

PROPERTIUS
E L E G I E S

BOOK I

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1961

ISBN 0 521 29210 7

First published 1961
Reprinted 1966, 1967, 1969, 1972
First paperback edition 1977
Reprinted 1981, 1985, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1995, 1999

Printed in Great Britain
by Athenæum Press Ltd, Gateshead,
Tyne & Wear

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INTRODUCTION

Propertius' works

Propertius' works consist exclusively of poems in the elegiac metre. In the manuscripts they are divided into four books, containing respectively 22, 34, 25 and 11 elegies, making a total of 92. As, however, several of these are subdivided by modern editors, the total in modern editions is usually larger.

Most of the elegies in the first three books are on the subject of love. But there are some on other subjects. Several for instance, though outwardly attached to the love theme, are really concerned with Propertius' achievements and ambitions as a poet rather than with his feelings as a lover. In several again there is no pretence of a connexion with the love theme. Thus I, xxi is about the death of a kinsman of the poet in the Perusine war; I, xxii is about the poet's birthplace; III, xviii is a funeral elegy on the death of Augustus' heir Marcellus; III, xxii is an encomium on Italy; and so on.

Many, though not all, of the elegies that are concerned with love refer specifically to the feelings of Propertius for a mistress whom he calls Cynthia. This subject completely dominates the first book and is still prominent in the second; in the third book it falls into the background, and the last two elegies of that book (which are not necessarily the last in order of composition) declare the relationship at an end. Cynthia is actually *named* in 13 elegies out of 22 in the first book, in 12 out of 34 in the second book, and in 3 out of 25 in the third book. Of the love elegies that do not name Cynthia some certainly refer to her (e.g. I, ii and I, vii); some certainly refer to other women (e.g. II, xxii); and some again are general essays on topics arising from the love theme, such as II, xii in which the poet discusses the reasons why love is appropriately represented with wings,

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or III, xix in which he argues, with illustrations from mythology, that the passions of women are more violent than those of men.

Book IV in its atmosphere and character stands apart from the rest. Of the 11 elegies that compose it, five (or six if we count the elegy that serves as introduction to the whole book) are 'aetiological' poems, i.e. describe the origin in legend or history of some place-name or religious institution or the like. Of the remainder, three are related indeed to the love theme but in a manner that contrasts sharply with that of the previous books. Of these IV, v represents a bawd giving advice to a younger woman on the exploitation of lovers; IV, vii recounts the appearance of Cynthia to Propertius in a dream on a night after her funeral; IV, viii shows Propertius caught by Cynthia in the company of a pair of less elegant courtesans. All are coloured strongly with an unromantic realism that is startlingly different from the emotional tone of the earlier books.

Hellenistic and rhetorical influences

In the form of a number of the elegies certain genres of Hellenistic poetry are clearly recognizable. Thus I, xx is a brief narrative of the Hylas story addressed to a friend of the poet: it repeats the form of Theocritus XIII. In I, xxi the speaker asks a passer-by to carry the news of his death to his family: this is an adaptation of the form of epigrams such as that of Callimachus in *A.P.* VII, dxxi. In III, iii the poet professes to have been advised by Apollo how to use his poetic gifts: this is an adaptation of a well-known passage from Callimachus' *Aitia*. In Book IV the same poem of Callimachus has given the idea for the five 'aetiological' poems (ii, iv, vi, ix, x).

Other elegies again seem in their form to show affinity with various types of composition that were practised at Rome as part of a young man's education. For instance, II, xii in which the poet discusses the representation of Love as a winged creature recalls an exercise mentioned later by Quintilian (II,

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iv, 26): *quid ita crederetur Cupido puer...et sagittis ac face armatus*. The praise of Spartan customs in III, xiv and the praise of Italy in III, xxii belong to the same class as the *laus legum* and *laus locorum* of Quintilian II, iv, 33 and III, vii, 27. The sermon in III, xiii is a *locus communis* (*in luxuriam*) such as those discussed by Quintilian II, iv, 22-3. The imaginary letter from wife to absent husband in IV, iii is a speech in character of the kind called a *prosopopoeia* by the teachers of rhetoric. It is not suggested that elegies such as these are no more than exercises; but it does appear likely that exercises such as those referred to have had some influence on their form.

The love elegy a creation of the Augustans

But the typical elegy on the love theme as we meet it in Propertius and his contemporary Tibullus and his successor Ovid—a piece of some extent in which the poet discourses about his own love (occasionally a friend's) or some occasion arising from it—seems to be a product of the Augustan age (if one may use the term loosely to embrace the whole period 43 B.C.—A.D. 14) and to have had no established form as predecessor in Greek or Latin literature. The known love poems of the Alexandrian elegists are epigrams in which the poet speaks of his own love in the compass of a few lines, or are narrative elegies in which the poet recounts or enumerates the love stories of mythology. The love poetry of Catullus belongs in *form* to the category of epigram. Both Quintilian in his review of Latin literature (*Inst. Or.* x) and Ovid when speaking of his predecessors in elegy (*Trist.* IV, x) agree in listing before Ovid three poets only: Gallus, Tibullus and Propertius. The first of these is Cornelius Gallus, subject of Virgil's tenth Eclogue, who incurred Augustus' displeasure as prefect of Egypt and committed suicide in 27 or 26 B.C. The Servian commentary on the tenth Eclogue says that Gallus *amorum suorum de Cytheride scripsit libros quattuor*. We may suppose,

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though we do not know for certain, that these poems were elegies. Only one line of Gallus' making (a pentameter: *uno tellures diuidit amne duas*) has survived. We do not know at all how much of his output consisted of love elegies. But in view of the statements of Ovid and Quintilian it is presumably to him that the credit for inventing the genre¹ must go. We may think of it, if we wish to speculate, as an expansion of the epigram under the influence of that facility in the development of an idea (*copia*) which contemporary education sought to promote.

Its treatment by the Augustan elegists

The genre is handled by Propertius, Tibullus and Ovid in quite separate and distinctive ways. Ovid for instance makes it plain at the outset of his *Amores* that his feelings are not involved, and the whole collection proves to be a set of studies, by an extraordinarily inventive and articulate talent, on topics borrowed from existing love poetry—borrowed, of course, intentionally, and inviting reminiscence of previous treatments as part of the artistic effect at which the writer aims. In Tibullus and Propertius erotic feeling is an important factor, and in Propertius this feeling is unmistakably intense. But in them too we are conscious of a considerable inherited or conventional element, the exact extent of which we are not able to estimate. This point has to be kept in mind in interpreting any individual poem, which cannot always be safely understood as referring to a real occasion, even when it very definitely professes to do so. Another point that has to be kept in mind is the social context in which the 'love affairs' of these poets purport to occur; this is different from the context of most English love poetry, and the reader has to be careful not to

¹ Catullus LXXVI by its length (26 lines) exceeds the limits of the epigram and bears a manifest resemblance to the love elegy of the Augustans. Cat. LXVIII is longer still, and foreshadows Propertius in its blending of mythology with personal statement. But these poems in Catullus appear as isolated experiments, not yet representative of an established genre.

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assume a background of sentiment to these poems which belongs to another world than theirs.¹ For instance, lifelong devotion is often professed, but it is hardly conceivable (and this the participants know very well) that it can be realized in fact. The women concerned, who may be both highly accomplished and sincerely loved, are none the less professional courtesans, and their social category is separated from that of the men in the story by law as well as by custom.

Propertius' life

Very little is known of Propertius' life beyond what he tells us himself in his works. His name was Sextus Propertius, for he is so called by Donatus in his life of Virgil, in a passage almost certainly derived verbatim from Suetonius. He was an Umbrian, probably from the neighbourhood of Assisi (I, xxii and IV, i, 120ff.). It can be assumed with some confidence that he was born not earlier than 57 B.C., since from IV, i, 120ff. it appears that when he assumed the *toga uirilis* he had already forfeited most of his patrimony in the confiscations of 41-40 B.C., and an age of seventeen or more on assuming the *toga uirilis* would be unusual.² He lost his father in boyhood (IV, i, 120ff.) and his mother in early manhood (IV, i, 120ff. and II, xx, 15). While still very young he chose poetry instead of oratory for his career (IV, i, 120ff.).

Not later than 30 B.C. (I, vi) he was captivated by Cynthia, the subject of so many of his poems, whose real name according

¹ Some idea of the social context, and of the variety of situations and of sentiment that might occur in it, may be got from the following: Terence, *Andria* 70-99 and *Eunuchus* 1-200 (where one must make due allowance for the difference of date and for the Greek background); Catullus X and XLV; Horace, *Epodes* xi and *Odes* I, xxv, III, xiv and IV, xiii; Propertius II, xxiii and IV, viii; Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*, *passim*. The list might of course be much longer.

It must be emphasized that Catullus' Lesbia and the elegist Sulpicia belong to a different category altogether.

² On the age for taking the *toga uirilis* see F. H. Sandbach in *Classical Review* (1940), p. 73.

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to Apuleius (*Apologia* 10) was Hostia. She was a *meretrix*, as appears from poems such as II, vi where he compares her to famous courtesans like Lais, Thais and Phryne, or II, xvi where he says of her that *semper amatorum ponderat una sinus*, or I, iv where she is one of a class designated as *puellae* and her vexation at the loss of a lover is spoken of as a recurrent event. The affair, according to III, xxv, 3, lasted five years; but the figure five in the poem quoted may be a rough one, and the breach there recorded may not after all have been final. In IV, vii Cynthia has recently died.

At some point Propertius' younger contemporary Ovid (born 43 B.C.) entered his circle; for Ovid (*Trist.* IV, x, 45 ff.) claims often to have heard Propertius recite his love poems (*ignes*) and to have been associated with him in some kind of *sodalitium*; this can hardly have begun earlier than 26 B.C. when Ovid would be seventeen years old, and may not have begun till considerably later. At some time also Propertius seems to have married—unless he adopted an heir; for the younger Pliny (*Ep.* IX, xxii, 1) speaks of one Passenus Paullus as descended from him. He died not later than A.D. 2, since Ovid in the *Remedia Amoris* (763) speaks of him in that year in the past tense. The last datable reference in his extant works is to an event of 16 B.C. (see below).

Datable occasions in his works

The occasions of a few of the elegies are definitely datable, and this gives us at least a rough chronology of Propertius' poetic activity. In book I the sixth elegy is on an occasion connected with the proconsulship of L. Volcacijs Tullus in Asia in 30–29 B.C. In book III the eighteenth elegy is on the death of Marcellus in 23 B.C. In book IV the eleventh elegy is a funeral laudation of the sister of P. Cornelius Scipio, who died (as appears from lines 85–6 of the poem) in 16 B.C., the year of her brother's consulship. In book II there is no allusion that fixes

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a definite date but several that fix upper limits of date; thus in the tenth elegy Octavian is addressed as Augustus, implying a date in 27 B.C. or later; in the thirty-fourth Cornelius Gallus is said (line 91) to have died 'lately', implying a date in 27-26 B.C. or not much later. In general therefore we can associate the four books with the years 30, 26, 23 and 16 B.C. respectively, it being understood of course that the composition of the poems in any one book may have been spread over several years. It is better not to speculate about dates of 'publication' since the conditions of publication in the ancient world were so different from those today that the term is likely to mislead.

The terms of IV, i, 131 do not naturally suggest that Propertius' assumption of the *toga uirilis* followed without any appreciable interval on the confiscations of 41-40 B.C. On the other hand the reader of Book I will probably form the impression that the author was fully adult; and when Propertius in I, xxii refers to the memory of his kinsman's death in the Perusine war of 40 B.C. as a great grief to himself personally it does not seem likely that he is referring to something that happened when he was twelve years old or less. These considerations may lead us to set the date of his birth later than 57, but earlier than 52 B.C. But it remains a matter of conjecture. All we really can assume with any confidence is that he was born in the decade beginning 57 B.C.

Character of Book 1

Book I seems to have been in circulation in the ancient world as a separate volume, beside and apart from any collection of Propertius' works as a whole; for the gift that is the subject of Martial XIV, clxxxix is described as *Cynthia, iucundi carmen iuuenale Properti* under the heading *Monobiblos Properti*. And indeed of the 22 elegies that the book contains the first 19 are, or appear to be, all concerned with the Cynthia story and Cynthia is actually named in as many as 13 of them. The last

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three poems of the book are miscellaneous; xx is an elegiac narrative of the Hylas myth, xxi commemorates the death of a relative of the poet, and xxii identifies the region of his birth-place. The first and last poems of the book are both addressed to a friend named Tullus, who is also the addressee of vi and xiv.

Motives shared with Tibullus and other poets

In the poems on the love theme there will be found a number of characters, situations and motives that are found also in contemporary or earlier poets. For example the witch (cf. Tib. I, ii, 41), the rich rival (Tib. I, v, 47), the derisive friend (Tib. I, ii, 87), the friends who try to bring the infatuated man to his senses (Hor. *Epod.* xi, 25). Or again the moonlight shining through the window on the sleeping girl (Philodemus in *A.P.* v, cxxiii), the poet made witness of a friend's amour (Cat. XLV), the departure of the lady on an arduous journey with another lover (arg. *Ecl.* x), the lover uttering his complaint amid romantic scenery (Virg. *Ecl.* x), the lover outside the lady's closed door (Callimachus in *A.P.* v, xxiii and Tib. I, i, 56). Or again the contrast between the lover and the man of action (Tib. I, i, 53), the worthlessness of riches by comparison with love (Tib. I, ii, 75), the value of poetry as an instrument of love (Tib. II, iv, 15), the role of instructor or expert in love (Tib. I, iv, 9ff.); the loved one's protestations proved false (Tib. I, ix, 1), the arts of adornment used by women and reflections thereupon (Tib. I, viii, 9).

The number of coincidences here between Propertius and his slightly older contemporary Tibullus needs explanation. It is not of course likely that one is consistently echoing the other, for why, of two contemporaries, should we suppose one so original and one so suggestible? Moreover a number of the motives that are common to the two poets are observable in earlier literature, especially in comedy, in epigram and in Alexandrian narrative elegy. We seem to be dealing with a set

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of motives that are already established as it were as a convention. But how and when did such a convention become established? And what contribution to it was made by Gallus? We do not know. But we can conjecture that two factors were probably important. First, the collection of motives from past literature and adaptation of them to adorn a theme was a habit encouraged by contemporary education. Secondly, we can be sure that the poets of that time wrote far more than they ever made fully public, and that much of this was communicated by private recitation within literary coteries such as those of which we are aware in connexion with the early life of Virgil and Ovid.

Mythological allusion

A characteristically Propertian feature of these poems is the abundance of mythological allusion. This habit was favoured by the rhetoricians' method, taught at school, of enumerating examples to support an argument. It was favoured also by the example of the Hellenistic poets, who were fond of assembling and reciting legends that had some common element (loves of gods, loves of poets, unhappy loves, etc.); indeed, a Greek named Parthenius had compiled for Gallus a book¹ (in prose) of tales of unhappy love expressly to be used as a source of allusions in his own poetry. In Propertius the resulting allusions have a far from mechanical quality, and in passages such as I, iii, 1-8, or I, xix, 7-18, or II, xxviii, 49-58 it is plain that in his imagination the legends and their characters are alive. The notes on the mythology in the present volume are necessarily brief and jejune, and the reader who does not wish to lose the evocative value of the allusions is advised to look up in a dictionary of mythology those stories that he does not carry in his head.

¹ Called 'Ἐρωτικά παθήματα and still extant.

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Arrangement of the contents of the book

The following list shows to whom Elegies i-xix are addressed:

- i Tullus

- ii Cynthia
- iii
- iv an interferer (Bassus)
- v an interferer (Gallus)

- vi Tullus

- vii Ponticus
- viii Cynthia (with pendant viiiB, to no named person)
- ix Ponticus

- x Gallus
- xi Cynthia (with pendant xii, to no named person)
- xiii Gallus

- xiv Tullus

- xv Cynthia
- xvi
- xvii soliloquy
- xviii soliloquy

- xix Cynthia

Elegy i (as also Elegy xxii) is addressed to Tullus in token that the book as a whole is as it were 'dedicated' to him. But its first word is 'Cynthia' and its natural counterpart in the collection is Elegy xix.

Elegies ii-xviii fall, as can be seen from the list above, into a series of groups,¹ and these groups are arranged within the

¹ Here is a comparison of Elegies ii-v and xv-xviii in respect of the percentage of pentameters in each that end in a word of more than two syllables: Elegy ii, 43.7%; Elegy iii, 60.9%; Elegy iv, 21.4%; Elegy v, 12.5%; Elegy xv, 66.6%; Elegy xvi, 75.0%; Elegy xvii, 21.4%; Elegy xviii, 25.0%.

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book in chiasitic order. A similarly chiasitic order is found in *Ov. Trist.* v (see Herrmann, cited by E. Martini, *Einleitung zu Ovid* (1933), p. 52).

Elegies ii-xviii also fall into eight pairs, the members of which are in some cases separated (ii and xv, iii and xvi, vi and xiv, vii and ix, x and xiii, viii and xi), and sometimes juxtaposed (iv and v, xvii and xviii). The members of each pair are addressed to the same person, except where there is no person addressed (iii and xvi, xvii and xviii), or there is an obvious reason for departing from the principle (iv and v, where the object is to exhibit two different types of interferer). The members of each pair have always related subjects or situations (e.g. ii and xv both reproach Cynthia for dressing herself up; iii and xvi, which might at first sight seem to have nothing in common, are in fact complementary to one another, presenting in antithesis the complaints of neglected woman and rejected man). And under the similarities that unite the members of any pair there are always intentional differences that contrast them.

Any reader interested in this aspect of Propertius' art will be able to work out the subject further for himself. Enough has been said here to show that the elegies of this book are not biographical in the order of their arrangement, and only to a limited extent biographical in character at all.

Quality of Propertius' poetry

A good deal has been said above about educational and literary influences, conventions, formal arrangement and the like. Some knowledge of these matters can prevent our making false assumptions about the nature of Propertius' poetry and looking for beauty in it in the wrong places. But it can tell us nothing in a positive sense about the excellence or otherwise of the poetry, any more than a knowledge of the subject of a picture and the occasion for which it was commissioned and the style

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of the school to which the artist belonged will tell one anything of the excellence or otherwise of the painting.

Propertius is a poet of a very high order; and he is so principally in virtue of three properties and (in his best passages) their exactly harmonious co-operation. The first of these is an abnormal sensitivity both of the senses and of the feelings—including incidentally the feeling evoked by proper names suggestive of distance, antiquity and legendary splendours. The second is a powerful pictorial imagination. The third is a strongly individual style, which can make glowing patterns of sound as it moves and which is, moreover, expressive in the utmost degree. These properties will be found abundantly illustrated in the poems of the present book: see for instance I, iii, 1-8, I, viii, 5-12, I, x, 1-10, I, xix, 1-12, I, xx, 33-49 and *passim*. Here are three examples taken from later books:

nam neque Pyramidum sumptus ad sidera ducti,
nec Iouis Elei caelum imitata domus,
nec Mausolei diues fortuna sepulcri
mortis ab extrema condicione uacant.
aut illis flamma aut imber subducet honores,
annorum aut ictu, pondere uicta, ruent.
at non ingenio quaesitum nomen ab aeuo
excidet: ingenio stat sine morte decus.

(III, ii, 19-26)

sunt aliquid manes: letum non omnia finit,
luridaque euictos effugit umbra rogos.
Cynthia namque meo uisa est incumbere fulcro,
murmur ad extremae nuper humata uiae:
cum mihi somnus ab exequiis penderet amoris,
et quererer lecti frigida regna mei.
eosdem habuit secum quibus est elata capillos,
eosdem oculos: lateri uestis adusta fuit,
et solitum digito beryllon adederat ignis,
summaque Lethaeus triuerat ora liquor,
spirantisque animos et uocem misit: at illi
pollicibus fragiles increpuere manus. (IV, vii, 1-12)

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heu Veii ueteres! et uos tum regna fuistis,
et uestro posita est aurea sella foro.
nunc intra muros pastoris bucina lenti
cantat, et in uestris ossibus arua metunt.

(IV, x, 25-8)

Some useful sources of information

There is useful information about Propertius' metre and prosody in M. Platnauer's *Latin Elegiac Verse*¹ (Cambridge 1951); an excellent discussion of his use of language in the Introduction of J. P. Postgate's *Select Elegies of Propertius* (Macmillan 1884, often reprinted); and a lucid and comprehensive account of the history of love elegy in the Introduction of Butler and Barber's *Elegies of Propertius* (Oxford 1933). For longer works and for articles in periodicals reference must be made to the usual sources. The standard edition of Book I is now that of P. J. Enk (Leyden 1946, 2 vols.), the notes of which, in Latin, are both copious and valuable.

¹ Constructively reviewed by R. J. Getty in *Class. Phil.* XLVIII (1953), pp. 189-92.