

Love Me, Love My Girl: the Economics of Elegiac Advertisement and Poetic Competition

The programmatically impoverished *amatores* of Latin love elegy insist on the contrast, both practical and moral, between the rich gifts of their rivals and their own poetry, which grants fame but no practical reward (e.g. *Amores* 1.3.7-12; *Ars* 3.551; Tibullus 1.4.59-70; Propertius 2.26b.21-26; see James 2003, ch. 3). But the *amatores* protest too much. When one understands the *puellae* as a practical courtesan (James 2011: 315), the fame the *amatores* grant their *puellae* has practical implications, both for attracting new clients (rivals, in the *amator's* eyes: Propertius, 2.24.1-2; *Amores* 3.12.5-10) and for encouraging their jealousy (and thus inflaming their desire; see Propertius 4.5.39-40, *Amores* 1.8.95-100). As such, the *amator's* poetic bargain (fame for sex) and secondary purpose (his own poetic recognition by the public) sabotage his ostensible goal of sexual access to the *puella*; the 'poet' and the 'lover' are working at cross purposes.

While this self-destructive trap applies to elegy as a whole, I argue that the Propertian voice, in particular, recognizes – and embraces – the paradox. In a world of homosocial competition where the female image is a medium of exchange (see Sedgwick 1985) and where 'to be read is to be loved' (Percy 2006: 31); where the elegiac *puella* represents – in some sense, *is* – the poetry itself (see Wyke 1987) and Tibullus offers his Delia to his patron Messalla as a serving-girl (Tibullus 1.5.31-34); the most successful poet is the one whose girl is loved – read – by other poets (such as Propertius' correspondents) in preference even to their own. Propertius' 'letters' to other poets can thus be read as competitions: assimilating non-elegiac figures such as Ponticus, Lynceus and Bassus into the elegiac fantasy world, the Propertian voice encourages his addressees to appreciate the virtues of his *puella*, while implying (and rejecting) similar attempts on their side (as in Propertius 1.4.1-2).

In this arena of homosocial 'seduction', the courtesan and the '*materia* girl' blur together. As the Propertian voice 'seduces' other men on behalf of his girl, his success as poet leads directly to his amatory *dolor*; and yet that *dolor* is the generic necessity of elegy, the *ingenium* that fuels the poet's success. The more 'rivals' the poet creates, the more miserable he is as a lover, and thus, the more truly,

triumphantly elegiac he becomes.

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