

HPAH 4009 – Roman History and Literature

Assessment 5: Write a critical commentary of 1000 words on a text; Propertius 1.3.21-46.

This commentary will explore, in detail, the poem *Cynthia surprised in sleep*, 1. 3, from Sextus Propertius' *Elegies*, in particular, lines 21-46¹. Sextus Propertius, a poet writing during the Augustan Age², draws from a myriad of myths, and past poetic works, from both Greek and Roman poets and from all disciplines of poetry from epic to epigram. These influences are then woven into elegiac form³. The writing of poetry is said to have been Propertius' own remedy for the hurt that Love had caused him⁴.

We first meet Cynthia, Propertius' muse, and lover, in the first poem, of the first book, of Propertius' *Elegies*⁵.

There is a somewhat, dream-like state, or ethereal quality to the opening of elegy 1.3, perhaps, we catch Propertius composing as he journeys to his lover's side. Propertius draws mythical parallels to not only his lover Cynthia, but also his affair's situation, and himself. First, a reference to Ariadne, and her abandonment by Theseus⁶. Is this allusion stating Propertius' insecurities? Perhaps, Propertius, by referencing this particular myth, has suspicions that he is arriving after another lover has left. Or, plainly, it is a comparison between his lover and a mythical ideal. Secondly, Propertius makes reference to Andromeda's release from the rocky cliff by Perseus, where she had been exposed, and left as food for some mythical beast⁷. The myth of Andromeda's rescue by Perseus was an extremely well known and popular myth, and hugely influential in terms of Greek and Roman art. The adventures of Perseus and the rescue of Andromeda appear on pottery, in sculpture, and in the plays of the Greek tragedians, Sophocles and Euripides⁸. The reference by Propertius to this particular myth can simply be taken as Propertius playing the role of Perseus.

Drunkenness and reality then kick-in, as Propertius meanders towards his journey's end, and next Propertius is kneeling beside his lover, Cynthia, who is sleeping⁹.

'And now I was taking off the garlands from my brow and arranging them about your temples'

¹ Goold, 1999, LCL 18 (Rev ed)

² Scoli, 2012, Brill's New Pauly (online); Goold, 1999, pp.1-33; Neumeister and Eck, 2006, Brill's New Pauly (online)

³ Keith, 2008, p.45

⁴ Neumeister and Eck, 2006, Brill's New Pauly (online)

⁵ Pro. Ele. 1.1

⁶ Plu. Liv. Theseus; Webster, 1966, pp.22-31

⁷ Phillips Jr, 1968, pp.1-23

⁸ Phillips Jr, 1968, p.2

⁹ Goold, 1999, p.47

Propertius has clearly been out celebrating, hence the wearing of a garland, possibly, a religious celebration. This crowning of Cynthia, with his garland, suggests Propertius believes he has spent the night worshipping the gods, and has now returned to Cynthia's side to worship her.

'then with hollowed palms I stealthily gave you apples.'¹⁰

The apple's use, meaning, and symbolism in both Greek and Roman literature is both extensive and varied¹¹. In this particular case, Propertius offers the apples as a gift of his love. The act of offering apples, in this way and in others, we find in other works of poetry. In Catullus 65, for example, where the dropping and exposure of the gifted apple to one outside the intimate relationship of the lovers, is a simile for lost innocence¹². Also, to be considered, is the seed of the apple, and obvious links to fertility and growth¹³. With this in mind, rather than this act being Propertius suggesting procreation to Cynthia, maybe, it is a reference to Propertius' growing love for his lover. Also, taking into consideration the poem's position, in the order of the elegies and in the work as a whole, the assumption is that this particular episode takes place early on in their relationship, and this reference to Propertius' growing love coincides with this idea.

'But all these gifts I was bestowing on ungrateful sleep'¹⁴

Propertius acknowledges the existence of other realms, the two worlds of 'reality', and 'sleep'. Propertius curses the fact that at this moment in time he and his lover inhabit different worlds. There is an aspect of fear, and subservience on behalf of Propertius, and this could perhaps be perceived as the normal Roman gender roles being flipped, reversed, with Propertius coming across as 'passive' as opposed to 'active'¹⁵.

'for I feared lest some nightmare be bringing you fantastic terrors, and a phantom lover forcing you to yield to him against your will'¹⁶

Again, a reflection of Propertius' insecurities. Also, the Roman gender roles have been corrected, Propertius is here to rescue and protect Cynthia.

""Has another's scorn then at last brought you to my bed...For Where have you spent the long hours of the night which was due me, you who come, ah me, exhausted, when the stars are driven from the sky?""

Cynthia is finally awoken by Propertius, he is admonished for his behaviour, and his tardiness, in coming to spend the now spent night with her. Also, Cynthia sees that Propertius is exhausted from the nights celebrations and will most likely be useless to her

¹⁰ Goold, 1999, p.47

¹¹ Littlewood, 1968, pp.147-181

¹² Green, 2007, pp.159 + 245

¹³ M^cCartney, 1925, p.75

¹⁴ Goold, 1999, p.47

¹⁵ Drinkwater, 2013, pp.329-336

¹⁶ Goold, 1999, p.47

when it comes to lovemaking. Again, there is the flipping of roles, 'passive' and 'active'. This reversal, however, is common in Roman elegy. It could be reasoned that this is not only Propertius referencing earlier works of elegy, but also, adhering to the 'traditions' of Roman elegiac composition¹⁷.

There is the feeling of spontaneity about the poem, a brisk outpouring of emotion, just as it can feel when in love. Time spent away from one's lover drifts incredible slowly, and time spent with a lover can feel as if it is moving ever so quickly. The poem does seem to quicken once Propertius has reached Cynthia's side, the night is suddenly over¹⁸. This type of poem would surely have offered some kind of escapism to the Roman reader, but at the same time, remained entirely relatable.

Word count 994

¹⁷ Drinkwater, 2013, pp. 329-336

¹⁸ W. P. T, 1893, p.413

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