

Stealing the Poet's Voice: Re-Reading Propertian Elegy through Cynthia and Acanthis

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## ABSTRACT

JESSICA WISE: Stealing the Poet's Voice: Re-Reading Propertian Elegy through  
Cynthia and Acanthis  
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Propertian elegy presents a battle of speech, in which the male poet-lover tries to win his *puella*'s affection with poetry. In Book Four, two particular women, the *lena* Acanthis in 4.5 and Cynthia in 4.7, hijack the dominant voice of the male speaker and impose their own feminine point of view onto the relationship. In this paper, I examine the manner in which Propertius purposely inserts these authoritative female voices into his final book of elegy in order to force a radical re-reading of his prior three books of poetry. First, I examine the manner in which Acanthis usurps verses from the rest of the Propertian corpus and uses them against the poet-lover, undermining the authority of his verse. Next, I examine Cynthia's autonomous speech in 4.7 and her dissenting account of the relationship. These new voices encourage a re-reading from the perspective of the elegiac *puella*.

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## INTRODUCTION

The innovative elegies of Book Four infuse Propertian elegy with a new set of female perspectives, each making claim to an identity that is not presented in the poet's earlier books of love poetry. Arethusa, Tarpeia, the *lena* Acanthis, Cornelia, and Cynthia all brandish their own style of rhetoric, independent from that of the male poet-speaker. These voices expose various realities of the female experience—sexual, economic, and emotional—that undermine the authority of the poet and demonstrate the subversive potential of elegiac discourse. Two particular women, Acanthis in 4.5 and Cynthia in 4.7, hijack the voice of the male poet-lover and impose their own point of view onto the relationship between the poet-lover and his beloved, Cynthia. In this paper, I argue that Propertius deliberately introduces these authoritative female voices into his fourth book to force a radical re-reading of his prior three books of elegy—a re-reading that incorporates a range of voices. By means of the female voices of Book Four, Propertius infuses his poetry with misdirection, complexity, and ambiguity designed to create a text that is constantly questioning itself.

## CHAPTER 1

### The Contest of Speech in Propertian Elegy

Speech is the greatest power in elegy. It is the Propertian poet-lover's most important tool. Through speech, specifically his poetry, the poet can attain fame and make an eternal name for himself and for others. With his elegy he glorifies his patron Maecenas (3.9) and memorializes Cynthia with praise or disgrace (2.11). He also establishes his own lasting reputation by means of elegiac epitaphs (2.1, 2.13, et al). Most importantly, speech is the means by which he seduces his mistress. As he brags to his friend Lynceus in poem 2.34, not only has his poetry attracted a number of women but it will also rank him among the likes of Varro, Catullus, Calvus, and Gallus. The poet relies on his ability to compose elegiac verse well enough to appeal to a *puella* who is learned, who appreciates and even composes poetry. As he boasts in 1.8 and 2.26, poetry is more alluring to Cynthia than the trivial luxuries of a wealthy rival.

Throughout the first three books, the poet-lover consistently affirms the important power of speech, but his own speech does not go uncontested. From the start, Cynthia has her own individual and effective speech, and their relationship is often a rhetorical battle. In Book One (1.9 and 1.15), the poet-lover warns his male comrades about the ability of a mistress to entrap and harm male lovers with her *blanditia*. In poem 9, the speaker exclaims that the only route available to his friend Ponticus to escape *servitium amoris* is to flee the girl's constant flatteries,

*assiduas blanditias* (30). These elegies do not offer insight into the specific content of these powerful *blanditia*, but in each elegy the speaker's reference to this type of speech ascribes to Cynthia a spoken power that counters his own elegiac verses. He thus casts Cynthia as a treacherous rhetorical opponent and attributes the girl's seductive power to a particular type of female speech.

Furthermore, throughout books 1-3, the poet-lover continuously dramatizes, in a number of imagined scenarios, the various reactions that certain words of Cynthia can provoke from him. He thus underscores her persuasive power. Cynthia's reported speech can be divided into four general categories (lamenting *querela*; sexual enticements; poetic skill; and the rejection or demand for material goods), each of which provokes a particular reaction from the poet, ranging from agony and indignation to affection and desire. All, however, serve as seductive tactics that render the poet powerless.<sup>1</sup> He may depict her as saying that she hates rich men (*dicit se odisse beatos*, 2.26.25), or that she provokes him with such speech as, "Do you just lie there, sluggard?" (2.15.8).<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the precise argument, Cynthia's words result in his returning to her door and to serving her. Thus the speaker continually endows his beloved with alluring and dangerous powers of persuasion.

Finally, in poems 1.3 and 2.29, Cynthia's direct speech demonstrates that she, as a learned girl, not only has a voice that is distinct from the poet, but further, that she can craft clever, effective arguments. In both elegies, Cynthia issues many of the standard arguments

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<sup>1</sup> For Cynthia's lamenting *querela* cf. 1.6, 3.6. For sexual enticements cf. 2.15, 2.23, 2.26. For recitation and appreciation of verse cf. 2.3, 2.26, 2.33. For rejection or demand for material goods cf. 2.26.

<sup>2</sup> *sicine, lente iaces?* 2.15.8.

employed by the poet-lover in his *querela*. For example, in 1.3 she appropriates the poet's typical exclamation of misery first issued in poem 1.1, *me misera* (1.3.40), and uses against him the words that programmatically defined him from the outset as a man lamenting his inescapable love. In 2.29, she professes her unconditional fidelity: *non ego tam facilis: sat erit mihi cognitus unus* (33). By usurping the lover-poet's characteristic arguments, Cynthia rewrites the role of the elegiac lover and inverts their respective positions in the relationship, making herself the faithful, injured party and depicting the speaker as a deceitful wrongdoer. Furthermore, she infuses her *querela* with unique descriptions of the female body aimed simultaneously to allure and destabilize the poet: Cynthia calls attention to her bed (*nostro...lecto* 1.3.35), the imprints of bodies (*toro vestigia presso* 2.29.35), and the heavy panting that follows sex.<sup>3</sup>

Together these speeches demonstrate Cynthia's ability to combat and overpower the male poet. In 1.3, the effectiveness of her lament is demonstrated by the manner in which her alluring words elude the expectations of her poet. Although he fears the reproaches of her well-known savagery (*expertae metuens iurgia saevitiae*, 18), he is countered with an enticing, elegiac lament. In 2.29, Cynthia's words again triumph over the poet. She slips away and leaves him speechless and powerless. In two grand examples of her well-crafted *blanditia* Cynthia borrows the poet's own persuasive tactics and uses them against him to fend off his sexual advances.

Cynthia's ability to wield autonomous, effective speech is essential to the dynamics of the elegiac relationship. Her faculty for crafting equally elegiac verses establishes her position as a force with which the poet must contend. By thwarting the persuasive powers of his speech,

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<sup>3</sup> *aspice ut in toto nullus mihi corpore surgat/ spiritus admisso notus adulterio*, 2.29.37-38. Damer, following the arguments of Fedeli and Richardson, asserts that *surgat spiritus* refers to an "unmistakable odor" rather than panting or gasping. Either interpretation yields a reading of this passage with unprecedented explicit language of sexual behaviors. Damer, 2010, 156.

Cynthia keeps the lover from ever being fully satisfied. She remains a girl who can continually elude his control.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Propertius, by depicting Cynthia as his rhetorical complement, casts the relationship in terms of a contest of speech in which *puella* and lover continually challenge each other's fidelity, devotion, and sincerity. Cynthia's autonomous speech illustrates her dynamic role as participant in this contest.

In the first three books of elegy the contest is fixed, the outcome controlled. The poet-lover grants a distinct, dangerous persuasive power to Cynthia's speech. By means of continual allusions to her represented speech, he offers slight indications of an account that dissents against his own perspective of the relationship. But any divergent account is controlled by the dominant authorial position of the male-poet. Granting only two glimpses into the viewpoint of his beloved (1.3 and 2.29), the male poet retains control of the elegiac medium and encourages the audience to accept as uncontested and genuine his description of the relationship.

### **Scholarship and Theory on Women, Speech, and Elegy**

In her book, *Les voleuses de langue*, Claudine Herrmann first proposed the concept that in order to assert an individual voice, woman must appropriate masculine discourse. Language, she explains, is male-dominated. Thus, woman is confronted with the task of deciphering how to express a feminine point of view within a masculine system—if she conforms she is not taken seriously, and if she strays she is considered alien and eccentric. Woman must struggle to find a balance between pure imitation of the masculine and her own individuality to engage in

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<sup>4</sup> Horos foretells this point to the poet-lover in 4.1, when he asserts that no matter the poet's victories, one girl will escape his grasp: *nam tibi victrices quascumque labore parasti,/ eludit palmas una puella tuas*. 139-140.

effective, legitimate discourse. Maria Wyke observes the critical importance of this conundrum as a contributing factor to the success of the historical female poet Sulpicia: “the female narrator appropriates many of the discursive strategies employed by the male ego in the poems of Propertius, Tibullus, and Ovid.”<sup>5</sup> Sulpicia’s appropriation of tropes similar to those employed by her male contemporaries help her audience to recognize, contextualize, and read her distinctly feminine voice within a predominantly masculine genre.

The women who are the subject of Herrmann’s interests are female authors—educated women in society—and thus, social equals of those men whose discourse they appropriate. Wyke, in discussing Sulpicia, also addresses a woman with status equal to her male counterparts—an elite Roman citizen. Herrmann’s theory, of which Sulpicia is an example, examines the ability of woman to express herself in a manner that reflects her social equality—to find the voice that allows her to assert a place already given to her in society. I contend that, in Book Four, Propertius endows Cynthia and Acanthis with a similar linguistic power in their speeches in 4.5 and 4.7. By imitating the poet-lover’s *querela* and infusing their laments with feminine sexuality as well as details particular to a courtesan, Cynthia and Acanthis appropriate a male-dominated discourse—elegiac poetry—to assert a distinctly feminine point of view.

My argument that Cynthia and Acanthis steal the voice of the poet-lover has obvious contiguities with the work of Herrmann. However, Cynthia and Acanthis, unlike Herrmann’s woman, are not the social equals of the poet-lover. Rather, as courtesans, they are his social subordinates. In stealing his voice, these women force the male poet to relinquish control. In so doing, they establish the authority of the female perspective. Their manipulation of speech is not

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<sup>5</sup> Wyke, 2002, 163.

a venue for expression among equals but a tool for combatting the words of the poet-lover. With autonomous speech they represent not only themselves but also their side of the elegiac relationship—namely, the social and economic realities that the poet-lover fails to present to readers. In Book Four, Cynthia and Acanthis accomplish what Cynthia could not in the first three books of elegy. They seize the most powerful tool of the male poet-lover and use it against him to open the narrative to diverse points of view.

### **Acanthis Steals the Lover's Voice**

In elegy 4.5, described by Richardson as a parody of a *laudatio funebris*, the poet-lover celebrates the death of Acanthis by calling terrible wrath upon her ghost and cursing her in perpetuity. The poem is framed by the curses of the poet-lover upon the grave of this old woman (1-20, 65-78). At the center of the elegy, occupying the majority of the poem is the forty-two-line speech of Acanthis, in which she preaches her mercenary precepts to the *puella*. The *lena* is a familiar character to the elegiac genre. She derives from Old and New Comedy, wherein her primary role is that of an older woman, frequently a former prostitute, who profits from the arrangement of young boys and girls. She commonly figures as an advisor to younger girls in the prostitution business and gathers benefits from their sex trafficking.<sup>6</sup> In elegy, as advisor of the elegiac *puella*, she is endowed with powers of persuasion, which she uses to instruct the *puella* to turn away from the empty-handed poet and into the arms that offer bountiful material wealth. Acanthis usurps the role of *praeceptor amoris* and encourages the *puella* to value wealth over poetry. Her precepts threaten the poet-lover and the effectiveness of his verse. Thus, in

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. the character Syra in Plautus' *Cistellaria* as well as Cleareta in Plautus' *Asinaria* and *Scapha* from *Mostellaria* for standard treatments of the *lena* in Roman comedy.

elegy, the rivalry between the *lena* and the poet-lover manifests itself in a battle of rhetoric. To every argument the poet-lover puts forth, the *lena* offers a counter-argument that is both cynical and destructive to his efforts. Both the *lena* and the poet-lover, when addressing the *puella*, underscore the stark realities of her situation: life is short, beauty is ephemeral, and soon the *puella* will be an old woman. But while the poet-lover employs this argument to encourage the *puella* to run to his bed and make love (3.20), the *lena* extracts this same argument for a practical agenda—namely, to capitalize on profit.

The *lena* is not a foreign character to elegy: she appears in the poetry of Tibullus (1.5) and Ovid (1.8) as well. Regardless, many scholars are troubled by the sudden appearance of the old woman in Propertius' last book. The first-person elegiac persona of the first three books has receded from the prior three elegies, along with the relationship of poet-lover and his beloved. Notably, two other female voices have already appeared in Book 4, those of Arethusa and Tarpeia, but their inventive stories have no bearing on the elegiac relationship. The poet-lover suddenly returns in 4.5 but rather than issuing *querelae* to the girl or asserting his poetic bravado, he is shaken and threatened by the *lena*—a character of great influence in *puella*'s life but, surprisingly, never previously mentioned.

In attempts to explain the sudden interjection of the *lena* into the Propertian corpus, a number of scholars have demonstrated the manner in which Acanthis assumes control of the elegiac erotodidaxis and challenges assertions previously made by the poet-lover. Micaela Janan, for one, proposes that Acanthis serves as a scapegoat for Cynthia—a person for the poet to blame for his frustrated attempts at winning over the *puella*.<sup>7</sup> By making Acanthis and her mercenary instructions the guilty culprit, the poet exonerates his beloved Cynthia. Kathryn

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<sup>7</sup> Janan, 2001, 94-96.

Gutzwiller and Kerill O'Neill formulate different theories about the relationship of the *lena* and the poet-lover to demonstrate that the figure of Acanthis offers a broader view of the elegiac relationship. Gutzwiller argues that the voice of the *lena* promotes a division of sympathies between the lover-poet and the procuress, thereby offering a distanced perspective on the lover-poet.<sup>8</sup> O'Neill similarly observes that, by encouraging our sympathies with Acanthis, the elegy demonstrates that the relationship between the lover-poet and the *lena*, and, consequently, the *puella* is more ambiguous than Propertius' previous books of elegy betray.<sup>9</sup>

I propose an argument that is similar to Gutzwiller and O'Neill but functions on a metapoetic level. As Sara Myers observes, the elegiac *lena* has a metaliterary function. In the role of *praeceptor amoris*, the *lena* functions as "counter-ego" of the male-poet, the former *praeceptor*. As such, Acanthis foregrounds both the self-delusions and seductions of the elegiac first person persona and elegiac poetry and exposes the tensions and contradictions of the elegiac code.<sup>10</sup> Myers develops this argument to demonstrate that the provocative character of Acanthis can be read as a signifier of moral, political and even poetical ideologies. She represents anti-elegiac values, is the anti-Muse, and expresses the anxieties of the male poet-lover.<sup>11</sup>

Certainly the *lena* functions to expose the underbelly of elegy and offer a new understanding of the dynamics of relationship. But the greatest threat Acanthis poses to the poet-lover is linguistic. In poem 4.5, the *lena*, as *praeceptor amoris*, assumes control of the poetic medium. By stealing his voice, Acanthis insinuates herself into the erotic discourse of the lover-

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<sup>8</sup> Gutzwiller, 1985, 105-115.

<sup>9</sup> O'Neill, 1998, 49-80.

<sup>10</sup> Myers, 1996, 1-21.

<sup>11</sup> Myers, 1996, 17-18.

poet and his silent *puella* and imposes a new point of view onto the elegiac relationship. She uses elegiac verse to pinpoint ironies, hypocrisies, and places in the texts where the reader might be misled and thus to challenge the previous assertions of the poet-lover. 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.

In her speech, Acanthis spurns poetry and, by appealing to the *puella*'s fondness for finery, encourages her to exploit a variety of lovers for their wealth. A closer examination of the speech demonstrates that Acanthis does not merely refute the arguments of the male speaker: she actually steals his voice. Her speech is constructed from a series of verbal echoes in which she extracts words and lines from the corpora of Propertius and Tibullus. By demonstrating her poetic abilities and usurping the elegiac dialogue, Acanthis establishes herself as a rhetorical opponent to the poet-lover. She steals his *verba* and thus renders the poet-lover impotent.

### Acanthis' Elegiac Speech

It is the male poet-lover who first grants the power of elegiac speech to the *lena*. The elegiac *lena* is frequently described as a clever, though malicious, woman. The elegiac lovers attribute to her a power that stems from her words, her *praecepta*, to the *puella*. Tibullus 1.5 describes the *lena* as *callida* and the speaker in Propertius 4.5 similarly acknowledges the cunning of Acanthis. However, by describing her powers with elegiac words, the Propertian poet-lover instills in Acanthis not just intelligence, but an intimate familiarity with elegy. First, he refers to her as *docta*.<sup>12</sup> This word is typically reserved for the *puella*. As Sharon James

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<sup>12</sup> Propertius 4.5.5: *docta vel Hippolytum Veneri mollire negantem*.

points out, the girl the poet-lover pursues with his verses is not just physically superior; she must also possess a certain “doctitude,” enabling her to read his works discerningly. In order for the poet-lover to be successful, the beloved *puella* must be a learned reader of elegiac poetry. Her ability to read and even compose poetry is one of her most attractive assets (2.3, 2.33, et al.). By describing the *lena* as *docta*, the lover-poet imparts to her a similarly comprehensive knowledge of elegy.

In line 19, the lover-poet provides further evidence of the *lena*’s familiarity with elegy. Unfortunately this line, as printed in the MSS, is unclear: *exorabat opus verbis ceu blanda perure*. The meaning of the line seems to be that Acanthis makes the enchantments previously described effective with a verbal spell, but *perure* is indecipherable and *exorabat opus* also makes little sense. Editors have offered various emendations for the verse. While they often propose various alternatives for *perure*, most uniformly agree that *blanda* should remain in the text.<sup>13</sup> If this is a correct reading, the lover-poet describes the spells of Acanthis with a word frequently employed to characterize his own speech to the *puella*: *blanda*, flattering or charming. As James observes, the language of the lover-poet is crafted to gain entrance to the bedroom of the *puella*. As such, “rather than being expressive language, it is persuasive speech, a function treated by the lover-poets as a given and openly acknowledged in terms such as *blanditias* (Tib.1.2.91: ‘flatteries’), *mollem versum* (Prop 1.7.19: ‘soft poetry’), *molliia verba* (Am. 1.12.22: ‘soft words’).”<sup>14</sup> Flattering language is the poet’s primary tool in his battle for the *puella*’s affection. Furthermore, as previously noted, the poet-lover describes Cynthia’s persuasive speech as the same type of flattery: her *blanditia*. By describing the *lena*’s words as *blanda*, the

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<sup>13</sup> For further explanation, see Camps, 1967, 99; Butler and Barber, 1933, 352; and Richardson, 2006, 442.

<sup>14</sup> James, 2003, 14.

poet-lover assimilates her speech both with his and with the dangerously powerful speech of Cynthia and thus highlights her elegiac abilities.

Kathryn Gutzwiller has asserted that the seductive, elegant speech of Acanthis demonstrates her unique role in this elegy. Acanthis plays a role more like that of Scapha of *Mostellaria*: a maid rather than a madam who has no personal profit motive at stake, but is concerned with the girl's well-being.<sup>15</sup> Her instructions stem from a concern that the *puella* is wasting time with poetry and not looking out for her future. Dead and with nothing more to gain, she aims to persuade and instruct the girl, not to manipulate.

While the poet-lover attributes a particular power to Acanthis' enchanting speech, her words vividly demonstrate that she is equally skilled in composition of elegiac verse. Following the poet-lover's scathing indictment of her powers (1-20), one does not expect the lofty language with which the *lena* opens her speech. Acanthis begins with a sophisticated conditional sentence filled with Greek names, poetic adjectives, and elaborate parallelisms.<sup>16</sup> She upsets the expectations of her that have been set up by the poet-lover, who casts her as a despicable old woman issuing evil spells.

In addition to a pleasing poetic construction, Acanthis' opening lines feature the first verbal echoes of the elegiac poets. In lines 21-23, she encourages the *puella* to take up Coan silks or the conch shells of the Tyrian sea if they please her: *et quae sub Tyria concha superbit aqua,/ Eurypylique placet Coae textura Minervae*. Elegists conventionally used these particular luxuries to describe foolish material possessions: Propertius condemns the Coan garment in 1.2.2; Tibullus curses the Coan silk and conch shells that Nemesis so greatly favors (2.4.29-30).

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<sup>15</sup> Gutzwiller, 1985, 12.

<sup>16</sup> O'Neill, 1998, 55-56.

By invoking these items, Acanthis uses a standard elegiac reference to argue for the superiority of the very luxuries the poets rail against. Notably, Propertius speaks of the Coan silk again in 2.1, but contradicts his earlier condemnation of the item, expressing appreciation for the thin fabric that seductively drapes Cynthia's figure. In fact, he claims the garment will inspire his poetry (2.1.5-6). O'Neill suggests that by invoking the Coan silk here and again in line 57, the *lena* reminds us that the poet's arguments can be ambiguous.<sup>17</sup> Acanthis employs the poet's words to highlight the contradictions in his speech and to dismantle his arguments in favor of her own.

Acanthis next instructs the *puella* to maximize her rewards by tricking her lovers. In lines 29-30, Acanthis tells the girl to pretend she has a primary male partner because inaccessibility will yield a greater price from her lovers. She also tells the girl to use every excuse to put a lover off because delayed love brings a passionate reunion: *et simulare virum pretium facit: utere causis!// maior dilata nocte recurret amor*. These lines evoke poem 2.33 of Propertius in which the lover-poet laments that in observance of the rites of Isis, Cynthia must be chaste for ten days and cannot have sex with him. The lover-poet's resolution of this dilemma in 2.33 is the same as that of Acanthis: following a separation, the reunion will be more passionate—*semper in absentis felicior aestus amantis:// elevat assiduus copia longa viros* (2.33.43-44). However, while the lover-poet employs this argument to soothe the unease caused by his separation from Cynthia, the *lena* twists the same argument to encourage the *puella* to get as much as she can from her lovers.

Acanthis proceeds with a further reversal of the lover-poet's verse in elegy 2.33. In lines 33-34, she tells the *puella* that as soon as she gets money from a lover paying for her embrace,

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<sup>17</sup> O'Neill, 1998, 56.

she should feign that the rites of Isis have come so that she does not have to follow through with sex: *fac simules puros Isidis esse dies*. The *puros dies* recall the *decem noctes* that the lover-poet bemoans in the opening couplet of 2.33. The poet-lover angrily laments these days of chastity as times of sad solemnity, *tristia sollemnia*, and defaults to attacking Io for his disappointment at a frustrated attempt at sex. Acanthis, contrarily, presents this religious obligation as a clever and joyous trick to reprieve the girl from the burdensome duty of sex.

Acanthis continues her instruction to the *puella* with a direct echo of the poet-lover. She advises the *puella* to have fresh bite marks always around her neck to keep her lovers jealous (39-40): *semper habe morsus circa tua colla recentis,/ litibus alternis quos putet esse datos*. In poem 3.8, Propertius' male speaker boasts about a bedroom brawl he had with, presumably, Cynthia on the previous night. Quarreling with the *puella* illustrates a passionate relationship and therefore the proud poet wants his comrades to see the bruises and bite marks Cynthia has left behind: *in morso aequales videant mea vulnera collo* (21). Acanthis' pilfering of the poet's language is obvious: *morsus... colla* and *morso... collo*. Again, she employs the lover-poet's own words against him. While the poet-lover represents Cynthia's love bites as a sign of the vitality of their relationship, Acanthis uses the same bites to teach the girl to exploit the advances of one lover to attract another.

In lines 41-44, the *lena* uses literary allusions to demonstrate to the *puella* the type of woman she should imitate in her profession. She should not fall prey to the pathetic adoration of Euripides' Medea, but rather should be more like costly Thais (*Thais pretiosa*), the adulteress of Menander's comedy who deceives shrewd slaves. The verb used for tricking men is *ferit*, commonly translated: "to strike, batter, knock."<sup>18</sup> This word, as Richardson suggests, appears to

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<sup>18</sup> See OLD, "*ferio*."

be a vulgarism. It is, however, used one other time in the corpus of Propertius: poem 3.3, when Calliope instructs the lover-poet in the type of poetry he should be writing. She tells him to teach the cunning lovers to deceive stern husbands: *ut per te clausas sciat excantare puellas,/ qui volet austeros arte ferire viros* (49-50). Acanthis thus takes the same word used to describe the lover-poet's powers of poetic persuasion, and gives it to the *puella* for purposes of extracting money from him.

From this point Acanthis launches into the most dangerous part of her speech: she extols the value of money and attacks the irrelevance of poetry and consequently, of the poet-lover. She bolsters her arguments by consistently stealing lines from other episodes in elegy and turning them against the lover-poet who first issued them. In lines 47-48, she states that the doorkeeper will maintain a vigil at the *puella*'s house all night. If a man knocks with an empty hand, the door will be deaf to his requests and the bar will remain drawn: *ianitor ad dantis vigilet: si pulset inanis,/ surdus in obductam somniet usque seram* (47-8). This line evokes the *paraclausithyron*—a standard elegiac trope in which the poet-lover, locked outside the door of the *puella*, becomes the *exclusus amator* and tries, vainly, to gain entrance through his laments.<sup>19</sup> The lines of Acanthis call to mind Propertius 1.16, wherein the lover-poet tries to open the door with his flattering songs, *carmina blanditia* (16). While the door often opens for various lovers of its mistress (*nec possum infamis dominae defendere noctes*, 9), it does not admit the poet offering only poetry. The poet-lover bemoans that his words fall vainly to the west wind (*at mea nocturno verba cadunt Zephyro*, 34).

Furthermore, on the metapoetic level, Acanthis recalls Tibullus 1.5, in which the lover-poet laments the necessity of wealth: *ianua sed plena est percutienda manu* (68). The difference

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Tibullus 1.2, Propertius 1.16, and Ovid 1.6 for examples of this trope.

in vocabulary in these lines underscores the irreconcilable agendas of the *lena* and the poet-lover. She demands a full hand, *plena manu*, but the poet-lover offers only poetry and hence is considered *inanis*. Acanthis' advice explains what the poet-lover omits in Propertius 1.16: he is sleeping outside for no reason other than that he refuses to offer money, in hopes of being admitted by way of poetry alone.<sup>20</sup> The *lena*'s instructions both teach the *puella* to consider poetry of little value and simultaneously undermine the poet's claims about the *puella*'s infidelity.

In the central section of her speech (lines 47-58), Acanthis builds upon her most damaging counter-argument to the poet-lover: the *puella* should value gold above all else. Her speech culminates in a dramatic climax in lines 55-56, in which she quotes two verses of the poet-lover from poem 1.2. She insists that the *puella* should not take issue with the type of man who brings her material goods, whether he be a soldier not skilled in love, a sailor, or a merchant. Mention of the soldier (*miles*) invokes Propertius 2.16, in which the poet-lover tells about a wealthy praetor from Illyria who threatens to steal Cynthia. The poet-lover argues that the cheap wealth of the praetor and his coarse hand are suitable only for war. He calls the praetor a *barbarus* (2.16.27) matching the *barbara colla* mentioned by Acanthis in line 51.

While the poet-lover tries to dissuade the girl from any interest in wealth, Acanthis forcefully asserts its importance by inverting the poet-lover's language. The cyclical construction of line 53, beginning and ending with "gold" (*aurum*), powerfully summarizes and underscores her fiscal agenda: *aurum spectato, non quae manus afferat aurum*. Her reference to the hand, *manus*, calls for further comparison with a line from Tibullus 1.5, in which the lover-

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<sup>20</sup> For further evidence of the poet-lover's insistence to offer the *puella* nothing but verse, cf. Tib. 2.4.19-20: *ad dominam faciles aditus per carmina quaero:/ ite procul, Musae, si nihil ista ualent*.

poet offers the empty hand of the impoverished poet as a token of safety for the *puella*.<sup>21</sup> The *lena*'s predilection for gold necessitates the rejection of the empty hand that offers poetry. She bluntly asks the *puella* in line 54: once you have heard the poetic verses, what are you left with but words (*versibus auditis quid nisi verba feres*)?

Acanthis' argument for the superiority of wealth over the folly of poetry reaches its pinnacle in line 55-56, in which she recites the first couplet of Propertius 1.2, the first words addressed to Cynthia by the lover-poet:

Quid iuvat ornato procedere, vita, capillo  
et tenuis Coa veste movere sinus?

In poem 1.2, the lover-poet attempts to persuade Cynthia that her natural beauty is preferable to adornment with luxurious goods and heavy make-up, and in doing so, to direct her from wealthy suitors to his verses. Following a stinging refutation of the value of poetry, and a vigorous call for economic prosperity, Acanthis' recitation of these verses is a direct and mocking effrontery to the poet-lover. Using his own poetry against him, she underscores the message that words are useless.

Scholars have debated whether the first couplet of Propertius 1.2 belongs in poem 4.5 or whether it was interpolated at a later date.<sup>22</sup> One reason advanced for the suspected interpolation

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<sup>21</sup> Tibullus 1.5.63-64.

<sup>22</sup> Richmond suggests that the lines were interpolated by early Italian scribes, but, though many editors reject them, he includes them, arguing that it is obvious that the poet means to reflect back upon his previous work. Shackleton Bailey gives a lengthy assessment of the arguments for and against interpolation. He refutes those in favor of interpolation and argues for the retention of the lines as a matter of taste. Shackleton Bailey, 1952-53, 17-20: He rejects the arguments of Knoche who argues, first, that the formal construction of lines 53-54 calls for a conclusion to her speech, rather than quotation; and second, that a quotation not marked as such by the poet with a word of speaking, such as *dixit*, is problematic. Shackleton Bailey refutes these arguments as a matter of taste, asserting that the poem reads better with the quotation in place. Syndikus, on the contrary believes that the couplet is out of place and likely derived from a note in the margin. Syndikus, 2010, 330.

is that Propertius does not usually quote his own poetry.<sup>23</sup> Yet, it is for this very reason the couplet can be said to belong to the elegy. Throughout her speech, Acanthis uses words and phrases extracted directly from the elegiac corpus. By reciting elegiac verse and repeating specific phrases that the poet-lover has employed in previous entreaties to the *puella*, the *lena* illustrates that she is his greatest foe, not because she practices magic, but because she usurps his poetic talent and refutes his poetic arguments. While the majority of Acanthis' elegiac references are subtle, she reserves for the acme of her speech a direct quote from the poet, using it to refute, effectively and unsympathetically, everything that the lover-poet can offer the *puella*.

Acanthis concludes her speech with a final exhortation to the *puella* that is an adaptation of one of the poet-lover's standard arguments. She urges the *puella* to take advantage of the present day because her age will soon start to show and her beauty will fade (59-60). Her command to the young girl to put youth to use (*utere*) implies a strictly utilitarian objective—that the *puella* gather as much wealth as possible. The poet-lover similarly asserts the urgency of the brevity of life to the *puella* but his objective is to convince her to sleep with him alone. In poem 2.15, he reminds Cynthia that death may come any day, so, while time remains, she should not neglect the enjoyment of life (*tu modo, dum lucet, fructum ne desere vitae!* 49). The enjoyment (*fructum*) to which he refers is undoubtedly the heavenly sex described in the beginning of the elegy. This *carpe diem* argument begins in line 49 with a temporal *dum*-clause and concludes with a warning of the danger that the future holds in line 54, mentioning specifically the possible fate that tomorrow's day will bring: *forsitan includet crastina fata dies*. Acanthis' exhortation to the *puella* in lines 59-60 closely parallels the construction of these verses. Line 59 contains two

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<sup>23</sup> Richardson, 2006, 445.

temporal clauses introduced by *dum* and line 60 a negative result clause that expresses the same danger posed by tomorrow's day (*cras..dies*).<sup>24</sup>

### The Poet-Lover Loses his Voice

After Acanthis steals the speech of the poet-lover for the benefit of her own arguments, he remains speechless, robbed of his elegiac powers. Following the encounter with his foe, the poet-lover does not proceed to match her persuasive skills with a battery of his own acclaimed rhetoric. Rather, he responds to her threats with curses devoid of elegiac character and the powers of poetic persuasion and elegance. A comparison of his words with those of the *lena* demonstrates that Acanthis effectively steals his poetic faculties.

Upon the conclusion of Acanthis' speech, the poet-lover proceeds:

his animum nostrae dum versat Acanthis amicae,  
per tenuem ossa <mihi> sunt numerata cutem.  
sed cape torquatae, Venus o regina, columbae  
ob meritum ante tuos gutturra secta focos!  
vidi ego rugoso tussim concrescere collo,  
sputaque per dentis ire cruenta cavos,  
atque animam in tegetes putrem exspirare paternas:  
horruit argenti pergula curta foco.  
exsequiae fuerant rari furtive capilli  
vincula et immundo pallida mitra situ  
et canis, in nostros nimis experrecta dolores,  
cum fallenda meo pollice clatra forent.  
sit tumulus lenae curto vetus amphora collo:  
urgeat hunc supra vis, caprifice, tua.  
quisquis amas, scabris, hoc bustum caedite saxis,  
mixtaque cum saxis addite verba mala!<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Acanthis' words here closely echo two verses of Tibullus 1.5. Acanthis states: *dum vernat sanguis, dum rugi integer annus,/ utere, ne quid cras libet ab ore dies!*. In Tibullus 1.5, the lover-poet presents a parallel construction with a *dum* clause followed by the imperative *utere*: *nescio quid furtivus amor parat. utere quaeso,/ dum licet: in liquida nam tibi linter aqua.*

In these sixteen lines, the language of the male speaker lacks the standard characteristics of the elegiac *querela*. One might expect the poet-lover, upon the death of his greatest rival, to issue another attempt at persuading (perhaps at last successfully) his *puella*; or, that he might offer a counter-argument to the malicious precepts of the *lena*. But no such argument appears. Cynthia is strikingly absent. The poet-lover does not mention any form of *amor*. His *blanditiae*, *mollia verba*, and *mollis versus* find no place in these lines. Rather, after encountering the *lena*, the lover-poet is left with nothing but hateful curses heaped upon the tomb of the deceased woman.<sup>26</sup> In the final line of the elegy, he acknowledges himself that all he has are *verba mala*, evil words.

As Damer has asserted, the poet-lover typically employs a variety of lofty mythological exempla and sophisticated descriptions of *cultus* as tactics for combating and seducing women by means of his verse—the type of language Acanthis uses to describe the luxuries Cynthia should demand from clients (21-26).<sup>27</sup> In the presence of the *lena*, the lover’s usual elegant and refined speech deserts him, and he resorts to sordid language and ugly images. Instead of using

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<sup>25</sup> Propertius 4.5.63-78: “While Acanthis turns the mind of my mistress with these words, all my bones may be counted beneath my shrunken skin. But Queen Venus, receive my offering before your altars, the cut throat of a ringdove! I myself saw the cough clot in her wrinkled throat, and the bloody spittle drip through her hollow teeth, and I saw her breathe out her putrid spirit on her father’s mats: the unfinished shed shook with a cold hearth. For her funeral there had been stolen bands for her scanty hair and a garment yellow with dirt and age, and the dog, overly wakeful to my distresses, when the locks had been slipped by my fingers. Let the tomb of the bawd be an old wine-jug with broken neck: over it, may you, fig-tree, exert your force; whoever you are who loves, strike this grave with rough stones, and add your curses mixed with stones!” (Trans. Jessica Wise)

<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the poet-lover in Tibullus 1.5 also has nothing to combat the *lena* but bitter curses: *sanguineas edat illa dapes atque ore cruento/ tristia cum multo pocula felle bibat;/ hanc volitent animae circum sua fata querentes/ semper et e tectis strix violenta canat;/ ipsa fame stimulante furens herbasque sepulcris/ quaerat et a saevis ossa relictas lupis,/ currat et inguinibus nudis ululeque per urbes,/ post agat e triviis aspera turba canum.* 49-56.

<sup>27</sup> Damer, 2010, 145-185.

the elegiac adjectives that describe the soft (*mollis*) or gentle (*lenta*) *puella*, he describes the bloody death of Acanthis with a vocabulary that focuses on the grotesque deterioration of the body; for example, the sliced throats of doves (*guttura secta*), the blood curdling in her neck (*rugoso tussim concrescere collo*) and the bloody spittle dripping from her teeth (*sputaque per dentis ire cruenta cavos*). In fact, the final couplet of Acanthis' speech features the last beautifully poetic verses of the elegy. She states, "I have seen the rose-beds of perfumed Paestum, about to bloom, lie blasted at dawn by the south wind."<sup>28</sup> Finally, in addition to his base language, the lover-poet seems so devoid of verse that he repeats the lines of Acanthis. He begins line 67 with *vidi ego*, regurgitating the words of Acanthis six lines above.

Sara Myers postulates that the *lena* threatens to sap the male sexually, economically, and artistically.<sup>29</sup> By challenging the lover-poet, the *lena* challenges his sexuality. Thus, Myers argues that in cursing the *lena*, the lover-poet attempts to reassert his poetic and male potency over her. Threats such as the *vis* (strength) described in line 76, "encode the masculine threat of penetration as the reassertion of power."<sup>30</sup> Appealing though it may be, there is a flaw in this argument. *Vis* is not the tool of the poet. It is more suitable to the Roman soldier. The poet-lover will get nowhere with strength. Without the powers of verse, he is helpless against the *lena*. The final, empty, and pathetic tenor of the curses that the poet-lover heaps on Acanthis, with no trace of *amor*, the *puella*, or language either *levis* or *blanda*, demonstrates that the *lena* has succeeded in stealing the poet's voice. Without his elegiac composition, the poet-lover is left

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<sup>28</sup> *vidi ego odorati victura rosaria Paesti/ sub matutino cocta iacere Noto*, Propertius 4.5.61-62.

<sup>29</sup> Myers, 1996, 1-21.

<sup>30</sup> Myers, 1996, 12.

with nothing with which he might compose a convincing counter-argument to the *lena*'s precepts. Spite is his only refuge and it is of no use in his pursuit of the *puella*.

#### Re-Reading Propertius Through 4.5

By usurping the voice of the male poet-lover, Acanthis also assumes command of the narrative of the elegiac relationship. She both demonstrates her elegiac ability and strips the poet-lover of his narrative voice. Thus she forcefully asserts the authority of her own perspective. Re-reading the Propertian corpus through the eyes of Acanthis reveals a new side of the elegiac *puella*. The enamored poet-lover at times depicts his girl as chaste and virtuous (1.4, 2.13, 2.26), and at other times as unfaithful and perfidious (2.5, 2.16, 2.24a). By introducing monetary and practical concerns, Acanthis challenges these accusations and proclamations about the nature of the *puella*, and by repeating the poet-lover's words and phrases, she encourages readers to redirect their attention to those passages and to question the claims made by the poet-lover therein. Thus she demonstrates that neither the *puella* nor the male speaker is perhaps who they originally seemed to be.

For an initial example, we may examine the manner in which this redirection operates in poem 1.2. In this elegy, the poet-lover threatens Cynthia with the loss of his love if she will not forsake her luxuries. He employs this threat as the apex of his argument to sway her to accept his poetry over material wealth. Acanthis' instructions, however, unveil a larger complexity within the relationship: she teaches Cynthia to accept luxuries from men and to cast off those who offer nothing. Thus, the threat that the poet-lover presents to Cynthia in 1.2 is not, in the end, much of a threat. If she follows the instruction of the *lena*, Cynthia will have no use for the *amator* who refuses to bring her expensive gifts. Furthermore, recent scholarship has

demonstrated that the elegiac *puella* is necessarily a courtesan and not a citizen woman.<sup>31</sup> The character of the *lena* and her mercenary precepts make this point completely clear. Acanthis introduces the realistic truth that the courtesan requires money and material wealth to sustain her livelihood. From the perspective of the *lena*, the petty adornment and obsession with fineries that the poet-lover mocks in 1.2 are necessary tools for seducing men and for turning a profit.<sup>32</sup>

In poem 2.33, the poet laments that he cannot have sex with Cynthia. Though she is the cause of his grief, the lover-poet does not suggest that her actions are malicious. Rather, he relieves his sexual frustration by chastising Io and lamenting the stipulations of Cynthia's religious duty. A re-reading of this poem after the speech of Acanthis recalls lines 34-35 of her speech, in which she instructs the girl to feign religious observance of Isis in order to extort money from her lovers while avoiding sex. These lines impose a perverse reality onto elegy 2.33: Cynthia may be honoring the goddess Isis, or she may be employing the deceptive tricks taught to her by the *lena*.

This phenomenon can be witnessed in elegies throughout the corpus. The advice of the *lena* consistently undermines the assertions of the male poet-lover and exposes inconsistencies and hypocrisies in the slanted perspective of the male elegiac persona. Her clever and effective composition of elegiac verse illustrates the presence of dissenting voices in the elegiac corpus, voices that challenge the linear plot offered by the male poet-lover. When she steals the voice of the poet-lover and renders her opponent inarticulate and powerless, Acanthis complicates the

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<sup>31</sup> James, 2003, 38.

<sup>32</sup> The poet-lover also frequently admits that he loves her elegance and beauty. This is evident in 3.10, the genethliacon, in which he commands Cynthia to put on the garments that first charmed his eyes: *ac primum pura somnum tibi discute lympa/ et nitidas presso police finge comas:/ dein, qua primum oculos cepisti veste Properti,/ indue, nec vacuum flore relinque caput* (3.10.13-16).

reading of Propertian elegy by eliminating the authorial control of the poet-lover and opening the poetry to alternate points of view, specifically encouraging readers to consider the situation of the *puella*.

### **Cynthia Rewrites the Poetry**

In elegy 4.7, Cynthia triumphantly returns to Propertius' poetry. In the form of a ghost, she confronts the poet-lover in an extensive elegiac speech that provocatively undermines his romanticized account of their relationship. Recent scholars have acknowledged in Cynthia's speech the dramatic and powerful presence of a distinct female voice as well as Cynthia's effective use of that voice to challenge her lover. Wyke, Janan, Ramsby and others consider the female voice in 4.7 within the larger, programmatic context of Book 4 as a poetic device that simultaneously exposes and expands the elegiac world with new perspectives. I contend that Cynthia's speech from the grave should not be considered in isolation: it should be examined in conjunction with the only other elegy in Book Four in which a woman speaks about the elegiac relationship, namely 4.5. When considered alongside Acanthis' words in poem 4.5, Cynthia's speech demonstrates the elegiac *puella*'s assertive and spirited realization of the endeavor set out by the *lena*: to do battle, in speech, with the authority of the male poet-lover.

Following the path of her mentor, Cynthia usurps the poet-lover's authoritative mode of speech, takes control of her own reputation, and lays claims to an independent identity. By establishing herself outside the poet, she definitively asserts her autonomous speech and forces her point of view into the elegiac discourse, introducing realities to the affair that undermine the poet's authority. Like that of the *lena* Acanthis, her point of view infuses Propertian elegy with a new perspective, one that subverts the singular, limited narrative of the poet-lover in the first

three books of Propertian elegy and retroactively disrupts a linear plotline for the elegiac relationship. With her command of the elegiac medium, Cynthia forcefully inserts the feminine voice into the narrative and rewrites Propertian elegy from the point of view of the *puella*. After reading Cynthia in poem 4.7, readers should re-read and re-evaluate what they were reading in Books 1 to 3. Effectively, Cynthia rewrites the love affair entirely.

In poem 4.7, Cynthia issues a *querela* that is an enhanced version of the rhetorical tactics she employs in 1.3 and 2.29; namely, a unique combination of elegiac composition and physical sexuality. In her curses, laments, and assertions of virtue, her language strongly recalls the previous words of the poet-lover. She begins in standard elegiac lament by accusing her lover of infidelity, *perfide* (4.7.13), a claim she reiterates in line 70 (*tua perfidia*). She professes her own fidelity in the face of his neglect (*me servasse fidem* 53). Further, she describes her funeral in terms reminiscent of the poet-lover's fantasies in 2.13 and 3.6. But, while he envisions her loving displays of devotion at his death, she angrily laments the way in which her funeral was conducted—without the tears or attention of her lover. She introduces a rival, Chloris (39-40, 46-47, 71-72), who resembles the poet-lover's rival, the wealthy praetor. And, as a final appropriation of the *querela*, she calls on mythological exempla to demonstrate her fidelity and the suffering she has endured as a result of male faithlessness (57-70). In line 63, she associates herself with Andromeda to whom the poet-lover also compares the peaceful, sleeping Cynthia in poem 1.3.

In lines 77-78, the tide turns as Cynthia boldly commands the poet-lover to burn the verses that sing her praises:

et quoscumque meo fecisti nomine versus,  
ure mihi: laudes desine habere meas!

Through this demand, Cynthia denies the authorial command to her *amator* and establishes her identity as an independent composer of elegy. Barbara Flaschenriem discusses the erotic as well as literary and discursive consequences of Cynthia's statement. According to Flaschenriem, Cynthia's order to burn the poet's verses can be viewed, in an erotic context, as a demonstration of her anger at his breach of faith. Her desires at this juncture, however, reach further into the discursive realm, where her bid to destroy his verse demonstrates an attempt to lay claim to his authoritative mode of speech.<sup>33</sup>

Cynthia achieves this goal with the creation of her own epitaph in lines 85-86. She orders the poet to erect a tomb for her on which he is to inscribe the words:

HIC TIBURTINA IACET AUREA CYNTHIA TERRA:  
ACCESSIT RIPAE LAUS, ANIENE, TUAE

Here golden Cynthia lies in the fields of the Tibur.

Anio, new praise/glory is added to your banks.

Although she entrusts the project to her poet-lover, Cynthia does not give him license to choose the words for her epitaph. Rather, she composes for herself a beautifully constructed elegiac couplet. In the hexameter, *aurea Cynthia* is suspended in the middle of the alliterative phrase *Tiburtina... terra*. In the pentameter, *laus* is featured in the middle of the line, in the same position as *aurea Cynthia* that it modifies.

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<sup>33</sup> Flaschenriem, 1998, 55.

Further, Cynthia's selection of a burial site upsets the poet's own fantasies about death.<sup>34</sup> In 3.16, the poet begs that, should he suffer death, he be buried in a shadowy, out-of-the-way place where no passersby can disturb and defile his tomb. He prefers his tomb to be hidden, provided that it be attended dutifully by his *puella*. Cynthia chooses the opposite type of location. She wants to be buried alongside the Tiber, so that travelers will read her words (...*quod currens vector ab urbe legat* 4.7.84).

Notably, the poet is mentioned nowhere in these lines. His absence from Cynthia's epitaph contrasts sharply with those in which he imagines her care for his grave, or, as in 2.13, his own epitaphs that pronounce his devotion to her.<sup>35</sup> In her study on the role of epitaphs in Propertian elegy, Teresa Ramsby explains that the male speaker's personal identity is "contingent upon his poetic reputation, or more accurately his poetic reception."<sup>36</sup> She asserts:

The gravestones that the poet considers throughout his prior collections provide one way of working out the artist's negotiation with his legacy.<sup>37</sup>

In creating her own epitaph, Cynthia adopts the authoritative mode of speech that has previously belonged to the male speaker and uses it to assert her own legacy, thus denying the poet-lover a

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<sup>34</sup> Flaschenriem, 1998, 56-57.

<sup>35</sup> *et duo sint versus: QUI NUNC IACET HORRIDA PULVIS,/ UNIUS HIC QUONDAM SERVUS AMORIS ERAT.* 2.13.35-36.

<sup>36</sup> Ramsby, 2007, 64.

<sup>37</sup> Ramsby, 2007, 64.

place in her story. As Barbara Flaschenriem asserts, this epitaph should be read, “Cynthia has assumed an existence independent of her creator.”<sup>38</sup>

Throughout books 1-3, the *amator* claims the power of his verses will make the renown of his beloved endure, whether in glory or infamy. In 3.2, he proclaims that his songs will be memorials to her beauty (*carmina erunt formae tot monumenta tuae* 3.2.18). In 2.5, he threatens to brand her eternally with verse: Cynthia, powerful in her beauty, fickle in her speech (*Cynthia, forma potens: Cynthia, verba levis* 2.5.28). In her epitaph in 4.7, Cynthia titles herself “golden” (*aurea*), recalling her golden statuette, which she claims greedy Chloris melted down for wealth (47). Having disposed of the lover’s verse, she reclaims this bold adjective to create an eternal identity, independent of the male speaker and his representations of her. In her verses, Cynthia demonstrates that her own elegiac abilities equal those of her poet. She thus establishes herself as his formidable elegiac opponent. She usurps his voice, triumphs in her own composition, and renders him powerless by thwarting his poetic powers with her own verse.

Having taken command of the poetic medium and asserted an identity separate from the poet-lover, Cynthia further subverts the speaker by offering her own account of their affair. As with the threatening precepts of Acanthis, Cynthia’s command of elegiac verse—the tool of the poet-lover—establishes her account as a legitimate and credible challenge to the perspective of the speaker. She introduces an unglamorous vision of elegiac sexual behaviors that exposes the grim realities of the relationship and parodies the idealized, erotic fantasies of the poet in books 1-3.<sup>39</sup> By twisting the standard *topos* of the elegiac *querela* with such realities and asserting her

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<sup>38</sup> Flaschenriem, 1998, 61.

<sup>39</sup> Damer, 2010, 165.

autonomous voice, Cynthia demands a re-reading from the *puella*'s point of view of the elegiac relationship of books 1-3.

In a study of the elegies that feature Cynthia's direct speech (1.3, 2.29, 3.6, 4.7), Erika Damer has argued convincingly that Cynthia's speech is autonomous from the male speaker. She demonstrates that what distinguishes the *puella*'s speech is a formulation of elegiac composition that imitates the poet-lover's, combined with an overt focus on the sexualized female body.<sup>40</sup> This combination yields a type of speech that simultaneously allures and destabilizes the poet-lover, and grants Cynthia the ability to make him her *servus amator*. In elegies 1.3, 2.29, 4.7, Damer asserts that Cynthia's distinct voice employs speech that embeds the sexualized female body in elegiac *querela*. In 1.3 and 2.29, Cynthia exposes her body using vivid physical descriptions—positioned invitingly on the bed, nude, panting—but these details are subtle and couched within the dominant voice of the male speaker. Most importantly, these inclusions do not upset his romanticized view of the relationship.

However, in 4.7 Cynthia's *querelae* are infused with crude, bodily realities never before seen. She begins with euphemistic assertions of her poet's infidelity by referring to the secretive acts (*furta*, 15) and nighttime cunning (*nocturni doli*, 16) they used to practice together. Her language becomes immediately explicit and base as she unashamedly reminds the poet-lover of the scandalous details of their affair. First, she reveals the late nights they spent in the Subura—the neighborhood known as a community of prostitutes, courtesans, and other low-class people.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Damer, 2010, 145-185.

<sup>41</sup> *iamne tibi exciderant vigilacis furta Suburae/ et mea nocturnis trita fenestra dolis*. 4.7.15-16; Hutchinson notes that many Latin poets, Persius and Martial among others, treat the Subura as the prostitutes' district. See Hutchinson, *Propertius Elegies Book IV*, 175.

Second, she claims to have frequently climbed down a rope to meet him in the middle of the night.<sup>42</sup> And finally, she reveals that, having laid their cloaks on the ground, they often had sex in the crossroads!<sup>43</sup>

As in 1.3 and 2.29, Cynthia's language foregrounds the sexualized female body and forces her lover to reckon with sexual realities that he shuns elsewhere.<sup>44</sup> She identifies the places (*Subura, trivio*), the actions (*furta, doli, tepidas vias*), and the state of their bodies (*in tua colla, pectore mixto*). In this speech, however, her inclusion of sexuality is aimed not at seduction, but at exposure. Dead and having no cause to gain his affection, Cynthia unveils the female experience of the relationship. Her depiction of the sordid affair contrasts the romanticized account of the poet-lover. For instance, while he claims to spend nights waiting in misery for one fortunate encounter with his girl (2.15, 2.17, 2.26, 2.33), Cynthia demonstrates that he is a frequent visitor to her home and, more specifically, her bed. While he elevates their sex to the realm of the heavens and immortality (2.14-2.15), she reminds us that it actually took place in the brothels of the Subura and the dirty crossroads.

Beyond the details of their physical relationship, Cynthia exposes the previously unseen perspective of the elegiac mistress, one that demonstrates her position in the material world as an economic dependent of the poet-lover. First, Cynthia introduces a new cast of characters: the slaves of both her household and that of the *amator*. She condemns Lygdamus and Nomas to horrific tortures—scalding irons—for their disloyalty (35-38). Petale and Lalage, Parthenie and

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<sup>42</sup> *per quam demisso quotiens tibi fune pependi,/ alterna veniens in tua colla manu?* 4.7.17-18.

<sup>43</sup> *saepe Venus trivio commissa est, pectore mixto/fecerunt tepidas pallia nostra vias.* 4.7.19-20.

<sup>44</sup> Damer, 2010, 164-176.

Latris, however, she honors for their devoted, domestic service and strives to protect them from the vindictive punishments of Chloris (43-46, 73-76). As Micaela Janan has asserted, Cynthia's speech reminds readers of a world that the genre elsewhere largely suppresses or glosses over.<sup>45</sup> Cynthia's directions expose the inner-workings of her household and reveal the stark realities of social stratification—slaves unquestionably subject to the whims of their masters and mistresses.

Furthermore, intimately and uncomfortably close to the tortured subalterns is the elegiac mistress herself—a courtesan. Just as slaves are dependent upon their masters, the social class that Cynthia represents relies upon men for both social and economic status. The pitiful description of Cynthia's funeral demonstrates her dependence on the poet-lover for both. Since he had already taken up with another woman, Chloris, the poet-lover neglected to fund and even attend her funeral. Cynthia laments that he gave neither sweet-smelling nard, nor cheap hyacinths, nor even a shattered jar to adorn her tomb (32-34). No guard ward off evil spirits from her grave. Only a broken tile propped up her head (25-26). Since she is not a citizen woman and lacks a husband, Cynthia charges her male client with the responsibility of providing her honor after death. The lover's absence and lack of financial support results in a barren funeral for Cynthia—one not worthy of the conspicuous glory golden (*aurea*) Cynthia deserves. The economic and social power of the male is evident in the consequences of the poet-lover's neglect: he prevented Cynthia from receiving an appropriate funeral and denied her fitting renown.

While Acanthis' precepts unveil the social complexities of the elegiac relationship and the jarring realities of courtesan life, Cynthia illustrates that *she* has suffered the dangers of life

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<sup>45</sup> Janan, 2001, 106-7.

as a *meretrix*, dangers that Acanthis' instructions sought to prevent. She died alone, without the gifts of her *amator* to embellish her funeral. Cynthia uses his cheapness to illustrate his lack of care and devotion to her. While the male speakers of elegy continually assert the impressive worth of verse, and, as in Tibullus 1.5, the enduring stability of an empty, devoted hand over one bearing gifts, Cynthia demonstrates that her lover's miserliness resulted in a pathetic funeral that was insulting to her pride and unworthy of the devotion she had previously shown him. Maria Wyke asserts that though the poet-lover often claims the passive, and at times victimized, role as *servus amator*, "Cynthia reveals that the Roman amatory world is constituted instead by male dominance, female economic dependence, and the literal torture of domestic slaves."<sup>46</sup> In unveiling the underbelly of the elegiac world and the consequences of her social position, Cynthia further removes the glamorous veil imposed upon their relationship by the male speaker.

Cynthia's sordid realities demand a re-reading of the poet's prior books of love poetry with a view to the female perspective, economic, emotional, and sexual. She demonstrates that for every assertion made by the male poet-speaker, the elegiac *puella* experiences something quite different. From an economic perspective, the fineries he mocks (1.2) and holds in contempt are essential. Pursuit of a wealthy praetor in place of a poet is a more prudent, practical option (2.6). In 1.3, Cynthia testified to her fidelity; however, her claims were undercut by the poet-lover's continual allegations of her perfidy. In 4.7, Cynthia vividly illustrates the suffering that resulted from her poet-lover's neglect. She combats the male speaker with her elegiac speech and authoritatively demands that her repeated professions of loyalty warrant serious consideration. Further, when we re-read 2.29 with a view to Cynthia's sexual experience, we no longer wonder why she angrily chastises the poet for waking her—she is

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<sup>46</sup> Wyke, 2002, 185.

merely sick of admitting him! With her explosive details, Cynthia demands an awareness of the social and economic realities of their affair. She contests the poet-speaker's authority by introducing a new, independent perspective that interrogates and rewrites the elegiac relationship.

As in poem 4.5, the male speaker in 4.7 is left speechless by his encounter with a ghost. At the conclusion of Cynthia's speech, he issues only a single couplet. He does not offer a rebuttal to Cynthia's claims but merely states that her shadowy ghost slipped away from his attempted embrace (*inter complexus excidit umbra meos*, 96). Certainly, his words have no power against a ghost. The opportunity for apology or amends is long past. Nevertheless, the similarity between his silence following the confrontation of Cynthia and his silence following his encounter with Acanthis merits attention. Cynthia, like the *lena*, leaves the poet-lover speechless and powerless when she steals his voice. Having forcefully eradicated the need for his verses and asserted her own voice and identity, Cynthia deprives the poet-lover of any authority or ability to combat her assertions. Rather, he is left grasping for what he can no longer control.

## CONCLUSION

Maria Wyke asserts that following the example of Propertius' spectral Cynthia in poem 4.7, readers can reconsider and retell the dynamics of gender and female representation in the elegiac genre. Both she and Janan, among others, have convincingly argued that Cynthia's speech "ambushes" the elegy-reading audience by uncomfortably exposing a marginalized world, and revealing that everything previously known is wrong. In their arguments, these scholars underscore the important role of the contesting voices of Cynthia in 4.7 and Acanthis in 4.5. By way of their contending reports, Cynthia and Acanthis expose the generic hypocrisies and ironies implicit in the complex dynamics of the elegiac relationship.

The triumphant speeches of these women, however, serve a more immediate purpose in the Propertian corpus. Cynthia and Acanthis engage in a battle of speech with the poet-lover. Their challenge to him stems not merely from stories that contest him, but more potently from their linguistic power. Together, Cynthia and Acanthis effectively demonstrate that the dominant male poet-lover of books 1-3 is not the exclusive possessor of the elegiac medium. By successfully taking command of this language, these women interrogate the veracity of the entire poetic corpus and demand a re-reading—word by word—of the prior three books of elegy from their diverse perspectives.

With the autonomous speeches of Cynthia and Acanthis, Propertius reveals to his readers that he has duped them. Throughout the first three books of elegy, readers are led to consider the account of the first-person persona, the poet-lover, as authoritative. The poet-lover consistently

grants a distinct, dangerous persuasive power to Cynthia's speech in his descriptions of her *blanditia* (1.9, 1.15), her represented speech, and her direct speeches in 1.3 and 2.29. But, Cynthia's distinct point of view is obscured by the male-poet's perspective. Her indirect speech is firmly shaped and limited by what he chooses to represent. Cynthia's direct speeches introduce a new perspective that includes the sexual realities of the relationship. In both 1.3 and 2.29, the male-poet is robbed of the opportunity to retort, but there is no evidence that Cynthia disarms the poet of his poetic power. Rather, the first-person account of the male poet-lover returns each time in the following elegies and reassumes command of the narrative. A feminine perspective is couched by the ever-present, dominant male voice from poem 1.1 to the final poem of book 3.

The *voleuses de langue* of Book Four, Acanthis and Cynthia, subvert the power of the male speaker and forcefully assert the presence of independent female voices in elegy. Following the introduction of these female voices, readers are encouraged to reconsider the voice of Cynthia in poems 1.3, 2.29 and those in which her speech is reported by the poet and to re-read the relationship from a new, feminine perspective. In re-reading Cynthia's speech in elegies such as 1.3, 2.15, and 2.29 in which she proclaims her love and fidelity, one may reverse the view that these are the claims of a fickle girlfriend, and treat them instead as cleverly crafted arguments aimed to simultaneously allure and destabilize the poet-lover. With explicit reference to her naked body, or enticing statements such as, "Do you just lie there, sluggard?" Cynthia demonstrates knowledge of what *he wants* to hear—the type of speech a courtesan might issue to a man whom she wishes to maintain as her client. Further, the precepts of the *lena* and the speech of Cynthia undermine the poet-lover of the first three books in such a way that his claims often appear ridiculous. For example, in 2.26 he dreams that Cynthia will read to him and say

she hates rich men. How could a courtesan, one who requires a man's support for her funeral, possibly truly cherish poetry over wealth? What appears a mere machination of the poet's imaginings upon first reading, considered from the stance of the *puella* demonstrates her ability to manipulate the poet with persuasive seduction.

Propertius places these new voices into his final book of elegy in order to challenge the poet-lover and force a re-reading of his prior three books of elegy from their diverse points of view. By successfully stealing his craft, Cynthia and Acanthis assume influence over the elegiac narrative and subvert the control of the male speaker. With their distinct capacity for autonomous speech, these women demonstrate that the elegiac relationship—the central subject of Propertian elegy—is not the glamorous love affair that the poet-lover represents. Rather, it is a battle between lovers that is manifested in a war of words in which Cynthia and Acanthis each play an important role as formidable rhetorical opponent of the poet-lover. Through the introduction of these new voices, Propertius infuses his poetry with misdirection, complexity, and ambiguity designed to hinder a comprehensive, linear plot and create a text that is constantly questioning itself and evolving.

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