

DUPLICES TABELLAE: PROPERTIUS 3. 23 AND OVID AMORES 1. 12

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AS AN introduction to this article, I should like to refer to some remarks which I recently made elsewhere about one of the two elegies which are mentioned in its title.¹ Writing there about Propertius 3. 23, I advanced the suggestion that, in lamenting the loss of his *doctae tabellae*, Propertius intended to signify as well the loss of the world of love and love elegy, and of the values of the *vita iners* to which the writings carried by the *doctae tabellae* to the eyes of the poet's *docta puella* had been devoted.² In other words, I take it that the love messages committed to the tablets by the poet (5–6) were the actual love elegies inscribed upon them, in the first place, to Cynthia herself.³

I find now that Gordon Williams, in a recent book which became available to me only when those suggestions were in press, had anticipated my view that it is more than the mere loss of the writing tablets which Propertius mourns in this poem. He too sees something symbolic in Propertius' placing a poem which records the loss of the tablets so close to the poems which record the end of his affair with Cynthia.⁴ It is also gratifying to discover that Williams' reading of 3. 20 and its significance in relation to 21 and the closing pair 24 and 25 accords well with my own.⁵ But, although I might be willing to agree with him that the poem addressed to Tullus (3. 22) is something of a failure poetically,⁶ I would emphasize even more strongly than

he does the importance of the poem schematically, considering its position in the book.⁷ I would, indeed, reaffirm my belief that, whatever its poetic demerits in detail, 22 is to be taken as constituting a palinode when read with 21.⁸ For this reason Williams' remarks on the final lines of 22 seem needlessly harsh, when he censures the "empty and unconvincing talk of magisterial office, eloquence, hope of descendants and . . . a smug and pompous prophecy of a good marriage."⁹ This is simply a catalogue of the goals which the man of action who was addressed in 1. 6 on his departure from Rome may now confidently and justly claim on his return. Nor is Propertius' allusion to the rewards in store for Tullus' service of Rome empty and unconvincing. These rewards make a pointed contrast with the present fate of the elegiac man of 1. 6 for whom such aspirations were a world well lost in pursuit of the *vita iners*.¹⁰ A mournful admission of defeat, rather than smugness or pomposity, is the spirit I detect in Propertius' prophecy of *aptus amor* for Tullus; we have just read in 21 that the poet's own *ratio vitae* has brought him only *gravis amor* (2) and *turpis amor* (33) against which his sole remedy is a trip to Athens to put Cynthia out of his sight (9–10).

Of more immediate relevance to the subject of this article, however, is another remark made by Williams in his commentary on Propertius 3. 23: "The poet means

1. See "Propertius' Lost Bona," *AJP*, XC (1969), 333–37.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 336 with notes.

3. Some support for this view is to be had from the note *ad loc.* by H. E. Butler and E. A. Barber, *The Elegies of Propertius* (Oxford, 1933), p. 319: "His letters had perhaps at times been couched in verse; he was writing to a *docta puella*."

4. G. Williams, *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry* (Oxford, 1968), p. 492. Henceforth Williams.

5. Williams, pp. 413 ff., esp. 417. Cf. my article (n. 1), pp. 333–34.

6. Williams, pp. 419–25.

7. "The address to Tullus occupies a rather important position," Williams, p. 490.

8. *Op. cit.* (n. 1), p. 335.

9. Williams, p. 425.

10. See, e.g., "non ego sum laudi, non natus idoneus armis: / hanc me militiam fata subire volunt" (1. 6. 29–30).

by those writing-tablets not the materials on which he composes his poems but the medium of his love-messages to his girl."¹¹ Having implied in my interpretation of this elegy in the article already mentioned that the love messages *were* his personal love elegies, written in the first place on these very *doctae tabellae*,¹² and having explicitly reaffirmed this view in the opening paragraph above, I must now attempt to defend it in the face of Williams' rather bald assertion to the contrary.

I

First of all, one may point to several places in Propertius' poetry where the utterances of his love-making are equated with the actual love poetry he writes. The one that springs first to mind is 2. 13. Here *Amor* has bidden Propertius to write love elegy (3-4), not simply so that the poet may play the role of Orpheus (5-6) but specifically to prosper his wooing of Cynthia:

sed magis ut nostro stupefiat Cynthia versu:
tunc ego sim Inachio notior arte Lino.
non ego sum formae tantum mirator honestae,
nec si qua illustris femina iactat avos:
me iuvet in gremio doctae legisse puellae,
auribus et puris scripta probasse mea [7-12].

Hardly less striking, and perhaps even more interesting in their context, are lines of similar import at 1. 7. While Ponticus is writing a *Thebaid*, Propertius is engaged in the pursuit of Cynthia:

nos, ut consuemus, nostros agitamus amores,
atque aliquid duram quaerimus in dominam;
nec tantum ingenio quantum servire dolori
cogor et aetatis tempora dura queri.
hic mihi conteritur vitae modus, haec mea fama est,
hinc cupio nomen carminis ire mei.
me laudent doctae solum placuisse puellae,
Pontice, et iniustas saepe tulisse minas [5-12].

Now, it is a common enough metaphor for poets writing on some theme or other to be described as actually performing what they are writing about.¹³ Such a description applied to the writer of love elegy, however, ceases to be a metaphor, as these lines show. According to the conventions of the *vita iners* the love elegist is not metaphorically, but actually, engaged in what he writes about; to be writing love elegies is to be making love to his *domina*.¹⁴ This identification of the one thing with the other constitutes much of the point of allusion to Cynthia in both these passages as *docta puella*. Implicitly in 1. 7. 11-12 and explicitly in 2. 13. 11-12 her appreciation of Propertius' love elegies betokens her reception of his suit as a lover.¹⁵ Similarly in 1. 9, the erstwhile epic poet Ponticus addressed in 1. 7 must turn to the writing of love elegy if he is to offer to his girl the love messages expected from a poet in love:¹⁶

plus in amore valet Mimnermi versus Homero:
carmina mansuetus lenia quaerit Amor.
i quaeso et tristis istos compone libellos,
et cane quod quaevis nosse puella velit!
[11-14]

11. Williams, p. 490.

12. *Op. cit.* (n. 1), p. 336.

13. Examples from Propertius include 2. 1. 17-18, 2. 10. 1-2, 2. 34. 63-64.

14. See the acute remarks of I. M. Lonie, "Propertius and the Alexandrians," *Aumla*, XI (1959), 30.

15. The same equation by Propertius of his love messages to Cynthia with his actual love elegies is found at 2. 24. 21-24: me modo laudabas et carmina nostra legebas: ille tuus pennas tam cito vertit amor? contendat mecum ingenio, contendat et arte, in primis una discat amare domo.

One might paraphrase these verses thus: "You used to respond to my love and to my love messages; now you do not. My

rival's love messages just may be better expressed than mine, but mine is certainly the truer love." See also 2. 26. 23-26.

16. The value which Propertius himself attached to his love elegies as the love messages that won Cynthia is suggested by 2. 13. 25-26. The whole span of his love life is to be represented by the presence in his funeral procession of the *tres libelli* of the poems which conveyed the message of his love to Cynthia, and by the presence of Cynthia herself displaying by her grief (27-30) that she still returns that love (51-52). Viewed in this light Propertius' books of love elegies are a fitting gift to take to Persephone (26) at the close of a *vita iners* whose beginning and progress they have recorded, and whose end they have so propitiously marked.

In the light of this I believe that, in the two couplets in 3. 23 where Propertius describes the role played by his tablets, he is to be taken as referring to the love elegies written by him to Cynthia and favorably received by her:

illae iam sine me norant placare puellam,
et quaedam sine me verba diserta loqui [5-6].
et quaecumque volens reperit non stulta puella,
garrula cum blandis dicitur hora dolis [17-18].

I have elsewhere expressed a preference for the reading *puellam* in line 5 and for seeing a reference there to Cynthia.¹⁷ My preference has been strengthened now by the belief that there is also a reference to Cynthia at line 17, in the expression *non stulta puella*, which I take to be a periphrasis for *docta puella*.¹⁸ The combination of the two couplets, representing Propertius' message and Cynthia's response, recalls 2. 13. 11-12 and 1. 7. 11 quoted above. My comments on those lines would apply here—with the difference that, as the repeated *sine me* emphasizes, Propertius here represents his suit as prospered not by love elegies he has read to Cynthia but by those he has written on the *doctae tabellae* and sent to her.

II

The second area into which one may look for confirmation of this view of what Propertius meant by his *doctae tabellae* in 3. 23 involves comparison of that elegy with one from the *Amores* of Ovid. Williams himself, very often in his book,

particularly in his eighth chapter on "Truth and Sincerity," illustrates a theme in Propertius by adducing Ovid's treatment of the same theme.¹⁹ For it is true that "the number of ways in which Ovid, in composing and arranging his *Amores*, followed Propertius is very large indeed";²⁰ and when at *Am.* 1. 12 Ovid curses his *tristes tabellae* and wishes them lost (7-20), one can hardly escape the suggestion that he had in mind the loss of the *doctae tabellae* mourned by Propertius in 3. 23.²¹ This can be confirmed by a comparison of the two elegies which reveals that Ovid has not only picked up the theme from Propertius, but also, characteristically, gone one better in several respects in his treatment of it.

It can be observed in the first place that at Ovid's hands the theme occupies two elegies. In *Am.* 1. 12 the tablets are at the poem's beginning already worthy of being lost. The earlier phase of Ovid's *tristes tabellae*, when they were faithfully carrying the poet's love messages and securing him a happy outcome, is treated in the preceding elegy, *Am.* 1. 11. It is in this elegy that Ovid more expansively covers the ground which is retrospectively, and more briefly, traversed by Propertius 3. 23. 3-10. Ovid's *victrices tabellae* (25) answer to Propertius' recollection of *effectus boni* from the service of his tablets at line 10. With allowance for the fact that in 1. 12 Ovid already views his *tabellae* in an uncomplimentary light, it can be shown that he had Propertius 3. 23 very much in mind when he wrote it.

17. *Op. cit.* (n. 1), p. 336 with nn. 14 and 15.

18. Possibly a metrical convenience. But I suggest that Cynthia is described retrospectively in these terms to point up her present *stultitia* in allowing the loss of everything represented by the loss of the *doctae tabellae*.

19. For example, Williams cites *Am.* 1. 2. 10 to emphasize the originality of Propertius 2. 4. 16 (p. 473); *Am.* 3. 11, Ovid's piece on the rupture of a love affair, is compared with Propertius 3. 24 and 25 and Catullus 8, 72, 76, and 85 (pp. 506 ff.); similarly *Am.* 3. 2 is contrasted with the more serious Propertius 3. 20 and Catullus 51 and 68 as a statement of an early stage of a love affair (pp. 515 ff.). "... in *Amores* i. 8

Ovid has written a poem which is directly and obviously based on Propertius iv. 5—a fact which the reader was no doubt intended to recognize and enjoy" (p. 545). Propertius' use of such conventionally based poems as 1. 17 and 18 to explore the emotional drama of his love affair is contrasted with the slickness of Ovid *Am.* 2. 11 (p. 548).

20. Williams, p. 517.

21. See Butler and Barber, *op. cit.*, introductory notes *ad loc.*, p. 319. Williams does in fact refer to *Am.* 1. 12 in his comments on Catullus 42 (pp. 196 ff.). But while Catullus 42 is again mentioned in connection with Propertius 2. 23 (pp. 490, 492), *Am.* 1. 12, rather surprisingly, is not.

For instance, Ovid's recollection of the ill-omened materials and workmanship that must have gone into the making of his tablets (9–12, 15–20) is an elaborate expansion of a single couplet by Propertius disclaiming any value for the materials in his (7–8). Their value lay elsewhere, in the faithful and successful transmission of his love messages (9–10).²² This couplet too is picked up by Ovid—and pointedly turned upside down. Propertius refers to the modest material in his tablets to emphasize that they were, for all that, *semper fideles*; the answering recollection in Ovid brings him to the conclusion, expressed in fine Ovidian word play and antithesis to his Propertian model, that his tablets were *duplices* from the start (27–28).

Two further examples of this correspondence between the two poems are the more arresting because they involve actual verbal echoes. The first of these is that between Propertius' lines 17–18 and Ovid's lines 23–24, in the epithet *garrula*. Ovid mimics its occurrence in the erotic context of Propertius' couplet, but frames it in the jarringly contrasted context of a scene in a law court with its associations from the daily life of Rome so inimical to the world of love and love elegy. The boldness of the contrast between the roles assigned to each poet's *tabellae* here is further pointed by the contrast between the *durum os* of the lawyer who reads the *vadimonia* and the *blandi doli* in which is couched the reply to Propertius' message by the *non stulta puella*.²³ Here too, by including in the fortunes of his *tabellae* the prosaic role of law-court note paper, Ovid goes one better than Propertius before proceeding in the next couplet (25–26) to consign them to another like fate. The second one echoes almost exactly the single fate (a

most miserable one for any object dear to a love elegist!) which Propertius envisages for his tablets at 19–20—the fate of lying *inter ephemeridas* of some *avarus*.

So far in this section I have been demonstrating that Ovid was following, or pointedly adapting and developing, ideas that he found in Propertius 3. 23 when he composed *Am.* 1. 12. It now remains to discover indications in Ovid's poem that he recognized that Propertius intended his readers to understand that the love messages on his *doctae tabellae* were his actual love elegies.

It is worth noting first of all that Ovid does, as we have seen Propertius doing in Part I of this article, associate the writing of love elegies and the successful pursuit of love. In *Am.* 1. 10, a poem which takes to task a girl who sells her love for gifts, Ovid makes the point that even the poor poet has a gift willingly to be conferred on the girl of his choice: “est quoque carminibus meritas celebrare puellas; / dos mea! quam volui, nota fit arte mea” (59–60). At *Am.* 2. 1, which asserts the superior worth of love elegy over epic, he attributes his successful wooing of his *puella* to the effects of his own love elegies written to her: “at facie tenerae laudata saepe puellae, / ad vatem, pretium carminis, ipsa venit” (33–34). The point is well enough established for *Am.* 3. 12 to be devoted to the exploitation of it in typically Ovidian fashion. His love elegies to Corinna are only too successful; their publication has brought not just the poet but many lovers besides to her open door (5–14).

Turning again to Ovid's *tabellae* at *Am.* 1. 11 where they are on their outward journey and have not yet returned *tristes*, we find the poet addressing the servant who is to deliver the written love message:

22. That, in my interpretation of the elegy, is to say that their value lay in their being the first vehicles of his love elegies—which is the view I am defending here.

23. I accept the interpretation of *blandis dolis* offered (but

not adopted) by W. A. Camps, *Propertius: Elegies Book III* (Cambridge, 1966), p. 164, “taking it as ablative—of the secret correspondence or the riddling language whereby the meeting is arranged.”

"si quaeret quid agam, spe noctis vivere dices; / cetera fert blanda cera notata manu" (13–14). Here is ample indication that the love messages on Ovid's *tabellae* are to be understood in the sense of love elegies. That this is the force of the expression *blanda manu* is illustrated by *Am.* 2. 1. 21: "blanditias elegosque levis, mea tela, resumpsi." But to offer a final parallel between Propertius and Ovid on this point—one which seems to confirm the argument of this article, I return once more to *Am.* 1. 12.

The *verba diserta* conveyed by Propertius' tablets (3. 23. 6) are the love elegies written, as he believed, in the tradition of Callimachus and Philetas:²⁴ "illae iam sine me norant placare puellas, / et quaedam sine me verba diserta loqui" (5–6). This Propertian couplet also has its counterpart in Ovid's poem. He interrupts the stream of abuse directed at his *tristes tabellae* to refer reproachfully to them in

the same retrospective tone, and in similar terms: "his ego commisi nostros insanus amores, / molliaque ad dominam verba ferenda dedi" (21–22). From the pen of the *tenerorum lusor amorum* (*Tr.* 3. 3. 73–74; 4. 10. 1–2), and in such a context as this, can the phrase *commisi nostros amores* refer to anything other than the writing of love elegies? As for the *molliam verba* which answer to Propertius' *verba diserta*, the use of *mollis* as a stock epithet applied to love elegy is too well established to require illustrative parallels here. Thus it is clear that Ovid, with Propertius 3. 23 very much in mind, intended the love messages on his tablets to be recognized as love elegies. Inasmuch as Ovid's judgment is to be trusted, I draw upon it to support my view that the *doctae tabellae* of Propertius 3. 23 are to be read in the same way.

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24. Hence the epithet *doctae* applied to the tablets (1), *op. cit.* (n. 1), p. 336. For Propertius' own explicit identification of love elegy with poetry in the manner of Callimachus and Philetas, see 3. 9. 43–46, and Lonie, *op. cit.* (n. 14),

pp. 17–22; also R. J. Baker, "Propertius III, i, 1–6 Again: Intimations of Immortality?" in *Mnemosyne*, XXI (1968), 35–39.