Caught Red-Handed: Fear of Exposure in Roman literature*

The Oxford English Dictionary defines fear as "the emotion of pain or uneasiness caused by the sense of impending danger, or by the prospect of some possible evil"[1]. The words 'danger' and 'evil' here point to something often found in studies of fear: an interest in the extreme cases, where the threat involves bodily harm or death. A chapter on fear in a recent handbook on emotion opens with this: "Consider a typical fear episode. You are strolling down a lonely mountain lane when suddenly a huge wolf leaps towards you." A chapter on fear in a different handbook begins by asking the reader to imagine a metal trash can hurling towards them, and then adds a further detail: "a vicious and snarling dog follows close behind"[2]. Studies of fear in ancient literature also tend to examine it in contexts where life hangs in the balance, especially war and tyranny[3]. Even the ancient philosophers focus more on examples of fear involving death and pain, although they also consider other sources like poverty and disgrace[4].

Perhaps this makes sense: why not try to understand and combat our very worst fears? Yet fear does not arise only from anticipation of attacks, disaster, or the threat of annihilation. There are many lesser things that can fill us with dread, and they, too, are damaging and unpleasant. The lover in Ovid *Amores* 1.4 fears that his own techniques at adultery are being used against him and that he will lose his *puella* as a result[5]. The *adulescens* in Terence's *Eunuchus* who has raped a girl fears not so much punishment

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[1] *OED* 3rd ed., 2a.

[2] The first example is drawn from Orederu 2024, 152, the second from Tappolet 2009, 326. See also Orederu et al. 2024, 154-6 for an overview of leading approaches to fear in the scholarly literature on emotion. Note that Ben-Ze'ev 2000 suggests that hope and fear are less intense than happiness and sadness, explaining that "the temporal distance existing in hope and fear between agent and the emotional object reduces emotional intensity" [473].

[3] Hence most of the studies are about epic and historiography: see e.g., Levene 1997, Travillian 2013, Estèves 2020, and Agri 2022. There are also exceptions, e.g., De Poli 2018 on fear in drama, Berno 2025 on Plautine comedy and Vassalle 2025 on Sapph. 31.

[4] See Arist. *rhet.* 2.5 1382a21-5, Cic. *Tusc.* 4.16, 4.46 (referencing *paupertas* and *ignominia*), 4.64, and Lucr. 3.830-1093. For a recent discussion of the treatment of fear in Cic. *Tusc*. and Lucretius, see Estèves 2020, 48-63.

[5] Ov. *am.* 1.4.45-46: *multa miser timeo, quia feci multa proterue, / exemplique metu torqueor, ecce, mei*.

as what others will think of him when they find out[6]. And in *Aeneid* IV, Aeneas is horrified when Mercury reprimands him for lingering in Carthage instead of sailing to Italy to found a new homeland for the Trojans [4.279-82]:

> At vero Aeneas aspectu obmutuit amens,
> arrectaeque horrore comae et uox faucibus haesit,
> ardet abire fuga dulcisque relinquere terras,
> attonitus tanto monitu imperioque deorum[7].
>
> But indeed Aeneas, beside himself, was struck dumb at the sight,
> his hair stood up in terror and his voice stuck in his throat.
> He burns to get away and leave these sweet lands,
> stunned by the warning and divine order.

Aeneas' fear is clearly marked by standard symptoms: the desire to flee, the horripilation, and loss of speech are all typical of other representations of fear, as we shall see[8]. Yet like the characters in the examples from Terence and Ovid, he does not fear anything immediately life-threatening, but instead that he has made a costly mistake. For him, as for the *adulescens* in Terence's play, what is frightening is the change in how other people see him, including the gods, and the need to re-evaluate who he is[9]. In cases like these, fear seems to blend with shame or guilt and embarrassment, even though this latter group of emotions is typically contrasted with fear rather than associated with it[10].

In what follows, I examine a few other cases of fear drawn from Horace *Odes* I, Terence's *Adelphoe*, and Propertius IV, ones in which characters are caught and confronted by someone they have disappointed. They are afraid of being exposed, and the signs of their fear are on full display. The selection of examples from different genres reveals a focus shared by literary authors which philosophers largely overlook, emphasizing the contribution literature makes to the study of ancient attitudes towards emotion. At the same time, the genres represented here – lyric, comedy and love elegy – are not the standard places to look for the representation of fear in Roman literature, though ideal for the kind of scenarios I am interested in here, given their interest in exploring human flaws and weakness in the context of close relationships. As we might expect, generic conventions shape each depiction, whether that means the openness of a Horatian ode versus the drive towards reform and resolution in comedy, or the didactic nature of comedy compared to the elegiac lover's tolerance for his (and his mis-

[6] See Ter. *Eun.* 610-611 and 855.

[7] Mynors 1969. All translations are my own.

[8] See Orederu 2024, 154 on 'fight, flee or freeze' as typical responses to fear, and Öhman 2004, 574 on the "three aspects of fear and anxiety – subjective experience as reflected in verbal reports, physiological responses, and avoidance behavior." For a detailed survey of the vocabulary of fear in Roman epic and historiography, see Estèves 2020, ch. 1.

[9] It is Dido of course who is most closely associated with *pudor*: see e.g., Verg. *Aen*. 4.321-324 and Gorab Leme 2020, 92-98.

[10] On *pudor* in Roman culture, see Kaster 2005, 28-65, and on its relationship to fear, Kaster 1997, 4-5. Fear is more usually associated with hope or *spes*: see e.g., Ben-Ze'ev 2000, ch. 16 who discusses the two together, and Agri 2022, Ch. 2. On the challenges of distinguishing among shame, guilt and embarrassment, see Parrott 2024 and Lewis 2004.

tress') failings. But these are merely inflections of common elements all the examples share. To begin with, while in each case fear is initiated by an external threat, our texts highlight the interiority of the emotion and the way that fear is intertwined with someone's own history, identity, and choices. A second dimension emerges when the person who is afraid would prefer to run or hide, but instead has to face someone else who 'reads' the fear from their face and gestures, affecting not only how characters see themselves, but their realization about how others see them[11]. And finally, all of the examples reveal the way that the visibility of a character's fear can lead to its manipulation by others, whether this is for domineering ends, something more restorative, or a combination.

I. The landscape of fear [Horace *Odes* 1.23]

I begin with Horace *Odes* 1.23, a poem in which the speaker tries to seduce a girl named Chloe by cajoling her to give up her childish fears and realize she is ready for a man. The poem has attracted attention both for its simile comparing Chloe to a fawn and for the speaker's rhetoric, which is clearly problematic. His attempt at seduction relies centrally on the girl's fear, though we only hear the details from the speaker's perspective rather than from the frightened character directly, as we will in our other two examples[12]. The poem nonetheless gives us signs of Chloe's interior experience, in particular her emotional ties to her mother and the natural landscape.

On one level we can read the poem as an obvious attempt to calm Chloe's fears about an attempted sexual advance:

Vitas inuleo me similis, Chloe,
quaerenti pauidam montibus aviis
    matrem non sine uano
        aurarum et siluae metu.

nam seu mobilibus veris inhorruit
aduentus foliis, seu virides rubum
    dimouere lacertae,
        et corde et genibus tremit.

atqui non ego te tigris ut aspera
Gaetulusue leo, frangere persequor:
    tandem desine matrem
        tempestiua sequi uiro[13].

[11] On facial expression in emotion, see e.g., Darwin and Ekman 2009 and Ekman 1999, who argued there are universal expressions, at least for a core set of emotions, and for a survey, cf. George 2013.

[12] While Horace describes the pursuit of young girls described as animals in odes like 2.5 and 3.11 as well, the focus on fear in 1.23 is unique. In 2.5, there is no mention of Lalage's fear. In *Odes* 3.11, though the poet refers to Lyde's fear (*metuitque tangi*, 10), this is its sole mention, and the majority of the poem concerns the power of song to persuade and bring pleasure.

[13] Shackleton Bailey 1985, modified in lines 5-6 to keep the transmitted reading *ueris…adventus* instead of *vepris a…ad ventum*. On the textual problems in these lines, see Nisbet and Hubbard 1970, 276-277 and Mayer 2012 *ad* 5-6.

> You avoid me like a fawn, Chloe,
> who searches the trackless hills for its frightened mother,
> not without empty terror
> of the breeze and woods.
> For whether the arrival of spring shudders with its trembling leaves,
> or a green lizard pushes apart the bramble bush,
> it trembles in heart and limb.
> And yet I'm not pursuing you to crush you
> like a fierce tiger or Gaetulian lion:
> stop following your mother,
> now you're ready for a man.

In the eyes of the speaker, Chloe is caught at a critical moment, like a fawn separated from its mother who has been approached by another animal[14]. Everything scares the fawn: the breeze, the trembling leaves, the sudden movements of a lizard, and of course the intruder himself, who appears to her as a wild and threatening beast. Its mother is also frightened, presumably at the danger the fawn faces without her protection[15]. The speaker offers this detailed picture of fear in the natural world in order to distance it and make Chloe feel more confident about him. He presents her fears as foolish and baseless [see *uano metu*, 3-4][16]. He denies that he poses any threat, though by saying that he is not a tiger or Gaetulian lion he seems to put in mind the very possibility he is trying to deny[17]. He suggests that she should embrace her time of life and readiness to leave childhood behind. The speaker tries to influence Chloe's decision by trivializing her fears, which he portrays as solely and needlessly about physical danger.

The speaker has a selfish interest in persuading Chloe to abandon her childish ways. Yet in trying to do so, he employs a simile that reveals the very things that matter most to her in the life he wants her to leave behind, in particular the attachment to a parent and the landscape in which they spent time. He describes the fawn's search for its mother as having the same intensity as his desire: just as the speaker pursues [*persequor*, 10] Chloe, so the fawn pursues [see *quaerenti,* 2 and especially *sequi,* 12] its mother. And it is not only the fawn who is afraid without its mother: the fawn's mother is also afraid for her offspring [*pavidam matrem,* 2]. The affection between mother and offspring is both powerful and mutual, in contrast with the speaker's erotic desire, which is new [see *aviis montibus,* 2] and to all appearances one-sided[18]. At the end of the poem, the speaker suggests it is inevitable that Chloe will go with him, as inevita-

[14] Horace draws from Anacreon fr. 408 here, though there the fawn is newborn, not *tempestiva viro* as in 1.23. See Nisbet and Hubbard 1970, 273-4, Pasquali 1920, 133-36, Campbell 1985, 36, and Hullinger 2016.

[15] The ancients believed that animals had emotion, with the exception of shame (see Kaster 1997, 9). The issue is debated in contemporary work, though there is consensus that animals experience fear: see Orederu 2024, 154-155 and 158.

[16] The reference to *vano metu* in lines 3-4 may be a translation of the Epicurean phrase *kenai phobiai*, or empty beliefs. See *inanis metus* at Lucr. 3.982 and Annas 1989 on the differences between 'natural' and 'empty' beliefs.

[17] This is often noted: see e.g., Nielsen 1970, 374, Ancona 1989, 52-3, Glinatsis 2022.

[18] Nielsen 1970, 378 and Mayer 2012 *ad* 11 suggest that the emphasis on the mother also prompts Chloe to consider her own future role as a parent.

ble as a change in seasons [see lines 11-12]. But in using the simile to paint Chloe's behavior as childish and unreasonable, the speaker allows the emotional dimensions of a young girl's identity and attachment to her parent to emerge, highlighting fear's connections to more than just the threat of danger or bodily harm brought on by his presence.

The description of the fawn's activity in the woods also provides access to Chloe's own experience and connection to childhood. According to the speaker, the fawn startles every time it encounters something moving in the forest [lines 3-8]. He describes fear as almost a kind of contagion, something that spreads from the mother to the fawn, and then from the fawn to everything it encounters, from the breeze and leaves above down to the lizards and bush on the ground[19]. Some critics have suggested that this activity marking the 'arrival of spring' also indicates sexual awakening and hence Chloe's readiness for a man, something that suits the speaker's interests[20]. But we do not need to adopt the speaker's perspective. The emphasis on the animation of the natural environment reveals something more than the fawn's excessive fear of everything in its path.

One way to interpret the trembling and rustling in the landscape is to see it as a response to the fawn's fear, a reaction that reveals nature's sympathy and concern for the fawn, like the shared anxiety experienced by both the fawn and its mother[21]. The movement in the hills could also be read as outward manifestations of the fawn's fear: the moving air might symbolize the fawn's rapid breath, for example, and the rustling of leaves and bush its nervous attempt to find a footing [see *aviis montibus,* 2]. A character's emotions are often projected onto the landscape in literary treatments, and this is especially true in the case of fear, where an unexpected noise or clap of thunder can be both a cause of fear and a manifestation of what that fear feels like inside the body[22]. The description of spring's arrival opens up several avenues of interpretation, some of them in conflict with the speaker's interest in portraying fear run rampant. Instead we see the way that the physical setting in the simile works together with the representation of the mother to highlight what is at stake: the significance of the fawn's ties to parent and familiar surroundings, which emerge not as causes of its fear, but as prospective of loss provoked by the experience of fear. The Anacreontic fragments that are taken to be models for Horace highlight his different aims in 1.23[23]. While fragments 346 and 417 focus on the lover's frustrations at being snubbed or rejected, Horace emphasizes not only the speaker's attempted seduction, but the girl's internal struggle over whether to leave her past behind. In doing so he brings out the way that under-

[19] On the contagious effects of emotion, see e.g., Hatfield - Cacioppo - Rapson 1993 and Cheshin 2026.

[20] On erotic imagery in the simile, see Nielsen 1970, 378, Bannon 1993, Ancona 1989, and Ronnick 1993.

[21] See Devereaux 2024, 165 for a similar argument about an emotional response between the landscape and fawn, though she describes the fawn as responding to the movement in the woods rather than the woods responding to the fawn, as I do here.

[22] See, e.g., Johnson 2012 on the 'landscape of fear' in examples from Horace's *Satires* and *Epodes* and Estèves 2020, ch. 2 for a detailed treatment of *loci horrendi.* On metaphors of emotion and embodiment, see Cairns 2016 and Devereaux 2024.

[23] See Nisbet and Hubbard 1970, 273-4, citing Anacreontic fragments 408, 417, and 346, which include similar animal imagery and, in the case of fragments 408 and 346, the presence of a mother as well.

standing the threat of fear only makes sense in the context of someone's history and relationships.

The recognition of someone else's fear points to their vulnerability, and this is what allows the speaker to try to manipulate Chloe in the way that he does. He employs traditional arguments of seduction, framing his interest in terms of pursuit, escape and violence, however much he denies it. He is convinced he is right, referring to the cycle of the seasons and Epicurean attitudes about excessive emotion and seizing the moment [see *tempestiva* 12] to bolster his authority[24]. But his perspective, though dominant, cannot entirely occlude Chloe's experience, especially given the absence of any resolution. Her decision remains unknown and in the future, unlike what we find in our next two examples. The architecture of the poem places Chloe's name at the end of line 1 and *viro* at the end of line 12, almost as far apart as they can be, with the speaker still in pursuit[25].

II. Fear and shame [Terence's *Adelphoe*]

In the next example, we hear about fear directly from the person experiencing it, and this allows us to see more clearly the connections between fear, personal history and reputation. Conflicts between fathers and sons are common fare in Roman comedy, but we find in Terence's *Adelphoe* some of the most extended discussions about child rearing, both ideals and reality. I focus here on a scene between Aeschinus and his father Micio where Aeschinus has to face a father who has recently learned a number of alarming things about him. Aeschinus is understandably panicked at being found out, and his vulnerability in the moment allows his father to manipulate him and punish him for his own good. Unlike the unresolved ending of *Odes* 1.23, manipulation here leads to understanding and reconciliation, not exactly what we would expect from the use of intimidation[26].

It is late in the play when Micio and Aeschinus finally appear on stage together, and Aeschinus has thus had plenty of time to upset his father and the neighbors. Not only has he impregnated the girl next door and promised to marry her, he has also stolen a music girl from a pimp for his brother, giving the appearance that he wants to back out of the wedding. Aeschinus has kept all of this a secret from his father, but rumors have been circulating about him in town. When he goes to the neighbors to try to explain, his father is already there, and Aeschinus realizes the cat is out of the bag [610-14]:

> Discrucior animi: 610
> hocin de inprouiso mihi mali obici tantum
> ut neque quid me faciam nec quid agam certu' siem!
> membra metu debilia sunt: animu' timore obstipuit:

[24] See also *Carm.* 1.1 on the use of Epicurean argument for the purpose of seduction. On the influence of Epicureanism and especially Philodemus on Horace, see e.g., Armstrong - Fish - Johnston - Skinner 2004 and Yona 2018.

[25] The male speaker and Chloe are juxtaposed in line 9 by means of the pronouns *ego te*; does this represent wishful thinking, or the speaker's physical approach? For other observations on word order in this ode, see Ancona 1989, 53.

[26] See Berno 2025, who argues that fear in Roman comedy is productive in the way that it drives forward the plot.

pectore consistere nil consili quit.
vah
quo modo me ex hac expediam turba[27]?

I'm in agony: this trouble has been thrown at me so unexpectedly that I don't know what to do with myself or how to act! My limbs are weak with fear, my mind is frozen with terror. I can't settle on any plan. Oh, how am I going to get out of this mess?

His response shows many of the hallmark features of fear: the use of vocabulary like *metus* and *timor,* a desire to hide and avoid the threat, a loss of control of his body, and a feeling of being overwhelmed and having no direction[28]. Even later in the play, when the confrontation with his father is over and things have been resolved, Aeschinus still describes himself as fearful [*eo vereor magis,* 698], because he is so happy at this point he worries it cannot last. Fear is to some extent stereotypical of the *adulescens* character in Roman comedy. Yet in the passage quoted above, Aeschinus' fear is not about the ephemerality of happiness, but about his own behavior, which he has described in an earlier part of his monologue. He has disappointed the girl and her mother, disappointed his father, and now everyone is talking about it. Not only does he have to face his father and his reputation: as the catalogue of mistakes makes clear, he has also had to confront himself[29].

Given his predicament, it is perhaps unsurprising that Aeschinus blushes when he and his father are face-to-face[30]. Blushes are normally associated not with fear, but with shame and humiliation, emotions that are typically viewed as quite different from fear, as mentioned earlier[31]. Fear is understood to be a threat imposed from outside, while shame and related emotions stem from an internal sense of right and wrong[32]. But the connection between fear and shame here is in fact neither surprising nor incidental to this moment in the play. Both emotions were raised powerfully in a debate at the beginning of the play, where Micio and his brother challenged each other over whether fear or love is the best way to instill *pudor* in a child[33]. Micio had boasted about using love rather than fear, confident that his son would always come to him with any mistake or problem. Suddenly he is confronting the failure of his method, and the blush thus provides a small moment of pleasure for him: "*erubuit, salua res est,*" he says to himself at line 643. Yet immediately after, he turns to using fear to force a

[27] Kauer - Lindsay 1926. The lyric meters also highlight his emotional distress.

[28] See additional references to his fear later in the same passage: *metuo* [627] and *horresco* [633].

[29] See lines 625-630, especially the last two in which he openly admits his guilt: *haec adeo mea culpa fateor fieri: non me hanc rem patri, / utut erat gesta,indicasse. exorassem ut eam ducerem.* See Kaster 2005, 56 on connections between sight and *pudor*: "the notion of "seeing yourself being seen" allows both for actual situations of being seen and for seeing yourself being seen with the mind's eye."

[30] Actors wore masks in the Roman theater, so the audience would not have seen the blush themselves, but only learn about it from Micio's comments. It is also possible that the actor playing Aeschinus used a gesture indicating shame as well (e.g., a hung head or slumped shoulders: see Parrott 2024, 189.) On the representation of gesture in the illustrated mss. of Terence, see e.g., Keefe 2015 and Dutsch 2016.

[31] See Kaster 1997, 7 on blushing and other physical indications of *pudor*, and also Cic. *Tusc.* 4.19 contrasting the symptoms of shame and fear: *ex quo fit ut pudorem rubor, terrorem pallor et tremor et dentium crepitus consequatur…*

[32] See Kaster 1997, 4-9.

[33] See lines 26-125 and Kaster 1997, 4-5 for a discussion of this scene. Demea returns to this debate at the very end of the play, vv. 985-997.

confession out of Aeschinus. Micio seems to recognize that love will not suffice, and that *pudor* does not always surface easily or without dread and anticipation. Fear and shame are closely interconnected in these cases, so closely that it is impossible to say whether they occur sequentially or simultaneously[34].

Micio's reading of Aeschinus' emotions – the hesitation to see his father on the other side of the door, the fear that must still have been visible in his body and face, the blush on top of it – all point to the fact that Aeschinus is vulnerable and capable of reform. This must be what leads Micio to try to get him to confess, even if it means using the very technique he had forcefully rejected earlier. What follows, however, feels brutal. Micio refers to the person who treated the girl next door so poorly in the third person, but it is obvious to Aeschinus that his father is criticizing him, and to his face. Aeschinus tries to mount a defense for his actions or at least criticize the remedy his father is suggesting, but his argument crumbles and he only looks worse. Finally he breaks down in tears, and at this point Micio finally relents, admitting this has all been a ruse and that his son can marry the girl after all. The progression of Aeschinus' emotion – from fear to shame, back to fear and defensiveness, and finally to tears (of humiliation? or relief? or both?) – shows the negotiations that are taking place both within Aeschinus and between him and his father. What is at issue here is not a beating or exile or being dragged to court. Rather, the emotional rollercoaster represents the pain of disappointing a parent and others who thought you were trustworthy or reliable. It depends upon Aeschinus' history and relationships with those who once saw him differently than he appears now. The gap that opens up between that former self and the present one is characteristic of *pudor*, but it is fear which is spelled out in the language of the script, highlighting Aeschinus' difficulty in accepting the position he is in.

Perhaps because of the history with his father, Aeschinus is able to work things out with him. It is worth pointing out that while Roman comedies tend to have a "happy ending," not all sons do end up talking to their fathers: many times they run away and let a slave or other stand-in do the explaining[35]. But the *Adelphoe* emphasizes the value of facing rather than avoiding unpleasant conversations, and we see this in the other relationships in the play as well[36]. Both Micio and his brother Demea have conversations with Hegio, a friend of the neighbors who have appealed to him for support. Hegio pressures both of the older brothers to make sure their family does the right thing and stand by the girl, even threatening to go to the lawcourts if they do not [line 497]. Micio is thus in the same position as Aeschinus, or something close: while he himself has not done anything wrong, he is held responsible for his son's behavior. The negotiations and assurances that take place in the meetings with Hegio avert disaster and public scandal, another positive outcome that results from an unpleasant revelation. Yet at the same time, Hegio's involvement highlights an added dimension to the fear that Aeschinus feels and the concern of his father. Not only has Aeschinus' behav-

[34] See also *pudet* and *puduit* at *Ad.* 683 and 690.

[35] See, e.g., *Ad.* 517-539 concerning Aeschinus' brother, or Antipho in *Phorm.* 215-219.

[36] Contemporary work on the emotions often emphasizes their beneficial and productive dimensions, in contrast with what we find in Hellenistic philosophy. See e.g. Neu 1980 on jealousy, Parrott 2024, 191 on shame and related emotions, and more generally, Frijda 1986.

ior damaged the relationship with his father, but it has come close to damaging the family's reputation as well.

III. Fear and justification [Propertius 4.8]

My last example of fear and its manipulation comes from Propertius 4.8. It is often remarked that despite the shift in Book 4 to aetiological themes and Roman history, Propertius cannot forget Cynthia, who appears in two elegies, 7 and 8. Both poems engage closely with fear as well as love. In 4.7 the ghost of Cynthia haunts the lover's sleep, appearing to him burnt from a funeral pyre and furious at his inadequate show of grief. In 4.8, the reader is surprised to discover that Cynthia is alive again and still threatening the lover[37]. This time it is because after telling him she would be away for the day, she came home early and found him cheating on her. Nor is this the only example of fear in 4.8: the opening of the elegy describes the ritual of Juno Sospita and a *virgo* who must confront a snake to prove her chastity. The elegy includes two tests of fidelity, then, or three if you count the allusion to Odysseus' return to Ithaca and reunion with Penelope in *Odyssey* 22 and 23[38]. The playful comparison of the unfaithful lover with both Penelope and a *virgo* are part of the reason why the elegy has often been dubbed a comedy[39]. But the tone does not keep the poem from being useful for a study of fear and the way it can expose anxieties about how we are seen by others. The male lover is afraid of Cynthia's reaction when he is caught in an act of infidelity. But he is not just afraid: as we will see, he also experiences shame and guilt and uses different strategies to try to redeem his reputation and himself.

At the beginning of 4.8, Cynthia has left town for Lanuvium. She claims she is going to celebrate the worship of Juno Sospita, but the lover knows the real reason for the trip is another man [15-16]. He decides to get revenge by inviting over two girls named Teia and Phyllis and having some fun of his own. It turns out he does not find either one attractive, and nothing goes on between them. Yet there is no way of denying his compromised position when Cynthia bursts into the house unexpectedly and finds them all together [49-54]:

> cum subito rauci sonuerunt cardine postes,
> nec leuia ad primos murmura facta Lares.
> nec mora, cum totas resupinat Cynthia ualuas,
> non operosa comis, sed furibunda decens.
> pocula mi digitos inter cecidere remissos,
> pallueruntque ipso labra soluta mero[40].

[37] As Hutchinson 2006, 189 observes, her return from the dead underscores the fictionality of both the affair and the collection.

[38] On the relationship of 4.8 (and also 4.7) to the *Odyssey,* see Evans 1971 and Warden 1996. See also O'Rourke 2024, 178-188 on the importance of 4.8 to the *Aeneid* as well. Walin 2009-2010 focuses on the "three tests of chastity" and parallels between the descriptions of the ritual and party at Propertius' house, as I do here, but his interest is directed not so much at the Propertian lover as at the role of Cynthia in both 4.7 and 4.8.

[39] On the poem as comedy, see the bibliography cited in Janan 2001, 201 n. 1.

[40] Heyworth 2007.

> Suddenly the doors screeched on their hinges and loud sounds were heard at the front of the house. Without delay, Cynthia breaks down the folding-doors, her hair in disarray, but still beautiful in her rage. The cup fell from my slackened fingers, and my lips, though stained with wine, grew pale.

We see what are by now a number of familiar dimensions to the representation of fear. Cynthia's entrance shocks the lover: she moves from outside to inside in just three lines, representing the lack of warning or time to prepare[41]. He loses control, dropping his cup and turning white[42]. The repetition of *nec, nec, non* at the beginning of lines 50, 51 and 52 seems to indicate his disbelief that this is actually happening. Hardly faithful herself, Cynthia nevertheless holds him to a high standard, one that he has failed to meet.

For her part, Cynthia recognizes his fear and uses it to advantage, seizing control as if on the battlefield [see *exuuiis* and *uictrix* in line 63][43]. She attacks and routs her rivals, then targets the lover himself. While we might take this to be a sign of that extreme fear and threat of physical injury discussed at the beginning of the paper, in fact the mistress' blows have a special significance for the elegiac lover and indicate passion rather than any real danger[44]. In the end, her rage and his fear lead not to a termination of the relationship, but proof of the lovers' ongoing interest in each other, allowing them to move on from the catastrophe. Like Aeschinus who had to accept his father's anger and disappointment, the Propertian lover has to swallow his pride and give in to everything Cynthia demands – and he does so willingly, in keeping with the typical submissiveness of the lover. In one of several allusions to the Homeric source, the couple use sulphur to purify the home after the rivals' 'slaughter,' and the poem ends with them going to bed[45].

As with the example from Terence, fear leads to humiliation first, before the lovers' reconciliation. Cynthia's attack is described as a *spectaclum,* one equivalent to the overthrow of a city [56]. She behaves like a victor reaping spoils, while he is a captive, deprived of his rights [70][46]. When Cynthia orders the slave Lygdamus to be punished for part in the debacle, the male lover expresses sympathy, and in keeping with the trope of *servitium amoris***,** claims that he is just a slave as well [70][47]. Nor is this kept private within the home, something important in the *Odyssey*: apparently the entire Esquiline is buzzing with gossip [19-20][48].

Throughout the entire confrontation, the lover does not say anything to Cynthia in

[41] See Fedeli 2015 *ad* 51-52.

[42] Hutchinson 2006 and Fedeli 2015 *ad* 53-54 compare this moment to Hom. *Od.* 22.17, when Antinous drops his cup after being struck by Odysseus' arrow.

[43] On the elegiac tropes of *militia amoris* and *servitium amoris* (mentioned below) in Roman love elegy, see Maltby 2006, 156-160 and Kennedy 2012.

[44] See Yardley 1976 and Caston 2012, Ch. 4. Physical blows are connected not just with love, but with writing poetry [see, e.g., Prop. 2.1.13-14]. Schultz 2006 discusses martial imagery in 4.8 in arguing that Juno Sospita was associated not just with chastity and fertility, but also Lanuvium and Rome's military strength.

[45] Janan 2001, 126-27 expresses skepticism about a 'happy ending.'

[46] See also *triumphum* and *spectaclum* in lines 17 and 21, and the remarks of Fedeli 2015, 1010. On legal imagery, see Hutchinson 2006, 202-203 and Dee 1978.

[47] On the prevalence of fear among slaves in Plautine comedy, see Berno 2025.

[48] Cf. Hom. *Od.* 22.411-412 and 23.133-140.

his own defense, but submits entirely to his mistress' commands. Yet the representation of his enslavement is of course a choice he makes, a role he can adopt or discard, just as he also affects the role of Penelope waiting for Odysseus' return, or of a host from comedy or satire whose dinner goes awry[49]. Indeed, however much he seems to agree to Cynthia's demands, the lover also reveals that he does not want to be viewed just through her eyes and worries about his status and reputation, not only with Cynthia, but perhaps also with his readers. The first way he tries to defend himself is by criticizing Cynthia. He says he only invited over the other women because of Cynthia's own infidelity [27-8]. He describes the man Cynthia is with as a lowlife [24-26] and scorns her for riding on her chariot dressed up like Juno Sospita[50]. At the same time, he says he had little interest in Teia and Phyllis and could not stop thinking about Cynthia [*Lanuvii ad portas, ei mihi, solus eram*, 48]. It is almost as if he were not actually 'present' at his own party: transported to Lanuvium, he was deaf and blind to the girls' charms [47]. The lover uses these characterizations to suggest that if anyone should feel ashamed, it is Cynthia. Perhaps for a moment he imagines that he is really not that different from Penelope, who entertained the suitors without sleeping with them.

He also justifies himself by assimilating himself to the *virgines* described in the passage about the ritual of Juno Sospita [9-14][51]:

talia demissae pallent ad sacra puellae,
cum tenera anguino creditur ore manus.
ille sibi admotas a uirgine corripit escas;
uirginis in palmis ipsa canistra tremunt.
si fuerunt castae, redeunt in colla parentum,
clamantque agricolae: 'fertilis annus erit.'

Girls grow pale when sent down to such rites, when their youthful hand is entrusted to the serpent's mouth. He snatches up the food offered by the virgins: the baskets tremble in the girls' hands. If they've been chaste, they return to the embrace of their parents and the farmers shout: 'It will be a fertile year.'

The girls tremble and grow pale [*pallent,* 9] at the prospect of meeting the snake and having their virtue tested, just as the male lover's lips turned white at the sight of Cynthia. The girls bring food to the snake, just as the lover served dinner to Cynthia's rivals. And after the girls have returned from the cave, they are embraced by their parents, a physical reunion like the one the lover has with Cynthia. However implausible it may seem, the lover uses these parallels to suggest his own innocence. Some critics have suggested that girls' descent into the cave and encounter with the snake represents a sexual experience[52]. But the girls can barely stand any contact: they tremble and recoil at even the thought of the snake. They are not alone at resisting the touch of

[49] See Hutchinson 2006 *ad* 43-44.

[50] See Walin 2009-2010, 139.

[51] Walin 2009-2010 details many parallels between the two passages. See also Fedeli 2015, 1010, Janan 2001, 125, and cf. Hutchinson 2006, 190, who notes important differences between the two passages.

[52] See Turpin 1973, Noonan 1983, 46, and Janan 2001, 116-127. Cf. Fedeli 2015, 1026-1027, who expresses skepticism about the vocabulary and a sexual interpretation, as does Hutchinson 2006 ad 7.

something unappealing, for of course the male lover has suggested that he was completely indifferent to Teia and Phyllis as well[53].

We may wonder why the lover did not say any of these things to Cynthia's face. Perhaps he was too overwhelmed, or made a calculation about the least risky way to respond. Or perhaps the whole defense was invented after the fact to make him sound better. But whatever his reasons, we sense how far he is reaching to explain and vindicate himself. He makes a case that he is not the only person in the affair who has been unfaithful. He points to the fact that even paradigms of chastity and loyalty have been caught in what looks like compromising positions. He is desperate to restore his relationship and reputation. And it seems that he will say almost anything to accomplish that.

IV. Conclusions

Fear is often defined as a threat of real or imagined danger, viewed as something external to ourselves. As we have seen, however, that 'danger' can also be something that threatens us from within. It stems from our own decisions and behavior, and the harm concerns the effect on our relationships with others and how they regard us, and thus also on how we view ourselves. It is this deep connection with our reputation and how we may have failed to meet others' expectations that makes the kind of fear examined here so painful, even when it is not a question of life or death.

In all of our examples, characters were caught doing something wrong, or at least were made to feel as if they were. In *Odes* I.23, the speaker makes Chloe confront a change in her identity of which she was apparently unaware or in denial. His invitation to follow him and leave her mother fills her with fear, since it suggests she needs to see herself and her relationship with her mother in a new light. In the *Adelphoe,* Aeschinus is caught in a lie and faces losing the girl he promised to marry. At the same time, his behavior towards the girl and defensiveness in front of his father lead his father to be deeply disappointed in him, which forces Aeschinus to view himself differently as well. As for the lover in Propertius IV.8, there is no way to hide the fact that he invited over two women to dinner in Cynthia's absence, and no way that he will not let Cynthia dominate him in the way that is true to their history together and the conventions of the elegiac genre. Yet he searches for a way to appease Cynthia and also preserve his reputation, and in the course of the poem finds ways to protest that he did not really do anything that terrible, or at least any worse than what Cynthia did to him. Fear generates not just panic and a sense of danger. It also forces characters to think about how they look to someone else, the mistakes they have made, and what really matters to them.

That is not to say that the authority of the one giving the lesson stands uncontested. What reveals a mistake or weakness in one person may also point to the flaws in another, especially if the latter seeks to gain from it in some way. The speaker in the *Ode* who warns about the dangers of excessive emotion and ignoring the march of time does so with obvious self-interest. Aeschinus' father Micio boasts about his childrearing methods, but he is shown up both by Aeschinus' behavior and the humiliating position Demea puts him in at the end of the play. And Cynthia's role as a kind of Odysseus and

[53] See *caeco* used both for the descent into the cave [5] and the lover's aversion [47].

triumphant general is full of comedy and parody. The irony and humor in these contexts do not detract from what we can learn about the Romans' view of fear in domestic or intimate contexts. Rather we find an interest in the dynamics of the emotion, not just the struggle taking place within a single character, but that character's interaction with others who are also interested in preserving their status and position.

The concern with reputation helps explain a different aspect of fear discussed here, its relationship to shame and humiliation, even when these are not always marked by vocabulary or symptoms in the text. This absence points to some of the challenges of studying emotion, whether we rely on the occurrence of certain terms, which will not catch everything going on in a text, or focus on a single emotion at a time, as if one occurs in isolation from others.[54] In Catullus 10, the speaker is caught in a lie as he tries to impress a girl. There is no terminology here for either fear or shame. Instead, we hear only his irritation in the final lines, as he bristles and tries to extricate himself from the situation.[55] Should we imagine that the only thing the speaker feels is anger, and not any anxiety or embarrassment? Alternatively, in the main examples examined here, should we expect that the characters feel only fear when someone discovers their betrayal, and not shame or guilt?

I suggest that we should think about fear in these cases as a *prelude* to shame and guilt, part of the dread of exposure before either the shame or guilt has set in.[56] This sequence is what we find in the *Adelphoe,* when Aeschinus feels fear before he blushes, and then when he grows afraid again before he cries. While it is the confrontation with his father that fills him with shame, his fear anticipates that moment, capturing some of the challenges in facing one's mistakes and giving space to thoughts about what to say or do and whether there is still the possibility to run away. Although we do not find such a linear sequence in Propertius 4.8, I have suggested that the lover's fear also leads to shame, something that we see emerge from the different layers of his story-telling in the elegy. The dominant narrative describes his indefensible behavior and fearful capitulation to Cynthia's power over him. But in other parts of the elegy, he challenges that depiction, revealing that he feels he has been unfairly charged and cannot bear to look so bad.

Fear is not just a passing episode that ends when the immediate danger is over. The kinds of fear we have been looking at prompt us to review and reflect on our relations, the expectations on us, and how well we have measured up to them; and that can further lead to changed behavior and commitments in the present and the future. What is essential about this kind of fear are the stakes involved, and unlike bodily harm and death, they are social and moral in nature. In their treatment of fear, these Roman poets primarily focus not on physical dangers but on one's social standing in the eyes of others.

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[54] Cf. several studies of interconnected emotions, e.g., Fusillo 2018 on the Greek novel, Sanders 2021 on the representation of Medea in A.R. III, and most recently, Cairns - Campeggiani 2025.

[55] Catull. 10.33-4: *sed tu insulsa male et molesta uiuis,/ per quam non licet esse neglegentem.*'

[56] Cf. *Tusc.* 4.64 where Cicero describes fear as preliminary to pain: *Est enim metus, ut aegritudo praesentis, sic ille futuri mali. Itaque non nulli aegritudinis partem quandam metum esse dicebant, alii autem metum praemolestiam appellabant, quod esset quasi dux consequentis molestiae.*

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Riassunto: La paura riguarda sempre una minaccia, e le nostre paure più profonde riguardano spesso minacce di danno fisico o di morte. Eppure, queste non sono le uniche forme di danno che possiamo subire, sebbene tale aspetto venga trascurato nelle trattazioni filosofiche antiche. Esamino tre casi tratti dalla letteratura romana (dalle *Odi* I di Orazio, dagli *Adelphoe* di Terenzio e dal Libro 4 di Properzio) in cui i perso-

naggi manifestano evidenti segni di paura che non scaturiscono da un nemico o da una divinità irata, bensì dalla necessità di confrontarsi con qualcuno nei cui confronti potrebbero aver mancato o che potrebbero aver deluso. In tali contesti, la paura non è intrecciata alla speranza, come nei casi di violenza, ma alla vergogna e all'umiliazione, le quali mettono a nudo una vulnerabilità che altri personaggi possono manipolare. In tutti questi esempi, la paura concerne il modo in cui si viene percepiti dagli altri ed evidenzia le sfumature del gestire relazioni intime, nelle quali possono essere in gioco la lealtà e la reputazione.

Abstract: Fear always concerns a threat, and our worst fears are often about threats of bodily harm or death. Yet these are not the only kind of harm we can suffer, though this gets overlooked in ancient philosophical treatments. I examine three cases from Roman literature (from Horace's *Odes* I*,* Terence's *Adelphoe,* and Propertius' Book 4) in which characters show obvious signs of fear that stem not from an enemy or an angry god, but being forced to confront someone they may have failed or disappointed. Fear is not intertwined with hope here, as it is in violent cases, but with shame and humiliation, which expose a vulnerability other characters can manipulate. In all these examples, fear concerns how one is regarded by others and highlights the nuances of navigating close relationships in which loyalty and reputation may be at stake.