

SEXUALITY
in GREEK
and ROMAN
CULTURE

MARILYN B. SKINNER

SECOND EDITION

WILEY Blackwell

This second edition first published 2014
© 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Edition history: Blackwell Publishing Ltd (1e, 2005)

Wiley-Blackwell is an imprint of John Wiley & Sons, formed by the merger of Wiley's global Scientific, Technical and Medical business with Blackwell Publishing.

Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

For details of our global editorial offices, for customer services, and for information about how to apply for permission to reuse the copyright material in this book please see our website at www.wiley.com/wiley-blackwell.

The right of Marilyn B. Skinner to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, except as permitted by the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

Designations used by companies to distinguish their products are often claimed as trademarks. All brand names and product names used in this book are trade names, service marks, trademarks or registered trademarks of their respective owners. The publisher is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty: While the publisher and author(s) have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. It is sold on the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering professional services and neither the publisher nor the author shall be liable for damages arising herefrom. If professional advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Skinner, Marilyn B.

Sexuality in greek and roman culture / Marilyn B. Skinner. – 2nd Edition.

pages cm. – (Ancient cultures; 2621)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4443-4986-3 (pbk. : alk. paper) – ISBN 978-1-118-61108-1 (epub) –

ISBN 978-1-118-61092-3 (mobi) – ISBN 978-1-118-61081-7 (epdf) 1. Sex customs–Greece–History–To 1500–Textbooks. 2. Sex customs–Rome–History–Textbooks. I. Title.

HQ13.S535 2013

306.70937'6–dc23

2013018151

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover image: Detail of Sleeping Hermaphrodite, Roman marble copy of original Hellenistic sculpture.

© Araldo de Luca/Corbis

Cover design by Simon Levy

Set in 10/12.5pt Rotation by SPi Publisher Services, Pondicherry, India

Printed in Malaysia by Ho Printing (M) Sdn Bhd

Republican and Augustan Rome: The Soft Embrace of Venus

“To some extent, the Roman male was condemned to a life of maleness,” says Eva Cantarella (1992: 220). Her quip calls attention to the difficulties citizen men, especially those of the upper classes, may have experienced in obeying a cultural injunction ceaselessly to perform masculinity, showing no hint of *mollitia*, “softness,” in conduct, dress, or demeanor. To be a Roman *vir*, a “real man,” was to be *hard* in every sense – physically to be impervious to pain or fatigue, mentally to be stern and unyielding, and, of course, always to take the insertive position in sexual congress (Veyne 1978: 50–1). Assertions that adult males are behaving in womanish fashion imply willing assumption of the passive or receptive role, a breach of the first protocol of Roman manhood (Williams 2010: 18, 180). With the right amount of malice, any behavior could be construed as womanish. The Roman *vir* is always poised precariously on a slippery slope leading to loss of manhood.

“Passivity,” as Romans understood it, also involved more than a simple yearning to be penetrated. It was a failure of willpower. The inviolable body of the elite Roman man was the external projection of his resolute and indomitable spirit. Moralists’ attacks on Greek decadence exhibit a fear of its softening effects on character. Luxurious living leads to decay of moral fiber and a corollary pursuit of more and more extreme forms of pleasure. Men turn to “feminized” modes of sex as control over the body’s boundaries and recesses dissipates in a frenzy of self-indulgence. The broader meanings of *mollitia*, then, encompass a breakdown of self-discipline that annihilates social, not just sexual, manhood (Dupont and Éloi 2001: 89–91). Passivity was a bankruptcy of will and nerve and only secondarily a sexuality.

Nevertheless, it *was* a sexuality, though not an easy one to pin down, as it was not distinguished by object-choice or even by the act committed. The Romans borrowed from the Greeks the word *kinaidos*, denoting a man who allowed himself to be entered anally. In Greek, this term was always associated with anal penetration, though in an extended sense it also connoted an inability to curb appetite with reason.

Latinized as *cinaedus*, it meant the opposite of *vir*; thus Romans could be assigned to one of two categories, “man” (*vir*) or “not-man” (*cinaedus*). *Viri* might or might not exhibit a preference for a particular kind of penetrative activity, oral, anal, or genital, but the preference itself did not define them further. By contrast, as remarked at the opening of this book, “not-men” were often characterized as addicted to specific practices – presenting themselves for sodomy or servicing men or women through oral contact. Yet the more unmanly someone was considered, the more inclined he supposedly was to engage in all of those unnatural practices, perhaps simultaneously.¹ Being sexually passive, moreover, did not exclude being active at other times. Villains could be reproached as defiled in every orifice of their bodies and, in the next breath, accused of criminal *stuprum* involving boys and women.

That might seem merely the broad brush of invective painting outside the lines, but the testimony of the fifth-century CE physician Caelius Aurelianus is applicable here, since it presents a digest of later medical theory on the state of effeminate men (*molles*). Such men, Caelius argues, suffer from a mental affliction (*corruptae mentis vitia*) that engenders limitless desire without hope of satisfaction (Cael. Aur. *Morb. Chron.* 4.9.131–2). Although the most direct expression of abnormality is their adoption of female dress and mannerisms, out of fear or respect for others’ good opinion they can channel desire into a display of virility. Here too, though, they go overboard, give way to excess, and involve themselves in greater misdeeds.² As they age, Caelius warns, their mental state worsens and their lust becomes stronger, and after they can no longer play an active role because of senility, “all their appetitive energy is turned in the other direction” (*Morb. Chron.* 137). Boys are, like old men, prone to passivity; the former because they are not yet capable of functioning in a virile manner, the latter because that capacity has deserted them. According to this model, then, the active role is only a stage in the male life-cycle. From the evidence of Caelius and other sources, C. A. Williams concludes that the *cinaedus*, instead of being defined by his practices, is a “gender-deviant” or, better, liminally gendered individual, one who straddles the boundary between masculinity and femininity (2010: 232–3). I would say, rather, that being a *cinaedus* is the zero-degree condition out of which manhood emerges, given a sane and healthy mind, and into which it must eventually sink back. Some potential men never make it.

This more flexible idea of the *cinaedus* is only one of the ways in which Roman sexual mores varied from those of the Greek world. Other divergences have been identified. From a Roman perspective, no blame attached to using adult male slaves or prostitutes, not boys, as passive partners; the emperor Galba, according to Suetonius (*Galb.* 22) had a predilection for “extremely butch and over-age” lovers. Indeed, there was a special category of Roman male prostitutes known as *exoleti*, “the over-aged” (see now Butrica 2005: 223–31). This practice was distasteful to Greeks, as it ran counter to the romantic dream of pederasty: we recall that readers of Zeno’s *Republic* objected to the proposal that *erastai* should continue their relations with *erômenoi* until the latter turned twenty-eight. Again, as might be expected from their humorous glorification of Priapus, the phallic god, and their tendency to use the phallus as an amulet, the Romans, both men and women, were said to admire the well-hung male: “Whatever bath you hear

applause in, Flaccus, know that Maro's dick is there" (Mart. 9.33). On this point, the cultural difference between Greeks and Romans is essentially one of attraction as opposed to identification (Williams 2010: 86). Gazing at the slim, athletic youth with modest penis, the classical Athenian felt desire; looking at Priapus, or at his well-endowed neighbor in the steam room, the Roman vicariously thrilled at the paraphernalia of domination.

These conjectures about Roman male sexual subjectivity were extrapolated from statements in a late antique medical treatise and clues furnished by epigrams and phallic tchotchkes. All might be souvenirs of single historical moments, so we need to cast the net wider. Let us now turn to what Roman men – and one woman – actually did say about themselves as gendered beings, beginning with testimony from the late Republic and early decades of the Augustan principate and proceeding on, in subsequent chapter installments, to the high Imperial period and into late antiquity. Despite this lengthy time span, textual witnesses are remarkably consistent. Almost without exception, they appear to proclaim the contrary of what we have just hypothesized: priapic power is what the other guy has.

Only Joking

The model of joke telling set forth in Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, which leagues the speaker (A) and the listener (C) in sympathy against the comic butt (B), permits a reading of Roman sexual humor as fundamentally aggressive in its purposes (Richlin 1992a: 57–63). Abusive wit invites audiences to relax their inhibitions against expressing feelings of hostility, in much the same way that pornography, according to feminist researchers, arouses in its consumers a greater propensity to use force against women and children (ibid., 78–80). If that is the case, literary obscenity would have been complicit in the culture of violence to which Romans were acclimatized. We can assess two very different genres of humor, Plautine drama and Catullan invective, to discover whether that formulation is always true.

Plautus' rowdy farces correspond to their Attic Greek models about as much as a *Saturday Night Live* impression of a politician resembles the genuine article. We saw in Chapter 5 that Athenian New Comedy explored changes in family dynamics by presenting believable characters in conflict over domestic issues, with a socially sanctioned love match the desired resolution. In Plautus, the hero's interest in the girl is only a peg on which to hang the plotting of the clever slave, whose machinations on behalf of his young master defeat a blocking figure – domineering father, pimp, or wealthy rival – and establish the girl's citizen identity or facilitate her purchase from the slave dealer (Segal 1968: 70–98). Comic business rare or nonexistent in Menander, like slapstick turns, flights of fantastic wordplay, and slanging matches, is a staple of Plautine humor. Much of the verbal sparring, and even some of the byplay, is risqué to say the least. Half of the surviving plays, for example, contain jokes about sexual submission, usually a gratuitous dig at the services a male slave performs for his master (Lilja 1983: 28–33). Since the insulting remark, made by

another slave, often includes a Latin pun with no equivalent in Greek, such passages are probably inventions of the Roman playwright corresponding to nothing in the original (Williams 2010: 36–8). Other joking, also at the expense of slaves, involves threats of torture and crucifixion. While there are no actual instances of slaves being abused on stage (apart from blows clownishly given and exchanged), the frequency of references to physical punishment, featuring extravagant metaphors for beating or execution, makes it clear that audiences thought those bits funny (Parker 1989; Fitzgerald 2000: 36–40). Again, this is a motif found infrequently in Greek drama and then, for the most part, only in Old Comedy.

If humor directed at slaves aimed only at degrading them further, it would surely be pointless, for slaves as a class were already the most oppressed group in Roman society. Tendentious jokes about their susceptibility to sexual penetration, beating, and capital punishment must have served a purpose other than the pure expression of hostility. Taking Freudian theories of humor one step further invites the supposition that Plautine mockery was directed at what was feared. In the same way that present-day “horror jokes” about AIDS, cancer, or terrorism “allow us to dispel some of our immense fear of random harm or death,” comic jokes about slave torture silently acknowledge but then allay the constant dread of slave uprisings (Parker 1989: 235–8; quotation from p. 236). At the same time, the clever slave is working for the benefit of the youth rebelling against his father’s will. “Splitting” the figure of the son defying *patria potestas* into two characters, the one dependent upon the wily tricks of the other, permits a final reconciliation between parent and child. Guilt is deflected on to the slave, who is brought to heel by a threat of punishment even if he escapes the punishment itself. “The wish for rebellion is indulged,” Parker observes, “but the fear of rebellion is pacified” (1989: 246).

A complementary approach to Plautine humor starts from the premise that Roman comedy, performed on festive occasions, creates a privileged space of reversal, a “*Saturnalian*” moment, in which prevailing rules of hierarchy and decorum are temporarily eased. This is the reason for the comic slave’s impunity; as the quintessential avatar of festive license, he will get away with his mischief today, but not tomorrow (Segal 1968: 140–4). It is also why Plautus’ slaves normally remain slaves even after performing exceptional services for their youthful masters. At the end of the play, the topsy-turvy world in which underlings drive the action is restored to proper order so that authority figures can take up the reins again. Emancipation, on the other hand, would mean an irrevocable shift in the relations of owner and slave.³

Extending this reading of Roman comedy as a “*Saturnalian*” exercise of imagination, one can then ask what pleasures the fantasy reversal of slaves’ and masters’ roles (along with other hierarchies, such as those of husband and wife, age and youth, rich and poor) offered to audiences (McCarthy 2000: 17–29). Funded by the government and mounted at public festivals, productions catered to the tastes of the dominant class and mirrored its ideology. As pointed out in Chapter 7, though, relations of dominance were not homogeneous but instead formed a complicated network of inequalities due to the fact that some status indicators might offset others. Not only were relative rankings of people on the same political or economic level very hard to fix, but status itself, so crucial to the functioning of the system, was persistently contested among ostensible

equals. McCarthy therefore postulates that masters felt anxiety arising from “the constant need to jockey for position in the many minutely gradated hierarchies that ordered Roman society” (2000: 20). Involvement in such a web of domination meant that each participant would at some point feel insecure because someone else outranked him. While remaining a slave (and thereby underscoring the futility of slave revolt), the character of the clever slave invites the citizen population to identify sympathetically with him and take pleasure in his cynical management of his betters. Vicariously assuming the subject position of fictional slave provided masters with short-term release from both the hard work of maintaining an authoritative presence in the company of real slaves and social inferiors and the difficulties of fending off the impositions of those perched on a more lofty rung of the ladder (*ibid.*, 25). If we accept McCarthy’s theory, then, jokes in which slaves are the butts of ribald humor negotiated the opposition between “higher” and “lower” status by having one menial remind an uppity fellow servant of his vulnerability to sexual penetration.

The most enthusiastic mockery in Roman comedy, however, is directed not at subalterns, slaves and the like, but at imperious spoilsports who attempt to thwart the Saturnalian resolution. In a like vein, cheeky ridicule of those in power was the aim of such widespread subliterate forms of expression as scurrilous lampoons and anonymous graffiti. In fact, the production of all literature during the Republican period, including elevated modes of writing, was pervaded by an ethos of strenuous social competition. Composed by and for the upper class and often recited in the presence of live audiences, history, poetry, and other genres became, at an early date, handy platforms for defining aristocratic male identity and promulgating a desired image of the self (Habinek 1998: 34–68). Consequently, they were implicated in open jostling for political advantage throughout the late Republican era and into the principate. Cicero’s eagerness to have the events of his consulship recorded for posterity (*Fam.* 5.12) illustrates the perceived value of texts as a vehicle for increasing one’s prestige. Caesar’s dispatches or *Commentaries* were likewise tailored to give domestic audiences the most favorable picture of his controversial military operations in Gaul and Britain. Augustus’ attempt to muster the talents of contemporary poets and historians to plead the necessity of social reform and articulate the essential features of his program is the most conspicuous instance of asking literature to serve political ends. Whether the *princeps* fully succeeded in winning the hearts and minds of artists is still contested, but there can be no doubt that his policies set the tone for most Augustan age writing.⁴ Even after the emperor’s hegemony was securely established and the restoration of the Republic became an impossible dream, production and recital of literary work continued to play a role in more nuanced rivalries for social prominence, as documented in the letters of the younger Pliny. Though freedom of speech had been curbed, meanwhile, traditions of public mockery persisted into the imperial era in the form of anonymous squibs poking fun at emperors.

Awareness of the extent to which the composition and recital of poetry was bound up with the Republican political rat race is necessary for understanding the thrust and verve of Catullan invective. Catullus, the younger son of a wealthy Veronese family, came to Rome in his twenties around 60 BCE. During the last decades of the Republic, ambitious scions of important provincial households migrated to the metropolis in

large numbers in pursuit of military and social advancement. In the elevated circles in which Cicero and other leading political players moved, such newcomers were at a profound disadvantage, for they were snubbed as interlopers and branded “uncouth rustics.” Catullus is acutely self-conscious of his non-Roman origins and, alas, goes too far in making up for them. On the one hand, he proudly proclaims himself a “Transpadanus” or native of the northern territory beyond the Po River (39.13); on the other, he is determined to show himself as cool and supercilious as any aristocrat born on the Palatine. With his political verse lambasting eminent personalities he must have meant to make a name for himself, for it aims at provoking gasps of shocked laughter and applause at his daring. We can draw an intriguing parallel between that strategy and a present-day competitive ethos in rural Mediterranean villages that encourages adult males to “perform manhood” by verbally inflicting public shame on others (Wray 2001: 113–60). Catullus’ obscene abuse is attention-grabbing.

If such fierce assaults were merely self-serving, they would doubtless be ethically questionable. However, the premise that Catullus turned his poetic talents to personal advantage does not necessarily deprive his invective of moral content. Blunt obscenities serve satiric ends by figuring political corruption as depravity, as in poem 57, a harsh attack on Julius Caesar and his deputy Mamurra:

Two dirty fags have a sweet deal going,
Mamurra the pathic and pathic Caesar.
No wonder: corresponding stains on both,
the one from the city, the other at Formiae,
are firmly set in and won't be bleached out:
equally diseased, twin organs of vice,
two little eggheads in one little bed,
neither one nor the other the keener seducer,
chummy rivals for and of girls.
The two dirty fags have a sweet deal going.

Catullus strikes at the jugular by imputing an unhealthy egalitarianism to Caesar and Mamurra’s purported liaison: each serves as the *pathicus*, turn and turn about. Because taking the active sexual role is a metonym for “natural” exercise of rank and privilege, allegations that Caesar reciprocally services his henchman cancel out his patrician birth and his authority as proconsul, reducing him to the level of his creature. Translated into a political indictment, the poem charges that the commander responsible for policing his functionaries is instead conniving in their guilt by using his clout to protect them – a serious accusation, all the grimmer for being conveyed in such searing language. Indeed, Caesar complained that Catullus’ verses on Mamurra left an indelible blemish on his own name (Suet. *Div. Iul.* 73). Yet he nevertheless maintained a friendship with Catullus’ father back in Verona and forgave the young man himself when he finally apologized. Like politicians today, Caesar knew that angrily responding to an insult dignifies it; perhaps he also appreciated Catullus’ effrontery because he was something of a posturer himself (Suet. *Div. Iul.* 45; Plut. *Caes.* 4). Following Caesar’s lead, we ought to regard Catullan polemic as bold and imaginative rather than mean-spirited, granting the

poet the same artistic license we would give a stand-up comedian who specializes in outrageous, politically incorrect humor.

For all his blistering attacks on politicians, Catullus frequently abandons his polemic stance to portray himself as victimized by those who, like his former chief of staff Memmius, are in a position to do him damage. Privations he endured may, as we saw, also be represented in sexual terms. By posing as a dupe, he is able to diagnose gross malfunctions in the patronage system and deplore a climate of opportunism in which double-dealing is only to be expected. Yet he also assumes part of the blame for the humiliations visited upon him and those friends with whom he sympathizes, making it clear that their own “unreflective collusion” with the Roman establishment laid them open to disgrace (Nappa 2001: 105). If he suffered indignities in Bithynia, it is because he had dreamed of quick and painless enrichment by milking the province, and because his job as a staff member was obtained by currying favors, “seeking noble friends” as he describes it (28.13). The sexual imagery that casts doubt on Catullus’ manhood by depicting him acquiescing in oral sodomy makes that larger point unforgettably: hoping to get ahead, he bought into a rigged scheme and thus surrendered his integrity. The sporadic frustrations of the Catullan speaker as he attempts to rise within the patronage network anticipate the deeper and lasting sense of alienation expressed by prominent men under the empire, when birth and wealth in themselves put one at risk and being too close to the seat of power induced perpetual nervousness. Catullan sexual polemic must therefore be understood in a wider public context: like Plautine humor, it does not simply aim at demeaning its object but instead grapples with recurrent anxieties surrounding the speaker’s or the audience’s own social standing.

Young Men(?) in Love

It may seem perverse to introduce Catullus to readers by way of his satiric and invective pieces when he is chiefly known as one of Rome’s greatest love poets. Doing so, however, makes it possible to locate the gender slippages of Republican and Augustan erotic elegy within a broader framework in which centuries-old patterns of elite male behavior were disintegrating. Much of Catullus’ lyric and elegiac verse traces his unhappy affair with “Lesbia” – a pseudonym, recalling Sappho of Lesbos, which almost certainly conceals the name of Clodia, the socially prominent wife of Metellus Celer (see Chapter 7). Accordingly, his poems reverse gender expectations by casting a grown man, not an inexperienced girl, as the betrayed lover. In the oligarchic rhetoric we have been discussing, adulterers were stereotypical examples of dissipation, and being at a woman’s beck and call was a flagrant sign of unmanliness. Catullus undermines such facile moralizing even as he explores the thorny consequences of a self-confessed violation of ethical principles. Emotionally ravaged by his fixation upon a promiscuous adulteress, the first-person speaker of the “Lesbia cycle” earns our compassion when he finds himself trapped in a grey area between masculinity and effeminacy, honor and culpability.

Catullus represents his adulterous affair as the equivalent of a legitimate marriage.⁵ Commemorating an initial night of love with Lesbia, poem 68 depicts her entering his house – borrowed for the purpose from a friend – as a bride escorted by Cupid (70–2, 131–4). Her act of crossing the threshold is envisioned as an awesome divine epiphany. Later in the poem, though, he faces up to the folly of that romantic illusion, reluctantly admitting that, while Lesbia's behavior is discreet, he is not her only partner. The most he can hope for is that she will regard him as her favorite (143–8):

In any case, she did not come to me led by her father's hand
 into a house fragrant with Assyrian perfume,
 but at midnight gave stealthy little tokens taken
 from the very embrace of her own husband. 145
 And so that is enough, if to me alone is granted
 the day she marks with a brighter stone.

This paradox of treating a clandestine affair as marriage involves the speaker in a double bind, for the fidelity he desires in his mistress presupposes her own infidelity to her marriage vows (Rubino 1975: 291). Consequently, he himself has no right to demand any exclusive commitment from her, as he finally admits to himself. The sober-minded resignation he arrives at in 68.147–8 will not last long, however, for he has already invested far too much in this relationship.

In the absence of other sanctions, Catullus, in pleading with his beloved, appeals to the code of honor that had once underpinned binding agreements between members of the aristocracy. This strategy desexualizes the liaison, converting it into a contractual bond (*foedus*) between two gentlemen. He loved her, he tells Lesbia in poem 72, “not just as a common fellow loves his girlfriend, but as a father loves his sons and sons-in-law” (3–4). In his eyes, theirs was an enduring alliance marked by the familial affection that unites generations. Elsewhere he describes his own conduct toward her with such value-charged terms as *fides* (“credibility”), *officium* (“service, obligation”), *pietas* (“consciousness of duty”) and justifies the use of that language by designating their love as “this eternal compact of holy friendship,” *aeternum hoc sanctae foedus amicitiae* (109.6). All his efforts to redeem her are in vain, though, as she sinks further and further into degradation.

In poem 75 Catullus admits the hopelessness of imposing a code of reciprocal obligation upon the actual circumstances of the affair:

To this point, my Lesbia, has my mind been brought through your fault
 and has itself so ruined itself by its own service [*officium*],
 that it could not now bear you goodwill, were you to turn all virtuous,
 nor cease to love you, whatever you might do.

By forging ties of intimate friendship, *amicitia*, with his mistress, he had attempted to define a private sphere of relations grounded upon a steadfastness banished from the larger political realm with its self-serving friendships (*amicitiae*) and flimsy alliances of convenience. Yet his claim to virtue as a lover, and his righteous anger at her perfidy, were of course already undercut by his disregard for the inviolability of marriage, an

institution even more fundamental to an ordered community than friendship. That untenable position gives his bitter complaints all the more poignancy. Worse: his appropriation of a vocabulary of social obligation to shore up his irregular union would have been futile in any case, since its imposition was arbitrary and unilateral, backed by no consensus of society. In fact his hopes of true affection were a pipe dream. "In light of the increasing fragility of aristocratic political and social relations in the closing years of the Republic as Rome heads toward civil war, the Catullan lover's irrational dedication to an irreplaceable beloved is also a fantasy of absolute commitment possible only in some other world" (Fitzgerald 1995: 134).

Insofar as "Lesbia" herself was so thoroughly caught up in the power transactions of the ruling elite, the weak foundations of Catullus' erotic world had always been exposed to the vicissitudes of current political events. It is fitting, then, that when he finally breaks with her in poem 11, he conflates her sexual hunger with the relentless progress of Roman imperial expansion. Furius and Aurelius, two characters who elsewhere appear in his corpus as false friends, have apparently tried to bring about a reconciliation with Lesbia, meantime professing, perhaps as an alternative, their own willingness to accompany the speaker to the ends of the earth:

Furius and Aurelius, comrades of Catullus
whether he shall penetrate into the farthest Indies,
where the long-resounding shore is beaten
by the Eastern wave;

or among the Caspians and spineless Arabs, 5
or the Scythians or quiver-bearing Parthians,
or to the flat plains the seven-mouthed
Nile discolors;

or march over the lofty Alps, 10
viewing the trophies of mighty Caesar,
the Gallic Rhine, the rough straits, at world's end
the British;

all these, wherever the will of the gods
should take him, prepared to endure with him – 15
go, tell my girl a few things
unkindly said.

May she live and prosper with her lovers,
three hundred of whom she embraces at once,
loving none truly, but again and again 20
breaking the loins of all.

Nor let her look back on my love as before,
which through her fault perished just like the flower
on the edge of the meadow, once it is touched
by the passing plough.

Here Lesbia's predatory dealings with her partners are equated, by implication, with Roman military expansionism, undertaken, as Catullus charges elsewhere,

not for reasons of national security but rather to feed the eager ambition of army commanders (Konstan 2000).

In the opening stanzas, the speaker envisions hypothetical options for adventure abroad, calling to mind actual military campaigns begun in 55 BCE: Crassus' ill-fated expedition against Parthia, Gabinius' intervention in Egypt, Caesar's first invasion of Britain. Scholars have often remarked that the verb "penetrate" (*penetrabit*) and the condescending description of the Arab enemy as unmanly (*molles*, "soft") paint military aggression as erotic domination. Paradoxically, as he runs through this catalogue of foreign settings, Catullus' own scope of activity narrows. By the third stanza he is reduced to a tourist, a simple witness to Caesar's heroic exploits (Putnam 1974: 72); in the fourth he relinquishes control over his life to the gods. When he refuses Furius and Aurelius' offer of companionship and instead packs them off to tell Lesbia what he is too disgusted to say to her directly, he turns his back on the whole martial enterprise. In startling contrast to the carefully regulated obscenity of the preceding stanza, he finally appropriates and applies to himself the poignant Greek nuptial image of the flower plucked in the meadow, symbolizing the bride's loss of virginity. This flower, though, was not gathered by a maiden, but instead cut down by a plow moving inexorably on. If the speaker's love was the flower, Lesbia becomes the plow – and plowing a furrow to define settlement boundaries was the main ritual action involved in founding a Roman colony (Cic. *Phil.* 2.102, Verg. *Aen.* 5.755; see Skinner 1991: 9). Thus the poem comes full circle. At its outset, current unilateral offensives against "feminized" tribes were described as priapic assaults; in the last stanza, Lesbia's insatiable sexual appetite is assimilated to Rome's territorial encroachment. In all this, Catullus' own sense of masculine integrity has been heedlessly destroyed by forces beyond his control, like the flower on the meadow's verge or the peoples in the way of the imperial machine.

Succeeding decades witnessed the development and popularity of Latin erotic elegy, a genre in which the poet, embellishing upon Catullus' predicament, portrays himself as a lover totally enslaved by a capricious beauty. For her sake he endures crushing humiliation: "[n]o duty is too low, no punishment too degrading for him to suffer in the service of love" (Copley 1947: 291). Propertius opens his earliest book of elegies by announcing: "Cynthia first snared poor me with her eyes, I who before was touched by no desire," then describing how Love had cast down his proud glance and trampled his head underfoot (1.1.1–4). Tibullus, his contemporary, fantasizes himself as his mistress Delia's slave attendant, clearing a path for her through the crowd (1.5.61–6) or guarding her person while meekly accepting lashes and chains (1.6.37–8). Later he is in thrall to an even more cruel *domina*, Nemesis, at whose bidding, he says, he would sell his ancestral estate or drink poison (2.5.53–60). Ovid, the last practitioner of Augustan elegy, who busies himself exploding the conventions of an already exhausted genre, runs the "slavery of love" conceit into the ground. In the *Art of Love*, ostensibly an instructional manual on choosing and winning a mistress, he advises the aspiring elegiac lover to demonstrate obedience to his lady's will: adapt your mood to hers, let her win at dice, hold her parasol and clear her way through the crowd, place a footstool under her feet, help her remove or put on her shoes, warm her cold hand in your lap, hold a mirror for her (2.199–216). The submission of these lovers, then,

ismore profound and melodramatic than Catullus', whose struggle to salvage his own personal dignity is evident throughout the cycle of epigrams in which he protests his ill treatment.

Meanwhile, the status of the elegiac poet's mistress – the *docta puella* or “learned girl” – is left unclear, in fact deliberately blurred. Contradictory aspects of her characterization puzzle critics. She has had access to considerable education and is therefore able to appreciate the poet-lover's verse and compose verse herself (Prop. 2.3.21–2). Sometimes she is represented as under the control of a *vir*, also a common word for “husband,” which gives the impression that she is a married citizen woman. Indeed, we find implications of high rank: in Propertius 1.16 a personified house door complains that it formerly welcomed triumphs, but now witnesses the drunken brawling of its mistress' suitors (1–8), and in another elegy (3.20.8), a girl, who may or may not be Cynthia, is reminded of the brilliant fame of her learned grandfather. However, from the evidence of Propertius 4.7.15–16, Cynthia at one time dwelt in the Subura, a poor and not very reputable district. Both Cynthia and Delia are said to be worshippers of Isis, whose cult was associated with prostitutes (Prop. 2.28.61–2, 4.5.33–4; Tib. 1.3.23–32). Often the *puella* is depicted as free to make her own sexual choices, selecting among her lovers and favoring the man who brings the most gifts. In those contexts, she is obviously a woman of easy virtue: by the late Republic, in fact, the word *puella* could be a euphemism for “whore” (Adams 1983: 346–8). Tibullus (1.6.67–8) states outright that Delia is not entitled to the long robe and headband of the decent married woman. Finally, Ovid candidly advises at the beginning of his *Art of Love* that the girls his addressee will pursue are not reputable (1.31–4). Having disingenuously warned matrons off, he presents himself as singing of safe congress and permitted deceits, “and in my poem there will be no wrongdoing.” Much good this disclaimer did, however, when the *Art of Love* drew Augustus' wrath down upon him for promulgating adultery. Mixed signals were obviously being given.

Cornelius Gallus, the recognized inventor of love elegy, wrote poems about a “Lycoris,” who was actually the freedwoman Volumnia Cytheris, a mime actress. Imagining the heroine of elegy as an independent, expensive courtesan such as Cytheris – a *meretrix* like the Greek *hetaira*, as opposed to the *scortum* or common prostitute – permits us to define a witty underlying tension when the pleas of the poetic lover are viewed from her perspective. As a woman on her own, she must provide for her old age by soliciting gifts from admirers before youth and beauty fade. The lover, on the other hand, can offer her nothing but his talent. He eloquently promises that their union will be immortalized in verse, a far finer present than material goods. Perhaps so, but she herself is aware that literary glory buys no bread. This irreconcilable disparity of interests has been termed the “elegiac impasse” (James 2003: 14). Vows of eternal devotion on the lover's part attempt blithely to gloss over economic considerations, though they would inevitably occur to a reader living in money- and class-conscious Rome. The speaker's dogged refusal to acknowledge those material facts of the relationship, and his futile railings against what he sees as his mistress' fickleness and avarice, obliquely poke fun at the blindness of romantic fixation.

There are, however, other meanings attached to the *docta puella*, and the workings of elegy have much more complex repercussions. It is now a truism that on one level the elegiac woman stands for the author's poetry, a self-referential metaphor that can be traced back to the Hellenistic epigrammatist Meleager. Beginning with Lesbia, almost all Roman literary mistresses bear names indicating their association with literature or aesthetics. Cynthia's name is derived from an epithet of Apollo, god of music, employed only by Callimachus; it signals Propertius' adherence to a Callimachean poetics of learned, elegant, highly polished verse (Clausen 1976). "Delia" is a straightforward reference to Apollo's birthplace, the island of Delos. Ovid sings of "Corinna," the name of a real Boeotian woman poet and, by a happy coincidence, also a calque or bilingual pun, for *korê* (girl) is the Greek equivalent of *puella*. The most transparent use of this device is "Cerinthus," the woman elegist Sulpicia's designation for her beloved. His name is the Greek word for "bee-bread," a substance manufactured by bees. Its close ties with honey remind us of the "sweetness" of verse, and its connection with wax (Greek *kêros*, Latin *cera*) points directly to the tablets covered with wax on which the poet composes (Roessel 1990). By calling her partner "Wax-man," Sulpicia makes it very clear that he is a poetic fiction allowing her to address questions of gender and writing under the guise of a love affair. When the male poet, meanwhile, proclaims his undying desire for his beloved, he celebrates his own imaginative control over his subject matter. Ovid's fable of Pygmalion, the sculptor who falls in love with the statue he makes (*Met.* 10.243-97), has consequently been interpreted as a comment on the inherent gender asymmetry in the elegiac metaphor of art as mistress (Sharrock 1991).

Sulpicia Unveils Herself

The most provocative instance of an elegist using erotic metaphors as tools for investigating curbs on personal autonomy is that of Sulpicia, niece of the eminent statesman Messalla, who headed a literary circle to which Tibullus and Ovid belonged. Transmitted to us as part of Tibullus' collection, her cycle of six elegiac epigrams begins with a programmatic poem in which she protests against the constraints imposed on the woman writer ([Tib.] 3.13.1-2=4.7). "At last love has come," she announces, a love of such a kind that to her the rumor (*fama*) of covering it (*texisse*) would be a source of greater shame (*pudor*) than the rumor of baring it (*nudasse*). Because of her social visibility, a young Roman woman would be expected to behave circumspectly, and writing love elegy, even about an imaginary affair, exposed her to

risk. Accordingly, the contrast between publication and silence is here figured as a difference between clothing and nakedness, and the use of *pudor* in this context reinforces the bold suggestion of a striptease. Kristina Milnor skillfully unpacks the metaphor: "a woman who offers her words to the reading public has notionally prostituted herself; in body and spirit, she no longer belongs only to herself but to anyone who might pick up a book" (2002: 260). Indeed, Sulpicia goes on to invite anyone denied the experience of love to participate vicariously in her affair, refusing even to seal her tablets so that her lover might first read them, and closing with the announcement that her literary reputation as a love poet requires complete honesty: "It's a pleasure to trespass, and tiring to put on a face for

(Continued)

Sulpicia Unveils Herself — Continued

reputation's sake: I, a worthy woman, will be said to have been together with a worthy man" ([Tib.] 3.13.9–10). The expression *esse cum* "to be with" is a delicate equivalent of "to have sex." Thus the last line breaks two taboos: it affirms the physical nature of the female speaker's relationship and, in a striking departure from the elegiac convention of erotic slavery, promises that the affair will be one of moral and social equals.

In her signature poem 3.16 (= 4.10), Sulpicia defines her poetic identity as *docta puella* against that of the generic elegiac mistress, revealing herself as the offspring of a noble house. Cerinthus, it seems, has presumed upon her affection by becoming involved with a disreputable woman, and she sarcastically reproaches him: "Let your attraction to a toga-clad creature, a whore laden with a wool-basket, mean more to you than Sulpicia, daughter of Servius" (3–4). By unmasking herself publicly in this way, she metapoetically pulls rank on the fictitious courtesan figure: male poets may play it safe by writing of their sordid "Cynthias" and "Delias," but she is an aristocrat with a good name to lose. Accordingly, she reintroduces into elegy the consequences avoided by depicting the *docta puella* as a permissible sex object, for she proceeds to warn Cerinthus that there are persons who fear that she might "yield to a base bed," *cedam ignoto ... toro* (5–6). Yet scholars have noted the irony with which this haughty affirmation of rank and class is undercut. *Servi filia* means "daughter of Servius," that is, her patrician father Servius Sulpicius Rufus, but it could equally well mean "daughter of a slave," *servus* (Hinds 1987: 44–5). Furthermore, the wearing of masculine dress, which marks the prostitute as a marginalized figure, could be symbolically imputed to Sulpicia herself because she has assumed the role of poet-lover generically assigned to the male partner (Flaschenriem 1999: 47–8). In this epigram, then, Sulpicia rings changes on elegy's inherent ambiguities of gender and status, adopting the victimized posture of the male speaker, identifying herself as an upper-class woman whose sexuality is not beneath public notice, and daringly trying on,

just for an instant, the character of slave-prostitute herself. It is a bravura performance.

In the Introduction to this book, I quoted in full the last poem of the preserved sequence (3.18=4.12), in which Sulpicia explains to Cerinthus that she left him the night before, not because she did not desire him, but because she was afraid to confess how much she did. Even in English translation, the complex structure of this declaration is apparent; it is a perfect example of the poet's notoriously difficult and labored syntax (Lowe 1988: 198–9). Instead of striving for clarity, the rhetoric retards full expression until the very last line, when meaning bursts forth in a rush: "wanting to conceal my own passion." Recent criticism has traced the psychological undercurrents: "Here, it is almost as if she restages, in the rhetorical organization of the poem, her former hesitation – her impulse to hide her ardor – but then firmly renounces such concealment and evasion" (Flaschenriem 1999: 51). The issue resolved in this final epigram can be traced back to the anxieties about propriety raised in Sulpicia's programmatic poem, which on first reading apparently has to do with whether a decent young Roman girl may write about her own sexual adventures. But we see now that *stuprum* was a peripheral matter: Sulpicia's verse is scandalous because it makes use of an obviously fabricated love affair to protest conventional strictures forcing women to lie and dissimulate their feelings (Hallett 1992: 352). To accomplish this critique of patriarchy, the poet must adopt a masculine perspective, invoking, in spirit if not in words, Catullus' notion of love as *amicitia* and condemning her previous dishonesty as a violation of the trust Cerinthus deserves as her equal. In this closing poem, and in fact throughout the sequence, disruptions of gender role are no affectation but a real and inherent consequence of female artistic expression. Thus the effeminacy affected by the male speaker of elegy has opened up space for a woman writer to assume a corresponding transgendered position (Wyke 1994: 114–15) and, in doing so, to speak forthrightly of the restrictions imposed upon her sex.

Although the poet exercises discursive mastery over the *puella* as art object, he nevertheless insists on his servility to her as love object, and therefore puts himself into a “feminized” subject position. His erotic stance is so unmanly that elegy has been said to make use of three genders: the masculine, the feminine, and the effeminate (Wyke 1994: 125). That concession to female dominance implicitly alludes to the increasing constriction of freedoms formerly enjoyed by the senatorial and equestrian classes. From the second century BCE onward, the figure of the controlling woman had stood for a disordered society in which the *mos maiorum* had been turned on its head. Elegists found this metaphor of male subjection useful for voicing feelings of impotence and marginalization as Rome passed under the control of one man. At the same time, the lover declares his unwillingness to participate in military service abroad or laments his misfortunes when actually engaged in that service, refuses to turn his talents to epic celebrations of Roman might and power, revels in his indolence, and disrupts conventional social arrangements by questioning a rival’s right to exclusive possession of a woman – who may, it is suggested, be a legitimate wife. All these behaviors are symptomatic of a crisis in the Roman male subject’s conception of himself as a social and political agent (Miller 2004: 16–30). As a medium of literary protest, elegy is not only subversive but narcissistic.

Apparent contradictions in the status of the *puella* seem to reflect current moral pressures on elite men. In politicizing love poetry, the elegists followed the lead of Catullus, who took advantage of his mistress’ involvement in backstairs political intrigue to color the poetic affair with topical overtones by presenting it as an exploitative relationship of social unequals. In an atmosphere of increasing hostility to adultery and other forms of sexual immorality, however, writing first-person accounts of liaisons with married noblewomen would have been indiscreet. Thus the elegiac mistress, on the surface, becomes a courtesan, and the *vir* who stands in the way of the poet-lover’s happiness is ostensibly her wealthy protector. This means that male status anxiety, which elegy wishes to explore in depth, cannot be symbolically justified by any extra-literary distinction of the beloved or by her influence and connections in the real world. Propertius and Tibullus disguise this weakness in the plot of love elegy with the claim that they have been captivated by the girl’s beauty and accomplishments, though they also try to blur the line between courtesan and matron through ambiguous language. Because a woman’s personality, however charismatic, seems inadequate to explain the lover’s utter submission, though, elegy’s inversion of gender and power dynamics may strike the reader as contrived. The fact that love elegy relies upon far-fetched scenarios hints that the genre is not really concerned with such scenarios – nor, for that matter, with the notion of romantic love. What is truly being negotiated between the first-person speaker and his mistress is best understood in socio-political terms.

Mother of All Empires

Venus, goddess of love and sexuality in the Roman pantheon, is an equivocal figure. On the one hand, she occupies a crucial place in state religious cult and ideology: among her titles is that of *Venus Genetrix*, divine ancestress of the Roman nation

through Aeneas, her child by Anchises (see discussion of the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* in Chapter 1). The patrician family of the Julii traced their lineage back to Iulus, son of Aeneas. When Julius Caesar became master of Rome after defeating his rival Pompey, he began construction on a new Forum Julium as an extension of the old market and civic meeting place. The centerpiece of Caesar's architectural project, dedicated on September 26, 46 BCE (Cass. Dio 43.22.2), was a temple of his hereditary patron divinity Venus worshipped under the epithet "Genetrix." This cult title celebrated the goddess as mother of not only the Julian clan, but, by extension, all the people of Aeneas (Weinstock 1971: 80–90). A generation later the epic poet Vergil created the canonical image of Venus as protective ancestress of the Roman race in his *Aeneid*, which retold the story of Aeneas' flight from Troy and eventual settlement in Italy. Early in its opening book she tearfully complains to Jupiter about the sufferings of the Trojans: "What end do you give to their labors, great king?" (*Aen.* 1.241). Jupiter reassures his anxious daughter by prophesying Aeneas' settlement in Italy, the later founding of Rome by Romulus, and Rome's ultimate leadership of the world (1.254–96). The chief impression made on the reader is the goddess' passionate concern for her descendants, and that impression still dominates scholarly discussions of her role in the epic.

Yet, for all her importance in state cult, Venus could nevertheless be viewed as a formidable agent of disruption because she was the immediate source of those unlawful pleasures that had supposedly sapped the moral fiber of men and women and were thus to blame for present ills. In the hands of two great poets, Lucretius and Vergil, that tension between her "beneficial" and "destructive" aspects reveals flaws in human nature that militate against the achievement of tranquility and lasting peace for individuals and nations alike.

Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*, a didactic epic in six books summarizing Epicurean science and moral teaching, begins by invoking the divine ancestress of the Romans, *Aeneadum genetrix*, as the supreme creative force in nature (1.1–9)

Mother of Aeneas' tribe, delight [*voluptas*] of gods and men,
nurturing Venus, who under the gliding signs of the sky
propagates the ship-bearing sea, the crop-bearing land,
since through you all the host of living things
is conceived and, brought to birth, looks on the light of the sun:
you, goddess, you put to flight the winds and clouds of the sky
at your coming, for you the dexterous earth sends forth sweet flowers;
for you the plains of the sea sparkle
and the calm sky glitters with extended light.

5

As soon as spring winds blow, the poet continues, Venus, personification of a newly awakened earth, manifests herself in the natural world. Heralded by birds and causing beasts to follow her enraptured, she strikes "alluring desire" into their breasts to make them produce offspring species by species (10–20). Her creative powers are so absolute and far-reaching that they overflow into the sphere of artistic invention, envisioned as an analogous creative act (Clayton 1999: 70). Accordingly, Lucretius calls upon her to be his ally (*socia*, 24) in writing his descriptive account of the world she governs

and asks her to endow his poetry with an enticing charm, *lepos*. So far, his picture of Venus is wholly benign and not altogether inconsistent with Epicurus' teachings on divinity. Though Lucretius follows his master in repeatedly insisting that actual gods are remote from human affairs, have no need of mankind, and do not intervene, for good or ill, in our business (2.167–81, 646–51; 5.110–94, 1194–240), it is easy to read this opening invocation as allegorical praise of the awesome processes of Nature, the productive dynamics of the sexual instinct, and Epicurean pleasure (*voluptas*, 1) as the motivating goal of the wise man (Brown 1987: 92–4).

Unorthodox overtones creep in, however, as the poet continues his prayer. Venus alone is in a position to end hostilities on sea and land (1.29–42). The operations of war are the domain of bellicose Mars,

who often casts himself back on your lap
 constrained by the eternal wound of love,
 and thus looking up, his rounded neck pillowed, 35
 feeds his starved eyes with love gazing open-mouthed,
 and his breath, when he reclines, hangs on your lips.
 Bending over him from above as he lies on your holy body,
 goddess, pour forth from your mouth sweet blandishments
 seeking tranquil peace for the Romans, renowned lady. 40
 For I am not able to write with easy mind
 during this treacherous time for my country ...

This tableau of Mars lying in Venus' embrace is heavily weighted with literary and pictorial antecedents. One of Lucretius' models is a poem on nature by Empedocles, a fifth-century follower of Pythagoras, who in his own proem may have depicted his two primary cosmic principles, Love and Strife, in a comparable anthropomorphic pose (Sedley 1998: 26–8). Iconographically, Mars' attitude is immediately reminiscent of Hellenistic representations of male divinities leaning back on the bosom of a female companion, such as the well-known scene of Bacchus/Dionysos reclining on his wife Ariadne's lap in the center of the great fresco of initiation in the **Villa of the Mysteries** at Pompeii (Room 5, East Wall, fig. 8.1; Edmunds 2002: 346–8). Similarly, the male speakers of Hellenistic erotic epigram imagine themselves reposing on the lap of a mistress (for example, *Anth. Pal.* 5.25.1–3 by Lucretius' contemporary Philodemus).

In art, however, this particular "erotic schema" (Edmunds 2002: 351) is a good deal older than the Hellenistic period: it can be traced back to Attic Greek vase painting, as on a late fifth-century hydria attributed to the Meidias Painter (Florence 81948; *ARV*² 1312.1). There, Adonis is embraced by Aphrodite, his languid relaxation rendering him both vulnerable and effete. Similarly, the centerpiece of Arsinoë's lavish display celebrating the Adonis festival in Ptolemaic Alexandria was the effigy of the boyish Adonis lying on a couch in Aphrodite's arms (*Theoc. Id.* 15.84–5, 131). This iconographic scheme had apparently become the traditional way to portray the goddess and her young consort. For Lucretius to describe the Roman war-god, sire of Romulus, in a posture originally associated with the youthful Adonis is unsettling. It suggests that Venus' relationship to her lover is that of a pampering mother,



Fig. 8.1 Silenus and satyrs, Marriage of Dionysos and Ariadne. Fresco. Location: Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii, Italy. Source: Scala/Art Resource, NY.

a disturbing notion to a Roman whose ideological construction of “motherhood” instead saw the female parent, in the father’s absence, as a strict disciplinarian. Furthermore, Mars bears a telling similarity to the hapless suitor mocked in the powerful diatribe against the illusion of romantic love that closes the fourth book of the poem (Brown 1987: 97). Like that lover, he is gripped by obsessive, frustrating desire for what he cannot possess, while his emotional dependency makes him profoundly susceptible to Venus’ wheedling words. Since she is pressing the cause of peace, this seduction scene is doubly disquieting because the liaison of the adulterous divine couple ironically serves to promote human good. Not only is Mars unmanned and painted as a libertine, but the fusion of the erotic and the maternal in the goddess’ stance also infantilizes him (Clayton 1999: 71–3). Although it is not to be taken as a straightforward prayer, this passage is equally hard to explain as an allegory of the generative powers of nature triumphant over forces of negativity and violence, as has been argued by Monica Gale (1994: 222–3). Too many adverse elements stand in the way of such a reading. We will shortly see that Vergil picks up Lucretius’ characterization of Venus as eroticized mother and makes her display the same combination of nurturing and seductive traits in dealings with her son. The outcomes are no less troubling.

Let us turn briefly to Book Four of *On the Nature of Things* to study its concluding diatribe against romantic love, which deconstructs this evocation of a sublime and numinous presence. The first thing to bear in mind is that sex and love are not identical phenomena: the latter, in Lucretius' view, is an unhealthy perversion of the former, permeated by false illusions. He leads up to the topic of sex through an analysis of the mechanism of dreaming. Dreams contain the residue of daily experience; the images seen are predetermined by waking pursuits or by the physiological condition of the speaker. Three examples of dreams occasioned by bodily appetites are cited: the thirsty man dreams of drinking from a river; someone needing to urinate supposes himself using a chamber pot, but actually wets the bed and its expensive coverlets; adolescent boys ejaculate in the course of an erotic dream (DRN 4.1024–36). From the last instance, Lucretius moves into a description of the biological and psychological workings of the sexual drive. The transition is skillfully contrived as an anticipation of his forthcoming point: the frustrating or embarrassing dream event is the product of a real corporeal need overlaid by mental error (Nussbaum 1994: 166–7). Romantic love is similarly explained, though it takes place in conscious life.

In the atomistic universe of Epicurus, sense perception always involves physical contact between entities: sight, for example, is the impression made by material particles shed by an object, which strike the eyes and then enter the consciousness of the beholder. Male sexual desire is the impulse to discharge semen into an attractive body whose visual impact upon the mind has biologically triggered the production of that fluid: “the body seeks that by which the mind has been wounded with love” (4.1048). This is a natural physical response; for us, *this* is “Venus” (*haec Venus est nobis*, 1058). Erotic urges are not inflicted by some mysterious divine agent but instead have a simple mechanistic explanation.

In the denunciation of romantic love that follows, Lucretius employs the noun “Venus” as a metonym for physical desire (1061, 1084, 1101, 1107, 1148, 1172), for the human object of such desire (1071, 1157), and for the act of intercourse (1073, 1113, 1128), using this troping strategy to demonstrate how a mere physiological process is foolishly elevated into a supernatural force. If the psyche fixates upon one person and she becomes the sole object of an infatuated hunger to possess, the lover, even in the actual course of lovemaking, suffers cares, pains, and cruel disappointments (1076–120). His urge for complete union with the beloved can never be satisfied, since the only thing his body can take in are the flimsy images (*simulacra*, 1095) given off by her body. Orgasm brings only momentary relief. Consequences of fixation include the ruin of health, fortune and reputation, as well as guilt, anxiety, and jealousy (1121–40). The lover deludes himself about the beloved's appearance, ascribing to her a superhuman beauty, turning her corporeal shortcomings into virtues, even refusing to admit that she performs the same physical functions as other women and therefore exudes foul odors (probably a reference to the menstrual period). Were he to enter her house at that time, one whiff would send him packing, damning himself for his own stupidity “because he would see that he had endowed her with more than it is correct to grant a mortal” (1183–4).

Our "Venuses," Lucretius adds ironically, are aware of that fact and attempt to preserve their suitors' illusions by concealing such behind-the-scenes features of human life (*vitae postscaenia*, 1186). You, however, can conjure them up in imagination to purge yourself of fantasy, and then, if the woman is a decent sort, accept her for what she is, an ordinary human being (*humanis concedere rebus*, 1191). He proceeds to demonstrate that women too derive enjoyment from the sexual act, paving the way for a "new understanding of intercourse, one that makes its aim the giving and receiving of pleasure on both sides" (Nussbaum 1994: 183). The remainder of Book Four concerns itself with the procreative aims of marriage: it explains the processes of conception and transmission of biological traits and the physical causes of infertility, advising wives to avoid harlots' lascivious movements employed for contraceptive purposes (1268–77). At the close, Lucretius observes that a "little woman" (*muliercula*, 1279), of no particular beauty but well groomed and accommodating, can bring a man to love her through daily habit, like dripping water wearing away a stone. However we are to take that last dubious simile, a relationship of intimacy developed over the course of years, characterized as *consuetudo* (1283), the Epicurean term for friendship (Betensky 1980: 294), is held up as the prosaic but rational alternative to the torments of passion.

The centerpiece of Lucretius' attack on love is a grim picture of unsatisfying sexual intercourse whose dominant element is sadistic aggression. In the very moment of possession lovers do not know what to enjoy: they injure the desired body by pressing down upon it and biting the lips they kiss, because "the pleasure is not pure, and there are underlying goads compelling them to hurt that very thing, whatever it is, from which those sprouts of frenzy arise" (1076–83). Immediately before climax they greedily affix their bodies, mingle salivas, and gasp while clenching the other's lips with their teeth, "in vain, for they are not able to scrape away anything, nor to penetrate and disappear into that flesh with their entire flesh" (1105–11). Conversely, a woman's responsive lovemaking is genuine and aims at giving as well as receiving pleasure: "seeking shared gratification she urges him to run the course of love" (1195–6). On the one hand, Robert D. Brown comments, we have "an affectionate act leading to mutual satisfaction"; on the other, "a one-sided and desperate act of near violence, the pleasure of which is swamped with frustration." The woman's movements are instinctive, the lover's driven by unnatural expectations (1987: 65–6). Recent feminist studies of Lucretius commend his contemporary-sounding valorization of female sexual response and shared pleasure (Nussbaum 1994: 184–5) and even suggest that his polemic against romantic obsession forms part of a broader critique of Roman structures of masculinity (Gordon 2002). One might note, though, that Lucretius' therapeutic model of sex is curiously biased. Despite Epicurean assumptions about the intellectual and moral parity of the sexes, it seems essentialist in its polarization of "unhealthy" male and "natural, healthy" female libido. It does not admit the possibility that a woman, too, might experience obsessive desire.

With the character of Dido, the Carthaginian queen who falls desperately in love with Aeneas and commits suicide when he abandons her, Vergil in his *Aeneid* reverses the gender roles in Lucretius' account of erotic madness. Widow of the

former king of Tyre in Phoenicia, Dido had fled her home with a group of supporters after her brother slew her husband in a palace coup. When the Trojan survivors are driven by a storm to the coast of Africa, they seek aid from her at her new settlement, Carthage. Like Aeneas, Dido is a political refugee who has experienced personal trials and bereavement. As a girl, she had heard about the fall of Troy while living in her father's house. Generous, warm, and compassionate, she is psychologically predisposed to be swept off her feet by a hero with whose story she is familiar. On their first meeting she is astounded at seeing him in the flesh: "Are you *that* Aeneas ...?" she asks (Verg. *Aen.* 1.617). In addition to feeling genuine admiration for a celebrated figure and personally empathizing with his misfortunes, Dido is in a lonely and precarious position as the female ruler of a small city surrounded by hostile peoples. Thus her spontaneous attraction to Aeneas is understandable in purely human terms.

But Venus is only too eager to get involved. Fearing the designs of Jupiter's wife Juno, whose hatred of the Trojans is the most formidable barrier to Aeneas' mission, and mistrusting the Carthaginians' motives, since Juno is their patron goddess, she sends her son Cupid, disguised as Aeneas' own son Iulus, to kindle a consuming passion for Aeneas in Dido's heart. When Dido, attracted to the boy because of his father, takes Cupid unknowingly upon her lap, the god obligingly begins, little by little, to efface her commitment to her former husband – for whose sake she had sworn never to remarry – and stimulate her dormant heart with a quickening love (1.717–22). It is possible to think of Cupid as an external realization of the queen's own feelings. By involving Venus, however, Vergil ensures that her desire for Aeneas has been, as the psychologists say, overdetermined: what might have been resisted as mere human impulse is all the more inescapable because it is supernaturally inflicted.

In Book Four, the tormented and miserable queen at length confides in her sister Anna, who encourages her to follow her heart, not least because of the military advantages of such a dynastic alliance (4.35–49). The political connection is also at the forefront of Juno's mind when she approaches Venus to cut a deal, proposing a merger of Trojans and Carthaginians and joint divine custody of Carthage, with Dido's people subject to Aeneas as their king (4.102–4). Her hidden purpose, as Venus quickly intuits, is to delay or prevent the fated arrival of the Trojans in Italy. With only token hesitation, and thick-skinned indifference to the well-being of the two principals, Aeneas' mother consents to the plan, knowing full well that Jupiter will never approve. Juno arranges a storm that conveniently forces Dido and Aeneas while out hunting to take shelter together in a cave, apart from their companions. The upshot is a travesty of a wedding ceremony: primal Earth and Juno, as matron of honor, attend; lightning flashes in heaven, sole witness to the conjugal rites; nymphs howl on the mountain tops. "That was the first day of death and the first cause of evils," remarks the narrator. "Dido is no longer moved by appearances or reputation nor contemplates a secret love: she calls it marriage; with this name she covers her fault" (169–72). No mention is made of Aeneas' feelings, although, as the tragedy unfolds, we learn that the queen's affection was reciprocated. Jupiter eventually hears of the affair and sends Mercury down to remind the errant hero of his duty to his son and their descendants. Mercury comes upon an Aeneas clad in purple

and gold, occupied with constructing new buildings – a sign that he has willingly taken on the role of royal consort (259–64). Awed by the god's epiphany and the cutting rebuke he delivers, the Trojan leader gives orders to ready the ships in secret. He will wait, he tells his men, for just the right moment and seek the most diplomatic way to tell *optima Dido* (287–94). It is really an excuse to put off a painful scene, one this hero does not have the guts to cope with.

Dido finds out on her own, of course, and, in an emotionally draining speech, confronts him with what she perceives as his breach of faith and pleads with him to stay (305–30). Pathos gives way to fury when Aeneas, making a steely effort to remain impassive (*obnixus curam sub corde premebat*, 331), attempts to reason with her; she mounts a disjointed tirade against him, threatening him with vengeance and promising that her ghost will hunt him down (365–87). Her hysteria at this point is a sign of incipient madness. When, upon further pleas from Anna, Aeneas refuses even to delay his departure, Dido, hounded by awful nightmares, resolves to commit suicide (450–73). As she beholds the Trojan fleet departing, she curses Aeneas and his bloodline and, in a final prayer, calls for eternal enmity between his people and hers (607–29). She then mounts a pyre she has prepared in the inner chambers of the palace and stabs herself with the sword her lover had left behind. Much later, on a journey through the Underworld, Aeneas meets the ghost of Dido, and, moved by compassion and guilt, finally confesses the truth: “Unwillingly, o queen, I left your shores” (6.460). It is too late. She remains icily silent, then shrinks from him, fleeing away to the embrace of her former husband Sychaeus.

Discussion of the Dido episode has generally centered upon which of the two protagonists is more responsible for the catastrophe: Dido, because she broke her vow of chastity and deceived herself with false expectations, or Aeneas himself, because he allowed an impossible situation to get out of hand, then, to avoid the agonizing consequences, coldly repressed his emotions and fled. While it is tempting to take sides, the ethical dilemma as it is presented to the reader makes it hard to form facile judgments. Both lovers are to blame, and Aeneas' sin of omission – his inability to let himself identify with Dido and share her pain – contributes as much to the sorry outcome as her loss of womanly virtue. Hence their final meeting in the Underworld wholly reverses their prior roles; for Aeneas, weeping as he confronts the queen's pitiless inflexibility, now experiences what she herself had suffered at his hands. Indeed, the fact that Dido receives consolation from Sychaeus, while Aeneas can only continue his journey burdened by regret, makes it clear that his long-term punishment will be greater and may hint that in Vergil's eyes there are worse crimes than loving too much.

If any character in the epic should be condemned for malicious mischief, it is Venus. Shortsighted as she appears to be, she may not have foreseen any lasting harm resulting from her manipulation of Dido's emotions or her cynical pact with Juno. Nevertheless, her actions strike one perceptive critic as “a case of cruel, divine irresponsibility, a piece of irresponsibility which not only contributed to Dido's death, but had nearly disastrous implications for her son” (Lyne 1987: 26). This is not the only place in the *Aeneid* where she shows unattractive qualities, but her selfish caprice is most evident here. Had she left well enough alone, the human protagonists might have handled their own difficulties better.

Is Venus merely Aeneas' interfering mother, or something more? It has long been customary to conceptualize divine agency in the *Aeneid* as a clash between two primal forces at work in the cosmos: Juno, the embodiment of anarchy and *furor* ("madness"), whose obsessive attempts to eradicate the Trojan race drive the narrative action (Keith 2000: 67), and Jupiter, catalyst of order, bent on establishing Rome as a stabilizing imperial power. When Juno bows to her husband's will at the end of the poem, renouncing her vendetta against Aeneas in return for the abolition of the Trojan name (12.791–842), it seems a victory for peace and rationality, though critics point out that her deeper grievances remain unresolved (Feeney 1991: 147–9). Yet viewing action on the divine plane solely in terms of the polarization of Jupiter and Juno may be reductionist. That approach overlooks the workings of Venus, who supports her father's long-range objectives but has no qualms about temporarily collaborating with the enemy, whatever the cost. If Jupiter and Juno are cosmic principles, so is she. On the metaphysical level, Venus mediates between order and chaos: amoral and impetuous, she triangulates what might otherwise have been a clear-cut struggle between good and evil. She is the incarnation of elemental human passion, treacherous because unpredictable.

As mother of the Roman race, she is a wild card, for her demeanor is often, to say the least, unmotherly. True, she often intervenes in Aeneas' life as an invisible helper. Because she comes to his rescue on those occasions, we think of her as a caring figure. Yet her face-to-face contacts with her son are few and strained, and his unsatisfying interaction with her is puzzling. Although their emotionally distanced association reflects Roman constructions of maternal behavior (Leach 1997: 364–5), some have noted, in addition, an unhealthy seductiveness in Venus' conduct, especially during an encounter in the woods near Carthage (1.314–410). There she appears to her son disguised as a young maiden huntress, bare to the knee and with loosened hair, to tell him Dido's story and reassure him that his fleet is safe. As she turns away, her neck glows, her hair breathes out fragrance, her dress ripples down to her feet, and, goddess-like, she walks majestically off. Recognizing his mother, Aeneas calls out bitterly as she vanishes (407–9):

"Why do you tease your son so often with false phantoms,
you, cruel as well? Why can't we clasp our right hands
and hear and return earnest words?"

There is a touch of lighthearted mockery in Venus' deception, which, as we infer from *totiens* ("so often") has happened before. Yet there are also undertones of eroticism throughout the passage, both in the goddess' disguise as nubile, scantily dressed virgin and in the mature sensuality (ruddy flush, perfumed hair, rippling dress) she projects when leaving (Reckford 1995–6).⁶ Presenting herself as a Punic huntress, a doublet of Dido (who will, of course, join Aeneas on the fatal hunt), Venus stirs her son's latent sexuality and prepares him to be receptive to Dido's advances. Incestuous overtones are compounded by patent echoes of Aphrodite's seduction of Anchises, Aeneas' own father, in the archaic *Homeric Hymn* (Reckford 1995–6: 16–22; Oliensis 1997: 306). Thwarted longings aroused by this seductive

mother must have contributed to his inability to express his heartfelt feelings to Dido: if Venus refuses to deal honestly with him, how can he fully trust anyone else he cares for?

In the last six books of the *Aeneid* Vergil makes it evident that forcibly repressed eroticism, on the part of Aeneas and others, manifests itself in violence. Linkages between sexuality and aggression in the narrative include the speaker's seemingly incongruous prayer to Erato, the muse of love poetry, to assist him in recounting the battles between the Trojans and their Italian opponents (7.37-44); the sterile virginity of the Fury Allecto, who, at Juno's behest, incites the war (Mitchell 1991: 222-4; Keith 2000: 69, 72-4); the "feminization" of young men slain in battle and the assimilation of the blood they shed to that shed by the deflowered bride (D. Fowler 1987); the romanticized treatment of Nisus and Euryalus, a homoerotic couple whose heroic, if futile, deaths are followed by an extraordinary promise of poetic immortality from the narrator (9.446-9); suggestive hints of Aeneas' sexual attraction to the young warrior Pallas, whose death at the hands of the opposing commander Turnus he brutally avenges in the last lines of the poem (Gillis 1983: 53-83; Putnam 1985); the highly eroticized description of the death of the warrior maiden Camilla, killed by a spear thrust beneath her bared breast (11.803-4); and, finally, the fact that Aeneas is provoked to slay a wounded Turnus pleading for mercy by the sight of Pallas' baldric, worn as a trophy, which depicts the Danaids' murder of their bridegrooms on the wedding night (12.940-52).

The most blatantly erotic incident in the poem is also the most explicit conflation of militarism with sex. Venus approaches her husband Vulcan to get him to manufacture a set of weapons for Aeneas (8.370-406). In a scene deliberately reminiscent of Lucretius' encounter between Venus and Mars, she cajoles him, embraces him when he hesitates, inflames him with desire, and so obtains his consent:

"... Therefore I am come as suppliant to beg the power I reverence
for armor, a mother for her son. The daughter of Nereus,
the wife of Tithonus were able to move you with tears. 385
Look at what nations are assembling, what towns with barred gates
sharpen their weapons seeking me and the death of my people!"
Thus the goddess spoke, and on both sides with her white arms
she clasped him in soft embrace as he struggled. Suddenly he
caught the customary spark, and the well-known heat 390
entered his vitals and ran through his trembling bones,
just as when torn out by rolling thunder a fiery streak
passes gleaming with light through the clouds.
His wife happily sensed this, aware of her beauty and wiles.

When she presents the weapons to her son, she finally appears undisguised and permits him to embrace her (8.608-16). "She must seduce Vulcan at the creation, Aeneas at the acceptance, of the arms," Putnam remarks (1985: 16). Thus sexuality, far from being incidental to the events of the last half of the *Aeneid*, permeates the poem in a muted and displaced form and lends it a bleak pathos.

Not all poets found Venus' duplex personality troubling. In his fourth volume of *Odes*, Horace glides easily from addressing the love-goddess as "savage mother of sweet Cupids" in the opening poem (*Carm.* 4.1.4–5) to a vision of peace in the final poem of the book (15.25–32). There the speaker, on behalf of all Romans, promises first duly to invoke the gods in the company of wife and children and then to celebrate "Troy and Anchises and the offspring of nourishing Venus." By alluding to Lucretius' proem through the epithet he gives Venus (*alma*, "nourishing"), Horace implies that the prayer at the beginning of *On the Nature of Things* has finally been answered: Venus has calmed Mars' warlike temper, and the suffering she once inflicted on the speaker has been transmuted into familial blessings and joy at the revival of civic community (Putnam 1986: 295–9; Feeney 1998: 101–4).

Meanwhile, the imperial family's claim to descent from Venus furnished ample fodder for Ovid's irreverence. If Caesar is her descendant, then Cupid must be his kinsman (*Am.* 1.2.51). Had Venus, like Corinna, sought an abortion when pregnant, "the future world would have been bereft of its Caesars" (*Am.* 2.14.17–18). In the *Metamorphoses*, Julius Caesar's impending assassination is the occasion for a pastiche of the scene between Venus and Jupiter in *Aeneid* 1: Venus again complains of the wrongs inflicted on her progeny, and Jupiter affirms the unchangeable decrees of fate, predicts the avenging triumphs of Caesar's son Augustus, and bids Venus transform the soul of Caesar into a star (15.760–842). *Alma* Venus – there is that epithet again – catches it up as it leaves his body and bears it aloft, and, "as she carried it, felt it glow and catch fire and released it from her bosom" (847–8). No doubt we should imagine her dropping it like a hot brick. In his open letter to Augustus defending his poetry after his relegation to Tomis, discussed below, Ovid protests that it is impossible to keep spicy literature out of the hands of a matron. As soon as she reads Lucretius' opening words *Aeneadum genetrix*, "mother of Aeneas' tribe," she will want to know just how that might have happened (*Tr.* 2.261–2). Even in exile, he cannot resist a sly dig at the Caesarian myth of origins.

Yet it is true enough that we make jokes about things we fear. And the fortuitous constellation of poetic motifs surrounding Venus – adultery with Mars and Anchises; passion, madness, and brutality arising from thwarted desire; parentage of the race, its empire, and the imperial house – spoke to very dark elements in the collective psyche.

Domestic Visibility

When Augustus undertook his mission to reform the morals of upper-class society and bring back the piety of an earlier, happier time, he did not neglect the visual arts as a communicative medium. One of the familiar iconographic, as well as literary, themes of the Augustan period is the expectation of an imminent Golden Age with its accompanying promise of fertility and abundance (Zanker 1990: 172–83; Galinsky 1996: 106–21). Images of prosperity may be balanced by the warning that the Golden Age will not be attained without struggle ("relentless labor has conquered all," Verg. *G.* 1.145–6), but they nevertheless permeate contemporary Roman

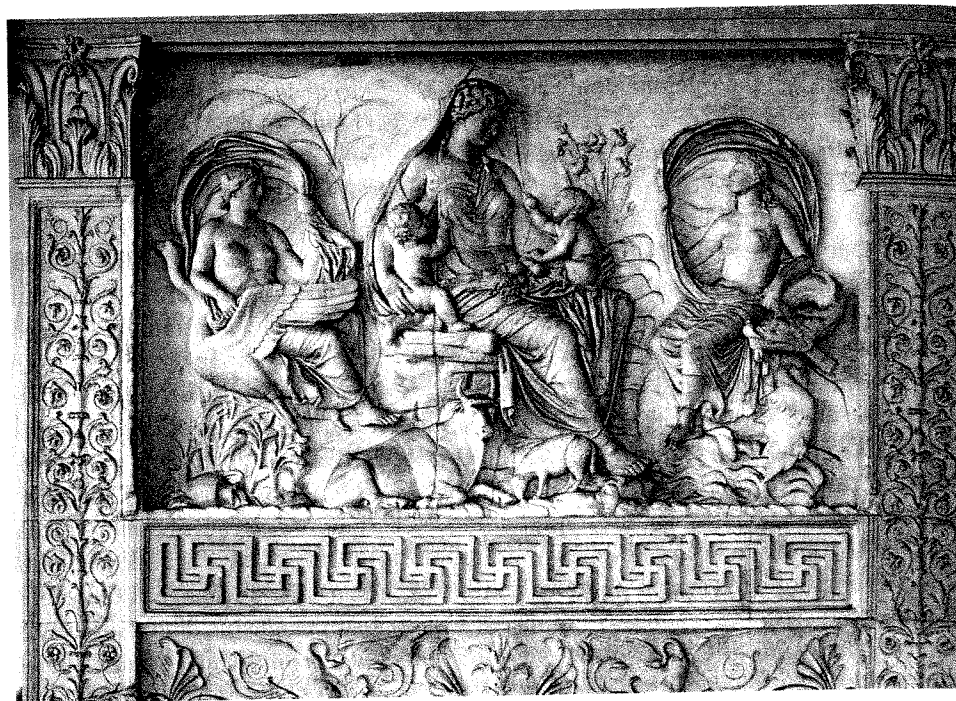


Fig. 8.2 Saturnia, Tellus, Goddess of the Earth, Air and Water. Panel from the Ara Pacis, 13–9 BCE. Location: Museum of the Ara Pacis, Rome, 13–9 BCE, Italy. Source: Nimatallah/Art Resource, NY.

art. The classic illustration is the famous *Ara Pacis Augustae* in Rome, the “Altar of the Augustan Peace” constructed by the Senate from 13 to 9 BCE, deemed the most representative monument of its time (Galinsky 1996: 141; Severy 2003: 104–12). With its luxuriant decorative motifs of tendrils, flowers, vines and branches, the altar complex is itself a testimonial to the productivity of the land and its people under the imperial order. Emblematic of this promise of future blessings is the richly symbolic panel of Peace or Mother Earth (the identity of the figure is disputed) on the southeast side of the precinct wall (fig. 8.2).

A mature deity sits on a rocky throne embracing two chubby infants who reach up toward her breasts. Fruits lie in her lap; grain, poppies, and reeds grow beside her; two domestic animals, a cow or ox and a sheep, rest at her feet; and personifications of favoring breezes, their garments billowing, flank her on either side. Whoever this mother goddess is, it is noteworthy that she is depicted with the sensual qualities of Venus. Her garment slips from one shoulder; her breasts are prominent, one nipple faintly visible under thin, clinging drapery, which is also drawn tightly across her rounded abdomen.⁷ This is female sexuality openly acknowledged, but properly put to use in generation and nurturing.

Meanwhile, the two long friezes of the wall feature religious processions: the north frieze shows senators and their families; the south frieze (fig. 8.3) the imperial family, including women and children, assisting at a sacrifice conducted by Augustus and the



Fig. 8.3 Marcus Agrippa with imperial family (south frieze). Detail from the Ara Pacis. 13–9 BCE. Location: Museum of the Ara Pacis, Rome, Italy. Source: Scala/Art Resource, NY.

major colleges of priests. The group is led by Marcus Agrippa, husband of Augustus' daughter Julia, the tall man shown with head covered on the far left. This is the first time adults and children are depicted interacting on a state monument, and the connection between the overall iconographic program of fertility and the concrete representation of actual Roman families, however idealized, is readily understood (Milnor 2005: 56–7). While the distinguished officials on the north and south friezes perform their public duties, the presence of their women and children beside them indicates that they also have reproductive and familial obligations no less vital to the state (Kleiner 1978: 772–6; Kampen 1994: 123). In this respect, the family of Augustus himself serves an exemplary purpose, the children holding out the prospect of continued political stability and a secure imperial line of descent.

That line of descent was not, however, a strict patrilinear succession. Augustus had no sons and only one daughter. His female kin were consequently called upon to provide him with male heirs. Being crucial to the legitimate transmission of his legacy, Augustus' wife, sister, and daughter assumed great significance in the political sphere (Corbier 1995: 192). Livia, his wife, became the key figure linking the Julian and the Claudian houses when in 4 CE the *princeps* adopted his stepson Tiberius, her son by her previous marriage to Ti. Claudius Nero, as his own son and ultimate successor. Livia had already been the recipient of earlier public honors (Cass. Dio 49.38.1, 55.2.5) and had played a key role in sponsoring religious cults for married women, thus assuming the informal role

of mother of the Roman state (Severy 2003: 131–8). Because of her dynastic position as sole link between her husband and son, she now had to be included in monuments to the imperial family (Flory 1996: 296–7).

When Tiberius became emperor in 14 CE, representations of Livia multiplied, showing her in sacerdotal dress as the priestess of the newly deified Augustus and investing her with the tokens of female divinities, particularly Ceres. Association with the Roman goddess of agriculture continued the theme of prosperity and abundance first sounded under Augustus' reign and also accentuated her maternal honors, assuring the propriety of Tiberius' accession (Bartman 1999: 102–12). Public recognition of her dynastic consequence set the pattern for the subsequent use of female members of the imperial household in statuary and reliefs, and especially on coinage, as markers of the vitality of the ruling house and the domestic program of the emperor. Conservative qualms about showing women, traditionally identified with the private sphere, in state-sponsored art were alleviated not only by stressing their domestic roles but also by assimilating them to personifications such as *Concordia* ("harmony") and divinities who oversee the performance of female duties (Kampen 1991). The imperial woman is a presence in official art not as a historical subject but as a sign of familial and reproductive concerns.

Going Too Far

Sensationalism is more arresting than sober fact, but to a Roman listening audience it was more entertaining as well. From the Augustan era onward, public readings were a popular diversion, and a great number of literary texts, even prose texts, were produced with recitation in mind. Ancient oratory privileged the impact of language over its referential content; that is, it was regarded primarily as an instrument for captivating listeners and not a means of communicating accurate information. Authors trained in schools of rhetoric imbued their writing with an exhibitionistic, "over-the-top" quality, striving to outdo their colleagues in point and verbal brilliance while hooking listeners with striking, sometimes grotesque images. This fashion for staginess affected different genres differently, but it is already present in late Republican poetry and becomes more pronounced in works produced toward the close of Augustus' reign and afterward.

Ovid, who belonged to the generation after Propertius and embarked on a poetic career during the late twenties BCE, is the strategic forerunner of imperial-age poets who score points by going to extremes. In numerous ways he signals his intent to be rebellious, most obviously when retelling mythic incidents of sex or violence or both. Consequently, Ovid's many (suspiciously many?) rape scenes have been exhaustively scrutinized. Ostensibly, the narrator expresses great sympathy for his hapless victims (Curran 1984). Indeed, the opening set-piece in the *Art of Love* on the Rape of the Sabine Women (1.101–34) has been read allegorically as a denunciation of Roman militarism because so much weight is placed on the terror of the abducted maidens (Hemker 1985).

Critical analysis, though, uncovers a grim subtext in such scenes: the author eroticizes the victim's suffering or, worse, trivializes it (Richlin 1992b). Thus the

beauty of the Sabine captives is said to be enhanced by fear (*potuit multas ipse decore timor*, 126). Rounding off his story, the preceptor lightheartedly identifies himself with Romulus and his gang of rapists: "Romulus, you alone knew how to give largesse to your soldiers; give me such largesse, I'll be a soldier too" (*Ars am.* 1.131–2). Later on in the poem, he advises the enthusiastic lover that using force is "pleasing to girls" (1.673). To make the latter point, he recounts the tale of Deidamia, violated by Achilles disguised as a woman (681–706):

... she by this sexual offense [*stupro*] learned he was a man [*virum*].
 In fact, she was conquered by force [*viribus*], so you ought to believe;
 but she wished to be conquered by force [*voluit vinci viribus*] anyway. 700
 Often she cried "Wait!" when Achilles was now hurrying off;
 for he had donned heroic armor, distaff put aside.
 So where's that "force" [*vis*] now? ...

Here the flippant punning on *vir* "man" and *vis* "rape" appears to hint that rape is what genuine men do, with the supplemental wordplay on the verbs *volo*, *velle* "to wish" and *vincere* "to conquer" reinforcing the claim that women want them to do it.

Physical transformations in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a panoramic catalogue of myths about change of form, repeatedly stem from threatened or realized atrocities. In the first book, the attempted or actual rapes of Daphne, Io and Syrinx are followed by **metamorphosis** into a laurel tree, a cow, and a clump of reeds, respectively (1.452–746). This chain of permutations is programmatic for the epic itself. Rape is not the only danger; at times Ovid uses mutilation of the body to stand in for the genital act he does not depict overtly. When the Thracian king Tereus, having despoiled his sister-in-law Philomela, cuts out the tongue with which she has reviled him, the reader is given an appalling picture of the severed member lying on the floor, quivering, muttering, twitching toward the feet of its mistress as it dies (*Met.* 6.557–60). "Is it decorum that makes the poet omit the details of the rape?" Richlin asks. "If so, it is a decorum that allows him to show us what the inside of [Philomela's] mouth looks like with the tongue cut out of it. This is a conflation of violence with sex" (1992b: 164). Cruelty begets cruelty: having learned of her husband's crime, Tereus' wife Procne joins with her sister in butchering the king's son, Itys, and serving him up to his father at dinner. That grisly impasse reached, the transformation of the three principals into birds (667–74) is tacked on abruptly, seeming an afterthought.

Elsewhere in the *Metamorphoses*, stories dwell upon the step-by-step change of the human form into that of animal or plant. By evoking horror, such disfigurement supposedly opens up space for the intersection of violence and pleasure (Richlin 1992b: 165). The pleasure would be that of the male reader gratified by observing the degradation of someone other than himself, which in complementary fashion heightens and reaffirms his own status. The satisfaction he enjoys can be equated with the visual gratifications experienced by spectators of public entertainments. Richlin compares Ovid's plots to the erotic scenarios of pantomime – a ballet on a mythic theme, usually a melodramatic account of rape or

seduction, performed by a single male dancer (1992b: 174–6). Ovid embellishes his narrative with rhetorical effects that either cleverly distance the action or intensify its repulsiveness. Pantomime atrocities were similarly stylized, formalized by the theatricality of masks and flowing silk costume and elegantly conveyed through gesture. Men found effeminate dancers sexually attractive and women, too, were said to be feverishly aroused by their movements when they enacted the plight of suffering heroines (Juv. 6.63–6). In both poetry and dance the combination of sophisticated art and thematic brutality may be a prurient turn-on.

That feminist indictment of Ovid is a heavy one and, if applicable, would taint the delight modern readers take in this wittiest of all Roman poets. Yet Ovid's rape scenes must be approached with due attention to their topical implications. His pre-exilic works react against both the histrionics of their elegiac predecessors and the Augustan climate of religious and moral earnestness. That does not mean they are politically "anti-Augustan," but they purposely transgress boundaries. The *Art of Love*, for example, spoofs the emperor's program of family values, and the preceptor's facetious approval of rape as courtship tactic contributes to its ludicrousness. Treatments of rape in the *Metamorphoses* jar the sensibilities when given a comic twist or when they fuse gruesomeness with narrative flourishes, as in the tale of Philomela discussed above.

In a key episode of the *Metamorphoses* (6.5–145), the author may indicate why he employs sexual violence as a reiterated motif. There the mortal Arachne pits herself against the goddess Pallas Athena in a weaving contest. Pallas creates a balanced, orderly, "Augustan" composition depicting her own gift of the olive to the Athenians as witnessed by the Olympians in majesty and, in each of the four corners, a cautionary tale of a mythic sinner's punishment. Arachne, in turn, produces a tapestry showing in chaotic fashion a whole succession of divine assaults on human women. The goddess can find no fault in the work but destroys it anyway, then beats Arachne with a shuttle; she hangs herself in despair, and Pallas, finally pitying her, transforms her into a spider doomed to weave for all time to come. Like Helen's weaving in the *Iliad*, which figures the epic itself (3.125–8), Arachne's textile is an emblem of the whole *Metamorphoses*, its design a justification of Ovid's subject matter. Rape scenes critique the surface decorum of Augustan art and poetry. There is a patent intention to shock and even offend, but their shock value requires the reader's underlying agreement that rape is an ugly business.

When Augustus reacted to years of poetic impudence by relegating Ovid to distant Tomis on the Black Sea in 8 CE, he gave as one pretext the immorality of the *Art of Love*. Addressing the emperor from his place of exile, Ovid defends himself by pleading that the message of his work was distorted and taken far more seriously than it was meant (*Tr.* 2.241–4, 277–8, 357–60). But that excuse after the fact may itself be disingenuous. Like Oscar Wilde, Ovid affected a nonconformity (in his poems, that is – we don't know how he dressed and acted) that called the prevailing temper of his times into question. Like Wilde, he paid the penalty. Foes of sanctimoniousness inevitably do.

Conclusion

Trained by Freud to look for latent sexual content beneath the surface of dull or neutral discourse, we may find it hard to grasp that Roman sexual discourse, wholly uncensored as it frequently is, has a latent content all its own, dealing with matters more disturbing to its original audience than mere libido. In this chapter we have probed beneath the use of sex and gender as symbolic counters in literature of the Republican and Augustan eras.

Correlations in the Roman mind between phallic display and claims to hegemony inspired poets to give concrete expression to hierarchical tensions by representing them as metaphorical sexual congress. In such texts, the unspoken referent to be inferred, the dirty little secret, as it were, is the ethical problem posed by unrestricted power. The slave is at once a tool doing his master's bidding and also, the moment his humanity is recognized, capable of exercising free will and demonstrating virtue (Fitzgerald 2000: 6–8). Discomforts in the relation of master and trusted household slave might be relieved, on the part of both, by laughing at a rude Plautine joke about slaves sexually obliging their owners. Catullan invective is all the more biting for its use of obscenity to encode charges of political corruption. Mocking the contention that men such as Caesar and Pompey have earned their position through their superior courage, wisdom, and achievements and their services to the Roman state, it presents collusion with subordinates as literally “being in bed together” – a trope that underscores the self-interest of the superior's motives.

The gender inversions of Latin love poetry convey multiple messages. Culturally, the Roman female was not the simple antithesis of the male, a place that woman occupied in the Greek symbolic universe. Her communal, financial, and familial responsibilities endowed her with male gender traits: she was a combination of “Sameness” and “Otherness” (Hallett 1989). If the poetic beloved is aligned with the oligarchy, as Catullus' “Lesbia” was, her insatiable sexual lust can stand for the ambition and greed motivating military expeditions. Social masculinity, moreover, always ran the risk of being “feminized.” Elegiac writers took advantage of built-in instabilities in Roman gender structures to create erotic fictions that expressed concerns about the position of elite men in a changing political environment, both in the fast-paced and dangerous last decade of the Roman Republic and during the Augustan age, when the rules of the power game were completely rewritten. These figurative repercussions are most evident in the short epigrammatic cycle of Sulpicia, who uses the scandal of an erotic intrigue to protest the social constraints imposed upon her sex.

Meanwhile, the epic poets Lucretius and Vergil saw that the contrary image of Venus, at once amoral temptress and protective mother of the Roman nation, could reveal social tensions. The introductory lines of *On the Nature of Things* depict her interceding with her paramour Mars on behalf of her people, her intentions doubtless good but the circumstances questionable. Lucretius' analysis of erotic obsession in Book Four then pictures human “Venuses” turning the same cajolery on their own hapless lovers. In the *Aeneid*, Venus is positioned halfway between the

cosmic forces of order and chaos; her character, implicated in violence to a profound degree, gives a flickering glimpse into the mindset responsible for a century of civil wars. Those pessimistic visions of the goddess of love anticipate the private anxieties about sex that were to surface during the imperial period.

On public monuments of the Augustan age the female figure, allegorical or drawn from life, proclaims the centrality of both dynastic succession and renewal of communal and domestic propriety. Propertius and Tibullus had already shown themselves indifferent to the civic and military goals of the regime. Ovid took resistance one step further. With the same vigor he had displayed in mocking the silliness of elegiac clichés, he lampooned moral proclamations in his *Art of Love* and *Metamorphoses*. Rape in those works calls attention to the real abjection of citizens under the Augustan regime, above all as sexual subjects (Johnson 2008: 69–71). The trope operates – feminist readers are correct here – by eroticizing a vulnerability to violence. That explains its metaphoric thrust, for under the Augustan marriage laws, it implies, responsible sex is coercive.

Discussion Prompts

1. Because Plautine comedies are adaptations of Greek New Comedy, they are set in Greece even after translation into Latin, and the characters themselves retain their Greek personal names and identities. Many plot devices, too, assume Greek laws and customs: thus to be eligible for legitimate marriage a girl must turn out to be a citizen by birth. Superimposed upon this Greek background, the plays contain current allusions and in-jokes that only Romans would understand. How would this nominal Greek setting add to the comic flavor of the plays?
2. In their portrayals of the poet-lover and his mistress, to what extent did the Latin love elegists modify Catullus' depiction of an ideal love relationship as a compact of friendship (*amicitia*)? What might have been their reasons for doing so?
3. Find parallels, if you can, between Lucretius' account of sexual obsession in Book Four and Vergil's representation of Dido's state of mind in the *Aeneid*. Can Dido's madness be explained in Epicurean terms?
4. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, though unquestionably an epic poem, strikingly departs from classical epic conventions. Thematically, for example, it does not concentrate upon the adventures of a single hero but instead reports the circumstances and outcomes of hundreds of physical transformations, most involving shifts in grades of existence (human beings become animals or plants; less commonly, the reverse occurs). For that reason, some critics approach Ovid's poem as a kind of anti-*Aeneid* (though admittedly there are metamorphoses in the latter poem too). Are there ways in which the perspectives of the one epic might be said to differ from that of the other?