

Credula Spes: Tibullan Hope and the Future of Elegy

Latin love elegy, like poetry in general, is rife with emotions, and they tend to be repetitive (i.e., perhaps, inter- or intratextual). The elegiac relationship is predicated upon the repeated rejection of the lover, and the frustration of his hopes. In fact, the most distressing of the elegiac emotions turns out to be hope (*spes*), because it is foundational for the elegiac situation, preventing the lover from seeing that his relationship is both doomed and dangerous (see e.g. Ov. *Her.* 17.234, *fallitur augurio spes bona saepe suo*, on the ways *spes* impedes judgment; also *Ars* 1.445, and *RA* 685). This view of hope is in keeping with a prevalent ancient tendency to view the emotion as at best an ambiguous quality, and at worst, as leading inevitably to destruction. After brief attention to other Tibullan uses of *spes*, I concentrate on the “*spes*-interlude” of Tib. 2.6, suggesting that it is not coincidental that it sounds the death-knell of Tibullan elegy: beyond this point, there can be no more writing of elegiac poetry.

Tibullus 2.6 details a number of vignettes in which people hope: farming, fowling, fishing, being a slave (19-28):

Iam mala finissem leto, sed credula vitam

Spes fovet et fore cras semper ait melius.

Spes alit agricolas, Spes sulcis credit aratis

Semina, quae magno faenore reddat ager;

Haec laqueo volucres, haec captat arundine pisces,

Cum tenues hamos abdidit ante cibus;

Spes etiam valida solatur conpede vinctum:

Crura sonant ferro, sed canit inter opus

Spes facilem Nemesim spondet mihi, sed negat illa;

Ei mihi, ne vincas, dura puella, deam.

Not coincidentally, these are also among the metaphors for the elegiac relationship itself (the lover is often described as a hunter, fisherman, slave, and even cultivator of land); each of them adumbrates a potential role that the lover can embody, and in each scenario, hope prolongs his sufferings, needlessly. So it is, I argue, no coincidence that this proves to be the last of Tibullus' elegiac poems; in the course of the poem, and through imaginative rehearsal of the doomed hopes of others (who also serve as alternate selves), the poet realizes the pointlessness of the elegiac situation. Although Tibullus seeks to avoid the obvious solution to his dilemma, threatening Nemesis if she disappoints his hopes, he must eventually face the fact that it is not Nemesis – as it was not Delia – but elegy as a whole that is the problem. A brief coda explores the intertextual ramifications of Tibullus' abandonment of elegy through exploration of some of the other key moments in the elegiac history of *spes*, most notably, in its partial recuperation by Ovid at *EP* 1.6.27-46.