



**ELECTRYONE**  
ΗΛΕΚΤΡΥΩΝΗ



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**Denise Eileen McCoskey and Zara Martirosova  
Torlone, *Latin Love Poetry* (Understanding  
Classics), London/New York: I.B. Tauris 2014.**

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Latin love elegy, primarily represented by Propertius, Tibullus and Ovid, and prepared by Catullus, has become increasingly popular in the past thirty years with scholarly research and teaching curricula alike, while Catullus and Ovid had been included for decades in the Advanced Placement US curriculum. As a result an amplitude of resources, both secondary works and textbooks, that address students of various levels of competency with the Latin language, are available for the instruction of Latin love elegy. Even so, *Latin Love Poetry* by D. McCoskey and Z. Torlone, the product of collaboration in the classroom and beyond (both authors are professors in the Classics Department at Miami University-Ohio, and both specialize in the literature of the Augustan age, during which Love elegy flourished), will be welcomed by the teachers and students of the Roman elegists, for it offers a comprehensive presentation and assessment of all major aspects tied to Latin love elegy as a complex cultural and literary phenomenon. To address the complexity McCoskey and Torlone have compartmentalized their study into seven chapters each of which offers a succinct and lucid essay on a major aspect of Latin love elegy. The

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book opens with an thirteen-page long introduction which explains the objective of the book (“to ‘denaturalize’ the process of reading Latin love poetry by exposing *how* Roman love poetry actually works”, p. xiii), and the structure of the argument in individual chapters which address the main literary devices of the genre, and the political and historic circumstances behind its *floruit* during the Age of Augustus. The rest of the introduction is devoted to a brief yet succinct introduction to the Augustan age. Specifically, the authors provide a chronology of the events leading to the rise and ultimate rule of Augustus, and then an informative description of Augustus’ moral legislation, specifically the marriage reform consisting of the two *leges Iuliae* (*de maritandis ordinibus* and *de adulteriis*), that criminalized adultery and stipulated penalties for the celibate and the childless, in the regime’s systematic effort to encourage the aristocracy to produce more heirs—legislation against which elegy is fashioned and largely defined. A brief mention of the importance of Augustus’ grand building program that transformed the urban landscape of Rome and thus fostered visually the stability and prosperity of the Augustan regime, follows next, and, along similar lines, Augustan literature is characterized as a product as well as a commentary of the era with which it interacts in complex ways. The introduction closes with brief summaries of the seven chapters that comprise the main bulk of the book. The chapters are structured on the basis of a series of paired terms and concepts that together contribute to the definition of the genre of Love elegy.

Chapter one, “Beginnings and Backgrounds” traces the origins of the genre of Latin love elegy. It discusses the influence of Archaic Greek lyric and Hellenistic poetry, including the impact of Callimachean poetics, offers brief biographical information for every one of the major elegiac poets, and goes over the interaction between elegy and Augustan politics. The elegiac line begins with Catullus, while Cornelius Gallus deserves special mention as the crucial missing link between Catullan poetics and Love elegy proper. The brief biographies are followed by brief mention of key themes at the core of the essence of the elegiac genre, namely its pro or anti-Augustan character, its fixation with gender (failure or not of the poet to prove his

masculinity), and the introduction of a set of new terms and notions in interactive relationship.

Chapter two, “Author and Ego”, takes on the issue of authorship identity, or the relationship between the real person of the author of an elegy and the “I” through whose voice the elegy is narrated. It is intriguing to realize that for most of the elegists the narrating “I” has been projected on the real “I”, and this advises against interpreting their erotic feelings and tribulations as reflections of actual affairs. Accordingly, the historicity of their confessions and the identity of their mistresses are highly contested. Here one should make a distinction between Catullus’ relationship, which was a real one since the identity of his Lesbia is not contested, and those of the Augustan elegists, who, more likely, used the motif of the *puella* more or less expressly as metaphor for their poetry—a technique in Ovid is patently acknowledged. The so-defined “incorporation of the female ego” deserves special mention in this chapter, and its course in Latin elegy is discussed in a variety of expressions (with the most prominent being the heroines/authors/elegiac poetesses of Ovid’s *Heroides*). Special mention is made to Sulpicia, the only woman elegist (and author) we know from Classical Rome. Still, the overflow of emotions the poets express on occasion is realistic and contagious, and points to a deliberate effort to forge a more sympathetic connection with their reader—a connection which will win them over ultimately as readership audience.

Chapter three, “Power and Play”, focuses on the major theme of gender and its fundamental role in Latin love elegy, specifically, the presence of the female, female domination but also subjectivity, the idealization of the female (as to exhibit certain features), the dependence of the elegist as a man but primarily as a poet on the presence of the female beloved in his life. The discussion is organized on the basis of case studies, or representative appearances of the elegiac mistress in the corpus and her interaction with her lover, the elegiac poet, who usually gives the impression that he is struggling to bring her under his control even though he is her creator. The considerable detail in which the body of the *puella* often is depicted, further, emanates from the explosion in monumental iconography at Rome under Augustus,

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including powerful representation of the female body—for instance, the authors mention an effigy of Cleopatra in a particularly eroticized position, included in Augustus' triumph. Akin to the body and the (imaginary and manipulated on occasion) image of the female, the elegists advance the emphasis on the gaze, depending on who is looking and who is looked at in a narrative, and on the power of vision in determining the reading of a poem. Thus the complete reading of a poem (that is, the ability to put together a complete picture of a voyeuristic narrative featuring an eroticized female) becomes a game between the poet and his readers, with the latter adding the details the former deliberately withholds. The remainder of this chapter discusses briefly the male body as subject of the elegist's gaze and the homoerotic element in the elegy genre. Also, several individual poems are discussed from the perspective of gender depiction. The chapter closes with a four-page long discussion of the topic of 'feminism' and its definition in the cultural context of Love elegy. McCoskey and Torlone wisely eschew to commit to a definite view, and introduce instead a compilation and assortment of opinions by leading feminist scholars on the matter.

Chapter four, "Readers and Writers", discusses this two-fold identity of the elegiac poets. In their effort to define their special place in the Greco-Roman literary canon, the elegists are introduced as sensitive readers of the Callimachean tradition which they proudly and programmatically acknowledge and then set out to appropriate creatively. At the same time, they are aware of their innovative work, the new genre they introduce in Roman literature and its firm ties to the Age of Augustus. A propos the argument introduces the ever-present (with Roman authors) anxiety of influence, and the ambition of each elegist (more or less prominently confessed) to become the 'Roman Callimachus'. Special mention is made of the motif of *recusatio*, in literary terms the denial to write epic, and on the political terms, the denial to embrace the agenda of the Augustan regime which the composition of an epic would necessitate. The use of myth in the form of mythological exempla, a pivotal feature of Love elegy, is rightly singled out. The chapter closes with special focus on Ovid's pseudo-didactic and self-consciously salacious and temptingly physical love poetry, which, among other things, is viewed as an alternative expression of and a response

to traditional elegy, as well as an entertaining commentary on the ‘serious’ didactic poetry.

Chapters five and six, titled respectively, “Country and City”, and “Love and Exile”, are thematically entwined. The urban space, City, is the natural location for elegiac Love. On the contrary, exclusion from the city space, usually accompanied by force or compulsion—the elegist rarely wishes to leave the city, and when he does, as is the case of Tibullus and Horace, the country they envision is idealized (a copy of the archetypal Rome of Evander’s day). Still, country is firmly present within the city, either as a reaction to it, an acceptable way for the elegist to escape when felt abandoned, excluded and disappointed by his mistress, or, as a symbol of poetics. The book rightly takes into consideration the pre-elegiac countryside-landscape tradition as developed first in Catullus and mainly in Vergil’s famous Arcadia, the location of the *Eclogues* and *Aeneid* 8. Ovid’s descriptions of the city deservedly take up most of the discussion on the elegiac cityscape in Chapter five, since it is in Ovid’s elegy, especially the *Ars Amatoria*, that Roman urban topography is reported with impressive detail, and even becomes the backdrop against which elegiac action happens and whereupon it depends. The sixth chapter explores exile both as a destroyer of Love elegy and the igniting force for the revival of the genre, for in Ovid’s *Tristia* exile has supplanted love as the source of inspiration for the composition of elegy.

The final chapter, “Death and Afterlife”, treats the reception of Latin love elegy. Following a brief overview of the transmission of the text of the four elegiac poets, the chapter identifies selective moments in the long and rich history of reception of the four elegists across the centuries in the western tradition and beyond. Thus, Catullus is examined in the context of his inspiring literary production in English poetry from the Renaissance poet Christopher Marlowe all the way to Sidney Keyes in the 20th century; Ezra Pound’s *Homage to Sextus Propertius* is read as a poetic response to Propertius who has become a means for Pound to deliberate pressing personal preoccupations; and finally, Ovid’ exile is seen from the perspective of Russian poets who suffered or experienced similar plights and found in the

despondency of the last Latin elegist a lyric tune already honed for them to take over.

The brief “Recommended Bibliography” that closes the book includes a selection of book-length studies, most of them well known and reference work on the study of Love elegy. The bibliography is divided in smaller sections: it opens with a list of general works and then small units of recommended books on the individual elegists Catullus, Propertius, Tibullus and Ovid. The book, however, does not lack copious bibliographical support. As a matter of fact the authors include ample bibliographical references throughout, which they record in the rich and numerous notes that are appended as endnotes in a separate section just prior to the “Recommended Bibliography”. The endnotes include literarily every important article and book on the Latin love elegy in the past thirty years, though no bibliography in a language other than English is cited. Its prose is crystal clear and the various themes discussed are nicely organized. As a result, *Latin Love Poetry* may be of considerable value both to undergraduates who read Latin elegy for the first time and to more advanced students of the genre at the graduate level, while it can be a pleasant and informative guide to the Love elegy genre to the educated reader and the non-Classical specialist who seeks a reliable and solid introduction to the major themes of the particular genre. No passages in the original Latin are quoted but ample elegiac poetry is cited in English translation throughout. Overall, this is a book that is highly recommended as a vademecum for a thorough and reliable introduction to Latin love elegy.

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