

AUGUSTAN LOVERS 11

The foedus aeternum: workshop

An eternal love: *foedus aeternum*

- Elegiac lovers frequently dream of their love lasting their whole lives, and Propertius also touches on the idea of love surpassing the boundaries of life and death
- This *topos* is connected to that of slavery of love in Tib. 1.1.55-69

But I am held a pris'ner, fettered by a lovely girl, / and take my post as keeper at her cruel door. / Glory has no charms for me, my Delia. They can call me / slack and ineffective, if only I'm with you. / **O let me gaze at you, when my last hour comes - / hold you, as I die, in my failing grasp. Delia, you will weep for me laid on the bed of burning / and you will give me kisses mixed with bitter tears.** / Yes, you will weep: your heart is not encased in iron / nor is there flint in your tender breast. / There will be no young man and no unmarried girl / going home dry-eyed from my funeral. / But do no violence, Delia, to my departed spirit: / spare your flowing tresses and spare your tender cheeks. (Tib. 1.1.55-69)

General effects

- E.g. Tib. 1.1 – as hints that old age together is unlikely to happen are present, the *topos* often works as a *memento mori* encouragement to enjoy the moment
- At the same time the *topos* highlights that what elegy claims to hope for will never be: its lead characters are *not* old men and women, but young people with life choices still ahead
 - ▣ Note, for instance, how Delia in Tib. 1.1 is – even within the daydream – supposed to sport flowing tresses and tender cheeks as an old woman
 - ▣ Old women in elegy only bawds and witches
 - Cf. Richlin on satire
 - ▣ Wishing but not getting to close the eyes of a loved departed one: much older *topos*: cf. Agamemnon in Od. 11.490-500

Prop. 1.19: a destabilising topos

Now I no longer fear tragic shades, my Cynthia, my accounts are all tallied to face my funeral at last. But the fear that you might be missing from my burial this is worse than death itself. The boy is not stuck so lightly to my eyes that my ashes can be lone, love all forgot. There, in those blind spaces, the hero Protesilaus couldn't forget his beautiful wife: eager, the Thessalian came to his old home a ghost, trying to touch his pleasure with invisible palms. There, whatever I'll be, I'll always be called your image: a great love breaks through the shores of death. There, let the chorus of beautiful heroines come, whom Troy's conquest gave to Argive men. None was as beautiful to me as you, Cynthia, even (may fair Tellus grant this wish) should a long old age delay your fate. Your bones will be washed in my tears. I hope you'll feel the same if you survive me! Then I'd be happy to die anywhere. I'm so afraid unfair Love will drag you from my grave, Cynthia, with contempt for my burial and force you unwillingly to dry your falling tears! The most faithful girl is bent by constant innuendo. Let's enjoy being lovers while we can: Love is never long enough.

Prop. 1.19

- The narrator assures Cynthia that his love will last beyond life
- Throughout, he remains aware that this may not be returned – ostensibly his concern is for her moving on after his death and due to external pressure
 - ▣ Cf. Prop. 1.19.3f; esp. 1.19.25f
- For his own part, he will remain faithful
- Propertius typically employs a mythological example to illustrate the power of love even after death: Protesilaus and Laodamia
 - ▣ Such examples often useful on the surface, but careful reading will reveal jarring details

Prop. 1.19: Protesilaus

- Protesilaus and Laodamia back story: Homer, *Iliad*; Cat. 68; Euripides' fragments
 - ▣ Protesilaus the first Greek captain to be killed at Troy, Laodamia his devoted widow
- Sensual description – but also ominous: 'trying to touch' 'invisible hands': a union that won't ever fully happen
- 'I will always be called your image': ominous prediction
 - ▣ Will he be an image / death mask of himself, belonging to her?
 - ▣ Will he be an image of her, thus clinging to something less than the real Cynthia?

Mythological misgivings

- In other versions, Laodamia is the active (if also slightly deluded) party
 - ▣ Her devotion causes the gods to grant her one more night with her husband; she makes the image to remember him
 - ▣ Inversion in Prop. 1.19 tallies with the inversion of gender roles generally in elegy; similarities provide better effects
- ...but as it places the onus of expressing love on the dead lover, the Propertian inversion highlights the possibility that Cynthia may be less devoted than Laodamia

Prop. 1.19: Protesilaus

- The suggestion that Cynthia may, in the future, be less staunch in her devotion than Laodamia also hints that she may in fact, not live up to these expectations even in the poem's present tense context
- A linear reading will have shown the reader that Cynthia is all but the ideal beloved: there have been rivals from 1.2 onwards
- However: Prop. 1.17 and 18 suggest that the narrator, too, has been less than faithful
- The ostensive ideals of elegy undermined even as they are being set out

Where else?

- Where else do the elegists express the notion that love should be lasting?
- What other aspects of a relationship are required to make it such?
- What aspects of elegy suggest that such a relationship is fundamentally impossible?
- How does such an ideal fit with the norm breaking aspects of Roman love elegy?

Where to look outside of elegy

- What other examples of ever-lasting love do we have in ancient literature/mythology, which were known to readers and writers of elegy? How should these be interpreted?
 - ▣ Love crossing/challenging the boundary of life/death
 - ▣ Lovers growing old together
- Do we have examples of other characters crossing the boundaries between life and death out of commitment/love for each other?
- What is the real-life context? What can we tell of the reactions of surviving spouses, male or female?

Follow-up tasks



Slavery and everlasting love

- Two *topoi* widely used in all three elegiac authors
- The slavery of love *topos* takes further commonplace expressions attested in earlier literature – best place for background: Lyne 1979
- The everlasting-love *topos* is particularly prominent in Propertius: Papanghelis 1987
- Both *topoi* are employed in such a way as to undermine the reader's trust in the elegiac relationship as a real-life love story where we are expected to take the narrator seriously – at the same time they contribute to delineate the genre