

## ROMAN BIRTHDAYS IN THE ELEGIAC STORY-WORLD

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The article analyses private Roman birthday parties as they are represented in Augustan poetry, to discuss to what extent literary texts from the Augustan period can be trusted as sources revealing historical Realien. It revisits some of our knowledge regarding these celebrations and is especially interested in those birthday rituals referenced in the poems and considered private birthdays. The article makes interpretative remarks on poems where this historical knowledge contributes to our understanding of the poems as literary artworks, but since a large number of poems are covered, no in-depth analysis is attempted.

*Key words:* birthdays, elegy, Augustan poetry, *genethliaca*, Tibullus, *Corpus Tibullianum*, Ovid, Censorinus

### *Introduction*

The private birthday celebration is a recurring *topos* in Latin elegiac verse, but one that represents everyday life much more closely than other *topoi*. Recurring motifs, such as the excluded lover, the various cures for love and the witch, belong more to poetry than to the lived experience of the poets, in describing rituals, traditions and scenes of private birthday celebrations. Birthdays were celebrated by everyone. As such, this particular motif offers a view into everyday life in Republican Rome and is an example of how a motif from everyday experience functions in conjunction with motifs taken from literary convention.

This article has two aims. First, it revisits some of the evidence regarding the celebration of Roman birthdays as it occurred in the first century BCE. The cultural history of birthday celebrations in Rome has been neglected. The *New Pauly* considers Wilhelm Schmidt's *Geburstag im Altertum* (1908) the last significant monograph on the subject.<sup>1</sup> Second, the use of the birthday celebration as a poetic motif has also been neglected especially when it comes to the exact nature of the birthday ritual described in poetry. I will make a few remarks on what this historical knowledge contributes to our understanding of the poems as literary artworks, but since a large number of poems is covered, no in-depth analysis is attempted. Lastly, the article includes some discussion on the extent to which

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<sup>1</sup> Also from the early twentieth century, Emanuele Cesareo's *Il carne natalizio nella poesia latina* (1929) deals in part with *genethliaca*. A few articles from later in the previous century contain some discussion, which will be discussed later.

literary and especially poetic texts from the Augustan period can be trusted as sources revealing historical *Realien*. Using literary sources, especially personal, subjective literature such as elegy, is notoriously difficult. Yet, the analysis of the celebration of a private birthday – something everyday, politically unencumbered, and collectively shared in Roman society – can serve as a useful test case for the inquiry.

There are three important points that need to be mentioned at the outset: (1) Elegiac poetry should be regarded as fiction, but a fiction placed in a Roman world. The Rome in which most of the action takes place very closely resembles the real Rome. (2) Private birthday celebrations are Roman and not Greek, hence, this motif is not taken from Greek examples, like much else in Roman poetry. (3) We do have inscriptions and some archaeological evidence for private birthday celebrations against which the evidence from poetry can be measured.

Much of the content of elegiac poetry is invented. Nevertheless, the city in which it is set and many of the people it mentions are known, and the situations in which the characters find themselves are authentic. Poetry may be fiction, but genres such as epic poetry, and to a lesser extent the satirical poetry of Horace and Juvenal, share much with ancient historiography.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, the story-world in Roman love elegy is often felt to be too personal or too small to contain worthwhile historical information. The story-world of Roman love elegy is mostly situated in Rome and is inhabited by a limited number of characters,<sup>3</sup> usually the poet, his girlfriend, a circle of friends (and enemies), patrons, and acquaintances. When what is told by a poem, strays beyond the confines of the speaker's personal sphere, as it sometimes does, there is a suspicion that this historical information is used as a rhetorical prop to serve poetic ends and is not wholly to be trusted. Finally, although the elegiac story-world often resembles the historical world in which it is set, sometimes very closely, it is never clear exactly where the story-world ends and where the real world begins. The use of birthday celebrations in elegy circumvents this problem to some extent.

The commonplace nature of birthday celebrations makes their use in poetry a useful source for cultural historical details. The birthday celebrations themselves

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<sup>2</sup> This has been shown by Woodman. The introduction to *Latin Historiography and Poetry in the Early Empire* makes the point (Miller and Woodman 2010:1–7) and much of the rest of the collection is built upon Woodman's use of poetry for history. Woodman's pertinent articles are now collected in Woodman 2012.

<sup>3</sup> The designation 'character' is pointed. These are assumed to be fictional creations even though they may resemble people that exist outside the poetry.

are usually not the point of a poem, but the poetry relies on the description of such usual practises and lived experiences for rhetorical effect.

Common elegiac motifs can plausibly be used without spoiling the audience's suspension of disbelief, *viz*: the lament of a locked-out lover, the magical crimes committed by witches, or the cruelty of the girlfriend. Although such events occur often in the poetic story-worlds, they are not verifiable, and even if they were, it would not matter. Historical events, such as the return of the Roman standards lost by Crassus, the dedication of the Temple of Apollo on the Palatine, or indeed the order of the spectacles at the Triple Triumph rarely encroaches upon the small cast in elegy and do not influence the characters in their daily life. In the story-world, these are incidental to the fundamental importance of the poet's night-time escapades and miserable hangovers.

The very demotic nature of the private birthday ritual makes the difference. The vividness of the story-world is to a certain extent enhanced by references to events that occur or have occurred in the world the audience inhabits, but what really enhances the feeling that the story-world is a real world, are the references to shared lived experiences. One can go so far as to say that the magic of Roman elegy lies in its depiction of the shared lived experiences of the audience – falling in and out of love, being poor, drinking at parties, and celebrating birthdays.

A second objection to extracting reliable historical data from elegy is its great debt to Greek poetry. Much of Roman literature is modelled on Greek precedent. The reception of Greek literature in Rome includes, among others, tropes, stock characters, typical themes and topics, and a system of conventions. The Roman birthday ritual, however, is unique to the Romans and completely unlike anything the Greeks celebrated.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, we can cautiously assume that the Roman private birthday ritual found in the poetry is modelled on the shared experience of Romans and not on the experience of reading Greek literature.

A third, and final reason for why the *topos* of the birthday ritual is a good test case for the attempt to extract cultural history from poetry is that we have other kinds of documentary evidence against which to evaluate the information supplied by the poetry. To be sure, these other sources might not present us with factual information either, but private correspondence (especially if unpublished) is very close to what people actually did or said.

The primary sources related to the celebration of an individual's birthday are scattered over five centuries and comprise published correspondence (2<sup>nd</sup> century CE and later), epigraphy (also 2<sup>nd</sup> century and later), and literature

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<sup>4</sup> Argetsinger (1992) collected birthday poems from the *Greek Anthology* but explains (1992:180) that these are all from Roman times and none pertains to private birthday celebrations.

(Plautine comedy, Augustan poetry, and a few pieces from Persius and Martial). The non-fictional sources, that is, sources describing antiquities, tell us surprisingly little about how Romans celebrated their private birthdays. Our most complete source is a treatise by Censorinus titled *De Die Natali*, written in 238 and dedicated to his patron Quintus Caerellius as a birthday gift (2.1).<sup>5</sup> We also have published private letters by Marcus Aurelius (Fronto: *Ad M. Caesarem* 3.10) and Pliny the Younger (*Ep.* 6.30), and there is a famous birthday invitation recovered from Vindolanda (*Tab. Vindol.* 291)<sup>6</sup> dated to about 100 CE and discussed originally in Bowman and Thomas (1987:137-140).

Our earliest sources in which Roman birthday celebrations feature are from Plautus.<sup>7</sup> The description of preparations for Ballio's birthday in Plautus' *Pseudolus* is the most extensive. *Pseudolus*, as most of the literary sources that mention birthday celebrations, assumes that the audience is familiar with what private birthdays entail and uses this shared cultural knowledge to make its own point. The humour in the episode from *Pseudolus* presents a simple example of how the text depends on cultural historical information for its message and how cultural historical information can be acquired from a literary text. Ballio, the master of the house and a miser (a stock character in Roman comedy), is arranging a birthday party for himself. The intention is to receive as many expensive presents as possible while spending as little as possible on the party. To this end, he instructs the prostitutes working for him to extract preposterously lavish gifts from their clients to bring to him on his birthday.<sup>8</sup>

The poetic sources reveal the most details regarding birthday celebrations; of these, the Augustan elegists are by far the most forthcoming. These sources may be divided between poems presented as birthday gifts and poems featuring birthday celebrations. Poems dedicated as birthday gifts or poems composed as a celebration (or mourning, in the case of Ovid) of the speaker's own or someone close's birthday

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<sup>5</sup> Despite the title, by far the greatest part of the book pertains to the development of the foetus and the calendar.

<sup>6</sup> Bowman and Thomas 1987 assign it the number 85.057. The tablet is on display at the British Museum and can be found in their online collection with the acquisition number 1986.1001.64.

<sup>7</sup> Preparations for a birthday party are central in Plaut. *Pseud.* 160–191 and 775–778 but also see the references in *Capt.* 174; *Curc.* 656; *Epid.* 638; *Rud.* 471.

<sup>8</sup> Birthday gifts feature in Martial 8.64 and 10.87 and a section from Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* (1.399–412) also has a humorous take on the economy of birthday gifts. We shall turn to this later.

are often called *genethliaca*.<sup>9</sup> However, the generic label is sometimes also applied to poems that only feature a birthday celebration.

The list of Latin elegiac *genethliaca* usually includes Tib. 1.7 and 2.2, two Sulpicia poems from the *Corpus Tibullianum* ([Tib.] 3.11 and 3.12), Prop. 3.10, Hor. *Carm.* 4.11, and Ov. *Tr.* 3.13 and 5.5.<sup>10</sup> To what extent all of these poems can be classified as *genethliaca* is not clear; Argetsinger (1992), for one, avoids the term *genethliaca* when discussing them.<sup>11</sup> For the purposes of this discussion, however, poems celebrating a birthday and poems featuring a birthday celebration are both useful. So, to the list, we can add three poems that feature birthday celebrations: *Corpus Tibullianum* 3.14 and 3.15 and a passage from Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* (1.399–412).

Roman elegy often presents well-worn topics in the form of enumerations or lists. The lists of historical or epic topics in *recusationes* about which the poet cannot or will not sing is well known. Likewise, the charms of the poet's *puella*, mythological examples of (un)faithful women, the pleasure of living in the country, and rivers at the edge of the world, are also typically given in list form. Because birthday celebrations are often presented in a similar list-like form, it suggests that this, too, was a clichéd topic.

The discussion will start at the hand of Tib. 2.2, which contains a general description of what is portrayed as a typical Roman private birthday.

<i>dicamus bona uerba: uenit Natalis ad aras:</i>	1
<i>quisquis ades, lingua, uir mulierque, faue.</i>	
<i>urantur pia tura focis, urantur odores</i>	
<i>quos tener e terra diuite mittit Arabs.</i>	
<i>ipse suos Genius adsit uisurus honores,</i>	5
<i>cui decorent sanctas mollia sarta comas.</i>	
<i>illius puro destillent tempora nardo,</i>	
<i>atque satur libo sit madeatque mero,</i>	
<i>adnuat et, Cornute, tibi, quodcumque rogabis.</i>	
<i>en age (quid cessas? adnuit ille) roga.</i>	10
<i>auguror, uxoris fidos optabis amores:</i>	
<i>iam reor hoc ipsos edidicisse deos.</i>	12
...	

<sup>9</sup> The delimitation of this genre is that of Cesareo (1929), who considered the Roman birthday poem as constituting a subgenre – the *genethliacon*. See especially Cairns 1971.

<sup>10</sup> The list is from Heyworth and Morwood 2011:197, which includes a bibliography.

<sup>11</sup> Argetsinger 1992:175 sees three different types of celebrations of *dies natales* – private birthdays, the birthdays of emperors, and the birthdays of temples and cities.

*eueniat, Natalis, auis prolemque ministret,*      21  
*ludat et ante tuos turba nouella pedes.*

Let us only speak good words: the Natalis approaches the altar: whoever is here, man or woman, hold your tongue. Let fire burn the sacred incense, burn the resins which the gentle Arab sends from his rich land. Let the Genius attend to see his honours, and let soft garlands wreath his sacred hair. Let his temples drip with pure spikenard, let him be filled with cake, and tipsy with wine. May he agree, Cornutus, to whatever you will ask. Go on, ask, come on (Why hesitate? He nods). I prophesy that you will wish for a wife's faithful love: I think this the gods themselves have learnt by now.

...

Natalis, let it be so and grant offspring and children, and let a crowd of young ones play around your feet.

Tib. 2.2 presents itself as a typical *genethliacon*. The poem starts with a ritual call for silence (*dicamus bona verba*) or at least a call that no inauspicious words be spoken, while the Genius approaches the altar. Some details of the celebrations are mentioned before the birthday boy is called upon to make a wish.

The speaker's ritual call to avoid speaking ill-omened words is typical of various religious ceremonies and indicates that birthday celebrations have a religious component.<sup>12</sup> In Roman elegy, speakers frequently don the persona of a leader of a religious ritual, most often in the opening lines of poems.<sup>13</sup> The call for silence also features in a birthday poem of Ovid's (*Tr.* 5.5.5–6), which celebrates the birthday of his wife who is still in Rome.

*lingua favens adsit, nostrorum oblita malorum,*  
*quae, puto, dedidicit iam bona verba loqui;*

Let there be words of good omen, I think, the tongue, forgetful of our misfortunes, has unlearned how to speak propitious words.

The speaker of the *genethliacon* is not always the one in charge of the ceremony and sometimes plays the role of an interested attendee. This ritualistic part of the birthday celebrations was probably a family affair, where the genius of the

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<sup>12</sup> Cairns 1971:149–150 makes much of Propertius' concern for bad omens on the birthday (*Prop.* 3.11) and links this concern with the general concern of Romans to the avoidance of blood sacrifices on such days. For more on this point, see below.

<sup>13</sup> The prime examples are *Hor. Carm.* 3.1–2 and *Prop.* 4.6.1–2. In these the poetic persona is almost vatic as he is about to speak about political matters.

*paterfamilias* was especially important.<sup>14</sup> The birthday celebrations also included other ritualistic activities. The altar with burnt offerings, libations and ritual pronouncements will be discussed below.

For all the solemnity of the ritual, it is not completely clear who the recipient of the offerings is: the *Natalis* or the *Genius*? The *Natalis* seems to be more than merely the birthday itself (*contra* Cairns, 1998:202–234), but is not always quite the same as the *Genius*. The word *natalis* is sometimes just an adjective and, as such, an abbreviation of *natalis dies* (*OLD s.v. natalis*), but in Tib. 1.7.53–54 and 63–64 and Ov. *Tr.* 3.13 and 5.5.13, the *Natalis* (capitalised) is directly addressed and entreated with sacrifices as if it is a divine being.

Tib. 1.7.53–54:

*sic uenias hodiernae: tibi dem turis honores,  
liba et Mopsopio dulcia melle feram.*

May you come today in this way. For you I shall give honours, I shall bring incense and cake sweetened by honey from Mopsus.

Tib. 1.7.63–64:

*at tu, Natalis multos celebrande per annos,  
candidior semper candidiorque ueni.*

But you, *Natalis*, come to your celebrations for many years to come, brighter and brighter every time.

Ov. *Tr.* 3.13.25–28:

*si tamen est aliquid nobis hac luce petendum,  
in loca ne redeas amplius ista, precor,  
dum me terrarum pars paene novissima, Pontus,  
Euxinus falso nomine dictus, habet.*

Yet, if, on this day, we must ask something, I pray that you [*Natalis*] do not return to this place anymore, not as long as Pontus holds me, almost the farthest corner of the earth, falsely named Euxine.

Ov. *Tr.* 5.5.13–14:

*optime Natalis! quamvis procul absumus, opto  
candidus huc venias dissimilisque meo.*

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<sup>14</sup> The Vindolanda invitation, mentioned above, implies that such celebrations were small affairs for family and close friends.

Best Natalis! Although we are far away, I wish that you would come here, bright, unlike me.

The solution forwarded by Murgatroyd (1980:231), and more extensively by Maltby (2002:299–300), is that the ‘adjective [*natalis*] could be used to designate a man’s Genius...or a woman’s Iuno’. To this Maltby adds that the specific combination *natalis Genius* never occurs (presumably because it would be tautological) and that in cases where only the word *natalis* occurs, it should be taken as ‘birthday spirit’. However, confusingly, the combination *Iuno natalis* does appear, albeit only once in [Tib.] 3.12.1–2.<sup>15</sup>

This solution is not completely satisfying for another reason. Censorinus explains that the Genius cannot leave the person to which it is attached, and, in several poems, the *Natalis* is summoned from a different location – in Ovid (*Tr.* 3.13.25–27) even from as far away as Rome. Two passages from *De Die Natali* (3.1) are notable:

*Genius est deus, cuius in tutela ut quisque natus est vivit. hic sive quod ut genamur curat, sive quod una genitur nobiscum, sive etiam quod nos genitos suscipit ac tutatur, certe a genendo genius appellatur.*

A Genius is a god under whose protection each person lives from the moment of his birth. Whether it is because he makes sure we get generated, or he is generated with us, or he takes us up and protects us once we are generated, in any case, it is clear he is called our ‘Gen-ius’ from ‘generation’.<sup>16</sup>

Censorinus seems to follow Horace (*Epist.* 2.2.187–189)<sup>17</sup> who believes the Genius is intrinsically linked to the unique living person to whom it is attached from birth. He continues (3.5) to explain that the Genius is bound to the person:

*genius autem ita nobis adsiduius observator adpositus est, ut ne puncto quidem temporis longius abscedat, sed ab utero matris acceptos ad extremum vitae diem comitetur.*

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<sup>15</sup> *Natalis Iuno, sanctos cape turis acervos / quos tibi dat tenera docta puella manu* (‘Juno Natalis, take these sacred stacks of incense, which the learned girl offers you with a soft hand’).

<sup>16</sup> The translation with the clever solution to the etymological analysis is by Parker 2007:4.

<sup>17</sup> ... *natale comes qui temperat astrum, / naturae deus humanae* (‘the companion who controls the birth star and is the god of human nature’). The interpretation is indebted to the commentary of Rudd 1989, who adds that Horace did not believe that the course of one’s life was determined by a star ((1989:145).



The Genius, however, has been appointed to us as a constant overseer and it follows that he never even for a moment, goes away from us, but is our companion from when we are taken from the mother's womb to the last day of our life.

The information given by Censorinus leaves us with a difficulty. If the Genius is bound to the individual, and the Genius is also the Natalis, then how can the speaker in Tib. 1.7.53–54 invite the Natalis, Ovid summon the Natalis of his wife (*Tr.* 5.5.13–14), or wish for his Natalis not to come to Pontus (*Tr.* 3.13.25–28)?

The nature of the Roman Genius, or indeed the different Roman Genii is a problem not wholly solved.<sup>18</sup> For the argument here, however, the historical construction is of secondary importance. The imprecision of the poems indicates the limits of what can be gathered from the poetic sources. None of our poems is concerned with explaining Roman cult practices and it is no surprise that the information is contradictory. The poems describe, or reference, private gatherings and we may plausibly assume that the participants, like the poets, were not well-informed or even overly concerned with such matters. Moreover, the contradictory information in our sources may merely indicate what is easily suspected: that many different views on cult practices existed.<sup>19</sup>

Tib. 2.2 mentions the offerings to be made at the birthday ritual: incense (*tus*), exotic spices (*odores*), cheesecake (*libum*) and unmixed wine (*merum*). The list is not exhaustive, but sufficient to set the scene. Again, the partial listing of the offerings suggests that we are presented with a scene from lived experience. If the décor listed in the poems were unfamiliar, it would have required some qualification, or the effect would have been spoiled.

The same inventory, in a similarly abbreviated form, is used in Ov. *Tr.* 3.13.13–20. The speaker first asks his Natalis why he followed the poet to the ends of the earth, before castigating him for it. The speaker then sarcastically asks the Natalis if he is waiting on the customary sacrifice due to him on this day.

*scilicet expectas soliti tibi moris honorem,  
pendeat ex umeris vestis ut alba meis,  
fumida cingatur florentibus ara coronis,  
micaque sollemni turis in igne sonet,  
libaque dem proprie genitale notantia tempus,*

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<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of the nature of the *Genius*, including a bibliography of seminal work on the topic, see Argetsinger 1992:185–6.

<sup>19</sup> Argetsinger 1992:186–8 is concerned with the relationship between a self, the *genius* and the patron. Her argument elucidates much of Hor. *Ode* 4.11 but is applied to a limited extent to other poems.

*concupiamque bonas ore favente preces.  
non ita sum positus, nec sunt ea tempora nobis,  
adventu possim laetus ut esse tuo.*

[Addressing the Natalis] You expect, evidently, the honours due to you according to custom, that the whites are hanging from my shoulders, that the burning altar is draped with floral garlands, that the little bit of usual incense crackles in the flame, and that I should give the sacrificial cakes appropriate to the birthday and that I should make good prayers by avoiding ill-omened words. I am not in such a place, and for us these times are not such that I can be happy with your arrival.

The incense and spices are burned on an altar in Tib. 2.2, Ov. *Tr.* 5.5.7–10, and [Tib.] 3.12.1–4 & 16–20, while the cake and wine are sacrificed. In Tib. 1.7.52–4 and in Ov. *Tr.* 3.13 the speakers offer the Natalis the incense and the cakes; in Ov. *Tr.* 5.5.11–12 the incense and wine are burned,<sup>20</sup> but it is not clear what is done with the cakes.<sup>21</sup> Virtually all the poems mention the cake, but none mention specifically that it is to be burned.

Although birthday celebrations seem to have a pronounced religious aspect, there are to be no blood sacrifices. Censorinus (*DN* 2.2) offers an explanation and takes Persius *Satire* 2 as his starting point.

*hic forsitan quis quaerat, quid causae sit, ut merum fundendum genio, non hostia faciendum putaverit. quod scilicet, ut Varro testatur in eo libro, cui titulus est Atticus id est de muneribus, id moris institutique maiores nostri tenuerunt, ut, cum die natali munus annale genio solverent, manum a caede ac sanguine abstinerent, ne die, qua ipsi lucem acceperissent, alii demerent.*

Here someone may ask: Why [Persius] would think that unmixed wine must be poured out for the Genius, and an animal sacrifice not be made? Clearly because, as Varro tells us in the book entitled *Atticus* (the one about official duties), our ancestors maintained the custom and institution, to keep their hands clean from killing and blood, when they paid the yearly offering to the Genius on the birthday, so that on the day on which they themselves received the light of life, they should not take it away from another.

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<sup>20</sup> The wine must be unmixed, i.e., *merum*, as is befitting a religious ceremony rather than a symposium.

<sup>21</sup> *Libum* is a kind of cheesecake, judging by the recipe in Cato *Agr.* 74. It was also a cult element, see Varro *Ling.* 7.44: *liba, quod libandi causa fiunt* ('cakes which are made for sacrificing'). The pun on *liba* and *libare* is untranslatable.

On this point by Censorinus, it is interesting to compare the blood sacrifice prepared by Horace in *Ode* 4.11 to celebrate the birthday of Maecenas. *Ode* 4.11 is an invitation poem addressed to a certain Phyllis to a celebration of the Ides of April, which is also the anniversary of Maecenas' birthday.<sup>22</sup> Yet, the celebrations imagined by the poem differ from the usual birthday celebrations: the poem does not mention the usual cake and incense, but it mentions a blood sacrifice.<sup>23</sup> Though labelled as a *genethliacon* by Heyworth and Morwood (2011:197) or regarded as a poem that contains a description of a birthday celebration, it would seem that this poem describes a different ritual. Celebrating the birthday of a private individual, or the individual as a private entity is somewhat different in kind from the celebration of the birthday of a patron. The most notable example is from Vergil's *Eclogues* (1.42–3) where a similar blood sacrifice is made to the *iuvēnis* in Rome who allowed Tityrus to keep his farm. Tityrus reveals to Meliboeus that he would honour that patron in Rome by sacrificing to him twelve days every year.<sup>24</sup>

Tib. 1.7.49–54 imagines a birthday celebration in honour of Messalla and these celebrations resemble private birthday celebrations much more closely.

*huc ades et Genium ludis Geniumque choreis  
concelebra et multo tempora funde mero.  
illius et nitido stillent unguenta capillo,  
et capite et collo mollia sarta gerat.  
sic uenias, hodiernae: tibi dem turis honores,  
liba et Mopsopio dulcia melle feram.*

Be present,<sup>25</sup> celebrate the Genius with games and dances; soak his temples with much wine. Let oil drip from the glossy locks and let soft garlands ornament head and neck. May you come in this way, This Day:<sup>26</sup> for you I

<sup>22</sup> Thomas 2011:216 sees no reason to assume that Maecenas will be present at the celebration at all.

<sup>23</sup> Hor. *Ode* 4.11.6–8: *ara castis / vincta verbenis avet immolato / spargier agno* ('The altar, bound with pure sacred boughs, desires to be sprinkled with the blood of a sacrificed lamb').

<sup>24</sup> For the identification of the ritual here see Cucchiarelli 2023:87–88, including a long discussion and bibliography.

<sup>25</sup> It is unclear who the invitee is: it may be Osiris who is the subject of the hymnic section that precedes this passage (Smith 1964:337–8, Putnam 1973:124, Maltby 2002:295), but inviting a foreign god to worship the genius of Messalla is objectionable. Murgatroyd 1980:226–227 argues that Wine is the invitee understood metonymically under Bacchus, who in turn was associated with Osiris, the addressee of the previous section.

<sup>26</sup> My translation takes *hodiernus* ('this day') as the addressee, as in verse 53. It is then to this very day itself to whom the speaker promises to give and bring (*dem* and *feram*) the incense and cake. The verbs do not specifically pertain to sacrifices and the passage is taken

will give incense and bring cake with Attic honey.

One imagines that the celebration of the birthday of a patron can easily resemble that of a private party, especially in elegy, where the relationship between patron and poet is often presented as very close, even familial. Yet, this posturing by the speaker also casts doubt on how far the text can be trusted to reveal a typical event. Argetsinger (1992:185–186) argues that such rituals straddled the spheres of social relations and religious practice, and that it is in this dual function of private practice that the origins of the later emperor cult can be found.<sup>27</sup>

Censorinus (1.5) informs us that it is each individual's duty to sacrifice to his Genius once a year and adds that he personally has the additional obligation to celebrate the birthday of his patron. The person whose birthday is being celebrated, need not be present as attested by *Ov. Tr.* 5.5, and the celebration of another's birthday, excluding those of patrons, is frequent in Augustan poetry: Ovid celebrates the birthday of his wife, Horace that of Maecenas, Sulpicia that of Cerinthus and Tibullus that of Messalla.

In keeping with the ritualistic aspect, it seems to have been customary to dress up for a birthday celebration. Ovid (*Tr.* 5.5.7–9) tells us that he wears his whites only one day a year – on his wife's birthday – and only because he must. In 3.13, he is silent on his attire on his own birthday. Love elegy has much more to say about women dressing up to attend birthdays. Both Propertius (3.10.13–16) and Sulpicia ([*Tib.*] 3.12.3.6) make the point of washing early in the morning and putting on something very attractive. Sulpicia reveals (3.12.6) that, although she dressed for Iuno Natalis,<sup>28</sup> it is actually Cerinthus that she secretly wants to please. Propertius too emphasises the erotic. In Propertius (3.10.15–16)<sup>29</sup> the male speaker asks Cynthia to put on the very same dress she wore when she ensnared him the

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to mean that the speaker will bring the incense and cake which may or may not be used in the rituals later.

<sup>27</sup> Argetsinger 1992:177–180 notes that this practice of commemorating the birthday of a patron continued down to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. The important texts are Martial 9.53, Pliny the Younger *Ep.* 6.30, Marcus Aurelius in Fronto *Ad M. Caesarem* 3.10, Gell. *NA* 15.7, and Censorinus *DN* 1.9–10; 3.5–6.

<sup>28</sup> *Iota tibi est hodie, tibi se laetissima compsit, / staret ut ante tuos conspicienda focos* ('Today she has bathed for you, joyfully she has adorned herself for you, to stand, a sight to behold, before your altar').

<sup>29</sup> *dein qua primum oculos cepisti veste Properti / indue, nec vacuum flore relinque caput* ('Then put on the dress with which you first captured the eyes of Propertius, and put a flower garland on your head').

first time (*i.e.*, Prop. 1.1.1–2). This erotic aspect of the birthday ritual is of course completely at home in Roman elegy.

Elegy often mentions that it was customary (maybe even required) for the person whose birthday it was to make a wish or to petition the *Natalis* for a favour. In elegy, this aspect is sometimes the crux of the poem. The last part of the birthday ritual in Tib. 2.2 concerns the wish made by Cornutus. We are not told what Cornutus wishes, but the speaker assures us that he knows Cornutus will wish for the everlasting love of his new wife and for lots of children. Although Cornutus is urged to do so in this poem, it is not clear if the wish is usually made out loud.

The idea that a wish is to be made, seems so common that it often goes without saying. It appears in different poems with different functions. Ovid's sad wish in Tr. 3.13.25–27 is for the *Natalis* not to return to Tomis again.<sup>30</sup> Persius *Satire* 2 congratulates a certain Macrinus for not making 'requests with a haggling prayer that can only be entrusted to the gods in confidence',<sup>31</sup> before deploring the avarice and impiety of the rich. A moment in which both the inner thoughts and the public posturing of a character can be described, is effectively exploited in Sulpicia ([Tib.] 3.12.15–20):

*praecipit et natae mater studiosa, quod optat:  
illa aliud tacita iam sua mente rogat.  
uritur, ut celeres urunt altaria flammae,  
nec, liceat quamuis, sana fuisse uelit.*

And the mother eagerly tells her daughter what she wants. She, with a will of her own, in the silence, now asks another thing. She burns, as the altar burns, with quick flames, and does not want to be cured of love, even though it is still possible.

Here, as was the case with other features of birthday celebrations, the wish is presented in the poems as an expected commonplace. The point is not the wish but its content. Some wishes are of an erotic nature (Sulpicia), some pious (Cornutus), and some tragic (Ovid).

Besides religious duties, birthdays were also a day for receiving gifts and favours. Censorinus (*DN* 1.5) implies this when he inscribes his booklet as a birthday gift to his patron Quintus Caerellius. Ovid tells us in the *Ars Amatoria*

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<sup>30</sup> *si tamen est aliquid nobis hac luce petendum, / in loca ne redeas amplius ista, precor* ('Yet, if, on this day, something must be asked for us, I pray that you do not return to these places anymore').

<sup>31</sup> Persius 2.3–4: *non tu prece poscis emaci quae nisi seductis nequeas committere divis*. The translation is by Henderson 2004:65. Not everyone agrees that *prece...emaci* entails a bartering with the gods; for a discussion, see Harvey 1981:57–58.

1.399–412 that one should (for financial reasons) avoid having a girlfriend on the kalends of April, Venus' day, or around the time of her birthday. Much better, he continues, is the 18<sup>th</sup> of July – a *dies nefas* – or the Jewish sabbath<sup>32</sup> when it is presumably much harder to shop the prospective lover to financial ruin.

*magna superstitio tibi sit natalis amicae:  
 quaque aliquid dandum est, illa sit atra dies.* (Ov. *Ars Am.* 1.417-8)

But hold in awful dread your lady's birthday; let that be a black day whereon  
 a present must be given.

The obligation to present gifts to the person whose birthday it is, seems to be very useful to the authors and is certainly very common in the examples discussed above. It is this obligation that Ballio tries to exploit with such humorous consequences in *Pseudolus*, and against which Ovid warns in the *Ars Amatoria*, also with humorous effect. The same obligation is presented by Censorinus as the reason for writing the *De Die Natalis* and this may also apply to other birthday poems.

### Conclusion

The general consensus among the different poems regarding the birthday ritual is significant: it suggests that the cultural practices surrounding birthday celebrations as described in Latin literature can largely be trusted. Moreover, the poems offer only selected details regarding birthday celebrations, yet this seems sufficient to effectively activate the imagination to recreate the scene of a birthday celebration. It follows that the poem's rhetoric relies on a widely shared cultural experience. These poems offer a limited, but tantalising view of private religious rituals, which, because of their common-place nature, are rarely considered worthy of description in literature.

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<sup>32</sup> On both the *Fasti Antiates minores* and *Antiates maiores*, July 18 commemorates the day the Fabii were defeated on the Cremera in 479 BCE, as well as the day the Gauls captured the city of Rome in 390 BCE. Because these two unfortunate events occurred on this day, although it was a *dies comitalis*, it was considered very unlucky and therefore a terrible day for any business or political transactions, journeys, or marriages. In 64 this is the day on which the great fire started. The casual reference to the Jewish sabbath (in the same breath) is interesting. The poem assumes that its readers are familiar with the experience of shopping on the Jewish sabbath and this, too, is a piece of history embedded in the poem. On encountering Jewish people and culture on the streets of Republican Rome in Augustan poetry, see Steenkamp 2023.

The fact that these poems tend to reduce the events and details surrounding the birthday celebrations to a rather formulaic list suggests that the rest of the details would be filled in by the audience. We can assume that the details are augmented from lived experience rather than from literary precedent because the poems abbreviate the stock descriptive list so consistently and because there was no Greek precedent.

Lastly, in the personal and private setting of elegy, much of the drama or humour in the poems depends upon a well-known and commonplace background. We assume that the poems present us with a scene from real life because any alternative would distract from the main point of the poem – conveying the dreams, hopes, and fears of the characters in them.

There are also limits to what the poetry tells us. Many aspects of these rituals are merely assumed to be familiar. Where the poems assume that their audience can fill out the rest of the scene from their own contemporary cultural encyclopaedia, we are left in the dark. The poems do not offer explanations for some aspects of the rituals. The ostensible speakers in the poems do not present themselves as experts on religious matters and the actual authors probably were not experts either. There was probably some variation in how such rituals were performed. Matters such as the nature of the Genius or the different rituals performed to celebrate the birthday of a personal patron require further research and different types of source material.

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