PROPERTIUS III 13.30: WHOSE BASKETS?

BY

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With Butler and Barber1) I accept the reading received from the consensus of the manuscript tradition here:

\[ \text{nunc violas tondere manu, nunc mixta referre} \]
\[ \text{lilia virgineos lucida per calathos} \]
\[ \text{vimineos Fruter} \]

I intend to argue, pace Shackleton Bailey, that Fruter's correction is by no means made necessary by the fact that "it is the young men who bring back the baskets" ²). This argument will be based on my observation that, far from being over-ingenious (as Shackleton Bailey opines), the view of Rothstein and Butler and Barber, that the girls have given their baskets to their lovers to fill, is fully consistent with the main thought of the poem down to v. 34.

It is not excessively ingenious to see that the initiative in the matter of the flowers as love-gifts rests with the girls themselves at v. 30. Such a view is, if not actually demanded, certainly sufficiently sanctioned, by the tone of the elegy from its beginning; too well sanctioned, indeed, for the manuscript reading on which it is based to be abandoned.

The poet's complaint in the opening lines of the poem is not simply that puellae are avidae for love-gifts. He complains that modern times have given them a too-ready taste for gifts in the luxury class (v. 4) which has arisen from the availability of the expensive gifts instanced at vv. 5-8. It is the girls' taste for expensive gifts, not their actual expectation of some love-token, which makes each night of love pretiosa for the suitor. This view is borne out by consideration of vv. 25-26. The agrestum iuventus is called felix, not because a puella did not demand gifts from her lover in

1) The Elegies of Propertius (Oxford 1933), 296.
2) Propertiana (Cambridge 1956), 180.
golden times gone by ¹), but because his resources of giving were
happily not calculated to excite expensive tastes.

I see no excess of ingenuity, therefore, in the view that Propertius
here tells us that the baskets belong to the girls. This simply
involves us in taking virgineos to bear its primary meaning, 'of or
belonging to a maiden or virgin' ²), which can be closely paralleled
by Propertius’ application of the epithet to a similar noun (virgineis
urnis) at II 1, 67. By themselves giving their baskets to their lovers
to fill, the virgines of III 13, 30 are charmingly subscribing to
the values basic to the erotic utopia which Propertius depicts at
vv. 27-37. Like their modern counterparts they do demand gifts
from their swains; but the sort of gifts they are prepared to accept
in exchange for kisses bestowed furtiva per antra (v. 33) are such as
are to be expected from lovers whose wealth lies in messis et arbor
(v. 26) ³). This being so, there is surely more point and charm in the
manuscript reading virgineos at v. 30 than in the rather pedestrian
correction vimineos. Thus far my argument in favour of the manu-
scripts; will it stand in the face of the parallels adduced to support
the correction?

Strictly speaking there should be no onus on the defender of a
manuscript reading in a poem to take into account parallels from
other poets adduced to support a correction of that reading. Espe-
cially is this true of a defence which has proceeded on the basis of the
reading’s perfect consistency with the economy of the poem itself.
But even editors who print the received reading virgineos are
tempted by the references usually cited from other Latin poets
to opt for the correction vimineos ⁴); and there are still author-

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¹) She did; as vv. 33-34 show, the kisses enjoyed by the silvicolaee viri
were empta. The emphatic his stresses the inexpensive nature of the purchase,
to be sure; but it also proves that the custom of giving love-gifts flourished
even in the good old days.

²) See Lewis and Short, s.v. For some discussion of its meaning here also
see D. L. Drew, CQ 19 (1925), 41—a discussion to which I will return below,
p. 57 and note 4.

³) Cf. the Cynthia of II 16 who, metaphorically at least, weighs her lover’s
purse and sends him to fill it (vv. 11-12, 17-18).

⁴) Shackleton Bailey, loc. cit., mentions three: Copa 16; Ov. Fasti IV 435
and Mart. III 58, 39. Butler and Barber, op. cit., 99, print the received text
but find vimineos “a tempting correction” in view of Copa 15-16 (p. 296).