

Classical Studies series

- Aeneas the Tacitician: How to Survive under Siege*, David Whitehead
Catullus to Ovid: Reading Latin Love Elegy, Joan Booth & Guy Lee
Diodorus Siculus: The Philippic Narrative, E.I. McQueen
Euripides: Medea & Electra, John Ferguson
Homer's Odyssey, Peter Jones
Plato: The Statesman, J.B. Skemp
Propertius: Elegies I, R.I.V. Hodge & R.A. Buttimore
Salust: Conspiracy of Catiline, Patrick McGushin
Sophocles: Antigone & Oedipus the King, J. Wilkins & M. Macleod
Suetonius: The Flavian Emperors, Brian Jones & Robert Milns
Tacitus: Annals XIV, N. Miller
Virgil: Aeneid, R.D. Williams

P 020/105

PROPERTIUS
ELEGIES BOOK I

Text and Translation
with a Critical Analysis
of each poem

R.I.V. Hodge & R.A. Buttimore

31.027



Bristol Classical Press

Qualis et unde genus, qui sint mihi, Tulle, Penates,
 quaeis pro nostra semper amicta.
 si Perusia tibi patriae sunt nota sepulcra,
 Italiae duris funera temporibus,
 cum Romana suos egit discordia ciuis
 (sit mihi praecipue, pulvis Etrusca, dolor:
 tu proiecta mei perpressa es membra propinqui,
 tu nullo miseri contegis ossa solo)
 proxima supposito contingens Umbria campo
 me genuit terris fertilis uberibus.

POEM XXII

Status-rank-ancestors-place-of-origin —
 You're always at me, Tullus, "for friendship's sake".
 Have you heard of Perugia's — our country's — cemetery?
 Italy's graveyard it was in those hard times,
 when factions in Rome affected all her citizens —
 dust of Etruria, sting me to special grief,
 for you groan with the weight of my cousin's scattered limbs,
 you shield his wretched bones but not with soil: —
 Umbria's sheltered plain just bordering those hills
 bore me, a rich place with fertile ground.

A Roman would have found this an intriguing and slightly disquieting introduction to the volume. It is almost accidentally suitable to stand first. It was probably composed early, (1) when most of the poems that follow did not exist, yet it has a retrospective air, as though summing up the whole relationship. It seems a more public poem than most in this book, as though it was addressed to the general reader, but it is strangely opaque, always hinting at a private dilemma which he seems unable to talk about directly. In it Propertius generalises about Love more than usual, but he is not expounding his Philosophy of Love. The successive statements come across as oblique expressions of an inner disturbance. Individually they are elliptical and obscure, over-all they follow no clear logical progression. The poem itself divides into sections that remain discrete: it gives a sense of having evolved by accretion. In the earlier poems the addressee usually gives one kind of unity to his poems, but here Tullus appears belatedly at line 9, and has only an insecure place in the poem. He merges into the plural "vos amici" at line 25, and is supplanted by others at line 31. The result is an elusive poem, dense, impacted, intricate, registering subterranean tensions through the movement of the verse and the quality of the language. Those first Roman readers would have been uneasily impressed but they would not have been sure quite what was to follow.

The first four lines make a clear enough statement. They are unusually impersonal and undramatic for Propertius, and the basic image is conventional. Its immediate source in this case is probably an epigram by Meleager. (2) Propertius gives a new complexity and seriousness to the stock images, however. The movement of his verse is carefully controlled, and the precise positioning of each word contributes subtly to the overall effect. "Cynthia prima" appropriately begins the poem and the whole volume, "prima" here perhaps having something of the force of "excellent, rare", as well as its more basic adverbial meaning. (3) Then "miserum me" follows, enclosed minutely by "suis ocellis", the instruments of his capture. The affectionate diminutive "ocellis" makes the process seem pleasant. "Miserum me" is the self-pitying sigh of the stock lover. So far there is nothing really surprising, but the structure already hints that the poet will be taking the materials of the convention unusually seriously.

The same enclosing structure determines the next three lines, where lines 2 and 3 about Propertius are contained by lines where first Cynthia and then Amor is the subject. Cynthia and Amor are closely identified: in fact over these two couplets Cynthia seems to transform into the abstract Love, the

(1) The percentage of pentameters which end with a word of more than two syllables is 37; see introduction pp. 9, 11 etc.

(2) Palatine Anthology XII ci 1-4, cited by most commentators.

(3) For "prima" applied in this way to a girl, cp. Terence, Eunuch 567 "primam dicas, scio, si videris".

woman disappearing as the force takes over. This crucial transformation is embodied in the syntax, through a transient ambiguity over 'deiecit'.⁽⁴⁾ The subject of this verb would naturally be taken to be Cynthia till line 4 reveals that the true subject is Amor.

The painful side of love, which was latent in the first line, becomes more evident in the second. 'Contactum' is stronger than Meleager's *ἄρπυρρον* *πρόσθε* suggesting that love is a disease as well as an arrow. 'Cupidinibus', especially in the plural, suggests the emotion rather than the god ('Cupido' is not normally a god for Propertius). The word does not carry such pejorative overtones as the English 'lust', but in conjunction with 'contactum' it has a definite negative charge, communicating an unlegiac hostility towards the dominant emotion of the genre.

Line 3 proceeds through a series of slight shifts in the evaluation of Love. 'Constantis' was a morally positive word, normally used of virtues persisted in resolutely by good Romans. 'Fastus', which it qualifies, was not, however, usually a virtue. It represented a kind of arrogant and contemptuous independence disapproved of by the Romans, and invariably criticised by Propertius where it occurs in others.⁽⁵⁾ So to eliminate this quality could be a virtuous action, though there is a violence about the remedy suggested by 'deiecit' that might seem excessive. 'Lumina' binds this line to the first through the contrast with 'ocellis', his bold gaze dashed to the ground, her feminine eyes so much more powerful in their effect.

So far the poem could have seemed only a highly-wrought version of a familiar notion. The fifth line, however, would have been more startling. 'Castus' is a strongly positive word, meaning someone untouched by scandal, above reproach. So for Propertius to say that he hates ('odisse') such girls is outrageous: and in spite of the uneasiness of commentators, 'odisse' cannot with any authority be reduced to mild aversion or simply lack of interest.⁽⁶⁾ 'Improbis' right at the beginning of the next line is exactly the word a Roman would use of someone who hated irreproachable women. However, Propertius uses it of Love, turning the accusation away from himself and endorsing it against the god or the emotion. In the space of four words he has repudiated both Roman morality and the repudiation itself. Such a self-

(4) See M.W. Edwards, esp. pp. 132 ff (for full ref. see Bibliography).

(5) For the meaning of 'fastus', see O.L.D.: for Propertius's usage cp e.g. III xii 9-10 'Haec etiam clausas expugnant arma pudicas, / quaque gerunt fastus, leonori, tuos', where the word is a criticism of aristocratic snobbery.

(6) Camps e.g. wishes to translate 'castas odisse puellas' as 'to have no use for women who are not free with their favours'. This involves a considerable reduction in the meaning of two words, 'odisse' and 'castas', in a context which is obviously (and by Camps's own admission) emotionally highly wrought. So the context gives no justification for this reduction and the dictionaries give little justification for the first (in the case of a personal object) and none for the second. Our account of this couplet is in general agreement with that of J. Fontenrose.

contradiction is of course not offered as a moral stance, but there is genuine moral feeling behind it. This is not the cheeky amorality of the elegiac lover, but a resentful, compulsive rejection of the prevailing morality.

The final lesson of Love inverts the normal aim of education. Propertius is reduced to living 'nullo consilio', 'with no rational scheme'. 'Consilium' is the practical use of the intelligence, the ability to devise means of getting what one wants. With a cruel irony Love makes him want the wrong things, then leaves him powerless to obtain them. Lines 17-18 will also lament that perversity.

Lines 7-8 emphasise the pains of his state. 'Furor' is an intense emotional state, a kind of madness. This has lasted a whole year, however, and Propertius emphasises that there has been not a moment's respite. The case of *totò anno* is significant. This is the ablative of a point of time: the whole year is considered as a single unbroken unit.

Line 8 again brings out the cruel irony of his position. The gods are opposed to his love, he reveals for the first time. But the line implies more than this sad but commonplace fate. Commentators and translators tend to treat 'cogor habere' as equivalent to 'habeo', no doubt thinking that Propertius has suffered enough already in having the gods against him. But 'cogor' represents part of his condition, and is not redundant. 'Habere deos' on its own means to be subject to gods⁽⁷⁾ - in this case, Amor and Venus. Propertius, however, has not willingly chosen this fate. He has been compelled (cogor) to be in love, and hence to rely on these gods, who then of course refuse to help him. 'Cogor' juxtaposed with 'adversos' brings out his helplessness before the contradictory forces acting on him. His inner need and the forces that oppose fulfillment are both conceived of as external to him, and the source of both is ultimately the same, the contradictory nature of the state he is in.

There is a sharp break in the poem at this point. Tullus is introduced as an addressee, and Milanton's example is invoked for no apparent reason. The negative 'nullo fugiendo labore' seems to be a response to some previous advice from Tullus, of the form: 'Why not get away from her then, go to Athens, or to some pleasant country retreat?' Tullus was especially likely among Propertius's friends to recommend this obvious kind of solution: in I vi he seems to have invited Propertius to accompany him to Asia, in I vii to join him at his Tiber estate.⁽⁸⁾ Propertius refuses both times. In both poems Tullus emerges as a public-spirited man of ample means, simple-mindedly and inappropriately generous towards Propertius, worthy in ways that the poet could respect but not imitate. His form of benevolent incomprehension makes him a suitable recipient of the present poem, representing

(7) Cp. e.g. Prop. III vii 18 'non habet unda deos', III xx 22 'non habet ultores nox vigilanda deos', and IV xi 13 'non minus inimicus habuit Cornelia Parcas', etc.

(8) See the discussions of these poems below.

tative of the other friends who would like to reclaim Propertius in line 25.

But the tone and function of this exemplum is not easy to determine. At first we might think of it as mythic authority for the course Propertius proposes to follow, but later he complains that Love does not work like this in his case. Nor is it simply the ideal that Love ought to aspire to, for by the time the conclusion is reached the authority of the exemplum has been subverted. The language is highly wrought, elevated in diction and strained in syntax, but as the passage progresses the triviality of Milanion's exploits deflates it into mock-heroic. Milanion, the exemplary lover, emerges as ludicrous by the heroic standards evoked by the grand style. But the final effect of the passage is again to convey an ambivalent attitude to love. Milanion may be ridiculous, but at least he is successful.

The first couplet of this section (lines 9-10) opens at a high pitch. 'Labores' connects Milanion's efforts with heroic labours such as those of Hercules.⁽⁹⁾ 'Contudit' is an epic word for a violent act such as a hero would perform. The object of this doughty blow is not an opponent's head, but Atalanta's cruelty. The substitution of this abstract, 'sævitiā', for a physical object makes the syntax remote from normal speech. 'Iasus', the patronymic instead of the name Atalanta, also heightens the style.⁽¹⁰⁾

The narrative that follows is highly allusive. 'Iasidos', for instance, is meaningless except to well-informed readers who knew that Iasus was Atalanta's father. So a detailed prior knowledge of the Atalanta myth seems to be required. The myth had a number of variant forms, but the details in Propertius point to a version similar to that given by Apollodorus. Apollodorus gives the suitor's name as Milanion not Hippomenes, and names Iasus as her father. Hylaeus as the Centaur who attacks her, and the Parthenian mountains as her birthplace.⁽¹¹⁾ But the best-known feature of the Atalanta story was the famous race. It was common to all extant versions of the myth. In Propertius, this is only briefly and indirectly alluded to in line 15, through 'velocem'. Till then it might have been thought that Propertius was following a different version, in which Milanion won Atalanta by other means. Commentators have in fact supposed this, treating 'velocem' as an inert relic of the dominant version of the myth. This, however, is hardly plausible. After Propertius had written so allusively that a particular version of the myth needed to be recalled, and had then followed one version in detail after detail, it would have been extraordinarily perverse in him to have first omitted the most famous element in the myth, and then forgotten that he had left it out.

The Milanion of myth won Atalanta by cunning. He relied on her greed for the golden apples Aphrodite had given him. Propertius's Milanion behaves

(9) Cp. E. Burck, esp. p. 176, on 'labores'.

(10) On the stylistic qualities of the language here, see H. Tränkle, pp. 12 ff.

(11) See Apollodorus III ix 2.

far more like the standard lover of the elegiac convention. The expectations aroused by 'contudit' are not fulfilled at all. First Milanion wanders deranged around Atalanta's birthplace. Parthenis' may recall its Greek meaning, 'the maiden's', especially here since it is used adjectivally in connection with such a famous virgin. If so, it might give erotic overtones to the caves and hollows ('antris') through which he gropes his way. Line 12 is the closest this Milanion gets to heroism, but it is not in fact very close. Some commentators have tried to make 'videre' describe a positive action, but the word cannot be strong enough on its own.⁽¹²⁾ This leaves Milanion a mere spectator of hairy wild animals. Even this may be brave for a lover, but it hardly counts as heroism.

Nor does he come out too well in the battle with the Centaurs. In Apollodorus, it is Atalanta who defeats them. Propertius says nothing to suggest otherwise for his Milanion. His only addition to the myth is to have Milanion present as an ineffectual participant, who is wounded and makes loud groans. Again the diction is elevated and the syntax strained, an absurdly inflated context for Milanion's inept contribution. The syntax of 'Hylaei percussus vulnere rami' in particular is so tortuous that the meaning is obscure. 'Rami' is usually interpreted as a club, since that is the most common metonymy. However, Apollodorus, whom Propertius otherwise follows so closely, attributes bows and arrows to the Centaurs. Ovid's otherwise close imitation of this passage uses 'arcu'.⁽¹³⁾ 'Percussus' usually implies penetration, which would be more proper for a bow than a club. So there are a number of reasons for supposing that 'rami' here refers to a bow (which was made out of a bough) and not the more usual club. Strictly it is the arrow that would strike, not the bow: but Propertius uses that metonymy at I vii 15. The point would be to make a closer parallel between Milanion's sufferings and the sufferings of a lover at the hands of Love the archer. Milanion's groans of line 14 are certainly more like the laments of a lover than the fortitude of a hero.

So 'ergo' of line 15 is pseudo-logical. 'Veloce[m] puellam' recalls Atalanta's defeat in the famous race. 'Pecces et bene facta' were certainly not the immediate causes of the mythical Milanion's success. The elegiac Milanion has not been notable for either of these, of course. (Housman, followed by others, postulated a missing couplet to supply this lack.) But the moral has been stated only to be subverted by the preceding verses. Success in love is not a simple matter of good deeds rewarded and prayers answered. The mythic Milanion triumphed by cunning manipulation of feminine greed. It is this latent moral that the next couplet (lines 17-18) picks up. Love refuses to inspire Propertius with the necessary guile (or provide him with the equiva-

(12) We agree with Shackleton Bailey, p. 3, that 'videre' means simply 'to look upon,' and that 'this makes Milanion no hero'.

(13) Ovid, *The Art of Love*, II 185-191.

...of golden apples). Tardus' makes the connection with the race of the ... for Atalanta, but made up for it with trickery. Love in Propertius ... lover, but is stupid as well.

The whole section is obscure and complex. Propertius has substituted an elegiac lover and elegiac behaviour for the mythic Milanion, but told the story in strained language that indirectly recalled the traditional myth. So the myth is available to provide the moral, and is also a standard that makes the behaviour of the elegiac lover seem ludicrously unheroic. There is some wit in the execution of all this, directed ultimately at himself, but the thought is as devious, intricate and recondite as the language itself. Any laughter that survived all this would not be uproarious.

At line 19 the poem changes direction sharply again. This time Propertius invokes witches' aid. Labor' of line 20 ironically echoes 'labores' of line 9 to connect the witches' activities with those of the lover Milanion. 'Fallacia' indicates Propertius's scepticism from the beginning. (14)

The meaning of the next line is obscure. Sandbach suggests that 'sacra piare' = 'to expiate a religious offence'. This would fit in well with what Propertius thinks of his relationship with the gods Venus and Amor and with the god-like Cynthia. He has in some sense offended and an appeal to some kind of magical purification would be appropriate. The alternative explanation (i.e. 'to make sacrifices for the sake of appeasing the gods') would have the same sort of connection with Propertius's position. (15) In fact the point of these 6 lines is an elaborately worked out parallel between heaven and earth, the moon and Cynthia, which may have been motivated in the first place by the connection between the goddess Cynthia and the moon. (16) 'Deducere lunae' looks strange, but is a standard way of describing an eclipse of the moon. (17) The literal significance of 'deducere', to draw down a heavenly body, will make it easier for Propertius to refer it to Cynthia.

In the two couplets that follow (lines 21-24) he sets these witches a test: if they can win over Cynthia he will acknowledge their powers over Nature. This challenge is made less arbitrary by the Cynthia-moon parallel. (14) 'Fallacia' implies a deception, and so Propertius does not suggest that the witches can in fact draw down the moon.

(15) The precise meaning of this phrase does not make any real difference to the validity of our overall account of the poem. For the discussion see Sandbach (see bibliography) and Enk and Shackleton Baley on this passage.

(16) Though Cynthia is not applied overtly to the moon before Ov. Her. XVIII 74, Diana (=Cynthia) is: see O.L.D. under 'Diana' b. On the connection between Cynthia and the moon in this and other passages in Propertius, see E. O'Neil.

(17) Cp. Verg. Bucolics VIII 69 'carmina vel caelo possunt deducere lunam'; and cp. the scholiast to Apollonius Rhodius III 533 (cited by Enk) -

'Pallor' can be used of eclipses as well as for the pallor of a lover. As used of eclipses it suggests a general loss of luminosity rather than simple pallor, so his wish here might recall his own 'dejecta lumina' of line 3, which were her effect on him. (18)

The parallel is worked out more extensively in lines 23-24. The trick of causing eclipses is repeated in 'sidera/ducere'; but this time the phrase is made much more difficult by the insertion of 'ames', which creates an extremely harsh zeugma. '(de) ducere sidera' could have remained a dead metaphor without this, but 'ducere ames' must employ the normal sense of 'ducere'. One effect of this is to insist on the literal meaning of the phrase: he wants Cynthia brought down. The currents or streams ('ames') which are brought into prominence by this curious syntactical role and by their position in the line, may have their analogue in the tears that he hopes Cynthia will be induced to weep. (19) If 'ames' refers to tears, the zeugma will be less harsh, since tears and stars can both be brought down, but the magic spell to do with streams ought to draw them upwards, against the current. 'De' cannot be understood with this construction. The point of all this is probably Cynthia's semi-divine status, as something like a force of nature, but the strain on language involved, especially in the last couplet, may be felt to be excessive.

In line 25 Propertius turns back to his conventional friends, into whose number Tullus has been absorbed. 'Sero' here is usually taken with 'revocatis' ('you reclaim me too late') but such despair is premature and out of place here. It is more satisfactory to take it with 'lapsum', where the sentiment would recall lines 1-2, implying something like I vii 26 ('venit magno faenore tardus amor'). In this poem Propertius wants to emphasise his resistance to love and his wish to return to his former habitual state. So in line 26 he accepts the view of himself as sick, as did 'contactum' of line 2, and he offers himself for a painful cure by surgery and cautery. But he cannot unequivocally wish to be reclaimed any more. 'Igenes' is qualified by 'saevos' a word with almost a technical meaning in elegy (as in 'saevitiam' of line 10). 'Igenes' of course often refers to the fires of love. (20) Through this double sense in the image he is asking for the disease again at the very moment he seems to be requesting a cure.

Line 28 is even more equivocal and obscure. What is a 'libertas quae velit ira loqui'? He seems to want to express anger, an emotion that has not been mentioned previously, though it has been felt as a powerful undercurrent throughout the poem. In this curious phrase 'velit' has the effect of (18) 'Pallor' is the normal word used for eclipses of the sun; it is first so used of the moon in Luc. VI 500 and then again in Claud. Cons. Mall. Theod. 40.

(19) For the woman's tears signifying longing cp. Ter. Heaut. 304-7. 'Ubi dicimus redisse te... mulier... continuo et lacrimis opplet os totum sibi ut facile scires desiderio id fieri'.

(20) Cp. for example Verg. Aeneid. IV 2 'caeco carpitur igni' (of Dido).

half-personifying anger: rage like love is seen as an external and potentially tyrannous force. The freedom Propercius craves is a limited one at best, freedom of speech not emotional freedom.

The mention of *libertas*⁽²¹⁾ also reflects back on the images of the previous line. The escaped slave who was recovered was branded and chained up. The images of fire and steel could then gain a different kind of significance. To be reclaimed by his friends would then be seen as a return to a kind of slavery. Again this would represent an extremely equivocal judgement on love and normality. Each is a kind of slavery from the other's point of view. The desperate request of the next couplet, lines 29-30, is for escape from both civilization and love.

The people whom he now addresses (line 31) seem to have changed slightly. These are lovers, but successful ones. Propercius gives them some advice which has an equivocal edge to it. He urges constancy ('semper') equality ('paris') and above all safety, but the tense quality of this "safety" comes out in lines 35-6. 'Vitate' implies movement away, but the lover will avoid the danger by staying exactly where he is:

Propercius's description of his own condition, in lines 33-4, again brings out the self-contradictory nature of his love. 'Venus nocetis exercet' on its own would refer to nights of making love. 'Nostra' generalises this Venus experience from their success (22) 'Amaras' coming at the end of the line then effectively negates the sentence. His venereal activity is the bitterness of not making love for night after night. The next line repeats that sentiment even more tortuously. 'Vacuus' indicates idleness, lack of activity. 'Vacuus Amor' must be a stronger form of 'tardus Amor' of line 17. Love is now not simply slow, it is wholly inactive on his behalf. But this complete ineffectiveness is an unremitting presence. 'Nullo tempore defit' recalls 'toto furor hic non deficit anno' of line 7. Love is always working at not working for him: lack of love is always present.

The poem closes with a warning, and insists on the penalties that await someone who does not heed it. The warning itself, however, is obscure and hard to profit by. The 'malum' to be avoided is not simply love, for the way to avoid it is by desperate adherence to a well-tried conventional love. The

(21) 'Libertas' is a very unusual word in elegy. It is used also in *Il xxiii 23* by Propercius, but apart from that occurs only once elsewhere, at *Tib. II iv 2*. Propercius uses other cognates of the word 'liber' fairly frequently also, which tend to emphasise the paradox of the independent man in the constraints of love.

(22) On this line we agree with B & B etc. as against Enk. The contrast is not between an implied 'vestra' and 'nostra': in fact the obvious contrast underlined by the positioning of the words is between 'vos' and 'in me', and for this contrast to be properly understood, the same force must be operating in both cases to produce the different effects; therefore, 'nostra Venus' cannot possibly mean 'my Venus' but must mean 'our Venus'.

true evil is Propercius's present condition, alienation from both love and society. Conventional notions of love have proved as inapplicable as conventional morality. The final line carries a sense of the incommunicability of the experience. 'Referet' is stronger than "to remember", closer to "re-enact". (23) So the poem concludes having failed to understand the distressing experience at its core, still not having talked about it directly. The failure has been re-enacted by the poem itself. Its power comes from the sense it gives that even the difficulties and obscurities are essential to convey the texture of the experience. There is no conclusion, but there could be none. Inconclusiveness is a primary quality of the poem, though in tension with this is an urgent need to understand. His attempts to generalise constantly break down, as he is unable to tell how general his experience is, or who he is talking to. Yet the refusal to be explicit could seem like a way of escaping from his private hell, not a strategy for understanding it. The obscurity may come, partly at least, from a deep reluctance to confront the insoluble. The result is a powerful and darkly troubled poem, but not a wise one, and only just a unity. The transitions are abrupt and there are vertiginous shifts of addressee. It is a poem of disorientation, a missing centre, shifting perspectives. From line 3, when Cynthia merged into Amor, the person who could have held it in a single focus has disappeared.

(23) There are several meanings of 'referet' in a transferred sense; of these the most important here are those in Lewis and Short B 2: viz. e.g. 'to repeat, renew . . . ; to reproduce; to call to mind'. This indicates that the word implies something rather more active than the simple act of memory.