

## Rural Agency, Urban Anxiety: Ritual and Citizen Identity in Tibullus

Religious ritual plays a prominent role in nearly all of Tibullus' elegies. This paper argues that central to his depiction of religion is a concern with the ritual agency of the citizen male. Tibullus wrote during a period of extraordinary change. A key element of Augustus' moral reforms was reviving traditional piety, a program made possible partly by the great antiquarian works of the previous generation (e.g., Varro, Nigidius Figulus). These works also inspired the poets of the day, whose enthusiasm for religious *doctrina* was partly inherited from their Alexandrian forebears (Cairns). Rather than focus on Tibullus' historical accuracy (Harmon), this paper asks how the poet uses religion to interrogate the emergent imperial social-political order and its implications for the religious life of the Roman citizen male. I argue that Tibullus portrays dichotomous pictures of Roman religious life as a means of exploring an underlying anxiety about the changes of his day.

The countryside is the setting for Tibullus' idealized fantasy. Rustic festivals and daily rituals honor some of Rome's most ancient deities: Ceres (1.1, 2.1, 2.5), Bacchus (1.7, 2.1), Pales (1.1, 2.5), the Lares (1.1, 1.3, 2.1) and Penates (1.3). Rituals are simple and idyllic: clay vessels carry offerings to wood-carved images (1.1, 1.10, 2.5). A sense of community (1.1, 2.1) and family (1.10, 2.1) pervades these scenes, at the center of which is the individual farmer, acting as the presiding priest (Ball) and the focus of the traditional piety of the countryside (Murgatroyd).

By contrast, the city's religious atmosphere is dominated by female figures: Venus (1.2, 1.8), Hecate (1.2, 1.5), Ops (1.4), Isis (1.3), Bellona (1.6), Bona Dea (1.6). Several of these are foreign: Isis is Egyptian, Ops is conflated with Phrygian Cybele, and Bellona with the Cappadocian goddess Ma (Murgatroyd). Religious life in the city is also suffused with the largely private practice of magic (Tupet), the realm of the *saga*, who is usually also a *lena*, the

poet-lover's proverbial enemy (Murgatroyd). These urban rituals all focus on the beloved, who performs several herself (1.3, 1.5).

Although Tibullus presents two diametrically opposed images of religious life—one rural, male, communal, and Roman and the other urban, female, individual, and “other”—one issue lies at the heart of both depictions: ritual agency. In the city, ritual access is mediated through another: the lover beseeches Isis through the beloved (1.3.23–32), hires an expert to perform magical rites (1.2.41–64), and consults a seer to divine the future (1.6.43–54). This urban mediator is always female, foreign, or both—a situation that inverts traditional Roman values (Stratton)—while in the country the citizen male holds his traditional position of dominance as the principal ritual agent for his household and community (*ipse* at 1.1.7; 1.10.23–24; Ball on 2.1). But this idyllic image of country life is a fantasy, an idealized image of a proto-Roman agrarian life constructed from antiquarian learning. The life of the small landholding citizen is something to be remembered or hoped for, but is never actually realized for the lover, whose present is always the mercenary reality of the city and his beloved.

The implications for understanding Tibullus' portrait of religious life are striking. I argue that Tibullus reveals a pervasive anxiety caused by the diminished religious role of the individual citizen male. Cult in the city is foreign and female; access to it requires compromising either citizenship or masculinity (as when the poet-lover himself performs rituals for Delia's health, in 1.5). And a return to traditional piety enacted by the citizen male is untenable: that agrarian past was already lost to the Republican antiquarians who studied it. The potential solution of hymnic composition for the imperial elite (1.7, 2.5) is both flawed and limited: the poet merely attends and observes these rituals, and few citizens have access to the elite. In the world of Tibullan elegy, the Roman citizen male is dissociated from religious authority.

Works Cited

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