CONSTRUCTING CHARACTERS IN PROPERTIUS

ALISON SHARROCK

nudus Amor formae non amat artificem

"Naked Love does not love an artificer of form"
Propertius 1.2.8

One of the major contributions of late republican and early imperial Latin poetry to the course of literature was the development of a subjective, first-personal voice that seems to speak directly to the reader or to the addressee (pretending to ignore the reader), without the framing devices of narrative or dramatic presentation, and without even an explicit rhetorical separation of speaker and persona.[1] This is not to say, of course, that the speaker of Augustan elegy straightforwardly *is* the poet, the man, the "real person"—far from it, for indeed, there are many levels of "persona" active in the communicative dynamics of elegy—but rather to suggest that the subjective stance offers a pose of immediacy which precisely occludes the artificiality of its own dynamics: *ars adeo latet arte sua* ("art lies hidden by its own art," Ov. *Met*. 10.252).[2] As Elizabeth Bruss has said: "To speak in the first person is to identify oneself as the immediate source of the communication, and to make of this a focal issue of that communication."[3] The subjective stance

1 These poets were not the first to write literature in the first person. I mean that their role in developing a subjective voice was disproportionately important. See Lefkowitz 1991, Goldhill 1991. On these issues in lyric, Johnson 1982.

I use the term "first-personal" as an adjectival form of "first person," but one which, at the same time, stresses the personal nature of subjective poetry.

2 All translations from ancient authors are my own.

3 Bruss 1976.21. See also Barthes 1977, Elliott 1982, Selden 1984, especially ch. 7. On "persona" in ancient literary thinking, see especially Clay 1998.

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speaks to our desire for presence, for authority and stability, for the immediacy of communication which Derrida has highlighted as the driving force of Western thought.[4] When the matter is that most subjective of subjects—love—then the desire for immediacy and the cuddly presence of the speaking voice is all the stronger. And there is nothing wrong with that: indeed, this is how love poetry works.

As is well known, for many years the critical response to Propertius' first-person communication was to take it at face value, as really reflecting a real situation. Then came a reaction, influenced partly by New Criticism, which stressed its literary and artificial nature.[5] A revolution in the study of such questions with regard to Propertius came in the work of Maria Wyke, who taught us to see Cynthia as an embodiment of the poetry itself and as a construct of the text whose apparent reality was in fact a "reality effect."[6] This paper is clearly indebted to that approach, but hopes to take it further. In that work, the issue was at least partly whether or not the elegiac mistress "had any objective reality." What I want to do now is to look at how the various realisms of character and situation are constructed and how they interact with each other. This discussion of *realien* will necessarily deconstruct to some extent the distinction between the "literary" and the "real," just as, as I shall show further, the Propertian text slips in and out of "real life," playing with the possibilities of immediacy, of artificiality, of realism and constructivism, of art and nature.

My aim in this paper is to expose the tricks of realism in Propertian elegy: not to disparage or undermine them, but to suggest how they enrich our involvement in the poetry and offer us a wealth of perspectives that go far beyond the straightforward authorial presence which is the stated (or unstated) pose of first-personal poetry. In this regard, "realism" is a construct which comes into being as an impression of reality and in a mimetic game between poet and reader. That game, I suggest, is itself reflexive with

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4 Classic discussion in Derrida 1981.

5 See Griffin 1985 on this, especially ch. 3. While I cannot agree with the straightforward immediacy which he sees as informing the connection between Augustan poetry and life, his strictures against the "purely literary" tradition of criticism are, in my view, right. Habinek 1998 is a sustained attack on "purely literary" readings of Latin literature. For Propertius, see 128–32.

6 Wyke 1987 and 1989. Greene 1995 is a good development of the idea of Cynthia as "reality effect," but the complexities of realism in all the interactions of gender have not been explored.

(reflects and is reflected by) the relationship between the lover and his *amicus* (his friend, side-kick, rival, and shoulder to cry on). Realism and artificiality are thus closely bound up with each other. I am particularly concerned with the way that all the characters of elegy, from the poet himself to other Roman men to the beloved, are constructs which come into being through interactions in, between, and outside texts. The first-personal realism of presentation allows gaps to open up in the process of representation, through which apparently stable readings and categories are deconstructed. Realism, particularly first-personal realism, is a device set up to entice the reader into taking the elegiac fiction as, at one level, "real," because it is only in doing so that we can enter into the eroticism of poetry. And yet, we are also given the opportunity to stand back from this involvement (or, at least, to think we *might* have a chance at standing back from it . . .) and to see how Propertius undermines the singular perspective of the elegiac narrator and invites the reader to notice how the perception of character is always multiply determined.[7]

The process of mimesis in subjective poetry is to some extent occluded by the first-person narrative, especially when the narrativity itself is occluded by the absence of a narrative or dramatic frame. Propertius, the speaker, is at one important level in complete control of the focalisation of our point of view and of the presentation of himself and the other characters.[8] But if we read with an awareness of this as a device of realism, we can see also that the poems offer us other ways of reading, ways which involve our appreciation of the tricks the text plays with (our) point of view. Moreover, it is the very fact of this narrowness of writerly point of view on the explicit level that enables us to look into the gaps in the constructed world of the poems. Let us take, first, the Monobiblos. It is easy to respond to the intense concentration on Cynthia in this first book by succumbing to it and not noticing the manipulation of viewpoint which is brought about by the first-person presentation and the variety of addressees. This is not just the story of Propertius and Cynthia, lovers in a timeless, spaceless, contextless world of their own, but a story of talking about love, of love as multi-faceted social intercourse.

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7 I am especially grateful to *Arethusa*'s anonymous reader for helping me clarify this point.

8 On "point of view" as a literary device, see, for example, Booth 1988 and Leaska 1988.

READING CYNTHIA TOGETHER

No one would now suggest, I think, that the arrangement of poems within a book such as the Monobiblos is random; at the very least, it must affect our reading of the collection. The intratextual power of a collection like this, however, is that there is a variety of different ways of chopping up the whole into parts.[9] One way of grouping the poems together is by noticing whose role we are asked to take on as recipient in each case. Of the 22 poems of Book 1, more than half have an *amicus* as their addressee; perhaps it would be useful to set out the structure of the book, according to addressee.

1	Tullus	9	Ponticus	16	Cynthia (door)
2	Cynthia	10	Gallus	17	Cynthia
3	Cynthia	11	Cynthia	18	Cynthia
4	Bassus	12	conscia Roma	19	Cynthia
5	Gallus	13	Gallus	20	Gallus
6	Tullus	14	Tullus	21	epitaph (Gallus)
7	Ponticus	15	Cynthia	22	Tullus
8 (a+b)	Cynthia				

All these poems, with the exception of the last three, are still "about" Cynthia: my table is not meant to suggest that Cynthia is not central to the book, but rather that their way of being "about Cynthia" is one which involves a variety of ways of looking which contribute to the construction of realism.[10] By this, I mean that the realist mimetic world is constructed through the eyes of these various people, looking in towards Cynthia, but their presence also fragments the viewpoint and allows it to go in different directions, letting us see that there are different ways of looking. If we swallow whole the first-personal voice, then it is communication which is foregrounded; if we are also sensitive to the varieties of perspective, then it is (also) mimesis.

I suggest that one of the groupings we can see shows the book framed by a group of three poems at the beginning and three poems at the end; in each case, two of the three link particularly closely together (2 and 3,

9 See Fedeli 1980.13–17 on the arrangement of Book 1.

10 See Wyke 1987 and 1989 for the first book as maintaining realism more closely than the later books, and Greene 1995 and 1998 for a response to this point.

21 and 22). Within this frame, we can see various other groupings: one links together the poems from 4 to 14, which contain nearly all the "friend-addressed" poems, with another group from 15 to 19 in which everything but Cynthia is shut out. There is also, it seems to me, another fairly clear group made up of 4 to 7 (the four friends), while various individual poems link together in ways that cut across the wider linkages (7 and 10, 6 and 8, to say nothing of those linked specifically by addressee).

The movement from a "friend-addressed" group to the "only Cynthia" group might seem to suggest that we have been working towards greater intimacy with Cynthia—until something odd happens. When we get to the edge, it is the frame that matters, but this frame is uneven. Propertius tells us that *Cynthia prima fuit, Cynthia finis erit* ("Cynthia was the beginning, Cynthia will be the end," 1.12.20). It is probably significant that the line ends a poem which is near the middle of the book. The line clearly repeats and quotes the opening of the book: *Cynthia prima suis miserum me cepit ocellis* ("Cynthia first captured with her eyes my unhappy self," 1.1.1). Cynthia opened the book; Cynthia first; Cynthia the First; Book 1 and forever. By rights, the second half of 1.12.20 should find resonances at the end of the Monobiblos. But it doesn't. The last time Cynthia appears in Book 1 is in poem 19, which uses the obvious closural device of death to lead towards the ending of the book. There are, however, three more poems to go, and it is *not,* in the end, Cynthia who is the beginning and end of the book, but rather Tullus.[11] Fedeli notes that the address to Tullus in these two crucial positions is a mark of honour and special friendship.[12] I would say it is more than that: it is a marker of the extent to which the *amici* who so often appear in the Monobiblos are crucial to the construction of realism and the direction of point of view.

The way in which they do this, I suggest, is that the various friends to whom the poems are addressed are to some extent standing in for the reader. They are invited to share in looking at Cynthia, in the pleasures and anxieties of Roman masculine sexuality—which are always at issue in these poems—and in the pleasures and anxieties of the poetic experience which

11 In the Monobiblos, it is always at issue whether we are reading one whole book or the first of four. It is interesting to note that *Cynthia prima* does not find the expected resonance at the end of Book 4 either, where the collection ends with Cornelia, a woman quite different in presentation from Cynthia. And yet: *semper amica mihi semper et uxor eris* (2.6.42). I am grateful to Sergio Casali for this point.

12 Griffin 1985 rightly rejects the view of Cairns that Tullus is Propertius' "patron." See also Putnam 1977.

are equally so. In doing so, moreover, their presence helps to construct for themselves (?), for Propertius, and for the reader a privileged position with regard to poetry and real life. The reader, with Tullus and Propertius, looks in at the world of the poem, the fictional artefact which is the object of his (sic) desire. Standing outside it, he maintains an illusion of being real. But in that case, the reader can also resist the identification, look at these Roman men looking, and ask whether life and literature will stay so neatly separate.

When we read the words "Tullus," "Bassus," "Ponticus," "Gallus," we are meant to respond to them as signifiers of Roman men, real people of whom a life-story can be told,[13] who read Roman poems and looked at (loved and read) Roman girls. The presence of these friends gives an immediacy of presence to the poetry, a sense that we are involved in something *real*, but Propertian poetics refuses to bridge the gap between reality and fiction, preferring rather to interweave them in creative but tricky tension. Opposite the world of Roman men—real, living, active, immediate—stands the world of myth—distant, dead (or never-alive), artistic and literary, transcendent. The world of the poems, of "Cynthia" and of love, stands somewhere—not perhaps *between*, but somehow among and in tension with these worlds. It must be significant that the two supposedly opposing poles are introduced into the collection together. The address to Tullus which, conventionally, dedicates the work to him and invites him into the poem, comes in the same breath as the first mythological allusion of the collection, the story of Milanion (1.1.9–10).

> Milanion nullos fugiendo, Tulle, labores
> saeuitiam durae contudit Iasidos.
>
> By sparing no efforts, Tullus, Milanion crushed the savagery of the hard daughter of Iasus.

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13 See Fedeli 1980 ad loc. for discussion of the men's identity. The big problem is Gallus: Fedeli denies that he is the poet Cornelius Gallus because of the reference to noble status. See also Hubbard 1974.24–26 on this. Hubbard sees the friends as providing "a social context to and a further clarification of Propertius' love for Cynthia" (25). It is my belief that it would be very hard for contemporaries to avoid reading a reference to the poet Gallus here. See Sharrock 1990. On identifying the Gallus of 1.21, see for example Heiden 1995, who creates a whole scenario for the speaker and addressees as brothers and comrades-in-arms. I do not suggest that there is anything wrong with this reading; I just note the power of male names to evoke complex, real-life (like) stories. For another one, see Traill 1994.

The abstruse telling of this exotic myth stands at one extreme of the spectrum between art and nature (fiction and reality), but, in a sense, the artificial, mythic Milanion is a kind of foil to the real-life Tullus as well as an exemplum for Propertius.[14] Here is another man invited into the poem, invited to join in the manly business of looking at Cynthia (and looking at myth) and looking at *domuisse puellam*.[15]

Just as (real-life) Tullus is mapped onto (mythical) Milanion, so, too, this programmatic first poem maps medicine onto magic, friends onto witches, reason onto irrationality (1.1.19–28).[16] Nothing in the poem allows us to give greater ontological force to one side of this list rather than the other—nothing, that is, other than our learned phallologocentric reading practices. If Tullus and the friends who will (or won't) cure Propertius of his love seem to have more real power (I mean, the power that comes from being real, power to be real) than the witches and Milanion, then, at the least, we must recognise this as a device of realism. We might also note that the poetry itself denies the greater power to the "real" side by aligning itself with precisely the forces of irrationality, magic, and myth. Its own presence refutes the clear distinctions which it claims to make. It is, like much "not in love" poetry, performatively self-refuting.

Milanion, Tullus, and Propertius are all there in the first poem, looking at Cynthia together. Crucial to the discourse of eros, even in its most apparently naive and romantic forms as in the Monobiblos, is that it is communicative. Love, especially love poetry, is, I suggest, much more of a social phenomenon than is generally supposed. The need to tell, even when it is denied, is a driving force.[17] I would like now to look at a few of the

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14 See the erudite note of Fedeli 1980 ad loc. The discussion of Lyne 1980.93–95 is a nice introduction to thinking about the complexities of Propertian use of myth. He calls Propertius "a heterodox romantic."

15 The language of taming and dominating is easily explicable in classical terms, and yet is actually quite foreign and almost shocking to the Propertian programme of s*ervitium amoris*. See Greene 1998 for an excellent discussion of the dominating force of elegy, despite its pose of humility.

16 See Sharrock 1994.57–61 for discussion of this passage; Fedeli 1980, Fauth 1980.

17 The way in which this is a truism about erotic discourse can be seen nicely from a modern American novel by Jay McInerney. A story within the story of the novel tells about two people who are shipwrecked on an island and fall in love. The man, however, is not as happy as he should be, as if he lacks something. He asks his lover to dress up as a man, his friend Frank, and walk along the beach. She does so: he greets her as the friend, saying "Frank, old chap, good to see you. You won't believe who I'm sleeping with . . ."

poems in the "friends" group to suggest how the interactions between the speaker, the addressee, and the subject matter tell us more than the speaker tells us directly and contribute to building up a picture of a world both realist and artistic.

Poems 4 and 5 work together. Their addressees, Bassus and Gallus respectively, are invited to join the speaker in looking at Cynthia and in experiencing the pleasure-pain of loving her. In fact, it almost seems that contemplating the beloved is something that is better done together, something that has only limited possibilities for the lover alone. Both poems plunge *in medias res*, opening as if in response to some question or comment from the addressee, thus tempting us to fill in the gaps that make up the reality effect. In both cases, the friend is presented as trying to separate the lovers; he thus provides the opportunity for the speaker to present himself, in contrast, as devoted to one love. In both cases, although the poems say "leave us alone in our affair," what they *imply* is something more like "join in." One of the clever tricks of the first-person reality effect is the possibility it offers of having it both ways, since the speaker's rejection of a certain way of looking at the world is also offered for his/our enjoyment in the process. Bassus and Propertius look together at the beautiful girls of Rome and of myth: Bassus vicariously focalises a promiscuous response to *multas . . . puellas*, which Propertius can then reject and use as a foil to his own devotion to and celebration of Cynthia. But his single-minded devotion works both ways, because he is also inviting Bassus to join him in it, in the act of reading and co-appreciating "Cynthia" (woman and poetry). That is not to say, of course, that Propertius as lover or poet would suffer rivals lightly, as the next poem shows. Here Gallus is in some way a rival for the affections of Cynthia, or, at least, he has been asking to know more about what it is like to love her. Such a question belongs to the discourses of both love and poetry: sharing experiences, reading poems. "Don't ask!" is the answer, "But *do* ask, so that we can share this pain together." The poem ends with Gallus and Propertius weeping together, comrades in suffering. It seems that a relationship with Cynthia is a shared relationship between men, that even rivalry can reinforce male friendship.[18]

Friendship between men again contributes to the construction of the erotic relationship in the next two poems. Poem 6, like 5, is about men

18 See Oliensis 1997 for the relationship between poet and "great friend" as reflecting that between poet and beloved. This is a bit different, but not totally so.

doing things together; this time going off on public business abroad, in the "real world" of Roman politics. The fact that Propertius refuses the opportunity, being tied to the life of love at Rome, is in a sense less important for what I am saying here than the fact that the possibility is raised. The desire to stay with Cynthia is partly constructed out of the desire to go off with Tullus into the world of men. Even in refusing, Propertius plays out that manly role. Even if he chooses "the woman's part" in staying at home as his mistress' love-slave, he has still allowed the possibility of the alternative to infect the *mollitia* (and the fictionality) of his self-presentation with the *virtus* (and the "reality") of the "Roman" alternative.[19] But, I would suggest, the effect of this infection is a refusal to place those two categories—Roman-real-man and effeminate-literary-lover—at opposite poles. His character is constructed as someone who *might* do either of these things. Perhaps we can see this more clearly if we map poem 7 onto poem 6. This poem also is about grand foreign places and choices of lifestyle, but this time it is a matter of poetics. The addressee is the epic poet Ponticus, whose introduction offers us the most explicit suggestion so far that loving Cynthia might at some level equal writing love elegy. While the poem is clearly a *recusatio* of epic and a statement of the elegiac programme, it also serves to undermine the clear distinctions of category. Ponticus will end up in love, writing a *mollem versum*, and Propertius' anti-epic stance will be infected with epic traces, as is argued by Greene in this volume.[20] Poem 6 contrasts Tullus on campaign with Propertius at Rome; poem 7 contrasts Ponticus writing epic with Propertius writing elegy: the manly and real with the soft and artistic (and fictional). But the categories will not stay separate.

If, as I have suggested, the male friend-addressees offer an alternative point of view for the reader, then I think perhaps we can see a kind of double inversion going on when Propertius himself turns into the viewer of another love affair. In poems 10 and 13, Propertius recounts his own voyeuristic response to the affair of his friend Gallus (to whom the poems are addressed) with an unnamed beloved.[21] In these poems, the poet-speaker-lover himself tries out the role of reader-viewer; we (so to speak), the "real reader-viewers," are thus given the opportunity to try out this doubly inverted role ourselves and see ourselves as he sees us—or see *him* as he sees

19 See Gold 1993, Edwards 1993, Wyke 1995.
20 See also Stahl's discussion of Propertius' relationship with "higher genres" (1985.57–71).
21 See note 13.

himself. The poems, on this reading, are an intensification of the trick of realism through which the reader's point of view is channelled through various eyes. But all this has depended on us, as readers, taking on the role of Roman man, playing Tullus. So we must, but that need not be all.

READING CYNTHIA DIFFERENTLY

So far, I have tried to tear our eyes away from the direction into which they are channelled, so that we can become aware of the effects of the channelling. I should like now to look back at the object of the gaze—it is Cynthia, of course—with perhaps a different perspective. Cynthia has had a bad press. Almost the entire weight of critical reception of this character swallows whole the authorial line that she is beautiful and exciting but capricious, unfaithful, and unreliable. Even so sensitive a critic as Greene, in this volume, speaks of Propertius' "exposure of Cynthia's hypocrisy." This, on one level of response to the fictional world of the poem, is absolutely right. I would suggest, however, that there is a value in noting that Propertius is not so much exposing as *constructing* Cynthia's hypocrisy. If we say he is exposing it, we imply that her behaviour is something objective and external to the world of reading which can be uncovered for all to see, something which exists independently of his attitude towards it.[22] Within the fiction, perhaps so. If we say he is "constructing" it (Cynthia's character), however, we are responding not only to the internal world of the poem but to the process of poetic mimesis—in the very broad sense in which mimesis includes the creation of a fictional world as well as the imitation of something transcendent.[23] If we make ourselves aware of the way in which Propertius is constructing Cynthia, then perhaps we can also see alternatives to that way of seeing Cynthia. It is important to stress that I do not mean that we might see the "real Cynthia" behind the distortions of the self-centred poet. Rather, I am suggesting that the devices of realism and the first-person voice offer us a whole range of ways of looking at fictional characters as

22 This is not simply a question of whether Cynthia has any objective reality. The same points would apply even if Propertius had in mind at the moment of writing—and expected his readers to have in mind—a particular flesh-and-blood woman with whom he was having an affair and who had done something he didn't like.

23 Creation posing as imitation? For thinking about literature in this way, Krieger 1979 is interesting, especially ch. 12, also Thomke 1990.

long as we are aware of the different levels of narration. Just as Sterne tells us a lot that his narrator Tristram Shandy does not, or Dickens gives us angles on characters that are at variance with the perception of David Copperfield, so too, albeit less obviously, Propertius offers us ways of seeing the characters of elegy that are not through the eyes of the poet-lover, even if the matter is complicated by the very close identification between the author and the first-person voice in this poetry. We might be meant to ask, for example, whether the accusation of infidelity would look the same from someone else's point of view (remembering that fidelity to Propertius almost certainly means infidelity to someone else), and whether the accusation of capricious anger might not cover a wish-fulfilment.

Almost any poem could be considered an example of this point. I'd like to look briefly at poems 2 and 3 of the first book, since they are so well known and so powerful in the construction of Cynthia. After the opening poem in which we heard little about Cynthia except the power of her eyes, these two poems purport to tell us a great deal about her: poem 2 celebrating her body and its accoutrements, poem 3 celebrating her desirability and vulnerability. In both poems, it seems to me, the speaker has it both ways. Poem 2 is presented as a complaint about luxury; it's easy to jump from this to vanity, to greed, to infidelity—to all the stereotypes of the "grasping courtesan." But, at the same time, the speaker is undoubtedly luxuriating in these things and inviting us to do so as well. We and he are allowed to blame Cynthia for the pleasure we/he get from this physicality and to use the opportunity to set up an opposition between art and nature. The poem presents the character of Propertius as on the side of natural beauty, sincerity, immediacy, and simplicity, while Cynthia is deceptive, artificial, and distanced. Even the comparison of her with the women of myth is double-edged, for, on the one hand, she is often compared negatively with mythical heroines (who were more faithful, as is shown by their untidy hair), but, on the other hand, the very comparison actually links her with these heroines, and so takes her further away from "the real" and into "the artificial." But Propertius, poet and lover, is far more like Cynthia than he is like this presentation of himself. His poetry itself belies his attempts at self-characterisation. Of course, what I mean by this is *not* that his self-characterisation is a lie, but that both the presentation of character in these poems *and* the sense that this presentation is not the whole story are part of the devices of realism.

Likewise, poem 3 has it both ways. As I have argued previously, the common response to the waking Cynthia as "breaking the spell" with the

harsh realistic words of the "shrew who is the real Cynthia" is a response which swallows only one side of the picture presented by this poem, and swallows it whole.[24] But there are other levels of possible response. Cynthia's complaint of neglect by her lover is, after all, *precisely* what Propertius wants. In this way, he both presents himself as humble, innocent, gentle, careful, hard-done-by (and, in all these things, he has inverted "normal" masculinity) and, at the same time, shows us how desirable he is. Happy is the man at whom a woman is angry (Ov. *Ars* 2.447). Likewise, his presentation of Cynthia as "shrewish" is both a piece of one-upmanship over her and also a celebration (and, of course, a construction) of her attractiveness.

Let us return to the question of intratextual presentation. The collection of poems as a whole, whether we take Book 1 separately or Book 4 separately or all four together, refuses to deliver on the promise of a chronological account of an affair—a promise which seems to be made by the temporal marker in the opening poem. (Propertius has been in love for a year already when the account begins.) While the story does not unfold in a linear way, however, the presentation of character is nonetheless affected by the linear reading which most of us will experience and which must at some level have been intended. While denying us the chronology of an affair, which most readers undoubtedly will crave, Propertius insidiously offers us, in our linear reading, a gradual unfolding of character—the more insidious precisely because of its denial of narrativity. Throughout the early poems, Cynthia is introduced to us with hints and insinuations of her "capriciousness." In poems 4 and 5, in which the relationship with Cynthia is shared with Bassus and Gallus, Cynthia's anger is constructed as directed against the friends, not against Propertius himself. This again is a way of having it both ways: "watch out, she's dangerous, she's really hot property." It is a way of enhancing her attractions and his own erotic position—and, at the same time, setting us up to construct her as *dura puella*.

Poem 15 is the first to make more substantive accusations of *levitas*. It presents itself as a little snippet, a fragment which allows a glimpse to slip out of the sea of troubles in the background. This is a common device of realism. But what exactly is her crime in this poem? To dress up well and come late? The suggestion is, of course, that these are markers of infidelity, that the non-vanity of mythological heroines guaran-

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24 E.g., Stahl 1985.76: "thus harshly emphasizing the difference between illusion and reality."

teed their sincerity, but the structures of the poem and of the book allow us to stand back and see that Propertius has been gradually poisoning our perception of Cynthia so that we immediately jump to such a conclusion about her character and her behaviour—her behaviour because we know this is her character, her character because her behaviour proves it. Let me stress again that what I am trying to do is to expose the devices of the construction of character, and to suggest that the poetry offers us alternatives, not to reify and defend the character of Cynthia.

Although I say this, at one level, I am indeed also trying to "defend the character of Cynthia," as if it referred to some real person and as if it mattered what we think about her. That, I think, is because, in the end, it does matter what we think about fictional characters, for the reason that it affects how we think about real characters, precisely because the real and the fictional will not stay in separate categories. If that were not true—indeed a truism—no literature would get read. The construction of character happens in the intercourse between life and art. Propertius and his audience are not likely to have thought of character as something wholly transcendent and external to the construction of it in discourse, as the rhetorical training of Roman education shows.[25] But Roman elegy walks on a tightrope, playing, at one moment, with current affairs and personal details of individuals and, at another, with abstract literary ideas that seem timeless and unreal, and then also confounding these opposing poles in a world which is constructed out of both art and nature.

READING CHARACTER THROUGH MYTH

I think we can see something of this happening in Book 2, in a sequence of poems made up of 7, 8, 9, and 10. It is not the most obvious grouping perhaps, nor need it undermine other possible groupings of poems, but it does seem to me that we can see a sequence here.[26] Two poems interacting in some way with "Augustan values" frame two poems of

25 On the construction and mediation of character and ideas about character in Greek literature, see Gill 1996. On rhetoric in the Roman educational system, see Clark 1957.

26 The awkwardnesses of Book 2 are notorious, particularly as regards composition and arrangement of poems. Camps' comment (1961.3) may be taken as emblematic of the traditional attitude: "The impression received is of a miscellany in which principles of order have been only partially asserted." Such despair would not always be acknowledged

generic and literary-artistic intensity. Poem 2.7 describes the joy of Cynthia and Propertius at the failure of one part of Augustus' moral legislation;[27] poem 2.10 lifts Propertius' poetic voice to a higher plane, raising the possibility that he might sing the praises of Augustus when "his girl has been written." These two contrasting poems (or are they?) frame two poems in which a classic elegiac situation (the infidelity of the beloved) is explored in remarkably unelegiac terms.

If we look at 2.7 and 2.10 together, we can see some aspects that contribute to the construction of character. Cynthia is a woman who responds to a social reality (though exactly how and why that reality causes a problem is not made clear); Cynthia is also poetry to be written—*quando scripta puella mea est*.[28] Propertius is a man who rejects the call to patriotic fatherhood; Propertius is also a poet who *might* write patriotic poetry, if he ever gets done with his lovely seductive subject matter who can't or won't marry him. In this last sentence, I have tried, in the pedestrian manner of the critic, to get across something of the complexity of representation which I think is going on in the construction of "Cynthia" and "Propertius." "Cynthia" "is" poetry, muse, inspiration, words on the page, the force of desire itself, a projection of the male poet's hopes and fears, *and* also a woman who is affected by the social constraints of her society. "Propertius" "is" an effeminate lover, slave to a woman, writer of soft poems, *and* also a hero of myth, a character in epic, with even just a hint of the heroic Roman.

My interest in the two framed poems (2.8 and 2.9) centres particularly on the mythological exempla which supposedly illustrate the personal situation. In both these poems, Propertius constructs for himself (slave to a mistress) the possibility of a heroic character who kills for love and scores on the battlefield; by using these myths as a way of looking at the elegiac situation, he appropriates an epic and "virile" persona which not only infects elegy with "hardness," but even infects epic with elegiac "softness." (I use these terms as generic and gendered markers.)

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nowadays. See Borrowski 1994, for a good discussion of the intratextual links between 2.8 and 2.9. On the view that our Book 2 of the Propertian corpus contains traces of two original Propertian books, see Heyworth 1995 and Lyne 1998. Lyne argues for a closural force to the sequence 8, 9(a), 10/11, the latter as one poem, constituting the end of the original Book 2.

27 On this poem and the history of its interpretation, especially vis-à-vis "Augustanism," see Gale 1997.

28 "When my girl has been written" (2.10.8): this classic phrase is crucial to Wyke's argument for reading Cynthia as a metaphor for the poetry. See Wyke 1987.

Poems 2.8 and 2.9 both begin in standard elegiac terms. The opening of 2.8 actually sounds as if it is a continuation of the problem of 2.7, where the beloved girl is "snatched away," but we soon learn that the reason is "elegiac" rather than "political."

> Eripitur nobis iam pridem cara puella:
> et tu me lacrimas fundere, amice, uetas?
>
> The girl long dear to me is being snatched away and you,
> my friend, forbid me to weep?

The friend, whom we have seen to be a crucial player in the elegiac game, is making his appearance again here, playing the same role in the creation of realism as did the addressees of 1.4 and 1.5, and contributing to our sense that what we have here is two Roman men considering a matter of social reality as well as erotic pleasure-pain. In 2.9, moreover, the other man has become an Other Man (2.9.1–2):

> Iste quod est, ego saepe fui: sed fors et in hora
> hoc ipso eiecto carior alter erit.
>
> What he is now, I have often been: but probably in an hour
> he will be cast out, and another will be dearer.

The idea that erotic success and failure goes in cycles has just been explored in more detail in the previous poem (2.8) with a thought that prompts the introduction of the mythic material, which itself links the two poems together (2.8.7–10).[29]

> omnia uertuntur: certe uertuntur amores:
> uinceris aut uincis, haec in amore rota est.
> magni saepe duces, magni cecidere tyranni,
> et Thebae steterant altaque Troia fuit.

29 I hope the reader can see that I have tried to suggest some of the intratextual links which bind these poems together, without going into them in detail.

> All things are overturned: certainly love affairs turn about.
> You are conquered or you conquer, this is the wheel in
> love. Often great generals, often great kings have fallen,
> and Thebes once stood, and lofty Troy once was.

So Propertius says "I am Troy; I am Thebes," immediate signifiers of epic and tragic grandeur. As the allusions develop, we see that the epic world evoked is self-destructive as well as glorious and virile. So, by implication, is the world of Propertian elegy.

I suggest that the pattern of mythological allusion in these two poems offers a good argument for reading lines 49–52 of poem 9 as integral to the poem.[30] In 2.8.10, Propertius has told us to expect Troy and Thebes: in poem 8, we get Haemon (Thebes) and Achilles (Troy), and then, in poem 9, we get Briseis (Troy) and the sons of Oedipus (Thebes).[31] None of these is an exemplum which actually "fits" particularly well to the supposed illustrandum. This very fact, it seems to me, enables the suggestive construction of character by hints. Let's look at them in a bit more detail.

Propertius has lost favour with his beloved, which once he had, just as once the great cities of Thebes and Troy stood tall. As a result, like them, he must die. In imagining his death, he imagines the violent response of Cynthia stamping on his bones. This brings us to thoughts of *Liebestod*, love as death, death as love, and the classic example of that is Haemon, who killed himself with his beloved Antigone because she was buried alive. As a result, *et sua cum miserae permiscuit ossa puellae* (2.8.23): the lovers were joined (sexually) in death. So Cynthia must die too (2.8.25). Propertius will kill her. Then in comes Achilles as an example of the violence to which love can drive a man and a hero. Like Propertius, Achilles has had his beloved (Briseis) stolen from him (*abrepta* in 29 echoes the opening word *eripitur*), and, as a result, he refuses to fight, so allowing the terrible slaughter of the Greeks and the death of his dear friend Patroclus. There is an interesting

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30 Camps 1967 presents 49–52 as a separate poem, 9b, but as referring to the same incident as 9a. The judgement of Butler and Barber 1933 is that "the tone of the quatrain clashes with that of the whole elegy. If it belongs to the elegy at all, there is clearly a hiatus." See Borrowski 1994. Papanghelis 1987.134–35 takes the passage as integral, but is non-committal on the question of a lacuna. He senses the awkwardness of Cynthia as Jocasta, but dismisses it as a detail that the poem can "take in its stride."

31 We also get Penelope and Deidamia, who belong to the Trojan cycle, although not actually at Troy.

twist here. After making the point that the *dolor* of *erepto amore* is so great as to cause all this, Propertius then takes us further on through the story, sending Achilles back into battle to wreak epic havoc and vengeance on Hector, who killed—of course—his other beloved, his friend Patroclus.[32] Not only does this bit of the story enhance the epic and virile force in the construction of Propertius' own character, but it also brings to the forefront that other elegiac point with which the poem began, the involvement of the male friend in all this. The *amicus*, at some subliminal, symbolic level, could "be" Patroclus. And he will crop up again in the next poem.

But before we look at that, we should just note the rather odd, perhaps lame closing lines of poem 2.8.

> inferior multo cum sim uel matre uel armis,
> mirum, si de me iure triumphat Amor?
>
> Since I am far inferior in mother and in arms, is it surprising if Love rightly triumphs over me?

It is, of course, a standard topos to say that the present day is inferior to the heroic past. But the odd thing about this is that Propertius follows up the ritual confession of inferiority with the implication that he is *even more* subject to the effects of love, and since he said it was the force of love that made Achilles behave in this heroic and violent way, the implication must be that, in fact, Propertius would be *even more* epic and violent than Achilles.[33] In his role as Achilles, whom exactly is Propertius going to kill? Cynthia, certainly, and himself, but also, I think, the rival (his other beloved), although he does not say so explicitly here. It is in his killing of the rival that he links most closely with Achilles, if we allow Hector now to stand

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32 It might be worth noticing the verbal echo of Haemon in the *Haemoniis . . . equis* (2.8.38) by which Hector is dragged. The two words refer to different things, of course, but the fact that they both sound bloody may contribute to a possible link.

33 It is often said, and Greene makes this point in this volume, that Achilles' sulking in his tent is a rejection of the heroic values of the Homeric world. It has always seemed to me, although I may be wrong, that, actually, sulking is precisely the act of a hero whose honour—in terms of the values of the Homeric world—has been insulted. He comes back when he has made his point. The infection of elegiac values that is going on here, however, concentrates both his withdrawal and his return onto personal relationships, rather than a matter of honour.

metaphorically in that position, with military rivalry merging into erotic rivalry, as we know erotic discourse is inclined to do at Rome. There are, of course, also further links with Achilles, since he himself will die *prima . . . aetate* (as Propertius said of himself in line 2.8.17), and his foreknown death has implications of suicide, and also since stories of *Liebestod* attach themselves to Achilles (Penthesilea, Polyxena). But the story Propertius puts before us is the Briseis-Patroclus-Hector episode, not any of those others that might seem to fit better. Moreover, the killing of the rival links us to the next poem, to which I now turn.

I'd like to work backwards from the end of poem 2.9. Propertius has been declaring his eternal devotion to his unfaithful mistress (thus, of course, constructing both their characters . . .). He tells her that no other woman will come into his bed (2.9.45), and then prays that—since he himself is such a good and honest man—her lover, his rival, will turn to stone in the act of love (2.9.47–48).

> atque utinam, si forte pios eduximus annos,
> ille uir in medio fiat amore lapis!
>
> Would that even, if by chance I have lived my years piously, that man should become a stone in the middle of the love-act.

An odd curse. That he will die? (But that has strong erotic connotations.) That he will die and crush Cynthia? (But that's even worse, since they would then die together.) That he will be impotent? (A lump of wood might have been better.) That he will turn into a statue? (But it is women who are statues in elegy.) Be that as it may, the sudden and violent switch of focus onto the rival heralds a disjunction in the poem so strong that many critics have scarcely been able to contain the final four lines within the poem, at least not without positing a lacuna before them. It seems to me, however, that the violence and disjunction of the poem gives plenty of justification for integrating them—uncomfortably.

With the very last word (2.9.52), it becomes clear that Propertius is now addressing the rival and threatening him with a fight to the death—with Propertius himself (i.e., not an erotic fight with Cynthia). The mythological vehicle for this is the mutual slaughter of Eteocles and Polynices, sons of Oedipus by his own mother, a mother who tried and failed to stop the fighting between them. Their deaths, as is well known, also resulted in the

death of Antigone and thus Haemon (which takes us back to the first myth in poem 8). So then Propertius and the rival are brothers, killing each other in a kind of grotesque but telling parody of the *Liebestod* which both of them might have desired with Cynthia. Cynthia (bizarrely, as critics have noted) thus becomes Jocasta. But perhaps there is another possibility for the *Thebani . . . duces*, lurking under the surface: not only Eteocles and Polynices but Oedipus and Laius. Laius, of course, did not actually kill Oedipus, but he tried to kill him as a baby and he was ultimately responsible for his terrible fate—if not his actual death; Oedipus did kill Laius. In that case, they would indeed be fighting over a woman (although they do not know it) and so Cynthia's identification with Jocasta would work rather better. In either case, the two men are as close as they could be, closer even than Achilles and Patroclus, or than Propertius and the friend who tries to comfort him for the loss of Cynthia. As I have tried to suggest throughout this paper, the character of the lover is partly constructed out of his close relationships with friends and rivals.

But if Cynthia is a rather awkward Jocasta, she is also a somewhat uncomfortable Penelope and Briseis earlier in the poem. The "official line," as so often elsewhere, is that Cynthia is *not* like these heroines of myth because she is unfaithful. In those days, *ueris gaudebat Graecia nuptis*, "Greece enjoyed true brides" (2.9.17) says Propertius with staggering, and no doubt wilful, blindness to the inappropriateness of such a comment immediately after the mention of the messy love lives of Achilles, Briseis, and Deidamia. Cynthia certainly isn't Penelope, that paragon of devotion to her absent (and erring) husband (2.9.3–8). It's a little bit odd, however, that Penelope is praised not only for her fidelity but also for her clever trickery in preserving that fidelity. This is an aspect of her myth which is certainly not the invention of Propertius, but it is used to good effect here in undermining the opposition between the supposedly innocent and simple past and the corrupt and duplicitous present. In a sense, although Cynthia *isn't* Penelope, she also is: I mean that the role is offered as a possibility for her, just as various heroic roles are offered as a possibility for Propertius, and so they contribute to the construction of her character.

The other epic heroine whom Cynthia is not is Briseis (2.9.9–13). The story carries on where it left off in the previous poem (where Cynthia *was* Briseis), except that the death of Achilles has happened in the hiatus between poems. Briseis is now showing her devotion by her attentions to the dead body of Achilles, even holding up his great bones in her little hand. The contrast with Cynthia in poem 8, treading on the bones of Propertius, is

great—or rather the connection is very close. Both are examples of *Liebestod*.[34] In poem 8, Achilles the killer had been an image for the dying and killing Propertius; now, in poem 9, the dead Achilles is an image for what turns out to be the dying and killing Propertius again, as long as we keep lines 49–52 as integral to the poem.

FINIS ERIT

What does an epic comparison have to do with realism and the construction of character? If we want to stay within the frame of realist representation, we might justifiably consider that the character Propertius is presenting for us here is one with epic pretensions, as Conte has argued forcibly for Encolpius in Petronius. But I would suggest that the relationship between "character" and "poet," between the fictional world and the devices of its construction, is more complex than that, especially in subjective, first-personal poetry. It is Propertius the elegist, as well as Propertius the lover, who "has epic pretensions"; or, to put it another way, the disparate genres are each infected by the other. Moreover, what I think we can see in Propertius, as elsewhere, is that "character" is something which comes into being through its construction out of a range of devices and intertexts. These include literature, myth, social dynamics, political actions, personal relationships. First-personal poetry challenges us with its directness and immediacy, but, at the same time, it contains traces which display the discursive nature of its communicative dynamics and undermine a clear distinction between art and life.[35]

University of Manchester

34 Borrowski 1994 also sees these poems as linked by *Liebestod*, on which see the full-scale study of Papanghelis 1987.

35 I am grateful to Trevor Fear, Martha Malamud, and *Arethusa*'s anonymous reader. Sergio Casali and Effie Spentzou have helped me more than they know.

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