

**Amy VAIL**

**The Emeralds of Nemesis: Luxury and Poetics In Tibullus**

Tibullus' deep contempt for luxury goods and wealth is much more than a hand-me-down trope fished from the metaphorical toolbox of Roman elegists. The avarice of the *domina* or *puer* and the hardships it brings upon poets are indeed mere commonplaces. Praise for *Paupertas*, however, has roots in Hellenistic epigram, (Maltby 2002). The learned Tibullus was attracted enough by the theme to have used it not only to form the core of his entire aesthetic program, but also as the driving force behind the dynamic sequence of his poetic books.

*Doctus poeta* though he was, Tibullus made little use of ostentatious displays of learning (Cairns 1979). The *vita iners* his persona so deeply desires is rich only in the simple pleasures of the hearth and the harvest. He pictured it, *tersus atque elegans* as always, in appropriately simple vocabulary. The elegist leads a pious life in country, where even his gods are carelessly groomed: Priapus is nude and bristly, while Cupid is redrawn as a clumsy rustic (2.1.67-9) (Williams, 1980). The locks of Apollo, pressed into the service of Admetus, become shamefully unkempt.

Notes of tension and self-doubt arise at the same time that expensive clothing begins to appear within the poetic cycle. The elegist's own ideal life requires only simple garments, and while he is still happy with Delia, her dresses are not described. Indeed, he envisions her, a true Penelope, running to welcome him home from Corcyra, her feet bare and her hair disheveled. Once Delia has proved herself an untrustworthy *meretrix*, however, she appears in the company of her garishly dressed *coniunx*, wearing a ring with a carved gem (1.6.25-6) and reclining with her dress loosened (1.6.18).

As the *turpis fabula* of Marathus evolves, the boy's lover Pholoe emerges as an entirely conventional elegiac *domina*, whose wardrobe contains more than one *amictus*, a particularly ostentatious garment (Flower Smith 1913) (1.8.11-14). The *coniunx* of Marathus' male lover dresses her hair elaborately and dons gold and purple dresses (1.9.76-70). As luxury enters the narrative, the elegist's tone darkens.

Nemesis, however, brings the poet to the breaking point. Until this point in the cycle, the elegist has been at pains to reject war and *praeda*. Yet when Nemesis demands luxury goods, he renounces his whole program in the space of one distich (2.3.49-50) and goes to war. Once he has become a soldier, the elegist loses his connection to his own peaceful landscape, while rare words creep into his verses. For the sake of *smaragdi*, he is willing to sell his paternal home and his Lares, and even to reject Elegy, Apollo, and the Muses, his former literary and spiritual patrons. Not coincidentally, 2.3 contains Tibullus' first lengthy mythological *exemplum*, (Murgatroyd 1994). Ostentatious displays of learning multiply as Tibullus begins to despair. For the first time, as Nemesis demands exotic clothing with which she may be conspicuous, the poet, for purposes of display, reaches for odd diction, obscure toponyms, and aetiological stories.

The Apollo myth is well chosen. The mooing of cows roughly interrupts the god's song, whose music like Tibullus', comes to a halt. His oracles untended, he lays down his role as a seer (Mutschler 1995). As the god loses his power and prestige, the poet, similarly out of his sphere, strives for sophisticated and conventionalized elegance. By choosing an Apollo fallen victim to love as his *amoris exemplum*, the elegist indirectly told the story of his own poetic breakdown.