COMIC INFLUENCES IN PROPERTIUS

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AT THE TURN of the century one of the most heated disputes in Classical Scholarship centred on the relationship between comedy and Latin elegy.[1] The question was further complicated by the assumed existence of a "subjective Alexandrian love elegy," through which comic motives were believed to have found their way into elegy. Since the demise of the "subjective Alexandrian elegy" school little attention seems to have been paid to the question of the influence of comic writers on the elegists, and Georg Luck goes so far as to maintain "that the influence of Menander, Plautus and Terence can be disregarded, at least in the case of Tibullus and Propertius; that there is no evidence which would force us to derive one literary genus from another. . . ."[2] Surely Luck is talking about two different things. To say that Propertius and Tibullus utilize themes of comic origin is not to say that elegy is derived from comedy; indeed one cannot talk meaningfully about the "biological evolution" of a particular genre from another genre.[3] A glance through Leo's section on elegy in his *Plautinische Forschungen* will reveal that there are many comic motives which have found their way into elegy; admittedly it is possible that many, or even most, of these *Anklänge* came into elegy indirectly (as indeed Leo believed) via Alexandrian (for which one may now substitute the term "objective") elegy or epigram. Our still scanty knowledge of Alexandrian poetry will not permit a firm solution to this problem, but direct influence of comedy—be it Plautus or Terence or,

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[1]Cf. M. Rothstein, *Philologus* 59 (1900) 441 ff.; F. Leo, *Rheinisches Museum* 55 (1900) 441 ff. and *Plautinische Forschungen*[2] (Berlin 1912) 143 ff.; T. Gollnisch, *Quaestiones Elegiacae* (Vratislava 1905); V. Hoelzer, *De Poesi Amatoria e Comicis Atticis exculta ab Elegiacis imitatione expressa* (Marburg 1899). A useful summary of the arguments is to be found in K. F. Smith's *The Elegies of Albius Tibullus* (Darmstadt 1964) 23, n.1.

[2]*The Latin Love Elegy* (London 1959) 43.

[3]See Ben Perry, *The Ancient Romances*. Sather Classical Lectures 37 (Berkeley 1967) 8–17. "Literature itself can influence literature only through the medium of human thought. Once it has entered into that medium, which is the mind of the prospective writer, its values are mingled with those of many other intellectual and spiritual forces, and it is these in their aggregate that determine the nature of what will be written—not the mere substance of what has been written before. The latter is of minor consequence in the question of origins. What the old form supplies is not motivation or causation, or inspiration, but only a loose structural pattern and building materials of one kind or another which may be used at will to a greater or less extent in the construction of the new thing" (10).

as is more likely, the Greek originals—cannot be ruled out; indeed, I believe some of Propertius' poems can be shown, beyond reasonable doubt, to reveal direct comic influence.

The clearest example in Propertius is probably 3.6. J.-P. Boucher[4] notes that this poem, in which the poet asks his slave questions about his mistress, is a "scène comique traditionelle," and refers to Ter. *Eun.* 1–80. A much closer parallel, cited by Gollnisch (*op. cit.* [n.1] 23 ff.), is *Haut.* 285–310. The slave Syrus tells Clinia what he has seen in the house of Antiphila, whom Clinia has not seen for a long time and of whose feelings towards him he is therefore unsure. Like Lygdamus in Propertius' poem, Syrus found the girl faithful, and working at the loom; and, like Propertius, Clinia is anxious to get the truth from his slave and tells him not to curry favour by falsehoods. Antiphila, like Cynthia, cried, and gave strong indications of her love. This close parallelism brought Gollnisch to the reasonable conclusion that Propertius drew on the original play of Menander (in fact, the scholiast on Ter. *Haut.* 239–294 remarks on the close resemblance of these lines to those of Menander fr. 130 [Koerte]).[5] It should also be noticed that Propertius promises Lygdamus freedom if his quarrel with his *innamorata* is patched up; this is the stock bribe offered to the clever slave by the pale-faced lover to obtain his services (cf. Plaut. *Poen.* 428 ff., *Merc.* 152–153, *Miles* 1192).

In 4.8 Cynthia has left for Lanuvium with a rival of the poet's; in a fit of pique, Propertius holds an alfresco party and invites two girls of questionable reputation to entertain him. The details of the party are clearly humorous (Butler and Barber [365] claim that this is Propertius' "one humorous poem"[6]): the lamps go out, the table collapses, the *damnosi canes* keep turning up on the dice (43–46). Then follows Cynthia's dramatic entrance, her furious scattering of the enemy, and her laying down of peace terms (48–84). Only the most naive would wish to see here a biographical account of an evening in Propertius' life; Reisch's remark on the poem, "da es nicht möglich ist, zwischen realer Wirklichkeit und dichterischen Spiel eine scharfe Grenze zu ziehen," is too cautious.[7] Is it not more likely that Propertius' inspiration comes again from comedy rather than life?

[4] *Etudes sur Properce* (Paris 1965) 435.

[5] *Praeterea una ancillula erat; ea texebat una, pannis obsita, neglecta, immunda inluvie.* καὶ θεραπαινὶς ἦν μία. αὐτὴ συνέφαινε ῥυπαρῶς διακειμένη. A. G. Lee, *CR* n.s. 16 (1966) 189, suggests that Tib. 1.3.85–88 is inspired directly by this passage of Terence.

[6] I share Eckard Lefèvre's surprise at this statement (*Propertius Ludibundus* [Heidelberg 1966] 120).

[7] E. Reisch, "Properz-Studien," *Wiener Studien* 9 (1887) 147. An English literary critic has gone further: "But the difference between art and the event is always absolute . . . Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part

The situation can be paralleled in comedy. In the *Asinaria* of Plautus, Artemona bursts into the house of Cleareta, a *lena*, to catch her husband Demaenetus in a somewhat compromising position with the *meretrix* Philaenium (*Asin.* 880–*fin.*). It is noticeable, too, that the couple, like Propertius and the girls, have been engaging in an after-dinner game of dice, where the "lover's" throws are seen as an omen, before the angry Artemona's entrance (*Asin.* 957; Prop. 4.8.46), and that the eye-scratching motif at *Asin.* 908 (where the parasite tells Artemona *in oculos* [sc. *Demaeneti*] *invadi optimumst*) is paralleled by Cynthia's revenge on Phyllis (Prop. 4.8.57 *Phillidos iratos in vultum conicit unguis*).[8]

It is also significant that the role of Lygdamus in this poem is similar to that of the comic slave.[9] He actually appears to be quite innocent; he simply serves his master as he has been commanded. Yet Cynthia regards him as the cunning slave who cleverly protects and furthers his master's amours: this is surely the interpretation we are expected to draw from lines 79–80:

> *Lygdamus in primis, omnis mihi causa querelae*
> *veneat et pedibus vincula bina trahat.*

Furthermore, the description of the furious beating that Cynthia inflicts on her rivals (57–62) is reminiscent of the violent threats made by characters in comedy (cf. Plaut. *Aulul.* 53 ff., 189; *Rudens* 759 ff.), and the military language of lines 70 ff. is a standard feature of comedy.[10] Commenting on 2.16, most editors maintain that the praetor who has come to town to rival the poet for Cynthia's affections is the one that Cynthia refused to run off with in the *propempticon* (1.8). One presumes, therefore, that the praetor is regarded by these editors as a historical personage (only Camps states that he may be "real or imagined"), and that one is to seek the poem's inspiration in life, not literature. A closer examination of the situation depicted in the poem will suggest that this is not so.

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in the man, the personality" (T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Essays* [New York 1932] 19; *The Sacred Wood* [London 1920] 56).

[8]For this motif, cf. also Prop. 3.8.5–6, a poem which in its theme and motifs is indebted to comedy; see A. L. Wheeler, "Erotic Teaching in Roman Elegy and the Greek Sources. Part II," *CP* 6 (1911) 58–59; F. Leo, *Plautinische Forschungen*[2] (Berlin 1912) 145.

[9]Lygdamus' position appears to vary according to the needs of each poem. In 3.6 he is clearly Cynthia's (cf. 3.6.2 *sic tibi sint dominae, Lygdame, dempta iuga*); in 4.7 he also appears to belong to her, for she thinks he has poisoned her (35). In this poem he is clearly Propertius'.

[10]E. Fraenkel, *Plautinisches im Plautus* (Berlin 1922) 23 ff. The positing of comic influence is not, I believe, in conflict with the view of S. Evans, who convincingly argues for Odyssean echoes in this poem ("Odyssean Echoes in Propertius 4,8," *G&R* 18 [1971] 51–53).

The praetor has arrived in town from overseas, from Illyria. He is stupid (2,8), and he is uncouth; but he is also rich,[11] and by virtue of that fact he has supplanted Propertius at Cynthia's table and in her bed:

nunc sine me plena fiunt convivia mensa,
nunc sine me tota ianua nocte patet. [2.5–6]

The circumstances depicted by Propertius owe much to the familiar triangular situation of comedy involving lover, girl, and *miles gloriosus*. The *miles* is a rich, stupid, uncouth braggart, who comes to town from overseas to buy the lover's girl (as in the *Epidicus* and *Curculio*) or, if the girl is independent, to supplant him in the girl's affections by virtue of his wealth (as in the *Truculentus* and Terence's *Eunuchus*). Cynthia is here represented as the unfaithful, grasping *meretrix*, whom the lover is too poor to win in competition with the rich soldier.[12] Propertius' rival is not, like the lover's rival in comedy, a simple *miles*; he is given the exalted rank of a praetor because, in Augustan Rome, he is thus richer and more dangerous than an ordinary *miles* (in comedy, of course, the soldier is a rich mercenary). But it may be significant that Propertius makes him the governor of Illyria, a barbarous province which had recently experienced a long and bloody war.[13] Moreover, there is a remarkable resemblance between Prop. 2.16.7–12, where the poet urges his mistress to take advantage of the situation and exploit the praetor (a position from which he shifts in 15 ff.) and the end of the *Eunuchus* of Terence, where Phaedria is persuaded to allow the *miles* Thraso to retain an interest in Thais because he can be easily exploited by the couple (*Eun.* 1072–1084).[14] Indeed, it is not an unreasonable assumption that Propertius' inspiration for the poem was this play of Terence.

It is possible that Propertius was not the first to adapt this comic situa-

[11]2,7–9, 12. It is surely significant that *stolidus* occurs only once elsewhere in elegy (Ov. *Tr.* 5.10.38—of the Getae), whereas it is a well-established word in comedy (Lodge, *Lexicon Plautinum*, quotes nine examples; McGlynn, *Lexicon Terentianum*, quotes two). For *praeda* (2) used of a person to be exploited cf. Plaut. *Men.* 441, *Poen.* 660–668, *Rudens* 1262; for the sheep-shearing metaphor (8) cf. *Bacch.* 1121 ff., *Merc.* 524 ff.

[12]Cynthia's status, like Lygdamus' position, appears to vary as the situation of each poem demands. In 1.3 and 3.6 she is a chaste, woolspinning Lucretia; more often she is, as here, a fickle *meretrix* (cf. 2.9, 1.11 and 12, 1.16, etc.). Her status in real life cannot be ascertained (for another view see G. W. Williams, *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry* [Oxford 1968] 529 ff.).

[13]Of course Illyria had no praetorian governor during the years immediately following the Illyrian war, when this poem was presumably written (cf. Butler and Barber 164). Commentators therefore presume that Propertius is using the term to refer to a *legatus pro praetore* (Butler and Barber 164) or generically to "a provincial office holder of some kind" (Camps 2.130). The problem disappears once we cease to regard the poem as a factual representation of an event in the poet's life.

[14]I owe this suggestion to Miss Hubbard.

tion to elegy. At *Ecl.* 10. 46–49 Virgil, according to Servius, is adapting some lines from Gallus' elegies:

> *Tu procul a patria (nec sit mihi credere tantum)*
> *Alpinas a, dura, nives, et frigora Rheni*
> *me sine sola vides. a, te ne frigora laedant!*
> *a, tibi ne teneras glacies secet aspera plantas.*

It has often been remarked that the situation depicted in these lines is similar to that of Propertius 1.8 (the *propempticon* to Cynthia), and Prop. 1.8.7 (*tu pedibus teneris positas fulcire pruinas*) is very close to Virgil's *a, tibi ne teneras glacies secet aspera plantas* (49). It is reasonable to suppose, therefore, that Propertius has imitated Gallus' poem, which was perhaps also a *propempticon*. It should also be noticed, however, that Lycoris' destination, according to Virgil, is Gaul, and we may presume that in Gallus' poem she was represented as going off to the Gallic campaigns with another soldier.[15] We have, therefore, the triangular relationship involving unhappy, jilted lover, unfaithful courtesan, and soldier. The same triangular relationship occurs in Ovid *Am.* 3.8, where Ovid, like Propertius, emphasizes the danger of his soldier rival by exalting his rank and making him a *dives . . . eques*. This is surely a comic situation which the elegists found suitable for elegiac treatment.[16] Thus while the ultimate origin of Propertius' theme is certainly comedy, the possibility that comic influence is indirect, that is through Gallus, cannot be excluded, though the close resemblance of Propertius' poem to the *Eunuchus* makes this only a remote possibility. Gallus may have been the first to introduce the *miles* into elegy, but Propertius' poem probably owes more to Terence than to his predecessor in elegy.

That Propertius was familiar with Greek New Comedy[17] and also Plautus and Terence few would deny, and it is not in itself implausible that he would on occasion adapt to elegy situations provided by comic poets. We can no longer accept as valid for Propertian criticism the rigid *Quellenforschung* that dominated the study of elegy at the turn of the century; but that is not to say that ancient (like modern) poets did not accept and modify themes which they found in various genres of preceding

[15]An ancient reader made this inference. Servius on the first line of this eclogue states: *hic autem Gallus amavit Cytheridem meretricem, libertam Volumnii, quae, eo spreto, Antonium euntem ad Gallias est secuta* (Thilo-Hagen 3.118).

[16]The Greek Epistolographers and Lucian also found the *miles gloriosus* a suitable subject. He found his way into Philostratus (*Ep.* 23) and Alciphron (2.34) and makes three appearances in Lucian's *Dialogi Meretricii* (9, 12, 15).

[17]Indeed he seems to have been particularly fond of Menander. Miss Hubbard has pointed out to me that Prop. 3.21.25–28, where the poet imagines what he will do in Athens after fleeing his mistress, reveal a descending order of difficult literary pursuits (or, conversely, an ascending order of enjoyable ones) from Plato to Epicurus to Demosthenes to Menander.

literature, including comedy. Comedy as a direct influence on elegy cannot, on the basis of the examples here cited, be ruled out completely. Indeed, it is difficult to see how the themes of any of these three poems could be successfully adapted to either Hellenistic epigram or elegy, and while Gallus may have been an intermediary for one of these themes (though here, too, direct borrowing from comedy seems more likely), there is no evidence to suggest that he was for the other two. It may be true that "on the bookshelf of Propertius, the editions of the comic playwrights . . . occupied only a small place next to the editions of Homer, Euripides and Callimachus" (Luck, *op. cit.* 43), but that does not mean that he did not read them.

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