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Propertius' Use of Myth in Book Two (*)

In book two Propertius adheres to his role as Cynthia's lover and as a love-poet, but he explores this role from a wider and freer perspective. The precocious young lover of the *Monobiblos* has largely vanished; instead, we see a more mature lover who has opened himself to a much greater range of experience and behaviour. The richer emotional and intellectual colouring of book two is reflected very strongly in Propertius' use of myth. As has been better recognized by critics over the last few decades⁽¹⁾, Propertius uses his images and illustrations from the world of myth as a real and often brilliantly imaginative reflection of the multiple permutations of his experience. In his poetry there is almost always a dynamic interaction between myth and present: on the one hand, we see that the poet's experience becomes infused with the pathos and grandeur of myth, while, on the other hand, we also perceive that myth comes to assume, in the poet's mind, the emotional dimensions of his own experience. It is in the second book that this continual interpenetration of mythical and present reality may be most clearly felt, and it is the purpose of my study to show how skilfully Propertius deploys the world of myth

(*) This study represents an expansion upon some of my observations and conclusions in chapter 3 of my doctoral dissertation, *The Development of Propertius' Poetic Technique in Books I-III* (Un. of Toronto, 1972).

(1) Important studies of Propertius' use of myth that have appeared over the last few decades are: A. A. ALLEN, *Sunt qui Propertium malint*, in *Critical Essays in Roman Literature: Elegy and Lyric*, ed. J. P. SULLIVAN (London, 1962), 107-142; J.-P. BOUCHER, *Etudes sur Propertius* (Paris, 1965), chapter 8; P. BOYANCÉ, *Propertius*, in *L'influence grecque sur la poésie latine de Catulle à Ovide*, ed. P. BOYANCÉ (Vandœuvres-Geneva, 1953), 169-220; L. C. CURRAN, *Vision and Reality in Propertius*, in *YCIS*, 9 (1966), 189-207; S. DESIDERI, *Il preziosissimo mitologico di Propertio*, in *GIF* 11 (1958), 327-336; B. W. KÖLMEL, *Die Funktion des Mythologischen in der Dichtung des Propertius* (diss. unpublished Heidelberg, 1957); G. LIEBERG, *Die Mythologie des Propertius in der Forschung und die Idealisierung Cynthias*, in *RhM* 112 (1969), 311-347. Only Desideri sees myth as a largely extraneous element in Propertius' poetry, as a flourish of Alexandrian inspired erudition that contributes little to the emotional substance of his elegies. In his recent study of Propertius, *Propertius: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, 1976), J. P. SULLIVAN rightly emphasizes (p. 134) the highly personal use the poet makes of myth.

as an index to his own sensibility and how, in doing so, he permits himself greater emotional and aesthetic freedom of expression than in the first book.

In the second book the presence of myth has become much more pervasive: in the *Monobiblos* there are only eight important passages of mythological comparison or reference (1.1.9sq, 1.2.15sq, 1.3.1sq, 1.4.5sq, 1.13.21sq, 1.15.9sq, 1.19.7sq and 13sq), excluding, of course, 1.20, which tells the story of Hercules and Hylas and is a mythological narrative in its entirety, although the myth is framed by a brief personal application: the second book, on the other hand, contains at least four times as many passages, and this represents a substantial increase over the *Monobiblos*, even when allowance is made for the fact that the second book is much longer than the first (1362 vs 706 lines).

We see the emotional freedom with which Propertius draws upon myth reflected in the fact that in the second book the poet identifies himself several times with great mythical figures. Thus in 2.8.29sq, he recalls the wrath of Achilles in order to justify his own violent outburst of anger over his humiliating loss of Cynthia to a rival. In poem 14 he celebrates a night of pleasure he has recently spent with Cynthia: to convey something of the quality of his joy, he opens the elegy with a series of comparisons, recounting three great climactic events from Greek myth and legend, the final capture of Troy by Agamemnon and his army, Ulysses' homecoming to Ithaca, and Electra's recognition of her long-separated brother Orestes, and then claims in a spirit of triumphant bravado that his own *gaudia* (7) surpassed any joy or satisfaction experienced by those mythical heroes and heroines.

A similar spirit of elation characterizes the mythological comparisons made in 2.22.25sq, and here the exaggeration has obviously become ironical: for Propertius ventures to compare his sexual prowess with that of Zeus and of the great heroes of the Trojan war, Achilles and Hector. The self-mockery that underlies this passage flows through the entire elegy, in which we find Propertius defending his recently acquired taste for promiscuous love. The mythological passage ends with an ironically bold identification by the poet of himself with Achilles and Hector (33-34),

*ille uel hic classis poterant uel perdere muros :
hic ego Pelides, hic ferus Hector ego.*

In 2.20 the poet tries to reassure his weeping mistress, who thinks that he has deceived and deserted her, that his love for her is still as firm as

ever. Again, to add emphasis to his pledges, he turns to the world of myth and compares his determination to Zeus' persistence in his wooing of Danae (9-12) ; indeed, he implies he would surpass the god's performance, for he adds the boast that even if he were bound with brazen fetters (a detail which, of course, is foreign to the story of Zeus and Danae) he would break free from them and so fling himself into the arms of his beloved.

The feelings underlying the *exemplum* of Haemon and Antigone in 2.8.21-24 are more serious. The highly emotional, even hysterical tone of the preceding lines, which, from line 13 onwards, are a succession of exclamations and questions, extends into the mythological illustration, which is caught up in the frenzied train of thought and feeling in this part of the poem. In lines 17-20 Propertius prays for his own death and, in an outburst of masochistic fury, wishes Cynthia to rejoice over his demise and to trample on his grave. The *exemplum* of Haemon's suicide in the tomb of Antigone makes clear that Propertius has been thinking of killing himself. In line 25 he directs himself to Cynthia (lines 17sq. were self-address) and threatens that he will also kill her : *hoc eodem ferro stillet uterque cruor* (26). Propertius' hysterical outburst has now reached its climax : in his agitation he has imagined himself murdering Cynthia and then putting the sword to himself – an expression of love-hatred violence unparalleled in Roman love-poetry. The comparison with Haemon's suicide occupies a pivotal position in this violent outpouring of emotion : not only does the thought of Haemon's death reveal that Propertius has been contemplating suicide, but it also sweeps him forward to fantasize a full *Liebestod* for Cynthia and himself, so that he and his mistress may re-enact in the present the tragedy of Haemon and Antigone. The mythological comparison thus functions very much as an emotional catalyst here rather than simply as an example or illustration which is not really crucial to the emotional direction taken by the poem. The fact that there is, of course, no physical and moral parallel between the deaths of Haemon and Antigone and the end which the poet is projecting for himself and Cynthia remains, of course, submerged in the feverish intensity of this whole passage ⁽²⁾ : here, too, the myth is transformed into a reflector of the poet's state of mind, rather than into a more or less extraneous paradigm.

(2) Butler and Barber comment as follows in their edition on Propertius' use of the Haemon-*exemplum* : "The illustration with which he justifies his proposed suicide (21-24) is peculiarly inept. Antigone was no faithful mistress : in all forms of the legend it is in grief for her death that Haemon slew himself". Rothstein, in his edition, recognizes the

All the above examples indicate that the poet feels much freer in the second book to identify himself with the great figures of the mythical past. In the *Monobiblos* there is only the Milanion-*exemplum* in 1.1.9sqq, where this kind of connection is made. However, even there Propertius is careful to underline, with the self-pity so characteristic of the first book, the crucial difference between his own and Milanion's sufferings: the mythical hero was ultimately successful in winning the favour of Atalanta, whereas he himself faces the bleak prospect of unending torment in his relationship with Cynthia. In book two Propertius confronts this relationship with a more mature flexibility of attitude and with greater emotional freedom, in which there is room for both emotional anguish and for playful and ironic posing as Propertius fuses his own experience with the trials and tribulations experienced by mythical lovers.

In the first book Cynthia is compared a few times to mythical heroines for her grace and beauty (1.3.1sqq, 1.4.5sqq, and 1.19.13sqq). Of these, the opening passage of 1.3, in which the sleeping Cynthia is successively compared to Ariadne, Andromede, and a Maenad, stands out as a pinnacle of achievement in the young poet's handling of myth. Not only is the description exquisite in its own right, but, as Curran has shown in his excellent study of this poem⁽³⁾, the motif established in the first simile, namely that of the girl abandoned by her lover, is pursued in the remainder of the elegy: here, then, myth provides more than simply an eye-catching beginning, but is intimately and dynamically related to the poem in its entirety.

In book two Propertius continues to elevate Cynthia to mythical status, but carries his idealization to even greater heights of intensity, indeed to such great heights that we are inclined to wonder whether he is not speaking with half-disguised exaggeration. In 2.2.5sqq, we find the poet comparing Cynthia for the first time to the goddesses themselves, first to Juno (6) and then to Minerva (7-8); she is subsequently compared to the heroine Isomache (9-10) and to the goddess Brimo (11-12); finally, she is said to be superior in beauty to the goddesses Juno, Minerva, and Venus who submitted themselves to the judgment of Paris. Nowhere else in Propertius is Cynthia in such grandiose, mythological terms, although 2.3

essentially emotional significance of the passage: see also T. A. Suits's excellent article on this poem, *Mythology, Address, and Structure in Propertius 2.8*, in *TAPhA* 96 (1965), 427-437, especially 429-432.

(3) See note 1.

comes close. There the poet says that Cynthia will be the first Roman consort of Jupiter (29-31) and that she is a Helen of Troy come back to earth. The figure of Helen leads him to reflect on the causes of the Trojan war : no longer, because of his passion for Cynthia, is he surprised that a woman's *forma* could have launched men into such great destruction and suffering. The theme of the Trojan war and its great heroes and heroines haunts the poet in the second book, and he gives it much greater prominence than in the *Monobiblos* (4). Helen herself, for instance, is referred to only once in book one (1.13.30), but in the second book she appears several times (2.1.50, 2.3.32sq., 2.8.11-12, 2.15.13-14, 2.32.31-32, and 2.34.88). There is also the figure of Paris, who is not mentioned at all in the first book, but appears five times in book two (2.2.13-14, 2.3.27-38, 2.6.11-12, 2.15.13-14, and 2.32.35sq.). Another famous pair of lovers from the Trojan war which emerges in the second book are Briseis and Achilles (2.8.29-38, 2.9.9-16, and 2.14.3-4), while Andromache and Hector also occur for the first time in book two (2.22.31-32).

The prominence of the Iliadic theme in the mythological illustrations of the second book suggests that the poet is demonstrating that he is capable of adapting epic material to the perspective of his love poetry. In the first poem, it will be remembered, he defends himself against critics who had suggested that he might more profitably write on epic and heroic themes : he, of course, declines to follow this advice, but even so he introduces into many of his elegies the legend of the Trojan war, selecting its romantic episodes, on which he concentrates with all the powers of his imagination, and with all his sense of pathos and irony. The irony is patent in Propertius' references to the Trojan war in the first poem, which pave the way for his subsequent treatment of the Iliadic theme : in lines 13-14 he jokes that he and Cynthia are remaking the Iliad with their amorous strife, and in lines 49-50 he remarks tongue-in-cheek that it is Helen alone out of the whole Iliad who draws Cynthia's disapproval. In 3.8.29-38 the wrath of Achilles, the warrior's sense of slighted honour, as it is depicted in the Iliad, becomes for Propertius the grief and anger of a frustrated and humiliated lover. There is fine pathos in the description of Briseis as she washes the dead body of Achilles (2.9.9.-16) ; this episode represents sentimental adaptation of the Iliadic theme at its best in Propertius. We see, then, that the spirit of emotional freedom and

(4) The importance of the Iliadic theme in Propertius is stressed by Boyancé (see note 1), 188sq.

flexibility characteristic of book two as a whole has also left its mark on these mythological images and illustrations.

We also observe that the mythological material is handled with greater rhetorical freedom in the second book. Thus we are struck by the freedom with which the poet often injects his own comments into his mythological references, comparisons, and illustrations, and by the increased casualness with which he often introduces a mythological reference into his argument. The insertion of personal comment is especially new to the second book, and in a number of passages myth and personal comment are inseparably interwoven. A good example is 2.6.15sq., where the poet adduces the stories of the Trojan War and the abduction of the Sabine women as illustrations of the fact that unbridled male lust causes nothing but strife and misery. The direct intrusion of the poet's own feelings is underlined by the use of the rhetorical question in line 21 and in the repeated use of the apostrophe in lines 19-22, where he addresses himself to Romulus. An equally direct involvement on the part of the poet underlies the references to the Trojan War in 2.3.33sq., where the poet resorts again to apostrophe, addressing himself in succession to the city of Troy, Paris, and Menelaus. One should also compare the following passages: 2.8.21-24, 2.20.1-4, 2.22.29-32, 2.2.33.7 sq., 29-30, all of which are marked by the use of rhetorical questions and direct address. The effect of these is largely rhetorical, although, as I have already shown in my discussion of the *Haemon-exemplum* in 2.8.21-24, occasionally, in an emotionally appropriate context, the heightening of tone reflects a real intensity of feeling.

It is characteristic of the *Monobiblos* that its mythological passages are generally presented in the form of actual comparisons, and that thereby these passages acquire a degree of delimitation from their context. There are only a few exceptions. In 1.4.5-8 the comparison of Cynthia to mythical heroines is framed by a concessive clause. But more striking is the manner in which myth is incorporated into 1.19. First of all, in lines 7-10 Propertius reminds Cynthia of Protesilaus, whose ghost came to the upper world in order to visit his faithful, grieving wife; then he launches himself into a fantasy, in which he imagines himself as a shade in the underworld, meeting the beautiful heroines of Troy, but remaining resolutely faithful to his Cynthia. In this poem we encounter two ways of using myth which become more prevalent in the second book: first of all, myth is presented simply in the form of an illustration or *exemplum*, as in the *exemplum* of Protesilaus, without any use of the forms of comparison; secondly, as in Propertius' vision of himself in the underworld,

myth is made an integral part of an encompassing fantasy which dominates the whole or at least a substantial part of the poem.

The form of *exemplum* is extremely popular in book two. The major instances are 2.1.37-38 (the virtue of loyalty between two friends as exemplified in Achilles and Patroclus and Theseus and Pirithoos), 2.1.59-64 (miraculous cures effected in the mythical past), 2.3.51-54 (the necessity for a lover to endure his trials patiently, as was done by Melampus), 2.8.21-24 (the deaths of Haemon and Antigone as a model of *Liebestod*), 2.8.29-38 (Achilles' wrath over the abduction of Briseis as a justification for the poet's own grief and anger over his loss of Cynthia to a rival), 2.9.3-18 (Penelope and Briseis as models of fidelity and *pudor*), 2.15.13-16 (the amours of Helen and Paris and of the moon-goddess and Endymion as models for the poet's own licentiousness), 2.18.7-18 (Tithonus and Aurora as a model of faithful love), 2.28.17-24 (famous women from the mythical past who were rescued at the last moment), 2.32.21-34 (illicit loves). The *exempla*, it will be noted, always cohere carefully with their context, so that, despite the fact that no explicit forms of comparison are used, their relevance to the context is immediately obvious. This is the case even in 2.1.37-38, although the *exemplum* follows rather abruptly upon line 36. Still, the connection is clear enough: in line 36 Propertius praises Maecenas for his loyal friendship to Augustus, and then in the following, extremely tersely phrased couplet cites Achilles and Patroclus and Theseus and Pirithoos as renowned examples of true friendship ⁽⁵⁾.

The possibilities of using myth in the context of a fantasy are also further explored in book two. There are three elegies in which myth functions in this manner. In 26a Propertius recalls a dream in which he saw Cynthia shipwrecked and floating helplessly in the sea. The mythological and religious allusions which he weaves into his account give the dream-narrative a light and ironic flavour, which counteracts any impression of naive sentimentality ⁽⁶⁾. In 2.28 the underlying mood of

(5) See the lucid paraphrase of lines 35-38 offered by Enk in his commentary. Camps, in his commentary, suspects that the extremely abrupt transition from line 38 to 39 may be due to a *lacuna* of one distich in the text; he points out that the addition of one couplet would give 2.1 a perfect internal symmetry in the distribution of the line-groups. However, I do not regard the transition as impossibly abrupt, for in line 39, after his brief and somewhat parenthetical panygeric of Maecenas in the two preceding distichs, Propertius picks up his earlier reflections, which started in line 17, on the merits of writing a mythological or a historical epic.

(6) In his *Propertius Ludibundus* (Heidelberg, 1966), 38-41 E. Lefevre offers a fine appreciation of the humor and irony that permeate this poem.

each of the different mythological passages fluctuates with the context. In the earlier part of the poem Propertius' fantasies about Cynthia's impending death and her descent into the underworld (25-30) are still marked by an attitude of detachment and playfulness, but later, as Cynthia's illness becomes truly critical, death and Hades are seen from a much grimmer perspective (39-40, 47-58). 2.29a is different from the two preceding elegies in that it completely blends myth and fantasy; the mythical element has become the *sine qua non* of the imaginary situation described by the poet, who claims that he was apprehended by a band of zealous Cupids the previous night as he was roaming the streets, well under the influence of wine. Propertius describes his dramatic encounter with humorous and sophisticated realism: the Cupids carry their traditional paraphernalia of torch, bow and arrow (5-6), and their spokesman actually chides the poet for disbelieving in their divinity (12), but, in fact, they act as though they were Cynthia's servants and instructed by her to arrest her errant lover (7).

My final point of discussion regarding the rhetorical use made by Propertius of myth is the internal structure of the more extended mythological passages, that is, the arrangement of the clauses and their constituent phrases and the repetition of words or phrases. Whether regular or irregular, symmetrical or asymmetrical, internal structure is often an important factor in the creation of the basic 'feeling' of a mythological passage. It is characteristic of the second book that it embraces the extremes both of regularity and irregularity (*uariatio*), whereas in the *Monobiblos* only symmetry and regularity are significantly exploited for their rhetorical possibilities, as may be seen especially in the opening mythological passage of 1.3.

The grandiose comparison of Cynthia to various goddesses and heroines in 2.2.5sq, which I have already discussed, is characterized by a quite irregular internal structure and movement. The passage is worth quoting in full:

...et incedit uel loue digna soror
aut cum Dulichias Pallas spatiat ad aras,
Gorgonis anguiferae pectus operta comis :
qualis et Isomache Lapithae genus heroine,
Centauris medio grata rapina mero :

(7) F. Cairns suggests in *CQ* N.S. 21 (1971), 455-460, that the Cupids are represented by Propertius as *fugitiuarii*, persons in Roman society who made a profession of catching runaway slaves.

*Mercurio satis fertur Boebeidos undis
uirgineum Brimo composuisse latus.
cedite iam, diuae, quae pastor uiderat olim
Idaeis tunicas ponere uerticibus.*

Until line 11 we have a loosely structured period, *et ...et ...aut ...qualis et*, while the final two mythological illustrations are contained each in a distich standing in adyndeton to the preceding and following lines. The extreme *uariatio* reflects the pervasively emotional tone that emerges from this passage and the poem as a whole, conveying the poet's turbulent awareness of Cynthia's great beauty – a beauty which acts as a deeply disruptive force in his life, not as a quality that can be admired in detached contemplation⁽⁸⁾.

The possibilities of symmetry and regularity are also fully exploited in book two. The opening sequence of mythological comparisons in 2.14 is an excellent example. The nearly perfect repetition and anaphora of *non ita ... nec sic ...nec sic ...nec sic* and the uniformity of syntactic structure (in each distich the main clause occupies the hexameter, while the subordinate clause – three times a *cum* clause, once a relative clause – is contained in the pentameter) build up a climactic effect, which is nicely resolved in the main clause, *quanta ego praeterita collegi gaudia nocte* (9), which follows upon the mythological comparisons.

We find the same principle at work in a number of *exempla*. In his long description of Aurora and Tithonus in 2.18.7-18 Propertius portrays the goddess's enduring affection for the old man, showing a real eye for the absurd and pathetic situation in which goddess and mortal find themselves. His attitude towards the mythical lovers' situation is one of both emotional empathy and ironic detachment. The anaphora *illum* (9), *illum* (11), *illa* (13) heightens the subtle ambivalence of feeling that runs through this passage, for the note of emphasis it introduces into the description embraces both aspects of the poet's attitude.

In 2.28.17-24 the structural parallelism and symmetry contribute to the ironic impression created by the mythological *exempla*, so that the element of pathos is left almost completely submerged. The passage is worth quoting in full :

*Io uersa caput primos mugiuerat annos :
nunc dea, quae Nili flumina uacca bibit.*

(8) Note that the effect of *uariatio* is also heightened by the abrupt switch in 12-13 to the form of direct address.

*Ino etiam prima terra terris aetate uagata est ;
 hanc miser implorat nauita Leucothoen.
 Andromede monstris fuerat deuota marinis :
 haec eadem Persei nobilis uxor erat.
 Callisto Arcadios errauerat ursa per agros :
 haec nocturna suo sidere uela regit.*

Here we have a succession of self-contained couplets, each comprising one *exemplum* and standing in asyndeton to the preceding and following lines. Within each distich the hexameter and pentameter stand in asyndeton and antithesis to another (the antithesis is created by the fact that the hexameter describes the heroine's sufferings while the pentameter points to her final delivery). Moreover, through the last three couplets runs the anaphora *hanc, haec, haec*. Finally, in the first couplet we should note the sharp and humorous antithesis *dea ... uacca*. The rhetorical effect of this whole impression is one of concise, catalogue-like enumeration, which has a certain playful 'deadpan' quality to it. One should contrast with this passage the mythological references in 51-56 :

*uobiscum est Iope, uobiscum candida Tyre,
 uobiscum Europe nec proba Pasiphae,
 et quot Troia tulit uetus et quot Achaia formas,
 et Thebae et Priami diruta regna senis :
 et quaecumque erat in numero Romana puella,
 occidit : has omnis ignis auarus habet.*

Here the repetition and parallelism contribute very much to the profound pathos which underlies these lines.

These observations on the various possible rhetorical effects that may be created by the internal structure of mythological passages again illustrate the freedom with which Propertius uses myth in the second book. Myth in the second book conveys the whole range of the poet's experience. It can embody his most passionate feelings in all their intensity as well as the attitude of cool, ironic sophistication which he is also often quite capable of evincing. More than in any of the other books, it becomes a macrocosmic foil to the poet's experience and an aesthetic stimulus to his creativity and rhetorical resourcefulness.