruct, the wall decorations with which these (upper middle, at least) citizens surrounded themselves. We have of course also been able to assess the durability of the houses themselves, which survived sufficiently intact, to bring us the story of the life that went on in them.

## Readings

Boethius, Axel, *Etruscan and Early Roman Architecture*, New Haven, 1994.

Hopkins, John North, *The Genesis of Roman Art*, New Haven, 2016.

## Discussion questions

How does the well to do Roman private house fit its environment? What kinds of architectural skill are displayed in this adjustment of living situation to environment?

What would you consider the major contributions of Greek to Roman architecture? In what ways did the Romans advance beyond the Greeks?

What was the secret of the Romans, that they mastered the art of cement construction for massive works of architecture? Did the Greeks have some notion of the use of cement?

## DANCE

**Overview** Ancient Roman dance had its origins in religious rite, in the early Republic, and in that resembled both Greek and Etruscan dance, the two regional traditions from which the Romans first inherited their own skills in this art. Throughout the millennium of Roman history, however, dance rarely occupied the central position familiar to it in its regional neighbors. With the exception of its use in ritual, the dance came on in ancient Rome as an inferior human action, typically associated with burlesque or licentious behavior, and as such came to an undignified end with the strictures applied to it by Christian theologians in the later centuries of the Empire.

**Dance as religious ritual in Rome** In the relatively 'rustic' age of the Roman Republic, through the Punic Wars (264-146 B.C.E.), dance played a part in the countryside ceremonies in celebration of seasonal return and good harvest. In the ceremonies of the Lupercalia semi nude rural dancing processions could be found crossing the land--we talk of a Roman culture which was still almost entirely agricultural. In the Ambarvalia, groups of young dancers could be found crossing fields and villages, celebrating the energies of springtime. (Ample vase paintings remain, to illustrate the importance of these deeply rural events, which cut into the social fabric at a level far deeper than the rather mechanized system of the Olympian Gods, as the Roman had translated them from Greece.) We are in an era, here, where unique historical conditions promoted ceremonial dances by the elders, and even by high priests wearing full battle armor, in organized promptings of a rich harvest.

**Dance legend** There was the current legend that the founder of the Roman Republic, Romulus, had instituted a bacchanalian dance which mimed the rape of the Sabine virgins, as a cautionary action to remind the Romans not to let such vicious action repeat itself. Finally, the use of masks in the theater of Roman comedy meant that much of the expressive burden of the drama had to be carried by gesture and ritual--dance of the body. Dance served thus as a necessary signifier in a ritual culture.

**Dance as entertainment** Dancers in Roman culture, like actors in Roman comedy, were for the most part scorned and marginalized members of society, treated as vulgar producers of entertainment. When you thought of dancers you thought of hired entertainers at festivals or noblemen's get togethers, or, say, at orgies like that of Trimalchio in Petronius' *Satyricon*. On such occasions dance served as burlesque and frequently lascivious fascination for the male libido. The guys would lean back on their triclinia, slurp their Falernian, and ogle to the ladies from Etruria, Syria, or even Black Africa. The same male and often patrician audience would commonly patronize the Circus Maximus, City Center's entertainment hot spot, for such entertainment as tight rope walking, or dancing on elephant backs--that is, on the backs of elephants who had been given stimulants sufficient to set them too into a dancing mode. From such high jinks, the reputation of dancing, throughout Roman culture, maintained its status as the dangerous amusement of fools, though that amusement remained seductive to some, and in Augustan Rome one of the most popular entertainments was the pantomime, in which a masked pair would dance and act out in gesture, carrying on an enchanted mute dialogue with one another. Though the always sober Cicero observed that 'nemo fere saltat sobrius, nisi forte insanit,' 'no one in his right mind dances, unless perhaps he is truly insane,' there was an evolving middle class out there which found entertainment dancing one of the pleasures of life.

**Christianity and dancing** While Jewish practice included celebratory dancing, as at the Festival of Tabernacles, the early Christian fathers, from the second century B.C.E., were critical of dancing, and avoided it. This attitude was not without exceptions, and the Fathers were well aware of examples like David, the King and Dancer who occupied the eminence of the earliest Christian tradition. It was not until later in its history, from the Protestant Reformation on, that Christian thinking turned against dancing as diabolical. It is worth noting that nowhere in antiquity was couples dancing, 'cheek to cheek,' even imagined.

**Roman kinesthetic** The kinesthetic of Roman culture contrasts with that of its Greek forerunners. The difference in the two cultures is evident in their architectures: Roman arches, temples, aqueducts, roads are all built of concrete, massive and forceful testimonies to the power of the state that funded them; Greek temples, shrines, city layouts, garments, all testify to a culture drawn to the fluid and flexible. It is in this optic, then, that we might want to view the Roman attitude toward dance. For the Romans, except in the earlier period of the Republic, when something like a genuinely rustic ethos prevailed, the organic movements of the body were hardly a source of aesthetic celebration. One has but to look at the portrait sculptures of the first Roman centuries to appreciate the stress on formality, dignity, restraint, even harshness. Vase paintings and murals--such as we see from the walls of Pompeii and Herculaneum--make plain that the Romans could excel in depicting the flow of dancing bodies, but the broad orientation of Roman sensitivity was toward weight, dignity, and restraint.

## Reading

Rust, Frances, *Dance in Society*, London, 1969.

Sachs, Curt, *A World History of the Dance*, New York, 1965.

## Discussion questions

Is there a fundamental unity between dance and the expression of religious feelings? Did the Romans feel that unity? Do we feel it today in the industrialized West?

What are the roots of the Roman scorn for the profession of dancing? Are they the same as the Roman scorn for theater actors?

What made pantomime such a popular entertainment in the Roman Empire? What kind of dancing was involved in the stage versions of pantomime?

## MUSIC

**Overview** Eclectic, rather than original, the Romans were in all the arts happy to follow the examples of those Greeks who, in letting themselves be conquered by Rome were at the same time becoming the conquerors of Rome. Thus while music was pervasive in Roman society, as it was in Greek, it did not open those vistas music widened for the Greeks: the profound inquiries of Pythagoras, into the harmonics and ultimately metaphysics of musical chords; Plato's inquiries, in *The Republic*, into the relations between the ethical and the musical life; and the active role of harps and lyres as accompaniments to the great epics of Homer. The pervasiveness of music, in Roman culture, displayed itself in festival, funeral, dinner party, religious sacrifice, and in the speculations of mathematicians, and though that music was not a spearhead of Roman cultural development and in fact only one shard remains to us, of ancient Roman music—nonetheless Roman music was an omnipresent trademark of Roman civilization, and through the Empire that music was everywhere distributed, the Roman spirit and Roman music intertwined. In return, as we would expect, the Romans received the musics of Asia, Gaul, and North Africa, dependent but vital territories of the Empire.

### What we can deduce about the nature of ancient Roman music

Roman, like Greek, musical notation is sketchy and hard to interpret. Whether or not we can interpret Roman notation after the fashion of Greek, we need to assume that in both systems four letters were used to indicate a sequence of four tones, and that rhythm indicators, located above the notes, indicated the notes' duration. Roman music itself appears to have followed the modes of Greek music, sequences initially associated with the qualities of regional musical forms, and given wide currency in the theories found in Plato, for whom ethical character and musical practice were closely related.

**What we know about the instruments of Roman music** Our knowledge of Roman musical instruments was largely derived from archeological evidence and from vase painting. We can deduce that the evolution of such instruments occurred over centuries, and the fact that we find Roman musical instruments, in parts of the Empire where they cannot have originated, proves that these instruments were regularly circulating through Roman territories, doubtless finding themselves modified and improved as they moved.

**The wind instruments.** The *cornu* (Latin for *horn*) was a long tubular metal instrument that curved like a capital G around the body of the performer. The *cornu* was used for giving military signals, and for parade operations. Typical, for a wind instrument, the *cornu* plays an essentially public role, in spectacle and military manoeuvre. The *tibia* (Greek *aulos*) was a double reed wind instrument, producing a sound (we think) like that of a low keyed clarinet. The third major wind instrument was the *tuba*, a long (one plus meters) tubular bronze trumpet, without valves—so that the single unvaried overtone note would predominate strongly.

**Strings** The *lyre* consisted of a tortoise shell sounding-box wired to resonant strings; the instrument was cradled held in one hand, its strings being plucked with a plectrum, by the other hand. In the course of time, during the Empire, the lyre found itself replaced by the *cithara*, a larger sound-box and plectrum instrument, played upright. The *cithara* was to prove the major performance and accompaniment instrument of imperial Rome. Our versatile *guitar*, of today, readily proclaims its ancestry to the *kithara*. The least employed stringed instrument, of Roman times, was the *lute*, kin to the lyre but offering fewer

strings, which could produce graduated notes by the 'stopping' of notes. Lutes were already familiar from Mesopotamia in the third millennium B.C.E., while the lute we know best, from the Middle Ages, appears to have its origins in the Arabic *oud*.

**Organs** The hydraulic pipe organ (*hydraulis*) was perhaps the most sensational Roman musical instrument, channeling water pressure into pipes 'sized so as to produce many of the modes known from the Greeks.' This remarkable instrument could be found in private homes, or even in the palace of Nero, who was known to be proficient in playing it. Even at the gladiatorial games the *hydraulis* made its appearance, like the recurrent organ roar at a Cubs' game.

**Percussion instruments** Drumming, clapping, and rhythmic beating instruments were common in many aspects of Roman life: rhythmic dances, military procedures, even 'for the control of bees in apiaries.' Rattles, bells, castanets, and tambourines were the regular dressing for festive occasions.

**Choral or group musical presentations** We have mentioned the use of organs for entertainment at the gladiatorial games. The fact is that all of the instruments listed above were regularly enjoyed for private entertainment, public spectacle, or military show. When we reflect on our own interface with the forms of music—especially in an age when digitization has raised the stakes of reproduceable art to a new height—we may want to remember the delight of the ancient Romans at the music which accompanied performances of comedy, such events as a mixed children's choir performed at the Secular Games in 17 B.C.E., or the joy of the *populus* as it devoured the percussive music of public pantomime in the streets of downtown Rome.

## Reading

Habinek, Thomas, *The World of Roman Song*, Baltimore, 2005.

Pierce, John, *The Science of Musical Sound*, New York, 1983.

## Discussion questions

Who *made* ancient Roman musical instruments? Was this a widespread profession? Where were such instruments sold?

In what way were musicians taught to play? Were there official 'music teachers'? Did middle class kids get lessons during their childhood?

Were there renowned musical performers? Were there teenage idols?

## THEATRE

**Overview** Theater in ancient Rome first makes its appearance in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., and gains its original character during the first two centuries of the Roman Republic: a character as a public platform for political power speeches. During those centuries the platform was extended, by the presentation of speeches and actions during periods of religious festivals and public holidays. For example each September, in honor of Jupiter, the city Ludi were performed for the citizens' pleasure, and became an occasion for actors to make their ways forward as community voices. In the mid-third century the infiltration of Greek culture and Greek themes had begun to make itself felt in Rome, and a distinguished translator, Lucius Andronicus, translated many Greek plays into Latin.

**Roman culture and the Greeks** As Roman culture grew increasingly aware of the ancient Greek world, and the public platform aspect of the Roman theater morphed into an entertainment role, the training and development of a Roman theater sensibility generated a fund of actors and playwrights, and a Latin theater culture emerged, peaking in the work of such world-creators as Plautus (205 B. C E.-164



B.C.E.) and Terence, whose dramas were created between 166-160 B.C.E. Their works acquired a characteristic national stamp, exercised itself on permanent theater platforms, dropped the chorus of Greek drama, and became major culture builders for the Romans. In addition to this foundational theatrical culture, which the Romans inherited from their early Republic years, there remains the significant first century closet-drama creator, Lucius Seneca, diplomat, advisor to the Emperor Nero.

**Comedy** Plautus composed 130 plays, of which 20 are extant. By and large they are domestic dramas, playing out into love intrigues, relations between masters and sassy slaves, and witty chit chat gathered from the rialto. Terence, from whom we inherit a handful of exquisite, intrigue filled social plays, deeply wrapped up in tales of childhood mistaken identity--the separated twins theme, lost lovers, and ultimate unexpected resolutions and rediscoveries--makes us think continually of his spiritual prototype, Shakespeare, who in many comedies plies the same themes--and in a play like *The Tempest* makes magic of the whole human drama. The typical setting of these Roman comedies illustrates the seemingly offhand elegance with which the Roman comedic creator allows his plots to flow from a real life setting in which the audience would find itself 'deeply at home.' The typical drama opens inside the atrium of a well to do house, from which movement out into and in from the street is free flowing. The master is in the back office making deals, the women are tucked away in the *gynaikeion*, the young master of the house is plotting an assignation with his chick, and in from the street, from houses opened through several doors right onto the street, comes the witty plotting pimp or family slave, with a plot by which the young master can evade the suspicions of his dad.

**The characters of comedy** It comes as no surprise, that the more or less set themes of Roman comedy are built on the behaviors of more or less set types of character. The young man on the make, avoiding dad; the pimp or slave wittily intermediating between chick and young master, the old matron shocked by the pre-marital goings on, but then the first to be reconciled to the prospect of a new marriage; the old guy with his inherited wisdom; the *miles gloriosus*, or braggadoccio soldier, who is living on tales of his past glory. With the appearance of each new character, the audience feels the shock of pleasure at recognition.

**The comic actor** While the action of Senecan tragedy was performed for court, and probably intended solely for reciting or closet acting, the robust actions of Roman comedy were display case entertainment for the man on the street in Rome, since the time of the early Roman Republic. However unlike the case in Greece, where the theatrical actor was viewed as a fairly respectable professional, with potential rights of citizenship, the Roman actor was, from the beginning, viewed as a marginal, even contemptible, member of society. Was it the instability of the actor personality, which was forever miming others, that lay behind this depreciation? If you look ahead to Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien, Paradox of the Actor* (1777), you will see that well into our time the actor has been viewed with deep suspicion. So deep has it typically been, that the actor has had to be buried in a common grave, not in the city cemetery with the good Christians.

**Tragedy** The nine remaining tragedies of Seneca are verse dramas, carefully and extravagantly wrought word flairs, in every case based on such crisis-filled, operatic Hellenic models as Medea, Oedipus, Phaidra, Agamemnon, or Thyestes--a rich diet of the most frenzied melodramas of the ancient Greek world. All that was restrained and complex, about the ancient Hellenic prototypes of these dramas, is thrown to the winds in these updated versions, plausibly intended only for the audience of a court with a taste for melodrama.

## Reading

Beacham, Richard, *The Roman Theater and its Audience*, Cambridge, 1991.

Moore, Timothy, *Roman Theater*, Cambridge, 2012.

### **Discussion questions**

In what chief ways do Greek and Roman drama differ from each other? What have they in common? Which culture seems to you to have been the more inventive, when it comes to using the background traditional material out of which it grew?

How do you explain the great influence of Menander, the Hellenistic Greek dramatist, over Roman comedy? Did Menander and the Romans share the same viewpoint toward mankind?

### LITERATURE

#### **Contents**

#### 1. POETRY

##### Epic Poetry

Lucretius (98 B.C.-55 B.C.)

Virgil (70 B.C.-19 B.C.)

##### Lyric Poetry

Catullus (84 B.C.—54 B.C.)

Horace (65 B.C. – 8 B.C.)

Propertius (60 B.C.—after 16 B.C.)

Ovid (43 B.C.—18 A.D.)

#### 2. DRAMA

Plautus (254 B.C.-184 B.C.)

Seneca (4 B.C.-65 A.D.)

#### 3. FICTION

Petronius (?—65 A.D.)

Juvenal (55 A.D.--138 A.D.)

#### 4. AUTOBIOGRAPHY

##### Overview

Cicero (106-43 B.C.) Letters

Catullus (84-54 B.C.) Lyrics

Horace (65-8 B.C.) Poems

Ovid (43 B.C.-17 A.D.) Poems : Tristia; Letters from Pontus

Statius (40-94 A.D.) Silvae

Pliny, (61-114 A.D.) Letters

Marcus Aurelius, (121-180 A.D.) Meditations (170-180 A.D.)

Saint Augustine, (354-430 A.D.) Confessions (397-398)

#### 5. ESSAY

#### HISTORY

Livy (59 B.C.-17 A.D.)

Tacitus (56 A.D.-117 A.D.)

#### PHILOSOPHY

Marcus Aurelius (121 A.D.—180 A.D.) .

Aurelius Augustinus (Saint Augustine) (354 A.D.--430 A.D.)

## Overview

**Greatnesses of Roman Literature.** Among the astounding riches of Roman literature is the burst of disciplined but passionate poetries that spring forth from the literary groups that gathered around the world of Augustus, at the very end of the pre-Christian era. What was the driver for these coteries? The phenomenon of the super wealthy patron Maecenas comes to full flowering among these creators—Juvenal, Horace, Virgil, Propertius, Ovid. Maecenas' closeness to Augustus, his love of patronizing the arts, his generosity to his favorites, were traits that marked the spirit of the period and materially facilitated a great literary growth-spurt. Maecenas' generosity fell on a rich soil, too, for the personal lyric or epigram—here we should mention other geniuses like Martial and Tibullus—was of peculiar vigor in Augustan Rome.

**Roman Epic.** The Roman epic was of decisive cultural influence. (We cannot speak of an epic tradition in Rome, the way we speak of the dominant Homeric tradition in Greece, a tradition which pervaded culture, law, folk tradition, principles of behavior throughout subsequent centuries; but we could align various Roman epic poets, like Ennius and Statius, who reached back into Greco Roman mythical tradition.) Virgil, though writing long after the formation of Roman culture, reached back to reconstruct an account, of the origins of that culture, which not only dignified the Augustan moment, but concentrated the account of founding into a compelling narrative lodged in Greco-Roman 'mythology.' While Virgil did not exercise the kind of Biblical force over the Romans, that Homer did over the Greeks, he continued to attract the literati throughout Roman culture, as well as to become a staple of school studies.

**Roman Historians.** We can safely say that the historical perspective was well developed in Roman literature. Just as Virgil created a past for the Romans, Livy went in search of one, uncovering and piecing together the early tales Roman—not Greco-Roman—history was made from. (Livy played for the Romans the crucial role Herodotus did for the Greeks, legitimizing them in their own eyes.) Tacitus, from the objective standpoint which contained a critical/urbane eye, scrutinized Roman political culture of the first part of the first century A.D., and served as one kind of conscience of the moment. Many more Roman historians could be included in any responsible survey—Julius Caesar, Sallust, Josephus, Ammianus Marcellinus—which will hardly surprise us, coming as these men do from a culture in which historical self-awareness played a constitutive role in every act of governing.

**Roman Satire and Drama.** When it comes to satire, the natural Roman fascination with character types—recall the stock characters of Plautus—and with intra-societal intrigues (Ovid's *Amores*), plays out into a fascination with the foibles, indeed with the vices, of big city politics, whether on a grand or a commoner level. Juvenal and Petronius both revel in the viciousness of Augustan Rome, but not without a reserve of severity, which gives their special stamp of attention to the notion that the satirist and the moralist are twins under the surface.

**Roman Drama** Roman drama, even at its best, most amusing (Plautus, his contemporary Terence) and most powerful (Seneca), is far below the dramatic achievement of the Greeks, for whom both tragic and comic drama served, at least in the fifth century, as the supreme vehicle of cultural energy and daring. Plautus and Seneca were popular and influential in their time, and give delight today, but they hardly seem to push the boundaries of art, or to find new territory for the human spirit.

**Romans as practical people.** It is a cliché to say that the Romans were a preeminently practical people. They were obviously brilliant in skills required to make a coherent and liveable society. They could—depending of course on the time, and with particular stress on the high *pax Augusta* epoch, the first two or three centuries of our era—they could build roads, aqueducts, public and private buildings, sewers and toilets; they could build systems of law as reference points for civil order. None of these skills is less than hugely important, none of them is represented with equal perfection among the Greeks—unless it be in temple architecture or, in the Hellenistic period, city management. None of these Roman skills, however, is on the level of that creative imagination which recreates the world rather than exploring its uses.

**Conclusion, with Saint Augustine.** All that having been said, Roman literature at its finest—in Virgil, the poets, in Ovid; in the deathless dignity of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*, in the spectacular satire of Petronius—is hard to

beat. And of course, depending on how you feel about confessing, Saint Augustine takes us through Roman culture over a high wall into new territory, new insights into the human self which no other Romans had tackled.

## Reading

*The World of Rome: An Introduction to Roman Civilization*, ed. Jones and Sidwell, Cambridge, 1997.

## Discussion questions

Do you see a conflict between 'being a practical people' and 'being a creative people'? Are these distinctions meaningful, when it comes to the Greeks and Romans?

How do you explain the relatively empty spaces in the history of Roman literature? What kind of literature was being written prior to the plays of Plautus? Was there significant Roman literature in the third and fourth centuries A.D.—that is, outside of the work of Saint Augustine?

How do you view the importance of actual chronological history to the literary creations of the Romans? Is their history important to many of these writers, as they go about their creation? Explain.

In what literary genres do you think the Romans excelled? Where, in your opinion, were they relatively limited in their contribution to world culture?

What seem to you the deep points of difference between the writing of Saint Augustine, and that of the earlier Roman writers we have considered here? Does Marcus Aurelius seem to you a forebear of Saint Augustine, or are Marcus' affiliations almost entirely to Stoic and Epicurean traditions?

Livy and Virgil give different accounts of the origins of Roman culture. Can you see their differing accounts fitting together with one another? What was the importance, for these two epic minded writers, of retelling the founding stories of Rome?

How do you view the Roman theatrical tradition? Have Plautus (and Terence) anything in common with Seneca? Why do you think drama was the central literary experience for the Greeks, while for the Romans it was a minor genre?

## 1. POETRY

### EPIC POETRY

Lucretius (98 B.C.-55 B.C.)

Virgil (70 B.C.-19 B.C.)

**Early Roman Epic** Virgil and Lucretius are the two best known Roman writers of epic, that is of extended and grave dactylic hexameter poems devoted to issues of high importance. Yet while these two epic creators were separated by only a generation in birth—Lucretius (94-55 B.C.); Virgil (70-19 B.C.)--they wrote for totally different cultural milieux, and with deeply different visions of reality.

**Lucretius and Epicurus** Of the life of Lucretius we know little, except that he was an ardent supporter of the philosophy of Epicurus (341-270 B.C.), about whom equally little is known, except that his world-view, featuring intellectual withdrawal, the simple life, and a materialistic conception of reality caught on forcefully in a Mediterranean world torn by political conflicts and social uncertainties. The social cultural milieu of Lucretius, like that of Epicurus himself, was fraught and dangerous, and Lucretius, like his master, appears to have taken refuge in a grandeur of poetic vision, which offered the comforts of intellectual control. The nature of that poetic cosmology was tuned to withdrawal, for Lucretius wrote of the impassive material interlocking of atoms which, in their complex interweavings and swervings construct those intersections which for a limited time become, say, organic

life and consciousness, which is thus itself, for a privileged moment, enabled to look back on the marvel of its own creation. Peace lies in this becoming equal to your own condition of being created.

**Virgil and the epic** Virgil, quite the opposite of Lucretius, did his epic writing in the high stakes environment of Rome's late first century transition from a rural democracy into a potentially world-shaping Empire. The company of such as Augustus himself, or of the literary patron of the culture, Maecenas, threw Virgil into sustained (and inspired) reflection on the meaning of his own culture, and the world-significance of Rome. Where Lucretius expounded the mysteries of the physical universe, and of their consequences for us in it, Virgil looked into the power of historical destiny, to find the triumphant panorama of which, by observing it, he made himself part.

### Reading

Sedley, David, *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom*, Cambridge, 2003.

Jones, Peter, *Reading Virgil: Aeneid I and II*, Cambridge, 2011.

### Discussion questions

Does Virgil's side-story of Aeneas and Dido replicate the *amour* of Odysseus and Calypso in *The Odyssey*? In which epic is the hero more drawn to the seducer? Why?

Does Lucretius tell a story in his epic? Is there a narrative thread? How is he able to hold the reader's attention—many great readers have loved him—in a tale about cosmology?

Does Virgil, who makes Aeneas the founder of a great nation, manage to make Aeneas attractive or interesting as a 'person'? If your answer is toward 'no,' what then might draw us to the *Aeneid* today? If your answer is toward 'yes,' tell us how Virgil does it.

### Lucretius (98-55 B.C.)

**Roman epic and Greek culture.** You will quickly see, from Potter's *Roman History*, that Roman culture is from the start deeply indebted to Greek culture, and Lucretius' epic, *De Rerum Natura; On the Nature of Things*, is just the proof we need. To write a long philosophical poem in Latin was to follow in the footsteps of early Greek literature, in which at least two major writers—Hesiod (in the *Theogony*, 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) and Parmenides (in *On Nature*, early fifth century B.C.)—developed their views of the world in formal epic poetry. (In so doing those Greek writers emulated the tradition, which goes far back into Middle Eastern and Indian philosophical and religious expression—*Enuma Elish* in Babylon, the *Vedas* in India—of consigning cosmological thought to poetry. To which we might add that the primal form of serious expression, throughout early cultures, is poetry, while prose is generally later to develop.)

**Epicurus.** Not only is Greek poetry, but also Greek thought, the founding energy for Lucretius. The third century B.C. Greek philosopher, Epicurus, was the master thinker behind Lucretius' view of the world. (Of him Lucretius writes:

*O glory of the Greeks, the first to raise  
The shining light out of tremendous dark  
Illumining the blessings of our life,  
You are the one I follow...*

As the founder of the Epicurean school, Epicurus exercised great influence on the thought of Hellenistic Greeks and of many Romans. His dominant principle was atomism; a belief that the world is composed of atoms collocated by chance, and responsible, in their infinitely subtle interweavings, for the entirety of existence, from the infinitesimal to the cosmically vast. Lucretius develops many riffs off of this basic perception. The best known of these concern his headlong assault on the fear of death, which he sees as the supreme disturber of mortal peace and happiness.

**Lucretius and the fear of death.** Like Epicurus, and indeed like many Hellenistic thinkers, Lucretius thought the fear of death sufficient to destroy the pleasure of life, and overgrown with all kinds of misconceptions, principally the ignorant belief that we will have sensation, and be aware of our 'dead condition' after death. Lucretius takes

special pains to argue away this ignorance, and to address also the subtler objections of those who see the world differently from him. One of those objections was that, even though we may be composed of atoms, and scatter to the winds at death, we may reassemble by accident and once again, at some time in the future, be conscious wholes again, essentially the persons we were before. To this Lucretius responds that even were this almost incalculably chance event to occur, we would be totally without memory, a new collocation entirely. So thorough does he believe the dispersal of the person at death, and the absurdity of fearing death as though it had any connection with our conscious presence?

**Venus and the swerve.** The vast poem in which Lucretius embedded this argument—and which is carried out in splendid dactylic hexameters, just as did Homer in the past and as Virgil will soon do in his *Aeneid*—scrutinizes all that is, starting with the human person, with his/her weaknesses, hopes, and dreams, and then moves on to encase the human in its worldly and finally cosmic setting. After an initial exordium to the goddess of love, Venus, who brings all organic things to growth and life, Lucretius takes his reader farther out into the world of human senses and perceptions, then into the inorganic stages of development of the world around us, with a magnificent reach into the nature of human societies and their growth, and onward out into the cosmos so noble but so devoid of all those theistic god-presences on which we typically rely for comfort in our human world. At the most, we might say, the universe provides a staging ground for our human efforts at society, and in particular for our free will—which might seem to be precluded by the compulsive and random movement of atoms in the void. This free will element, which for Lucretius is the foundation of the peculiar dignity of the human, enters through a *clinamen*, or *swerving*, of the atoms in the void, a swerving which introduces chance into random necessity.

**Love and spring.** Even the power of love, as we see in the opening of the poem (below) is to be understood in the terms of Epicurean physics, rather, say, than in the terms of Romance. The following passage may seem to boil down to a splendid praise of spring, and to the regeneration of nature through desire, and yet as the reader pursues the passage—reminiscent, say, of Chaucer’s wonderful prologue to spring, or Wordsworth’s loving poems about spring and daffodils—we find ourselves drifting powerfully into a universe where random movements of atoms, not any benevolence in things, is the driver.

Mother of Rome, delight of Gods and men,  
Dear Venus that beneath the gliding stars  
Makest to teem the many-voyaged main  
And fruitful lands--for all of living things  
Through thee alone are evermore conceived,  
Through thee are risen to visit the great sun--  
Before thee, Goddess, and thy coming on,  
Flee stormy wind and massy cloud away,  
For thee the daedal Earth bears scented flowers,  
For thee waters of the unvexed deep  
Smile, and the hollows of the serene sky  
Glow with diffused radiance for thee!  
For soon as comes the springtime face of day,  
And procreant gales blow from the West unbarred,  
First fowls of air, smit to the heart by thee,  
Foretoken thy approach, O thou Divine,  
And leap the wild herds round the happy fields \\\nOr swim the bounding torrents...

Readings:

Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, translated by R.E. Latham (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1987).

Godwin, John, *Lucretius* (Bristol, 2004.)

Discussion Questions:

Why do you suppose Lucretius wrote his epic vision in poetry?

Would we write such a vision in poetry or prose today? What is the peculiar power of poetry, in rising to the height of such an argument about reality?

How do you interpret Lucretius' claim, that he composed *De Rerum Natura* in order to help free human beings from the fear of death? Does the argument he develops seem calculated to achieve that freeing? Are you afraid of death? What do you do about it?

Does Lucretius integrate the idea of the swerve into his argument, or does it seem to be an artificial ingredient, introduced in order to preserve the possibility of free will?

### Virgil (70 B.C.-19 B.C.)

**The Roman historical setting.** Thanks to the nature of his epic, Lucretius did not clamor for attention to the historical setting in which he was writing. Yet well he might have done. The first half of the first century B.C. was a time in which Rome, and the Italian cities which surrounded it, and which were coming increasingly under Roman domination, was being thrown into the whirlpool of intense political and cultural change. The early formative centuries—4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> B.C.—had seen the firming up of the independent free spirited senate of the still largely agricultural Roman society, the value formative struggles of a hardy people who had taken charge of the Italian peninsula, and who were building the muscle soon to be required for intense military effort, wars against the Gauls in the North, and then the three exhausting Punic Wars, fought against the Carthaginians from 264 B.C.-146 B.C. In the century following the conclusion of these Wars, in which Rome was 'victorious' and consolidated its control of Italia, tumultuous developments forced the older rural Rome into legislative reform—here and throughout the civic arena the brothers Gracchi were the powerful innovators—and generated private political forces with their own armies, like Marius (157-86 B.C.) and Sulla (138-78 B.C.), which guaranteed a state of pressure cooker intensity to the whole peninsula. We are close to the period during which Julius Caesar and Pompey formed their first alliance—60 B.C. was the year—and with that we are stepping onto the rolling sidewalk of history along which the Roman Republic was careening toward Empire. No wonder, then, that we feel Lucretius' epic might well have clamored for attention to its historical embedding. And indeed, if we look closely enough, at Lucretius' stress on removing the fear of death, or on freeing mankind from superstition and anthropomorphic gods, we can see that in his work he *was* building himself a shelter from the chaos of his time.

**The Aeneid.** The same can be said, more obviously, for the work of Virgil in creating his *Aeneid*, which was written between 29 B.C. and 19 B.C., and which thus coincided with the accession to imperial power of Augustus Caesar (Emperor from 27 B.C. to 14 A.D.). Not only was Virgil a close friend of the man who was to become the greatest power figure of his age, but Virgil witnessed/heard about up close those tumultuous events—Julius Caesar's seizure of power and assassination in 44 B.C., the death of Pompey, the battle between Augustus and Antony/Cleopatra, which ended with the Battle of Actium in 34 B.C.—which were the transition of Rome into a world power, and one whose influence is profoundly culture shaping to our day. While Lucretius sought for personal quiet and speculative freedom, as a haven from the chaos of his world, Virgil took another path, letting his epic imagination expand onto a new vision of the new world Augustus was ushering in.

**Virgil and Homer.** Virgil's move was one of ultimate ambition, to write of world changing developments by following not only the dactylic hexameter epic tradition, inherited from the Greeks, but to create his epic directly out of the impulses of Homer's two epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which were probably composed around the beginning of the first millennium B.C., and which had served as a virtual Bible for the Greeks—underwriting their mythical imaginations, their sense of group pride, and providing an exemplar for aesthetic taste.

*The Iliad and the Odyssey.* Put very roughly, the first half of Virgil's epic follows the thematic developments of Homer's *Odyssey* while the second half of the *Aeneid*—the 'poem about Aeneas'—follows the thematic of the *Iliad*. This reversal of thematics, by which Virgil handles the sequence of events of Homer's poems in reverse order, brings distinct attention to the second part of the *Aeneid*, which concerns the founding of the city of Rome by the hero, Aeneas, who has fled with his family and his family gods from the destruction of the citadel of Troy by the Greeks. While many moderns find the second half of the *Aeneid* less gripping than the first, in which Aeneas recounts the tales of his wandering after leaving Troy, and Virgil narrates Aeneas' moving love affair with the Carthaginian Queen, Dido, there seems little doubt that for Virgil the true meaning of the epic lies in the second half of the *Aeneid*, in which Aeneas heroically defeats the regional Italic king, Turnus, and conquers Italy for Rome, the site of a new millennial world change. To call this monumental poem praise of Virgil's friend Augustus, would be a

huge understatement. The epic goes through and beyond flattery, to a level where the grandeur of the human enterprise is put out for viewing.

**Invocation.** In the fashion of the classical epic, Virgil opens with an invocation to the Muse, in which he sums up his whole theme. It will be up to the reader to consider the daring of emulation, and firmness of purpose, which Virgil demonstrates in opening as follows:

*I sing of arms and the man, he who, exiled by fate,  
first came from the coast of Troy to Italy, and to  
Lavinian shores – hurled about endlessly by land and sea,  
by the will of the gods, by cruel Juno's remorseless anger,  
long suffering also in war, until he founded a city  
and brought his gods to Latium: from that the Latin people  
came, the lords of Alba Longa, the walls of noble Rome.*

Readings: Virgil, *Aeneid*, translated by Robert Fitzgerald (New York, 1990.)

Putnam, Michael, *The Poetry of the Aeneid: Four Studies in Imaginative Unity and Design* (Cambridge, 1965).

Ross, David O., *Virgil's Aeneid: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford, 2007.)

Discussion questions:

It is customary to view the *Aeneid* as a panegyric of Augustus. Do you see another way of viewing the epic? What about the extreme brutality that marks the Romans' accession to power on the Italic peninsula? Is that brutality being justified in the poem?

Aeneas himself is called *pious*, in the *Aeneid*; a term suggesting *devout, reliable, mature*. Do you find Aeneas an engaging literary personality? Is he the stuff of a good novel?

How do you read the 'love affair' with Dido? Is there a true love exchange, or is their relationship entirely between blocks of national/ethnic groups of power? Is it hard for Aeneas to leave Dido?

Discussion Questions

What Stoic and Epicurean ideas did Lucretius import into his epic, *De Rerum Natura*? Are those ideas incorporated in such a way as to constitute parts of a flowing narrative? Does Lucretius manage to avoid didacticism?

Does Virgil avoid didacticism? His theme—or do you agree?—is arguably praise of Rome and Augustus. (There is much dispute about this.) If that is his theme, does he build it into a 'good story' while at the same time making his point?

## LYRIC POETRY

Catullus (84 B.C.—54 B.C.)

Horace (65 B.C. – 8 B.C.)

Propertius (60 B.C.—after 16 B.C.)

Ovid (43 B.C.—18 A.D.)

**Lyric and religion** What we cannot recover of ancient Roman poetry, the rough Saturnian meters of the earliest Italic settlements (7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.), was surely linked to religious sentiments and rhythms; praise, prayer, and increasingly organized meter were surely close to each other. The earliest religious institutions of the Republic, like the Arval brotherhood and the Salii, or 'leaping priests,' were devoted to preserving and reenacting the religious metrics of the founding settlement, and while it is far from this kind of creation to the super polished lyrics of Horace (65-8 B.C.E.) or Catullus (84-54 B.C.E.) the romanticized memory of these early figures and rites remained forceful well into the period of the Roman Empire (27 B.C.E.—1453 C.E.)



**New poetic voices in Rome** The world in which the Roman lyric would flourish, and which took off from the last half century of the Roman Republic, was one in which much turmoil had been endured and eventually turned to a kind of dictatorial order. The social conflicts of second century B.C.E. Rome, the Punic Wars, the radical but rejected politics of the Gracchi, finally the opportunistic populism of Caesar and the establishment of the Empire in 27 B.C.E.: these culture-changing events also laid the groundwork for a new level of cultural ripeness, the Augustan respite in which poetry and the arts flourished, the value of Greek culture was given ample freedom to unfold, and social patronage, like that of Maecenas, was there to provide financial support for poets of the world-level ability of Ovid (43-18 B.C.E.), Juvenal (55-138 C.E.), or Propertius (47-14 B.C.E.), as well as the above mentioned Horace and Catullus.

**Catullus and Horace** The poetry generated among these Hellenic-sensitive, highly gifted, new voices of Rome grew from excitement at the competitive poetry scene of the century surrounding the approach and accession of Augustus to the Emperorship. Catullus and Horace burst forth with Greek metric lyrics of the highest sheen, reminiscent of the finest work of Sappho or Archilochus; both men celebrated their lovers, while Catullus rode a passionate roller coaster of emotions with his greatest love, Lesbia; Catullus was a savage master of invective, while Horace was unsurpassed in praise of the quiet pleasures of life, both in country and city. Propertius played every register on the exquisite pains and loves of his girlfriend, Cynthia, while Ovid—among many other themes, often mythological—dealt continually with matters of love, from girl-watching and girl-catching to the love affairs of the gods of yore. Juvenal, biting critical, often cynical, wrote a satirical poetry pinning up the vices of sophisticate Rome for all to see, and never failing to include himself in the purview of his addled eye.

### **Readings**

Lyne, R.O., *Horace: Behind the Public Poetry*, New Haven, 1995.

Martin, Charles, *Catullus*, New Haven, 1992.

### **Discussion questions**

From the development of Augustan lyric poetry, our topic here, what can we learn about the relation between social/cultural history, and creation in the arts? Is there a perfect moment, when major poetry springs forth?

What was the role of Maecenas, in underwriting the artistic movements of the Augustan period? What was the trigger for Maecenas himself, in his largesse toward such young geniuses as Propertius?

Roman lyric poets paid homage to their Greek models, especially through embodying Greek metrical styles. Was this homage only in style, or was there deeper substance the Romans were finding in their Greek models?

## Catullus (84 B.C.-54 B.C.)

**Fine tuning the generic issue.** Our rapid movement among the literary genres of ancient Rome has taken us through samples of epic, history, satire and drama. Would it be fair to say that the emphasis, throughout that sequence, is on public expression—that is on expressing the nature of society, social relations, large historical purviews? Of course this is a simplified view, and we have already fine tuned our response and qualifications in earlier weeks, but I think our generalization holds, and especially when we put the earlier texts of our course side by side with those that constitute the lyric, which we turn to this Week. How is lyric expression different from that of these other genres?

**Lyric and personal expression.** One wants to respond that the lyric is an expression of personal feeling, as distinct from critical understanding. I think this distinction will survive our encounters with four lyric poets in the present section—though Ovid will be the hardest to ‘fit in’—for indeed Catullus, Horace (Week 11) and Propertius (Week 12) surely speak to some degree from the heart. The way Catullus does this is far from an emotional spilling of his guts, which he is much too witty/urbane/blasé to indulge—although in one of his most moving poems, #101, he unfolds a moving elegy to his departed brother, in which there is nothing but metrical savvy to stand between him and raw emotion.

**Life and work of Catullus.** Catullus was born in 84 B.C., and lived for only some thirty years. He was born and raised in Gaul, in a prosperous equestrian family—the equestrian class was the second level of the aristocracy. (His father was sufficiently prominent that he had twice hosted Julius Caesar, during Caesar’s campaigns in the West.) Catullus was sent to Rome for his young adult years, and there, as he began making waves with his red hot poetry, he was lucky enough to spend time with Cicero, Caesar, and Pompey, all of whom appear in his poems; he was, in other words, very much a part of the high stakes socio/political world of the first century B.C., although for Catullus and his own friends poetry was always far more important than politics. That Catullus was not only admired but liked in high circles follows from an episode involving Julius Caesar himself.

**Catullus and Lesbia.** Catullus insulted Caesar in a poem—Catullus was a master at pretty gross invective—but though Caesar was piqued, and agreed that Catullus had a bite, Caesar turned around the next day and invited Catullus to dinner. The poetry Catullus created, in this hot cultural climate he lived, was in large part amatory, and reflected his up and down passion for the woman he called Lesbia. (This woman, we think, was the sister of a notorious urban gangster, Publius Clodius Pulcher). Their relationship, to judge from Catullus’ poems, and from nothing else, was a battleground of on and off, climax, departure, despair, return to one another; the brilliant formulation Catullus gave, to this exhausting passion, has made him one of the most influential and frequently copied writers of antiquity.

**Catullus and his Circle.** The poetry of Catullus reflects a deep influence from fellow Roman poets like Ovid, Horace, and Virgil, who were all part of the milieu with which, even if briefly, Catullus intersected. But Catullus cast a wide net of reading and response. He is known, for instance, for a superb translation of Sappho’s (6<sup>th</sup> century Lesbos Greek lyricist) poem to the woman she loves. This translation (poem 51) is such a perfected rendition of Greek language and metric into polished Latin, that it constitutes a truly original poem of Catullus himself. Here, as at all points, Catullus is a master of form and style, openly preferring *venustas* (*beauty*) to *virtus* (which we could translate either as *manliness* or *virtue*.) Though Catullus and his group of writers were referred to by Cicero as *neoteri*, youngsters, they included among them some of the world’s most achieved lyric poets.

The small sample below is here for a reason. It is easy for us to identify with exquisitely passionate love poetry—rare though it is—but the invective, the grossness, which Catullus can blend with lust and love, is as scarce as hen’s teeth in modern poetry. Check out the following and delight!

### Lecherous tavern, and you its regulars,

*nine pillars along from the [Twins](#)’ pillars,  
do you think you’re the only ones with cocks,  
the only ones who’re allowed to trouble  
young girls, and consider the rest of us goats?  
Or, because a hundred or two of you sit in a row, you,  
dullards, that I daren’t bugger two hundred together?  
Think on: I’ll draw all over the front*

*of the tavern with your leavings.  
Because my girl, who's left my arms,  
whom I loved as no other girl's ever been loved,  
for whom so many great battles were fought,  
is there. You, all the rich and the fortunate, love her,  
and, what's so shameful, it's true, all the lesser ones,  
all the adulterous frequenters of by-ways:  
you, above all, one of the hairy ones,  
rabbit-faced offspring of Spain,  
Egnatius. Whom a shadowy beard improves,  
and teeth scrubbed with Iberian piss.*

Readings: *The Poems of Catullus: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Peter Green (Berkeley, 2005.)

Havelock, E.A., *The Lyric Genius of Catullus* (New York, 1967).

Martin, Charles, *Catullus* (New Haven, 1992).

Quinn, Kenneth, *The Catullan Revolution* (Melbourne, 1959).

Discussion questions:

Does Lesbia come across as a 'real person' or as a fiction of Catullus' imagination. Support your contention.

Does Catullus address the political turmoil of his time? Or does he sidestep it, in order to concentrate on 'pure poetry.'

How do you explain the blend of gross invective with erotic passion in Catullus' work? Do these two emotive states have a natural affiliation with one another?

Suggested Topics

Catullus devotes much of his lyric power to love and sex. Is he 'romantically' in love with Lesbia? How does his 'love' change through the body of his poems? What kind of 'love' does he feel toward his departed brother?

How do Petronius and Juvenal differ as satirists? Do they share a single opinion about the life of Rome, or are their targets totally different from each other?

Who was this Catullus, famed especially for the passion and occasional viciousness of his love poetry? How does he fit into the historical framework of our course?

## Horace (65 B.C.-8 B.C.)

**Lyric poetry and convention.** In introducing Catullus we were naturally drawn to the issue of self-expression, and, because that is the convenient pathway, we moved into the themes of that lusty and brilliant opus. We paid little attention to the finesse of prosody, through which Catullus, obviously, filtered his strong feelings. We did, though, remind ourselves that, though the lyric genre introduces expressive modes rare in the genres studied earlier here, the expression of self is always, especially in developed literary milieux, carried out under the banner of prevailing and available literary conventions. Horace, even more than Catullus, would enable us to value this point—which runs so sharply counter of the romantic ideas of poetic expression buoyed up bourgeois interpretations of European poetries of the early 19th century.

**Horace as craftsman.** To appreciate the complex relation Horace occupies, to the inheritance of Greek lyric, we need only look at the array of odes, epodes, satires, and *sermones* (stories) he draws on to develop his verbally, but not philosophically, complex response to life through poetry. This great poet, in craftsman and world view terms perhaps the greatest Rome created, was deeply immersed in the technical skills the Greek lyric poets—Sappho, Archilochos, Alcaeus—established as early as the seventh century B.C. The views of life Horace expresses through these forms—hearty patriotism, delight in rural life, sexual passion for women and young boys, despair at the loss of the old Roman virtues—these are views of far less conceptual interest than the procedure by which he thinks and sings, complexly, through these views. To the Roman orator Quintilian, these products were the finest verbal achievements of the Romans.

But where did Horace come onto the cultural background which made him privy to the artistic resources he utilizes.?

**Horace and the turmoil of the times.** Horace was born into the tempestuous first century B.C., which, unlike the tangled and internecine struggles of the first century A.D.—the world of Petronius, Tacitus, Juvenal—was all intra-armies struggle, factional violence, and the overwhelming need for some kind of political resolution, which, as it was, proved to be Augustus.

**Horace's birthplace.** Horace was born in the Samnite south of Italy, in the town of Venusia. (He was not a Roman, nor properly speaking an Italian, but a Samnite; his dialect of Latin may well have been tinged with the Samnite dialect, and even with some words of the Oscan tongue, a totally non-Italic speech form. This linguistic diversity may have played into Horace's unusual sensitivity to language tone, and, not much later, to his skill in mastering Greek.) In school he was forced to learn 'standard Latin,' which as lifelessly taught induced in him a contempt for forced learning.

**Horace's education.** By great fortune, Horace was born to a father determined to provide his son with the best possible education. (Horace's father was a slave, but through hard work and superior intelligence gained his freedom in mid life, and ever after remained a beloved model for his son.) As part of that commitment, Horace's dad made it possible for his son to study in Athens, where he went at age nineteen. This was to be a decisive move for the young man. He enrolled in the Academy—the West's first University, founded by Plato in the fourth century B.C.—and began an intensive study of Greek and Greek authors. It was at this time that he read and grasped the great lyric poets of the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., Sappho, Archilochus, and Simonides—and found his way into the secret of their intricate meters.

**Horace in Athens.** While Horace was in Athens, the political drama of Rome itself reached and surrounded Horace. Rome was at this time in turmoil between followers of old Republican ideals, like Brutus, and new social shapers, far more autocratic in temper, who after the death of Julius Caesar were competing to dominate Rome. Brutus, eager to create a strong Republican contingent around himself, came to Greece to recruit appropriate support, and there came into contact with promising young Roman/Italic scions, among whom was Horace.

**Horace and Brutus.** Brutus approached Horace carefully. and with care recruited him into his republican army. The relationship started well for the non-military, art-loving, Horace. The twists of fate for Horace

began when the army of Brutus, which Horace was fighting with, was crushed by Octavian at the Battle of Philippi in 42 B.C. Treated not as an enemy, but as a promising fellow Roman, Brutus was quickly befriended by Octavian's friend and super wealthy Roman political advisor, Maecenas. Under the umbrella of Maecenas' protection Horace was enabled to move back into distinguished society in Rome itself, and to serve as a spokesperson for the new regime. Horace made friends of the highest quality, like Virgil, who were to introduce him into Octavian/Augustus' circle, and from that arrived position, during a moderately long but highly creative life, Horace remained a fixture of Roman poetry and culture.

*What slender boy, Pyrrha, drowned in liquid perfume,  
urges you on, there, among showers of roses,  
deep down in some pleasant cave?  
For whom did you tie up your hair,*

*with simple elegance? How often he'll cry at  
the changes of faith and of gods, ah, he'll wonder,  
surprised by roughening water,  
surprised by the darkening storms,*

*who enjoys you now and believes you're golden,  
who thinks you'll always be single and lovely,  
ignoring the treacherous  
breeze. Wretched are those you dazzle*

*while still untried. As for me the votive tablet  
that hangs on the temple wall reveals, suspended,  
my dripping clothes, for the god,  
who holds power over the sea.*

**Readings:** Horace, *The Odes: New Translations by Contemporary Poets* (Princeton, 2002.)

Maclennan, Keith, *Horace: A Poet for a New Age* (Cambridge, 2010).  
Reckford, Kenneth, *Horace* (New York, 1969).

Discussion questions:

Does Horace's 'love poetry' display what we might call romantic passion, and if not, what is the drive of his love poetry. Is it purely erotic?

What role did Athens play in Horace's creative development? What did the Greek literary example mean to him?

You will note that Horace, like most of the authors we have studied, was not from Rome. What do you think was the significance of Horace's birth in a region where languages other than Latin were spoken?

## Propertius (60 B.C.- after 16 B.C.)

**Propertius and his moment.** The poem you find at the end of this week's syllabus is from the first of four books of elegies, by the Roman poet Propertius. We are in the year 25 B.C., and once again, as with Virgil, Livy, and Horace we are in that zone of tremendously powerful political change which surrounded the civil struggles of the Roman Republic, in its last decades, and the accession of Octavian to the role of Caesar Augustus in 38 B.C. As you can see, Propertius—like Catullus and Horace—tended to prefer love to politics, though none of these men shunned the perks that could devolve on them from healthy relations with power.

**The prosody of Propertius.** Since, however, Propertius was first and foremost a lyric poet, we should pause a minute to consider his product—the brilliantly hewn *elegy* form, which is the mould of the Latin behind the above translation. Look at the first two lines of the English, then at the far more compact Latin of those lines:

Cy'nthia pri'ma suis' miserum' me ce'pit oce'llis  
Con/tactum/ nullis/ ante cu'pidini'bus.

**The elegy form.** The interplay of these two kinds of line was from the time of the early Greek poets considered the gold standard for one kind of poetic construction. The first of the two lines of the elegiac couplet contains six stressed syllabic units, arranged (this is an average) on the basis of six succeeding dactyls—sound units consisting of a stressed followed by two unstressed syllables. The second of the two lines of the couplet consists of five stressed syllables, arranged in a such a sound pattern that the relatively brevity of the second line answers, closes off, and completes the proposition of the first line, so that the couplet is a perfect unit. Reader, forgive this foreshortened, simplistic account of a splendid, long trained verse form, and, taking the most you can get from this account, return to the first two shaggy and limping lines of our English translation. See the difference in concision?

**Form and content in Propertius.** The form of such poetry is not a hollow shell surrounding its content, but the content itself in action, and Propertius, on a par with the Horace who was master of Greek prosodic modes, is one of splendors of Roman literature. In a famous poem, #6 from Book I, Propertius writes to his friend Tullus that he is glad to be known as one who sang from the turmoils of love, rather than giving himself up to warfare, fighting with the Emperor. Propertius proudly proclaims, in many of his poems, that the warfare he values is with the obduracy of language.

**Propertius: the biography.** Which brings us to the issue of Propertius' distinctive life situation and value system. He was born in mid-first century in Assisi, in the province of Umbria. We know that Propertius' father died when his son was a young boy, and that Propertius was raised by his Mother—whose efforts had to have been huge; the family's land had been confiscated by Augustus, as part of a large offering to Octavian's veterans after the Battle of Actium, and Propertius's mother herself paid the indirect costs of war. Somehow, fortunately, Propertius made his way to Rome, where—untouched by any direct contact with the military conflicts seething around him—he settled on the Esquiline Hill, an upscale section of Rome, and entered slowly into the circle of the powers, a circle which, as we know from the intimacy of Augustus with Virgil and Horace, was open to the arts. Of supreme importance then was Propertius' meeting with Cynthia, the woman who was to dominate his first three Books, though in the fourth Book he records their bitter break up, and at the same time announces new themes he intends to pursue in his writing. The first Book of Elegies attracted cutting edge admiration in Rome, and fortunately for Propertius Maecenas—the benefactor of Horace and Virgil—was taken with this new work, and invited Propertius into his circle of literary discussants and fellow spirits. The financial support of Maecenas, for which this benefactor wanted nothing in return except praise, bailed out a whole generation of brilliant poets at a time of struggle, conflict, and danger in Rome.

**Propertius and romantic poetry.** It is fascinating to observe the power of love to generate poetry, in both Greek and Roman literatures. We have mentioned the peculiarity of the lyric genre in Ancient Rome, that it is a vehicle for self-expression, but that the vehicle in question is highly disciplined and prosodically wrought. Self-expression, in ancient Roman poetry, does not mean anything like free-verse, or even like the flowing personal line of a Whitman, who sings of his own soul. Ancient prosody precluded any such 'naturalism,' and in fact the reader of Propertius will find an abundance of scholarly myth references—all impeccably integrated—which betray the almost universal stress, in ancient poetry, on the same kind of erudition we know from the epic and satiric genres. As for Propertius who can ever have exceeded him in the exquisite formulation of the wonder of spending all night touching all the parts of another person's body.

*Cynthia was the first. She caught me with her eyes, a fool  
who had never before been touched by desires.  
Love cast down my look of constant pride,  
and he pressed on my head with his feet,  
until he taught me to despise chaste girls,  
perverse, and to live without plan.  
Already, it's been a whole year that the frenzy hasn't stopped,  
when, for all that, the gods are against me.*

Readings: Propertius, *Poems*, translated Lee and Lyne (Oxford, 1994.)

Hubbard, Margaret, *Propertius* (Bristol, 1974).

Sullivan, J.P., *Propertius: a critical introduction* (Cambridge, 1976).

### **Ovid (43 B.C.- 18 A.D.)**

**Distinctions within genres.** We have made many distinctions within the lyric genre of Roman literature. We have found that Catullus, Horace, Propertius all 'deal with' love, but that only says so much. There are great differences among those 'dealings.' Catullus is robust and sensual, and at his most enamored ready to kiss Lesbia for an eternity. Propertius is as passionate as Catullus, but far more self-conscious about the kinds of language he is using to create himself a lover in poetry. (He is more philosophical than Catullus.) Horace is more multi-themed than Catullus or Propertius—more discursive about morals, life styles, the political world, the social world—and, especially in the material we have discussed, less furiously passionate and love conscious than the other two. (Horace is also the author of sensuous homoerotic poetry which has proven unpalatably direct to Western tastes, and which far exceeds the boldness of the other two lyricists.) It is finally worth noting, once again, the difference between the love poetries of these three men and the Romantic lyric, by which we mean the Wordsworthian tradition in post 1800 poetry, which privileges the whole hearted and innocent love of man and maid, against a background (frequently sketched, as in the poetry of Browning) against the sense of a cruel and fated world, in which the ultimate outcome of human emotions is dubious.

**The works of Ovid.** When we come to Ovid, a born poet, one 'born speaking in hexameters,' as he says of himself, we reach, if possible, a new level of sophistication. (When it comes to love poetry the Romans lead the pack in finesse and inventiveness.) Ovid wrote many literary works, all in highly disciplined, Greek inspired, meters, and many of those works concerned love. We will address these promptly. But who was this Ovid?

**Ovid's life.** Publius Ovidius Naso was born in Sulmo to an important equestrian family—equestrian, as you recall, meaning just below the highest patrician rank. He was sent to Rome for his education—as were all his peers—and studied Rhetoric, as a prelude to the study and practice of law. (This educational pathway, leading toward Law, and beyond that toward politics, was generally expected of the aspiring young gentleman learning in Rome.) For some reason, perhaps the shocking death of his brother at age twenty, Ovid decided to stick with his initial instinct, and to give himself unreservedly to poetry. At this point—and here too you see a familiar pattern—Ovid went to Athens to study, and while studying there traveled to Asia Minor and Sicily. (Are you noticing, as we move through Roman history, that privileged Roman youth traveled widely, in the eastern Mediterranean?) From 29 B.C.-25 B.C. Ovid returned to Rome to devote himself to poetry. It was at this period that he too found his patron. This time it was not Maecenas, who was to become the central figure of Augustus' literary circle, but Marcus Corvinus, who was long a defender of the Roman Republic against Augustus, but who moved toward Augustus, as the tide of history swept in that direction, and whose daughter, Julia, became a keystone of the Augustan circle. Thus Ovid too came ultimately under the supportive umbrella of the Emperor's largesse, and left us one more instance of the way money and connections pave the way to literary success.

**Ovid's exile.** From this point on Ovid not only determined, but had the means to, give his life to poetry. He was in the midst of a highly popular series of works—the *Heroides*, the *Amores*, the *Ars Amatoria*, the *Metamorphoses*—when a devastating blow of fate assaulted him. In the year 8 A.D. Ovid was banished by the Emperor Augustus, and exiled to the distant city of Tomi, on the Black Sea. This was a serious exile for any Roman, let alone an urban

sophisticate accustomed to the cultural interactions of the metropolis. The world at large has never known the true cause of this exile, which Ovid attributes to *carmem et error, a song and an error*, terms which have resisted any clear interpretation though Ovid's contemporaries, and later scholars, have generated theories galore about what these words mean. One major trend of explanation is that Ovid had inside information about scandalous behaviors in Augustus' court. Whatever the case there, precisely, we are sure that Augustus was outraged by the 'open immorality' Ovid had foregrounded in his long poem, the *Ars Amatoria* (21A.D.), which promoted exactly the adultery that the new Emperor, Augustus, was making an intense effort to criminalize.

**The fury of Augustus.** The panoply of poems Ovid created, in a fertile life, included a wide variety of tones. The early *Amores* (16/15 B.C.) include some of the world's wittiest couplets on the war (and truce) between the sexes; funny, bitter, urbane to the max. The *Ars Amatoria* (2 A.D.) is equally witty—a handbook first for guys, then for gals, on the most effective ways of seducing a married woman or man, depending; and with tons of collateral tips on, for example, detours like the lady's maid you use to get at the married lady, but who turns out to want a seduction of her own en route. (This kind of game playing was particularly odious to the Emperor Augustus.) In his last poems, written from Black Sea exile, Ovid writes *The Tristia* (9 A.D.-12 A.D.), elegant but deeply sad poems from exile, in which he laments everything lost—his beloved Rome, his beloved third wife.

Readings:

Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*, Book One, trans. Hollis (Oxford, 1992).

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Raeburn (New York, 2004.)

*Ovid's Poetry of Exile* (translated into verse by David Slavitt) (Baltimore, 1990).

Liveley, Genevieve, *Ovid: Love Songs* (Bristol, 2005.)



## 2.DRAMA

### Plautus (254 B.C.-184 B.C.)

**Differences among genres.** We have looked at examples of epic and historical imagination in Roman literature, and found that in certain cases the two imaginations overlap, as between Virgil and Livy, both of whom are driven to sanctify the origins of the Roman State. When it comes to Roman drama, however, we tap another vein of literary expression, that of popular amusement.

**Origins of Roman drama.** Early Roman drama acquired its impulse from the influence of the Greek dramatist Menander (341 B.C.-290 B.C.), who was the perfect expression of the urbane creations of the Hellenistic period; if it is true that the Greeks, in being conquered by the Romans in the second century B.C., at the same time conquered the Romans—through superior creativity—then the earliest expression of that reverse conquest might be the comedies of Plautus, which take off from the Greek. It should be added, though, that there is fragmentary evidence that Roman comedy existed long before Plautus—perhaps several centuries earlier—though all we have left is references to plays; also that the ludic/often raw/often phallic quality of the comedy of Plautus belongs to a long tradition of Roman popular culture, of jongleurs in the streets, nude public dancing, flute concerts in public.

**Roman drama as popular entertainment.** Be that as it may, we inherit in Plautus a fully developed comic tradition which played an important role in the public entertainment of the Romans. This role unfolded regularly at the *ludi*, religious festivals honoring Jupiter, and held annually in September, starting in 366 B.C. At those *ludi*, where chariot races, boxing, and dancing were performed, plays of Plautus were regular centerpieces. Of that centrality it should be noted that these plays were performed *without a theater* until 55 B.C., so that the face to face quality of actors and spectators contributed directness. Plautus himself, born in the countryside (Umbria), and raised to a modest background, got his earliest job as a stage carpenter, which was not only the bridge to his exposure to Greek dramatic works, but his baptism of fire in the nitty gritty of stage presentation.

**Plautus' opus.** Of Plautus' fifty two plays there remain twenty, all comedies, and all more or less cut from the same cloth; the same stock of characters; the same plot developments; the same license—a lot of joking about the gods, which aroused criticism in many quarters, and squared off against the 'religious devotional' purpose of the *ludi*; the same referential background of cultural anxiety—the 2<sup>nd</sup> Punic War (218-201 B.C.) sustained a high anxiety level in Rome. The stockpile of familiar character types—remarkably similar to those bursting forth in Italian *commedia del'arte*, already in the Renaissance heralding developments in seventeenth European theater—shares with the sharp dialogue the joyful energy of these plays.

**Stock characters in Plautus.** A mild example of the repartee in these plays can be found in the brief excerpt below, from Plautus' *Captivi*. (That mini excerpt will remind us already of the texture of those Shakespeare comedies, like *Measure for Measure*, which dazzle us still with their wordplay.) The stock characters who enact the formulae of these plays are numerous: the *adulescens*, a love struck young man; the *senex*, an old man, perhaps the father of the *adulescens*, often a competitor with his son for the love of a younger woman; the *leno*, or whoremaster, often in charge of a young lovely who is the interest of the *adulescens*; the *miles gloriosus*, or braggardly soldier, who totally lacks self-awareness; the *parasitus*, who sponges off the leading characters; and so on into minor characters like the whoremistress or the virgin, who is typically without personality, except beauty, and is the love object of the major male population. With this kind of cast—whose behavior, costuming, language are pretty consistent from one play to the next—Plautus constructs witty variations on themes of misunderstanding, happy endings for love, and cranky obstructionism—which will arouse the emotions we expect today from a good old sitcom. It will only add to the effect if we complete the description: each play has virtually the same setting, as well as characters; that setting is an urban street with an exit out onto a thoroughfare through which characters enter and depart; the trigger to action is usually an act of eavesdropping by which a generative rumor starts things going.

SCENE II. Enter, from his house, HEGIO and a SLAVE.

HEG. Now, give attention you, if you please. Those two captives whom I purchased yesterday of the Quaestors out of the spoil, put upon them chains of light weight; take off those greater ones with which they are bound. Permit them to walk, if they wish, out of doors, or if indoors, but so that they are watched with the greatest care. A captive at liberty is like a bird that's wild; if opportunity is once given for escaping, 'tis enough; after that, you can never catch him.

SLAVE. Doubtless we all are free men more willingly than we live the life of slaves.

HEG. You, indeed, don't seem to think so.

SLAVE. If I have nothing to give, should you like me to give myself to flight?

HEG. If you do so give yourself, I shall at once have something to be giving to you.

SLAVE. I'll make myself just like the wild bird you were telling of...

History and the epic are hereby left behind as private acts, consummating private visions, while the dramatic imagination, in Rome as elsewhere, is eminently public, and in comedy especially absolutely requires giving public pleasure.

Readings: *Plautus: The Comedies*, Volume I, ed. Slavitt (Baltimore, 1995).  
Sharrock, Alison, *Reading Roman Comedy: Poetics and Playfulness in Plautus and Terence* (Cambridge, 2009.)

Discussion questions:

Why do Plautus' plays thrive on stock characters? Would it have something to do with his historical moment? In what ways do stock characters serve as useful vehicles of comic art?

Does Plautine comedy feature slapstick and burlesque elements? What kind of audience do you imagine for Plautus's plays?

What kind of use did Shakespeare make, of Plautus' plays? Does the comedy of errors theme seem to you to be of lasting value as a theatrical recourse?

### Seneca (4 B.C.-65 A.D.)

**Seneca and Plautus.** At the conclusion of this week's syllabus you will find a translation of a passage from Seneca's *Oedipus*—exact date unknown—which may at first glance make you doubt whether we are still dealing with Ancient Roman drama. We are. Though the passage yanks its original into strong contemporary diction it is nonetheless a vigorous and honest account of lines from the Roman dramatist and philosopher Seneca. We could hardly be farther in spirit from the comic world of Plautus, which we read in the previous week. We have moved two hundred years into the future, have entered the first half-century of Imperial Roman rule, and have changed genre from robust stock character drama to closet drama playing off against a sophisticated model, the *Oedipus* of the Greek dramatist Sophocles, written in the mid fifth century B.C.

**Oedipus the King.** Sophocles' play, as you know, concerns a proud, doomed, and irascible Ruler of Thebes, whose land has gone waste as a result—that is the rumor in the kingdom—of unholy actions somewhere in the community. The drive of the tightly compacted play is to find out the cause of the plague on the land, to track it to its individual source—the King himself—and to mete out a dreadful purging punishment to the King. The play is a perfect geometry of beginning, middle, end. Seneca's *Oedipus*, on the other hand, is baroque, digressive, highly rhetorical. Whereas the king's mother, Jocasta, is in Sophocles a cog in the wheels of destiny, who limits her commentaries, on the dreadful fate of her son, to various ways of deploring the savage ironies of life, in Seneca's play, as you see above, Jocasta deplores, in the fate of her son, the whole rotten fallenness of the human condition, and does so in extravagantly bitter and melodramatic terms. In the hands of her brilliant British adapter, Ted Hughes, her speech acquires a texture of its own, which brings to the front of the play the hyperbolic intensity of a character who, in Sophocles, is simply a stage in the development of the plot.

**The tenor of Seneca's work.** The tenor of Seneca's work as a dramatist is epitomized in this example: intense, hyperbolic, rhetorical, and, as we refreshingly begin to think, valuable in its own right and deeply expressive of its own age. (Think of the example of the murder of Agrippina, in Tacitus; think of the fierce personal struggles, and emotional depths, of the main figures in the fight for the succession to Augustus, at just the time of Seneca's life: doesn't the speech of Iocasta belong to the rhetorical modes of the time?)

**Seneca and Nero.** The dramatist behind Oedipus, and eight other tragedies on ancient Greek mythical themes, played a prominent role in the first half of the first century A.D. From Cordoba in Spain, Seneca went as a young man to Rome, to study Rhetoric and Philosophy—in the latter field especially to deepen his understanding of the principles of Stoicism, to which he adhered throughout his life. That Greek philosophy, with its emphasis on control of the passions, but also on the power of the emotions, lay behind the philosophical developments of Seneca's thought. His view was that the misuse of the passions is a sure key to downfall, and that man needs calm and willed self-discipline in order to lead a satisfactory life. This larger perspective, which is deeply embedded in the values of Seneca's literary work, was hard won, for in 'real life' Seneca himself was exposed to the baroque energies of a cultural moment which would not spare the individual. As tutor and advisor to the Emperor Nero—again recall the treatment of Nero in Tacitus—Seneca tried to convince his boss of the importance of self-control, and for a time, but only for a time, succeeded.

**Seneca as moralist.** In the year 41 A.D. Seneca was accused of complicity in a plot to kill the Emperor, and was sent into exile. It was while in exile on the island of Corsica that Seneca turned inward and began to write seriously, leaving us in the end a remarkably rich collage of texts—one hundred twenty four letters—many of them highly refined philosophical reflection, nine tragedies, and twelve substantial philosophical essays, in which he discusses, with great finesse, issues bearing on desire, anger, and the potentials for global oneness in humanity. It is cruelly ironic that this brilliantly outreaching creator was in the end forced to commit suicide, a dreadful one as the historian Tacitus again tells us, in which repeated vein cuttings and ultimately suffocation by steam were required to do the deed.

*when I carried my sons  
I carried them for death I carried them for the  
Throne  
I carried them for final disaster when I carried my  
First son  
Did I know what was coming did I know  
What ropes of blood were twisting together what  
Bloody footprints  
Were hurrying together in my body  
Did I know what past and unfinished reckonings  
Were getting flesh again inside me  
Did I think that the debts of the past  
Were settled before I conceived  
I knew the thing in my womb was going to have to  
Pay for the whole past  
I knew the future was waiting for him like a greedy  
God a man-eater in a cave  
Was going to ask for everything happiness strength  
And finally life  
As if no other man existed I carried him for this  
For pain and for fear  
For hard sharp metal for the cruelty of other men  
And his own cruelty  
I carried him for disease  
For rottenness and dropping to pieces  
I carried him for death bones dust I knew*

Readings:

Seneca, *Three Tragedies (Trojan Women; Medea; Phaedra)*, translated and with an introduction by Frederick Ahl (Ithaca, 1986).

Pratt, Norman, *Seneca's Drama* (Chapel Hill, 1983).

### Discussion questions:

How does Seneca's Oedipus differ from the Oedipus of Sophocles, in *Oedipus The King*?

What do you see as the connection between Seneca's ethical theory, his Stoicism, and what you are coming to know as his dramatic practice?

Seneca's drama was performed in private readings, rather than on public stages. Can you see why that was an appropriate way to showplace Seneca's work?

The comedies of Plautus are closely related to popular humor and daily entertainments. What larger points—views of life and mankind—do you see Plautus developing through his drama?

How does Seneca's drama reflect the tenor of the age it is written in? Is there melodrama and intensity in both the drama and the age? How do that age, and that melodrama, fit with the Stoic emphasis on calm in Seneca's own world-view?

### 3.FICTION

Petronius (?—65 A.D.)

Juvenal (55 A.D.--138 A.D.)

#### Petronius

**History of Roman Literature.** Though our emphasis is falling on the development of genres, of or diverse forms of imagination, in Roman literature, we are inevitably constructing an image of the chronological *flow* of Roman literature and culture. It will have become clear, from what we have been reading to date, that the half century following the death of Augustus was fraught with social conflicts and vivid human passions. Tacitus and Seneca have made the point for us, and we will soon have lyric poetry, like that of Catullus, to amplify the point from another direction. Our attention this week will fall on a brilliant satirist of just the period we are considering.

**Life of Petronius.** Little is known of the life of Petronius. Like Seneca, who had only contempt for the hedonistic life-style of the first century A.D., Petronius too was implicated in the goings on of imperial society 'at the highest level.' He himself came, apparently, of a wealthy family, and moved naturally into the intense life of metropolitan Rome. We may know him best for a raucous pre novel, the *Satyricon*, but must realize that he also did responsible work as a citizen, serving as Governor of the Province of Bithynia in 62 A.D., and after that as Consul, or First Magistrate, of Rome. These posts, however, led 'yet higher' in to the inner circle of Nero's court—remember the machinations of Nero, in the account given by Tacitus—and from there to appointment as Nero's *arbiter elegantiae*, or court judge of fashion. That this post was official and recognized is a measure of the high-life level that dominated the Imperial Court.

**Petronius' fate.** We do know that, after having achieved significant influence over the Emperor Petronius inevitably found himself the object of jealousy. Tigellinus, commander of Nero's public guard, accused Petronius—wrongly, as we know—of conspiring to kill the Emperor, whereupon Petronius was arrested, in 65 A.D. Before the Emperor had returned from campaign, Petronius, who was to the max a hedonist and not a masochist, proceeded to commit suicide. The way he did so was as distinctive as the way he lived his life. He cut his veins, which bled only feebly, so that he temporarily postponed his death, while chatting with his friends, listening to pop music, and reclining. Only after it had become evident that he needed help, in dispatching himself, did his companions essentially suffocate him with steam from his bath. (Remember Seneca?)

**Ancient satire.** *The Satyricon*, the only text Petronius left us, has been a smash hit with readers from the beginning. On the surface, the explanation might seem to be the over the top luxury and eroticism climate of the text—the anal, the urinary, and the phallic competing for top role. The fact is, though, that the *Satyricon* is an exceptionally

innovative form of that satirical genre which is occasionally a byproduct of conspicuously over-sophisticated societies. (We will turn, next week, to another brilliant Roman satirist, Juvenal, whose chief target, like that of Petronius, was the decadence of first century A. D. Rome. We will be asking ourselves, as we advance, why Greek society generated almost no satire—except for aspects of Aristophanes’ comic drama—while Roman was rich in the genre.) The narrator of the tale, Encolpius, recounts events as do the narrators of early English novels, like Fielding’s Tom Jones, where the tale teller is also immersed in the events being told about. Formally, therefore, Petronius’ tale makes moves toward the novel, in its earliest western form. And there is much more to say about those moves, for the world Encolpius tells us about smacks of that ‘real world’ so forcefully brought to the literary text by the novels of Renaissance Europe—cf. *Gil Blas* or *Don Quixote*—in which literary convention often steps aside to let the rawness of ordinary life assert itself.

**The *Satyricon*.** It might well be added that the narrator of the *Satyricon* travels dark paths of irony, which complement his broadly satirical view of the society he portrays. The passage below both caricatures the indifference of the ‘elite’ to the trashed people of their society, and leaves us gasping, as we absorb the bitter subtext of the narrator’s words.

*We had had enough of these novelties and started to enter the dining-room when a slave, detailed to this duty, cried out, "Right foot first." Naturally, we were afraid that some of us might break some rule of conduct and cross the threshold the wrong way; nevertheless, we started out, stepping off together with the right foot, when all of a sudden, a slave who had been stripped, threw himself at our feet, and commenced begging us to save him from punishment, as it was no serious offense for which he was in jeopardy; the steward's clothing had been stolen from him in the baths, and the whole value could scarcely amount to ten sesterces. So we drew back our right feet and intervened with the steward, who was counting gold pieces in the hall, begging him to remit the slave's punishment. Putting a haughty face on the matter, "It's not the loss I mind so much," he said, "as it is the carelessness of this worthless rascal. He lost my dinner clothes, given me on my birthday they were, by a certain client, Tyrian purple too, but it had been washed once already. But what does it amount to? I make you a present of the scoundrel!"*

Readings: Petronius, *Satyricon*, trans. Arrowsmith (New York, 1983).

Courtney, Edward, *A Companion to Petronius* (Oxford, 2001.)

Sullivan, J.P., *The Satyricon of Petronius: A Literary Study* (London, 1968).

Discussion questions:

The life Petronius pillories is that of the Roman *nouveaux riches* of Nero’s moment. What does Petronius think of the ‘little guy’? What is his attitude toward the slaves in Trimalchio’s house?

Does the *Satyricon* read like a novel to you? Do you see a plot developing, and a ‘growth’ in the central characters?

Do you leave Petronius’ satire with the sense that he has scourged evil, or does he himself seem to delight in the fallen world he describes.

## Juvenal (55 A. D. -138 A.D.)

**Life of Juvenal.** As with many of the authors we have met in Ancient Rome, little is known about Juvenal. Born in the second half of the first century A.D., he lives out his life in a settling, and gradually less turbulent, phase of the imperial experience. He was born in Aquinum, scion of a wealthy freedman, studied in Rome as a pupil of the eminent orator Quintilian, and left us sixteen substantial dactylic hexameter satires.

**Satire.** Satire, said the Roman orator Quintilian, is the one genre the Romans can claim as their own. He had something there. We have remarked that for the Greeks—with the exception of the comic dramatic genius Aristophanes, a mime writer like Herondas, and perhaps in places a Hellenistic playwright like Menander—tragedy, riotous comedy, epic all came naturally, but, perhaps for some distinctive twist to Greek culture, the satire-breeding urban culture was not present. To the Romans, on the other hand, satire came naturally. Already in the second century B.C. Roman society had been suitably mocked by Lucilius, a model for Juvenal, while Horace (65 B.C.-8 B.C.), a close contemporary of Livy, had provided a more recent model, as had Petronius' Stoic contemporary, Persius (34 A.D.-62 A.D.).

**Types of Satire.** It should be said from the start that these Roman satirists are all different from one another, and that the genre in which they write is looser than it might seem. Lucilius, for instance, was a dark Stoic, imbued with severe moral precepts, and brought a heavy hammer to bear on the foibles of his society, while Horace, his contemporary, was far mellower, though at all times a *criticus*, and made sure that his ire was foremost art. The cases of Petronius and Juvenal are even harder to distinguish. There is no doubt that, plain on the face of their texts, both writers deal with life as it is, the common people, even the *bas fonds* and gross levels of social existence. This latter proclivity is especially marked in Petronius, who, while shocked at the wretched treatment of such menials as slaves and domestic servants, is in his camp, Fellini mode totally intrigued by the outrageous goings on in 'high society.' (It is as though Trimalcho is a slightly concealed portrait of Nero, though even Trimalchio is not worse than good naturedly degenerate; concerned, after all, with the will in which he is going to decree the freedom of all his slaves.)

Juvenal, by contrast with Petronius, is much less the caricaturist. While Petronius carries out a proto novel narrative in prose, Juvenal adopts the dactylic hexameter verse form, which links him to the grand tradition in poetry—though in a manner ever so slightly tongue in cheek. Juvenal is more the sociologist/satirist, with a sharp eye, as in Satire Three, for the self-inflicted plight of his beloved Rome. How does he handle this critique of his city?

**The voice of satire, and society.** He talks his satire to a friend who is moving out of the city to a removed and quiet spot along the coast south of Rome. And why is the friend making this move? He is sick of Rome. Juvenal embraces the chance to criticize the metropolis, in characterizing his friend's view. Rome is overcrowded and noisy, the aristocrats are fake and pretentious, the streets are full of the seriously poor. Morals are shot and piety to family or gods is weak. He takes pleasure in detailing each of these weaknesses. He dwells, for example, on the shoddy construction of buildings, which are doomed to rapid collapse, on the bribes that are required in order to get contracts, on the sloppy indifference of the legal system. The passage below suggests the subtlety of the author's insight into the corruption that has befallen the city.

In this passage the narrator's friend speaks, throwing up his hands before the embedded corruption of his world. In order to succeed, in the literary world, one has to kiss ass, lie about the merits of so and so's work. One must entice others with prophecies of the impending death—of those whose wills will devolve on them. One must collude in fraudulent schemes, in order to get on the governor's staff:

*What can I do at Rome? I cannot lie; if a book is bad, I cannot praise it, and beg for a copy; I am ignorant of the movements of the stars; I cannot, and will not, promise to a man his father's death; I have never examined the entrails of a frog; I must leave it to others to carry to a bride the presents and messages of a paramour. No man will get my help in robbery, and therefore no governor will take me on his staff: I am treated as a maimed and useless trunk that has lost the power of its hands. What man wins favour nowadays unless he be an accomplice--one whose soul seethes and burns with secrets that must never be disclosed?*

Readings: Juvenal, *Sixteen Satires*, trans. Peter Green (New York, Penguin, 2004.)

Jones, Frederick, *Juvenal and the Satiric Genre* (London, 2007).

#### Suggested Topics

What seem to you the chief differences between the satire of Petronius and that of Juvenal? Are the authors pillorying the same faults and/or the same level of social behavior?

What seems to you to generate the satirical spirit in the first century A.D.? Is it the decline in morals? Or is it the particularly rich target that sophisticated urban enclaves offer to the literary eye?

Does Juvenal offer us a true to life picture of the problems facing the city of Rome? Or does he, in the mouths of his 'characters,' work for literary effect? How would you know how to answer this question?

#### 4.AUTOBIOGRAPHY

##### Overview

Cicero (106-43 B.C.) Letters

Catullus (84-54 B.C.) Lyrics

Horace (65-8 B.C.) Poems

Ovid (43 B.C.-17 A.D.) Poems : Tristia; Letters from Pontus

Statius (40-94 A.D.) Silvae

Pliny, (61-114 A.D.) Letters

Marcus Aurelius, (121-180 A.D.) Meditations (170-180 A.D)

Saint Augustine, (354-430 A.D.) Confessions (397-398)

#### Overview of Autobiography in Classical Roman Literature

Classical culture in the West is divided into two separate but jaggedly continuous parts: Greek culture and Roman culture. The origins of Greek culture take us back to the Mycenaeans, the Phoenicians, and Ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian culture; culture worlds of which we know more all the time—from archeology and epigraphy— but which still remain outside the founding presence of our own culture. That Western founding level continues to be the Greco-Roman, which pervades our references and institutions.

Roman culture follows its mothering Greek culture, from which the Romans drew their artistic themes, their derivative mythography, their sense for the fine detail of literary craftsmanship and statecraft. As it happens, there is a breakthrough of individual literary self-awareness, in Roman culture, at the same cultural point—at a major historical transition—at which it occurred centuries before in Greek culture. I refer to the historical intervention of the Roman personal lyric, and other poetic styles, with their (albeit highly stylized) revelations of the self inside, a kind of intervention we found earlier in Greece, as that culture segued, in the sixth century B.C., from epic mode (a 'shame culture') to democratic mode (a 'guilt culture'), from epic to lyric poetry. Roman culture's transition from the late Republic into the early Empire ushers in a period rich in salient artistic personalities ready (in their ways) to 'write about themselves.' The synecdoche of these two periods--6th century B.C. Greece; 1st century B.C./A.D. Rome-- puts such lyricists as Archilochos, Sappho, Catullus, Horace, at the center of our analysis. The lyric moment becomes the most expressive outpouring of both Greek and Roman culture, and we need to reflect on the political/economic similarities between the lyric age in Greece (6th century B.C.) and the lyric outpouring of Rome in the the first centuries before and after Christ.

Another challenge to thought—as we construct this syllabus-- is that which leads us out of the classical age altogether into the heady air of a new cultural expression. The transition from the 'old' classical world (both Greek and Roman) into the more familiarly subjective world we know today, is heralded by the writing and thinking of Marcus Aurelius, whose Meditations open up the page to a mature human, at the crosshairs of world history, subtly portraying himself as a texture of concerns, anxieties, and moral convictions. (We will have to feel, already here, an intimacy to us which is new among the texts we will have so far read in this course.) With Marcus Aurelius we encounter a spiritual guide no less modern, and far more subtle, than the latest self-help book in Barnes and Noble. That text opens the first dawn of modernity. That is a beginning. But only a beginning. Saint Augustine, two

centuries later, is the first Christian in our study, and a founder, in the tradition of Platonic and neo-Platonic thinking, of the deepest themes of a new religion. His small book, *The Confessions* (397 A.D.), distills the intensity of a new life perspective, opens a vibrant and penitent person to us, and gives us the sense, for the first time, that the ancient classical world is the other. With Augustine we open onto the kind of autobiography to which the western tradition is now accustomed—the opening of the heart, the disclosure of personal details, the personal response to the impersonal world.

Readings: Mary Beard and John Henderson, *Classics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2000)

### **Cicero** (106-43 B.C.) Letters

Historical context determining many traits of human self-awareness, we will agree in advance that the three centuries separating Xenophon from Cicero saw changes in culture which would sharply inflect writers' autobiographical self-images. Such, of course, is true of the cultural space separating Cicero from Xenophon, a space in which the formative dominance of Greek culture, in the Eastern Mediterranean, was replaced by that of Rome, the new power center. The Eternal City replaced the increasingly fractious city states of Hellas, and the Empire of Alexander (356-323). So portentous was this cultural change, for the issues foremost in this course, that a culture in which the abstract and general was prioritized was being replaced by one in which the individual was being given that priority; in short, a cultural change was brewing which, though hardly to be fleshed out in a brief syllabus like this, was to undergird a change in the mode of the writing self as it moves into self-accounts, autobiography. We will have occasion to remark on this large scale change, as we consider the Roman literary persona in the first years of the Empire—and of course as we move, in our final section on Saint Augustine, into Christian registers of self-expression.

Viewed in political terms, Cicero was living through a chaotic historical period—1st century B.C., 300 years after Xenophon—in which the already hoary Roman Republic, with its traditional Latin virtues and severities, was falling prey to power forces—Caesar, Mark Antony, Brutus were the major players—and Julius Caesar was fatefully to promote himself to dictator status. Cicero, who was of aristocratic family and publically involved—equally brilliant as politician, lawyer, orator, and writer—found himself immersed in the struggles of his time, which ultimately led to his murder, but on the way elicited from him so prominent a public presence that many think him to have been the most formative Roman personage of his time; acquainted with all the power players, a trial lawyer handling cases central to the strategies of government and its foes, a man serving, both as quaestor and then as consul, at the highest administrative level of the Republic.

Cicero's Letters, which he did not write for publication, concern us this week, and will provide a window into a whole personality—politician, lawyer, father, orator, philosopher all in one—with a bewildering life fullness which makes us feel, coming from the Greek autobiography we have been reading, as if we are coming into a new universe. (Have we, among the personally rather reticent Greeks we read, encountered anything like the personal revelations Cicero offers us?) What are the topics of these letters? Political issues, such burning topics as the rise of Caesar as dictator, and the shaping of an opposition to him; the issues raised by the import of Greek philosophy and education into the training of the Roman gentleman; the wonders of filial love, as Cicero feels it toward his beloved daughter Tullia, whose death in 45 B.C. broke his spirit; Cicero's growing conflict with his wife, Terentia, with whom he seems never to have been in love, and whom he divorced, after thirty years of marriage, when he was sixty three—to marry a young girl for her money. What Greek of the ancient past do we know under these different phases? No need to enlarge usage, in order to view this material as autobiographical.

Readings: Cicero's Letters

Suggested Translation: Evelyn Shuckburgh, *The Letters of Cicero* (London, 1908-09)

Questions:

1 We referred earlier to the question of genres, and now with renewed force the generic question arises: is it relevant, and if so how, that an autobiography is being generated in letters—as distinct from being generated in lyric poetry, say, or in the writing of history? What kind of autobiography gets created through letters? Do you know autobiographies in letters, in our time? How do they compare with Cicero's work in letters?



2 How do you explain the difference in self-presentation which announces itself so dramatically in the historical space dividing Cicero from Xenophon? Is self-expression in autobiography so tightly linked to the environing political-economic milieu, that a period of three centuries, even in a single broad geographical area, could undergird such change?

3 What kind of autobiographical construction of the self is letter-writing? Are letters—I mean old fashioned pen and ink or stylus-and-wax- tablet letters—creative imaginative documents? Can they be a genuine literary form? Or is the pressure of the audience, the intended receiver, too intense in letters to allow for the movements of higher imagination? Have you favorite letter writers, from closer to our own time, who have on you the effect of literary art?

### **Catullus** (84-54 B.C.) Lyrics

Catullus was born in Verona of a prosperous family, and, like Cicero and most of the accomplished Romans we are considering here, spent his life interacting with and moulding his equally aristocratic age mates. (Like Cicero, and the entire elite clique we refer to here--Tibullus, Propertius, Juvenal--Catullus was educated on and in Greek literature, and drew many of his values, including his aesthetic, from these Greek forebears.) The entry of Catullus, onto the scene of highly sophisticated poetry, was natural, given his genius and the support of a clique of neoteri, bright young fellow poets from the north of Italy. From within this setting Catullus rapidly distinguished himself, and managed within a short life—thirty or so years seems to suffice for prodigies like John Keats, Leopardi, or Shelley –to set fire to the possibilities inherent in his language.

The lyric work, onto which Catullus poured his skill, passion, and vitriol, is quick to establish him as autobiography in language, free and direct in his sentiments, and with little desire to conceal.

The body of Catullus' work falls into a number of thematic categories—invectives, Alexandrian epyllia (so called), poems to dear friends, passionate love poems, and poems of condolence, of which the one addressed to his brother (#101), is especially touching. Within these themes, and in a dressy variety of meters which conform to various lyric 'moods,' Catullus establishes a poetic personality of extraordinary openness, complexity, and fire. What kind of autobiography is established by the lyric has already been discussed in connection with the Greek lyric—'three characterful individuals speaking in their own voices'—and no precise answer. It is apparent that the classical lyric expresses an individual self—through the optic of a transformative metric and a rich inheritance of techniques—and is not to be confused, for instance, with the freer lyrics of Western European Romanticism—Hugo, Vigny, Wordsworth—where the free (but careful) flow of feelings is given its head. It is significant, in that regard, that one of Catullus' masterpieces (#51) is a translation of Sappho's passionate lyric addressing the lucky person who is seated beside her lover, a proximity she (the poet) would treasure but would find intolerably intense. 'That fellow seems the same as a god, /seems, if I may, to excel the gods,/ as he sits beside you and at one time/watches and hears you...' The powerful positioning device, by which the narrator accumulates a rare intensity around the beauty of the beloved, is a brilliantly literal squeeze of Sappho. You will want, again here, to sift through the meanings of 'autobiography,' for clearly Catullus is 'telling us about himself' but he is doing so in a subtly performative way, not in any kind of life-detail narration. The same positioning in artifice shines through such different virtuositities of self as poems # 64, the Marriage of Peleus and Thetis, and #97, a powerful example of 'invective.' In the Marriage epyllion, Catullus observes an intricate box within box structure, with plentiful mythological scope and an ultimate conclusion, that our age is fallen and is abandoned by the gods—a conclusion often echoed in ancient texts, and already familiar to us here from our reading of Hesiod. (How elliptically Catullus brings us around, here, to himself as viewpoint!) In #97 we find the same charged skill brought to bear on an unfortunate victim of Catullus' contempt. How could Catullus have more powerfully expressed what he himself felt and was? How could he have done it with more adroitness of scorn, than by describing a foe whose mouth 'has half a yard of gums that grate like wagon crates;/ it widens as, in summer, split in two, the cunt of a pissing mule will do.'

Reading: Catullus, Lyrics

Suggested Translation: A.S. Kline, Catullus, The Poems,  
<http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Catullus.htm>

Classics in Translation, (Vol. II), edited by MacKendrick and Howe (Madison, 1959) , is an excellent recourse for orienting yourself in Latin poetry.

Questions:

1 We marked a wide cultural gap between Xenophon's self-presentation and that of Cicero, two and a half centuries later. Do you have that 'gap' sense at all when you step from the world of Sappho, Archilochos, and Solon into that of Catullus? Does Catullus deal with a wider range of themes, and in a broader palette of moods, than his Greek predecessors? Or would you attribute whatever differences there are in this case to the relatively more fragmentary state of the Greek lyric poets' texts?

2 Catullus' passionate love poems are addressed to 'Lesbia,' about whose identity there is some doubt—though she was clearly a high flying society woman, and the spouse of a powerful political figure. Many of Catullus' poems refer to this woman, for whom he felt great passion. What kind of passion did he feel? Is it 'romantic passion'? Is it purely physical? Does Catullus seem to you similar to Archilochos, in the physical passion he expresses?

3 You have read several registers of Catullus' poetry: regret poetry, elaborate mythographic poems, long and super subtle, and invective. Do you have a sense of Catullus, in his poetry, as a whole individual sensibility? Do you see some similarities between Catullus and Cicero, as analysts of human passions? What kind of autobiography is Catullus creating, as he builds his poetic testimony? Have you acquired a sense of what kind of person he is?

### **Horace (65-8 B.C.) Poems**

By two of his earliest translators into English, Lonsdale and Lee (1874), Horace has been called the first autobiographer, and while we clearly dispute that view, in this course, our quarrel with the view may be partly semantic, and in any case does not prevent our seeing some truth in the point. Horace is the first Western writer to sit back, albeit in highly curried verse forms, borrowed from Greek masters, and to tell us about his life (a little), his viewpoints (a lot), the world in which he is living (a good deal), and his views on art, his aesthetic (a lot.) The sum of these disclosures is a fairly rounded personality impression—known in more aspects than Catullus, though subtler to characterize than Catullus—and as engagingly human as Cicero, with whom he competes in drawing our attention to a new sensibility, the Roman, in which the 'modern individual' we Westerners know and are is visible.

The poems left to us by Horace—odes, epodes, iambs—range from startlingly dirty invectives or erotic poems to reflections on art, beauty, and the good life, and carry out their single mission in meters transported from Greek—Archilochos and Sappho are major sources—which Horace had learned to master during his study years in Athens. What kind of man does Horace think he is, in these poems of many sorts? He 'thinks he is' a simple man, son of a freedman who selflessly pursued his son's education, ultimately shaping his ear and sensibility; he thinks of himself, as he ages, as a man enjoying his privacy and the peace of the countryside—Epodes # 2, Odes #3. 1 in which he opens with the famous *odi profanum vulgus et arceo*, I hate the vulgar crowd, and avoid it; Odes 2.18 on the vanity of riches, 2.14 on the shortness of life, I. 11 on the unpredictability of life and the case for a joyful/Stoic *carpe diem* philosophy—

Even now, whilst we are talking,  
Grudging time pursues his flight:  
Use today, and trust as little  
As thou mayst tomorrow's light...;

he is a man whose sexual passions are much tamer than those of Catullus, and who considers himself, at forty, past the 'age of interest' IV, 1; who creates an *Ars Poetica*, an account of what makes for value in art, which is of pertinence to our day—and was his last published work, in 13 B.C., as well as a splendid poem, III.30, in which he declares that he will not wholly die, because his art, the fruit of his leisure and care, will survive.

What we have, by and large, is the testimony of a life-loving but careful—no Catullus he—gentleman, at home on the major power levels of society (his patron, Maecenas, was Rome's wealthiest supporter of the arts), happy in his country home and the surrounding scenes of nature which he loves, devoted to his art, exquisitely sensitive to

language, and on the whole at peace with the human condition. There is no contesting that we have here, in sharply turned and learned verse forms, the unsystematic account of a whole life.

And all this living was gone through over a period of 57 years of civil strife and soon Civil War, strongman turf battles on the governing level—Caesar, Pompey, Crassus; Brutus, Antony—world shaping events like Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon in 49 B.C. or the battle of Philippi, in 42 B.C., which set the stage for the Imperium of Augustus, the institution of a new form of government and eventually of society, a heralding of unparalleled consequence for modern western humanity. It was Horace's genius, and indeed a byproduct of his personality and values, that he was enabled to escape fairly tranquil and unscathed, though far from uninstructed, by these world formative events.

Suggested Translations: A.S.Kline, <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Horacehome.htm>  
Kraemer, Casper, Jr., *The Complete Works of Horace* (New York, 1936)

Questions:

1 Horace lives and writes during the very heart of Rome's political/military/social revolution, and yet in many places he writes of the beauties of art, the wonders of the integral life—the poem *integer vitae exemplum* exemplifies this theme—and of the removed pleasures of the countryside, praising his own suburban mansion, in Rome, for being *rus in urbe*, the countryside in the city. Do you read Horace as attempting to counterbalance, in his poetry, the unsettled world he is living in? Does he form his poetic autobiography as a defense against the world?

2 Does Horace's *Ars Poetica* seem to you an aesthetic theory drawn from his own work? Does his *Ars Poetica* exemplify his aesthetic, written as it is in poetry? These two questions may seem to stray from the autobiographical issue, but they do not. Does Horace write with self-consciousness, does he seem to know himself, perhaps to a degree not found in Catullus or the Greek lyric poets?

3. It was often claimed, in classical antiquity, that although local wars eventually sapped Greek power, and made the Greek city state a natural victim for the ascendant power of Rome, in the end the Romans were conquered by those whom they defeated. The reference here is to the overwhelming power of Greek culture, as it passes over into the Roman Republic and Empire. We have seen that Horace writes with virtuosity in a variety of Greek meters. Does it seem to you that the persona Horace is creating, as he builds his autobiography in language, is heavily indebted to Greek culture? Does your reading in Greek autobiography suggest any parallel to the work and life of Horace?

4. What are you learning, from this course, about orality/writing/printing issues in the formation of ancient Classical Literature? How did the Greeks and Romans create canons of their literary values? Who controlled the means of production when it came to the written word? Who, and when, determined the texts to be canonized as of defining value for the two civilizations? Will we understand classical autobiography more fully, as we understand the answer to questions like these?

2. Horace, Catullus, and Cicero all write from a tumultuous social-political period. (In the ancient classical world there is one other example of such a potent transition, from older to newer values, and that is the transition from the epic to the 'lyric' age of Greece, in the seventh and sixth centuries.) Does that period reflect similarly in the works of the three men? Which man is the most deeply imprinted by his age?

3. Both Horace and Catullus indulge in 'invective poems.' These are not Romantic or erotic poems, but 'scurrilous physical attacks,' in which, in language, the other person is delivered over to scorn. (References to body odors and sexual proclivities abound.) Do these language efforts raise a red flag, alerting you to the strong presence of ANOTHER CULTURE? Or does the poetry of our time include the scurrilous?

**Ovid** (43 B.C.-17 A.D.) Poems : *Tristia*; Letters from Pontus

The figure of Augustus Caesar, who became Emperor of Rome in 27 B.C., and ruled until his death in 14 A.D., was a powerful tone setter for the cultural milieu in which Ovid grew up. Ovid was born in Sulmo, ninety miles from Rome, and with the support of his father, who, like Horace's dad, pushed himself to provide a fine education for his son, he became deeply immersed in the study of poetry and Greek. (Ovid was said, anecdotally, to have spoken in dactyls, the classic meter of Latin and Greek poetry, from infancy on.) Though Ovid's father pushed for his son's political career, Ovid himself was born for poetry, and though he undertook minor administrative jobs, and

underwent legal training, his chief interest was in the language of the legal profession, not in the procedures. His decision for poetry was made the easier by his early popular success—the *Amores* were published when he was twenty, and were the talk of the town—and by his acquaintance with significant literary figures like Virgil, Propertius, and Tibullus. Rooted in Roman life, married—he was married three times, the last one the true mainstay of his life—he went on to major literary successes—especially *The Metamorphoses*, a catalogue of mythical figures who had passed into natural forms, and the *Ars Amatoria*—and to a position, along with Virgil and Propertius, as Rome’s leading literary figure. (A position of eminence which was to play out through subsequent literary history, in which Ovid became formative for poetry in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.) In the midst of this ‘successful life’ a blow descended on Ovid; in 8 A.D. he fell victim to the wrath of the dictator—and sometimes dictatorial—Emperor Augustus, who sentenced Ovid to ‘relegation,’ who ‘relegated’ Ovid to exile in the (to the Roman) fairly barbarous outpost of Tomis on the Black Sea. (It is the present day resort town of Constanza, on the Black Sea.) There Ovid was to pass his remaining years, far from the culture he depended on, and surrounded by a people so foreign to Ovid that they dressed in skins, lived by bow hunting, and barely spoke Latin. And all that for an offense to the Emperor which we cannot fully understand, though Ovid attributes it to an ‘error’ and to a ‘song,’ a *carmen*. The explanatory theories around this ‘relegation’ cannot delay us here, for our point has to be this: during the twenty five years of Ovid’s exile he created two long verse essays, the *Tristia* and *The Letters from Pontus*, into which he pours his genius and disappointment, and in one of which, *Tristia IV. x*, he includes a 132 line autobiography. That autobiography incorporates, in classical hexameters, virtually all the limited information we have about Ovid’s life. This is the first text in classical literature that packages concisely, into a single area, what we might almost call a poetic resume. You will, therefore, want to give special attention to the way Ovid presents himself, though you may conclude, ultimately, that he is hardly revealing more from the inside than do Catullus and Horace, in more diffuse mode.

Reading: Ovid, *Tristia* and *Letters from Pontus*

Suggested Translation: A.S. Kline, cited above for his translations of Catullus and Horace, has translated (online) all the major works of Ovid.

Questions:

1 What is the dominant tone of Ovid’s autobiography? Is he humiliated or unbowed? Does his pride in his achievements, as a writer, console him for the punishment he is suffering? Does he divulge his personality as fully, in this explicit ‘autobiography,’ as he does in his poetry, say *The Ars Amatoria*, where his unbridled wit and fascination with the *eros* game give glimpses of a full self?

2 Many of our inquiries into classical autobiography have been into verse texts—Hesiod, the Greek lyricists, Catullus, Horace, and now Ovid, a poet’s poet, a supreme master of the dactylic meter. While it is a limitation of our course, that we must read all texts in translation, we can through translation think out an important issue: in what way is the autobiographical project inflected by being created in poetry? Does poetry, in itself, shape and define the kind of autobiography created?

3 In Ovid’s poetry the split between the cultured life of the Big City and the ‘barbaric’ life of the out back is vividly lived. Ovid is truly an exile, and, unlike Horace, Catullus, or Cicero spends many years exposed to a deeply foreign culture. (He is the first autobiographer in our class to live in such foreignness; though Herodotus visits the deeply foreign he does not live in it, only passes through and observes.) How does Ovid deal with this aspect of exile? Does he discover anything new? Or does he remain the Roman City poet? Does Ovid’s exiled condition contribute significantly to his autobiographical image?

**Statius** (40-94 A.D.) *Silvae*

Statius was born into modest circumstances in Naples. His father was a *grammaticus*, a teacher of poetry and augury, and himself an active poet. (Statius’ father, like those of Horace and Ovid, was a devoted supporter of his son’s education, and did all he could to assure the boy a firm foundation in Greek and poetry.) Both father and son were to be regular participants in the poetry festivals—like today’s poetry ms. competitions—which were regular and popular events in Rome during the period of the Flavian Emperors (69-96A.D.), and which pitted leading poetic voices in both full scale and impromptu combat, again as in a poetry slam today. Statius became by this route a hanger-on with people of wealth, who admired and valued his verse. A natural genius with the

hexameter, like Ovid, Statius was renowned for virtuoso impromptu poems, which he could pull up on the spot for a potentially interested patron; and not surprisingly he was an excellent eulogizer of Emperors, and particularly of the mediocre Emperor Domitian (86-96 A.D.), whose military and poetic exploits vied with one another—Statius' formula—for divine approval.

In his lifetime Statius was widely known both for his *Silvae* (89-96 A.D.), a collection of diverse hexameter poems on scenes of nature, events in Rome, and on the consolations available for those who lose their loved ones—and for *The Thebaid* (80-92 A.D.), a major epic derivative from Greek myths, and concerning the theme of the Seven against Thebes, around which Aeschylus had created a great drama. Much of Statius' work is highly polished and displays what to us seems purely formal feeling, but at certain points, as in his love poem to his wife, in his long eulogy for his late father V.3., or for his favorite slave V.5., he touches us deeply, and shows us his true face with as much ingenuousness as the intricately orchestrated hexameter lines permit. We are in these places as affected by the power of autobiography, as we are in the presence of Sappho's declarations of passion, or of Archilochos' erotic poetic electricity, at the very thought of Neoboule.

Readings: Statius, *Silvae*

Suggested Translation: Betty Rose Nagle, *The Silvae of Statius* (Bloomington, 2004).

Questions:

1 Autobiography in intricate, metrically deft and allusive poetry, chuck full of mythological references and exquisitely deft turns of phrase! Is it possible to put forth your life in such a way, in such a medium? How would you answer this question for the case of Statius' work in the *Silvae*?

2 We have not paid much attention to the economics of literary support, in the ancient texts for this course? How does Statius put bread on the table, so that he can express his feelings intricately onto the tablet? How does he address the Emperor of the day, especially Domitian? Did Horace, Catullus, and Ovid have patrons? Did working for a patron strongly influence a poet's creations?

3 From Cicero to Statius—by way of Horace, Catullus and Ovid—we have seen that Rome is the dominant center for writing and cultural activity. We have referred to the collegiality between our selected poets and coteries of writers with whom they exchange ideas and inspiration. Are such creative communities points at which the self grows conscious, and in which the conditions for autobiography are created?

### **Pliny, (61-114 A.D.) Letters**

Not to be confused with an uncle, author of a renowned *Natural History*, Pliny the Younger enters history's pages as a prolific letter writer, an epistolary autobiographer who lays himself on the table, who has left hundreds of letters recording his own extensive public experience, both as a distinguished barrister and as a Senator appointed by the Emperor Trajan to supervise the Province of Bithynia. Less human in his letters than Cicero (Week 7), Pliny writes formally and seasons his messages with news of the day, remarks on his responsibilities, his affections, his life among important ruling figures, his work in the supremely distinguished post of augur, State Diviner, and his three marriages. All these events provide rich texts, and offer a prolonged look at the Roman man of state in this period when the Empire is still shaky from now century old problems of transition from the Republic. Among the letters of both lasting and local interest are Pliny's domestic vignettes—the combined pleasures of hunting and writing (I,vi), the joys of country peace away from the city (I, ix), his praise of the ideal gentleman, in the person of the philosopher Euphrates (I, x), his discussion of suicide (I, xii), his pleasure in hosting a guest to a fine tuned dinner (I, xv), his ample and fascinating description of his villa seventeen miles outside Rome (II, xvii)—and his major descriptions of two widely different historical events, the eruption of Mount Vesuvius (VI, xvi; VI, xx) and his encounters with Christians, in his role as Governor of Bithynia (X, 96). Some of these letters deal with events of world moment, others with 'daily life,' but in either case the author is audible, almost visible sometimes, behind his text, and no more eager than Cicero to cloak himself in the fine robes of disguising art.

Having said this, we have of course not sketched the outer profile of the person behind this language. With Pliny, as with Cicero, life in the public sphere is the oxygen of thought and action. Pliny, like Horace, Catullus, and Ovid, was privileged to receive a distinguished Roman education, indeed to study rhetoric under Quintilian. By the age of

eighteen Pliny made his first appearance at the bar—he too was a brilliant orator and trial lawyer, like Cicero. In 100 A.D., after surviving the reign of terror under the Emperor Domitian, and after having occupied an important administrative position in Rome, as supervisor of River Banks and Sewers, Pliny was made consul by the Emperor Trajan. He died in 115 A.D, a full life behind him, and one which he had assiduously translated into an immortal design, a soul in language.

Readings: The Letters of the Younger Pliny

Suggested Translation: Betty Radice, *The Letters of the Younger Pliny* (London, 1963)

Questions:

1 What is the special character of letters as vehicle of autobiography? Is it not significant that the letter is a transaction between writer and intended receiver—a transaction involving a situational background--in which a distinctive kind of intimacy is evoked? How does Pliny use this vehicle, to bring out his own personal traits in the course of writing? Is he conscious of ‘talking about himself,’ or does he simply ‘reveal’ himself by what he ‘says’ in letters?

2 How does Pliny’s autobiographical presentation compare to that of Cicero? Cicero, it seems, did not write his letters for publication, while Pliny did; how does this difference in motive play out on the page? More than a century separates the letter writings of the two men. Do you see the marks of their different historical moments in the autobiographies they make of themselves?

3 Does autobiography, as we see it in Pliny the Younger, serve as an effective historical record, as well as a personal record? When Pliny describes the eruption of Vesuvius is he writing both about himself and about the eruption? Where, in Pliny’s account of the eruption, does his account of himself enter?

**Marcus Aurelius**, ( 121-180 A.D.) *Meditations* (170-180 A.D)

Marcus Aurelius was born during the reign of Hadrian, and grew up on the highest echelons of imperial society. (It is worth considering that all of the Roman writers considered here were born into comfort, and most into wealth and privilege. Among the Greeks we read, Hesiod was a modest farmer, Archilochos a merchant soldier, Herodotus son of a prosperous but upper middle businessman.) At the age of seventeen Marcus was adopted by the newly enthroned Emperor Antoninus Pius--whose daughter became Marcus’ first wife- and in 161 Marcus himself was crowned Emperor, a role he worked with until his death in 181. (From the ages of seventeen to forty, when he became Emperor, Marcus Aurelius was learning the ropes of administration and governance in the rapidly growing empire, which by this time included what to the Romans seemed ‘all the known world.’) While the Emperor was immensely busy with his new post, fighting against various unfriendly barbarians, in the East of the Empire, he was, as he aged, increasingly scribbling (marvelous prose) into his day book.

The *Meditations*, the name we give to this scribbled text, are antiquity’s richest revelation of personal philosophy—think Sir Thomas More or Henry David Thoreau—as distinct from the other genres of self-revelation visited in this course—the letters, poems, histories, poetic accounts. The frame of the Emperor’s self-presentation is Stoic reflections on life; the unique profile of a gentleman philosopher, experienced in a fallen world, radiates from these pages. What comes from these ruminations is what the Romans viewed as the ultimate in philosophy, the central function of which was to substantiate moral ideas. You will want to think, as you read these ‘meditations’ in light of our course, about what kind of autobiography is created by this kind of thinking. Does it matter what the idea-content of the meditations is, or is that content what Marcus Aurelius himself is, and is showing us?

The discussion in Marcus Aurelius’ text is carried out informally, leaves and returns to ideas, then undercuts its ‘ideas’ sufficiently to preclude any strain of didacticism. Yet the self-portrait of Marcus turns around compelling self-images as a Stoic, that is as an inheritor of a post- classical Greek school of thought founded by Zeno of Elea at the beginning of the third century B.C. The central themes of this school will leave no doubt of themselves—follow reason, which will be a key to following nature; suffer all events as they come, confident they are guided by a meaning; discipline your emotions; cross check all the petty claims of your ego (jealousy, greed, above all anger); treat all humans as equal, bringing no judgment except the presenting of the best behavior you yourself are; enjoy fellowship; rest confident in the awareness that all things pass away, and are left to the disposition of the order of the

universe. What renders this compilation of thoughts live, and leads many to consider this the finest ancient autobiographical text, is that Aurelius allows enriching tones, into his perspective, which allow him to self-portray as a person both noble and complex. Maxwell Staniforth, in the introduction suggested below, remarks that ‘the varying moods of hope and depression, the sensitive shrinking from disagreeable associates and sights of blood, the repressed but evident longing for sympathy and affection—these are not the signs of a temper cast in the antique Stoic mould.’ (p. 21). It is as though the precepts Aurelius makes of himself are playing out against the very sub-thematic moods the precepts are meant to combat. The person surging at that point of conflict is the noblest of the Roman Emperors.

Readings: Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

Suggested Translation: Maxwell Staniforth, *Marcus Aurelius Meditations* (New York, 1964).

Questions:

1 We have discussed whether, and in what sense, lyric poetry is the establishment of an autobiography, and we can pose the same question about the kind of informal moral philosophic writing we find in Marcus Aurelius. Is this kind of philosophizing writing your autobiography or showing yourself as the figure that can be taken as your autobiography in motion?

2 Does Marcus Aurelius portray himself as a humble figure, and if so does he thus mark a departure from the ancient themes prominent earlier in this course? (Is any of the earlier Greco-Roman autobiographers humble: Solon has his *gravitas*, Cicero has his *dignitas*, Pliny and Horace have their ‘rustic modesties,’ but is any of the Roman poets ‘humble,’ or interested in ‘humility’?) Does not Marcus revel in the awareness of his own fragility and temporary hold on life, and does that reveling not constitute a pleasure in humility?

3 Does Marcus Aurelius’ self-account include a view of himself as a lover of the beautiful, as well as of the good? Consider Book IV, section 20, of the *Meditations*. Is the beautiful just what things are by their nature? Is Marcus Aurelius presenting himself as a lover of beauty, as he respects each thing’s realization of its own nature?

**Saint Augustine**, (354-430 A.D.) *Confessions* (397-398)

Saint Augustine was born in present day Thagaste, forty five miles south of the Mediterranean coast in present day Tunisia. He was, thus, an African, but from a North Africa which was a province and dependency of the Roman Empire; no longer the confident Empire of the time, say, of Marcus Aurelius, but an Empire already under threat from non-Roman ‘hordes’ on the Eastern border.

In his youth Augustine enjoyed a thorough classical education but was drawn to the pleasures of the flesh—a woman he loved, who bore him a child, and to whom he remained sexually faithful—and to the thought of a sect prominent and influential in North Africa, the Manicheans. Embedded in the world of those involvements, he started a school of Rhetoric in Carthage—the kind of study drawing all the Roman writers we have introduced earlier—but he found himself appalled by the hooligan behavior of his pupils, and thereupon decided to undertake a teaching career in the mother country, Italy, a career which soon (384 A.D.)—because his brilliance early on attracted the intellectuals of Rome—won him a Professorship in Milan, and with it the opportunity to meet the first religious sensibility that made sense to him and inspired him, the equally brilliant Saint Ambrose. Under the influence of this new Italian milieu he was won over to Catholicism in 386, and baptized in 387. (In 313 the Emperor Constantine had issued the Edict of Milan, which conferred legal and privileged status on Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire.) In 388 Augustine returned from Italy to Africa, and in 395 he was appointed Bishop of Hippo, where he remained for the rest of his life, writing and preaching voluminously, and proving himself a master of both prose and theological genius in works like *The Confessions* (397-398) and *The City of God* (early fifth century). Augustine is the first Christian to appear on our syllabus, and we will pay attention to this spiritual change and the new conception of autobiography. Many new regions of self-investigation are opened up by the Christian perspective.

What are *The Confessions*? They are the text in which Augustine recounts his youth, his gradual breaking from sensuality—marriage, the dualism of the Manichaeans—his Italian peregrinations leading to a Professorship in Milan, the encounter with Ambrose, conversion, and, at the very end of the text (397 A.D. in real time) his baptism

and the death of his beloved mother, Monica. Is this recounting an autobiography in any of the multiple senses we have been giving the term earlier in the course?

Maria Boulding, the recommended translator of *The Confessions*, writes that we are not ‘reading autobiography in the modern sense. Few modern writers of autobiography...would relentlessly take us through page after exhausting page about the nature of memory, the mystery of time...He referred to his work as “the thirteen books of my confessions.”’ The two operative senses of confession here—as the translator continues—are a retailing of sins, and a praising of God. From the start of the text, these two senses are fused. The sins offered to the reader are made namable, by Augustine, through the grace of God, whom he praises for having made those sins visible to this sinner—thus of course saving Augustine from unresolved Hell.

Readings: Saint Augustine, *Confessions*

Suggested Translation: Maria Boulding, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* (New York, 1998)

Questions:

1 Does Augustine belong in the lineage of autobiographies that we have been tracing in earlier classical literature, or does his confessional presentation move into new territory, which reflects his Christian faith? Do we feel he is establishing, toward us as reader, a self-presentational style which differs from that of the Greco Roman tradition?

2 In such poets as Archilochus or Catullus or Horace we see a readiness to lay personal cards on the table, in the form of lyrical discourse. Is that kind of laying out of cards at all what Augustine decides to do, in *The Confessions*? Is Augustine talking to you and me, the readers, or to the inner voice he names God?

3 Marcus Aurelius is concerned, in the *Meditations*, with ‘making his behavior better,’ with growing closer to perfection in his personal life. That preoccupation hardly seems present in any of the earlier classical autobiographical writing we have read, but it is clearly present, in fact dominant, in the work of *The Confessions*. How does Augustine’s autobiographical quest for perfection differ from that of Marcus Aurelius?

4 We suggested earlier that literary genre plays a role in shaping autobiographical texts. How many literary genres have we worked with—epic, lyric, history, epistle, prose meditation, confession—and which seemed (seem) to you especially propitious for the construction of autobiography?

5 Do the autobiographers we have read often take us inside their erotic or romantic lives? Which ones do? What is the effect, on an autobiography, of the incorporation of the beloved or significant other? Does that incorporation enrich the autobiographical text?

6 Viewed as a whole, are the autobiographies reviewed in this course profoundly distant from what we would read, today, from someone of our own moment? Which of the ancient biographies seem to you most distant from us, from another age? Which closest? Is temporal proximity to us the key to intelligibility to us?

7 Apart from Augustine—for the instance is too evident—do the autobiographers we have reviewed feel easy with showing us their inmost feelings? Do we hear much of sadness, loss, anxiety? Please cite examples of such ‘inmost feelings’ in our texts.

8 Each of our autobiographers is embedded in history—we all are. Which of these writers seem to you most conscious of the historical world they are in? How do they see themselves in that world? Which writers seem most nearly to be writing in a historical vacuum?



Recommended Readings (The Loeb Classical Library, published by Harvard University Press, has for over a century been assembling a complete series of bilingual--Greek and English; Latin and English-- volumes of all the significant literary work remaining to us from ancient Greek and Latin literature. Those volumes are a convenient source for the readings of our course; they can be found in most larger libraries, and are reliable. Be it said, though, that the translations provided in those volumes are sometimes good, but often only 'scholarly'. You can read all our texts in the Loeb version, as a default move, but I will indicate preferred translations for each week-- preferred meaning 'lively,' 'contemporary' but not necessarily more 'scholarly' than the Loeb version. Note, of course, that most of the material for this course can be accessed on line, sometimes in the "preferred translation," sometimes not. A Google search will inevitably generate many alternate translation choices, for the readings of this course. Suit your taste, pocketbook, and good sense in these matters, and remember that newness is not necessarily a virtue in translations from the Classics.)

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## 5. ESSAY

### HISTORY

Livy (59 B.C.-17 A.D.)

Tacitus (56 A.D.-117 A.D.)

### HISTORY

**Overview** Cultural self-awareness, the construction of something like national self-consciousness, depends on a group's historical consciousness. You have to know where you have been, as a group or nation, before you can know who you are. The same with an individual person. You have to know your own background, personality, temper, talents and weaknesses, and you need to know them as part of the living narrative which you are. An individual, like a state, comes together around such self-awareness.

**The historians of Ancient Rome** There was an abundance of historians in ancient Rome, many of them today virtually unknown, and remaining only as references, or in almost illegible fragments. Four of the most influential are these:

**Sallust** Sallust (86 B.C.E.--35 B.C.E.) was a man of middle class origins, a populist of a sort, and a strong partisan of Julius Caesar. His ruling theme was the moral decline of the Roman state and its citizens; a position he maintained undisturbed by his own felonious past. He is perhaps best known to us for his study of the Catilinarian conspiracy (63 B.C.); his interest in which, apparently, was chiefly to exonerate his ally Julius Caesar from any complicity.

**Livy** Livy (59 B.C.E.-17 C.E.) Livy is known for one great work, *Ab Urbe Condita (From the time of the Founding of the City)*, an history of the Roman state, chiefly the Republic, through to the imperial accession of Augustus. The work was of wide interest, sparking followers of the craft of history, and setting a model for both anecdotal and chronological history writing.

**Tacitus** Tacitus (58 C.E.-120 C.E.) was a masterful historian of Imperial Rome from the death of Augustus (14 C.E.) to the Roman-Jewish conflict of 70 C.E. His two great works, *The Histories* (105 C.E.) and *The Annals* (117 C.E.), are preoccupied with the events and intricacies of the courts of the Emperors Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero. He plumbs every depth of the human heart, in a period when corruption was rife and baroque.

**Ammianus Marcellinus** Ammianus (330-400 C.E.) was a Roman soldier and historian, whose lengthy *Res Gestae (Events; Deeds)* essentially covers the history of Rome from where Tacitus left off, to the death of the Emperor Valens (370 C.E.) Ammianus has provided the foundation of much of what we know of fourth century Rome.

### Readings

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### Discussion questions

The Roman historians were famously conscious of their Greek historian predecessors as models. Do you see the work of Thucydides or Herodotus in the major Roman historians?

What kinds of self-image did the Roman historians bring into their work?  
Does each of them mark his history with a distinctive personal trademark? Explain.

What kind of training did the Roman historians have, in writing history? Did they go to graduate school? Did they learn from predecessors? Did they learn from life?

## Livy (59 B.C.-17 A.D.)

**Virgil and Livy.** As we are working through Roman literature on the basis of types of imagination, we should note how ‘history’ differs from the historical epic of Virgil, which might at first glance seem also to be ‘history.’ In fact the *Aeneid* and the works of Livy might also seem to intersect as works of poetry, for we will find, on reading our Livy, that in his story telling mode of history writing he differs greatly from what an age like ours would consider ‘scientific writing of history.’

Apart from the formal matter of prosody itself—Livy in prose, Virgil in highly self-conscious dactyls, which breathe a line by line dialogue with Homer’s own verses—Virgil may be said to thread his material with vision, a purposiveness centered on getting the founder of a new Rome to his destination, while Livy narrates historical material that is itself anecdotal and digressive, though like Virgil Livy too has an ultimate interest in praising aspects of his own culture, and promoting attention to them. When we come to Tacitus, the following week, we will find a more empirical historian than Livy, and have little trouble in distinguishing the historical from the epic viewpoint. With Livy we need to make our distinctions carefully, between the two genres with which we are opening this syllabus.

**Livy and the world of Augustus.** Like Lucretius and Virgil, though a generation or two later, Livy was born into the turbulent world we have already met, out of which Augustus, formerly Octavian, was to emerge the victor and the first Emperor; the world in which Caesar, Antony, and Pompey had gone down to defeat before the power of historical change.

**Livy’s popularity.** Where Livy was born was relevant to his world view. He was born and raised in the north of Italy, near the present city of Padua, a region traditionally conservative, and accustomed to praise of Old Roman Values. To that viewpoint Livy remained faithful throughout his life, though by the 30’s B.C., when he moved semi-permanently to Rome, he was exposed to the intense new world forming around him, and was in fact a close friend, and distant relative, of the Emperor to be, Augustus. Though Livy’s one surviving work, a *History of Rome From the Founding of the City* (753 B.C.), became a popular text, and indeed a touchstone for his compatriots, as they formulated their own history for themselves, Livy remained in favor with the new imperial culture, the tendencies of which unmistakably moved away from the ‘old simplicity’ and ‘staunch rural values’ which Livy admired in the early centuries of his culture.

**Annals and Traditional History.** The history Livy constructs was by his time part of ancient oral tradition, as well as of written histories by predecessors whose works are now lost. His history opens with the founding of the city of Rome by Aeneas—the same narrative as Virgil’s—and is left to us in three main sections, devoted, respectively, to the origins of Roman culture, various consulships in the sixth century B.C., and then incidents in the political history of Livy’s own time. We might say, today, that the way Livy’s historical mind works—a mixture of annals, which report the administrative leaders of the Republic for each year, with critical narration of traditional material—is cunning in its human perceptions but naive in its ‘notion of historical method.’ An example may help us nail down this point.

**Roman origin tales.** Origin tales are central to Livy’s *History*, which begins credently with the tale of Aeneas’ founding, the same launch point Virgil employed. There follows a sequence of generations, several hundred years, in which peace dominates, the new nation flourishes; but then, as with the struggle of Cain and Abel, conflict comes in, needed to generate the birth pangs of the new world. The struggle pits two brothers, both candidates for the kingship, and turns violent when the younger flouts the rule of seniority, and sets off a train of consequences—it’s an intricate read, here—which eventuates in the rape of a Vestal Virgin, whose twin offspring barely escape the homicidal plans of the wronged king. At this point myth, rather than putative history, enters to divinize the lineages in store for Rome. The twin infants, as we all know, find themselves on the river bank ready to be washed away, when a she-wolf appears, on her way for a drink of the river, gives teat to the babes, saves their lives, and readies them, Romulus and Remus, for a role as the true legislative founders of the Roman State.

**The voice of Livy.** What is the voice of Livy, as he tells this historical tale? In many ways he delights in the telling, and gratefully plugs these hallowed events into the ongoing tale. But Livy is, remember, living more than five centuries after the origin tale, and in a culture of world sophistication, in the milieu of

speakers and creators like Virgil, Cicero, and Catullus. Unable even slightly to wink at us, as he maintains the old tradition, he feels obliged to comment as follows, on the reaction of the Emperor's flock-master, to the advent of the twins in his hut:

*his (the flock master's) name was Faustulus. He took the children to his hut and gave them to his wife Larentia to bring up. Some writers think that Larentia, from her unchaste life, had got the nickname of "She-wolf" amongst the shepherds, and that this was the origin of the marvellous story.*

As an historian, we have said, Livy accepts a mission not wholly different from that of the poet. But he does so with a clear acknowledgement, that he knows how to undercut his tale when he needs to.

Readings: Livy, *The Early History of Rome, Books I-IV, translated by Ogilvie* (London, Penguin, 2002.) Read entire text.

Dorey, T.A., *Livy* (London, 1971.)

Discussion questions:

To what extent are Livy and Virgil similar, in their efforts to reconstruct the origins of Rome through literature? Do they both 'glorify' those origins?

What do you think of the 'historical value' of founding tales—Horace at the Bridge, Romulus and Remus—such as Livy uses to construct the early parts of his history?

Does Livy write as a friend of the new Imperial world, or as an old Roman democrat, fundamentally opposed to the new?

### **Tacitus (58 A.D.-117 A.D.)**

**Livy and Tacitus.** From our reading in Livy we note that the Romans were intensely interested in their own past, which, like all peoples, they manipulated in part for the sake of establishing their national image. This very motive, as we have seen, may parallel that of Virgil, in writing the *Aeneid*—for the Romans of the late first century B.C. were preoccupied with using the past to shape the present and gain power over the future. When we come to the historian Tacitus, however, our account must be different. Tacitus observes human affairs dispassionately, without projecting them into a future where they would acquire their meaning.

**Tacitus and the imperial world.** Tacitus was born well into the imperial period of Rome—Augustus Caesar died in 17 A.D.—and in his most famous works, *The Histories* and *The Annals* he writes directly of his own time, specifically of the Imperial reigns of Tiberius (42 B.C.-37 A.D.), Claudius (10 B.C.-54 A.D.), and Nero (37 A.D.-68 A.D.). His own life brought him into contact with the major players on the political/imperial scene. Born in the provinces—probably in Gallia Narbonensis—Tacitus soon entered political life in Rome, where throughout his career life he was brilliantly active as a Senator/orator, a sought after lawyer in the increasingly litigious atmosphere of imperial Rome, and a provincial governor in the East, where he gained experience and great distinction. In other words, when it came to the dense historical material of the present, Tacitus had much personal awareness to bring to bear. While he proudly commented that he wrote his histories *sine ira et studio, without anger or zeal*, they nonetheless bear the marks of the hot fire of political action. There is no mistaking, in those works, a hatred of tyranny, and a surgical scorn for the kinds of voluptuous infighting which marked the struggles, among the successors of Augustus, to occupy the center of power in Rome.

**Tacitus' style as historian.** The unusual mixture of personal involvement with terse and observant style, a style both intense and withdrawn, forces our attention onto the way Tacitus went about informing himself, as an historian. (We have noted that Livy turned to earlier and anecdotal Roman historians, in constructing his history.) The answer is that Tacitus is both working from his personal experience, and from a consultation of contemporary documents, to which he devotes analytical attention (*sine ira et studio*.) Among his written sources were: the *Acta*, the official records, of the actions of the Roman

senate; copies of official speeches; copies of personal letters to which he had access; the *acta diurnala populi romani*, the official news of daily developments in Rome.

**The Annals.** In *The Annals* Tacitus plunges into the complexities of high level political struggle—for stakes richly involving love and power—the material of a sitcom like *Dallas*, but played out on the stage of Imperial rule. His presentation of the Death of Agrippina, the mother of Nero, shows his historical hand. The years following the death of Augustus presented a bewildering tangle of personal interrelations, among ambitious, lustful, perverse, greedy competitors for imperial power, or for the voluminous perks that spilled on all sides of the royal throne. The attempts of Agrippina, to raise her son Nero to imperial status, involve her in complex machinations which, because she is trying to manipulate a nest of vipers like Nero, Sejanus, and Britannicus, leads to her brutal and brilliantly described death.

*Cluvius relates that Agrippina in her eagerness to retain her influence went so far that more than once at midday, when Nero, even at that hour, was flushed with wine and feasting, she presented herself attractively attired to her half intoxicated son and offered him her person, and that when kinsfolk observed wanton kisses and caresses, portending infamy, it was Seneca who sought a female's aid against a woman's fascinations, and hurried in Acte, the freed-girl, who alarmed at her own peril and at Nero's disgrace, told him that the incest was notorious, as his mother boasted of it, and that the soldiers would never endure the rule of an impious sovereign. Fabius Rusticus tells us that it was not Agrippina, but Nero, who lusted for the crime, and that it was frustrated by the adroitness of that same freed-girl. Cluvius's account, however, is also that of all other authors, and popular belief inclines to it, whether it was that Agrippina really conceived such a monstrous wickedness in her heart, or perhaps because the thought of a strange passion seemed comparatively credible in a woman, who in her girlish years had allowed herself to be seduced by Lepidus in the hope of winning power, had stooped with a like ambition to the lust of Pallas, and had trained herself for every infamy by her marriage with her uncle.*

**The mind of Tacitus.** A close look at the present passage lets the reader into the labyrinthine complexity of Tacitus' historical analysis. (You will want to read this historian with a fine toothed comb.) There are two interpretations of Agrippina's behavior toward her son: one of which lays the stress on the mother's lust, the other on that of the son. (The preference given to the second is backed up by other authorities, and given credence by further biographical evidence from Agrippina's youth.) Tacitus manages, in this passage, to generate subtle psychology-- *it was Seneca who sought a female's aid against a woman's fascinations--*

and to introduce the subordinate motivations of two smaller players in the paragraph's drama, Acte and Seneca. This rich crowding of perspectives is characteristic of the never simplistic texture of Tacitus' history.

Readings: Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, translated by William Brodribb (Digireads.com, 2005.)

Martin, Ronald, *Tacitus* (Berkeley, 1981).

Discussion questions:

What is Tacitus' personal attitude toward the intrigues and machinations at the imperial court? How does he view the death of Agrippina?

How does Tacitus differ from Livy as an historian? Which of the two seems more to fit the 'modern model' of the critical historian?

What evidence do you see, in Tacitus' work, of his career as a politician and orator?

Discussion Questions

Does Livy, as historian, at all carry out the same project as Virgil, in the *Aeneid*? Is Livy, too, concerned to 'glorify' the origins of his culture?

Tacitus declares that he writes his history 'objectively.' Do you think he is correct about that? If not, what do you see as his 'point of view'? Does he in any way write like what we today call an investigative reporter?

## PHILOSOPHY

Marcus Aurelius (121 A.D.—180 A.D.) .

Aurelius Augustinus (Saint Augustine) (354 A.D.--430 A.D.)

**Greece and Rome** The adage which says that Greece (meaning Greek culture and thought) conquered Rome even while the Roman military was overwhelming Greece, in the final two centuries of the classical era, applies in spades to the influx of Greek philosophy into early Roman thought.

**Lucretius** Lucretius (*The Nature of Things*, 50 B.C.E.) is an epic poem, in the same dactylic-hexameter meter we know from Homer and Virgil, and is an excellent instance of one of the greatest Roman philosophical texts highly dependent on Greek writing, in this case on the thoughts of Epicurus, the fourth century Greek moralist. Lucretius also thrived on the cosmological speculative physics of the Milesian (Asia Minor) philosophers. From those writers Lucretius formed or enriched his idea that the fundamental substance is atoms linking to one another in the void, and conjoining to form such random developments as organic life.

**Seneca and Stoicism** In the years following Lucretius (d. 55 B.C.) two of the finest Roman minds—Cicero (d. 43 B.C.) and Seneca (d. 65 A.D.)—drew their spiritual inspiration largely from the fund of Stoic ideas, a world view founded in late fourth century B.C. Athens, and destined to grow in strength throughout the Roman Empire. The basic thrust of this worldview was to promote self-control and the human peace that comes from co-operating with others, as well as from understanding how the world works. Cicero imposed a skeptical spin—‘our knowledge is limited—on this philosophy, while Seneca stressed control over the passions, and the dangers of sacrificing our independent judgments of things.

**Marcus Aurelius** To the modern reader, the most accessible of Roman philosophers is the Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180 C.E.), whose *Meditations* continue the Stoic trend of much Roman thought, while inflecting it with the standpoint from which he wrote—as a military commander on the front line, snatching a night time respite whenever he could, to write the text of his deeply human memoir, which he had no thought of publishing. Life lasts but a moment, he says, and we should coolly observe and enjoy our brief moment, meanwhile keeping our eye on the whole cosmos, and avoiding the delusions of vanity or flattery. While the world view of Marcus Aurelius still belongs to the Greek sphere, and is far from the Christian—lying ahead—it seems a harbinger of that one-god Platonism which was to shake Saint Augustine (354-430 C.E.) and to make of his *Confessions* a new kind of voice in the Roman world.

**Saint Augustine** Is it a philosophical voice we hear in Augustine? His speculations on God interweave with his reflections on memory, despair, guilt, hope. The fund of moral investigations that swarms through Roman Stoic and Epicurean thought, and that links Greek to Roman intellects, emerges in Augustine at the far end of considerations, intimate and sweeping, which will no longer be contained inside the framework of Greco-Roman thought.

### Reading

Farquharson, A.S.L., *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus*, Oxford, 2008.

Inwood, B., ed. *Seneca: Selected Philosophical Letters*, translated with introduction and commentary, Oxford, 2007.

### Discussion questions

Were the leading philosophies of ancient Rome all derived from Greek thought? What was the relation of Augustine’s thought to the Greeks? Did he inherit many of his ideas from the Greek Neoplatonists who were a formative element in later Roman cultural development?

The philosophical perspectives dominant in Roman philosophy were largely ethical, centered on questions about how to live the good life. Is there an element of logic, metaphysics, or theory of history in the Roman intellectual tradition?

While it is true, as in the adage above, that the Romans were in some sense conquered by their Greek subjects, would we say that the Romans made something new and fresh from what the Greeks gave them? What would you see as the distinctively Roman contribution to world thought?

## **Marcus Aurelius (121 A.D.- 180 A.D.; Emperor 161 A.D. -180 A.D.)**

**Stoics and Epicureans.** We have been advancing through Roman literature by way of genres, and come at the end to philosophy, which requires a special prologue. At its peak, *Greek* philosophy, especially in Plato and Aristotle, had tried out systematic speculation, and established a power of rigorous dialectic with imagination which has left its mark on the formal study of philosophy to this day. But there were other themes in Greek philosophy, most influentially the schools of Stoicism and Epicureanism which came to flower in the third century B.C. These two branches of thought devoted their attention to the moral life, though not without concern for the ontological background of the universe in which human behavior is framed. Both the Stoics and the Epicureans, with their emphases on self-discipline, moderation, and toleration, exercised huge influence on Roman society and culture.

**The Meditations.** All this by way of direct approach to Marcus Aurelius, for whom Stoicism was an inspiration and staff of support throughout a hectically busy life at the top of the social/administrative ladder. Marcus' philosophy is embedded in a single book, which he called *To Himself*, and which we call the *Meditations*, and which is a living masterpiece of Stoic—and broadly human—wisdom. We will return to the book. Who was the man?

**The Life of Marcus Aurelius.** Marcus Aurelius was born in Ucubi, south east of Cordoba, Spain, to a family of wealth and distinction. His great grandfather had been a Senator, while Marcus' mother had inherited great wealth from her own father. This was already the formula for success, and Marcus, following the expectations of his class and educational aspirations, moved to Rome, where he spent his formative youth years in a upscale neighborhood, the Caelian Hill. (It will have struck us all, in this class, that Rome served as the magnet for all its future luminaries, though the leaders of Roman literary culture hailed widely from distant parts of the Empire.)

**Education.** In Rome Marcus was home-schooled, as were all young men of his class and expectation, Attracted by the ideal of the 'philosopher,' he went through a stage of dressing in dark rough cloaks, and sleeping on the ground—occupational traits of one kind of 'ancient philosopher'—until falling under the influence of Fronto, whom the Emperor Hadrian appointed tutor to Marcus Aurelius, and who—himself a wealthy and independent scholar--- remained a prudent and affectionate guide to Marcus Aurelius throughout his life. Marcus was studious as well as active, and seemed destined for a superior role in practical political administration.

**Imperial succession.** In 138 B.C. the Emperor Hadrian chose Antoninus Pius to succeed him—Hadrian morbidly concerned with the decline in his health. As part of the succession deal, Hadrian stipulated that Antoninus should adopt Marcus Aurelius as his son. Pursuant to that deal Antoninus, taken as all were by the abilities of Marcus Aurelius, passed a law permitting his 'son' to assume the (very important) role of *quaestor*, before the age of twenty-four; and from there on the Emperor made all the necessary maneuvers required to prep Marcus as *his* successor. In 161 the death of Antoninus Pius opened the way for (a thoroughly reluctant) Marcus Aurelius, to become the last of the Antonine Emperors.

**The worries of ruling.** We are making our way back to a book, *The Meditations*, which Marcus Aurelius jotted down 'to himself' in intervals of camp and court life between 170 A.D. and 180 A.D. By the time Marcus was pushed to that brilliant literary survival tactic, his reign had become more than difficult, and more than a challenge to a man who, though a quick learner and a brilliant 'ruler,' had a strong withdrawal streak of the private intellectual in him. (Marcus' reign had started well, but already in 162 A.D. Rome had been hit by devastating floods which had killed most of the livestock in the city, destroying whole settled areas, and setting off a long lasting famine which had to be countered by opening emergency grain supplies. Not much later the frontiers of the Empire fell under attack from a wide variety of Marcomanni, Quadi, Sarmatians, and Germanic tribes avid to get their pillaged share of the Imperial fruits. The worries of ruling soon beset Marcus Aurelius, who was above all conscientious, and the literary result is a world classic of Stoic wisdom and good sense. The end of his life was essentially the conclusion of this book, which, as you will see, was essentially his life turned inside out.

**Supreme self-help book.** You will have little trouble following the themes of this work, which highlight the importance of self-control, self-examination, indifference to petty behaviors, a sense of our cosmic setting, a refusal to be bullied by the seeming urgency of the moment. No self-help book, on the shelves at Barnes and Noble, can light a candle to the wisdom of the *Meditations*.

Here is a passage from Book One, in which Marcus is praising his father, for the virtues he learned from him:

*whenever any business upon some necessary occasion was to be put off and omitted before it could be ended, he was ever found, when he went back to the matter again, the same man that he was before. He was accurate in examination of things and in consultations, and patient in the hearing of others. He would not hastily give over a search into any matter, as one easy to be satisfied with sudden notions and apprehensions. He was careful to preserve his friends; nor at any time would he carry himself towards them with disdainful neglect, and grow weary of them; nor yet at any time would he be madly fond of them. He had a contented mind in all things, a cheerful countenance, care to foresee things afar off, and to take order for the least, without any noise or clamour.*

### **Readings**

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Hammond (New York, 2006.)

*A Companion to Marcus Aurelius*, ed. Van Ackeren (New York, 2012.)

### **Discussion questions**

What explains the great attraction of Marcus Aurelius to Stoicism and Epicureanism? Do those philosophies contain the potential for the kinds of insight Saint Augustine (as a Christian) will instinctively work from? Does the Stoicism of Seneca—you may want to research this—resemble that of Marcus Aurelius?

In what ways is Marcus Aurelius' *To Himself* a response to the immediate pressures of his own life? What were those pressures? What finally was his attitude toward them?

Would you call Marcus Aurelius a philosopher, or a practical man of considerable wisdom? To answer this you would need to establish a working definition of 'philosopher,' which is not so easy. In Greco Roman times the philosopher was sometimes the sage, sometimes—as in Plato—the brilliant dialectician. What does 'philosopher' mean to us today?



## Roman HISTORY (Historiography)

**Overview** Cultural self-awareness, the construction of something like national self-consciousness, depends on a group's historical consciousness. You have to know where you have been, as a group or nation, before you can know who you are. The same with an individual person. You have to know your own background, personality, temper, talents and weaknesses, and you need to know them as part of the living narrative which you are. An individual, like a state, comes together around such self-awareness.

**The historians of Ancient Rome** There was an abundance of historians in ancient Rome, many of them today virtually unknown, and remaining only as references, or in almost illegible fragments. Four of the most influential are these:

**Sallust** Sallust (86 B.C.E.--35 B.C.E.) was a man of middle class origins, a populist of a sort, and a strong partisan of Julius Caesar. His ruling theme was the moral decline of the Roman state and its citizens; a position he maintained undisturbed by his own felonious past. He is perhaps best known to us for his study of the Catilinarian conspiracy (63 B.C.); his interest in which, apparently, was chiefly to exonerate his ally Julius Caesar from any complicity.

**Livy** Livy (59 B.C.E.-17 C.E.) Livy is known for one great work, *Ab Urbe Condita (From the time of the Founding of the City)*, an history of the Roman state, chiefly the Republic, through to the imperial accession of Augustus. The work was of wide interest, sparking followers of the craft of history, and setting a model for both anecdotal and chronological history writing.

**Tacitus** Tacitus (58 C.E.-120 C.E.) was a masterful historian of Imperial Rome from the death of Augustus (14 C.E.) to the Roman-Jewish conflict of 70 C.E. His two great works, *The Histories* (105 C.E.) and *The Annals* (117 C.E.), are preoccupied with the events and intricacies of the courts of the Emperors Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero. He plumbs every depth of the human heart, in a period when corruption was rife and baroque.

**Ammianus Marcellinus** Ammianus (330-400 C.E.) was a Roman soldier and historian, whose lengthy *Res Gestae (Events; Deeds)* essentially covers the history of Rome from where Tacitus left off, to the death of the Emperor Valens (370 C.E.) Ammianus has provided the foundation of much of what we know of fourth century Rome.

### Readings

Dudley, Donald, *The World of Tacitus*, London, 1968.

Matthews, J., *The Roman Empire of Ammianus*, Baltimore, 1989.

### Discussion questions

The Roman historians were famously conscious of their Greek historian predecessors as models. Do you see the work of Thucydides or Herodotus in the major Roman historians?

What kinds of self-image did the Roman historians bring into their work?

Does each of them mark his history with a distinctive personal trademark? Explain.

What kind of training did the Roman historians have, in writing history? Did they go to graduate school? Did they learn from predecessors? Did they learn from life?

