The Augustan Character of Goethe’s Third Römische Elegie

The third of Goethe’s Römische Elegien (RE) begins with the amator’s advice to the puella not to reproach herself for yielding so quickly to his advances: Laß dich, Geliebte, nicht reun, daß du mir so schnell dich ergeben! The double sense of sich ergeben immediately places this elegy in the Augustan tradition: since the German verb can denote both sexual submission and military surrender, the poem’s first line depicts the puella as the defeated party in a proelium amoris. The poem progresses, again in classic Augustan style, to a series of mythological exempla: Venus and Anchises, Luna and Endymion, Hero and Leander, Rhea Silvia and Mars. The amator inaugurates this list with the claim that in heroic times, the satisfaction of sexual desire was never delayed (In der heroischen Zeit, da Götter und Göttinnen liebten, / Folgte Begierde dem Blick, folgte Genuß der Begier, RE 3.7-8); by implication, an unnecessary discretion marks his own era (Bernhardt 1990: 51). But to what era does this amator belong? In some of the cycle’s other elegies, the first-person narrator is a Northern European conducting his Italienische Reise, and the dramatic date, like the date of composition, is the late eighteenth century (e.g. Froh empfind’ ich mich nun auf klassischem Boden begeistert, / Vor- und Mitwelt spricht lauter und reizender mir, RE 5.1-2; O wie fühl’ ich in Rom mich so froh! Gedenk’ ich der Zeiten, / Da mich ein graulicher Tag hinten im Norden umfing, RE 7.1-2), but the final couplet of this poem seems to be situated in the Augustan Age, with Rome at the height of its power: So erzeugte die Söhne sich Mars!—Die Zwillinge tränket / Eine Wölfin, und Rom nennt sich die Fürstin der Welt, RE 3.17-18).

If read in isolation, then, the third Römische Elegie potentially incorporates the conceit that it was composed in the era in which the Augustan elegists were working; if read as part of
the cycle, however, it features a first-person persona whose donning of different masks during the course of the cycle also replicates a convention of Augustan elegy. Finally, the suggestion that Rome owes its origin, and hence its power, to Eros is of a piece with the sly subversions of Augustus’s moral legislation that figure prominently in the Roman elegists, especially Propertius, the one who most strongly influenced Goethe (Luck 1967: 184-192). And yet the poem does not read like a translation of a lost Latin elegy: the poetic voice is distinctly that of Goethe’s early maturity, by which time he was a *doctus poeta* in his own right (Luck 1967: 173, Meissler 1987: 9-10).

Bibliography

