

Duras Ianitor Ante Fores: Cerberus and the “Shut-out Lover” in Tibullus’ Elegies Book I

Scholars have long appreciated the well-crafted and rich poetry of Tibullus, along with the wide variety of techniques he employs, which include his carefully positioned ring compositions, his retelling of the ancient myths, and his adaptations of Hellenistic poetry. Francis Cairns claims that Tibullus is “a learned poet but one more subtle and less obtrusive in his learning than some of his Greek predecessors” (1979: 36). The nuanced yet powerful way in which Tibullus uses his skill in reworking mythology can be found in his representations of and allusions to Cerberus, the great obstacle and canine *ianitor* of the Underworld. Scholars such as Bassi (1994) and Houghton (2007) have discussed the image of Cerberus in Tibullus’ work and its possible interaction with elegiac tropes. For example, about poem I.3.71-72, when Tibullus presents Cerberus as the guard of the doors of the Underworld, Houghton notes: “The language in which his vigil is described... can scarcely fail to evoke the position of the prostrate lover-poet of elegy before his mistress’ bolted door” (2007: 161).

This paper will consider the presence of Cerberus in both of the poems of Tibullus’ first book in which he appears, poems I.3 and I.10, and then explore the relationship between the representation of Cerberus in poem I.3 in particular and the elegiac theme of the *paraclausithyron* and the “shut-out lover” in Tibullus’ work. This paper will highlight the multiple occurrences of the imagery of the closed doors and “shut-out lover” found in Tibullus’ work, such as representing himself as the lover who is *duras ianitor ante fores* “the doorkeeper before harsh doors” (I.1.56); another would-be lover who *stare nec ante fores puduit caraeve puellae* “was not ashamed to stand before the doors of the dear girl” (I.2.93); and the lover who realizes that *nec verbis victa patescit ianua* “the door, although being prevailed upon by words, does not open” (I.5.67-68). By setting the scene of Cerberus as the guard of the doors of the

Underworld (I.3.71-72) alongside these images of the “shut-out lover,” I hope to shed light on the imaginative way in which Tibullus incorporated a specific mythological figure into his poetry in order to emphasize some of the key elegiac *topoi* in his verses. In addition, I hope to elucidate the influences of Tibullus’ predecessors on his representation of Cerberus, as well as examine Tibullus’ use of the character alongside that of his near contemporary authors, such as Vergil in the sixth book of the *Aeneid* (6.417-425). In doing so, this paper aims to contribute to the study of mythology in Tibullus by illuminating the subtle way in which he embeds the persona of the lover within the depiction of a mythological figure, which not only acknowledges the Hellenistic roots he was drawing upon, but develops those traditions in a completely original way.

Bibliography

- Bassi, Karen. (1994). “Desired Silence: *Amor* and *Mors* in Tibullus.” *Syllecta Classica* 5.1: 53-61.
- Cairns, Francis. (1979). *Tibullus: A Hellenistic Poet at Rome*. Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press.
- Houghton, L.B.T. (2007). “Tibullus’ Elegiac Underworld.” *The Classical Quarterly* 57.1: 153-165.
- Murgatroyd, Paul, ed. (1980). *Tibullus I*. London: Bristol Classical Press.
- Putnam, Michael C.J. (1965). *Tibullus: A Commentary*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.