

Hickey Hermeneutics: Varied Visualities of Love-Bites in Latin Love Elegy

Among extant ancient literature, the motif of the hickey or love-bite is peculiar to the Latin love elegy of Propertius, Tibullus, and Ovid. These poets use the visual prominence of the hickey to craft the anxious jealousy that is the hallmark of the genre (Caston 2012). These ways of viewing vary in the identities of the gazer and the gazed-upon, the marker and the marked, and the writer and the written-about.

Since there has not yet been an examination of love-bites in classical studies, prior scholarship on hickies is confined primarily to social-scientific studies on sex and violence (Alapack 2005, Jones and Hearn 2008). I adopt Grosz's lens of "gendered materiality" to explore how the hickey can be interpreted differently depending on the genders of the bearer and the viewer (Grosz 1994). I also use Frederick's work on elegiac violence and Bartsch's work on the importance of visibility to male civic identity to elucidate the attention afforded to love-bites in the elite Roman mind (Frederick 1998, Bartsch 2006). These sources provide sociological, cultural, and literary context for my analysis of five elegiac passages from the works of Ovid (*Am.* 1.7; 1.8, 95-98) and Propertius (3.8, 21-22; 4.3, 23-28; and 4.8, 63-70).

First, I interrogate the various phrases that elegiac poets use to describe love-bites. Since there is not a specific Latin word that is equivalent to the English word 'hickey,' the poets use various terms that convey the marking of the body. Chief among these is *nota*, which is rich in its network of semantic implications. It can be any mark upon the body, such as a brand or tattoo, which implies the violent act of its 'inscription.' Outside of bodily marking, *nota* is used most often of writing, as the character marks on a tablet, which holds metapoetic significance for the lover-poet, who inscribes his beloved both in literature (with elegy) and body (with love-bites).

Next, I show that the exhibition and scrutiny of hickeys have two main semiotic functions in Latin erotic elegy. The first is to connote pride, in which the hickey-bearer's overt display of the bite reinforces his sexual prowess and proper performance of Roman masculinity, such as Propertius 3.8 (21-22). Notably, this function can only occur in the Roman world when the love-bites are made on male bodies. The "gendered materiality" of the lover-poet's inscribed body, coupled with an audience of his peers, creates a meaning intended to boast one's sexual exploits.

This differs starkly from the second, and most common, function of the hickey: to spark jealousy in the viewer (Ov. *Am.* 1.8, 95-98; Prop. 4.3, 23-28). *Amores* 1.8 details an older woman's tip to a young woman that love bites will make her lover think that he has a rival, and therefore will shower her with more gifts. Conversely, Propertius 4.3 recounts a wife's anxiety about her deployed husband; she imagines the changes to his body and hopes that the conditions of war and estrangement are the source of these physical changes, rather than another woman. Both poems are written from a female point of view, though the genders of the marked bodies differ. In both, love-bites feature as key evidence for the mark-bearer's infidelity, thus acting as the trigger for pangs of jealousy in the viewer. In Propertius 4.8 (63-70), jealousy also plays a prominent role, though it is the incentive for bestowing the love-bites, rather than the result of viewing them. In this way, the marks that an enraged Cynthia inflicts upon the lover-poet's body act as a brand by which she lays claim to him and rids him of his bodily autonomy. I ultimately argue that the love-bite both epitomizes Latin elegists' preoccupation with the overlap between sex and violence and provides metapoetic material to inscribe one's lover in poetry.

Works Cited

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