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1
PROPERTIUS' LIFE AND LITERARY FORTUNES

Early life

Not far from Etruscan Perugia, the small hill town of Assisi rises above the Umbrian plain. Apart from St Francis, its most prominent son was Sextus Propertius.[1] The general area has a number of inscriptions relating to the Propertii and to the Passenni, who we learn from Pliny the Younger (6.15, 9.22) were connected to the Propertii. These allow us to infer without certainty that Propertius' family belonged to the equestrian class or, at least, to the propertied landowners of the area (4.1.129). Establishing the date of his birth is difficult, but it is important not to let his precocious poetic and amorous talents blind us to the general drift of the evidence. Most authorities put it around 48 B.C., although conservative opinion, forgetting the examples of Lucan, Chatterton and Keats, pushes it back as far as 54 or earlier.

His early years, in any case, were spent in horrendous times of civil war. His father died, perhaps a casualty of war, when he was only a child, which perhaps produced a dependency and a closeness to his mother which would have some effect on his later erotic life. It would at least foster the importance of the maternal image and perhaps lead to his preference for an older woman such as Cynthia. His relatives clearly took the wrong side in the civil war between the followers of Antony and Octavian. The penultimate poem in his first book refers to the death of a close relative following the siege of Perusia, the modern Perugia, when Octavian bloodily and ferociously starved the army of Lucius Antonius into surrender in 41 B.C. However we date his birth, Propertius was old enough to know and re-

1 Cf. 1.22.1–3, 9–10; 4.1.61–6; 4.1.121–6.

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member his kinsman. The subsequent reduction of his family estate by the distribution of his (or his father's) lands among the veterans of Octavian and Antony left an additional mark on his memory, which was to show itself in his political attitudes to the principate and in his strong allegiance to his Etruscan connections. We may assume that his mother, whom he was to lose before the publication of his second book, brought him to Rome in his early adolescence, just as Catullus' family had brought him from Verona. There was, after all, little opportunity in the small towns of Italy for a bright and ambitious boy to rise. But as with Catullus and Ovid, Propertius' ambitions did not follow the conventional Roman mould. Legal, political, and military careers, though not incompatible with the practice of elegy, witness Gallus and Tibullus, were not for Propertius (4.1.133–6). Art, sensuality, and romance were for him, as for Ovid, the preferred mode of life: aspirations to fame were to be satisfied by the power of the pen. However unreliable the details, Propertius' life as a young man about town is chronicled in his first book. Unlike Persius, he had no Cornutus to save him from the wrong choice when he got the freedom all well-to-do Roman youths got when they donned the *toga virilis* (at the age of sixteen or earlier) and entered manhood. Unlike Horace, he may have lacked the means to continue his education at Athens (cf. 1.6; 3.21), although his plaint may be simply the elaboration of a conventional theme.

If the less conservative chronology is correct, then Propertius' passionate involvement with Cynthia came at a very early age by modern standards. Romance of course is not a prerogative of youth, but young men think it is, and our myths reinforce this belief. Rome afforded easy access to women of all sorts, and Propertius' first recorded adventure was with Lycinna, the slave of his beloved Cynthia (3.15.6, 43), chosen perhaps because Cynthia was not then available to him.

Cynthia was somewhat older than Propertius. She was probably a high-class *meretrix*, a courtesan, talented as well as sensual, who in return for the proper consideration involved herself on a long- or short-term basis with various lovers, although the possibility cannot be excluded that she was a married woman

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with a fairly complaisant or easily deceived husband.[2] The relationship was a stormy one and lasted, if we can trust Propertius' poetic evidence, something like five years until their final break. She died not many years afterwards.

Chronology of his poetry

Beyond these probabilities, attempts to reconstruct in detail the actual course of Propertius' affair with Cynthia, because of the conventions of elegy, indeed of poetry in general, must be rejected. Book 1, the so-called *Monobiblos*, probably appeared sometime before 28 B.C., when the poet was twenty or so, and brought him immediate fame, although it is fairly clear from the persons addressed in the first book, Bassus the iambic poet, Ponticus the epic poet, and Tullus, a member of an originally Etruscan family and the nephew of L. Volcacius Tullus, consul in 33 B.C., that Propertius was well established in the social and literary circles to which Ovid would later belong (*Tr.* 4.10.45ff.) and there hear him recite.

The opening of Book 2 is addressed to Maecenas, as is elegy 9 of Book 3. There is no mention of him in Book 4. Could it be that the poet's *succès d'estime* did not endure in the most important circle of all, where Vergil and Horace dominated?

If we go by the latest datable events in the traditional division of Propertius' books, it would seem that Book 2 was published sometime in or after 26 B.C.; Book 3, sometime after 23 B.C.; and Book 4, sometime in or after 16 B.C. We know from Ovid (*Rem.Am.* 764) *that* Propertius was dead by 2 B.C., and Pliny's references to Passennus Paulus, himself an elegist and a self-avowed descendant of the poet, indicate that Propertius finally did his duty: he married and had children. It has also been conjectured, despite the highly artistic arrangement of Book 4, that it was edited and published posthumously.

2 See Gordon Williams, *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry* (Oxford 1968) 529ff. Certain elegies in which Propertius has easy access to Cynthia and she to him or where she is waiting for his arrival at her home tell against this theory (cf. e.g. 2.9, 14, 15, 29; 3.8, 16; 4.8).

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This traditional chronology, however, has been recently challenged by Gordon Williams.[3] He propounds the theory that the first three books, more or less as we have them in our present texts, were published as a collection like Horace's first three books of *Odes.* As this is a matter of some moment for our view of Propertius' poetic career, it might be well to examine the evidence upon which such a theory is based.

Martial's view of the *Monobiblos* as a pleasing present (*Cynthia – facundi carmen iuvenale Properti:* 14.189) and the fact that Propertius ends the book with a brief epigram (*sphragis*) describing his origins and homeland, would indicate that the book was published separately. The chief evidence Williams adduces for his thesis is the famous passage at 2.13.25 where Propertius pictures himself taking three books as gifts to Persephone after his death.

Williams believes that the book Martial praises was just a convenient selection and since Propertius, in publishing his poems, more or less preserved the chronological order of their composition, this 'youthful production' need not refer to an early attempt to put his work before the public, since private and semi-public circulation was perfectly adequate for this. At 2.3.4 Propertius alludes to 'a second disgraceful book' with little time (*mensem*) intervening after the first about his love life. At 2.13.25 he wants only to take *tres libelli* in his funeral *cortège* to Persephone. This could be a reasonable, if pessimistic, prediction of his output; it could be a satisfactory magic number to invoke; but Williams takes it as evidence that he was proposing to publish his first three books as a 'single unit', describing, among other things, his relationship with Cynthia from the beginning to the end. There is, I believe, an implicit assumption here that Propertius put into the *Monobiblos* all he had written so far. But given the careful symmetry of that book and the balance most Augustan poets liked in their published works, is this likely? Did Horace include *all* the lyric poems he had written in *Odes* 1 – 3? Propertius' selection for Book 1 could easily have been made from a larger mass of available material. There

3 *Tradition and Originality*, 480ff.

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is certainly metrical evidence that earlier elegies were incorporated into later books.

The external evidence is admittedly scanty and disputable. When, however, we look at the internal, perhaps more subjective, evidence, it is still hard to accept Williams' basic thesis. He argues that since Cynthia dominates all three books, although references to her become more and more infrequent, then they must have been conceived as a unit.

Williams accepts the fact that there is a distinct movement in Propertius, perhaps through Tibullan influence, towards the disyllabic Ovidian pentameter endings in the four books as we have them (namely: 61%, 86%, 95%, 98%). His explanation is that Propertius more or less preserved the chronological order of his writing. If, on the other hand, one looks at the statistics for individual elegies, it seems as though Books 2 and 3 are fairly consistent in their move towards the disyllabic norm, but Book 1 is somewhat uneven in this, thus destroying Williams' thesis that Propertius kept roughly to the chronological order of writing when he published his poems. For example in Book 1 such elegies as 7, 9, 10, 13, and 19 are much closer to Propertius' later metrical norm. This offers support to O. Skutsch's thesis that certain later poems were introduced into Book 1 to provide it with the necessary symmetry and ballast.[4] Books 2 and 3 (as we have them) are much more consistent, although certain traces of earlier work, perhaps now polished, survive in them, as is indicated by the higher number of polysyllabic pentameter endings in certain elegies (e.g. 2.20, 31, 34). Therefore stylistic analysis indicates that the chronology of Propertius' poetry can hardly be a linear one. Though we may be justified on the basis of the scant historical references in saying that such-and-such a book *cannot* have been published before a certain date, we must not assume that all the material in a given

4 O. Skutsch, 'The structure of the Propertian *Monobiblos*', *CP* 58 (1963) 238–9. Skutsch argues convincingly for a symmetrical arrangement of the poems in Book 1, necessitating even a deliberate creation of poems to secure this symmetry. Whatever the disagreements about the details, there is in Book 1, with its author's seal in the last short elegy, a very self-conscious structure, which critics have tried in vain to find in Book 2.

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book was written after the completion (or publication) of its predecessor.

Some other relevant facts may be adduced. Book 1 has twenty (or twenty-one) elegies followed by two short epigrams. Book 3 has twenty-five elegies. Book 4 has twelve elegies. The lines number 686, 990 and 952 respectively. Book 2 alone has 43 elegies and 1,328 lines. If the poets of the Augustan Age were as careful about construction, symmetry, and variation as we know they were, it is unlikely that Book 2 could have been issued from the hands of its author as it was. Whatever the accidents of transmission, tradition, or misfortune that have produced the present state of Book 2, it seems clear that this is where the explanation for these troublesome lines of Propertius on his gift to Persephone is to be found. The range of themes in Books 2 and 3 is far greater than in Book 1. This might be discounted on grounds of chronological development, but the great divergency of addressees cannot be so easily shrugged off. If we exclude Cynthia we find that in Book 1 Gallus is addressed four times, Tullus three, Ponticus twice, and Bassus once. Ponticus is not addressed again, unless he is the Demophoon of 2.22 and Tullus is addressed again only in 3.22. In fact, named addressees, except for two important elegies addressed to Maecenas, are very uncommon in the last three books. Were the first three books put together and published as a unit, one would have expected some greater consistency in this complimentary practice. Williams compares their publication to that of Horace's *Odes* 1 – 3, but the careful arrangement of each of Horace's books, their comparable length (e.g. Odes 1 and 3 are approximately the same size[5]), their consistent admixture of themes and addressees make this a very inappropriate analogy, and Ovid's second edition of the *Amores* in three books indicates what a careful arrangement one might also expect from an elegist.

Book 4, which introduces a totally new note in Propertius' works, was published either by the poet or posthumously. In any case, its arrangement does credit to the author or the editor

5 Book 2 of the *Odes* was clearly meant to be a centre for the other two books, see W. Ludwig, 'Zu Horaz, C. 2.1–12', *H* 85 (1957) 336–45.

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and it should be regarded as a separate phase of the poet's career.

It is best therefore to postulate an early, middle, and late stage in Propertius' poetic development. A separate publication for each of Books 1 and 4 is indicated. But although we cannot entirely exclude separate publication of Books 2 and 3, somewhat in the form we now have them, the various datable allusions and the pronounced differences between them with regard to pentameter endings make more plausible K. Lachmann's theory, which was also based on 2.13.25 *(tres libelli)*.[6] Lachmann postulated an edition of three books, which in the course of time was considerably mutilated in various ways. This might explain the bloatedness and unevenness of Book 2, which, in the words of one critic, L. J. Richardson, presents us now with a text reminiscent of a 'mass of spaghetti'. In its present shape, it would certainly have been no fit companion for that elegant gift Martial so praised.

The three stages in Propertius' career, I would suggest, are represented by the initial and momentous Book 1, the three Books that presently comprise our Books 2 and 3 and then, somewhat later, the radically changed style and content of Book 4.

There is no room here to discuss where the division of Book 2 should be made. There are various theories, just as there have been various futile attempts to descry an ordered structure in this book. The possibility of severe textual disruptions in the elegies as they stand makes a decision harder to reach. Indeed, the game is profitless if one takes the view, fortified by the confusion of statistics in the individual elegies, that we are dealing with a re-edited set of poems which might have been perfectly clear sequentially in their original ordered form.

If the above account is correct, then the chronology of Propertius' poetry must become somewhat more tentative. We may assume that Book 1 was published before October 28 B.C., since elegy 31 in Book 2 celebrates the inauguration of Apollo's temple on that date. Nevertheless, although in Book 2, elegy 34 refers to the death of Cornelius Gallus in 26 B.C., we no

6 See the introduction to *Sexti Aurelii Propertii Carmina* (Leipzig 1816) pp. xixff.

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longer have to assume that the *whole* of our present Book 2 was published after this date. We may now entertain the idea that the original Book 2 could have been published between 28 and 26 or else, following to this extent Williams' theory, the whole collection of the three books of elegies which now comprise our present Books 2 and 3 were published together sometime before the settlement with the Parthians in 20 B.C. There would, of course, be no need after the publication of the first book for an elegist to produce the regular thin volume at two- or three-yearly intervals that we require from our budding younger poets. There were many opportunities for informal and oral publication: semi-public recitations, the circulation of manuscripts among friends, particularly among those connected with Maecenas' circle, and so on. The long gestation of Vergil's *Aeneid* did not lessen his fame once the *Eclogues* were published around 37 B.C. This would have been enough to prompt the salutations of the crowd in the theatre referred to by Tacitus (*Dial.* 13). Book 4 of course cannot have been published before 16 B.C., as a reference in the Cornelia elegy (4.11) to her brother's consulship in that year makes obvious.

Literary life in Rome

Whatever the age Propertius was when he took up residence in Rome, it is clear that, like Ovid, he took up the craft of poetry early, stimulated no doubt by the inordinate literary activity of the period. We do well to remind ourselves of the enduring masterpieces that emerged during Propertius' lifetime and to whose composition he was privy, not to mention the records we have of poets such as Varius Rufus and Valgius, whose works have almost entirely vanished.[7] Around 37 B.C. Vergil had published his *Eclogues*. In 35 B.C., Horace's first book of satires had appeared; around 30, the second book and the *Epodes*; late in 23, his collection of *Odes* were published in three books. 30 B.C. is a not unlikely date for the publication of Vergil's *Georgics*. Tibullus was active during this crucial period and Gallus was widely read before his suicide in 26 B.C.

7 See H. Bardon, *La Littérature latine inconnue* II (Paris 1956) 11–77.

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What part the literary circles of the time played in Propertius' development as a poet is a subject of some speculation. If we accept the traditional view, contested by Williams, that the *Monobiblos* gave Propertius some sort of entrée to the circle of Maecenas, signalized by the initial programmatic elegy of Book 2, we must also realize that, even by the time he published the first book, he had literary and social acquaintances worth addressing in individual poems (notably, Bassus, Ponticus, and Tullus). In his first book, Propertius was most influenced by Catullus and Gallus, but the influence, and the mediated Alexandrianism, is limited, showing itself most clearly in the variation on the *paraclausithyron*[8] (1.16) and the *epyllion* on the rape of Hylas (1.20). What is most noticeable in the book is the autobiographical stress on his relationship with Cynthia, a specifically Roman note that he owed to Catullus, just as in satire and epistolography it had been well established by Lucilius and Cicero.

Admission to wider circles of acquaintance and to further familiarity with the literary theories discussed and artistically embodied would perhaps explain the greater self-consciousness about his art that Propertius reveals in Book 2 and after. Although the aesthetic implications of all this will be discussed in a later chapter, one may glance briefly at the historical circumstances of patronage and literary production that Propertius must have encountered and, as I shall argue, found unfavourable or distasteful.

Systematic patronage was a prominent feature of the time. The Scholiast on Horace reports that Vergil and Varius each received one million sesterces from the emperor and, according to Suetonius' *Life of Vergil*, that poet's earnings were ten million. No doubt these figures are exaggerated, but Horace's own works indicate that the poets of his circle did indeed receive munificent gifts. Nor, to judge from Horace's poems to Maecenas, was the reward purely financial. Friendship with the

8 The theme is first seen in literature with Alcaeus (374), occurs frequently in comedy and was very popular with the writers of the Greek Anthology. Catullus' dialogue with a door may have prompted Propertius to write this soliloquy *from* the door. Even Horace utilized the basic theme (*Od.* 1.25; 3.10.19–20).

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great, in a society which depended so much upon personal alliances and political protection, was in itself no small reward, particularly when one considers the misfortunes of certain earlier republican writers who had had no such protection. Two patrons stand out above all others: Messala and Maecenas; both of them were scholarly or literary men. With Messala are associated Tibullus and Ovid, as well as a number of lesser poets. Maecenas' great catches were, of course, Vergil, Varius, and Horace, but there were many others: Tucca, Domitius Marsus, C. Melissus, to name but a few. By the time of Martial, Maecenas had become the paradigm of the patron. We need not view such a literary circle as this in terms of crass monetary dependence, although that was clearly available as a lever in the case of the poorer writers of the period. It is rather that in such a caste-ridden society as Rome, *dignitas* was attached to both *gloria* and *auctoritas*. The complaints of Horace about his poverty, certainly those of Tibullus, and perhaps those of Propertius, are part of a poetic convention and are probably exaggerated. But, whatever the leverage used, there can be no doubt, as Syme has suggested,[9] that Octavian, through Maecenas, was interested in forming a favourable climate of opinion about his now autocratic rule. Pressures of all sorts could be applied, however subtly. To be the acquaintance of a man whom so many poets regarded as a friend would in itself be an attraction to the highly emulatory poets of the period. The later works of Ovid reveal how interested poets of the period were in the works of their contemporaries and in claiming their friendship. To be 'in' was apparently as important in Rome as it now is in New York or London. But since, whatever the human or baser motives that existed on both sides, the poets of the age were indeed literary theorists and craftsmen of a high order, we may also surmise that the discussions of literary principles were as important as simply hobnobbing with the great and famous. As with all coteries, there would also be rivalries and it is at this point that one has to examine the ambiguous attitude of Propertius to Maecenas.

That some sort of rivalry emerged between Horace and Pro-

9 *The Roman Revolution* 251ff.; 459ff.

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