

THE  
EROTICS OF  
DOMINATION  
*Male Desire*

*and the Mistress*

*in Latin Love Poetry*

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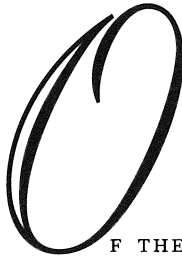
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## Elegiac Woman

### Fantasy, *Materia*, and Male Desire in Propertius' *Monobiblos*



OF THE ELEGIAC POETS, Propertius is considered by many to be the inventor of the image of the *servitium amoris*.<sup>1</sup> The Propertian lover appears to demonstrate *par excellence* the elegiac *topos* of the male narrator as enslaved and the female narrative subject as his enslaver. As I will argue in this chapter, however, despite Propertius' realist narrative strategies, particularly in Book 1, the elegiac woman is not portrayed primarily as a beloved but rather as narrative *materia* in the poet's literary discourse. In two recent essays on deciphering the "real" existences of elegiac mistresses,<sup>2</sup> Maria Wyke offers a compelling argument that "Cynthia is depicted as matter for poetic composition, not as a woman to be wooed through writing." Wyke applies her argument mainly to Books 2–4 and maintains that Book 1 stresses the portrayal of Cynthia as a flesh and blood woman who does not become intimately associated with the practice of writing until Book 2. I will argue, however, that even in Book 1, despite her apparent dramatic presence, Cynthia is depicted primarily as a "woman in a text"—a text that inscribes male desire and also reflects the self-conscious literary concerns of the poet. My analyses of Propertius' amatory texts will take into account what has, for the most part, been ignored: the gender specificity of Propertius' portrayals of Cynthia and of the ways desire is constituted in his poems.

Because of their emphasis on devices of realism, the poems in the *Monobiblos* provide fruitful opportunities for an examination of Propertius' depiction of Cynthia as beloved and as narrative *materia*. Through an analysis of four poems from the *Monobiblos*, I will show that Propertius presents his elegiac mistress as a pictorial *object* that arouses the lover's erotic fantasies *and* serves as a vehicle for his artistic fame. Even though Propertius represents Cynthia as both *dura* (strong) and *docta* (learned), the male narrator in Book 1 often imagines his mistress either in an ideal state of captivity and helplessness, or he identifies her exclusively with a nonrational nature. Further, I will argue that even in poems that emphasize most clearly the *amator's* subservience toward Cynthia, as in the opening elegy, Propertius nonetheless portrays her as little more than a vehicle for his artistic fame and a function of his literary discourse. Despite the appearance of a more or less egalitarian union between men and women in Propertian elegy (e.g., Georg Luck asserted that elegists "honestly believed in the equality of women"),<sup>3</sup> I believe that an examination of poems in the first book shows that amatory relations in Propertius' elegies are closely bound up with the "realities" of male domination and power. Cynthia is often depicted either as a helpless victim who needs the guardianship of her male lover *or* as a creature of uncontrolled passion and emotion — a potentially dangerous source of disorder.

### *Elegy 1.1*

Because of its programmatic nature and its apparent reliance on devices of realism, Propertius' first elegy in the *Monobiblos* is a good place to begin our discussion of his portrayal of Cynthia as a woman in a text and to examine how male desire is inscribed in poems that appear to emphasize the speaker's helplessness and passivity.

Cynthia prima suis miserum me cepit ocellis,  
 contactum nullis ante cupidinibus.  
 tum mihi constantis deiecit lumina fastus  
 et caput impositis pressit Amor pedibus,  
 5 donec me docuit castas odisse puellas  
 improbus, et nullo vivere consilio.  
 et mihi iam toto furor hic non deficit anno,  
 cum tamen adversos cogor habere deos.  
 Milanion nullos fugiendo, Tulle, labores  
 10 saevitiam durae contudit Iasidos.  
 nam modo Partheniis amens errabat in antris,  
 ibat et hirsutas ille videre feras;

ille etiam Hylaei percussus vulnere rami  
 saucius Arcadiis rupibus ingemuit.  
 15 ergo velocem potuit domuisse puellam:  
 tantum in amore preces et bene facta valent.  
 in me tardus Amor non ullas cogitat artis,  
 nec meminit notas, ut prius, ire vias.  
 at vos, deductae quibus est fallacia lunae  
 20 et labor in magicis sacra piare focis,  
 en agedum dominae mentem convertite nostrae,  
 et facite illa meo palleat ore magis!  
 tunc ego crediderim vobis et sidera et amnis  
 posse Cytinaeis ducere carminibus.  
 25 et vos, qui sero lapsum revocatis, amici,  
 quaerite non sani pectoris auxilia.  
 fortiter et ferrum saevos patiemur et ignis,  
 sit modo libertas quae velit ira loqui.  
 ferte per extremas gentis et ferte per undas,  
 30 qua non ulla meum femina norit iter.  
 vos remanete, quibus facili deus annuit aure,  
 sitis et in tuto semper amore pares.  
 in me nostra Venus noctes exercet amaras,  
 et nullo vacuus tempore deficit Amor.  
 35 hoc, moneo, vitate malum: sua quemque moretur  
 cura, neque assueto mutet amore locum.  
 quod si quis monitis tardas adverterit auris,  
 heu referet quanto verba dolore meal

[First Cynthia made me, to my unhappiness, her prisoner with her lovely eyes, me, who had been touched by no desires before. Then Amor forced down my eyes, that had shown a firm pride, and pressed my head beneath his feet, until he taught me to hate chaste women, that shameless one, and to live without a guiding principle. And my frenzy already has lasted incessantly for a whole year, but nevertheless I must have the gods against me. I am addressing myself to you, Tullus. By shunning no toils whatsoever, Milanion crumbled the savage resistance of Iasus' haughty daughter. For at times he used to roam about the Parthenian glens in a state of frenzy, at times he also went repeatedly to face shaggy beasts. That hero was even hurt by a blow from Hylaeus' club, and wounded, broke into moaning on Arcadian rocks. Thus he was able to tame and win the swift-footed girl; such is the power of prayers and good actions in love. In my case, however, Amor is tardy and does not devise any crafts, and he no longer remembers to travel

well-known roads, as before. But you, who scheme to pull down the moon and labor to perform appeasing sacrifices on magic hearths, look, go ahead, convert the mind of our mistress and make her face paler than mine! Then I would be ready to believe you that you are able to pull the stars and streams by the magic chants of the sorceress from Cytaea. And you, my friends, who call me back too late, after I have fallen, look for remedies for an unsound heart! Bravely we will endure the sword and the savage fire if only freedom be granted to say what my anger wishes! Carry me across the nations at the end of the world and across the sea, where no woman knows where I am! You stay behind, to whom the god inclines a gracious ear, and I wish that you be equal partners in a secure love. In my case Venus plies bitter nights against me, and at no time does Love either rest or cease. Avoid this evil, I warn you. May each be detained by his own dear worry, and may he not stray from his familiar love. But if anyone heeds my warning too late, alas, how painfully he will recall, my words!]

No one could deny that on the face of it, the speaker introduces himself to us as wretchedly unhappy (*miserum me*). From the beginning, he characterizes himself as being subject to an agency outside himself, captive of an external force. Cynthia, on the other hand, is an active agent who has ensnared (*cepit*) the speaker with her eyes. Moreover, the opening words of the poem, "*Cynthia prima*," imply that Cynthia will be the subject of the poem and the focus of the speaker's attention. Yet we soon discover that what really concerns the speaker is his own role as poet. Cynthia herself is not mentioned again in the poem; she is merely a function of the poet-lover's self-conscious awareness of his literary commitments and of his place in literary tradition.

In spite of the speaker's putative misery, he seems to convey a sense of delight in his own state of captivity. The use of the diminutive form in *ocellis* (line 1) communicates affectionate play and lightheartedness rather than the heaviness we might expect to be associated with the speaker's imprisoned condition. The speaker describes the process of becoming enslaved by love in tangibly physical terms: he had been touched (*contactum*, line 2) by no desires before, and *Amor* forced the speaker's eyes down and pressed the speaker's head (*caput*, line 4) beneath *Amor's* feet (*pedibus*, line 4). Although it is a *topos* in the tradition of love poetry to describe the effects of *eros* in physical terms,<sup>4</sup> Propertius' physical descriptions here depart in an important way from those of his predecessors. Both Sappho and Catullus use physical detail to describe an emotional and physical loss of control which closely associates erotic experience with death or loss of identity.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Propertius describes the speaker's enslavement to love, not as an internal emotional event, but as an external action that takes place in the world of military conquest.

Propertius' military metaphor to describe the experience of falling in love highlights the way in which private and public discourses are deeply interwoven. The language of the elegiac lover is presented as part of a public discourse. By depicting his lover as a fighter on the battlefield (even a defeated one), Propertius portrays a lover whose poetry and practices are bound up inextricably in the masculine sphere of public achievement. Even though Propertius' use of military imagery in an amatory context is, to be sure, a display of literary ingenuity, it nonetheless draws on the association of Love and War which is persistent in both the Greek and Roman traditions. The Trojan War is the primary example of this association; it is implicit in the story told of Aphrodite and Ares in the *Odyssey* and is explicit in the speech of Phaedrus in Plato's *Symposium*.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in the invocation to Venus at the start of *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius makes clear that Venus' powers of nurture and inspiration are fruitless without her association with Mars, whose disruptive and destructive influence must be tamed constantly by Venus. Love and peace cannot flourish unless Venus maintains her vanquishing hold on Mars. Thus Lucretius suggests, paradoxically, that love—symbolized by Venus—can only bring peace to mortals if the lover learns to conquer and enslave the beloved. *Amor*'s defeat of the narrator in Propertius' poem reiterates a traditional paradigm for amatory relations in which conquest and subjugation of the other are viewed as integral to amatory experience. In addition, that the language of warfare becomes the language of love suggests the intertwining of the seemingly "private" discourse of the lover and the public discourse of martial valor.

Indeed, Propertius portrays *Amor* much like a Roman general defeating his enemies. However, the action of *Amor* trampling the speaker's head with his feet reverses the traditional gesture of victory in battle, in which the victor places his foot on the chest of his victim before despoiling him.<sup>7</sup> Here, the victim rather than the victor is the one who records the event. The speaker thus seems to be far more in control than his "wretchedness" would imply. In his analysis of the poem, Hans-Peter Stahl assumes that the point of view offered here of the victim with his head under the feet of his conqueror necessarily implies that pain and torture are the results of this action.<sup>8</sup> But the incongruity in Propertius' mock-heroic image of *Amor*'s defeat of the lover seems more humorous than tragic.

Unlike the Catullan lover, the speaker does not, with one part of himself, reject his "shameless" erotic feelings, nor does he attempt to overcome them. In fact, the speaker makes it clear that his new imprudent way of living (*nullo vivere consilio*) is taught to him by a god. Not only does this remove any agency from the speaker himself but it also, paradoxically, makes it seem

as though the speaker is improving himself by learning an important lesson from his mentor. In addition, the speaker describes himself moving from one extreme to the other, from an attitude of absolute aversion to sexuality to an absolute dedication to it, signified by his hatred of chaste women. The fact that the speaker describes his desire as a form of hate reveals the violence of his emotions yet also ostensibly expresses the Catullan conflict in which erotic impulses are necessarily characterized by an ambivalent mixture of love and hate. Critics have generally understood the speaker's abrupt change from chastity to sexuality as a way for Propertius to show how the speaker is taken by love against his will. But they fail to see the playfulness in the hyperbolic way the speaker describes his position. Not only is he converted to sexuality but he also learns to "hate chaste girls." Not only is the speaker *not* scandalized by his hatred of chaste girls but, on the contrary, he seems to relish his new role.

Further, the dispassionate tone in the speaker's declaration belies any sense of conflict or suffering. Embedded in Propertius' erotic discourse is an awareness of audience expectations as to the role of the lover and his particular mode of expression. The fact that the lover speaks about his amatory situation in the past tense suggests that he is at a remove from his feelings and also shows that he is departing in an important way from the Catullan tradition, which envisions the lover as hopelessly bound in a present tense of conflict and introspective self-analysis. The real thrust of Propertius' erotic discourse here is directed neither toward himself nor toward his beloved but rather toward his audience and the particular benefit it can derive from his experience. As Poem 1 progresses, the speaker's purpose in telling his story becomes clearer: to explain, illustrate, and instruct from the *exemplum* of his personal experience. That the speaker describes his situation in quasi-mythological terms, as fighting and losing a battle with a mythological figure, stresses the more mythical, abstract, and universal aspects of his amatory struggles. Both he and his mistress become mythical figures in a story that the lover hopes will bring him *fama*.

The mythological *exemplum* of Milanion and Atalanta reinforces Propertius' presentation of the poet-lover as a teacher who has important truths to pass on to his community. His apostrophe to Tullus at line 9, at the moment when he embarks on his mythological tale, accentuates Propertius' instructive tone by heightening our awareness that the speaker is telling this story for the benefit of others. Whether one knows who the actual Tullus was or not, the realism and specificity in the mention of his name bring into focus the world outside the poem. The *amator's* self-conscious awareness of the pres-

ence of an audience shows that he is telling the story not merely to highlight aspects of his own personal situation (either for himself or for others) but to express messages that have more universal application.

One of the messages implicit in Propertius' version of the story of Milanion and Atalanta is in the way the figure of Milanion embodies the values of both the hero and the lover. Milanion's *exemplum* reinforces, in a more serious vein, Propertius' earlier image of the lover as a soldier and its associations with heroic values. Propertius contradicts the stereotypical association of effeminacy and inaction with the lover.<sup>9</sup> Instead, he presents an example that shows the lover in a heroic context in which he courageously endures the pain of *amor* and fearlessly encounters all obstacles, which not only wins glory for the hero but captures the object of desire as well. Even though Milanion is not a soldier, he is a fighter who exhibits traditional heroic qualities (risking body and soul for what one desires). The implied parallel between Milanion and Atalanta and the speaker and his mistress suggests a paradigm for amatory relations in which the male lover "overtakes" the reluctant female—a paradigm that implies the inevitability of male dominance over women. Indeed, in lines 10 and 15, the words Propertius uses to describe Milanion's success with Atalanta—*contudit* and *domuisse*—suggest that Propertius' ideal lover wins his mistress not by wooing her but by "crushing" or "subduing" her. The violence implicit in *contundere* reiterates *Amor*'s earlier violence toward the *amator* himself. But in the mythological *exemplum*, the speaker imagines the lover in the position of *Amor* and the woman in the role of the speaker. Like the speaker, Atalanta too surrenders to *Amor* and gives up her stubborn pride. The correlation between the speaker and Milanion thus suggests that the speaker imagines himself in the role of subduer rather than captive and in turn pictures the woman as *his* captive. Perhaps the *amator*'s delight in his own captivity bespeaks an awareness that the positions of captor and captive become, in matters of love, like those in war, often reversed.

Although the speaker's mythological *exemplum* ennobles the pursuit of love and demonstrates the eventual rewards that can come to the suffering lover, the myth also offers an extreme contrast to the speaker's own situation. Atalanta shows that even the most chaste, resistant girls can give in to love. But clearly, because Cynthia remains "chaste" (as far as the *amator* is concerned), the speaker's situation does not fit the norm established by the myth. On the one hand, this serves to heighten the speaker's suffering, but on the other hand, it demonstrates that his love for Cynthia goes far beyond normal expectations. The myth suggests that the speaker's job is more difficult than Milanion's and that his persistence and devotion are greater. The



speaker's self-effacing declaration, *in me tardus Amor non ullas cogitat artis*, is usually taken to reinforce the uniqueness of the speaker's love by emphasizing his failure compared with Milanion's success. Even though the speaker admits that in his case, *Amor* has not devised any crafts to help him, we have just seen ample evidence of the speaker's wit and poetic craft in his conceit of the lover as both soldier and hero.

The speaker's sudden entreaty for help from sorceresses at lines 20–22 seems to reinforce his presentation of himself as desperate and powerless.<sup>10</sup> On the surface, the speaker's apostrophe to witches can be read as a new way for him to express the hopelessness of his amatory situation. But here Propertius' evocation of erotic magic draws on the trope of witches, which has a long tradition in Greek and Roman literature, particularly in myths concerning courtship and marriage.<sup>11</sup> This tradition can be seen most notably in the figures of Circe, Deianeira, and Medea. The theme of love magic can also be traced in Apollonius' depiction of Medea in Book 4 of the *Argonautica*, Theocritus' story of erotic magic in his second idyll, and Virgil's adaptation of Theocritus' poem in his eighth eclogue. What seems remarkable about Propertius' discourse on erotic magic is the way traditional gender positions are reversed. In Propertius' poem, a male narrator calls on female witches to "convert" the mind of his mistress even though witches typically use their magic to attract males or take revenge on them if the males do not reciprocate. Moreover, the speaker's invocation to those whose practice it is to draw the moon down from the sky (19) specifically echoes the voice of the sorceress in Virgil's Eclogue 8 as she expresses her belief that "songs can even draw the moon from the sky" (*carmina vel caelo possunt deducere lunam*, line 69). In addition, the allusion to Medea in line 24<sup>12</sup> reinforces the implications of female sorcery in the speaker's invocation (*at vos*). The erotic magic of Medea, like that of Circe, Deianeira, and Theocritus' witch Simaetha, emphasizes not only the theme of unmitigated desire but also the potential transformation of love magic into black magic. As Faraone argues, erotic magical rituals aimed at attracting men seem to be concerned primarily with "energizing and thereby controlling the 'normally' active male, while those magic rituals aimed at women have a completely different orientation, their primary goal being to rouse up and energize the 'naturally' passive female."<sup>13</sup> The object of the narrator's plea to "change the mind" of his mistress by no means seems to be to stimulate desire in her or to "energize" her. Rather, Propertius' *amator* asks that Cynthia's cheek be made as pale as his is (*et facite illa meo palleat ore magis!*). The erotic magic that the speaker invokes here seeks to debilitate and control the mistress rather than to arouse her. Moreover, the

implications of black magic—with its deadly consequences for the recalcitrant object of desire—suggest motives of revenge on the part of the speaker and a desire to undermine the woman's position as *domina*.

But there is humor in the speaker's evocation of magic as well. In his apostrophes both to witches and to friends, the speaker chooses ludicrously impossible remedies that he clearly considers neither credible nor potent. At line 25 the speaker himself says that he is beyond remedies: *et vos, qui sero lapsum revocatis, amici*. How can his friends possibly help him when, by his own admission, they are already too late? He asks witches and friends to do the impossible: to pull down the moon and the stars and to exorcise the love from his heart either by the knife or by fire. Presenting two impossible alternatives functions as a rhetorical gesture to heighten the speaker's desperate situation. But the hyperbolic images of being carried to the end of the earth where there are no women and enduring the sword and fire (*fortiter et ferrum saevos patiemur et ignis / sit modo libertas quae velit ira loqui. / ferte per extremas gentis et ferte per undas, / qua non ulla meum femina norit iter*) take the speaker's emotional situation to ludicrously literal extremes. We can detect perhaps more than a hint of mockery of the lover's excesses here. Asking the sorceresses to make Cynthia even paler than he is, in the middle of his emotional entreaty, reveals a concern for concrete detail which evokes comedy instead of tragedy and suggests mockery of the clichés of romantic expression. Stahl, on the other hand, sees no humor in the speaker's description of his emotional "desperation." "The poetical surprise of lines 18–30 lies in the fact that Propertius has found a still wider range of expression of his personal isolation: after Cynthia, Amor, the gods, Milanion, Tullus, now even witches (a traditional help in an irrational situation) and volunteering friends are introduced and prove to be of no avail; whereas the group of 'the others' receives accretion, the outline of his loneliness becomes still sharper: *definitio e contrario*."<sup>14</sup> The speaker himself undercuts his desperate emotional stance by announcing at line 28 that his amatory suffering is tied to an aesthetic purpose. Saying that he would endure any amount of suffering if only he has the freedom to express his feelings suggests that literary expression is the antidote to the lover's pain and, more importantly, counterbalances the image of the enslavement of the lover with that of the freedom of the poet.

The speaker's desperate apostrophes, rather than reinforcing a presentation of a truly helpless self, expose the literary strategy at work here, in which the speaker's unique erotic situation becomes a new *exemplum* to be used by succeeding generations of lovers. In the last eight lines of the poem the speaker reveals his self-conscious awareness of his place in the literary tra-

dition of love poetry. Stahl reads the speaker's final apostrophe to the lovers he leaves behind as his "final statement of his now utter separation and isolation."<sup>15</sup> It is true that the speaker separates himself from the world of happy lovers, but in so doing he creates out of his entirely unique situation a new *exemplum* with its own message. Stahl reads the *vos* at line 31 as a contrast to rather than a continuation of *at vos* at line 19. I would argue, however, that *vos* at line 31 does continue a pattern in which the speaker demonstrates or claims that his particular fate is so unique as to find no parallel anywhere, even in myth.

At the beginning of line 33, the speaker again emphasizes the uniqueness of his position (*in me*). The threefold repetition of *vos* and the repetition of *in me* here accentuate the singularity of his erotic situation. But despite the speaker's emphasis on his personal dilemma, *nostra* attached to Venus links the speaker to the wider concerns of all lovers. Although the speaker describes his situation as hopeless, with nights of torment and unceasing, lonely *amor*, the very singularity of that experience becomes an *exemplum* of *hoc malum*. From this example the speaker draws out a message of warning (lines 35 and 36), a message that establishes another norm for *amor* which has a lesson in it for all lovers to come.

The speaker's final emphasis is not on his tormented emotional state but on his message derived from the *exemplum* artfully constructed from painful erotic experience. The pain shifts from that of the speaker to that of lovers who do not heed his warning (*heu referet quanto verba dolore mea*). The speaker himself is associated not with his erotic torment and his helplessness at the end but with his words (*mea verba*). Before, it was *Amor* who was slow (*tardus Amor*) to help; now it is the ears of other lovers who are slow (*tardas auris*) to listen. Now the speaker rather than *Amor* teaches a lesson. In the end, the lover is assimilated to the poet, who has transformed the torture of love into the artifice of *exemplum*. Despite the speaker's claim in the first line of the poem that Cynthia is *his* captor, we see that this is little more than a rhetorical gesture to establish his particular aesthetic stance as a writer of elegies. The speaker, as love poet, is very much in control. Indeed, his warning at the end is spoken with an oracular authority (his use of the imperative in *vitae malum* and hortatory subjunctives *moretur*, *mutet* in lines 35 and 36) that belies his protestations of subservience toward his mistress. The air of authority expressed here not only undermines the speaker's avowed position as *servus amoris* but also assumes, on the part of the speaker, a privileged relation to language, the traditionally masculine prerogative to name and write his desire.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the first poem in the *Monobiblos* establishes a position for

the male lover in which his “captivity” is a fiction within a narrative he both defines and describes. The woman, as we will see clearly in 1.7, 1.3, and 1.11, is a function of the narrator’s text — *his* story.

*Elegy 1.7*

Addressing the epic poet Ponticus, the speaker in Poem 1.7 explicitly rejects the values associated with martial conquest and the heroic ethos generally expressed in epic poetry. In the context of asserting his elegiac values against those in the epic tradition, the speaker substitutes Cynthia as his preferred subject for his literary productions. To show Ponticus that the lover’s *materia* for his writing is not only worthy but indeed superior to that in epic, he describes it (Cynthia) as being both *dura* and *docta*. But while scorning these heroic values the speaker nonetheless reconfigures the heroic ethos in a way that allows him to play the epic hero and thus occupy the subject position of the heroic male.<sup>17</sup> That subject position, I shall argue, gives rise to stereotypically masculine binary views of the mistress as either an adversary to overcome (*dura*) or an audience (*docta*) to impress with literary prowess.

Dum tibi Cadmeae dicuntur, Pontice, Thebae  
 armaque fraternae tristia militiae,  
 atque, ita sim felix, primo contendis Homero,  
 (sint modo fata tuis mollia carminibus):  
 5 nos, ut consuemus, nostros agitamus amores,  
 atque aliquid duram quaerimus in dominam;  
 nec tantum ingenio quantum servire dolori  
 cogor et aetatis tempora dura queri.  
 hic mihi conteritur vitae modus, haec mea fama est,  
 10 hinc cupio nomen carminis ire mei.  
 me laudent doctae solum placuisse puellae,  
 Pontice, et iniustas saepe tulisse minas;  
 me legat assidue post haec neglectus amator,  
 et prosint illi cognita nostra mala.  
 15 te quoque si certo puer hic concusserit arcu  
 (quod nolim nostros, heu, voluisse deos),  
 longe castra tibi, longe miser agmina septem  
 flebis in aeterno surda iacere situ;  
 et frustra cupies mollem componere versum,  
 20 nec tibi subiciet carmina serus amor.  
 tum me non humilem mirabere saepe poetam,

- tunc ego Romanis praeferar ingeniis;  
 nec poterunt iuvenes nostro reticere sepulcro  
 ‘Ardoris nostri magne poeta, iaces.’  
 25 tu cave nostra tuo contemnas carmina fastu:  
 saepe venit magno faenore tardus amor.

[While you, Ponticus, sing of Cadmean Thebes, and the grievous arms of fraternal battle, and—as I wish to be happy—you contend with Homer the master, may the Fates be kind to your songs, we are, as we are accustomed, doing our love poems, and seeking some means to soften our harsh mistress; I am forced to serve not so much my talent as my pain, and to grieve over the harsh times of my youth. This is the life that wears me down, this is my fame, and hence comes the glory I seek from my songs: Let my praise be that I alone pleased a talented girl, Ponticus, and often bore her unjust threats. Let the despised lover hereafter read me, and may the study of our sorrows help him. If you, too, are shaken by the boy’s unfailing arrow (I do not wish our gods to have decreed this for you), then, unhappy man, you will realize amid tears that for you the camp is far away, the seven armies far away, lying in silence, buried in the eternal rust of oblivion. And in vain you will long to compose delicate verse, nor will belated Love supply you with songs. Then you will often admire me as no lowly poet, then I will be preferred among Roman literary talents. The youths will not keep silence by my grave: “Here you lie,” they will say, “the great poet of our ardor.” Take care your pride does not despise our songs: Late Love often comes exacting a heavy interest.]

The elegy opens with the speaker’s contrast between his own poetic concerns and those of Ponticus: Ponticus writes epics whose subject is war and fraternal dissent, but the speaker is occupied with his “humble” poems about love. Where Ponticus has chosen the lofty goal of contending with Homer, the love poet merely wants to find something (*aliquid*) that will soften his harsh mistress (*duram dominam*). The position of the elegist in relation to the epic poet is clear. He adopts the appropriate attitude of deference toward the art that was traditionally regarded as the only adequate way to express the greatness in man. The literary and social prestige of the epic poet were unquestionable. The speaker gives the appearance of paying homage to epic poetry by imitating its grand style at the beginning. Yet the speaker’s praise of Ponticus and his style is tinged with irony and ambiguity. First, the exaggerated quality of the speaker’s admiration calls his sincerity into question. Second, the speaker’s parenthetical hope that the songs of Ponticus will not be forgotten (*sint modo fata tuis mollia carminibus*) injects an ominous note

into an atmosphere of grandiose aspirations and implies that perhaps the *fata* will be harsh rather than merciful to those songs.

Although the speaker claims to embrace a way of life opposite that of Ponticus ("While you . . . I"), the language with which he explains that life suggests that it is merely another version of the traditional heroic ethos. The speaker insists that he, compared with the epic poets, is preoccupied with pursuing his desires and seeking some way to soften his harsh mistress. The antiheroic passivity expected of an elegiac poet, however, is undercut by the speaker's use of *agitamus* in line 5 to describe the activity typical of love poets. Indeed, the sense of motion and the possible implications of pursuing and hunting in *agitamus* suggest a level of manly exertion consistent with traditional heroic values. Further, the actions of pursuing an object single-mindedly and attempting to overcome a difficult adversary (in the lover's case, his *duram dominam* in place of other male fighters) reiterate rather than contradict the combat mentality of heroic males. Cynthia is deserving of the speaker's attention *and* his pursuit precisely because her hardheartedness makes her a worthy enough opponent. In other words, the narrator's representation of Cynthia as *dura* creates the impetus for him to activate and articulate *his* desires.

In fact, right after the speaker mentions his harsh *domina*, we learn that it is not really her whom he serves but rather his own talent. Although he claims to be serving his pain and not his *ingenium* (lines 7 and 8), he immediately associates his painful way of life as a lover with his fame as a poet: *hic mihi conteritur vitae modus, haec mea fama est*. The syntactical link between his *vitae modus* (as the suffering lover) and his *fama* shows that the lover's pain is closely bound up with winning immortality for himself as a poet. The repetition of personal pronouns at line 9 (*mihi, mea*) emphasizes the speaker's pride in asserting his *vitae modus* against that of Ponticus and that expressed in the epic tradition. The speaker's triumphant tone here, which contradicts his earlier stance of humility, reinforces his ironic attitude toward the triviality of *his* achievements and the grandiosity of those of Ponticus.

At line 10, desire (*cupio*) is linked not to the *puella* but to the glory of the speaker's songs. The main concern of the speaker is for the praise he will receive because of his liaison with a *docta puella*. Indeed, the praise he seeks is dependent on his ability to be the only one who can please (*solum placuisse*) not just any *puella* but one who is *docta*. As before when he imagined Cynthia as an obstacle worthy of his erotic prowess, here he alludes to her talent not so much in terms of its worth in its own right but in terms of the way it may reflect on him and thus win him more praise.

That the speaker is obsessed with his own talents—indeed his own oracular abilities—is evident in the magisterial way he speaks to Ponticus in the rest of the poem. Not only does this tone contradict his claims of passive subservience, it also reiterates the attitudes of militancy and competition which are traditionally disavowed by the elegiac poet. In the previous elegy, 1.6, the speaker clearly rejects the *ethos* of the public life: *non ego sum laudi, non natus idoneus armis: / hanc me militiam fata subire volunt* [I was born unfit for glory, unfit for arms, this is the warfare the Fates would have me bear] (lines 29 and 30). But in 1.7 we see that it is not only glory the speaker is after (and believes he will receive) but that he wants to assert his superior talent in a hierarchy of men of genius: *tum me non humilem mirabere saepe poetam, / tunc ego Romanis praeferar ingeniis* [Then you will often admire me as no insignificant poet, and I will be preferred among Rome's men of genius] (lines 21 and 22). Such an assertion hardly constitutes the antiheroic passivity expected of the elegiac lover. On the contrary, it merely reconfigures the heroic, martial *ethos* in a way that perpetuates the aggressive, adversarial modes of conduct and discourse typical of heroes on the battlefield. In fact, the speaker's taunting of Ponticus and his confident assertions that he will ultimately "win" in the battle of the *ingenia* sound very similar to Achilles or Aeneas deriding their opponents before killing them.

As the speaker warns at line 15, if the epic poet should suddenly be struck by love he would not have the vocabulary at his disposal, the aesthetic resources to "compose" himself. Moreover, the use of *cupio* at line 19 (*et frustra cupies mollem componere versum*) in relation to Ponticus is associated not with the union between the lover and his beloved but with the ability to compose (*componere*). In the last half of the poem, the speaker's use of the future tense for what will happen to Ponticus points to the inevitability of the power of love over human beings. In addition, the hypnotic effect of repeating again and again what, in fact, *will* happen displays a magisterial power that elevates the love poet to prophetic status. The speaker's earlier statement that he serves his pain rather than his talent was a rhetorical gesture of humility, one that enabled him to establish his position as a writer of love poems rather than a writer of epics. And the speaker's emotional servitude is the vehicle through which he comes to be remembered as a great poet and to defeat his literary rivals in securing a place for himself in posterity.

Ironically, the epic poet who scorns the lover's art and the state of servitude implied in the position of the lover will end up, according to the speaker, being a slave to his emotions, devoid of the emotional or literary resources to heal himself. Another irony is that the speaker, the writer of elegies, is the

one who is entirely “composed” and has glory in the area where men are the most vulnerable and powerless. In lines 17–20 the speaker implies that emotional composure and the composing of poems are the same; the answer to poor Ponticus’ emotionally helpless state is the *componere* of *mollem versum*, not the appearance of the beloved. Moreover, the speaker asserts that it will be the elegiac poet who shall be a hero to young men in love. He reconstructs himself as a heroic paradigm in the manner of epic heroes—whose exploits and attributes he argues are of no use where personal existence is at stake.

In the last line of the poem, the speaker consolidates his appropriation of male public culture by using the language of the commercial world to assert his dominance in that culture: *saepe venit magno faenore tardus amor* [Late love often comes exacting a heavy interest]. The speaker not only makes his point in a language Ponticus can understand but also demonstrates the way in which the power of *amor* extends into the realm of practical affairs. By mingling the discourses of love and money, the speaker shows that he can have power in the world of Ponticus. The speaker’s triumphant announcement of his supremacy in the world of Roman literary talents suggests that the elegiac stance of servitude toward the mistress is nothing more than a ruse to create an alternative heroic ethos for the male protagonist. We shall see in the following discussion of *Elegies* 1.3 and 1.11 how the lover’s fantasies of control over a helpless and captive mistress are played out to ensure his fame and to perpetuate a status that reinforces masculine prerogative and privilege.

### *Elegy* 1.3

Recent work in feminist psychoanalytic theory provides a framework for interpreting the tension in 1.3 between the real and ideal Cynthias. In their provocative works, Luce Irigaray (“This Sex Which Is Not One”) and Jessica Benjamin (*The Bonds of Love*) critique Freud’s accounts of both male and female desire and sexuality.<sup>18</sup> In particular, Irigaray unravels Freudian theory about the *gaze* as a phallic activity linked to a desire for mastery of the object (the woman).<sup>19</sup> Irigaray and Benjamin challenge the idea—one they regard as dominant in the Western tradition—that the woman is a mirror for male desire (“penis envy”) and that woman’s object status, her lack of an active desire of her own, and her passivity are all hallmarks of the feminine. In her interpretation of Freudian theory, Irigaray demonstrates how the gaze is crucial in securing the domination of the male. Her argument that women are turned into statues in the process of specularization—through the agency of the look that sees only a reflection of the observer’s own desires—seems



especially useful in reading both 1.3 and 1.11. I will argue that in both poems Propertius' narrator turns his mistress into an object to gaze at and that this encounter with an *objectified other* gives rise to the image of the woman as either a dangerous siren or an unruly hag who is a potential threat to the narrator's position of domination.

Maria Wyke agrees that despite the apparent reversal of sex roles in Propertius' elegiac texts, those texts do not depict female power, nor do they elaborate a role for the female subject which grants her an elevated social status.

The heterodoxy of the elegiac portrayal of love, therefore, lies in the absence of a political or social role for the male narrator, not in any attempt to provide or demand a political role for the female subject. The temporary alignment with a sexually unrestrained mistress whom Augustan elegy depicts does not bestow on the female a new, challenging role but alienates the male from his traditional responsibilities. The elegiac poets exploit the traditional methods of ordering female sexuality which locate the sexually unrestrained and therefore socially ineffective female on the margins of society in order to portray their first-person heroes as displaced from a central position in the social categories of Augustan Rome.<sup>20</sup>

Wyke is right in pointing out that elegiac texts are "more generally concerned with male servitude, not female mastery."<sup>21</sup> But her argument centers on refuting the view that elegiac poets are interested in empowering women and raising their social status through an unconventional portrayal of gender relations. Wyke does not, however, consider the full implications of the elegiac lover's identification of his mistress with her *function* in literary discourse — as *materia* for poetic production. *Elegies* 1.3 and 1.11 both demonstrate that the subordination of the woman as beloved to the woman as *materia* reveals a version of male desire which devalues women and turns them into objects in male fantasies of erotic domination.

Propertius 1.3 has prompted a number of important and influential studies.<sup>22</sup> Although scholars have emphasized somewhat different critical approaches to the poem, the focus has been the tension between the reality and the idealization of the lover and his mistress. R. O. A. M. Lyne tells us that 1.3 "is about Cynthia the woman of wonder, the idealised creation of Propertius' own mind, and Cynthia the woman of reality who inevitably reveals herself, and breaks in upon the eggshell world of dreams."<sup>23</sup> Likewise, Daniel Harmon argues that "1.3 portrays an occasion upon which the poet envisions an encounter with Cynthia while exploring reality through fantasy."<sup>24</sup> Leo Curran's study emphasizes "the contrast between the epic world

with its serene and accessible heroines and the real world of capricious and hot-tempered mistresses.”<sup>25</sup> These scholars offer many illuminating insights about the poem, but their readings tend to privilege and romanticize the male perspective of the narrator. More important is their failure to question male assumptions about desire or to consider the gender-specific nature of desire which the poem expresses. In my analysis, I will explore how a version of male desire is constituted in the poem and how Propertius’ amatory discourse produces an image of the elegiac mistress as the object of male fantasies of erotic domination—despite the apparent reversal of gender roles in the poem.

Qualis Thesea iacuit cedente carina  
 languida desertis Cnosia litoribus;  
 qualis et accubuit primo Cepheia somno  
 libera iam duris cotibus Andromede;  
 5 nec minus assiduis Edonis fessa choreis  
 qualis in herboso concidit Apidano:  
 talis visa mihi mollem spirare quietem  
 Cynthia non certis nixa caput manibus,  
 ebria cum multo traherem vestigia Baccho,  
 10 et quaterent sera nocte facem pueri.  
 hanc ego, nondum etiam sensus deperditus omnis  
 molliter impresso conor adire toro;  
 et quamvis duplici correptum ardore iuberent  
 hac Amor hac Liber, durus uterque deus,  
 15 subiecto leviter positam temptare lacerto  
 osculaque admota sumere et arma manu,  
 non tamen ausus eram dominae turbare quietem,  
 expertae metuens iurgia saevitiae;  
 sed sic intentis haerebam fixus ocellis,  
 20 Argus ut ignotis cornibus Inachidos.  
 et modo solvebam nostra de fronte corallas  
 ponebamque tuis, Cynthia, temporibus;  
 et modo gaudebam lapsos formare capillos;  
 nunc furtiva cavis poma dabam manibus;  
 25 omniaque ingrato largibar munera somno,  
 munera de prono saepe voluta sinu;  
 et quotiens raro duxti suspiria motu,  
 obstupui vano credulus auspicio,  
 ne qua tibi insolitos portarent visa timores,  
 30 neve quis invitam cogeret esse suam:  
 donec diversas praecurrens luna fenestras,

luna moraturis sedula luminibus,  
 compositos levibus radiis patefecit ocellos.  
 sic ait in molli fixa toro cubitum:  
 35 'tandem te nostro referens iniuria lecto  
 alterius clausis expulit e foribus?  
 namque ubi longa meae consumpsti tempora noctis,  
 languidus exactis, ei mihi, sideribus?  
 o utinam talis perducas, improbe, noctes,  
 40 me miseram qualis semper habere iubes!  
 nam modo purpureo fallebam stamine somnum,  
 rursus et Orpheae carmine, fessa, lyrae;  
 interdum leviter mecum deserta querebar  
 externo longas saepe in amore moras:  
 45 dum me iucundis lapsam sopor impulit alis.  
 illa fuit lacrimis ultima cura meis.'

[As on the lonely beach Ariadne lay, fainting while Theseus' keel receded; or like Andromeda free at last from her rocky prison, her limbs relaxed in the first flush of sleep. She looked like a girl from Thrace exhausted from her Bacchic dancing, sunk to rest by the grassy banks of the river. There she lay, breathing gently, all at peace, with her head lying on unresisting hands. Then I staggered in, dragging my footsteps, drunk as a lord, in the wee hours, when the torch was burning low. And I had an urge—I still had some of my faculties left—to tiptoe quietly up to the bed where she lay. I was growing hot, set on fire by a double flame, drink and desire, an insistent pair of masters. Have a go, they said,—put your arms around her softly—come closer—now then—kiss her—take her by storm. But I didn't dare disturb her when she looked so quiet and peaceful; she's a devil when she's roused, as I know too well. So I just stood there watching, all eyes—like Argus gazing with some surprise at Io's horns. And then I took off the garland I still had on from the party, and put it gently on your sleeping brows. If your hair was out of place, I lovingly rearranged it, and smuggled you apples in my cupped hands. But you were far away—these gifts meant nothing to you, and they rolled from your lap time and again to the floor. And when you stirred at times and heaved a sigh, I stood transfixed with empty apprehension. I thought you sighed at a nightmare, full of strange horrors, or a man who tried to take you against your will. And then at last the passing moon shone full in your window, the busybody moon, outstaying its welcome. The pale light of its beams unshuttered your sleeping eyes. . . . And off she started, propped up in bed on her elbow: "So you've come at last, and

only because that other woman has thrown you out and closed the doors against you.”]

As Leo Curran observes, 1.3 does not establish any narrative context for the poem but instead launches immediately into the world of myth and legend.<sup>26</sup> From the outset, Propertius introduces us to Cynthia by comparing her with famed mythological heroines and thereby implicitly compares the speaker with the corresponding male heroes. Although scholars have been in accord about the elevation of tone and language in the opening lines and about how Propertius transports the elegiac lovers to the exotic and idealized world of myth, there has been a good deal of disagreement about the extent of the erotic implications in the language of the first three couplets. Lyne and Allen view Cynthia in these couplets as an entirely idealized image of mythic beauty who “remains in a world beyond time.”<sup>27</sup> Although both Curran and Harmon mention some of the sexual connotations in the vision of the sleeping Cynthia, R. J. Baker, in his article “Beauty and the Beast in Propertius 1.3,” maintains that the first six lines of the poem contain “an undercurrent of sexual reference in these mythological *exempla* which Propertius fully intended readers of this poem to recognize.”<sup>28</sup> In particular, Baker points out the sexual connotations of such words as *iacuit* (line 1), *languida* (line 2), and *accubuit* (line 3).

Although Baker does not romanticize the vision of Cynthia in the beginning couplets as much as other commentators on the poem, he too fails to provide any gender analysis of the ways desire is expressed in the poem. Indeed, all of the approaches to the poem seem to be limited by an identification with the perspective and values of the male narrator.<sup>29</sup> Criticism on the poem has not even attempted to link the so-called “idealization” of Cynthia to a particularly masculine point of view. I want to explore how the “woman in a text” is a projection of male fantasy and desire and moreover reflects male stereotypes about women which deny them agency and autonomy.

We may begin by analyzing the specific comparisons of the sleeping Cynthia with mythical heroines and how they express aspects of peculiarly masculine views of “ideal” amatory relations. Daniel Harmon points out that images of rest (*languida*) link the three *exempla* to one another and that “it is not merely sleep, but varying degrees or attitudes of sleep which invite comparison with Cynthia.”<sup>30</sup> Harmon, however, does not consider the implications of the speaker clearly relishing the opportunity Cynthia’s sleeping state offers him to create his version of idealized fantasies of his mistress. In the first *exemplum*, the speaker compares his sleeping mistress with Ariadne as

she sleeps on the shore — unaware that she has been abandoned by Theseus: *Qualis Thesea iacuit cedente carina / languida desertis Cnosia litoribus* [As on the lonely beach Ariadne lay, fainting while Theseus' keel receded] (lines 1 and 2). Here the speaker imagines his mistress in a state of helplessness which allows him to play the role of rescuer. Indeed, in the myth Bacchus comes and rescues Ariadne from the deserted shore. As the drunken lover, the speaker's connection with Bacchus is clear. Curran observes that "like Bacchus, Propertius is on fire with love . . . the mention of Bacchus himself in 9 and 14 is, of course, not inconsistent with the identification of Propertius with the god; indeed the explicit reference confirms the identification."<sup>31</sup> The implication is that the image of the stranded and helpless woman evokes desire in the male lover. Moreover, the speaker's arousal seems to depend on turning his "real" mistress into a static, pictorial object he can watch without any resistance or interference from "reality." The object of desire he imagines, both in the myth and in the narrative context of the poem, lacks agency of her own.

The second *exemplum* of Andromeda's release by her lover Perseus continues the theme of the male lover delivering a defenseless mistress from danger and abandonment: *qualis et accubuit primo Cepheia somno / libera iam duris cotibus Andromede* [And as Andromeda freed at last from her rocky prison, her limbs relaxed in the first flush of sleep] (lines 3 and 4). As both Curran and Harmon point out, Propertius' use of *accubuit* in line 3 has the usual sexual connotation. Thus, the linkage of the release of Andromeda with the sexual consummation of her marriage to Perseus again connects female helplessness and captivity to male fantasies of erotic fulfillment. This association of the sleeping heroine with erotic fantasy culminates in the image in the third *exemplum* of the frenzied Maenad who collapses in exhaustion onto the grass after incessant dances: *nec minus assiduis Edonis fessa choreis / qualis in herboso concidit Apidano* [no less she looked like a girl from Thrace exhausted by her Bacchic dancing, sunk to rest by the grassy banks of the river] (lines 5 and 6). This last *exemplum* deviates from the pattern of the two previous ones in that there is no allusion to a male figure corresponding to Theseus or Perseus; the Maenad is "self-sufficient in her ecstasy."<sup>32</sup> Despite the implication of the Bacchant's active expression of desire and her autonomy, the speaker's vision of the Maenad seems to resemble the speaker's own drunken state more than Cynthia's sleeping condition. The three *exempla* become progressively more overt in their sexual connotations and thus suggest a heightening of the speaker's arousal as he constructs fantasies of his mistress held captive by his imagination. Cynthia seems most desirable to the speaker as long as she remains a *fantasy* — a static projection of his own desires. As Curran comments,

“There is a certain static quality about the world of the heroines, which is only in part owing to the fact that they are all recumbent. They have the stability, permanence, and immutability of works of art, whether or not Propertius had particular paintings or statues in mind.”<sup>33</sup> Curran’s suggestion that the images of mythical heroines are statuelike and that later on in the poem the speaker’s offer of gifts to the sleeping Cynthia “might as well be . . . offerings before the statue of a woman or a goddess” is entirely apt. Curran, however, does not question the assumptions implicit in the male lover’s “drawn-out gaze.” Although both Curran and Harmon acknowledge the “unreciprocal confrontation of watcher and watched . . . gazing and being gazed at,”<sup>34</sup> they privilege this process of specularization and do not explore the implications *for the woman* of being subjected to the gaze of the male.

In the second section of the poem (lines 11–20), where the speaker attempts to approach the “real” Cynthia as she sleeps, he nonetheless continues to treat her as an object of erotic fantasy. The prospect of encounter only evokes another mythic comparison, one that heightens the expression of the speaker’s fantasies of domination and control over a helpless, captive mistress. The speaker describes himself staring at Cynthia as Argus gazed on Io. Curran sees the process of gazing in the relationship of Argus and Io as an expression of intimacy.<sup>35</sup> This view suggests that intimacy is primarily a matter of male protectiveness toward a vulnerable and defenseless female. Neither Curran nor Harmon considers the implications of control and captivity in the picture of Io being watched *and* guarded by Argus. Later in the poem, the speaker expresses his fears about Cynthia being “taken” by another man as he imagines what Cynthia might be dreaming: *et quotiens raro duxti suspiria motu, / obstupui vano credulus auspicio, / ne qua tibi insolitos portarent visa timores, / neve quis invitam cogeret esse suam* [And when you stirred at times and heaved a sigh, I stood transfixed with empty apprehension; I thought you sighed at a nightmare, full of strange horrors, or a man who tried to take you against your will] (lines 27–30). In view of the speaker’s earlier attempts to approach his sleeping mistress in a way that suggests an “aroused physical state,” it is quite possible to read the speaker’s concern about Cynthia’s dream as a projection of his own sexual desires and intentions.

Scholars tend to emphasize how charming it is that the speaker approaches his mistress so timidly, but they fail to explore how his mythical, that is to say, *idealized* depiction of himself as rescuer, protector, and ultimately captor of his mistress devalues the woman and denies her subjectivity and autonomy. Moreover, the speaker’s gestures of arranging garlands on Cynthia’s head, re-arranging her hair, and trying to place apples into her hands do not, I believe,

“increase the feeling of intimacy and tenderness” as Curran thinks. These gestures, rather, reinforce a portrayal of Cynthia as a mannequinlike figure; the speaker arranges her as an artist might arrange a still life. In addition, the eroticism suggested by the images of apples<sup>36</sup> furthers the idea that turning Cynthia into a pictorial object is linked to the sexual arousal of the male lover.

Indeed, the speaker’s imagination comes alive when his mistress is asleep, when she exists as a *tabula rasa* upon which he can inscribe his desires. Ironically, in 1.3 Propertius gives Cynthia a voice of her own; in fact, she has the “last word” in the poem. But when she awakens and is presented as a flesh and blood woman with desires and prerogatives of her own, her voice becomes an abrupt, unpleasant intrusion into the rich inner life of the narrator. She is a shrew who was most desirable when she was completely subjected to the gaze of the male narrator—with no voice or agency of her own.

By giving us Cynthia’s own words rather than letting the speaker narrate them, Propertius is able to dramatize the narrator’s experience of reality clashing with myth. The transformation of Cynthia from an idealized object of beauty to a hysterical female is shocking; Cynthia’s diatribe against her drunken lover seems not so much an indictment of his irresponsible behavior but shows, dramatically, how Cynthia’s particular form of discourse confines her within the banalities of circumstance and everyday existence and sets her apart from the speaker’s own highly imaginative poetic practice. Curran’s view of Cynthia’s “outburst on awakening” reflects the unquestioning attitude toward the perspective of the male speaker which has dominated criticism on the poem: “Propertius had fancied himself a Bacchus or a Perseus, but in Cynthia’s eyes he is only a disappointed Lothario, seeking solace with his second choice for the evening. Cynthia is, of course, only drawing her own inferences about how Propertius has spent his evening, but [he] is given no chance to deny his charges and has already admitted that he has arrived very late at night from an elaborate and bibulous party. The initial vision, with its romantic dignity and its augury of success, has been almost completely destroyed.”<sup>37</sup>

Such a view seems to privilege inevitably the way desire is constituted and expressed by the male lover and is thus unable to question the stereotypical portrayals of the woman put forth by the speaker. Curran, like Propertius, has entrapped Cynthia within the unfortunate roles of being *either* a woman who evokes desire through her helplessness and passivity *or* a shrewish nag who destroys the lover’s lofty visions of beauty and tenderness. By ending the poem with Cynthia’s complaints, Propertius leaves us with the disappointing realities of amatory relations—realities that are vocalized by a woman

who seems to fulfill the stereotype of the rancorous wife scolding her man for his unruly, irresponsible ways while she reminds him, in her mock-tragic tone, what a victim she has become. Cynthia's "absence" (her sleep) provides the speaker with the opportunity to create images of her projected from fantasies of domination which are linked to his sexual arousal. In like manner, Cynthia's "actual" absence in *Elegy* 1.11 gives rise to the narrator's fantasies about her—fantasies that reveal a more overt attempt to objectify her and control her sexuality.

In my discussion of the poem, I shall argue that by identifying Cynthia with nature, with "uncivilized" urges and passions, Propertius relegates her to a sphere that is traditionally regarded as inferior.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, one of the chief *topoi* in the poems of both Catullus and Propertius is the complaint about the tendency of their mistresses to lack control over their seemingly insatiable sexual desires—desires that, of course, require their men to keep them in line. As Maria Wyke has pointed out, the sexual promiscuity of women is a conventional *topos* in the invective tradition against women.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, from the period after the rise of Rome to imperial status, a burgeoning of moral discourses associated female sexual impropriety with social and political disorder.<sup>40</sup> I will show that in *Elegy* 1.11, Propertius identifies Cynthia with the disruptive and dangerous sensuality that was considered a threat to the perpetuation of Roman cultural values.

### *Elegy* 1.11

Ecquid te mediis cessantem, Cynthia, Bais,  
 qua iacet Herculeis semita litoribus,  
 et modo Thesproti mirantem subdita regno  
 proxima Misenis aequora nobilibus,  
 5 nostri cura subit memores, a, ducere noctes?  
 ecquis in extremo restat amore locus?  
 an te nescio quis simulatis ignibus hostis  
 sustulit e nostris, Cynthia, carminibus?  
 atque utinam mage te remis confisa minutis  
 10 parvula Lucrina cumba moretur aqua,  
 aut teneat clausam tenui Teuthrantis in unda  
 alternae facilis cedere lympha manu,  
 quam vacet alterius blandos audire susurros  
 molliter in tacito litore compositam!  
 15 ut solet amoto labi custode puella,  
 perfida communis nec meminisse deos:



non quia perspecta non es mihi cognita fama,  
 sed quod in hac omnis parte timetur amor.  
 ignosces igitur, si quid tibi triste libelli  
 20 attulerint nostri: culpa timoris erit.  
 an mihi nunc maior carae custodia matris?  
 aut sine te vitae cura sit ulla meae?  
 tu mihi sola domus, tu, Cynthia, sola parentes,  
 omnia tu nostrae tempora laetitiae.  
 25 seu tristis veniam seu contra laetus amicis,  
 quicquid ero, dicam 'Cynthia causa fuit.'  
 tu modo quam primum corruptas desere Baias:  
 multis ista dabunt litora discidium,  
 litora quae fuerunt castis inimica puellis:  
 a pereant Baiae, crimen amoris, aquae!

[While you, Cynthia, are relaxing in the midst of Baiae, where Hercules' causeway stretches along the shore, even now admiring the waters that are subjected to Thesprotus' realm, bordering on noble Misenum. Does concern come over you, to spend nights mindful of me? Is there room left for me at the edge of your love? Or has some unknown enemy, with simulated ardor, carried you away, Cynthia, from my poems? I would much prefer that some small boat, trusting to its tiny oars, detained you on the Lucrine lake, or that the water were holding you enclosed in Teuthras' thin wave, the water, willing to give way to your alternating arms, than you, softly stretched on the silent beach, have leisure for the flattering whispers of another man. As is the rule: Once the guardian is removed, the girl lapses, and faithlessly, no longer remembers mutual gods. Not that I do not know your proven honor, but in this place all love is feared. Thus forgive me, if my letters bring you sadness; my anxious fear shall be at fault. Could I be a better guard of my own dear mother? Or would I, without you, have any concern for my own life? You are my only parents, my only home, Cynthia, you are every moment of my joy! Whether I appear sad to my friends or joyful, whatever I am, I will say, "Cynthia has been the cause." As soon as possible, leave corrupted Baiae: to many lovers these shores mean separation, shores so hostile to chaste girls: Oh, may the waters of Baiae perish, love's corruption!]

In this poem, the narrator expresses his anxious fears about his mistress' trip to the fashionable Roman resort of Baiae—a place with a reputation for encouraging indulgence in sensual and erotic pleasure. The speaker fantasizes about Cynthia in Baiae and imagines her not only as part of the lush, sensual landscape itself but also as unable to withstand erotic temptation and

uphold the *sancta fides* of their romantic union. As John Warden points out, addresses in Propertius create the illusion of listening in on private speech.<sup>41</sup> The speaker's abrupt, urgent opening address to Cynthia, which throws us into the middle of an ongoing argument, creates from the beginning an impression of dramatic vitality and immediacy. This sense of ongoing drama is heightened by the image of Cynthia already "in the midst of the pleasures of Baiae" (*mediis Bais*). But despite the illusion of intimate dialogue and of a dramatic situation here, in the second line of the poem we are plunged into highly embellished poetic language and a complicated syntax that suggest we are in a poetic rather than a geographical landscape.

Indeed, from the speaker's dramatic opening and his reference to a real place, we may expect a detailed description of the pleasures that Baiae offers. Instead, he introduces Baiae to us in language that draws our attention away from narrative to the realm of imagination and myth. The mention of Hercules at line 2 as the builder of the causeway at Baiae and the allusion to the "realm of Thesprotus" (a mythical king whose country is associated with an entrance to the underworld) to describe Baiae's waters show that the speaker is, from the outset, more interested in his imagination of Baiae than he is in presenting a realistic picture of it.

In light of Baiae's reputation as a corrupter of *puellae*, it is curious that the speaker emphasizes the sensually appealing aspects of the place and lingers on the images that produce wonder rather than revulsion. Despite the speaker's fears about what Cynthia may be doing at Baiae, he clearly derives pleasure from her absence, in the opportunity it gives him to fantasize about her in a new place. Separation and the possibility of loss give the speaker the opportunity to re-create Cynthia imaginatively and to elevate and embellish her by linking her to a mythological realm.

At line 5, the speaker shifts abruptly from Thesprotus' mythical realm to a passionate query of Cynthia to remember him and to hold a place in the corner of her heart for him. The speaker presents himself as the unhappy lover asking his mistress for even the smallest tokens of love. His devaluation of his imagined rival according to the only criterion that really matters for lovers — depth of passion — contradicts his presentation of himself as helpless and vulnerable. The speaker clearly has weapons his rival lacks, and he is clever in suggesting that Cynthia's fame depends on his willingness to immortalize her. The way the words *nostris carminibus* enclose Cynthia's name in line 8 shows the fusion of the speaker's poems and Cynthia's name and also implies that the figure of the *puella* to whom he speaks is less a woman he is wooing than a *subject* for his writing.

The mention of *nostris carminibus* leads directly to the speaker's evocation

of Cynthia on the Lucrine lake. The speaker fantasizes Cynthia as he would like her to be, away from the realities of potential corruption and temptation, held (*teneat*) and enclosed (*clausam*) in his imagination. These verbs of holding and enclosing recall the speaker's fantasies in 1.3 of his mistress in a state of idealized captivity. But in 1.11, Cynthia's absence permits the speaker's imagination free rein. He envisions what he would like Cynthia to be doing at Baiae and yet fears these same visions. In the first case, the speaker pictures Cynthia alone in a small boat, enclosed by water that yields to her arms as they move in alternating motions. Although the speaker sees Cynthia isolated and protected—her sexuality in bounds—he nonetheless describes her sensuality and seductiveness. A pattern similar to the one in 1.3 emerges here: the image of the mistress detained, confined, and protected leads to a heightening of the speaker's sexual arousal. Indeed, in lines 13–16 the speaker's fantasy of Cynthia in the middle of an attempted seduction suggests this intensification of the speaker's excitement. The sensual immediacy with which the speaker describes Cynthia stretched out on the beach, listening leisurely to the whispers of another man, has an air of voyeuristic titillation. It seems that Cynthia's erotic charms overshadow the moral implications of her imagined infidelities. In fact, the speaker's rapt absorption in the sensually appealing fantasies of his beloved with another man points to an autoeroticism that fuels both his literary and sexual imaginations.

But as in 1.3, here the speaker casts Cynthia in the stereotypical role of the faithless, sexually unrestrained female who needs to be monitored and controlled. Immediately after becoming carried away with his fantasies of a potentially promiscuous Cynthia, the speaker vilifies women in general for their tendencies to transgress the norms of female behavior: "As is the rule: once the guardian is removed, the girl lapses, and faithlessly, no longer remembers mutual gods" (lines 15 and 16). By invoking *communis deos* in the context of female sexual transgression, the speaker implies that female sexuality poses potential dangers to commonly accepted views of social and political order. As Maria Wyke argues, the elegiac lover's avowed position of servitude toward his mistress must not be taken to imply female empowerment. But Wyke does put forth the view that elegists "explore . . . the concept of male dependency."<sup>42</sup> I think such a view does not take into account the degree of manipulation and posturing in the elegiac stance of servitude toward the mistress.

As we saw in 1.3, the speaker appears to be titillated by imagining his mistress in a state of helpless captivity, and in 1.11 he is aroused by fantasizing about her possible transgressions. These two poems dramatize a polarization

of women — “into the chaste and the depraved,”<sup>43</sup> a polarization that makes the representation of female sexuality a projection of male desire. In 1.3, the posturing in the speaker’s stance of servitude toward Cynthia is suggested through mythical *exempla* that emphasize female helplessness and dependence on men. And in 1.11, the speaker presents a rather stereotypical picture of female sexual misconduct. In both poems, the elegiac mistress is an object of erotic fantasy and fertile material for poetic production. Thus, the speaker’s apparently servile position can be read, at least in part, as a strategy of manipulation to promote his own artistic fame.

Indeed, at line 17 the speaker shifts abruptly from his moralistic tone about how women need guardians to keep their sexuality in bounds to a mood of supplication, as he asks Cynthia to forgive him. The speaker’s convoluted double negatives at line 17 suggest a confusion in his attitudes toward Cynthia. On the one hand, he flatters Cynthia by telling her that her *fama* is unquestionable; on the other hand, the use of *fama*, especially in light of Cynthia’s imagined infidelities, can also imply a bad reputation. Thus, declaring that Cynthia’s *fama* is well known to the speaker may also cast doubt on her honor, by questioning her transgressions at Baiae. The ambiguity in the meaning of *fama* (good or bad reputation) suggests the speaker’s binary images of his mistress. Moreover, *perspecta* at line 17 conveys a sense of active scrutiny rather than passive knowledge, which reflects how the speaker’s imagination has been scrutinizing Cynthia’s reputation.

The fear the speaker expresses at line 18 that “all love is feared in Baiae” recalls his earlier fear that some “unknown enemy” has already snatched Cynthia from his poems. The speaker’s manipulative strategies toward his mistress are all but transparent; he implies that her *fama* (good or bad) depends on the continuation of her position as his mistress. The speaker’s offer (or threat) to confer *fama* functions as a very persuasive argument for Cynthia’s continued faithfulness, but it also suggests a reversal of the elegiac balance of power in which the male lover is subservient to his mistress. The speaker, essentially, suggests that Cynthia offer herself to him as *materia* for the continuation of his poetic practice. His fear of losing her to other suitors at Baiae seems to be as much a fear about Cynthia’s *name* being snatched from his literary productions as it is a fear of her being snatched from his life.

We can see the speaker’s manipulations and convoluted logic in his claim that the *culpa* is solely his — his ability to imagine vividly the moral transgressions Cynthia commits. Cynthia’s absence, like her sleep in 1.3, provides the *tabula rasa* on which the speaker can project his fantasies and desires. Taking all the moral blame on himself — in light of his earlier allusion to the moral

laxity of *puellae* — can be understood as part of his strategy of self-effacement toward his mistress. The speaker's desire to renew a poetic practice in which Cynthia will not only have a crucial role but from which she will gain praise or condemnation is the most persuasive argument the speaker can use to get his mistress back and thus increase the likelihood of his own *fama* as well.

The speaker's strategy of manipulation continues through his comparison of Cynthia with his own mother (lines 21–24). In this passage, the roles the speaker assigns to himself and his mistress reflect a profound confusion in the way gender relations are constructed in this poem. The image of the speaker as the *custodia* of his mother recalls the earlier implications of male protectiveness expressed in the images of containment associated with Cynthia. But more important is the way the speaker turns his mistress into his mother. Before this, Cynthia was associated with an indulgence in sensual pleasure which seemed to transgress appropriate social conduct for women. Now, Cynthia is the desexualized, infinitely nurturing mother who, of course, could not possibly abandon her dependent, desolate son. This shift from the woman as dangerously unrestrained to woman as chaste, fertile, and selfless again points up the polarization of women into good and bad, virtuous and depraved.

The speaker, however, transforms Cynthia not only into his mother but into his father as well, and as both, she is stripped of her gender altogether and of any trace of sexuality. Moreover, it is interesting that this passage recalls Catullus' Poem 72 in which the speaker declares that he loves Lesbia as a father loves a son: *dilexi tum te non tantum ut vulgus amicam, / sed pater ut gnatos diligit et generos* [I loved you then not only as the common sort love a mistress, but as a father loves his sons and sons-in-law] (lines 3 and 4). Propertius reverses Catullus by comparing the lover not with the parent but with the child. Furthermore, Propertius' speaker does not merely compare his relationship to Cynthia with the filial love between parents and children. He says that Cynthia *is* his parents; it would be difficult not to see the hyperbole in such a statement. What could be more guilt inducing than telling Cynthia that she is as responsible for the speaker's life as parents are for those of their children? The implications of nurturance in equating Cynthia with his parents and making his survival depend on that nurturance reinforce the importance of Cynthia's role in the continuation of the speaker's poetic practice.

The sense in which the speaker considers Cynthia crucial to both the private and public aspects of his life is evident in his declaration that Cynthia is the cause of both what he is and how he appears to others (lines 25 and 26). The speaker's overriding concern seems to be for *Cynthia* as a *name in a text*. It is the speaker's own text — his speaking — that *makes* Cynthia the reason for

his existence and the basis of how others see him. The speaker's language—his text—causes him to be what he is and controls the image he puts forth to the world. The speaker does not merely report that he informs his friends about Cynthia's crucial role in his life. He emphasizes the role of language in conveying that information and thus reveals his self-conscious awareness of his own active role in creating images of himself and his mistress.

Moreover, Cynthia's existence—real or imagined—is defined exclusively in relation to the speaker. She is a projection of the male lover's moods and thoughts—indeed, of his very identity. One of the most important aspects of feminist theory has been a critique of the assumption underlying Western philosophical discourse<sup>44</sup> that the woman is merely man's *other*, a mirror of his masculinity, and that she can never achieve the status of subject, at least for or by herself. Applied to Cynthia's position in 1.3, this point of view reduces her to a foil for the male speaker.<sup>45</sup>

In addition, Jessica Benjamin's study of the oedipal model in her analysis of gender and erotic domination<sup>46</sup> is useful for understanding the polarized images of the mistress in 1.11, where, for the speaker, the mistress is both seductress and nurturing mother. Benjamin argues that "on the psychic level, the oedipal repudiation of the mother splits her into the debased and the idealized objects."<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, Benjamin observes that this split denies to the woman recognition of her own subjectivity. Her comments on this point, I believe, help to illuminate how male desire is constructed in 1.11. "The problem is that using the wife-mother as a prop for autonomy threatens to reduce her to a mere extension of the self. . . . This is a version of the contradiction we saw in erotic domination, the fear that we have destroyed or wholly objectified the other whom we need. It is also another version of the oedipal model: wanting to devalue and control the other while still drawing sustenance from her, *wanting to keep mother in captivity* and yet alive and strong [my emphasis]."<sup>48</sup> The image of the captive woman whose separate identity is never recognized, who is devalued and objectified *as a woman* yet needed for emotional and creative nurturance, seems to be a crucial element in the way the mistress is depicted in both 1.3 and 1.11.

In the last four lines of 1.11, the speaker returns to the moralistic, paternalistic tone he adopted earlier (lines 27–30). The speaker's abrupt shift from imagining Cynthia as the chaste, nurturing woman to evoking the moral laxity of *puellae* in general suggests the polarized view of the good and the bad woman. The speaker blames Baiae for corrupting the chastity of young women, but the angry tone of his moralistic railings recalls his earlier allusion to the tendency women have to stray once their guardians are removed. The

speaker cannot expect us to believe, literally, that the shores of Baiae are the source of corruption. They merely provide the opportunity for women to do what is customary (*ut solet*) for them: lapsing into depravity if they are not under the control and watchful eye of a man.

Moreover, there is irony in the speaker's use of the word *crimen* in the last line of the poem. *Crimen* is in apposition to *aquae Baiae*; but earlier, the speaker admitted his own anxious imaginings to be at fault. It is the speaker who evoked the seductiveness of the waters of Baiae and vividly conjured up fantasies of a *crimen* at Baiae. In fact, the speaker's *crimen* produced the captivating images of his beloved through which the speaker and his mistress will both be remembered. The only *crimen* is that projected from the speaker's imagination and which, ironically, makes him desire Cynthia more. The titillation in fantasizing about the potential seduction of his mistress at Baiae leads the speaker to vilify women in general but, at the same time, to express his urgent desire for Cynthia to return to him. The speaker's depiction of his mistress according to binary views of women as *either* virtuous *or* corrupt offers little possibility for women to be considered as subjects in their own right.

Indeed, the male lover's position of servitude helps to facilitate the gender polarities that inform the way amatory relations are portrayed in Propertius' elegiac texts. The dependent, servile stance of the lover which gives rise to the image of the *domina* creates a hierarchical configuration of lover and beloved which is based on relations of power. I have tried to show that despite the alienation of the male narrator from customary masculine pursuits and from positions of power, Propertius nonetheless transfers many conventional attitudes and assumptions about women to the expression of male desire. *Elegies* 1.3 and 1.11 in particular, through their polarized representations of the elegiac mistress, suggest the entrapment of the woman within a discursive practice that preserves her object status and places her in a symbolic order structured around male fantasies of control over women's autonomy and sexuality. Much of the criticism on Propertian elegy has, unfortunately, tended to accept the male lover's "idealized" images of his mistress as simply a part of the genre and has failed to question the implications of the lover's mythologizing for the way women are both read and represented.