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978-0-521-10653-5 - Propertius: A Hellenistic Poet on Love and Death

Theodore D. Papanghelis

Excerpt

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## 1

## INTRODUCTORY

To speak of love *and* death in the same breath is to speak of romantic passion *par excellence*. Classical antiquity knew such passion – and, as a rule, frowned upon it. Marriages of convenience and other practical considerations would normally take precedence over romance.<sup>1</sup> It was also in a practical spirit that people prodded themselves to timely sensuality in view of death's inevitable onset. The *carpe diem* mood is as unavoidable as human weakness. Catullus, Propertius and Tibullus shared with their contemporaries a sensitivity to it, but they could also fly in the face of their contemporaries' conception of love by endorsing, in varying degrees of seriousness, a type of lover consumed by the *morbus*, intent on the *militia* and wallowing in the *servitium amoris*. These are metaphors on which the idea of death will naturally thrive, although not in order to militate against, but rather in order to confirm the idea of love. 'Love until death' and 'death in the service, or because of the hardships of love' do not mark an antagonism (which lies at the root of the *carpe diem* mood) so much as a certain *rapprochement*. Such *rapprochement*, apt to be accounted a mere cliché of love poetry today, would have struck the contemporary reader of love elegy as part of an idiom that wanted, whether in jest or earnest, to sound unconventional. This idiom Propertius shared with his fellow elegists but in dealing with one of its cardinal topoi, namely, the rapport between elegiac love life and death, he also developed an 'idiolect' of his own. It is a central claim of the present book that this poet, chiefly in the course of his second poetic book, reached out towards modes of erotic expression which cannot be probed or adequately described simply in terms of 'love until death' or 'death *in and because of* love'; that the potential of the Propertian *amor* is fully realised and its quality best revealed within the frame of various death fantasies; and that the association of love and death in his work grows so radical as to shade off into various forms of identification, where the one comes to be envisaged in the pictorial and conceptual terms pertaining to the other.

Scholars freely acknowledge the frequency and intensity of Propertius' references to erotic death but their pronouncements on the subject do not

<sup>1</sup> Allen (1950) 258–64, Burck (1952) 163–82 and Sullivan (1976) 81–91 offer informative accounts, but a more recent and livelier picture is to be found in Lyne (1980) 1–18.

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make it clear whether he differs from other love poets in kind as well as in degree. S. Commager, speaking of 'Propertius' peculiar linkage of love and death', 'quasi-sexual union in death' and the like, marks one of the exceptions. 'Radical association', the expression I have just used, is also his. He observes that the reasons behind it 'are problematic, and it is easier to trace their ramifications in his verse than to define their roots in his psyche'.<sup>2</sup> An age of Freudian experience may find it imperative to reach for 'psyche' wherever such primal forces as Eros and Thanatos seem to be involved; and no doubt there must be a path, however elusive and sinuous, that leads from verse back to those regions. But what the critic is more immediately exposed to, and a more competent judge of, can perhaps be better described as a certain brand of artistic sensibility and/or aesthetic thought; and for that (at least in the case of poets like Propertius where no explicit critical theory complements poetic practice) no more reliable evidence exists than the poet's own verse. I have, accordingly, tried to trace in a number of elegies the artistic sensibility and/or aesthetics that underlie the bond between love and death – a bond which has always and on all hands been recognised as typical of this poet.

Much of what I have to say on Propertius' sensibility has already been, in one way or another, outlined or touched upon by such scholars as P. Boucher and A. La Penna in their important books on the poet,<sup>3</sup> and the present book attempts to bring some of their insights, broadened and qualified wherever this seemed fit, and buttressed by fresh evidence, to bear more systematically – and, it may be, more obsessively – on the reading of some of the most stimulating and, as it happens, problematic elegies. It is, I hope, not churlish on the part of someone perfectly conscious of his debt to these scholars to complain that in their studies a critical assessment of any one elegy *as a whole* is hard to come by. If it is reasonable to point out that enterprises anxious to present a comprehensive, overall picture of the poet cannot accommodate detailed treatment of individual poems, it is, I believe, also fair to draw attention to the possible inadequacies of a method which normally entails arguing from the evidence of isolated passages and lines and within the requirements of a specific chapter, but seldom, if ever, with reference to the basic unit, that is, the poem with its particular structure and thought sequence. Attention to these – which, as I hope to show, is essential in the case of the poems to be discussed – is encouraged by a more restricted scope. Not that a restricted scope is an unmixed blessing, but it at least allows a sharper focus, and I have endeavoured to preserve one throughout.

<sup>2</sup> Commager (1974) 20.<sup>3</sup> Boucher (1965) and La Penna (1977).

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Boucher studies Propertius' sensibility under four headings: 'Tempérament visuel', 'Le sentiment de la mort', 'La *fides*' and 'Le sens patriotique'.<sup>4</sup> It is my central assumption that it is the first of these which is of overriding significance, being, in my view, the chief reason for the prominence of the second and the monitor of the expression of the other two. Amid the controversy surrounding the 'patriotic' 4.6 scholars forget to ask themselves whether this poet could describe the events at Actium except by means of isolated, almost incoherent, visual effects. Boucher himself seems to have sensed as much, for he writes that Propertius' 'tempérament visuel' manifests itself not only in love but whenever his sensibility is set astir by his favourite themes: beauty of Cynthia, passion, beauty of works of art, death, love of Rome and awareness of her grandeur.<sup>5</sup> It had been my original plan to examine all those poems which are organised around the themes (or, perhaps, the complex of themes) specified here, save the last one. But I was apprised in good time that I would not be suffered to send the juggernaut of this project rumbling over the Ph.D. word-limit rules; and when, having transferred myself to the jurisdiction of the C.U.P. Syndics, I was mercifully allowed to extend the dissertation by the long section on 4.7, I needed no one to tell me that insistence on the original project was hardly making for an economical and εὐσύνοπτον book. Thus a number of pieces whose general drift seemed to me to promote not so much the pair love–death as a highly peculiar complex of beauty–art–death had eventually to be left out. However, 4.7 does partly belong with this group; the discussion of 4.7.51ff. on pp. 170ff., and especially 173, will go into some of the implications of the latter emphasis, and will adumbrate others. Both from this poem (on which more anon) and from 2.13 it will be clear that with Propertius the distinction I have just drawn is a very fragile one. I venture it not in the certainty that I can make a virtue of a technical necessity but in the hope that I shall be able to deal elsewhere with this other group of poems without undue spatial pressure and better prepared for the job.

Boucher was not the first to stress but was the first to attach such importance to Propertius' 'tempérament visuel' as to devote a whole chapter to it. This concept, however, can and must be broadened. Propertius gives pride of place to the eyes (*oculi sunt in amore duces* 2.15.12) in a poem where he responds to love with the full range of his senses. This is not visual temperament so much as sensuous temperament spearheaded by sight. Propertius obeys a human instinct that assumes all other senses active but subsumes them under the most obvious or, perhaps, valuable. Therefore, Boucher's chosen term need not be a misnomer and one should

<sup>4</sup> Boucher (1965) 41–159.<sup>5</sup> Boucher (1965) 59–60.

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not find it at all difficult to see it as a synonym for La Penna's felicitous 'esaltazione estetica della gioia dei sensi'.<sup>6</sup> Writers with a penchant for this, especially those of the nineteenth century, have often been called 'Aesthetes'.<sup>7</sup> I have not shunned this and other anachronisms, indeed I expect them to be condoned, at least by those who like to ponder Propertius' modernity. A modern literary critic tackling Donne, Keats or Baudelaire would not feel apologetic about harping on their sensuousness or, indeed, about writing a whole book on it. Classical critics, more puritanical as a rule, are apt to examine their chosen poet under general or local anaesthetic (a rule occasionally challenged by delightful exceptions). 'Sensuous' and its two, so to say, satellites, namely, the more neutral 'sensory' and, given our thematic area, 'sensual', will feature in the following pages with a frequency that may strike some as importunate. I confess to feeling only slightly apologetic about this, not only because these are keywords capturing what I take to be the keynotes of my subject but also because I think that Propertius is, along with Lucretius, the Roman poet most deserving to be 'sensitised'.

Poets whose main strength lies in their sensuousness should perhaps not be expected to excel in the serio-problematic treatment of moral, social and existential issues. In any event, I do not believe that Propertius delved into the moral and existential implications of *Liebestod*. But there are those who obviously think he did. 'For some time', writes G. Luck, 'it had been fashionable to read into Roman love poetry important statements on religious, philosophical and political issues.'<sup>8</sup> H. Drews is anxious to get to the bottom of Propertius' 'Todesangst' and to investigate his attitude to death.<sup>9</sup> U. Wenzel takes the frequency of the poet's references to death as evidence of preoccupation with a special problem.<sup>10</sup> I can see no *problem* here, though I think I can see the seriousness of Propertius' sensuousness. Neither Drews nor Wenzel have anything to say on this (in their studies I miss the word 'Sinnlichkeit' or the like), which should give the measure of my disagreement with these works. Nevertheless, Wenzel's is the more discriminating of the two in that she

<sup>6</sup> La Penna (1977) 213.

<sup>7</sup> The use of the term 'aesthetic' to refer to a definite, mainly nineteenth-century literary trend should not be confused with the rather neutral sense the word bears in philosophical discourse, where it refers to the general criteria by which art is appraised. Such confusion (often venial in view of the fact that some at least of the implications of the literary-critical use derive from the emphasis placed by Aesthetics on the 'beautiful') is observable in non-specialised discussions. The word, as is the way with such words, is apt to be abused.

For the various attempts to define the province of Aesthetics as a branch of philosophy see Osborne (1972) 1–24. <sup>8</sup> See Luck, p. xx.

<sup>9</sup> Drews (1952) 78–145, esp. 108–20 and 136–45. On pp. 38–77 and 146–53 she asks the same questions in connexion with Tibullus and Ovid respectively.

<sup>10</sup> Wenzel (1969) 53.

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repudiates the view, held also by W. Herz,<sup>11</sup> that in Propertius more often than not the theme of death is subordinate to the wooing of the elegiac lady – what German scholars often refer to as ‘Werbung um die Geliebte’.<sup>12</sup> One should agree with Wenzel that in a number of poems the thought of death is so tenuously motivated by the erotic situation as to appear quite autonomous;<sup>13</sup> and, of course, there are poems like 3.7 and 3.18, where death’s powerful imagery and atmosphere have nothing whatsoever to do with love. And yet even in such cases, and despite some superficial indications to the contrary in the poems themselves, I should rather start from Boucher’s remarks as quoted on p. 3 than see these pieces, with Wenzel, as general statements on the nature of death.<sup>14</sup>

Neither the suffering nor the liberating experience of lofty poetry is to be sought in Propertius. La Penna, who instructed thus back in 1951, also denied the poet a world vision from which his work could be said to spring.<sup>15</sup> Propertius had no vision of the lover’s destiny, any more than he had a vision of the world. Yet there is no dearth of attempts to follow in poem after poem, and with disproportionate scrupulousness, an arduous lover’s progress.<sup>16</sup> Would it not be better ‘to analyse the poems as artistic constructions, as though they were *paintings*, demonstrate their finer points and bring out their essential qualities. . . ?’<sup>17</sup> My italics show what I feel to be a most important point in this suggestion.

‘The usefulness of approaching Propertius without keeping one’s eyes shut to painting’<sup>18</sup> is rather obvious nowadays. The pictorial quality of his mythology in particular is yet another open secret. In the following pages I have clung to the belief that Propertian mythology is more of an art gallery than a typological system of universal import; and that what it lends to the postures of the protagonists is form, colour and texture, not absolute and timeless significance.<sup>19</sup> This, however, is not to say that a simple relationship is assumed here between visual art as model and poetry as reproduction. When Théophile Gautier takes up a painter’s subject he does not attempt a faithful verbal comment on what he sees. It is rather the case that the poet executes like a painter.<sup>20</sup> Keyssner understood this better than Birt;<sup>21</sup> and so did Hubbard: ‘The imagination

<sup>11</sup> Herz (1955) 88, 131, 149 and *passim*.

<sup>12</sup> See Wenzel (1969) 57 n. 1 and 67 nn. 1 and 2.

<sup>13</sup> Wenzel (1969) 64ff.

<sup>14</sup> Wenzel (1969) 95.

<sup>15</sup> La Penna (1951) 124.

<sup>16</sup> Wiggers (1972) offers an example. See, for instance, her first chapter (pp. 10–35) and the summary on p. 36.

<sup>17</sup> See Lee (1960) 519.

<sup>18</sup> Hubbard (1974) 166.

<sup>19</sup> Allen (1962) 130 concludes that myth serves ‘to raise the experience from an individual to a universal level’. Kölmel (1957) 49 had taken a similar view: through the use of myth the love poet ‘becomes a type himself’. Contrast Lyne (1980) 84ff.

<sup>20</sup> See Snell (1982) 85–6.

<sup>21</sup> Keyssner (1975) 264–77, 284; Birt (1895) 31–65, 161–90. What is at issue here is the relation-

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of Propertius is limited by the scope of the painter or sculptor.<sup>22</sup> No one-to-one correspondence between a given mythological passage and a specific piece of visual art need be inferred from this. Kölmel warns against attempting to establish in each case which particular painting Propertius might have had in mind, unless genuine pictorial intentions can be ascertained; I should incline to agree with him, if I knew what exactly his 'echt "malerische" Absichten' means.<sup>23</sup>

There is little room within the limits of this work for mythological taxonomy; but what I have just said in the preceding paragraph should explain why on the whole I find it too abstract for my purposes. If this poet's sensibility fleshes itself as highly visual myth, to tear off, abstract and classify his mythology is, in one sense, to subscribe to the outdated view that it is ornamental and external rather than integral and intrinsic. And although it does not seem altogether unhelpful to draw a few broad distinctions by way of establishing a convenient framework for discussion, as R. Whitaker does for example,<sup>24</sup> La Penna's animadversions, first voiced in 1951, are, I believe, still topical: 'a separate analysis of [Propertius'] mythology is abstract and superfluous'<sup>25</sup> – and it calls to mind scholastic works of some time ago which were also apt to foster the impression of a poet whose frigid learning, especially in the form of mythological illustration, impaired the quality of his poetry. Since then a change of taste has combined with a more industrious scholarship to alert us to the possibility that *doctrina* may galvanise a poet's sensibility into highly original and deeply individual expression.

So in studying the themes of love and death in Propertius' poetry I have endeavoured to retrace, so far as I could, what Paolo Fedeli has aptly called his 'itinerario culturale'.<sup>26</sup> That this occasionally reached back through classical Greek literature to Homer is beyond question. But we can also be fairly certain that the terrain traversed is predominantly Hellenistic; and that the sightseeing is being done through Hellenistic eyes. There are notorious blind spots in the area and those frequenting it have by now learned to live with guesswork. I have felt confident enough to add some more – not by way of mere *Quellenforschung*, nor yet in order to single out a particular work as the main influence on any given elegy, but rather with a view to adumbrating the artistic quarters towards

ship of poetry to sculpture rather than to painting, nevertheless the objections Keyssner raises against Birt's simplistic view of Prop. 1.3.1ff. as an exact commentary on the plastic details of the Vatican Ariadne are relevant to any question concerning literature and visual art in general.

<sup>22</sup> Hubbard (1974) 164.<sup>23</sup> Kölmel (1957) 47.<sup>24</sup> Whitaker (1983) 88.<sup>25</sup> La Penna (1951) 102; cf. *id.* (1977) 196–7.<sup>26</sup> Fedeli (1977) 99 'perché questo significa interpretare la sua poesia'.

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which Propertius must have felt drawn both by education and by innate sympathy of sensibility.

If Propertius brings a sensuous temperament to bear on the themes of love and death, and if he treats these themes as a Hellenistic poet, then Hellenistic erotic poetry can be expected to display a similar slant. And yet what, even today, is habitually publicised as the hallmark of this kind of poetry is its study of the psychological intricacies of erotic passion. True as this may be, it is but part of the story. The view E. Rohde reached quite a few years ago is more comprehensive inasmuch as it does not lose sight of the sensuous charm (*sinnlichen Reiz*), as distinct from the woes and delights, of erotic passion.<sup>27</sup> Sensuous, or sensory, charm is seldom innocent; the sinister, the morbid, the grotesque are of its essence. Scholars have used similar adjectives to capture the qualities of Hellenistic erotic material.<sup>28</sup> This is the ‘Decadent’ side of Hellenistic ‘Romanticism’. The odd specimen from the modern literary field (of which I claim no specialist knowledge) has been rather fitfully brought in not only to vindicate the employment of the anachronisms but also to hint that Propertius as much looks forward to European modes of sensibility as he looks backward to the Alexandrian masters. If the same position can be predicated of other Roman poets as well – if, that is, some of them can be seen as intermediaries between ancient and modern – it is Propertius’ unique distinction that by employing motifs destined to become topoi of Western culture he founded ‘the uneasy and dialectical relationship between love and death’.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, those who do not fight shy of parallels which in some quarters are still thought too hazardous to be of any value are most likely to cherish the Propertian treatment of erotic death as one of the tokens of the unity of Western literature.

The axis of the discussion passes through Book 2, with Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 devoted to each of poems 1, 13, 26b and 8 respectively. Passages and poems germane to the issues raised by these central pieces are adduced from the entire corpus both as supporting evidence and in order to allow a clearer view of the developments and shifts in the poet’s technique and emphases, especially in the course of the first two books. Clarifying Propertius by means of Propertius is, needless to say, as important as placing him in a broader literary context. All four poems just mentioned display, I think, a similar structural pattern which tends to assert itself, on a smaller or larger scale, in the majority of the elegies

<sup>27</sup> See Rohde (1914) 109.

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Clausen (1964) 190; Cairns (1979) 22 and Lyne (1980) 82.

<sup>29</sup> Paduano (1968) 27.

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which bring together the themes of love and death. Attention to structure where a self-conscious craftsman is concerned needs hardly any justification, but in the case of Propertius it is all the more vital as it can afford valuable clues to the vexed questions of the unity and/or the boundaries of individual poems.

Chapter 7 takes a brief look at poems 9, 17, 20 and 24b of Book 2. These poems, although thematically and structurally akin to those of the previous group, have less marked structural patterns and display a less characteristic *Liebestod* in that the interpenetration between the two themes is ‘conceptual’ rather than ‘sensuous’. They are important, however, as evidence of Propertius’ engrossment, during the composition of Book 2, in a particular set of poetic ideas, and of his repeated variations upon a specific kind of structure as a vehicle of their expression. These two groups, together with poems 4, 15 and 27 (all of which are considered below), account for almost one-third of the total number of lines in Book 2 (approximately 430 out of 1,360 lines). Had the group of elegies referred to on p. 3 been allowed to contribute its evidence, the buzzing of the bee in the poet’s bonnet would have come through louder and clearer. Scholars contract different kinds of obsessions. Voices have been recently raised to the effect that Book 2 has a discernible structure as a whole, with neat correspondences among its poems. At the end of Chapter 7 I have a word to say on this, and also on the question of the book’s unity.

To flank Chapters 3–7 there are the discussions of two poems from each of Books 1 and 4. Chapter 2 seeks to find out what the *amor* of 1.19 is likely to mean in the face of death – or, rather, in view of the received ideas about this poem, what it is unlikely to mean. Chapter 8, which tackles 4.7, is the lengthiest one less because the poem itself is a massive composition than because it strikes me as a unique and self-conscious synthesis of themes and images which, though they always appeal to the poet’s sensuous imagination, are nowhere else granted such bold coexistence within the boundaries of a single poem. Although the prophecy with which Cynthia’s speech grinds to a halt in ll. 93–4 allies 4.7 with the love-and-death fantasies of Book 2, ‘Hymne à la beauté’ would perhaps give a better suggestion of its bias than ‘La mort des amants’, so discussion in this case calls for a slight readjustment of the critical focus; and since this poem is a fine, if comparatively idiosyncratic, specimen of Propertius’ late manner, it also warrants some comment on the significance and achievement of his mature style, the surge of realism in particular. For this reason and also because of the ‘readjustment’ I have just spoken of, some readers may well feel that the approach to 4.7 causes them to stray from the track beaten in the rest of the book towards new regions



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which the title would never lead them to surmise. In point of fact, the differences in narrative technique, style and structure far from obscuring underscore in 4.7 the constant among the variants, namely, a peculiar aesthetic sensibility and the themes through which it preferably finds expression. Let me state here, more emphatically than I have done on p. 3, a case that takes this and, perhaps, yet another instalment to be fully argued on the basis of all the evidence available: between Propertius' 'love and death' and 'beauty and death' (and 4.7 looks different partly because in discussing it I have made much of the latter pair) there is a subtle distinction without a clear-cut difference. Re-readers who come back to, and bring a keener awareness of the poet's sensibility to bear on, the *amor* of 1.19 (which *amor*, I thought, demanded a whole preliminary chapter to itself) will no doubt procure themselves much more than an inkling of the profound affinity that binds together the Dead Beauties of 4.7 with the *Liebestod* of the other pieces.

Propertius can be witty and humorous. More often, however, he is deeply ironical. I have laid stress on a particular kind of irony that collaborates with sensuous pathos; this brand of irony, to use Ciceronian language, is not *peracutum et breve*<sup>30</sup> but works almost as a structural device; it eludes theorising, although it can be seen clearly at work in individual poems.

Finally, Chapter 9 draws some of the threads together and places some of the points made in the book in their wider context, but not without raising a couple of new ones, notably in respect of the historical–social backgrounds against which Propertius, his Hellenistic models and some of the nineteenth-century European poets, with whom his congeniality is suggested or implied, wrote their poetry.

<sup>30</sup> Cic. *De Or.* 2.218.

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## 2

*NOSTRIS PUER HAESIT OCELLIS:*  
THE LESSONS OF 1.19

Tu sais avec quelle ardeur j'ai recherché la beauté physique, quelle importance j'attache à la forme extérieure, et de quel amour je me suis pris pour le monde visible.

Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin*

ὄταν ξυπνᾷ τοῦ σώματος ἡ μνήμη,  
κ' ἐπιθυμία παληὰ ξαναπερνᾷ στό αἷμα·  
ὄταν τὰ χεῖλη καί τό δέρμα ἐνθυμοῦνται,  
κ' αἰσθάνονται τὰ χέρια σάν ν' ἀγγίζουσι πάλι.

Cavafy, 'Ἐπέστρεφε'

F. Jacoby and R. Reitzenstein were at daggers drawn over the question of where the point of 1.19 was to be found, but they obviously agreed that in the central part of the poem Propertius was propounding the notion of love outlasting life and living on in the hereafter.<sup>1</sup> None of the later critics quarrelled with this, and in view of the grand *traicit et fati litora magnus amor* 'Great love can cross even the shores of fate' in l. 12 it would certainly have seemed captious, to say the least, to do so. G. Williams is no exception here, but his penetrating discussion is of special interest in that it broaches an issue whose wider implications seem to me to affect the semantic scope of the word *amor* and thereby seriously to qualify the import of 12 and its immediate context. *fata*, he says, means 'death' but 'the reader must be conscious that *fatum/fata* can also have a concrete sense of "dead body"'.<sup>2</sup> He goes on to notice that *funus* (3), *exsequiis* (4) and *pulvis* (6) are subject to the same ambiguity; and elsewhere he explains that Propertius can alternate between striking visual effects and 'manipulation of words, without the interference of the mind's eye'.<sup>3</sup> But to my mind, he hits upon something far more vital when he sees in the poem 'deliberate juxtaposing of concrete and abstract'. In fact, the whole poem articulates with dense urgency a dialectics of the concrete and the abstract, caught up in which *amor* can hardly be as abstract as it has been

<sup>1</sup> Jacoby (1910) 29ff.; Reitzenstein (1912) 94ff.

<sup>2</sup> See Williams (1968) 766ff.

<sup>3</sup> Williams (1968) 393.