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Propertius Book IV:
Themes and Structures*

J. P. SULLIVAN

Book IV has always presented problems for critics of Propertius. Despite Propertius' professed adherence to Callimachean poetic canons (III. 1. 1), it is only here that we encounter aetiological ventures along the lines of the *Aetia*, and not many at that. Also, despite the rejection of Cynthia for her wicked ways (III. 24 and 25), she returns in IV. 7 and 9 both as a ghost and as a haunting memory.

Some have taken Book IV as Propertius' concession to Augustan pressures. Ronald Syme says:

Even Propertius was not untouched by the patriotic theme, or the repeated insistences of Maecenas. For all his dislike of war, he could turn away from his love and lover's melancholy to celebrate with fervour, and with no small air of conviction, the War of Actium, or to plead in solemn tones for the avenging of Crassus.¹

On this view Book IV represents Propertius' compromise between his Callimachean poetic and the pressing demand for patriotic poetry on the grander scale of Virgil and Horace. So, we are to believe, Propertius began the first sketches of a Roman *Aetia*, represented by elegies 2, 4, 9, and 10 of Book IV, but unfortunately foundered in any more ambitious aetiological undertaking, perhaps akin to Ovid's *Fasti*, because this sort of writing did not suit his talent or his emotional

* This is a revised version of a seminar paper presented at Vanderbilt University (1982).

¹*Roman Revolution* (Oxford 1960), pp. 466 ff.

inclination. It should be noted that even the *Fasti* was not completed, though Ovid had a great deal of poetic energy left.

It has been argued² that Book IV represents a subtle *recusatio*, a defiance of Augustan demands, a disguised reiteration of such elegies as II. 7, exulting in the defeat of Augustus' law forcing bachelors to marry. Propertius' tackling, in elegy IV. 10, of the tricky question of the *spolia opima*, a subject hotly debated at the time, seems to support this thesis. A more tactful or patriotic poet would have avoided such a theme.

As for the elegy Syme relies on for his judgment, the well-known and often defended, elegy IV. 6 (*Sacra facit vates*),³ this may be seen in its hyperbole as a parody of Horace's famous Cleopatra ode (*Nunc est bibendum*, I. 37), which by its sheer exaggeration would do little for the reputation of the victor of Actium. The reader could hardly fail to note the absurd exaggeration of *one* arrow from Apollo's bow sinking ten ships and so the whole piece can be interpreted as an exercise in irony, a familiar poetic mode in our poet.⁴ So Propertius is having it both ways, saying, in effect, "Augustus, I've given you a victory elegy; I've tried to honor Rome with some Callimachean aetiology, explaining our Etruscan roots in the Vertumnus elegy, and condemning Tarpeia for her infidelity to Rome. But I'm not really suited to the 'patriot game', so leave me to my own devices and visions. Use your more compliant poets, such as Virgil and Horace, instead of me. The first poet is not really Callimachean except in his early work and the second I dislike as much as he does me (*quis nisi Callimachus?* Hor. *Epp.* II. 2. 100); which is why we do not mention each other except by oblique and slighting references, the only possible treatment of an enemy. Who would wish to immortalize him in one's verse?"

This is not an impossible view of Propertius' poetic strategy, and we have to bear in mind also that there is a dispute as to whether Book IV was put out by Propertius as his last *magnum opus* or whether some learned friend gathered the pieces on his desk or in his *scrinium* and did the best he could with the disparate poems that were Propertius' final legacy to posterity.

Now obviously one cannot exclude the possibility that a friend, sensitive to Propertius' *œuvre*, and so skilled in arrangement, could

² J. P. Sullivan, *Propertius: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge 1976), pp. 134 ff.

³ W. R. Johnson, "The Emotions of Patriotism: Propertius 4. 6," *California Studies in Classical Antiquity* 6 (1973), pp. 151 ff.

⁴ E. Lefevre, *Propertius Ludibundus: Elemente des Humors in seinen Elegien* (Heidelberg 1966), pp. 63 ff.

produce a book that the poet would have been proud of, but the chronology of Propertius' life is such that his fourth book could easily have been edited and published by the writer himself. We know from Ovid that he was dead at the latest by 2 B.C., but there are indications that Book IV was published in or a short time after 16 B.C. The poet may then have married and given to the ungrateful world descendants that included Passennus Paulus, himself an elegist, who claimed, according to the younger Pliny, that he was related by birth to Propertius.

My thesis then is that Propertius himself edited and arranged Book IV of his poems with exquisite care and that it shows the same art of *variatio* and structure that was displayed in the popular *Monobiblos*.⁵

Few, I think, would disagree, after examining the exasperating state of the text of Propertius Book II, that Lachmann was right in claiming that Propertius wrote five books of elegies, not four. No ancient poet would ever have produced such a messy collection as Propertius' second book as we now have it. How the damage happened—careless scribes, book-worms, badly protected monasteries—need not concern us here, not to mention the less significant damage inflicted by time on our present Book III. I am simply arguing that Book IV is as carefully organized as the *Monobiblos*, that gift frequently sent to friends by Martial's contemporaries at the *Saturnalia*.

What then are we to conclude about the editing of Book IV? First, we have to accept the principle that, whether Propertius or a sympathetic learned friend put the book together, it is an impressive work of art. In my view Propertius was the editor, but the notion of its editing by a sensitive poetic friend cannot be excluded.

Now we come to the question of structure. With a few exceptions, which can often be explained away, ancient authors had their favorite or standard units for a book. Except, if you wish, Valerius Martial, who tossed together his *libelli*, directed towards patrons initially, for public consumption in the cold days of the *Saturnalia*. Normally, however, prose and verse writers (such as Livy with his decades of histories, Virgil with his ten *Eclogues*, his four *Georgics*, and his twelve books of the *Aeneid*, Horace with his three carefully crafted books of *Odes*) had in mind a numerical symmetry, which might be deliberately broken by the occasional *coda* or *sphragis* of the sort we see in the *Monobiblos*.

Eleven is, I suggest, a difficult number to accept as a structure for

⁵ See the careful analysis by O. Skutsch, "The Structure of the Propertian *Monobiblos*," *Classical Philology* 58 (1963), pp. 238 ff.

Propertius' Book IV. But if we comprehend the poetic technique of the diptych, then we have a key to the structure of Book IV.⁶ Ovid's diptych on Cypassis (*Am.* II. 8) is of course the most famous example of this technique, where Ovid protests to Corinna that he couldn't possibly sleep with a slave and therefore her suspicions are groundless, and then in the next poem blackmails the slave to sleep with him again since, if she does not, he will tell her mistress about their relationship.

Propertius had already used this structure in Book I: numbered by editors as 8A and 8B. 8A begins with *Tunc igitur demens* and 8B starts with *Hic erit! hic iurata manet*: a proclamation that Cynthia, who was about to leave with some richer lover for cold climes, now has decided to stay with the lovesick poet. Turn now to Book IV. In the opening elegy, or rather the two opening elegies, Propertius states boldly that he will produce a sort of *Fasti* for patriotic Roman readers: he ends, with appropriate solemnity and a rich poetic cadence, highly suitable for the close of a poem, with these lines (69-70):

sacra diesque canam et cognomina prisca locorum:
has meus ad metas sudet oportet equus.

The astrologer Horos then chides Propertius for abandoning his proper *métier*: love poetry. He gives Propertius' biography as well as his own credentials as an astrologer, but essentially it is a complement, not a supplement, to Propertius' vainglorious boast, however ironic, that he is to become a national poet, or should we say an "Augustan" poet? If we think in terms of the diptych, already established in Propertius' *œuvre*, then we find that Book IV yields us twelve, not eleven poems, which would be consonant with the practices of Roman poets. For surely by our present numbering the first elegy is overlong by any standards (150 lines by comparison with the next longest, 102 lines, and the shortest 48 lines).

Assuming now that Propertius Book IV is neatly divided into 12 poems, what can we say of its theme and structuring around that theme? I would suggest that the theme is *fides*.

Propertius begins (IV. 1) with professing that he is abandoning his chosen theme of love and moving on to his new profession of glorifying Rome in his own inimitable Callimachean way. In the opening, programmatic diptych the wise Horos tells him, as Apollo has told him before (III. 3), that his genius is for elegiac love poetry, that *fallax opus*, not epic or the more ambitious genres.

⁶ See now J. T. Davis, *Dramatic Pairings in the Elegies of Propertius and Ovid* (Bern and Stuttgart 1980).

A tentative structural diagram would then look like this, if we agree that the theme is *fides*:

1. Propertius attempts to break faith with his poetic *métier*.
2. Horos advises him to return to his primary allegiance.
3. Vertumnus, keeping himself the same, or keeping the faith beneath his many guises, and not least keeping himself true to the Etruscan influences on Rome.
4. Arethusa's love letter to Lycotas (*haecne marita fides*, IV. 3. 11).
5. The vestal Tarpeia's breach of faith with her religion and Rome.
6. *Lena* poem: examples of fidelity, e.g. Penelope, cited (*sperne fidem* IV. 5. 27).
7. Actium poem (*vincit Roma fide Phoebi*, IV. 6. 57).
8. The ghost of Cynthia indignantly proclaims her fidelity to Propertius (*me servasse fidem*, IV. 7. 53) and his infidelity to her (IV. 7. 13—*per fide*; IV. 7. 70—*perfidiae*).
9. Propertius' futile attempt at infidelity with Phyllis and Teia.
10. The Hercules elegy (*non infido . . . hospite Caco*, v. 7), which makes much of the violation of the *fides* of hospitality.
11. Jupiter Feretrius and the *spolia opima*.
12. The sublime example of *fides*, the dead *univira* Cornelia addressing her husband Paullus.⁷

It is true that poets, unlike scholars, do not seek mechanistic structures around which to mold their work, yet I would argue that the theme of *fides* in various forms is the keystone of Book IV, although other grace notes can sometimes be heard—of defiance, irony, and the refusal to bow to pressure. Yet these too represent a form of *fides* to one's chosen *métier*, or to one's life-long mistress.

University of California, Santa Barbara

⁷ Schmeisser's *Concordance* to Propertius informs us that Book 1 produces 6 examples of the word *fides*: Book II, 6; Book III, 11; and Book IV, 10.