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 everyday 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.
Wreathe 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.

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: OBGV133 (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
0 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, Pyrrha, for whom bindst thou In wreaths thy golden hair, Plain in thy neatness? 0 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: Satire II. 6, 1-8
This was what I prayed for: a small piece of 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, 0 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

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 austere 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, Hurting 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