

A Learned Dog: Roman Elegy and the Epitaph for Margarita

The treatment of CIL 6.29896, an epitaph in elegiac couplets for a dog named Margarita dated to around the second century CE, is indicative of a tendency in modern scholarship to read ancient epitaphs for companion animals as straightforward expressions of grief. Following a discussion of this epitaph Jocelyn Toynbee writes, “These dog-poems surely suggest that the ancient Roman differed little from the modern Englishman in his love of pets,” (Toynbee 1948: 25). Liliane Bodson and Etienne Wolff come to similar conclusions in their treatments of ancient epitaphs for animals (Bodson 2005; Wolff 2000). However, K. R. Walters offers a different approach to these epitaphs in his reading of CIL 13.00488, a poetic epitaph for a dog named Myia. He suggests that this poem presents itself as a lament, but that allusions to Catullus signal to the reader that it is intended to be humorous (Walters 1972). In this paper, I will take a similar approach to Walters and argue that references to the erotic side of Roman elegy in Margarita’s epitaph make it impossible to read the poem as simply an expression of grief. In fact, the epitaph may have been intended as a parody of elegy.

The relationship between the funerary language of Roman elegy and poetic epitaphs is well established (Yardley 1996; Ramsby 2007). However, my paper will demonstrate that Margarita’s epitaph instead draws on the genre’s erotic language and themes. First, I will discuss instances in which the author of the epitaph alludes to the poetry of Propertius, Tibullus, and Ovid through direct verbal and metrical parallels. For example, one line in the epitaph reads: *et noram in strato lassa cubare toro* (8). This pentameter is clearly modeled on another in the *Ars Amatoria*, which reads: *et timet in vacuo sola cubare toro* (2.370). Helen of Troy is the subject of Ovid’s line, and it appears in a mythological example illustrating his erotic advice. Margarita literally takes Helen’s place in the line, as an adjective modifying the dog (*lassa*) replaces one

modifying the woman (*sola*). The author of the epitaph has not chosen this line to imitate at random, as putting a dog in Helen's place brings to mind her description of herself as *κυνὸς κακομηχάνου ὀκρυόεσσης* (*Il.* 6.344). The author thus alludes to a line from an erotic context in Roman elegy and uses the allusion to make a joke with the subject of the epitaph as its punch line. This is typical of Margarita's epitaph, in which allusions to Roman elegy overwhelmingly draw from its erotic side. Other examples include the dog lying in the *molli... sinu* of her mistress (7) and a description of her *niveo corpore* (6), which in wording and meter parallels a line from Lygdamus (3.4.30) and another from Ovid (*Am.* 3.2.42).

Next, I will focus on the author's use of larger tropes and language typical of elegy, such as the *servitium amoris*, the *docta puella*, and the Callimachean distinction between fat and thin verse. The author's use of these elegiac tropes and language to describe a dog suggests that the epitaph may have been intended as a parody. In the same way that the *Batrachomyomachia* parodies epic by replacing human combatants with mice and frogs, this epitaph parodies elegy by replacing the *docta puella* with a dog. The allusions to the erotic side of elegy throughout the poem and the possibility that it was intended to be humorous complicate our assumptions about why Margarita's owners may have erected this memorial for her. I will argue that her owners may have commissioned it at least in part to show off their taste and engage in the literary competition that became increasingly common among Roman elites under the empire. Although the motivations and identities of Margarita's owners are lost, her epitaph at the very least suggests that we should not interpret funerary monuments for animals simply as expressions of sadness. A more nuanced approach to their purpose will be necessary moving forward.

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