

Latin Prose Elys, ed. P. Allen Miller
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PROPERTIUS *Novena 1-11*

1.1

This is the programmatic poem for the *Monobiblos* in which the poet's beloved is introduced [49-50]. Cynthia, as the first word of the book, would have served as its title. In the same way, the *Aeneid* was known as *arma virumque*. Thus, the identification, and at times down right confusion, between the topic of Propertius's poetry and the poetry itself is immediately introduced. The tone of the poem on the surface is one of unrelieved sorrow and suffering but the text reveals an ironic wit equally characteristic of Propertius. It proceeds by a series of abrupt transitions from one section to the next and makes the reader supply the connections between them. The sharp juxtapositions that characterize Propertian style mark its distinct nature from the more dreamlike nature of Tibullan elegy in which one part of the poem blends almost imperceptibly into the next.

The poem starts with a bare statement of the facts: Propertius has fallen hopelessly in love with Cynthia (lines 1-8). The mythological exemplum of Milanion shows the power of devoted service to win over even the most demanding mistress (lines 9-16), but Propertius's case is hopeless and impervious even to the powers of magic (lines 17-24). He calls on friends to lend aid (lines 25-30), but bids happy lovers keep clear. Let his case be a warning to all (lines 31-38). The reader should note the symmetrical construction. Four out of the five sections are eight lines long, while the fourth is six lines long. Moreover, the first couplet of the last section may just as easily be construed as the last couplet of the penultimate section, thus making the symmetry even more striking while avoiding repetition.

1-2. Prima is deliberately ambiguous. Did Cynthia capture Propertius first with her eyes or was she the first to capture him? The pentameter makes clear the answer to both questions is "yes." On love emanating from the beloved's eyes, see Meleager's poem in the *Palatine Anthology* (12.101) on which Propertius based the opening of 1.1.

Ocellus = a diminutive, a commonly used form in Catullus to show emotional intimacy.

Contactum = "hit," as by an arrow. It can also mean "infected." Love was often conceived of as a disease in traditional Roman circles (see Catullus 76).

3-4. The contrast between Cynthia's eyes shooting darts of love and Propertius's downcast in dejection is rendered more effective by the image of Amor landing on the poet's head with both feet.

Constantis . . . fastus = genitive of description with *lumina*. The pride of those who think they are immune to love's darts is a common theme in the *Monobiblos*.

Impositis . . . pedibus is a pun. Poetry has imposed metrical feet on the poet's sentiments giving Amor form. This continues the confusion between subject matter and artistic form seen in the first couplet.

5-6. The poet announces his status as one who lives outside the norms of traditional Roman conduct. Love is *improbis*. It makes one have *castas puellas* and live with *nullo consilio*.

Castas . . . puellas can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, the poet has learned to hate the kind of proper young aristocratic women an equestrian would be expected to marry in favor of *meretrices* such as Cynthia [13]. Poem 2.7 provides support for this position. On the other hand, Cynthia is not shown in this poem as yielding to the poet's advances, and so the hatred may be of only those *puellas* who remain *castas* in relation to Propertius. The two interpretations are not mutually exclusive. If Cynthia is a *meretrix* - and no certain identification can be made - she is a high class courtesan and no common prostitute open to all comers.

7-8. The madness of love has gripped him for a year and the gods have shown themselves hostile to the poet's desires. *Furor* in the *Aeneid* represents the opposite of *virtus* and *pietas* [23].

9-10. The poet introduces the mythological exemplum of Milanion. While the *Laudamia* myth was a prominent structural device in Catullus 68 and several examples were seen in Tibullus (1.4.63-65, 1.5.45-46, 2.3.11-32), mythological exempla are integral to Propertius's style. The relation between the myth and the content of the poem is often less than straightforward and makes demands upon the reader.

Milanion: a suitor for Aralana, the daughter of Iasus (Iasidos). In the more common version of the story, Aralana challenged all her suitors to a series of foot races. She eventually lost when Hippomenes distracted her with three golden apples. In the present version, Milanion is supposed to illustrate the value of devoted service in love (*servitium amoris*). The expected parallel

see 4, 5, 10, 11

put, in love

with Propertius, however, is not forthcoming, since, as we learn at the end of this section, the poet's love is ^{near to the} ~~unlike~~ ^{the} wit of introducing an exemplum only to deny its applicability is characteristic of Propertian irony.

Tullus: one of Propertius's early patrons, the nephew of the consul L. Volcacius Tullus. See poem 1.6.

Saeutian refers to both the girl's refusal of Milanion's advances and the tradition that Atalanta had been exposed at birth and suckled by a bear. She is ^{not} ~~un~~ ^{virginal} ~~virginal~~, which in traditional terms also refers to her virginity. See the Greek verb *damazō*, which means both to marry and to break a wild horse. Compare Carullus 68.118.

Durae is a common epithet for the beloved in Propertius. See 2.1.78. It represents an inversion of normative gender roles as the poet inevitably becomes correspondingly *mollis* or *tener* [7, 9, 23, 27].

11-12. Madness (amens) and error (errabat) are common traits of the elegiac lover who wanders outside the norms of accepted behavior as Milanion ranges through the wilds of Arcadia. Amens is also a pun on *amans*, present participle of *amo*.

Partheniis . . . antris: Atalanta was exposed and raised on Mount Parthenius.

Videre = infinitive of purpose after a verb of motion, a poetic construction. The notion that Milanion's labores consisted in going to see shaggy beasts (*hirsuras . . . feras*) is humorous.

13-14. According to the version of the myth followed by Propertius, Atalanta was accosted by the centaurs Hylaeus and Rhoeteus ope day while hunting in the Arcadian hills. In Apollodorus, she slays them herself, but in Propertius, Milanion apparently comes to her aid and is wounded (percussus) by Hylaeus's club (*rami*).
obscure
Key!

15-16. Atalanta is moved by Milanion's sacrifice and yields to his advances. The pentameter draws the expected lesson from the story. Velocem = "swift," a learned reference to the alternative version of the myth involving the footrace with Hippomenes.

Domuisse = to tame, a verb with clear sexual references; see saeutian in line 10. The irony of Milanion taming Atalanta through being struck by the aroused Hylaeus's club would not have been lost on Propertius's readers.

17-18. Propertius's case is different. Love refuses to follow marked paths (notas . . . uias). This is an allusion to Propertius's Callimachean allegiances, which have just been demonstrated in his highly original use of mythological learning [9, 26-30, 53, 55]. See Tibullus 2.3.15-16.
Non ullas cogitat artis = "devises no strategies."

19-20. The figure of the witch and her ability to call the moon from the skies (deductae . . . lunae), as we have already seen in Tibullus, is proverbial in elegy (see 1.2 and 1.5). Fallacia implies not only Propertius's disbelief but foreshadows the inability of practitioners of the black arts to help him.
Piare sacra = to perform sacred rites.

21-22. Pallor is a universal sign of lovesickness—in the ancient world. *Ore* = ablative of comparison.

23-24. Another standard list of miracles performed by witches. These would all be easier than making Cynthia fall in love with Propertius.
Credetis uobis = "I would trust in your claims."

Cyraenes = Greek genitive singular, "of Medea," who was born in Cyrae, a town in Colchis. She was famous as a witch.

25-26. The poet seeks the aid of his friends. *Sero* = "too late." Assume *me* with *lapsum*.
Non sani pectoris: the metaphor of love as a disease is continued.

27-28. *Ferrum saeuos patiemur et ignis*: iron and fire allude to cauterization in ancient surgical practices. The implication of the pentameter is that the poet has lost his *libertas*, "aristocratic freedom of speech," through his *sentitium amoris*. Only surgery can cut this cancer out. The poet seeks a restoration to the status his social rank bestows upon him, but of which lovesickness has robbed him. Then, he could express his anger (*ira*), which, at present, fear of his *domina's* wrath keeps under wraps.

29-30. The poet's friends are called upon to take him to a place where no woman can find him and he will escape love's clutches. Assume *me* as the object of *ferre*. *Norit* = *noverit*.

31-32. But those who experience required love, keep back. The poet finds their presence a reminder of his plight and begs them to keep their distance from his infection.

Sitis et in tuto semper amore pares: he wishes them the mutual love that is both the elegiac ideal and that which by definition can never be if the genre is to exist. Those to whom Amor (*deus*) nods with a receptive ear (*facili . . . aure*) do not write elegy.

33-34. The lover's sleepless nights are an elegiac truism, but note the striking expression. His nights (*noctes*) are bitter (*amaras*) because of Venus's exertions. The active verb vividly portrays the tormented nights of the unsatisfied lover without being unduly specific.
Vacuus = "idle." The adjective is not redundant. Love is by definition in

Rome a kind of *otium* or "idleness" as opposed to the nobler *negotium* of law, warfare, or politics [44]. The sentence, thus, can be translated two ways, either "Idle love rests at no time," or "at no time is Love idle nor does it rest," depending on whether *uacuus* is thought of as predicative or attributive. The first option is grammatically easier but logically contradictory: Love is both idle and never resting. The second is more convoluted in terms of syntax, but logically more consistent. From the perspective of Roman ideology, however, both statements make sense. Finally, this love is literally *uacuus*, "empty," because it is unfulfilled. Such semantic and syntactical complexity is typical of Propertius.

35-36. The poet concludes by striking the pose of the *praceptor amoris* [7, 58]. Cura here, as often in elegy, refers to the object of desire. See Sulpicia (3.16, 3.17, 3.18).

37-38. The poet slyly prophesies his own poetic fame. All those who do not heed his lesson will recall (*referet*) his words with great pain. Thus, he will live on in men's minds both those who first listen and those who do not. This is a clever and appropriate way to end a poem introducing a poet's first collection of poems.

1.3

This poem is well known and widely anthologized because of its complex use of mythology and the sudden reversal of power relations at the poem's end. It begins with a series of comparisons between Cynthia and three mythological figures and ends with a recollection of Penelope, the ever-faithful wife who proved herself not only a match for the suitors but also Odysseus himself.

The scenario is basic. Propertius stumbles home after an evening of carousing to find Cynthia asleep. The besotted poet is overcome with fear and desire. His angry mistress wakes and accuses him of leaving her to find pleasure in the arms of another.

In contrast to 1.1 and later poems, Propertius and Cynthia's relationship seems almost domestic, with Propertius playing the tardy husband coming home late at night. It would be a mistake to expect consistent and realistic treatment from one poem to the next in these collections. Elegies are not autobiography, but highly stylized poetic constructs that investigate the topics of love and desire within the terms permitted by Roman ideology and its contradictions. Elegy offered its audience a field for the aesthetic exploration of possible worlds rather than a simple representation of reality.

1-6. The three mythological exempla, each introduced with *qualis*, share certain themes that prepare the reader for the poem, although no one element is common to all. In the first comparison, we see Ariadne asleep on the beach

unaware that Theseus has abandoned her. What is not mentioned, but traditional in most retellings of the story, is that when Bacchus subsequently comes upon the distraught heroine, he makes her his bride. Propertius here plays two roles, he is both the cruel Theseus who has abandoned Cynthia and the Bacchus-inspired lover.

The second comparison is more difficult. In our mythological tradition, we know of no scene where Andromeda fell asleep after her rescue by Perseus nor where she was abandoned by a lover. Yet, the imagery implicit in the scene helps make the poet's intent clear. Andromeda was to be sacrificed to the Hydra by her mother and father and was chained naked to a rock. Such a sacrifice is a form of rape or violation. Andromeda was saved at the last moment by Perseus who took her as his bride. Thus, Andromeda's first sleep would have been in the arms of her rescuer. Again, Propertius has two roles. He plays both the monstrous rapist and the legitimate and faithful "husband."

In the final comparison, the Bacchic element implied in the first is made explicit. There are numerous ancient paintings of sleeping nymphs and maenads approached by a satyr, Pan, or Priapus with sexual intent. These idealized rape scenes, including a Pompeian wall painting of a Bacchant asleep by a stream, provide an obvious source for this third couplet, and provide a link between it and the preceding comparison. At the same time, Bacchantes were notoriously vicious when woken. Thus, once again, the image is double. On the one hand, we have Propertius as drunken satyr about to take advantage of the sleeping maenad, on the other her fury if awoken before the act was completed.

1-2. *Thesea cedente carina* = ablative absolute. *Languida* is often used to refer to sexual exhaustion. *Cnosia* = Ariadne.

3-4. The verb *accubuit*, "to recline," in Propertius has an erotic sense. *Cepheia* = daughter of Cepheus, king of Ethiopia.

5-6. *Edonis* = Thracian, an area associated with Bacchic cult. In *herboso* . . . *Apidano*: the *Apidanus* was a river in Thessaly. The reference is presumably to a dry riverbed, a common phenomenon in Greece and Italy during the summer, although in + the ablative can on rare occasions mean "beside," but *herboso* is then hard to explain.

7-8. *Visa*: understand *est*. *Mollem spirare quietem* = both "to breathe like one asleep" and more literally "to breath forth soft rest." This is a good example of the condensed nature of Propertius's poetic language.

Caput = a Greek accusative of respect with *nixta*.

Non certis . . . *manibus* = a suggestive phrase alluding to the precarious nature of Cynthia's repose.