

## PARAGRAPHOI

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### A. E. Housman's Latin Elegy to Moses Jackson

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THE READING AT THE 2002 ANNUAL MEETING of the APA in Philadelphia of Tom Stoppard's play *The Invention of Love*,<sup>1</sup> a drama which places much emphasis on Housman's unrequited love for Moses Jackson, his undergraduate contemporary at St John's College, Oxford and housemate in London lodgings in the late 1870s and early 1880s, motivated me to look again at the Latin elegy addressed to Jackson with which Housman prefaced his edition of the first book of Manilius' *Astronomica*, published in 1903.<sup>2</sup> After an inscription *sodali meo M. I. Jackson, harum litterarum contemptori*, "to my comrade Moses Jackson, scorner of these studies," in an ironic version of the usual dedication of a learned work to a fellow scholar,<sup>3</sup> fourteen elegiac couplets follow. The choice of elegiacs for Housman's dedicatory poem is of course natural given the dedicatory function of epigrams in antiquity,<sup>4</sup> but its address to a friend from whom the poet is separated at the other end of the world also recalls the basic situation of Ovid's elegiac exile poetry. By 1903 Housman was Professor of Latin at University College London, while Jackson was far away as a headmaster in India, where he had been (apart from occasional visits to England)

<sup>1</sup> I should like to take this opportunity to thank Judy Hallett and Mary-Kay Gamel for inviting me to participate in the reading, and them and my fellow cast members for an enjoyable collaboration. I am also very grateful to Paul Naiditch, member of the post-reading discussion panel in Philadelphia, for his expert advice on this note, and to Cynthia Damon for her helpful comments and for the information to be found in note 10.

<sup>2</sup> The text was originally printed on p. xxi of Housman. The Latin text cited here is from Burnett 298–91 (the few notes on pp. 565–66 are the only commentary I know on the poem) and the English translation is that of Leofranc Holford-Strevens, *ibid.* 566.

<sup>3</sup> As noted by Naiditch 1988: 208. See also Naiditch 1995: 133.

<sup>4</sup> The most relevant ancient parallel is perhaps the epigram introducing Ovid's *Amores*; for this and other prefatory epigrams cf. McKeown *ad loc.*

since 1887,<sup>5</sup> and Housman's elegy shows throughout an ethos of lamentation for opportunity lost through physical apartness which matches that of Ovid in exile. The poem begins with an evocation of starlit evenings long ago (1–4):

Signa pruinosa variantia luce cavernas  
 noctis et extincto lumina nata die  
 solo rure vagi lateque tacentibus arvis  
 surgere nos una vidimus oceano.

The constellations that besprinkle the caverns of frosty night, and the lights that are born at the extinction of the day, together we saw them rise from Ocean as we wandered in the deserted countryside and the fields silent far and wide.

The warm memory of common friendly activity with which the poem begins, recalling evening walks together long ago, echoes in general terms a poem from Ovid's exilic verse, the nostalgic account of his youthful travels and talk with the poet Aemilius Macer in *ex Ponto* 2.10; for Ovid and Macer as for Housman and Jackson, imitating Callimachus' famous lament for his fellow-poet Heraclitus (*Ep.* 2 Pfeiffer),<sup>6</sup> the sun often set on their peripatetic conversations (*Pont.* 2.10.37 *saepe dies sermone minor fuit*), and the frosty evenings of Housman's starlit walks with Jackson also recall and invert Ovid's imagined communing with his distant friend under the frosty sky of Tomis (2.10.48 *gelido . . . sub axe*).<sup>7</sup> But the picture of a pair walking alone in the starlight has a romantic overtone which Ovid's poem patently lacks, and which sets the tone for the subdued but clear romanticism of Housman's approach to Jackson in this poem.

The opening of the poem's dedicatory section, following some lines describing the literary achievement and poor textual transmission of Manilius (5–14), gives the reasons for the selection of Jackson as dedicatee (15–20):

non ego mortalem vexantia sidera sortem  
 aeternosve tuli sollicitare deos,  
 sed cito casurae tactus virtutis amore  
 humana volui quaerere nomen ope,  
 virque virum legi fortem brevemque sodalem  
 qui titulus libro vellet inesse meo.

<sup>5</sup> On Jackson's career see Naiditch 1995: 132–44, summarised by Burnett 393.

<sup>6</sup> The parallel is noted by Williams 44.

<sup>7</sup> The conjunction *pruinosae . . . noctis* is another Ovidian touch, this time non-exilic, but appropriately echoing a fragment of Ovid's own lost poem on the stars matching Manilius, his translation of Aratus' *Phaenomena*: cf. fr. 2.1 Courtney *clara pruinosa iussit dare lumina nocti*.

I did not endure, not I, to importune the stars that blast our mortal lot, or the eternal gods, but smitten with love for valour that would swiftly fall I resolved to seek a name with human help, and man to man I chose a brave and brief companion who should be willing to stand at the head of my book.

Here the strength of Housman's feelings for Jackson, memorably encapsulated in his English love-poetry,<sup>8</sup> is transmuted into heroic comradeship, but for alert readers of the Latin this aspect co-exists with a distinctly erotic colour. *Cito casurae* refers to the swift but glorious life of the human hero as contrasted with divine immortality, but *tactus virtutis amore* suggests physical love for manly beauty as well as moral hero-worship (for *tactus* of erotic passion cf. Ov. *Am.* 2.1.6. *et rudis ignoto tactus amore puer*),<sup>9</sup> and *virque virum* indicates a significantly homosocial element, recalling with this polyptoton the Roman institution of "team-picking" in military and political life whereby one group of select men selected another of the same number.<sup>10</sup> The "brave and brief" companion echoes typical pairs of laudatory adjectives used of friends in contexts of affection or recommendation (cf., e.g., Hor. *S.* 2.5.102 *unde mihi tam fortem tamque fidelem?* and *Ep.* 1.9.13 *fortem crede bonumque*), but "brief" clearly alludes to the past intimacy of the 1880s that cannot now be recovered, the chief topic of the English poems Housman wrote about Jackson.<sup>11</sup>

The final lines address Jackson directly (21–28):

o victure meis dicam periturene chartis,  
 nomine sed certe vivere digne tuo,  
 haec tibi ad auroram surgentia signa secuto  
 hesperia trado munera missa plaga.  
 en cape: nos populo venit inlatura perempto  
 ossa solo quae det dissoluenda dies  
 fataque sortitas non immortalia mentes  
 et non aeterni vincla sodalicii.

O you who will, shall I say live or perish in these pages, but worthy indeed to live on your own account, to you who have followed the rising stars to the east I send this gift, dispatched from the western shore. Here, take it; there comes to

<sup>8</sup> All the relevant poems, though largely written immediately after the breakdown of Housman's relationship with Jackson in the mid-1890s, were published after Housman's death in 1936: *More Poems* XI, XII, XXX, XXXI, and *Additional Poems* II and VII (all to be found in Burnett's edition).

<sup>9</sup> For further examples see McKeown ad loc.

<sup>10</sup> Compare the recruiting formula used at Liv. 9.39.5 *cum vir virum legisset*, which is echoed by Tacitus' Galba at *Hist.* 1.18.2 *more militari, quo vir virum legeret* and adapted by Suetonius for an Augustan *lectio senatus*: *Aug.* 35.1 *ipsorum arbitratu, quo vir virum legit*.

<sup>11</sup> See the poems cited in n. 8 above.

enrol us amongst the nation of the dead the day destined to give the earth our bones to decompose, and with them our souls that did not obtain immortality for their lot, and the bonds of comradeship that does not last for ever.

The idea that Jackson might live on through Housman's dedication, though its expression derives from the fabulist Phaedrus' dedication of his fourth book to his friend Particulo (Phaed. 4. ep. 5 *Particulo, chartis nomen victurum meis*), revealingly uses a topic of love-elegy, that the mistress will live on through the poet-lover's work.<sup>12</sup>

In this passage there are also funereal echoes: Housman's elegy sent from west to east recalls Catullus 101, the elegy for the tomb of the poet's brother in Asia, in which both poet and poem similarly come all the way across the world to present an elegiac tribute: *trado munera* (24) recalls Cat. 101.8 *tradita sunt tristi munere ad inferias*. This element of lament is appropriate for the context of quasi-Ovidian erotic exile: Housman presents Jackson as a lost brother, but it is the chance of romantic happiness with Jackson which has been lost forever. The Western stars of Housman and Jackson's evening walks with which the poem began are here picked up by an allusion to the Eastern stars followed by Jackson in his journey to India; such astral allusions are of course appropriate in a dedication to Manilius' poem, but the contrast between previous intimacy and current distance by reference to the stars is a moving one.<sup>13</sup>

The last line of all perhaps contains the greatest pathos. Unlike the "eternal" romantic relationship envisaged by Catullus 109 (6 *aeternum hoc sanctae foedus amicitiae*), the relationship between Housman and Jackson could not last in its romantic form once revealed as such to Jackson, as is movingly depicted by Stoppard's play and Housman's own poetry.<sup>14</sup> The idea that death will ultimately destroy the bonds even of heroic friendship recalls the image of Theseus forced to abandon Pirithous in the Underworld at the end of Horace *Odes* 4.7, memorably rendered by Housman himself in his famous translation of the poem (4.7.27–28): *nec Lethaea valet Theseus abrumpere caro / vincula Perithoo*, "And Theseus leaves Pirithous in the chain / The love of comrades cannot take away."<sup>15</sup> This passage and the model of Theseus' supposedly asexual feelings for Pirithous are used by the young Housman char-

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Ov. *Am.* 1.3.19–26 with McKeown ad loc.

<sup>13</sup> We might also compare the use of the stars as an imaginary channel of communication between Ovid in Tomi and his wife in Rome (*Tr.* 4.3), a significantly conjugal intertext.

<sup>14</sup> See Stoppard 76–81, and the poems cited in n. 8 above.

<sup>15</sup> This echo was noted by Wilkinson 44.

acter in Stoppard's play as an attempt to explain his feelings to Jackson,<sup>16</sup> and it is likely that Housman's translation (first published as early as 1897) reflects the Jackson relationship. It is interesting to note that the phrase "love of comrades" has a Whitmanesque homosexual colour in the 1890s,<sup>17</sup> and that the relationship of Pirithous and Theseus may have been implied to be homosexual in some prominent texts of Latin poetry.<sup>18</sup>

This brief investigation of Housman's poem, though not the full commentary which it deserves, not only indicates something of its literary texture, but also shows how that literary texture reflects Housman's still deep feelings for Jackson more than twenty years after their first meeting in the late 1870s and after many years of separation. The classical scholar's intertextual range, though cast in the decent obscurity of Latin, reveals rather than conceals a romantic and personal subtext.

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<sup>16</sup> Stoppard 79.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Burnett 428–29.

<sup>18</sup> This view of the Theseus-Pirithous relationship seems to originate in rhetorical Ovidian innuendo, though not all scholars accept this reading of the passages in question: cf. Ovid *Ep.* 4.109–12, *Met.* 8.403–7, Sen. *Phaed.* 97, 225, 244, with Jacobson 155 n. 32.