EPIC THEMES IN PROPERTIUS II.9

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VIRTUALLY nothing has been written about elegy II.9 although it remains one of the finest examples of Propertius' adaptation of epic themes to elegy. For this reason it forms a nice counterpart to II.8, a poem in which Propertius employs epic parallels in order to explore the discrepancy between literary and real erotic situations. There the Homeric hero Achilles functions as a standard against which Propertius measures himself in life and love and finds himself lacking.[1] In II.9 Propertius again experiments with epic themes as he explores his complicated relationship with Cynthia. If Propertius discovers in II.8 that he is no Achilles, he states openly in II.9 that Cynthia is neither a Penelope nor a Briseis. And although the poem is ostensibly an explication of Cynthia's character, Propertius obliquely reveals his own nature through reference to epic themes.

Like the preceding elegy, II.9 is a poem about fidelity. The two poems also share the same dramatic context: Cynthia has left Propertius for another man. The poet is much more candid in this poem, however, about Cynthia's infidelity and initially displays a kind of bitter sympathy towards the rival with whom he shares a common fate. The opening couplet (*iste quod est, ego saepe fui: sed fors et in hora/hoc ipso eiecto carior alter erit*, 1–2) stresses the cyclical nature of Cynthia's involvements and recalls the view of life and love which Propertius expressed in II.8:

> *omnia vertuntur: certe vertuntur amores:*
> *vinceris aut vincis, haec in amore rota est.*
> *magni saepe duces, magni cecidere tyranni,*
> *et Thebae steterant altaque Troia fuit.* (7–10)

Just as this statement with its concluding reference to the total annihilation of Thebes and Troy offers little hope for a positive future,[2] the first lines of II.9 suggest not so much the triumph of the new lover as Cynthia's fickleness. The idea of inconstancy, however, is immediately contrasted

[1]For informative discussions of II.8, see P. J. Enk, "The Unity of Some Elegies of Propertius," *Latomus* 15 (1956) 181; D. P. Harmon, "Myth and Proverb in Propertius 2.8," *CW* 68 (1975) 417; U. Knoche, "Propertius edd. Butler and Barber," *Gnomon* 12 (1936) 267; and T. A. Suits, "Mythology, Address, and Structure in Propertius 2.8," *TAPA* 96 (1965) 427. The commentaries of H. E. Butler and E. A. Barber, *The Elegies of Propertius* (Oxford 1933) and W. A. Camps, *Propertius, Elegies, Book II* (Cambridge 1967), and D. R. S. Bailey, *Propertiana* (Cambridge 1956), will be referred to by authors' names alone.

[2]Cf. Harmon (above, note 1) 418.

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with those two symbols of permanence, Penelope and Briseis, whose figures dominate the next eight couplets.

Penelope and Briseis exemplify devotion and fidelity despite insuperable difficulties, and Propertius deliberately stresses the negative aspects of their erotic experiences. For example, he never alludes to the happy conclusion of Penelope's seemingly hopeless vigil for Ulysses; he dwells instead on her despair at ever seeing him again (*visura et quamvis numquam speraret Ulixem*, 7), on the loss of her youth and desirability, and on the loneliness of her unfulfilled old age (*illum exspectando facta remansit anus*, 8).[3] Similarly, nothing is said of Briseis' happiness with Achilles. Rather Propertius focuses on Briseis in the moments directly after death has permanently deprived her of Achilles. The scene reminds us of Briseis' mourning for Patroclus in Book 19 of the *Iliad*: in particular, the phrase *amplectens Achillem* in line 9 echoes Homer's ἀμφ' ἀυτῷ χυμένη (284), and her ritual gestures in line 10 (*candida vesana verberat ora manu*) recalls the less vivid χερσὶ δ' ἄμυσσε/ . . . καλὰ πρόσωπα (284–285). But in Propertius' poem there are elements which make Briseis' mourning for Achilles specifically erotic. She embraces him as a lover, not as a friend, although the double negative which precedes that phrase underlines the futility of the gesture: Achilles is irrevocably lost to her.[4] Her continuing desire to touch Achilles despite death's frightening distortion of their physical relationship is expressed in lines 13–14: *et tanti corpus Achilli/ maximaque in parva sustulit ossa manu*. In short, Briseis' attentive grief proves her to be Achilles' slave (*captiva*, 11) in more ways than one, and the reference to his negligent wife in line 15 makes her devotion seem that much more remarkable.[5] Both Penelope and Briseis then are women whose allegiance to their men transcends the barriers of real and imagined death. The contrast with Cynthia is obvious: in much more favorable circumstances Cynthia does not even approach their dedication or self-denial.

[3]The word *anus* need not have pejorative connotations here, but Propertius finds it an effective curse in II.18, 19 f: *at tu etiam iuvenem odisti me, perfida, cum sis/ipsa anus haud longa curva futura die.*

[4]Elsewhere Propertius uses *amplector* and *amplexus* exclusively in erotic contexts: see I.12, 5; II.15, 9; 18, 11; 26, 49; III.18, 12; IV.5, 33.

[5]Butler and Barber object to the manuscript reading *viro* in line 15 on the grounds that reference to Achilles' separation from his wife (which essentially makes him a widower) is inappropriate "in view of his subsequent passion for Briseis." As so often happens, textual criticism doesn't take into account the poetic force of the unexpected. Line 15 reminds us that Achilles has a legitimate wife and, therefore, impresses us with the thanklessness of Briseis' position as well as her extraordinary devotion. Erotic rivalry is, after all, a major theme in the poem and for this reason I would retain the original reading. Notice that the relationship between Achilles and Briseis is described somewhat more positively in II.8, 29 where Briseis is dignified with the title *coniunx*, a word which recalls Achilles' affectionate reference to Briseis as his ἄλοχον in *Iliad* IX, 336.

At first glance, the young concubine who provides sexual services for the soldier on the battlefront seems an odd choice to support the example of the lawfully wedded wife who remains at home while her husband goes off to war. But both Penelope and Briseis are necessary to Propertius' argument. If anything, Briseis, who represents proper behavior even in the morally compromising circumstances of war, serves to intensify the point he makes with Penelope, who merely exemplifies the fidelity expected of a legitimate wife. Propertius neatly sums up this distinction between the two women in lines 17 and 18: *tunc igitur veris gaudebat Graecia natis,/ tunc etiam felix inter et arma pudor.*[6] In addition, Briseis provides an example with which Cynthia can readily identify, lest Penelope's marriage be too remote from her experience, and effectively counters any excuse Cynthia might put forth on behalf of her promiscuity, since she proves that the unwed can be faithful too.

Propertius establishes Penelope and Briseis as paragons of femine virtue and then sharply contrasts Cynthia's behavior with theirs. Penelope remained celibate for twenty years (3), but Cynthia can't restrain herself for a single day: *at tu non una potuisti nocte vacare,/ impia, non unum sola manere diem!* (19–20).[7] Commentators have tended to regard these lines as biographical detail,[8] when in fact they are phrased in such a way as to encourage comparison, not only with line 3, but also with the description of Penelope's more worthy diurnal and nocturnal activities in line 6 (*nocturno solvens texta diurna dolo*). In addition, the inclusion of the epithet *impia* (supported later in the poem by *perfida* in 28) betrays Propertius' conviction that Cynthia has violated a relationship he considers as sacred as Penelope's marriage to Ulysses. That Cynthia is lacking in the natural discretion which Briseis' *pudor* implies is evident from the type of behavior (colored albeit by Propertius' paranoia) described in lines 21–22: *quin etiam multo duxistis pocula risu:/ forsitan et de me verba fuere mala.*

[6]This couplet refers to Penelope as well as Briseis. Bailey (81) assumes that the lines comment only on the example of Briseis, as does Camps (107). Bailey rejects Baehrens' emendation of *nuptis* for *natis* on the basis of this assumption, arguing that "*nuptis* would be more tempting if Deidamia, not Briseis, had been the model of fidelity." But this objection is no objection at all, since Propertius does offer us a viable model of wifely virtue in Penelope. On the other hand, both readings point to the same idea, conjugal fidelity, and *nuptis* is an unnecessary emendation of the more subtle *natis*. Bailey also expresses dissatisfaction with line 18: "The pentameter arouses suspicion by its clumsy collocation of *etiam* 'also' and *et* 'even', neither serving any very good purpose. . . ." But these difficulties can be resolved if *etiam* is understood as introducing a new exemplum (that of Briseis) and *et* is taken as an intensifier which emphasizes just how remarkable Briseis' behavior was amidst the irregularities of war.

[7]Note the textual variant of *sola* for *salva* in line 3. If correct, this reading would link lines 3 and 20 more firmly and reinforce the contrast between Penelope and Cynthia.

[8]Cf., for example, Butler and Barber (207) on lines 29–32 and Camps (106) on line 29.

Thus we see that the poem through line 22 takes the form of a tightly woven argument. Propertius carefully sets up two standards of fidelity, the one dictated and sanctioned by society, the other arising out of spontaneous affection and the traditional submission of female to male, and claims that his mistress has fallen short of both. Having provided us with a complete spectrum of what he considers acceptable feminine behavior, Propertius demonstrates that Cynthia is neither to be redeemed by a matronly sense of duty nor excused by reason of flattering emotional dependency.

Up to this point the poet's use of epic is straightforward: Penelope and Briseis provide an effective foil to Cynthia's consummate inconstancy. By extension Propertius finds his analogues in the figures of Ulysses and Achilles—or so we would assume from the direct comparison of Cynthia with the feminine Homeric figures. Elsewhere, after all, the elegist encourages us to compare him with epic heroes. In II.26, for example, Propertius likens his heroic endurance to Ulysses':

> *omnia perpetiar: saevus licet urgeat Eurus,*
> *velaque in incertum frigidus Auster agat;*
> *quicumque et venti miserum vexastis Ulixem,*
> *et Danaum Euboico litore mille ratis.* (35–38)

In II.14 Ulysses' experience is again evoked as analogous to Propertius': *nec sic errore exacto laetatus Ulixes,/ cum tetigit carae litora Dulichiae;/ . . . quanta ego praeterita collegi gaudia nocte* (3–9).[9] But the figure of Achilles evidently held particular fascination for Propertius. One instance of Propertius' use of Achilles has already been alluded to in this paper; another occurs in II.13, a poem which deals with death.[10] There Propertius makes the curious statement that his tomb will be no less famous than Achilles' bloody pyre: *nec minus haec nostri notescent fama sepulcri,/ quam fuerant Pthii busta cruenta viri* (37–38). This couplet, with its startlingly crude reference to the sacrifice of Polyxena over the hero's tomb, provides a transition between the earlier description of the poet's death in 17 ff. and the otherwise abrupt allusion to Cynthia's in lines 39–42. The mingling of the virgin's blood with the dead man's ashes foreshadows the idea of Cynthia's ultimate reunion with the poet in death (39–40). The epic example also supports Propertius' implication that the dead

[9]Ulysses provides Propertius with what is perhaps his favorite example of conjugal bliss: see III.12, 23 (*Postumus alter erit miranda coniuge Ulixes*) and II.6, 23 (*felix Admeti coniunx et lectus Ulixis*).

[10]For another instance of Propertius' association of himself with Achilles, see II.22, 29 ff. (especially line 34: *hic ego Peliades, hic ferus Hector ego*). The analogy with Achilles and Hector is also implicit in II.20, 1–2 where Propertius compares Cynthia to Briseis and Andromache. See also II.3, 39–40 where an analogy is drawn between Cynthia and Helen, for whose beauty Achilles might justifiably die.

have power over the living and, conversely, that the living have an allegiance to the dead (41–42). This is perhaps the most unattractive reference to sexual domination in all of Propertius' poetry, but it corresponds exactly with the image of Achilles which Propertius belabors in II.9, namely that of the dead *dominus* who commands the attention of a lovelorn *captiva*. Here too the political and erotic aspects of Achilles' power over Briseis are almost indistinguishable.

Is Propertius then to be identified with the adored, yet authoritative figure of Achilles? Obviously he is not, no more than Cynthia can be identified with Penelope or Briseis. In II.8 Propertius openly rejects the analogy (*inferior multo cum sim vel matre vel armis . . .* , 39), and in this poem he shows himself unable to command Cynthia's attention or respect, let alone her love. Excluded from her affection, Propertius can only exert a power which is verbal: in line 24 he curses her with his own malady, but the positive effect of even this is minimal since he condemns her to erotic bondage to another man. The analogy between Propertius and Achilles fails because he is neither Cynthia's master nor her beloved. What he is, however, he reveals through a clever inversion of the epic themes he employed so effectively in lines 1–22 to berate Cynthia.

The first part of the poem (1–24) is characterized by Propertius' righteous indignation and his stringent condemnation of Cynthia. In line 25, however, the mood of the poem changes as Propertius alters his approach. Instead of trying to shame Cynthia into love by unfavorable comparison with exemplary women, he appeals to her reason. By his reference to the past (her illness) in lines 25–28 and the future (his projected absence) in lines 29–30, he tries to lead Cynthia into a more rational evaluation of her behaviour. In the process of doing this, Propertius goes over from the offensive to the defensive: rather than scolding Cynthia for her many transgressions, he defends his own conduct.

The portrait of Cynthia upon her death bed in lines 25–28 is not as extraneous to the poem as it might seem, and it cannot be adequately explained as biographical detail.[11] In fact, literal criticism of this type obscures the consistency of these lines with the preceding passages. If the pathetic scene in which Cynthia appears victimized not only by sickness but also by an inattentive lover seems to contradict the earlier portrait of her as a malicious slut, thematically it does make some sense, and we may look for its immediate inspiration in the earlier description of Achilles' death. Just like Achilles, Cynthia finds herself tended in sickness by an adoring lover, although not by the man who should have been at

[11]Cf. Butler and Barber (207) on line 26: "The illness to which he alludes is perhaps that recorded in II. xxviii."

her side (*hic ubi tum, pro di, perfida, quisque fuit*? 28). Most importantly, Propertius casts himself in the role of the solicitous lover (*haec mihi vota tuam propter suscepta salutem*, 25), and in his constant devotion he bears more resemblance to Briseis than Cynthia ever did. Thus the parallel between the epic situation and the elegiac is partially clarified: Briseis is Propertius' analogue, not Cynthia's.

In similar fashion, lines 29–30 also revive the epic themes of the first part of the poem. The projection of his lengthy detention abroad (*retinerer miles*, 29, and *staret navis*, 30) certainly recalls Ulysses who appears in ancient epic as both soldier and sailor. With his questions here Propertius rhetorically offers Cynthia another opportunity to conform to the earlier model of Penelope. Almost immediately, however, he excludes her from this chance to redeem herself by saying: *sed vobis facile est verba et componere fraudes:/ hoc unum didicit femina semper opus* (31–32). But even this biased assessment of women reminds us in an unnerving way of Penelope's deception of the suitors: *coniugium falsa poterat differre Minerva,/ nocturno solvens texta diurna dolo* (5–6). Once again the superficial similarity between the two women only serves to remind us of the more profound differences: in Penelope's case duplicity is admirable because it benefits a man, but in Cynthia's it is reprehensible because it helps her to maintain her autonomy. Thus Cynthia continues to be characterized as the contradiction of everything Penelope represents.

The proverbial condemnation of women's inconsistency in the simile of lines 33–36 completes Propertius' expression of despair over ever communicating with Cynthia or changing her ways. Her inability to remain faithful to any man becomes a permanent fact which Propertius must accept, and he does this with resignation in line 37: *nunc, quoniam ista tibi placuit sententia, cedam.* Even more surprisingly, Propertius exhibits a willingness to accept Cynthia as she is:

> *sidera sunt testes et matutina pruina*
> *et furtim misero ianua aperta mihi,*
> *te nihil in vita nobis acceptius umquam:*
> *nunc quoque erit, quamvis sis inimica, nihil.* (41–44)

At this point in the poem the process which began in line 25 is complete: Propertius himself has become the focal point of the elegy and we are forced to turn our attention from the question of Cynthia's character to an appreciation of Propertius' monumental constancy. The poet is necessarily distanced from his mistress on account of the wrath his criticism has provoked, but despite this insuperable obstacle which derives from his conflicting feelings of love and hate, he pledges that he will remain true to her. In doing so, he says to her the things she should

be promising him. In lines 45–46 Propertius becomes even more explicit in his expression of devotion, as if it were his purity which had been called into question in the first place: *nec domina ulla meo ponet vestigia lecto:/ solus ero, quoniam non licet esse tuum.*[12] His rejection of another *domina* appositely recalls the relationship exemplified by Achilles and Briseis in line 11, and with the appearance of this word it again becomes obvious that Propertius' epic counterpart is not Achilles, the *dominus*, but Briseis, the *captiva*. Propertius' insistence on his chastity extends even into his parting shot at his rival when he adds the qualifying clause *si forte pios eduximus annos* (47). Here the use of the adjective *pius* to characterize his life is in deliberate contrast to Cynthia's epithet *impia* in line 20.

But most importantly, the idea of *pietas* and *fides* throughout the years brings us full-circle to the portrait of Penelope in the beginning of the poem (*poterat bis denos salva per annos/ vivere*, 3–4), and Propertius' rejection of other sexual opportunities (*solus ero, quoniam non licet esse tuum*, 46) reminds us of Penelope's fierce determination to grow old alone after she's lost all hope of Ulysses' return. Thus we see a kind of thematic ring composition operating in this poem. By the end of it, Propertius has discovered his epic analogues first in the example of Briseis and then in Penelope. These women have little significance for Cynthia, but Propertius adopts them as his own appropriate symbols. Their ideal of selfless submission to another person becomes his.

In discussing this poem Camps hints at an "underlying symmetry in the disposition of the piece," but chooses not to define it for his readers (104). I would argue that the unity of this poem lies not in any strict structural symmetry but rather, as I have tried to demonstrate in the analysis above, in the continuing evocation of the two epic exempla of Penelope and Briseis throughout the poem. The elegy becomes a coherent whole through Propertius' clever manipulation of these epic themes; through a strange process of role-reversal, he rejects masculine counterparts like Ulysses and Achilles and increasingly identifies himself with the two female figures who are the archetypes of traditional womanhood.[13] Viewed in this way, the poem becomes more than an attempt to chastise Cynthia for her infidelity. It also becomes an opportunity for Propertius to examine himself and his relationship, not only to Cynthia, but also to the accepted standards of masculine behavior.

[12]Propertius' protestations of fidelity form a major theme in Book II. See II.1, 47–48; 3, 45–6; 6, 41–42; 7, 7–10 and 19–20; 20, 15 ff.; 25, 9–10; 26, 27 ff. It may also be significant that Propertius defends his purity here in the same language Cynthia uses in II.29, 35.

[13]Sexual role-reversal also figures as a major theme in II.6 and II.20.

In conclusion, a word should be said about the controversial couplets which complete the elegy:

> *non ob regna magis diris cecidere sub armis*
> *Thebani media non sine matre duces,*
> *quam, mihi si media liceat pugnare puella,*
> *mortem ego non fugiam morte subire tua.* (49–52)

Scholars have long been troubled by these lines: Butler and Barber (208) assume a hiatus between lines 48 and 49, while Camps (107) characterizes the passage as a "four-line growl" and prints it as a separate elegy (IX B) in his edition.

The difficulties of this passage are very real. The change of direct address is troublesome, although not unprecedented.[14] More importantly, the bold language Propertius employs in challenging his rival to a duel is incompatible with the unsportsmanlike tone of his curse in lines 47–48, and his aggressive attitude belies his earlier passivity. But however difficult the transition between lines 48 and 49, the authenticity of the passage itself can be defended on the grounds that it brings us back full-circle to the Theban motifs of II.8 and provides a suitable conclusion to the theme of selfless devotion developed through the poem: Propertius is willing to face annihilation, if only Cynthia will witness his self-sacrifice. Thus the suicidal contest becomes the consummate proof of Propertius' love. These lines also make explicit the kinship between the two rivals which was hinted at in the first lines of the poem: the analogy with Eteocles and Polyneices tells us that the two men are brothers in their shared obsession and that there can be no victor in their tragic confrontation. Cynthia's epic counterpart is Jocasta, whose presence at the death of her sons suggests a perversion of her nurturing, creative role.[15] In Cynthia too we are perhaps meant to see the creative power of love turned destructive since, unlike Briseis who was the innocent victim of her lover's death, Cynthia is the cause and the beneficiary as she exacts the final price of devotion from her lovers. In short, this passage is not a very nice one. But as an expression of willful self-negation in the service of love, it is consistent with the rest of the poem and carries the theme of fidelity to a frighteningly effective conclusion.

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[14]Witness the unexpected apostrophe of Achilles in line 15 of this poem.

[15]My interpretation here is based on Camps's explanation (108) of the word *media* in lines 50 and 51.