



Propertius, Tibullus and Ovid: A Selection of Love Poetry

Further Commentary Notes

These commentary notes are intended to supplement those in the book and concentrate on points of style and understanding of the literary and cultural context.

Propertius 1.1

1-4 – these verses echo Meleager, *A.P.* 12.101.1-4, showing how Propertius situates himself within the literary tradition of learned elegy, but his tone is more earnest and less light-hearted than that of Meleager:

Unwounded by Desires I was when Mysicus shot me in the heart
with his eyes, and shouted this:

‘I have caught the arrogant man; look, I trample underfoot that
insolent look of domineering cleverness.’

1 ocellis – is diminutive, ‘her little eyes’. The tenderness thereby implied already hints at the theme of love.

3 deiecit – its subject is Amor, the god of Love, in the next line. Delaying the subject in this way gives the impression that Cynthia is the one casting down Propertius’s look, and when we find out in the next line that it is in fact Amor, a strong association is created between the two.

4 – this verse continues the sense of love as harmful, alluded to in the second line with *contactum*; here Amor violently tramples Propertius’s head under his feet. But the feet have a double meaning: in addition to the physical feet of the boy Amor, they are *metrical* feet of a line of poetry. That is to say, the meter of elegiac couplets is imposed on Propertius; this is how he comes to be a love elegist (compare Ovid *Am.* 1.1). Just as Cynthia is from the start his subject and inspiration, so is Amor his divine inspirer.

18 nec meminit notas, ut prius, ire vias – foregoing well-known paths, that is, avoiding worn subject matter and tropes, is an elegiac and Callimachean touch. The distinction the Latin



elegists strive for is avoiding the commonplace, and so they represent themselves as doing something new, departing from the expected traditional models – or paths. In Propertius's case, Amor is doing precisely that, and it brings along with it some irony for the poet's progress in love.

19 – it is relevant to bear in mind here that the name of Propertius's mistress, Cynthia, is also an epithet of Diana, the goddess of the moon. A little later Propertius asks witches to change Cynthia from her usual habit and make her pale – witches are famous for doing this to the moon.

27 ferrum ... ignes – the multiple metaphorical meanings of these words make it ambiguous whether Propertius is truly looking for a cure or is happy to continue in his love – provided he has his freedom of speech, something a slave might be denied, as we learn in the next line. The multiple meanings are likely intentional, and you may wish consider their different effects.

34 nullo ... tempore deficit – Amor, besides being *vacuus*, is also a constant companion to the lover: 'never leaves my side'. This also recalls *toto ... non deficit anno* of line 7.

Propertius 1.3

6 Apidano – it is also good to bear in mind that besides a running river and a (dried-up) river-bed, the mention of the river also suggests the river-god. Therefore the Bacchant, to match Ariadne and Andromeda (and Cynthia), may not be entirely without a lover.

24 furtiva – there is room for different interpretations of why the apples are *furtiva*: either the apples are stolen from the party, or given now to Cynthia with secrecy or stealth. There is a precedent for giving apples as a secret love gift (Cat. 65.19ff.), but stealth is not inappropriate when giving a gift to a sleeping recipient, either. Perhaps the ambiguity is intentional.

35-40 – these verses play with the theme of the locked-out lover, a common scenario where the elegiac lover is rejected by his mistress and reduced to lamenting his fate outside her locked doors. Cynthia suggests that this has just happened to Propertius, which finally brings him to her house. At Cynthia's house, unlike at the door of the other woman, he has managed to get in the door. At the same time, Cynthia herself plays the role of the rejected party,



abandoned by Propertius. She even adopts the typical plaintive language of the locked-out lover with *ei mihi* (38), and her complaints about the suffering that Propertius has put her through recall those of the *exclusus amator* at his mistress's door.

39 perducas – the prefix *per-* emphasizes that Cynthia wishes Propertius to spend the *whole* night *through* in this kind of suffering.

41-46 – these verses elaborate on the kinds of nights Cynthia wishes Propertius to spend: she tells how she has just passed this night, waiting for Propertius. There are echoes of the passage on Propertius's offering gifts to his sleeping mistress in *modo* and the imperfects, and the final perfect tenses that put an end to the activities.

42 – given what happens to Orpheus at the end, torn to pieces by enraged Bacchants, we are subtly reminded also of the Bacchant to whom Propertius compares the sleeping Cynthia in 5-6.

43 mecum deserta querebar – *mecum* and *deserta* emphasize her loneliness, 'abandoned, I complained to myself'. *deserta* also echoes *desertis* of line 2, and invites us to compare and contrast the sleeping Cynthia (as compared with Ariadne) and the waking Cynthia here.

Propertius 2.14

19-20 – in these verses Propertius assumes the role of *praeceptor amoris*, with authority to advise from his own experience.

20 sic hodie veniet, si qua negavit heri – this may suggest Sappho fr. 1, where the poetess asks Aphrodite (Venus) for help, and pictures the goddess as reassuring Sappho that whoever is now rejecting her will soon reciprocate her love (esp. Sappho fr. 1.21-24). Such an allusion is a learned, Callimachean touch. Propertius later in his poem (25-28) turns to address Venus in making his thank-offering to her in a context with all the marks of *militia amoris*, even substituting Venus for the role traditionally belonging to the Capitoline Jupiter in military triumphs. Sappho ends her poem with asking Aphrodite to be her ally or fellow-fighter (fr. 1.28). Propertius's invocation of the goddess's support in the context of *militia amoris* may be a further learned allusion to Sappho's poem and an acknowledgement of a distinguished predecessor and literary model.



27 tuas tibi – the polyptoton brings to the fore the earnestness of the dedication. Usually in this period **aedes** means ‘house’ when plural and only in singular ‘temple’. Either it can be seen as a poetic plural for added grandeur or we can take Propertius as making a familiar reference to the temple as the goddess’s house, as if they were on close terms.

Tibullus 1.1

5 vitae ... inertī – ‘to a life of inaction’, ‘to an unwarlike life’: the simple country life Tibullus envisages has no *ars*, artfulness or complicated skill.

6 adsiduo – this contrasts with the *labor adsiduus* of the soldier in line 3, and the glowing of the fire is opposed to the gleam of the yellow (*fulvo*, 1) gold.

7 seram – the subjunctive (as also at 9, *destituat*, and 10, *praebeat*) conveys the unattainability of the ideal.

11-12 seu ... seu – literally, ‘whether ... or’, indicates the extent of his dutifulness: no matter where he encounters a place marked for worship, he will pay his respects.

15-16 – the wheaten crown demonstrates how the hopes of the farmer have been realized. **sit** and **pendeat** are both subjunctives, as Tibullus returns to a more remote, wishful way of describing his country ideal.

18 saeva falce – ablative of means, ‘with a ferocious pruning hook’, a suitable weapon for Priapus, who was frequently shown with one.

19 – there is an echo of Virgil *Ecl.* 1.74, *felix quondam pecus*, here.

21-22 tunc ... / nunc – elaborates the contrast between the past and present state of the farm begun in line 19 (*quondam*, *nunc*).

22 exigui ... hostia parva soli – the chiasmic word order entwines the little lamb and the land in their meagreness.

27 aestivos ortus – may be a poetic plural standing for singular, though the plural may also suggest habitual and repeated action, an idea that is not inappropriate here; similarly with *rivos* in the following line.



33-34 est praeda petenda – gerundive of obligation, ‘seek your prey’, where *praeda* continues the military metaphor.

36 placidam – ‘appeased’ or ‘kindly’, is either a complimentary epithet or looks forward to her cooperativeness as a result of the ritual offering of milk (*lacte*) sprinkled as a libation.

48 igne iuvante – ‘with the fire helping him along’, an echo of 6.

67-68 – these verses suggest that Tibullus’s love for Delia survives his death: it would hurt his spirit for Delia to disfigure herself.

71 – just as in 5 *iners* is used to contrast the inactive, unwarlike life of the lover to that of the soldier, so here it is used to contrast the even more inactive old age with the life of the lover, who in 73-74 engages in some vigorous activity.

77 securus acervo – these words recall the security and peace of mind in Tibullus’s rustic ideal of modest but sufficient means (9, 25-26, 43-50).

Tibullus 1.3

3 ignotis ... terris – points to death in an unknown place far from one’s friends and family, a terrifying thought to the ancients (see e.g. Cat. 68.97-100).

4 modo – ‘only’, ‘just’, shows that Tibullus thinks it is bad enough to be left behind ill in an unfamiliar place.

27-28 – although appealing to Isis as a goddess of healing fits Tibullus’s predicament, his preference for the old Italian gods (33-34) suggests that this is an act of desperation.

48 – a “golden” pentameter with the arrangement adjective, adjective, verb, noun, noun; such pentameters are rare before Catullus.

71 tum – indicates that when the *impia turba* has fled before Tisiphone, they are prevented from leaving Tartarus by Cerberus.

76 pascit aves – may be a gruesome reversal of the idyllic, pastoral *pascit oves*.

86 – both **plena** and **longa** highlight the dullness of the work as well as Delia’s diligence.



Ovid *Amores* 1.1

12 Aoniam ... lyram – recalls Prop. 1.2.27-28, where one of the Muses gives his mistress the Aonian lyre.

18 – some commentators find here the first double entendre of the collection: *nervos*, apart from strength and vigour, can also denote the male sexual organ.

Ovid *Amores* 2.5

16 pars bona – ‘a good many’ (literally, ‘a good part of’).

43-44 – the motif of ‘whatever she did, she looked beautiful’ is a favourite of Ovid’s, and offers opportunities for elegant repetition and arrangement of the words to enhance the meaning (chiasmus in 43 and symmetry in 44).

47-48 – the idea that the beauty of his mistress disarms the poet recalls Prop. 1.3.13-20.

54 ex hac ... nota – the wine metaphor is very appropriate to the context of the party.

55-62 – there are several key words in these verses that signal the theme of the *praeceptor amoris*: *docui* (55), *addidicisse* (56), *doceri* (61), *magister* (62).

Ovid *Amores* 2.7

2 piget – establishes the sense of vexation at the accusations already begun by *ergo* and *semper*.

3 – Ovid most likely has the Theatre of Pompey in mind, the only permanent stone (*marmorei*) theatre at the time.

17 – *ecce* introduces the poem’s main theme, Corinna’s accusation that Ovid has slept with her maid. **novum crimen** recalls *nova crimina* of the opening. **sollers ornare** (*viz. capillos*), ‘skilled in hairdressing’, may retain something of the meaning ‘crafty’ of *sollers* here.

26 – elsewhere Ovid considers the risk of rejection one of the more exciting features of being a lover (e.g. *Am.* 2.9b, 2.19). Perhaps he is enjoying this!



Ovid *Amores* 2.8

1-4 – these opening lines rework 2.7.23-24 into a *captatio benevolentiae* to regain Cypassis's favour: line 1 echoes *ornandis ... operosa capillis* (2.7.23), line 4 *tibi ... grata* (2.7.24), while *perfecta* (2.8.1) and *non rustica* (2.8.3) recall *doctas* (2.7.24), and *comere ... solas digna ... deas* (2) evokes the representation of Corinna as a goddess (2.7.24; see note). Now the mistress is demoted from that status, however. This opening ties the two poems together, as well as beginning the humour in the apology the poet-lover now has to make to Cypassis, who has apparently heard all the less flattering things he has just said about her to Corinna.

9-10 – the defence of slave-love based on mythological *exempla* is reminiscent of Hor. *Odes* 2.4.1-8 and Prop. 2.8.29-40.