

Love's Madness and its Remedies in Propertius

It has long been noted that the remedies for love's madness feature prominently in Propertian elegy. His three books of "love poems" begin and end with this metaphor (Cairns 1974), and several poems between take up the motif in unique ways (Merriam 2001, Caston 2006). The extent to which Propertius repeats particular aspects of it, however, remains largely unexplored, for he frequently reproduces what becomes a standard set of remedies while artfully varying each instance with etymological and metonymic play (see Guenther 1998, Michalopolous 1998, and Yardley 2001 on wordplay in Propertius). Beyond displaying his wit and poetic prowess in these passages, though, Propertius uses this technique to comment on the complex relationship between his remedies and the love they are meant to cure.

By line 7 of the first poem, Propertian love is explicitly a form of *furor*, and his speaker thus seeks out remedies which have long been associated with madness (Cairns 1974). Specifically, he requests the aid of witches (1.1.19-24), friends (1.1.25-6), iron and fire (1.1.27-8), and a long journey (1.1.29-30). Of course, none of these remedies actually works, for three full books of love poems immediately follow. Then, in poem 3.24, when the speaker finally thinks he has been released from Love's grasp, he looks back on his previous, futile attempts to find a cure (3.24.9-19). Propertius here lists the same remedies of witchcraft, the care of one's friends, harsh medical treatment with iron and fire, and a journey over the sea (albeit here wrecked), and the repetition provides a satisfying close to what he began in very first poem.

With this set of cures firmly established as a sort of framework, many aspects of Propertius' first three books take on a new light. In fact, further variations on these same remedies appear at important points throughout his poetry (four of the five most prominent examples are in programmatic poems). If I may provide but one example, though, Propertius

revisits the motif as early as poem 1.5, where we learn that Gallus will soon endure fire and witchcraft (1.5.1-6), much as the speaker was recently willing to do. The speaker is also now in the role of the helpful friend, (*pares* 1.5.2; *socio* 1.5.29), and the journey the two men are on (1.5.2) recalls the one he himself had previously prayed for. Thus only the iron of poem 1.1 seems to be missing, but as a highpoint of wit and variation Propertius conceals the term by etymologizing it. Having previously established the combination of *ferrum* and *ignis* as a medical procedure in 1.1.27, Propertius here pairs the two again (*ferre per ignis*, 1.5.5) with a “suppressed etymology,” or an etymology in which one term is left out (see O’Hara 1996). Instead of including the iron itself, he draws upon the popular relationship between *ferrum* and *fero* to make the idea of iron implicit in the line. The combination of *furor* (1.5.3), the remaining remedies, the familiar juxtaposition of these two terms, and the poem’s motion toward *medicina* in 1.5.28 provide enough context for the etymology to stand out. Then, when the reader makes the connection, the “enduring” quality of *fero* blends into the notion of iron as a cure for love, much as it did in the similar etymological play between *fortiter (...patiemur)*, *ferrum*, and *ferte...ferte* at 1.1.27-30.

Propertius thus repeats these same remedies at multiple points in his first three books, but each instance provides a unique variation that artfully ties the motif to the lover’s condition. In this way he accomplishes far more than merely showcasing his poetic ability, for he comments on the lover’s experiences via the very remedies he seeks. This constantly developing motif, most visible in Propertius’ carefully constructed wordplay, draws out deeper connections between the lover and his madness, a theme central to Propertian elegy.

Bibliography

- Cairns, F. 1974. "Some Observations on Propertius 1.1." *CQ* 24: 94-110.
- Caston, R. 2006. "Love as Illness: Poets and Philosophers on Romantic Love." *CJ* 101 (3): 271-98.
- Guenther, H. C. 1998. "Word Play in Propertius." *Eikasmos* 9 : 243-57.
- Merriam, C. 2001. "Clinical Cures for Love in Propertius' Elegies." *Scholia* 10: 69-76.
- Michalopoulos, A. N. 1998. "Some Cases of Propertian Etymologising." *PLLS* 10: 235-50.
- O'Hara, J. J. 1996. *True Names: Vergil and the Alexandrian Tradition of Etymological Wordplay*. Ann Arbor.
- Yardley, J. C. 2001. "Word-play in Propertius." *CEA* 38: 129-34.