LIGHT AND DARK: PLAY ON CANDIDUS AND RELATED CONCEPTS IN THE ELEGIES OF TIBULLUS

In the third elegy of his first book Tibullus represents himself as sick on the island of Corcyra (called by its Homeric name of Phaeacia) and unable to continue in the entourage of his distinguished friend and benefactor Messalla on a mission to the East. He puts his misfortune down to the love-god’s anger with him for leaving his distraught mistress Delia behind in Rome. After imagining death on the island without her, Tibullus eventually ends the poem with a prayer that he will in fact come back unexpectedly and find her, like Penelope or Lucretia, spinning with her maids, as she faithfully awaits his return. The poem displays a type of ring composition, with the opening prayer for dark death to spare him balanced by the closing one for a bright day to bring him home:

abstineas auidas Mors modo nigra manus.  
abstineas, Mors atua, precor...  (Tib.1.3.4-5)

hoc precor; hunc illum nobis Aurora nitentem  
Luciferum roseis candida portet equis.  (Tib.1.3.93-4)
Nigra and atra of the personified Death (Mors) at the start are ‘answered’ by nitentem and candida of the personified Morning Star (Luciferum) and Dawn (Aurora) at the end. The darkness of death is, of course, a commonplace, and candidus is also regularly used of a ‘lucky’ or ‘fortunate’ day (ael sim.).

There is much to suggest, however, that the concepts of light and dark, and, in particular, the adjective candidus, had special significance for Tibullus and his friends. We shall argue for four interrelated facets of it in this paper: (1) play involving Tibullus’ own nomen Albius; (2) play on candidus and similar terms in association with the style of both Tibullus and Messalla; (3) play on Corvinus, the cognomen of Messalla; (4) systematic patterning of the concepts and vocabulary of light and dark (candidus especially) to reflect Tibullus’ changing vision of elegiac existence and the differing roles of his two mistresses, the bright Delia of book 1 and the dark Nemesis of book 2.

1. Candidus, albus and Albius

Ancient poets had a taste for play on their own names. The tradition goes back at least to the fifth-century philosophical verse of Empedocles, where the coupling of the two compound adjectives ἐμπεδόφυλλα and ἐμπεδόκαρκα, ‘ever-in-leaf’ and ‘ever-in-fruit’, is thought to suggest that the author’s name may be creatively derived from some such coinage as ἐμπεδόκλειτος, ‘ever-in-fame’. Probably, however, the Hellenistic epigrammatist Meleager provided the most direct cue for a poet called Albius. At Epigram 98.3-4 G-P (= AP 12.165.3-4), in an apparently playful derivation of his own name from μέλας, ‘black’, and ἄργος, ‘white’, Meleager claims that ‘the Loves, they say, wove me out of white and black’:

οὶ γὰρ Ἐρωτεῖς
ἐκ λευκοῦ πλέξαμ φιάσκο με καὶ μέλανος

One of the words involved, ἄργος, is, as often in ancient etymological play, replaced by a synonym, λευκός. The potential for Latin play on the nomen Albius, through connection with albus, ‘white’, is thus clear enough. It was certainly seen by Horace. At Odes 1.33.1-4, addressing an ‘Albius’, he plays via the subsequent verb praenitere on the ‘white’ and ‘bright’ connotations of the personal name:

Albius, ne doelas plus nimio memor
iminitis Glycerae neu miserabilis
decantes elegos, cur tibi iunior
laesa praenitere tide...

Albius’ ‘nominal’ quality is here trumped, so to speak. At Epistles 1.4.1 Horace again plays on the name, this time through the description of the addressee as candidus, which bears the meaning ‘white’ or ‘bright’ as well as ‘fair’ or ‘lucid’ (in judgement or style; more of this shortly):

Albi, nostrorum sermonum candide iudex.