

(Un)Elegiac Characterisation in Propertius 3.12

Postume, plorantem potuisti linquere Gallam,
miles et Augusti fortia signa sequi?
tantine ulla fuit spoliati gloria Parthi,
ne faceres Galla multa rogante tua?
si fas est, omnes pariter pereatis avari, 5
et quisquis fido praetulit arma toro!
tu tamen iniecta tectus, vesane, lacerna
potabis galea fessus Araxis aquam.
illa quidem interea fama tabescet inani,
haec tua ne virtus fiat amara tibi, 10
neve tua Medae laentur caede sagittae,
ferreus aurato neu cataphractus equo,
neve aliquid de te flendum referatur in urna:
sic redeunt, illis qui cecidere locis.
ter quater in casta felix, o Postume, Galla! 15
moribus his alia coniuge dignus eras.
quid faciet nullo munita puella timore,
cum sit luxuriae Roma magistra suae?
sed securus eas: Gallam non munera vincent,
duritiaeque tuae non erit illa memor. 20
nam quocumque die salvum te fata remittent,
pendebit collo Galla pudica tuo.
Postumus alter erit miranda coniuge Vlives:
non illi longae tot nocuere morae,
castra decem annorum, et Ciconum mons Ismara, Calpe, 25
exustaeque tuae mox, Polypheme, genae,
et Circae fraudes, lotosque herbaeque tenaces,
Scyllaque et alternas scissa Charybdis aquas,
Lampeties Ithacis veribus mugisse iuencos
(paverat hos Phoebos filia Lampetie), 30
et thalamum Aeaee flentis fugisse puellae,
totque hiemis noctes totque natasse dies,
nigrantisque domos animarum intrasse silentum,
Sirenum surdo remige adisse lacus,
et veteres arcus leto renovasse procorum, 35
errorisque sui sic statuisset modum.
nec frustra, quia casta domi persederat uxor.
vincit Penelopes Aelia Galla fidem.

Postumus, how could you leave Galla crying, to follow Augustus' brave standard, as a soldier? Was the glory of Parthia's spoils worth so much to you, with Galla repeatedly begging you not to do it? If it's permitted may all you greedy ones perish equally, and whoever else prefers his weapon to a faithful bed! You, you madman, wrapped in your cloak for a covering, weary, will drink Araxes' water from your helm. She in the meantime will pine away at each idle rumour, for fear your courage will cost you dear, or the arrows of Medes enjoy your death, or the armoured knight on a golden horse, or some bit of you be brought back in an urn to be wept over. That's how they come back, those who fall in such places. O Postumus you are three or four times blessed by Galla's chastity! Your morals deserve a different wife. What shall a girl do with no fear to guard her, with

Rome to instruct her in its voluptuousness? But go in safety: gifts will not win Galla, and she will not recall how harsh you were. On whatever day fate sends you safely home, modest Galla will hang about your neck. Postumus will be another Ulysses with a wifely wonder: such long delay did him no harm: ten years of war; the Cicones' Mount Ismara; Calpe; then the burning of your eye-socket, Polyphemus; Circe's beguilement; the lotus, its binding spell; Scylla and Charybdis, separated by alternate tides; Lampetie's oxen bellowing on Ithacan spits (Lampetie his daughter grazed them for Phoebus); then fleeing the bed of Calypso, Aëaea's weeping girl, swimming for so many nights and wintry days; entering the black halls of the silent spirits; approaching the Sirens' waters with deafened sailors; renewing his ancient bow with the death of the suitors; and so making an end of his wanderings. Not in vain, since his wife stayed chaste at home. Aelia Galla outdoes Penelope's loyalty.

The focus of this paper falls closely on Propertius 3.12 – a highly neglected poem that sits right at the heart of the 24-poem Book 3.¹ This is a short, perplexing elegy in which Propertius reflects on the institution of marriage with extremely uncharacteristic *favour*,² through the figure of one Aelia Galla, whose faithfulness is said to surpass even that of Penelope. In a world of elegiac *inconstancy*, it's precisely the lack of fit that should attend the faithful Galla that sparks my interest in the poem. In fact, like several other *personae* that populate Propertius' third book, Galla seems designed to shatter the established elegiac mould.

Let me begin with a quick word on these 'unelegiac' characters, partly to provide 3.12 with some context, as well as to establish the direction from which I approach the poem. In a thematic sense, in Book 3 Propertius pushes his amatory genre towards the point of breakdown – remembering, of course, that this is the book in which his poetry *does* finally breakdown, in 3.24, with the lover's climactic claim to reject Cynthia, who has been the poet's muse and mistress since the very beginning. But, even before this point, Book 3 has been stuffed full of significantly *external* characters with considerable symbolic potency – all of whom seem set up in order to test exactly what *else* elegiac verse is capable of accommodating. In 3.7 there is an unparalleled poem lamenting the death at sea of the drowned merchant Paetus; in 3.9 Propertius plays with the question of whether patron Maecenas is really a poetic insider or political outsider; 3.11 sees Propertius joining Virgil and Horace in denouncing an unnamed Cleopatra as the embodiment of all things wrong with womankind, and in praising the upright masculinity of Augustus instead; and, perhaps most egregiously of all, 3.18 enacts an elegiac lament for Marcellus, dead Augustan prince – a poem that voices political platitudes in a way unthinkable in the *Monobiblos*.

And here we also find the faithful, married Aelia Galla – who has, in 3.12, the unenviable task of picking up the baton for elegiac women after the poet's fearful tirade against femininity in 3.11. Galla and her poem have attracted no sustained scholarly attention whatsoever in the past several decades: a glance at many an *index locorum* shows critics leaping from 3.11 to somewhere near the end of the book – presumably in search of the reappearance of Cynthia (only, of course, to discover her disappearing as the collection

¹ In this paper I follow Fedeli's *Teubner* text (1984) which, like Heyworth's recent OCT (2007), treats 3.24 and '3.25' as a single elegy. On the unity of 3.24-25, see Richardson (1977) 409-10, Fedeli (1985) 672-74, Heyworth (2007) 412.

² Cf. Propertius' loud rejection of Augustan marriage legislation in 2.7. The discussion of marriage in an Augustan context (and the mention of Augustus' name in the second line) provides 3.12 with potent political connections – although for reasons of space the focus of this paper will be on the poem's literary significance.

itself winds down).³ My own approach overlays a discussion of Propertius's developing sense of eroticism with his sense of literary evolution. This serves to set up two final, complementary (if not contradictory) readings – first, of the ways in which the existence of Aelia Galla *should* be impossible within the world-view of elegy; but, at the same time, of the way that this poem simultaneously *upholds* the poet's long-held rallying cry within the battle of the genres: that elegy – ever evolving and expanding – remains the ultimate form of writing, surpassing all other forms just as Galla surpasses Penelope.

Let us turn to the structure of the poem, since the pattern of its narrative progression is significant. 3.12 comprises two distinct sections: first we seem to rehearse elegiac commonplaces in which lust for wealth leads to all manner of misery. We have seen this just recently in Book 3, at 3.7, when the merchant Paetus is figured as abandoning the embrace of his *penates* in order to seek financial gain – and with quite disastrous results. Here avarice has led to the separation of *lovers*; greed has induced Postumus to leave behind, not the embrace of his *patria*, but the tears of his *puella* instead – in order to follow the standards of Augustus. We then settle upon an establishing portrait of the two separated lovers: Postumus, wrapped up in his military cloak, supping water from the river (*potabis Araxis aquam*, 8); and Galla pining away at home (*tabescet*, 9) in response to idle rumours of her lover's well-being; and she actively indulges her fears as to the fate that might have befallen him (11-14).

So far, so familiar – and, significantly, there's nothing yet to suggest that Postumus and Galla are *married*. But in the poem's central passage (15-22) and beyond, the reader of love-elegy is in for a shock. Here – at least, according to what we have come to expect on such occasions when the elegiac code has been broken (and the death of Paetus offers a vivid and recent lesson) – our poem veers wildly in new directions upon the introduction of Galla's unexpectedly *faithful* character. Within the value system of 3.12, and so at the heart of Book 3, it turns out that, unlike Paetus, Postumus *won't* be made to suffer for his unelegiac neglect of Galla, for Galla will prove heroically resistant to the kind of temptations to which elegiac women are supposedly susceptible: significantly, in terms of the poem's initial engagement with the elegiac past, Galla will not be won over by bribes (19). And so it follows that Postumus might traverse the military world safe in the knowledge that his wife will await his return chastely – thus he will be, literally, a second Ulysses: *alter erit Vlixes* (23). At this point Propertius inserts a poem within a poem, through an extended retelling of the *Odyssey*, recast in erotic terms, ostensibly to reinforce the point that the length of Odysseus's wanderings did no harm to *his* marriage, at the end of the story. And this, of course, sets up the real point of *our* story: that, in amatory terms, Postumus should have even less to worry about than Odysseus, since Galla will prove even more faithful than Penelope: the poem's final line, *uincit Penelopes Aelia Galla fidem* (38).

³ For a rare (if brief) treatment of 3.12 on its own terms, see Nethercut (1970) who views 3.12 as the start of a three-poem sequence concerned with 'the participation of women in military exercise, and the contest between *aurum* and *fides*' (99). Fantham (2006) 196-97 observes that Galla represents 'a sympathetic and serious depiction of a loyal Roman woman', a then-novel portrait Propertius would later develop in 4.3 and 4.11. Otherwise, scholarly interest in 3.12 comes largely from the external perspective of other poems or other poets: Becker (1971) 469-71 and Günther (2006a) 366-69 treat Galla briefly from the perspective of Arethusa in 4.3; White (1995) and Keith (2008) 5-7 are concerned with the historical identity of the addressee Postumus, and whether he is the same figure to whom Horace *Odes* 2.14 is addressed (White argues no; Keith, yes). Perhaps most significantly, Harrison (1988) 186 cites in passing the narrative construct of 3.12 as an elegiac counterpoint to Horace *Odes* 3.7 – a connection which I intend to treat more fully in an expanded form of this paper (see also below, n.11).

Yet it's not enough just to say that Galla simply doesn't fit. In a very basic sense she *must* fit – because here she is, sitting chastely at the centre of Book 3. So what kind of role does she play in Propertian poetics? Here a quick glance at Penelope will help us out. Just as the basic scenario of Postumus leaving his Galla behind is common enough to love-poetry, so the figure of Penelope is found frequently in love-poetry as an *exemplum pudicitiae*, a model of chastity – and this is no different in 3.12.⁷ But – *unlike* in 3.12 – the mythically chaste Penelope is usually drawn upon as the representation of an elegiac *fantasy*, as a way of describing the kind of female loyalty that the elegiac lover desires but finds conspicuously lacking in his *puella*. 2.9 (another poem that seems conspicuously revisited in 3.12) provides a case in point that demonstrates the link and distinction between Penelope and elegiac *puella* very clearly:

Penelope poterat bis denos salva per annos
vivere, tam multis femina digna procis;
coniugium falsa poterat differre Minerva,
nocturno solvens texta diurna dolo;
visura et quamvis numquam speraret Vlixem, 5
illum exspectando facta remansit anus.
2.9.3-8

Penelope was able to live untouched for twenty years, a woman worthy of so many suitors. She evaded marriage by her cunning weaving, cleverly unravelling each day's web by night: and though she never hoped to see her Ulysses again, she waited, growing old, for his return.

Here Penelope is foregrounded for her customary faithfulness, at the beginning of the poem – but the point will turn out to be that such a Penelope acts in direct *contrast* to the poet's mistress. In fact, when Cynthia first appears towards the middle of the poem, she has been apparently unable to remain chaste even for *one* night in Propertius' absence:

at tu non una potuisti nocte vacare,
impia, non unum sola manere diem!
2.9.20-21

But you, impious girl, can't stay free a single night, or remain alone a single day!

But what makes 2.9 a particularly useful poem to compare with 3.12 is that Propertius goes on to wonder rhetorically just what Cynthia would get up to, were *he* to go away at length on military service – just as Postumus has done, just now in 3.12:

quid si longinquos retinerer miles ad Indos,
aut mea si staret navis in Oceano?
2.9.29-30

What if I were a soldier, detained in far-off India, or my ship was stationed on the Ocean?

To begin with, the precedent of 2.9 shows our third book poem using a comparison with Penelope to set up Galla, once again, as an anti-Cynthia – in that Galla acts *like* a Penelope, rather than *unlike* one. But Galla does not therefore simply express some further kind of erotic fantasy. The use in 3.12 of the recurrent Penelope-device – but now to characterise an apparently 'real' woman – establishes Galla as actually the living embodiment of a long-term elegiac desire – that is, as the flesh-and-blood *incarnation* of

⁷ See here Harrison (1988) 187, for both the relevance of the *Odyssey* to the poetic motif of separated lovers, and for the identification of this motif as particularly *elegiac*.

I'm not afraid to discover the Adriatic with you, Tullus, or set my sail, now, on the briny Aegean: I could climb Scythian heights, or go beyond the palace of Ethiopian Memnon. But, clinging there, my girl's words always hinder me, her altering colour: her painful prayers.

Here we see Propertius himself, in conspicuous contrast to Postumus in 3.12, very properly *refusing* a request to travel away on public business – and precisely because the entreaties of his *puella* forbid him: note in particular that line 5 (*sed me complexae remorantur uerba puellae*) contrasts pointedly with the fourth line of 3.12 (*ne faceres Galla multa rogante tua*). But, in essence, in 1.6 Propertius tropes his literary decision in Book 1 to be and to remain an elegist, rebuffing requests for other, presumably more public forms of poetry. Accordingly, Postumus' decision in 3.12 to follow the fierce standards of Augustus trope a literary decision to embark on some manner of Augustan epic: in this vein Postumus is figured subsequently as drinking, Ennius-like, from an epic water-source (*potabis Araxis aquam*, 8);¹⁰ and, as we've seen, he will of course be transformed *into* an epic character, an *alter Vlixes* (23) – who, to reinforce the point, is already a character ripe for the metapoetic representation of poet-figures. For her part, Galla (like Cynthia in 1.6) must align therefore with *elegiac* practice: note here, not only her emblematic weeping in the opening line, but also, once again, her aesthetically appropriate slightness, as she wastes away elegiacally (*tabescet*) in line 9. What is significant here, at the level of metapoetry, is that this elegiacally problematic scenario of Postumus and Galla should appear in the middle of a book in which Propertius himself will eventually seek to abandon his own *puella*, possibly for a programme of more overtly Augustan poetry, such as we find eventually in Book 4.

Yet, if there is a lesson to be had here, it is a complicated one, especially as it pertains exactly to the type of poetry that Propertian elegy has become by this stage of his third book. The metapoetic discussion of course proceeds in tandem with analysis of character development, such as we've already had. But, in terms of metapoetry, what is significant here is that, at the very point that elegy's beloved subject has transformed from *puella* to Penelope, and that the elegiac hero has assumed the identity of a second Ulysses, exactly here Propertius sets out for us a poem within a poem. Not only this, but the literary quality attributed to this internal retelling of the Odyssey is marked quite ostentatiously:

castra decem annorum, et Ciconum mons Ismara, Calpe,
 exustaeque tuae mox, Polypheme, genae,
 et Circae fraudes, lotosque herbaeque tenaces,
 Scyllaque et alternas scissa Charybdis aquas,
 Lampeties Ithacis veribus mugisse iuencos
 (paverat hos Phoebos filia Lampetie), 30
 et thalamum Aeaee flentis fugisse puellae,
 totque hiemis noctes totque natasse dies,
 nigrantisque domos animarum intrasse silentum,
 Sirenum surdo remige adisse lacus,
 et veteres arcus leto renovasse procorum, 35
 errorisque sui sic statuisset modum.

3.12.-25-36

... ten years of war; the Cicones' Mount Ismara; Calpe; then the burning of your eye-socket, Polyphemus; Circe's beguilement; the lotus, its binding spell; Scylla and Charybdis, separated by alternate tides; Lampetie's oxen bellowing on Ithacan spits (Lampetie his daughter grazed them for Phoebus); then fleeing

¹⁰ The widespread association of different types of (drinking-)water with genres of writing is particularly prominent at the start of Book 3: see esp. 3.1.5-6 and 3.3.1-6, 51-52. On the Araxes, see Richardson (1977) 369.

the bed of Calypso, Aeaea's weeping girl, swimming for so many nights and wintry days; entering the black halls of the silent spirits; approaching the Sirens' waters with deafened sailors; renewing his ancient bow with the death of the suitors; and so making an end of his wanderings.

To begin with, lines 29-36 employ an almost humorously 'literary' repetition of *-isse* through a perfect infinitive in the penultimate word of every line, barring the thirtieth. But, as the episode closes, Propertius also marks the ending of a *poem* by drawing on an ancient tradition that reads Odysseus as a surrogate poet-figure, gifted with words and narrative, and a conveniently musical bowstring. As such, as the internal 'poem' closes, this new Propertian hybrid Postumus-Ulysses both brings his wanderings to an end and, metaphorically, sets them to metre: *errorisque sui sic statuisse modum* (36). But what type of poem has Postumus-Ulysses sung, that can accommodate this newly chaste *puella*? It seems neither clearly elegiac – even giving the usual recasting of the Odyssey in an erotic context – but then nor does it look like epic, either – especially as through *statuisse modum* Propertius has his poet-surrogate literally 'setting a limit' to what ought then to be properly limitless.

By way of closing, let me offer a couple of suggestions about possible ways out of this tangle – beyond simply acknowledging the poem's symbolism *as* a tangle. One means of dealing with the unparalleled presence of a married couple within a Propertian elegy has been to treat Aelia Galla's chastity with a kind of wry irony.¹¹ In such a reading, any lingering discomfort about the ways in which Galla doesn't fit the elegiac value system is soothed by treating her presence in any literal sense as literally an impossibility. Here the poem's final line becomes not amatory conversion but instead suggestive hyperbole. It is claimed that Galla will surpass the faithfulness of Penelope – but of course *that* is patently impossible: Penelope is, and always has been, the very pinnacle of literary loyalty, and to claim that Galla will out-do her in fidelity is as absurd as claiming that a girl will not give in to the gifts of a seductive poet. In fact, the elegiac world can return to rights since, in reality, Galla will very probably be deceiving her absent husband just as certain epic traditions have Penelope really cheating Odysseus and – as even our poem makes clear, at line 31 – as Odysseus was cheating Penelope.¹²

One final approach might be to return to the evocation of writing-practice and generic allegiance with which the poem begins. In this sense, the poem's final line does more than assimilate once-elegiac Galla with a chastely-epic Penelope. Given its emblematic *elegiac* verb *vincent*, the poem's ending actually *maintains* the sense of competition that was established at the very start: in a literal sense, Galla is not assimilated with Penelope; Galla *defeats* Penelope. Perhaps, in the end, 3.12 does not contribute to the rapid unravelling of the elegiac construct, though it certainly adds to its development. Instead it mounts a very third book redefinition and defence of Propertian elegy; one that tracks and exposes the degree to which elegy has expanded, but which leaves defiantly unchanged the assertion that elegy is still the genre *par excellence* for voicing what really makes things tick. In a sense, it shouldn't really surprise us that in 3.12 Propertius positions an essentially elegiac

¹¹ See eg. Fedeli (1985) 398. Such an ironic reading may also be prompted by the parallel of Horace *Odes* 3.7, a poem which – despite asserting a kind of lyric invulnerability to erotic harm – nevertheless dwells suggestively on the temptations to which separated lovers are subjected during their time apart; see here Nisbet & Rudd (2004) 113-14, Harrison (1988). See also below, n.12.

¹² The inevitability of infidelity in such situations will be reasserted once again at 3.20, when Propertius will cast *himself* as the successful seducer of a girl whose *vir* – like Postumus in 3.12 – has left her behind in pursuit of wealth abroad.

symbol as surpassing an epic one. We've already read in 2.1 that sex with Cynthia outdoes the *Iliad*, and that in the bedroom Propertius himself is as great a warrior – if not greater – than Achilles and Hector combined. And then again, 3.12 should perhaps alert us to the fact that the ideal of faithfulness, just like we find it in this poem, has in fact *always* marked the elegiac ethos, notwithstanding its surface obsession about *infidelity*. Indeed, the frequent accusations of mutual unfaithfulness tend to obscure the several occasions on which elegiac fidelity comes into being as more than an ideal: when Propertius comes home late, as in 1.3, he *does* find Cynthia resting fitfully, weary of waiting up for him; as we saw in 2.29 above, when the lover journeys early that morning to check on Cynthia's solitude, she *is* there sleeping quite alone; and when Cynthia finally offers her own extensive version of elegiac history in 4.7, it's precisely her own wifely faithfulness that she chooses to assert. But, most fundamentally of all, the constancy of an elegiacally-incarnate Aelia Galla in 3.12 offers yet one more variation on what turns out eventually to be a literary truism: that Propertius will in fact stay wedded to writing elegy – that, for Propertius, Cynthia will indeed prove to have been the first and the last.

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