



# CLASSICAL LATIN ELEGY

The Invention of Personal Poetry

# Agenda

- Elegy
  - What is elegy?
  - Where did elegy come from?
  - Epic meter
  - Elegiac meter
  - What made elegy different?
  - Catullus (84 BCE-54 BCE)
  - Sulpicia (~40 BC - ?)
  - Propertius (55-43 BCE, Assisi, Umbria [Italy]–died after 16 BCE)
  - Ovid (43 BCE-17)
  - Catullus - Carmen 85 - close read
  - Let's write an elegiac couplet
- Resources

# What is elegy?

- Modern elegy is a melancholy and meditative kind of poem – defined by tone and theme
- Elegy in ancient literature (Greek and Latin) is defined by its meter: alternating lines of dactylic hexameter and pentameter – like an epigram, but it is longer
- Characteristics of classical Roman elegy:
  - Convey mood and personal feelings
  - May or may not tell a story
  - During reign of Augustus, preferred method of telling a (non-marital) love story
  - Often directed to an anonymous recipient with a (dactylic) pseudonym
    - Catullus – Lesbia
    - Sulpicia – Cerinthus
    - Propertius – Cynthia
    - Ovid – Corinna

# Epic Meter

- Dactylic hexameter: - ~ ~ | - ~ ~ | - ~ ~ | - ~ ~ | - ~ ~ | - x
- Classical meter allowed for a spondee to substitute for a dactyl in most positions.
- The first four feet can either be dactyls or spondees more or less freely. The fifth foot is usually a dactyl (around 95% of the time in Homer).
- The sixth foot can be filled by either a trochee (a long then short syllable) or a spondee.
- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote "Evangeline" in dactylic hexameter:
  - This is the | forest pri | meval. The | murmuring | pines and the | hemlocks

- ~ ~ = dactyl

- - = spondee

# Elegiac Meter

- First line: dactylic hexameter. Second line: dactylic pentameter.

- ~ ~ | - ~ ~ | - ~ ~ | - ~ ~ | - ~ ~ | - x  
- ~ ~ | - ~ ~ | - | - ~ ~ | - ~ ~ | -

- Classical meter allowed for a spondee to substitute for a dactyl in most positions.

- Ovid's *Amores* 1.1.27-28

- ~ ~ | - ~ ~ | - ~ ~ | - - | - ~ ~ | - -

sex mihi | surgat o- | pus nume- | ris, in | quinque res- | idat;

- ~ ~ | - - | - | | - ~ ~ | - ~ ~ | -

ferrea | cum ues- | tris | | bella ua- | ete mod- | is

- ~ ~ = dactyl

- - = spondee

| | = caesura

My work rises in six numbers, it falls back in five;

farewell to you, iron wars, and to your meters.

# Where did elegy come from?

- The word *elegy* comes from the ancient Greek language
  - *elegos* (ἔλεγος) and its derivatives *elegeion* (ἐλεγεῖον), and *elegeia* (ἐλεγεία)
  - One meaning: sad and mournful song
  - Other meaning: rhythm of two verses combined as a couplet
  - A poem constructed by way of elegiac couplets is an *elegy*.
- Early Greek elegy did not tell a story – feelings only, conveyed strong emotion. Stories were for epics.
- Greek elegists include Callimachus, Mimnermus, and Archilochus
- Few works are extant – we know of them from references by other poets, including the Roman elegists.
- The Roman poet Ennius introduced the elegiac couplet to Latin poetry for themes less lofty than that of epic, for which dactylic hexameter was suited. The works of the earliest Roman elegists have not survived (not studied in Roman schools).

# What made elegy different? (besides meter)

- Epic was *Durus* (hard) where elegy is *mollis* (soft)
- The thematic topic was a (non-marital) love affair.
- Often directed to an anonymous recipient with a (dactylic) pseudonym)
  - Catullus - Lesbia
  - Sulpicia - Cerinthus
  - Propertius - Cynthia
  - Ovid - Corinna
- Subversive
  - Gender roles - the female lover was depicted as having all the power (*domina/servus, servitium amoris*)
  - Subversive of property rights (lover is married or else paid for love)
  - Expected career of a poet - because of wealth but not too high status, the poets had time for love
- Popular topic was the *paraclausithyron* or *exclusus amator* - the "locked out lover"
  - Three reasons: husband posted a guard at the door, the woman is with another lover, or the madam has locked the door for lack of funds
  - Modern example: <https://youtu.be/YQHsXMglC9A?t=128>

# Gaius Valerius Catullus (84 BCE–54 BCE)

- Born to an upper middle class family in Verona, in Cisalpine Gaul
- Wrote a variety of moods and styles of poetry (not just elegy)
  - Poems about friends
  - Erotic love poetry
  - Invective and attacking poems
  - Condolences – funeral laments
  - Others that defy categorization
- Not a lot of biographical information available – no political career
- 116 carmina
- Poems include graphic descriptions of sexual acts, in both loving and derisive contexts
  - Catullus 16



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# Catullus 70 – Love poetry

Nulli se dicit mulier mea nubere malle  
quam mihi, non si se Iuppiter ipse petat.  
dicit: sed mulier cupido quod dicit amanti,  
in vento et rapida scribere oportet aqua.

My woman declares there's no one she'd sooner marry  
than me, not even were Jupiter himself to propose.  
*She declares* – but a woman's words to her eager lover  
should be written on running water, on the wind.

Translation by Peter Green

# Catullus 83 – Love poetry

Lesbia mi praesente viro mala plurima dicit:  
haec illi fatuo maxima laetitia est.  
mule, nihil sentis? si nostri oblita taceret,  
sana esset: nunc quod gannit et obloquitur,  
non solum meminit, sed, quae multo acrior est res,  
irata est. hoc est, uritur et loquitur

Lesbia keeps insulting me in her husband's presence:  
this fills the fatuous idiot with delight.  
Mule, you've no insight. If she shut up and ignored me  
that'd show healthy indifference; all the insults mean  
is, she not only remembers, but-words of sharper import –  
*feels angry*. That is, the lady burns – and talks.

Translation by Peter Green

# Catullus 69 - Invective

Noli admirari quare tibi femina nulla,  
Rufe, velit tenerum supposuisse femur,  
non si illam rarae labefactes munere vestis  
aut perluciduli deliciis lapidis.

laedit te quaedam mala fabula, qua tibi fertur  
valle sub alarum trux habitare caper.

hunc metuunt omnes; neque mirum: nam mala valdest  
bestia, nec quicum bella puella cubet.

quare aut crudelem nasorum interfice pestem,  
aut admirari desine cur fugiant.

No need to wonder why no woman's willing,  
Rufus, to spread her soft thighs under you,  
though you sap her resistance with expensive dresses  
or rare and translucent gems.

You're done in by unkind rumors, which alleges  
your armpit's valley is home to a rank goat.

This everyone fears, and no wonder: it's a nasty creature  
with which no pretty girl would share a bed.

So either kill off this brutal plague of noses  
or stop being puzzled why girls run away.

Translation by Peter Green

# Catullus 16 – Catullus answers his critics

Pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo,  
Aureli pathice et cinaede Furi,  
qui me ex versiculis meis putastis,  
quod sunt molliculi, parum pudicum.  
Nam castum esse decet pium poetam  
ipsum, versiculos nihil necesse est;  
qui tum denique habent salem ac leporem,  
si sunt molliculi ac parum pudici,  
et quod pruriat incitare possunt,  
non dico pueris, sed his pilosis  
qui duros nequeunt movere lumbos.  
Vos, quod milia multa basiorum  
legistis, male me marem putatis?  
Pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo.

I myself will forcefully penetrate you both from behind and in the mouth,  
cocksucker Aurelius and bottom bitch Furius,  
who think, from my little verses,  
because they're a little soft, that I have no shame.  
For it is right for the devoted poet to be chaste  
himself, but it's not necessary for his verses to be so.  
[Verses] which then indeed have taste and charm,  
If they are delicate and have no shame,  
And because they can incite an itch,  
And I don't mean in boys, but in  
Those hairy men who can't move their loins.  
You, because [about] my many thousands of kisses  
You've read, you think me less of a man?  
I myself will forcefully penetrate you both from behind and in the mouth,

# Catullus 101 – Funeral elegy for his brother

Multas per gentes et multa per aequora vectus  
advenio has miseras, frater, ad inferias,  
ut te postremo donarem munere mortis  
et mutam nequiquam alloquerer cinerem.  
Quandoquidem fortuna mihi tete abstulit ipsum.  
Heu miser indigne frater adempte mihi,  
nunc tamen interea haec, prisco quae more parentum  
tradita sunt tristi munere ad inferias,  
accipe fraterno multum manantia fletu,  
atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale.

A journey across many seas and through many nations  
has brought me here, brother, for these poor obsequies,  
to let me address, all in vain, your silent ashes,  
and render you the last service for the dead,  
since fortune, alas, has bereft me of your person,  
my poor brother, so unjustly taken from me.  
Still, here now I offer those gifts which by ancestral custom  
are presented, sad offerings, at such obsequies:  
accept them, soaked as they are with a brother's weeping,  
and, brother, forever now hail and farewell.

(Translation by Peter Green)

# Sulpicia (~40 BC - ?)

- Author of six short poems (40 lines in all)
- Only extant female Roman poet of the golden age of Rome literature
- Member of the senatorial class, daughter of Servius Sulpicius and niece of Messalla
- Poems were collected with the poems of Tibullus (3:13-18)
- Is not the *domina* nor threatens property rights – instead presents herself as equal with her lover who is not her husband
  - *Pecasse iuvat* ["it is a pleasure to have done wrong"] (3.13.9)
  - *Cum digno digna fuisse ferar* ["Let me be said to have been a worthy woman with a worthy man"]



# Sulpicia 1 (Tibullus 3.13)

Tandem uenit amor, qualem texisse pudori  
quam nudasse alicui sit mihi fama magis.  
Exorata meis illum Cytherea Camenis  
attulit in nostrum deposuitque sinum.  
Exsoluit promissa Venus: mea gaudia narret,

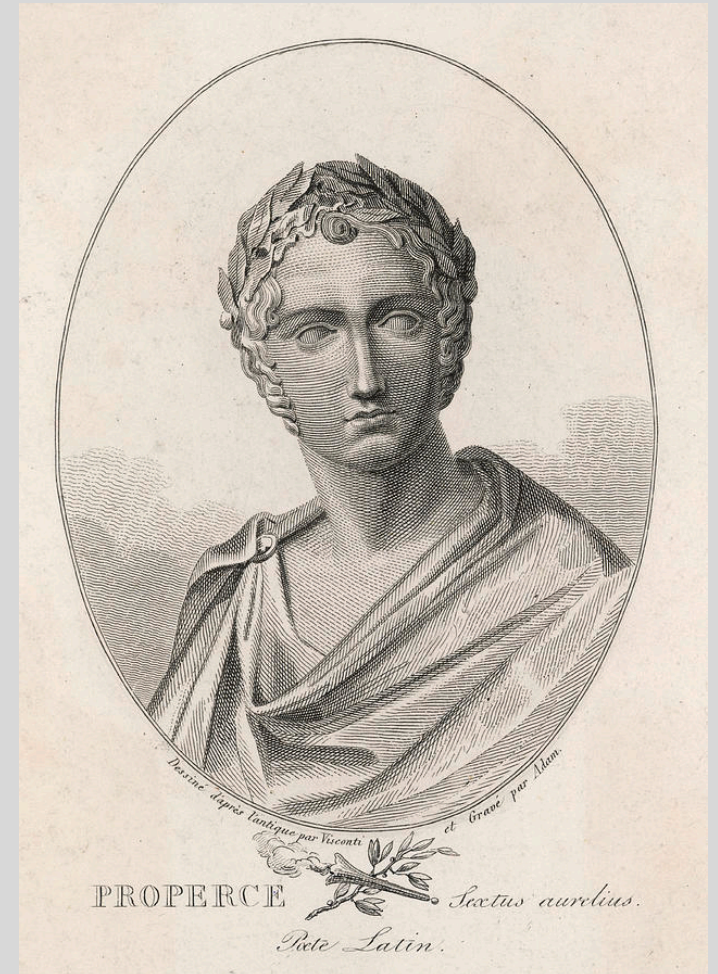
dicetur si quis non habuisse sua.  
Non ego signatis quicquam mandare tabellis,  
ne legat id nemo quam meus ante, uelim,  
sed peccasse iuuat, uultus componere famae  
taedet: cum digno digna fuisse ferar.

Finally love came, and the rumor that I had  
concealed would cause greater shame than if I had laid it bare.  
Having been persuaded, Venus brought him to my poetry  
and laid him in my lap.  
Venus let loose these promises: if anyone tells of my joy,

it is decreed that I have not had it.  
I do not demand anything with sealed letters,  
lest no one read it before than my own, I would wish,  
but he delights to have done wrong, to compose the appearance of a rumor  
he tires me: let it be said that I am worthy with someone worthy.

# Sextus Propertius, (55–43 BCE - 6 BCE)

- Born to equestrian class family in the country north of Rome
- Started a political and legal career in Rome, switched to poetry
- First book of poetry published in 29 BCE
- Poems speak of slavery to love (*servitium amoris*) and his naughtiness (*nequitia*)
- Sex was an unproblematic Good Thing, but Love was a madness that “unmanned” men
- Wrote a *recusatio*, a refusal to write epic and state the intent to write love poetry instead
  - *laus in amore mori* [“It is a praiseworthy act to die in love”] (2.1.47)





# Propertius 1.11.18-27

non quia perspecta non es mihi cognita fama,  
sed quod in hac omnis parte timetur amor.  
ignosces igitur, si quid tibi triste libelli  
attulerint nostri: culpa timoris erit.  
ah mihi non maior carae custodia matris  
aut sine te vitae cura sit ulla meae!  
tu mihi sola domus, tu, Cynthia, sola parentes,  
omnia tu nostrae tempora laetitiae.  
seu tristis veniam seu contra laetus amicis,  
quicquid ero, dicam 'Cynthia causa fuit.'

Not because your reputation is not well known to me,  
but that in that place every desire is to be feared.  
So, forgive me if my little writings have brought you  
sadness: the fault is to my fears.  
I do not watch over my mother now with greater care,  
nor without you have I any care for my life.  
You are my only home, my only parents, Cynthia:  
you, every moment of my happiness.  
If I am joyful or sad with the friends I meet,  
however I am, I say: 'Cynthia is the reason.'

# Publius Ovidius Naso (43 BCE–17 CE)



- Born to equestrian family east of Rome, raised to be a politician. Became a poet instead.
- *Amores* ("Loves"), c. 20 BCE and *Ars Amatoria* ("The Art of Love"), 1 BCE are in elegiac meter
  - *Amores* Tells the story of from the moment poet falls in love to the end of the affair in three books of poetry.
- *Metamorphoses*, finished in 8 CE, is in the epic meter of dactylic hexameter
- Exiled at age 50 by August for *carmen [Ars Amatoria] et error*. The error is unknown, but he was in the social circle of Julia. Julia and Ovid were banished in the same year, 8 CE.
- *Tristia* ("Sorrows"), is in elegiac couplets

# Ovid, *Amores* 2.17.1-10

Siquis erit, qui turpe putet servire puellae,  
    Illo convincar iudice turpis ego!  
Sim licet infamis, dum me moderatius urat,  
    Quae Paphon et fluctu pulsa Cythera tenet.  
Atque utinam dominae miti quoque praeda  
fuissem  
    Formosae quoniam praeda futurus eram!  
Dat facies animos. facie violenta Corinna est –  
    Me miserum! cur est tam bene nota sibi?  
Scilicet a speculi sumuntur imagine fastus,  
Nec nisi conpositam se prius illa videt!

If there's anyone who thinks it's disgraceful  
to be slave to a girl, he'll judge me guilty and  
disgraced!  
Disrepute's alright, so long as I'm less scorched  
by her who holds Paphos and sea-washed Cythera.  
And, since I'm to be a lovely woman's prize,  
I wish I was also the prize of a gentler girl!  
Beauty brings pride. Corinna's tempestuous with  
beauty –  
Ah me! How does she know herself so well?  
No doubt she gets her disdain from her mirror's image,  
and never looks at it until she's ready!

Translation by A.S. Kline

# Ovid, Tristia 3, 1-20

Missus in hanc uenio timide liber exulis urbem  
da placidam fesso, lector amice, manum;  
neue reformida, ne sim tibi forte pudori:  
nullus in hac charta uersus amare docet.

Haec domini fortuna mei est, ut debeat illam  
infelix nullis dissimulare iocis.  
Id quoque, quod uiridi quondam male lusit in aeuo,  
heu nimium sero damnat et odit opus.  
Inspice quid portem: nihil hic nisi triste uidebis,  
carmine temporibus conueniente suis.

Clauda quod alterno subsidunt carmina uersu,  
uel pedis hoc ratio, uel uia longa facit;  
quod neque sum cedro flauus nec pumice leuis,  
erubui domino cultior esse meo;  
littera suffusas quod habet maculosa lituras,  
laesit opus lacrimis ipse poeta suum  
Siqua uidebuntur casu non dicta Latine,  
in qua scribebat, barbara terra fuit.

Dicite, lectores, si non graue, qua sit eundum,  
quasque petam sedes hospes in urbe liber.

I come to this city fearfully, sent as an exile's book.  
Reader, my friend, give a calming hand to the weary  
and don't worry that I might shame you in some way.  
No line in this manuscript teaches about love.

My master's fate is such that the miserable man  
should not hide it in any jokes  
That work which amused him once in his green age  
He now condemns—alas, too late—and hates.  
Look what I carry: you will find nothing but sorrow here,  
a song which matches its own days.

If the lame song breaks off in alternating lines,  
then it comes from the meter's form or the journey's length.  
If I am not bright with cedar nor smooth from pumice,  
it is because I turned red at looking better than my master.  
If the letters are shapeless, if they are marred by erasure,  
it is because the poet wounded the work with his own tears.  
If any words seem by chance not to be Latin,  
it is because he wrote them in a barbarous land.

Tell me, readers—if it is not too much—where should I go,  
What home should I, a foreign book, seek in this city?

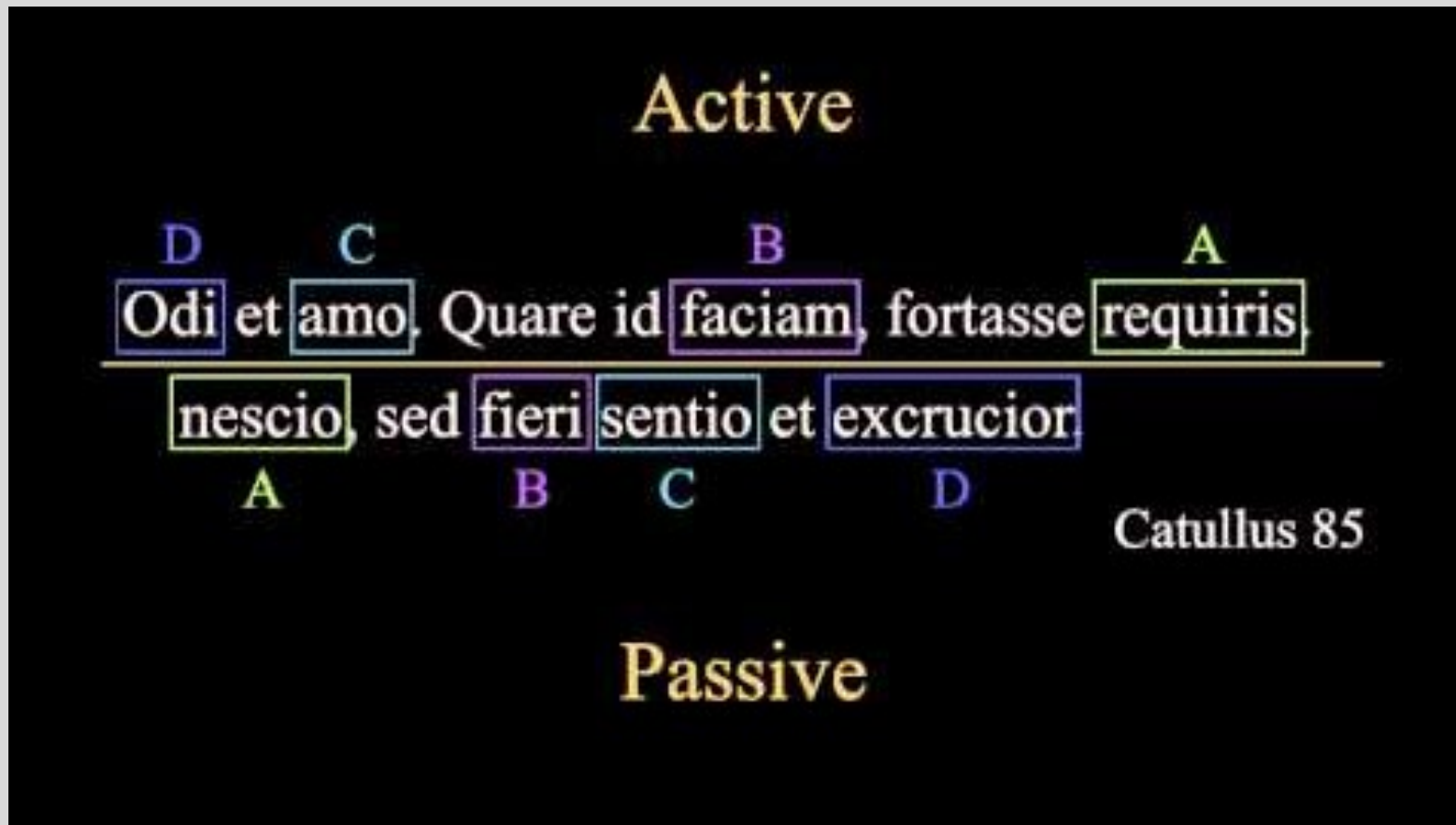
# Catullus – Carmen 85

Odi et amo. Quare id faciam, fortasse requires.

I hate and I love. Why do I do it, perhaps you will ask?

Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior

I don't know, but I feel it happening, and I am crucified.



# Let's write an elegiac couplet

- Meter:

- ~ ~ | - ~ ~ | - ~ ~ | - ~ ~ | - ~ ~ | - x  
- ~ ~ | - ~ ~ | - ~ ~ | - ~ ~ | -

- Dactylic names: Percival, Pamela, Kamala, Hamilton, Josephine, Geraldine, Timothy, Tennyson, Annabelle, Andrea, Beatrice, Cecily, Antony, Dominic, Elliot
- Strong emotion: love, longing, begging, anger, sorrow, nostalgia
- Theme possibilities: closed door oration, lament for (emotional) infidelity, dedication of oneself to the lover, slave to love

# Online Resources

- Oxford Reference (<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095746696>)
- Classical Literature (<https://www.ancient-literature.com/> )
- Latin Literature: <https://www.britannica.com/art/Latin-literature>
- Latin pronunciation: <https://www.thoughtco.com/introduction-to-latin-pronunciation-119470#:~:text=Latin%20Consonants,sometimes%20pronounced%20as%20a%20y.>
- Ben Johnson YouTube channel (<https://youtu.be/r7--agTtb5M>)
- Gill, N.S. "Elegiac Couplets Explained." ThoughtCo, Aug. 28, 2020, [thoughtco.com/examples-of-elegiac-couplet-118817](https://www.thoughtco.com/examples-of-elegiac-couplet-118817).
- Ovid: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ovid> , <https://www.thoughtco.com/ovid-overview-of-the-latin-poet-112463> ,
- Catullus: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/gaius-valerius-catullus>
- Propertius: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sextus-Propertius>
- Tristia: <https://sententiaeantiquae.com/2018/03/04/sad-ovids-sad-poem-is-really-sad/>
- Fun blog about Latin: <https://sententiaeantiquae.com/>