

## Propertius, Elegy and Epic: Redefining Roman Masculinity

This paper revisits the existing scholarship on the opening poems of the first three books of the Propertian *oeuvre* and argues that he appropriates the topics of epic in order to reclaim his lost masculinity as a member of the Roman elite. Despite the prominence of epic in Propertius' programmatic poems 1.1, 2.1, and 3.1, little attention has been paid to Propertius' use of epic themes and characters in his elegies. Contrary to existing approaches, this paper will show that the Propertian speaker does not fully reject elegy, but welcomes epic themes as he associates them with his weakened masculinity both as a member of the elite and as an elegiac poet-hero. This technique suggests a literary response to Augustus' attempt to weaken the elite in the early Principate.

Keith (1992) has argued that in his programmatic poem *Amores* 1.1, Ovid, Propertius' successor, sets up elegy as a literary pursuit just as legitimate as epic by his frequent use of references to Virgil's *Aeneid*. In contrast to Ovid's explicit competition with epic, however, Propertius' competition with this "masculine" genre develops throughout his first three books. The Propertian speaker becomes increasingly bold in equating the worth of the elegiac genre with that of epic as he responds to the changing literary and political climate of Augustan Rome.

While James (2005) has noted that the genre of elegy is associated with the redefinition of masculinity in general in the Roman world, this paper in particular will look at the socio-political aspects involved and thus offer a distinctly new approach to these elegies. In Propertius 1.1, Cynthia is the first word of the poem and hence the book, highlighting her importance. In this poem, the Propertian speaker associates himself with an epic lover, Milanion. Wyke (1987) has argued that in Propertius 2.1, the Propertian speaker moves away from a female subject toward the subject of the act of writing. Likewise, in Propertius 2.1, the Propertian speaker claims that he could write epic just as easily as he could elegy, making himself the master and "hero" of both his elegiac and epic subject matter. In Propertius 3.1, the Propertian speaker celebrates a military triumph and makes the bold claim that heroes have their fame only through the agency of a poet, be it epic or elegaic. Thus the Propertian speaker ultimately claims for himself a position superior to that of an epic hero.

### Selected Bibliography

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