HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Propertius (60 B.C.- after 16 B.C.)

Propertius and his moment. The poem you find at the end of this week's syllabus is from the first of four books of elegies, by the Roman poet Propertius. We are in the year 25 B.C., and once again, as with Virgil, Livy, and Horace we are in that zone of tremendously powerful political change which surrounded the civil struggles of the Roman Republic, in its last decades, and the accession of Octavian to the role of Caesar Augustus in 38 B.C. As you can see, Propertius—like Catullus and Horace—tended to prefer love to politics, though none of these men shunned the perks that could devolve on them from healthy relations with power.

The prosody of Propertius. Since, however, Propertius was first and foremost a lyric poet, we should pause a minute to consider his product—the brilliantly hewn *elegy* form, which is the mould of the Latin behind the above translation. Look at the first two lines of the English, then at the far more compact Latin of those lines:

Cy'nthia pri'ma suis' miserum' me ce'pit oce'llis
Con/tactum/ nullis/ ante cu'pidini'bus.

The elegy form. The interplay of these two kinds of line was from the time of the early Greek poets considered the gold standard for one kind of poetic construction. The first of the two lines of the elegiac couplet contains six stressed syllabic units, arranged (this is an average) on the basis of six succeeding dactyls—sound units consisting of a stressed followed by two unstressed syllables. The second of the two lines of the couplet consists of five stressed syllables, arranged in a such a sound pattern that the relatively brevity of the second line answers, closes off, and completes the proposition of the first line, so that the couplet is a perfect unit. Reader, forgive this foreshortened, simplistic account of a splendid, long trained verse form, and, taking the most you can get from this account, return to the first two shaggy and limping lines of our English translation. See the difference in concision?

Form and content in Propertius. The form of such poetry is not a hollow shell surrounding its content, but the content itself in action, and Propertius, on a par with the Horace who was master of Greek prosodic modes, is one of splendors of Roman literature. In a famous poem, #6 from Book I, Propertius writes to his friend Tullus that he is glad to be known as one who sang from the turmoils of love, rather than giving himself up to warfare, fighting with the Emperor. Propertius proudly proclaims, in many of his poems, that the warfare he values is with the obduracy of language.

Propertius: the biography. Which brings us to the issue of Propertius' distinctive life situation and value system. He was born in mid-first century in Assisi, in the province of Umbria. We know that Propertius' father died when his son was a young boy, and that Propertius was raised by his Mother—whose efforts had to have been huge; the family's land had been confiscated by Augustus, as part of a large offering to Octavian's veterans after the Battle of Actium, and Propertius's mother herself paid the indirect costs of war. Somehow, fortunately, Propertius made his way to Rome, where—untouched by any direct contact with the military conflicts seething around him—he settled on the Esquiline Hill, an upscale section of Rome, and entered slowly into the circle of the powers, a circle which, as we know from the intimacy of Augustus with Virgil and Horace, was open to the arts. Of supreme importance then was Propertius' meeting with Cynthia, the woman who was to dominate his first three Books, though in the fourth Book he records their bitter break up, and at the same time announces new themes he intends to pursue in his writing. The first Book of Elegies attracted cutting edge admiration in Rome, and fortunately for Propertius Maecenas—the benefactor of Horace and Virgil—was taken with this new work, and invited Propertius into his circle of literary discussants and fellow spirits. The financial support of Maecenas, for which this benefactor wanted nothing in return except praise, bailed out a whole generation of brilliant poets at a time of struggle, conflict, and danger in Rome.

Propertius and romantic poetry. It is fascinating to observe the power of love to generate poetry, in both Greek and Roman literatures. We have mentioned the peculiarity of the lyric genre in Ancient Rome, that it is a vehicle for self-expression, but that the vehicle in question is highly disciplined and prosodically wrought. Self-expression, in ancient Roman poetry, does not mean anything like free-verse, or even like the flowing personal line of a Whitman, who sings of his own soul. Ancient prosody precluded any such 'naturalism,' and in fact the reader of Propertius will find an abundance of scholarly myth references—all impeccably integrated—which betray the almost universal stress, in ancient poetry, on the same kind of erudition we know from the epic and satiric genres. As for Propertius who can ever have exceeded him in the exquisite formulation of the wonder of spending all night touching all the parts of another person's body.

Cynthia was the first. She caught me with her eyes, a fool
who had never before been touched by desires.
Love cast down my look of constant pride,
and he pressed on my head with his feet,
until he taught me to despise chaste girls,
perversely, and to live without plan.
Already, it's been a whole year that the frenzy hasn't stopped,
when, for all that, the gods are against me.

Readings

Propertius, *Poems*, translated Lee and Lyne (Oxford, 1994.)
Hubbard, Margaret, *Propertius* (Bristol, 1974).
Sullivan, J.P., *Propertius: a critical introduction* (Cambridge, l976).