

The Weapons of Love and War: A Note on Propertius IV.3¹

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Propertius' Arethusa poem is a masterpiece of wit and irony. It is full of pathetic hyperbole: the girl suggests that her tears might wash away the letters (3-4), that a trailing scrawl might depict her death (or loss of consciousness) as she writes (5-6). Her husband, meanwhile, has travelled to the ends of the earth: Parthia, China, Thrace, Arabia and Britain—quite an accomplishment for a veteran of four years' service (7-10)! Furthermore, she envisions Lycotas not as a soldier like the *robustus puer* of Hor., *Odes* III. 2 but as too delicate to hold a weapon or to wear a breastplate. In lines 23-24 we meet a curiously soft-skinned fighter:

dic mihi, num teneros urit lorica lacertos?
num gravis imbellis atterit hasta manus?

One expects that the man will fear for the woman's safety, as does Gallus in Verg., *Ecl.* 10. 46-49:

tu procul a patria (nec sit mihi credere tantum)
Alpinas, a! dura nives et frigora Rheni
me sine sola vides. a, te ne frigora laedant!
a, tibi ne teneras glacies secet aspera plantas!

The wonderful irony is that here the girl fears for the delicacy of the man. Finally, whereas Arethusa disclaims her elegant Punic crimson (51), she is making a Tyrian red cloak for Lycotas (34).

It is clear that Propertius has used a light and playful touch, but one must also recognize that a major portion of the poem's humor comes from Arethusa's atypical attitudes towards her husband. Margaret Hubbard writes that the poet has created "one of the few portraits antiquity offers of a good and beautiful noodle, loving, tender, and not in the least clever or

¹ I wish to express my thanks to Dr. R.O.A.M. Lyne for his help and advice throughout, and to Professor Martin Ostwald, who kindly read this note in draft and made many useful suggestions.

formidable."² She properly points out the poem's lack of rhetorical logic (p. 143): if we take, for example, lines 7–22, we can count five different topics: Lycotas' travels, an expostulation on his *fides*, the wedding omens, the failure of her votives, an imprecation on the makers of weapons. That Arethusa is slightly muddle-headed is undeniable, but she is also, at least in amatory matters, quite formidable. Just as Propertius has depicted through Arethusa's vision of Lycotas a soldier who does no credit to Rome, so in Arethusa he depicts a wife whose openly expressed erotic interests are highly unconventional among upper-class Roman women.³ Starting with lines 25–28, one finds Arethusa praying that any wounds Lycotas receives be the result of his abrasive armor and not some girl's teeth. She is not particularly concerned by the fact that Lycotas has grown thin, rather she prays that the condition be due to his longing for her (the position of *meo* at the end of line 28 is emphatic). Camps⁴ has pointed out that *salvo* at the end of the poem reflects Arethusa's double concern—the safety of her husband and his fidelity towards her. This has already been adumbrated in line 2: *si potes esse meus*.

It is lines 67–69 that most clearly show Arethusa's twin concerns:

sed (tua sic domitis Parthae telluris alumnis
pura triumphantis hasta sequatur equos)
incorrupta mei conserva foedera lecti!

All commentaries correctly gloss *pura hasta* as a Roman military reward. The evidence for this is abundant: see especially Servius *ad Aen.* VI. 762:

² M. Hubbard, *Propertius* (New York 1975), p. 144.

³ It is admittedly difficult to form fully satisfactory generalizations about a given culture's sense of propriety, but the evidence suggests that an upper class Roman would have found the idea of a wife's having any control over her husband's sex life unusual if not improper. Cato (*Plut., Cat. Mai.* 17. 7) boasted that his wife never came into his arms except when it thundered. Plutarch elsewhere remarks that Julia's affection for Pompey was notorious (*Pomp.* 53. 2): περιβόητον ἦν τῆς κόρης τὸ φίλανδρον, and in *Mor.* 279 e–f observes that a Roman wedding was consummated in total darkness, giving as possible reasons the bride's modesty, the husband's modesty, hiding physical abnormalities, and a sense of shame, even in lawful unions, καὶ τοῖς νομίμοις. Elsewhere we hear praise for Aemilia, wife of Scipio Africanus, for her tolerance of his affair with a slave girl (*Val. Max.* VI. 7. 1), and learn that Octavian divorced Scribonia for her "moral perversity" (*pertaesus morum perversitatem eius*) of being intolerant of her husband's mistress (*Suet., Aug.* 62. 2 and 69. 1). Livia was more prudent, so ran the rumors, and provided Augustus with virgins to deflower (*Suet., Aug.* 71. 1, *Dio LIV.* 19. 3). We might further note Propertius' Comelia as a contrast to Arethusa: *haec est feminei merces extrema triumphii / laudat ubi emeritum libera fama rogum* (IV. 11. 71–72). Granted that the situation is different, it is still significant that Comelia never mentions anything even faintly erotic, and accepts the thought of Paullus' taking another wife with equanimity. For discussion of these and other documents, see J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *Roman Women* (London 1962), pp. 200 ff.; W. Kroll, *Die Kultur der Ciceronischen Zeit 2* (Leipzig 1933), pp. 26 ff.; P. Grimal, *L'amour à Rome* (Paris 1963); R.O.A.M. Lyne, *The Latin Love Poets* (Oxford 1980), pp. 1–18; J. Griffin, *Latin Poets and Roman Life* (London 1985), pp. 112–41.

⁴ W. A. Camps, *Propertius: Elegies, Book IV* (Cambridge 1965), p. 86.

Pura iuvenis qui nititur hasta, id est sine ferro: nam hoc fuit
praemium apud maiores eius qui tunc primum vicisset in proelio,
sicut ait Varro. . . .

and also Suet., *Claud* 28: (sc. *Posiden spadonem*) *inter militares viros hasta pura donavit*. What has been neglected by the commentators, however, is the common meaning of *hasta* as the male member. J. N. Adams⁵ amply demonstrates that "the sexual symbolism of weapons was instantly recognizable in ancient society," citing examples from a wide variety of Greek and Latin genres. The *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* gives five references for the use of *hasta* itself as a sexual image: *Priap.* 43, App., *Met.* X. 21 (codd. Laur. 29. 2, Laur. 54. 32, et al.), *Zeno* I. 6. 3 (=PL 11. 315), and *Aus., Cento Nuptialis* 359. 17. With this in mind we can recognize a highly witty *double entendre* ending Propertius' poem.

At first glance, Arethusa seems to make three wishes in lines 63–70. In lines 63–66 she begins a prayer that Lycotas stay out of the way of flying weapons, but only gets to the point of describing the danger. In 67–68 she hopes that Lycotas will have the distinction of a *pura hasta*—although a military decoration, we should note, would be difficult for someone to obtain who accepts the advice to avoid danger and disregard glory (*ne . . . tanti sit gloria*). In line 69, Arethusa makes her wish for Lycotas' *pura hasta* conditional upon his keeping their marriage undefiled, and finally, in line 70, she adds that this is the only condition under which she wants him to return. Thus the eight lines modulate from a plea for Lycotas' physical safety to one for his sexual fidelity. Lines 67–68 seem to break the logic of the passage, but in fact, given the double meaning of *hasta*, these lines become an important part of the psychological realism of the poem: Arethusa's amatory concerns mix with and overshadow her wishes for Lycotas' military success and safety. Just as in lines 23–28, where her concern for the physical hazards of the campaign yields to her more immediate concern for Lycotas' fidelity, the "second sense" of line 67 is that Lycotas should keep his member undefiled by an illicit liaison. *Pura* modifying *hasta* is paralleled in line 69 by *incorrupta* modifying *foedera*. Unlike Propertius' more explicit boasting over his erotic encounter in II. 15, the Arethusa poem is generally more subtle, but the woman's sexual interests surface consistently throughout the poem.⁶ It would be very difficult to capture the nuance of the *double entendre* in English without losing the primary meaning of *pura hasta* as a military reward. Perhaps

⁵ J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (London and Baltimore 1982), p. 19.

⁶ For an excellent evaluation of Propertius' use of *double entendre* (in IV. 9) see W. S. Anderson, "Hercules Exclusus, Prop. 4.9," *American Journal of Philology* 85 (1964), 6–9. Jasper Griffin (note 3, above), p. 140 observes that the veiling of the characters behind Greek names allows Propertius to depict a bolder, more aggressive Roman woman than he could in, e.g., III. 12, where the characters are the contemporary figures Aelia Galla and Postumus.

something to the effect of "May your Regimental shaft join the parade untainted" would do.

One could perhaps relegate Arethusa and Lycotas to a category of "fantasies on Greek themes": like Horace's Lydia and Sybaris they do not quite conform to the patterns one expects of a youth of military age and his lady. But is the Arethusa poem at all Greek, except for the names of the couple? Unlike that of Horace, *Odes* I. 8, which heavily admixes elements of the Hellenic world,⁷ Propertius' setting is utterly Roman, down to the household Lares (54). Moreover, Arethusa is not a hot-blooded *meretrix*, but a Roman matron, married and managing a household in the traditional manner. If it is valid to view Propertius IV. 3 as evoking a largely Roman world, then we can properly see in the poem humor that is also a piquant rejection of Roman attitudes and duties. Horace wrote about an army of tough Italian boys in *Odes* III. 2: Propertius' soldier, as we have seen, is barely capable of holding his weapons. Like the foreign princess of the same ode, Arethusa fears for her man, but her trepidation over his sexual fidelity is at least as strong as that for his safety. It appears that Propertius, whose apathy and contempt for *res militaris* is openly expressed in II. 7, II. 15, and III. 4, has lightly and delicately asserted in Arethusa's letter that the claims of the life of love are the strongest ones at last.

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⁷R. G. M. Nisbet and M. Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace: Odes, Book I* (Oxford 1970), p. 109.