

Revolting and Refined: The Aesthetic Function of Acanthis

In a number of his elegies, Propertius depicts the characters of the elegiac scenario in a manner that provokes positive and negative emotions, from admiration to revulsion, in the poet-lover as well as the reader. He does this in particular in 4.5 with the *lena* Acanthis, of whom he paints so hideous a picture as to give rise to a whole range of negative emotions. He also endows her, however, with the ability to speak verses of great refinement, like Propertius himself, whom she actually quotes. She thus stimulates the very positive emotion of admiration alongside a sense of revulsion. This juxtaposition is deployed with great elegance in Acanthis' long speech in 4.5. When he is confronted by his inadequacy as a poet and as a lover, which is to say by his inability to retain his beloved with his verses and his love, the poet-lover projects his anger onto Acanthis, who is trying to lead his beloved away from him. Acanthis advises the *puella* to pursue wealthy lovers who can compensate her well for her services, basically asserting that the poet-lover has nothing of value to offer her. She speaks to his beloved of the pointlessness of his love and the insignificance of poetry with the skill of a great elegist, and that ability generates sentiments of admiration in the reader, the negative emotions provoked by her horrible body notwithstanding.

In this paper I argue that, by adopting this dialectical strategy, Propertius introduces into his elegy imagery of a disquieting nature that problematizes the aesthetic experience of his poetry. Following Martindale's invitation to attempt aesthetic readings of Latin poetry (2005, p.5), I explore why and how imagery designed to provoke negative emotions must be regarded as a determining factor in the aesthetic discourse on Propertian elegy.

My argument is based, in the first place, on a close reading of elegy 4.5, focused on the sense of mocking indignation felt by the poet-lover, starting with 4.5.57-58, in which he denounces the *lena* as an obstacle to his designs, and ending with 4.5.71-74, when he depicts the pathetic nature of her funeral. In these lines and at various other places, the poet-lover conveys

the sense of repugnance by which he is induced to degrade Acanthis. Scholars have variously approached the figure of Acanthis, focusing on the distinction between the hideousness of the singer and the beauty of her song. Of particular relevance to my reading of Propertius 4.5 are Gutzwiller's (1985) observation that through the *lena* the poet distances himself from the voice of his autobiographical persona, Myers' (1996) suggestion that anti-elegiac postures may be a necessary condition of erotic elegy, Keith's (2008) emphasis on the centrality of the rhetoric of *prosopopoeia*, and Richlin's (1992) view of elegy as a genre focused on the idealization of characters and their erotic relations. The work of these and other scholars informs in part my analysis of Acanthis and the negative emotions to which her presence in the poem gives rise.

In the second place, my argument is based on the aesthetic discourse of what is generally known as the *paradox of ugliness*, that is to say the vexing problem of what aesthetic value repellent imagery and its attendant negative emotions may have in a work of poetry (Kuplen 2013). That discourse includes Aristotle, for whom the artistic representation of hideousness rendered with exactitude is a source of artistic delight (*Poetics*, 1448b11). But a close reading of elegy from this perspective shows that its juxtaposition of revolting and refined imagery, in the manner of the grotesque (Harpham 1982), reaches out to a more complex view of literary aesthetics, in which the provocation of negative emotions plays a crucial role in both our interpretation of the text and our appreciation of the poem as a work of art.

Bibliography

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