

What role do Augustan politics play in Latin love elegy? Discuss with reference to specific textual examples

This essay discusses the role Augustan politics play in the love elegy produced during the reign of Augustus. It is important to note that there is debate surrounding how biographical elegy is, as most scholars can agree that the world of elegy is one constructed by the composer. Galinsky notes that because of this we should not press elegy for biographical details¹, however, Stahl is fairer to say that there will be degrees of closeness to the realm of historical facts² especially as the elegy spoken about here were written during a transformative period for Rome as it settles in to be an empire rather than a republic³. The work of Propertius, Tibullus and Ovid will be used as evidence to show that elegy does engage with politics, which varies slightly between them all and especially changes as we move to Ovid, in a way that one should consider elegy as fundamentally not only political but anti-Augustan.

There is trend to be anti-war in elegy in way that first appears to be a way of demonstrating and emphasising the love the poet has for his beloved, rejecting military campaign to remain with them⁴. But arguably the anti-war sentiment is more serious than that. Both Propertius and Tibullus are writing, sticking to the generally agreed chronology, close to the civil wars. Propertius demonstrates how impactful this period was for him, as when he writes of the Perusine war he writes the line '*tu nullo miseri contegis ossa solo*'⁵ in present tense despite twelve years having passed. Therefore, the anti-war feelings in the elegy take on new meaning.

For Propertius in book one there is a strong sense of animosity for Augustus and war, in a way that Heyworth explains that in the other books the reader is looking for political statements and wondering if Propertius is now aligned with the Augustan reign⁶. Propertius' family appear to have been grievously affected by the civil war, with Stahl suggesting that the Gallus in 1.21 whose 'scattered bones'⁷ are on the Etruscan Hills is the relative Propertius had in Perugia who died in the war and is unburied⁸. In book four he writes how his family lost their fortune and he suffered a deprived childhood⁹, with this along with Stahl's analysis one could assume that his family fought against Octavian, who would become Augustus, during the civil wars.

This gives new light to book one as perhaps it is not that he refuses to go with Tullus to Asia because of a girl, but because joining Tullus would be joining a cause where Propertius would feel closer to the victims of that campaign than the victors¹⁰. As it is assumed that Tullus' uncle is L. Volcarius Tullus a proconsul of Augustus, but as no proconsul could go to Asia without Augustus' consent then it can be deduced that this is the campaign into Asia to eliminate any remains of Antony's rule and ensure Asia was dependant on Rome¹¹. Evidence for this in the elegy is Propertius describing Tullus' objective for going to Asia as being to 'bring back law to forgetful allies'¹². Hayworth however does not agree that Tullus can be connected to L. Volcarius Tullus as they argue Tullus is not real as there is nothing to suggest closeness between Tullus and Propertius¹³, comparing the two to Tibullus and Messalla who did go on campaign together¹⁴.

But why should there be closeness between Tullus and Propertius? If we agree with Stahl's convincing narrative that Propertius is anti-war and anti-Augustus, as his family were opposed to him during the civil wars and that brought suffering to his family and his childhood. Then Tullus, real or not, is surely

¹ Galinsky 1996: 270

² Stahl 1985: 72

³ Nikoloutsos 2011: 53

⁴ Prop.1.6.1-5

⁵ Prop.1.22.8

⁶ Heyworth 2007: 100

⁷ Prop.1.21.9

⁸ Prop.1.22.3-8

⁹ Prop.4.1.121-135

¹⁰ Stahl 1985: 98

¹¹ Stahl 1985: 83-84

¹² Prop.1.6.20

¹³ Hayworth 2007: 96

¹⁴ Tib.1.3.1-2 and 1.7.9

brought into the elegy as the antithesis to Propertius. The questions Tullus asks Propertius in 1.22 prove that even if he is a creation of Propertius that he is meant to represent someone of high political connection and wealth, as what he is interested in other people's social rank¹⁵. Propertius does not want to be like Tullus because he does not wish to align himself with Augustus because of his family's history, so he promotes being financially poor and as another insult to Tullus and the political/military way of life promotes that he is emotionally rich whereas Tullus will have a loveless life¹⁶. In summary Propertius is gaining what victories he can over Tullus.

As mentioned before, after book one Propertius is arguably not making obvious political statements but it should not be assumed that he has now made peace with the Augustan regime even despite having Maecenas as his patron. In the first elegy of book two Propertius is very conscious to make it clear that Augustus is 'your Caesar'¹⁷ not his. This added to Hayworth's argument that Propertius always goes out of his way to present himself as an Umbrian patriot¹⁸ is very bold, especially when we compare this to Horace who fought against Octavian but in his work stresses his changed allegiance¹⁹. In essence, for Propertius personal events seem to have shaped his elegy and the reason for stressing love over campaign and is coloured to be anti-Augustan as while he prioritises love he refuses to 'breed sons'²⁰ so Augustus can have soldiers.

Tibullus, also writing close to the civil wars and therefore his family may have been affected, continues this idea to juxtapose the lover with the warrior²¹ and as Propertius did²² promote love as the precondition for peace²³. The Augustan motto was *terra marique pax* but the difference was under Augustan regime war was the precondition for peace²⁴. For Tibullus this ideal of peace and a place where there is not death takes precedent in his elegy.

The impression you get from Tibullus is someone who has had enough of war, he wishes for a life in country farming²⁵. There also seems to be a rejection of expansion as expansion comes from war. While Augustus in 29 BCE closed the twin doors of the temple of Janus to symbolise peace, in 27 BCE they would open again Rome would campaign against Gaul²⁶. Tibullus writes that he 'can live contented with little'²⁷ and that you can prosper just as well when you have just enough that can sustain you 'a small field's produce is enough'²⁸. He is rejecting the empire not because of personal events that dictate he morally cannot be a part of the Augustan regime, as we saw with Propertius, but because he does not agree with the need to expand the empire.

It also seems that Tibullus has just had enough with death, elegy is known to only deal with young lovers and there is a rejection of ageing but Nikoloutsos puts forward that Tibullus' use of it along with the want to return to the country instead of staying in the urbane where elegy normally resides is Tibullus rejecting the tomb and wishing to return to the womb²⁹. This is something that is perhaps more pronounced in 1.3 when Tibullus does go on campaign but becomes ill and must stay on foreign land while Messalla goes on without him, all Tibullus wants at that moment is comfort of a female as he writes about his mother, his sister and Delia his lover³⁰. By going out on campaign in order to

¹⁵ Prop.1.22.1

¹⁶ Prop.1.14

¹⁷ Prop.2.1.25

¹⁸ Hayworth 2007: 100

¹⁹ Hor. Od. 2.7.9-14

²⁰ Prop.2.7.13

²¹ Tib.1.1.53-78

²² Prop.3.5.1-2

²³ Tib.1.10

²⁴ Galinsky 1996: 270

²⁵ Tib.1.1

²⁶ Nikoloutsos 2011: 57

²⁷ Tib.1.1.25

²⁸ Tib.1.1.42

²⁹ Nikoloutsos 2011: 66

³⁰ Tib.1.3.1-13

expand the empire you are placed in mortal danger, but by rejecting campaign and being satisfied with what you have at home instead gives you comfort and you stay safer than you would be in war.

Political changes can affect social spheres and due to the civil wars and the military expansion of the empire the model for masculinity was associated with military performance³¹. However, it is a mistake to think that because there was a tendency in elegy to be anti-war that they were rejecting this model of masculinity. While they seemingly all reject the notion of war and Augustan campaigns, even Ovid who compares a soldier preparing for warfare with unfortunate things such as going to school and going to court³² and like what Propertius did in 1.22 reminds us that his native land fought against Rome in the Social Wars³³, all of them still employ military terminology. Tibullus, as Nikoloutsos reminds us, embraces this model of masculinity casting himself as still a warrior³⁴ but in the erotic field where he is a 'brave captain and private'³⁵ and Ovid provocatively says 'lovers are soldiers'³⁶.

This *militia amoris* is a continuation not a deviation of Roman masculine ideology. In fact, *militia amoris* is arguably linked to the idea of *libido dominandi*, but is a domestic manifestation of it as Cahoon believes³⁷. In which case the elegists have the same impulses and desires as the soldier who goes on campaign, but because they do not go on campaign, perhaps because they are politically opposed to it, they instead go on campaign on women. Ovid has Cupid coloured as a Roman victor capturing and enslaving and returning to triumph with 'the cheering crowd will chant the triumph song'³⁸ before equating Cupid with Caesar³⁹.

Something that is key to Roman masculinity is the idea being able to assert and exercise dominion over others⁴⁰, while elegy does play around with the idea of the man being dominated by the beloved or even by love itself as Tibullus asserts himself as 'loyal slave' to Venus⁴¹. This maybe because, as discussed it seems as though Tibullus has had enough of war and death and would rather be slave to love than a slave to Augustus and be among war and death. However, all the elegists give their lovers Greek names, which Keith explains could be a way of the elegists of subtly showing dominion over them as it implies Roman conquest⁴². Not only as conquest for the elegist when they win the lover over. But, also because as Rome militarily expanded into Greece, Greek courtesans became available to Roman men hence they can also, by just being in the elegy, be reference to the results of Roman conquest. But, when we get to Ovid something different has happened, with both Cahoon and Curran agreeing that Ovid only adopts the facade of being a captive in order to capture his beloved⁴³.

While Ovid appears as though he has been dominated in 1.3⁴⁴, he then compares her to Io, Leda and Europa⁴⁵ all of whom are victims who in a sense are dominated by Jupiter. So, Ovid now employs tactics in order to assert dominion over his beloved, meaning that while Tibullus was happy to be a slave Ovid is not. Eventually it comes to the point where he physically asserts his power over her as he beats her⁴⁶ and thinks she is beautiful when she is crying from being beaten comparing her to

³¹ Nikoloutsos 2011: 54

³² Ov. Am. 1.13.14-22

³³ Ov. Am. 3.15.8-10

³⁴ Nikoloutsos 2011: 64

³⁵ Tib. 1.1.74

³⁶ Ov. Am. 1.9.1

³⁷ Cahoon 1988: 249

³⁸ Ov. Am. 1.2.19-36

³⁹ Ov. Am. 1.2.51

⁴⁰ Nikoloutsos 2011: 60

⁴¹ Tib. 1.2.97

⁴² Keith 2011: 23-53

⁴³ Cahoon 1988: 295

⁴⁴ Ov. Am. 1.3.1

⁴⁵ Ov. Am. 1.3.21-23

⁴⁶ Ov. Am. 1.7.3

Ariadne and Cassandra⁴⁷ again, both victims of males. This is not a one-off occurrence as again in book two he finds sexual attraction from a woman being upset and wants to physically harm her⁴⁸.

While Ovid presents an extreme, this idea of *militia amoris* in elegy demonstrates how pervasive Roman social ideology was. While the poets may play around with gender expectations presenting themselves as soft and having hard mistresses⁴⁹ for example, they still cannot seem to get away from including masculine ideals such as warfare and dominating others. In which case in this political climate is it then hard for individual identity to emerge, as there was an increasing push for a national identity especially as Augustus began promoting certain ideologies making the personal now political⁵⁰.

We may think of Tibullus as an individual and asserting that individuality as he pushes for farming and being happy with what you have over military success and the greed of plunder⁵¹. But, Tibullus refers to the *spicea corona* hung on Ceres' temple door⁵² which was an Augustan symbol of peace won through victory⁵³ which then does not match up to Tibullus own ideals. Tibullus is trying to be an individual and not promote the Augustan military male ideal, but he is then accidentally following those ideals by using Augustan military symbolism. Also, while Tibullus may wish to make an anti-Augustan statement by perusing farming over empire building, he is still doing what Augustus wants because Augustus also promoted farming by associating on coins himself with Ceres in order to gain support from common citizens⁵⁴. Therefore, Tibullus either actively or unknowingly seems to be highlighting the problematic relationship during this time of trying to be an autonomous individual and being part a collective. Especially when the national myth of the Roman people was tied up into the myth of the Julian family.

Propertius and Tibullus seem to mainly be reflecting on the past civil war and the current military campaigns, as Augustan legislation would not come into effect until later. While it can be argued that Augustus made his intentions of these legislations earlier, as Nikoloutsos does⁵⁵, and therefore, allows perhaps the implication that Propertius and Tibullus chose lovers who were unsuitable as *matrona*⁵⁶ as a comment on *ex Iulia de maritandis ordinibus* which would control private life. Ovid however writing later can comment on more specific political matters, so it can be easier to identify the role politics plays in his elegy.

For example, in 18 BCE adultery became illegal in Rome⁵⁷ and Ovid is very keen to remind you that the two gods most prominent in Julian family myth, Mars and Venus, are adulterers as we know from Homer⁵⁸ and Ovid writes about 'what Mars can get from Venus when he can'⁵⁹. This is made clearer still if we compare Virgil to Ovid, as Virgil simply states 'Ilia pregnant by Mars'⁶⁰ whereas Ovid emphasises the adultery and that 'Romulus and Remus were bastards, Ilia set the naughty norm'⁶¹. Augustus also elevated Mars' importance by building his temple in the *Forum Augustae*⁶², which also has the effect of promoting the war elements of his heritage, but Ovid promotes how the gods Augustus claims to have ancestry from are lovers. Stating that Mars is Cupid's stepfather⁶³ and when Ovid is writing about an abortion he muses about if Venus decided to terminate her pregnancy with

⁴⁷ Ov. Am. 1.7.15-18

⁴⁸ Ov. Am. 2.5.42-46

⁴⁹ Prop. 1.7.6

⁵⁰ Davis 1999: 431

⁵¹ Tib. 1.1.1-25

⁵² Tib. 1.1.15

⁵³ Nikoloutsos 2011: 59

⁵⁴ Nikoloutsos 2011: 59

⁵⁵ Nikoloutsos 2011: 68

⁵⁶ Prop. 1.3.30 and Tib. 1.2.63-66

⁵⁷ Davis 1999: 435

⁵⁸ Hom. Od. 8.266-366

⁵⁹ Ov. Am. 2.5.28

⁶⁰ Verg. Aen. 1.274

⁶¹ Ov. Am. 3.4.37-40

⁶² Davis 1999: 434

⁶³ Ov. Am. 2.9b.23-24

Aeneas and how then 'the world would be without its Caesars'⁶⁴. Which is quite a bold thing to do, especially as we hear from Suetonius how Augustus reacted to accounts of his life which was scandalous or degrading⁶⁵.

While Hayworth has a point that we should perhaps stop categorising elegists as pro-Augustan or anti-Augustan as it can be reductive⁶⁶ however, it also is important to note that Augustan elegy is fundamentally anti-Augustan in its conception. Epic had an increased importance in the Augustan regime because it had potential to promote the Trojan origin story, which was so important to Augustan ideology as Davis remarks⁶⁷. The Trojan myth was not just the origin myth for Rome itself but also the Julian family and so was thrust into the Rome's national identity. Propertius lets the reader know he is making an active choice to write elegy and he has made that choice so he would not have to write epic⁶⁸, Ovid tells us the same thing that he could write epic as he is capable of it but he will not⁶⁹ between Caesar and Corinna, he chooses to write about Corinna⁷⁰. Interestingly, Ovid does this because he would rather write lies in elegy than be 'tied to truths of history'⁷¹, which can be read as a damning opinion of the history Ovid is living that he would prefer a creation to real life. Regardless, it seems that the Augustan elegist all actively chose to pursue elegy as a rejection of epic, as epic is so entangled with Augustus at this period it is convincing what Davis says that to reject epic was to reject Augustus⁷².

To sum up, Augustan politics play a large role in love elegy especially when you consider the possibility that the actual choice to write elegy is making a political statement. While each of the three poets shape their elegy due to different stresses and address different aspects of politics, nevertheless politics does play a key role to all three. Which is not surprising given the political climate of the time. Propertius and Tibullus are living in a society who is recovering from a time of civil war and while now we can say that Augustus' reign was internally stable, they did not have the luxury of that foresight. While Ovid is more in the thick of it reacting to legislation and building regimes, living with the struggles of being an individual in a society where national identity was becoming increasingly important and was already becoming an issue years before for Tibullus.

⁶⁴ Ov. Am. 2.14.17-18

⁶⁵ Suet. Aug. 39.3.3

⁶⁶ Hayworth 2007: 93

⁶⁷ Davis 1999: 434

⁶⁸ Prop. 2.1.17-26

⁶⁹ Ov. Am. 1.1

⁷⁰ Ov. Am.3.12.15-16

⁷¹ Ov. Am.3.12.12-15

⁷² Davis 1999: 436

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