

## A Lovely Work of Art: *Cultus* and Poetry in Latin Elegy

Scholars of elegy agree that the elegiac *puella* represents her elegist's poetic program through her dress, appearance, and adornment, or her *cultus*: the Coan silks of Propertius' Cynthia, for example, represent his poetry's place in a Hellenistic literary lineage (e.g. Keith 2008, 92-93; Debroun 2003, 166-168; Wyke 2002, 149-150). This paper, however, argues that, contrary to our assumptions, the elegiac poets almost never use the *puella*'s *cultus* in order to make unambiguously positive statements about their poetry: rather, they forge a strong link between the *puella*'s *cultus* and her negative traits, including her greed and infidelity. The poets' criticisms of the *puella*'s luxurious garments and accessories exist as part of an elegiac world dominated by competition with the *puella* for her services and affections (James 2003), and this generic structure prevents the elegists from using the *puella*'s *cultus* to promote their poetic goals.

The idea that the elegiac *puella* represents, via her *cultus*, the poetic goals of the elegist seems ubiquitous and may be a concept that students of elegy take for granted. However, I believe that metapoetic deployment of the *puella*'s *cultus* does not exist in the ways that we assume it does. Explicit references to Coan silks, perhaps the most direct reference to elegy's Hellenistic predecessors, rarely appear, and even more rarely do they provide unambiguously positive statements about the poets' work. In Propertius 1.2, for example, the poet ostensibly rejects Coan silks and other luxury material goods for his *puella* (*quid iuvat ornato procedere, vita, capillo / et tenues Coa veste movere sinus...*, Prop. 1.2.1-8). His rejection of her material *cultus* curiously stands in contrast to the poetic adornment of this poem and his praise of her intellectual refinement (1.2.25-32; Wyke 2002, 124; Zetzel 1996, 89; Gaisser 1977, 391). The

poet, then, expressly avoids creating a positive link between the *puella*'s material *cultus* and his poetry.

Elsewhere, the elegists use the *puella*'s *cultus* to highlight her greed and infidelity: the poets complain about the need to provide their *puellae* with luxury material goods, including expensive silks, especially since they must compete in their gift-giving with other, richer rivals (e.g. Prop. 1.8B.37-42, 1.15.1-8, 2.1.9-22, 2.16B, 2.18, 2.23; cf. Tib. 2.4, Ov. *Am.* 1.10, 1.14). This pervasive poetic strategy precludes the poets from using the *puella*'s *cultus* to praise their own poetry; it seems to be inappropriate to join the negative image of the *puella*'s material *cultus* to their poetry, and the poets avoid doing so. The only positive links between the poet's work and material *cultus* occur with characters other than the *puella* (e.g. Elegy and Tragedy, Ov. *Am.* 3.1.5-14) or after the poet has fully imbued such luxury garments with the worst traits of the *puella* (Prop. 2.1.1-16).

A closer look at *cultus* throughout elegy, therefore, helps us jettison our assumptions about the *puella* and refine our ideas about the overlap of *cultus* and poetry in Latin elegy.

#### Works Cited

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