

Propertius' Arethusa: Wife or Concubine?

Propertius' Arethusa (4.3) is generally treated as a wife because she more or less claims to be such, with terms like *marita fides* and references, in lines 11-16, to points in her wedding ceremony, such as the wedding torch, the sprinkled water, and the bridal hairstyle. I suggest, however, that her language and concerns are characteristic not of a citizen wife, but of an elegiac courtesan under exclusive contract to a man on military campaign. These contracts are discussed in Herter 1960, James 2003 and 2006 (which discusses the contract proposed in Plautus' *Asinaria*); see also Rawson 1974. Roman elegy characteristically abuses the terminology of legitimate marriage by applying it to extramarital relationships (James 2003: 41-52); here Propertius puts that misused language in the mouth of the courtesan herself.

Arethusa's own description of the wedding ceremony marks it as dubious: the fire-and-water elements of the ceremony were faulty, associated with death; the bridal fillet was misplaced; the marriage god did not attend (4.3.13-17). As Jeri DeBrohun notes, "Arethusa expresses an uncertainty whether she and Lycotas are really married at all' because 'nothing was quite right even with their wedding itself.'" In poem 3.20, Propertius has already played extensively with the elements of legitimate citizen marriage, in proposing what is instead a new elegiac liaison (see James 2003: 44-47); here again, I argue, he uses that same language both playfully and disingenuously. The rest of the poem—the great majority of the poem, in fact—depicts the speech and concerns of an elegiac *puella*, awaiting the return of her man.

Arethusa articulates a courtesan's concerns: she fears that Lycotas is cheating on her, and prefers him to suffer war wounds rather than bruises made by a rival (23-26). She envies Hippolyta, hardly a legitimate wife (42-43), and wishes that military camps were open for Roman *puellae* (45). Most strikingly, she prays that Lycotas will preserve his sworn fidelity, and promises a votive plaque for his safe return: "incorrupta mei conserva foedera lecti! | hac ego te sola lege redisse velim: | armaque cum tulero portae votiva Capenae, | subscribam SALVO GRATA PUELLA VIRO" (4.3.69-72="Keep pure the treaties of my bed! | Only under this condition would I want you to return: | and when I take your arms, for offering, to the Capene gate I shall write, | 'A GIRL, GRATEFUL FOR HER MAN'S SAFE RETURN.'" These lines seal the identification of Arethusa as a contracted courtesan: the *matrona* can fall back on more than *foedera lecti*, and would hardly identify herself publicly as a *puella* rather than a wife. Dee 94n.21 notes that the "connotations of *puella* are so overwhelmingly in the direction of unmarried women that it comes rather oddly and almost comically from Arethusa." I suggest that this is the poem's final reminder that she is not a true Roman wife, and that Arethusa and Lycotas are not fictitious names designating even a generic, rather than specific, Roman couple.

Roman Comedy depicts young courtesans who actually love a man and want to stay faithful to him. Philaenium in *Asinaria*, Selenium of *Cistellaria*, and Antiphila of *Heautontimoroumenos* engage in (or hope to) exclusive relationships, as marked at *HT* 392-94. Such a woman, taking a contract with a man who was about to go off on campaign, might well want to go through some kind of ritual, the kind of thing proposed in Propertius 3.20, which lists elements of the Roman wedding (sealed and deposited contracts, witnesses, pledges, preparatory omens and auspices, holy marriage rites), all adduced for a new elegiac liaison, one that replaces the *puella*'s previous relationship (with a man who has left her for military profiteering travel to Africa). I suggest that Arethusa gives us the voice of this woman.

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