

MENELAUS AMANS: VERGIL AEN. VI 525-6

Two problems are raised by commentators on these lines: Menelaus is referred to as Helen's *amans*, when he is her husband, and it is unclear whether the *limina* (525) belong to the *thalamus* of Deiphobus and Helen or to the house. These are solved if we see here a sarcastic allusion to the *komos*. Deiphobus casts Menelaus in the role of the *admissus amans* and himself as the cuckolded husband, and the *limina* accordingly belong to the house.

intra tecta uocat Menelaum, et limina pandit:
scilicet id magnum sperans fore munus amanti.

So says the shade of Deiphobus as he describes Helen's treachery to Aeneas in the underworld. There are two problems: (1) Why does Deiphobus refer to Menelaus as *amanti* when he is Helen's legitimate husband? (2) Do the *limina* belong to the *thalamus* of Deiphobus and Helen, as Conington-Nettleship suggest, or to the house (the two ideas in the line being *hysteron proteron*)?

(1) The commentators tell us, rightly, that 526 is a piece of spiteful sarcasm. «Ganz besonders gehässig», remarks Norden, «Menelaus als Liebhaber, und Helena eine Frau, die durch Geschenke einen Buhlen ködert», and Fletcher comments: «'her lover', as though Menelaus were the wronger instead of the wronged husband». In the most recent edition, Austin comments on *scilicet*: «'naturally'; the bitter sarcasm is continued in the spiteful *amanti*, the onetime husband who was to receive such a 'present'»¹. True, but this does not go far enough. Virgil is surely putting in Deiphobus' mouth a bitterly sarcastic allusion to the *komos*, to the lover's coming at night to the girl's door to seek admission. Deiphobus sees Menelaus as the *receptus* or *admissus amans* (the

¹ So, too, Page: «[*scilicet*] strongly accentuates the scorn, which is also marked in *amanti*: «doubtless hoping that this would be a noble gift to her lover». Jackson Knight seems to me to miss the mark in his Penguin translation: «Of course she thought she was doing her old lover a great favour» (p. 163).

komast who has been successful in his plea) and himself as the cuckolded *uir*. The situation is not an unfamiliar one in Augustan poetry, especially Roman elegy: cf. Prop. II 9, 41-2, II 14, 28, II 20, 23-5, IV 7, 15 ff.; Tib. I 9, 44, II 1, 75 ff.; Ovid, *Am.* II 12, 2-4; Horace, *Odes* I 25, 1 ff. etc. But the sarcasm goes deeper than this. Often the komast brings gifts to win over the girl. In Theocritus they may be apples (Theoc. II 120, III 10)², but in elegy they tend to be more substantial, and a frequent complaint of the elegist is that *munera* are needed for the girl to open the door: cf. Prop. III 13, 9, IV 5, 47-8, II 20, 25 (inverted); Tib. I 5, 67-8, II 4, 21-2 and 31 ff.; Ovid, *Am.* I 8, 77. Here, says Deiphobus, the situation is reversed: the girl gives a *munus* instead of receiving one.

Two further points lend support to this. First, Odysseus is said to be the *comes* of Menelaus (528). Frequently the komast is attended to the girl's door by a friend or a group of friends: cf. Tib. I 9, 42 *ipse comes multa limina nocte tuli*; cf. also Theoc. II 119; Plutarch, *Amat. Narr.* 772F; *AP* VI 71, 6 (Paulus Silentiarius). Secondly, Menelaus and Odysseus *inrumpunt thalamo*. Violent entry, or the threat of violent entry, is a *topos* of the *paraclausithyron* and the komastic scene in general: cf., e. g., Herodas II; *AP* XII 252 (Strato); Lucian, *Bis. Acc.* 31, *Dial. Mer.* 15; Ovid, *Am.* I 6, 56 ff.; Horace, *Od.* III 26, 7, etc.³ In short, the echoes of the *komos* are too numerous for Virgil not to have intended an ironic comparison; for, as Francis Cairns has observed, «ancient sensitivity to generic contexts, always greater than ours, was especially fine with regard to the *komos*»⁴. Hence *amanti* in 526.

(2) The answer to the second question follows from the discussion above. Helen is opening the house door and calling to her 'lover' (and the two actions are *hysteron proteron*)⁵. The two ideas are also conjoined by Tibullus:

non labor hic laedit, reseret modo Delia postes
et uocet ad digiti me taciturna sonum.

(I 2, 33-4)

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² Cf. also Prop. I 3, 24 and see A. Wlosok, «Die dritte Cynthia-Elegie des Propertius (Prop. I 3)», *Hermes* 95, 1967, p. 345, n. 1.

³ See further F. O. Copley, *Exclusus Amator: A Study in Latin Love Poetry* (APA Monographs 17), p. 148, n. 26.

⁴ *Generic Composition in Greek and Roman Poetry*, Edinburgh 1972, pp. 88-9.

⁵ For *uocare* used of erotic invitations, cf. Prop. II 25, 33; Ovid, *Ars* II 228: cf. also Prop. IV 8, 33.