

THE ROMAN ELEGIST'S DEAD LOVER OR THE DRAMA OF THE DESIRING SUBJECT

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ANCIENT EROTIC POETRY SEEMS SOMEHOW TO DEMAND that we prioritize a desiring, intending subject, identified with the author, as an object of our interpretation. The universal and intensely personal nature of eroticism, as well as the temporal distance of antiquity, collude in this demand: the expression of erotic desire, even in poetry of a highly "literary" nature, seems to offer a secure link directly to a familiar individual experience in a distant and often alienating past. But such poetry, as well as our interpretation of it, might also be understood as cultural practice, as a communally-sponsored restaging of familiar behavior, in spite of its intense focus on the individual subject and his or her intentions and desires. How do our desires as scholars—as interpreting subjects—blind us to such restaging? Have we yet, can we ever, overcome our wish to read Roman erotic elegy as fundamentally about the intentions and desires, conscious or unconscious, of the individual author? In what follows, I would like to focus on these issues by considering the history of scholarly practice surrounding Propertius 4.7, "*sunt aliquid Manes*," apparently one of the most forceful expressions of the durability of the subject and of erotic desire in the ancient corpus. Here a speaker identified as Propertius recounts a dream in which the ghost of his dead lover, Cynthia, returns to him and, in the style of a legal orator, reproaches him for his neglect of her, accuses her murderers, defends her own good name, and predicts that soon she will possess him when they are joined in the grave. Revisiting this famous poem, I wish to suggest that our critical approaches to it have left essentially unchallenged a basic assumption, namely, that prioritizing an idea of the poem as a drama illuminating the involvement of the subject "Propertius" with one of the putative objects of his passion, whether a real "love affair" or poetry itself or a disruptive intervention in Augustan ideology, will allow us to account fully for the poem's form—for the way that Propertius here "calls up" the ghost of his dead lover. What does it mean to find such an idea of the poem "attractive" and, conversely, to find it "dissatisfying," which is to say, undesirable? What alternative, if any, is left to us, and why should we seek one?

Rather than simply advancing a new interpretation of Propertius 4.7—although this is part of my goal—I would like to consider the implications of shifting interpretive emphasis away from the desires of Propertius, the individual author, onto the collective desires of his audiences, both ancient and modern. In itself, this is hardly a radical interpretive move, since it is clear that all poets who expect to have an audience write with not only their own desires but also the desires of that audience in mind. It does not mean, furthermore, that Propertius' desires

play *no* part in my reading, for to insist on a poem as purely a collective production would be perverse. I hope, rather, that what will distinguish my reading of the poem from others is its self-consciousness about this move and its concern with the "desirability" of understanding both Roman elegy and our interpretations of it as different kinds of cultural productions. I will argue that both Propertius 4.7 and, in a more attenuated sense, our interpretations of it are restagings of a Roman republican oratorical topos known as *mortuos ab inferis excitare*, "calling up the dead from the underworld." On the one hand, the performance of this elegy bears striking resemblances to the employment of the topos in a republican speech such as Cicero's *Pro Caelio*. On the other hand, our scholarly approaches tend to center on "calling up" the ghost of Propertius 4.7 so as to scrutinize her as "the Roman elegist's dead lover," Cynthia (whatever "Cynthia" may represent). In approaching the poem with this set of priorities, we defer emphasis from the authority of an intending subject identified with the author to concentrate instead on the authority of pre-existing practices (both those of ancient orators and those of modern scholars) that dramatize not individual desire but modes of communal access to the past. This is desirable in that it means allowing the Augustan elite a similar capacity to stage such rituals as we claim, usually implicitly, for ourselves.

My paper, then, can be read in part as a response to some of the questions about authorial intention and intertextuality addressed by Joseph Farrell in this issue (98–111), insofar as I am interested in locating intention in a verbal practice circumscribed and shaped by a political context. Such a view of authorial intention, we may note, requires some notion of intertextuality even when we do not posit intentional allusion to a specific written document. In this instance, as we shall see, an oratorical trope speaks within a Propertian poem; Propertius' language belongs, in some way, to Cicero and the other republican orators who employed the trope that Cicero happens to have made famous. But in this regard Propertius' poem is illustrative of a larger principle, namely, that to understand any verbal practice as circumscribed and shaped by a political context assumes that its language has some prior existence in the political domain. Such practices refer, that is, to some preexistent "text" in the "context"—not a specific written document but a more diffusely-imagined social "text" (here, a trope as a feature of political discourse) that, because others favor it, somehow *works on the author*. This kind of political interpretation of literature is a potentially unsettling act from the perspective of what one might call a conventionally intentionalist type of reading. Indeed, intentionalist criticism has often rejected the premise that a "great" author's "material" ends up as anything but "his own": a great author, rather, can be counted on to take whatever material he chooses and "make it his own," as if absolute ownership were a non-negotiable criterion of "greatness" and any sharing of ownership rendered that greatness suspect.

Let us turn, then, to a brief and necessarily selective survey of scholarship on a much-studied poem. Propertius 4.7 has been a touchstone for all the major

trends in Propertian scholarship and, more broadly, in the criticism of Roman elegy. When scholars emphasized the biographical aspects of Propertius' poetry, *Elegy* 4.7 could be read, in Postgate's words, as "an expression of contrition and an earnest of reparation" (1884: xxvii). Propertius' dream was a record of a real "love-affair" and of Propertius' mixed feelings of sadness and guilt about it after the demise of his real lover. Biographical readings characterized much scholarship from the nineteenth century into the 1960s, but then the prevailing attitude toward the poem, as to Augustan elegy in general, began to change.¹ The fact that Propertius here reworks another famous dream scene in the ancient poetic tradition—the visitation of Patroclus' ghost to the sleeping Achilles at *Iliad* 23.59–92—rendered Propertius 4.7 especially open to a critical trend emphasizing the Augustan elegists' highly sophisticated literary sensibilities.² As Maria Wyke (2002: 16) has shown, this trend did not erase the scholarly interest in viewing erotic elegy as "produced to express its authors' own amatory experiences." The intensity of personal experience, however, that Propertius 4.7 seems to express was easy to transfer from a presumed amatory reality to the relationship of the poet to his art. For Margaret Hubbard (1974: 150), the Propertius of *Elegy* 4.7 was "fascinated" by poetry's power to confer on the contemporary and everyday experience of love the immortalizing grandeur of epic. For Theodore Papanghelis (1987: 19, 149), the themes of "love and death," in their Hellenistic manifestations, were "a fascinating obsession" for Propertius; the ghostly Cynthia of *Elegy* 4.7 was "the visual 'embodiment' as well as the exponent of the poem's [Hellenistic] aesthetics." *Elegy* 4.7 has also been central to Maria Wyke's development (2002: 156) of the argument that "the elegiac mistress is a textual body that incarnates her author's aesthetic and ideological ambitions."³ For Wyke (2002: 155–191, esp. 184–186) and others, the poem well illustrates Propertius' interest in "playing the female" in such a way as to disturb accepted categories of gender as they pertain to Propertius' idea of his genre. Indeed, Judith Hallett (1973) at one time read the poem as an ancient form of feminism. Micaela Janan (2001: 100–113) has recently interpreted the poem from a Lacanian perspective as a passionate

¹ Examples of biographic readings include Butler 1905: 4–5; Lake 1937; Helmbold 1949; Enk 1957: 29–30; Boucher 1965: 82, 95; Burck 1966: 417–418; further bibliography in Warden 1980: 78–79. Closely linked to the question of the "reality" behind the poem is that of Propertius' apparent contradiction here with his earlier insistence on Cynthia's infidelities, as well as that of the poem's position *before* an elegy (4.8) in which Cynthia appears very much alive. For the idea that Propertius sought to rehabilitate the image of a historical Cynthia and/or idealize his relationship with her, see Helmbold 1949: 342; Enk 1957: 29–30; Boucher 1965: 95. Lake (1937: 55) and Guillemin (1950: 191) are among those who take the minority view that Cynthia was actually alive at the time of 4.7's composition. On the debates, see further Janan 2001: 101 and Warden 1980: 78–79.

² On Propertius' use of the *Iliad* passage and the place of this reference among the poem's other intertextual references see, for example, Hubbard 1974: 149–152; Mueke 1974: 125–128; Warden 1980: 14–15, 18–21, 76–77; Dimundo 1990: 27–43.

³ DeBrohun (2003: 152–153 and *passim*), author of the most recent study of Prop. 4, similarly reads *Elegy* 4.7 for aspects of its self-conscious commentary on earlier conventions of Propertian elegy.

indictment of elegy evincing Propertius' desire to speak as woman and so disrupt a masculinist dominant order.⁴

As the scholarship on Propertius 4.7 shows, when we begin from an idea that *Elegy* 4.7 dramatizes Propertius' intentions and desires, we arrive at a rich and persuasive picture of his creative process: the way the poet crafted the personal, literary, social, and cultural material at his disposal, transforming this material into the surpassing work of art that is Propertius 4.7. Having dismissed, if only partially, the biographical fiction, we have come to see the poem as part of Propertius' response to Homer, to Alexandrian poetry, to his own genre of elegy, and to Roman and Augustan gender ideology. A unified idea of "Propertius," the desiring subject, grounds this picture of the poem's genesis, even if we posit conflict or division as an essential element of the subject we imagine.

A problem, however, with this picture is that it seems inadequate to account entirely for the poem's form as a feature of Roman culture, and more specifically, the culture with which we know Propertius and his audience to have been deeply imbued. How, for example, are we to explain the similarities between Propertius 4.7 and another famous evocation of the dead in Latin literature, the *prosopopoeia* of Appius Claudius Caecus in Cicero's *Pro Caelio*?⁵ At a culminating moment of his argument, Cicero says (*Cael.* 33–34):

aliquis mihi ab inferis excitandus est . . . ex hac ista familia aliquis ac potissimum Caecus ille . . . si exstiterit, sic aget ac sic loquetur: "mulier, quid tibi cum Caelio, quid cum homine adolescentulo, quid cum alieno? . . . cognatus, adfinis, viri tui familiaris? nihil eorum. quid igitur fuit nisi quaedam temeritas ac libido? . . . ideone ego pacem Pyrrhi diremi ut tu amorum turpissimorum cotidie foedera ferires . . . ideo viam munivi ut eam tu alienis viris comitata celebrares?"

I must conjure up from the Underworld . . . someone from this very family—and best of all the famous Caecus If he arises he will act and speak like this: "Woman, what business do you have with Caelius, what business with a young man, with a stranger? . . . Was he related directly or by marriage, or a close acquaintance of your husband? He was nothing of the kind. What, therefore, was the reason if not a certain impetuosity and lust? . . . Was it for this that I dissolved the peace treaty with Pyrrhus: so that you might daily strike amorous bargains of the most shameful sort? . . . Was it for this that I built a road so that you might frequent it accompanied by strange men?"

Here through a commonly-used rhetorical device, *mortuos* (or *defunctos*) *ab inferis excitare*, Cicero seeks to shame an aristocratic woman, Clodia, whom he accuses of sexual immorality. Cicero calls up Clodia's dead ancestor, Appius Claudius Caecus, and thereby aligns his own cause with the moral and political authority

⁴In another recent Lacanian study of Roman elegy, Miller (2004: 188) argues that the apparent "incoherence" of the poems in Book 4 is evidence that "the position from which the [elegiac] subject speaks has vanished, making it impossible to specify the place from which a statement is made, the object toward which it is intended, and its consequent ideological inflection."

⁵On the comparison between Prop. 4.7 and Cicero's *Pro Caelio*, see Dufallo 2003; I reproduce here some of my earlier argumentation for the different purposes of the present essay.

embodied by the ghost. The technique, a sub-type of *prosopopoeia*, was frequently cited as a familiar aspect of republican oratory:⁶ it is referred to repeatedly in rhetorical treatises from Cicero on and would have been familiar to both Propertius and the rhetorically educated male members of the upper class who formed at least a significant portion of his audience.

As has long been recognized, Propertius 4.7 characterizes Cynthia's words of self-defense and indictment as a kind of legal speech.⁷ The verbs *insector* (49) and *perago* (95) and the noun *lis* (95), referring to her tirade, as well as her accusations of poisoning (36–38), demands for the torture of slaves (5), and oath of innocence (35–53), all connote judicial process (and this is one of Propertius' most significant additions to his Homeric model). The poem resembles a performance such as the *Pro Caelio* in several ways. Cicero, a performer in an actual public trial, calls up a ghost for the purposes of moral censure in the circumstances of an illicit erotic attachment referred to as a *foedus* (34) and characterized by its association with geographical margins (the public roadways, 34), while in Propertius 4.7, a performer, adapting the judicial setting, calls up the dead for the purposes of self-censure in the context of an illicit *foedus* (21) associated, again, with the marginal roadways (19–20).

At least as significant, however, as the resemblances between the *Pro Caelio* and *Elegy* 4.7 are their differences. In Propertius, a genealogical bond such as that between Caecus and Clodia is replaced by an erotic bond and the "dead lover" herself now reproaches her living partner for his current love affair, where previously this role might have belonged to a dead ancestor's venerable ghost. In republican judicial oratory, this dead ancestor might have called attention to his public renown and exemplary status as a means of furthering the orator's case and boosting his political standing, while Propertius' Cynthia contrasts her own renown and exemplary status, which she demands become still more public (83–86), with Propertius' unworthy appropriation of it (77–78). Propertius plays with and inverts the priorities of a republican orator.

Why would Propertius be interested in echoing and manipulating the conventions of republican oratory in this fashion? None of the accepted interpretations of *Elegy* 4.7 would seem to account for this aspect of the poem: as my survey of its critical history suggests, we (i.e., scholars) do not want the poem to be about oratory, but rather about Propertius' engagement with one of the objects that are more easily identifiable as his passions.⁸ Our desires are implicated in limiting the interpretation of Propertian elegy to a circumscribed set of desires we attribute to the subject "Propertius."

When we begin, however, from the perspective of the collective desires of Propertius' audience, we arrive more readily at an explanation for this aspect of

⁶ Cf. Cic. *Orat.* 85; *De or.* 1.245; Quint. *Inst.* 4.1.28, 9.2.31, 12.10.61; Aquila Romanus 3; Rutilius Lupus 2.6; cf. Quint. *Inst.* 3.8.49–54, 9.2.29–37 on *prosopopoeia* in general.

⁷ Krokowski 1926: 95; Guillemin 1950: 190; Warden 1980: 37.

⁸ But cf. the previous note.

the poem: Propertius' audience wanted to see republican cultural traditions such as the genealogical techniques of oratory transformed to suit the circumstances of the Principate. What we know of the cultural tastes of the Augustan elite in other areas confirms this. Augustan declamation, for example, favored the imitation of Cicero, with speakers both quoting and adapting the words of the master and focusing on the very episode of his life that could most easily be assimilated to the circumstances of Augustan rule: Cicero's conflict with Marcus Antonius (Sen. *Controv.* 7.2, *Suas.* 6, 7). As Harriet Flower reminds us (1996: 223–255), celebrations of genealogy such as the display of the *imagines maiorum* did not disappear with the coming of the Principate, although their political function for families other than the *gens Iulia* was now greatly muted. Actual orators must have attempted to adapt the topos *mortuos excitare* itself to the circumstances of imperial trials, since it reappears more than once in Quintilian.⁹ The political self-promotion of a speech like the *Pro Caelio* was simply incompatible with the circumstances of imperial rule, but this would not necessarily have diminished the attraction of a republican style of performance such as this one for Augustan poets and their audiences. Indeed, the political incompatibility of republican oratory with Augustan society is a determining factor in the rise of poetic *recitatio* among the Roman elite. For Maria Wyke, "As the institution of *recitatio* emerged so that of *oratio* disappeared, for with the establishment of the principate exercise of power moved [out of the hands of individual members of the elite] to the imperial palace" (2002: 182). *Recitationes* served a compensatory purpose for an elite deprived of traditional forms of self-expression and in search of new ones (cf. Dupont 1997).

Republican oratory's methods of foregrounding illustrious genealogy, as recalled and transformed in a poem such as Propertius 4.7, are likely to have attracted audiences of the Augustan elite. Such techniques could provide a poet with the authority inherent both in the forming of a bond with the past and in a traditional way of forming that bond. Propertius' celebration of erotic bonds connecting the living to the dead can be seen as a sly, witty imitation of Augustus' own restoration of republican traditions, a counter-genealogy expressed in mock oratorical performance; this might have been especially enticing to an Augustan audience. Propertius' own desire for a disruptive intervention in Augustan ideology is no doubt in part responsible for the fact that the poem can be understood in this fashion. But the full cultural significance of the poem is unlikely to emerge from a reading that begins from the perspective of Propertius' desire to subvert rather than the collective desire of his audience to find the past "restored" across the boundary of social and political upheaval that separated Republic from Principate. That is, while Propertius' personal nostalgia for republican oratory might be an unconvincing motivation for the form of *Elegy* 4.7 (since Propertius seems uninterested in oratory for the most part, and even recalls the moment

⁹ See above, 116, n. 6.

when he renounced the life of an advocate to become a poet [4.1.133–134]),¹⁰ it is more convincing to imagine that Propertius' audience as a whole wanted to find reminiscences of major republican cultural institutions, such as oratory, in the poetry they favored and that the pleasure they took in the reminiscence of an oratorical topos such as *mortuos ab inferis excitare* was different from the pleasure they took in, say, finding *militia* reworked into elegy's *militia amoris* or any number of epic conventions reworked into elegiac ones. For neither *militia* nor epic in general would have carried the connotations of *republican* culture that the evocation of the illustrious Roman dead in public oratory did. This style of performance was bound up in a far more intrinsic way with the zealous (and ruinous) political competition among aristocratic clans and their factions that had characterized the Republic's end and had become untenable in the new Principate.¹¹

Propertius' *Elegy* 4.7, when performed before an audience or even when read aloud privately, has the ritual effect of restaging a familiar mode of communal access to the past: the evocation of the dead in oratory. And if this was true for the Romans, so too, it turns out, is it true for us, in that our own discussions have come to restage the familiar drama of Propertius' engagement with the objects of his desire: Homeric poetry, Alexandrian poetics, Roman elegy, and a disruptive intervention in Augustan ideology (the last of which plays a part in the present reading). Ultimately, it would seem, our interpretations owe something to the form of the poem itself. We take our cue from Propertius' evocation of Cynthia to evoke our own Cynthias, whether they stand for a real love-affair, for poetry, or for a challenge to Roman constructions of the female. Or, in Duncan Kennedy's terms (1993: 85–86), we “mask appropriation” and “identify interpretation” with a “hermeneutics” that seeks out an originary meaning for the text, when, following the lead of “Propertius” (the author), we call up the ghost of Cynthia and render her knowable as a function of our passionate ancient love poet. The approach to *Elegy* 4.7 I have outlined here does not obviate the need to attribute desire to Propertius, the author: we still must imagine that Propertius desired to please his audience by appealing to a shared experience of political and cultural change. I am not claiming, that is, to offer some fundamentally different sort of reading from those of previous critics. But in shifting emphasis self-consciously from poet to audience, I do hope to have challenged an assumption apparently operative in much previous criticism, namely that *prioritizing* the “drama” of Propertius' personal engagement with the objects of his passion will yield a fully adequate interpretation of the poem.

Maria Wyke (2002: 189) has argued that appeals to performance in recent feminist study of elegiac gender play do not constitute what she describes,

¹⁰ An exception is *Elegy* 4.11, which includes overt reminiscences of legal and funerary oratory (see, e.g., Dufallo 2003: 171–177; Janan 2001: 146–163; Wyke 2002: 109, 113; Reitzenstein 1969).

¹¹ For the political motivations behind Cicero's use of the topos, see Dufallo 2001; on the politics of the *Pro Caelio* as a whole, see further Austin 1960: v–xvi; Gruen 1974: 305–309.

paraphrasing Duncan Kennedy (Kennedy 1993: 21–22), as a “return to the comforts of describing history or extratextual realities.” Rather, Wyke (2002: 189) maintains, from the perspective of such interpretations, Propertian elegy, “as a form of poetry recited before an audience of the Roman elite, . . . was part of an institutionalized system of representation—a social technology—through which gender was performed and, therefore, constructed at Rome.” We may say something similar of Roman elegy and its modern interpretation as performances of the relationship to the past. As scholars, we implicitly claim the capacity to stage such performances for each other and ourselves, but, in the case of *Elegy* 4.7 at least, this has meant denying a similar capacity to the Romans. Reframing our perspective on this poem may have the desirable effect of restoring to the Romans their capacity for collective desires that we simultaneously illuminate within ourselves.

Let me end with a different sort of backward glance. Another reason (in addition to those cited at the beginning of this essay) why privileging the social existence of tropes may be disturbing to conventional intentionalism is because it seems to shake reading’s moorings in literary chronology. Once we hear Cicero speaking within Propertius, Propertius’ “claim” to inhabit our reading of a text such as Cicero’s *Pro Caelio* becomes considerable, for the historically specific reason that Propertius is an index of the larger Roman collective for whom rhetorical tropes that Cicero favored took on different significance not long after the republican orator’s death. The Augustan elite was certainly not identical to its republican counterpart, but was nevertheless tied to it by shared social experiences as basic as education and, of course, the Latin language. Knowing that an Augustan poet adapted a particular trope to evoke a dead lover may make the republican orator’s use of the trope to evoke the long-dead patriarch of an aristocratic family suddenly more complex and unsettling. What intellectual and affective significance, we might ask, is latent in the earlier “political” use of the trope that makes its Propertian “personal” and “erotic” use possible, even desirable (to the Romans as well as to us)? And how might this alter our sense of the original “intentions” of an author such as Cicero? I leave these questions to a future study.

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