

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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ANCIENT ROMAN POETRY

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EPIC POETRY

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

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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*, 8th 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—4th and 3rd 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’s 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 *pius*, 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?

ESSAY

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 (7th 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, bitingly 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.

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?

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 (6th 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 *neoterói*, 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?

Essay (1,000 Words)

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?

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,
perversely, 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.)