

Elegizing Epic Footwork in Tibullus 1.3

The poems of Tibullus sometimes read like airy fantasy, but recent scholarship continues to show the poet's sophistication. In particular, a volume of *Aevum Antiquum* (21: 2021) focuses on his interest in challenging the boundaries of genre, e.g. through his allusions to Callimachean iamb (Giuseppetti 2021) or Lucretian didactic (Nethercut 2021), and calls for further study of this aspect of his work (La Barbera & Philbrick 2021). Other scholars (Henkel 2014, Harrison 2020), moreover, have demonstrated the effectiveness of a metapoetic approach to Tibullus's work. I propose therefore to examine Tibullus 1.3, in which the poet excuses himself from a trip to Greece with his patron Messalla (*Ibitis Aegaeas sine me, Messalla, per undas*, 1.3.1), both as a metapoetic *recusatio* from writing a military epic about Messalla's exploits and as an attempt to elegize the epic genre by focusing on the *Odyssey* as a model instead of the *Iliad*. Bright (1978), Ball (1983), and others have discussed the structural importance of the *Odyssey* as a model for this poem, which casts Tibullus as the absent Odysseus and Delia as the chaste Penelope; Henkel 2014 claims that Tibullus frames Book 1 as replying to Messalla's request for a Ennian-style epic about his military exploits. This paper seeks to frame the embrace of Odyssean epic in poem 1.3 as presenting an alternative to the Iliadic and Ennian model of epic prevalent in late Republican Rome, so that even as Tibullus demurs from his patron's request for one type of epic, he seems to vindicate another type as a licit model from Roman love elegy. Tibullus too is participating in the generic enrichment so characteristic of Augustan poetry (e.g., Harrison 2007).

Rather than attempting a close reading of all poem 1.3, this paper follows Henkel 2014 and Fineberg 1991 in paying specific attention to Tibullus's use of metapoetic imagery of feet (*pes*: 1.3.20, 92) and roads (*via, iter*: 1.3.14, 19, 36, 50) to comment on elegy's meter and related issues of genre. Like Ovid in *Amores* 1.1, for example, Tibullus here sees an incompatibility between martial epic and his elegiac meter: the occasion of the poem is Messalla's expedition to Greece, which Tibullus cannot join because his (elegiac) foot gives offense (*o quotiens ingressus iter mihi*

tristia dixi | offensum in porta signa dedisse pedem, 19–20); Delia, by contrast, will run to meet the speaker with her delicate foot unshod (*obvia nudato, Delia, curre pede*, 92), embodying the meter’s halting progress from line to line. But Tibullus is not content simply to shirk the imagined burden of epic; instead, he uses an metapoetic digression on the Saturnian Golden Age (1.3.35–52) to fantasize about the Saturnian era of Italian poetry, before the hexameter was introduced at Rome and opened the way to long epics such as Messalla seems to hope for (*quam bene Saturno vivebant rege, priusquam | tellus in longas est patefacta vias!* 35–36). Tibullus’s Golden Age is characterized especially by the absence of doors and fixed boundary stones in fields (43–44), a detail which seems to point to the lack of metrical subdivisions in the Saturnian meter (cf. Quint. Inst. 9.4.115). As in other treatments of the Saturnian age (e.g. Verg. Geo. 1.118–159), Tibullus says it was a time of spontaneous plenty (45–46) and that wars and weapons had not been introduced (47–48), before “a thousand ways of death” appeared under Jupiter’s Iron Age (*leti mille repente viae*, 50). Tibullus alludes here to the absence of martial epic before Ennius introduced the hexameter in his *Annales*. The best-known poem from that period, Livius Andronicus’s translation of the *Odyssey*, probably influences Tibullus’s own adaptation of that poem here.

Bibliography

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