

SUSTAINING DESIRE: CATULLUS 50, GALLUS AND PROPERTIUS 1.10

In Propertius 1.10, one of many in the *monobiblos* that address or name a ‘Gallus’, the poet-figure remembers a recent night during which he observed Gallus in an erotic dalliance with a girl; he thanks his friend for the pleasure and reciprocates with a poetic offer of erotic aid which is also an offer of aid-through-poetry. The elegy figures poetry as an appropriate recompense for erotic pleasure, an aid in erotic pursuit and a *medicina* for the wounds of love. The relation between poetry and desire in the poem is further complicated by the suggestion that Propertius’ seemingly voyeuristic pleasures are actually textual and not sexual, or are both textual and sexual, cloaking a description of reading the erotic elegy of Cornelius Gallus.¹ Propertius’ rather creepy night spent² watching, listening to and revelling in Gallus and his girl’s all-night exertions becomes instead a night spent passionately reading Gallus’ *Amores*: the *lusus* from which Propertius cannot pull himself away (1.10.9) becomes the play of light verse; the *alternae uoces* of Gallus and his girl in the heat of passion (1.10.10) become the *alternae uoces* of elegiac couplets, or possibly of amoebian verse.³ Perhaps we are particularly to imagine Propertius reading Gallus’ first book, his *primus amor* (1.10.1); here, in a poem nearly at the centre of his own first book, Propertius reflects on the sources of his (poetic) passion.⁴

This critical reconfiguration of Propertius 1.10 as concerned with the erotics of poetic reception also has brought it into close dialogue with Catullus 50’s impassioned plea to Licinius Calvus. Both Propertius and Catullus have passed sleepless nights (cf. Cat. 50.10: *nec somnus tegeter quiete ocellos*; and Prop. 1.10.7, *quamuīs labentis premeret mihi somnus ocellos*) fuelled by the pleasure of a *lusus* that is both poetic and erotic.⁵ A number of recent studies have explored the homoerotic dynamics of the two

¹ A suggestion first made by F. Skutsch, *Gallus und Vergil* (Leipzig and Berlin, 1906), 144–6; and expanded by A.S. Benjamin, ‘A note on Propertius 1.10: *O iucunda quies*’, *CP* 60 (1965), 178; D.O. Ross, *Backgrounds to Augustan Poetry* (Cambridge, 1975), 83–4; J.K. King, ‘The two Galluses of Propertius’ *Monobiblos*’, *Philologus* 124 (1980), 212–30. See also citations in n. 5, below. An association of the Gallus of the *monobiblos* (or at least some of him) with the historical poet was long closed off by the *communis opinio* but re-opened in earnest by Ross. Most major recent studies treat an association of the name ‘Gallus’ with Cornelius Gallus as part of the equipment with which a reader approaches Propertius 1. M. Pincus, ‘Propertius’ Gallus and the erotics of influence’, *Arethusa* 37 (2004), 165–96 offers a summary of the question at 169–72.

² E. Oliensis, ‘The erotics of *amicitia*: readings in Tibullus, Propertius and Horace’, in J.P. Hallett and M.B. Skinner (edd.), *Roman Sexualities* (Princeton, 1997), 151–71, argues (at 160) that the *testis* of line 1 plays with the anatomical meaning of the word and places the speaker (bizarrely) inside Gallus’ scrotum; see also Pincus (n. 1) at 172–5.

³ On the amoebian reading, J. O’Hara, ‘The new Gallus and the *alternae uoces* of Propertius 1.10.10’, *CQ* 39 (1989), 561–2, building on J. Fairweather, ‘The “Gallus papyrus”: a new interpretation’, *CQ* 34 (1984), 167–74; contra A. Sharrock, ‘*Alternae uoces* – again’, *CQ* 40 (1990), 570–1.

⁴ On correspondences between this poem and 1.1 (the *Cynthia prima*): M. Hubbard, *Propertius* (New York, 1975), 27–8; cf. O. Skutsch, ‘The structure of the Propertian *Monobiblos*’, *CP* 58 (1963), 238–9; B. Otis, ‘Propertius’ single book’, *HSCP* 70 (1965), 1–44.

⁵ O’Hara (n. 3); P.A. Miller, *Subjecting Verses: Latin Love Elegy and the Emergence of the Real* (Princeton, 2004), 78–9; Pincus (n. 1) at 175–9. On poetic sleeplessness in both poems: R.F. Thomas, ‘New Comedy, Callimachus, and Roman poetry’, *HSCP* 83 (1979), 179–206 at 203–5.

poems particularly in their conjunction and have focussed on the figure of the girl / Cynthia⁶ in the Propertian poem as a sign of rupture in a Catullan homosocial ideal. One critic concludes that 'The inverse dynamics of these two, so similar, poems correspond to the dramatically different ways in which each text charts the speaker's desire. In the Catullus text, the desire between men is depicted as symmetrical and dyadic ... In Propertius, the convergence of poetic production and homoerotically tinged desire is perverted into a scene of voyeurism by the insertion into the scene of Gallus' *puella*.'⁷

The bulk of critics are all but silent on the second half of the Propertian poem, where the poet shifts from reminiscence of his pleasure (*iucunda quies ... iucunda uoluptas*, 1–4) to the production of a recompensatory gift: *accipe commissae munera laetitiae* (12). The same strategy of intertextual reading that has done so much for our understanding of the first portion of the Propertian poem is nonetheless applicable to the final section. In particular reading Propertius 1.10.19–30 as in dialogue with the final four lines of Catullus 50 focusses more attention on Cynthia / the *puella* as subject rather than symptom in 1.10. The Propertian poem in the end emerges as a critique of the erotics of poetry played out in Catullus 50 and perhaps also as a critique of Gallan elegy; most importantly it makes a claim for the self-sustaining desire-and-poetry produced by Propertius' *fides* to Cynthia.

It must initially be established that the Propertian poem does not abandon its Catullan intertext after the first ten or twelve lines. The instruction offered by the poet figure as recompense for his pleasurable reception of Gallus' (and his girl's) *alternis uocibus*, continues the pattern of lexical connection to Catullus 50. Where Catullus closes with a warning to Calvus not to spurn his poetic offering and his prayers for continued interaction (*nunc audax caue sis precesque nostras, I oramus, caue despuas*, Cat. 50.18–19) backed up by a reference to the goddess Nemesis, Propertius' poetic offer of erotic assistance is backed up by reference to Cynthia, who has taught him 'what things each person should seek out, and what things he should beware of' (*quae cuique petenda I quaeque cauenda forent*, 19–20; cf. also, *tu caue ne tristi cupias pugnare puellae*, 21). Just as Calvus must be careful not to offend Nemesis (*laedere hanc caueto*, 21), Propertius warns Gallus that an offended girl won't give up her righteous anger (*nec meminit iustas ponere laesa minas*).

These fairly mild lexical signs of the connection between Nemesis in Catullus 50 and the figure of Cynthia and the more generalized *puella* in the Propertian poem are given more interpretative weight by the broader situational echoes. Nemesis in the Catullan poem is introduced as an enforcer of fair exchange: she will ensure that Catullus' continuation of the previous day's amoebean games is answered in kind.⁸

⁶ It does and does not matter whether the girl with Gallus in 1.10 is Cynthia. If the reader is tracing the narrative of a love affair (and Gallus' interference in it), she will remember that in 1.5 Gallus was Propertius' rival for Cynthia's attentions; 1.13 will find Propertius 'alone with his love snatched away' (2) and Gallus involved with a girl very like Cynthia, a girl with whom Propertius has seen Gallus make love. If the reader is thinking instead about literary emulation and rivalry, Propertius' Cynthia is inevitably wrapped up with Gallus' *amor* and his *puella*. Poem 1.10 itself recognizes an affinity between the *Cynthia* of line 19 and the *puella* of line 5 in that the lessons learned from the one will apply to the other; they are, after all, both elegiac mistresses, quintessentially generic women. Cf. King (n. 1) at 214; L. Richardson, Jr., *Propertius Elegies I–IV* (Norman, OK, 1976), 180–1; M. Janan, *The Politics of Desire: Propertius IV* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2001), at 35–6; Miller (n. 5) at 84.

⁷ Pincus (n. 1) at 177. Subtler but similar are Janan (n. 6) and Miller (n. 5) at 67, with further reference to Oliensis (n. 2) and A. Sharrock, 'Constructing characters in Propertius', *Arethusa* 33 (2000), 263–84 at 270.

⁸ D.L. Burgess, 'Catullus c. 50: The exchange of poetry', *AJP* 107 (1986), 576–86 at 585.

Propertius 1.10's elegiac mistress is likewise positioned as an enforcer of exchange and particularly of *verbal* exchange: when Propertius passes on to Gallus what he has learned under the tutelage of Cynthia, a surprising bulk of the didactic content concerns the regulation of words: *neue superba loqui, neue tacere diu; / neu, si quid petiit, ingrata fronte negaris, / neu tibi pro uano uerba benigna cadant* ('Be careful neither to speak haughtily, nor to keep silent for long; nor, if she asks for something, should you deny her with a scowl, nor should her kind words fall unheeded by you'⁹) (1.10.22–4). Failure to keep up the exchange, to answer with the right sorts of words, will result in something that sounds very much like the *uehemens dea* with whom Catullus threatens Calvus: *irritata uenit, quando contemnitur illa, / nec meminit iustas ponere laesa minas* ('She comes angered when she is scorned, and, once offended, she does not remember to put aside just threats') (Prop. 1.10.25–6). Nemesis is precisely the embodiment of *justified* anger¹⁰ and the retribution that comes with it, and the Propertian girl takes up the same position. Her quasi-epiphanic arrival (*irritata uenit*) allows her to step all the more easily into the goddess' role;¹¹ we may even hear Nemesis' name bubbling under the couplet: *contemnitur illa / nec meminit*.

The figure of Nemesis, then, is the crux for the intertextual play between the latter parts of the two poems. Nemesis' appearance in Catullus 50.20–1 has struck many readers as awkward and out of line with the rest of the poem and indeed there is a shift in tone in the Catullan poem not unlike that in Propertius 1.10:¹² the final lines are purely monitory with the break strongly marked by *nunc* at the start of line 17. More importantly, the introduction of Nemesis as a third figure into the poem's intimate exchange between two men is jarring. In a certain sense the goddess stands in for the poet: harm me, scorn me, Catullus says, and *she* will react badly; the repetition of the verb *cauere* in lines 18–19 and 21 underlines the union between the two. The interpolation of the goddess allows Catullus to express the prospect of righteous anger without unduly upsetting the mood of pleasurable intercourse with Calvus. Still, the shift of tone from all-absorbing passion and longing to warning and veiled threat, and what seems a sudden triangulation of the two poets' mutual exchange (*reddens mutua*) reads as a disruption, a break in the hoped-for continuum posited by the poem. The fact that Nemesis is the primary focus for the intersection of the didactic portion of Propertius 1.10 with the Catullan poem may in part explain the frequent modern failure to follow intertextual readings all the way to the end of the Propertian poem: if critics are unsure what to do with Nemesis, then they may know even less what to do with Cynthia-as-Nemesis.

⁹ There is some controversy over the meaning of this clause; is it the *uerba benigna* of Gallus or of the girl that should not fall *pro uano*? S.J. Heyworth, *Cynthia: A Companion to the Text of Propertius* (Oxford, 2007), 50 summarizes the positions and comes down on the side of Gallus, arguing that an interdiction against vain promises on the part of the lover corresponds nicely with the exhortation in the preceding line to grant the beloved's requests. However, the sense of continuous exchange of words set up by line 22 is better continued by advising the lover to respond appropriately to kind words from his girl.

¹⁰ Cf. Ov. *Met.* 3.406, of Nemesis: *adsensit precibus Rhamnesia iustis*.

¹¹ See Hubbard (n. 4), 26, n. 1, with comparison to Prop. 1.5.32, *rogata uenit*; cf. also L.A. Moritz, 'Well-matched lovers (Propertius 1.5)', *CP* 62 (1967), 106–8.

¹² A number of critics have read the shift in tone as comical, an intentional over-extension that tempers the intensity of the Catullan poem: W.C. Scott, 'Catullus and Calvus (Cat. 50)', *CP* 64 (1969), 169–73 at 171–2; P. Pucci, 'Il carme 50 di Catullo', *Maia* 13 (1961), 249–56 at 255; K. Quinn, *Catullus: The Poems* (Macmillan, 1970), 239; H.P. Syndikus, *Catull: eine Interpretation* (Darmstadt, 1984), 253–4; D.F.S. Thomson, *Catullus* (Toronto, 1997), 326. D. Wray, *Catullus and the Poetics of Roman Manhood* (Cambridge, 2001) at 106–7 offers a more fruitful integration of the final lines.

If Cynthia / the *puella* in the second half of Propertius 1.10 plays out the role of enforcer taken by Nemesis in Catullus 50, that already gives the seemingly dry didacticism of this portion of the poem more interpretative weight and a closer relation to the dynamics of exchange in the first half of the poem. In lines 1–12 Gallus makes a pleasurable gift to Propertius of the opportunity to observe an exchange of pleasure and of words between Gallus and his girl; Propertius gives thanks for the pleasure afforded him by Gallus and promises a fitting gift in return. In 13–20 Propertius explains that his gift is not only a recitation of Gallus' passions,¹³ but something greater: powerful new words, and words learned from his own girl (*Cynthia me docuit*). The gift itself follows in lines 21–30 and consists of advice on continuing the proper exchange of pleasure and words between Gallus and his girl. While Catullus introduces Nemesis at this point, a third figure to enforce the continued exchange between himself and Calvus, the presence from the start of 'the girl' in the Propertian poem all but guarantees the continuation of this process of exchange: she herself will enforce it. A continuation of the one level of exchange will mean a continuation of the other, the repetition of pleasure Propertius prays for in line 4. If we are taking the erotic pleasure of Propertius 1.10 as a metaphor for, or indeed an analogue of, poetic pleasure, the girl is positioned as, or perhaps more pointedly *recommended* as, the driving force of poetry; the poem concludes with an exhortation to faithful submission to *una puella* (29–30).¹⁴

Of the extant Latin elegy, Propertius' poetry, particularly in the *Monobiblos*, focusses its elegiac *querelae* most strongly on the *puella* in question. Propertius advertises this unusual focus from the opening of the first poem whose *Cynthia prima* is as much a claim to Propertius' innovation in the genre as it is a marker of Cynthia's primacy in the poetry. Tibullus had, of course, different mistresses in his two short books of elegies, Delia and Nemesis,¹⁵ and neither is as powerful a force in the poems as Cynthia is in the Propertian corpus. More importantly for my argument, we have no indications that Gallus' poetry shared Propertius' focus on a single beloved: a girl-friend, Lycoris, was clearly present in the poetry, but just as clearly not omnipresent.¹⁶

Propertius 1.10, then, which lauds the pleasure Propertius has gained from Gallus' *primus amor*, but goes on to advise Gallus based on the poet's own experience with

¹³ I here accept Heyworth's emendation of line 13 from *non solum uestros didici reticere dolores* to *non solum uestros didici recitare calores*, as printed in the new OCT (2008) and argued in 'Notes on Propertius books I and II', *CQ* 34 (1984), 394–405 at 397–9.

¹⁴ Cf. S. James, *Learned Girls and Male Persuasion: Gender and Reading in Roman Love Elegy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2003), which brings to the fore Roman elegy's nature as a persuasive genre directed to a mistress who is constrained by the economic and temporal realities of her social position as a courtesan; she necessarily resists the impoverished poet in favour of men who can offer her more concrete resources. Nonetheless, this *docta puella* has the discernment to be affected and persuaded from time to time by the offerings of her poet-lover. Her ability (and indeed her compulsion) to say no with frequency, but also to say a meaningful yes, gives a self-sustaining impetus to the poetic project of persuasion. Contrast this with, for example, Miller's formulation of Cynthia's role in Propertius' work: 'The poetry of the *Monobiblos* is inconceivable without Cynthia. She is what allows the work to function and the semiotic game to be played. Yet she herself never comes into focus; rather, she is like the vanishing point in a painting that allows the more defined shapes around it to have their form and intercourse with one another' (n. 6 at 66). For Miller, Cynthia is the medium of exchange between men; for James, she is an agent in the creation of the poetry.

¹⁵ Is the name of Tibullus' Nemesis perhaps chosen as an acknowledgement of Propertius' recasting of Catullus' goddess of exchange as an elegiac mistress?

¹⁶ On Lycoris and Gallus: Prop. 2.34.91–2; Ov. *Am.* 1.15.29–30, *Ars* 3.537–8, *Tr.* 2.445–6; and Mart. 8.73.5–10. See Ross' characterization (n. 1 at 48–9) of Gallan poetry.

Cynthia, can be read not just as poetic praise, but as a critique of Gallus, a promise of 'something greater' than faithful repetition of Gallus' mode of poetry. Propertius claims for his own *amor*, and his own poetry, an element of self-sustaining exchange. Throughout Propertius 1.10, as in Catullus 50, words are the primary medium of that exchange: the proper and pleasurable reception and return of *uerba* drives this poem from start to finish. Unlike the Catullan Nemesis, though, the Propertian 'girl' is not just the enforcer of an exchange of poetic *uerba*, she is also the stuff of poetry, and more importantly, a player in the *lusus* that produces it. Her presence and the *alternae uoces* she shares with Gallus are what allow Propertius to enjoy his textual/sexual pleasure in the early lines of the poem and it is Cynthia who has given Propertius the words to give back to Gallus. The *puella's* continued presence means the continuation of elegiac production and Propertius' concluding lines promise more success and pleasure if Gallus submits to the girl and (therefore) to the continual process of verbal exchange. Ross tantalizingly suggests that Prop. 1.10 might 'refer, on one level, to experiments in amatory elegy Gallus may recently have been writing'.¹⁷ If so, it claims (whether chronology allows or not) to be ahead of Gallus in the experiment: Propertius takes the role of *praeceptor amoris* to Gallus, and shows him the way to sustainable erotic elegy.

The Propertian girl thus unifies three roles in the erotic and poetic exchange sketched out in Catullus 50: she is the goddess / enforcer Nemesis; she is the medium and material of an exchange of poetic *uerba* between men, that is, effectively, the poetry; and most importantly, she herself is a producer of exchanged *uerba*. The anguish of the Catullan poem lies precisely in the mediation of the exchange of pleasure through tablets, verses, metres. When the two men are physically separate the reality of poetry as medium becomes clearer and it is at this point that anxiety for continuation and the figure of Nemesis creep in. Propertius' recasting of Nemesis and the union of enforcer, topic and producer of *alternae uoces* in *una puella* produce a more sustainable model of poetic and erotic exchange than the *furor* of Catullus 50 and perhaps also than Gallan elegy.

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¹⁷ Ross (n. 1), at 83; see also at 102.