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Jealous Lovers, Jealous Poets

Despite recent interest in the passions in ancient literature, Roman love elegy has been almost completely neglected. Elegy depends crucially upon the passions: without love, anger, jealousy, pity and fear, the genre could not exist at all. Of all the passions which arise in elegy, jealousy is arguably the focal point of the elegiac lover's emotional experience. In this paper, I first explore the importance of jealousy in the elegiac relationship and then discuss two poems of Propertius (1.5, 2.34) in which we find tensions in the evidence. Jealousy occurs when a rival threatens the love relationship and it usually causes the poet-lover great pain. Yet in cases where the danger comes from other poets, the anxiety and anger the narrator typically feels for a rival give way to sympathy and even support. The more tolerant attitude towards jealousy in these two poems can help explain the extent to which this emotion predominates in elegy.

What is crucial in 1.5 and 2.34 is the conversion of rivals Gallus and Lynceus to a life of love. What the poet-lover shares with his rivals is precisely the demand for exclusivity and thus he can identify with them while still remaining a competitor. The question of jealousy arises in a context that has more to do with the narrator's identity as a poet than with possession of the beloved. The complexity of his amorous relations has implications for his literary relations to his poetic rivals. Here, too, they have in common a larger aim while still vying with each other.

The portrayal of a jealous lover vacillating between pride and insecurity in love can thus be seen as something more: a depiction of a poet who is both proud of his work and anxious about his reading public. The poet hopes that his poetry will circulate, but the beloved's promiscuity poses a risk to the carefully selected audience the poet had in mind.