

PROPERTIUS' HOROSCOPE AND A BIRTHDATE REJECTED

Paul T. Keyser has recently asserted¹ that Propertius 4.1.83–86 represent an authentic horoscope prepared for the poet by a professional astrologer,² and has accordingly calculated from it that Propertius was born in 43 B.C. between May 4 and June 24; and he goes on to suggest on the basis of 4.1.150 that that date might be further narrowed to either May 10–12 or June 6–8. According to Keyser, “the burden of proof rests on those who might wish to controvert”;³ this note takes up that challenge and argues that Keyser’s assumptions are not supported by the text, indeed that the assumption on which everything else rests—that lines 83–86 are in fact the poet’s horoscope—is directly refuted by Propertius himself.

Since Keyser quotes the passage in question out of context, it will be useful to present it with some of the surrounding lines:⁴

Di mihi sunt testes non degenerasse propinquos,	
Inque meis libris nil prius esse fide.	80
Nunc pretium fecere deos, et fallitur auro	
luppiter. Obliquae signa iterata rotae,	
Felicesque Iovis stellas Martisque rapacis	
Et grave Saturni sidus in omne caput,	
Quid moveant Pisces animosaque signa Leonis,	85
Lotus et Hesperia quid Capricornus aqua	
Dicam. “Troia cades, et Troica Roma, resurges”	
Et maris et terrae †longa† sepulcra canam.	

Consideration of 83–86 in context reveals two things. First, there is a singular lack of coherence in the passage.⁵ In particular, the words from *obliquae signa* to *Capricornus aqua* are difficult, if not impossible, to construe. The punctuation adopted by Fedeli, which detaches *dicam* in 87 from its natural construction with its own line and makes it govern the accusatives of 82–84 and the indirect questions of 85–86, is clearly an unsatisfactory stopgap, and no convincing arrangement has been proposed.⁶ The problem of continuity is especially acute in 87–88, when Horos, for no apparent reason, conjoins the supposed horoscope of Propertius with the complementary destinies of fallen Troy and rising Rome. Second, it is apparent that, whatever 83–86 are doing in this context, nothing in them or around them

1. “Propertius’ Horoscope: A Suggested Birthdate,” *CP* 87 (1992): 328–34.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 331: “It is important to reemphasize that Propertius did not generate the horoscope himself: he must have consulted a professional (who appears under the name of Horos).”

3. *Ibid.*

4. This reproduces the text and punctuation of Fedeli’s Teubner (Stuttgart, 1984) except that the transmitted *rapacis* (obviously an accusative plural) has been restored for *rapaces* in 83.

5. “I vv. 82–87 sono i più tormentati dai critici” according to Fedeli (*Properzio, “Elegie.” Libro IV* [Bari, 1965], p. 70), while for Butler and Barber (*The “Elegies” of Propertius* [Oxford, 1933]) lines 81–86 “present an almost insoluble problem”; Shackleton Bailey (*Propertiana* [Cambridge, 1956]) says on 4.1.81 that “Of the problems presented by the rest of the couplet [sc., apart from *pretium fecere deos*] no satisfactory solution is available.” Smyth’s *Thesaurus Criticus ad Sexti Propertii Textum* (Leiden, 1970) records seven suggestions for emending or deleting or transposing 83–86 in addition to the wholesale re-orderings of 4.1 tabulated on p. 127.

6. Barber’s OCT put *fallitur auro luppiter* into a parenthesis, thus making the accusatives of 82–84 further objects of *fecere* (81) but leaving the indirect questions of 85–86 without a construction. Even more unnaturally, Enk proposed to read *nunc . . . luppiter* in a parenthesis and have *dicam* govern the rest (*Commentarius Criticus ad Sexti Propertii Textum* [Zutphen, 1911]). There is a recent inconclusive discussion of the problem by C. E. Murgia in “Propertius 4.1.87–88 and the Division of 4.1,” *HSCP* 92 (1989): 258–61.

identifies them as a horoscope. Horos is contrasting his own supposed credibility with the fraudulent practices of others; with Fedeli's punctuation (or indeed with any other) their contents are in apposition to *obliquae signa iterata rotae* and thus constitute a generic reference to astrology, not the horoscope of any individual.⁷ Keyser makes a further crucial assumption about these lines: "Since Propertius lists three planets in no natural order, and then lists three signs in no natural order, I would argue that he means us to take the planets as paired with the signs in corresponding order";⁸ but there is no more warrant for this than there is to think that we are meant to pair planets and signs in chiasmic order, or "in no natural order," or even at all.

Nevertheless, it might perhaps be argued that the key horoscopic context has been lost in the corruption that has clearly damaged the text,⁹ or at least that these lines, if they do not say that this is Propertius' horoscope, equally do not say that it is not. While no such explicit declaration appears here, we find in the sequel that, after retailing his stories of the satisfied customers Arria and Cinara (89–102), after boasting the superiority of astrology to other means of divination (103–8), after citing Calchas as a failed prophet (109–18), Horos finally announces (4.1.119–20):

Hactenus historiae: nunc ad tua devehar astra:
Incipe tu lacrimis aequus adesse novis.

This can have no meaning except, "So far legends: now I shall come to your stars" (my emphasis).¹⁰ In other words, Horos will now deal for the first time with Propertius' horoscope or *astra* and therefore cannot have done so previously (unless Keyser will argue for a new transposition).¹¹ It follows that the only astrological information in the poem that could deal explicitly with Propertius' horoscope is the controversial 150 (*octipedis Cancrī terga sinistra time!*). Keyser proposes that "Cancer is Propertius' Moon sign . . . and the warning . . . concerns Cynthia. . . . Thus Propertius may intend to suggest that 'Cynthia (i.e., Luna) in Cancro.'" ¹² Textual corruption has apparently truncated his conclusion, but since his arguments have been shown to rest on a false premise, whatever suggestion Keyser intended to offer here can also be safely discounted.

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7. Fedeli, "Elegie", p. 70, cites a series of parallel passages that demonstrate the generic nature of their contents; he describes 82–85 as containing "in una frettolosa successione gli attributi degli astrologi."

8. Keyser, "Propertius' Horoscope," p. 330.

9. Keyser is noncommittal on the question of corruption: "The lines . . . are often relocated. But the relocation does not alter the horoscope, so long as the two couplets are kept together" ("Propertius' Horoscope," p. 330).

10. Cf. W. A. Camps, ed., *Propertius: "Elegies": Book IV* (Cambridge, 1965), p. 63: "In lines 119–50 he [sc., Horos] gives a summary of the content of Propertius' horoscope (*astra*)"; p. 68 (on 119–20): "the astrologer now turns to Propertius, having discoursed sufficiently about himself and his art." This interpretation is at least as old as Beroaldus ("Revertor inquit mathematicus ad tuam o Properti constellationem atque horosconon" runs the note in the version of his commentary printed by Zuan Tacuino [Venice, 1500]), and is generally acknowledged by translators who do not settle for "star(s)" as a rendering of *astra*: cf. J. S. Phillimore (Oxford, 1906): "Now I will come down to your horoscope" (Goold's recent Loeb gives substantially the same); and G. Luck (Zürich, 1964): "Jetzt will ich zu deinem Horoskop übergehen."

11. Smyth, *Thesaurus*, p. 127, records no proposal to put 83–86 anywhere after 119.

12. Keyser, "Propertius' Horoscope," p. 331.