

Past-and-Future Background Briefing:

Roman Amatory and Satirical Literature: Catullus, Ovid and Petronius

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- *Introduction: From Desire to Satire*
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Abstract:

Ancient Latin poetry and prose is worth intensive study in its own right, and also provides a window into Republican and Imperial politics and society. Catullus and Ovid, in particular, were able to distill and portray desire, passion and other emotions in all their forms. A selective analysis of the works of Catullus, Ovid and Petronius shows their ambiguous and problematic relationship with persons of power, including Julius Caesar, Augustus and Nero. Under Emperor Augustus, in particular, there was an effort to control the narrative of values that should be promoted for elite Romans, leading to patterns of patronage and cultural prescription. This moral agenda led to the relegation of Ovid from Rome to a remote city on the Black Sea. For the later writer Petronius, the situation was even starker, driving him to fiercely satirize the decadence of his own society. Though seen for a time as an 'arbiter of taste' for the Emperor Nero, he soon fell out of favour and was forced to commit suicide. Poets of the later Empire, like its philosophers, would have to make a choice: aggrandisement and rhetorical flattery of the regime, or more oblique forms of social satire and comic dialogue. The works of Catullus, Ovid and Petronius, whether in or out of vogue during later periods, remain significant legacies for European and global literature. Indeed, they are brilliant explorations of what it is to be human, now and then. They deserve further study and prominence in the twenty-first century.

1. Introduction: From Desire to Satire

An important aspect of Roman culture is its love poetry and erotic prose. This type of literature might be regarded as intensely personal, private, and in stark contrast to public rhetoric, historiography, or the great epic poems of Lucan or Virgil. This division, however, is not so easily made for Roman writers. The nature of the political and social life of the late Republic was such that even 'private' poetry could not readily avoid political entanglements. This was due to the particular nature of patronage during the period and changing political conditions as the late Republic passed into the early 'Empire'.

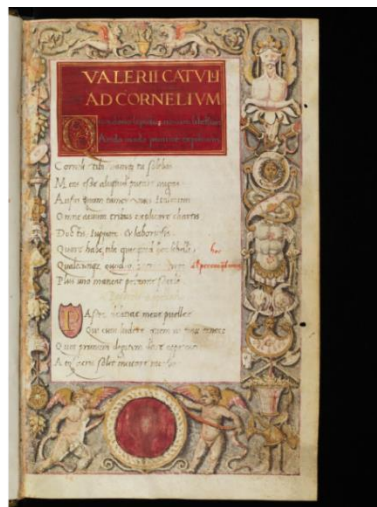
With the growing dominance of Augustus from 27 BCE to 8 CE, we begin to see an insidious change in the nature of patronage in Rome. Patronage had been the networking practice of any Roman of means, and this under the Principate of August and the early emperors. Now, however, we now find that all public works need to find a concord with the type of settlement of affairs envisaged by Augustus and his ministers. Furthermore, from 19 BCE Augustus himself becomes the major patron of Roman literature, no longer working through subtle men such as Maecenas, and panegyric become a major criterion for the success and survival of creative works. Horace and Virgil, for example, would praise Augustus as the harbinger of a new age, accepting their duties as clients, though well aware of the risks of such engagement. This movement towards more centralized patterns of

patronage would affect not only poetry. It would also spell a disaster for the vigour of rhetoric in the 1st century CE, which would shift from the vigorous presentation of opposing viewpoints to a subtle flattery designed to promote, at best to influence, but rarely to oppose, the ideas of the current regime. ‘We live in the best of all regimes’ might be its dominant note. This intellectual crisis was clearly noted and explained by Tacitus in his dialogue on oratory, the *Dialogus* of circa 102 CE, where the stability of political life has led to a decline in real debate, and where the prosecutors and private accusers seeking fortunes (*delatores*) had made creativity a dangerous endeavour.

It is this context that we can see a work such as Petronius’ *Satyricon* in a new light. It may indeed be one of the origins of the bawdy picaresque novel in Europe, but it is also much more than this. It contains a sustained parody of much of the literature and mores of its age, and retains an earthy vigour that frees it from the real decadence of the period. We can approach this changing environment for poetry by considering three major writers: Catullus, Ovid and Petronius.

2. Catullus: Portraits of Passion

Catullus is one of the earliest Roman poets of lyric and erotic poetry whose work survives to any large degree. Otherwise, only a few fragments of contemporary poets such as Calvus, Cinna, Bibaculus and Tigidius survive. The poems of Catullus went out of vogue for about a thousand years with the dominance of Christianity, but a major codex was discovered wedged under a wine barrel in the 13th century CE, allowing its revival in the following centuries (Whigham 1966).



The frontispiece from a late fifteenth century Catullus codex, preserved in the Foundation Martin Bodmer, Cologny, Switzerland
(<https://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/searchresult/list/one/fmb/cb-0047#details>
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Gaius Valerius Catullus was born circa 84 BCE, dying around 54 BCE. His father was an eminent citizen of Verona, who had at one time entertained Julius Caesar in his house (Whigham 1966), and it seems clear that the family was of the *equites* (‘knight’) rank, a rich order just below the senatorial class. We have no exact dates for his introduction into Roman society, though this was likely to have been achieved by 62 BCE, with Catullus becoming acquainted with major Roman politicians such as Cicero (who apparently disliked his poetry) and Julius Caesar (Wasson 2020; Whigham 1966). It was possible that such an introduction was provided by a fellow Veronese, Publius Valerius Cato, the older teacher and poet, who was known to, and probably strongly influenced, Catullus and other ‘new poets’ such as Tigidius, Gaius Helvius Cinna and Marcus Furius Bibaculus (Whigham 1966, pp23-24).

Whigham's translation here misses some of the punch of the original. It can more literally be translated: -

I have no great desire to make myself agreeable to you, Cesar, nor to know whether your complexion is light or dark. (trans. by Francis Cornish, in Gould 1988)

It is important in such a genre to leave the sharpest cut to the last, quickly, with a sudden turn of the blade. As far as we know, this distain for Julius Caesar was not detrimental to Catullus' career. A limited poetical distain during this early period, as distinct from direct political opposition, could be allowed to continue without serious reply by a rising leader such as Julius Caesar, so long as reconciliation was possible. According to Suetonius: -

Valerius Catullus had also libelled him [Caesar] in his verses about Mamurra, yet Caesar, while admitting that these were a permanent blot on his name, accepted Catullus' apology and invited him to dinner that same afternoon, and never interrupted his friendship with Catullus' father. (Suetonius *Julius Caesar* 73)

In the following period of the emperor Augustus such tolerance would not be so easily granted, and poetry would be chained more directly to enhancing the prestige of a leader, a regime, and what came to be represented as a 'new age' of peace and prosperity (see further below).

Catullus may have also been one of the lovers of Clodia Metelli, probably the Lesbia of his poems, (Whigham 1966, p15-27) a great source of scandal in the period and sister to the Publius Clodius Pulcher, the populist politician and gang leader who had attacked Cicero and for a time driven him into exile. Twenty-five poems concern or are addressed to Lesbia, an object of romantic and erotic love and the cause of much disappointment and bitterness (Wasson 2020; see especially Catullus Poems 5, 7, 8, 11). Likewise, in Cicero's *Pro Caelio*, Clodia is attacked as a 'notorious' woman and the ultimate source of contumacious legal prosecutions. At such, Catullus was on the fringes of the powerful political and legal battles that raged through the Republic in the mid-first century BCE (see Ferguson 2024 for the wider political context). In 57 BCE Catullus and his friend Gaius Cinna accompanied C. Memmius Gemellus to Bithynia in northern Anatolia (Whigham 1966, p13), probably as members of his official entourage, giving him and opportunity to travel through parts of the East and visit his brother's funeral remains near Troy, as well as deal with possible business family interests (Cairns 2012; Catullus Poems 68 & 101).

Catullus had three main traditions to draw from: 'Roman epic and tragedy; Roman comedy and satire; and the Roman love epigram, which was an importation from Alexandrian Greek' (Whigham 1966, p26). The importance of this last tradition must not be under-estimated: the apparent simplicity of Catullus's poems is part of a highly polished and refined art which strove precisely for this freshness, even for an apparent naivete while exploring themes that run back through the entire corpus of Greek literature. The poetry of Callimachus (died 250 BCE), and the romantic elements derived from Apollonius Rhodius (circa 295-230 BCE) seem to have been well known to Catullus and his circle (Whigham 1966). We even find Catullus virtually translating a section of the poetry of Sappho (Catullus Poem 51), while the far-ranging mythical structures of poems 63-68 remind us that Catullus was writing in a highly allusive, self-referential world.

We can see some of this in the Attis poem (no. 63), which deals with the themes of the relationship between male and female, of castration, and transformation. Superficially, it deals with the cult of the Great Mother goddess Cybele and with the *galli*, dancing priests who would carry the sacred relics of the goddess in ecstatic processions throughout the empire, even in the streets of Rome. These frenzied priests would flagellate and cut themselves, and their most special act was that of self-

castration. These practices are attested to by their religious supporters, their critics and by some sculptural and archaeological evidence (see Chronopoulos 2024; Julian *Oration to the Mother of the Gods*). Eusebius, for example, notes: -

The Phrygians say that Maeon was king of Phrygia and begat a daughter named Cybele, who first invented a pipe, and was called the Mountain Mother. . . . But Cybele became pregnant by intercourse with Attis, and when this was known, her father killed Attis and the nurses; and Cybele became mad and rushed into the country, and there continued howling and beating a drum. . . . Wherefore the Phrygians keep this custom even to the present day, lamenting the death of the youth, and erecting altars, and honouring Attis and Cybele with sacrifices. And afterwards, at Pessinus in Phrygia, they built a costly temple, and instituted most magnificent worship and sacrificial rites. (Eusebius *Preparatio Evangelica* II.ii.22, in Barrett 1987, p125)

This eastern tradition seems to have become associated with other cults in Hellenistic religion, including the cults of Bacchus, Adonis and Dionysus, as ecstatic, even antisocial cults that were introduced into Rome but never fully trusted or respected. The Phrygian (west-central Anatolian) cult of Cybele, known in Greece by 500 BCE, was formally introduced into Rome in 204 BCE, when a black stone (perhaps a meteorite?) representing the Great Mother was brought by boat up the Tiber and installed in the Temple of Victory before her own temple could be constructed, thereby incorporating her into the accepted roster of Roman cults (Chronopoulos 2024; Whigham 1966). Apparently, an ancient book of Roman oracles recommended her inclusion in Roman worship, partly because of her connection to Troy, believed to be one origin for Rome via Aeneas who had escaped the fall of that ancient city (Beard 2015). At the social level, the practices of the cult may have allowed non-binary or transgender individuals to join a community which had at least ritual recognition in Rome, and allowed them to ‘to express themselves in a way that traditional Roman manhood did not permit’ (Chronopoulos 2024).

Catullus, however, is not simply recasting mythic material, nor merely describing a procession which he would have had opportunities to see. He deals with this material with a rather different purpose. We find our ‘hero’ Attis:-

Attis with urgent feet treads the opaque ground
of the Goddess, his wits fuddled, stung with phrenetic
itch, slices his testicles off with a razor-
flint, sees the signs of new blood spotting
the earth, knows arms, legs, torso, sans
male members and

SHE

ecstatically snatches in delicate hands
the hand-drum of Cybebe [= Cybele] . . .

(Catullus Poem 63, trans. Peter Whigham)

But after ecstasy and the loss of the old self, comes a realisation: -

Attica mother & maker, I
like a gateless housecarl fleeing
his mesne, footloose among Ida's
snows among the wood & rock lairs
with the board caves for an icy hearth,
have I stripped myself of my patrimony
friends, goods, kin?"

(Catullus, Poem 63, trans. Peter Whigham)

But Attis is unable to return to normal society, for Cybele ensures that his/her madness returns, through the image of a lion, infecting him/her with ‘fear and desire for Cybele’s pale’: -

The beast self-scourges its flanks
bounds through the brushwood, bursts
on the white-lined sands, appearing
where delicate Attis still stands by the sea.
The demented creature flees to Cybebe wold
her life-space doomed spent in Cybebe's thrall.

(Catullus, Poem 63, trans. Peter Whigham).

Catullus closes with a prayer to Cybele that her fury would not come to Catullus’ own house and home.

From this and similar poems, Whigham argues that ‘there was in Catullus a strain of femineity which was deeper than “normal” adherence to the bisexual conventions of his class and time’ (Whigham 1966, p42), a point which he supports by citation of Poem 65, where Catullus seems to identify himself with a young girl who is harbouring a secret. However, it is problematic to interpret these poems in such a direct way. Even Catullus warns readers against deducing effeminacy of the author from his poems (Poem 16). If Catullus identifies with the female in poem 63, for example, it is only an identification with the female as an emasculated man, a ‘synthetic woman’. This image may reflect the values of Roman high society of the time: there was still a serious attempt to keep upper class women closeted in a world of fine education making them suitable for political and financially-driven marriages, and thereafter to the roles of mother and house-keeper (Beard 2015). In reality, of course, individual Roman matriarchs sometimes had enormous influence, as well as a strong role on Greek and Roman religious cults, though our evidence is usually filtered through male writers and prejudices (see Richlin 2014). Free access to sexuality, as well as to public prominence, were often suppressed for these women, and often viewed as scandalous.

However, the real ambitions, desires and abilities of these women form an undercurrent in the poetry of the period from Catullus to Ovid. It is, moreover, only in this political and social sense that they can be viewed as ‘the emasculated’. Indeed, Cybele is the great mother, the progenitor, all fertility is absorbed into her and originates from her. It is the man who must surrender his sex, his desire, and his passion to worship to her, and remain forever in thrall, but forever unsatisfied. Catullus can empathise with the sexuality of the female in these poems, but it is an awareness of a mythic, creative and destructive aspect of the female which he finds, in the end, mysterious and alien. It is this bifurcation which provides some of the intensity and tension in the Attis poem. It is not just a love-hate relationship, nor a fear of castration in the sexual act. Whigham’s observation concerning this so-called ‘love-hate see-saw’ as the experience of ‘the manic depressive’ (Whigham 1966, 43) is psychologically incorrect. Catullus holds the tension of desire and fear together at the same moment. This tension allows a skilful play of emotions within the poem itself. Catullus’s prayer at the end exposes the poem as just that, a literary image or a dream, but the emotions in it may be viewed as both genuinely experienced and perfect artifice.

Catullus creates a poetic world of conceits, conceptions and deceits. Paul Veyne suggests that it is extremely dangerous to read this material as direct or indirect biography (1988). Indeed, the question we must ask is whether we can read the adopted persona in these poems as a direct reflection of Catullus the man. If we accept Catullus as a genuinely naive poet, freshly inventive but unsophisticated, we can then readily proceed to mine the poems for historical references for the biography of Catullus. But this simplicity is misleading; Catullus is reflecting some 800 years of mythical thought in Greece and Rome, and is structuring a forum for the development of sensibilities

(Veyne 1988). Catullus even ironically refers to his own naivete, his own entrapment (Poems 1, 6, 8, 52). But as noted by Veyne, the irony includes more than this playful juxtaposition between ego and persona: -

But, let the reader be assured, elegiac irony is usually more subtle than this 'second order' playfulness, as it is called. What our poets say does seem to be the expression of the deepest passion. Yet the way it is said belies this appearance: it deliberately lacks naturalness. This said, the question of the poets' ultimate sincerity is far from settled, but it becomes more difficult. Indeed, it is harder to see how a picture is painted than it is to see what it claims to represent, which is the first thing that leaps to the eye. . . . In his tender or passionate verses it is difficult to believe him insincere, but it is no less difficult not to suspect that he is playing. The details are often true while the whole rings false. What are we to make of those cries of jealousy, of despair, that are cut off after two lines to make room for a sententious voice, quickly succeeded by an allusion to rakish mythology? In short, Roman erotic elegy resembles a montage of quotations and cries from the heart. But these tightly controlled changes in tone do not even try to present themselves as lyrical effusions. Above all else, the poet seems to seek variety. He denies himself no attraction, not even that of some quite torrid lines of verse, so long as their torridness remains in its proper place and so long as any such attraction, within this mosaic, is set amidst other material that makes it unreal. The very movement of the poem, which is so contrived, lifts it to the apparent level of an outpouring of emotion. (Veyne 1988, pp3-4)

A beneficial historical usage of this material beyond identifying individuals and their linkages, is to try to establish some idea of how the poetry would have been understood in its age, and how the structure of this poetry reveals a certain reaction to the ideas and life of the period. In the *Carmina* (Poem 64) Catullus laments the lost golden age but tries to transcend the limits of humankind: he has a goddess marrying a man (Pelius marries Thetis), and the gods walking among men (Whigham 1966). In a sense, Catullus is trying to recreate the world where the gods live among mankind, which can throw off some of its limitations. If this cannot be done by nature, it must be done through careful artifice. It is in this context that Catullus' poetry was enjoyed and loved in the Roman world: not its prurience but its brilliance was prized. Walter Landor has written rather cleverly of Catullus's supposed obscenity: -

Tell me not what too well I know
About the bard of Sirmio -
 Yes, in Thalia's son
Such stain there are - as when a Grace
Sprinkles another's laughing face
 With nectar, and runs on.

(in Whigham 1966, p46)

Catullus had a powerful effect on his immediate successors, including the poets Tibullus, Propertius, Horace and on the epigrams of Martial. He had a particular impact on Ovid, whose own amatory poetry is full of reflections of the passion of Catullus. Likewise, the early sections of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* echo not just the declining ages of the world as derived from Hesiod, but speak of the gods in terms already developed in Catullus' mythic poems. The admirers of Catullus in the modern period included Ben Jonson, Lovelace, Landor, Yeats and Ezra Pound. Today, contemporary readers can directly experience the intense emotions that emerge from many of these poems even in translation, enjoying the rapturous kisses of Poem 7, the disdain for sodomites who too casually interpret his poems (Poem 16), his sarcastic treatment of an 'open-mouthed bore suffering from halitosis' (Poem 98), the unexpected return of a lover (Poem 107), or the weak character of a man who owns land but has no substance, i.e. who is a mere *tool* (Poems 114 & 115). It is this combination of directness and sophisticated framing of experience which has helped Catullus's work survive the moral censorship of the following imperial and Christian periods to reemerge as one of the most enduring of Latin poets.

3. Augustus, Patronage and Cultural Prescription

Great Roman men had always attempted to promote themselves, their family, ancestors, and their careers through literature, whether in speeches, poetry or histories, written by themselves or others. The autobiography of Sulla (known to us by fragments in later writers), the campaign writings of Caesar (his Commentaries on the Gallic War and the Civil War), the published and often self-congratulatory speeches of Cicero, all included these aspects among their purposes. Augustus, however, went one step further as he gained dominance in Rome by seeking to coopt major writers as part of a wider reform in moral and political life. This required the passing of laws on morals and making sure they were enforced. Augustus, as censor and reformer of morals, seems to have been proud of his efforts in this area. He states in his *Res Gestae*: -

. . . the senate and the people of Rome agreed that I should be appointed supervisor of laws and morals The measures that the senate then desired me to take I carried out in virtue of my tribunician power. On five occasions, of my own initiative, I asked for and received from the senate a colleague in that power. (*Res Gestae*, 6.1-2)

To this he adds: -

By new laws passed on my proposal I brought back into use many exemplary practices of our ancestors which were disappearing in our time, and in many ways I myself transmitted exemplary practises to posterity for their imitation. (*Res Gestae* 8.5)

Thus, Augustus emphasised his leadership role in the attempt to rejuvenate the morals of his times, largely by an emphasis on traditional values. Both these passages seem to refer to the *Julian Laws on Marriage of the Orders and on Adultery*, and perhaps to laws against electoral bribery passed in 18 BCE. The Julian Laws served two purposes: to curb the increasing decline of sexual morals, and to try to stimulate the flagging birth rate among the upper classes. If of limited success in these two explicit aims, as a social program it may have more successfully asserted 'a reallocation of power between elites, on the one hand, and state authority on the other', accruing power to Augustus as princeps and thereafter to a more centralized imperial system (Reid 2016, p202).



Marble Portrait head of the Young Augustus, circa 14-73 CE

(Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum, N.Y., used under their Open Access Policy and Public Domain, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/248119>)

Indeed, more than laws and legal reform were required to reform the morality and behaviour of the ruling classes in Rome and to stabilise Augustus's control of affairs. Augustus was sensitive to the way the regime was viewed in a variety of areas: upon becoming Chief Pontiff of Rome he had many of the Greek and Latin prophetic verses then in circulation destroyed, keeping only an edited version of the Sibylline Books under strict oversight with limited access – they were not circulated to the wider public (Suetonius *Augustus* 31; Gruen 2016). Likewise, he stopped the publication of the proceedings of the Senate (Suetonius *Augustus* 36), begun by Julius Caesar, perhaps in an effort to limit the widespread knowledge of just how dominant his position was in relation to that body. Suetonius states that Augustus had a particular interest in literature, both Latin and Greek: -

[His] chief interest in the literature of both languages was the discovery of moral precepts, with suitable anecdotes attached, capable of public or private application. . . . He even read whole volumes aloud to the Senate, and issued proclamations commending them to the people - such as Quintus Metellus's *On the Need for Larger Families*, and Rutilius's *On the Need for Small Buildings* - just to prove that he had been anticipated in his recommendations by earlier thinkers. (Suetonius *Augustus* 89).

From the writings of Augustus himself and Suetonius it is evident that Augustus was attempting to lay down general standards of behaviour, and furthermore that he was willing to censor or promote literature according to whether or not it supported his reform program. Metellus' work, for example, probably supported many of the aspects of the Lex Julia.

Augustus can be viewed as 'culturally prescriptive' in two ways. First, he attempted to lay down standards of behaviour, especially as it applied to the senatorial classes. Secondly, he attempted to influence what would be promoted via contemporary literature, harnessing the genius of men such as Horace, Virgil, and Livy to support his notions of a revived Roman virtue. This virtue was to be carefully cultivated under the peace provided by his own overriding *auctoritas* (more than formal political or legal authority, this concept included notions of 'social authority, reputation, and status', Sifuentes 2019). However, this control was far from perfect. Indeed, the very effort to repeatedly reform the family life of the Roman elite suggests that actual social behaviour was far from the censor's ideals. Indeed, even in within the imperial family itself he would find his hopes often dashed, especially over the sexual adventures of his daughter Julia, which led to her banishment and eventual death. The question we can ask, then, is why was the prominent poet Ovid banished? Was it because of some positive action, some specific 'error' in his behaviour, or due to a failure to sufficiently support the regime and its morality in his poetry?

4. The Relegation of Ovid

Publius Ovidius Naso was born in 43 BCE of an equestrian family from Sulmo, some ninety miles east of Rome (Innes 1955). He was educated in Rome and Athens, studying rhetoric in preparation for a political career. However, after achieving some minor offices, he turned away from entering the Senate. Instead, he pursued his great love for poetry, finishing the *Amores* in five books by around 10 BCE, followed by his *Ars Amatoria* (*The Art of Love*) and the *Remedia Amoris* (*Remedies of Love*), completed by 2 CE (Williams 1978). Ovid has been described as 'a poet utterly in love with poetry' (Gilbert Murray in Griffin 1977, p57).

Ovid was soon accorded a place among the major poets of the age, being the youngest of a generation which included Virgil, Horace, Tibullus and Propertius (Williams 1978). His poetry is witty, allusive, and dwelt on the themes of seduction, desire, and cures for failed love. None of these poems, however, were really more shocking than the lyrics already written by Catullus or Propertius. Yet, in 8 CE Ovid was suddenly banished from Rome to the remote, barely Hellenised town of Tomus in the

Back Sea (present-day Constantza in modern Romania). The type of banishment was not complete exile, but rather *relegatus*: that is, he retained his civil rights and his property. Furthermore, this punishment shows that Ovid himself was not prosecuted under the Lex Julia, whereby Augustus had made adultery a criminal action with the penalty of exile and the loss of citizenship and property.

The main source of data concerning this relegation and its cause comes from Ovid's own poems, especially his *Tristia* and his 'Letters from Exile' (*Ex Ponto*). One such letter, entitled 'To Augustus, in Defence of the Art of Love', states: -

Though two charges, carmen et error, a poem and an error,
ruined me, I must be silent about the second fault:
I'm not important enough to re-open your wound, Caesar,
it's more than sufficient you should be troubled once.

(Ovid *Tristia* 2.207, translated by S. Kline).

Thus, Ovid seems to imply that a poem or collection of poems, perhaps the *Ars Amatoria*, was one of the main reasons for the offence he had given Augustus. It also seems that some second, unstated 'error', perhaps in association with the first, was involved. This has led modern scholars into a detailed, and largely fruitless, search for proof of the offending attitude and action that lay behind Augustus' opprobrium (Griffin 1977; Scullard 1966).

The *Ars Amatoria* was a work in three books pretending to 'instruct' males (Books I & II) and females (Book III) on how to achieve romantic and sexual liaisons. In reality it is neither a manual of love, nor a pornographic work, but rather an extended narrative exploring the themes of love and sexual encounter (see Griffin 1977). Ovid writes in Book III: -

As once the boys, so now my crowd of girls
inscribe on your trophies 'Ovid was my master.'

(Ovid *Ars Amatoria* III.18, translated by S. Kline)

Ovid, however, had tried to ensure that his work should not be construed as an invitation to adultery with married matrons: -

Of safe intrigues and lawful thefts I rhyme,
Nor can my song be charged with any crime.

(Ovid *Ars Amatoria* I.31ff, translated by A.D. Melville)

This does, however, seem to be special pleading, as elsewhere Ovid explored more dubious relationships, as in the following poem where it becomes clear that a married woman had a secret lover:

Your husband will be there at the same dinner –
I wish your husband his last meal tonight.
I'm just a guest then, gazing at my darling
While at your touch another takes delight?
And you to warm another's breast will snuggle,
While around your neck his arm at will he throws?
No wonder that for fair Hippodamia,
When the wine went round, the Centaurs came to blows.
I'm no half-horse, my home's not in the forest,
Yet I can hardly keep my hands from you

(Ovid *The Art of Love* I, poem 4, translated by A.D. Melville)

These poems as a whole are full of emotional sophistication, a playful eroticism expressed publicly that was entirely out of keeping with sober moral program envisaged by Augustus. Furthermore, there is no doubt that it was aimed at the upper classes, the Senatorial order and the equites, the very groups which Augustus hoped to reform and to encourage in suitable and stable marriages, thereby producing several legitimate children to carry on Roman institutions and their traditions. Overall, Ovid did mobilise contextual praise of the name 'Caesar', perhaps indicating the family as a whole, and less often uses the specific name of Augustus in his writings (Herbert-Brown 2011). One of the clearest examples of such encomium is found at the end of the *Metamorphoses*:

Apollo's son came to us from abroad,
but Caesar is a god in his own land.
The first in war and peace, he rose by wars,
which closed in triumphs, and by civic deeds
to glory quickly won, and even more
his offspring's love exalted him as a new,
a heavenly, sign and brightly flaming star.
Of all the achievements of great Julius Caesar
not one is more ennobling to his fame
than being father of his glorious son.

(Ovid *Metamorphoses* XV.745, trans. by Brookes More)

However, sometimes these references are somewhat ambiguous and potentially ironic, or associated with trivial, indeed, scandalous issues (Ovid *The Art of Love* I, Poem 1, lines 170-200). The panegyric aspect, then, was somewhat tainted by the overall tone of the more erotic works.

Ars Amatoria would have been published around 1 or 2 CE. The question remains as to why Ovid's punishment did not occur till 8 CE. Two possibilities exist for this delay. First, the period between 2 and 8 CE saw specific changes in the situation at Rome, and in Augustus' public policies. His position was now extremely dominant, and he was able to pass legislation at will. Secondly, it is possible that a specific error was involved in Ovid's public relegation. In 2 BCE Augustus' daughter Julia, the wife of Tiberius, had been exiled for adultery, while one noble was executed and four exiled for their part in the scandal (Williams 1978; Tacitus *Annals* IV.71). In 8 CE Julia the younger, the granddaughter of Augustus, was also banished to a remote island for debauchery and the resultant unplanned pregnancy, while her lover, a certain D. Junius Silanus, lost Augustus' friendship and was thus forced into exile (Tacitus *Annals* III.24; Suetonius *Augustus* 65; Pettinger 2012; for elite Romans the role of friendship, *amicitia*, was politically charged as a pattern of social expectations, see Rollinger 2020). It is possible that Ovid's relegation was associated in some way with these events since he was sent from Rome in the same year (Pettinger 2012; Griffin 1977). In Ovid's letters we find the following lines: -

I've done nothing that the law forbids to be done:
yet a weightier offence of mine's to be confessed here.
And don't ask, what it is, I wrote a stupid 'Art of Love':
that prevents my hands from ever being clean.
Did I sin further? Don't seek to know,
so my guilt can hide beneath my 'Art' alone.
Whatever it is, my judge's anger was moderate,
who took nothing from me, except my native earth.

(Ovid *Epistulae ex Ponto* II. 9.75-6, translated by S. Kline)

Thibault argues that 'Ovid sees his poem as a screen or cloak to conceal the nature of his mistake' (1964, pp30-1). Indeed, in *Epistulae ex Ponto* III.3.71-72; II.9.72-76 this invisible mistake seems to

be the most important of the two causes. The idea that Ovid's poetry is not the sole cause is supported by two other factors. Augustus had the *Ars Amatoria* removed from the three public libraries (Thibault 1964), but a more total ban was not applied. In some other cases under the early Empire, offensive or dangerous books were generally banned and publicly burnt (Howley 2017). Since this did not happen to Ovid, then the offending work was not hated as much as might be expected, and may have actually been a pretext for Ovid's treatment rather than the major cause. Furthermore, Ovid was not tried in any court, but merely suffered a private interview with Augustus. Ovid notes: -

Thou didst not condemn my deeds
through a decree of the senate nor was my exile
ordered by a special court. With words of stern
invective — worthy of a prince — thou didst thyself,
as is fitting, avenge thine own injury. And thy
command, though severe and threatening, was yet
mild in naming my punishment, for it calls me
relegatus, not exile, and thou dost use therein language
especially adapted to my fate.

(Ovid *Epistulae ex Ponto* II.131-138, translated by A. Wheeler)

Private hearings were not unknown at this stage in Augustus' reign, and this procedure does suggest how many sensitive matters may have been dealt with. Augustus had been granted the powers to regulate the mores of the Romans, as noted in the *Res Gestae*. An imperial command under these terms was enough to banish Ovid, though he probably retained citizen-rights, marital status and his property (Lee 2021).



Ovid's Exile became a major theme for later writers and artists:

Eugene Delacroix, 1862, 'Ovid among the Scythians'

(reproduced courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum under their Public Domain Open Access policy,

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/439631>)

Ovid suggests that his error was to have seen a crime which was somehow related to Augustus, but that Ovid himself committed no crime, nor conspired against Augustus (Thibault 1964, pp27-30). What kind of error would fit this suggested scenario? It is unlikely that Ovid was involved in some kind of political conspiracy. He had turned away from political ambitions, his poems do not reveal such designs, and if this was the case a more serious charge could have led to Ovid's formal exile

with loss of all rights, or even execution. It is possible, however, that the poem is in some way directly related to the second error. Thus, Ovid writes: -

Doubtless for this very reason is she fair to me now because she injured me before, when she was indicted with me for a joint crime.

(Ovid *Tristia* IV.1.25-6, translated by A. Wheeler)

Here Ovid seems to be saying that both he and his poem were indicted in relations to the one 'crime'. Perhaps he was convicted merely for seeing, or encouraging, such behaviour. It seems reasonable, then, in the absence of stronger evidence, to suggest that Ovid either witnessed or encouraged adultery within Augustus' inner circle. In this he would be associated by the 'seduction' sequences in the *Ars Amatoria*. This would resolve the apparent contradictions in Ovid's later poetry where he on the one hand speaks of his error, on the other hand his poetry, as the main cause of his relegation. With our limited evidence, however, such a theory must remain conjectural (Scullard 1966, p249). It is however, a better-founded theory than the commonly asserted theory that Ovid was directly involved in the corrupt life of Augustus' grand-daughter Julia (Grant 1980, p300). Despite his appeals and later contrition, Ovid would never be recalled and would die in Tomus (see further below).

5. Ovid as A Symptom of the Age

There was a powerful sense among writers of the early Empire, including the elder and younger Senecas, the elder Pliny, Petronius and Tacitus, that they were living in an age which had declined, morally and politically, from earlier times (Williams 1978). In the elder Pliny, for example, we find the following analysis: -

Once you had senators being selected on income, judges being appointed on income, magistrates and army commanders finding honour in nothing so much as in income: once childlessness began to have the greatest influence and power, and will-hunting was the richest source of profit, and the only pleasures were in possessions - then the real values of life were lost, and the arts called liberal from their greatest distinction (i.e. liberty) fell into its opposite, and slavery began to be the sole means of progress. This slavery took different forms of devotion and centred on different objects: what was common to all was the aim - the hope of gain. Everywhere you found even outstanding men preferring to practise foreign vices rather than native virtues. So, by heaven, pleasure began to live, life began to die. (*Natural History*, 14.6, in Williams 1978, p16).

This powerful sense of decline can be explained in various ways; for Tacitus it was based on the over-centralisation of political power and its dominant patronage (*Dialogus* 2, & 40-41; Williams 1978, p49). Greek constitutional theories of a universal cycles of the rise and corruption of institutions could also be employed to suggest the natural decay of the late Republic (Polybius *Histories* VI.4; Aristotle *Politics* IV.1289a). In this context, Ovid left a powerful legacy. He was one of the most influential poets for the next century, quoted regularly by Lucan and Juvenal (Williams 1978, p52). As noted by Williams: -

His (Ovid's) importance was increased by the fact that he found it impossible to avoid becoming involved in politics, and he was the first poet to fall a victim to the clash between republican ideals and the imperial system. And herein lies a paradox: his poetry seems, to a degree most unusual in Roman poetry, to have been created basically for its own sake, with no ulterior purpose, no message - art for art's sake; yet his personal life became deeply involved in the public life of his times that a major problem concerns the interpretation to be placed on the many passages in his poems that touch on politics. (1978, pp52-3)

Like philosophy, poetry was expected to pull for the good of the regime, not the regime for the good. An attempt to write a personal poetry, or even in the service of a personal ethic, smacked of a

dangerous indifference to the political reality of the times. It was no co-incidence that Seneca the elder, Seneca the younger, and Ovid found that they were unable to really retire from political life. With the death of major poets such as Horace and Virgil, Ovid for a time was the pre-eminent poet in Rome. His 'art conceals its own art' (Ovid in Griffin 1977, p58), and his movement from apparently simple love poems to the extended epic, *Metamorphoses*, whose scope ran from creation down till his own time, indicate his deeper interests. Throughout, he was concerned with the full range of human emotion and relationships (Griffin 1977). His work showed a genuine liking, and generosity towards women, something not the norm for the period (Griffin 1977). He remained a major source of inspiration in the Middle Ages, especially with the Goliards (the 'wandering scholars' and clergy of the 12-13th centuries), then with Dante, Chaucer, Montaigne, La Fontaine, Spencer, Milton, Dryden, and Pope, but his popularity then began to decline in the modern period until his revival in the late 20th century (Innes 1955, pp19-24; Griffin 1977, p57).

Ovid's treatment of certain stories has greater scope than his Roman sources and is certainly better than many modern adaptations, e.g. his treatment of the female in Pygmalion seems more profound than Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* or the shallow treatment in the movie *My Fair Lady* (Griffin 1977; Ovid *Metamorphoses* X.243). Many aspects strike a sympathetic chord with contemporary sensibilities: -

The Narcissus and Pygmalion episodes also show that Ovid had what strikes us as a strangely modern interest in the question of personal identity. He was aware that within an individual one set of emotions can conflict with another and sometimes endanger the integrity of the personality. Ovid does not, of course, use modern psychological jargon, but his characters often face crises because of a clash within them between illusion and reality. Narcissus cannot come to terms with the world around him and therefore destroys himself. Pygmalion at first rejects the world around him and seeks, through the art of sculpture, to escape from it, but comes at length to terms with life, or rather life adapts its terms to suit him. Ovid had a unique insight into the personalities of people who might be described as oddities. His imaginative portrayal of how they feel shows a genuine sympathy for them. (Griffin 1977, p68; see further Innes 1955, p15)

We may justly blame the harsh rulings of emperors such as Augustus or Nero: there is no doubt that these rulers became increasingly authoritarian. However, the attempt to separate the political from the aesthetic, to create a private concern exempt from an encroaching intrusion of public interests, was not possible under the early Principate. Neither Ovid's eloquent appeals from the border of the empire, nor the greatness of the epic *Metamorphoses* or the *Fasti* would secure his return. He died in exile, robbed of his fatherland, something that was fatal for the spirit of a Roman poet. Nonetheless, he hoped his name and works would live on, a hope and prediction at the end of the *Metamorphoses* that has remained true enough two thousand years later:

And now, I have completed a great work,
which not Jove's anger, and not fire nor steel,
nor fast-consuming time can sweep away.
Whenever it will, let the day come, which has
dominion only over this mortal frame,
and end for me the uncertain course of life.
Yet in my better part I shall be borne
immortal, far above the stars on high,
and mine shall be a name indelible.
Wherever Roman power extends her sway
over the conquered lands, I shall be read
by lips of men. If Poets' prophecies
have any truth, through all the coming years
of future ages, I shall live in fame.

(Ovid *Metamorphoses* XV.871-879 trans. by Brookes More)

6. Petronius: Decadence and Robust Satire

There has been considerable argument about the date of the *Satyricon*, with suggested dates ranging from early in the reign of Augustus to the 2nd century CE. It seems likely that it was written circa 60 CE and should be associated with the Petronius who was forced to commit suicide in 66 CE as a result of a 'conspiracy' against the Emperor Nero (Williams 1978, p12). The envy and jealousy of a certain Tigellinus, Prefect of the Praetorian Guard, may have been one of the main reasons for his downfall. If so, then the writer would be T. Petronius Niger, the infamous 'arbiter of eloquence' for Nero's more interesting dinner parties, and the competent consul in 62 CE and proconsul of Bithynia (Tacitus *Annals* 16.17-19; Sullivan 1986). He would have had considerable social and political influence until his downfall (Sullivan 1986). According to Pliny the Elder, a certain T. Petronius, when he knew that he was going to die at Nero's order, decided to destroy a valuable murrhine (gemstone) basin worth 300,000 sesterces rather than let it end up in the Emperor's possession (*Natural History* 27.20). This seems consistent with the little we know of the writer.

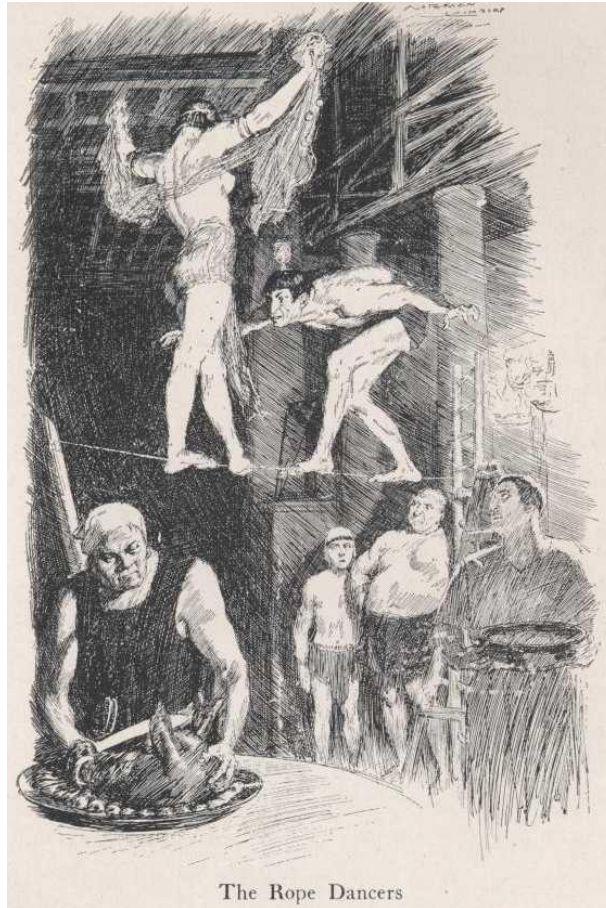
A robust attack on the decadence of the imperial age begins in the very first fragment which we have of Petronius's *Satyricon*, a prose 'novel.' The character and main narrator, Encolpius says: -

"Our professors of rhetoric are hag-ridden in the same way, surely, when they shout "I got these wounds fighting for your freedom! This eye I lost for you. Give me a hand to lead me to my children. I am hamstrung, my legs can't support me." We could put up even with this stuff if it were a royal road to eloquence. But the only result of these pompous subjects and this empty thunder of platitudes, is that when young speakers first enter public life they think they have been landed on another planet. I'm sure the reason such young nitwits are produced in our schools is because they have no contact with anything of any use in everyday life. All they get is pirates standing on the beach, dangling manacles, oracles advising sacrifice of three or more virgins during a plague - a mass of cloying verbiage: every word, every move is just so much poppycock. People fed on this kind of thing have as much chance of learning sense as dishwashers of smelling clean." (*Satyricon* 1-2, translation by J. P. Sullivan)

The theme of decadence is developed further in Section 88: -

We, on the other hand, are submerged in wine and women; we do not even deign to understand even the arts that have been discovered, but, slandering the past, ourselves learn and teach nothing but vice. Where do you find dialectic now? Astronomy? Where is that most civilized path of philosophy? They do not even pray for sanity and good health, but, before even reaching the Capitol's entrance, one is promising an offering if he can bury a rich relative, another if he can dig up some treasure, another if he can make a few millions and live. (*Satyricon* 88, see further Williams 1978, pp10-12).

The *Satyricon* takes us on a wild journey of parody and satire: poets, rhetoricians, the rich, dinner-parties, mystery cults, slaves and freedmen come in for Petronius' critical attention.



The Rope Dancers

The Rope Dancers: - Trimalchio's Favourite Entertainers
 (from the illustrated Firebaugh edition, Project Gutenberg Ebook, 2004,
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<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5219/5219-h/5219-h.htm#p090>)

In doing so he reveals some of the 'contradictions internal to a social group and the dialectic between groups' (Veyne 1988, p77). Freeman, particularly, were now an in-built part of Roman society, needed to enhance their ex-master's prestige, and used by emperors such as Augustus and Claudius to manage their financial and administrative affairs. Important freemen were at various times pandered to, respected, hated and ridiculed. Trimalchio, the freeman who-would-be-a-knight, is granted a special place by Petronius as the arbiter of bad taste at an over-blown dinner party. It is the treatment of slaves by this ex-slave which is also held up for special parody.

Petronius himself and his book might be regarded as decadent and prurient. Though some of the scenes in this novel rightly shock modern sensibilities, the decadence lies mainly in his subject matter. His writing is brilliant, incisive, and in its own way hard and unyielding. Surrounded by a genuine debasement, he may have had to pander to it but was also its sternest critic. Moreover, the limited range of other poetry that we have from the author shows a certain tenderness, e.g. towards a simple rural life where the hours of life are not sold 'for rich men's feasts' (Fragment 37) or remembrance of a past joys (Fragment 40). Some of the complexity of the Petronius's approach to his writing and life can be seen the following brief poem:

Beauty is not enough, who wishes to be fair
 Must not content herself with average care.
 Talk, be witty and smile to show your wit –
 If Nature's unaided, nothing comes of it.

Art is Beauty's aid, her finest dress:
Beauty, if scornful, dies of nakedness.

(Fragment 44, translated by J. P. Sullivan)

7. Conclusion: Explorations of the Human

The relationship between writers and patronage has now come full circle. The independence of a Catullus was a thing of the past. Ovid had attempted a middle path of the private poetry of love, with limited references to Caesar and Augustus, and failed. Livy, Virgil and Horace bowed to praise Augustus and his regime, but the brilliance of their own individual viewpoints saved them from too gross a subservience. Poets of the later principate, however, like its philosophers, would now be forced to make a choice: the aggrandisement and rhetorical flattery of a Lucan, or the indirect, social satire of a Lucian. Petronius took the later course, but this did not save him either. His revenge was to flatter neither a Nero nor a Tigellinus. Indeed, he apparently wrote a full description of Nero's vicious indulgences and sent it to the emperor, then committed suicide with dignity, apparently holding, as the blood slowly flowed, a literary soiree (Tacitus, *Annals* 16.19). Petronius had previously satirised almost every other tier in Roman society. Now he could afford to include the emperor, since he was about to die by his own hand.

Taken together, the works of Catullus, Ovid and Petronius, whether in or out of vogue during later periods, remain significant legacies for European and global literature. Indeed, they are brilliant explorations of what it is to be human, now and then. They deserve further study and prominence in the twenty-first century.

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