

Bodies that Shatter: Carnage and the Sense of a (Not) Ending in Tibullus 2.6

Tibullus II's brevity, and Tib. 2.6's abrupt ending, inspire scholars to debate whether book and final poem are fragmentary. The fanfiction of *Corpus Tibullianum III* suggests that Tibullus' readers saw the ending as premature, the corpus as undisciplined. Tellingly, CTIII purges from its elegiac cycles Tibullus' most glaring deviations from elegiac tradition (same-sex relationships, mistresses switched mid-oeuvre). These policing reader-responses construe Tibullus' elegies as perverse. A Lacanian understanding of perversion illuminates that moral panic as not entirely misguided, and reveals new facets of the "sphragis," Tib. 2.6.

Perversion for Lacan pivots not on prohibited behaviors, but on the idea of limit enshrined in prohibition. The pervert's obsessive flouting of the Law solicits but continually fails to evoke a limit to be imposed upon the endless, anarchic circuits of enjoyment. That obsession aligns perversion with the drives' repetitive circuit—particularly with the death-drive's dual identity as propulsive and dissipating. Tib. 2.6 cycles through images of bodies mangled and violated, like Tibullus' soldier-friend Macer fantasised as tortured runaway slave, or the bloody corpse of Nemesis's little sister. The sister's fatal fall repeats Tibullus' salvific descent from heaven to meet Delia, a fantasy of a Law that could compass such a rustic "marriage" (Tib. 1.3). Reversing Tibullus' Odysseus-like rescue from 1.3's "Phaeacia," the sister evokes the tragic Astyanax thrown from the walls of Troy, destroying Troy's futurity. Elegiac dalliance become a form of death drive, its repetitive cycles perpetuating Tibullus' adolescence, infinitely deferring citizen male adulthood as husband and father. Yet these circuits produce another legacy—the poetry itself, iterated by the poet's (now and future) readers, returning the poet to an eternal "inorganic state" outlasting his physical body, the exact aim of the death drive.

The death-drive's iterative logic underwrites its legibility, its intertexts referencing mythic history. Tibullus' conclusion conjures a "MacGuffin" — Phryne the bawd, on whom Tibullus blames all his troubles with Nemesis. But this Phryne's name and occupation evoke 4th-century Athens' Phryne the *hetaira*. Her advocate Hypereides stripped Phryne naked in an Athenian courtroom where her ex-lover Euthias prosecuted her for "introducing a new god" and "excessive revelry." But no limit imposed by Law answers Hypereides' perverse act. Seeing her naked, the judges "fear Phryne as a god": they acquit, evading the limit *within* the Law—the suspicion that sadism, not austere but impartial justice, informs Law's pronouncements, infusing it with (Euthias') obscene enjoyment. The jurors' punt refuses Hypereides' invitation to confront these directly.

Like the Athenian jurors' shocked acquittal, Tibullus' conjuring the bawd Phryne as causality from nowhere undermines *all* his narrative's fictive premises, and its closure. His illogic vitiates his whole narrative of the Nemesis affair, thus its organising signifiers: Romanness, masculinity, goddess/human. Like the death drive, Tibullus' verse obsessively circles the bodies of branded Macer, bloody little sister, the daimonic Phrynes, seeking a *commencement de la fin*. Yet the category confusions embodied in their gore, servile branding, divine/human duplicity render ontological coherence impossible. The final aporetic silence points to a conceptual, ineffable "beyond" to elegy and Rome.

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