

Three Propertian Puns¹

My topic is best approached by way of a well-known passage of Vergil's *Georgics* (1.491-7):

nec fuit indignum superis bis sanguine nostro
 Emathiam et latos Haemi pinguescere campos.
 scilicet et tempus ueniet, cum finibus illis
 agricola incuruo terram molitus aratro
 exesa inueniet scabra robigine pila, 495
 aut grauibus rastris galeas pulsabit inanis
 grandiaque effossis mirabitur ossa sepulcris.

Many readers of Mynors' commentary must have been mildly puzzled by the last sentence of his note on 491: 'Some sensitive modern ears catch an echo of the Homeric *emathoeis*, "sandy" and *haima*, "blood".² In commenting on the same line, Thomas is less negative, but mentions only the blood, not the sand: '**Haemi . . . campos:** given the force of *pinguescere* . . . V. surely intends a gloss — "plains of blood" (cf. Gr. *haima*).³ He provides no further guidance as to who might be the owner of Mynors' 'sensitive modern ears'. For the record, the answer is George Doig, and his case is far stronger than Mynors' dismissive comment might be taken to imply.⁴ The first point in favour is (as Doig says) the inaccuracy of Vergil's geographic reference. Whether *bis* (491) refers to the battles of Pharsalus and Philippi, or (less likely) to the two battles at Philippi, none of the three was fought in the district of Emathia or very near to Mount Haemus.⁵ Of course, poetic geography is notoriously vague, but that argument is double-edged: why should Vergil have used these two particular names out of the dozens or even hundreds

¹ A more precise definition of the subject of this paper would be 'three examples of etymological or pseudo-etymological geographic word-play in Propertius, one of them also found in other Latin poets', but I thought my title ought to aim to attract readers rather than repel them. Quotations of Propertius are taken from E. A. Barber (ed.), *Sexti Properti Carmina*, Oxford, 1960².

² R. A. B. Mynors, *Virgil, Georgics* (Oxford, 1990).

³ R. F. Thomas, *Virgil, Georgics* (Cambridge, 2 vols., 1988).

⁴ G. Doig, 'Vergil, *Georgics*, I, 491-2', *AJPh* 86 (1965), 85-8. The idea of taking *Haemi* as a reference to blood goes back at least to Paratore (1955), though Doig deserves the credit for adding *Emathiam* and working out the argument in full.

that poetic vagueness on this scale permitted? The second point in favour is the typically Vergilian gloss, whereby *sanguine nostro* in 490 (and again in 501) in effect translates *Haemi* in 491.⁶ Doig also suggests that if Haemus represents blood and Emathia sand, the combination of the two, by a kind of poetic shorthand, implies gladiatorial combat, and tells us something of Vergil's attitude towards the doomed soldiers.

Viktor Pöschl has suggested a similar pun in the *Cleopatra Ode*, where Horace describes Octavian pursuing Cleopatra *uelut . . . citus / uenator in campis niualis / Haemoniae* (C. 1.37.16-20).⁷ The implicit colour-contrast between the snowy fields of Haemonia and the blood of the hare that is soon to stain them seems pointed.⁸ Pöschl refers to Doig, provides numerous examples of similar etymological word-play in Vergil, adduces an ancient etymologization of the name in Apollodorus (1.6.3),⁹ and traces the pun back to Sophocles' Αἴμων ὄλωλεν· ἀυτόχειρ δ' αἰμάσσεται (*Ant.* 1175). R. L. Hunter has suggested similar puns on Αἰμονίη in Apollonius of Rhodes (*Arg.* 3.1090 and 4.1000),¹⁰ and Stephen Heyworth adds *Georgics* 2.484-8, where *frigidus . . . sanguis* and *gelidis conuallibus Haemi* are juxtaposed.¹¹

Doig and Pöschl are quite right to see etymological word-play in their passages: puns on the nouns *Haemus*, *Haemonia*, and *Haemon*, and the adjective *Haemonius*, are to be found not just once each in Vergil and Horace, but more widely in other Augustan poets. Propertius is particularly fond of them. I will not attempt a full listing of

⁵ Nor would a site half-way between the two battles solve the problem. As Doig notes, Emathia is to the west, Mount Haemus well to the north, of both battlefields.

⁶ The fact that *Emathiam* is not similarly glossed is no doubt one reason why Paratore and Thomas find the pun in *Haemi* more convincing.

⁷ V. Pöschl, *Horazische Lyrik* (Heidelberg, 1970), 89 n 47.

⁸ Pointed pairing of the colours white and red (or purple) is of course endemic in Latin verse.

⁹ Latin etymologists derive the name of Haemonia either from Mount Haemus or from Haemon, one of the *Spartoi* and so a second-hand son of Ares. Details in R. Maltby, *A Lexicon of Ancient Latin Etymologies* (Liverpool, 1991).

¹⁰ *Apollonius of Rhodes, Argonautica, Book III* (Cambridge, 1989), ad 1086, and *The Argonautica of Apollonius: Literary Studies* (Cambridge, 1993), 68.

¹¹ This was one of his editorial suggestions. In *True Names: Vergil and the Alexandrian Tradition of Etymological Wordplay* (Ann Arbor, 1996), 265, J. J. O'Hara registers 1.492, but not 2.484-8. The

Haemonian puns in Latin literature, which would be more appropriate to a dissertation. Instead, I will examine four likely instances of the pun in Propertius, before going on to consider two other instances of unnoticed etymological geographic word-play, each confined to a single passage of Propertius.

The adjective *Haemonius* is found once in Tibullus and six times in Propertius, who seems to have introduced it to Roman verse. The three earliest instances (Prop. 1.13.21, 1.15.20, Tib. 1.5.45), are ambiguous, at best, and it is only in Books II and III of Propertius that Haemonian puns become relatively clear. For instance, in 3.1.25-28, *Haemonius* is used of Achilles in one pentameter, and Hector's bloody corpse is described in the next:¹²

nam quis equo pulsas abiegno nosceret arces,
fluminaque Haemonio comminus isse uiro,
Idaeum Simoenta Iouis cum prole Scamandro,
Hectora per campos ter maculasse rotas?

In the similar passage 2.8.37-38, Achilles' horses are referred to as Haemonian in a passage that again suggests that they are blood-spattered as well as Thessalian:

at postquam sera captiua est reddita poena,
fortem illum Haemoniis Hectora traxit equis.

The unstated implication of the epithet is reinforced by the preceding context: just a few lines before (33-4), Propertius had described the blood-soaked corpse of Patroclus:¹³

uiderat informem multa Patroclon harena
porrectum et sparsas caede iacere comas.

Patroclus is not Hector, and the explicit mention of blood in 32 is not directly juxtaposed with the mention of Haemonian horses in 38, but there do seem to be enough similarities to provide a reinforcement of the general mood. A third passage (2.1.63-4) refers to another of Achilles' victims:

latter is the less likely of the two, since the two phrases are four lines apart, but the double connection — both cold and blood — seems significant even at that distance.

¹² The juxtaposition of *flumina* and *Haemonio* in 25 suggests that Propertius may also intend a poetic contrast of blood and water.

¹³ Since *caede* here means 'gore', we have blood (in the pentameter) paired with sand (in the hexameter), just as in the *Georgics* passage from which we began. Are we to take Patroclus as a dead gladiator?

Mysus et Haemonia iuuenis qua cuspidē uulnus
senserat, hac ipsa cuspidē sensit opem.

It is not just Achilles, but specifically his spear-point, that is called Haemonian here, in reference to its previous use in wounding Telephus. In this case, it would be unusually appropriate for *Haemonius* to mean *sanguineus* or *sanguinolentus* as well as *Thessalus*.

My argument is cumulative, and we now have three plausible instances of Haemonian puns in Propertius to add to the two in Vergil and Horace — not to mention Sophocles and Apollonius. Moreover, besides simple cumulation of instances, another and stronger type of argument is possible. If reading something as a pun helps to solve a long-standing interpretative crux, that is itself a strong point in favour of the pun being intentional. My fourth Propertian passage (2.10.1-2) contains just such a crux:¹⁴

sed tempus lustrare aliis Heliconā choreis,
et campum Haemonio iam dare tempus equo.

Editors agree that this Haemonian horse represents the contemporary political epic poetry that Propertius professes to be newly eager to write. Although Thessalian horses were much admired in antiquity, some have found the bare epithet insufficient to specify a war-horse rather than, for instance, a race-horse. Heinsius made the horse a Homeric one with *Maeonio* (omitting the *et*, which Housman reinserted after *campum*), while others have suggested *Aonio*, *heroo*, *Ausonio*, and, as it happens, *Emathio*.¹⁵ However, all these are unnecessary, if we take *Haemonio* as a pun: a ‘bloody’ horse is obviously a war-horse in a way that a Thessalian one is not. Following Doig in his poetic short-hand course, we might say that if Helicon represents poetry, and Haemonia war, then the juxtaposition of the two implies poetry about war: epic.¹⁶

The passages examined include four of the six in which Propertius uses the adjective *Haemonius*.¹⁷ Examples could be multiplied by appealing to other, later, poets,¹⁸ but I

¹⁴ As elsewhere, I must omit consideration of unrelated textual problems, though I will say that it seems to me unlikely that this is the beginning of a poem, still less a whole book, as Lachmann suggested.

¹⁵ Details in W. R. Smyth, *Thesaurus Criticus ad Sexti Propertii Textum* (Leiden, 1970).

¹⁶ *Haemonio* cannot be purely ornamental, since Helicon is of course in Boeotia, not Thessaly.

¹⁷ It may also be significant that his one mention of Antigone’s Haemon (2.8.21-2) is in a context of suicide by sword-thrust: *quid? non Antigonaē tumulo Boeotius Haemon / corruit ipse suo saucius ense*

think I have made my point. In the verse of the early Augustans, the adjective *Haemonius* and the related nouns are found in sanguinary contexts much more often than not, and this can hardly be coincidental.

The second and third of my three Propertian puns can be handled more concisely. Each is found only in a single passage, and neither is strictly necessary to our understanding of the poem in which it occurs. One of them is in fact rather dubious. It occurs in the first couplet of 2.16:

Praetor ab Illyricis uenit modo, Cynthia, terris,
maxima praeda tibi, maxima cura mihi.

If I am not reading too much into the epithet, *Illyricis* is more than just a geographic reference: it also means *haud lyricis*. The praetor of 2.16 is a vulgar fellow, even a metaphorical *barbarus*,¹⁹ and a province populated by *Illyrici* is the most appropriate possible posting for him.²⁰ In culturally more familiar terms, we might say that the poet's rival has just returned from governing the Philistines.²¹

The third pun is found in the last elegy of Book I, where Propertius informs his patron Tullus, and through him his readers, where he was born (1.22):

Qualis et unde genus, qui sint mihi, Tulle, Penates,

latus, . . . ? In favour of such a pun is the Sophoclean parallel, against it the lack of any sanguinary language in the context, along with the fact that Haemon was not known for anything much except his suicide and that the sword was the standard tragic way of killing a man. Propertius nowhere mentions Haemus or Haemonia.

¹⁸ I will mention only two here. Haemonian puns are surprisingly infrequent in Ovid. I find only three or four sanguinary contexts for roughly 40 instances of *Haemonius* and related words, and coincidence will easily account for that many. Exceptions are for the most part early, and occur in Ovid's reworkings of the Propertian passages examined above: examples are *Amores* 2.1.31f (Hector's corpse) and 2.9.7f (Telephus). On the other hand, two of the three instances of *Haemonius* in Seneca's tragedies seem significant. In the *Medea*, *Haemonius* . . . *Athos* is the source of the drugs that Medea cuts *cruenta falce* (720-22) — is she gathering mandrakes? In the *Agamemnon*, Polyxena is *Haemonio desponsa rogo* (640). Note that it is the pyre, not the hero buried under it, that is Haemonian: it will be quite literally *sanguineus* when Polyxena is sacrificed.

¹⁹ The interpretation of 27f (*barbarus exclusis agitatur uestigia lumbis — / et subito felix nunc mea regna tenet!*) is extremely controversial, but the first word at least seems secure.

²⁰ If there is any scholar still living who thinks it profitable to try to identify this praetor with a historic personage, the poetic appropriateness of this particular step in his *cursus honorum* makes it and him that much more likely to be purely fictional.

²¹ Of course, that is a conscious metaphor, with a known inventor (Robert Schumann), while Propertius' *Illyricis* would be the opportunistic use of a convenient linguistic coincidence.

quaeris pro nostra semper amicitia.
 si Perusina tibi patriae sunt nota sepulcra,
 Italiae duris funera temporibus,
 cum Romana suos egit discordia ciuis, 5
 (sic mihi praecipue, puluis Etrusca, dolor,
 tu proiecta mei perpessa es membra propinqui,
 tu nullo miseri contegis ossa solo),
 proxima suppositos contingens Vmbria campos
 me genuit terris fertilis uberibus. 10

9 suppositos . . . campos *Postgate* : supposito . . . campo *O*

Postgate's conjecture in line 9 seems slightly preferable stylistically, since *contingens* needs an object more than *proxima* needs a dative. It is printed by G. P. Goold in the new Loeb (1990). I will offer a further point in favour.

At first glance, it looks as if Propertius is simply specifying his place of birth with some precision. Just as Horace defines his birthplace as the border between Lucania and Apulia, juxtaposing the two in one line (*Lucanus an Apulus anceps*, S. 2.1.34),²² so Propertius less compactly uses *Perusina . . . sepulcra* (3), *puluis Etrusca* (6), and *Vmbria* (9) to define the area of his origin as the Etrurian-Umbrian border, near Etruscan Perugia, but on the Umbrian side. It is not until Book IV that the towns of Mevania and Asis, modern Bevagna and Assisi, are mentioned (4.1.121-6).

It is worth asking why Propertius uses *Vmbria* rather than *Meuania* or *Asis* in this passage, when we might expect a *sphragis* to be as specific as possible about the author's birthplace. I suggest that there is a bitter and very serious pun in these lines, and that we should understand *Vmbria* as 'Land of Shades', perhaps even 'Hades on earth'. The fact that there is at least one unburied corpse in the context is the main point in favour of my interpretation. After 1.21, whose speaker is a dead or dying man pleading for burial, and the further mention of naked bones in 1.22.7-8, the alert reader can hardly help but take

²² Although they do not refer to birthplaces, Catullus 44.1 (*O funde noster, seu Sabine seu Tiburs*) and Horace *Ep.* 1.5.5 (*inter Minturnas Sinuessanumque Petrinum*) are quite similar. Petronius parodies the practice in *Sat.* 48.2: *in suburbano . . . quod ego adhuc non noui. dicitur confine esse Tarraciniensibus et Tarentinis.*

Vmbria in the very next line as an allusion to unhappy shades.²³ Would a Roman reader have noticed the connection? Livy mentions the doubly ill-omened mutineer Atrius Vmber, whom Scipio calls *nominis etiam abominandi ducem* (28.28.4).

H. N. Parker has shown that this elegy specifically alludes to the passage of the *Georgics* from which we began, with Propertius' *Perusina sepulcra* (3), *ossa* (8), and *campus* (9) referring to Vergil's *pinguescere campos* (492) and *ossa sepulcris* (497).²⁴ He thus shows that the implication of Propertius' final words is not 'nostalgically emphasizing a personal loss' (Stahl), still less 'healing, reconciliation, the natural fertility of the land reasserting itself' (Hodge and Buttimore), but a bitter refusal to heal. This is consistent with my own interpretation of *Vmbria* and *contingens*. The latter is usually treated as an instance of *OLD* s.v. *contingo* § 2.a: 'be in contact with, be contiguous with, border on, touch'. This seems redundant: if the fields are spread out below the Umbrian hills or towns, they can hardly help being contiguous with them. I prefer the pejorative sense of *OLD* § 6: 'afflict with a disease or other affliction, smite, infect'. This provides an image of the hills of Umbria 'staining' or 'polluting' the fields below by fertilizing them with the corpses of their citizens. I would translate the couplet: 'nearby Umbria (= Land of Shades), polluting the fields spread out below, a place rich in fertile (= corpse-fattened) lands, gave me birth'.

Finally, since this is the last couplet of Book I, it is worth noting that Propertius' only other use of *contingere* in a pejorative and tactile sense comes in the first (1.1.1-2):²⁵

Cynthia prima suis miserum me cepit ocellis,
contactum nullis ante cupidinibus.

²³ Whether the speaker of 1.21 is dying or already dead, whether he is the same as the poet's unnamed *propinquus* in 1.22, and what relation the latter is to the poet, are all very much disputed. However, none of these questions requires an answer here, since none of them makes any difference to my point. The latest and fullest treatment is by I. M. Le M. DuQuesnay, 'In Memoriam Galli: Propertius 1.21', in T. Woodman and J. Powell (edd.), *Author and Audience in Latin Literature* (Cambridge, 1992), 52-83. He argues (75f) that the two men should not be identified.

²⁴ H. N. Parker, "The Fertile Fields of Umbria: Prop. 1.22.10", *Mnemosyne* 45 (1992), 88-92.

²⁵ The *OLD* lists 1.1.2 under *contingo* § 7.a ('affect emotionally, move, touch'), but it seems better to take it as another instance of *contingo* § 6, along with 1.22.9.

Given the careful structuring of Book I and the imagery of military surrender and imprisonment in 1.1-2, it is tempting to take this correspondence as a subtle pairing, on the scale of an entire book, of the devastating and corrupting effects of Love and War.²⁶

²⁶ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the biennial meeting of the Classical Association of the Midwest and South (Southern Section) in Chapel Hill in 1994. I particularly wish to thank Jenny S. Clay for correcting a silly blunder, and Stephen Heyworth, whose editorial comments and suggestions were extremely helpful: note 11 is only the tip of the iceberg.