

PROPERTIUS' LYCINNA

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The standard biographies of Propertius nearly all include an affair with one Lycinna, an affair which, it is believed, launched the poet's love life. Butler and Barber claim that "soon after his [Propertius'] assumption of the *toga virilis* there took place his first love-affair with Lycinna . . . It may have occurred some time between 35 and 33 B.C."¹ Postgate had made the same claim in the introduction to his *Select Elegies* (xvii): "Soon afterwards [sc. after the adoption of the *toga virilis*] he made the acquaintance of Lycinna." Enk, in the introduction to his commentary on Book 1 (7), agreed: "vix sumpserat togam virilem cum cognovit ancillam adulescentem, cui nomen erat Lycinna." *Sed haec prius fuere*. One would have expected that the controversy over the biographical interpretation of Roman Elegy in recent years (one thinks especially of Archibald Allen's "Sincerity and the Roman Elegists"²) would introduce a measure of caution in the reconstruction of Propertius' love affair from the poetry (for Lycinna appears only in the poetry, in 3.15). But not so. "As a very young man," says Georg Luck, "he had an affair with a slave-girl, Lycinna, whom he remembers affectionately because of her unselfishness."³ Leon Herrmann suggested at the International Ovidian Conference at Sulmona in 1958 that she was none other than Ovid's Corinna, that Ovid and she started an affair after she was left by Propertius.⁴ Saara

¹ Butler and Barber's Introduction (xx). Oddly enough, in the commentary on 3.15 (300), they claim that "in both cases [i.e., 3.15 and 1.20] the setting of the legend may be real or fictitious."

² *CP* 45 (1950) 145-60, expanded into "Sunt qui Propertium malint" in J. P. Sullivan's *Critical Essays on Roman Literature* (London 1962) 107-48.

³ *The Latin Love Elegy* (London 1969²) 119.

⁴ Cf. "De Ovidianae Corinnae vita," *Atti del Convegno Internazionale Ovidiano* (Rome 1959) 307-9.

Lilja is still willing to pinpoint the time in Propertius' youth when the affair took place, referring to the *fact* that "as soon as he had assumed the *toga virilis*, which was usually assumed at the age of fifteen or sixteen, he had a love affair of short duration with Lycinna, and then fell in love with Cynthia . . ." ⁵ J. P. Boucher claims that "l'origine du poème [3.15] est à rechercher du côté de la circonstance réelle dont le récit est la transposition, l'expression symbolique et artistique." ⁶ Lycinna is clearly still part of Propertius' biography.

A number of considerations cast doubt upon the historical existence of Lycinna. Propertius states at the beginning of the Elegies that Cynthia was *prima* (1.1.1), though this could be taken to mean not that she was his first amorous adventure but that "die wahre Leidenschaft der Liebe lernte er erst durch Cynthia kennen." ⁷ Further, Lycinna appears in 3.15 for the first time and she does not reappear, though one could argue that love for Cynthia naturally excluded other women from his erotic elegies. More difficult to counter is the argument that of the poem's 46 verses only 14 are given to the "personal" situation while the remaining 32 recount the myth of Dirce and Antiope; even if the story is only an extended *exemplum*, one still feels—as with 1.20, which it resembles in structure ⁸—that the autobiographical setting is necessitated by the personal nature of the genre in which the poet is writing, and that the poet has invented the personal setting to give an "objective" elegy a "subjective" form. Wilamowitz, who himself felt this, argued that one may still accept the biographical evidence of the poem "because the link (sc. between the first ten lines and the legend of Dirce and Antiope) is not neatly joined." ⁹ It hardly needs to be

⁵ *The Roman Elegists' Attitude to Women* (Helsinki 1965) 13.

⁶ *Études sur Properce* (Paris 1965) 237.

⁷ K. P. Schulze, *Römische Elegiker* (Berlin 1910⁵) 168. The argument is found at least as early as Kuinoel's 1805 edition (Kuinoel, vol. 1, xxxvi).

⁸ As both Butler and Barber (300) and Camps (vol. 3, 125) point out, in both poems Propertius uses a personal introduction, recounts a legend at some length and ends with an application of the legend to the present situation. In both poems, too, it is left to the reader to reconstruct that situation from the legend (see E. Reitzenstein, *Wirklichkeitsbild und Gefühlsentwicklung bei Properz*, *Philologus* Suppl. 29.2 [Leipzig 1936] 70).

⁹ *Hellenistische Dichtung* (Berlin 1924) 236 note 1: "nicht mehr bedeutet der scheinbar ganz persönliche Eingang von 3.15, das nur die Antiopegeschichte erzählen will. Nur weil die Verknüpfung schlecht gelungen ist, darf man glauben dass an dem Verhältnis mit Lycinna etwas Wahrheit ist."

pointed out that an abrupt transition is by no means the hallmark of "sincerity" in a poem.¹⁰

These considerations apart, there is another, and more compelling, argument against the biographical veracity of the poem's "personal" situation, namely that the situation itself seems to be a literary borrowing. Let us now examine the "personal setting," and, in particular, Lycinna's position.

To do this, we must go to the myth of Dirce and Antiope; as Shackleton Bailey maintains (*Propertiana* 186), the bearing of the myth on the "personal" subject of the poem is clear and would be even without 43 which draws the moral from the story; the "real" triangle Cynthia-Propertius-Lycinna is paralleled by the mythical triangle Dirce-Lycus-Antiope. In 13 ff. Propertius describes the torments inflicted upon Antiope by Dirce, and in 15 he goes out of his way to show that Antiope's position in the household of Dirce is that of a slave. She is referred to as *famulam*, and one of the punishments she endures at the hands of Dirce is described by the words *pensis oneravit iniquis*, which is very close to the description of the punishment inflicted on Cynthia's erstwhile slaves by her successor in Propertius' affections (4.7.41: *et graviora rependit iniquis pensa quasillis / garrula de facie si qua locuta mea est*). In fact, no extant version of the myth makes Antiope the servant of Dirce. Either, therefore, Propertius is following a version of the story unknown to us,¹¹ or else he has himself altered the relationship between the characters of the myth to suit the purposes of the poem. Whichever of those alternatives is the case, one thing at least is clear, that Antiope is the slave of Dirce in this poem. It follows,

¹⁰ Whether or not something has dropped out between lines 10 and 11 is not pertinent to the argument of this paper. For an excellent account of the problem, see Shackleton Bailey, *Propertiana* 186.

¹¹ On Propertius' sources, see L. Alfonsi, "L'Antiope di Pacuvio e Properzio III 15," *Dioniso* 35.2 (1961) 5-10. Alfonsi argues that Propertius is indebted to Pacuvius, but the loss of Pacuvius' play makes this very difficult to substantiate and Alfonsi's comparison of the fragments of Pacuvius with Propertius' poem is not very convincing.

It seems to me likely that Propertius is following some Alexandrian model. H. J. Rose, commenting on Hyginus *Fab.* 7, which is very close to Propertius in some of its details, claims that the Hyginus version of the myth is a "recentiorem fabulae formam." For his arguments, see his *Hygini Fabulae* (Leyden 1933) 9. Further, the scholiast H. on *Odyssey* 11.260 (*Τὴν δὲ μέτ' Ἀντιόπην ἴδον, Ἀσωποῖο θυγάτρα*) tells us that, whereas Antiope is Asopus' daughter in Homer, *Νυκτέως αὐτὴν οἱ νεώτεροι ἱστοροῦσιν*. In Propertius, she is *Nycteos* (3.15.12).

therefore, as many scholars have assumed,¹² that Lycinna is the slave of Cynthia.

Sexual relationships with a slave are frequent in both Greek and Roman literature. A free-woman's relationship with a male slave occurs in Mime (cf. Herodas 5 and the Oxyrhynchus Mime), Roman Satire (cf. Juvenal 6.279 ff., Petronius 45; cf. also Martial 12.58) and in later Greek prose literature (cf. Xen. Eph. 2.5, Lucian *Ep. Sat.* 29, Aristanetus 2.15).¹³ It is found at least as early as Aristophanes *Thesm.* 491, and its occurrence in Aristophanes, Mime, Satire and Romance may indicate that it was a theme of Novella.¹⁴ That is not to say, of course, that such affairs are confined to literature or story-telling; their occurrence in real life is well demonstrated by Claudius' law of A.D. 52 which diminished the status of a woman who entered into concubinage with a slave.¹⁵ For free men and female slaves cf. Theophrastus *Char.* 4, Horace *Odes* 2.4, *AP* 5.18 (Rufinus), 5.302 (Agathias), Aristanetus 1.17, etc. That this, too, was not simply a literary theme is perhaps suggested by the word *ancillariolus* ("lover of maidservants") in Seneca *De Benef.* 1.9 and Martial 12.58.1, and also by Quintilian's example of an "argument from similarity" (5.11.34): *Si turpis dominae consuetudo cum servo, turpis domino cum ancilla; si mutis animalibus finis voluptas, idem homini.*¹⁶ What is noticeable in the examples cited above, but absent from Propertius, is a concern with the propriety of such relationships.

Closer to Propertius in theme are the Cypassis poems of Ovid, *Amores* 2.7 and 2.8, inasmuch as the situation in these poems involves rivalry between mistress and maid for the man. For this situation Ovid may be indebted to Propertius, although there are no verbal similarities,

¹² E.g., Luck (above, note 3) 119; Camps, vol. 3, 126; Rothstein, vol. 2, 124; R. Helm, *Properz Gedichte* (Berlin 1965) 267. Some have shown undue scepticism; e.g., Postgate in his introduction (xvii), Herrmann (above, note 4) 308, Enk, vol. 1, 7. (Enk's scepticism is mystifying; he accepts that Lycinna is an *ancilla*, but will not commit himself on whether or not she is *Cynthiae serva*!) Most recently, John Barsby (*Ovid: Amores* 1 [Oxford 1973] 129) states: "It is perhaps surprising that the *ancilla* . . . plays no part in the affairs of Propertius and Tibullus."

¹³ For more examples see Headlam-Knox, *Herodas* xlii, note 1.

¹⁴ See Sophie Trenkner, *The Greek Novella* (Cambridge 1958) 86-87.

¹⁵ Tacitus *Annals* 12.53. Suetonius (*Vesp.* 2) also mentions the law but wrongly assigns it to Vespasian (see Furneaux *ad loc.*).

¹⁶ For this same question (the comparative propriety of man-slavegirl and woman-male slave relationships) see also Musonius Rufus 12 (Lutz).

and he has emphasized a different aspect of the situation; Ovid concerns himself, at least in 2.7, with the question of the propriety of a free man-female slave relationship,¹⁷ whereas Propertius is concerned only with Cynthia's jealousy of Lycinna. We might concede that Ovid took only the triangular situation from Propertius and gave it a very different treatment. But it is also possible—I would venture to say likely—that Propertius and Ovid drew the triangular situation from the same source, that is from comedy.

That the elegists were indebted to the comic poets for this situation was first suggested by Leo.¹⁸ Leo pointed out the similarity of theme between the Ovidian Cypassis poems (*Am.* 2.7 and 8) and Plautus *Truculentus* 94, where Diniarchus, who is in love with the *meretrix* Phronesium, sees Astaphium, the *ancilla* of Phronesium, approach and says: *sed haec quidem eius Astaphium est ancillula; / cum ea quoque mihi fuit commercium*. A closer parallel, also cited by Leo, is Aristaeetus 2.7, which Leo believed was inspired by New Comedy. In this letter we have the story of a slave-girl who was in love with her mistress's lover. She was attractive, and so easily seduced the lover, but they were caught *in flagranti delicto* by the mistress, who proceeded to tear out the girl's hair. Albin Lesky sees this as "Unterlage für einem Mimus,"¹⁹ but Leo may have been correct in assuming that comedy was the source since the situation here may be regarded as a conflation of two comic situations, the jealousy of the *matrona* of the slave-girl with whom she believes her husband to be in love (see below) and the *matrona* bursting into a house and discovering the husband in a compromising position with a girl, usually a *meretrix* (cf. Plautus *Asin.* 880 ff., *Mercator* 783 ff.).

But we do not have to rely on late epistolographers; satisfactory parallels can be found in Roman Comedy. In Plautus' *Casina* we find Cleostrata complaining of her husband's love for an *ancilla* (*Casina*

¹⁷ Ovid uses the triangular situation again in the *Ars*. At 1.375 ff. he considers the question of whether it would be profitable to seduce the maid of the girl to boost her enthusiasm for pressing the lover's suite with the girl. In this Ovid is giving a new twist to the theme of the "maid-as-go-between," familiar in Greek and Roman literature from at least the time of Euripides' *Hippolytus*. See John Barsby (above, note 12) 129.

¹⁸ *Plautinische Forschungen* (Berlin 1912²) 150.

¹⁹ *Aristaeetus: Erotische Briefe* (Zurich 1951) 173.

190 ff.). At Caecilius *Plocium* 142 ff. (Warmington 136 ff.), the hen-pecked husband complains about his wife, and the reason he gives for his most recent troubles with her is that she suspects him of involvement with his *ancilla* (148 *Ea me clam se cum mea ancilla ait consuetum*). The passage is quoted by Gellius (2.23.4) who informs us that the wife in Menander's *Plocium* entertained the same suspicion. It is true that in both Plautus and Caecilius (and Menander, his source) the "master" is not a lover, but a husband, and it is not a mistress who is jealous of the *ancilla* but a wife. Nevertheless, the situation is still a triangular one, involving a man and a woman with a commitment to each other, and an *ancilla* who is suspected by the woman of being involved with the man. Apart from the formality of the relationship between the man and the woman, the situation parallels that of Propertius' poem exactly.

It is well known that Propertius makes use of the situations and motifs of Comedy, whether Roman, or as seems more likely, Greek.²⁰ Lycinna seems to belong to such a borrowed situation. It is thus difficult to resist the conclusion that this situation, and Lycinna, are fictional, not autobiographical. In fact, it is time for Lycinna to be driven from Propertius' biography, or, at least, only admitted with a question mark.

²⁰ See A. A. Day, *The Origins of Latin Love-Elegy* (Oxford 1938) 85-101; *Phoenix* 26 (1972) 134-39.

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