

Sextus Propertius
Selected Elegies



translated by C. John Holcombe

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Sextus Propertius: Selected Elegies

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Colin John Holcombe

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a new translation by Colin John Holcombe

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SELECTED ELEGIES

OF

SEXTUS PROPERTIUS

1 INTRODUCTION

As they have come down to us, the Elegies of Sextus Propertius are a very mixed bag, with some superb pieces and much second-rate material that probably represents the author's less inspired moments combined with corrupt Dark Ages copying. What follows here is a short selection of sometimes slimmed down translations that make acceptable poetry in English. All are drawn from my complete 2009 Elegies of Sexus Propertius publication, where the full translations are to be found, plus the original Latin and detailed notes.

Propertius was born around 50 BC, probably near Assisi in Umbria, and seems to have been dead by 2 BC. His family were well-to-do farmers who lost land after the Perusine War, but neither the confiscation of estates nor the early death of Propertius's father reduced its equestrian standing. Money was found to send the young man to study law in Rome, where he won a literary reputation with startling ease. His first collection of Elegies was published in 29 or 28 BC, when the poet was still in his early twenties, and brought something new to Latin literature: a slavish subjection to love expressed in vivid elegiac couplets that no one has bettered. Catullus was more intense and personal, but published only short pieces in the metre. Tibullus was more continuously graceful, but seems over-refined when set against the turbulent moods that Propertius depicts in his love affair with Cynthia.

That inspiration we cannot fully know. Apuleius identified the model as Hostia, a vivacious demi-monde, which there is no reason to doubt, but Cynthia is also a literary stalking-horse, a persona Propertius created to explore the many facets of romantic

infatuation. By turns, the lover is tender, ecstatic, despairing, worldly-wise, self-pitying and importunate. Cynthia is just as various, everything from the warmed-hearted and cultivated lover to the calculating hussy. Anyone who has been in love will recognize these shifting fictions of the heart, which are a tribute to what poets have created from the emotional turmoil of our lives, and where the Latin elegists played a large part.

Marriage for traditional Romans was a duty, and while couples could marry for love, most unions were contracted for social, financial and political advancement. Upper-class young men were encouraged to indulge their passions with courtesans or women in approved brothels before settling down to the serious business of life, which was service in the army, the law courts or public affairs. Upper-class women enjoyed no such licence: they managed the home, brought up the children and found recreation in spinning wool to make their husband's clothes. As Rome conquered the east, however, the city absorbed more cosmopolitan attitudes, becoming addicted to luxury and pleasurable living. As a social contract, marriage could be ended quickly, and wealthy couples frequently found themselves new spouses. More independent women also took lovers, sometimes multiple lovers, changing them as the whim took them. Among the most notorious was Clodia, wife of Q. Caecilius Metellus Celer, with whom Catullus fell in love and addressed as Lesbia in his poems. Men were even freer: affairs attracted little attention if matters were kept within bounds, and it was understood that young entertainers of both sexes at discreet musical evenings offered more of their body than singing or musical skills. Naturally, such goings-on were not a tribute to the self-denying Roman fortitude of old, and the Emperor Augustus, by no means innocent himself, tried to inculcate more family values, first by encouragement and then by

legislation. Offenders were punished, and even the well-placed and popular Ovid was exiled to the Black Sea for some unknown but egregious misdemeanour.

For some fifty years the Latin elegists fought back, arguing a case for an alternative morality, one based on feelings more than social standing or material gains. Catullus expected love to last a lifetime, forlorn hope though that was with the rapacious Clodia. Propertius went further, and made himself a slave to love — something bewildering to the average Roman. Horace found this absurd and distasteful. Ovid pulled fun at its earnestness.

Propertius himself soon came up against the realities of urban life. The Cynthia of the Elegies has a sharp eye for the main chance: all very well to be showered with verses but money and social connections were what really counted. Propertius persists, finding examples from mythology to excuse the unfortunate errings of his beloved. He sees himself bound in traditional military service, though now to Venus, reporting back with advice for others so conscripted. He draws from the classics, finding the gods and heroes too had their setbacks and humiliations. He pays the obligatory tributes to contemporaries, to Maecenas and Augustus, but still in Book Three is arguing that his achievements are real, and not to be diverted into Rome-glorifying epics.

Book Four brings the inevitable, and under the stern eye of the emperor, Propertius starts making amends. He burnishes the reputations of Roman heroes. He explores the etymology of Roman names and landmarks. For Cynthia he continues to feel an irresistible attraction but in the end allows her to go her own way, a fading jewel in the tawdry setting of mercenary sex. His last elegy praises the faithful devotion of a chaste wife, as faithful to her husband's name as he had been to his romantic ideals.

Are the Elegies sincere, representing real attitudes and experience? Propertius was following an established tradition that need only broadly correspond with life, but to recite poetry about a non-existent mistress, or about a mistress without Cynthia's charms, was to invite ridicule. Upper-class Rome was tightly knit, and its members would expect to find in the Elegies something of their own lives and attitudes. Cynthia was simply being professional, moreover. Had the demi-monde forgotten her training and become the doting partner there would have been scant material for the emotional range of the Elegies: all would have gone smoothly. Conversely, had Cynthia really been as portrayed, then the high-flown flattery and continual importuning of Propertius would have been intolerable, driving the poor woman to her wits' ends. Friends would have pointed this out, even had their author hoped to continue in his blindness. In short, some awareness of his extravagance we have to grant Propertius: to take all the Elegies entirely at their face value not only defies common sense but detracts from our opinion of the man, and how we respond to his words. Ezra Pound's approach was to construct a flippant Propertius, one whose self-deprecating mockery hints at their author's hapless circumstances. Other translators have shied away from adding what is only implied in the text, no doubt thinking the translation would be more their Propertius than the man in his own words, humorously self-demeaning as those words can be.

One solution may be to remember Aristotle's view of art, that it gives us something in a more satisfying fullness than is possible in everyday experience. Elegy 2.13 stems from self-pity, but the sheer eloquence of the writing lifts this unattractive emotion from the commonplace and makes it poetry. Elegy 4.5 is unreasonably bitter, but through it Propertius writes movingly of the dark side of

love, its degeneration into lust and recrimination. In Propertius the mundane is being moved towards the eternal, which classical poetry can claim kinship with, though never fully occupy.

If poetry enables its own kind of truth, then so does mythology, which was known to contemporaries in poetry, wall paintings, mythological handbooks and civic celebrations. Greek playwrights saw the gods as providing insight into the inscrutable workings of fate. Ovid saw them as decorative parables on selfish human nature, his witty commentaries on Roman morals rounding off the short life of the Latin love elegy. Propertius used myths to add emotional depth to his stories, reminding readers that current states were ever changing, and that only in poetic expression could the doings of gods become a lasting substrate to our fleeting natures. Love for Propertius can persist beyond the grave, can end at death, or end well before death. Yet the gods remain, and it is to poetry's advantage to use these personifications of human feelings, which for Propertius are real and life-enhancing within the ambit of his words.

Cynthia is the focus of the first two books. Book One is the more charming, complete and playful, seeming to possess a carefully balanced structure, the elegies being arranged in four groups and rounded off by a coda of Elegies 20 to 22. A date of 29 to early 28 BC is suggested by the dedication to Tullus, nephew to the proconsul of Asia in 30 BC.

Book Two is a mixture of superb elegies, broken fragments and rather mechanical pieces. It probably dates from 26-25 BC, to judge from the reference to the repeal of Augustus' marriage law (28 BC), the prospect of an Arabian expedition (carried out in 25-4 BC), the death of Gallus (by suicide in 26 BC) and the opening of the temple of Apollo Palatinus (October 28 BC).

The mentioned death of Marcellus (23-22 BC), and the unmentioned Parthian settlement (20 BC), suggest that Book Three belongs to the years 25-22 BC. To avoid writing the epic that Virgil had left incomplete by his death, something which Augustus could certainly have expected, Propertius feigns a kinship with Callimachus and Philetas, Alexandrian poets who avoided such uncongenial tasks. By now, Propertius is writing smoothly on a wider range of subjects, and while the Elegies are competent they lack some of the previous invention and fervour.

Book Four is very different: twelve long elegies on varied matters, in which Cynthia makes a final appearance: once in affectionate farce and another from beyond the grave. The latest poem (4.6) seems to have been composed for the Ludi Quinquennales of 16 BC.

The Elegies are known in some 146 manuscript versions, but most are blundering copies of others no better. Lines have been miscopied, altered to fit in with misconceptions, transposed to new places or lost altogether. Book Two is probably a mule, the remains of two books now fused in a way that makes the originals difficult to know. Scholars in fact recognize two families of manuscripts. One stems from a northern France MS of around 1200, and is missing only 4.11.17-76. The other MS was written around 1240 near Orleans, and ends at 2.1.63, though text missing is supplied by later copies. Both MSS probably originate in a single MS barbarously copied in the Dark Ages of Latin scholarship, in the 6-8th centuries AD.

Though Propertius is a learned author and needs an extensive glossary to be understood, this is not an academic translation but a literary one. Greatly assisted by previous translations and the studies listed under References and Resources, I have worked

from the Loeb 1990 text to produce what I hope will be a pleasing rendering that provides some of the poetry in English that Propertius provides in Latin. The Latin elegiac couplet is basically a hexameter plus pentameter, but I have found that the 6/4 couplet, hexameter plus tetrameter, gives the crisper rendering in English.

Love's Madness

Cynthia's eyes first brought me to this wretchedness: (One 1)

I had not felt love's pull before.

Amor, the little boy, reduced my scornful look,
and with his feet pressed down my head.

He it was who said despise the virtuous girls,
and wantoned with me, had no sense.

And in this folly he has kept me one full year
in constant danger from the gods.

But, Tullus, my friend: Milanion went on to quell
the savage hardness of Iasus.

He wandered, maddened, through Parthenian caves, in sight
of long-haired beasts, and howled his pain

the club of centaur Hylaeus awarded him
from cave to cave in Arcady,

to win at last his Atalanta, fleet of foot.

Such then is love's true strength in prayer
and deed, but his poor wits run slow for me, and do
not keep to ways they one time travelled.

But you whose sorcery draws down the temptress moon,
propitiates the magic flames,

come, change the disposition of my mistress, turn
her face a paler shade than mine.

Do that, and I'll believe you have the Colchis spells
to summon up the ghosts and stars.

But, friends, if now too late to call the fallen back,
or seek to aid the wounded breast

that fiercely would outdo the worst in fire and blade
when inner torment found its tongue,

convey me through the furthest lands and waves to where
that woman cannot find my track.

I leave all those who have the ear of gods and live
in safe and constant mutual love.

Now Venus works on me but bitter nights, and Amor
toils the same through emptiness.

I therefore warn you: cling to love, escape this curse,
and keep your love's familiar place.

If any are too slow to turn their ears, what grief
awaits them in these words of mine!

The Poet's Horoscope

Why this rush to learn your fate, Propertius? (Four 1b 1-24)

Unfavourably your threads are spun.

Your song brings grief; Apollo slights you; not so willing
is the lyre to grant you words.

Some things I tell with certainty, or am a seer
who cannot work the sphere of bronze
for kindly Jupiter, rapacious Mars, the star
of Saturn burdensome to all.

Babylonian Horops of Archytas fathered
me, called Horos: Conon's house.

All witnesses declare I have not shamed my kin,
that truth is foremost in my books.

The gods have set a price, and — Jupiter! — how men
with gold deny the horoscope.

I said, when Arria sent her two sons off (and armed,
against the counsel of a god)

they'd not return their weapons to ancestral hearth:
in truth two graves made good my words.

For Lupercus in shielding horse's injured face
then slipped and fell before the same.

and Gallus, minding standards in the camp, was cropped
by that same eagle's bloodstained beak.

Both ill-starred youths a mother's greed brought down! How sound
my prophecy, though not so wished.

* * *

Enough of stories: now I venture on your stars: (Four 1b 47-78)
compose yourself for further tears.

Old Umbria gave you an illustrious home — I lie,
or touch upon your native land?

In mists on fields Mevania lays down its dew,
as Umbrian lake its summer streams:
a wall ascends the high Assisi peak, and one
that's made more famous with your gifts.
Here, early for your age, you took up father's bones,
withdrawing to a modest home.
Where many bulls had worked your land, strict measuring rod
emerged to seize that well-tilled wealth.
Gold bulla taken from your youthful neck, you wore
the toga flanked by mother's gods,
Apollo gives some little of his verse, forbids
you thunder on the forum stage.

You'll form your elegies, seductively, for war
you show the others how to write.
You'll go on flattering service in the cause of Venus,
useful target for her boys.
Yet, whatever victories your efforts win,
a single girl evades the palm.
You'll see the night and day as she dictates, nor will
one teardrop fall but as she bids,

and though you loose the hook lodged in your chin, yet more
her prows will press and spike you fast.
Nor can a thousand guards or sealed-up doors assist:
the smallest chink allows deceit.

In future, should you struggle in mid-ocean, go
unarmed against the fully armed,
in shuddering earth and open cleft, take note of Cancer:
fear its eight-legged other side!

Beauty Unadorned

Who can be pleased, my love, by such a hairdo, float (One 2)
of contours through a Cōan dress?

Or curls so wetted with Orontean myrrh they frame
a face sold out to foreign ways?

You have a natural beauty with unblemished limbs
that need not trade in cultivation.

Your figure, trust me, is its own revival: how
can naked looks need artifice?

Think how the untilled soil throws out its brilliant hues,
and ivy spirals by itself,
how pretty strawberry trees will grace deserted hollows,
water, untaught, find its course.

The unaffected shoreline throws up glittering pebbles,
birds to please dispense with art.

Was it their ornament made Dioscuri twins
for Phoebe and Helaira burn?

Made Idas and fond Phoebus fight for Evenus's
daughter on her father's shore?

For false white face was Hippodamīa whirled away
to marriage on those Phrygian wheels?

What jewels detracted from those natural dew-soaked skins
that glowed in tints Apelles paints?

In truth, cosmetics helped but few affairs: for most
a sun-flushed modesty sufficed.

I do not fear you will be seen as wanting: so
well bred a girl has gifts enough.

Phoebus sends his words to you, Calliōpe
the joy of the Aolian lyre.

Nothing's wanting from your winning tongue, enchanting

Venus and Minerva too.

With these you'll ever stay my love of life, but not
with vile and tiresome ornament.

After A Night's Drinking

Lain out as that deceived Cnossian girl was left (One 3)
with Theseus long shipped away,
or as Andromeda, King Cepheus's daughter,
slept when freed from her harsh rock;
or as incessant Maenad dancers, tired, stretched out
on grass beside the Apidanus:
so was my Cynthia in her softly breathing body,
head extended on her hands,
as I came blundering in from too much wine, the boys
with lanterns throwing lights about.

But still I had my wits about me, made advances,
gently pressed her on the bed,
and in the clutches of Amor and Bacchus — both
of them are cruel gods — I
eased an arm beneath the slumbering body, raised
it then to take a lengthy kiss,
but carefully, all too conscious of the trouble should
my mistress wake in usual temper.

And so in rapture, holding you, my eyes like Argus
seeing Io's new-horned brow;
I took the garland that my brows were wearing, slipped
it gently on your temples, Cynthia,
gladly rearranged where tresses fell, which seemed
like furtive apples in my hands,
rewards bestowed ungratefully on sleep, and which
from your curved body fell away.

But when you, stirring, gave occasional starts, I stopped,
supposing you beset with omens,
that in your sleep you felt a someone take you,

forcefully, against your will,
till in the window opposite a moon appeared,
and hastened with its interfering

beams to press your shut eyes open. You awoke,
with elbows on the linen, said,
'Has misbehaving closed some other's door and sent
you shamefaced to our bed at last?
Where have you wasted what was mine, the night long past
and stars now fading from the sky?

'You wretch! I hope continually you have such nights
as I'm so cruelly treated to.
For you I put off sleep by weaving crimson threads,
and held out hearing Orpheus's lyre.
At times I cheered myself to think that broken love
is often subject to delays,
until the downy wings of Sleep closed over me,
and formed my weeping's last respite.'

An Invitation Declined

I have no fear to sail the Adriatic, Tullus, (One 6)
brave Aegean swell with you.

Together we could climb the cold Rhiphaean mountains,
venture south from Memnon's house.

But still my girl would hold me back: her fond embraces,
flushed complexion, long entreaties.

Whole nights she babbles of her passion, swears
my going would deny the gods.

She now denies herself to me, and makes the threats
that unappreciated love suggests.

I cannot stand another hour of peroration,
perish thoughts of tepid love.

Besides, how would it help to visit learned Athens,
see all Asia's ancient wealth,
if Cynthia made such dreadful scenes at embarkation,
cursed me with a hand-scratched face,
declared she kept her kisses for an adverse wind,
that none's so fickle as a man?

Supposing you surpass your uncle's well-earned axes,
turn our allies back to law,

Your life forbids the leisure owed to love, forever
warring fatherland you served:

On you the youthful rascal can't impose his labours,
tasks I know too well from tears.

And seeing fortune's ever tried to bring me down,
I give my life to worthlessness.

How many perished in such long and glad devotion:
let me join them in the earth,

who was not born to arms or martial fame, it is
the fates that drive this soldier on.

But you among the rich Ionian plains, or where
Pactōlus waters Lydia,
when crossing lands on foot, or seas by oar, will go
as part of an accepted rule,
and if some thought of me should come at times, recall
I live beneath an unkind star.

Facing Death

I do not dread that gloomy underworld, my Cynthia, (One 19)
grudge what's owed the final flame,
but only that my funeral rites may lack your love:
a fear that's worse than death itself.
Not so lightly settled on the lids is love that I'd
forget or lose it in the dust.

Phylacus's, heroic in the realms of dark,
could not forgo his lovely wife,
but reached for joys with unreal hands, returned a ghost
to Thessaly, his native home.
In this, whatever else, I shall be called your shade:
great love can cross the shores of death.

And if there came the beauteous heroines of Troy
as booty given Argive men,
still none could match the pleasure of your beauty, Cynthia,
(may Earth allow it and be just),
and though the fates preserve you to a weary age,
my tears will hold that body dear.

May you, still living, know this from my embers, when
no place of death is harsh for me.
But how I fear you will despise my tomb, and cruel
Amor drag you from my dust,
compel you dry your tears, for, when fatigued, the truest
girl must yield to constant threats.
So, while we may, let's still enjoy our love, for that,
though long, can never last enough.

The Task.

You ask me why I often write of love affairs, (Two 1 1-40)
my verses soft upon the lips.

The songs are not Apollo's, nor Calliope's,
but what the girl herself inspires.

The splendour of a dress she's walking in creates
such volume in that Cōan cloth.

And if I've seen her forehead's straying curls, my praise
persuades her walk more proud of head.

The melodies her ivory fingers pluck from lyre
enthrall me with their practised touch.

And if in sleep she droops her heavy eyes, through me
the poet finds a thousand themes.

Or if, with dress undone, she wrestle me, in truth
from that I build whole Iliads,
and from whatever she has done, or may have said,
are born great sagas out of nothing.

So if on me, Maecēnas, fates bestowed the means
to lead heroic troops to war,

I'd not sing Titans, Ossa on Olympus piled,
with Pelion the route to heaven,

nor Homer's glory, Pergama, nor ancient Thebes,
the two seas joined at Xerxes' word,

nor early reign of Remus, lofty rise of Carthage,
Cimbrian threat and Marius' feats:

I'd tell the wars and actions of your mighty Caesar,
but as second of my themes.

I've sung of Mutina, and Philippi, that grave
of Romans, routs off Sicily,

the altars overturned of old Etruscans, captured

shores of Ptolemaic Pharos,
and would of Egypt and the Nile, displayed through Rome,
its feeble seven streams curtailed,
the necks of kings with golden chains, and Actium's prows
progressed along the Sacred Way.
To such exploits my Muse would always add you: faithful,
leading and rejecting peace.
As Theseus showed below, above Achilles, sons
of Ixion and Menoetius:
your steps will march along with Caesar's fame, Maecenas:
faith of yours his greatest prize.

Love's Ecstasy

O happy me! O night of radiance, and you, (Two 15)
sweet bed that's strewn with such delights!
What declarations when the lamp was lit, what fights
and tussles when the light was doused!
With breasts undone she teased me as we wrestled: then,
with clothes drawn up, she feigned delay.
Her breath fell on my eyelids thick with sleep: she hissed,
'Is this the way you finish, sluggard?'
Such length of arms' embraces as we changed positions,
kisses lengthening on the lips!

No pleasure comes from sightless acts, and you must know
that eyes go forward in desire,
as Paris found who met the Spartan naked, coming
from the bed of Menelaus,
as splendidly undone was chaste Diana, where
Endymion as naked lay.

So do not come to bed still wearing clothes, or my
delirious hands will rip them off.
Avoid the further angering me, or your bruised arms
will bear their witness to your mother.
Allow no loosened breasts prevent our playing, look
for shame to those who've given birth.

Let's feast our eyes with lover's scenes: for days bring on
the night from which no day returns,
and pray that we ever are like this, bound in chains
that none at daybreak can undo,
and close as murmuring doves are, that is man and woman
one and so completely joined.
Who looks for limit to love's madness finds no end,
for love will never have enough.

And sooner earth betray the farmer with false crops,
or jet-black horses draw the sun,

or streams call waters back to source, or deeps dry up
and leave their fish in cindery earth,
than I should think to loan my love-pains to another:
hers in life, and in my death.

Grant she give me such a few more times: a year
with these would serve me for a life.

Grant she give me many of such nights, from each
I rise more godlike than before.

Grant that everyone so run through life, their limbs
be weighted down as though with wine —
there'd be no blows from daggers, nor from ships of war
would bones be tossed to Actium's deeps,
nor Rome attacked by its own triumphs, shown forever
grieving with its hair undone.

Posterity would surely raise their cups to us
who did not injure any gods.

You give, in glory of our loving, all your kisses,
yet those kisses are but few.

As petals wither from the garlands, fall in cups
and drift at loss there listlessly,
so we, who fill ourselves with lovers' breath, may find
tomorrow fate has shut us in.

Cynthia Sick

Jupiter, have mercy on my girl who's sick, (Two 28)
spare death in one so beautiful.

The season's come which seethes with heat, when earth begins
to glow beneath the Dog-star's drought,
but neither heat nor heaven's malignity are cause,
but lack of reverence for the gods.

This ruins girls, and has before: whatever's vowed
the wind and water sweep away.

Did Venus grieve at the comparisons, a goddess
envious of all who shine?

Or have you scorned the bearing of the Argive Juno,
found eyes of Pallas weren't too fine?

They do not watch their words, the beautiful, and this
your hurtful words and looks have done.

But from the countless perils of a troubled life
may mildness come at close of day.

Io, now a goddess, mooded as cow, and with
her head transformed has drunk the Nile.

First Ino strayed on earth but as Leucōthoë
the ships invoke her in distress.

Andromeda, a sacrifice to some sea monster,
married noble Perseus.

Callisto, wandering Arcady as bear, became
the stars to guide the ships by night.

If destiny should hasten you to rest, then you,
made beautiful by burial,
can tell your beauty's griefs to Semele, whose own
misfortunes tell her yours are true.

Among the heroines of Homer, you'll be first,
and none will not consent to this.
So bear as best you may through pain with fate, for god
and day of death can both be changed.

No more the whirling rhombuses impose their spell;
scorched laurel marks the burnt-out hearth;
the moon declines to fall so frequently; the dire
bird utters its dark funeral note.
One fated boat will carry both our loves; its sails
traverse the sombre lake of hell.
But if you cannot pity one, then pity both:
she lives, I live, if not I die.

For such a blessing I will write this sacred line:
'through mighty Jove my girl is safe'.
And at your feet she'll sit as women purposely
pouring endless troubles out.
And Juno will forgive your help, for even she
will flinch to see a young girl die.
And have, Persephone, your clemency maintained,
nor let your consort be less kind.

How many beautiful must walk the world below:
let one remain on earth above.
You have Antiope, Europa, lovely Tyro,
infamous Pasiphaë,
the beauties Crete and Greece produced of old, and Thebes,
and Priam's kingdom, since destroyed.
Gone is every Roman girl of much account,
all these the covetous fire consumed.
Since you, my light, have escaped great danger: pay
Diana what you owe in dance,
and worship one who, once a heifer, is a goddess:
give to me ten votive nights.

A Fantasy

Yesterday, my love, when wandering, lost in wine, (Two 29A)
without my leading band of slaves,
a group of little boys came up, and in some number,
(fear had stopped me counting them).
Some little torches held, some arrows, some
I thought were making chains for me.
But they were naked. One more forward said, 'Arrest
this man; you know him well enough.
He's here, the one the angry woman set us on.'
At which a noose went round my neck.

One went to push me in their midst, one added, 'Death
to any thinking us not gods!
For you, who don't deserve it, she's been waiting up,
but you, a fool, seek out of doors,
though when she loosens the Sidonian nightcap strings,
and looks about with sleepy eyes,
it's not Arabian spices that will waft to you,
but what love has in his own hands.
Release him, brothers, now he pledges love is true;
we're at the house we were to reach.'
And so they threw my mantle back to me, and said,
'Now learn to stay at home of nights.'

To Lynceus

Who'd now entrust a well-made mistress to a friend? (Two 34)

My own was near to snatched away.

Experience proves that none's dependable in love,
but wants the beauty for himself.

That god pollutes relations, undoes friends, and calls
to arms those linked in harmony.

Whom Menelaus took in proved adulterer,
unknown the man Mēdēa chose.

How could you dare, false Lynceus, to hold my girl:
did not the life forsake your hands?

Suppose she had not proved so staunch and faithful: such
perfidious acts you could survive?

Destroy my body if you wish with a blade or poison;
from my mistress be forsworn.

You may be comrade of my soul and body, have
the stewardship of all I own,

from bed alone I ask forbearance on, for Jove
himself cannot another brook:

I'm jealous by myself of my own shadow, often
tremble foolishly at nought.

There is good reason to remit your crime, however:
wine had caused your words to stray,

but looks of your ascetic life will never fool me,
all know by now how good love is.

Lynceus too, at this late hour, is mad with love!

I'm pleased that you address our gods.

In what resides the wisdom of Socratic books,
to know the workings of the world,

or have the music of the Cretan's stories, when
your ancient is no help to love?

Better imitate the muse of slight Philetas,
dream as simple Callimachus,

tell the course of the Aetolian Achelous,
waters freed by power of love,
or of Maeander wandering through the Phrygian plain
deceiving its own courses there,
or talking Arion, Adrastus's, the horse that won
Archēmoros's funeral games,
or Amphiaros' chariot's fate, the death that pleased
our mighty Jove: Capaneus's.

Then no more gather words for Aeschylus's buskin:
loose your limbs in supple dance.

Start turning verses on a narrow lathe, come close,
hard-hearted one, to what you feel.

You'll be no safer than Antimachus or Homer:
beauties turn down mighty gods.

Name girls who sought the secrets of the world, or why
Moon laboured with her brother's horse,
or what survives of us beyond the River Styx,
if thunderbolts could have good cause.

The stubborn ox will never yield to ploughing till
its horns be fastened in a noose,
nor will you gladly take the hurts of love until,
though wild, you are subdued by me.

See, with little wealth at home, or ancestor
who won his triumph in past wars,

I reign among the banquet of the girls, and for
the very gifts that you despise.

I'm garlanded by yesterdays because the god
of sharpest aim has pierced my bone.
Let Virgil sing of Phoebus guarding Actian shore,
or Caesar's mighty fleet that brings
to life now warriors of Troy's Aenēās, walls
he founded on the Lavine shore.
Make way, you Roman authors, and you Greeks, far greater
than the Iliad is born.

Invocation

Shades of Callimachus, Cōan rites of Philetas, (Three One)
give me to walk in your grove.

I am the first, priest of the clear fount, bringing to Italian
bacchanals a Greek song.

What grotto fined that measure, what foot was entered on,
what water, tell me, did you drink?

No more you'll wheedle Phoebus into war: my verse
is pumiced to exact perfection,
and will by fate be lifted up: you'll find me flower-
hung above triumphal horse,
and little Cupids there will ride with me, a throng
of writers bustling at my wheels.

In vain you seek to race me with your loosened reins,
there is no highway to the Muses.

Many, Rome, will add new honours to your annals,
enlarge your bounds to Bactria,
but what to read in peaceful times, a page brought down
unsullied from the Sister's mount?

Be careful of the bays you give, Pegasid daughters:
epic crowns don't suit my head.

What envious crowds in life deny me, fame will pay
with added interest afterwards.

If age will bring its approbation, so my name
at death looms larger on men's lips.

How else to know the walls pulled down by fir-wood horse,
Achilles' tussle with the rivers,
Ida's Sīmois with Scamander, Jove's son, Hector
three times fouled by chariot wheels,

Dēiphobus and Hēlenus, Polýdamas' armour
Paris awkwardly had donned?

Unheard of. Little matter Ilium, or Troy
twice taken by the Oetaean god.

And Homer, who has told your fate, has doubtless seen
his reputation grow with time.

So will I live to have my future day in Rome,
and prophecy, though I be ash,
unscorned will be my grave some stone will mark: so hears
the Lycian god and promises.

Power of Song

Returning meanwhile to our verse: a round to please (Three 2)
my girl with a familiar song.

They say that Orpheus tamed ferocious beasts and stilled
swift rivers with his Thracian lyre,
Apollo's music stirred the rocks of Cithaeron
that by themselves built up a wall,
at Etna Galatēa reined her dripping horse
to hear your pipings, Polyphemus.
What wonder Bacchus and Apollo show me favour,
that crowds of girls pay court to me?

My house has not its pillars of Taenarian marble,
gilded arching, ivory beams.
I have no fruit trees as Phaeācian orchards, grottos
man-made by the Marcian stream,
but words find readers, Muses help: Calliōpe
is not too weary of my song.
Happy anyone who's mentioned in my book:
each song their very testament.

Not costly pyramids that reach to stars, nor Jove's
great Elis temple like to heaven,
nor that rich tomb, so blest, of Mausolus, that breaks
the contract death will make with each.
Fire and rain efface their splendour, or the years
suppress them with their silent weight:
but a name acquired by genius will never fade
but stand a deathless ornament.

Midnight Summons

Midnight brings a letter from my mistress: meet (Three 16)
me on the Tibur's banks at once,
where waterfalls turn twin hills white, the Anio
thence falling into spreading pools.
What shall I do? Submit myself where ruffian hands
could strike my person in the dark?
But if I disobey through fear, her tantrums hurt
me more than some nocturnal foe.
I erred the once, and was rejected one whole year:
nor do her hands grow kind to me.

And who would harass sacred lovers? They can take
the central path down Sciron's road.
Whatever lover walks the Scythian shores, there's none
so barbarous as bring him harm.
What rogue would shed the drop of blood a lover has,
accompanied by Venus too?
Moon lights the way, the constellations show up ruts,
and Love in front waves flaming brands.
The savage watchdog turns aside his gaping jaws:
such personages travel safe.

But if the journey brought a funeral, a death
like that is surely worth the price.
She'd bring me unguents, would deck my grave with flowers,
and at my tomb be guardian.
But God forbid she put my bones some busy place,
some thoroughfare where all men pass,
for so are lovers desecrated after death.
Some secluded place with trees
is preferable, or nameless heap of sand: what good
if I am here memorialised?

Homage to Bacchus

As humbly bent before your shrine, now, father Bacchus, (Three 17)
give me peace and prospering sails.

For you can quell the raging passions; in your draught
a lover's grievings find their balm.

Through you will lovers meet and lovers part: wash out
the mischief, Bacchus, from my mind.

You know all this, had Ariadne up to heaven
carried on your lynx-drawn way.

This sin that's burned for long within my bones is cured
by death alone or with your wine.

An empty night forever tortures lovers sober,
hope and dread pull either way.

But Bacchus: if you'll bring good slumber to my bones
through temples glowing with your gifts,
then I will pattern hills with rows of vines, keep watch
that no wild beast shall injure them.

But let my vats be filled with purple must, the feet
be stained by treading yet more fruit.

I'll spend what life is left me honouring horns and you:
be poet, Bacchus, of your powers.

I'll tell how mother bore you after Etna's lightning,
Indians by Nysa dancers felled.

Lycurgus raving over vine, how Pentheus' corpse
was three ways torn by Maenad bands,

how Tuscan sailors bent to dolphin's bodies, fleeing
vine-clad ship to reach the waves,

how from your streams, sweet smelling through the land of Dia,
Naxos people take their wine.

Your neck that's white I'll dress with trailing ivy clusters,
Lydian-turban crown your hair:

your throat will stream with perfumed oil, Bassareus,
bare feet will part the flowing robe.

Dirce's Thebes will shake the pulsing tambourine
and goat-foot Pans shrill unstopped pipes,
and Cŷbele the great, much turreted, will clash
her cymbals in Idaean dance.

Before the temple doors I'll stand as priest and pour
libations from a golden cup.

I'll hymn the themes, not shyly but with buskin strain,
in voice that Pindar thundered out,
you've but to free me from a proud enslavement, pour
your slumber on this troubled head.

An Unwelcome Interruption

Much trouble on the fountained Esquiline last night, (Four 8)
and folk by New Fields all came out.

A brawl erupted in a drinking shop, involving
my good name if not myself.

Lanuviun, from old protected by an ancient snake,
(the odd hour here is not mispent)
displays a sacred slope that opens to a cleft
where serpent (maidens, fear this path!)
hungrily demands its annual tribute, spitting
hisses from the twisted earth.

It comes and seizes what is offered, though the basket
tremble in each virgin's hand.

The girls on such a task are never keen to trust
their honour to a serpents mouth,
but if found chaste come back to parents' arms, the farmers
calling it a 'fruitful year.'

So there went Cynthia with her close-clipped ponies, pleading
rites of Juno (Venus, more).

So tell of that triumphal progress, Appian Way,
as wheels rolled forward on your stones,
her spectacle above the yoke in flourishing
the reins about the shameful parts.

Myself, I'm silent on the youngster's silk-hung trap,
Molossian dogs with jewelled straps:
some day he'll have to sell himself for filthy gruel
with beard to shame those smooth-scraped cheeks.

But since she often wronged our bed I chose to move
my camp and find some other couch.

There is a Phyllis near the Aventine Diana,
plain when sober, pleasing drunk,

A pure Teia, also, from Tarpeian groves,
not satisfied with one at cups.

With these I planned to pass a happy night, and add
some spice to usual nuptial sports.

A couch for three was set out on a screened-off lawn,
with me — you ask? — between the two.

Lygdamus had charge of ladle: summer glasses,
scented, unmixed Lydian wine.

Miletus played the flute, and Byblis castanets
(with roses pelted for her skill).

Magnus, shrunk to his small frame, was beating stunted
arms about a boxwood crate.

Although the lamps were full, the flames kept flickering;
the table top fell to its legs,

and when at dice I sought the lucky Venus throw
the wretched Dog kept showing up.

But I was deaf to singing, saw no undone breasts,
my thoughts still on Lanuvium's gates,

when suddenly the doors were shattered on their posts,
and fracas rushed in from out front.

Cynthia throws back the folding doors, her hair
disordered, and in splendid rage.

The cup fell from my hands; my lips, though steeped in wine,
I felt had turned distinctly pale.

Her eyes flashed fire as only women's can, a scene
as frightful as a city's sack.

Angrily she goes for Phyllis with her nails,
Teia calls out, 'Neighbours, help!'

The hubbub wakes up neighbouring citizens, the whole
concourse awash with angry noise.

The girls, their hair torn out and tunics ripped, escape
to darkness and the nearest tavern.

Cynthia, gloating on her spoils, then hastens back
to lay about me with her hand:
she bites my neck, there drawing blood, and most of all
must poke out eyes she thought to blame.

And when she tired of beating me she went for Lygdamus
concealed the left side of the couch.
She dragged him out. He called upon my guardian spirit,
(but Lygdamus, I'm held like you).

Finally, a suppliant, I begged for terms,
and was allowed to touch her feet.
'So, if you'd seek forgiveness for such offences,
know the terms that I prescribe.
They'll be no promenading now through Pompey's shade,
or sand at Forum festivals,
beware of craning round to see the upper stalls
or ogling at an open litter,
Lygdamus, my foremost curse, shall have his legs
bound up in chains and sent for sale.'

Such were the terms, which I agreed. She laughed, exulting
in the power that she enjoyed.
Immediately she cleansed each spot the girls had touched,
and rinsed the threshold thoroughly;
she made me change once more the oil in lamps, and thrice
with burning sulphur touched my head.
At last, when every sheet was changed, and I not loath,
we laid down arms about the bed.

The Only Remedy

So I must take this lengthy jaunt to learned Athens, (Three 21)
free myself from love's long yoke.

Amor, in seeing her, but grows the more oppressive,
nourishes and feeds itself.

All ways I've tried to conquer him, but still he presses,
sleeplessly the god persists.

She hardly sees me now, says no, or in her clothes
will hug the far side of the bed.

My one recourse is changing countries, Cynthia then
as far from mind as from our eyes.

Come now, my friends, propel our ship on through the waves,
draw lots in pairs for turns at oar.

Hoist welcome sails on topmost mast; already winds
speed sailors on their watery path.

To towers of Rome, and friends, and you my girl, however
you may be, I say farewell!

I come, a raw guest on the Adriatic, meeting
the gods of roaring waves with prayers,
yet with the Ionian crossed, my ship can rest worn sails
in placid seas of Lechaeum.

So hasten, feet, on hardships that remain, where Isthmus
beats off sea from either shore,

but when Piraeus' shores receive me I shall tread
long arms of walls that Theseus built.

In Plato's porticos I'll start my mind's improvement,
try your grounds, sage Epicurus.

I'll study languages that armed Demosthenes,
and taste your wit, refined Menander,

at least some paintings will attract my eye, works framed
in ivory, or, better, bronze.

Both time and that all-sundering sea will ease my wounds
that fester silent in the breast,
and if I die, it will be fate, not ill-starred love,
a day that's not dishonourable.

Farewell to Cynthia

Woman: looks have brought you only arrogance, (Three 24-25)
you're over-proud of those fine eyes.

Our love has made you so renowned that I'm ashamed
to think my verse has played its part.

In truth my words were drawn from others' charms, and you
are other than what love supposed.

I've often weighed your features with the rosy dawn,
when white was all your face would show.

What friends and kin could not avert, nor Thessalian
witchcraft oceans wash away,

I brought upon myself, in truth, and not in fire or sword,
but shipwrecked in Aegean passion.

So Venus caught and held me in her roasting cauldron,
hands were fastened at my back,

but now my ship is garlanded and come to port,
the sandbanks passed, and anchor dropped.

Of that wild surge I've wearied, gained some sanity:
my wounds at last are closed and healed.

Good Sense, if you're a goddess, you I worship. Many
vows were left by Jove unheard.

I used to be the laughing stock when food was laid
and anyone could talk of me.

But five years' faithful service having passed, you'll bite
your nails and miss my constancy.

Your tears won't work, the strategems that, Cynthia,
you used too much to get your way.

In grief I go, but injury outlasts the tears,
for you have wrecked this well-yoked pair.

Farewell the threshold of my grievances, that door
my fists, though vexed, did not break down.

May age oppress you with unwanted years, and ugly
wrinkles come to blear your looks,
that you will wish to tear out white hair by the roots
as though the mirror chided you.

Scorned, rejected, now a crone complain that as
you acted once is done to you.

Such are the fatal curses that my page foresees:
so learn to dread what fate will send.

Early Rome

Stranger, what you see as mighty Rome was grass (Four 1a 1-14)
and hill before Aenēās came.

Where Naval Phoebus sanctifies the Palatine,
Evander's cattle lay at rest.

To gods of earthenware were first these golden temples,
simple huts no cause for shame.

Tarpeian Jupiter resounded from bare rock,
unknown our cattle to the Tiber.

At Remus's, the house that soars with flights of steps,
one hearth was all the brothers had.

The lofty Curia adorned with Senate robes
housed rustic fathers dressed in skins.

A horn would summon ancient citizens to talk:
the senate but a field of them.

* * *

From first the omens boded well. The Wooden Horse's
opened belly did no harm (Four 1a 43- 56)

to trembling father carried on his own son's neck:
the flames held back from burning them.

Then came the noble Decius, and Brutus' axes,
Venus bearing Caesar's arms.

And so the Sibyl's tripod purified the fields
with blood of Remus Aventine,
and words of Trojan prophetess, though late fulfilled,
to aged Priam truly said:

'Troy will fall but rise again as Trojan Rome:
on land and sea a glorious reign.

Rein back, you Greeks, from futile triumph: Ilium lives,
and for these ashes Jove has arms.'

Foreseeing his Funeral

Whenever death shall come at last to seal my lids, (Two 13 17-58)
do not allow my funeral
to be one endless cortège of ancestral gods,,
or empty trumpeting at death,
or bier that's borne on ivory posts, the corpse stretched out
on couch-inlaid Attalic gold,
or row of perfume dishes, but of rites that mark
a plain but decent burial —
and adequate if to Persephone be borne
my worthiest gift of three small books

Following, you may be tearing at bared breasts,
howling endlessly my name,
be quick to press my ice-cold lips as Syrian myrrh
is broken from its onyx jar.

If so, when fire beneath burns all to ash, receive
my ghost in its receptacle,
and plant a shading laurel to protect the spot
the pyre flamed out, and let there be
two verses: 'here lies one of horrid dust who was
a slave before a single passion.'

Not less will be the glory of my sepulchre
than that, blood-stained, of great Achilles,
and you, grey-haired and near the end, can take the path
that comes to my memorial stones.

Till then, do not insult my resting place, for earth
has consciousness and senses truth.

Though better had it been if one of those Three Sisters
cut my life when in the cradle
than to an unknown end had drawn out breath, remember

three whole generations passed before
Nestor's pyre was lit, though had his fated age
been met by guard on Troy's walls
he'd not have seen his son Antilochus interred,
nor cried out: 'Death, why come so slow?'

So you, for friends must sometime weep: the gods require
we care for those who've gone before.

Witness that fierce wild boar which felled the white Adonis
hunting on Idalian heights:
and he so handsome, Venus washed him in the marshes,
wandering thence with hair undone.

In vain will you call, Cynthia, to my unanswering shade:
what words can come from these small bones?

Cythia's Death

May earth, procuress, heap your grave with thorns, (Four 5 1-20)
and what's most feared: your shade feel thirst.
No peace in ashes, and avenging Cerberus
for much shamed bones howl hungrily.

She could seduce the celibate Hippolytus,
make omens dim the brightest match,
she'd have Penelope ignore her husband's rumours,
marry lustful Antinous.

At her behest the lodestones spurn their iron, mother
birds abandon young at nest.

And if she move the Colline herbs to field-side ditch
the crops would wash away in rain.

She'd boldly cast her spells upon the moon, and take
on pelt that is the night-time wolf's.

With nails she'd scratch out eyes of harmless ravens, blind
the watchful husband to her arts,
consult the screech-owls how to have my blood, and take
the potent slime of mares in heat.

She'd work in darkness like the papyrus worm, or bore
as moles do, sedulously through earth.

* * *

So with Acanthis working on my lover's mind, (Two 1 61-76)
my bones were numbered through the skin,
but Venus, queen: accept this ring-dove, throat cut clean,
before your altar as deserved.

I've lived to see cough rattling in a withered throat,
and blood-flecked phlegm in pitted teeth.

She breathed her last foul breath into an ancient couch;

her hut was shaky, hearth was cold.
For funeral she had but borrowed braids beneath
her scanty hair and washed-out cap;
a dog was left, once vigilant when I would try
to lift the door-latch with my thumb.

Let bawd's tomb be an old amphora, neck cracked off,
and let the fig-tree press her down.
Have lovers desecrate her grave with broken rocks,
their curses mixed with stones they cast.

Cynthia's Ghost

The Shades exist, and death not wholly bounds our life: (Four 7 1-34)
a sallow ghost escapes the pyre.

I dreamt that Cynthia leant upon my bed, though late
immured within the wayside din.

Awoken to the love I'd buried, round me fell
the frigid empire of my bed.

Her hair was worn as at her end, the same her eyes,
though dress was charred along one side,
and fire had eaten that familiar beryl ring,
and Lethe worn away her face.

But living breath and voice erupted; brittle fingers
rattled as she snapped her thumb.

'Can woman get no better from a gutter wretch
whose strength's already gone in sleep?

Have you forgotten the Subura trysts, nocturnal
slidings down a window-sill?

How often I let down a rope to you, by turns
my body coming to your hands,
or, sharing Venus at the crossroads, breast to breast,
we warmed the road beneath our cloaks.

Alas for troths, deceiving words the South
Wind mocked at and has torn to shreds.

'Who cried to see my eyelids close? Or called me back?
Nor did you grant me one more day.

No watchmen rattled his split reed for me when roof
tile coarsely cut into my head,
nor did they see you bowed in grief, or your dark toga
wetted with hot tears for me.

It irked to walk beyond the gate: nor would you make

the cortège go at slower pace.
You called no winds to fan the pyre, nor did you add
a sprinkled incense to the flames.
Were hyacinths too much to pay: could you not pour
some offering from that broken jar?

* * *

No more I'll say, though warranted, Propertius, (Four 7 49-70)
since in your books my reign was long,
but swear by incantations none unravels — may
the threefold dog bay soft for me —
that I've kept faith. If false then let the viper hiss
and coil about my mound of bones.

'Two ways are given us across that hideous river:
all row this way or must that.
One bears adulterous Clytemnestra and the Cretan
queen disgraced as monstrous cow,
the other — see — is borne off in flower-hung skiff,
Elysium's roses scenting air:
the rhythmic lyre and Cŷbele's round cymbals make
the Lydian chords match mitred dance.
Andromeda and Hypermnestra, truly married,
tell their sad betrothal tales.
The first of arms unjustly shackled to cold rocks
and bruised by chains her mother forged,
and Hypermnestra tells the crime her sisters dared
for which her mind had not the strength.
In death our tears confirm our love, and I conceal
the many faithless sins of yours.

* * *

'Disdain no dreams that come from that blessed gate: when sent
they issue with the force of truth. (Four 7 70-80)

At night unloosed, we fettered shades can roam, and even
Cerberus can slip his chains,
but dawn compels return to Lethe's stagnant waters;
ferryman tots up his load.
Let others have you now, but soon I'll take you: mine
to mix your worn-out bone on bone.'

And having laid this mournful lawsuit out, the shade
dissolved, eluding my embrace.

Cornelia

Make no more sad my grave with weeping, Paullus: those
deaf shores will drink your tears unmoved. (Four 11 1-44)

Prayers may move the gods above, but, Charon paid,
the path is fixed unalterably.

The god of that halled gloom may hear, but his dark door
will give no passage to our prayers,
and when the dead wind through the Underworld, a pall
of dirt shuts off the burnt-out pyre.

So howled sad trumpets when the harmful fire was hurled
beneath the bier and bore me off.

What good was in my wedding, Paullus, forebears' triumphs,
children's pledges for my name?

Cornelia has not found the Fates more yielding: all
I am is what five fingers hold.

Condemned to darkness and the shallow drift of waters,
sedges clutching at my feet,
it's true I come too early here, but for no crime,
nor kindlier treatment for my shade.

If some Aeacus sit as judge before the urn
then let him weigh my lot as called,
his brothers counselling beside the chair of Minos,
forum silent with its Furies.

With Sisyphus at rest, and Ixion's wheel suspended,
Tantalus's thirst assuaged,
no Cerberus today will lunge at evil ghosts,
but chain hung loose from silent bars,
I'll speak my case: and, if not truly, have the sisters' task
of punishment weigh down my arms.

If any fame derives from fine ancestral trophies
ours are old Numantian bronze,
and, equally, Libōnes of my mother's line,
our house supported either side.

In time, with maiden's toga changed for nuptial torch,
and other headband in my hair,
I joined your couch — let stone record — to leave it, Paullus,
married to a single man.

I swear by forebear's ashes, those which Rome reveres,
and broken Africa respects,
by Perses emulating great Achilles, crushing
house my own forefather swelled,
that never have I loosened censor's laws, nor brought
one sin to cause this hearth to blush.
Cornelia never tarnished those illustrious trophies,
was exemplar to her house.

* * *

To Paullus I commend the pledges of our love; (Four 11 72-112)
my care for them burns on in ash.
Perform the mother's part as father; this whole troop
of mine is thrust into your arms.
You'll kiss them when they cry, and add a mother's kisses:
all the house is now your charge.
And if you're sad then do not show it: when they come
deceive their kisses with dry cheeks.
Be nights enough to wear out thoughts of me with, Paullus,
dreams enfolded round my shape,
and when in secret you address my semblance, speak
such words as I would answer to.

If house-door face another's wedding bed, a wary
mother on the couch once mine,

then honour her and, children, praise your father's marriage:
winning her she'll yield to you.

Do not extol the mother past too much, the new
will take unguarded speech as slights.

If he remember me, consoled by shadows, holding
still my ashes dear to him,
then he may find his old age softened, and avoid
the sadness widowers must feel.

Let time that was removed from me fill out your years,
my offspring please an ageing Paullus.

So will the house continue. I go willingly
if many mine extend its span.

My speech is ended. Rise from tears my witnesses:
the earth will give what life has earned.

To virtue heaven opens: have these bones conveyed
honourably to ancestors.