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Cynthia, Propertius, Gallus, and the Boys

Where Lesbia is an important and certainly the most memorable feature of Catullus's poetry, Cynthia in Propertius' Monobiblos is a dominating figure unlike any seen before in extant Roman poetry (King 1975-76: 108). She is the first word of the first poem and the topic of every text in the book except the last three and 1.16. Where Lesbia appears in less than a third of Catullus's poetry, Cynthia is the subject of the vast majority of Propertius' poems in books 1-3. As Boucher notes, Cynthia and the implied narrative of Propertius' affair with her is the animating force of Propertius's poetry (1980: 240). Without Cynthia, the Monobiblos would not exist. Yet, while there is wide agreement on Cynthia's importance, stating who or what Cynthia is is far more problematic. Moreover, Cynthia is inextricably linked to Propertius' relationship with his male interlocutors throughout book 1, with particular reference to Gallus. The present paper will therefore examine three related areas: who is Cynthia, who is Gallus, and how does their interrelation structure the homosocial order of the Monobiblos? In section one, I shall look at the way in which Cynthia's very indefinability is related to her function in the book on both a thematic and a structural level and how that function is related to the figure of Gallus in poems 1.20-22. In section two, I shall examine the historical Gallus, his impact on Propertius' poetry, and his semiotic function in the Monobiblos. In section three, I shall undertake a reading of poems 1.10 and 1.13 with particular attention to Cynthia's relation to their homoerotic subtexts.

1. Who is Cynthia?

The question of Cynthia's status has long been at the center of Propertian studies. Is she a person and if so of what status: matrona or meretrix, free or slave? Is she a fictive construct and if so to what purpose: a character in a drama, a literary allegory, the symbolic representation of the author's nonconformist poetic and political agenda? All of these positions have been argued and each has merit. I argue that this very indefinability is what marks her as the symptom of crisis in the masculinist homosocial order.

2. Who is Gallus?

Gallus is the eminence grise behind Augustan elegy. Acknowledged by Propertius (2.34.85-94) and Ovid (Amores 1.15.27-30, 3.9.61-64; Ars Amatoria 3.533-34, 3.535-58; Remedia Amoris 763-66; Tristia 2.427-48, 4.10.51-54, 5.1.15-18) as an influential predecessor, he is listed by Quintilian (10.1.93) as the first of the elegists. I argue that in Propertius he functions as the sign of a lost masculine plenitude, in which the lover and the soldier are complementary rather than opposed. It is this plenitude that Propertius seeks to recover through the competition for the beloved. Cynthia serves as the mediating link between the poet, Gallus, Bassus, and Ponticus.

3. Where the Boys Are: Sharing the Joy.

In poems, 1.10 and 1.13, Propertius and Gallus enjoy a sexual experience. Gallus is the performer and Propertius a voyeur. The scene is charged with the shared eroticism that defines Irigaray's concept of hom(m)osexualité. The imagery at times borders on the graphic. Propertius in 1.13 uses the exemplum of Neptune assuming the body of the river god Enipeus so as to make love to Tyro. Here the two men's bodies become one, each penetrating the other in order to have intercourse with the woman who is the medium of their union (Hodge and Buttimore 1977: 158; Rothstein 1979: ad loc.). This exemplum, in turn, modulates directly into that of Hercules and Hebe, which, while in itself heteroerotic, looks forward to the only other mention of Hercules in the Monobiblos, which is found in the next and last of the erotic Gallus poems, 1.20 on the hero's pederastic beloved, Hylas (Rothstein 1979: ad loc.).

4. Conclusion.

The heteroerotic competition that characterizes the Monobiblos points to and serves as a substitute for a lost world of masculine fullness. Cynthia thus becomes a technology of mediated masculinity. Indeed, she is a virtual prosthetic.