PROPERTIUS 4.9

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Elegy 4.9 of Propertius concludes with a prayer addressed to Sancus, the Sabine name for Hercules:[1]

> Sancte pater salve, cui iam favet aspera Iuno:
> Sance, velis libro dexter inesse meo. (71–72)

In discussing the poem Hugh E. Pillinger asserts that this final couplet is a conventional formulaic ending, reminiscent of the concluding prayer of Homeric and Callimachean hymns. He states further that these two verses, with the first six lines of the elegy, form a solemn hymnic framework within which the poet treats his subject with sophisticated humor.[2] It seems to me, however, that the concluding couplet is not so conventional as it may at first appear. Propertius had made no overt mention of literature in this elegy; rather he has wittily portrayed Hercules' adventures with the monster Cacus and with the cult of the Bona Dea. Yet, at the end of the poem, the poet asks Hercules to dwell graciously in his book, an unusual request to make of Hercules, who was not primarily a patron of literature. How, we might ask, does the concluding prayer relate to the elegy as a whole?

Now, in 4.9, Propertius is ostensibly composing an aetiological poem explaining the origin of the Ara Maxima. His first three books consist almost exclusively of love elegies, and he presents himself as one whose sole concern is love. In his fourth book, however, he seems to be in a transitional state, between the writing of love elegy and the writing of aetiological elegy. In this poem, fifty verses are devoted

[1] W. A. Camps, ed., *Propertius, Elegies, Book IV* (Cambridge 1965) 136. I have used Camps' text throughout this paper.

[2] H. E. Pillinger, "Callimachean Influences on Propertius," *HSCP* 73 (1969) 183.

to a paraclausithyron in which Hercules appears as a comic *exclusus amator*.[3] Both Anderson[4] and Pillinger[5] suggest that the function of this topos of love elegy within the poem is to debunk, so to speak, the heroic Hercules, and he is, indeed, an amusing figure. I would suggest, however, that in view of the fact that Propertius asks Hercules' blessing on his book, he must have had some other purpose in composing this elegy with its long paraclausithyron than merely debunking the heroic Hercules. It is, then, the purpose of this paper to examine the poem in the hope of discovering what function the paraclausithyron has and how the final couplet is related to the elegy as a whole.

The greater part of the elegy is composed of two episodes occurring shortly after Hercules' arrival at Rome with the cattle of Geryon, whom he has recently killed: his battle with Cacus (1–20) and his confrontation with the cult of the Bona Dea (21–70). The story of Hercules' encounter with Cacus, it is generally agreed, is introductory to the tale of his actions before the shrine of the goddess. As Pillinger has shown, the lofty tone with which the poem opens gradually yields to one of increasing humor during the course of Propertius' portrayal of the battle. Not only does the poet suppress heroic aspects of the battle, which are fully described in Vergil (*Aen.* 8.185 ff.) and Livy (1.7), but, especially in the light of the previous accounts, he wittily undercuts the heroism of the tale by describing the doors of Cacus' cave as *implacidas* (14) and by causing Hercules to dismiss his herds with the words of a rustic shepherd (*Ite boves / Herculis ite boves*—16–17).[6] The humorous undercutting of the heroic Hercules in this episode helps to prepare for the farcical presentation of the god in the second tale.[7] Furthermore, both tales are told in terms of exclusion, and there are many correspondences of detail between them. Hercules' weariness is mentioned in both situations (4, 34, 66). He is granted hospitality by Cacus (7) and later begs for hospitality from the worshippers of the Bona Dea (34). When Cacus steals his cattle, Hercules is excluded from the monster's fearsome cave (*metuendo* . . .

[3] W. S. Anderson, "Hercules Exclusus: Propertius IV.9," *AJP* 85 (1964) 1–12.

[4] Anderson (above, note 3) 11.

[5] Pillinger (above, note 2) 189.

[6] Cf. Pillinger (above, note 2) 185–86, who points out that Hercules' speech echoes Vergil's *Eclogues* 10.77 (*ite domum saturae, venit Hesperus, ite capellae*).

[7] Pillinger (above, note 2) 185–86.

antro—10); he is excluded from the cave of the Bona Dea (*antro*—33) by a fearsome law (*metuenda*—55). In his wrath at Cacus, he breaks down the doors of Cacus' cave (*furis et implacidas diruit ira fores*—14); similarly, the door of the cave of the Bona Dea cannot withstand his wrathful thirst (*ille umeris postis concussit opacos / nec tulit iratam ianua clausa sitim*—60–61).[8] Finally Hercules sends away his cattle, who are addressed in the femine gender (*Herculis ite boves . . . / bis mihi quaesitae . . . .*—17–18); he later sends the *puellae* from him by excluding them from worshipping him (*haec nullis umquam pateat veneranda puellis*—70). Like the witty undercutting of the heroic aspects of Hercules' battle with Cacus, the inclusion of details in vv. 1–20 which correspond to those in the episode with the cult of the Bona Dea helps to set the scene for the second episode.[9]

Thus, the most important function of the Cacus episode is preparatory, and we might then expect the burden of the elegy to be carried by the story of Hercules' encounter with the worshippers of the Bona Dea. This tale is motivated by Hercules' Gargantuan thirst (21), caused not by his battle with Cacus, but by his speech releasing his cattle into what is to become the Forum Boarium. By placing the onset of the god's thirst immediately after his speech, Propertius again undercuts the heroic aspect of Hercules and reveals him in a more broadly humorous light than before, thus pointing the way to his farcical actions before the shrine of the Bona Dea.[10] That Hercules is again to be excluded, this time because of sacred law, is strongly suggested by the phrase *inclusas puellas* (23) and by vv. 25–26:[11]

> femineae loca clausa deae fontisque piandos
> impune et nullis sacra retecta viris

Moreover, the position of the word *femineae* at the beginning of the couplet and *viris* at the end underlines the separation of men from

[8] Anderson (above, note 3) 4.

[9] Anderson (above, note 3) 5. Anderson says that the inclusion of details in the Cacus episode which correspond to those in the tale of Hercules' encounter with the cult of the Bona Dea facilitates the transition to the second story. It seems to me, however, that in view of the fact that Propertius establishes in vv. 1–20 the pattern of exclusion which pertains throughout the poem, it might well be said that the inclusion of these details helps prepare for the second and major tale.

[10] Pillinger (above, note 2) 186.

[11] Anderson (above, note 3) 6.

women and foreshadows to a slight degree the coming conflict between Hercules and the worshippers of the Bona Dea. In fact, the episode, as Anderson has pointed out, is written in terms of a paraclausithyron, an important theme in love elegy, and Hercules appears as a common *exclusus amator*.[12]

Hercules, stricken by ludicrously caused thirst, rushes to the goddess' shrine and speaks before the closed doors. He begins, as a lover usually does in a paraclausithyron, by begging for admittance:

> Vos precor, o luci sacro quae luditis antro,
> pandite defessis hospita fana viris.
> fontis egens erro, circaque sonantia lymphis;
> et cava succepto flumine palma sat est. (33–36)

The girls to whom Hercules addresses his plea are not the staid matrons and Vestal Virgins traditionally associated with the Bona Dea, but the mistresses of love elegy.[13] Furthermore, the word *luditis* has definite sexual overtones and great thirst is a metaphor in erotic poetry for passion.[14] Thus, Hercules indeed appears in the role of a lover begging admittance to his mistress' house. He follows his plea with boasts of his brave deeds, ending his speech ridiculously by vaunting his absurd adventure as a servant-girl in the court of Queen Omphale: *et duris manibus apta puella fui* (50).

Upon being refused water, Hercules wrathfully breaks down the door and rushes into the shrine. Having slaked his thirst by draining the river, a ludicrous contrast to his request for a mere handful of water (36),[15] he pronounces his edict:

> 'Maxima quae gregibus devota est Ara repertis,
> ara per has,' inquit, 'maxima facta manus,
> haec nullis umquam pateat veneranda puellis,
> Herculis aeternum ne sit inulta sitis.' (67–70)

[12] Anderson (above, note 3) 6–7.

[13] Anderson (above, note 3) 6–7. Anderson states that the rites of the Bona Dea were solemn and were carried out by matrons and Vestal Virgins. Laughter and young girls were not associated with this cult. By speaking of laughing *puellae* in this context, Propertius appears to be evoking the mistresses of erotic elegy rather than the married women and Vestal Virgins who carried out the normal rites in honor of the goddess.

[14] Anderson (above, note 3) 7, 11–12.

[15] Pillinger (above, note 2) 187.

Thus Hercules, an *exclusus amator*, revenges himself on those who shut him out. His speech, announcing the vowing of the Ara Maxima and the exclusion of women from his cult, reveals the aition of the narrative. Just as the poet subordinates the story of Hercules' battle with Cacus, so he refers to the promise of the altar (there is no mention of its actual dedication) with a subordinate relative clause (*quae gregibus devota est Ara repertis*) and a participial phrase (*ara per has . . . maxima facta manus*). Likewise, just as he devoted most of the poem to Hercules' adventure with the cult of the Bona Dea, so the exclusion of women from his cult is expressed in the main clause of the sentence (*haec nullis umquam pateat veneranda puellis*). Thus, it would appear that Propertius is concerned primarily in this poem not with the origin of the Ara Maxima, but with the reason why women are not permitted to worship there.[16]

The poem, however, does not end with Hercules' edict. In the following couplet, he is named *sanctus* by the Tatian Cures:

> hunc, quoniam manibus purgatum sanxerat orbem,
> sic sanctum Tatiae composuere Cures. (73–74)

Ostensibly the phrase *quoniam manibus purgatum sanxerat orbem* refers to Hercules' actions of bettering the world by ridding it of monsters and malefactors.[17] The word *orbem* (73), however, recalls *orbe* (24), which Propertius uses in describing the grove in which the shrine of the Bona Dea is set. The fact that he repeats the word in v. 73 and that vv. 73–74 immediately follow Hercules' proclamation subtly suggests that the god is being rewarded for cleansing, not just the world, but the grove. Thus, Hercules is venerated as a holy being by the Sabines.

This seems rather incongruous, if, as Anderson suggests[18] and Pillinger states,[19] the major point of the poem is to transform a hero into a fool. That Hercules does appear less and less heroic and

[16] Both Anderson (10–11) and Pillinger (188–89) mention the aition of the ritual of Hercules' cult at the Bona Dea, but they look upon it only as an expression of Hercules' lack of heroism and his absurdity, and do not show the relevance of the aition to the last four verses of the poem.

[17] Camps (above, note 1) 146.

[18] Anderson (above, note 3) 11.

[19] Pillinger (above, note 2) 189.

increasingly ludicrous in the course of this poem, there can be no doubt. Propertius' purpose, however, does not seem to me merely to debunk the hero, but to show the basic absurdity of the *exclusus amator*, here represented by Hercules. Furthermore, though he appears ridiculous, unlike most excluded lovers the god not only obtains his desire, but also succeeds in revenging himself upon the *puellae* who shut him out; and, moreover, he is sanctified as a result of his actions. Thus, at the end of the poem Hercules emerges *invictus*, as he is at the beginning, which is indicated by the subtle play on his title *Invictus* in v. 3: *invictos . . . montis*.[20]

In the final couplet of the elegy, Propertius asks Hercules to dwell propitiously in his book:

> Sancte pater salve, cui iam favet aspera Iuno:
> Sance, velis libro dexter inesse meo. (71–72)

As was said earlier in this paper, it seems odd in light of the major subject of the poem for Propertius to ask Hercules, who was not primarily a patron of the arts, to be propitious to his book. It seems reasonable to assume that the key to the resolution of this apparent incongruity must lie within the body of the poem. I would suggest that it is Hercules' act of excluding those who had excluded him that led Propertius to make this request at the end of his elegy; for Propertius, like Hercules, has been an *exclusus amator*.[21] In presenting Hercules as a comic figure in the paraclausithyron (21–70), he is showing that the role of the *exclusus amator* is ridiculous, not only as it pertains to Hercules, but as it pertains to all who assume that role. Thus, Propertius, it might appear, feels some identification with the god. Hercules, however, goes beyond the role of the *exclusus amator* when he excludes women from worshipping at his altar and, furthermore, when his action in shutting out the women is actually suggested to be a purification. Thus, in requesting Hercules to be the patron of his book, Propertius is intimating that he is rejecting the role of *exclusus amator* and, one might infer, that, like Hercules, he too is rejecting

[20] Pillinger (above, note 2) 184.

[21] See particularly *Elegies* 2.16 and 3.25. and also Frank O. Copley, *Exclusus Amator: A Study in Latin Love Poetry* (Baltimore 1956) 74–82, for a discussion of the way in which Propertius uses the paraclausithyron.

women. Moreover, when he asks the god's blessing on his book, he is replacing as his literary patron Cynthia, whom he has previously called the inspiration of his work (2.1.1–4), with Hercules. By presenting in a ridiculous way the paraclausithyron, which culminates in the rejection of women, and, finally, by replacing as his patron Cynthia with Hercules, the god who has excluded women from his worship, Propertius seems to be suggesting that he is no longer interested in women or in composing love elegy.

As we have seen, the Cacus episode is essentially preparatory to Hercules' adventure with the cult of the Bona Dea, which forms the major part of the poem. The paraclausithyron is not an end in itself, but serves to reveal the absurdity of the role of the *exclusus amator*, represented by Hercules, and to show why the god excludes women from his cult. In the last two verses of the poem, Propertius subtly intimates that he feels an affinity with Hercules, in that he too is excluding women, and suggests that he is turning away from the writing of love elegy. Thus, though the final couplet has the conventional form of the ending of a hymn, Propertius has endowed it with more than conventional significance.