

Selected Propertius Elegies

Prop. 1.1

Cynthia first with her eyes ensnared me, poor wretch, that had previously been untouched by desire. It was then that Love made me lower my looks of stubborn pride and trod my head beneath his feet, until the villain taught me to shun decent girls and to lead the life of a ne'er-do-well. Poor me, for a whole year now this frenzy has not abated, while I am compelled to endure the frown of heaven.

It was, friend Tullus, by shrinking from no hardship that Milanion broke down the cruelty of harsh Atalanta. For now he wandered distraught in the Parthenian glens, and now he would often go and look upon shaggy wild beasts. He was also dealt a wound from the club Hylaeus bore, and on the rocks of Arcady he moaned in pain. Thus he was able to subdue the swift-footed girl: such power in love have devotion and service.

In my case dull-witted Love thinks up no stratagems, and remembers not to tread, as formerly, his well-known paths. But you, whose practice it is to lure the Moon down from the sky and to propitiate spirits over the magic fire, come, alter the heart of my mistress and see that she turn paler than this cheek of mine. Then should I credit you with the power of summoning ghosts and stars with Thessalian spells.

Else you, my friends, who too late call back the fallen, seek medicines for a heart that is sick. I shall bravely submit to the knife and cautery, if only I were free to utter the promptings of anger. Carry me through distant lands and over distant seas, where no woman may know my path.

Stay you at home, to whose prayer the god has nodded with easy ear, and be ever paired in a safe love. For I am harassed by our goddess Venus through nights of torment, and Cupid is never idle, never absent. Shun this plague, I counsel you: let everyone cling to his own sweetheart, nor switch his affections when love has grown familiar. But if anyone turn a deaf ear to my warning, ah, with what pain shall he recall my words!

Prop. 1.3

Like the maid of Cnossus as in a swoon she lay on the deserted shore when Theseus' ship sailed away; like Cepheus' daughter Andromeda as she rested in her first slumber on her release from the rugged cliff; no less like the Thracian bacchant, exhausted after incessant dances, when she collapses on the grassy bank of the Apidanus: even so did Cynthia seem to me to breathe a gentle repose, her head pillowed on a cushion of her hands, when home I came dragging footsteps unsteadied by much wine and the slaves were shaking their dying torches in the far-gone night.

Not yet were all my senses gone, and I tried by leaning gently on the couch to reach her; and, although seized with a double passion, for the two inexorable gods, on this side Love, on that Bacchus, were urging me to edge my arm deftly beneath her and try her as she lay, and, bringing up my hand, to steal belated kisses, yet I did not venture to disturb my lady's peace, fearing the chidings of a cruelty I had tasted before; but I remained rooted with eyes intent upon her, like those of Argus upon the strange horns of Inachus' child.

And now I was taking off the garlands from my brow and arranging them about your temples, Cynthia; and now I took pleasure in building up your fallen locks, then with hollowed palms I stealthily gave you apples. But all these gifts I was bestowing on ungrateful sleep, gifts which repeatedly rolled down from your lap; and when from time to time you stirred and heaved a sigh, I held my breath, believing in a vain divination, for I feared lest some nightmare be bringing you fantastic terrors, and a phantom lover forcing you to yield to him against your will.

At length the moon hurrying by the parted shutters, the officious moon with light that would fain have stayed, opened with its gentle beams Cynthia's fast-closed eyes. Then, with elbow propped on the soft couch, she cried: 'Has another's scorn then at last brought you to my bed, expelling you from doors closed in your face? 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? Oh, may you spend nights like these, you villain, such as you are always compelling poor me to endure!

‘For now I was beguiling sleep by spinning crimson thread, and now in my weariness by music of Orpheus’ lyre; and sometimes, all forlorn, I softly complained to myself that in unmarried love waiting is often long: till Sleep with soothing wings overcame my exhausted body. That was my weeping’s last concern.’

Prop. 1.5:

What are you after, lunatic? To feel my sweetheart’s fury? Wretch, you are hastening to experience the ultimate in woe, to make your luckless way through unimagined fires, and drink all Thessaly’s supply of poison.

She is not like flighty girls and is not to be compared with them: she will not be able to restrain her anger with you. And if by chance she does not turn a deaf ear to your prayers, yet what countless sorrows will she cause you! Soon she will not allow you to sleep or close your eyes: she is fierce and just the one to curb men with her will.

Ah, how often will you run to my door after a rejection, when your brave words will break down in sobs; trembling and shuddering will come over you with unhappy tears, and fear will trace unsightly lines upon your face, and any words you are groping for will die on your lips as you complain, nor in your distress will you succeed in knowing who or where you are!

Then you will be forced to experience the harsh bondage of my sweetheart and what it means to go home when the door is shut in your face; and by that time you will not so often be surprised by my wan colour, or why my whole body is shrunk to nothing. And your high birth will not help you in love either: Love scorns to defer to ancestral portraits.

But if you leave the least trace of infidelity, how quickly will your noble name become a subject of scandal! Then when you ask me, I will be unable to bring you any comfort, since I have no medicine for my own malady; but, comrades in love and woe, we shall be equally compelled to weep each in turn on the other’s bosom.

Wherefore, Gallus, cease asking what my Cynthia is capable of: heavy the toll they pay whose invitation she accepts.