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A Latin Lover in Ancient Rome

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P R E F A C E A N D A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S



IN THE CENTURY before the birth of Christ, a new fashion in thinking about love, about falling in and out of love, about making love, gradually took shape in the city of Rome. What we know about the nature and spread of that fashion, like much else that we know about those turbulent, fascinating years in which the Roman Republic was in the process of coming to pieces, is somewhat fragmentary. Nevertheless, somehow evading the wide ruin that overtook Latin literature when the Roman Empire declined and dissolved, a sizable portion of Latin love elegy remains to us. The spirit that informed this body of love poems, both those we have the fortune to possess and those we have lost, in part fueled and in part reflected the new erotic fashion in question, and it is this new perspective on the erotic that serves as the background for the readings of Propertius that I offer here.

Central to Latin love elegy, in my belief its vital core, are the poems and the poetic career of Propertius. Lacking the poems of his immediate predecessors (those of Gallus in particular), we depend for our knowledge and enjoyment of Latin love elegy on the poems of its three extant masters: Propertius, Tibullus, and Ovid. Whatever his charms and virtues—and they are many and varied—for Tibullus the thrills and

spills provided by a powerfully erotic identity matter less to him than his subtle ruminations on his cultural identity (to which his girlfriends and his boyfriend function chiefly as fashionable decoration) and his “sentimental nostalgia for the beauties of nature” (Conte, 329). As for Ovid, who came at the tail-end of the elegiac project, his love poems, glittering with flawless technique and polished to a durable sheen by ruthless irony, concern themselves mostly with cataloging—as for a museum exhibit—the prime themes and tactics of love elegy and with displaying them as a sort of gaudy collection of outworn clichés. As a recent critic sums up the machinery of the *Amores*: “He turns elegiac conventions into tongue-in-cheek comedy, ditches emotion for clever puns, and his graphic, literalizing style leaves little to the imagination” (Rimell, 209). (But Ovid, by the time he was revising his collection of love elegies for their second edition, was getting to move on to fresher fields and newer pastures.)

It is, then, not without reason that when critics of Latin love elegy set about constructing a theory of its genre, very many of their illustrations of what they take to be its essential forms and themes, its defining conventions, they draw from Propertius. They do this not only because, among their three possible sources, his corpus is the largest and his improvisations the most varied in tone and mood, but also because his poems are closest to what the genre uniquely offers and what it demands: rich linguistic and rhetorical inventions and the steady obsession and bitter wit that nourish them. Theorists of the genre go mainly to Propertius to design their theories of Latin love elegy because he is its most original and most powerful exponent extant. Hence, my subtitle: this is a book about Propertius and the genre he made *his* own. (Despite his mastery, however, down the centuries he was rarely to influence other love poets very directly or even to meet with the quantity and quality of readers he deserved: Quintilian’s schoolmasterly sneer, “There are readers of the sort who actually prefer Propertius” to Tibullus, Ovid, and Gallus [*Institutio Oratoria* 10.93.1], more or less adumbrates his future in European literature.¹)

Propertius is currently a contested area in the study of Latin poetry, but for the most part, he is now examined less for his own sake than for the purpose of exemplifying—one might almost say, of testing—current literary theories, particularly as they address themselves to the problem of how modern theories of gender, identity, and metaliterary processes

1. For Propertius’ reception, see Benedikston, 117–32; Conte, 337–38; Gavinelli; Zimmermann; and, for Donne, with Pound his best successor, see Revard’s admirable essay.

can be made to relate to the literature of ancient Rome. This book is a product not of critical theory but of literary criticism. This style of reading is, to be sure, not innocent of theory, but the theories that ground it are shaped and directed by a love of poetry. Its chief function is to serve the poets who make the poems.

This book, then, is intended for undergraduates and graduates in classics and for other readers of European poetry who want a sketch of the kinds of pleasure and thought that Propertius has to offer them. Specialists in Propertius or in Latin Poetry may find some of what I have to say useful to them, but, though I have at times attempted to speak to some of their concerns, they are not my primary audience.

In the footnotes, a surname followed by page numbers (or in some instances by name, date and page numbers) indicates where the reader can go for further information about the topic at hand or for an opposing opinion. (See the Bibliography.) The translations throughout, unless otherwise noted, are my own. The language of Propertius is famously crabbed and condensed, and in rendering what I take to be his meanings, what I offer, in an attempt to get at what seems to be lurking beneath a verse's literal surface, is sometimes rather free. For this reason, some readers, on occasion, may want to consult translations that provide uniformly literal versions (for example, the recent renderings of David Slavitt or Vincent Katz, but the slightly older translation by Guy Lee is generally as trustworthy as it is charming).

Some of the materials in my book have their origins in The John and Penelope Biggs Lectures, which I gave at Washington University in the spring of 2004. I wish to tender my heartiest thanks to Mr. and Mrs. Biggs, to Robert Lamberton and his colleagues in the classics faculty for a delightful week of work and play. I am also grateful for a Mellon Emeritus Grant which gave much welcome aid in the completion of this book. David Wray's timely advice and generous support made a crucial difference to me. I want to thank Ray Kania and to Jessica Seidman for their expert help in preparation of the manuscript. Finally, my cordial thanks to Eugene O'Connor for his generous encouragement and advice.

