

Propertius 1.5.3-10

Quid tibi vis, insane? meae sentire furores?

What do you want, lunatic? Would you know my anger?

infelix, properas ultima nosse mala,

Unfortunate one, you hasten to know the worst of evils

et miser ignotos vestigia ferre per ignes,

and wretch unknowing to bear your footsteps through fire,

et bibere e tota toxica Thessalia.

and drink from all Thessaly's poison.

non est illa vagis similis collata puellis:

She is not fickle like those girlish thoughts:

molliter irasci non sciet illa tibi.

it is known her anger towards you is not mild.

quod si forte tuis non est contraria votis,

If by chance she is not opposed to your prayers,

at tibi curarum milia quanta dabit!

nonetheless how many thousand cares will she give you!

Commentary on Tibullus 1.1-32

These lines open the first of Tibullus' elegiac poems. Being originally presented on a scroll, books of poems were very much intended to be read sequentially, so the first poem was often taken as an opportunity for the poet to set out their programme for the whole book of poems and this seems to be the case here too. These lines set out two sets of contrasts. Synchronic (at the same time) contrast between the adventure of seeking treasure and the calm of farming; and diachronic (through time) contrasts of an agricultural estate growing, prospering and then declining. These themes can be taken as metaphors for romance: promiscuous adventuring contrasted with the security of a stable relationship. They can also be taken as comment on the wars that brought wealth to the Roman Republic contrasted with the stability of the *Pax Romana* under Augustan imperialism.

Both the Loeb edition (Postgate and Mackail, 1988) and the Delphi edition (Mackail, 2015) slightly rearrange the order of the lines from that which has come down to us in manuscript, principally bringing forward lines 25-32 to fit more closely with the timeline of the hypothetical agricultural estate described. In common with those editions we will here use the original numbering but take the lines in rearranged order. Lines 1-6 introduce the treasure and agriculture metaphors. Lines 25-32 describe the initial labour of establishing a farm; lines 7-18 the bountiful harvest that comes; and lines 19-24 the estate in decline.

The topic is introduced immediately with '*Divitias...auro*' *golden treasure* framing Line 1. However, Line 2 shows the ultimate purpose of acquiring wealth with another phrase framing that line '*et teneat... soli*'. This reflects the Roman sense that land was the surest and most refined way of holding wealth as noted by Finley (1999) "The Ancient Economy". The framing reinforces the sense of these as aspirations. Next on Line 3 the mechanism for acquisition surprisingly is '*labor... hoste*' *labour against the enemy* emphasizing the effort and exertion rather than brave and glorious risk-taking of combat. This contrasts with Line 4 where the Martial spirit is personified '*cui somnos*' *who sleeps*. The portrayal of combat as requiring effort rather than merely bravery further sets it up as a way to acquire good land to be contrasted with the effort of cultivating it oneself (or at least the effort of directing one's slaves to do so). A series of pronouns '*me mea...// meus*' *to me mine ... mine* now bring the attention to the poet's own interests, '*igne focus*' *the fire in the hearth*. Fire rather than being a symbol of combat here is a symbol of domestic bliss. In these first lines the poet has set out the synchronic contrast between the labour of combat and the labour of agriculture.

Lines 25-32 will be taken as intended to come next. Line 25 begins with a temporal word repeated '*iam modo iam*' *now only now* to signpost that we have switched to diachronic mode. This living in the moment of '*vivere parvo*' *small living* contrasts with on Line 26 '*semper longae*' *always long* of the military life. Where the previous lines referred to labour here the negative of the agricultural activity is surprisingly '*pudeat*' *being shamed*. The wholesome rewards though of this agricultural life are clearly set out as destinations at the end of each line '*umbra// ... aquae//... boves//... capellae//... domum//*' *shade... water... cattle... goats... home*. The line ending '*domum*' mirroring the earlier line ending '*focus*' hearth. In addition to fearing shame

perhaps the poet here also hints at another fear at the other end of the line from *'domum'* is *'desertum oblita'* *forgotten abandoned*, albeit the subject is apparently one of his goats. These lines have set out the benefits of living in the moment as a farmer despite the shame in being forgotten.

Lines 7-18 will be taken next which describe the estate coming to fruition and bearing its harvest. The diachronic mode is signposted again on Line 7 *'ipse...tempore'* *the very time*. However, the discussion is less in the moment, on Line 9 *'semper acervos'* *always heaped up* parallels the *'semper longae'* *always long* of the earlier march but now is positive here. The line ends have agricultural rewards again but now they are more related to the harvest *'maturo...vites'* *ripe vines*; *'frugum... acervos'* *heaped up corn*; *'musta lacu'* *wine vat*, *'rure corona'* *country wreath*. The text turns to thanksgiving. This is first in Line 15 to a generic *'agricolae... deo'* *countryman's god* but then specific gods are named *Ceres* [goddess of corn and the harvest] and *Priapus* [god of fertility] and they are addressed in the second person *'tibi'* *to you*. The simple country wreath develops into offerings in Line 16 *'templi... ante fores'* *before the temple doors*. This reflects a diachronic growth in the complexity of rituals as land is cultivated and society develops. This section has had the estate and perhaps also society more widely coming to fruition.

Finally in Lines 19-24 the estate is in decline. Diachronic mode is signposted with a temporal word again *'nunc'* *now* in Line 19. The gods are addressed in the second person again *'vos quoque'* *you also* but are now more simply *Lares* [household gods] in Line 20. The diachronic comparison is made very clear in Lines 21 and 22 in *'tunc vistula innumeros'* *then calf uncounted* compared with *'nunc agna'* *now a lamb*, a single much smaller animal. The more personal interaction with the gods continues on Line 24 as they are addressed in quoted speech including an imperative *'bona vina date'* *give good wine*. This seems to suggest a wider societal interpretation again: Although people's means are reduced their expectations from the gods are not.

In conclusion Lines 1-32, taken together, first set out a synchronic comparison of treasure hunting versus stable agriculture which could be taken as alluding to war versus a steady society. It could also be taken as alluding to promiscuous romances versus a steady relationship. Secondly they set out at greater length a diachronic comparison of an agricultural estate first requiring cultivation, then bearing harvest, before finally yielding much more modestly, perhaps less than expectations. Again this could be taken as commenting on the evolution of a society through three stages or on a romantic relationship going through stages of getting to know one another, yielding passionate pleasures, and finally being more limited in scope.