

Quantum femina saevit:
Cynthia and the Monstrous Feminine in Propertius Book IV

Monstrous women run wild in the imagination of the ancient world—gorgons, witches, and sirens color the pages of ancient works and illustrate the anxieties and desires of the cultures from which they sprang. Much scholarly attention has been paid to these “canonical” monstrous women as they appear in Augustan poetry (Lowe 2020, Ripat 2016), but even outside of these more traditional monsters, women and the feminine dwell near the border of the monstrous. Femininity, in its associations with excessive emotion, lack of self control, desirability, and abjection, supplies the core of many ancient monstrosities. In the view of ancient authors, women were already more easily polluted and more likely to pollute others (Lennon 2012). Women are deceptive, whether by use of cosmetics, witchcraft, or beguiling words (Richlin 2014). Whether femininity repulses, attracts, or both, it stands as a threat to patriarchal order. In this paper, I closely read Propertius 4.7 and 4.8, tracing tropes of pollution, deception, and emasculation, and examining the poet’s treatment of femininity and the monstrosity it can produce. I use Cohen’s (1996) seven theses of monster studies, which explore the ways in which monstrosity disrupts categories, blurs boundaries, and creates a safe place in which to de- and reconstruct one’s own identity, in conjunction with Carroll’s (2020) work on the formation of monstrous bodies and horrific imagery to read Propertius’ Cynthia as monstrous.

Despite the poet’s attempt to oust Cynthia from his poetry at the end of Book 3, she returns twice in Book 4 in distinctly monstrous forms. In 4.7 she is envisioned as a ghost who haunts Propertius in a dream. She embodies what contemporary monster theorists term “monstrous fusion,” the combination of opposing characteristics into one body. In Propertius’ visceral description, the woman is characterized by opposing elements: the same eyes she had in

life (*eosdem oculos*; 4.7.8), withered lips (*summaque...triverat ora*; 4.7.10), a living breath (*spirantisque animos*; 4.7.11), creaking, bony hands (*illi pollicibus fragiles increpuere manus*; 4.7.11-12). These seemingly conflicting attributes fuse within her to create a distinctly monstrous exterior while she, speaking from the grave, lambasts Propertius for his faithlessness. Cynthia relates her desire that others who have betrayed her be brutally tortured and reminds Propertius of her eternal power over him (*mox sola tenebo: mecum eris, et mixtis ossibus ossa teram*; 4.7.93-93), leaving the poet emasculated as her ghastly form fades away.

In 4.8, Cynthia has seemingly regained her corporeal form and terrorizes the poet. I examine Propertius' use of horrific metonymy in his depiction of a monstrous Cynthia. The approach of the woman is enough to cause things to go awry- tables upend (*reccidit inque suos mensa supina pedes*; 4.8.44), lamps flicker (*sed neque suppletis constabat flamma lucernis*; 4.8.43), doors creak (*cum subito rauci sonuerunt cardine postes*; 4.8.49), emphasizing her power to disrupt the natural order. Then Cynthia attacks Propertius and his companions. While Cynthia has been depicted as physically violent before by Propertius, the vivid language used here elevates this episode to alarming heights (1.6, 1.5, 1.13, 3.8). Her actions, words, and gorgonian visage (Walsh 2010, O'Neill 2005) terrorize Propertius' companions and petrify the poet himself. She functions as a warning, relayed always by a Propertius who has survived to tell the tale. The poet ultimately retains the very power and control he often depicts himself as yielding in his poems. The monstrous Cynthia enables a safe exploration of masculinity and emasculation, one which, constrained to the poetic space, can be successfully cast off and replaced with a reaffirmed hegemonic identity.

Works Cited

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