# PROPERTIUS 3.6.9: A WEEPING MISTRESS?

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*Sicin eram incomptis vidisti flere capillis*

So BARBER. It was Damsté who first suggested *eram* for the manuscript
reading *eam*, and his reason was an aversion to *eam* on two counts: "Prono-
men *eam* ferendum non esse arbitror ante pron. illius in vs. sq. quo iterum
Cynthia denotatur, atque, hercle, parum reverenter Propertius ita amicam
suam huius servo indicaret."[1] Damsté therefore emended to *siccine (h)eram*,
which seems to have persuaded Barber, who read *sicin eram*, first in the
Butler-Barber edition of 1933 (in which the editors reproduce Damsté's
objection to *eam*: "*sicin eam* . . . is scarcely admissible owing to the strange-
ness of *eam* followed by *illius*") and subsequently in the Oxford editions of
1953 and 1960.[2]

However, between the two Oxford editions appeared Shackleton Bailey's
important *Propertiana*. Shackleton Bailey countered Damsté's first argu-
ment with the observation that the sequence *eam . . . illius* is paralleled in
Valerius Flaccus (6.115 ff.) and the elder Seneca (*Suas.* 1.8). So, with that
objection removed (and Damsté's argument that *eam* makes Propertius talk
rather disrespectfully of Cynthia not being compelling), it seemed reason-
able to return to the manuscript reading, especially since *era* occurs nowhere
else in Propertius. And that is what nearly all subsequent editors have done,
notably Helm, Camps, and the two recent Teubner editors, Hanslik (Leip-
zig 1978) and Fedeli (Stüttgart 1984).[3] Only L. Richardson Jr. of recent
editors retains *eram*, adding the misleading comment that "*ea* is a pronoun
to which Propertius shows distinct aversion."[4]

Is *eam*, then, the true reading? I think not. First, even if two parallels can
be found for the awkward *eam . . . illius* sequence (and the Seneca one is

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[1]P. H. Damsté, "Propertiana (Ad Lib. III)," *Mnemosyne* 52 (1924) 413–427, at 414.

[2]Unless, as Shackleton Bailey *ad loc.* seems to suggest, Barber arrived at the conjecture
independently. Certainly no mention of Damsté occurs in Butler and Barber's note, where *sicin
eram* is ascribed to Barber. G. R. Smyth in his *Thesaurus Criticus ad Sexti Propertii Textum*
(Leiden 1970) lists both emendations (94).

[3]So also Schuster-Dornseiff in the 1957 Teubner, H. Tränkle, *Die Sprachkunst des Properz
und die Tradition der lateinischen Dichtersprache* (Wiesbaden 1960) 156. Fedeli champions *eam*
in his note on lines 9–10 in his 1985 edition of Propertius 3. J. L. Butrica, however, retains
*eram* in his "sample text" of 3.6 (*The Manuscript Tradition of Propertius* [Toronto 1984,
*Phoenix* Supp. 17] 179).

[4]Certainly it is used far less frequently than *ille*, but Schmeisser lists 14 instances in Propertius
(including 3.6.9).

somewhat dubious, depending as it does on an emendation, one not accepted by Winterbottom), it remains none the less awkward. But the strongest argument for *eam* seems to be that *eram* would be a *hapax* in Propertius (it occurs nowhere in Tibullus either, and once only in Ovid, at *Heroides* 9.78). We should, however, remember the comment of Shackleton Bailey that "*eram* may well be right," that "Propertius never uses *era sens. erot.*, but here it would refer to Cynthia's relation to the slave, not the poet." Good point, but there is another and a better argument. It has long been acknowledged that the situation depicted in 3.6 derives from comedy[5] and, in particular, is close to a scene in Terence *Haut.* (285–310) where the slave Syrus describes to his master Clinia what he has seen in the house of Clinia's beloved Antiphila. Now whether the inspiration of this poem is Terence[6] or the Menandrian original, this scene, in which Propertius cajoles a slave and expresses a hope for his freedom if he aids the poet's love-affair (1–2, 41–42), is recognisably comic. It would, therefore, be very apt for Propertius to use language that would strike his readers as being the language of comedy, and *erus/era* rather than *dominus/domina* is in this category, as a quick glance at Lodge's *Lexicon Plautinum* and McGlynn's *Lexicon Terentianum* will reveal. *Sicine*, too, is a colloquialism frequently found in comedy (cf. Tränkle, above, note 3).

It is not simply, as Tränkle suggests, that Propertius uses in this poem colloquial language because his addressee is a slave (167); it is because the situation is immediately recognisable as a scene from comedy and such language therefore gives the appropriate flavour. So, at line 8, when Lygdamus is asked to repeat his story, Propertius uses the expression *suspensis auribus ista bibam*, and this metaphorical use of *bibere*, unparalleled in Propertius and Tibullus and occurring only once in Ovid (*Tristia* 3.5.14), is very common in Plautus. In line 39 (*me quoque consimili impositum torquerier igni*), the word *consimilis* is a *hapax* in Propertius and occurs only once elsewhere in elegy (Ovid *E.P.* 3.7.3) but is frequent in both Plautus and Terence (see Lodge and McGlynn s.v.), while the infinitive *torquerier* can also be seen as contributing to the comic tone. Parallels for this practice are also forthcoming in other poems which are obviously indebted to comedy. So, in 4.5, we find the expression *si pulset inanis* (47), with *inanis* used in the sense of empty-handed, a usage unparalleled in Propertius, Tibullus, or Ovid but frequently found in comedy. The same is true of *ferire* in line 44: in its meaning "to sting" or "touch for money" this is unparalleled in elegy

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[5]Cf. T. Gollnisch, *Quaestiones Elegiacae* (Vratislava 1905) 23 ff., J. P. Boucher, *Etudes sur Properce* (Paris 1965) 435, J. C. Yardley, "Comic Influences in Propertius," *Phoenix* 26 (1972) 135 ff. See, also, P. Fedeli's introduction to the poem in his recent commentary (though convinced of comic influence in the poem, he does not seem to see this as an argument for reading *eram*).

[6]So A. G. Lee, *CR* NS 16 (1966) 189.

but is found in both Plautus and Terence.[7] Finally, in 2.16, which is based on the comic theme of the *miles gloriosus*, we find the word *stolidus* used of the praetor (8), and this is a word found frequently in comedy, nowhere else in Propertius, nowhere in Tibullus, and only once in the elegiac works of Ovid (*Tristia* 5.10.38).

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[7]See E. Fantham, *Comparative Studies in Republican Latin Imagery* (Toronto 1972) 31.