

AUGUSTAN LOVERS

Myth in elegy

Where do we find it?

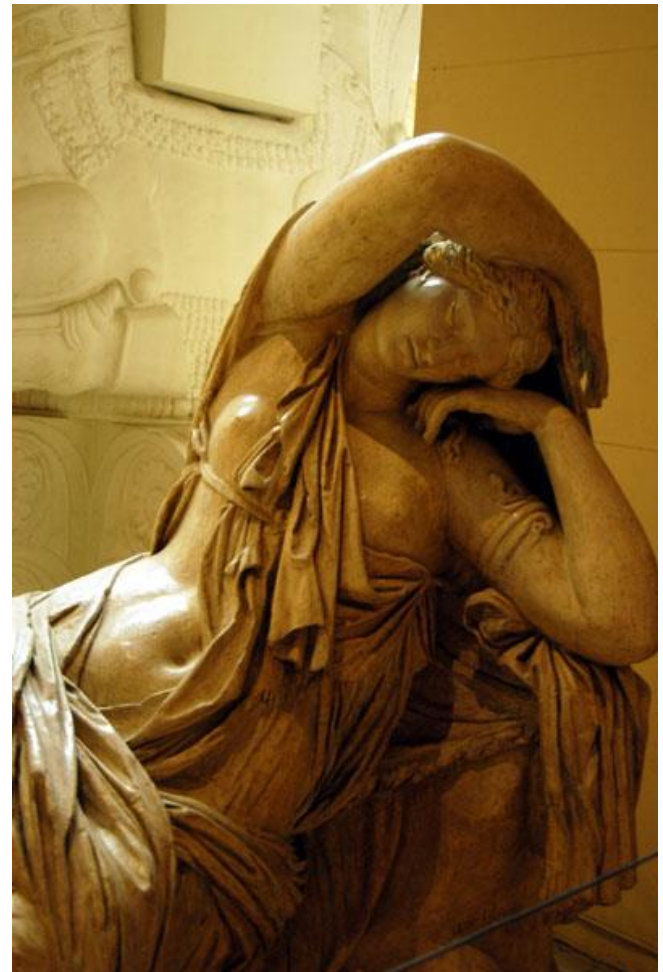
- The common perception is that there are relatively few extensive mythological references in Tibullus, but...
 - ▣ Tib. 1.3 (extensive references to the *Odyssey*, underworld and Elysium); Tib. 1.4 (Priapus); 2.3 (Apollo and Admetus); 2.4 (Aeneas and the foundation of Rome)
- Ovid and particularly Propertius do use explicit mythological references more frequently
 - ▣ ...and Roman aetiological myth will become a specific focus of Prop. 4, as well as Ovid's *Heroides*

Looking ahead: Ov. *Am.* 2.18:

And this too my girl's stopped –
divine injustice – and Love has
triumphed over the buskined bard.
So – what's allowed – I teach the
art of loving – poor teacher hoisted
on my own petard; write love-
letters, Penelope to Ulysses,
compose for abandoned Phyllis'
tearful screed, appeals for Paris,
Macareus, and Jason, and Theseus
and Hippolytus to read, the last
words of the loving Lesbian lyrist,
and wretched Dido, naked sword in
hand.

The use of mythology in elegy

- You have already seen several uses of mythology represented in Roman elegy:
 - ▣ The use of mythological references tweaked by the narrator to indicate his/her unreliability and create ironic effects
 - ▣ Mythological allusions to both art and text as typical of Callimachean-style poetry (cf. Prop. 1.3)
 - ▣ Mythological allusion and topics in line with the Callimachean preference for lesser known stories



When it works

- For the ironic effects of unreliable narration and ‘myth tweaking’ to be felt as effectively as possible, they need to be blended with rhetorically effective allusions which build up the narrator’s credibility
- We will look at one such example today (Prop. 2.9)
- ...which will also allow us to comment on the changes that elegy (and perhaps Callimachean discourse in general) imposes on traditional material



Tiepolo: Briseis being led to Agamemnon

Myths in Prop. 2.9

Where he is I've been – often. **But perhaps within the hour she'll drop him too for another dearer.** For twice ten years Penelope could live secure, deserving of so many suitors; she could postpone re-marriage by Minerva's guile, unravelling at night the day's weaving; and though expecting never again to see Ulysses she stayed true – grew old waiting for him. Briseis too, embracing lifeless Achilles, tore her fair cheeks with frenzied fingers. A prisoner in mourning, she washed her blood-stained lord beside the sandy pools of Simois, threw dust on her hair and lifted in her little hands the huge bones of great Achilles. For Peleus was not there, nor your blue-eyed mother, nor Deidamia the widowed Scyrian. Then Greece was therefore blessed with true brides; then honour prospered even in war. **But you could not lie idle for a single night, faithless, nor be alone for a single day!** (Prop. 2.9.1-20)

- Framing lines: Two paragons of virtue and fidelity used to contrast with the *puella's* infidelity?
- Myth as an expression of the narrator's fantasy? (Cf. Macleod, 1974)
- You already know that Penelope was a proverbial example of marital fidelity, but how about Briseis?

Briseis in the literary tradition

- The *Iliad* shows Briseis very much as an object to be possessed, and there is no emphasis on any emotional connection between her and Achilles
 - ▣ Hom. *Il.* 1:

‘The girl I will not give back; sooner will old age come upon her in my own house, in Argos, far from her own land, going up and down by the loom and being in my bed as my companion. So go now, don’t make me angry, so you will be safer.’
- The Hellenistic poet Quintus Smyrnaeus has a similar episode to Propertius, showing the laying out of Achilles’ body – but Briseis’ role is smaller:
 - ▣ Having performed the other tasks with care they laid the fallen son of Peleus fitly in his hut. The sight of him moved the wise goddess Tritogenia to pity. She sprinkled his head with ambrosia, which is said to keep untainted for long the flesh of death’s victims. She made him dewy-fresh as though he still drew breath. She put a frightening frown upon the corpse’s brow, such as once possessed his fearsome visage when he was angered by his friend Patroclus’ killing. Also she made his body appear more solid and handsome. Wonder seized the Argives as they gathered and saw the son of Peleus as though alive. [...] The heart that felt the keenest grief of all was that of Briseis, the noble warrior Achilles’ concubine. Round and round the corpse she turned, with both her hands tearing her lovely flesh and crying aloud. On her tender bosom blood-red welts were raised by her blows; you’d think them drops of crimson blood on milk. But even in her bitter anguish her beauty kept its radiant charm and she was clothed in grace.

Hellenistic Briseis?

- Quint. Smyrn. 7.709-727 shows Briseis among other captive women meeting Neoptolemus:
 - ▣ Among them Briseis, as she looked at the son of Achilles, now was thrilled with joy in her heart, now wrung with grief at the memory of Achilles. Her heart within her was struck with speechless wonder, for it was as if Aiakos' dauntless grandson himself was still alive.
- Scholars have presumed that Propertius and Quintus both draw on a lost Hellenistic treatment of Briseis' grief after the death of Achilles, but the issue cannot be satisfactorily resolved.
- The dominating image of Briseis in literature is the *Iliadic* one

Briseis in the iconographical tradition



- Most scenes featuring Briseis deal with the abduction of Briseis, or her return to Agamemnon
- A painting by Polygnotos may have shown the return of Briseis to Achilles, but we only have Pausanias' account of it today.

Propertius' sources and changes

- Propertius may have drawn on previous romanticised versions of Briseis' story, but he may also have added the scene of Briseis' dressing Achilles' corpse independently
 - ▣ This is likely to be the first instance where the Achilles myth was eroticised in Latin literature
 - ▣ Achilles the lover and Achilles the warrior is a much more versatile example for the elegists – is this the motivation?
- The representation of Penelope in Prop. 2.9 can all be seen as drawn from the *Odyssey*, but other Propertian references may also owe something to Hellenistic alternative traditions on Penelope.

Prop. 2.9

For twice ten years Penelope could live secure, deserving of so many suitors; she could postpone re-marriage by Minerva's guile, unravelling at night the day's weaving; and though expecting never again to see Ulysses she stayed true – grew old waiting for him. Briseis too, embracing lifeless Achilles, tore her fair cheeks with frenzied fingers. A prisoner in mourning, she washed her blood-stained lord beside the sandy pools of Simois, threw dust on her hair and lifted in her little hands the huge bones of great Achilles. For Peleus was not there, nor your blue-eyed mother, nor Deidamia the widowed Scyrian. But you could not lie idle for a single night, faithless, nor be alone for a single day!

- The narrator creates a sharp contrast between the *puella's* behaviour and that of the mythological heroines: she is faithless, they are not.
 - ▣ Note, though, that he starts with his own rival!
- Longevity of Penelope's faithfulness brought out also by the number of lines devoted to her (and to Briseis): six lines on Penelope, eight on Briseis, two lines on 'Cynthia' (19f)
- From 22 onwards, the narrator imagines himself as the topic of her conversation with the rival
 - ▣ Narrator = Penelope??

Penelope and Briseis

For twice ten years Penelope could live secure, deserving of so many suitors; she could **postpone** re-marriage by Minerva's guile, unravelling at night the day's weaving; and though **expecting** never again to see Ulysses she stayed true – grew old **waiting** for him.

- The examples are differentiated
- Penelope: her long endurance
- Latin: starts off in quick-paced dactyls, but has a marked interruption before *uiuere* (live), suggesting the hiatus of her life
- The weaving trick: emphasises *useless* passing of time
- Static: postpone, expecting, stayed
- Unflattering hints? 'Grew old' – is this a reminder old women are unattractive (a.k.a. don't belong as love objects in elegy?)

Penelope and Briseis

Briseis too, embracing lifeless Achilles, tore her fair cheeks with frenzied fingers. A prisoner in mourning, she washed her blood-stained lord beside the sandy pools of Simois, threw dust on her hair and lifted in her little hands the huge bones of great Achilles. For Peleus was not there, nor your blue-eyed mother, nor Deidamia the widowed Scyrian.

- Briseis: captured in one dramatic moment
- Contrasts also within the example: 'little hands the huge bones of great Achilles'; colours: 'fair cheeks – blood-stained lord'
- Penelope: wife, Briseis: prisoner (and note the reference to Achilles' wife Deidamia in this context!)
- Mention of Achilles' parents also makes the reader view him and Briseis as belonging to a younger generation, compared to Penelope and Odysseus.

Briseis and Penelope, and the *puella*

- Together, the examples represent two opposites (old and young, Greek and Trojan, married and unmarried, snapshot and panorama), thus giving the narrator's claim universal validity
- The combination of Briseis and Penelope thus suggests that whatever the circumstances, a faithful woman will stand by her lover; it is so far rhetorically effective
- Ancient history: '*Then Greece...*' '*Then honour...*'; the examples belong in a distinct and distant past
- This contrast is heightened by 'but you' in l. 19

Sneaky suspicions

- In the following, the narrator seems to leave the examples behind, their effect achieved
- He expresses suspicions about 'Cynthia' being unfaithful earlier as well
- ...and goes on to state:
- 'But it's easy for you to lie and scheme. Such work is the one thing that women always learn.' (Prop. 2.9.31f)
- This statement may cause the reader to re-evaluate what the narrator has said about Penelope as well

□ Prop. 2.9.21-28

No, you two drank your wine amid much laughter and maybe slander against me. This is the man who left you once, and still you want him. I wish you joy of your infatuation. Was it for this I made those vows for your recovery when the waters of Styx had gone over your head, and we, your friends, were standing round the bed in tears? Who was he then, and where, you traitor?

Penelope and the *puella*?

- For twice ten years Penelope could live secure, deserving of so many suitors; she could postpone re-marriage by **Minerva's guile**, unravelling with **nightly deceit** the day's weaving; and though expecting never again to see Ulysses she stayed true – grew old waiting for him.
- 31f: all women are treacherous
- Two phrases in the Penelope example may worry us in that context:
 - ▣ Minerva's guile (*falsa Minerva*)
 - ▣ Nightly deceit (*nocturno dolo*)
- *Dolus* the word used of Odysseus' trick in the Dolon episode of the *Iliad*
- Do these word cast doubt on Penelope as an example to follow, or are they merely befitting of Odysseus' wife?

The narrator

- The narrator thus accuses his girlfriend of character traits (resourcefulness?) he has already lauded in Penelope: he is not consistent
- The comparison of Briseis and Penelope to 'Cynthia' implicitly sets up the narrator as an analogy for Achilles and Odysseus
- Effects? It is more explicit in other poems (Prop. 2.6 and 2.20 e.g.) but it may highlight the double standards of the narrator: both mythological men had girls on the side – is there a Roman Calypso?

To take away

- Mythological allusions used in a variety of ways in elegy, and are often open to seemingly contradictory readings
- Elegy draws on both highly canonical intertexts and traditions (e.g. Homer) but also on lesser known Hellenistic intertexts
- In addition, we should be aware that the elegiac authors also change myth themselves: the romanticised version of Briseis' story in Propertius and Ovid's *Heroides* is a case in point

Lectures ahead

1. Myth in elegy (Fri)
2. Changes in elegy: Ovid's *Amores* (Mon)
3. Sulpicia (Tue)
4. Preparing the presentation 2 (Fri)
5. Elegiac reception (Fri)