

Who's That Girl?: (Mis)recognizing Marathus in Tibullus 1.8

Although elegiac lover-poets usually construct a sense of self through a relationship with a *puella*, the Tibullan lover-poet does so through his relationship with a *puer* as well. I show that the shifting representation of the beloved boy Marathus as *puella*, *puer*, and *amator* in poem 1.8 is crucial to understanding his relationship with the lover-poet. I suggest that the lover-poet sees in Marathus a reflection of his own complex gender identity as an effeminate *amator*, which makes the boy both a compelling object of desire and powerful source of anxiety. The lover-poet's ever-changing portrayal of Marathus ultimately reveals his uneasiness about his own identity. His interactions with Marathus allow him to develop his self-representation in new ways by exploring the dynamics of desire beyond the roles of *amator* and *puella*.

In poem 1.8, Marathus plays the elegiac roles of girl, boy, and man interchangeably. As the poem begins, the lover-poet seems to be critiquing an overly glamorous *puella* at her toilette, when suddenly, almost a third of the way into the poem, the lover-poet refers to her as “miserable *boy*” (*misero*, 1.8.23). Looking back on the text, the reader can reconcile the image of the supposed *puella* with the realization that (s)he is instead a *puer delicatus*, but this double-take of gender misreading leads to even more confusion in the last third of the poem. Now the *puer* who looks like a *puella* appears as an *amator* outside his own *puella*'s door. The reader can account for the collapse of the categories of *puella* and *puer* through their shared function as beloveds in elegiac poetry. But what if the *puella*-figure looks like an *amator*? What if the *puer* as *amator* looks like the Tibullan lover-poet himself?

This paper fits into the broader conversation about beloved figures in elegy, a discussion which has often focused on female beloveds (e.g. Wyke 2002, Greene 1998). More recently Drinkwater has emphasized the way that the Marathus poems play with male and female roles,

but she largely leaves aside the relationship between the boy and the lover-poet itself (Drinkwater 2012, 2013). Nikoloutsos has argued for a queer identity for the boy, but his label smooths over inconsistencies in the boy's representation that are vital to understanding his role (Nikoloutsos 2007, 2011). I show how the boy's ambiguous status straddling the gender binary makes him both desirable and distressing to the lover-poet. In the figure of Marathus the lover-poet confronts a literal incarnation of his metaphorical self-image as an effeminate *amator*. Throughout poem 1.8 we see the lover-poet drawn to a beloved whom he has fashioned like himself and repulsed by how that beloved represents identities that he wants to reject.

I use a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework to explore the dynamics of the relationship between the lover-poet and the boy, fitting my reading with other readings of elegy that use this model (Miller 2004, Janan 2001). Lacan's framework can articulate how the mirroring between the lover-poet and the boy simultaneously causes the lover-poet's desire for the boy and inspires a crisis in his self-image (Lacan 1988, Fink 1995). Poem 1.8 reveals a breakdown in the Symbolic (the world of signs that enable intersubjective communication), as terms such as male and female disintegrate in the lover-poet's representation of the boy. This breakdown destabilizes the sense of wholeness that the lover-poet formerly created in his Imaginary image (his vision of self) as an elegiac *amator*, which he hoped to define by appealing to those crumbling categories. Exploring the multi-faceted representation of the boy's identity illuminates both the boy's relationship with the lover-poet and the lover-poet's anxieties about his own complex and unstable identity. It allows us to expand our understanding of the Tibullan lover-poet's self-construction and to see one way Tibullus' poems explore the dynamics of desire beyond the *amator* and *puella*.

Bibliography

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