Mythology, Address, and Structure in Propertius 2.8

THOMAS A. SUITS

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Not very long ago, any discussion of structure in Propertius 2.8 would necessarily have begun with a defense of the poem's unity.¹ Butler and Barber divided the forty lines transmitted as a whole by the manuscripts into the "fragments of three separate elegies," between which they claimed there was no coherence. Richmond saw in the same lines no fewer than seven distinct fragments belonging to six separate elegies. Damon and Helmbold, in a study more eloquent than persuasive, spoke of "Erebus," "ancient Night," and "old Chaos," suggesting that we have here at least ten fragments from an anthology.² But such views have been more than counterbalanced by vigorous defenses of the poem, of which perhaps the most effective are those of Rothstein, Abel, and Enk.³ The modern consensus is well reflected by the fact that in the recent critical editions of Barber and Schuster-Dornseiff, as well as that of Enk, the lines are printed without division.⁴ Thus.

¹ Some of the views expressed in this paper formed part of my dissertation, "Studies in Structure of the Propertian Elegy, Books I—III," presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Yale University in 1958. I am grateful to the Columbia University Council for Research in the Humanities for a grant enabling me to prepare for publication several studies on Propertius, including the present one. I am also indebted to my colleague, Professor William M. Calder III, who has generously and beneficially read my typescript.

² H. E. Butler and E. A. Barber, *The Elegies of Propertius* (Oxford 1933) 203; O. L. Richmond, *Sexti Properti quae supersunt opera* (Cambridge 1928) 402–403; P. W. Damon and W. C. Helmbold, "The Structure of Propertius, Book 2," *Univ. of Calif. Publ. in Class. Philol.* 14.6 (1952) 228–29.

⁸ M. Rothstein, Die Elegien des Sextus Propertius², Vol. 1 (Berlin 1920) 257-58; W. Abel, Die Anredeformen bei den römischen Elegikern (Berlin 1930) 46-50; P. J. Enk, "The Unity of Some Elegies of Propertius," Latomus 15 (1956) 181-85. Cf. also Enk, Ad Propertii Carmina Commentarius Criticus (Zutphen 1911) 92-94; U. Knoche (reviewing Butler and Barber), Gnomon 12 (1936) 267-68; A. La Penna, Properzio (Florence 1951) 34-36.

⁴ E. A. Barber, Sexti Properti Carmina² (Oxford 1960); M. Schuster-F. Dornseiff, Sex. Propertii Elegiarum libri IV² (Leipzig 1958); P. J. Enk, Sex. Propertii Elegiarum liber secundus (Leiden 1962). The text given in the present paper, except for minor details of punctuation, is that of Enk's edition.

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while much of the following discussion will serve incidentally to supplement previous arguments favoring unity, it does not seem necessary now to reproduce all of those arguments. Assuming unity, this paper will examine some aspects of composition still unnoticed in the poem, in particular the relevance of the Antigone-Haemon example and the pattern of the changing direct address.

* * *

Eripitur nobis iam pridem cara puella: et tu me lacrimas fundere, amice, vetas? nullae sunt inimicitiae nisi amoris acerbae: ipsum me iugula, lenior hostis ero. possum ego in alterius positam spectare lacerto? 5 nec mea dicetur, quae modo dicta mea est? omnia vertuntur: certe vertuntur amores: vinceris aut vincis, haec in amore rota est. magni saepe duces, magni cecidere tyranni, 10 et Thebae steterunt altaque Troia fuit. munera quanta dedi vel qualia carmina feci! illa tamen numquam ferrea dixit: 'Amo.' ergo iam multos nimium temerarius annos, improba, qui tulerim teque tuamque domum? 15 ecquandone tibi liber sum visus? an usque in nostrum iacies verba superba caput? sic igitur prima moriere aetate, Properti? sed morere; interitu gaudeat illa tuo! exagitet nostros manes, sectetur et umbras, 20 insultetque rogis, calcet et ossa mea! quid? non Antigonae tumulo Boeotius Haemon corruit ipse suo saucius ense latus, et sua cum miserae permiscuit ossa puellae, qua sine Thebanam noluit ire domum? 25 sed non effugies: mecum moriaris oportet; hoc eodem ferro stillet uterque cruor.

quamvis ista mihi mors est inhonesta futura, mors inhonesta quidem, tu moriere tamen.

ille etiam abrepta desertus coniuge Achilles	
cessare in tectis pertulit arma sua.	30
viderat ille fuga stratos in litore Achivos,	
fervere et Hectorea Dorica castra face;	
viderat informem multa Patroclon harena	
porrectum et sparsas caede iacere comas,	
omnia formosam propter Briseida passus:	35
tantus in erepto saevit amore dolor.	
at postquam sera captiva est reddita poena,	
fortem illum Haemoniis Hectora traxit equis.	
inferior multo cum sim vel matre vel armis,	
mirum, si de me iure triumphat Amor?	40

I. THE ANTIGONE-HAEMON EXAMPLE

The dramatic situation in 2.8 is a common one: the poet discovers that he is losing Cynthia to another man. At first he looks upon this as a case of robbery (Eripitur, 1), and his reaction is enmity and jealousy directed toward the successful rival (3-6). Later, however, the focus of his resentment shifts entirely to Cynthia, as he bitterly recalls her ingratitude and coldness (11-12) and her inexcusably callous treatment of him: she has never thought of him as other than a slave and never will (15–16).

The ten lines which follow contain so many twists of thought and have been so variously understood and misunderstood by the commentators that a re-examination seems warranted. Butler and Barber find the entire passage "amazingly incoherent" and take strong exception to the mythological example: "The illustration with which he justifies his proposed suicide (21-4) is peculiarly inept. Antigone was no faithless mistress; in all forms of the legend it is in grief for her death that Haemon slew himself. The inappropriateness is intensified by the lines which follow (25-8), in which the poet threatens to murder Cynthia." 5 La Penna is troubled by the same problem: "Il passaggio sarebbe molto più chiaro se il distico 25-26 seguisse a 20 e precedesse 21;"6

⁵ Butler and Barber (above, note 2) 204. In contrast, C. T. Kuinoel, Sexti Aurelii Propertii Carmina (Leipzig 1805) 1.100, called 17-24 "splendidus locus," without further comment. He was endorsed by F. A. Paley, Sex. Aurelii Propertii Carmina² (London 1872) on 2.8.17, who adds: "There is something fine in the sudden despair with which he resigns his resolution to resist as soon as he has made it."

⁶ La Penna (above, note 3) 36.

in other words, the decision to kill Cynthia logically should precede application of the Antigone-Haemon example. Enk seeks to avoid the difficulty by minimizing the importance of Antigone: "Propertius does not compare Cynthia with Antigone, but he compares himself with Haemon, who could not live without Antigone." There is some truth here, but it is far from a complete answer.

Almost all attempts to explain this passage have been hampered by a belief that with the Antigone-Haemon example Propertius is seeking to justify an earlier decision to kill himself. But there is nothing in 17–18 to indicate that the poet envisions a death that is anything more than a wasting away from unrequited love; sed morere (18) betokens despair, not purpose. The ease with which Propertius can move to thoughts of his own death is well known; suicide, however, only rarely forms part of them. Similarly, in 2.9.37–40, where Cynthia has likewise deserted him, Propertius expresses only a rather passive wish to die:

nunc, quoniam ista tibi placuit sententia, cedam: tela, precor, pueri, promite acuta magis, figite certantes atque hanc mihi solvite vitam: sanguis erit vobis maxima palma meus.

The mood of mixed self-pity and resentment at being wronged is continued in the next couplet (19–20), where, in a wild flight of imagination, Propertius pictures Cynthia tormenting or defiling all his spiritual and physical relics. Line 19 can be instructive for our poet's technique. Conventionally, the ghost of an injured person pursues the party who wronged him, as Dido promises to do in *Aeneid* 4.384–87:

sequar atris ignibus absens et, cum frigida mors anima seduxerit artus, omnibus umbra locis adero. dabis, improbe, poenas. audiam et haec manis veniet mihi fama sub imos.

In the Propertian passage, by a characteristic reversal, it is the ghost of the injured person that continues to be harassed by the

⁷ Enk, "Unity" (above, note 3) 184.

⁸ Only Knoche (above, note 3) makes the distinction between "natürlicher Tod aus Schmerz (17–20)" and "Selbstmord wie Haemon aus Schmerz um die erepta puella (21–24)."

⁹ See, in general, A. K. Michels, "Death and Two Poets," *TAPA* 86 (1955) 171–79. For an imagined suicide, cf. 2.17.13–14.

guilty party even after death. 10 The poet continues (21): quid? non Antigonae tumulo ...? Coming as it does after the picture of Cynthia trampling on the poet's bones, the mention of Antigone in connection with a tomb can scarcely lead the reader to expect anything but one of Propertius' customary contrasts of Cynthia's behavior with that of a heroine: "Antigone risked her own life to give pious burial to Polynices." But once the example of Antigone in this sense has come to the poet's attention, he thinks of other details of the story that are relevant to his own situation. Antigone was also involved in a tragedy of love. Haemon killed himself at her tomb because he could not go on living without her. The implication is clear: Propertius too must kill himself. other words, the example is not adduced to justify suicide but itself suggests suicide. The thought of Antigone has led to that of Haemon, which only then leads to that of suicide. Failure to recognize this sequence has been the chief cause of the condemnation the example has received.

There remains the decision to kill Cynthia. Enk thinks that this is motivated by the poet's desire to keep her from rejoicing at his death or to punish her for her infidelity. Rothstein somewhat better understands Propertius' thought: "Während er schon mit seinem eigenen Schicksal abgeschlossen hat, regt sich in ihm, unter dem Eindruck des tragischen Ausgangs der eben erwähnten Antigonesage, der Wunsch, dass mit ihm auch die Geliebte sterben soll..." Propertius realizes that in the story Haemon's death followed from that of Antigone. Elsewhere, he must carefully select or adapt his myths to fit the details of his situation. Here, on the other hand, he is in the unusual position of being able to control the circumstances and ensure that the myth will be appropriate; he has only to kill Cynthia and take her with him. The oportet gives a clue to his thinking: "After

¹⁰ La Penna (above, note 3) 36, rightly notes: "Il legame è però evidente tra Cinzia che ingiuria il poeta vivo e Cinzia che perseguita il poeta morto."

¹¹ Commentarius (above, note 3) 93; "Unity" (above, note 3) 185.

¹² Rothstein (above, note 3) 263.

¹³ From the way in which Propertius alludes to the Antigone-Haemon story in 21-24 it seems highly unlikely that he had in mind the version of the myth reported by Hyginus (Fab. 72): "Haemon se et Antigonam coniugem interfecit." However, it is conceivable that he knew such a version and that this contributed to the transition at 25. For the view that Sophocles too knew such a version, see W. M. Calder III "Was Antigone Murdered?" GRBS 3 (1960) 31-35.

all, if we are to be like Antigone and Haemon, it is proper that you die with me." 14

The exceedingly complex function of the example as suggested above (by a process of free mythological association the poet has moved from the thought of Cynthia's abuse of his remains to Antigone to Haemon to suicide and finally to murder) would admittedly be hard to parallel in the rest of the corpus. The situation, however, is also unique. Propertius is attempting to dramatize the distraught thinking that could lead to a combination of murder and suicide.

II. THE PATTERN OF CHANGING DIRECT ADDRESS

One of the most remarkable aspects of 2.8 is the frequent and sudden change of direct address. This very feature has been responsible, at least in part, for editorial tendency to division. Conversely, others have found it an effective means of expressing the vehement emotion and excited mood of the poet. The matter requires closer consideration.

As the poem opens, Propertius is addressing a friend (amice, 2). The first clear change of address occurs at 13, where the poet turns to Cynthia. Lines 7–10, however, present a special problem.¹⁷ Abel followed Ribbeck and Hertzberg in regarding these lines as an interruption by the friend of line 2, in a fruitless attempt to console the poet.¹⁸ The common view, that the poet himself speaks the lines, is defended by Enk: "Propertius tries to calm himself with a trite proverb, but the only result is that his indignation grows even stronger, as lines 11–16 show." There is undeniably a change in tone at 7, and the soothing platitudes, their effect reinforced by the nasals and spondees of the two hexameters and by the perfectly balanced structure of the two pentameters, would be appropriate in the mouth of an interlocutor. On the other hand, such an interruption as this would

¹⁴ That the transition from suicide to murder is contained implicitly in the myth is pointed out by A. W. Allen, "Sunt Qui Propertium Malint," in *Critical Essays on Roman Literature: Elegy and Lyric*, ed. J. P. Sullivan (London 1962) 138.

¹⁵ Cf. H. E. Butler, Sexti Properti opera omnia (London 1905) 185: "I cannot believe that such an abrupt change of person (at l. 13) is possible."

¹⁶ Rothstein (above, note 3) 257; Abel (above, note 3) 46.

¹⁷ Regardless of to whom the lines are addressed, in "vinceris aut vincis" (8) there is simply an instance of the gnomic "you"; so Rothstein (above, note 3) 259.

¹⁸ Abel (above, note 3) 46.

¹⁹ Enk, "Unity" (above, note 3) 183.

be unparalleled in Propertius; for "at magnus Caesar" (2.7.5) is only a brief interjection in the style of the diatribe, in which the poet talks with himself in two voices. A middle view may be suggested. We learn at the outset that the friend has told Propertius to cease his tears. It is quite possible that 7–10 do reflect arguments of the friend, but arguments which are supposed to have been set forth prior to the opening of the elegy and which the poet now quotes sardonically, showing by the next couplet (11–12) how ill-suited to his case they actually were. It might be different if the wheel of love had ever lifted him to success; but as it is, in spite of all he has said and done, she has never really loved him—never, he claims, even said that she loved him. This technique would find a parallel in 4.5.55–58, where the *lena* quotes a couplet from the poet (if 55–56 are genuine here) and then proceeds to ridicule it.

After turning directly to Cynthia at 13 (*improba*, 14), Propertius continues speaking to her through 16. At 17 he breaks off to address himself (*Properti*), continuing until 25, where he resumes the address to Cynthia:

sed non effugies: mecum moriaris oportet.20

How long this continues is not immediately clear. Cynthia is still addressed in 28 (tu moriere); but to whom are 29 ff. directed? A rather strong break between 28 and 29 has long been recognized: it is at this point that Butler and Barber (after Baehrens) divide between their fragments "B" and "C." At the same time, 29–40, including as they do the example of Achilles robbed of Briseis, form a unified whole even to Damon and Helmbold, who are reluctant to acknowledge any coherence in the poem. In strong contrast to 25–28, where the addressee is constantly before us (effugies, moriaris, ista mors, tu moriere), the addressee in this block of lines has receded so far into the background as almost to disappear. The only hint of a second person is in the question of the concluding couplet (39–40):

inferior multo cum sim vel matre vel armis, mirum, si de me iure triumphat Amor?²¹

²⁰ So all modern commentators, rejecting Keil's view that this and the following lines are addressed to the poet's rival; cf. Enk, *Commentarius* (above, note 3) 93.

²¹ For the content and tone of this couplet commentators neglect to compare Aristoph. *Nub.* 1080-82:

εἶτ' ἐς τὸν Δί' ἐπανενεγκεῖν,

That Propertius could be referring this judgment to the same Cynthia he has so recently threatened with murder is difficult to believe. On the contrary, the orientation and manner are strongly reminiscent of the question directed to the friend in the opening couplet (1-2):

Eripitur nobis iam pridem cara puella: et tu me lacrimas fundere, amice, vetas?²²

Not merely the concluding couplet but in fact the entire passage 29–40 has much in common with the introductory section. Butler and Barber concede: "It would be possible to link up 1–6 (perhaps even 1–10) with 29–40 to form a single elegy." ²³ Also, Knoche rightly points out that the two parts share the same mood and the same three motifs—*erepta puella*, *dolor*, and the result of such *dolor*—and that there is a verbal reminiscence of the beginning in the *sententia* by which the Achilles example is applied (36):

tantus in erepto saevit amore dolor.24

Still other points of contact between 29–40 and the introductory section can be demonstrated. The Achilles example is ostensibly adduced to show the disgraceful extremes to which disappointment

κάκείνος ώς ήττων έρωτός έστι καὶ γυναικῶν καίτοι σὺ θνητὸς ὢν θεοῦ πῶς μεῖζον ὢν δύναιο;

The motive is common in Euripides (e.g. *Hipp*. 451-59, *Tr*. 948-50) and is represented in New Comedy; cf. Ter. *Eun.* 584-91, especially 590-91:

at quem deum! 'qui templa caeli summa sonitu concutit.' ego homuncio hoc non facerem?

Ovid, in a passage reminiscent of the present one, uses the examples of Agamemnon and Achilles to justify love for a slave girl (Am. 2.8.13-14):

nec sum ego Tantalide maior nec maior Achille; quod decuit reges, cur mihi turpe putem?

²² So Abel (above, note 3) 49: "Das Schlussdistichon kehrt tatsächlich zu dem in Anfang geäusserten Gedanken zurück und gibt dem Gedicht eine Geschlossenheit..." Cf. Rothstein (above, note 3) 258: "Mit diesem Schlusswort ist der wesentliche Inhalt der Elegie angegeben, der Gedanke, den der Dichter am Anfang dem gut gemeinten Zureden seines Freundes entgegenstellt und auf den er immer wieder zurückkommt." La Penna (above, note 3) 36, speaks of a change at the end to a tone that is "arguto ed epigrammatico."

²³ Butler and Barber (above, note 2) 203.

²⁴ Knoche (above, note 3) 267.

in love can lead, even in the case of a great hero. By it Propertius attempts to justify his decision of the preceding couplet (27–28):

quamvis ista mihi mors est *inhonesta* futura, mors *inhonesta* quidem, tu moriere tamen.²⁵

However, the manner in which the example is introduced seems to imply that the poet has been thinking of Achilles previously. The ille (29) is understood by Butler and Barber to suggest "the famous Achilles," but this is at most only partly correct. The word points backward to the first section of the poem even as does the phrase abrepta ... coniuge to Eripitur ... puella. (So illum ... Hectora in 38 points back to the previous view of Hector in 32.) To be sure, the reader familiar with Propertius is not surprised to find an example from the Trojan cycle. In line 10 both Thebes and Troy had been mentioned: the Haemon-Antigone story was set in Thebes; the present one now balances it. 26 But what is there to suggest that the poet has been thinking specifically of Achilles? Lines 5-6 provide the clue:

possum ego in alterius positam spectare lacerto? nec mea dicetur, quae modo dicta mea est?

It would be difficult to find words more appropriate to Achilles when robbed of Briseis.²⁷ As early in the poem as this, evidently,

²⁵ This is the point of the details in 30–34, which are summed up in the *omnia* of 35. Enk, "Unity" (above, note 3) 185, following Knoche (above, note 3), understands the transition as follows: "The grief for the loss of his sweetheart has driven the poet to distraction, even to the thought of killing Cynthia. In the same way Achilles has sacrificed his bosom friend Patroclus to his passion." This is an interesting secondary point of comparison, but it involves the awkwardness of having Cynthia correspond to both Briseis and Patroclus. The primary purpose of the example is to illustrate the *inhonesta* to which grief over the loss of one's beloved can lead; cf. Allen (above, note 14) 134, 137. Patroclus' death is mentioned as only one of these disgraceful sequels. A striking parallel (with some verbal coincidences) to this application of the example of Achilles, which does not seem to be cited by any of the editors, is Plaut. *Mil.* 1287–89:

verum quom multos multa admisse acceperim inhonesta propter amorem atque aliena a bonis: mitto iam, ut occidi Achilles civis passus est.

²⁶ There is an additional allusive link between the two in the words *Haemon* (21) and *Haemoniis* (38).

²⁷ This was first observed by A. Otto, *De fabulis Propertianis*, Vol. 1 (Breslau 1880) 10–11, but appears to have gone unnoticed by later commentators. On the strength of his discovery Otto favored moving the Achilles section to follow line 6.

Propertius has begun to picture himself as a counterpart to Achilles.

A further link between the introductory and concluding passages is the manner in which the maxims of 7–10 are illustrated in the Achilles section. For Propertius does not discard the example of Achilles after using it to illustrate *inhonesta*. To the sententious finality of 36 he appends, with seeming irrelevance (37–38):

at postquam sera captiva est reddita poena, fortem illum Haemoniis Hectora traxit equis.

This has at least two important effects. First, it illustrates the kind of reversal spoken of in 8–9: vinceris aut vincis... magni saepe duces... cecidere. After the picture of Hector burning the Greek camp (32) we now see him drawn by Achilles' horses. 28 Secondly, as Hector exemplifies change from victory to defeat in war, so Achilles now illustrates change from disappointment to happiness in love. The couplet puts Achilles' situation in a new light and suggests the possibility of a happy ending in the poet's case as well. In this respect the example of Achilles is only slightly less complex in its application than that of Haemon and Antigone. It opens the prospect that the wheel of love may turn full circle. 29 This prospect in turn paves the way for the lighthearted couplet with which the poem ends.

The pronounced similarity in motif and, above all, in tone between 29–40 and 1–12 point to the conclusion that at 29 Propertius is resuming his argument with the friend of line 2, not continuing to address Cynthia and defending himself before her.³⁰ If this be so, the structure of the poem is based on a neat circularity in the changing direct address, reinforced by the fact that the

²⁸ Since Propertius focuses on the shift from victory to defeat, it is likely that he has in mind not *Il.* 24.14–17, adduced by Enk, *Liber secundus* (above, note 4) 2.132, but the earlier passage immediately following the death of Hector, *Il.* 22.395–404.

²⁹ Knoche (above, note 3), arguing against the view that 7-10 are spoken by the friend, stresses the pessimistic nature of their contents. Apart from the inconclusiveness of his argument, it should be noted that the observation is true only of 9-10; 7-8 are at least partially optimistic. (The negative tone of 9-10, however, does prepare for the black mood of 11-12.)

³⁰ Abel (above, note 3) 49, feels the need for such a resumption: "Man hat den Eindruck, als ob Properz jetzt wiederum auf die Widerlegung des vom Freunde zu Anfang gesprochenen Gedankens zurückkommen müsse."

corresponding sections have an equal number of lines.³¹ The pattern may be represented schematically as follows:

A1 1-12 (12 lines) to the friend
B1 13-16 (4 lines) to Cynthia
C 17-24 (8 lines) to himself
B2 25-28 (4 lines) to Cynthia
A2 29-40 (12 lines) to the friend

The A sections, with their facile rhetoric for the friend's benefit, are the most intellectual; the B sections, with their bitter reproaches and threats to Cynthia, more emotional (although toward the end of B2, when the poet pauses to consider his proposed action in terms of honor and dishonor, he is well on the way back to the level of A2). In the center, the C section, dominated by the wild logic of the Antigone-Haemon example, is, as suggested above, an attempt to dramatize utter distraction. It is significant that these lines are addressed by Propertius to himself. Selfaddress, relatively rare in the corpus and almost always accompanied by interpretational difficulties, is apparently restricted to Book 2.32 In this book more than anywhere else Propertius attempts to examine and explore the psychological aspects of love. Sometimes the effects of his passion upon him can best be brought out in soliloquies, in which his occasional rise to address of himself in the second person serves to render more vivid to the reader his state of mind and process of thought.

³¹ While numerical balance or "stanzaic structure" is sometimes demonstrable in Propertius, it did not form a constant principle of his composition, and attempts to prove otherwise invariably lead to forcible treatment of the text. See P. J. Enk, "Lucubrationes Propertianae," *Mnemosyne* 57 (1929) 145–59.

³² The certain case, apart from the present one, is 5.9–16; other probable instances are 3.1–4 and 18.1–4, possibly also 16.35–42.