

Saga Poetica: Tibullus and the Metapoetics of Magic

While Tibullus deals with magic as a poetic subject less frequently than Propertius or Ovid, he stands apart from other elegists in his direct engagement with witchcraft. He uses detailed descriptions of magical activity, rather than mere allusion to these practices. In my paper I propose the existence of an arc in which Tibullus, as he encounters magic, continually juxtaposes himself with its practitioners. Old women in elegy, like Tibullus himself as an elegist, deal in *carmina* (bearing the twofold meaning of “verses” and “spells”), which they use to bend others to their will. Indeed, the old woman’s verbal skills place her in direct opposition to Tibullus (James 2003). Tibullus takes full advantage of the parallels between sorcery and poetry, using the arts of the *saga* (witch) as a reflection of those of the poet and engaging as a kind of *magus poeticus*, a poetic sorcerer who vies directly with the old woman in contests of song over the objects of his affections.

I begin with an examination of poem 1.2, in which Tibullus enlists the aid of a *saga* to win Delia’s heart. Specifically, he requests that the witch use her *carmina* to alter Delia’s feelings, which is the precise function of the poetry that Tibullus writes for her (43-64). In poem 1.5, it is Tibullus himself who practices witchcraft (9-16); he writes *carmina* in both senses of the word. He also takes the time to put a curse on the old witch who betrayed him before, turning his verses into a kind of poetic curse (Musurillo 1970, Gager 1992). He thereby stacks his own poetic compositions against those of the *saga*, establishing her as a kind of rival poet.

Magic also occurs in the Marathus cycle, though in poem 1.8 Tibullus is not an active participant in the practice; that said, the workings of witchcraft run parallel to his own creative endeavors. Tibullus, having failed to win Marathus’ heart with his poetry, must explain the boy’s indifference away as an effect of the old woman’s influence, despite the fact that both kinds of

carmina are rendered useless in the poem in the face of youth and beauty (15-24). This suggests a failure of poetry itself, which comes to fruition in poem 2.4. At this point, Tibullus has given himself over to Nemesis *in servitio amoris*, and is not strong enough to contend with her should she take up the mantle of the *saga* (55-60). Her imagined powers rely not on *carmina*, however, but on drugs and herbs. Both forms of verse—the poetic and the magical—have failed, leaving Tibullus with neither means to defend himself from the inevitable power of the aging elegiac *puella* (Lee-Stecum 2000, James 2003).

The *carmina* of the elegiac poet run parallel to and are at times indistinguishable from those of the witch in all of these poems, resulting in a peculiar exploration of themes of magic, composition, and control in Roman love elegy. In these passages, Tibullus explores the parallels between witches and poets by framing himself as a witch and emphasizing the activities shared in common between the two professions. Eventually, though, *carmina* fail. The elegiac *puella* ages into a strong, persuasive woman, and the poet loses his strength in the face of this natural process—spells are no longer recited and poetry has no effect. At the end of this arc, Tibullus has lost to the *saga*, whose role Nemesis herself begins to fill. Despite his attempts to augment his verse with magic, Tibullus still cannot win the *puella* with *carmina* alone.

Bibliography

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