

The Propempticon In Tibullus I.3

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Tibullus' treatment of the propempticon genre in poem I.3 is of special interest as an example of his poetic craftsmanship and his control of the conventions.

I shall demonstrate the qualities of the propempticon as a literary genre through relating Tibullus I.3 to the tradition of this genre and showing the conventions he develops.

The propempticon is the farewell or "bon voyage" poem, in which the poet conveys his personal feelings to a departing friend or lover. There are some common features appropriate to this theme, which we know from the comparative study of the poems themselves. It is worth mentioning here that Menander, the rhetorician of the third century A.D., had a treatise on the writing of a propempticon, in which he set forth the following rules⁽¹⁾: a friend should express a *σχετλιασμός*⁽²⁾, which means a passionate complaint and a reproach to detain the traveller, an attempt to persuade him to abandon the idea of going away⁽³⁾. Then he should claim to give in to the traveller's determination to leave. This reaction is to be followed by prayers to sea-gods wishing him "bon voyage" and a safe journey.

Menander discussed the sort of things the speaker might include in the *σχετλιασμός*, all of them stressed the friendship between speaker and traveller which the traveller is now breaking by his departure.

This structure which Menander laid down is found in several Roman poetic propemptica⁽⁴⁾. There are some other recurring propemptic elements, though not mentioned by Menander, yet are common in the extant poems, such as the dangers of the journey by sea⁽⁵⁾ and the perfidy of the traveller⁽⁶⁾. The speaker's longing for the traveller's return or the happy reunion is another propemptic element⁽⁷⁾.

The propempticon is a familiar type of which we have several examples that come down to us from antiquity in both Greek and Latin⁽⁸⁾. We do not know how the genre was originally created. At least, let us say that it became a frequent motif in Roman Elegy⁽⁹⁾ and that the Elegiac poets probably followed the example set by Cornelius Gallus in a propempticon written for his mistress Lycoris⁽¹⁰⁾.

If we accept Menander's standards of judgement, we find that the Roman poets adhered to these rules with varying degrees of strictness⁽¹¹⁾ and they might stress one element at the expense of the others⁽¹²⁾, or use them in an inverse order⁽¹³⁾.

I would say that Tibullus composed poem I.3 with this tradition in mind. It is his adaptation of the propempticon that was certainly in his thought. Although many -if not most- critics consider I.3 a false propempticon⁽¹⁴⁾, yet it does not seem to have escaped the notice of the reader. Whether it is a real one or not depends on the reader's generic consideration⁽¹⁵⁾. It is a false propempticon only in the sense that it gives the reader the impression that the whole elegy is a propempticon. To my mind Tibullus I.3 is a modification of the propempticon put in an unexpected context.

In the first two lines, Tibullus deplores Messalla's departure⁽¹⁶⁾. He starts the poem with these words:

Ibitis Aegaeas sine me, Messalla, per undas, (I.3.1)
 "Will you go, Messalla, without me through the Aegean waves"⁽¹⁷⁾.

This sounds like the generic elements related to the propempticon. In the second line Tibullus asks Messalla to remember him:

O utinam memores.....mei ! (I.3.2)

It is a traditional demand in the propempticon at the moment of separation⁽¹⁸⁾.

Tibullus accompanied Messalla to the East, but fell ill and was left behind at Corcyra⁽¹⁹⁾.

me tenet ignotis aegrum Phaeacia terris: (3)

Possibly it was not a real journey, but a poetic imagination echoing the fantasy of Propertius I.17⁽²⁰⁾. Most likely Tibullus went to Corcyra and the poem is a real occasional one related to a particular personal experience.

So the first couplet of the poem suggests that the poet is going to write a propempticon to Messalla, who departs abandoning the poet on Corcyra. Although Messalla is here the propemptic addressee he is not further addressed in the poem⁽²¹⁾.

Some critics see that the mention of Messalla here is arising from the need to address the poem to someone⁽²²⁾, but was Tibullus really in need of an addressee, and was this his main reason to start the poem in such a way ?

Although the propempticon is to Messalla, Tibullus does not forget his role as a lover, but was the propemptic beginning an excuse to introduce Delia?⁽²³⁾ Could not Tibullus have written about Delia without an addressee? If Delia was his sole purpose, Tibullus could have started the poem at line (3), but the first two lines have an artistic purpose. Tibullus wanted to exploit the tradition known in the Roman Elegiac poets. Yet, we should not take this beginning

literally and think that Tibullus is going to express a pure propempticon.

A recent critic considers Tibullus' propempticon to Messalla a misleading generic announcement and a deception to the reader⁽²⁴⁾. It seems to me that if we admit the existence of a deception-technique in I.3, it is ostensible. Tibullus' propempticon is not an intended deception to the reader but an intended variation on the conventional theme, a modification of the propempticon, as I have already said.

Tibullus announces his acceptance of the tradition in the first couplet of the poem, and then attempts to make a poem out of several elements: the propempticon, the theme of death, the love element and mythological topics. All these elements are included in the elegiac world. After the conventional propemptic elements in the beginning of I.3, Tibullus gives the poem another unexpected turn. So the propempticon is not the main structure of the poem but rather one part of the design. At this point it is convenient to consider briefly the thematic structure of poem I.3, which is a debated subject⁽²⁵⁾.

After the introduction, Tibullus refuses the idea of death⁽²⁶⁾ away from home:

abstineas avidas Mors modo nigra manus.
abstineas, Mors atra, precor:..... (4 - 5)

and away from Delia who consulted all the gods on his departure to be sure of his safe return :

Delia non usquam quae, me quam mitteret urbe,
dicitur ante omnes consuluisse deos. (9 - 10)

She asked the help of augurs, and though they assured his safe return (11 - 13), yet nothing kept her from tears and terror :

.....tamen est deterrita numquam
quin fleret nostras respiceretque vias . (13 - 14)

Tibullus expresses this brief *σχετλιασμός* on Delia's part when he left Rome. Although it is not in the familiar way, yet he possibly has Cynthia's *σχετλιασμός* of Propertius I.6 in mind⁽²⁷⁾.

Tibullus begins to recall the bad omens that accompanied his departure (15-20), and comes to the conclusion that he should not have left home because he is emotionally attached to home and Delia. No one should venture to depart if love is unwilling:

audeat invito ne quis discedere Amore , (21)

Delia's appeal to Isis is useless:

quid tua nunc Isis mihi , Delia , (23)

but now he asks the goddess to come to his help:

nunc ; dea , nunc succurre mihi (27)

Tibullus thinks that it would have been better to live in the Golden Age of Saturn (35-48) where the people lived well before journeys were known :

quam bene Saturno vivebant rege , priusquam
tellus in longas est patefacta vias ! (35 - 36)

But now when Jupiter is lord:

nunc Iove sub domino (49)

there is the sea and thousand ways of sudden death :

nunc mare , nunc leti mille repente viae . (50)

This is the first time in the poem to mention the sea. Tibullus does not talk about the traditional sea-dangers, which we meet in the propemptica of Horace, Propertius and Ovid⁽²⁸⁾, whose aim was to set the reader in the sea-voyage and recreate its atmosphere. The dangerous sea in I.3 is only touched on in passing.

The idea of death dominates Tibullus' thought⁽²⁹⁾, he wants to be mentioned in his epitaph as Messalla's companion over land and sea⁽³⁰⁾ (55 - 56).

After his death, Venus herself will lead him into the Elysian fields⁽³¹⁾, because he is always easy to tender love:

Sed me, quod facilis tenero sum semper Amori,
 ipsa Venus campos ducet in Elysios . (57 - 58)

He describes Elysium (59 - 66), the place of those , who die while loving and Tartarus, where the enemies of love are punished (67 - 82) . As we notice, the two elements: love and death are combined in the underworld passage.

Finally the poet returns to Delia (83 - 88) and introduces an appeal to her to remain chaste and loyal :

at tu casta precor maneas, (83).

The poem concludes with the imagination of his happy reunion with Delia⁽³²⁾(89 - 94). He dreams of his coming home suddenly:

tunc veniam subito, nec quisquam nuntiet ante,
 sed videar caelo missus adesse tibi. (89 - 90)

Tibullus foresees what will happen when Delia sees him, how she will rush toward him with disordered hair and bare feet:

tunc mihi, qualis eris longos turbata capillos,
 obvia nudato, Delia, curre pede. (91 - 92)

At the beginning of the poem Tibullus fears death , while lying mortally ill at Phaeacia , then we are led on from the fear of gloomy death to death that leads to Elysium and finally, at line (89) Tibullus abandons the idea of death and adopts a different mood, he cheerfully thinks of his reunion with Delia, thus the poem has a happy ending in contrast to the beginning.⁽³³⁾

It is interesting to observe how Tibullus plays with the element of time throughout the poem, he talks about his present status with transitions in his imagination between past and future⁽³⁴⁾, as we have seen.

Tibullus' departure from tradition needs explanation. It seems unlikely to me that the familiar details of the propempticon models did not appeal to him. Tibullus was aware that these propemptic features were well known to his readers and so he approached the subject in another literary sense. This different approach which he adopted exploited the reader's expectations and considerations to another end and with another purpose in mind. Tibullus wanted to play on the idea of separation from Delia mixed with other elements of love-elegy and the world of the propempticon. The propempticon of I.3 is not an excuse to treat the mythological topics of the Golden Age and Elysium and the love topic of Delia. If Tibullus wanted to retell them for their own sake, he could have done so without any need to an excuse. However, it seems likely to me that he wanted to play on the organic connection between the different elements of the poem.

Poem I.3 demonstrates Tibullus' response to the propemptic tradition and the expression of that response.

Notes

- (1) Apud K. Quinn, *Latin Exploration*, (London, 1963), p.242; J.C. Yardley, Ovid's other Propempticon, *Hermes*, 107, (1979), p.184.
- (2) The Latin equivalent of this word is conquestio.
- (3) S.F. Bonner, *Roman Declamation*, (Liverpool, 1949), p.151, points out -in this respect- to the influence of the suasoria "an navigandum". See also L.P. Wilkinson, *Ovid Recalled*, (Cambridge, 1955), p.23.
- (4) See for example Propertius I.8; Ovid Am. II.11.
- (5) Horace, Od. I.3.9 ff.; Ovid, Met. XI. 425 ff.; Am. II. 11.1 ff., Statius 3. 2. 61 ff.; see Yardley, (op. cit. pp. 185 f.).
- (6) Horace, Od. III. 27. Propertius I.8.17; Ovid, Am. II.11.7-8. For the analysis of the propempticon in these three poems see: A.G. Lee, Teneorum Lusor Amorum, in: *Critical Essays On Roman Literature (Elegy & Lyric)*, ed. by: J.P. Sullivan, Routledge & Kegan Paul, (London, 1962), pp.164 ff.; Quinn, (op.cit., pp. 242 ff., 253 ff., 266 ff.); C.W. Macleod, A Use Of Myth In Ancient Poetry, *C.Q.*, LXVIII, (1974), pp., 88 ff.; Yardley, (op.cit., pp. 185 ff.).
- (7) Theocritus, Id. 7. 63 ff.; Ovid, Am. II. 11. 38 ff.
- (8) See Homer, Odys. V.203 ff.; Theocritus Id. 7; Horace's famous propempticon to Virgil in Od. I.3; also Od. III.27; Statius Silvae, 3.2. Parthenius had a lost Propempticon, see N.B. Crowther, Parthenius and Roman Poetry, *Mnemosyne*, XXIX, (1976), pp. 68 f.; Quinn, (op.cit. pp. 239 f.) cites all the fragmentary propemptica in Greek and Latin.
- (9) The propempticon appears at Propertius I.6, I.8 and I.17; Ovid Am. II. 11 (see above).

- (10) Servius, the famous ancient commentator and grammarian of fourth century A.D., says that Virgil's *Ecl.* 10.46-9 are taken from 'one of Gallus' poems. It has been argued that *Ecl.* 10, written in honour of Gallus, contains a number of references to his own works. Modern commentators are inclined to consider *Ecl.* 10.46-9 as coming from a real propempticon written by Gallus to Lycoris when she went off leaving him. See for example Quinn, (*op.cit.*p.245); F. Cairns, *Tibullus, A Hellenistic Poet at Rome*, (Cambridge, 1979), p.226.
- (11) Propertius in I.8 adheres to the propempticon pattern. He starts his propempticon to Cynthia expressing indignantly that she is going to Illyria with another man (I.8.1). Then in (5 ff.), he tries to dissuade her by citing the dangers of the journey. Finally, he gives in (17-20), and presents his best wishes to her. Cf. Horace *Od.* I.3.
- (12) The dangers of the journey are stressed in both Horace *Od.* I.3 and Propertius I.8.
- (13) From the analysis of several familiar propemptica we notice that the *σχετλιασμός* comes first, followed by farewells and good wishes. In *Od.* III.27, Horace reversed the order; lines 1-16: a prayer and a farewell, 17-20: a *σχετλιασμός*, cf. Statius *Silvae* 3.2 and Theocritus *Id.* 7.52 ff. See Macleod, (*op. cit* pp.91 f.).
- (14) See D.F. Bright, *Haec Mihi Fingebam*, in: *Tibullus in His world*, Cambridge Classical Society III, (Leiden, 1978), p. 17; Cairns, (*op.cit.* pp. 166 f.); Quinn, (*op. cit.* p. 241), thinks that no surviving Latin propempticon is a bon voyage poem pure and simple.
- (15) Cf. Tibullus II.6.
- (16) We know that Tibullus was not one of the court-poets who belonged to the circle of Maecenas. Tibullus' patron was the

statesman Marcus Valerius Messalla Corvinus, addressed in I.3.
See also I.7 & I.10.

- (17) We are not told here Messalla's destination. In Propertius I.8 we are told that Cynthia is off to Illyria with a new lover. In Am. II.11, Ovid tells us that Corinna is going away but we do not know the reason of her departure or her destination.
- (18) See Horace Od. III.27.13 f.; Ovid Am. II.11.37.
- (19) Corcyra is identified with the Phaeacia of Homer's *Odyssey*. See Bright, (op.cit.pp.17 ff.); Cairns, (op.cit.pp.44 f.) thinks that the use of the name Phaeacia for Corcyra is intended to call attention to Tibullus' similarities and dissimilarities to Odysseus.
- (20) In I.17, Propertius imagines that he deserted Cynthia and crossed the Adriatic in a ship. Threatened by a storm, Propertius begs Cynthia for mercy. Then he realizes that it would have been better to endure Cynthia's behaviour than to perish by sea-storm.
- (21) The whole poem lies in 94 lines, the poet devotes only two of them to address Messalla. He mentions him once more in his epitaph: I.3.55-56.
- (22) See for example Bright, (op.cit. pp.17 f.).
- (23) Delia was Tibullus mistress who dominates the first book of his *Elegies*.
- (24) Cairns, (op.cit. pp.166 ff.) discusses Tibullus' habit of deceiving his reader with reference to *Elegy I.3*.
- (25) For discussions of this subject see C. Cambell, *Tibullus: Elegy I.3*, *Y.C.S.*, 23, Cambridge, (1973), passim; Cairns, (op.cit., p.46).
- (26) I do not agree with Bright, (op.cit.,p.28), that Tibullus' whole vision of death was a metaphor for separation from Delia. I believe that his physical condition leads him naturally to the

thought of death. His separation from Delia makes him a pessimist. So he fears death away from her.

- (27) In I.6 Propertius was asked by a friend to accompany him on an official mission to Asia. The poet was about to accept the idea when his mistress Cynthia refused such a separation.
- (28) See above, n. 5.
- (29) G. Williams, *Figures Of Thought In Roman Poetry*, (New Haven & London 1980) p.92, remarks briefly that the entire poem is composed of the poet's fevered thoughts of love and death.
- (30) Bright (op.cit.p.27) correctly remarks that Tibullus dictates a soldier's epitaph not a lover's. For elegiac epitaphs see: Propertius II.1.79; II. 13.35 f.; IV.7. 85 f.; Ovid Am.II.6.61 f.; Her. XIV. 129 f.; Tr. III. 3.73-6.
- (31) Venus' role in Elysium, in place of Mercury, introduces, as Cairns, (op.cit.p.51) remarks, the concept of an Elysium for lovers alone. So Tibullus' concept of the underworld is dominated by the idea of love: Elysium only for lovers and hell only for enemies of love.
- (32) In Am. II. 11.43 ff., Ovid, influenced by the conclusion of Tibullus I.3, imagines his happy reunion with his mistress Corinna.
- (33) Cairns (op.cit.p.175) comments on the surprising turn which the poem takes at its end saying: " in I.3 Tibullus has been all the time at death's door, so that his sudden vision of return to Rome and Delia is a shock".
- (34) Bright, (op.cit.p.19) says: "the poet's thoughts move through a world of recollection and vision..... he moves in his imagination to the past and distant future."