

Haec Nobis Fingebamus: Tibullus, Ovid, and the Power of Imagination

This paper will explore the parallel uses of imagination in two elegiac poems: Tibullus 1.5 and Ovid's *Tristia* 4.2. In poem 1.5, Tibullus depicts a scene in which he and his beloved Delia live a pleasant life together in the countryside, far from the greed and rivals of the city. Eventually, however, he must admit that he was imagining it all (*haec mihi fingebam*, Tib. 1.5.35) and later reveals that he is in fact still locked out of his beloved's house in the city. In *Tristia* 4.2, Ovid similarly uses his imagination to place himself back in Rome during Tiberius' German triumph. He, too, must eventually admit that this is only possible in his imagination (*at mihi fingendo*, *Trist.* 4.2.67), due to the reality of his exile.

A number of scholars have discussed Tibullus' fantasies in poem 1.5 and have tended to focus on the ultimate failure of these fantasies (see Luck 1969, Ross 1975, Lyne 1980, Lee-Stecum 1998). Scholars of Ovid's exile poetry, meanwhile, have argued that Ovid's imagination in these poems provides him with mental access to Rome in spite of his physical absence (see Edwards 1996; Claassen 1999, 2008; Hardie 2002). My paper will refine this view of Ovid's exile poetry by reading it in tandem with Tibullus 1.5 rather than on its own. I will argue that Ovid's imagination in *Tristia* 4.2 turns out to be as ineffectual as Tibullus' in 1.5, and functions as a failed fantasy in line with Tibullus' earlier model.

In both of these poems, fantasies allow the poet to challenge and experiment with the generic norms of elegy. Tibullus' pastoral fantasy in 1.5 challenges elegiac norms by depicting the lover's romantic success and rejecting Rome as the ideal landscape of love. It also experiments with genre by introducing elements of bucolic poetry into elegy. Ovid's imagining of Tiberius' triumph in *Tristia* 4.2 similarly challenges the norms of his exile poetry by portraying the poet's success at returning to Rome. It also experiments with the elegiac genre,

both by introducing elements of epic and national poetry into elegy, and by transforming the city of Rome from the locus of love to the poet's new unattainable beloved. The failure of these fantasies in both poems, however, ultimately restores generic norms. Tibullus reassumes his role as the *exclusus amator* locked out of his beloved's house and returns to the urban setting of elegiac love, while Ovid resumes his longing for the city he cannot reach and focuses again on his personal plight rather than the success of the state. In both poems, the generic experimentation—like the poet/lover's success—only lasts as long as the poet's imagination remains viable.

Although *Tristia* 4.2 inverts Tibullus 1.5 by longing for Rome rather than rejecting the city for the countryside, the way Ovid utilizes fantasy and its ultimate failure in *Tristia* 4.2 closely conforms to Tibullus' model of imagination in 1.5. In both of these poems, the ability of imagination to give the poet/lover what he desires is limited. The real power of imagination is instead in its ability to create a space for the poet to explore the boundaries and expectations of the elegiac genre.

Bibliography

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