

Introduction: Ancient Lyric Poetry

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Ancient lyric poetry, as its name in Greek implies, was originally intended to be accompanied, usually, by the lyre, a stringed instrument shaped like a small harp. Unlike the stately dactylic hexameters of the Homeric epics, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the meters of lyric poetry are more varied and thus well-suited to the more personal themes and intimate psychological states of the short lyric stanza. Thus, the majority of our poems celebrate themes of every day life — love poems, drinking songs, songs of farewell, odes to spring — rather than the heroic exploits of the epics and the tragic situations of the drama, another complex poetic form. As with other poetic forms, the original musical accompaniment, in addition to the complex metrical patterns of the original Greek and Latin lyrics, is but a small part of what has been lost both through time and translation into a modern language. Moreover, many of the longer lyric poems were meant for choral performance. Thus, another dimension, that of the dance, has also been lost to us.

The so-called Age of Lyric Poetry in Greece followed the period of Homeric composition, but unlike the Homeric epic, the period of lyric poetry's creative growth, the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, coincided with the widespread adoption and use of writing in Greece. Thus, the Greek lyric poems were written down and spread the fame of their composers throughout Greece of the Archaic Period (circa 650 - 500 BCE).

When we turn our attention to Roman lyric poetry, it is generally agreed that the period of its greatness dates from the first century BCE to the end of the first century CE. But, with this body of literature, we note a very different development from that of the Greeks, for Roman lyrics are almost entirely derivative — i.e., the Romans adopted Greek lyric forms and themes in blatant imitation of their Greek models, though frequently with a new twist. Thus, in the much abbreviated selection of Greek and Latin lyrics which follows, the guiding principle in selection has been to choose a Roman poem and, whenever possible, to include the Greek model upon which, in part or in whole, it has been based. In addition, frequently, ancient lyrics have inspired great poets of the English Language. Thus, whenever possible, their translations have been included rather than those of academic translators whose renditions, though accurate, can never equal the original.

(Most of the poems which follow are selected from the collections found in the Oxford books of Greek and Latin poetry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), and noted as OBGV (*Oxford Book of Greek Verse*) and OBLV (*Oxford Book of Latin Verse*).

Ancient Lyric Poets: Greek and Roman

Alcaeus: Greek poet from Mytilene on Lesbos; born circa 620 BCE.

Sappho: Greek poetess also from Lesbos; born circa 612 BCE.

Anacreon: Greek poet from Teos; born circa 570 BCE.

Asclepiades: Greek poet, prominent at Alexandria; flourished circa 270 BCE.

Horace: Roman poet, friend of Vergil and Augustus; son of a freed slave; 65-8 BCE.

Catullus: Roman poet; knew Cicero; 84-54 BCE.

Sappho: OBGV 156

The moon amid the Pleiades has set-
Midnight—now the hour comes
And I dream on alone.

Sappho: OBGV 142

Stars around the moon
Will hide its glowing light;
But seen full-moon
Sheds silver even on the earth below.

Sappho: OBGV 150

To what ,beloved husband, shall I best compare
you ?
To a slender willow will I most compare you. —
M.O.

Sappho: OBGV 155

The nightingale, of spring the angel, voice of
yearning.

Sappho: OBGV 141 (Compare Catullus:
Carmen 51)

Blessed among the blessed
Who sits beside and shares sweet whispers.
You laugh
And startled flies my heart
Caged within the quiet of a glance.
You speak
And I am nothing
But a light flame skimming through my body.
I see nothing,
Blind face bathed in silence;
I hear nothing but a slow trembling.
Then like pale winter grass,
Wind-blown, scattered,
I know what death is. —M.O.

Catullus: Carmen 51

He seems to me equal
And more than equal to the gods
Who sits near you,
Hearing you
Seeing you.
You laugh sweetly, I am numb;
I see you, Lesbia, and I have no voice.
Just a thin flame spreads
Over my limbs.
My ears ring.
My eyes are shod with night.

Day dreaming is bad for you, Catullus, and you do
it too much.
Daydreams ruined kings
And kingdoms
Once crowned with dreams and bright garlands,
Now gone. —M.O.

Alcaeus: OBGV 136

Sappho, like a willow gently smiling
In a wreath of violets.

Alcaeus: OBGV 135 (Compare Horace: Odes
1.9)

Zeus thunders from a stormy sky;
The streams are iced.

Damn the storm and stoke the fire.
Bring on lots more honeyed wine.
Wreath your head with crowns of wool;
Don't think about your sorrows now.
That won't get us anywhere.
Wine's the medicine for sadness, now.
Yes, wine and drinking it.

Horace: Odes 1.9, v. 1-20.

Do you see there
How Soracte stands with snow?
The forest stoops beneath its load
And iced, the streams stand still
Get a log to chase the cold;
Bring down a jug of vintage wine. Let
the gods worry about the world
Outside
Then the winds may cease;
The cypress and ash will rest;
Stop worrying about tomorrow.
Count each day a gift.
Don't forget love and all the fun of youth—
Night-time chats in moonlit spaces
Now while cranky age is far away.... —M.O.

Asclepiades: OBGV 529

I don't care if I'm twenty-two; I'm tired.
Love, you're too painful. Go burn someone else.
What happens if I die? What'll you do?
Without a tear for me,
You'll go off and gamble with somebody else.

Catullus: Carmen 100

I hate and I love: I bet you're going to ask me
why.
I don't know. But, I feel it happening and I am
crucified. —M.O.

Anacreon: OBGV 180

Bless you cricket, drunk upon a drop of dew.
How like a lord you sing!
Your kingdom-fields and glowing woods
Bounded by your voice.

We honor you, sweet priest of spring.
The Muses and Apollo blessed your slight,
shrill song.

Time will not touch you, wise musician of the
earth.

Without our tears, our mortal blood,
You are a god. —M.O.

Alcaeus: OBGV 133 (Compare Horace: Odes
1.14)

The quarreling winds perplex me. On this side
One wave rolls up, on
That a different tide,

And the black ship, whereon we sail,
Shifts with the shifting gale.
We are exhausted by the fearful blast:
Round the mast's base the bilge is rising fast.
And all the sail is thin and worn,
With great holes gaping, rent and torn.

—C.M.

Bowra

Horace: Odes 1.14. v. 1-2

O ship, new waves bear you out to sea.
What are you doing! Get back to port.
Can't you see we've lost the oars,
The mast groans; the ropes are loose. The
sails are torn

And god seems far away.

M.O.

Catullus: OBLV 86

Lesbia, live to love and pleasure
Careless what the grave may say
When each moment is a treasure
Why should lovers lose a day?

Setting suns shall rise in glory,
But when little life is o'er,
There's an end of all the story—We
shall sleep and wake no more.

Give me then, a thousand kisses
Twice ten thousand more bestow
Till the sum of boundless blisses

Neither we nor envy know. —J. Langhorne

Horace: OBLV 125

What slender youth bedewed with liquid odours
Courts thee on roses in some pleasant cave,
Pyrha, for whom bindst thou

In wreaths thy golden hair,
Plain in thy neatness? O how oft shall he
On faith and changed gods complain: and seas
Rough with black winds and storms
Unwonted shall admire:

Who now enjoys thee credulous, all gold,
Who always vacant, always amiable
Hopes thee, of flattering gales
Unmindful. Hapless they
To whom thou untried seem'st fair. Me in my
vowed

Picture the sacred wall declares to have hung
My dank and dripping weeds
To the stem god of the sea. —John Milton

Catullus: OBLV 86B

Kiss me, sweet: the wary lover can your favours
keep, and cover,

When the common

Courting jay

All your bounties will betray. Kiss
again! No creature comes; Kiss, and
score up wealthy sums On my lips,
thus hardly sundered, While you
breathe. First give a hundred,

Then a thousand, then another
Hundred, then unto the t'other
Add a thousand and so more,
Till you equal with the store

All the grass that Rumney yields,
Or the sands in Chelsea fields,
Or the drops in silver Thames,
Or the stars that gild his streams In
the silent summer nights

When youth plies its stolen delights:
That the curious may not know
How to tell them as they flow
And the envious, when they find
What their number is, be pined. —Ben Jonson

Horace: OBLV 152 ii

The snow, dissolv' d, no more is seen
 The fields and woods, behold, are green;
 The changing year renews the plain. The
 rivers know their banks again; The
 sprightly nymph and naked grace
 The mazy dance together trace; The
 changing year's successive plan
 Proclaims mortality to man.

Rough winter's blasts to spring give way,
 Spring yields to summer's sovran ray;
 Then summer sinks in autumns reign, And
 winter holds the world again. Her
 losses soon the moon supplies, But
 wretched man, when once he lies
 Where Priam and his sons are laid,
 Is naught but ashes and a shade.. ..

—Samuel Johnson

Horace: OBLV 139

The man of firm and noble soul
 No factious clamours can control:
 No threatening tyrants darkling brow
 Can swerve him from his just intent;
 Gales the warring waves which plough,
 By auster on the billows spent,
 To curb the adriatic main

Would awe his fixed determined mind in vain.
 Ay, and the red right arm of Jove,
 Hurling his lightnings from above,
 With all his terrors there unfurled,
 He would unmoved, unawed behold.
 The flames of an expiring world,
 Again in crushing chaos rolled,
 In vast promiscuous ruin hurled,
 Might light his glorious funeral pile,
 Still dauntless 'mid the wreck of earth he'd

smile.

—Lord Byron

Horace: Satire II. 6, 1-8

This was what I prayed for: a small piece o f land
 With a garden, a fresh flowing spring of water at
 hand
 Near the house, and above and behind, a small
 forest stand.

But the gods have done much better for me, and
 more

It's perfect. I ask nothing else, except to implore,
 O son of Maia, that you make these blessings

my own

For the rest of my life. If my property has not
 grown

By my making a series of deals, neither will it
 shrink

By my mismanagement.... —S.P. Bovie