

THEME AND IMAGERY IN PROPERTIUS 2. 15

A glance at Enk's commentary will show how much dispute there has been about the poem's coherence. In the past several scholars have proposed transpositions, but no scheme has won acceptance, and no modern expert advocates that procedure.¹ Another way of understanding the poem's design might be through its modes of expression – exclamation, narrative, threat, etc.² But this also proves unsatisfactory; for although a number of clear divisions can be made, the sections are too short and fragmented to be regarded as structural units. (We will find, however, that at three important points a change in the mode of expression accompanies and reinforces the divisions suggested by a different method of analysis.) A third approach might be made by following the direction of the poet's address – now to himself, now to Cynthia, now to the reader. But it is not always clear where the divisions come, and even when we agree on an approximation (i.e. 'somewhere between line x and line y'), the break rarely coincides with a break in thought.³ So it is worth trying instead the approach indicated by the title. In doing so we shall note half a dozen cases where the method supports one textual reading against alternatives proposed.

O me felicem! o nox mihi candida! et o tu
lectule deliciis facte beate meis!

In the rapturous opening, with its sequence of exclamations and its allusion to Tidas,⁴ the most arresting phrase is *nox...candida*. Camps rightly reminds us of the practice of marking white days on the calendar; but we should not overlook the paradox of 'radiant night', especially as this sets in motion a series of antithetical images which develop through the first part of the poem and re-emerge at the end.

¹ The proposals by G. Jachmann in *Rhein. Mus.* 84 (1935), 193–240 were resisted by E. Reitzenstein in *Philologus*-Supplementband 29 (1936), 71–93, reprinted in *Properz*, ed. W. Eichenhut (Darmstadt, 1975), pp. 134–59, and by K. Barwick in *Philologus* 99 (1955), 112–32, but tentatively supported by P. B. Marzolla in *Maia* 7 (1955), 170–7. Neither of the two foremost experts on Propertius' text – D. R. Shackleton Bailey in *Propertiana* (Cambridge, 1956) and G. P. Goold in 'Noctes Propertianae', *Harv. Stud. in Class. Phil.* 71 (1966) – urges transposition. There is much to agree with in Barwick's article; it seems to have been unduly neglected.

² Thus one might distinguish exclamations (1–10), interspersed with narrative (5–8); persuasive general assertion, supported by examples (11–16); threats (17–20); and so on, ending with exhortation (49), corroborative assertion (50), and hypothetical general statement (51–4).

³ At the start Propertius is thinking aloud, recalling his night of joy. He continues to do so at least to the end of 8. With *quantum* (9) he has begun to address Cynthia, as is plain from *tuis* (10). But what of *quam uario amplexu mutamus brachia*? These words could go either with what precedes or with what follows. There is no clear division, nor do we need one, for there is no break in thought. Again, how long does the address to Cynthia continue? In view of *tibi* (27) certainly to the end of 28. In 36 *huius* makes it clear that the direct address is finished; but *quam* (35) brings us back to *prius* (31). So the direct address must be over by the end of 30. Where exactly it finishes is not clear; nor does it matter, for again there is no break in thought. After that Propertius' observations continue to be general down to 48. But this time we encounter the opposite objection, for everyone agrees that a new thought begins in 41.

⁴ It is worth recalling Housman's convincing suggestion that the fragment of Tidas should be completed thus:

felix lectule, talibus
sole <conscia> amoribus.

The mistake would have arisen from the confusion of CI with OL. Other examples of this confusion are given by Housman: see *CQ* 1 (1907), 158.

The contrast light/dark is continued in *apposita... lucerna/sublato lumine* (3–4); then it changes to revealed/concealed in *nudatis... papillis/tunica... operta* (5–6); then to open/closed in *patefecit/lapsos ocellos* (7) – a sequence which supports *lassos* against O's *lassos*. As this last pair has to do with eyes, we are still closely in touch with the contrast light/dark; and this is confirmed by *caeco/oculi* in 11–12:

non iuuat in caeco Venerem corrumpere motu:
si nescis, oculi sunt in amore duces.

The thought is then developed in a pair of *exempla* on the theme of nakedness (Paris/Helen, Endymion/Selene). If Cynthia persists in remaining clothed (*uestita*), her dress will be torn (*scissa ueste*); she may even have to show bruised arms to her mother. There is no need for such demure behaviour, says the poet, no reason why she should cover her breasts. The lovers' gazing continues with *oculos satiemus* (23), and the whole motif concludes in 24:

nox tibi longa uenit, nec reditura dies,

where *nox... dies* recalls *nox... candida* (1) – except that now the night is death and the daylight life. This contrast tells against Burman's proposal to read *quies* for *dies* in 24.

Propertius then goes on to talk of lifelong attachment, but there is no abrupt change of direction. The clause *dum nos fata sinunt* (23) has already foreshadowed the new theme, and *dies* (26) – used now in its commonest sense – momentarily disguises the fact that the opening theme is over. The syntax of *atque* (25) also indicates progression. Attachment begins as a physical image:

atque utinam haerentis sic nos uincire catena
uelles, ut numquam solueret ulla dies!

Propertius wishes that he and Cynthia could be bound together, and he cites the pair of doves (with interlocking word-order) as an *exemplum* from nature:

exemplo iunctae tibi sint in amore columbae,
masculus et totum femina coniugium.

Such love, he says (30), can have no limit. No doubt he is partly thinking of intensity, but in view of 26 (*ut numquam solueret ulla dies*) and 36 (*huius ero uiuus, mortuus huius ero*) one must also include the idea of time: Propertius will always be Cynthia's. The importance of this assertion is signalled and prepared for in the adynata described in 31–44. Propertius might have concluded the theme of attachment with 36, but instead he searched for further ways of expressing what the love-partnership meant to him:

quod mihi si tecum talis concedere noctes
illa uelit, uitae longus et annus erit.

In view of *illa uelit* (38) *tecum* is impossible in 37. The oldest correction is *secum*. Several scholars have thought it otiose, but that is not a good reason for rejecting it; for Propertius, like Catullus, often works by accumulating emphasis. Here *secum* continues the idea of attachment – an important argument in its favour and one which cannot be used to support the modern conjectures. Nor does any one of those conjectures seem so convincing as to impose itself for other reasons.⁵ Propertius, then,

⁵ The conjectures are collected by W. R. Smyth in his *Thesaurus Criticus* (Brill, 1970). *Tantum* (Camps) gives greater intensity but lacks the advantage of *secum* mentioned above; *interdum* (Housman) is flat; *centum* (Smyth) does not give a proper contrast to *multas*; and *si tales iterum* (Baehrens) assumes a further stage of corruption. Surely *talis noctes* by itself may be taken to imply 'in the future'.

claims that if Cynthia grants him nights like this with her, a year of life will be a long period; if she grants him *many* such nights he will live for ever; indeed a single night is enough to make a man a god – rhetorical variations on the theme of lifelong passion.

In 41–8 we have, as it were, a reply to the criticisms made by respectable public-spirited people – a reply which insists that a life devoted to love and wine is infinitely less harmful than a life devoted to violence and civil war. Future generations will endorse Propertius' claim:

haec certe merito poterunt laudare minores:
laeserunt nullos pocula nostra deos.

Some editors (most recently Camps and Hanslik) have been dissatisfied with *pocula* (48) and have printed Fontein's *proelia* instead. This provides an excellent contrast with the civil wars just mentioned in 43–6, whereas 'our wine cups' as opposed to 'other people's warfare' is comparatively weak. But if we go back to 42 (*et pressi multo membra iacere mero*) we find a reference to wine and also, by implication, to a dining couch. So lines 47 and 48, with *pocula*, would hark back to 41–2 and so provide a frame for the whole section, just as *nox...dies* (24) recalled *nox...candida* (1). Supporters of Fontein can fairly point out that *proelia* would link up with the *rixa* described earlier in 3–6. But this is balanced by the fact that *pocula*, as we shall see in a moment, provides an equally impressive link with what follows.

In 49 Propertius turns to Cynthia again, urging her to make the most of love and life while it is still possible. But he doesn't say that. He says:

tu modo, dum lucet, fructum ne desere uitae!

So instead of putting the more obvious *dum licet*, which Palmer and Housman both wanted to restore, he recalled the opening images by writing *dum lucet*, 'while it is light'.⁶ And he provided an original version of *carpe diem*: 'do not leave the fruit of life (to wither on the tree)'. Then, prompted by this idea, he added those sad and beautiful lines describing the leaves which drop from withered garlands and float strewn (i.e. scattered and dead) on wine cups:⁷

ac ueluti folia arentis liquere corollas,
quae passim calathis strata natare uides.

This links up with the previous section (love and wine better than the struggle for power and glory) and adds the idea 'even though both ways of life are brief and uncertain'. The choice between *pocula* and *proelia* has now become very narrow. I think myself that *pocula* is just superior. But even if the balance is equally poised, *pocula* should still be retained; for the text should be changed only if the editor is convinced that the conjecture is an improvement. In the last line:

forsitan includet crastina fata dies

'tomorrow's day will perhaps close our allotted span', *fata* and *dies* recall the slightly different *fata* and *dies* of 23–4, and *includet* brings us back to the series developed in 1–24. Therefore, although exact parallels may be hard to find, the word should not be altered to *inducet* (preferred by Burman and Ayrmann).

⁶ Housman's objection was this: 'The metaphor of *lucet* is poetical to a modern taste but hardly possible in a Latin writer unless there has preceded something leading up to it', *J. Phil.* 22 (1894), 93. One eases this difficulty by pointing to the images of light in the first half of the poem. So, rightly, L. Richardson in his commentary (Oklahoma, 1977), ad loc.

⁷ Richardson offers a second explanation: 'which you see drifting scattered here and there from their baskets'. But this hardly brings out the force of *natate*, and it removes the image of wine, which we have argued to be part of the structure.

The main divisions of the poem, then, fall at 24, 40, and 48. These divisions coincide with the new wish – *atque utinam* (25), the new conditionals – *si cuperent* etc. (41 ff.), and the final exhortation – *tu ne desere* (49). There are four related themes: (a) recollections of and reflections on an experience of rapturous love, (b) a wish that the relationship may last for ever, (c) a justification of *amor* in contrast to the life of political engagement, (d) an exhortation to make the most of the present. Each theme is conveyed and enforced by an appropriate set of images: (a) light/dark, open/closed, etc., (b) lifelong attachment, (c) passion and wine as opposed to the desolation of war, (d) light, ripeness, and love contrasted with darkness, withering, and death. According to Butler and Barber 'the elegy is far from being perfect in point of form, and there are repetitions in the argument'.⁸ A harsh verdict. With a lover's hopefulness (touching and transient) Propertius sees a night of radiant pleasure as analogous to a lifetime of love surrounded by the darkness of death. As in music, the repetitions are part of the form, and hence part of the meaning. If the result is a beautiful and memorable poem, perfection can be left to look after itself.

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⁸ H. E. Butler and E. A. Barber, *The Elegies of Propertius* (Oxford, 1933), p. 216.