

The Power of Performance in Propertius' Love Elegies

The elegies of Propertius give evidence for both the oral presentation of poetry in Rome and the sharing of verses in written form. In the fictional world of Propertius' love elegies, the lover-poet believes that his power of persuasion lies in his performance, or oral delivery, of verses to Cynthia. In his relationship with Cynthia, the lover-poet relies on his poetic abilities to persuade her and he flatters her with verses. This paper will examine the effectiveness of oral verses as a medium of persuading the beloved, in contrast to that of written verses. I will argue that while oral presentation of verse is depicted as a powerful tool for wooing the beloved and for maintaining happiness in the relationship, written verse is shown to be ineffective in persuading her and instead brings harm and pain.

Physical presence dictates how successful the lover-poet's verses will be. The importance of physical presence and recitation for wooing and for a happy relationship is represented in a number of Propertius' elegies. For example, in poem 2.13, the lover-poet expresses his delight in reciting his songs for Cynthia (11-12: *me iuuet in gremio doctae legisse puellae, / auribus et puris scripta probasse mea*). Both the lover-poet and Cynthia recite verses in each other's presence in several poems, including 2.24b, and Cynthia's poetic talent is emphasized often (e.g. 1.2; 2.3; 1.7; 2.1). This shared poetic experience is instrumental for the success of their relationship.

When the lover-poet and Cynthia are separated, whether by a door or a journey's distance, discord arises in their relationship and his poetry is ineffective in wooing her. In these circumstances, the lovers are no longer able to share in the immediate effect of the verses, and the performance loses its efficacy. In poems 1.11 and 1.12, Cynthia is vacationing in Baia with a rival lover. During this time, Cynthia is separated from the lover-poet and also his verses (1.11,

line 8: *e nostris carminibus*), so that his poetry is unable to prevent her infidelity. In 1.17 and 1.18, the lover-poet withdraws to the woods and again is separated from Cynthia. In poem 1.18, he cries out, not to Cynthia, but to deserted nature. As a result, his laments echo in silent shadows (21: *a quotiens teneras resonant mea verba sub umbras*) and his passionate words resound amidst the trees and rocks (32: *sed qualiscumque es resonent mihi 'Cynthia' silvae, / nec deserta tuo nomine saxa vacent*). In vain, he carves flattery to her in the bark of a tree (22). In 1.17, the lover-poet addresses the lonely halcyons, rather than Cynthia, and his promises fall on empty shores (4: *cadunt*). *Cadunt* calls to mind the description of the shut-out lover's words in 1.16, which are similarly powerless (34).

The written word in Propertius' elegies, when used as a means of flattery or appeal between the lover-poet and Cynthia, fails to be persuasive. In 1.11, Cynthia is away, and the lover-poet sends her a little book of poetry (*libellus*). Instead of flattering her, however, it seems to contain complaints about her behavior that may anger her (19-20: *ignosces igitur, si quid tibi triste libelli attulerint nostri: culpa timoris erit*). In 2.25, the lover-poet promises Cynthia that he will make her beauty famous and immortalize her with the publication of his books (3: *ista meis fiet notissima forma libellis*). He promises the same for any *puella* he celebrates in 3.2: *fortunata, meo si qua es celebrata libello! / carmina erunt formae tot monumenta tuae* (17-18). Written poems fail to please, however. In 2.8, the lover-poet laments that none of the verses he composed for Cynthia were able to woo her. She never said, "I love you." (11-12: *munera quanta dedi vel qualia carmina feci! / illa tamen numquam ferrea dixit 'amo'*). The use of *facere* highlights the writtenness of the verses, in contrast to recited verses. Similarly, in 3.23, the lover-poet's writing tablets bearing praises to Cynthia are lost and therefore rendered powerless for wooing her.

The form of communication that is the most permanent and might be expected to be the most powerful, then, the written word, functions the opposite way in Propertius' love elegies, because it implies physical separation. When the lover-poet's appeals to Cynthia are carved in the bark of a tree in the woods, or written on writing tablets or in books or letters, their power to woo is lessened. Presence and performance go hand-in-hand, and the successful persuasion of the beloved and enjoyment of their erotic relationship in Propertius' elegies is achieved through the oral delivery of verses while in the beloved's presence.

Works Cited

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