

Acanthis Steals the Poet's Voice: A Re-Reading of Propertian Elegy

Speech is the greatest power in Roman love elegy. It is the Propertian poet-lover's most important tool. Through speech, specifically his poetry, the poet can attain fame and claim immortality for himself and for others: he glorifies his patron Maecenas (3.9) and memorializes Cynthia with praise (2.15) or disgrace (2.11). Most importantly, speech is the means by which he seduces his mistress. A distinctive feature of Propertian elegy, however, is the amount of space it grants to female speech, chiefly in Book 4 where, as this paper argues, women effectively steal the poet's voice and force a re-evaluation of the elegiac love relationship.

Throughout the first three books of Propertian elegy, the poet-lover's voice is dominant. Granting only two glimpses into the viewpoint of his beloved (1.3, 2.29), the male poet retains control of the elegiac medium and encourages his readers to accept as uncontested and genuine his description of the relationship. But the innovative elegies of Book Four infuse Propertian elegy with a new set of female perspectives. Among the most notable is that of the *lena* Acanthis.

In poem 4.5, Acanthis, in a forty-two line speech, addresses the *puella*, offering practical and cynical advice for reaping the maximum benefits from her lovers. Acanthis is the poet's greatest foe. Her precepts threaten the poet-lover and the effectiveness of his verse. To every argument the poet-lover puts forth, the *lena* offers a counter-argument that is destructive to his efforts. He boasts that poetry is more alluring to Cynthia than the trivial luxuries of a wealthy praetor (1.8). The *lena* inverts this argument for a practical agenda—namely, to capitalize on profit. She instructs the *puella* that poetry is worthless (54).

A number of scholars have demonstrated that the opposing precepts of the *lena* both expose the underbelly of elegy and offer a new understanding of the dynamics of relationship (Janan, Gutzwiller, O'Neill, James). I contend, however, that the greatest threat Acanthis poses to the poet-lover is her elegiac speech. She usurps the poet's voice and uses his poetic language to expose a number of social and economic realities that he ignores. Her elegiac verse pinpoints ironies, hypocrisies, and misleading statements of the poet.

In her advice to the *puella*, Acanthis extracts arguments from each of the books of poetry, in chronological order (*Coae textura*, 23 also in 1.2; *puros Isidis esse dies*, 34, in 2.33; *morsus circa tua colla*, 39 in 3.8). Through continual allusions to previous elegies (21-23, 29-30, 33-34, 39, 44, 47-58) Acanthis confronts and challenges the authority of the male poet-lover. Each allusion encourages the reader to return to those verses and to reconsider the situation of the *puella*. Acanthis instructs the *puella* to put off a lover by feigning that she must observe the rites of Isis. In 2.33, the poet-lover pathetically laments this religious observance and the separation from Cynthia. In two climactic lines of her speech, 55-56, Acanthis quotes two verses from poem 1.2, in which the poet attempts to persuade Cynthia that luxurious goods and heavy make-up are detrimental to her beauty, and in doing so, to direct her from wealthy suitors to his poetry. The *lena* employs these very lines to teach the *puella* the superiority of wealth over poetry. Her instructions call to attention Cynthia's social position as courtesan, a life in which fidelity to one man is impractical and insufficient for maintaining a living. By stealing the poet's speech she undermines the male poet-lover and throws his account of the relationship into question.

The effectiveness of her speaking powers is demonstrated by the final verses of 4.5 in which the poet, having had his own words taken from him, is left with nothing but bitter curses to cast against the *lena*. Acanthis renders her opponent inarticulate and powerless. Until the fourth book of poetry, Propertius' elegies have been limited to the narrow viewpoint of the lover-poet. By usurping the role of speaker and turning the words of the lover-poet back upon him, Acanthis provides the audience a counterpoint to the previous three books of the corpus. Her voice exposes various realities of the female experience—sexual, economic, and emotional—that undermine the authority of the male poet and hint at the subversive potential of elegiac discourse.

Works Cited

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