

Burial and Bodies in Tibullus and Propertius

This paper focuses on the elegiac writings of Tibullus (*Elegies* Book 1) and Propertius (*Elegies* Book 1), and examines the ways in which their poems express anxieties about civil war and reveal post-war trauma. Specifically, this paper concentrates on the recurring theme of burial, especially the fear of improper burial, as an articulation of these concerns. For example, Tibullus yearns for death in Delia's arms and a well-attended funeral (1.1.59-69). This is not simply a desire to die in the company of one's beloved partner, but rather it is evidence of a deeper psychological need to have his death and burial broadly acknowledged and mourned. Again in 1.3, Tibullus panics at thought of dying apart from the loved ones who can demonstrate affection to his remains, even going so far as to preemptively compose his own epitaph (1.3.3-10, 51-56). It is not death itself that Tibullus fears. It is the prospect of a neglected, unmourned death that agonizes him. Similarly, Propertius tells Cynthia that he can cope with dying well enough, but the possibility that she will forget him and leave his corpse lonely is unbearable (1.19.1-7). Propertius also ends his first book of poetry with repeated references to the death of soldiers, betraying a preoccupation with bones that are scattered, uncared for, unburied, and unidentifiable (1.20).

In taking this approach to their works, this paper builds on existing research about Tibullus and Propertius as anti-war poets (Harrison 2013; Gold and Liveley 2021; Sullivan 2010). Both poets express rejection towards war, and make the high cost of war focal points within their poetry (Harrison 2013). Statements rejecting and condemning war are only one aspect of the bigger picture, however. This paper seeks to uncover a deeper, more emotional response to war in these poems as well. To accomplish this aim, this paper also draws upon

scholarship regarding trauma, and takes a psychoanalytic approach to the text (Kurtz 2018). By reading the text in this way, we can start to piece together how Tibullus and Propertius are attempting to work through the internal conflicts and fears caused by the haunting experiences of civil war and continuous political instability.

Because this form of analysis centers so much on the author's deeply personal responses to the world around them, this paper also addresses the hazards of reading elegy at face value for autobiographical information and the true interior thoughts of its writers. Countless scholarship has delved into the pitfalls of such an approach, as these texts "turn out to be swathed in clouds of literariness which must make us distrust the evidence of love elegy as in any way simply biographical or autobiographical" (Braund 2017). There is indeed a tension between literary tropes and genuine expressions of self. The Tibullus and Propertius inhabiting the worlds of their poetry are absolutely distinct from the Tibullus and Propertius who are writing and crafting those worlds. However, this paper argues that the deeply traumatic context of civil war is too strong to ignore. To be sure, both Tibullus and Propertius work within a well-established framework of generic expectations. We should not, and indeed cannot, divorce author and persona so strongly when it comes to such a weighty topic, however, simply because they stick to the script of love elegy. To do so would deny them their humanity, a humanity which they so desperately wanted to be recognized and appreciated in a world that so easily could leave them as anonymous bones on a battlefield.

Bibliography

Braund, Susanna Morton. *Understanding Latin Literature*. Routledge, 2017.

Gold, Barbara K., and Genevieve Liveley. *A Guide to Latin Elegy and Lyric*. Wiley Blackwell, 2021.

Harrison, Stephen. "Time, Place, and Political Background." *The Cambridge Companion to Latin Love Elegy*, edited by Thea Thorsen, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, pp. 133–150.

Kurtz, John Roger, editor. *Trauma and Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Sullivan, J. P. "The Politics of Elegy." *Latin Erotic Elegy: An Anthology and Reader*, edited by Paul Allen Miller, Routledge, New York, NY, 2002, pp. 312–328.