

## Never Out of Style: Teaching Latin Love Poetry with Taylor Swift

When my students hear that we will be discussing Latin poetry, I receive a decidedly unenthusiastic response. As a Classicist, I delight in the style, syntax, and meaning of ancient verse and am disappointed when my students do not share my enthusiasm. Even in translation, students often find the poetry awkward or odd because they lack the knowledge of the cultural context to understand the rules and social constraints which govern them. To overcome these obstacles, I have found it useful to offer something familiar to demystify the past and its poetry: popular music. Contemporary pop songs offer a perfect parallel because they follow recognizable patterns, reflect cultural trends, comment on society, and often focus on love.

A simple framework for investigating themes is one of the essential tools for students to begin analyzing poems. While the importance of meter, context, and location (Rome) are discussed, I focus on the prescribed progression of the affair between the lover and beloved, the constructed persona of the poet (*amator*), and the effects of love (*servitium, vulnera, morbus, etc.*) (Thorsen 2013; Wyke 2002). Using selections from Catullus, Sulpicia, Ovid, and Propertius, students read poems in groups of three looking for these elements. Even with these limited guidelines, the subtlety is still often lost. For this reason, I turn to contemporary culture for assistance.

Pop music surrounds us and is very familiar to students who hear it everywhere they go. They are accustomed to listening to a song and translating meaning unconsciously. Music, as Bellver (2008) has argued, is a powerful tool to hook students. In class, it is an opportunity to take the lyrics, music, and video and show that they already understand the unspoken rules of Roman poetry. While many artists could be utilized, I have found that Taylor Swift works remarkably well. In her album *1989* (2014), Swift creates multiple personae for herself through

her first person narrative and the images presented in her music videos all the while tackling themes of love, loss, stalking, and anger. Unlike ancient authors, Taylor Swift includes a commentary on her album concerning the origin and meaning of her songs which details her unconscious adherence to love poetry...in a modern format. The song that encapsulates all these themes and presents several aspects of elegy is *Blank Space*.

By analyzing the lyrics of this song, we can trace the affair between two individuals from its seductive beginning to destructive end. The gaze and approach of the beloved are chronicled as well as the desire for love and the craziness caused by it. The accompanying music video underscores the progression of the relationship of the lover and beloved. The character of the song-writer is firmly established within the story and she is familiar to the audience versed in celebrity gossip. However, this person, as we will learn, is not the true nature of Taylor Swift but rather the image created of her by the media. Swift's song plays with identity, power, and gender. By presenting a pop song and evaluating it like a poem that happens to have musical and video accompaniment, students learn the appropriate techniques which they can then return to the Latin poetry. Utilizing comparanda from the ancient authors, I connect their sentiment to the song's lyrics. When Swift sings in *Blank Space*, "I get drunk on jealousy/ But you'll come back each time you leave/ 'Cause, darling, I'm a nightmare dressed like a daydream," she echoes the conflict in Catullus 75.4 where the poet can never stop loving Lesbia despite all that she has done (*nec desistere amare, omnia si facias*). I ask students to reconsider their poems and suddenly the poets of the past become rock stars in the present.

As a final assignment, I ask the students to find another modern example and analyze it within the confines of Roman love poetry, use examples from the Latin poems to show parallels, and to consider the differences based on context. The papers which I receive are insightful

reflections on the form, meaning, and presentation of ‘poetry’ in the modern age and its debt to Latin poets. This ‘mindshift’ in students, as called by Caine, Caine, and Crowell (1999), creates a willingness to look at the world, modern and ancient, in a different way and ultimately value the poetic arts in whatever form they are preserved.

### Bibliography

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