

## INTRODUCTION

### Through the Past Darkly: Elegy and the Problematics of Interpretation

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In a well-known Bob Dylan lyric, a certain “Mr. Jones” wanders into a room clutching a pencil and fails quite spectacularly—to the accompaniment of the refrain “something is happening here, but you don’t know what it is”—to comprehend the alterity of his new surroundings. Dylan’s lyric stands as a powerful metaphor for the attempt to confront and comprehend the other. Only the most self-assured of literary critics has not felt at some point, on confronting an ancient literary text, the profound alienation of Dylan’s “Mr. Jones.” As investigators of a culture removed from us by a chasm of 2,000 years (a chasm that has been filled with the debris of subsequent history), we are all Mr. Jones wandering into an unfamiliar room, pencil in hand, trying to understand and work out a means of perception that renders the past comprehensible to our present.

Of course, as readers of texts that have been in circulation, albeit intermittently and narrowly, since their conception, we are not the first to enter this textual space. Our interpretative path to the text necessarily passes over the sharpened and splintered pencils of previous literary critics. In this sense, as Charles Martindale has persuasively argued, the object of investigation is inevitably not only the materiality of the text but, more widely, “all-the-forces-that-moulded-the-text-plus-its-reception” (1993.54). In other words, our object of concern is not merely the textual space itself, the room that Mr. Jones finds himself in, but also the planning that went into its architecture and the previous explorations of others.

Interpretation is thus a densely overdetermined business where our encounters with the text form a site of contestation between past and present

motivated textual constructions and decodings. In such an interpretive arena, there is a veritable cacophony of competing discursive claims, synchronic and diachronic, to greet the critic. In the case of texts that have attained canonical or classic status, this situation is particularly intense, for as Martindale has also noted, a "classic" is "a text whose 'iterability' is a function of its capacity . . . for continued re-appropriation by readers" (1993.28). Thus "classic" texts facilitate the motivated interpretations of their readers in an on-going historical process through which the accretion of disparate critical analyses serves to bolster the reputation of the work rather than ultimately decode its potential meaning.

In this manner, the longevity of the appeal of the elegiac corpus resides in the potential polyvalence of the meaning of the literary language that is inscribed in its history and its continuing capability to respond to, and illuminate, the questions and imperatives that have been, are, and will be brought to it by various historically and culturally motivated interpretative strategies. One might, therefore, consider the relationship between canonical texts and interpretative critics to be a symbiotic process whereby both literary product and reader/reading method are validated as the text is confirmed as a site of continuing relevance, and the strategy of approach is confirmed as adding something to our knowledge of the work.

In a recent collection on Roman elegy, Paul Allen Miller and Charles Platter have argued that the study of elegy has shifted in recent times from "positivist and new critical approaches" to readings influenced by the paradigms of "feminism and poststructuralism" (1999.403). Supported by the readings of the contributors, the editors have cogently argued that "the aporetic nature of elegy . . . is systematic, and that any attempt to reduce the genre to a more easily resolvable set of interpretative problems necessarily involves a misreading of the polyvalent discourses out of which these texts are constructed" (1999.446). Thus the way forward in elegiac studies is presented as a form of epistemic rupture with past paradigms of interpretation. The Mr. Jones of the present, when confronting the apparently naked expression of an elegiac poet, uses a different epistemic sharpener in the hope that a lead thus tempered will stand the test of time.

However, as the authors candidly add, "This observation . . . represents not the end of elegiac criticism but only its beginning" (Miller and Platter 1999.446). This may be taken to indicate that the terms within which a poststructuralist approach essentializes elegy paradoxically apply closure by denying its possibility, and hence perpetuate elegiac interpreta-

tion within the potential proliferation of signification that accompanies the use of language over time. However, it might also be seen to allow for the possibility that historically and culturally motivated modes of interpretation, which Miller and Platter openly concede poststructuralism and feminism are, will inevitably be superseded by the emergence of other modes of historically determined interpretation that will in turn constitute an epistemic rupture that will attempt to reconfigure the elegiac texts in their own terms.

We approach the elegiac text along a path of successive critical moves and, at its end, we construct our own motivated readings in the present. Our own readings, in turn, rather than finally exhausting the meaning of the text and realizing its "truth," are instead another episode in an ongoing dialogue between past and present that optimally has the cumulative potential to elucidate both temporal moments and the points in between: to appropriate the words of Winston Churchill and take up the closural image of Miller and Platter, "[T]his is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end, but it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

The assessment of Miller and Platter of the current modes of elegiac interpretation is certainly accurate. The discourses of feminism and poststructuralism have had the effect of channeling inquiry into both the investigation of the proliferation of signification in language and the ability of such expression to destabilize and reconstitute seemingly stable *loci* of meaning and authority within a given historical context.

Elegy, with its narrative of a seemingly effeminized male and masculinized female, has been fertile ground for feminist criticism. Emphasis, however, has generally shifted away from positivist attempts to see elegy's problematization of gender roles as a direct reflection of an Augustan reality.<sup>1</sup> Instead, focus has moved onto a consideration of how gender as a specific, historically determined, ideological construct is manipulated rhetorically by the poet and how it intersects, in a challenging or normative mode, with contemporaneous dominant ideological paradigms.<sup>2</sup> This, in

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1 See Lilja 1965, Hallett 1973.

2 Consider as a representative but far from exhaustive selection: Wyke 1987a, 1987b, 1989a, 1989b, 1994; Gamel 1989, 1998; Sharrock 1991; Skinner 1993 (on Catullus); Kennedy 1993; Janan 1994 (on Catullus), 1998, 1999; Greene 1994, 1995, 1998, 1999; Miller 1994, 1998 (on Catullus). For a fuller consideration of the development of feminist approaches to elegy, the reader is referred to the succinct discussions and bibliographical references of James 1998 and Miller and Platter 1999.

turn, may be seen as a movement away from a concentration on gender *per se* towards a more general reflection on the discursive use of power where gender represents one of a plurality of possible sites of negotiation and contestation (albeit one that is heavily foregrounded in elegy).<sup>3</sup>

With regard to poststructuralist approaches to elegy, Miller and Platter place in fruitful opposition Paul Veyne's *Roman Erotic Elegy* and Duncan Kennedy's *Arts of Love*. The former represents elegy as a form of linguistic game where "semiology" is privileged over "mimetic sociology," whereas the latter demonstrates how both semiotic and sociological approaches can only partially apprehend the text in their own terms (Miller and Platter 1999.404). Kennedy's analysis, by exposing the partiality of current critical methodologies, calls for a need to approach elegy with a sensitivity both to the proliferation of meaning in literary language (and verbal signification generally) and also to contextual issues of ideological negotiation.

The elegiac text is neither a simple window onto Augustan reality nor a transcendent linguistic artifact that has no relation to its historical moment of conception. Rather, the investigation of elegy becomes an inquiry into what Clifford Geertz described (1973.448) as "social semantics": a decoding of a culture's textual gestures of signification. In turn, these "gestures of signification" should not be seen as a passive reaction to contextual pressures but as an attempt to intervene actively in such ideological sites of contestation.<sup>4</sup> Hence, a poet's textual narration in its rhetorical manipulation of the hierarchical relations of self, society, and reader forms a type of microcosm to a contemporaneous macrocosm of ideological disputation.

The pieces in this volume demonstrate a variety of current modes of apprehending elegy. In so doing, they indicate the scope of possible approaches that can be applied within prevailing interpretive models. Readings that variously emphasize the deconstructive potential of elegiac language and its consequences (Kennedy, Lee-Stecum), the rhetorical manipulation of the poet and the contextual elaboration of issues of power, gender, and ideological negotiation (Fear, Greene, and Sharrock) and the interpre-

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3 The potential of a poststructuralist critical framework to de-emphasize gender as a primary, or even a stable and coherent, category naturally has led to some antipathy between feminist and poststructuralist agendas: for this conflict in the study of classical texts see the works listed by Miller and Platter 1999.446 n. 3.

4 An approach to Latin Literature recently demonstrated by Habinek 1998.

tive history of the text (Skoie) should not be viewed as antithetical but as forming a synthesis that enables a rounded image of the significance of elegy to emerge.

Through their choice of subject matter, the essays also demonstrate the broad scope of elegiac material available in the form of the very different works of Tibullus, Propertius, and Ovid, in addition to the didacticism of the *Ars Amatoria* and the understudied elegiac work of Sulpicia. The very term “elegy,” it must be remembered, is itself an essentializing term that serves to flatten out the various idiosyncrasies of the authors who are collected under its umbrella.

Ellen Greene’s essay, “Gender Identity and the Elegiac Hero in Propertius 2.1,” presents a detailed reading of Propertius 2.1 to demonstrate how a heroic persona, left only implicit in the first book, is foregrounded and established more firmly in the poet’s second book. This results in a fluctuation between elegy and epic that serves to problematize the supposed polarity of these discourses and their respective hierarchical synonymous oppositions: *mollis* and *durus*, feminine and masculine, empowered and enslaved. By appropriating epic discourse, the poet reconfigures himself as an alternate form of elegiac hero whose validity is reinforced by mythic allusion to the potential for heroes to be conceptualized in unconventional ways.

In “Bluff Your Way in Didactic,” Duncan Kennedy examines the nature of didacticism in Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria*. The scene in the *Ars* of the instruction of Achilles by Chiron is used as a springboard for a consideration of “pedagogic action” and the nature and basis of authority constituted through didactic means. Ovidian mimesis, as expounded in the famous statement of *Ars* 1.615–16, disrupts “familiar paradigms of truth, reality, and authenticity” and so clashes with the Platonic pedagogical theory of anamnesis by making “reality” not a prior cause but an “effect.” Thus representation, rather than being stigmatized as “a degenerative process,” emerges instead as the grounds for the very possibility of truth and knowledge. In this manner, too, didactic discourse is seen to involve not so much “knowledge” as “texts in citation,” drawing its authority not from reference to a prior truth but from reference to a prior text. A final twist is brought to bear by the paradox that the *fides* necessary for *didaxis* is constructed through an unreliable textuality where the instruction of the pupil in ensnarement, *capere*, is dependent on the “*praeceptor*.”

Parshia Lee-Stecum, in “Poet/Reader, Authority Deferred: Re-Reading Tibullan Elegy,” examines how the poet manipulates the expecta-

tions a reader would have brought to bear on book two after reading book one and how, in this manner, the reader is situated with regard to the text in a position that is analogous to that of the poet/lover within the text to his beloved. The inadequacies of the reader in apprehending the slipperiness of elegiac language are matched by the poet/lover's failure to use words effectively in his pursuit of the elegiac *domina*: a readerly quest for stability is matched by an erotic desire for a permanent relationship. Thus reading and loving are found to be comparable and interlocked to the extent that the verbal strategies of the poet/lover serve in themselves to destabilize the reader's grasp of the text. This problematization of certainty has a particular resonance within the renegotiation of authority that accompanied the contemporaneous shift from republic to principate.

In "Constructing Characters in Propertius," Alison Sharrock also charts the potentially slippery relationship between a first-person discourse and its readers by examining how characters are mediated through and by the reader's involvement in such a mimetic narrative. Character, like knowledge in Ovidian *didaxis*, is not a prior essence, but something constructed through intra/inter/extratextual interactions. One important area for such construction within the text is the communication between poet/lover and other men: this not only figures love as a social rather than an anti-social activity, but also produces a plurality of viewpoints. This multiplicity of perception, in turn, both provides a commentary on "realism" as a way of looking and also opens up the possibility of "reading otherwise" (whether or not such "deviant" reading is authorially intended or not). This, in turn, provides the ground for a more far-reaching questioning of such apparently stable categories as gender, genre, ethnicity, and cultural history.

The focus in Mathilde Skoie's "*Sulpicia Americana: A Reading of Sulpicia in the Commentary by K. F. Smith (1913)*" falls on one particular historical and cultural moment of interpretation of an elegiac text: the uneasy alliance between the problematic female intrusion of Sulpicia into the male genre of elegy and the interpretive techniques of one of early twentieth-century America's leading scholars. This analysis demonstrates how contemporary socio-historic climates inform intellectual responses and thus how the commentary constructs as well as analyzes the text. Confronted with a female elegist, Smith's analysis is found to be quite different from his analysis of her male counterparts: their self-conscious artistry is replaced by her artless spontaneity, their contrived fiction with her naked confession. Thus Smith's own form of typological closure exercised over a

male-authored corpus is destabilized by what appears to him as a virtually oxymoronic conflation of woman and literary artist.

My own piece, "The Poet as Pimp: Elegiac Seduction in the Time of Augustus," examines elegy's, and Ovid's in particular, use of the pre-existing metaphor of the poet as pimp and the poem as prostitute as an enabling strategy. By advertising within the text the allurements of the elegiac *puella*, the textually inscribed poet runs the risk, as is elaborated at length in *Amores* 3.12, of jeopardizing his erotic exclusive. However, such inscribed textual erotic penury is also clearly inversely proportional to the extra-textual success of the poet. Thus the lament of the textualized poet is the laugh of his extra-textual counterpart. Finally, consideration is given to how this poetics of pimping and seduction coheres with, and comments upon, Augustus' establishment of the principate in light of Tacitus' famous comment on the *princeps*' political solicitation, *cunctos dulcedine otii pellexit*.<sup>5</sup>

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