XXI. The Structure of Propertius 2.28 : Dramatic Unity

RONALD E. WHITE

STATE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

The Neapolitanus, our oldest and best manuscript of Propertius, begins a new poem at 2.28.35. In his edition of 1816, Lachmann began a new elegy with 2.28.47. Either or both of these divisions have been accepted by almost all modern editors. In this paper the chief arguments for and against these divisions will be discussed and the unity of the poem defended.

The evidence of the Neapolitanus would have great weight if this manuscript were always accurate in poem divisions. But as Abel has already pointed out, it is incorrect in joining 1.21 to 1.22 and 4.9 to 4.10 and 4.11.[1] To these errors indicated by Abel may be added the connection of 2.33 and 2.34. In each case the Neapolitanus unites poems which are clearly independent of one another.[2]

Since the manuscripts are not wholly reliable in this matter, the most logical and best possible criterion for the division and connection of Propertius' poems is internal evidence. It follows from this that the interpreter must perform a specific series of analyses before he is ready to recommend the proper disposition. First he is to determine the subject matter of the sections which comprise each poem and pass judgment on their coherence. If he finds that their subject matter is identical or closely related, and that there is an artistic interaction between them, then he should decide that the manuscripts are correct in treating these sections as one poem. If, on the other hand, he finds that the theme in one section has no relationship to that in the others, then he should strongly suspect the connection indicated by the manuscripts. His next step is to consider what possible relationship there might be between this divergent section and the poem which follows or precedes in the manuscripts. If he finds a

[1] W. Abel, *Die Anredeformen bei den römischen Elegikern* (Diss. Berlin 1930) 81, note 13.

[2] Modern editors divide several poems otherwise than in the manuscripts; the edition of C. Hosius (*Sex. Propertii Elegiarum libri* 4[3] [Leipzig 1932]) shows six poems thus divided, that of H. E. Butler and E. A. Barber (*The Elegies of Propertius* [Oxford 1933]) fourteen, that of E. A. Barber (*Sexti Properti Carmina* [Oxford 1953]) eleven, and that of M. Schuster (*Sex. Propertii Elegiarum libri* 4 [Leipzig 1954]) nine.

demonstrable relationship, he is justified in suggesting that this section be separated from those sections with which it is incoherent and attached to the adjoining poem. If there is no demonstrable relationship, he should propose that the section stand by itself as an independent elegy or, if it seems incomplete, as a fragment. He must consider, moreover, whether or not two adjoining poems appear so closely related in subject matter and treatment that they seem to have been composed by the poet to comprise one rather than two poems.

In the case of Propertius 2.28, no one has denied that its component sections are closely related by virtue of their common theme, Cynthia's illness. There has been much disagreement, however, on the nature and degree of interaction among them.

Butler and Barber, following the Neapolitanus, began a new poem with 35. They argued that the passionate despair of 35–46 does not sort well with the "artificial tone" of what precedes.[3] To this objection it may be answered that 1–34 are not artificial in tone but rather of such a nature as to prepare the reader for the despairing tone of 35 ff. by describing the gravity of Cynthia's illness. Note first 15–16:

> sed tibi vexatae per multa pericula vitae
> extremo veniet mollior hora die.

The *extremo die* seems to signify "the day of death" just as in 2.24.50, where the poet warns his sweetheart that a rich or noble lover will not do her the service of gathering up her bones *extremo die*. This would indicate that Cynthia's condition is serious enough to elicit thoughts of death. The next indication is in 25–26:

> quodsi forte tibi properarint fata quietem,
> illa sepulturae fata beata tuae.

Here *properarint quietem* implies that her present affliction may prove fatal. But more explicit still are 31–32:

> nunc utcumque potes, fato gere saucia morem:
> et deus et durus vertitur ipse dies.

Modern commentators agree that *durus ipse dies* is equivalent to *dies mortis*.[4]

[3] Butler and Barber (above, note 2) 238.

[4] Cf. M. Rothstein, *Die Elegien des Sextus Propertius* (Berlin 1898) 1.313; and Butler and Barber (above, note 2) 240.

Knoche also objected to the unity of these sections, asserting that, while the basic situation is the same throughout the poem, different stages of development are described.[5] He held that it is not Propertius' practice to include different stages of development within a single poem, but rather to place them in separate, independent poems as he did in 1.7 and 1.9.

In answer to this argument, the fact that 1.7 and 1.9 are separated by another poem reveals the irrelevance of the construction of those two poems to that of 2.28, in which no poem intervenes between the sections. Moreover, his assertion that Propertius is not accustomed to depict in one and the same poem different stages in the development of a single basic theme is incorrect, for 1.8, 2.29, 2.33, 2.34, and 3.20 are parallel examples of this type of construction.[6]

A strong objection to the separation of 35 ff. from 1–34 is the resulting obscurity of the imperative *miserere* in 41. If 35–46 are taken independently, the reader does not learn until 44 that Jupiter is the addressee. But when the sections are taken together, *miserere* in 41 is quite clear. The poet uses the same form of the same verb when beseeching Jupiter in the opening line: "Iuppiter, affectae tandem miserere puellae." Furthermore, 33–34 are spoken to Jupiter.[7] These are the reasons for which Propertius did not consider it necessary to include a vocative noun in 41; the reader is expected to think of Jupiter as soon as he reads *miserere*, which reminds him of both the exact parallel in 1 and the plea to Jupiter in 33–34.

Lachmann treated 47–62 as an independent elegy on the ground

[5] U. Knoche, "Gedanken und Vorschlaege zur Interpretation von Properzens Gedicht 2.28," *Atti dell'accademia properziana del Subasio* v.5 (1957) 4.

[6] These elegies will be discussed in subsequent articles.

[7] Butler and Barber held that 33–34 should be transposed after 2 because 11–32 are spoken to Cynthia and there is no preparation for the sudden appeal to Jupiter in 33. They deny that *coniunx* in 33 is a vocative on the ground that it is an unusual way to speak to Jupiter. It may be held, however, that a forecast of the change of person is to be found in the *deus* of 32. The poet exhorts his beloved to adapt herself to her fate and says, by way of encouragement, that the god is turned, i.e., the god may change his mind about allowing Cynthia's death. What god is meant? Almighty Jupiter, of course—and this reference leads the poet to repeat the plea he made to the god in 1; hence his assurance to Jupiter that Juno will not be angry with him for saving Cynthia (33–34). As to the unusualness of this use of *coniunx*, this very poem affords a close parallel, for in 48 *coniunx* is a vocative and refers likewise to a god, Pluto; this recurrence supports my interpretation.

that they were written after the illness of Cynthia.[8] One may disagree with Lachmann's view that Propertius depicts Cynthia cured as of 47. It is my view that she is not depicted as cured until 59–60, in which *magno dimissa periclo* indicates at least an improved condition, and *redde choros* would seem to imply something like complete recovery. On the other hand, it appears to me that in 47–58 her condition is even more critical than in lines 35–46. Let us consider 47–48:

> Haec tua, Persephone, maneat clementia, nec tu,
> Persephonae coniunx, saevior esse velis.

Haec clementia refers to the fact, not that these gods have allowed Cynthia to recover, but rather that they have not yet removed her from the world of the living even though she is extremely ill. In support of this view is the fact that 47–58 throughout give the appearance of a plea for something unattained, rather than of thanks for something granted. Had his prayers already been answered, the poet should be expected to give thanks and sing the praises of Persephone and her mate. But these lines contain no thanks and no praise. They are in the form of an urgent plea, almost an argument; the poet petitions that, since there are already so many beautiful girls in Hades, the gods should not begrudge the life of this one, especially since death takes everyone sooner or later. The forcefulness of this plea seems to indicate that Cynthia not only has not yet recovered, but is even in an extremely critical condition.

Knoche has supported this division made by Lachmann with the argument that, while Propertius seldom dedicates poems to gods, it would be unheard of for him to begin a poem with a request to one god, Jupiter, and later to add a plea to Persephone and Pluto in the very same poem. This arrangement, says Knoche, would be contrary to the poet's practice in 3.17, in which he begins and ends with a plea to the same god, Bacchus.[9]

It may be answered that Knoche is making an inverted use of statistics. There are only two poems in the corpus of Propertius which can be considered as dedicated to deities. One is the poem under discussion and the other is 3.17, which Knoche cites. In view of the fact that the total number is so very small, it seems

[8] C. Lachmann, *Sex. Aurelii Propertii Carmina* (Leipzig 1816) 201–202.
[9] U. Knoche (above, note 5) 5.

impossible to reach any conclusion as to what feelings the poet may have had on speaking to more than one god in a single poem. Moreover, even if we had a large number of poems like 3.17, addressed to one god, and only this one, 2.28, addressed to more than one god, Knoche's point would still be invalid; for the situation in 3.17 is different from that in 2.28. The only acceptable basis for the judgment as to whether or not Propertius could conceivably have addressed 2.28 to more than one god is the suitability or unsuitability of this scheme to this particular poem.[10] In my view the change from Jupiter to Persephone and Pluto is not only suitable but highly artistic. During the first stage of the illness, described in 1–34, the poet begs Jupiter to help his sweetheart. The second section begins with a reference to rites of magic. What is the connection between Jupiter and magic? The answer to this is that Cynthia's condition continues to worsen after the plea in 33–34, and so Propertius turns from his own god, Jupiter, to magic rites, which were most likely practised by Cynthia, who is here and elsewhere described as a devotee of eastern religions.[11] But the rites are unfamiliar to the poet, and so he quickly turns again to his own god, Jupiter, this time adding the threat of suicide. Why does the poet switch the address in the third section (47–58) from Jupiter to the gods of the underworld? Clearly because his prayers to Jupiter have again proved fruitless. Moreover, with Cynthia so critically ill, Propertius realizes that it is Persephone and Pluto who will soon be taking her away, and so he begs them to spare her life, just as they have spared it up to that point (*haec clementia*). There is, then, a logical and artistic basis for the change of deities to whom the poem is addressed.

If it be granted that the objections previously raised to the unity of this poem have been answered satisfactorily, how then are we to explain the abrupt manner in which the poet passes from one section to the next? The explanation is that Propertius in this poem employed abruptness of transition intentionally in an attempt to achieve a striking effect. This effect may perhaps be called "dramatic." The term "dramatic" is not new to criticism of Propertius' style. Long ago Plessis used the phrase *coup de*

[10] It is noteworthy that some elegies of Tibullus are addressed to more than one deity, cf. 2.1, 3, 4, 17, 55, 81; 2.3, 27, 63.

[11] Cf. 61–62; 2.33.1–20.

théâtre véritable in discussing 1.8.[12] Enk described 2.28 as a *quaedam trilogia*.[13] And Godolphin commented that the presentation in 2.28 is "dramatic, enabling the poet to show the earlier stages of the disease with the vividness of present misfortune."[14] To substantiate his theory, Godolphin cited parallel uses of dramatic development in other poets.[15] He pointed out that in Tibullus 2.1 the author himself is in succession the priest (1), the *magister bibendi* (27), and finally the love poet (67); moreover, the approach of night at the conclusion indicates the passage of time and change of scene as additional dramatic elements. His next example was Tibullus 2.2 in which 1–16 describe prayers to the god *Natalis* to grant Cornutus a wish; and 17 begins *vota cadunt*, "the vows are fulfilled" or "realized"; the suddenness of this development, said Godolphin, is dramatic in effect. Perhaps his best parallel for an unexpressed event is Horace, *Odes* 1.27.18. In the preceding lines Horace has asked the name of his young host's sweetheart; though we hear of no reply by the boy, Horace groans *a miser* in disappointment. On the basis of the poet's reaction, the reader must understand that the boy either named his sweetheart or made some other answer which displeased him. While these examples cited by Godolpin are of interest, there is no better way to illustrate the development employed in the poem under discussion than by a parallel drawn from Propertius himself. In 1.8.1–26 Propertius complains that Cynthia is deserting him for a rival with whom she will sail away to Illyria. 17–26 indicate that the poet is virtually reconciled to her departure, for he even bids her *bon voyage* and charts her safe passage over the sea. He swears eternal devotion and expresses confidence that at some future date she will be his. Through 26, it seems inevitable that Cynthia will make the trip to Illyria. Suddenly, however, 27 finds the poet jubilant over Cynthia's decision to remain with him at Rome instead of sailing away with the praetor. The tone of rejoicing lasts for the remainder of the poem. The situation in 27–46 is not only later in time than that in 1–26 but also

[12] F. Plessis, *Études critiques sur Properce et ses Elégies* (Paris 1884) 233. In harmony with this description by Plessis is the designation of 1.8.1–26 as the first act of a drama by L. Alfonsi, "Nota properziana," *Rev. belge de philologie et d'histoire* 26 (1949) 1.

[13] P. J. Enk, *Ad Propertii Carmina commentarius criticus* (Zutphen 1911) 164.

[14] F. R. B. Godolphin, "The Unity of Certain Elegies of Propertius," AJP 55(1934) 65.

[15] *Ibid.*, 62–63.

entirely reversed. The reader is required to understand, from the poet's reaction in 27 ff., that there has occurred between 26 and 27 not only a time lapse but also some unexpressed action which has revealed Cynthia's change of heart; it is this unexpressed action, perhaps the arrival of Cynthia or a message from her, which causes Propertius to exclaim his surprise and joy over her tardily revealed loyalty. This technique of development may be termed "dramatic" by analogy to a device often used in plays. In the poem, the reader learns the nature of what has been left unexpressed only through the reaction of the poet in the following section, in much the same way as the audience at a play recognizes from the changed behavior or appearance of the actors that something has occurred between the acts. And the several sections comprise one poem, just as the several acts comprise but one play.

When this theory is applied to 2.28, the poem is seen as composed of four stages of development in the theme of Cynthia's illness, i.e., 1–34, 35–46, 47–58, and 59–62. All four stages are dramatically connected, and the resultant whole is both interesting and effective. Between 34 and 35 the reader must understand that some time has passed, in which Cynthia's condition has worsened and during which Propertius has found that all signs are unfavorable. This is the basis for the deep gloom of the second section (35–46) and also for the poet's renewed plea to Jupiter. Again, after 46, the reader must realize that there is an unexpressed passage of time during which Cynthia's condition further deteriorates. He recognizes this from the reaction of the poet in 47–58, for Propertius turns in desperation to Persephone and Pluto to beg that their clemency, which has led them to spare Cynthia's life thus far, be continued. It is logical to believe that just as the plea to Jupiter in line 1 went unheeded, so also did the plea to Jupiter in the second section (41); therefore, the poet changes his tactics and seeks the aid of Persephone and Pluto, the gods of death. One must understand that a considerable interval of time has passed between 58 and 59, for in 59–62 it is clear that Cynthia has recovered completely. This we learn only from the poet's own reaction, when he urges Cynthia in 59–60:

> tu quoniam es, mea lux, magno dimissa periclo,
> munera Dianae debita redde choros.

Each of the four sections is the outgrowth of what precedes it; only when considered thus, as the dramatically connected sections of one unified poem, can 1–62 be properly appreciated as a complete unit.

There would be no objection to the common practice of labeling the sections of this poem 28A, 28B, etc. if it were made clear that the several parts comprise but one poem. It would perhaps be more appropriate to print the sections with a slight horizontal line between them as an indication of the unexpressed action and/or passage of time.