THE POETIC ATTACK ON CYNTHIA:
PROPERTIUS 2.5 27–8

scribam igitur quod non unquam tua deleat aetas,
'Cynthia, forma potens: Cynthia verba levis.'

On the face of it Propertius is saying that since he is a poet, one whose head is encircled by ivy (26), his punishment for the unfaithful Cynthia will be to write vitriolic poetry against her. But the threat actually fits the situation better than scholars have realised and is generically very opposite. From 21 Propertius has been telling Cynthia how he will not punish her: he will not tear her clothes, beat her or break down her doors. The situation which he envisages is the well-known komastic situation in which the excluded lover often threatens (and occasionally inflicts) violence against door or girl or both: cf. AP 12. 252. 1 (Straton), Theoc. 2. 128, Athenaeus 13. 585a, Herodas 2. 34ff. (with Headlam ad loc), Terence Ad. 102, 120, Tib. 1. 73–4, 1. 10. 53 (perhaps imitated by Propertius here 2), Prop. 2. 19. 5, Ovid Am. 2. 19. 39, Ars 3. 71–2, Rem. Am. 31. What Propertius will do instead is write vitriolic poetry on her doors, as komasts often do when they realise their entreaties are fruitless 3: cf. AP 5. 191. 5–6 (Meleager), [Theoc.] 23. 45–81; cf. also the variations AP 12. 23 (Meleager) and Calpurnius Siculus 3. 90–1. Propertius’ inscription will begin with praise of Cynthia’s beauty, as lovers’ graffiti usually did (cf. AP 12. 130 [Anon], 12. 129 [Aratus], Lucian Amores 16, Callim fr. 73, Aristoph. Ach 144), but it will have a sting in its tail, a denunciation of her treachery which all passers-by will be able to read. In this Propertius follows the Roman tradition in which such inscriptions on the door contained an indictment (often obscene) of the girl’s scandalous behaviour, to be read by passers-by; cf. Prop. 1. 16. 10, Plautus Merc. 409 and the variation Catullus 67. 1ff. 4. Hence Cynthia’s pallor, occasioned by her feelings of guilt when her scandalous behaviour is known to all 5, Propertius does not feel obliged to state baldly

1) The real reason for his refusal to inflict physical punishment on her, however, we can see in 23–4: he would not dare do it! Propertius’ readers are well aware from Book I (and especially 1.3) of the character of the woman involved.

2) See F. Solmsen “Propertius in his literary relations with Tibullus and Virgil” Philologus 105 (1961) 274.

3) For a rather different interpretation (but one which recognises that Propertius’ poetry is an inscription for Cynthia’s door or wall) see Erich Burck “Sextus Propertius: Elegie II 5” Antike Lyrik ed. W. Eisenhut (Darmstadt 1970) 444ff. Burck sees line 28 as a diffamatio.

4) See F. O. Copley “The Suicide-Paraclausithyron” TAPA 71 (1940) 61, note 27.

5) For pallor arising from a guilty conscience, cf. Ovid Met. 8.465, Trist 3.9.18, Hor. Epist 1.1.61 etc. I wonder if one might see the line Cynthia forma potens, Cynthia verba levis not as the actual inscription, but as
that the inscription is for Cynthia’s door: his readers would be well aware
of the nature of such verses and would realise from 21 ff. that he is referring
to komastic activity. Similarly, in the Amores, Ovid makes Elegia say of
herself vel quotiens foribus duris incisa pependi non verita a populo praeterente legi
(Am. 3. 1. 53–4) 6), and the reader is aware that the grounds for the fear
(which Elegy might be expected to feel but in fact does not) are that the
elegiac complements are of this scurrilous nature.

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the substance of Propertius’ scurrilous inscription. This might better
explain why a woman whose nequitia is already known citywide (1)
would blanche at it and why her reputation would be stained for ever (27) – Propertius
would go into details.

6) The reading incisa has been impugned by G. P. Goold (HSCP 69
[1965] 45 f.). See, however, W. Stroh Die Römische Elegie als Werbende Dich-
tung (Amsterdam 1971) 188 note 52.