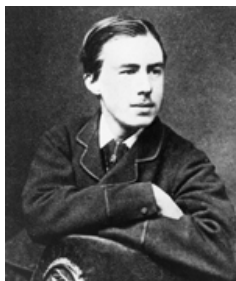
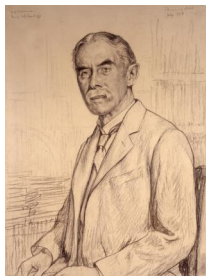


## Queer loss, queer Classics: A.E. Housman's lost country



A.E. Housman (1859-1936), aged 18; © Royal National Theatre)



(A. E. Housman, Professor of Latin at Cambridge University, in 1926; portrait by F. Dodd, 1926  
© Mansell/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images)



(Moses Jackson (1858-1923) as an undergraduate at Oxford © Wikimedia Commons)

### Loss in Housman's poetry and scholarship

I never read such a book for telling you you're better off dead. ... No one gets off; if you're not shot, hanged or stabbed, you kill yourself. Life's a curse, love's a blight, God's a blaggard, cherry blossom is quite nice.

(Tom Stoppard, *The Invention of Love* 1997, 88-9)

"... our salvage from the wreck of Greek literature" (Housman, *Classical Papers* 1. 24 (1888))



He'd been very fond of the corny old poems he'd learned in grade school ... strange old sentimental stuff ... Quite often I had heard Bunny say this Housman aloud – seriously when drunk, more mockingly when sober – so that the lines for me were set and hardened in the cadence of his voice; perhaps that is why hearing it then, in Henry's academic monotone (he was a terrible reader) there with the guttering candles and the draft shivering in the flowers and people crying all around, enkindled in me such a brief and yet so excruciating pain, like one of those weirdly scientific Japanese tortures calibrated to extract the greatest possible misery in the smallest space of time. (Donna Tartt, *The Secret History* 1993 (first publ. 1992), 488-9; the passage goes on to quote 'With rue my heart is laden' = *A Shropshire Lad* LIV)

## Blest as one of the gods is he

3. *Elsewhere – night.*

*Jackson, in his pyjamas and dressing-gown, reads aloud from a handwritten page; a modest silver trophy-cup perhaps in evidence.*

**Jackson**

'Blest as one of the gods is he,  
The Youth who fondly sits by thee,  
And hears and sees thee all the while  
Softly speak and sweetly smile.  
For while I gaze with trembling heart . . .'

Mmm. Did you write this?

*Housman comes with two mugs of cocoa. He is wearing day-clothes.*

**Housman** Well, Sappho, really, more or less.

**Jackson** (*ponders*) Mmm. What's that one you used to have about kisses?

**Housman** Catullus. 'Give me a thousand kisses and then a hundred more.'

**Jackson** Yes. She might think that's a bit hot, though. It should really be about me being unhappy and ticking her off for her unfaithfulness, and at the same time willing to forgive. Where's the one again where I'm carving her name on trees?

**Housman** Propertius. But honestly, that's a bit raving – she's only said she's staying in to wash her hair.

**Jackson** But I'd got tickets and everything! After being at her beck and call . . .

**Housman** *Quinque tibi potui servire [fidelitur annos]*

**Jackson** What?

**Housman** Five years your faithful slave.

**Jackson** Exactly. Two weeks anyway.

**Housman** The problem we're up against here is that the ticking-off ones make her out to be a harlot, and the happy ones make her out to be, well, *your* harlot . . . so I think the way to go is more *carpe diem*, gather ye rose-buds while you may, the grave's a fine and private place but none I think do there embrace.

**Jackson** She'd never believe I wrote that.

**Housman** Dear old Mo, what will become of you?

**Jackson** Orchestra stalls, too.

**Housman** Oh, *well!* – 'If that's the price for kisses due, it's the last kiss I steal from *you*' – written to a boy, but never mind – interesting poem, by the way: *vester* for *tuus* –

**Jackson** She thinks you're sweet on me.

**Housman** – plural for singular, the first use. What?

**Jackson** Rosa said you're sweet on me.

(Tom Stoppard, *The Invention of Love* 1997, 76-77)

Peer of gods he seemeth to me, the blissful  
Man who sits and gazes at thee before him,  
Close beside thee sits, and in silence hears thee  
    Silverly speaking,  
Laughing love's low laughter. Oh this, this only  
Stirs the troubled heart in my breast to tremble!  
For should I but see thee a little moment,  
    Straight is my voice hushed;  
Yea, my tongue is broken, and through and through me  
'Neath the flesh impalpable fire runs tingling;  
Nothing see mine eyes, and a noise of roaring  
    Waves in my ears sounds;  
Sweat runs down in rivers, a tremor seizes  
All my limbs, and paler than grass in autumn,  
Caught by pains of menacing death, I falter,  
    Lost in the love trance.

(Sappho, fr. 31; tr. J. A. Symonds, 1883; first published in Wharton 1885)

## Sapphic voices

δέδυκε μὲν ἃ σελάννα  
καὶ Πληΐαδες, μέσαι δὲ  
νύκτες, παρὰ δ' ἔρχετ' ὄρα,  
ἔγω δὲ μόνα κατεύδω.

The moon hath left the sky;  
Lost is the Pleiads' light;

It is midnight  
And time slips by;  
But on my couch alone I lie.  
(Sappho fr. 52 Bergk/ Fr. Adesp. 976 *P. M. G.*; translation J. A. Symonds, 1883)

The weeping Pleiads wester,  
And the moon is under seas;  
From bourn to bourn of midnight  
Far sighs the rainy breeze:

It sighs from a lost country  
To a land I have not known;  
The weeping Pleiads wester,  
And I lie down alone.  
(Housman, *More Poems X*)

The rainy Pleiads wester,  
Orion plunges prone,  
The stroke of midnight ceases  
And I lie down alone.

The rainy Pleiads wester  
And seek beyond the sea  
The head that I shall dream of  
That will not dream of me.  
(Housman, *More Poems XI*; Burnett 1997, 121 has 'and 'twill' at the start of line 8)

"... Since, therefore, never more  
I see my native home, the Hero these ['these' = locks of his hair Achilles cuts off in mourning]  
Patroclus takes down with him to the shades."  
He said, and filling with his hair the hand  
Of his dead friend, the sorrows of his train  
Awakened afresh. And now the lamp of day,  
Westering apace, had left them still in tears ...  
(W. Cowper 1791; tr. of Homer, *Iliad* 23.189-95)

## Queering the wedding song

### EPITHALAMIUM

He is here, Urania's son,  
Hymen come from Helicon;  
God that glads the lover's heart,  
He is here to join and part.  
So the groomsman quits your side                   5  
And the bridegroom seeks the bride:  
**Friend and comrade yield you o'er  
To her that hardly loves you more.**

Now the sun his skyward beam  
Has tilted from the Ocean stream. 10  
Light the Indies, laggard sun:  
Happy bridegroom, day is done,  
And the star from Cæta's steep  
Calls to bed but not to sleep.

Happy bridegroom, Hesper brings 15  
All desired and timely things.  
All whom morning sends to roam,  
Hesper loves to bring them home.  
Home return who him behold,  
Child to mother, sheep to fold,  
Bird to nest from wandering wide: 20  
Happy bridegroom, seek your bride.

Pour it out, the golden cup  
Given and guarded, brimming up,  
Safe through jostling markets borne  
And the thicket of the thorn; 25  
Folly spurned and danger past,  
Pour it to the god at last.

Now, to smother noise and light,  
Is stolen abroad the wildering night, 30  
And the blotting shades confuse  
Path and meadow full of dews;  
And the high heavens, that all control,  
Turn in silence round the pole.

Catch the starry beams they shed 35  
Prospering the marriage bed,  
**And breed the land that reared your prime  
Sons to stay the rot of time.**

All is quiet, no alarms;  
Nothing fear of nightly harms. 40  
Safe you sleep on guarded ground,  
And in silent circle round

**The thoughts of friends keep watch and ward,  
Harnessed angels, hand on sword.**

(Housman, *Last Poems* XXIV; in notebooks, first draft of c. 1894/ 5 = title and lines marked in bold)

Ἐσπερε πάντα φέρων ὅσα φαίνολις ἐσκέδασ' αὖως,  
ἡμέρας οἶν, φέρεις† αἶγα, φέρεις ἅπυ μᾶτερι παῖδα  
Evening, all things thou bringest

Which dawn spread apart from each other;  
The lamb and the kid thou bringest,  
Thou bringest the boy to his mother.

(Sappho fr. 104a L-P; tr. J. A. Symonds, 1883)

Dusk, you restore all that the glittering dawn has dispersed, -  
bringing the sheep, bringing the goats, - but you keep the bride from her mother  
(tr. A.P. Burnett 1983, 224)

*Collis o Heliconii*

*cultor, Uraniae genus*

O you dweller on the hill

Of Helicon, Urania's breed (Catullus 61.1-2; tr. Guy Lee, 1990)

## The end of love: forgetting and Hades

Crossing alone the nighted ferry

With the one coin for fee,

Whom, on the far quayside in waiting *ripae ulterioris amore* (Virgil, *Aen.* 6.314)

Count you to find? Not me.

The fond lackey to fetch and carry

The true, sick-hearted slave,

Expect him not in the just city

And free land of the grave.

(Housman, *More Poems* XXIII; text: Burnett 1997, 128-9; the text originally printed in *More Poems*, 40 has at line 3 'Whom, on the wharf of Lethe waiting.' a variant Housman crossed out in his notebooks)

κατθάνοισα δὲ κείσῃ οὐδέ ποτα μναμοσύνα σέθεν

ἔσσετ' οὐδὲ πόθα εἰς ὕστερον· οὐ γὰρ πεδέχῃς βρόδων

τῶν ἐκ Πιερίας, ἀλλ' ἀφάνης κῆν Αἶδα δόμῳ

φοιτάσῃς πεδ' ἀμαύρων νεκύων ἐκπεποταμένα.

Yea, thou shalt die,

And lie

Dumb in the silent tomb;

Nor of thy name

Shall there be any fame

In ages yet to be or years to come: [reading tote, τότε, 'then', 2; contrast reading potha, πόθα, 'desire']

For of the flowering Rose,

Which on Pieria blows,

Thou hast no share:

But in sad Hades' house,

Unknown, inglorious,

'Mid the dim shades that wander there

Shalt thou flit forth and haunt the filmy air.

(Sappho fr. 55; tr. J. A. Symonds, 1883)

*Theseus infernis, superis testatur Achilles,*

*hic Ixioniden, ille Menoetiaden* (Prop. 3.9.37-8)

I understand our distich thus: 'Theseus before the lower world, Achilles before the upper bear witness, the one of Pirithous, the other of Patroclus.' Theseus in hell and Achilles in his isle of Leuce are everlasting remembrancers of their less famous comrades and keep their

character and story from oblivion: no one sees the knight but he recalls the squire; so indissoluble is the bond.

(Housman 'A transposition in Propertius', *Classical Papers* 1972 (first publ. 1914), 2.882).

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