

Sex, Violence, and the Elegiac Hero in Propertius 2.15 (LP)

Amatory aggression is a well-known feature of Propertian elegy in particular, and Roman elegy in general. Despite the elegist's avowed identification with feminine powerlessness and vulnerability and his concomitant classification of elegy as a distinctly "feminine" genre, the male narrator of Propertius' *Elegies* often subverts his own rhetoric of subservience by associating love and sex with epic violence (Fredrick 1997, Miller 2000, Greene 2001). Images of the mistress' torn clothing, pulled hair, bites, and bruises abound in Propertian elegy. How do we reconcile this with the elegiac lover's well-known stance of servitude toward his mistress and her nominal domination and control over him? In this paper I shall address this question by examining how the male lover's violence toward his mistress not only constitutes an attempt to recuperate a sense of his own masculinity and but also to identify himself with masculine epic.

Indeed, one of the most compelling features in Propertius' elegies is the constant interplay between epic and elegiac discourses and between conflicting images of the *amator* as both poet and lover, master and mastered. By allying the elegiac enterprise with the heroic values of epic and thus linking *amor* to images of death and glory, Propertius often collapses oppositions between the images of an effeminized lover and a masculine hero (Sharrock 2000, Greene 2001). In Book 2 of the *Elegies*, especially, we see the *amator* vacillate more openly between epic and elegiac discourses and between conflicting images of himself as both masculine hero and abject lover (Wyke 1987, Miller 2001,). Moreover, as I shall argue, the enactment of violence not only is key to the *amator*'s development of a heroic persona but is also integral to a presentation of himself as poetically productive.

My study here will focus on *Elegy* 2.15, a text that offers a striking illustration of the explicit connection Propertius makes between the idea of sex as war and the construction of the

elegist's heroic and literary identities (Flaschenriem 1997). In addition, the poem establishes a distinct causal connection between amatory aggression and the attainment of glory, a connection reinforced by the implicit parallel between Augustus' conquest of Cleopatra and the *amator's* domination of Cynthia (Gurval 1998). At the same time, however, the *amator's* presentation of himself as one who engages in violence in his own case and critiques it in the case of Augustus underscores the contradictions and vacillations characteristic of the male lover in Propertius.

Indeed, Propertius depicts the *amator* as pointing up the similarities *and* differences between the battles of love and war and the losses and glories that can attend both. In addition, the speaker's use of the *carpe diem* argument to persuade his mistress to submit to his desires emphasizes the role of *both* persuasion and violence in the male lover's attainment of his erotic and literary ends. This resonates with his portrayal of himself as both abject lover and masculine hero.

The use of the *carpe diem* argument also allows the speaker to offer a more general commentary on the way one ought to live life. As Robert Gurval (1998) has noted, the image in 2.15 of petals floating in cups recalls the image of Roman bones being tossed in the Actian sea. Both these images, of petals and bones, are not only reminders of the brevity and fragility of human life, but also evoke the worlds of both lover and soldier. The implication is that loss and death pervade both the amatory and military arenas and that both may provide opportunities for the exercise of masculine agency and power. While this may constitute an unreconcilable position for Propertius, it nonetheless mirrors the *amator's* constant vacillations between his identities as the *mollis* poet of elegy and the elegiac hero whose erotic and discursive mastery of the beloved ensure his *fama*.