Blame It on the A-a-a-a-a-Alcohol: Propertius 1.3 and the Poetics of Drunken Focalization

The purpose of this paper will be to take more seriously the admission of drunkenness on behalf of the narrating poet at Propertius 1.3.9. Following Harrison (1994), Kaufhold (1997), and Wyke (2002), I suggest a reading of Cynthia’s speech at the close of the poem that challenges the main interpretation of the dual Cynthias—one ideal and one realistic. I will argue that both Cynthias are idealized, albeit to different spheres. Propertius puts the words he wishes his mistress had said to him on his return home into her mouth, knowing full well that these traits do not suit her.

First, I will look more closely at the opening mythic exempla and the following narrative and highlight where and how wine is invoked. I will show that in every section of the poem prior to Cynthia’s speech wine and drunkenness abound. As soon as Propertius comes into the scene he is thrown into a mythic fantasy world, replete with maidens and Bacchants. When we finally switch from the mythic realm to, what seems to be, a more realistic realm, the undercurrent of wine continues. To interpret the awakened Cynthia as “real” or “realistic” is to argue for an abrupt shift in narrative focalization and to ignore that the narrator is still intoxicated, quite heavily.

Finally, I will argue that if we read the latter sections of 1.3 assuming that the narrator’s perceptions may indeed be still off kilter, one can make more sense of Cynthia’s seemingly incongruous description of herself. This reading will help to explain the problematic aspects of the attribution of subjectivity and identity to the Cynthia persona because it will show that her speech is not truly her own. Even where Cynthia is allowed to speak, it seems that she has no more of a true voice than when she is entirely a *scripta puella*.

Select Bibliograpy

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