

CYNTHIA'S BIRTHDAY ACROSTIC (3.10.1–5): PROPERTIUS ON ELEGIAC TIME AND ETERNITY*

ABSTRACT

This article argues that an intentional acrostic spanning the first five lines of Propertius' elegy for Cynthia's birthday (3.10), **MANE[T]**, contributes significantly to the poignancy and purpose of the poem. **MANE** can be read as *māne*, 'in the morning', or *manē*, 'stay!', both of which emphasize the fleeting nature of dawn—and of Cynthia's youthful beauty. **MANET** can suggest both '[art] remains' and '[death] awaits'. All four of these meanings work together to capture the tension between human transience and artistic immortality. The theme is further enhanced by a balancing reverse *telestich* at the poem's end, **ROSA RVES** ('[a] rose, you will fall to ruin').

Keywords: acrostic(s); *telestich*(s); rose(s); Muses; dawn; immortality; beauty; art

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
— Shakespeare, Sonnet 116

In a culture that prizes youthful beauty (does any culture not?), adult birthdays may be an occasion for mourning more than for celebration. For the 'written women' of elegy, imaginary creatures whose sole *raison d'être* is their sexual attractiveness, the birthday can hardly be anything other than a death knell.¹ Propertius' poem for Cynthia's birthday highlights this irony: on a day that marks the fatal passage of time, he exhorts her to pray for 'everlasting beauty', *forma perennis* (3.10.17), even while recognizing that this kind of durability—as Catullus (1.10) and Horace (*Carm.* 3.30.1) famously remind us—is possible only for a written artefact. In the worldview of the pre-Christian poet, it is Art, not Love, that will survive after Time's bending sickle has harvested the roses from lips and cheeks. I suggest that the acrostic at the poem's beginning and the reverse *telestich* at its end, part of a vertical conversation among Greek and Latin poets that stretches all the way back to Homer, ingeniously capture this tension between human transience and artistic immortality.² Even as the poem

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¹ On the mistresses of elegy as *scriptae puellae*, the classic treatment is M. Wyke, *The Roman Mistress: Ancient and Modern Representations* (Oxford, 2002).

² See J.D. Hejduk, 'Was Vergil reading the Bible? Original Sin and an astonishing acrostic in the *Orpheus and Eurydice*', *Vergilius* 64 (2018), 71–101, at 72–6 on 'Why a Belief in Acrostics Is Not Actually Insane'. For recent work in the burgeoning field of Acrostic Studies, see L. Kronenberg, 'Seeing the light, part I: Aratus's interpretation of Homer's *LEUKĒ* acrostic', *Dictynna* 15 (2018), available at <http://journals.openedition.org/dictynna/1535>; 'Seeing the light, part II: the reception of

performs the worship of Cynthia's divine essence (her *genius* or *iuno*), a rite associated with Roman birthdays,³ it reminds us of the incompatibility of *Cynthia* as written artefact with that of Cynthia as woman.

The acrostic and the telestich support previous scholarship on 3.10, which has emphasized the mannered artificiality of the poem's portrayal of Cynthia. Jonathan Wallis's insightful recent discussion, 'The Birth of *Cynthia*', highlights the transition from the *woman* who once mesmerized Propertius to the *book* with that woman as its main (but not only) attraction.⁴ For instance, whereas Cynthia's eyes captured the poet in 1.1, and he implored her to appear naked and unadorned in 1.2, he now exhorts her to wear the same dress she wore when she captured *his* eyes and to adorn her hair with flowers (3.10.15–16); the poem is also replete with vocabulary for writing (*finge*, 3.10.14) and publishing (*edita*, 3.10.11). Wallis's summary is especially apt:

In sum, the *mannered prompts* in 3.10 to *compare* the representation of Cynthia now with her appearance at the start of Book 1 ironically reveal a figure that has developed significantly over time. The Cynthia who began life as a (comparatively) realistic figure with fearful authority over Propertius has become in 3.10 a more outwardly *literary* creature, overtly subject to her poet's *artistic whim*. Besides the poet's new interest in the *poetic arrangement* of Cynthia's *superficial garb*, even the switch at 3.10.15 from her eyes to his has the effect of acknowledging Cynthia now as the *focus of the poet's gaze* rather than suggesting, as at 1.1.1, his submission to hers. (*emphasis added*)

Intertextuality, artistic arrangement, superficial adornment and visuality all point to a poem ripe for an acrostic.

When the Muses—not Cynthia!—burst upon the scene, they bring that visual adornment with them. Laughing Camenae stand before Propertius' bed at dawn, signalling that this will be an unusual day (3.10.1–6):⁵

Mirabar, quidnam risissent **mane** Camenae,
Ante meum **stantes sole** rubente torum.
 Natalis nostrae **signum** misere puellae
Et manibus faustos **ter crepuere** sonos.

Aratus's *LEPTĒ* acrostic in Greek and Latin literature', *Dictynna* 15 (2018), available at <http://journals.openedition.org/dictynna/1575>; and 'The light side of the moon: a Lucretian acrostic (*LUCE*, 5.712–15) and its relationship to acrostics in Homer (*LEUKĒ*, II. 24.1–5) and Aratus (*LEPTĒ*, *Phaen.* 783–87)', *CPh* 114 (2019), 278–92; M. Robinson, 'Arms and a mouse: approaching acrostics in Ovid and Vergil', *MD* 82 (2019), 23–73 and 'Looking edgewise: pursuing acrostics in Ovid and Vergil', *CQ* 69 (2019), 290–308; J.D. Hejduk, 'Sacrificial acrostics and the fall of great cities in Virgil and Lucan', *CJ* 115 (2020), 302–7 and 'Acrostic reflections on divine violence in the *Aeneid*', *Vergilius* 68 (2022), 31–55; J. Abad Del Vecchio, 'Literal bodies (*somata*): a telestich in Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 1.406–11)', *CQ* 71 (2021), 688–92; and K. Mitchell, 'Ovid's last letters on his exile—telestichs from Tomis: postcode or code?', *CCJ* 66 (2020), 144–64 and 'Acrostics and telestichs in Augustan poetry: Ovid's edgy and subversive sideswipes', *CCJ* 66 (2020), 165–81. In the latter article (at 169), Mitchell notes that Propertius' 'best [acrostic] effort ... may be the acrostic MANE in a poem specifically about a morning visit and with *mane* in the opening line', but he does not elaborate further.

³ On Roman birthday cult, see A. Kachuck, 'Births, rebirths, and Horace's *genius*: a study of *Odes* IV, 11', *ASDIWAL* 14 (2019), 127–43. He notes that Horace figures himself as 'high priest of the *genius* of Maecenas (which is as good as being the high priest of his own *genius*)' (143).

⁴ J. Wallis, *Introspection and Engagement in Propertius: A Study of Book 3* (Cambridge, 2019), 76–83, at 82.

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, texts are from G.P. Goold, *Propertius: Elegies* (Cambridge, MA, 1990) and translations are my own.

Transeat hic sine nube dies, stent aere uenti,
ponat et in sicco molliter unda minas.

I was wondering why the **Camenae** had laughed this **morning**,
standing before my bed as **the sun grew red**.
They sent forth a **sign** of the birthday of my girl
and clapped their **hands three times**, auspicious **sounds**.

Let this day **pass by** without clouds, the winds pause in the air,
And the wave lay its threats down softly on dry ground.

The acrostic starts out as *MANE*, either the adverb *māne*, ‘in the morning’, or the imperative *manē*, ‘stay!’: one of the advantages of vertical composition is that it allows the simultaneous existence of words that are visually identical but have different vowel quantities. Then, with the addition of the *T*, it metamorphoses into the indicative *manet*, ‘he/she/it remains’ or ‘awaits’. After sketching the many reasons for believing this acrostic to be intentional, I shall discuss how it adds to our understanding of the poem.

For those open to the possibility of intentional acrostics, these lines are positively screaming with cues and clues.⁶ First, they are the opening lines, arguably the most marked position of any poem, and thus a prime location for important word and letter play.⁷ Second, the phrase *sole rubente*, ‘as the sun was growing red’, both emphasizes the ‘morning’ aspect of *māne* and taps into a long acrostic conversation among

⁶ One must also, of course, be open to the possibility of acrostics in elegiac poetry, in which the pentameter lines—if indented on the page—would create a zigzagging left margin that might make the acrostic harder to spot. The little evidence we have about the *mise en page* of elegiac poetry in the Augustan period does not allow us to say with certainty whether Propertius would have indented his pentameters. Even if he did, however, detecting acrostics in that medium would hardly have presented an insurmountable challenge to sophisticated readers, as a ragged right margin did not prevent the detection of telestichs. For an example of ‘hidden’ skipped-line acrostics in the pentameter verses of Propertius’ contemporary, see L. Kronenberg, ‘Tibullus the elegiac *uates*: acrostics in Tibullus 2.5’, *Mnemosyne* 71 (2018), 508–14. Greek elegiac inscriptions provide useful comparanda. Their pentameter verses, which frequently begin with undeniably intentional acrostics (such as the name of the honorand), are sometimes indented but more often not. For a representative collection of Greek acrostic inscriptions—some of which have the acrostic written in a separate column—see V. Garulli, ‘Greek acrostic verse inscriptions’, in J. Kwapisz, D. Petrain and M. Szymański (edd.), *The Muse at Play: Riddles and Wordplay in Greek and Latin Poetry* (Berlin, 2013), 246–78. J. Lougovaya, ‘Indented pentameters in papyri and inscriptions’, *Actes du 26e congrès international de papyrologie, Genève, 16–21 août 2010* (Geneva, 2012), 437–41, at 441 notes that the device of indenting pentameters in inscriptions ‘perhaps was never employed in more than 10% to 15% of elegiac epigrams in the later Hellenistic and Imperial period’. The late Hellenistic ‘Atthis’ inscription presents a mixture of indentation and non-indentation in the same artefact: see J. Hanink, ‘The epitaph for Attis: a late Hellenistic poem on stone’, *JHS* 130 (2010), 15–34.

⁷ For instance, see C. Castelletti, ‘Following Aratus’ plow: Vergil’s signature in the *Aeneid*’, *MH* 69 (2012), 83–95 on Virgil’s boustrophedonic signature in *Aen.* 1.1–4. In inscriptions, acrostics usually begin with the first line (see n. 6 above). The beginnings of Propertius’ poems present only three other meaningful vertical sequences (that is, sequences that form Latin words or sentences) of four letters or more: *HISCE* (1.20), *I TVIS* or *IT VIS* (2.28), *SESE* (4.6). Of these, only the middle one seems relevant to the context. J. Hejduk, *The God of Rome: Jupiter in Augustan Poetry* (Oxford, 2020), 182–90 suggests that 2.28 plays with the idea that Cynthia is lovesick over an affair with Jupiter; *I TVIS*, ‘go to your own [people]’, could be addressed to either Cynthia or the god, and *IT VIS*, ‘violence/rape is coming’, has obvious resonance with Jupiter’s *modus operandi* with regard to attractive women. (For acrostic purposes, the letters *I* and *V* can be either consonantal or vocalic, regardless of their value in the horizontal text.) Whether any or none of these is intentional is irrelevant to my argument about *MANE[T]*, except to show that four to five letter acrostics in the opening lines of Propertius’ poems are unusual.

metapoetic passages involving the redness or whiteness of sunlight and moonlight.⁸ Third, the acrostic word itself, *mane*, appears in the very first line; I call this a 'Frisbee acrostic', because the phenomenon resembles a Frisbee (the horizontal word) sailing toward a goalpost or very thin person (the vertical word).⁹ To my knowledge, no other extant Latin poem from the Augustan period or earlier has a four-letter Frisbee in its first line. Fourth, *Camēnae* at the end of the line—the only appearance of this word in Propertius, though the 'Muses' show up more than a dozen times—contains the anagram *mena*, forming a jingle in the ending *mane Camēnae*. Fifth, both the second and the fourth lines begin with anagrams of *MANET*, *ante m-* and *et man-*. Sixth, *ante*, forming a second jingle with *stantes* to mean 'standing before', is a classic acrostic cue phrase: the letters literally 'stand before' the rest of the line, and this acrostic also 'stands before' the rest of the poem vertically. Seventh, when the laughing Muses send a *signum* ('sign' or 'letter of the alphabet') by thrice clapping their hands, *manibus*, part of their joke may be that the *man-* sound has just made its third appearance—twice horizontally and once vertically. Eighth, the *T* of *MANET*, 'it remains' or 'it awaits', leads into its exact antonym *transeat*, 'let it go by'.

Most importantly, however, every meaning of both *māne/manē* and *manet* is appropriate to the context, and the fourfold ambiguity greatly enhances the poignancy of the poem. Birthdays mark both the cyclical and the linear aspects of time. They occur because the sun has returned to its same position in the year, passing through the seasons, just as it returns to its same position each day, passing through the hours. Yet for living creatures this cyclicity is also teleological: one more birthday means one more step in our irreversible journey toward the permanent winter, the permanent night of death. Alone of Propertius' poems, 3.10 traces just such a journey—*iter*, the poem's last word—from daybreak to night. So when the poet tells his beloved to pray that her beauty will last forever, the very context of the poem turns that prayer into an *adynaton*. The physical beauty of a human being can never be eternal, and a birthday provides irrefutable proof of that fact.

The first acrostic, *MANE*, underscores this impossibility. Daybreak, *māne*, with the sun just reddening, is the mark of a beautiful new beginning, the youth and springtime of life. But its salient characteristic is that it passes quickly. Propertius may tell this beauty to 'stay', *manē*, but that exhortation addressed to an actual woman has as little effect as telling the sun not to rise. As Robert Frost succinctly reminds us, 'So dawn goes down to day, / nothing gold can stay': the inexorable transience of time underpins every aubade. Only in Art can rosy-fingered Dawn, like the flowers crowning Cynthia's head (3.10.16), never lose her bloom.¹⁰

Another impermanent rose reinforces this melancholy message in a balancing reverse telestich at the poem's end. Propertius deftly employs what Richard Wilbur's 'A Late Aubade' dubs 'the rosebuds theme of centuries of verse'—that is, 'enjoy love and

⁸ See the three articles by Kronenberg (n. 2). Prominent in this acrostic conversation, which appears ultimately to stem from Homer's ΑΕΥΚΗ (*Il.* 21.1–5), are Aratus' ΑΕΙΠΘ (*Phaen.* 783–7), Lucretius' LVCE (5.714–17), Virgil's skipped-line *Ma-Ve-Pu* (*G.* 1.429–33) and Ovid's CANES (*Met.* 15.194–8).

⁹ Other readers (such as the very helpful anonymous reader of this piece) may prefer a term less American and more classical, such as 'discus acrostic'. *De gustibus non disputandum*.

¹⁰ S.J. Heyworth and J.H.W. Morwood, *A Commentary on Propertius Book 3* (Oxford, 2011), 198: 'the backdrop is a Homeric rosy-fingered dawn, which together with the Muses sets up epic expectations that are revisited but repeatedly disappointed in this, the poem their appearance does inspire.'

sex now, because beauty and life itself are as fragile and fleeting as flowers.¹¹ Propertius spells this out in his most exuberant poem of consummation, 2.15, whose themes resonate with those of 3.10. Having declared that occasional nights such as the one just spent would make ‘a year of life long enough’ (*uitae longus et annus erit*, 2.15.38), while many such nights could make him immortal (2.15.39), the poet ends with a ghostly image of flower petals floating in wine (2.15.51–4):

ac ueluti folia arentis liquere corollas,
 quae passim calathis strata natare uides,
 sic nobis, qui nunc magnum spiramus amantes,
 forsitan includet crastina fata dies.

And just as petals have fallen away from withered garlands,
 petals you see strewn everywhere, floating in goblets,
 so for us, who now live and breathe so deeply as lovers,
 perhaps tomorrow’s fate will seal our days.

Poem 3.10, though it emphasizes the boisterous celebration that precedes the private rites of Venus, similarly ends with a dead flower, this time along its right margin (25–32):

tibia continuis succumbat rauca choreis,
 et sint nequitiae libera uerba tuae,
 dulciaque ingratos adimant conuicia somnoS;¹²
 publica uicinae perstrepat aura uiaE:
 sint sortes nobis talorum interprete iactV,
 quem grauius pennis uerberet ille pueR.

cum fuerit multis exacta trientibus horA,
 noctis et instituet sacra ministra VenuS,
 annua soluamus thalamo sollemnia nostrO,
 natalisque tui sic peragamus iteR.

Let the raucous flute be exhausted by unending dances,
 and let the words of your naughtiness run free,
 and let sweet arguments drive away thankless sleep,
 the public air of the neighbouring street resound:
 let’s cast lots, deciding with a throw of the dice
 whom that boy whips more fiercely with his wings.

When the hours shall have passed by, after many cups,
 and acolyte Venus sets up nocturnal rites,
 let’s perform in our bedroom the annual ceremonies,
 and thus complete the journey of your birthday!

The reverse *telestich ROSA* allows one to focus on the flower’s beauty, and Cynthia’s, without necessarily calling to mind their fragility. The combination with *RVES*

¹¹ The classic expression of this theme in English verse is the opening stanza of Robert Herrick’s ‘To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time’:

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
 Old Time is still a-flying;
 And this same flower that smiles today
 Tomorrow will be dying.

¹² I accept Broukhusius’s conjecture *conuicia* (‘arguments’) for the manuscripts’ *conuiuia* (‘parties’), discussed by Heyworth and Morwood (n. 10), 203.

(‘you will fall to ruin’), however, sounds the threatening chord of the ‘rosebuds theme’ as stridently as the raucous flute in the preceding couplet.¹³ As the *telestich* unfolds, the symbol of beauty transforms into a symbol of death.

To return to 3.10’s beginning, the metamorphosed acrostic, *MANET*, contains another play on mortality and immortality, this time not in contradictory words but in contradictory meanings of the same word. Propertius uses transitive *manet*, ‘it awaits’, in a context directly related to our poem (2.28.57–8):

nec **forma** aeternum aut cuiquam est fortuna **perennis**:
longius aut propius **mors sua quemque manet**.

Neither is **beauty** eternal for anyone, nor fortune **everlasting**:
farther or closer, **his death awaits each one**.

Editors disagree about where this couplet belongs (it seems out of place in 2.28, its manuscript home), yet its self-contained message is clear. In the birthday poem, Propertius tells Cynthia to pray that her beauty will be eternal, *ut sit tua forma perennis*; but if we think of Cynthia as a real woman, that can never be the case, because beauty is no more *perennis* than fortune, and ‘his death awaits (*manet*) each one’. In the ominous closing poem of Book 3, the poet asserts that the facial colouring ‘so often compared to rosy Dawn’ (*totiens roseo collatus Eoo*, 3.24.7) was actually produced by cosmetics, paints a gruesome picture of Cynthia wrinkled and grey (3.25.11–16), and exhorts her to ‘learn to fear the final end of your beauty!’ (*euentum formae disce timere tuae*, 18).¹⁴ Yet *manet* in its *intransitive* sense, ‘it remains’, *does* apply to Art. As long as there are readers, *Cynthia* the book will remain—or perhaps we should call Book 3 by its opening words and thus by its real title, the ‘Ghost of Callimachus’, *Callimachi Manes*.

Were the full implications of this manifold ambiguity present to Propertius when he composed the acrostic *MANE[T]*? We will never know. I can, however, give some insight into authorial intentionality, and the creative process, through a glimpse of one mind I know fairly well. I blame my subconscious for the pun in ‘manifold’, which I did not notice when composing the sentence above. On the other hand, I take full responsibility for the first letters of my subtitle spelling *POETAE*, that most annoyingly ambiguous of first-declension forms. And what about my title, *ABC* in reverse? The alphabet has long been a locus for mystical, magical properties: witness the abecedarian Psalm 119 or the word ‘abracadabra’. Backwards, ABC forms a sort of binding spell, so that the ‘CBA of the Poet’ mimics the magical freezing in time of the transient that I am arguing is the point of Propertius’ acrostic. But that interpretation of my own letterplay came to me only gradually. I knew I could do something with *POETAE*, and my original title, ‘An Acrostic for Cynthia’s

¹³ Propertius’ works show no other *telestich* sequences *ROSA* or *RVES*, forward or backward. Though the ragged state of the Propertian manuscript tradition makes exact counts difficult, we can make some generalizations about the frequency of certain line-end letters in his extant poetry (based on the Packard Humanities Institute text, <https://latin.packhum.org/loc/620/1/0#0>, which has 3994 lines): O (419), S (1556), A (331), and E (371) are fairly common word endings, but R (153) and V (90) are less so. (Special thanks are due here to my son Nathaniel Hejduk, who added *telestich* search capability to the acrostic string search program designed by my husband.)

¹⁴ I am assuming that 3.24 and 3.25 form a single poem that constitutes, as Goold (n. 3), 301 suggests, a ‘designed repudiation of 1.1, which it echoes in themes and structure, even to the number of lines’.

‘Birthday’, rearranged itself in my head as I was lying awake one night. So for me at least, though I know that my own acrostic was intentional, the half-subconscious process that produced and then sought to understand it still retains an element of mystery.

Whatever meaning we may find in Propertius’ acrostic and telestich, we can say with certainty that they are visual artefacts, existing solely through written letters on a page. Cynthia is a *scripta puella* indeed. Yet, as I hope I have shown, the awareness of such artificiality should only increase our appreciation of Propertius’ achievement. The playful seriousness of the opening acrostic *MANE[T]*, especially combined with the closing reverse telestich *ROSA RVES*, helps to make the diurnal ‘journey’ captured in 3.10 a microcosm of his poetic journey as a whole. Like the inconstant and mercurial Cynthia herself, the acrostic metamorphoses before our eyes, its layers of meaning successively unfolding but never supplanting one another. Its permanently unresolvable ambiguity testifies to one of elegy’s most important themes, the contrast between the transitory beauty of human beings and the perennial beauty of Art—a reminder that, except through the magic of poetry, not even Golden Cynthia can stay.

Baylor University

JULIA D. HEJDUK
julia_hejduk@baylor.edu