

Word-to-World and World-to-Word in *the Renuntiatio Amoris* of Propertius

Francis Cairns (1972) analyzes a genre of poetry that he dubs the *renuntiatio amoris* (“renunciation of love”). Such a poem entails a lover acting as the speaker, a beloved as the addressee, and finally the renunciation of love for said beloved. Furthermore, Cairns shows that the *renuntiationes amoris* exhibit many common *topoi*, such as the lover’s wish for the beloved to experience the same pain. Under these proposed criteria, three poems by the Roman elegist Propertius qualify as *renuntiationes amoris*: 2.5 and the paired poems 3.24 and 3.25. Yet despite demonstrating similar formal qualities and sentiments, 2.5 differs from 3.24 and 3.25 in the conviction to renounce that Propertius assigns to the speaker. While 3.24 and 3.25 combine to effect a bitter and genuine repudiation of the *puella* Cynthia, 2.5 appears as a weak and half-hearted attempt to discard Cynthia, as the last lines merely threaten to attack her with a line of verse. Although the placement at the end of book 3 grants the renunciation in 3.24 and 3.25 a greater aura of conviction than 2.5, which occurs earlier, I contend that a close reading that employs speech act theory reveals the underlying intent and thoughts of each poem.

Speech act theory conceives of speech as “doing” something as opposed to simply “saying” something. Moreover, the theory understands utterances within their context, rendering the approach fruitful for the determining the meaning and force in the context of a “world”, even the fictional one created by Propertius’ poetry. In speech act theory, the relationship between words and the world is expressed through the idea of “direction of fit.” In the case for assertions and descriptions, the word matches the world. For promises, vows, and commands, the world fits the word. In Propertius’ *renuntiationes amoris*, the speaker’s expression of his pain constitutes the word-to-world direction of fit, while his promises illustrate the world-to-word direction. According to Searle (1979), utterances can also have no direction of fit or a double direction of

fit. For instance, 3.24.1, *falsa est ista tuae, mulier, fiducia formae* has a double fit, as the line simultaneously describes the falsity of Cynthia's beauty and declares it to be so.

As this paper will show, the direction of fit in Propertian utterances affects the reading of the poems and allows us to gauge conviction without resorting to questioning the poet's "true feelings." The lack of conviction in 2.5 becomes manifest through the tension between the statements (word-to-world) and promises (world-to-word). For example, Propertius' threat at 2.5.6 to find a new girl (*inveniam tamen e multis fallacibus unam*) is undercut by continued interest in Cynthia and by the admission of the fickleness of lovers' anger at 2.5.16 (*omne in amore malum, si patiare, leve est*). Instead, 2.5 functions to criticize Cynthia for her behavior and in fact to praise the potency of her beauty (*forma potens*, 2.5.28). 3.24, on the other hand, proclaims that this beauty has been falsely represented by the verses that Propertius produced while enslaved and tortured by Venus (3.24.9-14). Finally, the self-dedication (a dual direction of fit) to Good Sense (*Mens Bona*) at 3.24.19 enables Propertius to assume a more rational persona in 3.25, where he cements his rejection of Cynthia by cursing her to the suffering of old age. Thus, a speech act analysis will demonstrate how Propertius uses the words of his poetry to create- and destroy- a literary world.

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