



CHAPTER

## 8 Classical Love Elegy in the Renaissance (and after)

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### Abstract

This article presents an explanation on classical love elegy in the Renaissance. It also mentions that the linkage ‘suggested by the label is something of a category mistake’, and assures that ‘it plays out in literary history, though, as something other than just a mistake’. The Roman love elegies are not notably ‘elegiac’ in the dominant modern sense of the term. The Renaissance enthusiasm is discussed. After the Renaissance, the only major revival of the classical genre in clearly recognizable form comes toward the end of the eighteenth century. ‘Euphrosyne’ is perhaps the kind of poem that ‘love elegy’ in modern usage might most naturally designate: an encounter with a loved one in which intimacy and distance both figure in something like equal measure.

**Keywords:** [classical love elegy](#), [Renaissance](#), [Roman love elegies](#), [enthusiasm](#), [Euphrosyne](#)

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THAT a book on the literature of loss and mourning would make space for something called the love elegy is to some extent an accident, the terminological legacy of Renaissance enthusiasm for a group of classical Latin love poems—by Catullus, Propertius, Tibullus, and especially Ovid. Except for some of those by Catullus, these poems are all in elegiac couplets; they were in the Renaissance the most popular classical poems in that meter, and it seemed natural to call them love elegies, or simply elegies. The label stuck. The genre defined by these poems is still known as the Roman love elegy; new poems written under their influence are often called elegies by their authors and others, and the sense that there is a type of elegy—and a type of love poem—called ‘love elegy’ has lodged in the critical tradition. The oddity of this is that Roman love elegies are not notably ‘elegiac’ in the dominant modern sense of the term—many of them are indeed aggressively and memorably otherwise—and the linkage suggested by the label is something of a category mistake.

It plays out in literary history, though, as something other than just a mistake. It is, after all, answerable to something essential about love, of pretty much any stripe: the way it can be as powerful in frustration as in fulfillment. Plato in the *Symposium* calls Love the child of Poverty and ‘always the companion of want’ (203d); Love longs for what he does not have. That knowledge is part of classical love poetry as early as Sappho, and artfully so. A poem of hers that opens by defining the greatest beauty as *ottō tis eratai*, ‘whatever one loves’, takes its time to reveal that the context for this brave declaration and the martial imagery that accompanies it is the speaker’s own sense of loss: ‘remembering Anaktoria, who is not here’ (Lobel and Page 1955, fragment 16). The words finally acknowledging absence—*ou pareoisas*—end the fourth stanza, all but filling the last line. Sappho’s *oeuvre*, however, is in tatters, like that of the other Greek love poets, too much so to support much in the way of generalization. Writing a generation before Sappho, Mimnermus became famous for writing about love in elegiac couplets, reportedly about his passion for a

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courtesan named Nanno; the Roman love poets may have been working from the precedent he set, elaborated in Hellenistic times by Callimachus and others. There is, however, not enough evidence to say so with any confidence, and it is entirely possible that Roman love elegy was not quite like anything that came before it.

The love of which it treats is actively sexual, in sometimes quite frank specifics; Ovid more than once brags of his own promiscuity (and in one poem speaks to his penis). It is also predominantly and by the time we get to Ovid exclusively heterosexual, and the object of male desire is a woman of some consequence, not just *puella* but also *domina*: different from the slaves and courtesans of Greek literature, mercenary perhaps (everyone in Rome was mercenary) but not necessarily venal, cultured and well-educated (*docta*) and independent in her ways. Sometimes she is married. The poets are shifty in their attitude toward the expectations of respectable Roman citizenship; Propertius admits from the start that his love for Cynthia compels him to live contrary to any good advice, ‘nullo uiuere consilio’ (1960: 1.1.6). At their most assertive these poets posit love as a pursuit opposed to the striving for military glory, though that contrast is recuperated in a famous metaphor: ‘militat omnis amans’ (Ovid 1994: *Amores* 1.9.1), every lover is a soldier, love itself a kind of war. It is a war above all because it is a contest of wills, and most of the poems center on some occasion for conflict, usually with the woman, where the male speaker must exert himself; he is ardent, angry, sarcastic, demanding, wheedling, ingenious. The sense of urgency to these crises varies—some in Propertius have real emotional violence to them, those in Ovid are often knowing and gamesome (as in a complaint that a husband is spoiling the fun by making adultery easy)—but a presumption of ongoing contentiousness seems basic to the genre. We appear (except with Catullus) to have the poems in their intended order, but no intelligible chronology is maintained and individual battles culminate in no final outcome. Propertius seems to make a decisive break with Cynthia at the end of his third book, but in the fourth she is back, confusingly, both as a ghost and as the poet's live mistress; at the end of Ovid's *Amores* the speaker affirms his wish to remain Corinna's lover despite her continuing infidelities. The lesson seems to be that this kind of conflict is central to this kind of love; ‘non bene, si tollas proelia, durat amor’ (Ovid 1994: *Amores* 1.8.96), take away the fighting and love won't last long. The psychological friction rhymes with the physical lovemaking that is always the acknowledged goal.

p. 155 This focus on present conflict keeps elegiac moments in the modern sense near the margins. Separation from the woman occasions more anger than longing. When the lover in Propertius 1.18 wanders through the deserted countryside, his thoughts all of Cynthia, he fills the air with the complaints that he wishes he had had the nerve to say to her face. Her posthumous visitation in the last book is a hectoring speech ‘querula...sub lite’ (Propertius 1960: 4.7.95; in angry indictment) on the inadequacy of her lover's grief, and ends in a lurid forecast of their reunion: ‘nunc te possideant aliae: mox sola tenebo: | mecum eris, et mixtis ossibus ossa teram’ (4.7.93–4; ‘let other women possess you now; soon I alone will hold you: you will be with me, and I will press bones together with bones’). Robert Lowell heightened the menace only slightly to make the poem at home in *Lord Weary's Castle*: ‘Others can have you, Sextus; I alone | Hold: and I grind your manhood bone on bone’ (1946). The history of the elegiac couplet in funerary inscriptions is acknowledged in a number of epitaphs and other posthumous memorializations used to local effect; the most memorable are parodic, as in Ovid's lament for Corinna's dead parrot (1994: *Amores* 2.6.61–2) or his wish to be honored for dying *in flagrante*: ‘conueniens uitae mors fuit ista tuae’ (2.10.38; ‘you died as you lived’). There are some formal funeral elegies in the corpus, though none of them concerning the poet's mistress: Catullus' famous poem about his brother (101; in the BBC/HBO television series *Rome* Julius Caesar recites the last two lines, in Latin, at the funeral pyre of Pompey), Propertius' lament for the emperor's nephew (1960: 3.18) and his personation of a dead woman consoling her husband from the grave (4.11), Ovid's elegy for Tibullus (1994: *Amores* 3.9). The only sustained elegiac feeling in the love poetry comes from Tibullus, the gentlest of the group; that feeling provides the main continuity as praise of a simple rural life grades into lament for a lost golden age—‘quam bene Saturno uiuebant rege, priusquam | tellus in longas est patefacta uias’ (1915: 1.3.35–6; ‘how well they lived when Saturn was king, before the earth was opened up with long highways’)—and within a few lines to the poet's own death and departure to Elysium (his epitaph occupies ll. 55–6), and finally to an earthly reunion with his absent love: ‘tunc mihi, qualis eris longos turbata capillos, | obuia nudato, Delia, curre pede’ (ll. 91–2; ‘then, just as you are with your long hair disheveled, run barefoot to meet me, Delia’).

By a trick of fate Ovid's elegiac couplets do become a vehicle for prolonged mourning in his last poetic productions, the verse epistles written in exile: perhaps the most unguarded expressions of authorial emotion in classical poetry—far more securely autobiographical than the *Amores*—and in effect an elegy for himself. The recurring trope is that exile is death; his last night in Rome was like attending his own wake:

'femina uirque meo, pueri quoque funere maerent, | inque domo lacrimas angulus omnis habet' (Ovid 1915: *Tristia* 1.3.23–4; 'men and women, children also wept at my funeral, and every corner of the house was full of tears'). The poetry moves beyond self-pity when it becomes the invocation of lost presences, and of one in particular:

lassus in extremis iaceo populisque locisque,  
et subit adfecto nunc mihi, quicquid abest.  
omnia cum subeant, uincis tamen omnia, coniunx,  
et plus in nostro pectore parte tenes.  
te loquor absentem, te uox mea nominat unam;  
nulla uenit sine te nox mihi, nulla dies. (3.3.13–18)

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I lie weary among the farthest peoples and places, and those things that are absent now come upon me in my weakness. Although all things come, you, my wife, surpass them all, and possess the greater part of my heart. I speak to you in absence, my voice names you alone; no night comes to me without you, no day.

His wife's imagined presence becomes real enough to provide the comfort of shared feeling:

nuntiet huc aliquis dominam uenisse, resurgam,  
spesque tui nobis causa uigoris erit.  
ergo ego sum dubius uitae, tu forsitan istic  
iucundum nostri nescia tempus agis?  
non agis, adfirmo. liquet hoc, carissima, nobis,  
tempus agi sine me non nisi triste tibi. (23–8)

Let someone announce that my mistress had come, I will revive, and hope of you will be my source of strength. So am I unsure of living, and you perhaps spending your time cheerfully, ignoring me? You are not, I assert it. It is clear to me, dearest, that you do not spend time without me without sadness.

Before the poem is over, he composes his own epitaph (73–76), and reasserts in somber terms the flippant self-memorialization of the *Amores*: he did indeed die as he lived, writing poetry, indulging the craft that (as he notes repeatedly) had ruined him, but that also will be the vehicle of his immortality. His books will be a longer lasting monument, 'quos ego confido, quamuis nocuere, daturus | nomen et auctori tempora longa suo' (79–80; 'which, I am confident, though they did harm, will give their author long endurance'). But the prospect of literary immortality is not separate from the anticipation of his wife's mourning:

tu tamen extincto feralia munera semper  
deque tuis lacrimis umidaserta dato.  
quamuis in cineres corpus mutauerit ignis  
sentiet officium maesta fauilla pium. (81–4)

Yet forever give funeral offerings to the dead, and garlands wet with your tears. Although fire turns my body into dust, the sad ashes will know of your reverent duty.

We have no other source on how Ovid's wife felt about her situation; her selfless and enduring devotion could be only a fantasy crafted by her husband's distress (in other moods—e.g. *Epistulae ex Ponto* 3.1—he berates her for being insufficiently diligent in seeking his recall). But precisely in writing the fantasy Ovid anticipates things that he would seem to have no business anticipating. A distant woman, hitherto unknown to his poetry, becomes his spectral custodian and comfort as he sheds one life for another: Fabia (if that was indeed her name) becomes Ovid's Beatrice.

Or rather his Laura. She is present in the exile poetry in a way that often bears specific comparison to that of Petrarch's unattainable lady in the *Rerum Vulgarum Fragmenta* thirteen centuries later. That lover, otherwise hopeless in his desires, imagines her coming to his grave and blessing it with a change of heart: ♪

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già terra infra le pietre  
vedendo, Amor l'inspiri  
in guisa che sospiri

sì dolcemente che mercé m'impetre  
et faccia forza al cielo,  
asciugandosi gli occhi col bel velo.

seeing me already dust amid the stones, Love will inspire her to sigh so sweetly that she will win  
mercy for me and force Heaven, drying her eyes with her lovely veil. (Petrarch 1976: 126.34–9)

In the present he is paradoxically happiest when farthest from her; then the thought of her can come most peacefully to his mind—‘A ciascun passo nasce un penser novo | de la mia donna, che sovente in gioco | gira 'l tormento ch' i' porto por lei’ (129.17–19; ‘with every step is born a new thought of my lady, which often turns to pleasure the torment that I bear for her’)—and offer the otherwise impossible prospect of her reciprocity:

Poscia fra me pian piano:  
‘Che sai tu, lasso? forse in quella parte  
or di tua lontananza si sospira.’  
Et in questo penser l'alma respira.

Then to myself softly: ‘What do you know, wretch? perhaps off there someone is sighing now because of your absence.’ And in this thought my soul breathes more easily. (129.62–5)

Such solitary reverie is one of the most important scenes of Petrarchan love; it resembles that of Propertius 1.18, but supplied with a gentler fantasy: not the continuation of unfinished conflict, but the experience of a happiness all the more compelling for being contrary to fact.

Petrarch's example, for better or worse, provides the dominant model for Renaissance love poetry in Western Europe at least up to the end of the sixteenth century, and it is a model that inescapably conditions the reception and especially the imitation of Roman love elegy. Petrarch's own interest in Roman love elegy was itself keen, insofar as conditions allowed. He was deeply familiar with Ovid, whose works had been on the reading list throughout the Middle Ages. The other poets were later recoveries, with a more perilous survival, but Petrarch had some acquaintance with all three; he owned a rare manuscript of Propertius, and may have had copies of Catullus and Tibullus as well. The work of these writers with the greatest relevance to Petrarch's vernacular poetry, however, is by a wide margin the *Metamorphoses*, with its mythic figurations of problematic desire; in general the relation between Petrarch's love poetry and the Roman love elegy is one of severe contrast. The strongest parallel between the *Amores* and the *Rerum Vulgarum Fragmenta* is the theme of poetic glory; Ovid was Petrarch's principal authorization for the faith, which Ovid voices explicitly at key moments, that writing about love can be a route to literary immortality. The development of that theme by Petrarch, however, is primarily through a motif from the *Metamorphoses*—the myth of Daphne—that also articulates one of the most significantly un-Ovidian features of Petrarchan love. Apollo ↵ claims the laurel crown because of his lack of success as a seducer, his rather un-Olympian failure to win the first woman to rouse his desire; in Petrarch the momentous commerce between Laura and *lauro* is inseparable from the lady's firm chastity (part of the point being that real fame is posthumous, never to be enjoyed by the living poet). This presumption mandates the sense of distance from the loved one in which Petrarchan love poetry becomes ‘elegiac’ in a way in which Roman love elegy seldom is (unless you include the *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*). In Petrarch's lyric sequence that distance becomes even more conclusive when, about three-quarters of the way through, Laura dies, and the only imaginable future reunion can be in heaven; while her lover lives, their only contact is in brief dreams and ghostly visitations, and the situation of his poems becomes that of the funeral elegy.

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A 1472 incunabulum starts a long-standing tradition of printing Catullus, Propertius, and Tibullus together; Joseph Scaliger calls them ‘the triumvirs of love’. They and Ovid constitute the most substantial surviving corpus both of love poetry and of elegiac couplets to survive from antiquity; from the fifteenth century on that corpus becomes an object of both study and imitation. Italian humanists take the lead in writing their own first-person love poems in elegiacs; among the first is the future Pope Pius II, whose sequence *Cinthia* treats of his passion for the beautiful but unavailing woman after whom it is named (as in Propertius, that name is the first word of the first poem). Attempts to define the genre manifest some strain in the wish to be inclusive. Ovid himself personifies an ‘Elegia’ who on different occasions is the voice of *lascivus Amor* (1994: *Amores* 3.1; in opposition to ‘Tragoedia’) and of mourning for the dead (1994: 3.9; the elegy for Tibullus) and seems content to leave it at that. Post-classical theorists strive to divine some thematic common ground

between the two functions. John of Garland, writing in the thirteenth century, calls elegy the song of misery (*miserabile carmen*) 'because it contains or voices the sorrows of lovers' (1974: 5.365–6). Joseph Scaliger's father, Julius Caesar, provides two slightly different accounts in his *Poetices libri septem* (1561). Elegy began as funeral poetry and then was transferred to other topics, such as love: 'And not without reason. For in love affairs there is much complaining and genuine [*uerissima*] death, which we in our insanity experience with that insane and ungrateful sex' (Scaliger 1561: 1.50 sig. e6<sup>v</sup>). Later, however, Scaliger announces himself unsatisfied with that theory (*non placet*), and theorizes instead that the first elegies were male complaints addressed to a woman's closed door; from this start the genre was generalized to include other possibilities in love (3.125, sig. p5<sup>r</sup>).

Something more interesting happens in poetic practice. A particularly good example is provided by Janus Secundus (Jan Everaerts), perhaps the most popular neo-Latin poet of the sixteenth century. Best known for his lyric *Basia*, he also composed three books of poems in elegiacs, of which the first one tells a well-defined love story about the poet's passion for a woman (brunette, like Shakespeare's Dark Lady) whom he calls Julia. The story gives every indication of being autobiographical; the events in question probably happened in 1531, when Secundus was 19, and the poems composed as the story unfolded. Yet their literary roots are

p. 159 unconcealed, and central to the occasion: ♪

a, poteras, lux, a, poteras ius dicere nobis  
 oreque formoso regia uerba loqui  
 inque meo uersu sublimia regna tenere,  
 prima fidis nostrae gloria, serus honos,  
 inque puellarum, quas olim carmine uates  
 laudauere pii, nomen habere choro,  
 qualis quae falso Nasoni dicta Corinna est,  
 Deliaque et Nemesis et bene culta comam  
 Cynthia, forma potens, nec non tua, Galle, Lycoris,  
 quarum immortalis forma perenne uiret.  
 (Secundus 2000: 1.7.31–40)

Ah, you could, my light, ah, you could have laid down the law for us and spoken royal words with your lovely mouth and reigned supremely in my verse, the first glory of our lyre, its final honor, and have had a name in the chorus of girls whom reverent poets once praised in their songs: like Corinna, so misleadingly named by Ovid, and Delia and Nemesis and Cynthia, the powerful beauty with the well groomed hair, and also, Gallus, your Lycoris: the immortal beauty of all of whom flourishes forever.

Gallus is Cornelius Gallus, an elegist of whom only a few lines survive; Secundus' enthusiasm for Roman love elegy extended even to works he could not read. Like those writers, Secundus and his mistress (named after the dissolute imperial daughter whom many in the Renaissance thought to be Ovid's Corinna and the reason for his banishment) will become famous because of the poems he writes about their love, a love which is, like that in the *Basia*, happily and knowingly sexual:

quas superas facie, iam iam superabis in arte,  
 dent modo di nostris uersibus esse fidem.  
 nos neque Chaonii uincet lasciuia nidi,  
 nec Iouis omniuoli deliciosus amor. (1.5.31–34)

Those whom you outdo in looks, soon soon you will outdo in expertise, if the gods only give persuasive power to my verses. The lasciviousness of the Chaonian dovecote will not surpass us, nor the voluptuous love of omnivorous Jove.

The poems are appropriately saturated with borrowings from the Roman elegists (the lustful Chaonian doves are in Propertius 1960: 1.9.5; *Iouis omniuoli* is a phrase from Catullus (1958: 68.140)). Secundus' sequence is as self-conscious a recreation of the Roman genre as can be found in Renaissance literature.

Important things nevertheless intervene between Secundus and his admired models. European sexual morality had changed since Ovid's time. Whatever the disreputability of the Roman elegists, the eros of

which they write was something held to more severe account in the Christian sixteenth century—and

p. 160 Secundus finds himself mourning for a time when it was not so: ↵

quam bene priscorum currebat uita parentum,  
ingenuae ueneris libera sacra colens!  
nondum coniugii nomen seruile patebat,  
nec fuerat diuis adnumeratus Hymen.

passim communes exercebantur amores  
omnibus, et proprii nescius orbis erat....  
scilicet ex illo sensit fera iura iacetque  
clausa pedem dura compede serua Venus. (1.7.65–70, 83–4)

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How well went the life of our ancient parents in observing the free rites of natural desire! The enslaving name of marriage did not yet exist, and Hymen was not numbered among the gods. Everyone everywhere practiced communal love, and the world knew nothing of private property.... Since then of course Venus has felt savage laws and lies in slavery, bound by her feet in harsh constraint.

The lament is itself an imitation of Tibullus. It draws on the praise of the Saturnian golden age in 1.3, quoted above, and on a briefer passage about the greater sexual freedom in older times in 2.3; but Secundus makes the propaganda for free love central and dominant, as it is not and does not have to be in Tibullus. Secundus is in fact following humanist precedent; Ercole Strozzi elaborated the same models into a very similar vision of a lost pastoral world of erotic deregulation: ‘in commune dabant segetem, in commune puellas’ (*Amores* 1.2, Strozzi 1530: sig. k1<sup>r</sup>; ‘they made the crops communal, they made the girls communal’). It becomes a standard topic.

In Secundus’ sequence, there is a reason that it comes up when it does. The seventh elegy is a narrative turning point; after a successful and satisfying seduction, a rival has appeared and offered Julia what her present lover cannot or will not offer: ‘sancti foedera coniugii’ (Secundus 2000: 1.7.10; ‘a contract of holy wedlock’). Secundus’ classical predecessors regularly contend with infidelity in their mistresses, but they are never up against anything quite like this. Their women may in fact be married, but not in *sacrum coniugium*; here, though, Julia’s change in marital status threatens to be and in fact will be an end on it as far as Secundus is concerned. She accepts the proposal and goes with her new husband to Antwerp, and in the remaining four poems in the sequence Secundus writes of a longing that persists even in her absence. Now in Brussels, he longs to revisit Mechlin, where their affair took place; that city (‘Cupid’s city’, 1.9.28) is his Petrarchan landscape:

abscessit: doleo. quid tum? uestigia restant  
et loca quae nobis gaudia longa dabant,  
et si istic fuero, fuero uicinior illi.  
esse putas haec tu ludicra? magna loquor.  
tum quam multa foro noua sisteret esseda uesper  
noxque rates tarda sera referret aqua,  
ipse rates omnes audax speculator obirem  
cunctaque defixis esseda luminibus,  
si quae forte meam mihi redderet hora puellam. (1.9.31–9)

She has gone. I hurt. What then? Traces remain, and the sites which gave us prolonged pleasure, and if I were there I would be closer to her. Do you think this is silliness? I am speaking very seriously. Then however many new carriages evening stops in the square, and however many boats late night brings back on the slow tide, as a brave observer I will meet all the boats and every carriage with steady eyes, should by any chance the hour bring my girl back to me.

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He fantasizes that Venus has replaced Julia with a *scortillum turpe* (47; ‘disgusting little whore’) who looks just like her: ‘barbarus ingratis illam complexibus urget, | teliger intactam te mihi seruat Amor’ (49–50; ‘the barbarian thrusts himself upon her in unwelcome embraces, armed Love keeps you intact for me’). In these imaginings the sequence moves toward its most overtly erotic moments, when Julia comes to her

discarded lover in his sleep. Their lovemaking has the present-tense vividness and the flickering unreality of dreamwork:

Iulia, te teneo; teneant sua gaudia diui;  
te teneo, mea lux; lux mea, te teneo.  
Iulia, te teneo; superi, teneatis Olympum.  
quid loquor? an uere, Iulia, te teneo?  
dormione? an uigilo? uera haec? an somnia sunt haec?  
somnia seu sunt, seu uera, fruamur, age.  
somnia si sunt haec, durent haec somnia longum,  
nec uigilem faciat me, precor, ulla dies. (1.10.23–30)

Julia, I hold you; let the gods hold to their own pleasures; I hold you, my light; light of mine, I hold you. Julia, I hold you; let the higher powers hold Olympus. What I am saying? Do I really hold you, Julia? Do I sleep? Do I wake? Is this real? Is this a dream? Whether it is real, whether it is a dream, let us enjoy, come on. If this is a dream, let this dream last long, and I pray that no day make me wake.

The sentiment is Petrarchan: ‘se l’error durasse, altro non cheggio’ (1976: 129.39; ‘if the deception should last, I ask for no more’). Petrarch’s dreams of Laura are chaste, but his imitators are more suggestive; one of the most refined of those imitators, Pietro Bembo, writes a series of particularly influential dream sonnets:

Se ‘l viver men che pria m’è duro e vile,  
né più d’Amor mi pento esser suggetto,  
né son di duol, come io solea, ricetto,  
tutto questo è tuo don, sogno gentile.  
Madonna più che mai tranquilla umile  
con tai parole e ‘n sì cortese affetto  
mi si mostrava, e tanto altro diletto,  
ch’assequir no poria lingua né stile. (1966: 89.1–8)

If life is less hard and vile to me than before, and I repent less at being Love’s subject, and I am not the refuge of pain that I used to be, all this is your gift, gentle dream. My lady, calmer and humbler than ever, came to me with such words and such kind affection, and such further delight, that no tongue or pen could follow.

For Secundus also the dream plays its role in making reality less painful. The book ends not in bitterness but in celebration, even as he looks forward to his own death:

at quocumque mei tabescent lumine uultus,  
o saltem possim dicere, ‘talīs erat,  
nobile quae paruo nomen sortita libello,  
prima meae spoliū Iulia mentis habet.’ (1.11.53–6)

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But on whatever day my face wastes away, let me at least have the strength to say, ‘Such was Julia, who gained a noble name from a little booklet and was the first to make a trophy of my mind.’

For three years Secundus keeps a vow to commemorate the affair each May with an ‘Elegia Sollemnis’ which similarly recalls the exhilaration of first love and ‘tremulis ignea luminibus’ (*Elegia Sollemnis* 3.80; ‘the fiery girl with the darting eyes’). What turns one kind of elegy into another is not *conquestio* but the palliative reimagining, at increasing distance, of what has passed.

That is not the whole story. Within the Julia poems Secundus is already scouting the good looking girls of Mechlin for her successor (1.9.53–64), and even the commemorative elegies reach for non-elegiac consolations; ‘ad latus accedat fusca puella meum, | quae nigris oculis et nigro crine decora | antiquae memorem me facis efficiat’ (*Elegia Sollemnis* 2.12–14; ‘at my side let there be a dark girl who with her beautiful black eyes and black hair can make me remember the one of old’). A second book of elegies relates, though without the narrative clarity of the first, dealings with further mistresses, and leaves us with the general impression of a serial pursuit of sex without marriage (‘sine dote torus’; Secundus, 2.8.90). Biographically that impression is probably accurate, and in other venues the legacy of the Roman love

elegists puts up a stronger resistance to the kind of metamorphosis that it undergoes in Secundus' first book. The most significant instance is in England. In 1593 a flurry of poets—Barnabe Barnes, Giles Fletcher, Thomas Lodge—publish books containing love poems identified as 'elegies'; thematically and formally they seem very miscellaneous, without in most cases any obvious reason for the generic label (Barnes does write one of them in English elegiac couplets, though he uses other meters for his other examples). A likely stimulus for this use of the term is the circulation in manuscript of Christopher Marlowe's complete translation of Ovid's *Amores*; when it saw print in the mid-90s it carried the title *All Ovids Elegies*. There were at least six editions before the end of the decade, undated and evasively claiming Holland as the place of publication; the wisdom of the evasiveness was confirmed in 1599 when one edition was called in and burnt on order of the Bishop of London. Marlowe's translation is not uniformly accurate, but it is cheerily unexpurgated ('the wench did not disdain a whit, | To take it in her hand, and play with it'; 1987: 3.6.73–4); the frank presentation of Ovid's manifest content outside the obscurity of a learned tongue could readily seem an offense to public decency. It also gratified an appetite in a literary culture that since the publication of Philip Sidney's *Astophil and Stella* in 1591 had been whelmed in a great onrush of sonnets. Here was a rudely, bracingly different tradition in love poetry, with a cultural pedigree older and arguably more secure than Petrarchism.

Among those who appear to have responded in that way was the young John Donne. His earliest poetic productions, from the 1590s and the first few years of the next century, include a number of love poems that come, intermittently, with the label 'elegy' (both in manuscript and when they were eventually printed, beginning in 1633). Donne's poetry of this period effects a particularly aggressive break with the neo-  
 p. 163 Petrarchist repertoire of high Elizabethan literature. His mockery of the stylized ↪ poetry of unsatisfied male desire—'whining Poëtry' (1967: 'The Triple Fool', l. 3)—is rude and memorable, and not just for laughs:

Love's not so pure, and abstract, as they use  
 To say, which have no Mistresse but their Muse,  
 But as all else, being elemented too,  
 Love sometimes would contemplate, sometimes do.  
 (1967: 'Love's Growth', ll. 11–14)

Ambitious claims are made for the indispensability of the flesh in love's fulfillment:

So must pure lovers soules descend  
 T'affections, and to faculties,  
 Which sense may reach and apprehend,  
 Else a great Prince in prison lies.  
 (1967: 'The Ecstasy', ll. 65–8)

Such august affirmations share space with manifestoes of unapologetic libertine promiscuity: 'I can love her, and her, and you and you, | I can love any, so she be not true' (1967: 'The Indifferent', ll. 8–9). It is an enterprise that testifies not just to an annoyance with Petrarchism, but also to an appreciative and intelligent engagement with Roman love elegy.

The engagement is not only with Ovid; it has been cogently argued (by Revard 1986) that the Roman with whom Donne found the most in common was the more impatient and troubled Propertius. The most creative use of the Roman models comes in the so-called *Songs and Sonnets*, Donne's poems in various lyric meters. 'The Sun Rising' ('Busie old foole, unruly Sunne...') rehearses Ovid's abusive argument with the dawn in *Amores* 1.13, and installs a triumphant conclusion in place of Ovid's ultimate concession of defeat. 'The Apparition' looks very much like a recasting of Cynthia's return from the grave as a fantasy of first-person revenge: the speaker forecasts here his own terrifying posthumous visitation to rouse the guilt of a recent love as she lies in another man's bed. The poems called elegies are usually thought to come earlier, and critics have generally found them less complex and interesting than what followed; but they are ambitious in their own way, and collectively constitute the closest thing in English to a vernacular recreation of the classical genre. The nonchalant use of the term 'elegy' by other Elizabethan love poets never comes to designate anything in particular, but it is possible to make some reasonably secure statements as to what Donnean love elegy is and is not—one of those statements being a contrast with Secundus' own fairly well-defined first book: Donne's elegies are specifically not elegiac, and in that regard amount to a more authentic reanimation of their models.



Generalizations do fray at the edges because of questions of authorship and generic definition. Both in manuscript and in print neither Donne nor those presenting his work are any more scrupulous in their use of the term 'elegy' than their contemporaries. One poem so designated—in many cases it has no other title—is an unusually strong reminder that within the larger picture Donne's relation to Petrarchism is not in fact that of consistent or simple rejection: ↵

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So, if I dreame I have you, I have you,  
For, all our joyes are but fantasticall.  
And so I scape the paine, for paine is true;  
And sleepe which locks up sense, doth lock out all.  
(1967: 'Image of her whom I love', ll. 13–16)

No modern editor, however, groups this with Donne's love elegies, and the simple and persuasive reason for that practice is formal. This poem is in quatrains, whereas in the other poems in question the poet follows (as Barnes, Fletcher, and Lodge, for instance, do not) the specific precedent of Marlowe's translation of the *Amores*: rhymed pentameter couplets, offered as a vernacular equivalent of the classical elegiac couplet (so effective a one that Marlowe's translation has the same line count as the Latin). Within the elegies that rate that title on these grounds, the most mournful passage does find the speaker sounding like Secundus and his Renaissance predecessors, though the loss being lamented is not that of the poet's mistress:

How happy were our Syres in ancient times,  
Who held plurality of loves no crime!  
. . . . .  
Women were then no sooner ask'd then won,  
And what they did was honest and well done.  
(1967: 'Variety', ll. 37–8, 43–4)

The remembering of a sexual golden age is of course the elegiac topic appropriate to a libertine program; it has a notable career in Cavalier verse of the seventeenth century (Thomas Carew's 'A Rapture', Richard Lovelace's 'Love Made in the First Age'). Donne's authorship of the poem, however, has been often doubted, primarily on stylistic grounds: the writing and argumentation seem uncharacteristically smooth and pat. Omit both or either of these poems, and the canon of Donne's love elegies is dominated all the more thoroughly by the edgy confidence of a man deploying 'my words masculine perswasive force' (1967: 'On his Mistress', l. 4) in expectation of having his way in the here and now.

In this regard they are like the Roman love elegies, and often a bit more so. An elegy given over to the trope of 'Love's War' twists the topic into a bravura claim that none of Donne's classical predecessors dares make; his campaign of sexual predation in fact serves the state's interest:

Thousands we see which travaile not  
To warrs; but stay swords, armes, and shott  
To make at home; And shall not I do then  
More glorious service staying to make men? (1967, ll. 43–6)

The most notorious elegy (not printed until 1654) is a sustained expansion on *Amores* 1.5, or rather on a single moment in that poem. Ovid's account of a particularly gratifying sexual encounter follows things through to the languor afterwards—'lassi requievimus ambo' (1994, 25; 'tired, we both rested')—but  
p. 165 Donne ends at the ↵ moment of maximum arousal, just before the bodies join: 'To teach thee I am naked first; why then | What needst thou have more covering then a man?' (1967: 'Going to Bed', ll. 47–8). It is a moment that occasions a novel literalization of *militat omnis amans*: 'The foe oft-times having the foe in sight, | Is tir'd with standing though he never fight' (ll. 3–4). Love's militancy can be felt throughout in a drumbeat of witty abuse: 'Though all her parts be not in th'usuall place, | She hath yet an Anagram of a good face' (1967: 'The Anagram', ll. 15–16). Secundus sounds this note on occasion, as when he imagines an old man's hernia dangling like a ghost penis (2000: 2.8.59–64); it is pervasive in Donne's elegies, a usual way of doing business. The virtuoso showpiece is 'The Perfume', a prolonged display of flyting ostensibly directed at the toiletry ('Base excrement of earth'; 1967: l. 57) that has led to the speaker's being discovered in bed with a young heiress, but also taking in every member of her household ('thy immortall mother which doth lye | Still buried in her bed, yet will not dye'; ll. 13–14), and not sparing the lovers themselves (skewered *en passant* when we hear that the father 'hath oft sworne, that hee would remove | Thy beauties beautie, and

food of our love, | Hope of his goods'; ll. 9–11). For extended passages Donne's elegies take on the aggression of satire.

The prospect of a loss such as ruined Secundus' contentment, however, can touch this poet as well, and change his tone. 'His Parting from Her' indeed begins with the expectation of elegiac lament: 'Since she must go, and I must mourn, come night, | Environ me with darkness, whilst I write' (1967: ll. 1–2). The circumstances of the woman's departure are never given, but enough is said to locate this story in a world like that of the Roman elegies. The affair is adulterous (l. 42), and it has been proceeding through the kind of wiles in which Ovid revelled:

Have we not kept our guards, like spie on spie?  
Had correspondence whilst the foe stood by?  
Stoln (more to sweeten them) our many blisses  
Of meetings, conference, embracements, kisses? (ll. 45–8)

The ordinary thing is for such passions to fade, and for the people to move on; part of this speaker's dread is the humiliation of confirming the *cliché*: 'after all this passed Purgatory, | Must sad divorce make us the vulgar story?' (ll. 55–6). He speaks in fact not to mourn but to affirm that he and the woman he repeatedly calls his 'friend' will beat the odds:

Rend us in sunder, thou canst not divide  
Our bodies so, but that our souls are ty'd,  
And we can love by letters still and gifts,  
And thoughts and dreams; Love never wanteth shifts. (ll. 69–72)

He invokes the Petrarchan resources of love at a distance in the service of an un-Petrarchan love already consummated, one with the strength of assured mutuality: 'Take therefore all in this: I love so true, | As I will never look for less in you' (ll. 103–4). That concluding couplet, of course, is not just an assertion but also an appeal, and ends the poem testifying once more to the speaker's vulnerability to what the woman in fact goes on to do. An unexpectedly thoughtful pair of elegies addresses that vulnerability in more searching ways. In 'Natures lay Ideot' the speaker sets out the simple logic by which his successful seduction of the love of the moment inevitably, by showing her how it is done and the pleasure of doing it, opens her to interest in other partners. He bristles at the prospect:

Thy graces and good words my creatures bee,  
I planted knowledge and lifes tree in thee,  
Which Oh, shall strangers taste? Must I alas  
Frame and enamell Plate, and drinke in glasse?  
Chafe waxe for others seales? breake a colts force  
And leave him then, beeing made a ready horse? (1967: ll. 25–30)

But the poem ends here, because the complaint has nowhere to go; he has to see that the answer has to be Yes. In 'Change' he looks to find in his mistress's infidelity not the end of love but its enrichment:

Although thy hand and faith, and good workes too,  
Have seal'd thy love which nothing should undoe,  
Yea though thou fall backe, that apostasie  
Confirme thy love. (1967: ll. 1–4)

He endorses on the woman's behalf a code of erotic liberty at odds with any sense of personal possession — 'Women are made for men, not him, nor mee' (l. 10)—but also knows that he does not want to lose her. He strives, in an argument less brittle than that in 'The Indifferent', to affirm the woman's wisdom in having other lovers, and eventually finds his way, through some inconsistency and awkwardness, to an exhilarated final metaphor for something between stale fidelity and unreckoning promiscuity:

Waters stincke soone, if in one place they bide,  
And in the vast sea are worse putrifi'd:  
But when they kisse one banke, and leaving this  
Never looke backe, but the next banke doe kisse,  
Then they are purest; Change is the nursery

But this is not quite what he wanted to say; the celebratory close, ‘swept along by the excitement of expectancy’ (Estrin 1994: 221), is so eagerly sought and welcomed that the speaker seems not quite to register the implications of ‘Never looke backe.’ Donne comes closer here than anywhere else in his libertine elegies to the sadness of loss; its prospect can be seen even in preemptive denial.

p. 167 After the Renaissance, the only major revival of the classical genre in clearly recognizable form comes toward the end of the eighteenth century. Goethe’s *Römische Elegien*, written in a German version of elegiac couplets, are a direct result of his stay in Italy in 1786–8; they are connected with the beginning both of his serious study of classical culture and of his love for his future wife, Christiane Vulpius. Goethe frames the sequence with an elegiac address to the sequence itself—‘Wie wir einst so glücklich waren! | Müßens jetzt durch euch erfahren’ (‘how happy we once were we must now learn through you’)—but the poems themselves are almost entirely centered on present-tense pleasure (NB: all translations from the German are by the author of this chapter). That pleasure is so straightforwardly sexual that some passages were discreetly removed before publication in 1795: ‘Uns ergötzen die Freuden des echten nacketen Amors | Und des geschaukelten Betts lieblicher knarrender Ton’ (Goethe 1977: 1a.31–2; ‘the joys of true naked love delight us, and the lovely creaking sound of the rocking bed’). There are tensions in the implied narrative, but few between the speaker and the partner he calls (appropriately enough) Faustina. When they quarrel once, early on, we are told that the moment quickly passed; otherwise their problems are outside the bedroom. The triumvirs of love are invoked by that title (5.20), and antiquity is remembered as *die goldene Zeit* (14a.29) specifically because, the speaker is convinced, venereal disease had not yet appeared in Europe; he and his love neutralize that risk in the present by being faithful to each other. Love himself visits the speaker to tell him that precisely in his present happiness he is reviving the classical tradition: ‘War das Antike doch neu, da jene Glücklichen lebten! | Lebe glücklich, und so lebe die Vorzeit in dir!’ (13.21–2; ‘the classical age was new, since they lived in happiness; live happily, and then antiquity lives in you’). Enjoying the present and reviving the past are converging enterprises: ‘Oftmals hab ich auch schon in ihren Armen gedichtet | Und des Hexameters Mass leise mit fingernder Hand | Ihr auf den Rücken gezählt’ (5.15–17; ‘I have often even composed poetry in her arms and, tapping with my hand, softly counted out the beat of the hexameter on her back’). Nothing of importance is absent from their contentment. Goethe was, however, sufficiently taken with the meter to keep using it, and in 1797 it becomes the vehicle for a very different engagement with its past—indeed, an encounter with a ghost. Cynthia’s return from the grave is the classical template for ‘Euphrosyne’, where the poet is confronted by the spirit of Christiane Becker, a young actress dead at the age of 19. Goethe had not been her lover, but their relations had had moments of disturbing intensity, which she recounts, taking on his own voice. The poem is far less horrific than Propertius’, but the reproach is there—‘Kennst du mich, Guter, nicht mehr? Und käme diese Gestalt dir, | Die du doch sonst geliebt, schon als ein fremdes Gebild?’ (Goethe 1994: ll. 23–4; ‘dear, do you not recognize me, and has this shape, which you loved so much, already become something strange?’)—as is the sense of unfinished business: ‘Bildete doch ein Dichter auch mich! und seine Gesänge, | Ja, sie vollenden an mir, was mir das Leben versagt’ (ll. 139–40; ‘after all, a poet shaped me, and his songs, yes, will supply what life denied me’). The poem itself attempts to close the circle.

p. 168 ‘Euphrosyne’ is perhaps the kind of poem that ‘love elegy’ in modern usage might most naturally designate: an encounter with a loved one in which intimacy and distance both figure in something like equal measure. There are arresting poems in that category, sometimes with very clear biographical grounding—those, for instance, that Thomas Hardy composes on his powerfully revived love for his first wife after her death in 1912, even as he had begun a happy second marriage. Many involve his revisiting the scenes of their early life together, and testify to a strong but elusive spectral presence; at one extreme he even has the confidence to speak for her, though what she has to say is that on both sides devotion and estrangement are permanently joined:

Now that he goes and wants me with him  
 More than he used to do,  
 Never he sees my faithful phantom  
 Though he speaks thereto.  
 (Hardy 1976: ‘The Haunter’, ll. 13–16)

Hardy, however, did not call these poems elegies, and the most commanding employment of that title over the last century draws much of its power from dealing with something not so easy to focus. Rainer Maria

Rilke's *Duineser Elegien* (1912–22) are elegies not because they lament the loss of particular persons or things, but because of the nature of human consciousness and experience: 'so leben wir und nehmen immer Abschied' (1939: 8.75; 'so we live and are always taking leave'). They are love elegies because of the models held up for admiration: 'Sehnt es dich aber, so singe die Liebenden' (1.36; 'but when longing seizes you, sing of the lovers'). The tradition that Rilke invokes here is specifically Petrarchan; he names as his example the greatest of the female Petrarchists, deserted by the male lover of whom she writes so ravishingly:

Hast du der Gaspara Stampa  
denn genügend gedacht, dass irgend ein Mädchen,  
dem der Geliebte entging, am gesteigerten Beispiel  
dieser Liebenden fühlt: dass ich würde wie sie? (1.45–8)

Have you sufficiently considered Gaspara Stampa, that almost any girl who has lost a loved one would feel from that lover's heightened example: if I could become like her?

The highest objects for emulation are not even human; Rilke calls them angels. To love them is to learn the ways of godlike deprivation:

Glaub *nicht*, das ich werbe.  
Engel, und würb ich dich auch! Du kommst nicht. Denn mein  
Anruf ist immer voll Hinweg; wider so starke  
Strömung kannst du nicht schreiten. Wie ein gestreckter  
Arm ist mein Rufen. Und seine zum Greifen  
oben offene Hand bleibt vor dir  
offen, wie Abwehr und Warnung,  
Unfasslicher, weitauf. (7.86–93)

Do *not* think that I court you. And even if I were courting you, angel, you do not come. So my summons is always total dismissal; against such a powerful current you can make no way. My call is like an outstretched arm. And its grasping hand, opening upwards, stands before you in defense and warning, incomprehensible, up there.

Reaching out and warding off are the same gesture.

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