

Propertius, Tibullus and Ovid: A Selection of Love Poetry

Style and Metre

These notes supplement the section on metre in the introduction of the book and assume knowledge of it. They provide some background on how the use of the elegiac couplet developed over time and from one poet to the next. Most importantly, however, they illustrate further how the elegists used metre and rhythm for stylistic effect.

Over time, there were developments in the employment of the elegiac couplet. The Greek predecessors of our elegiac trio did not conceive of the elegiac couplet as a self-contained sense-unit, and among the Roman poets, Catullus (the first extant poet to make any substantial use of the metre) continues this practice. In his elegiacs, sense could spill from one couplet to the next – for several couplets. The rhythms would be heavily spondaic and harsh elisions common, even over the caesura in the pentameter. While these effects suit Catullus' disjointed expression of deep emotion and strain, the three elegists move away from them: Propertius shows most affinity to the Catullan practices and Ovid the least.

Along with treating the couplet as a self-contained unit came the desire to emphasize the dactylic rhythm of the second half of the pentameter. This was accomplished through the coincidence of ictus (the stress of the metre, marked with `) and accent (the natural stress of the word, marked with ´; their coincidence is marked with ~). The best way to achieve this was by having a disyllabic word at the end of the line, e.g. *ũnde do|lẽre ve|lis* (Ovid *Am.* 2.7.3). Longer polysyllabic words tended to destroy this effect, e.g. *nĩxa cá|pũt máni|bus* (Prop. 1.1.8). A disyllabic final word became the rule, and again its application increased from Propertius to Tibullus to Ovid (and in Propertius's case, there is a substantial leap in this regard from his first book to the second).

Another development was exploiting the balance of the couplet. The pentameter frequently restates or elaborates the idea of the hexameter, as for example in Prop. 2.14.17-18:

ante pedes caecis lucebat semita nobis:
scilicet insano nemo in amore videt.



Rhyme within the line could also be used to create balance between the half-lines in both the hexameter and pentameter, e.g. Tib. 1.1.51-52:

o quantum est auri pereat potiusque smaragdi,
quam fleat ob nostras ulla puella vias.

Ovid took this exploitation of the couplet-form furthest, constantly crafting carefully balanced lines and couplets in diverse ways. Although these techniques are not unique to him, the following examples from his poems illustrate their frequency and variety. The range of techniques includes carefully balanced parts of speech, e.g. *Am.* 2.5.4 (chiastic ordering of adjective and noun pairs):

in mihi perpetuum nata puella malum

or e.g. *Am.* 2.5.31 (antimetabole of the pronouns):

haec tibi sunt mecum, mihi sunt communia tecum

Also among the techniques are echoing of specific words from one half line to the next, e.g. *Am.* 2.5.43-44 (again with balanced word order, varied from one line to the next):

spectabat terram: terram spectare decebat;
maesta erat in vultu: maesta decenter erat.

and even echoing words from the hexameter to the pentameter, e.g. *Am.* 2.7.5-6:

candida seu tacito vidit me femina vultu,
in vultu tacitas arguis esse notas.

This extension of balance to all aspects of the couplet is of course a matter of style, not only of metre – something to keep in mind for stylistic analysis of the poems.