

The Aesthetics of Revulsion in Propertius' Depiction of Acanthis

This paper concerns the aesthetic function of negative emotions generated by grotesque imagery in Propertius' elegy 4.5 on the *lena* Acanthis. In this elegy, the *lena* is a decrepit grotesque character who, in a song that is on all fronts elegant and refined, strongly advises Cynthia not to yield to the poet-lover's entreaties. Her counsel represents a formidable opposition to the poet-lover's designs. Assuming the role of a *praeceptor*, Acanthis imparts her teaching in verses that display throughout the skill and manner of Propertius himself, displacing both the poet-lover's and the poet's voices with her own in a large section of the poem. Within the narrative, her grotesque appearance provokes in the poet-lover a sense of revulsion and related negative emotions, including anger and horror, in accordance with the "script" of expected response to the grotesque in the contemporary discourse on disgust (Kaster 2001, 2005; Lateiner & Spataras 2017).

Propertius seems to have designed her as a character on whom the poet-lover can focus the negative emotions that he feels when he interprets Cynthia's rejection of his love and poems as a sign that he is a failure both as a poet and as a lover. In the readers' aesthetic experience, the images that make up Acanthis' portrait raise negative emotions in the reader as well. At the same time, however, Acanthis generates in the reading process feelings of great admiration for the beauty of her song and the poetic skill with which she has been endowed by Propertius. Acanthis is thus the source of sharply contrasting aesthetic emotions. In this paper I argue that the contrast between the negative and positive emotions raised by Acanthis constitutes the basis of our interpretation of the poem and of our appreciation of it as a work of art. The hideousness of the singer and the refinement of her song engage Propertius' readers in a satisfying contemplation of revulsion, generating in them a disquieting combination of emotions that destabilize their view of

the logic of elegiac conventions as well as their initial sense of the poem's cognitive and aesthetic purport.

Scholars have variously approached this poem, focussing on the issues involved in the juxtaposition of the hideousness of the singer and the beauty of her voice. Of particular relevance to my reading of Propertius 4.5 are Gutzwiller's (1985) observations on the distinction between the poet and the poet-lover, Myers' (1996) reading of the poet's anti-elegiac postures, Keith's (2008) study of *prosopopoeia*, and Richlin's (1992) interpretation of the idealizing nature of elegy. My argument builds on the work of these and other scholars from an aesthetic perspective, following Martindale's suggestion that Latin poetry should be read primarily for its aesthetic value (2005, p. 5). My task is thus to explore why and how the emotions provoked by Acanthis play a fundamental role in our understanding of the poem and in our aesthetic response to it.

My argument is based, in the first place, on a close reading of elegy 4.5, concentrated on the indignation experienced by the poet-lover and on the derisory attitude that he assumes, starting with 4.5.57-58, where he informs us that the *lena* is a major obstacle to his plans, and ending with 4.5.71-74, in which he visualizes her pathetic funeral. His indignation unleashes in him various negative emotions, all suggested by the *lena*'s grotesque physical appearance. My argument is also based on the concept of the *paradox of ugliness* in both ancient and modern aesthetics. The classical text on the paradox is found in Aristotle (*Poetics*, 1448b11), who maintains that images of ugliness can be pleasing, but I will also invoke modern theorists who have contributed to our understanding of grotesque realism and the aesthetics of revulsion, especially Bakhtin, Kayser and Kristeva.

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