

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

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