

CYNTHIA'S BEDSIDE MANNER

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THE FIFTEENTH ELEGY OF PROPERTIUS' first book starts with this complaint:

3 *Saepe ego multa tuae levitatis dura timebam,
 hac tamen excepta, Cynthia, perfidia.
 aspice me quanto rapiat fortuna periclo!
 tu tamen in nostro lenta timore venis;¹*

What kind of danger does Propertius face? The two traditional answers, a voyage at sea or sickness, were questioned and rejected recently in this journal by Alva W. Bennett.² He argued that *periclo* (3) and *timore* (4) both refer to Propertius' dreadful suspicion that Cynthia is *perfida*, a liar. I want to make a case for Propertius' sickness.

That Cynthia has lied to Propertius, and under oath too, may be granted. He says so:

33 *tam tibi ne viles isti videantur ocelli,
 per quos saepe mihi credita perfidia est!*
35 *hos tu iurabas, si quid mentita fuisses,
 ut tibi suppositis exciderent manibus:*

How can she raise those eyes to the mighty sun and not tremble? Nobody demanded her false display of love (39–40). And he warns her:

25 *desine iam revocare tuis periuria verbis,
 Cynthia, et oblitos parce movere deos.*

The gods have forgotten her perjury. Now, by protesting her innocence, by defending herself with new lies, she will remind them.³

Of course Cynthia is a liar. And Bennett is right to insist that *perfidia* in 34 echoes *perfidia* in the first couplet. But can the second couplet mean *vides quantopere timeam ne perfida sis, sed lenitudinem ad timorem meum ostendis*, or something to that effect?⁴ Surely not. The *perfidia* of 2 is too

¹Unless otherwise noted, quotations come from the text of E. A. Barber, *Sexti Properti Carmina*² (Oxford 1960).

²"The Elegiac Lie: Propertius 1.15," *Phoenix* 26 (1972) 28–39, hereafter cited as Bennett. My frequent references to his article, along with my sparse mention of other scholars, will attest to Bennett's thorough analysis of the poem's scholarly treatment during the past two hundred and fifty years.

³Cf. Bennett 38.

⁴To that effect, Bennett 35–36: *periculum* will be synonymous with *timor*, as in Catullus 61.82–86, where the chorus reassures Aurunculeia against her *periculum* that there is any girl more beautiful than she; Cynthia has told Propertius that she is true, but he fears that she has lied, and he gets no reassurance to the contrary from her *lenitudo*.

immediate and particular (*hac*) to admit fearful suspicions, to leave any room for doubt. Propertius has never feared or suspected what is now plainly revealed. His *periculum* and *timor*, therefore, do not result from Cynthia's *perfidia*. Rather, her response to his danger and fear proves Cynthia *perfida*, and it is this present *perfidia* (2) which makes Propertius realize how often in the past *credita perfidia est* (34).

Anagnorisis leads to advice, in the closing lines of the poem:

41

quis ego nunc pereo, similis moniturus amantis
'O nullis tutum credere blanditiis!'

Here, the somewhat vague *quis* will embrace all of Cynthia's sworn deceptions, verbal and otherwise, mentioned in 33–40;⁵ it might be glossed *quibus blanditiis perfidis*. The futurity of *moniturus* implies that *pereo* is to be understood literally, that Propertius is dying, and that his actual death will be the warning for lovers spelled out in 42.⁶ And so *quis* is likely to be an instrumental ablative. Somehow or other, Cynthia's *perfidia* is now (*nunc*) killing Propertius, and that is why his death will be a warning, a warning against *perfidia*, for *similis amantis*, credulous lovers like himself.

I suggest that the situation is this. Propertius is dying from a dangerous illness (*periculo*, 3). Cynthia ought to have come to his bedside, to comfort him and, especially, to pray and to perform the rituals essential for his recovery. Any Roman would have known what was expected, and Propertius records what he himself did when Cynthia was dangerously ill, in 2.28 A/B/C. Prayers to Jupiter and Persephone, magic spells, comfortable words about death; nothing was overlooked, and Cynthia, of course, recovered. But now, when Propertius is ill and afraid, Cynthia is slow to visit (*lenta venis*, 4), and when she does come, her biggest worry seems to be her own sexual attractiveness to other men:

5

et potes hesternis manibus componere crinis
et longa faciem quaerere desidia,

8

nec minus Eois pectus variare lapillis,
ut formosa novo quae parat ire viro.

Propertius realizes that all her promises to love him, and him alone, forever, in health and in sickness, were lies, that he has been fooled repeatedly. If, however, Cynthia had come to him at the first news of his sickness, if those prayers had been said and those rituals performed, he would have recovered health and would not now be facing death. Thus, in fact, Cynthia's *perfidia* is killing Propertius. Credulous lovers should

⁵Cf. H. E. Butler's and E. A. Barber's note on *quis*: "Neuter; sc. all the devices used by Cynthia to make Propertius believe she loved him" (*The Elegies of Propertius* [Oxford 1933] 176).

⁶See M. Rothstein, *Die Elegien des Sextus Propertius I*³ (Berlin 1920) 157. Rothstein, of course, first suggested, in 1898, that Propertius here is sick and dying.

beware. Propertius' death will demonstrate the real, physical danger in a woman's *blanditiae*. Simply, it is not safe (*tutum*, 42) to trust them at all.

The heroines (9–22) are devoted women separated from lovers or husbands. If none of their separations seems to be particularly relevant to Cynthia's separation from Propertius, through his sickness, allowance must be made for the normal health of heroes, in myth and legend; by all accounts, they were notoriously free from illness. Yet Propertius cannot be imagined searching in the old stories for sick heroes, lovingly attended by wives or mistresses, and then contenting himself with *exempla* which were scarcely apt.

The *exempla* in question introduce an incidental, textual problem. The fourteen lines which they occupy are presented by the mss in this order:

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|----|--|
| 9 | <i>at non sic Ithaci digressu mota Calypso</i> |
| 10 | <i>desertis olim flevrat aequoribus:</i>
<i>multos illa dies incomptis maesta capillis</i>
<i>sederat, iniusto multa locuta salo,</i>
<i>et quamvis numquam post haec visura, dolebat</i>
<i>illa tamen, longae conscia laetitiae.</i> |
| 15 | <i>Alphesiboea suos ulta est pro coniuge fratres,</i>
<i>sanguinis et cari vincula rupit amor.</i>
<i>nec sic Aesoniden rapientibus anxia ventis</i>
<i>Hypsipyle vacuo constitit in thalamo:</i>
<i>Hypsipyle nullos post illos sensit amores,</i>
<i>ut semel Haemonio tabuit hospitio.</i> |
| 20 | <i>coniugis Eoadne miseros delata per ignis</i>
<i>occidit, Argivae fama pudicitiae.</i> |

Editors usually rearrange the sequence of lines, placing 15–16 after 20 (with Markland) or after 22 (with Lachmann), on the grounds that the sentence beginning *nec sic* (17) should follow the sentence which begins in 9, with *at non sic*, and ends in 14.⁷ Retain the order of the mss, however, and the *exempla* are quite comprehensible, as a series in themselves, and as a vital part of the poem. Admittedly, *nec sic* in 17 must pick up *at non sic* in 9. Calypso's disregard for her personal appearance (*incomptis capillis*, 11), after separation from Ulysses, contrasts with Cynthia's present anxiety to look good to other men (5–8). And Calypso grieved (*dolebat*, 13). Hypsipyle's appearance, after separation from Jason, is not described, but Hypsipyle never loved again (*nullos sensit amores*, 19). Emotionally, her story expands Calypso's. But each of those two *exempla* is expanded, in turn, by a briefer, grimmer *exemplum*. Alphesiboea, separated from her husband Alcmaeon, through his exile, murdered her own brothers after they had killed Alcmaeon for taking another wife (15–16). Calypso's passive *dolor*, after Ulysses' voluntary exile from her

⁷For defence of Markland's transposition, against Lachmann's, see P. J. Enk, *Sex. Propertii Elegiarum Liber I (Monobiblos)* 2 (Leyden 1946) 130.

island, pales in comparison with that violent *dolor* of Alpheisiboea. So, also, Hypsipyle's refusal to love anybody after Jason is as nothing compared with Evadne's reaction to the loss of Capaneus, for Evadne threw herself on her husband's funeral pyre (21-22). The *exempla*, therefore, fit into a schema which might be printed, not as *A, B, C, D*, but, rather, as *A, AI, B, BI*, or, more accurately, as *a, A, b, B*. And the purpose of that schema is to unfold dramatically the total and terrible demands of real love when the lover is separated from the beloved. It carries Propertius' thought from bodily adornment and possible infidelity to ultimate fidelity and bodily death.

Moreover, the two short and powerful *exempla* include the idea of beloved men in great danger. The deaths of Alcmaeon and Capaneus will point to Propertius' danger and fear and imminent death. And the awful truth is that Cynthia, so far from matching Alpheisiboea and Evadne in devotion, will be responsible for that death. Yet, even now, Propertius cannot hate her. If the gods should punish her perjury, if she should suffer, he would suffer with her:

27

*audax a nimium, nostro dolitura periclo,
si quid forte tibi durius inciderit!*

Mention of Cynthia's *audacia*, after his plea that she not remind the gods of her *periuria* (25-26), recalls Propertius' explanation of her sickness in 2.28A:

5

*sed non tam ardoris culpa est neque crimina caeli,
quam totiens sanctos non habuisse deos.
hoc perdit miseras, hoc perdidit ante puellas:
quidquid iurarunt, ventus et unda rapit.*

Probably, therefore, *dolitura* (27) and *quid durius* (28) will refer to sickness, punishment from heaven, and *nostro periclo* (27) to Propertius' own suffering when Cynthia suffers from that sickness.⁸ The couplet might be rewritten: *audax a nimium, periuriorum poenas dabis! sed in periculum quasi morbum incidam si tu dolebis, si incideris in morbum periculosum*. As Propertius says in 2.28B. 42:

vivam, si vivet; si cadet illa, cadam.

The contrast between Cynthia and the heroines, and between Cynthia and Propertius, is complete. He would respond as they did, and as she will never respond, to forced and dangerous separation from the beloved.

I end with a cautionary note on nearly everything said above. Propertius constantly saves himself from the sentimental and mawkish by means of playful irony. Here, that enormous conceit, of a sick poet hastened to

⁸D. R. Shackleton Bailey throws much light on *nostro periclo* (*Propertiana* [Cambridge 1956] 43-44).

the grave by his mistress' lies, is tempered nicely by the language used. As Bennett showed, *periculum*, a key word, at least might suggest emotional instead of physical danger.⁹ But it is *pereo* (41) which especially stamps the poem with Propertius' witty seal. The verb's use in reports of situations amorous and erotic hardly needs to be illustrated. To be sure, Cynthia's bedside manner is killing Propertius, if he is really, physically sick. If, however, he is not, if he is simply lying in bed watching Cynthia fix her hair and put on make-up and jewelery, much too carefully for his comfort, then her bedside manner is equally deadly, but his separation from her, and his sickness and his death, will be emotional rather than physical.

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⁹Yet, as a cautious note on a cautionary note, there is this: Propertius uses the word *periculum* five times outside the present elegy; in 2.27, he mentions the *caeca pericla* of travel (6), but in 2.28, where Cynthia is ill, *periculum* appears four times: should Cynthia die, after *multa pericula* (15), she will be able to tell Semele, in the underworld, *quo sit formosa periclo* (27); if she recovers, she will sit before a statue of Jupiter and recount *longa pericla sua* (46); she has recovered, *magno dimissa periclo*, and owes *chori* to Diana (59-60). Cf. Shackleton Bailey's observation: "*periclo*, without further definition, would, I think, have suggested sickness to a Roman" (*Propertiana* 42).