

## 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,  
Pyrrha, 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