

Reading Elegiac Grief in Propertius 1.7

In Elegy 1.7, Propertius distinguishes himself from his addressee Ponticus, an epic poet, defends his elegiac career and hopes to attain poetic renown. At line 7, he declares that he “serves not so much talent as grief” (*nec tantum ingenio quantum seruire dolori*), highlighting his “service” to grief. This line has not been much discussed beyond registering an “expression of personal affect” (McCarthy 2019) characteristic of an elegiac lover, reflecting a lacuna in addressing Propertius’ engagement with grief in this programmatic poem (Quadlbauer 1970, Parca 1982, McCarthy 2019). Recent scholarship has demonstrated that Roman poets skillfully engage with an array of emotions to advance their own poetic agenda (Caston 2012, Keane 2015, Baraz 2020, Agri 2022). This paper will demonstrate that Propertius eagerly encourages his readers to reflect on his use of grief in different contexts as he constructs his elegiac voice and lays claim to poetic fame. There are three major inter-related but distinct contexts in which Propertius uses grief: his Callimachean aesthetic, his elite social functions, and his base of young followers in the throes of love.

First, Propertius exploits grief in the broader context of his Callimachean aesthetic. Allusions to Callimachus and innovative uses of Alexandrian tropes abound in 1.7 (e.g. *mollia*, 4, *doctae* 11, *mollem* 19). But nowhere else is the connection between grief and his commitment to Callimacheanism made more clear than at lines 9-10: *hic mihi conteritur uitae modus, haec mea fama est, / hinc cupio nomen carminis ire mei*. At first, this description seems rather negative, since the poet’s life is “worn away” (*conteritur*) by grief. But it effectively evokes Callimachus’s famous declaration that he chooses “unworn paths” (κελεύθους ἀτρίπτους, fr. 1.27-28) in the prologue of his *Aetia*, an affirmation of his commitment to delicate poetry. The

lexical similarity between τριπός and *teritur* also explains Propertius' choice of the word *conteritur* and solidifies the link of his elegiac grief to his Callimachean aesthetic.

Second, Propertius exploits grief as a form of social currency among Roman elite readers. The social aspect of elegy has been well observed (Miller 2004, McCarthy 2019). In Elegy 1.6, lines 11-12 point us to a social context that requires close scrutiny: *me laudent doctae solum placuisse puellae,/Pontice, et iniustas saepe tulisse minas*. At first glance, Propertius' use of grief as a social currency is not readily apparent in this couplet. No clues on why Propertius, who seems to have debased himself in love, is worthy of praise are given to us readers. I suggest that Propertius points us to the social situation in Elegy 1.6 to imagine his elite readers such as his patron Tullus in 1.6 as the unnamed "they" (subject of *laudent*) who can recognize the elegist's poetic wit and learning, and praise him. The notion of pleasing Cynthia and enduring her threats crisply mentioned here is laboriously described in Elegy 1.6. Critical verbal correspondences between the two poems (*minas* here and *minatur* in 1.6.9; *doctae* here and *doctas* in 1.6.13), consolidated by the two poems' proximity, make the connection unmistakable.

Thirdly, Propertius recognizes that grief is a powerful emotion that affects and unites young lovers, another base of his readers. Lines 13-14 underscore the power of grief that resonates with these lovers who understand Propertius' trials and tribulations of bad love (*mala*, 14) through their own sufferings. The emotional value offered by the poet's grief is not to be underrated, for Propertius later in lines 23-24 asserts his poetic fame his young followers grant: *nec poterunt iuuenes nostro reticere sepulchro: "Ardoris nostri magne poeta, iaces."*

In conclusion, Propertius' "service" to the emotion of grief, binding him to his role as an elegiac lover, is not to be underestimated in our reading of this poem, for it becomes the fulcrum for Propertius' bold claims to poetic fame: that he ought to be regarded as a *non humilis poeta*

(21) and a *magnus poeta* (24). In this elegy, it is emphatically clear that Propertius invites us to sympathize with his claim to poetic renown through our recognition of his poetic art (cf. *non ullas artes* 1.1.17) of engaging with the emotion of grief.

Bibliography

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