

A Mime Is A Terrible Thing To Waste: Propertius' Utilization of Pantomime in 4.7 and 4.8

The elegies of Propertius have presented scholars with many problems, from an abundance of corrupted lines to sometimes incoherent grammar. The saving grace of his first three books is the linear consistency of their style and theme, which consist mainly of love poems to his dear Cynthia. Book Four, on the other hand, is Propertius' shortest and most confusing book in regards to plot line. Scholars such as Pillinger (1969) and DeBrohun (2003) have tried to solve this issue of discontinuity by hypothesizing that Propertius is dabbling in narrative elegy, whereas Sullivan (1976) argues that he does not see a discontinuity in theme or style. This paper offers an alternative approach to those above to argue that some poems in Book Four are not linked by time of events, but instead, by the use of elements that feature in the genre of pantomime. Specifically, I examine poems 4.7 and 4.8, which I propose can be read as a pair whose order is determined by stock tropes in pantomime.

McKeown (1979) convincingly lays out the ways that Augustan elegists exploit Roman mime for themes and situations. A significant feature of pantomime is mimicry of the characteristics of a person alive or dead, and in this case, real or fictional. Throughout the first three books, Propertius draws a vivid sketch of Cynthia as fickle and expressing an array of emotions. Come Book Four, Propertius focuses on a few, but significant character traits to exaggerate in the style of pantomime: Cynthia's anger, her jealousy, her tendency to nag, and even her love. This exaggeration reveals Propertius' larger engagement with several other tropes typical of the genre, which include the use of common situations, stock characters, and an emphasis on the outrageous.

Poem 4.7 employs the use of stock scenarios. McKeown (1979: 72) notes that one trope stemming directly from mime is that of the adulterous wife, in which the wife either convinces her lover, or is convinced by her lover, to kill her husband. In typical elegiac fashion, Propertius has reversed this and instead, he, the lover, has been convinced by his girlfriend to kill Cynthia. Though she never names the girl, Cynthia demonstrates her accusations against the girl, claiming that Propertius' new lover both melted Cynthia's statue and took her dowry from Cynthia's pyre (*te patiente meae confluit imaginis aurum / ardente e nostro dotem habitura rogo*, 4.7.47-48).

Stock characters also play a large role in pantomime. According to Fantham (1989), pantomime has stock characters, like the clever slave. Lygdamas is one such slave. Cynthia acknowledges Lygdamas in this role by placing the blame on him both for her death in 4.7 (4.7.35-36) and for the party in 4.8. Cynthia physically assaults Lygdamas, and then demands that he be sold, since he is the main cause of her pain (*Lygdamus in primis, omnis mihi causa querelae / ueneat*, 4.8.79-80). These repeated accusations against Lygdamas not only portray a trope of pantomime, but also join the two poems through blame and repeated assault.

Exaggeration is another quintessential component of pantomime. Propertius often laments the power that Cynthia has, but his description of her lordling her control over him is almost alarming. Propertius begins by stating that Cynthia barely allowed him to touch her feet (*cum uix tangendos praebuit illa pedes*, 4.8.72), and follows with an extensive list, given by Cynthia, of what Propertius is and is not allowed to do (4.8.73-80). Cynthia then smiles with haughty pride at the power he has given her (*riserat imperio facta superba dato*, 4.8.75). Though it is not uncommon for a *puella* to have sway over her boyfriend, the lover, as a male, typically keeps some sense of power due to his role in society; Propertius, however, has handed that over. This scene transforms Propertius from a *servus amoris* to a *servus Cynthiae*.

My analysis demonstrates how this commonality of mimicry and other tropes of pantomime link poems 4.7 and 4.8 and, I hope, will encourage readings of other poems in Book Four based on the commonality of theme or genre, as opposed to chronological narrative order.

Bibliography

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