

The Lexicon of Loneliness in Propertius

The poet-lover of Roman elegy is famously an *exclusus amator*, locked out of his beloved's house and isolated from her charms and sexual favor. The lonely lover is indeed an enduring trope not only in elegy but in erotic poetry of many cultures and periods. But the poet-lover of Propertius is extraordinarily lonely, to hear him tell it. In this paper, I present the results of a philological study of Propertian elegy and argue that the poet makes the motifs of emptiness and loneliness into a locus of lexical innovation. Propertius' extensive use of the lexicon—a network of words prominently including *uacuus*, *solus*, and *desertus*, all repurposed to refer specifically to erotic loneliness (abstinence or romantic and sexual deprivation)—creates a poetic atmosphere of emptiness and loneliness that is unique to elegy and is in fact a hallmark of Propertius' poetry, unnoticed in previous studies of and commentators' notes on these terms in Propertius (e.g., Bellido Díaz; Camps, Richardson, Hutchinson). Propertius' erotic alteration of this lexicon is at a scale, consistency, and innovativeness comparable to Catullus' reframing of Roman *amicitia* (Ross 80-94; see also Oliensis, Tatum) in erotic terms.

Propertius uses the lexical complex of emptiness and loneliness almost exclusively in the context of the erotic elegiac relationship, and he employs it as a sign for sexual access, denial, and abstinence. While Propertius occasionally uses the terms *uacuus* and *uacare* to denote a desolate landscape (e.g., 1.18.2, *uacuum...nemus*; 1.18.32, *saxa uacent*), he primarily applies the terms to the poet-lover's sexual or amatory "voids" (his lack of sexual activity and sexual access to his *puella*) and also to the fact that the *puella* is not herself devoid of sexual activity (especially sex with other men than the poet-lover). The elegiac bed is regularly depicted as empty, whether because of the beloved's refusal to have sex with the poet-lover (1.15.18, 3.6.33) or because the lover is trying to throw off the shackles of love (2.2.1). It is in Propertius that

uacare takes on for the first time its special sexual sense (*OLD* s.v. *uaco*, 6d). In a sense, the Propertian poet-lover's use of *uacuus* and *uacare* can be seen not just as a mode of lament but also as an avenue of judgment, another way of sexually objectifying and evaluating the *puella*.

While *uacuus* and *uacare* normatively describe the elegiac relationship (that is, they praise or criticize the sexual behavior of the *puella* and its effect on the poet-lover), *uanus* and *inanis* function more instrumentally—that is, they reveal the poet-lover's failures to persuade or take sexual possession of the *puella*, whether through false dreams (*uana...mea somnia*, 3.6.31), premature joy (*laetitia...inani*, 3.6.3), or misdirected rage (*fremitu...inani*, 2.16.37). *Solus*, the term the poet-lover applies to himself when discussing his lack of sexual access to the *puella*, often carries with it bad connotations (e.g., 2.34.19). *Vnus*, in contrast, points to positive aspects of the elegiac relationship, whether it is the beloved's unique characteristics (e.g., 2.28.41, 50) or the times she spends together with the poet-lover (e.g., 2.26.31-33). Propertius primarily uses *deserere* and *desertus* in his formulations of the *topos* of the *locus desertus* (especially in poems 1.17-18). The *locus desertus* becomes not only the venue for the poet-lover's complaints, but the physical expression of them as well: in Propertius 1.18, the speaker himself projects his own feelings onto his landscape (cf. Worman), changing it from an initially peaceful *locus desertus* into something more of a *locus destructus*, a site of utter isolation and unhappiness.

The Propertian lexicon of loneliness and emptiness changes slightly from book 1 to book 3, but its use is broadly consistent across them, particularly in contrast to the profound lack of erotic usages of these terms in Propertius book 4. Propertius uses this lexical complex as an important, perhaps central, tool in defining the elegiac landscape and describing the erotic elegiac relationship. Terms for emptiness and loneliness share the same external contradictions (e.g., the poet-lover inhabits a deserted landscape, though his poems in books 1 and 2 are

frequently directed towards friends and patrons) and internal inconsistencies (e.g., the poet-lover's sexual desertion is negative; the beloved's is not). Subsequent elegists do not follow suit, making Propertius' lexical landscape of loneliness stand alone.

Bibliography

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