

### The Elegiac Mysteries: Initiation and *Katabasis* Imagery in Propertius 1.3

Scholars have long wondered at the imagery and sequence of Propertius 1.3, for which a variety of interpretations have been proposed by focusing on the striking contrast between myth and reality. Allen (1962) and Lyne (1970) suggested the Cynthia of 1.3 was the idealized mythic creation of Propertius who culminates in her realistic form. Wyke (1989) remarked at the tempting “realistic” view of Cynthia in 1.3, but refuted the long-standing claim that Roman elegy elevated women’s power by subverting traditional social roles. Greene (1995) argued that the polarized representation between myth and reality in 1.3 represented women within a symbolic structure of male domination over female sexuality. Scholars have also struggled to find a common thread that unites the mythological exempla in the poem. Harmon (1974) first recognized the “logical progression” within the priamel structure, yet Miller (2002) maintained the three exempla have no correlating elements. Another major textual crux of the poem lies in the interpretation of the slaves “shaking the torches in the late night” (*et quaterent sera nocte facem pueri*, 1.3.10) in the fifth couplet. Richardson argued that the slaves “shake the torches to knock off the ash and keep them burning . . .” (2006: 154). Miller affirmed this practical reason for shaking the torch, and pointed out that “the confused reference is emblematic of the poet’s state of mind” (2002:172).

This paper attempts to solve the problem of the seemingly uncorrelated exempla by reinterpreting the reference to the torches. I argue the phrase *quaterent facem* and the couplet’s Bacchic theme (*vestigia Baccho*, 1.3.9) is best explained by the ritual shaking of torches in Bacchic mysteries, and furthermore that the imagery of 1.3 is informed by a subtext of the tradition of Greek mysteries. This reading suggests that the allusion to the torches functions within a broader narrative structure in the context of ritual initiation into the mysteries. I argue

the torches are not only linked to a more nuanced and intricate theme woven throughout the entire poem, but are also introduced by the mythological exempla. This paper not only explains the purpose of the exempla, but also unifies the various textual cruxes by pointing out that the themes of the maenad (1.3.5), the shaking of torches (1.3.9), the *stephanos* (1.3.21), and the Orphic lyre (1.3.42) are derived from the Greek mystery tradition. My reading argues that the various uncorrelated elements coalesce into a depiction of Propertius' own *katabasis* into the elegiac underworld ruled by the *domina* Cynthia.

I demonstrate the logical progression of the poem from the context of mystery initiation, by arguing that the pattern of initiation provides a logical framework for unifying the narrative into a coherent sequence. I show how Propertius represents the elegiac lover in the symbolic realm of the underworld by drawing on the familiar pattern and motifs of the initiatory sequence. Finally I intend to prove that Propertius inverts the mystery tradition and redeploys its themes and imagery in the form of elegy, which points to the intricate and layered nature of the elegiac form. In so doing I hope to contribute to Propertian scholarship with regard to its use of mythological themes particularly in relation to the tradition of the Greek mysteries.

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