

## THE STRUCTURE OF PROPERTIUS BOOK 3

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IT IS NOW WELL ESTABLISHED that Books 1 and 4 of Propertius are composed on a symmetrical scheme in which the poems are arranged in groups and pairs on a principle of approximate numerical equality—or even, as I hold,<sup>1</sup> exact equality. Mr A. Woolley (*BICS* 14 [1967] 80) has tried to establish a similar scheme for Book 3, but his attempt encounters two difficulties. First, there is no approach to numerical correspondence; second, the links between individual poems and groups are nowhere near so plain as in Books 1 and 4, and in many cases those discerned by him are so tenuous that I fear they must be termed illusory. It is my contention that Book 3 is not in fact assembled on the same principles as 1 and 4, and I wish to suggest why this should be so.

The reason, in my view, is this. In Book 1 the situation is static. The poet's concern is to portray under its different aspects his love-affair with Cynthia as it was at one period; the book opens with them in love, it ends with them in love. Book 4 is of course of a different character, which automatically entails that there is no attempt to depict a situation either developing or static. In this respect Book 3 is quite different; it is intended to lead up to the final break between Propertius and Cynthia in poems 24–25. The method of composing in symmetrical groups of poems, involving continual reference backward, is clearly of its very nature unsuitable for building up to a gradual climax; and I now turn to indicating how Propertius did this.

In this book he first expresses a wish for escape from love in poem 17, the hymn to Bacchus; the god is a symbol of wine itself, which can drown the pain of love (cf. Tibullus 1.2.1–4; this poem is much imitated by Propertius both here and elsewhere). Love is a *vitium* (6), a *malum* (10), a *servitium superbum* (41). The next poem, on the death of Marcellus, has nothing to do with Propertius and his love. This is the first instance of what will appear several times, namely that Propertius does his best to keep his readers in suspense by giving hints which arouse unsatisfied curiosity; they now think that 17 indicates no more than yet another temporary quarrel. Poem 19 is addressed to an unnamed woman, who keeps remarking that men are lustful; Propertius replies that women are even more so. The reader naturally supposes that Cynthia is addressed; this impression has to be revised when he has read the next two poems, 20a and 20b. Propertius has employed deliberate mystification as one of his means of maintaining suspense.

<sup>1</sup>*Phoenix* 22 (1968) 250, where I neglected to remark that Propertius draws attention to the numerical symmetry in Book 4 with the famous line (4.2.57) *sex superant versus*.

The manuscripts present the next thirty lines as one poem, no. 20; this cannot be right. Lines 1–10 were separated from 11–30 by Scaliger, and the poems may be read as Propertius wrote them in the editions of Postgate and Butler-Barber. Poem 20a is addressed to a woman, again unnamed, on her desertion by a lover; Propertius invites her to attach herself to him and promises fidelity. We are meant to connect this with the eight-line *exemplum* of Scylla which concluded poem 19; that poem turns out to have been a warning to the girl not to abandon herself unreservedly to her Minos, and we now see the point of *vos, innuptae, felicius urite taedas* in the final (according to Housman's transposition) couplet of 19.

In reading 20a we are still left under the impression that it is addressed to Cynthia, and Propertius deliberately confirms this impression by the line (7) *est tibi forma potens, sunt castae Palladis artes*; compare 2.5.28, *Cynthia forma potens*, 1.2.30, *omnia . . . quae . . . Minerva probet*. But doubt creeps in with the next verse, *splendidaque a docto fama refulget avo*. Cynthia's real name was Hostia, but everything which we have heard of her so far strongly suggests that she was the usual type of courtesan, the freedwoman of some Hostius (this question is further discussed in an appendix); her *nomen* (2.20.19) is not inconsistent with this. Many editors tell us that 3.20.8 refers to the poet Hostius. Even in a compliment would Propertius, with his literary creed, be likely to call him a *doctus poeta* or refer to his *splendida fama*? (Though imitated by Virgil, he is not even mentioned by any literary source until Macrobius.)

Doubts are reinforced by the next line (9) *fortunata domus* (the sense of which is made quite plain by *avo*). It is incredible that this could refer to Cynthia (in spite of her alleged *propinqui* 2.6.7;<sup>2</sup> her *domus* in 2.8.14 means her household); on the supposition that it did, Markland felt himself constrained to alter to *nimis*. And *in nostros curre, puella, toros* (10), if addressed to Cynthia, surely ought to be *recurre*; it would be more than strange to give no hint that she has previously frequented Propertius' bed. For *curre* Dr Shackleton Bailey, *Propertiana* 307, compares [Tib.] 3.9.24, where in fact we have *recurre*!

Here ends this little poem of ten lines, the same length as 1.21 and 22 (in view of the uncertainties about Book 2 I do not quote any parallels from it); though brief, it is perfectly rounded, and line 10 makes an entirely satisfactory conclusion. Poem 20b is related to 20a as 1.8b is to 8a. It begins thus:

13	<i>nox mihi prima venit; primae data (Itali; date codd.) tempora noctis.</i>
14	<i>longius in primo, Luna, morare toro.</i>
11	<i>tu quoque, qui aestivos spatiosius exigit ignes,</i>
12	<i>Phoebe, moraturae contrahe lucis iter.</i>

<sup>2</sup>These alleged *propinqui* have the *ius osculi* (see *RE s.v.*; Walbank *Commentary on Polybius* 1.671); but that is far from proving her to be a Roman matron, since we have no information to show exactly what this practice meant in the time of Propertius.

(The transposition, corrected by Scaliger, was caused by the homoeoteleuton *toros*, 10, *toro*, 14). The situation has changed from 20a; he no longer addresses the girl, and he is accepted now, not pleading. Line 13 is just as clearly a beginning as 10 was a conclusion.

Here I pause to examine some views put forward recently by Professor Gordon Williams in his book *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry*. In his discussion of this poem (413) it is surprising to find him repeating the old objection to Scaliger's conjecture that the sun ought to be named before the moon. In this context it is absolutely natural that the moon should come first, and this was firmly stated by Leo (*GGA* [1898] 745 = *Ausg. kl. Schr.* 2.204). The index to *Ausg. kl. Schr.* (445), referring to Leo's discussion of this poem, remarks "nicht in zwei Gedichte zu trennen"; I do not know whether this is intended as an expression of personal opinion by the compiler of the index, but it is certainly the direct opposite of what Leo says. Professor Williams also maintains the unity of 3.20, but my disagreement with him is more apparent than real, since he agrees that there must be a pause in the action after line 10<sup>3</sup> (but be it noted that in the poem itself there is nothing to motivate this abrupt transition). What seems to me decisive is the analogy of 1.8, which the symmetrical scheme of the book proves to be two poems; Williams rejects both scheme and separation. His reference of 3.20 to Cynthia (491; on 535 he refers lines 1-6 to her husband on the supposition, discussed below, that she was a Roman matron) and the dramatic dating of the poem to the beginning of the affair depend on his hypothesis of unitary publication of Books 1 to 3, which is surely to be rejected.

The opening of poem 20b at last reveals all; he is starting a new affair with a new girl (*amore novo*, 16, though as Shackleton Bailey [204] points out this is not conclusive). It is totally impossible to interpret this emphatically repeated *primus* of a *resumption* of his affair with Cynthia. With hindsight we can now see that poems 19 and 20a must be interpreted in the light of 20b; just as in 17 Propertius tried to escape Cynthia with wine, now he tries to escape her with another girl.

He proceeds to explain that they must draft out and seal a proper marriage settlement (*sacra marita*, 26; this is of course euphemistic, like the common elegiac use of *maritus*; cf. *dominae*, 29) before the *nox prima*; otherwise, if the "marriage" should break up, the wronged party has no redress from heaven. This *foedus* with its *fides* (24)<sup>4</sup> is like that between Catullus and Lesbia (Cat. 87.3-4, 109.6). Without such a contract there

<sup>3</sup>Likewise White in *Laudatores Temporis Acti, Studies in Memory of W. E. Caldwell* (Chapel Hill 1964) 70.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. *fides* 9; we thus have the complete Ablaut series of this root. This aspect of the poems is interestingly discussed by R. Reitzenstein, *Zur Sprache der lat. Erotik* (*Sitzb. Heidelberger Akad.* 3 [1912] Abh. 12) 12.

is only *libido*, not *amor*, and *libido* will presently break free. This *libido* refers us back to 19.1–2, where Propertius, though asserting that it is stronger in women, could not deny its presence in men. Here he is thinking of the lover who has abandoned this girl in consequence of her failure to secure such a contract. That is the point of 20a.5, *at tu, stulta, deos, tu fingis inania verba*. Dr Shackleton Bailey (204) interprets this to mean “you cheat yourself with talk of gods and such-like empty words”; for *fingere deos*, “to call on the gods deceptively,” he compares Lucan 5.159, *superis quos fingis* (where his misunderstanding can be corrected from 148) and Stat. *Theb.* 7.497, *quid molles lacrimas venerandaque nomina fingis* (is Polynices supposed to be calling on his tears?). Propertius’ meaning, I think, is that the girl pretends that the man swore by the gods and used words (“as it might be *fides*, *foedus* etc.,” Shackleton Bailey) which she now alleges were empty; but he never used them at all, and therefore *non habet ultores nox vigilanda deos* (20b.22). Poem 20b then ends by cursing men who do make and break such contracts; Propertius thus recurs to the idea of fidelity imposed on the man and thereby reinforces the protestations of 20a.10.

Thus throughout 20a and 20b there is no hint at all of female infidelity. This would be incredible if the poems were addressed to Cynthia; we should have to suppose a tactfulness and chivalry which are the last qualities displayed by Propertius in such situations, qualities indeed which the conventions of his literary genre would hardly allow him to display.

In poem 21 Propertius tries yet a third, the last available (9), remedy for his love, since others have failed (5). He will now run away from it and go on his travels, a remedy envisaged in 1.1.29, tried in 1.17, and recommended by Ovid in his *Remedia Amoris* 213–248 (Ovid also deals with wine 803–810 and suggests a second mistress 441–488). Poem 22, exhorting his friend Tullus to return to Italy, at first sight seems to be irrelevant to Propertius and Cynthia; but in fact there is an elaborately contrived contrast with 21. The return of Tullus from Asia directs the reader’s mind back to 1.6, which referred to his departure for Asia; and that poem, with its contrast between Tullus and Propertius, is crucial for the poet’s attitude to his life. Propertius there praises Tullus for his devotion to his state duties and indicates that his own surrender to love is by comparison contemptible: *nequitia* (26), *cessatio* (21). Now, years later, *turpis amor* (3.21.33) is driving Propertius from Italy to find consolation in the artistic riches of Athens (25–30; compare *doctas Athenas* with *an mihi sit tanti doctas cognoscere Athenas?* [1.6.13] and note how the situation has changed); he will either find relief in *spatia annorum et* (Scaliger; *aut* codd.) *longa intervalla profundi* (31) or he will meet a *mortis honesta dies* (34). Tullus on the other hand actually has been separated from

Rome by time and distance; but unlike Propertius he can now return to an honourable life in Italy (22.39–42) with the prospect, first, of continuing his civic activity (40–41), second, of a loving wife and legitimate offspring (41–42). The Greece which appeared so attractive to Propertius in his flight from Italy is now depicted as the home of monsters and horrors (27–38), whereas Italy is shown in the most attractive colours (17–26). The contrast between poems 21 and 22 thus accentuates the humiliation which Cynthia's love has brought to him, and secures the reader's understanding for his attempt to break free.

Poem 23, on the loss of the writing-tablets which once carried love-messages, if considered on its own appears, like 18, to have nothing to do with the theme of Propertius' increasingly desperate struggles to escape from his love. But when we have read poems 24 and 25, hindsight will again make us see that the poet has once more been deliberately keeping us in suspense, so that the climax of the break in 24 and 25 will come with all the more effect for its surprise. It is a generally valid principle that poems should be read as self-contained wholes, including within themselves everything needed for their understanding; but we have seen several cases in which the full meaning depends on context and setting. I believe the same to be true here; it is hard to avoid understanding the loss of the tablets which once carried love-messages as in some degree symbolic of the rupture with Cynthia,<sup>5</sup> though Propertius has avoided any phraseology to suggest this. Similarly one cannot but think that 24 and 25 partly symbolize the poet's farewell to erotic elegy before he turns to aetiological, just as Ovid symbolized the same transition by writing a poem on the *cure* of love.

It can accordingly, I hope, be seen that towards the end of the book at any rate (for I do not deny that poems 1–5 form a group) Propertius needed a method of arrangement allowing linear progression; he could not have achieved his striking, though carefully prepared, climax by arranging the poems in groups with interlacing correspondences to each other.<sup>6</sup>

#### APPENDIX: THE STATUS OF CYNTHIA

PROFESSOR GORDON WILLIAMS in his book *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry* argues that Roman Elegy envisages love-affairs with married Roman women; but his discussion is, I think, over-influenced by a desire for originality and too low a regard for traditional beliefs (542,

<sup>5</sup>And not just with Cynthia, but with love in general; note the plural *puellas* in line 5.

<sup>6</sup>This article was with the editor before the appearance of that by R. J. Baker in *AJP* 90 (1969) 333, which coincides with mine in some points and does not persuade me to change my view on others.

“contrary to received opinion”). In the first place, the case of Lycoris, which does not suit his thesis, is played down (541): secondly, Tibullus’ explicit statement about Delia (1.6.67–68) has to be twisted out of its plain sense (536). The status of Cynthia is discussed on 529 *sqq.* The first piece of evidence produced is 2.23, but Williams himself admits that this poem does not necessarily offer precise evidence; Propertius (cf. 3.14.23–24) is elaborating on a contrast suggested to him by Philodemus in a lost epigram quoted by Horace *Sat.* 1.2.120–122 (note *si exierit vir*), and Horace himself *ibid.* 127 *sqq.* (compare *vir rure recurrat* with Propertius 2.23.20, *hodie vir mihi rure venit*). Again, 2.6.41–42 is agreed to provide no firm basis. In discussing 2.7 Williams begins by expressing, quite reasonably, disapproval of enquiring why Propertius could not have married Cynthia, but then proceeds to answer this question. There are two possible answers; either Cynthia was married already, or her legal status made marriage impossible. Williams chooses the first answer, which suits his thesis; but he produces no solid argument against the second, since his whole discussion is based on the unwarranted assumption that the projected law was similar in its provisions to those which were actually enacted at a later date. In fact this poem too is neutral. In the fourth place he argues that 2.32.43–46 necessarily imply that Cynthia and Lesbia are in all relevant respects comparable; this would be a valid inference if we were reading Aristotle. And finally 2.13.9–12, a general statement not to be tied down to Cynthia.

On the other side Cynthia-Hostia is associated with Lycoris-Volumnia by 1.8 and 2.16; as the mistress of Gallus followed a soldier to the Rhine, so Cynthia is willing to accompany a praetor to Illyria. 1.8a in fact is evidently much indebted to Gallus.

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