THE TARTARUS MOTIF IN TIBULLUS' ELEGY 1.3*

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Much of the literature that has so far appeared on the Corpus Tibullianum has dealt with elegy 1.3. 1 In discussions of the poem attention has been drawn to the balance in the external structure of this particular elegy, and consequently no commentator has failed to point out that Elysium, where faithful lovers will go after death (59-66), has its counterpart in the scelerata sedes 2 with its permanent inhabitants (67-80).

By stating that Venus herself will accompany him to Elysium where Amor is constantly fanning lovers' quarrels, and that all true lovers are to be seen there with myrtle in their hair, the poet is unmistakably creating an Elysium for lovers. This impression is brought into sharper focus by the reference to roses and myrtle, flowers often associated with love. 3

Since Elysium is represented as a haven for those faithful to Venus, it has seemed logical to many scholars that the subsequent description of the scelerata sedes is a description of the place where sinners against Venus are punished. Consequently the four arch-sinners mentioned here (the daughters of Danaus are considered as one group), viz. Ixion (73), Tityus (75), Tantalus (77) and the Danaids (79), have been subjected to a thorough investigation in order to

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* The substance of this paper has been taken and amplified from a thesis submitted for the M.A. degree at the Rand Afrikaans University (1972) entitled Organiese eenheid by Tibullus: 'n struktuuranalise van elegiee 1.3 en 2.4, written under the supervision of dr. W.J. Henderson.


2. Although the poet does not explicitly state that by scelerata sedes he means Tartarus, commentators agree that he in fact has Tartarus in mind. For example, Tibullus' scelerata sedes hidden in nocte profunda is reminiscent of Hesiod's Tartarus: ἀνώτερος τριστοιχικός κέφαλαιος περὶ δειρήν (Theog. 726-7). Likewise the aeratus ... foris (72) is reminiscent of Hesiod's ἀειρικός ... χαλκείως (Theog. 732-3), and of Homer's στόάημα τοῦ πόλεως καὶ ἱππαρκος σύνθες (Il. 8.15). Cf. also Hom. Od. 11.568-600; Plato Phaedo 113E; Verg. Aen. 6. 548-627; Ov. Met. 4.449-463 and for a survey of the development of the Tartarus myth, cf. Schering in RE IV, 2, 2440.34-2443.49.

3. For myrtle cf. Hor. C.1.25.17-20; Cat. 61.18ff; Ov. Fast. 4.139, and for roses cf. Prop. 4.7.60.
ascertain to what extent they were sinners against Venus, and thus relevant and significant in the elegy.

Ixion’s impertinence in desiring Hera\(^4\) can be technically considered as an offence against Venus, and his presence in Tibullus’ Tartarus as of elegiac significance.\(^5\) The same applies to Tityus for his violation of Leto,\(^6\) and to the Danaids for the treacherous way in which they murdered their husbands on their wedding night.\(^7\) And yet it cannot be stated as the rule that the ancients thought of all these characters as sinners against Venus.

It is not so simple, however, to ascribe Tantalus’ presence in Tartarus directly to an offence against Venus and thereby make him of elegiac significance in this poem. From primary sources his guilt would seem to be as follows: \(a\) he revealed the secrets of the gods; \(b\) he stole ambrosia and nectar which he gave to his friends; \(c\) he killed Pelops and offered his flesh to the gods in order to test their omniscience; \(d\) he desired to be equal to the gods; \(e\) he was guilty of perjury concerning the theft which Pandareus committed; \(f\) he abducted Ganymede; \(g\) he denied the divine nature of the sun.\(^8\) At the root of all his misdeeds lies his unwillingness to appreciate his exceptional good fortune, and by ancient writers Tantalus was considered as the exemplification of avarice.\(^9\) At no stage was there any question of sin against Venus. Consequently the inclusion of Tantalus in this context remains a tantalizing problem to those scholars who wish to attach elegiac value to each of these arch-sinners.

In 1952 H. Drews examined, from Lydian folk-lore, the possibility of identifying Tantalus with Assaon.\(^10\) Assaon attempted to seduce Niobe and burnt her children to death when his attempt failed. This may perhaps be technically considered as an offence against Venus which could bring Tantalus into line with the other sinners. Both Eisenberger and Wimmel are sceptical about the possibility of an identification of Tantalus with Assaon, since they feel that the grounds for such an assumption are insufficient.\(^11\) To this may be added that even if such an identification were possible, it is doubtful if Tibullus would have used such an obscure legend to ‘prove’ his Tantalus guilty of sin against Venus. Unlike Propertius, Tibullus avoids obscure mythological references.\(^12\)

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The most radical explanation for Tantalus’ presence in these lines is to be found in the article by Henderson. Under the influence of Quinn as he himself admits, Henderson believes that Tibullus consciously follows Lucretius’ description of Tartarus in order to refute the philosopher’s negative doctrines on love and death, and in order to defend the elegy as a fully respectable literary genre at the same time. Henderson believes that Tibullus tried to stress anew the traditional reality of Tartarus and that he sought to give the four arch-sinners elegiac significance by pointing out that each of the four sinners was in a specific way an enemy of love.

Henderson admits that Ixion is mentioned in Tibullus’ Tartarus but not in Lucretius’. He gives reasons, however, for his belief that originally Ixion was also mentioned by Lucretius and that Tibullus could have taken it over from him.

As for Tantalus in Tibullus, Henderson believes that at a certain stage in the tradition of the text the distich in which this character’s name appears, replaced another about Sisyphus, and that Tibullus had never placed Tantalus in his Tartarus. Henderson is convinced that Sisyphus fits better into the context since he can be considered as a sinner against Venus: Sisyphus told Aesopus of the whereabouts of his daughter, Aegina, in defiance of her lover, Zeus. To prove his theory, Henderson contends that neither the use of the phrase *iam iam* (78), with this particular meaning of ‘on the point of’, nor the use of abstract for concrete, is typical of Tibullus. If Sisyphus instead of Tantalus is read, all Tibullus’ sinners will be functional in an elegiac sense.

When considering Henderson’s theory, it should be pointed out at once that in the manuscripts there is no paleographic indication of such a radically different reading at an early stage. It is also unnecessary to doubt the authenticity of distich 77–78 because of the single occurrence in Tibullus of *iam iam* bearing this particular meaning. This type of repetition was not at all common in the time of Tibullus. Ovid, whose *oeuvre* surpasses Tibullus’ by far in...
quantity, uses *iam iam* in this sense only five times in his elegiac verse and once in his non-elegiac verse.  

Henderson’s objection that the diction of line 78 is too abstract to be typically Tibullan is not convincing. It is not more abstract than, for example, 1.4.41–42.  

There is really no compelling reason why the authenticity of distich 77–78 with its reference to Tartarus in Tartarus should be regarded with suspicion.  

As for Henderson’s assumption that Tibullus attempted to answer Lucretius and that he consciously took over Lucretius’ sinners, it must be observed that it is an acknowledged characteristic of Tibullus that with the exception of occasional references to his patron, Messalla Corvinus, and the elegy addressed to Macer, his work contains no references to literary contemporaries or predecessors. Consequently Tibullus himself gives us no indication that he had Lucretius in mind when he introduced the Tartarus motif into this elegy.  

What is of supreme importance is to bear in mind that Tartarus with its inhabitants was such a common literary *topos* in Tibullus’ time, that it is hardly possible today to determine with certainty who was influenced by whom. It is of equal importance to remember that this literary *topos* would not allow the poet (or the reader) any uncommon associations. There were traditionally only five arch-sinners in Tartarus of whom Tibullus mentions four. If the poet had had a choice of, say, ten, then the interpreter would have had the task of determining why the poet chose specifically these four. But in reality the poet did not have much of a choice. One should be wary of attributing more weight to a literary *topos* than it can bear.  

At this point the question to be answered remains: if these arch-sinners are not all sinners against Venus in the first place, what is the effect of lines 67–80 in this elegy?  

The adversative conjunction *at* (67), which introduces the Tartarus motif, is a formal indication of a strong contrast with the preceding section. In his description of the well-known characteristics of Tartarus and its inhabitants, the poet does not indicate any Tartarus-Venus relation except in the case of the Danaids where he explains their punishment as *Veneris quod numina laesit* (79). Therefore, neither Ixion, nor Tityus, nor Tantalus can be considered as sinners against Venus in these lines. Their punishment against the horrible setting of Tartarus which they all share, underlines by way of contrast the ideal state in Elysium, the lovers’ paradise. This is the primary effect of the lines under discussion. In these allusions there is no indication that the poet has remoulded this *topos* to give every separate element in it specific elegiac meaning in order to balance every element in Elysium.

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22. *Neu comes ire neges, quamvis via longa paretur Et Canis arenti torreat arva stil.*  
23. Elegy 2.6. *Cf.* Smith, 38, 53 and 477 who believes that the Macer of elegy 2.6 is possibly the poet Aemilius Macer of Verona who died in 16 B.C.
In the case of the Danaids however, the poet clearly attributes their punishment in Tartarus to sin against Venus. Apart, therefore, from the contrast with Elysium which they help to create together with the other three sinners, they are also of specific elegiac significance. Their punishment is a typical warning in the elegy against treachery in love. The elegiac association which only the Danaids evoke, is particularly functional in this elegy because the poet is returning from a reflection of life after death to reality. By stating that the daughters of Danaus are in Tartarus because of sin against Venus, he is giving his mistress, Delia, who as a young woman can easily identify herself with one of the Danaids, something to think about. The reference to the Danaids prepares the way for the poet's entreaty to Delia in line 83: *at tu casta precor maneas*. . . . The artful way in which the poet evokes and uses an elegiac association around the Danaids at the end of the Tartarus motif to provide a smooth progression of thought, should not go unnoticed.

The poet-lover's desire in lines 81–82 to see his ill-wishers in Tartarus, does not necessarily imply that all the traditional inhabitants of this region which he has already mentioned, are offenders against Venus.

To summarize: the Tartarus motif in Tibullus 1.3 is a literary *topos* which does not indicate unusual treatment by the poet. Accordingly one should not read more into the *topos* than the text can bear. The basic effect of Ixion, Tityus, Tantalus and the Danaids is that by the utmost misery which they share in their horrible habitat, they underline the happiness in Elysium, the lovers' paradise. There is no reason to feel that Tantalus does not fit into the context because he was not a sinner against Venus. Sin against the goddess is mentioned only in connection with the Danaids and there the resulting elegiac significance has a specific effect: it gives the poet the opportunity to try to persuade Delia to remain faithful to him. It is impossible to determine with certainty from what source Tibullus has taken his Tartarus motif and whether he really meant it as an answer to Lucretius 3.978–1023.

24. Cf. Tib. 1.5.57–58; 2.4.39–44; Prop. 2.16.43–46.
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