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*Arethusa* 32.1 (1999) 123-144**Propertius 2.3: The Chaos of Desire** [1](#)**Christopher C. Spelman**

Propertius 2.3 has not received much scholarly attention in recent years, and, in one sense, the unwillingness of critics to address themselves to this elegy comes as no surprise: in exploring his inability to resist love (1-8), the poet first denies the power of his mistress' beauty (9-16), but later, without explaining why, focuses on her loveliness as the very thing that attracts him (23-44). [2](#) The structural damage this mysterious change of mind apparently wreaks on the poem's logical coherence allows commentators to treat it as a largely unexamined whole whose inconsistencies require no further scrutiny than to remark that Propertius has once again failed to achieve narrative consistency.

Though few would deny that Propertius' elegies often resist a smooth reading, treating this poem as a type rather than a unique work is not an adequate response--first of all, because it leaves the question of why **[End Page 123]** the poet changes his mind conspicuously unaddressed. This goes beyond the question of unity; it concerns the structure of desire and why its object, though scorned, returns triumphant. Surely this elegy deserves a closer look.

In my approach to the poem, I shall, after briefly demonstrating that the contradiction not only exists, but is central to the poem's construction, examine a dense cluster of metrical and rhetorical anomalies that indicate that what compels the elegiac speaker to desire incessantly is not the woman he loves but beauty as a separated object. [3](#) To investigate why this object is at once irresistible and fundamentally unsatisfying, I shall have recourse to the work of Jacques Lacan. This theoretical frame will allow us to disclose the underlying dissonance of the speaker's desire and probe the thematic integrity of the Melampus *exemplum* with which the elegy concludes (51-54).

Propertius 2.3 begins with an unidentified voice chiding the poet for the failure of his declared resolution to eschew the torments of love (1-4):

"Qui nullam tibi dicebas iam posse nocere,  
haesisti, cecidit spiritus ille tuus!  
vix unum potes, infelix, requiescere mensem,  
et turpis de te iam liber alter erit." [4](#)

"You kept on saying that no woman could get to you; now you're caught, your arrogance has fallen by the wayside. You miserable fool, you can barely give it a rest for one month. Now there'll be another disgusting book about you."

Richardson (1977 ad loc.) identifies the speaker as either Propertius talking to himself, or a friend who knows his troubles well. Richardson prefers the former possibility; as I argue below, I feel that the ambiguity is deliberately insoluble. **[End Page 124]**

Propertius explains his erotic recidivism by drawing a parallel with nature: for him to live other than as a lover is as essentially impossible as for animals to change their habitats (5-8):

quaerebam, sicca si posset piscis harena  
nec solitus ponto uiuere toruus aper;  
aut ego si possem studiis uigilare seueris:  
differtur, numquam tollitur ullus amor.

I was trying to find out whether a fish could live on dry sand or a wild boar--beyond all expectation--in the ocean; or whether I could stay up all night in ascetic pursuits; no love is ever gotten rid of--it's put off.

By equating his pursuit of asceticism with the perversion of nature, Propertius conversely aligns his participation in love with what is natural. No matter how hard he tried, love proved irresistible, and the reason is that the natural order, which is made to include him as lover, is inevitable.

But Propertius emphasizes that his mistress' beauty is not responsible for his return to love (9-16); what truly captivates him, he claims, are her artistic talents (17-22):

quantum quod posito formose saltat laccho,  
egit ut euhantis dux Ariadna choros,  
et quantum, Aeolio cum temptat carmina plectro,  
par Aganippaeae ludere docta lyrae;  
et sua cum antiquae committit scripta Corinnae,  
carmina quae quibus non putat aequa suis.

It's really that she dances beautifully when the wine has been brought to the table, just as Ariadne led the frenzied chorus, and that, when she begins a song with the Aeolian plectrum, she's as skilled at playing on the Aganippaeae lyre; and when she matches her writings with Corinna's of old, absolutely no one thinks the latter's songs are the equal of hers.

Yet these talents are learned, not natural, and are thus somehow out of sync with the *adynata* that form the starting point for the rest of the poet's [End Page 125] remarks. For if nature provides a key or guide to what must be, her natural beauty should compel him, not what she has studied.

The question of nature's importance becomes further vexed when Propertius ascribes Cynthia's unique power over him to supernatural forces that played a part in her birth (23-28):

non <sup>5</sup> tibi nascenti primis, mea uita, diebus  
candidus argutum sternuit omen Amor?  
haec tibi contulerunt caelestia munera diui,  
haec tibi ne matrem forte dedisse putes.  
non non humani partus sunt talia dona:  
ista decem menses non peperere bona.

My life, bright Love sneezed a clear omen for you in your first days of life, didn't he? The gods bestowed these heavenly presents upon you; don't think that your mother gave you these, by any chance. No, these are not the gifts of a human birth; ten months did not produce such treasures.

That this discussion follows the description of her talents suggests that these are the *munera* or *dona* in question, but the learned allusions that define her arts make it difficult to accept them as essentially innate. <sup>6</sup> The gods might provide an extra dose of raw talent, but they are unlikely to imbed abstruse details in one's mind.

On the other hand, her birth, that which is most basically--and etymologically--natural to her, is also expressly what is least natural (*non humani partus sunt*), and the legendary future Propertius envisions for her heightens this paradox (29-32):

gloria Romanis una es tu nata puellis:  
Romana accumbes prima puella Ioui,  
nec semper nobiscum humana cubilia uises;  
post Helenam haec terris forma secunda redit. [End Page 126]

You have been born as a singular glory to Roman womanhood; you will be the first Roman girl to sleep with Jupiter, and you won't always stay with me, in a human bed; this beauty returns to earth a second time, after Helen.

Not only was her birth beyond the normal, but she will break the boundary between divine and mortal by sleeping with the ruler of the universe.

Thus the two passages seem to flow together smoothly--preternatural birth will lead to sex with a god--but, like the enchanting artistry Cynthia possesses, they are out of harmony with the natural paradigm that forms the rhetorical basis for Propertius' entire response. And when Propertius reveals the cause of Cynthia's unique status, he derails the logical progression of the entire poem. For his mistress' beauty (*forma*, 32), whose value and potency he initially denigrates and denies (9-16), now serves both as the

cause of her eventual sexual union with Jupiter and as what motivates the poet's conviction that she was born under divine influence. Without providing any reasons, Propertius has suddenly changed his mind.

The lengthy allusions to the Trojan War that follow the reference to Helen confirm that physical beauty is indeed what fascinates the poet: *hac ego nunc mirer si flagret nostra iuuentus? / pulchrius hac fuerat, Troia, perire tibi* ("Should I be surprised now if our young men are on fire for it? [7](#) / It would have been nobler, Troy, for you to perish for it," 33-34). The apostrophe to Troy dramatically underscores Propertius' obsession with his mistress' looks. He is so enthralled that he personifies the city, for, as regards Cynthia's *forma*, he can only imagine others, even the ancient city, as identical to himself: that is, as desiring subjects.

The desire for his mistress he imagines on Troy's part prompts him to re-evaluate the war; what once seemed mysterious becomes clear now that he considers the power of beauty (35-40):

olim mirabar, quod tanti ad Pergama belli  
Europae atque Asiae causa puella fuit:  
nunc, Pari, tu sapiens et tu, Menelae, fuisti,  
tu quia poscebas, tu quia lentus eras. **[End Page 127]**  
digna quidem facies, pro qua vel obiret Achilles;  
uel Priamo belli causa probanda fuit.

I used to be surprised that the reason Europe and Asia had such a big war at Pergamum was a girl; now, Paris, you were wise, and you too, Menelaus--you because you demanded her back, you because you stalled. Her face was really worth dying for, even for Achilles; as a reason for war, even Priam had to approve of it.

But though we can trace the poem's movement from initial rejection of beauty to the antithetical revelation that beauty provides the motivation after all, we have not yet determined what causes the reversal.

For that, we must turn to Propertius' advice to the would-be master-artists. Here both the words themselves and an intense concentration of poetic devices make it clear that Cynthia is treated as a thing, rather than as a person, and it is on this reification of the loved one that I shall focus my inquiry into the poet's ambivalence (41-44):

si quis uult fama tabulas anteire uetustas,  
hic dominam exemplo ponat in arte meam:  
siue illam Hesperiiis, siue illam ostendet Eois,  
uret et Eois, uret et Hesperios.

If any man wants to surpass the fame of classic paintings, he should use my mistress as the model for his work: if he shows 'er to the Westerners, or shows 'er to the Easterners, he'll burn the Easterners, and he'll burn the Westerners.

When Propertius offers to hand his mistress over to any artist who wishes to rival the old masters, she becomes, inasmuch as she is an exchangeable item, an object. It is exactly at this moment of objectification that he shows her to be most completely and satisfyingly his, for the imaginary artist is just that--a creature of the poet's mind who is at liberty to "use" (*ponat*) her for his art, "show" (*ostendet*) her from one end of the earth to the other, and "burn" (*uret*) peoples far and wide with her.

And so she is possessed by something that exists only within her lover and that serves as a buffer between herself and her lover. The image is **[End Page 128]** of three concentric rings: Cynthia at the center, encircled by the artist, who is in turn encircled by Propertius by whose will he exists. With this configuration in mind it requires no great leap to realize that Cynthia's existence, too, depends entirely on the poet; indeed, the complex arrangement of the Latin confirms this. [8](#)

When Propertius encourages the painter to hold her up to universal inspection, the pronoun *illam* (43) that refers to her appears twice, and both times it is in the middle of elision on either side: *siu(e) ill(am) Hesperiiis, siu(e) ill(am) ostendet Eois*. Thus Cynthia, as represented by *illam*, is herself elided twice, on two sides each time--passed over, distorted, hidden. [9](#)

This reading of Cynthia elided provides an aural parallel for the image of Cynthia encircled and hidden within the encompassing control of two creators. And, as we shall see, the densely elaborate patterns the poet sets up through word placement provide additional evidence for his mastery not only of his mistress, but of all the elements in the poetic world he creates.

Both *illam* (43) and *uret* (44) are repeated, and this highlights the inverted repetition of *Hesperis* . . . *Eois* . . . *Eoos* . . . *Hesperios* (43-44). **[End Page 129]** This chiasmus, though perhaps insignificant by itself, reminds us of another, not too distant, example of double repetition coupled with chiasmus (37-38):

nunc, Pari, tu sapiens et tu, Menelae, fuisti,  
tu quia poscebas, tu quia lentus eras.

now, Paris, you were wise, and you too, Menelaus--you because you demanded her back,  
you because you stalled.

Here *tu* is repeated in the hexameter, echoed by the repetition of *tu quia* in the pentameter. The chiasmus (*Pari* . . . *Menelae* . . . *poscebas* . . . *lentus eras*) functions through the association of Menelaus with his behavior (demanding Helen back) and Paris with his (stalling). [10](#)

What the two examples of repetition-chiasmus have to do with one another besides formal resemblance (*AA/BB* intertwined with *AB/BA*) is that both passages, and the situations they represent, revolve around and depend on the idea that a woman is nothing but the objectification of her beauty: Helen reduced to the *facies* that even Achilles would be dignified by dying for, Cynthia as the elided kernel of gorgeosity capable of setting the world on fire--Kryptonite in an hour-glass.

The parallels between *forma* (32), *facies* (39), and the reified *illam* (43) indicate that all function similarly; that is, they all point to Cynthia as object. But they do not form an isolated group, for the repetition of *facies* from earlier in the poem (9) reminds us of the objects of desire originally dismissed as inadequate--the *facies*, *comae*, *oculi*, etc. of 9-16. The repeated *facies*, occupying the same metrical position both times, suggests that both times beauty appears it is essentially identical; only by focusing on this fundamental congruity will we be able to understand why what is rejected in the first instance is embraced in the second.

To begin with, the introductory disavowal of Cynthia's physical charms takes the form of a list of uninspiring physical attributes (9-16):

nec me tam facies, quamuis sit candida, cepit  
(lilia non domina sint magis alba mea; **[End Page 130]**  
ut Maeotica nix minio si certet Hiberno,  
utque rosae puro lacte natant folia),  
nec de more comae per leuia colla fluentes,  
non oculi, geminae, sidera nostra, faces,  
nec si qua Arabio lucet bombyce puella  
(non sum de nihilo blandus amator ego):

It was not so much her face--though it is quite radiant--that captivated me (lilies are not whiter than my mistress; it's as if Maeotian snow were vying with Spanish cinnabar, or rose petals were swimming in pure milk), nor her hair flowing fashionably over her graceful neck; not her eyes, those twin torches, my constellations, and not if any girl gleams in Arabian silk (I'm not some fawning lover for no reason):

Face, hair, eyes, clothing: none of these compels him. What beguiles him, he goes on to assert, is her artistry. But as we know from the return of her beauty in the latter part of the poem, the talents she has learned are not in fact what he finds irresistible; six lines are enough to deal with them.

What we must keep in mind is that this list of deficient features presents Cynthia in parts; Propertius itemizes, and then discounts, fragments of a woman's body that Roman erotic poetry traditionally held to be compelling objects of desire. [11](#) To answer our basic question, to learn why Propertius later changes his mind and points to Cynthia's physical appearance as the essence of her appeal, we must first discover why the allure of these parts is so overpowering. The work of Jacques Lacan will provide a framework particularly suited to this task, for he theorizes that the object of desire is a fetishized part that is, though unsatisfying, unavoidable.

For Lacan, the object of desire is the "goal" of Freud's *Trieb*, "drive," yet the drive never achieves this goal, so there is never absolute satisfaction. [12](#) There is, however, a certain satisfaction produced by the movement of the drive around its object, and Lacan describes this movement **[End Page 131]** as the drive's "aim." He illustrates his point by referring to the oral drive and the breast that supposedly satisfies it. The breast itself is not ingested (i.e., the object/goal is not attained); the pleasure associated

with the breast comes from surrounding the breast with one's mouth (i.e., the drive makes a circuit around its object; this circuit is its aim) (Lacan 1977.167):

No object of any *Not*, need, can satisfy the drive. Even when you stuff the mouth--the mouth that opens in the register of the drive--it is not the food that satisfies it, it is, as one says, the pleasure of the mouth.

Since the aim of the drive is the circuit of pleasure around the object (i.e., the pursuit) and not the attainment of the object (i.e., not the completion of a biological function), "the object of the drive . . . is indifferent"; since the object/goal is not attained, it does not matter what it is (Lacan 1977.168).

Lacan gives this irrelevant object the designation *objet a*, <sup>13</sup> which operates as the fetishized body part that excites desire. According to Lacan, the masculine subject "only ever relates as partner to the *objet a*" (Lacan 1982b.151). What a man desires is not another person, but some (any) object around which his drive can complete its circuit.

In these terms, a man's sexual partner is, for example, a breast as object, and there can be no sexual relation with the woman who is attached to it (Lacan 1975.53). Yet the male subject does not settle for a relationship with the disembodied part; a romantic fantasy must be constructed: "For the man . . . courtly love is the only way of coming off elegantly from the absence of sexual relation" (Lacan 1982a.141). And, in the realm of love, the woman herself, as constructed by the man, must be entirely fantasy; whatever there is of her that resists fantasy must be cast out. <sup>14</sup> **[End Page 132]**

In this light, Propertius' initial refusal to admit that Cynthia's face or eyes are the source of his enthrallment is perfectly comprehensible. If they are objects of desire, as *objets a* they are the unattained goal of the partial drives and not sufficient to support the fantasy of love.

The mystery still remains, however, as to why her repudiated beauty returns and is, in fact, heralded as a wondrous, compelling force. If Propertius denies that the fetishized parts are worthy objects of this or any love (*ullus amor*, 8), then he should propose something, or someone, that actually is worthy. We have seen that he does not, that he returns to the objectified *forma* and *facies*. The solution to this question appears in Lacan's explicit definition of *objet a* as the fetishized part that, though unsatisfactory, is nonetheless the only object available to the masculine subject: he "only ever relates as partner to the *objet a*."

The reappearance of beauty as object is thus inevitable, beyond Propertius' control or ability to refuse, and if we examine both the original disavowal of beauty and the subsequent assertion that her dancing, e.g., is what really attracts him, we find this inevitability present from the very beginning.

The disclaimer opens with the comparison of nature's visual beauty to that of Cynthia; Cynthia is the second item: *lilia non domina sint magis alba mea* ("lilies are not whiter than my mistress," 10). But when the poet points to his beloved's talents, she is the first term in a comparison: *egit ut euhantis dux Ariadna choros* ("just as Ariadne led the frenzied chorus," 18). In the schematization [a] is compared to [b], Cynthia can be cast as either [a] or [b], depending on the poet's organization of his material.

This shift dramatizes Propertius' power over his mistress in defining precisely what roles her attributes may play and how they may be perceived. He not only chooses the points of comparison--the image of lilies and the story of Ariadne specify the associative world in which she exists for the reader--but maneuvers her as an element in a set of formal relations. He effectively reduces her to a figure set in the world he creates: his fantasy.

As Propertius continues his list, he scorns as well any appeal her eyes might hold: *non oculi, geminae, sidera nostra, faces* ("not her eyes, those twin torches, my constellations," 14). Yet even while dismissing the allure of her eyes he demonstrates the fascination they hold, for he uses three nouns to refer to them (*oculi, sidera, faces*), the triple expression militating against the offhand dismissal (*de nihilo*) they receive.

Furthermore, the two metaphors conjure up different scenarios: in the first, her eyes function as cold, distant, unreachable, superhuman fires; **[End Page 133]** in the second, they represent the internal flames of love that burn beyond his control. Their inaccessibility and destructiveness make them unlikely objects of desire, yet this very unsuitability confirms their status as *objets a*, which can be anything, no matter how unappealing or unlikely: "the object of the drive . . . is indifferent." Perhaps even more important, in both scenarios, according to the way these images are traditionally used, it is he who is insignificant in comparison to the fire's force, and the infinite range between the distant stars and the intimate torches emphasizes the extent of its control over him. <sup>15</sup>



If Cynthia's eyes are torches, it is because they burn him despite his protestations to the contrary. The conflict between the poet's intended message and his expression of it illustrates the basic weakness of his position: he is not in control of the images he is using. As the *adynata* suggest, the natural world, of which the lilies are part, resists all tampering, and his blindness to the undercurrents of the fire metaphors shows him as ignorant victim, rather than master, of these objects. Just as the lilies and fires are beyond his control, so the *facies* and *oculi* they are associated with [End Page 134] baffle his attempts to assimilate them. He is no more able to rid himself of their dominance than he is to attain them in the first place. As *objets a*, Cynthia's parts-as-object remain and recirculate, intransigent and persistent "to the end." [16](#)

That they recirculate as precisely the same objects is stressed most particularly by the reappearance of one of the original terms (*facies*, 9 and 39) in the same metrical position both times, the distinct echo sounding a note of precise harmony between the two sections of the poem. But as we have seen, there is a marked difference in the ways in which beauty-as-object is handled each time the poet confronts it. The tension generated by the poet's representation of beauty as both indistinguishable and incompatible in the two passages suggests that, at its center, Propertius' desire is structured as a contradiction. To investigate this paradox we shall have to devote further attention both to the elaborate control he wields over her image when beauty makes its return and to the fantasy-woman he constructs out of that image.

In the original rejection, his attempt to dismiss her physical attributes is undermined by the significance of the images he chooses: the imperviousness of the lilies, constellations, and torches predicts the inevitability of their return. In the second instance, however, we see the elision of Cynthia as object, the intricate doubling of the repetition-chiasmus figure that enwraps and disposes the legendary heroes, the mistress, and the imaginary painter.

The poet's ability to maneuver his words and characters, his skill at encompassing them in whatever mythological allusions he cares to use--and of which he is the master--guarantee that the final product is wholly his: it takes whatever place(s) in the elaborate architecture of formal verbal correspondences and metrical patterns he assigns it, and derives its significance from whatever literary associations he constructs as its context. [17](#)

Unlike the natural images he constructed earlier, these images are fully manipulable by him, and the control he asserts in no way eludes him. As if to illustrate the point, the flames that earlier exceeded his grasp [End Page 135] (*sidera, faces*, 14) reappear now as the doubled *uret* (44). The elided Cynthia now functions merely as a tool. [18](#)

Thus, by the time it emerges in Propertius' fantasy of the painter, Cynthia's beauty is no longer hers, but his. He has apparently resolved the poem's opening dilemma, his contempt (*non sum de nihilo blandus amator ego*, 16) for her body in parts, by absorbing the object of his desire, swallowing it, and breathing it back out as part of him now, rather than as something foreign. [19](#) After being displayed from west to east, Cynthia does not appear in the poem again; the poet seems content to expel her now that he has disassociated her from the object of desire.

This expulsion suggests that Propertius has acquired a new and rare knowledge; he does not need Cynthia as the support for fantasy because he realizes that the object of desire was never hers in the first place. [20](#) In Lacanian terms, Cynthia's metrical and rhetorical effacement has [End Page 136] brought the poet to the realization that "[t]here is no such thing as *The Woman*" (Lacan 1982a.144).

The non-existence of "*The Woman*" surely stands behind the apparently unmotivated reference to "any girl" in the poet's initial denial of the power of physical attractions: *nec si qua Arabio lucet bombyce puella / (non sum de nihilo blandus amator ego)* ("and not if any girl gleams in Arabian silk / [I'm not some fawning lover for no reason]," 15-16). In Lacan's account, the lover circumvents this impasse of non-existence by fantasizing that his beloved possesses a mysterious x-factor, the essential kernel of *objet a* that explains his desire and (as is the case in this poem), remains even after all objective properties have been dismissed as object-causes. But for this reason "*The Woman*"--the woman of fantasy--might as well be anyone. Thus when Propertius claims, "I don't get excited over just any woman," what he means is, "I don't get excited over just any woman--except the woman I've supplied with *objet a*, and she could be anybody at all." Therefore, it makes perfect sense to include women in general: none, no matter how lovely or extravagantly adorned, is fundamentally different from any other. [21](#)

Yet the ramifications of Propertius' newly-gained knowledge extend even further. Cynthia's reduction from elision to invisible, inaudible presence and finally to absolute absence, mirrors the revelation that (Lacan 1977.179-80):

the object that we confuse all too often with that upon which the drive closes . . . is in fact simply the presence of a hollow, a void, which can be occupied, Freud tells us, by any object, and whose agency we know only in the form of the lost object, the *petit a*. [End Page 137]

The *petit a* thus not only functions as the random object that putatively fills in this void, but provides an image of the subject as precisely "the presence of a hollow," an entity that exists only insofar as it desires to fill the void that constitutes it (Lacan 1977.180). *Objet a* is thus "simultaneously the pure lack, the void around which the desire turns and which, as such, causes the desire, and the imaginary element which conceals this void, renders it invisible by filling it out" (Žižek 1994.178). Everyone, every subject, consists of this void, but nobody perceives it, and so everyone seeks satisfaction through those fetishized objects around which the partial drives circulate. <sup>22</sup>

Everyone, that is, but the few, the non-duped (in Lacan's terminology), <sup>23</sup> and, as I have been hinting, Propertius is one of these. For immediately after Cynthia vanishes, he utters a prayer that reveals his astonishing discovery: *his saltem ut teneam iam finibus!* "May I no longer go beyond these boundaries, at least!" (45). The boundaries Propertius speaks of are most obviously the two opposite ends of the earth, but if he has recognized the object as his own lack, they are also the limits that he hopes his discovery will impose on his desire. <sup>24</sup> That is, in turning Cynthia into an absence, he has come to recognize that the absence is something within him, the presence of a void that he will never be without, and he desperately [End Page 138] hopes that this knowledge will somehow reduce the infinite force of his desire: *his saltem ut teneam iam finibus!* <sup>25</sup>

Yet even as he makes this prayer its impossibility confronts him: *aut mihi, si quis / acrius, <sup>26</sup> ut moriar, uenerit alter amor!* "Or, if some other love comes with a more bitter force, may I die!" (45-46). Just as the first prayer does not complete the hexameter, and more words, more prayers, are inevitable, so another love (*alter amor*) must appear. Here Propertius moves beyond the recognition that the object is his own to the realization that his knowledge is immaterial; he knows the new love will not satisfy him, but he also knows he will desire it. Though non-duped, he errs. Hence his prayer for death (*ut moriar*). The only way to avoid the other, fiercer love--*acrius* since he is now aware that it will come despite his knowledge--is to die. Death is the only escape from desire. <sup>27</sup>

Rather than die, Propertius posits a model for accepting bitterness, a model that seems to dull the pain through repetition and habit (47-50):

ac ueluti primo taurus detractat aratra,  
post uenit assueto mollis ad arua iugo,  
sic primo iuuenes trepidant in amore feroces,  
dehinc domiti post haec aequa et iniqua ferunt.

And just as a bull tries to shake off the plow at first, but eventually comes meekly to the fields in his accustomed yoke, so feisty young men are uneasy in love at first, but then, once subdued, they put up with what's fair and what's not. [End Page 139]

Yet even by proposing this path of passive non-resistance he rejects the acquiescence to helplessness it recommends, for through following the bull's example he will reduce the force of his desire to imperceptibility. Eventually, the demands the object makes become a matter of indifference: *aequa et iniqua ferunt*.

So, in the very act of acknowledging the inescapable structure of desire, the poet attempts to elude it. Not only do the non-duped err, they err twice. Despite knowing what the object is (and is not), they desire it; despite knowing that desire is ineluctable, they struggle to escape it. Here is the illogical center, the impossible core of Propertius' desire.

Here, too, is the key to the Melampus episode that concludes the elegy (51-54):

turpia perpressus uates est uincla Melampus,  
cognitus Iphicli surripuisse boues;  
quem non lucra, magis Pero formosa coegit,  
mox Amythaonia nupta futura domo.

The vatic Melampus endured sordid chains when he was discovered to have made off with Iphiclus' cattle. Lust for profit did not drive him, but rather beautiful Pero, who would soon be a bride in the house of Amythaon.

What was apparently the best-known version of this myth appears first in the *Odyssey* and involves the theft from Iphiclus of cattle originally stolen from Pero's grandmother by Iphiclus' father. Pero's father set the return of these cattle as his daughter's bride-price, and Melampus, son of Amythaon, undertook the deed on behalf of his brother, Bias, who was in love with Pero. [28](#)

Yet Homer also presents what may be another tradition of the story (*Od.* 11.287-97) in which Melampus appears to figure as Pero's lover, for there is no mention or hint of Bias. While we may presume that Propertius was familiar with the more common version, he, too, through his failure to refer to Melampus' brother, alludes to the possibility that Melampus was pursuing Pero for himself. The vagueness of the poem's final line (*mox [End Page 140] Amythaonia nupta futura domo*, "[she] would soon be a bride in the house of Amythaon") maintains the ambiguity about which version of the myth Propertius is using. [29](#)

The more familiar telling carries with it a built-in problem. Pursuing the object of someone else's desire on that person's behalf is absurd. Yet this very formulation of the problem illuminates the connection between legend and poem, for the entire elegy can be seen as the poet's attempt to resolve the inexplicability of his object of desire. [30](#) In addition, the triangulation of desire represented by the unnamed brother directly parallels that created by the presence of the unnamed painter who appears earlier (41-44).

On the other hand, if we read the *exemplum* as the story of Melampus' own love, it is easy to see the enchained hero as a forebear of the enslaved lover who endures sordid torments--the correspondence between *turpia uincla* (51) at the conclusion and *turpis liber* (4) at the beginning is unlikely to be coincidental--for the sake of his love. And this version, too, involves narrative non-sense along the axis of desire, for Melampus is bound not by Pero, the putative object of his desire, but by Iphiclus, and thus this story hints at triangulation as well.

We are invited to read the myth either way, or, perhaps more to the point, both ways at once. The irresolvable ambiguity of the myth as presented fits in with the poet's separation of the object (beauty) from its original bearer (his mistress): the truth about desire is that the identity of the individuals involved is irrelevant.

Now, at last, the triangulation of desire I have been alluding to begins to make sense. Each trio forms a matrix wherein the subject defines **[End Page 141]** himself in terms of his desire and its relation to the others. In each instance--Melampus, Pero, and Bias; Propertius, Cynthia, and the imaginary painter; Propertius, Cynthia, and the unidentified speaker whose chiding opens the poem--the woman is merely a punctiform link [31](#) between the subject and another man whose existence is in question. [32](#) By defining himself against such nebulous beings, Propertius puts his own identity in a very precarious position. [33](#)

This is particularly true as regards his relation to the woman, who only exists in and as fantasy ("*The Woman does not exist*"), because "the phantasy is the support of desire; it is not the object that is the support of desire." [34](#) If, as Lacan proposes, the subject exists only because of the desire produced by the *objet a* as inner void, and if this desire needs fantasy as its support, then Propertius can scarcely be said to exist at all, for he unmistakably depicts the woman of his fantasy--and it is the same fantasy all three times--as a cipher whose identity would not matter even if she did exist.

The Melampus episode thus culminates and brings to a climax this indifference of identity, for its radical ambiguity robs every figure in it of even the hope of intelligible desire. Cynthia, the other, is merely an object set up by the subject to camouflage the inner absence that produces desire; Propertius, the subject, is defined as a lack he does not perceive pursuing **[End Page 142]** objects whose attraction he can neither understand nor resist. It does not matter who in Amythaon's household will marry Pero: he will be one of the sons, and he will not be satisfied.

In this way, the elegy ends by stressing the impossible: first, the impossibility of finally deciding which myth is being told, but more important, the impossibility of resolving the dilemma of desire addressed in the first four lines. Thus the Melampus *exemplum* provides a coda, a return to the poem's initial themes. The argument for unity is strengthened when we consider that the myth refers us to the opening *adynata* as well: the nature of desire it reveals is as impossible as the perversion of nature.

This is, indeed, as the manuscripts indicate, one poem, unified not by a coherent verbal progression, but by a complex system of rhetorical devices and metrical tricks fashioned together in an attempt to cover over the incoherence and to block out that which defines the poet's essence: the chaos of his desire.



## Notes

1. My sincere thanks to Micaela Janan, whose class on Propertius at Duke University in the fall of 1992 inspired an early version of this essay, and who offered incisive criticism of that paper and much-needed encouragement to its author. Others to whom I am indebted include Denise McCoskey, Francis Newton, Lawrence Richardson, Jr., and *Arethusa's* anonymous reader for their helpful comments and suggestions.

2. Those scholars who do notice the poem tend to concentrate on questions of textual integrity. Though Richardson 1977.218 calls this "an archetypal poem" in its experimentation with illogical structure and sudden shifts in tone and intensity, he nonetheless revives Scaliger's conjecture that 2.2 and 2.3 were originally one poem and reads them as such. Boucher 1965.388 sees 1-8 as an introduction to which 43-44 respond as a "distique de conclusion"; 45-54 are to be taken as the opening lines of 2.4 where they perform the common Propertian function of introducing what is not the true subject of the poem. But many take the connection between the helplessness of the opening couplets and Melampus' imprisonment at the end as evidence that the poem is complete as we have it; see Shackleton Bailey 1956.67, Camps 1967.80, and Whitaker 1983.110.

3. Following the usual practice, and without assuming correspondence with any historical persons, I call the speaker here Propertius and his mistress Cynthia. However, Book II has fewer specific names than Book I, and the absence of names (both here and in other poems) suggests the possibility that we are dealing with a different cast of characters; see Richardson 1977.4-15, Papanghelis 1987.95, Wyke 1989.30, and Veyne 1988.58-59.

4. Unless otherwise noted, the text I use is Barber 1960.

5. Like Richardson 1977 and Camps 1967 (see both ad loc.), I follow the reading of *N* here and take it that *non=nonne*.

6. Richardson 1977 ad loc. comments on the erudition implied by the names *Iaccho*, *Ariadna*, *Aeolio*, *Aganippaeae*, *Corinnae*. But see Schmidt 1972.402-03 for the view that the *munera* are indeed her talents.

7. As Richardson 1977 notes ad loc., *hac*, ablative of cause, refers to *forma*, not to Cynthia herself.

8. Commager 1974.35 notices the poet's centrality here despite the praise of Cynthia: the earlier imputations of divine birth and the comparison with Helen allow him to equate himself with Jupiter by conferring immortality on the object of his desires.

9. Though modern debates over the sonic effects of elision will probably never be resolved, virtually no one would contest that such an extravagant concentration of elisions--there are four here; as far as I can tell, the only line of Latin poetry with five elisions is Catullus 73.6--must produce a very unusual reading. The most difficult question *re* elision is, of course, to what degree, if any, the elided syllables were pronounced. Since the relevant ancient texts tell us nothing unambiguous, we are required to imagine our own theories of probable usage; for detailed discussions of the issue, see Holland 1979 and Soubiran 1966.

Holland imagines a Transpadanian style of neither eliding nor slurring any of the syllables, but rather shortening the pronunciation of each affected syllable to fit the meter--that is, pronouncing "every hemi-demi-semi-quaver" (Holland 1979.18). Among the problems with this theory is the way it often effaces crucial metrical effects or creates rhythmic agitation where the poem calls for none. Furthermore, every objection to total elision I have read seems ultimately based on a perceived need for absolute intelligibility: total elision often produces radically ambiguous readings and it is presumed that Roman poets would not have allowed this. The present paper is not the place for a full-length refutation of this argument, but I invite the reader to listen to Chuck Berry's "Promised Land" (1964) or Elvis Costello's "The Greatest Thing" (1983) for examples of key words and phrases sung in such a way as to render them virtually indecipherable.

Finally, no matter which theory one adopts, the multiple elisions here must produce a highly unusual sound pattern, and *illam* survives only under duress.

10. But see Richardson 1977 ad loc. for the possible ambiguity of the referees of *poscebas* and *lentus*.

11. See Richlin 1992.45-47 and 234 n. 21 for a discussion of the parts of a woman's body usually

praised in Roman poetry.

[12.](#) The following discussion of drive and object depends mainly on chapters 13 and 14 ("The Deconstruction of the Drive" and "The Partial Drive and its Circuit") of Lacan 1977.

[13.](#) Lacan 1977.168; elsewhere called *objet petit a* or simply *a*; he defines it differently at different times.

[14.](#) Lacan 1982b.157: "[T]he whole of [a man's] realization in the sexual relation comes down to fantasy." In this same work (155-56), Lacan holds that the fantasy of love produces the soul ("love's effect") by separating sex from the equation--"there is no sex in the affair. Sex does not count"--and banishing everything about woman that is not fantasy: "For the soul to come into being, she, the woman, is differentiated from it." See also Rose 1982.51.

Roman elegy reproduces this need to shun what will not fit into fantasy. Richlin 1992.67 demonstrates "that the female genitalia have no part in the ideal of beauty and that Latin erotic literature leaves a blank space in the middle of women it describes." Clearly, there is a "loathing for female genitalia, which are ignored in Latin erotic poetry and castigated in invective as smelly, dirty, wet, loose, noisy, hairy, and so on" (68). Equally clearly, the loathed genitalia can be no part of the fantasy.

[15.](#) For the fires of love as a literary commonplace "even in Propertius' lifetime" see Commager 1974.12, who also points out (13-20) the ways in which Propertius regularly suggests that such fires are destructive and uncontrollable: e.g., 1.13.23-24, where the *flagrans amor* that burns Hercules is a reference to both the poisoned shirt of Nessus that sears his flesh and the pyre on which he throws himself to die, as well as a parallel to the *non tepidas faces* (1.13.26) Gallus' mistress applies to him; 2.25.11-12, where the lover's lot is compared unfavorably to that of Phalaris' victims, who were roasted alive inside a hollow brass bull; 3.13.15-22, where he praises the practice of suttee, in which a *fax* placed beneath the *lectus* (both "pyre" and "bed") incinerates dead husband and fortunate wife alike; they burn (*ardent*) with love as well as in fact. In an instance not mentioned by Commager, Propertius (4.4.69-70) has Vesta bury (*condit*) in Tarpeia's *ossa* the *plures faces* of an impious love for Tatius before Tarpeia treacherously admits the foreign king into Rome. This radically illogical move on the goddess' part (illogical in that Vesta thereby apparently betrays both her city and the principal of chastity enshrined in her worship), underscores the unfathomability of irresistible desire. For other, roughly contemporaneous references to the irresistible fires of love, cf. (for *fax*): Hor. *Carm.* 3.9.13 and 4.13.26; (for *flamma*): Cic. *Ver.* 5.92, Cat. 51.10 and 61.171, Verg. *Aen.* 4.24; (for *ignis*): Cat. 35.15 and 45.16, Hor. *Carm.* 1.13.8, Verg. *Aen.* 1.660.

For the distance and immutability of the stars and all superlunary bodies, see Commager 1974.35, who quotes (n. 83) Cicero (*Rep.* 6.17.17): *Supra Lunam sunt aeterna omnia*. For *sidera* in a specifically erotic setting, cf. Cat. 7.7-8 (*aut quam sidera multa, cum tacet nox, / furtivos hominum vident amores*), where the stars not only hover innumerable and unaffected by human passions, but look down upon what must be, over the unlimited span of their existence, an equally limitless parade of love affairs, each all-consuming for those involved, each equally insignificant from the stars' eternal, superior perspective.

[16.](#) Žižek 1991.21: "Drive . . . is a 'mechanical' insistence that cannot be caught up in dialectical trickery: I demand something and I persist in it to the end."

[17.](#) See Commager 1974.3 for Propertius as the allusionist *non pareil*. Warden 1980.11 argues that myths constitute "the single most important element" in the system of allusions that forms a kind of "meta-language" for the elegiac poet and his reader; see also Luck 1969.133.

[18.](#) If she were expressed she would be ablative of means or instrument, but Propertius does not even bother to mention her here. There also exists the possibility that Cynthia is the unexpressed subject of *uret*; if this is the case, she would still represent the forcible presence of an absence, a subject without a signifier.

[19.](#) For the quasi-internalization of *objet a*, see Lacan 1977.144-45 (where he discusses "the role of the obturator--the *objet a*, sucked, breathed into the orifice") and 195 (where *objet a* is described as "something that is separated from [the subject], but belongs to him and which he needs to complete himself").

[20.](#) Žižek 1991.75, in a discussion of films by Alfred Hitchcock and Charlie Chaplin, describes a situation like this as one in which "the idyllic texture of the everyday course of events can disintegrate" into "radical ambiguity and lability." It is appropriate that the intricate knot of musical/rhetorical patterns is responsible for Propertius' new perspective on the object of his desire, for, in Žižek's terms (75), the mechanism that allows for the unsettling epiphany is always "a certain feature, difficult to specify at the

level of positive properties, whose presence or absence radically changes the symbolic status of the object."

To apply this to Propertius, the elegy's verbal signifying system--the language of words and their presumed meanings--is the one from which we derive our basic understanding of the poem. But, as I have tried to show, there are metrical and rhetorical patterns at work as well. Though these elements do not have direct verbal significance (i.e., neither elision nor the chiasmic *ABBA* configuration "means" anything in our normal use of the word), they can be composed in formal arrangements that create axes of meanings that may intersect and influence the axis of verbal signification. Yet the non-verbal nature of these patterns will confound attempts to align them neatly with the language of words through which, paradoxically, they are expressed and into which they intrude; or, as Žižek puts it, they will be "difficult to specify at the level of positive properties" (see above).

The "certain feature" Žižek refers to is "the 'phallic' element of a picture . . . a meaningless stain that 'denatures' it, rendering all its contents suspicious, and thus opens up the abyss of the search for a meaning" (91). Here, the "meaningless stain"--one of Lacan's other definitions of *objet a*--is the verbally meaningless elision of Cynthia.

For a more complete discussion of non-verbal languages as signifying systems, see Culler 1975.

[21.](#) Perhaps this is the reason for the otherwise unattested description of silk as Arabian: generally *bombyx* is *Assyrius* (see Richardson 1977 ad loc.), but here the utmost effect of extravagance, expense, and rarity is sought in order to underscore the point that even when a woman's beauty is adorned by uniquely gorgeous raiment, she's just another girl. Papanghelis 1987.96, discussing the lack of names in Book II in general and comparing this with Book I's relatively more frequent references to realistic situations and (putatively) real-life characters, maintains that "any female will do" in the "more radical assertion of erotic euphoria" that Book II represents. Wyke 1987.48, presuming that the *puella* in 2.1 is Cynthia, claims that she is essentially the "starting point for poetic production" and continues as such throughout the rest of the book; in 2.10, for example, she is merely "a fiction which may be finished" (50).

[22.](#) "The subject is the void" because the subject does not exist without desire, viz., the desire to fill up its lack, or void. This lack in the subject corresponds to a fundamental lack in the signifying order, language itself, what Lacan terms "the big Other." The flaw emerges most clearly in the subject's need to define the fantasy that grounds his desire in terms supplied by the signifying order itself: "[f]antasy is a way for the subject to answer the question of what object he is in the eyes of the Other, in the Other's desire--that is, what does the Other see in him, what role does he play in the Other's desire?" Just as the subject's incessant desire reveals a constitutive void in the subject, so the desire of the big Other confirms that the signifying order itself is flawed by a "void that gapes in [its] midst" (Žižek 1994.177-78). This void consists of the fact that, though Language, the big Other, claims to be able to signify everything, in fact, no limit can ever be put on the meaning of any symbolic expression. The crucial example of this is the impossibility of adequately symbolizing sexual difference, for "if it were possible to symbolize sexual difference, we would have not two sexes but only one. 'Male' and 'female' are not two complementary parts of the Whole, they are two (failed) attempts to symbolize this Whole" (Žižek 1994.160).

[23.](#) *Les non-dupes errent* is the title of Lacan's 1973-74 *Séminaire*, a pun on his famous concept of the "Nom du Père," which recasts Freud's Oedipus into wholly linguistic terms.

[24.](#) To paraphrase Propertius' prayer in Lacanian terms, "Now that I know the object is a nothing, please let the desire burn less fiercely!"

[25.](#) "The subject can see 'himself' in [the *objet petit a*] . . . as a *hole of which he himself is the rim*" (Borch-Jacobsen 1991.231-32).

[26.](#) Since the line makes sense with this reading, it does not seem necessary to follow Barber 1960 in abandoning the *codicum consensus*; see Richardson 1977 ad loc., and also for the possibility that *acrius ut moriar* "is a single phrase."

[27.](#) Knowing the truth about something (i.e., being "non-dupes," as Propertius is in this case, for he seems to understand the workings of desire) does not prevent one from falling into the same traps and making the same mistakes as those who are ignorant: "les non-dupes errent." Žižek 1991.70 explains the concept in terms of "the fetishistic split *je sais bien, mais quand même*: I know very well what will follow (because I know in advance the end of the story), but still I don't quite believe it, which is why I am filled with anxiety. Will the unavoidable really happen?"

28. For ancient sources for this version of the story see *Od.* 15.225-38 and scholia ad loc., Theoc. *Id.* 3.43-45, Paus. 4.36.3, Apollod. *Bibl.* 1.9.12.

29. Camps 1967 ad loc. thinks it possible that Propertius is hinting at a version of the story in which Melampus pursued Pero for himself or that he has allowed the ambiguity to stand simply to align himself with the *uates* of the myth. Whitaker 1983.110 makes a similar point. Veyne 1988.117 dismisses the structural significance--or even relevance--of all mythological *exempla* in Propertius as part of a "pedantic game" whose point is to parody, for the entertainment of learned poet and reader alike, the idea that such elaborately catalogued allusions might be taken seriously (127-28). I certainly cannot accept Veyne's point with regards to this poem, and to do so in general would be to reduce drastically and needlessly much of the richness of the Propertian corpus.

30. That is, the poem follows Propertius' attempts to explain both why he is attracted and why there is no satisfaction. Melampus' winning of Pero for his brother deals with both these questions, but in different ways; it reiterates the first question ("Why is he attracted? Why does Melampus pursue Bias?") and provides an obvious answer to the second ("Why is there no satisfaction? Because somebody else gets the object.")

31. Specifically: [1] Pero, whose role is impossible to decipher; [2] Cynthia elided and erased; [3] Cynthia as a collection of rejected parts.

32. Specifically: [1] Bias, who may or may not be a part of the story; [2] the painter, who is a figment of the poet's imagination; [3] the poem's first speaker, who may or may not be Propertius.

33. Paris, Helen, and Menelaus could be included in this scheme, because, though there is more to Helen than her looks--Homer does not present her merely as a physical object to which others react--it is not clear what either Paris or Menelaus gets out of possessing her besides the idea of her beauty. Also, she is obviously a more compelling figure than either of them, yet the mystery of what it is about her that satisfies them, or that they think should satisfy them, renders them dependent upon a shadow for their definition, just as, in this elegy, they depend upon a pattern of non-verbal signifiers for their meaning and purpose. The mysterious or shadowy nature of Helen and her attraction finds support in the tradition that the Greeks and Trojans contended over a mere *eidolon* sent by the gods to Troy, while the "real" Helen stayed in Egypt: cf. Stesichorus (Diehl, *Anth. Lyr. Graec.*, f. 11), Aesch. *Ag.* 408-26, and, of course, Euripides' *Helen*.

34. Lacan 1977.185, where he goes on to say: "The subject sustains himself as desiring in relation to an ever more complex signifying ensemble. This is apparent enough in the form of the scenario it assumes, in which the subject, more or less recognizable, is somewhere, split, divided, generally double, in his relation to the object, which usually does not show its true face either."

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