



## The Poems

*Propertius*, Guy Lee (translator)

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Of all the great classical love poets, Propertius, alive around 50-10 BCE, is surely one of those with most immediate appeal for readers today. His helpless infatuation for the sinister figure of his mistress Cynthia forms the main subject of his poetry and is analyzed with a tormented but witty grandeur in all its changing moods, from ecstasy to suicidal despair.

### **The Poems Details**

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## From Reader Review The Poems for online ebook

### David says

Poetic

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### Roman Clodia says

Following Catullus' Lesbia poems, Propertius is the first of the Latin erotic elegists proper and has a deep influence on Ovid. Guy Lee's translation is fluent and flowing but doesn't really convey the texture of the Latin originals.

The Cynthia poems which sit at the heart of the Propertian texts go on to have a profound impact on the dynamics of erotic love as represented in western literature so it is definitely worth reading this first to see how literary erotic love develops under Petrarch, Wyatt, Sidney etc.

In lots of ways Propertius gets squeezed out between the rawness of Catullus and the mocking self-knowingness of Ovid but he plays an important role in the erotic love tradition. And the poems themselves are vibrant and often very wittily clever.

If you have even a little Latin then the Loeb is probably a better buy, but if you don't then this is a fine alternative.

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### charlotte says

Propertius is ridiculously hard to capture in English, but Katz does a darn good job, and hey, he gives the Latin, too! Some folks like the intensely personal portrait of an emotional young man in love with a high-maintenance woman. Great stuff. I like the anti-Augustan, anti-militarism undertones. If you want to know where the medieval court poets got all that stuff about the lover's abasement to his lady, this is a good place to start. The tradition of the servile lover just never gets old, nor do emphatic statements about living an unconventional life and being happy, dammit!

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### Jenna says

I'll be honest: I only read the first two volumes of this book in their entirety, then skimmed the last two volumes. My current interest is in love poetry, not poetry about the greatness of Caesar, etc., after all. While it seems that this is the most scholarly/well-researched translation out there, I was rather disappointed by the fact that it doesn't read like poetry at all. This translation is a prose translation -- a fact that needn't necessarily have been a limitation (there *is* such a thing as prose poetry, after all) except that it was. Despite the wide gulf between Latin original and English translation, some of these poems still shine -- particularly the narrative poems, the poems that vividly recount neurotic dreams, and the hilariously chest-thumping poems that proclaim "One girl is not enough" ("The worship of Venus has never been hard work for me... Often a girl has discovered that I can do my duty all night through, and if perchance with an unkind look she called a halt, cold sweat would run down my brow."). Propertius's technically skilled compositions

(Just imagine writing a long, colloquial-sounding poem entirely in end-stopped couplets, for starters!) convey ideas about romantic love that have become so entrenched in Western culture that they seem a bit trite now -- through no fault of Propertius's own, of course. Arguably, the mythological allusions come on a bit too heavy at times (even for a mythology buff like me), but I still think Propertius is a poet worth being familiar with. In the future, I'll stick to looser but more lyrical translations, though.

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### **Vikram Kumar says**

These poems are absolutely brilliant. Occasionally the editor makes some rather polemic changes, such as capitalizing certain words that should not be personified. Some sentences are also put in different places. Nevertheless, the true magic is in the poems of Propertius, which take one upon a journey of musings and imagination.

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### **Cynthia says**

Probably only deserves 3 stars as it's not as amazing as Ovid, but he writes all of his love poems to Cynthia. Extra star for having a mistress with such a cool name.

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### **A. J. McMahon says**

I just could not get anything at all from any of the poems. It might be that everything was entirely lost in translation, or it might be that I lack the cultural mind-set to respond to a communication from Ancient Rome. Tedious from beginning to end, for me at any rate.

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### **Caroline says**

Translations are very stilted in the first book, which is reputedly the freshest and most revolutionary of the poetry that Propertius wrote. They become smoother and easier to read in the following books.

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### **James Violand says**

A delightful read, though how much is owed to the translator's talent is a valid question. Still, the world of Ancient Rome becomes current with the same struggles we all deal with in some way. Even though the elegies are profane, they are enjoyable and Propertius's humor and curse of loving a courtesan is entertaining.

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### **James Miller says**

As with all books of poetry there will be high and low points in here. Propertius' poetry is less abusive than Catullus (his predecessor), less (at least ostensibly) lauding of Augustus than Virgil, less hilarious than bits

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of Ovid, but has moments of genius all of its own.

Cynthia's visit from beyond the grave was a favourite as was her rage on discovering some sexual shenanigans. I also enjoyed the warnings on the dangers of love:

Don't be deceived because she's willing, Ponticus;  
When a girl's yours her sting goes deeper.  
Your eyes once caught, Love won't allow you to withdraw them  
Or lie awake for someone else's sake.  
He does not show until his hand touches the bone.  
Run, whoever you are, from his temptations.  
Stocks and stones are powerless to resist them,  
Much less your poor lightweight soul.  
So for goodness sake confess your error now. In love  
It's often a relief to name one's ruin.

OR

Shun the desire to fight with a moody girl,  
And proud speech, and long silence.  
Do not, when she wants a thing, refuse ungraciously,  
Nor let her kind words fall unheeded.  
She comes, when slighted, in bad temper, and when wronged  
Forgets to drop her rightful threats.  
But the more humble you are and deferential to love,  
The oftener you'll enjoy success.  
He who forgoes freedom and the uncommitted heart  
Can find abiding bliss with one girl

There is a cheerful humour in this mock advice.

The piece upon death too has some fabulous lines reflected many times in poetry since:

Cease, Paullus, to importune my tomb with tears.  
The black door opens to no prayers.  
When once the dead have entered infernal jurisdiction  
The roads are blocked by inexorable adamant.

And whilst I have never been the spouse left behind by a husband at war, I suspect that the sentiments there are eternal too (IV.iii).

I was not as impressed by the aetiological Callimachus material of book IV explaining the names of altars/Cattle markets etc., but the ancients clearly enjoyed this stuff and it is there in Virgil too.

The translation was pretty good - on those occasions I looked at the Latin (where I am by no means brilliant) it seemed pretty close - and it reads very well as the excerpts above suggest.

## Evan Leach says

*"I wish my enemy a placid girl-friend." (iii. 8. 20)*

Luckily (from the poet's perspective), Propertius was not cursed with a placid girlfriend. Instead, he fell for a woman named Cynthia who drove him so crazy that he devoted most of his poetry towards memorializing their schizophrenic relationship.

Unlike Horace and Virgil, Propertius focused his efforts on love poems in the style of Catullus. This book contains all of 92 of them, divided into four books published from roughly 29 to 15 b.c. All of the poems are written using the elegiac couplet. The first three books are squarely focused on Propertius' relationship with his lover, Cynthia. Their affair is presented immediately as a stormy and torturous relationship, and veers wildly between emotional extremes. The fourth book, written after Cynthia's death, shifts focus from love poems to aetiological poetry (poems explaining the meaning of names) in the manner of Callimachus.

Propertius doesn't quite reach the heights set by Horace, Ovid, and Virgil, but his work is very good and comparable with the poems of Catullus. Propertius has a way of blending the epic and mythical into his love poetry, while remaining self-aware enough that it never feels heavy-handed. However, it never becomes *so* self-aware as to seem cynical. Book I is probably the strongest of the four (i. 8a is probably my favorite of all the poems), but there are standouts throughout the collection (including ii. 1, iii. 5, and iv. 11).

Ultimately, this isn't a must-read collection, in the sense that Propertius is probably the fourth-most important Augustan poet (after Virgil, Ovid, and Horace in some order). But he's not terribly far behind, and fans of the other Augustan poets will find this collection quite enjoyable. **3.5 stars.**

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## Janet Martinez says

very nice&concise translation but-still prefer my loeb propertius but-i think only because-it's the one i was originally exposed to when i took latin in high school

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## Yann says

Toujours dans la veine des poètes latins, après un Catulle tout à la fois impétueux et tendre, après un Tibulle irénique et volage, voici Propertius, passionnément fidèle et attaché à sa Cynthia, et terriblement voluptueux. C'est sans doute de ces trois auteurs le plus vivant, le plus touchant et celui qui donne le plus de présence à cette antiquité disparue. Propertius célèbre les délices de l'amour, et rien de ce qui peut le rendre plus piquant ne semble lui être étranger.

Il y a tout d'abord une fidélité à toute épreuve, que rien ne vient entamer. Il est clair que pour lui, tout papillonnage lui enlèverait tout le plaisir qu'il sent à se consacrer tout entier à son idole. Mais il lui faut encore sentir les marques de cet attachement passionné qu'il souhaite inspirer en retour, et rien n'y parvient mieux que ces fureurs impétueuses, que ces reproches amères, que ces querelles impatientes et ravageuses que font naître l'inquiétude de la jalousie. Tout ce qui sent la passion le ravit, et pour rien au monde on sent qu'il ne voudrait d'une maîtresse froide et raisonnable. Ses rigueurs sont pour notre amant autant de délices,

et lui même ne laisse pas de piquer son amour à l'aiguillon de la jalousie, afin qu'il ne s'affadisse pas.

La production de Properce est abondante. A côté de scènes de vie émouvantes, il mobilise une vaste érudition dans ses comparaisons. Un appareil critique riche permet de suivre le fil de l'ensemble de ses allusions. Comme Tibulle, il considère que l'amour vaut mieux que la guerre, même s'il insiste moins. Un point intéressant et qui m'a fait penser à L'émancipation féminine dans la Rome antique, c'est l'évocation des religion orientales à mystère qui arrivent à Rome. Le frétilant Properce semble peu goûter l'engouement de sa Cynthia pour ces nouveautés qui le privent de privautés dont il est fort impatient:

*Pour ma tristesse, voici déjà revenues à nouveau les solennités: Cynthia a déjà officié pendant dix nuits. Et qu'elles périssent ces cérémonies que la fille d'Inachus, depuis les tièdes rivages du Nil, a envoyé aux matrones ausoniennes! Quelle est cette déesse qui a tant de fois séparé des amants aussi épris? Quelle qu'elle eût été, ce fut toujours une déesse amère. [...] N'est-ce pas assez pour toi de l'Égypte aux enfants basanés? Pourquoi avoir fait une si longue route pour atteindre Rome? A quoi te sert-il que les jeunes femmes dorment seules? Mais toi, crois-moi, tu auras de nouveau des cornes ou bien, nous, cruelle, nous te chasserons de notre ville; il n'y a jamais eu de bonnes grâces entre le Tibre et le Nil.*

Mais il semble que son amour l'ai rendu sensible au mysticisme, et lorsque sa maîtresse périt, il croit voir son fantôme venir se pencher sur son lit pour lui faire une dernière fois des reproches affectueux. Il termine par une évocation de sa propre disparition. En somme, un livre de poésies à cœur ouvert pour plonger dans l'intimité de la vie de ces romains.

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