

**Goethe**

**Roman Elegies**

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## Translator's Introduction

Goethe (1749-1832) was in Italy, and Sicily, from 1786 to 1788, his visit having a profound influence on his poetic and philosophical development. Closer contact with the remains, in Rome, of the Roman Classical world, and, in Sicily, with Classical Greek architecture, deepened his knowledge and understanding of ancient Greek and Roman culture, influenced as it had been by the writings of Winckelmann. Classicism tempered his initial leanings towards Romanticism throughout his later career. *Iphigenia in Tauris* (1787), the *Roman Elegies* (1795) the prose journal *Italian Journey*

(1817), and the second part of *Faust* (1832), bear particular witness to this. During his stay, he lodged with the artist Tischbein (see his well-known painting, *Goethe in the Campagna*, of 1787) when the latter was in Rome. The text translated here is that of the original edition with its twenty elegies, published in German as *Römische Elegien* in Friedrich Schiller's literary periodical *Die Horen* (*The Horae, or The Hours*), not the later edition, with its additional four poems. The notes at the end of the translation offer explanations of the more obscure names in the Elegies.

## **Roman Elegies I**

Tell me, you Stones! O speak, you towering palaces!  
Streets, say a word! Spirit of this place, are you dumb?  
All things are alive in your sacred walls  
Eternal Rome; only for me, it seems, all is still.  
Who'll whisper to me, at what window  
Will I see the sweet thing who'll kindle me now, and quicken?  
Already I guess the ways, walking to her and from her,  
Ever and always, I'll go, while sweet time slips by.  
I'm gazing at church and palace, ruin and column,  
Like a serious man making sensible use of a journey,  
But soon it will happen, and all will be one vast temple,  
Love's temple, receiving its new initiate.  
Though you're a whole world, Rome, still, without Love,  
The world is not the world, nor can Rome be Rome.

## **Roman Elegies II**

Ask, now, whoever you wish, you'll not reach me,  
Lovely Ladies, and you, fine Men of the World!  
'Did Werther really live?' 'Was it really so?'  
'Which town can truly claim Lotte as resident?'  
Ah, how often I've cursed those foolish pages,  
That showed my youthful sufferings to everyone!  
If Werther had been my brother, and I'd killed him,  
His sad ghost could hardly have persecuted me more.  
So '*Malbrouk*' persecuted the British traveller  
From Paris to Leghorn, then from Leghorn to Rome,  
Then down to Naples, and if he'd sailed for Madras  
There too the harbour would have been filled with the song.  
Luckily, I've escaped! She's barely heard of Lotte,  
Or Werther, or knows the name of this man of hers.  
She sees in him a free, and vigorous stranger,  
Who lives among mountains and snow, in a wooden house.

### **Roman Elegies III**

Beloved, don't fret that you gave yourself so quickly!  
Believe me, I don't think badly or wrongly of you.  
The arrows of Love are various: some scratch us,  
And our hearts suffer for years from their slow poison,  
But others strong-feathered with freshly sharpened points  
Pierce to the marrow, and quickly inflame the blood.  
In the heroic ages, when gods and goddesses loved,  
Desire followed a look, and joy followed desire.  
Do you think the Goddess of Love was calm for long  
Once Anchises attracted her in the groves of Ida?  
If Luna had waited to kiss her beautiful sleeper,  
Ah, then envious Dawn would have woken him swiftly.  
Hero saw her Leander at a loud feast, at once  
Her hot lover leapt out into the midnight flood.  
Rhea Silvia the royal maiden went to the Tiber  
To draw water, and the God captured her there.  
So, Mars conceived his sons! – And so, a she-wolf  
Suckled twins; so, Rome became Queen of the World.

### **Roman Elegies IV**

We lovers are pious, we worship the powers that be,  
Seeking favour from every god and goddess alike,  
And so, no different from you, all-conquering Romans,  
Who housed the deities from the whole of the world,  
Carved, dark and stern, from black Egyptian basalt,  
Or shaped, from snowy marble, as lovely Greek maids!  
Yet it barely troubles the Eternal ones that we scatter  
Our rarest incense for the loveliest of their host.  
Yes, we happily confess that our daily devotions,  
Our prayers, to one in particular are consecrated.  
Playful, solemn, but joyful, we perform our secret rite.  
And secrecy *is* right, for all such consecrations.  
We'd rather have the Furies pursue at our heels,  
Or invite cruel punishment from Almighty Zeus,

Chained to the rock, or bound tight on Ixion's wheel,  
Than withdraw our thoughts from a task so divine.  
This deity's name is Opportunity. You'll know her;  
She often appears, though always in different forms.  
She might be Proteus' daughter, fair Thetis bore  
Whose cunning disguises fooled many a hero,  
For she now deceives the foolish, and the naïve,  
Teasing the sleeper, fleeing from those who wake,  
Yielding only to the vigorous, the swift-to-act,  
Who find her lively, tender, kind, seemingly tame.  
So, once she appeared to me, all tanned by the sun,  
Her hair trimmed, rich and dark, over her forehead,  
With little ringlets curling about her delicate neck,  
Her un-braided locks springing up from the crown.  
I mistook her not, that fair maid, as she hastened by;  
Knowingly, kisses, embraces she soon returned.  
Oh, how happy I was! And yet, those days are over;  
While I, Roman braids, am now bound up, with you!



### **Roman Elegies V**

I feel I'm happily inspired now on Classical soil:  
The Past and Present speak louder, more charmingly.  
Here, as advised, I leaf through the works of the Ancients  
With busy hands, and, each day, with fresh delight.  
But at night Love keeps me busy another way:  
I become half a scholar but twice as contented.  
And am I not learning, studying the shape  
Of her lovely breasts, her hips guiding my hand?  
Then I know marble more: thinking, comparing,  
See with a feeling eye: feel with a seeing hand.  
If my darling is stealing the day's hours from me,  
She gives me hours of night in compensation.  
We're not always kissing: we often talk sense:  
When she's asleep, I lie there filled with thought.  
Often, I've even made poetry there in her arms,  
Counted hexameters gently there on my fingers  
Over her body. She breathes in sweetest sleep,  
And her breath burns down to my deepest heart.  
Amor trims the lamp then, and thinks of the times  
When he did the same for his three poets of love.

### **Roman Elegies VI**

'How can you, Cruel one, grieve me with such words?  
Amongst you, do lovers speak so bitterly, harshly?  
If folk scorn me, I must endure it! Am I not guilty?  
Ah yes, but only guilty through being with you.  
To the envious neighbour, my attire bears witness  
That the widow no longer weeps for her husband, alone.  
Did you not, carelessly, come to me, in the moonlight,  
In a grey surtout often, your hair smoothed behind.  
Wasn't it you chose to mask yourself like a prelate?  
You'd be a prelate? Well now, tis a prelate you are!  
In sacred Rome it's hard to believe, yet, I swear,  
No prelate before e'er enjoyed my fond embrace.

I was poor, alas, I was young, well-known to those  
Who seduce us; Falconieri often gazed in my eyes,  
And Albani, that go-between, with tender missives,  
Lured me now to Ostia, now the Quattro Fontane.  
But none saw there the maid that with all her heart  
Ever hated those red stockings, the purple ones too.  
For: “You girls are always sure to be duped in the end,”  
Father said, though mother took things more blithely.  
And yet, in the end, it’s duped that I am; you scold me  
But it’s all for show, because you’re planning to flee.  
Go, you’re unworthy of women! We bear our children  
Next to our hearts, and likewise we bear our loyalty too,  
But you men who squander your passion and strength  
In our arms, dissipate all of your love there too.’  
So spoke my beloved, lifting her child from its chair,  
Pressing it, with kisses, to her heart, tears in her eyes,  
And I was ashamed that words from malicious folk,  
Had blackened, a moment, for me, so lovely a sight.  
Darkly the fire burns an instant, veiled in steam,  
When water, falling suddenly, covers the embers,  
But the heat soon disperses the clouds of vapour,  
New, and more powerful still, the flame rises again.

## **Roman Elegies VII**

Oh, how happy I am in Rome, remembering the times  
When grey days clung to me, back there in the North,  
The sky was dark, and weighed heavily on my head,  
The world around me colourless, formless, dull,  
And I'd sink to brooding over myself, trying to see  
Down the gloomy paths of my discontented spirit.  
Now the glow of brighter air shines round my brow:  
Phoebus, the god, calls up colour and form.  
The night shines bright with stars, echoes with gentle song,  
And the Moon shines clearer to me than Northern day.  
What happiness for a mortal! Do I dream? Does your  
Ambrosial palace, Father Jupiter, receive its guest?  
Ah, here I lie; to your knees extending imploring  
Hands. O, hear me, Jupiter, the Lord of Guests!  
How I came here, I don't know: Hebe has claimed  
The wanderer, and has drawn me to these halls.  
Did you command her to go and fetch a hero?  
Did Beauty err? Pardon her! Let error help me!  
Your daughter Fortune, too! She hands out noblest  
Gifts, like the girl she is, as the mood might take her.  
Aren't you the God of Hosts? Oh, then don't hurl  
Your guest downwards to Earth from Olympus again!  
'Poet, where are you climbing to?' – Forgive me:  
The high Capitoline Hill's your second Olympus.  
Accept me here, Jupiter, later let Hermes lead me,  
Quietly, by Cestius' Pyramid, down to Orcus.

## **Roman Elegies VIII**

When you tell me, Beloved, that, as a child,  
No one admired you, and your mother scorned you,  
Till you grew older, quietly maturing – I believe you.  
I like to think of you as an unusual child.  
The blossom of the vine ever lacks form and colour,  
But the ripe grape delights both us and the gods.

### **Roman Elegies IX**

With an autumnal light, the fire on the rustic hearth glows,  
Crackles sociably, sends sparks flying, how swiftly!  
This evening it pleases me more, since before it dies,  
And my fuel consumes itself, and to embers descends,  
My sweet girl will arrive; brushwood, then logs, will blaze,  
And the night, now warmed, will grant us its festival.  
Tomorrow, at dawn, she'll busily quit the bed of love,  
But only to waken the flame from the embers anew.  
Above all others, Cupid has granted her, the cajoler,  
The gift of rousing a joy, neath the ashes barely sunk.

### **Roman Elegies X**

Alexander and Caesar, Henry, and Frederick the Great,  
Would gladly have granted me half of their well-earned fame,  
If I could have granted them this bed for *one* night.  
But those poor fellows are held in Orcus' strong grip,  
So, alive, rejoice, that Love keeps you warm awhile,  
Before your fleeting foot is dipped deep in cold Lethe.

### **Roman Elegies XI**

For you, O Graces, the poet lays down a few leaves  
On the glistening altar, and a few rose-buds too;  
A confident offering. His workshop pleases  
The artist, if he sees the Pantheon about him:  
Jupiter lowers his brow, while Juno raises hers,  
Phoebus steps forward, shaking his head of curls,  
Minerva looks down coolly, Hermes, the flighty,  
Turns his gaze to the side, mischievous, tender.  
But it's after Bacchus, soft and sensuous dreamer,  
Cytherea sends her gaze, moist even in marble.  
For she likes thinking of his embrace, and asks:  
'Shouldn't a glorious son be standing by our side?'

## **Roman Elegies XII**

Do you hear those happy shouts, from the Via Flaminia?  
Beloved, it's the reapers, back home from far away.  
Having gathered the Roman harvest, they neglect  
To plait the wreaths, they themselves owe Ceres.  
No more, those festivals for the Great Goddess.  
Who, instead of acorns, gave us the golden wheat.  
Let us two celebrate, then, in joyful silence,  
Since two lovers may stand for a whole people.  
Have you ever heard of the sacred procession,  
That followed the victor home from Eleusis?  
The Greeks began it; within the walls of Rome,  
Only Greeks shouted: 'Come to the Holy Night!'  
Far fled the profane, while the novice shivered,  
Dressed in white robes, as a mark of purity.  
Then the initiate wandered, stunned, midst a circle  
Of unfamiliar figures, as if adrift in a dream.  
Snakes writhed on the ground; fair maidens bore  
Locked boxes, richly-wreathed with ears of corn.  
The priests gestured, murmuring their deep chants.  
The impatient acolyte waited, hoping for light.  
Only after many a trial, would he discover  
The secret symbol the holy circle concealed.  
And what was the secret? Simply, that Demeter  
Accommodated a hero; as she did, a while ago!  
On seeing Jason, now vigorous King of Crete,  
She revealed to him her deathless body's secrets.  
Then Crete was happy! The goddess' wedding bed,  
Swelled with ears of corn, the field rich with seed,  
While all the rest of the world languished, as Ceres  
Lingered beside her lover, enjoying her lovely task.  
The initiates, hearing the story, quite astonished,  
Winked at their lovers; see what a wink means, now?  
That myrtle bush casts shade on a sacred place!  
Our satisfaction will scarcely trouble the world.

### **Roman Elegies XIII**

Amor is still a rogue: believe in him, he'll betray you!  
That hypocrite came, saying: 'Trust me again this once.  
I mean well by you: you have, I know and I'm grateful,  
Dedicated both life and poetry to my worship.  
Look, I've even followed you to Rome! I'd like  
To do you a service of sorts in these foreign fields.  
Travellers always complain hospitality's poor:  
With Love's recommendation it proves first class.  
You're gazing now, in wonder, at ancient ruins,  
Sensibly wandering round this sacred place,  
Revering even more all the works that remain  
By rare artists, whose workshops I frequented.  
I created these forms myself! This time, excuse me,  
I'm not boasting: you must confess what I say is true.  
Now you serve me, idly, where are the lovely forms,  
Where are the colours and light of your inventions?  
Do you wish to create, my friend? The Greek school  
Is still open, the passing years fail to close its doors.  
I, the teacher, am ever young: and love youth.  
I don't like aged cunning! Listen now, look alive!  
When those happy ones lived, the ancient was new!  
Live happily, and the past will be living, in you!  
Where are the themes for your song? I'll grant them,  
You'll only learn of the highest style from Love,'  
So spoke the sophist. Who could argue with him?  
And, alas, I follow orders when my lord commands. –  
Now the traitor is keeping his word, granting a theme,  
Ah, and robbing me too of sense, and time and strength:  
A loving pair clasp hands, are exchanging glances;  
Affectionate tones, and words of precious meaning.  
Here lisping is conversation, stammering sweet speech:  
A hymn like this rises without verse or metre.  
Say how I found you, once, Dawn, the Muses' friend!  
Aurora, has Amor, the wanton, seduced you too?

You appear to me now as his friend, and wake me  
To a day of feasting again before his altar.  
I find the wealth of her hair over my breast!  
Her hand weighs on my arm that cradles her neck.  
How gladly I wake to find that the peaceful hours  
Show traces of the desire that lulled us to sleep! –  
She moves in her sleep, sinks down in the wide bed,  
Turns from me, and yet still leaves her hand in mine.  
True longing and heartfelt love bind us forever,  
And only our passion retains its right to vary.  
A touch of my hand, and I'll see those heavenly eyes  
Open again. – No! Let me take rest in her form!  
Don't open! You'll make me drunk, confused, snatch me  
Too soon from the calm pleasure of pure beholding.  
Her shape, how fine! Her limbs how nobly formed!  
If Ariadne, sleeping, was as fair: Theseus how could you go?  
Just one kiss on those lips! O Theseus, can you leave now!  
Gaze in her eyes! She wakes! – She holds you fast for ever.

#### **Roman Elegies XIV**

'Light me a lamp, boy!' 'It's still day. You'll squander  
Oil and wick for naught. Don't close the shutters yet!  
Behind the houses, the sun's dropped, not the hills;  
While it's a good hour, or so, till the curfew sounds!'  
'Do what I tell you, wretch!' I'm waiting for my girl;  
Console me, lamp, till then, you fair herald of night.

#### **Roman Elegies XV**

I'd never have gone with Caesar to Britain; Florus  
Would have soon dragged me into the next *popina*!  
For I hate the northern mists and fog far more  
Than their busy population of southern fleas.  
And I welcome you even more, you kindly taverns,  
*Osterias*, as the Romans most aptly name you,  
Since you showed me my love, beside her uncle,

Whom she often deceives so she can meet me.  
Here was our table full of convivial Germans;  
Over there the girl took her place by her mother,  
While shifting about on the bench most artfully,  
Till I had a sight of her neck, and half her face,  
She spoke a little louder than Roman women will,  
Sending a glance towards me, spilling her wine,  
Which ran all over the table, her dainty finger  
Drawing moist circles on the wood's patina.  
She entwined my name with hers; ever eager  
I gazed at that little finger. Aware I was watching,  
She finally drew, there, the 'V' of a Roman 'five'.  
With an 'I' before it, and, soon as she knew I'd seen,  
Traced circle on circle, to rub it out completely,  
Though the 'IV', that 'four', still lingered in my eye,  
I sat there silently, chewing my burning lips,  
Half-bitten by lust and sin, and half by desire.  
And Night's far away! And four hours to wait!  
Lofty Sun, you're here still, gazing on Rome;  
No greater a sight you've seen, none greater will see,  
As Horace, your priest, in his rapture foretold.  
Don't dally here, now! Come, turn your face away,  
Swiftly, willingly, from Rome's seven hills.  
For a poet's sake, shorten those glorious hours  
That the blissful artist admires so greedily.  
Take a last glowing look at those high facades,  
The domes, the pillars, the tips of the obelisks.  
Plunge into the sea; view, the sooner, tomorrow,  
What the gods, for centuries, gave you to enjoy.  
Those moist shores, long overgrown with reeds,  
Those sombre hills, shaded by bushes and trees,  
Revealed a few poor huts, till you suddenly saw  
Them seethe with folk, a band of fortunate thieves,  
Who dragged all of their plunder to this place.  
The rest of the world scarce worthy of your gaze,  
You saw a world rise here, saw that world in ruins,  
And, from the rubble, one well-nigh greater rise!



So that I long may see it, boldly lit by your eye,  
May the skilful Parcae spin out the thread for me!  
Yet hurry it on, now, the sweetly-signalled hour,  
What joy! Here already? No! But it did strike three.  
Thus, dear Muses, you've cheated the clock again,  
This stretch of time that's kept me from my love.  
Farwell! I'll flee, with small fear of offending you,  
For, though proud, you ever grant Cupid first place.

### **Roman Elegies XVI**

'Why didn't you come to the hut in the vineyard, today?  
Alone, as I promised, my love, I awaited you there;  
Dearest, I nearly entered, but saw your uncle by chance,  
Lingering near the vines, glancing this way and that.  
Off I went, quietly!' 'Oh, a phantom drove you away,  
A scarecrow flung together from sticks and old rags!  
By helping him so, I've only done myself harm.  
Well, the old man's wish is granted: the boldest of birds  
He's scared away, one after his wine, and his niece!

### **Roman Elegies XVII**

There's many a sound that annoys me, but most of all  
It's the baying of dogs I hate, those ear-splitting yelps.  
Yet there's one whose noise I hear with a thrill of joy,  
The hound, yapping away, that my neighbour reared;  
Because he once barked at my love, when, furtively,  
She came to meet me. He nearly betrayed our secret.  
Now when I hear him barking, I think: 'She'll come.'  
Or I think of the time when, long-awaited, she came.'

### **Roman Elegies XVIII**

One thing above all annoys me, and there's another  
I find an abomination, every fibre outraged,  
At the mere thought of it. I'll confess, my friends,

It's annoying to be alone in one's bed all night,  
While it's abominable to fear, on the path of love,  
Venomous serpents haunting the roses of desire;  
When, yielding oneself to the loveliest peak of joy,  
Comes sibilant Care afflicting one's drooping head.  
That's when I'm happy Faustina is sharing my bed,  
Proving herself, most gladly, the truest of the true,  
Young men are roused by the charm of obstacles,  
I like to take my time, enjoying a lasting pleasure.  
What bliss it is! Exchanging our confident kisses,  
Drinking in, and pouring out both breath and life.  
Thus, we two savour the night, while we listen,  
Breast against breast, to the storm, the pouring rain.  
And so, the new day dawns, and brings, to this hour,  
Fresh and festive flowers to adorn the coming day,  
O Quirites, allow me my happiness, and the god  
Grant, to all, this first and last of earthly delights.

### **Roman Elegies XIX**

It's not easy to keep one's good name, since Fame  
Strives against Amor, whom I know as my lord.  
Where did it spring from, their hatred of one another?  
It's a tale from ancient times, that I'll tell once more.  
Ever the mightiest goddess, to all the company  
Most unbearable, always seeking the final say;  
That's how she's always been at the feasts of the gods,  
Her overbearing voice hated by great and small.  
Once, quite full of herself, in her arrogant way  
She claimed she'd enslaved Jove's glorious son,  
'One day, O Father of the Gods, I'll bring you,  
My Hercules,' she cried in triumph, 'new born;  
No longer the Hercules that Alcmene gave you,  
His devotion to me has made him a god on earth.  
I've no doubt, when he gazes up at Olympus,  
You think he's looking at you; he's searching for me.  
Most worthy hero! Only to earn my favour,

Lightly, his vigorous step treads untrodden ways.  
 Yet I meet him half-way, as well, and praise him,  
 Sounding his name in advance, before he begins.  
 You'll marry me, to that conqueror of Amazons,  
 One day he'll be mine. Gladly, I'll call him spouse!  
 The gods fell silent; none dared reply to her boast.  
 Since, when angry, she ever works someone harm.  
 But Amor, slipping away, unseen, enslaved the hero,  
 Subdued through the artless power of a lovely face.  
 And he decked out the pair; she wore the lion's skin  
 At her shoulder, his unmanageable club at her side;  
 While he sprinkled the hero's bristling hair with petals,  
 And, in his mighty hand, placed a distaff as a jest.  
 With the scene mockingly complete, Amor now ran,  
 Shouting loudly, throughout the heights of Olympus,  
 'A great deed is done! Heaven, Earth, and the Sun,  
 Unwearied on his infinite path, never saw the like!'  
 All hastened to him, all believing the naughty lad,  
 He spoke so earnestly, nor did Fame linger behind.  
 Who most rejoiced on seeing the hero humiliated so?  
 Juno, it was, granted Amor a warm and friendly smile.  
 Fame, beside her, felt shame, embarrassment, despair!  
 She laughed, at first; 'Here's but a masque,' she cried,  
 'I know my hero too well; these are only actors!'  
 But soon, with pain, she realised: it *was* Hercules!  
 (Vulcan had not felt a thousandth part as vexed  
 On catching his wife and her bold friend in his net,  
 When, at the height of the action, he'd trapped them,  
 Entwining that pair, clasped in their close embrace.  
 How amused they were, young Bacchus and Mercury,  
 Admitting it must be sweet to lie there, breast to breast  
 With lovely Venus. 'Don't free them yet, that pair.  
 Let us view her so, once more, Vulcan!', they cried,  
 While the old man, cuckolded, fastened the net still tighter.)  
 As for Fame, in shame and fury she swiftly fled.  
 Since then, there's been no peace twixt her and Amor.  
 As soon as she chooses a hero, the boy's on his trail,

He that admires her the most, he best knows how to grip,  
While the most morally strict are the most in danger.  
He that tries to escape him, descends from bad to worse.  
He'll lead him to some girl; if he foolishly scorns her,  
Then the hero will feel the fiercest shafts from his bow,  
Hot now for a friend, or lusting for beasts of the field.  
He who feels ashamed of his love, is the first to suffer,  
The hypocrite's pleasures marred by bitter remorse.  
At the same time Fame, the goddess, all eyes and ears,  
Follows Amor; if she sees you with him, beware!  
Her frown will scare you, her angry look of contempt,  
Condemning, fiercely, houses he often frequents.  
And so, it is with me; I already feel pain; the goddess,  
Jealously seeks me out, to uncover my secrets.  
I follow the ancient rule, and, in silence, revere her;  
As the Greeks atoned for such royal quarrels, so must I.

## **Roman Elegies XX**

Strength, generosity, courage become a man,  
Ah, but deepest reticence becomes him more.  
Discretion, conqueror of cities, ruler of men,  
Beloved goddess who's led me safely through life,  
What a fate is mine! The laughing Muse, and Amor,  
That rogue, are both unlocking my sealed mouth.  
Ah, already the King's shame's harder to hide!  
Neither a crown nor a Phrygian cap can conceal  
Midas' long ears: his closest servant has seen,  
And at once the secret weighs heavily on his breast.  
He'd gladly bury it deep, and so find release:  
But Earth refuses to guard such secrets as these.  
Reeds spring up, and rustle and lisp in the wind:  
'Midas, Midas the king, he's grown long ears!'  
Now too I'm finding it harder to keep a sweet secret:  
Ah, how quickly the heart's fullness flows from the lips!  
There's no friend I can trust: she might scold me:  
No man either: he might be a dangerous rival.  
And I'm not solitary enough, or so full of youth,  
As to confide in the woods or the echoing cliffs.  
Hexameter, and Pentameter, I'll tell it to you,  
How she delights me by day and enchants me by night.  
Pursued by hosts of men, she avoids the snares  
The impudent bold, and the secretly cunning, lay:  
Cleverly, daintily, she slips by, knowing the path  
Where her, eagerly-listening, lover awaits her.  
Stay, Luna, she comes! Don't let the neighbours see:  
Rustle, breeze, in the trees! So, none hears her step.  
And you grow and bloom, my beloved songs,  
And sway in the gentlest breath of the loving air,  
Reveal to the Romans, like those gossiping reeds,  
The lovely secret at last of this happy pair.

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### Notes to the Elegies

**Elegy I.** Goethe captures here something of the tone and spirit of his Renaissance predecessor Joachim Du Bellay's *The Ruins of Rome*.

**Elegy II.** 'Malbrouk' is the song 'Malbrough s'en va-t-en guerre' a burlesque lament on the falsely-rumoured death of John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough (1650–1722) after the Battle of Malplaquet in 1709. Lotte and Werther are the famous characters from Goethe's prose work, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

**Elegy III.** Anchises, was the father of Aeneas, the hero of Virgil's *Aeneid*; Venus his mother. Luna, the Greek Selene, was the moon-goddess. Leander swam the Hellespont to be with his love, Hero, and

was eventually drowned while attempting the crossing. Rhea Silvia was the legendary mother of the twins Romulus and Remus, who founded Rome.

**Elegy V.** The three love poets of ancient Rome whom Goethe refers to, are Ovid, Propertius, and Tibullus. Horace is mentioned elsewhere in the Elegies, though he was not regarded primarily as a love-poet. Catullus, though he wrote poems to his *Lesbia*, was of an earlier generation to the three.

**Elegy VI.** The prelates Falconieri (his position making him a red-stockinged man of the Church) and Albani (a purple-stockinged one) are the names Goethe assigns here to his two philanderers, their names probably borrowed from those of eighteenth-century prelates. Ostia was the ancient port of Rome, at the mouth of the Tiber. The Quattro Fontane is a group of four Late Renaissance fountains located at the intersection of Via delle Quattro Fontane and Via del Quirinale in Rome. They were commissioned by Pope Sixtus V, built at the direction of Muzio Mattei, and were installed between 1588 and 1593.

**Elegy VII.** Hebe was the Greek goddess of youth, and a cupbearer to the gods. The extremely well-preserved Pyramid of Cestius is sited near the Porta San Paolo and the Protestant Cemetery, in Rome. It was built as a tomb for a certain Gaius Cestius. Orcus, was the Greek Hades, the god and personification of the underworld to which mortal spirits passed after death.

**Elegy X.** Heinrich (Henry) is presumably Heinrich I of Germany, (876-936). Frederick II, the Great, had died in 1786, just before Goethe's visit to Italy. Lethe was the river of forgetfulness in the underworld.

**Elegy XI.** Cytherea is an epithet for Venus-Aphrodite, from her island of Cythera.

**Elegy XII.** The Via Flaminia, in Rome, is part of the ancient Flaminian Way that ran from Rome to Rimini (Ariminum) on the Adriatic coast. Demeter-Ceres was the goddess of harvest. Eleusis was the sanctuary of Demeter and

her daughter Persephone, on the coast, on the road from Athens to the Isthmus of Corinth. It was where the rites of the Eleusinian Mysteries were performed in honour of the goddess. Jason, according to myth, slept with Demeter, on Crete, during the marriage-feast of Cadmus and Harmony.

**Elegy XIII.** Ariadne, the daughter of Minos of Crete, and sister to Phaedra, fell in love with Theseus, helped him to slay the Minotaur, but was abandoned by him, only to be rescued by Dionysus-Bacchus.

**Elegy XV.** For Florus, see those of Horace's Epistles BkII written to Julius Florus, on campaign with Tiberius. *Popinas* were trattorias in ancient Rome. The Parcae, the three Fates in Greek mythology, were Atropos, Clotho, and Lachesis. Atropos spun the thread of each person's life, Clotho drew it out, and Lachesis cut the thread, to end it.

**Elegy XVIII.** Faustina is the name, probably a pseudonym, of the widow with a child, who is Goethe's lover in the Elegies. Various theories as to her identity have been put forward, none conclusive. Quirites was the ancient name, possibly of Sabine origin, for the citizens of Rome.

**Elegy XIX.** Fame, the Roman Fama, was the goddess of reputation, gossip and rumour. Hercules, the Greek Heracles, was the offspring of Jove's dalliance with Alcmena. Juno, antagonistic towards Heracles, tasked him with the Twelve Labours, the ninth of which was to retrieve the girdle of the Amazon queen, Hippolyta. Vulcan, the blacksmith of the gods, forged an iron mesh, and entrapped his wife Venus, as she committed adultery with Mars, the god of war.

**Elegy XX.** Midas was, in myth, a Phrygian king, who was given the ears of an ass by Apollo in revenge for Midas' denigrating the god's lyre-playing. He hid his ears with a turban, but his servant unable to contain his knowledge of the secret, murmured it to a hole in the ground, after which a bed of reeds appeared there, and the reeds whispered the tale abroad. The last line anticipates Rilke's ending to his Duino Elegies.