GENDER IDENTITY AND THE ELEGIAC HERO IN PROPERTIUS 2.1

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The elegiac lover's well-known stance of sexual servitude and his characterization of both himself and his verse as *mollis* establish a feminine persona for the male lover that becomes one of the chief *topoi* in elegiac poetry.[1] Of the elegiac poets, Propertius is often considered to be the inventor of the image of *servitium amoris*. Throughout the first three books of the *Elegies*, the Propertian lover appears hopelessly enslaved to a mistress he describes as *domina*. The elegiac enterprise in general, especially in Propertius' amatory texts, seems to subvert Roman conventions of masculinity by assigning to the male narrator traits typically associated with women: *servitium*, *mollitia*, and *levitas*. The male lover thus presents himself as devoted, dependent, and passive and, in turn, often depicts his mistress as *dura*. The gender inversion implicit in the narrator's stance ostensibly allows the Propertian lover to embrace a philosophy of life that overturns traditional gender roles and violates the principles under which women are subject to male authority.[2]

Indeed, one of the most striking features of Propertian elegy, as both Maria Wyke and Barbara Gold have argued, is the way the male narrator often takes "the woman's part," enacting what seems to be the woman's conventional role of subservience and "softness."[3] While, in the

1 For discussions of the image of the *servitium amoris* in Roman elegy, see, especially, Copley 1947, Day 1938, Kennedy 1993, Lyne 1979, McCarthy 1998, Veyne 1988.

2 See Hallett 1984, Wyke 1987 and 1989.

3 See, especially, Wyke 1994 and Gold 1993. Gold argues that Propertius destabilizes traditional Roman categories of gender by putting the male narrator "into play as the feminine."

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Monobiblos, Propertius largely maintains the fiction of gender reversal, the *amator* often undermines his own rhetoric of subservience by constructing mythological *exempla* that depict him in the role of rescuer, protector, and hero to a defenseless and captive mistress.[4] In this paper, I shall argue that the heroic persona the male lover *implicitly* imagines for himself in Book 1 becomes more overt in the second book. My study will focus on Propertius' programmatic poem 2.1, a text that offers a dramatic example of the ways in which the speaker in Book 2 vacillates between an image of himself as the *mollis* poet of elegy and an identification with the values and ideals associated with masculine epic.[5]

Throughout Book 2, the narrator identifies himself with the images of disease and vulnerability characteristically associated with the Sapphic and Catullan traditions of portraying *eros* as disintegrating and disabling to the lover.[6] Propertius carries on this tradition not only by having the male lover explicitly characterize himself as subject to the violent ravages of desire, but also by dramatizing the experience of fragmentation through the conflicting gender identities he associates with the male lover. Unlike the Catullan lover, the speaker in Propertius' poems does not try to overcome his "feminine" powerlessness and vulnerability by urging himself to exert the manly self-control and *dignitas* expected of any Roman male citizen wishing to live up to his social and moral obligations.[7] The Propertian *amator*, instead, expresses gender dissonance in the way he subtly shifts between epic and elegiac discourses and between conflicting images of himself and his mistress. Moreover, the increased association of the elegiac mistress with literary production in Book 2 heightens the ambivalent nature of the

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4 In Greene 1998, chapter 3, see my argument about how the *amator* in Book 1, despite his protestations of passivity and subservience, treats the elegiac mistress as a pictorial object that arouses the lover's erotic fantasies and serves as a vehicle for his artistic fame. See also McCarthy 1998. McCarthy argues that the elegists' assumption of a feminine persona allowed them a "vacation" from the vigilance and control required of them as members of the Roman male elite. While McCarthy's paper offers some interesting insights about the way elegy plays with the hierarchies in Roman culture, her essay does not explore the ways in which the *domina*'s apparent "autonomy" is part of a poetic strategy to reassert the authority of the male poetic voice. I attempt to argue for such a view in this paper.

5 Miller 1998 has an insightful discussion of Propertius' tendency, in Book 2, to vacillate between the discourses of elegy and epic.

6 On the *topos* of erotic disease in Greek poetry, see, especially, Cyrino 1995 and Carson 1986.

7 In Greene 1998 (chapters 1 and 2), see my discussion of moral discourses in Catullus. See also Edwards 1993.

speaker's gender identity and dramatizes more forcefully the *amator*'s vacillations between his identities as lover and poet.[8] Despite the narrator's repeated declarations that he rejects the more lofty occupation of epic poet, he, nonetheless, often identifies himself with the ideals and discourses of that manner of writing. In so doing, I shall argue, the Propertian speaker not only circumvents the feminine persona that he establishes for himself in the first book, he also reveals a discourse that often eludes categorization. To be sure, the fact that Propertius' elegiac discourse constantly resists formulation coincides with the problematization and destabilization of traditional generic categories in Augustan poetry.[9]

ELEGY 2.1

Propertius' opening programmatic poem takes the form of the *recusatio*, a form that traditionally refuses engagement with other kinds of discourse such as epic or encomium.[10] As Paul Allen Miller argues (1998), Propertius' opening poem shows that his project in Book 2 is based on both his refusal to embrace "normative Augustan discourse" and his acceptance of it. The speaker in the poem begins by describing his book as *mollis*, as soft and effeminate, and links this characterization with the announcement that his *puella* inspires him rather than Calliope or the Muses (1–4):

> Quaeritis, unde mihi totiens scribantur amores,
> unde meus veniat mollis in ora liber?
> non haec Calliope, non haec mihi cantat Apollo.
> ingenium nobis ipsa puella facit.

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8 See Wyke 1987 and 1989 on the image of Cynthia as a literary construction in Book 2 of Propertius' *Elegies*. Wyke argues persuasively that the elegiac mistress becomes equated with the elegiac book, and that "Cynthia's attributes and activities reveal her to be a written woman" (a *scripta puella*, 2.10.8), the marker of a Callimachean poetic practice. In other words, Cynthia's body constitutes the poetic corpus of the male narrator. On this point, see also Keith 1994 and Fredrick 1997.180ff.

9 This instability of genre in Augustan literature may be, in part, a function of the transition from Republic to Principate: a transition in which many of the traditional values of the *mos maiorum* were seriously undermined. For recent discussions of cultural "revolution" and the attendant *mutatio morum* in the wake of the establishment of the Principate, see Habinek and Schiesaro 1997 and Habinek 1998.

10 For discussions of the *recusatio* in Roman elegy, see, especially, Cahoon 1985, Lyne 1980, Ross 1975, Wyke 1987.

> You ask how love poems are written so often by me,
> how my book comes soft on the lips?
> Neither Calliope nor Apollo sings these songs for me.
> The woman herself makes my talent.[11]

At first, the speaker accords the mistress blanket authority by asserting that "the woman herself" (*ipsa puella*) gives rise to his poetic talent. The *amator*'s conventional stance of passivity is reinforced by the passive *scribantur* in line 1, while the mistress' active role is emphasized by the agency ascribed to her in *facit* at line 4. Indeed, the distinct active and passive roles traditionally associated with the mistress and the male lover seem to be reinforced by the speaker's use of *nobis* in line 4. In depicting himself as a passive recipient, the speaker uses the personal pronoun *mihi*, but then switches to the more impersonal *nobis* to describe the *ingenium* arising from *ipsa puella*. To be sure, the use of the first-person plural to refer to the speaker is a convention in Roman elegy. But here the abrupt change from *mihi* to *nobis* is striking and suggests a public dimension to the *puella*'s role in the production of literary discourse. This public dimension may recall the association of the elegiac mistress with the poet's *fama* in Book 1. In poem 1.11, for example, the figure of the beloved Cynthia is inextricably tied to her role as narrative *materia* in the poet's writing.[12] The speaker in 1.11 makes it clear that the poet's place in posterity is dependent on the mistress' own *fama* (in the double sense of Cynthia's "reputation" and her "fame" as the continuing subject of the poet's elegies). While, in 2.1, the speaker attributes agency to the *puella* in making her the "cause" of his poetic talent, the use of *nobis* in line 4 hints at an image of her as a vehicle for the speaker's artistic fame. The *puella* provokes *ingenium* not only for the speaker but, as *nobis* suggests, for the benefit of present and future audiences. It may also be argued that *nobis* alludes more specifically to the speaker and Maecenas, since the "you" of *quaeritis* refers to the speaker's immediate addressee, Maecenas. If that is the case, then the speaker implicitly privileges *amicitia* over *amor* here.[13] The speaker suggests that the *puella*, cast in the conventional role of *domina*, is herself the medium for an exchange between men.

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11 All translations are my own.

12 For a fuller argument concerning the elegiac mistress as *materia*, see Wyke 1987 and Greene 1995b.

13 In Oliensis 1997, see the discussion of the triangulation among client, patron, and *puella* in Tibullus 1.1.

In lines 5–8, the speaker goes on to provide a seemingly logical litany of cause and effect relationships between the mistress and the poetic skill she inspires.

> sive illam Cois fulgentem incedere vidi,
> totum de Coa veste volumen erit;
> seu vidi ad frontem sparsos errare capillos,
> gaudet laudatis ire superba comis;
>
> If I have seen her step forth in Coan silks,
> a whole book will emerge from her Coan garment;
> if I have seen her scattered locks wandering on her brow,
> proud, she enjoys walking with praised hair.

That logic dissolves at line 8 when the narrator tells us that once he has seen Cynthia's scattered locks, and has praised them, she walks proudly with "praised hair." The speaker's act of gazing at his mistress seems to be the cause of her *laudatis comis*. The speaker had asserted earlier that Cynthia "creates" his poetic talent, yet here it appears that the image of the mistress as *superba* depends on the poet's *ingenium* to praise her. The images of Cynthia as both joyful and *superba* derive syntactically from the speaker's actions of looking at her and being able to describe what he sees. It turns out, in fact, that the poet/lover is most inspired when the mistress is asleep; only then does he discover *causas mille novas* for his verse (11–14).

> seu compescentis somnum declinat ocellos,
> invenio causas mille poeta novas;
> seu nuda erepto mecum luctatur amictu,
> tum vero longas condimus Iliadas:
>
> or if requiring sleep she lets her eyelids fall,
> I, poet, discover a thousand new themes;
> or if, her dress torn off, she struggles naked with me,
> then, truly, I compose long *Iliads*.

In addition, after he describes Cynthia with her clothing "torn off," presumably by him, he proclaims that then he is able to compose *longae Iliadae*. In both instances, the *puella*'s position of vulnerability, either asleep or naked, leads to an intensification of the narrator's poetic talent—or at least to

fantasies of such talent arising in him. Despite his declarations that the *puella*'s words and deeds inspire him to write verse, he admits finally that a *maxima de nihilo nascitur historia* ("a great story is born out of nothing," 16). Given the authority and agency earlier accorded to the *puella*, the narrator's statement here seems paradoxical. The logic of the speaker's argument requires us to equate the "nothing" (*nihil*) that generates the speaker's verse with the mistress herself.

Interestingly, the word the *amator* uses to describe his new poetic inventions is *causas*, implying that he, rather than the mistress, is the *causa* of his own creations. In addition, we can observe a division in the speaker's presentation of himself; he shifts from speaking in the first person (*vidi*) to referring to himself, in the third person, as a *poeta*. The personas of fictive lover and elegiac poet seem to be split off from one another and to be linked with gendered modes of speech. The lover who speaks in the first person (*mihi* and *vidi*) identifies himself with the *mollis* mode of speech associated with elegy, while the *poeta,* in line 12, implicitly imagines himself in a position of dominance over a sleeping and naked mistress. It is that dominance that apparently gives rise to his grandiose fantasies of literary production. Moreover, the poem's seemingly univocal elegiac discourse is quickly disrupted by allusions to epic. They begin with references to amorous violence in line 13, and continue with the announcement that such violence provokes the narrator to write his own long epics (Miller 1998.3). Despite his avowed rejection of epic poetry, the speaker, in his identity as *poeta*, links himself not only to the masculine genre of epic but also to the traditional gender hierarchies associated with that genre. As *poeta*, the speaker constructs a *maxima historia* out of a woman, or *de nihilo*.

Further, by describing his slender verse in epic terms, the speaker undermines his own claim that epic lies beyond his grasp. Casting elegy in terms of epic diminishes the distance between these seemingly opposite modes of composition and, moreover, calls into question the autonomy of the very categories of epic and elegy, *mollis* and *durus*, that his *recusatio* is predicated upon. More generally, elegy's resistance to traditional values and literary genres emphasizes its multivocal nature.[14] It may also be argued that genres, in general, are constituted through a dialectical relationship with

14 I thank the anonymous reader for suggesting a greater emphasis on the ways in which elegy constantly calls into question the terms of its own generic category. On this point, see Edwards 1996.53–63.

other genres.[15] Indeed, throughout 2.1, Propertius identifies elegy as a generic category precisely through its opposition to epic, thus suggesting that elegy derives its meaning, its "borders," through constant reference to what is *other*. In line 14, the speaker asserts that amatory struggle gives rise to the production of epic; his *longae Iliadae* are not offered as analogies to elegiac verse. Rather, the speaker states that amatory experience—in particular the defenseless position of the *puella*—leads directly to epic composition. The *amator* thus elevates his own long tale of amatory troubles to epic proportions, implying that *amor* is as worthy a subject of commemoration as military conquest. Not only, as Duncan Kennedy suggests, does the *puella* replace the *hostis* of epic, but the male lover also re-configures a position for himself as a hero worthy of confronting an adversary he describes here and throughout the elegies as *dura*—the elegiac mistress.[16]

The conflation of epic and elegiac discourses, and of the speaker's position as lover and poet, is reinforced when the speaker addresses Maecenas directly in line 17 and provides him with a list of epic subjects he cannot undertake. Naming Maecenas, however, in the context of the speaker's *recusatio,* explicitly introduces another relationship that ostensibly aligns the speaker with the rhetoric of subservience associated with the effeminate lover. As Ellen Oliensis argues, the asymmetry in the client-patron relationship mirrors the fiction of gender reversal in the bond between lover and beloved depicted in elegy.[17] The mention of Maecenas' name not only evokes the "network of relations between men" in Roman society, but also underscores Maecenas' superior status as well as the speaker's avowed position of erotic subjection.[18] Oliensis argues, however, that the client's subordinate status links him with the beloved rather than the lover, since the lover only feigns subservience while the client experiences it.[19] On the surface, the association of Maecenas with male public culture is reinforced

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15 See, especially, Derrida 1991.256–68 and 1992.221–52. Derrida argues that a text can never belong merely to the genre it mentions, that it always exceeds the limits that bring it into being. "Every text," Derrida writes, "*participates* in one or several genres, there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging. . . . In marking itself generically, a text unmarks itself" (1992.230).

16 For a discussion of the elegiac lover's characterization of his mistress as *dura*, see Kennedy 1993.31–33, Greene 1995, Miller 1998.

17 Oliensis 1997. Oliensis argues that the fictional subjection of the elegiac lover provides compensation for and escape from the realities of the poet's subordination to a patron.

18 Oliensis 1997.152.

19 Oliensis 1997.153.

by the inclusion of his name in the speaker's list of masculine subjects for song that he rejects. Indeed, the narrator's long excursus on the history of epic themes, from the battle of the Titans through Augustus' glorious feats, sustains the speaker's identification with epic ideals implicitly expressed earlier in his description of the elegiac enterprise in terms of masculine epic. Moreover, the highly embellished language with which the speaker presents these epic themes, ironically, attests to his ability to memorialize epic achievements with as much skill as he describes his amorous exploits.

After his demonstration of poetic virtuosity, the speaker assures his patron that if he were to write encomiastic epic, his muse (*mea Musa*) would "interweave" (*contexeret*) Maecenas into his epic themes (25–26, 35–38).

> bellaque resque tui memorarem Caesaris, et tu
> Caesare sub magno cura secunda fores.
>
> I would commemorate your Caesar's wars and deeds, and you,
> after the great Caesar, would be my second care.
>
> te mea Musa illis semper contexeret armis,
> et sumpta et posita pace fidele caput.
> Theseus infernis, superis testatur Achilles,
> hic Ixioniden, ille Menoetiaden;
>
> You my Muse would always weave into these exploits,
> you, loyal soul, in taking up or rejecting peace.
> Theseus in the underworld, Achilles in the world of men
> bore witness, the one for Pirithous, the other for Patroklos.

Earlier, the speaker identified *ipsa puella* as his source of inspiration in place of the Muses. The reference here to *mea Musa* thus weaves an image of the elegiac mistress into images of war, again linking the production of elegy with that of epic and also conflating the normative gender roles associated with those genres. This conflation is reinforced by the speaker's promise to Maecenas that any commemoration he might offer to Augustus would also celebrate Maecenas. Ellen Oliensis points out that "*amicitia* and *amor* are not only cognate," but that they have analogous hierarchical structures. She argues, rightly, that what matters most in the sexual ideology of Rome is not the gender of the participants, but their positions as active or passive partners. Oliensis also argues that the asymmetrical client-patron relation-

ship often has a sexual component, and we can see implications of this in Propertius' presentation of the speaker's relationship to Maecenas (Oliensis 1997.154–55).

The supposed subordination in the speaker's relationship to his patron is called into question in a number of ways. Camps asserts (1967.68) that Propertius had adequate means so as not to need a patron. If that was true, then it is possible that the relationship implied in the speaker's address to Maecenas is of a more intimate nature than that between client and patron, or at least we may say that the relationship—particularly its hierarchical structure—is indeterminate. Indeed, unlike Tibullus, who specifically celebrates Messalla's military exploits in the context of his *recusatio*, the Propertian poet/lover imagines Maecenas only as a fiction within his creative universe.[20] The speaker tells Maecenas that after he commemorates the wars and deeds of Caesar, he (Maecenas) will be his *secunda cura*. The use of the word *cura* to describe what Maecenas means to the speaker seems to emphasize a more personal bond between them. Although *cura* can signify an object of literary study, it also often carries implications of concern and devotion. The word stands out especially in contrast to the list of the abstract, impersonal glories of epic heroes, including those of Augustus. Moreover, the affectionate manner with which the speaker refers to Maecenas in line 36, *fidele caput*, heightens the personal nature of his address to his putative patron.[21] Such a personal address has a disruptive quality in the context of the speaker's litany of Augustus' achievements—all of which involve the impersonal destruction of people and places (27–34).

> nam quotiens Mutinam aut civilia busta Philippos
> aut canerem Siculae classica bella fugae,
> eversosque focos antiquae gentis Etruscae,
> et Ptolemaeei litora capta Phari,
> aut canerem Aegyptum et Nilum, cum attractus in urbem
> septem captivis debilis ibat aquis,
> aut regum auratis circumdata colla catenis,
> Actiaque in Sacra currere rostra Via;

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20 In *Elegy* 1.1.53–58, Tibullus refuses Messala's invitation to join him on military campaign, yet praises his excellence in battle and predicts his inevitable success.

21 In Book 4 of Propertius' *Elegies* (11.55), the speaker refers to his mother as *dulce caput*. Also, Camps 1967.70 points out that, in the *Aeneid,* Dido refers to Aeneas as *infandum caput* (*Aen*. 4.613).

> For as often as I sang of Mutina or Philippi,
> that compatriots' graveyard, or the naval battle,
> the rout at Sicily, the ruined hearths of Etruria's
> ancient race, and the captured shores near Ptolemy's
> lighthouse, or I sang of Egypt and the Nile,
> when dragged into Rome, it went feebly with its
> seven streams captive, or the necks of kings circled with
> golden chains, or beaked ships running along the Sacred Way.

The speaker's reference to Maecenas as *fidelis*, an attribute associated in elegy with ideal relations between the lover and his mistress, further links *amor* and *amicitia*. It also conflates the distinction between masculine power relations implicit in the client-patron relationship and the more disreputable (feminine) sphere of amatory relations. The manly pledges between client and patron contained in the concept of *fides* are closely tied to the vows lovers make to one another. In addition, as Oliensis points out (1997.153), the presence of a patron's name in elegiac verse adds a public dimension to the poetry and also calls to mind the "extraliterary" reality of the social and sexual subordination at the heart of the client-patron relationship. However, the speaker in 2.1, while personalizing his address to Maecenas, nonetheless makes it clear that Maecenas would exist in his poems as a *name in a text*. Like the elegiac mistress, Maecenas, as another theme in the poet's verse, would be subject to the rhetorical control of the speaker. The patron's *fama*, like the *puella*'s, would depend on the poet endowing him with the heroic attributes worthy of inclusion in commemorative verse.

Indeed, the speaker's mythological comparisons between his would-be celebration of Maecenas and the commemorations of Achilles and Theseus for their companions seem to reinforce the speaker's privileging of *amicitia* over *amor* and to underscore the hierarchies in the client-patron relationship. Yet the speaker's implicit comparison of himself to Theseus and Achilles positions the speaker as a figure of heroic proportions whose own fame guarantees the fame of his comrade. As a Theseus or Achilles, the speaker clearly imagines himself in a position, not of subordination to his patron, but of superiority in terms of his ability to confer *fama*. The allusion to Achilles, however, has more ambiguous implications regarding the speaker's gender identity. The interpolation of strong homosocial bonds into epic encomium links the *amator* to a mode of speech that may be identified as feminine. In the *Iliad*, Achilles' withdrawal from battle signifies his alienation from warrior culture. Achilles only returns to battle as a result of

his passionate devotion to Patroklos and not out of a sense of civic duty. Achilles' chief mode of commemoration for Patroklos is lamentation, a form of discourse that aligns him with the marginalized position of women in Greek society.[22] Further, the theme of lamentation in the *Iliad* also implicitly contests the dominant ideology of Homer's poem that celebrates the *kleos* achieved by the warrior in battle. The identification of the Propertian speaker with Achilles thus may connect the *amator* not only with modes of speech associated with women but also with a form of discourse that suggests criticism of the prevailing social order. Although the speaker lists Augustus' conquests in order to tell Maecenas the subjects about which he will *not* be writing, the lengths he goes to do that suggest that, perhaps, he wants to remind his audience of the destruction and losses perpetrated by the Emperor. Further, the emphatic position of *te* in line 35 reinforces a contrast between the bellicose exploits of Augustus and the peaceful activities of Maecenas (*te mea Musa illis semper contexeret armis, / et sumpta et posita pace fidele caput*.) The *amator*'s promise to "interweave" a commemoration of Maecenas into a tribute to Augustus suggests the intrusion of a celebration of personal bonds into public praise. It also reinforces the paradoxical nature of the speaker's discourse, exemplified by his refusal to perform the traditional encomiastic function of the poet at the same time as he demonstrates his poetic skill in celebrating heroic exploits—including those of Maecenas.[23]

Although the speaker vows that Maecenas would be his *secunda cura*, he ends his litany of heroic accomplishments not by mentioning Augustus but by praising Maecenas' *fides*. The emphasis on personal loyalty, presented in the context of epic discourse, furnishes a link between the epic subjects rejected by the speaker and the production of elegy. Maecenas' *fides* is the very same attribute the elegiac lover perpetually calls for in his mistress. In lines 39–46, the speaker renews his commitment to the more personal subjects typically treated in elegy.

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22 On Achilles' association with "feminine" lamentation in the *Iliad*, see Foley 1993 and Murnaghan 1998.

23 See Gale 1997. Gale argues that Propertius misreads the *Iliad* as a work of love-poetry and thus undermines his assertion that elegy is as good a genre as epic. As I have been arguing in this paper, however, the Propertian speaker's identification with masculine epic underscores the indeterminacy of Propertius' elegiac discourse.

sed neque Phlegraeos Iovis Enceladique tumultus
intonet angusto pectore Callimachus,
nec mea conveniunt duro praecordia versu
Caesaris in Phrygios condere nomen avos.
navita de ventis, de tauris narrat arator,
enumerat miles vulnera, pastor oves;
nos contra angusto versamus proelia lecto:
qua pote quisque, in ea conterat arte diem.

But Callimachus with his slender breast would not
sound the strife of Jove and Enceladus at Phlegra,
nor is my temperament fit to put into the harsh strains
of epic verse the name of Caesar among his Phrygian
ancestors.
The sailor tells of winds, the ploughman of oxen,
the soldier counts his wounds, the shepherd his sheep;
but I wage my own battles on a narrow bed:
let each man spend his days in whatever art he is able.

The speaker invokes Callimachus in order to reaffirm his aversion to epic poetry. But the narrator's statement that his temperament (*praecordia*) precludes him from preserving the name of Caesar seems ironic in light of his earlier highly descriptive, poetic catalogue of Augustus' epic feats. Moreover, the description of epic as *durus versus* resonates with the *amator*'s characterization of the *puella* as *dura*. That the speaker attributes the same trait to his mistress as he does to epic suggests not only an intertwining of public and private discourses, but also a subversion of the speaker's avowed feminine stance. While he claims that the *durus versus* of epic is beyond the capability of the "soft" poet, he embraces the same quality of *duritia* as a subject for his elegiac verse. It is that attribute of *durus* that provides the material from which the *amator* composes his *maxima historia*. How soft can the soft poet be if his chief subject is *dura*?

Despite his protestations, the speaker continues to characterize effeminized elegy in terms of masculine epic. In lines 45–46, he uses a military metaphor to describe his amorous exploits: *nos contra angusto versamus proelia lecto*.[24] Although the speaker insists that every man, no

24 See Cahoon 1988 for a discussion of the use of military metaphors in Ovid's *Amores*. Cahoon's analysis may be usefully applied to Propertius as well.

matter what his occupation, has only one subject to tell ("the sailor his winds, the ploughman his oxen," etc.), his own discourse remains decidedly indeterminate. The implicit characterization of his verse as *angustus*, the same adjective used of Callimachus, signifies the position of the elegiac lover as *mollis*. But the representation of amatory activity as *proelia* and the use of a verb denoting vigorous manly exertion (*versamus*) to describe the particular occupation of the elegiac poet identify the speaker with the *durus* style of epic.[25] In the next stanza, however, the speaker seems to offer a positive affirmation of his commitment to love poetry—to the *levis* style of poetic discourse (47–56).

> laus in amore mori: laus altera, si datur uno
> posse frui: fruar o solus amore meo,
> si memini, solet illa levis culpare puellas,
> et totam ex Helena non probat Iliada.
> seu mihi sunt tangenda novercae pocula Phaedrae,
> pocula privigno non nocitura suo,
> seu mihi Circaeo pereundum est gramine, sive
> Colchis Iolciacis urat aena focis,
> una meos quoniam praedata est femina sensus,
> ex hac ducentur funera nostra domo.
>
> To die in love is glory: and a second glory, if it is given
> to be able to enjoy one love: oh may I alone enjoy my
> love. If I recall, she used to blame fickle girls, and
> because of Helen disapproves of the whole *Iliad*.
> Even if I am doomed to taste the potion of step-mother
> Phaedra, a potion not destined to harm her stepson,
> or if I must die of Circe's herbs, or if the Colchian witch
> should heat her cauldron on the hearths of Iolcus,
> since one woman has plundered my senses,
> from her house my funeral will set out.

The speaker circumvents the putative opposition between epic and elegiac poetry by linking *amor* to images of death and glory. The repetition of the word *laus* and its emphatic position in line 47 give greater prominence to the

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25 Camps 1967.72 points out that Propertius' use of *versamus* here is equivalent to *agitamus*: a word that connotes forceful activity, even hunting.

epic goal of glory in death than to the elegiac aspiration to possess the beloved expressed in line 48. What is most intriguing about the speaker's characterization of his mistress in this stanza is the way he describes her as implicitly condemning the very style of verse in which she is the chief subject. The kind of girls the mistress finds fault with are described as *levis*: the same adjective used of the poet's own elegiac verse. In addition, the speaker tells us that Cynthia censures the "whole *Iliad*." Earlier in the poem, the *amator* referred to his own poetic compositions as *longae Iliadae*, and declared the *puella* to be the source of his inspiration for these poems. The mistress ostensibly repudiates the *Iliad* because she disapproves of Helen's infidelity. This is highly ironic in light of the fact that, throughout the *Elegies,* Cynthia's own infidelity is constantly bemoaned by the *amator*. It is also ironic that, as the *levis* subject of elegy, the mistress castigates other *levis puellas*. On the one hand, the speaker depicts his mistress here as *dura*, as implicitly rejecting the style and substance of his poetry—and hence of him as well. But, on the other hand, the contradictions in the mistress' attitudes call into question her role as the poet's muse. The speaker's exposure of Cynthia's hypocrisy here suggests that the image of the *amator* as a man ravaged by desire is a rhetorical stance adopted by the speaker in service to his art. Furthermore, the speaker's association of Cynthia with mythical female sorceresses, each one more diabolical than the next, invokes stereotypical views of women as themselves incapable of controlling their sexual desires.

In light of this implied invective toward women in general and Cynthia in particular, the speaker's expression of fidelity in lines 55–56 seems not only hyperbolic but also part of his continued strategy to ally the elegiac enterprise with the heroic values of epic. On the one hand, the speaker links himself to the tradition of love lyric by describing his emotional condition as an incurable disease. On the other hand, the speaker again evokes an image of glory in death through an association between his fidelity to one woman (*una femina*) and his future funeral rites. In lines 57–70, the speaker catalogues the legendary cures of famous epic heroes apparently in order to highlight, by contrast, the incurability of love.

> omnis humanos sanat medicina dolores:
> solus amor morbi non amat artificem.
> tarda Philoctetae sanavit crura Machaon,
> Phoenicis Chiron lumina Phillyrides,
> et deus exstinctum Cressis Epidaurius herbis

restituit patriis Androgeona focis,
Mysus et Haemonia iuvenis qua cuspide vulnus
senserat, hac ipsa cuspide sensit opem.
hoc si quis vitium poterit mihi demere, solus
Tantaleae poterit tradere poma manu;
dolia virgineis idem ille repleverit urnis,
ne tenera assidua colla graventur aqua;
idem Caucasia solvet de rupe Promethei
bracchia et a medio pectore pellet avem.

Medicine cures all human sorrows:
only love does not love the healer of disease.
Machaon cured the lame legs of Philoctetes,
Chiron the eyes of Phoenix son of Phillyra,
and the Epidaurian god with his Cretan herbs
restored lifeless Androgeon to his father's hearth;
and the Mysian youth from that Haemonian spear by which
he felt his wound, then felt his cure.
If anyone can remove this defect from me, he alone
can put fruit into Tantalus' hand;
he, too, will fill the vessels from the maidens' jars,
lest their delicate necks be weighed down with constant water;
and he too will free Prometheus' arms from
the Caucasian cliff and drive the bird from the middle of his chest.

The speaker emphasizes in these lines the incurability of *his* affliction when compared with those of famous heroes. The use of the word *vitium* to describe the speaker's ailment appears to accentuate its irremediability, since it is a word sometimes used to characterize a defect that cannot be eradicated. It seems that the speaker presents himself here in the Catullan tradition of portraying the lover as someone whose moral failings prevent him from achieving the *sanitas* he claims to desire.[26] Like the Catullan lover,

26 In poem 76, the Catullan lover explicitly links mental and physical health with giving up unrequited desire. See a discussion of this in Greene 1995a.

the speaker in Propertius' poem also reveals an ambivalence in his attitude toward his supposed shortcoming. While Catullus correlates the sickness of the lover with the detrimental effects of unrequited love, Propertius refers to the lover's *vitium* in the context of a *recusatio*, the incapacity of the poet to take up the more challenging strains of epic poetry. The moral distress of the lover often evinced in Catullus' poems seems to be completely absent in Propertius' poem. Thus, the use of *vitium* to describe what is little more than an aesthetic deficiency suggests melodrama rather than moral ineptitude. In addition, the credibility of the speaker's reference to his condition as a *vitium* is undermined by his earlier statement that *laus in amore mori* ("To die in love is glory"). It is clearly a contradiction for the speaker to say, on the one hand, that *amor* constitutes a defect of character and, on the other hand, that it engenders virtue (*laus*) or is at least worthy of praise. How can a *vitium* produce glory or even praise for the speaker—considering the connotations of moral depravity contained in *vitium*? The association of *amor* and glory is also evident in the mythological *exempla* the speaker uses to support his claim that his "defect" is supposedly incurable.

The speaker attests to the hopelessness of his situation by saying that if he can be cured, then surely the impossible dilemmas of Tantalus, the Danaids, and Prometheus can be solved. The speaker seems to reinforce his own *vitium* by comparing himself to figures in myth who are notorious for the punishments they receive as a result of their *vitia*. The punishments of both Tantalus and the Danaids represent frustrated human endeavor, the perpetual but futile attempts to satisfy human desire. That particular aspect of their situations clearly mirrors the speaker's own often fruitless efforts to win Cynthia's love. The implicit identification of the speaker with the Danaids, who are presented sympathetically despite their crime of killing their husbands, underscores the speaker's avowed position of feminine powerlessness and vulnerability. But the image of the Danaids also reinforces the invective against women implicit in the earlier images of mythical witches whose powers constitute a threat to masculine sexuality and authority.

Tantalus and Prometheus both represent figures who resist divine authority, and thus the images of them here may call to mind the elegiac lover's oppositional stance toward Augustan ideology.[27] In particular, the association of the speaker with Prometheus suggests that there is irony in the

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27 See Miller and Platter 1999 for a discussion of Roman elegy's resistance to traditional Augustan values. See also Platter 1995 and Edwards 1996.

speaker's characterization of his condition as a *vitium*. First, the fact that Prometheus is freed from his bondage by Heracles undercuts the speaker's implicit argument that his situation is more impossible than that of Prometheus. Second, Prometheus is known in antiquity, not for his moral failings, but for his courageous defiance of the gods and his association with the origins of fire. Indeed, the most prominent (surviving) portrait of Prometheus comes from Aeschylus who depicts him as a culture-hero, responsible for expanding man's skills and spheres of knowledge. The speaker's identification with Prometheus seems to emphasize the glory that comes from heroic action, in particular, from action that claims for man an individual voice in the face of arbitrary authority. The speaker's abject status as lover, his choice to write elegy rather than epic, thus can hardly be considered a *vitium* in light of his identification with Prometheus. Rather, the *amor* that constitutes the *amator*'s seemingly incurable disease is what defines his place in posterity and guarantees for him, as for Prometheus, mythical status. Indeed, in the last stanza of the poem, the speaker expresses intense concern for what posterity will say of him (71–78).

quandocumque igitur vitam mea fata reposcent,
  et breve in exiguo marmore nomen ero,
Maecenas, nostrae spes invidiosa iuventae,
  et vitae et morti gloria iusta meae,
si te forte meo ducet via proxima busto,
  esseda caelatis siste Britanna iugis,
taliaque illacrimans mutae iace verba favillae:
  "Huic misero fatum dura puella fuit."

When, therefore, the fates claim my life,
  and I will be a brief name on meager marble,
Maecenas, the hope and envy of our youth,
  and the rightful boast of my life and death,
if by chance your path should bring you near my tomb,
  halt your British chariot with its carved yoke,
and, weeping, lay these words on my silent ashes:
  "A harsh girl was the doom of this wretched man."

This last stanza conveys the poem's characteristically oxymoronic style. The speaker begins by expressing an identification with the *levis* style of elegy; like his slender verse, the speaker's name will be *brevis* and his

tomb merely *exiguus*. The invocation of Maecenas, however, once again brings into focus the world of male public culture, but also underscores the close association of *amicitia* and *amor*. The description of Maecenas as "the hope and envy of our youth" recalls the sexual connotations in the speaker's earlier affectionate personal references to his patron. Moreover, in the process of declaring the *dura puella* to be the defining feature of his life, the speaker calls Maecenas his *iusta gloria* in life and death. Such an approbation suggests that the speaker regards Maecenas at least as much the source of his potential *fama* as the mistress herself. Indeed, the fact that the *gloria* Maecenas brings to the speaker is described as *iusta* suggests a symmetry between the speaker and his addressee. Further, the double images of Maecenas as warrior (in his British chariot) *and* lover (the envy of Roman youth) in this stanza resonate with the conflation of epic and elegiac discourses earlier in the poem and also with the speaker's own vacillations between the personas of abject lover and masculine hero. Although the speaker assumes a posture of self-effacement at the beginning of the stanza, his use of imperatives in his address to Maecenas (*siste*, *iace*) again suggests that it is the speaker—*qua poeta*—who endows his addressee with the praise that ensures his *kleos*. It is also the speaker who composes his own epitaph, an epitaph that appears simply to commemorate the *dura puella* and to sustain the speaker's position as the effeminate poet/lover.

On the one hand, the speaker evokes the characteristically unstable emotional condition of the lover by referring to himself as *miser* and also by attributing to the *puella* the cause of his *fatum*. On the other hand, the logic of the poem depends on equating the *puella* with the poet's *ingenium*, and thus with the praise and glory the speaker explicitly links to both love and death. Although the speaker rejects the *durus versus* of epic, he embraces the epic ideal of glory in death. The speaker's characterization of Cynthia as *dura* not only identifies elegy with epic, but also suggests that the style and substance of the elegist's preferred mode of poetic composition cannot be reduced to neat classifications of genre. If the mistress, as Wyke argues, is to be equated with the narrator's poetics, then the characterization of her as *dura* also suggests that elegy is as rigorous a form of discourse as epic (Wyke 1987, 1989). Despite his protestations, the speaker, in the end, implicates himself in the world of Maecenas. Although the speaker appears to reinforce his identity as the soft poet of elegy, the image of Maecenas proclaiming over the speaker's ashes in his chariot of conquest imparts an air of epic grandiosity to the scene of death imagined by the speaker. And

although the speaker tells Maecenas to pay tribute to his "silent ashes," the speaker's voice at the end is anything but silent.

While elegy itself is defined as *mollis,* and is thus discursively aligned with the feminine, the *puella* herself (*ipsa puella*) has been rendered subject to the poetic control of the speaker, who begets his *maxima historia* from the raw material (*de nihilo*) she supplies. Further, the assertion that the *dura puella* is the speaker's *fatum* echoes his earlier association of *amor* and glory ("To die in love is glory"). At the end, the speaker imagines himself fulfilling this dictum, achieving the glory worthy of a great epic hero. It is Maecenas and the male audience he represents who are described as conferring on the speaker his *iusta gloria*. That the speaker describes the *fama* Maecenas brings to him as *iusta* suggests a reciprocity between the two men that is nearly always lacking in the imagined relationship between the lover and his mistress. The image of the *puella*, it seems, merely provides the means through which one man can pay tribute to another. The true *fama* the speaker envisions for himself issues from the homosocial bonds that not only constitute the fabric of Roman society, but also comprise an aesthetic space in which the elegiac poet can define himself as a "hero" in a set of shifting discursive relations of both gender and genre.[28]

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