Ann Chou

March 21, 2012

Love Poetry

Erik Gray

**Classical Myth: Tales of Betrayal and Love**

**in Campion’s “Vobiscum est Iope”**

Thomas Campion’s “Vobiscum est Iope” is marked by several allusions to classical mythology. The title and mention of Iope come from an elegy by Propertius, and the poem also alludes to Helen of Troy and Orpheus. Even though the speaker and his beloved belong unquestionably to the Elizabethan age of masques and tourneys, their afterlife appears to take place within the Greco-Roman mythological universe. These allusions to classical myth enrich an understanding of the woman’s identity and her relationship with the speaker by providing a framework for the occurrence of betrayal in erotic love and by undermining expectations.

This understanding is initially clouded because so much information appears to be implicit within the dialogue. The poem occurs within an address from the speaker to his beloved, in which he enacts what she will say and what she will do once she is dead. The speaker makes no attempt to contextualize events or to describe the woman, even though the address is a one-sided, imagined dialogue for an audience that doesn’t include the addressee. As a result, the details of most interest to the reader—who was the woman and what happened—are a mystery. The revelations disclosed in the last line—that the man is dead and that he was murdered by this woman—come as a surprise. The woman, who is described mostly indirectly, comes across as a vague figure. We learn she must have been beautiful from all the honors that have been paid to her, but would never be able to describe her. Of her relationship to the speaker, we only know that she occupied an important place in his life, and that she was responsible for his death.

Campion’s choice of diction refines what we know of the speaker’s feelings towards the woman. In the first stanza, he imagines that she will be honored in death as she had been in life. She is admired by, and even held above, a roster of women renowned for their beauty. Upon arriving in the underworld, she is treated as “a new admired guest” (2). The choice of the word guest contradicts the implication in the first line that she is there out of necessity. It is only once she has died that she “must home” to the underworld, and if she is dead and this underworld is her new home, then she is not really a stranger, as the word guest implies. But to be a guest is also to occupy a position of honor, and so this highlights her extraordinary stature. Similarly, the word “engirt” (3), whose meaning is linked to the action of girdling, evokes a sense that these spirits are not simply surrounding the beloved, but attending to her. The laudatory attitude the speaker takes towards the woman shows that he admires her and that he believes that her traits will receive similar appraisal.

The ambiguity of the meaning of “finished love” (5) may also hint towards the relation between the speaker’s murder and the woman, and the relation between love and death. The woman tells stories of her “finished love” rather than her “finished life”, thereby conflating life with love. The stories of her life become the stories of her romantic pursuits. “Finished love” could also refer to romantic attention that has come to an end. The chivalric honors described—banquets, masques, revels, tourneys, and challenges—are all pursuits of the young. It’s impossible the woman refers not to the end of her life, but to the end of love in her life, and this reverberates in the speaker’s death in the end. More exactly, the phrase “finished love” may refer to the dead speaker himself—the lover who was finished off. The end of her life, the end of love in her life, and the end of the speaker’s life are all mutually compatible interpretations of the phrase.

The references Campion makes to classical myth lend a greater richness to the poem. Straight away, the Latin title suggests that the meaning of this poem might draw on a world beyond the immediate one. A.H. Bullen points out that this title “Vobiscum est Iope” refers to an elegy by the Roman poet Propertius (Bullen xii). Propertius wrote most of his elegies about a woman named Cynthia, whom he grew to hate as intensely as he once loved. Propertius’s intense love-hate relationship is an appropriate parallel to that of Campion’s speaker, who also holds extreme and contradictory emotions at once. By fusing his address with Propertius’s, Campion’s speaker evokes an intense emotional attachment that exceeds the more objective appraisal in the first stanza, and connects “Vobiscum est Iope” to a tradition of love poetry.

In Elegy 28, Propertius pleads with Persephone and Hades to spare death to just one beautiful woman since they have already claimed so many. Naming four, he writes, *vobiscum est Iope, vobiscum candida Tyro, / vobiscum Europe, nec proba Pasiphae,* or “with you is Iope, with you is white Tyro, / with you is Europa, and shameless Pasiphae” (28.51-2). Of the women identified in Propertius’s elegy, only Iope remains in “Vobiscum est Iope”. This figure is even more significant in Campion’s poem since the beloved’s relation to her becomes the title. This title doesn’t simply refer to a line from Elegy 28, or act as a euphemism for the woman’s death, but alone can also be a way of describing the woman’s character. But an attempt to make anything out of this is frustrated by the fact that Iope is not the name of any famous mythological figure.

Scholars have offered two guesses for Iope’s identity. In a footnote to Elegy 28, Karl Pomeroy Harrington mentions that Iope is sometimes identified with Cassiopeia, the Queen of Ethiopia and mother of Andromeda (Harrington 266). According to the Perseus legend, she once declared her beauty and Andromeda’s to exceed that of the Nereids, thereby angering Poseidon. To placate him, Cassiopeia offered her daughter as a sacrifice to the sea monster Cetus. Thus, Cassiopeia is associated with great beauty as well as ruinous vanity. Alternatively, A.H. Bullen notes that some editions of Propertius’s poem replace Iope with Antiope (Bullen 266). Antiope was an Amazon married to her abductor Theseus. According to one legend, Theseus then tried to marry Phaedra and as payback, Antiope attempted to kill everyone at the wedding. In the process, she was killed by Theseus. As in Propertius’s elegy, the characters chosen as the beloved’s peers serve to enhance her beauty. In “Vobiscum est Iope” they also emphasize more destructive qualities. Helen, Cassiopeia, and Antiope are all beautiful and powerful women who also happened to be destructive and untrustworthy. Just as Helen betrayed Menelaus for Paris and later, the Trojans during the sack of Troy, just as Cassiopeia betrayed her daughter, and just as Theseus and Antiope betrayed one other, the speaker’s beloved has betrayed him. And so it is appropriate that his address begins “you are with Iope”, and that the traits shared by those in the underworld are not only beauty and death, but betrayal as well. The formula set up in Propertius’s elegy that makes Cynthia interchangeable with Iope, Tyro, Europa, and Pasiphae then creates a more meaningful connection between the woman and Iope and Helen in Campion’s poem.

An interesting deviation from Propertius’s elegy (and from the iambic pentameter) occurs in the epithets for Iope and Helen, which are new and don’t work very accurately as descriptors. White Tyro’s epithet in the Propertius elegy becomes appended to Iope in Campion’s poem. Yet both Antiope or Cassiopeia are dark-skinned, since Antiope is an Amazon and Cassiopeia is the Queen of Ethopia. Nor is blitheness primarily associated with Helen. While she is fickle in her relationships, she shows regret for her actions once in Troy. The erroneous epithets describe the women as they aren’t and undermine expectations in the poem, much like the shock of the final revelation.

In addition to Helen and Antiope or Cassiopeia, the woman is also connected to Orpheus. In line 6, the speaker praises her “smooth tongue whose music hell can move”—this ability to move hell was the most legendary accomplishment of the mythical musician. According to legend, Orpheus famously used music to persuade Hades and Persephone to return Eurydice from death. In its form, “Vobiscum est Iope” shares a link to another well-known reclamation from the underworld: Adonis’s return to Venus. Each stanza in “Vobiscum est Iope” consists six lines in iambic pentameter with the rhyme scheme ABABACC. This is specifically known as the “Venus and Adonis” form, after Shakespeare’s poem which was published almost a decade before Campion’s. In some versions of the myth, Venus is able to persuade Zeus to allow Adonis to leave the Underworld for part of the year.

While Orpheus and Venus’s supplications on behalf of their beloveds resonate with Propertius’s plea to save Cynthia from death, the myths share less in common with Campion’s poem. In “Vobiscum est Iope”, it is not the lover who will follow the beloved to the Underworld for he is already dead. And it is not a poem about love, but a finished love. It is also curious that the elevated diction and courtly activities place the speaker and beloved of “Vobiscum est Iope” in Elizabethan England, and yet they should live, after death, in the mythological world of classical antiquity. But just as Propertius’s elegy helped establish a framework for identifying the woman despite sharing little plot in common, that is also the attraction of mythological references. On their return, Orpheus breaks his promise to not look at Eurydice until they have returned, and in doing so, he sends her back to the Underworld for good, effectively killing her a second time. Like Campion’s speaker, Eurydice is in hell, and this heartbreak is caused by the one she loved.

But she is also very much unlike Orpheus or Venus because she was not a faithful lover and she is in the underworld only because she is dead. Her capacity to inspire love and hate simultaneously appears even in the poem, where the beloved’s murder follows the scenes of her tributes. The way she doesn’t live up to the classical comparison upend our expectations just as the poem itself does. But what these same allusions do most significantly, is support and even add a richness to our understanding of this woman, who is as destructive as she is beautiful, and of the speaker’s feelings of admiration and betrayal which the poem describes.

Works Cited

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