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Cynthia and Propertius, Haemon and Antigone: Prop. 2. 8, 21–24

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The piece deals with the interpretation of Prop. 2. 8. 21–24. These verses seem to be problematic and illogical over the years. In the poem, the speaker, deserted by his beloved Cynthia, imagines himself dead and then describes the heroine's reaction to this disastrous event. Propertius thinks that she will be happy about his death and defile his grave. Then he suddenly turns to Haemon, who commits suicide in despair of the Antigone's death, and after that threatens Cynthia to kill her. Firstly, it is incorrect to compare the righteous Antigone with the unfaithful Cynthia. Secondly, the decision to kill the beloved is inept. Some scholars transpose the verses in order to avoid the incoherence. Others try to interpret the passage, leaving the lines in their initial order, but they usually think that Propertius compares himself with Haemon and Cynthia with Antigone. The author of the article reconsiders gender roles in this comparison and suggests a new interpretation. There are also some examples from the Catullan and Propertian poetry, which show that the gender-inverted comparisons are widely used in ancient literature and especially in Roman love poetry of the 1st century B. C., in which they, probably, are part of a new literary strategy.

Keywords: imaginary death, Roman love poetry, Cynthia, Haemon, Antigone, gender-inverted comparison.

One of the most important motifs in the Propertian poetry is the motif of the speaker's imaginary death.¹ When Cynthia is unfaithful or cold to him, he imagines how he will die because of her betrayal and describes her subsequent reaction. It is necessary for Propertius to draw Cynthia's attention and see that she regrets her betrayal.

¹ There are some different versions why this motif appears in the Propertian poetry. For example, J.-P. Boucher describes the historical background of it. Namely, he writes about the Roman sense of death which is connected with the precarious life in the 1st century B. C. (Boucher 1965, 71–74). J. P. Postgate tends to explain the Propertian allusions to death by the poet's personality and health (Postgate 1884, XXXV–XXXVI). T. D. Papanghelis considers the Propertian *Todesphantasie* “against the Hellenistic literary background” and reckons that Propertius is “another Hellenistic poet at Rome” (Papanghelis 1987, 201).

In 2. 8 the speaker who was deserted by his beloved pictures his death and expresses indignation that Cynthia will be glad to learn about his end and defile his grave. Then the poet abruptly turns to the myth of Haemon who committed suicide over the tomb of Antigone and after that Propertius intends to kill Cynthia.

*sic igitur prima moriere aetate, Properti?
sed morere; interitu gaudeat illa tuo!
exagitet nostros Manis, sectetur et umbras,
insultetque rogis, calcet et ossa mea!
quid? non Antigona tumulo Boeotius Haemon
corruit ipse suo saucius ense latus,
et sua cum miserae permiscuit ossa puellae,
qua sine Thebanam noluit ire domum?
sed non effugies: mecum moriaris oportet;
hoc eodem ferro stillet uterque cruor.
quamvis ista mihi mors est inhonesta futura:
mors inhonesta quidem, tu moriere tamen (Prop. 2. 8. 17–28).*

“Well, Propertius, is this then how you will die, so young? Die then; let her gloat over your demise. Let her harass my ghost and persecute my shade, let her outrage my pyre and trample on my bones! Say, did not Boeotian Haemon perish at Antigone’s tomb, stabbed in the side by his own sword, and did he not mix his bones with the unhappy girl’s, since without her he would not enter his Theban home? Still, you will not escape: you must die with me; let the blood of both drip from this same sword. Your death will be passing shameful for me: a shameful death indeed, but even so you will die” (transl. G. P. Goold).

Lines 21–24 seem to have been very difficult to interpret over the years, because the comparison of the unfaithful Cynthia to the righteous Antigone is simply incorrect and the poet’s moving from the mythological example to the imaginary murder of the beloved is illogical. H. E. Butler and E. A. Barber write in their 1933 edition: “11–28 are amazingly incoherent. The illustration with which he justifies his proposed suicide (21–24) is peculiarly inept. Antigone was no faithless mistress; in all forms of the legend it is in grief for her death that Haemon slew himself. The inappropriateness is intensified by the lines which follow (25–8), in which the poet threatens to murder Cynthia”²

Scholars have tried to solve this problem in different ways. Many transpositions have been suggested since J. Scaliger.³ For example, C. Lachmann divides the poem into two parts: according to him, the new part begins with “sic igitur prima moriere aetate, Properti?”⁴ C. Murgia also thinks that 2. 8 should be halved. From his point of view, a new poem (8b) consists of lines 11–28.⁵ Whereas S. J. Heyworth argues with C. Murgia that 17–28 is a continuation of 11–16. Moreover, he assumes that there is a lacuna between lines 10 and 17.⁶ H. E. Butler supports the idea of Housman: “Lines 21–24 cannot belong to their present context; the simile is too irrelevant. Housman would place them after XXVIII. 40, perhaps rightly”⁷ On the other hand, some researchers try to explain the *exemplum*, leaving these

² Butler, Barber 1933, 204.

³ Scaliger 1577, 188–190.

⁴ Lachmann 1816, 150–151.

⁵ Murgia 2000, 223.

⁶ Heyworth 2007, 144–146.

⁷ Butler 1929, 84; Housman 1972, 34.

verses in their initial order. For instance, W. A. Camps finds no mistake in this comparison and thinks that “the speaker’s thoughts are rendered incoherent by emotion”⁸. According to P. J. Enk, Propertius does not compare Antigone with Cynthia but he only compares himself with Haemon.⁹ However, if this is correct, the conclusion of this simile should be “I will kill myself” instead of “I will kill her”. P. Fedeli thinks that Propertius changes the myth in the manner of a love elegy: “Per parte mia, credo piuttosto che ci si trovi in presenza di un’ennesima lettura del mito in chiave elegiaca, secondo un procedimento non raro in Propertio”.¹⁰

In contrast with the scholars mentioned above, T. A. Suits develops an intricate hypothesis in order to explain this passage: describing the scene with Cynthia at his grave, Propertius turns to the story of Antigone burying Polynices; however, instead of drawing a comparison between the heroines which would dramatize Cynthia’s sacrilege (we can see something like that in 2. 9), Propertius, being distracted, remembers another episode of the myth of Antigone — her love story with Haemon. For the reason that Creon’s son commits suicide, feeling deep sorrow at the death of his beloved, Propertius should behave in the same way. Then why should Cynthia die after the speaker? T. A. Suits explains this by the word *oportet*: “all, if we are to be like Antigone and Haemon, it is proper that you die with me.”¹¹ He thus divides Propertian thought into 3 parts: firstly, the poet thinks about Antigone, imagining the interment of Polynices (which seems impossible to prove because there is no information about this in the text), then he remembers Haemon and compares himself only with the mythological character, and after that he moves again to Antigone in order to justify Cynthia’s death. This hypothesis seems to be very complicated and entangled. Moreover, we find the line of argumentation hopeless;¹² in our opinion, interpreters should reconstruct not the capricious poet’s associations (we will never know anything about them anyway), but those logical operations, according to Propertian idea, the reader should perform in order to understand the poem.

The comparison seems to be even more inappropriate when we consider the tragedy of Sophocles, where Antigone commits suicide and Haemon, bemoaning her, kills himself with a sword. However, there are several other versions of the story. The Euripides’ tragedy has a happy end: Antigone stays alive and becomes the wife of Haemon.¹³ Of course, this plot is inept in our situation. There is one more version of the myth that is described by Hyginus (fab. 72). Creon requires of his son to murder Antigone but Haemon conceals her and tells his father that he complied with his request. When the king of Thebes discovers the secret, the main character kills himself and his beloved (“Haemon se et Antigonam coniugem interfecit”). It is hard to verify on which sources the story of Hyginus is based, but it is definitely not the Euripides’ play. Moreover, it cannot be the tragedy of Accius because he mostly imitates the Sophocles’ version.¹⁴ There was also an *Antigone* of Astydamas but we know only the title of it (60F 1e TrGF).

T. D. Papanghelis considers different versions of the myth in order to explain the Propertian passage and he also outlines the hypothesis of W. M. Calder III, who supposes

⁸ Camps 1967, 102.

⁹ Enk 1956, 184.

¹⁰ Fedeli 2005, 258.

¹¹ Suits 1965, 432.

¹² Suits himself admits that it is “hard to parallel in the rest of corpus” (432).

¹³ Kannicht 2004, 261.

¹⁴ Dangel 1995, 362.

reference to the version of Hyginus in the Sophoclean play.¹⁵ The scholar presumes that the playwright introduces it as a rudimentary motif and adds this deliberate ambiguity to the play.¹⁶ Creon, running into Haemon near the body of Antigone, says:

ὦ τλήμον, οἷον ἔργον εἴργασαι: τίνα
νοῦν ἔσχες; ἐν τῷ συμφορᾶς διεφθάρης (Soph. Ant.1228–1229);

“My son! my son! O why? What have you done? What brought you here? What is this madness?” (transl. H. D. F. Kitto).

W. M. Calder III claims that Creon’s question does not mean that he is surprised that Haemon appears at the Antigone’ tomb but the father has in mind that Haemon killed his beloved (“...Kreon fears the boy deranged. This is plausible if he believes that Haimon has murdered his betrothed, but is nonsense otherwise”¹⁷). According to this interpretation, we can easily explain why Propertius wants to kill Cynthia first and then to commit suicide. However, it is impossible to imagine Haemon that hangs Antigone. W. M. Calder III gives the parallel of hanging women in *Odyssey* 22.465–467,¹⁸ but this example shows mass execution of slaves, not a murder which is motivated by strong anger towards a beloved one. It is more “habitual” to kill an unfaithful beloved with a sword; and Propertius describes this kind of love killing.

Furthermore, T. D. Papanghelis thinks that there was one other dramatist who used the Hyginus’ plot in his own play or “simply exploited different possibilities of an already diversified myth”.¹⁹ M. Rothstein develops the similar idea: “Properz folgte also wohl einer späteren Dichtung, in der Züge aus verschiedenen Dramen miteinander verschmolzen waren, und in der der erotische Inhalt der Sage schon die sentimentale Färbung erhalten hatte, die der eigenen Art des Properz entsprach”.²⁰ All in all, there is nothing about murdering the heroine by Haemon in the plays of the two of the most popular playwrights — Sophocles and Euripides; if Propertius wanted to imply an exotic version of the myth, he would do it in more detail. So, in this article I will consider the familiar interpretation of the myth, namely the Sophoclean play without any ambiguity; and I offer another solution to this interpretation problem.

To this end, I would like to step away from the previously accepted paths of explanation; I suggest that Propertius compares himself not with Haemon but with Antigone and Cynthia is compared with Haemon. Therefore, the speaker, who is sick of unrequited love, unfairly dies like the mythological heroine, who has to commit suicide. The example of Haemon shows how Cynthia should react in this situation: she should yearn for her beloved and then kill herself. However, Propertius thinks that she, on the contrary, will be glad to learn about his death, defile his grave and trample over his bones, so he cries: “quid?” and holds Haemon for an example. If she is not ready to conform to the mythological character’s behavior, the speaker will murder Cynthia himself in spite of the fact that this is a dishonorable action. Anyway, she will share Haemon’s fate (“sed non effigies: mecum moriaris oportet”).

Although many researchers tend to interpret the myth in a traditional way (Haemon is compared with Propertius and Antigone with Cynthia), there are some scholars who pro-

¹⁵ Papanghelis 1987, 121.

¹⁶ Calder 1960, 31–35

¹⁷ Calder 1960, 33.

¹⁸ Calder 1960, 34

¹⁹ Papanghelis 1987, 121.

²⁰ Rothstein 1898, 194.

ceed from the point of view that it is a gender-inverted comparison but they do not word it distinctly enough. For example, G. Lieberg, describing different Propertian comparisons of Cynthia with mythological women, writes about one parallel where the contrast between the mythological character and Cynthia is especially sharp: “Haimon starb durch Selbstmord am Grabe Antigone, da er ohne sie nicht weiterzuleben vermochte. Cynthia soll nun auch mit dem Dichter zusammen sterben, aber nicht aus übermächtiger Liebe wie der Heros, sondern umgekehrt deswegen, weil sie immer zu wenig oder gar nicht geliebt hat”.²¹ He claims that this mythological example emphasizes the contrast between Cynthia’s infidelity and Haemon’s fidelity. Furthermore, C. Murgia iterates the same idea: “If the lines are genuine in this position, they provide an exemplum not so much for P’s suicide as for C, whose supposed indifference to P’s death is contrasted with the proper behavior of Haemon; this thought, that if C really loved him she would commit suicide on his tomb, then would lead to the resolve to force the issue by the sword”.²² But he does not develop this idea and leaves “it to the reader to make up his/her own mind”.²³ Surprisingly enough, one finds the example of this interpretation in the Russian translation made by A. I. Lubzhin:

“Что с того? разве Беотиец Гемон не упал у могилы
своей Антигоны, поразив себя в бок мечом,
и не смешал свой прах с прахом несчастной девы,
без которой не пожелал вернуться в отчие Фивы?
И тебе не избежать его участи: придется умереть вместе со мной,
а нашей крови — стекать с лезвия одного клинка”.²⁴

A. I. Lubzhin translates “sed non effugies” as “you will not avoid his fate”. It means that Cynthia is compared with Haemon, as well as it is supposed in our version.

To support this point, I would like to adduce some further examples from Roman literature. It is worth noting that the gender-inverted comparisons of this kind had a special place in the Roman love poetry of the 1st century B. C. As K. S. Myers has shown,²⁵ there are a lot of them in Catullus’ poems. The first Catullan example is 2b. I will not look into the controversial and complicated problem whether it belongs to the whole 2nd poem about *passer* or not, because it is not important for the topic. It is plausible that the speaker of these 3 lines is the poet who draws an analogy between his delight and the delight of Atalanta who became the wife of Hippomenes because of his trick with golden apples.

*Tam gratum est mihi quam ferunt puellae
pernici aureolum fuisse malum,
quod zonam soluit diu ligatam* (Catull. IIb).

“This is as welcome to me as to the swift maiden was (they say) the golden apple, which loosed her girle too long tied” (transl. F. W. Cornish).

There is also a comparison with woman in *Catull.* 65. Catullus says that he did not forget about the Hortalus’ request to translate and send him the verses of Callimachus,

²¹ Lieberg 1969, 330.

²² Murgia 2000, 226.

²³ Murgia 2000, 227.

²⁴ Любжин А. И. (пер. и прим.) Секст Проперций. Элегии в четырех книгах. Москва, Греко-латинский кабинет Ю. А. Шичалина, 2004, 67.

²⁵ Myers 2021, 78–81.

he did not let this request “fall” like a girl’s apple, a present from her beloved, accidentally dropped in front of her mother (lines 15–24).

In poem 68 Catullus says that he will forgive his beloved for her intrigues and compares himself with Juno who often endures Juppiter’s infidelity:

*quae tamenetsi uno non est contenta Catullo,
rara verecundae furta feremus erae,
ne nimium simus stultorum more molesti:
saepe etiam Iuno, maxima caelicolum,
coniugis in culpa flagrantem concoquit iram
noscens omnivoli plurima furta Iovis (Catul. LXVIII, 135–140).*

“And though she is not content with Catullus alone, I will bear the faults, for few they are, of my modest mistress, lest we become as tiresome as jealous fools. Juno, too, greatest of the heavenly ones, often keeps down her anger for her husband’s fault, as she learns the many loves of all-amorous Jove” (transl. F. W. Cornish).

Certainly, Juno was not so tolerant. Catullus makes this apology ironically,²⁶ or just “bends the myth to serve his purpose”.²⁷ Anyway, this example also shows that a speaker in ancient poetry can compare not only himself with a woman, but also his beloved with a man, because, as we can see, Lesbia is likened to Juppiter. Moreover, this passage illustrates that the inversion of gender roles is a very pretentious technique in Roman love poetry of the 1st century B. C. and it is connected with a new system of values towards sexes. By drawing this analogy, which would seem outrageous to Catullus’ contemporaries, he demonstrates a very radical thought that male and female infidelities are equal.

2. 8 is not the only case of gender-inverted comparison in the Propertian poetry. Another example is in the poem 2. 14, which begins with a priamel: the poet, describing his pleasure from the night with Cynthia, compares it with delight of other male and female mythological characters:

*non ita Dardanio gavisus Atrida triumpho est,
cum caderent magnae Laomedontis opes;
nec sic errore exacto laetatus Vlixes,
cum tetigit carae litora Dulichiae;
nec sic Electra, salvum cum aspexit Oresten,
cuius falsa tenens fleverat ossa soror;
nec sic incolumem Minois Thesea vidit,
Daedalium lino cum duce rexit iter;
quanta ego praeterita collegi gaudia nocte:
immortalis ero, si altera talis erit (Prop. 2. 14. 1. 10).*

“Non thus did you rejoice, son of Atreus, in your triumph over Troy, when the mighty power of Laomedon collapsed in ruin; nor so jubilant was Ulysses when, his wanderings over, he reached the shore of his beloved Ithaca; nor so Electra, when she beheld Orestes safe, having wept a sister’s grief as she held his supposed ashes; nor so Minos’ daughter, when she

²⁶ Quinn 1970, 393

²⁷ Thomson 1997, 486.

saw Theseus unharmed, for whom, with thread for pilot, she had steered a course through Daedalus' maze: all their joys were as nothing to those I garnered this past night: come such another, and I shall be immortal" (transl. G. P. Goold).

Propertian "gaudia" exceed the delight of Agamemnon, Odyssey, Electra and Ariadne. Two last examples with female characters are connected with love-feeling (sororal and romantic love). The episode of Minois is the closest to Propertian story, so it is placed at the end as an acme.

In conclusion, I would like to stress that if we consider Propertius as Antigone and Cynthia as Haemon, we will solve two problems. Firstly, we do not have to explain why the poet compares the righteous Antigone to the unfaithful Cynthia. Secondly, we understand why the speaker wants to kill his beloved: the imaginary picture of true love does not correspond to the real actions of Cynthia, so he has no choice. Moreover, a gender-inverted analogy is entirely appropriate here, because it is part of a new literary strategy employed by Roman love poets of the 1st century B. C.

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Статья посвящена интерпретации сложного места в стихотворении 2, 8 Проперция. Ход мыслей лирического героя в строках 21–24 уже много лет считается нелогичным и трудным для толкования. В стихотворении Проперций, покинутый своей возлюбленной Кинфией, воображает собственную смерть и описывает, как, по его мнению, девушка отреагирует на его гибель. Лирический герой думает, что она, вместо того, чтобы горевать, возрадуется, узнав о его смерти, и осквернит его могилу. После этого он внезапно вспоминает о Гемоне, который покончил жизнь самоубийством из-за гибели Антигоны, и далее угрожает убить свою возлюбленную. Однако сравнение неверной Кинфии с добродетельной Антигоной выглядит неуместным, а переход от мифологического примера к воображаемому убийству девушки — нелогичным. Некоторые исследователи находят выход в перестановке этих строк. Другие же стараются объяснить сравнение, сохраняя стихи в изначальном порядке, но, как правило, они считают, что Проперций сравнивает себя с Гемоном, а Кинфию — с Антигоной. Автор статьи переосмысливает гендерные роли в приведенном сравнении и предлагает другую интерпретацию этого места. В статье также приводятся несколько примеров из поэзии Катулла и Проперция, которые показывают, что гендерная инверсия в развернутых сравнениях не является чем-то новым для античной литературы, и, кроме того, такого рода сравнения хорошо вписываются в рамки той новаторской литературной стратегии, которую демонстрируют римские любовные поэты I в. до н. э.

Ключевые слова: воображаемая смерть, римская любовная поэзия, Кинфия, Гемон, Антигона, гендерно-инвертированные сравнения.

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