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## Propertius and Antigone: Innovation on the Theme of Eroticized Death

Chandler Richard Kendall  
*Brigham Young University*

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Propertius and Antigone: Innovation on the Theme of Eroticized Death

Chandler Richard Kendall

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of  
Master of Arts

Roger Macfarlane, Chair  
Seth Jeppesen  
Mike Pope

Department of Comparative Arts and Letters

Brigham Young University

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## ABSTRACT

### Propertius and Antigone: Innovation on the Theme of Eroticized Death

Chandler Richard Kendall  
Department of Comparative Arts and Letters, BYU  
Master of Arts

This thesis looks closely at Propertius' reception of the Antigone mythology in Propertius 2.8. First, I lay the groundwork to argue that Propertius is consciously receiving the Antigone mythology as found in Sophocles' eponymous tragedy. I show through a close examination of language and themes that Propertius and Sophocles share semiotic markers of eroticized death that reveal Propertius' intentional use of Sophocles' tragedy, as opposed to other scholars who argue that Propertius is engaging with a later lost tradition of Haemon in Hellenistic poetry.

After connecting Propertius with Sophocles, I explore the motif of eroticized death in mythological literature. I highlight four types of eroticized death with brief examples: 1) the suicide/intentional death of the lover at the death of the beloved by outside forces, 2) the mourning/survival of the lover at the accidental death of the beloved, 3) the suicide of the beloved at the abandonment of the lover, and 4) the intentional murder of the lover by the beloved because of betrayal. I then show that Propertius' threat of murder and violence does not fit any of these categories and that he is innovating upon the theme of eroticized death.

I then look closely at why a new type of eroticized death, one that is more extreme than other types, finds itself in the genre of poetry, which argues to depart from the world of masculine violence. I show that suicide occurs because of the poet's insistence on being both poet and character of poetry, causing him to do harm to himself. The threat of the *puella's* murder occurs because she embodies poetry itself, and the poet has become frustrated with the quality of his poems. Finally, I explore how readers can respond to violence towards a woman who is fictional and representative of poetry and argue that despite her identity residing in poetry that there is still concern for discussion about real domestic violence toward ancient women in erotic contexts.

Keywords: ancient reception, eroticized violence, metapoetics

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Introduction.....   | 1  |
| A Close Reading of Propertius and Sophocles .....                   | 2  |
| The Eroticized Death Motif .....                                    | 12 |
| Propertius' Antigone: Innovating Mythological Eroticized Death..... | 19 |
| Reader Response to Elegiac Violence .....                           | 29 |
| Conclusion .....  | 37 |
| Works Cited .....   | 40 |

## Introduction

Latin love elegy provides fertile ground to explore how elegiac authors interact with their poetic forbearers through intertextuality and reworking of myths. It is impossible to escape how female literary productions are portrayed in the world of the counter-cultural *servitium amoris* (slavery of love) and his pursuits of free love. Examining the use of mythological women allows us to compare how Latin elegists appropriate mythological gender dynamics into the world of *Amor*. The elegiac lover-poet uses his poetry to project his amatory experience onto the world of myth, filled with golden ages and heroic lovers.<sup>1</sup> But, not all is sunshine and rainbows, as they say, especially for women. While some references to mythological women allow the poet to project his otherwise degraded and rejected love life into a satisfying and ideal world, occasionally the reference accompanies acts of violence toward the *puella* that transgress his submissive role in their sexual relationships. The reading of the elegiac beloved as the *scripta puella*—a *puella* who is not only fictional but more representative of poetry than “real-life” love affairs—has complicated readings of violence found in Latin love elegy. How should a reader read violence towards a woman who is neither real nor representative of life but of poetry?

One passage that has received more attention within the past several decades is Propertius’ violent outburst towards Cynthia in 2.8. In this passage, Propertius adapts the narrative of Haemon’s suicide at Antigone’s death to threaten his own suicide, following Cynthia’s fantasized murder. While other scholars have noted in this passage violence that is inconsistent within the stated *mores* of the elegiac world, I hope to add to this dialogue by looking specifically at the intertextuality this scene shares with Sophocles’ *Antigone*. After looking closely at the eroticized language of Haemon’s death scene in Sophocles and comparing

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<sup>1</sup> Gian, Conte, *Latin Literature: A History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 199), 323.

it with Propertius, I will see how Sophocles' portrayal of eroticized death fits into a larger motif within Greco-Roman mythology. I will then look at how Propertius picks up on this tradition and incorporates it into the unique literary functions of the elegiac world. I will argue that Propertius' appropriation of Haemon's suicide to threaten Cynthia's murder and his own suicide is unique in its premeditated intentions to manufacture a tragic death, which is made possible by the customs of the elegiac world and Propertius' explicit role as poet/creator within his poetry. I will then explore how readers can respond to such violence in a genre of poetic games and literary fictions and show that both a "poetic" and a "social" reading are possible in this scene of unprecedented scene of erotized violence.

### **A Close Reading of Propertius and Sophocles**

Propertius is inspired by Sophocles' *Antigone* in his use of the Antigone/Haemon mythology. Theodore Papanghelis provides the most current argument for why we should avoid looking solely to Sophocles as Propertius' main source. To sum up his main points: the Haemon/Antigone myth has a more erotic reception after Sophocles (especially in Hellenistic literature which had a great influence on Latin elegists) and more parallels can be extrapolated between Hellenistic authors and Propertius than there are between Sophocles.<sup>2</sup> Papanghelis argues that the main overlap between Propertius and Sophocles is the "tomb" (*tumulo*, Prop. 2.8.21) which alludes to Antigone's cave and which is absent from other Hellenistic portrayals.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Theodore Papanghelis, *Propertius: A Hellenistic Poet on Love and Death* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 120-24. <sup>3</sup> Ibid., 123. "The 'tragic couple'...is at one remove, at least, from the world in which the modern reader is conditioned to locate it. To be sure, the bloodshed still takes place in a very Sophoclean tomb (*tumulo* 21), but this is partly due to technical considerations...the point of the preceding discussion has not been to disprove Sophoclean reminiscence altogether—this would be perverse since, after all, Sophocles was the first to give the story a dramatic shape with which Roman audiences became thoroughly familiar through Accius' emulation—but to widen and modify...the literary experience that is normally brought to bear on the assessment of the example."

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 123. "The 'tragic couple'...is at one remove, at least, from the world in which the modern reader is conditioned to locate it. To be sure, the bloodshed still takes place in a very Sophoclean tomb (*tumulo* 21), but this is partly due to technical considerations...the point of the preceding discussion has not been to disprove Sophoclean reminiscence altogether—this would be perverse since, after all, Sophocles was the first to give the story a dramatic

He then argues that Propertius uses the *tumulo* as a wordplay for erotic excitement. This is cryptically hidden in the words *tu moriere* (Prop. 2.8.28) which he argues points us to Lucretius 4.1045-51 where Lucretius uses “*tument*” to describe the swelling of seed during sexual intercourse.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the tomb in Propertius’ *Antigone* is not meant to point the reader to Sophocles but to Lucretius, and there is therefore little reason to look to Sophocles as a source (or at least the main source) of Propertius’ reception.

There are several points in Papanghelis’ argument, however, that lead us to doubt the strength of his reasoning. Papanghelis is almost certainly correct that the Hellenistic tradition of the *Antigone*/Haemon mythology influences Propertius’ reception. While many of his points are valid, his focus on the Hellenistic context does not sufficiently take into account thematic and linguistic resonances between Propertius and the earlier Sophocles. I hope to show through a close examination of Sophocles’ language that there is more contact between Sophocles’ *Antigone*/Haemon and Propertius’ than previously acknowledged, and that Sophocles’ *Antigone* is a sufficient source for Propertius among the sparse textual evidence from later adaptations.

There are different theories that explain the source Propertius is drawing upon when cites the *Antigone* mythology. The most explicit theory for this poem comes from Papanghelis (mentioned above), which tries to demonstrate that Propertius draws upon a later Hellenistic source—which has since been lost—instead of the 5<sup>th</sup> century Sophoclean source. An alternative explanation for mythological reference in general comes from R.O.A.M. Lyne, who argues that, “there are parallels between particular subjects popular with the [Roman] painters and Propertian

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shape with which Roman audiences became thoroughly familiar through Accius’ emulation—but to widen and modify...the literary experience that is normally brought to bear on the assessment of the example.”

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 127-28.

mythical *exempla*.”<sup>5</sup> While he goes on to explain how archeological evidence correlates three paintings matching up with the mythical heroines of Propertius 1.3, he does not argue that wall paintings were likely to be the source of *every* mythical *exemplum*. Alternatively, Alison Keith offers the best data for poetic sources that supports my assertion of Sophocles as Propertius’ source. Keith offers ample evidence that Propertius received a typical Roman rhetorical education, then explains the type of training that would entail.<sup>6</sup> “The rhetorical handbooks make it clear that this curriculum was as efficacious for the training of poets as for orators. Both Cicero and Horace attest to the study of the poets in the traditional rhetorical curriculum...while Quintilian recommends the study of epic, *tragedy*, and comedy even before oratory.”<sup>7</sup> She follows this by stating that “elite Roman youths were schooled from an early age to rework, in their own words, the literary and historical narratives they read in the canonical authors.”<sup>8</sup> Given the prevalence of this pedagogical exercise, it is likely that Propertius both encountered Sophocles at a young age and that the text would be readily available to him. However much Hellenistic literature or Roman house paintings influenced Propertius’ use of mythological *exempla*, the linguistic and thematic parallels between Sophocles’ and Propertius’ Haemon/Antigone demonstrate a strong probability that Propertius uses Sophocles as his main source of inspiration.

Propertius rewrites his elegiac version of the Antigone/Haemon death in the middle of 2.8 where he chides a friend for trying to comfort him after Cynthia accepts a rival lover. After complaining about Cynthia’s infidelity and her refusal to accept poetry as sufficient payment for

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<sup>5</sup> R.O.A.M. Lyne, *The Latin Love Poets: From Catullus to Horace*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 84.

<sup>6</sup> For the entire discussion see Alison Keith, *Propertius: Poet of Love and Leisure*, (Bristol Classical Press, 2008), 19-44.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 21. Italics added.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

her bed/fidelity, the lover-poet's rage escalates to such a point that he offers the following deliberation about how to receive Cynthia's betrayal:

*sic igitur prima moriere aetate, Properti?*  
*sed morere; interitu gaudeat illa tuo!*  
*exagitet nostros Manes, sectetur et umbras,*  
*insultetque rogis, calcet et ossa mea!*  
*quid? non Antigoniae tumulo Boeotius Haemon*  
*corruit ipse suo saucius ense latus,*  
*et sua cum miserae permiscuit ossa puellae,*  
*qua sine Thebanam noluit ire domum?*  
*sed non effugies: mecum moriaris oportet;*  
*hoc eodem ferro stillet uterque cruor.*  
*quamvis ista mihi mors est inhonesta futura:*  
*mors inhonesta quidem, tu moriere tamen.*

Will you die so in your first youth, Propertius? But die then, let her rejoice in your ruin. Let her harass our ghosts and pursue our shades. Let her mock my pyre and trample my bones. What? Did not Boeotian Haemon himself collapse at the tomb of Antigone, bloody in his side by his own sword, and mix his bones with those of the wretched girl, without whom he refused to go to his Theban home. But you will not escape: it is right that you die with me; let both of our blood drip from this same sword. Although this death will be shameful for me—indeed a shameful death—still you will die. (Prop., 2.8.17-28)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> All translations are my own unless otherwise stated. My translations throughout will be fairly literal in order to make more obvious any double entendre within these passages. Greek and Latin texts are provided from “Perseus

Before looking too closely at the language Propertius employs in this violent threat against Cynthia, I want to present the Antigone/Haemon death scene as represented by Sophocles. After Creon leaves to go bury Polynices and free Antigone from her rocky tomb, a messenger enters shortly after to describe for Eurydice her son's death:

τὸν δ' ἀγρίοις ὄσσοισι παπτήνας ὁ παῖς,  
 πτύσας προσώπῳ κούδ' ἐν ἀντειπῶν, ξίφους  
 ἔλκει διπλοῦς κνώδοντας. ἐκ δ' ὀρμωμένου  
 πατρὸς φυγαῖσιν ἤμπλακ': εἴθ' ὁ δύσμορος  
 αὐτῷ χολωθεῖς, ὥσπερ εἶχ', ἐπενταθεῖς  
 ἤρεισε πλευραῖς μέσσον ἔγχος, ἐς δ' ὑγρὸν  
 ἀγκῶν' ἔτ' ἔμφρων παρθένῳ προσπτύσσεται.  
 καὶ φυσιῶν ὀξεῖαν ἐκβάλλει ροῆν  
 λευκῇ παρειᾷ φοινίου σταλάγματος.  
 κεῖται δὲ νεκρὸς περὶ νεκρῷ, τὰ νυμφικὰ  
 τέλη λαχὼν δαίλαιος εἰν Ἄιδου δόμοις,  
 δείξας ἐν ἀνθρώποισι τὴν ἀβουλίαν  
 ὅσῳ μέγιστον ἀνδρὶ πρόσκειται κακόν.

The boy looking sharply at his father with fierce eyes, spitting at his face and replying nothing, draws his two-edged sword. But he misses his father running in flight. Then, ruined and angry with himself, just as he was, he stretched out and drove the sword to the middle in his ribs, and while he was yet conscious, he held the maiden in a weak (moist) embrace. And while he still breathes, he shoots out a sharp flow of bloody drops onto her

white cheek. Dead body lies near dead body, the wretch has obtained marriage rites in the house of Hades, showing to men the thoughtlessness by which the greatest evil is placed on a man. (Soph., *Ant.*, 1231-43)

Without going too far into the larger meaning of these two passages (which I will address below) I want to look at how language reveals Sophocles as a main source for Propertius. There are several correlations between Sophocles and Propertius beyond Sophocles' mention of "marriage rites in the house of Hades" (τὰ νυμφικὰ τέλη...εἰν Ἄιδου δόμοις, Soph., 1240-41) that compel us to consider intertextuality between the two. Elizabeth Craik details a few of the "erotically suggestive" moments of Haemon in Sophocles, including his holding of Antigone around her middle, swords and phallic imagery, and blushing cheeks as a metaphor for the shame associated with a maiden's virginity.<sup>10</sup> In addition to these images, a close reading of Sophocles through the lens of Propertius reveals other eroticized images not articulated by Craik that suggest Propertius' reworking of Sophoclean material.

The first overlap is the use of the sword as a phallic symbol. Greek and Romans recognized the sexual symbol of weapons, and Propertius uses the word *arma* at least once as a sexual metaphor, "we released our arms all over the bed (*et toto solvimus arma toro*; Prop. 4.8.88).<sup>11</sup> The sword (*ferro/ἔγχος*) presents one of the most recognizable phallic symbols, and in these scenes, they take on a nuanced meaning as the phallus is turned upon the *amator* himself. For Propertius, this fits the programmatic purpose of his poetry to portray himself as the *mollis* (soft/effeminate) poet who defies gender roles by taking the feminine/passive position in the

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<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Craik, "Significant Language in Sophocles, 'Antigone' 1192-1243," *Quaderni Urbinati Di Cultura Classica* 70, no. 1 (2002): 89-94.

<sup>11</sup> Papanghelis, 126.

amatory relationship.<sup>12</sup> It also reflects his role as the master of his poetry. The poet creates the characters of his poetry, thereby making them his passive objects. This includes the eponymous character of the lover-poet. As Sharon James states, “The male speakers of elegy are just as fictional as the women created in the poems.”<sup>13</sup> Since Propertius is both poet and poetic character, he turns his role as masculine poet upon himself as feminine/passive object using his own sword. For Sophocles, Haemon’s decision to turn his sword upon himself reflects the negative coloring from a fifth-century Athenian audience as disobedient son and as a young man perverted by the influence of a threatening “woman in charge.”<sup>14</sup> For both Propertius as a character and for Haemon, the use of the sword becomes symbolic of perverted gender roles and how each of their amatory situations places them in a state of self-inflicted phallic passivity.<sup>15</sup>

Not only the use of the sword, but also the *locus* of the sword’s piercing reveals another parallel containing implications of fatal eroticism. Propertius describes Haemon’s wound as placed in his “side” (*latus*) as he dies near Antigone. *Latus* is often used in sexual terminology to express either male genitalia or “the general sight of exhaustion” following sexual intercourse.<sup>16</sup> This description fits well with Propertius’ representation of Haemon “collapsed” (*corruit*) in sexual exhaustion at Antigone’s side after he receives his fatal wound. But, it works just as well with Sophocles’ description which has Haemon “breathing out” (φουσιῶν) shortly after receiving his own wound in his “ribs/side” (πλευραῖς) and embracing his dead bride. In both Sophocles

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<sup>12</sup> Ellen Greene, “Gender and Genre in Propertius 2.8 and 2.9,” in *Oxford Reading in Classical Studies: Propertius*, ed. Ellen Greene and Tara S. Welch (Oxford University Press, 2012), 374.

<sup>13</sup> Sharon James, *Learned Girls and Male Persuasion: Gender and Reading in Roman Love Elegy*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Christiane, Sourvinou-Inwood, “Assumptions and the Creation of Meaning: Reading Sophocles’ Antigone,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 109 (1989): 146.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion on phallic passivity see Marilyn Skinner, “*Ego Mulier*: The Construction of Male Sexuality in Catullus” in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. Judith Hallett and Marilyn Skinner, (Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> Adams, 49. Also cf. Cat. 6.13.

and Propertius, we can imagine the physical exhaustion and panting that accompanies sexual climax. The use of the side as the point of the wound in both texts and the physical exhaustion that accompanies them eroticizes the analogous act of sexual climax and the final act of dying.

While both the sword and the point of entry for the wound illustrate overlap between Propertius and Sophocles, one of the clearest points of overlap is the description of blood in each work and its connection with semen. While Papanghelis discourages associating Propertius with Sophocles, he provides compelling evidence that may point out a stronger connection than anticipated.<sup>17</sup> To make the connection between blood and semen for Propertius, Papanghelis looks to Lucretius' comparison between sex and single combat as a source of inspiration:

*inritata tument loca semine fitque voluntas  
 eicere id quo se contendit dira libido,  
 idque petit corpus, mens unde est saucia amore;  
 namque omnes plerumque cadunt in vulnus et illam  
 emicat in partem sanguis, unde icimur ictu,  
 et si comminus est, hostem ruber occupat umor.*

These places are stirred and swell with seed and there arises the desire to expel the seed towards the object to which fierce passion is moved and the body seeks that body, by which the mind is smitten with love. For as a rule all men fall towards the wound, and the blood spirts out in that direction, whence we are struck by the blow, and, if it is near at hand, the red stream reaches our foe. (Lucretius 4.1045-51)<sup>18</sup>

He points out that act of “swelling” (*tument*) in Lucretius accords well with Haemon’s death in

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<sup>17</sup> Papanghelis, 127-29.

<sup>18</sup> Translation from Ibid., 127.

Propertius being at the “tomb of Antigone” (*Antigoniae tumulo*). Along with Lucretius metaphor of a bloody wound, a few lines before this passage Lucretius mentions nocturnal emissions with the phrase “stains his vestment” (*vestemque cruetent*; Lucr., 4.1036), which accords well with Propertius use of “blood dripping” (*stillet...cruor*), which accords well with Lucretius a few lines later describing “drops dripped” during sex (*stillavit gutta*; Lucr., 4.1060). To sum, “Suspicion creeps up that *cruor* [Haemon’s blood]... may be flowing under false colors.”<sup>19</sup> There is additional wordplay in the passage that also lends itself to seminal imagery. For instance the first line reads “*sic igitur primā moriere aetate, Properti,*” where we find *moriere* (you will die) linked with *amor*. This effect is duplicated in the last line of the passage, “*mors inhonesta quidem, tu moriere tamen,*” but instead of *amor* we get *umor* (liquid/semen). Therefore, within Propertius’ reception of Haemon/Antigone we get *amor*, *cruor*, and *umor*, which combined with the “blood dripping from the sword” (*ferro stillet...cruor*) creates a consistent semiotics of seminal imagery. Propertius’ reception of this language reveals his own reading of Haemon/Antigone from Sophocles, where semen is also explicit. The messenger, who reports the details of Haemon’s death, describes not only the blood/semen itself but also the act of ejaculation by describing Haemon’s wound as “a sharp flow of bloody drops shooting on her white cheek” (ὄξειαν ἐκβάλλει ῥοὴν λευκῆ παρειᾶ φοινίου σταλάγματος). Furthermore, while ὑγρὸν does describe a “weak” embrace, it means a “wet” embrace,<sup>20</sup> further emphasizing the imagery of semen and ejaculation. This wordplay erotically changes Haemon’s subjective view. The imagery of blood and semen in both Sophocles and Propertius provides further evidence of intertextual overlap where both authors emphasize the erotic consummation for Haemon and the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>20</sup> See definition “A” in Franco Montanari, *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek*, ed. Madeleine Goh, Chad Matthew Schroeder, Gregory Nagy and Leonard Charles Muellner (Brill, 2015), 2176.

lover-poet denied in life and only available through a graphic and bloody death.

Finally, Sophocles and Propertius portray their poetic deaths as dishonorable. Ellen Greene offers the most extensive reading post Papanghelis of Prop. 2.8, although she only briefly engages the Antigone reception. She argues that Antigone and Haemon's death in Sophocles are portrayed as moral triumphs whereby both receive glory through their deaths. "Just as the elegiac mistress provides the *materia* for the *amator's* poetic compositions, Antigone's death produces the occasion that allows Haemon to achieve his own glory."<sup>21</sup> In other words, Propertius employs the Antigone myth as a means to enhance his own amatory glory through a heroic myth and thus recasts the lover-poet in the typical male Roman role. While I agree that Propertius' violence moves the lover-poet into the masculine realm from his constructed effeminate role, Greene's reading misses that the poet uses the Antigone mythology not to impart glory to the lover-poet but to emphasize the shameful of his situation. Sourvinou-Inwood has pointed out that both Antigone and Haemon would be seen as morally perverse characters by a fifth-century Athenian audience.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Propertius seems to pick up on this theme in the very language of Sophocles which he reiterates in his poem. At the end of the messenger's speech, he sums up the implication of Antigone and Haemon's deaths, "Dead body lies near dead body...showing to men the thoughtlessness by which the *greatest evil* is placed on a man" (κεῖται δὲ νεκρὸς περὶ νεκρῶ...δείξας ἐν ἀνθρώποισι τὴν ἀβουλίαν ὅσα μάλιστα ἀνδρὶ πρόσκειται κακόν). This last line describes the sum total of the mess each character takes part in as contributors to the tragedy, including Creon. Far from being portrayed as a glorious death, Antigone and Haemon's actions are portrayed with Creon's as "the greatest evil," especially as

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<sup>21</sup> Greene, 381.

<sup>22</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood.

the messenger's summarizing declaration follows directly upon their gruesome marriage reenactment. As Propertius contemplates murdering Cynthia, he states, "Although this death will be shameful for me—indeed a shameful death—still you will die" (*quamvis ista mihi mors est inhonesta futura: mors inhonesta quidem, tu moriere tamen*). Propertius knows emphatically that the death will dishonor him, but he still is determined to do it.<sup>23</sup> This language shows further evidence that Propertius may be picking up upon the Sophoclean model of Antigone's death as he employs it within his elegiac world. I will comment more below about why Propertius would pick up upon the language of shame in his characterization of himself, but the previous examination should be sufficient to show that Sophocles and Propertius share many points of eroticized language and imagery than merely the *tumulus* as the common *locus* of Haemon's suicidal demise.

### **The Eroticized Death Motif**

The above analysis has shown several parallels between the eroticized language of Sophocles' Antigone/Haemon death scene and Propertius' that warrant an intertextual examination between the two authors. To better understand both why and how Propertius uses Antigone's death for his murderous threat, however, we should look to the larger motif of eroticized death within Greek and Roman poetry. Understanding the eroticized death motif in a larger context will help us better discern why Propertius picks up on the Antigone myth specifically within this poetic moment.

To discuss precisely why Propertius appropriates the Antigone myth into his elegiac world, I want to look generally at how lovers and beloved act within eroticized death scenes. By

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<sup>23</sup> Hans Syndikus, "The Second Book," in *Brill's Companion to Propertius*, ed. Hans Christian Günther (Boston: Brill, 2006), 263.

using the terms “lover” (*amator*) and “beloved” (*amata*), I am referring generally to the active and passive participants in an erotic relationship respectively. This examination will revolve around what roles the lover and beloved play in their participation of the erotic elements of death. The four types of relationships I will examine are 1) the suicide/intentional death of the lover at the death of the beloved by outside forces 2) the mourning/survival of the lover at the accidental death of the beloved 3) the suicide of the beloved at the abandonment of the lover and 4) the intentional murder of the lover by the beloved because of betrayal. The examples I will look at below are merely representative of these general themes and do not comprise a comprehensive survey of all eroticized death scenes. I will briefly look at examples of the four categories, how Sophocles’ *Antigone* fits into them, and then argue that Propertius’ use of *Antigone* stands as an innovation of eroticized death that is made possible by the conventions of elegy.

Before diving into examples, I want to set parameters around what constitutes an “eroticized death.” First, when using the term eroticized death I mean a death that can be read as containing imagery symbolic of sexual acts. This is opposed to an “erotic death” which would constitute a death happening in the sexual act itself. As a framework for my examples, I want to use a structure used by Catherine Edwards in articulating the sexual imagery of the deaths of three females (Messalina, Octavia, and Agrippina) in Tacitus. Edwards invites the reader to consider these deaths as rapes because of the sexual relationships that precede and are closely tied to the circumstances of death.<sup>24</sup> For instance, she asks the reader to consider Agrippina’s death as a rape because of the incestuous relationship that is repeatedly expressed between Nero and his mother. When Nero’s henchmen come to murder Agrippina, Edwards says that “they are

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<sup>24</sup> For the full context see Catherine Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome* (Yale University Press, 2007), 199-201.

also, on a symbolic level, his surrogates in her sexual violation.”<sup>25</sup> I find this a useful framework for assessing whether a particular poetic death can be considered “eroticized.” While almost any murder could be read as eroticized, especially where one agent penetrates the other in an active/passive relationship, looking at the contextual relationship preceding the death can better help us assess whether a particular death meets the criterion. Therefore, if a particular death is preceded by circumstances and language that are themselves erotic, then the process of death can often be read both on a literal level (i.e. the actual mechanics of death) and an eroticized-symbolic level (i.e. sexual acts signified in certain violent descriptions). Even though the line between violence and sex may be thin according to ancient understandings of these concepts—since both violence and sex are framed by active and passive roles—this framework allows us to explore imagery that can be read with more explicit eroticized meaning.

One of the best examples of the first type, the suicide/intentional death of the lover at the death of the beloved by outside forces, comes from the Nisus and Euryalus episode in Book IX of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Sophocles’ *Antigone* fits into this type, since Haemon (the lover) commits suicide at Antigone’s death which is precipitated by forces connected more to Creon and Polynices than himself. Virgil hints at the potential eroticized nature of Nisus and Euryalus’ relationship by introducing them in the following manner:<sup>26</sup>

*Nisus erat portae custos...*  
*et iuxta comes Euryalus, quo pulchrior alter*  
*non fuit Aeneadum Troiana neque induit arma,*

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>26</sup> There is some debate among scholars about the erotic nature of Nysus and Euryalus’ relationship. For an argument against, see, David Meban, “The Nisus and Euryalus Episode and Roman Friendship,” *Phoenix* 63, no. 3 (Fall, 2009). For arguments for, see Philip Hardie, *Virgil: Aeneid Book IX* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 107-8; Robert Wardy, “Virgil’s Sacred Duo,” in *Maieusis: Essays on Ancient Philosophy in Honour of Myles Burnyeat*, ed. Dominic Scott (Oxford University Press, 2007).

*ora puer prima signans intonsa iuuenta.*

*his amor unus erat pariterque in bella ruebant;*

Nisus was a guard of the gates...and joined as a companion was Euryalus, whom no other of the Aeneid host was more beautiful nor bore Trojan arms, a boy signaling his first youth on his unshaven face. There was one love between these men and they rushed equally into battle. (Aen. 9. 176-82)

Virgil describes Euryalus as “very beautiful” (*pulchrior*) and that he is “a boy signaling his first youth on his unshaven face” (*ora puer prima signans intonsa iuuenta*), and proceeds to relate that there is “one love between them” (*his amor unus*). This context suggests a pederastic relationship between the two. The eroticism is sustained by the simile Virgil uses when Euryalus is killed in front of Nisus: “Just like when a purple flower droops as it dies, cut down by a plow, or a poppy bends its head on its weary neck when it is heavy with strong rain” (*purpureus ueluti cum flos succisus aratro/lauescit moriens, lassoue papauera collo/demisere caput pluuia cum forte grauantur*; Aen. 9.435-37). The languid poppy represents Euryalus’ absent virility, imagery Virgil seems to be picking up from Catullus’ love poetry and that Ovid later picks up in his description of Hyacinth’s death.<sup>27</sup> Within this eroticized death, it is Nisus’ rush into certain death against the Rutulians that puts this scene in the first category. Although Haemon’s death comes at his own hands and Nisus’ at the hands of others, both choose to subject themselves to death at the dying of the beloved. While the lover often puts himself in death’s path because of his mourning, not all eroticized deaths result in the death of both parties.

I will illustrate the second type of death, the mourning/survival of the lover at the

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<sup>27</sup> Hardie, 150. “The frequent association of the violent death of a virgin warrior with sexual defloration...here marks the ‘consummation’ of a love story. Also cf. Hom., *Il.*, 8.306-7; Cat., 11.21-24 and Ov., *Met.*, 10.190-93.

accidental death of the beloved, through Bion's treatment of the death of Adonis. The erotics of this scene are best described by Adonis' wound, "Beautiful Adonis lies on a hill with a tusk in his thigh, struck with a white tusk in his white thigh" (κεῖται καλὸς Ἄδωνις ἐν ὄρεσι μηρὸν ὀδόντι/λευκῶι λευκὸν ὀδόντι τυπαίς; Bion, Lament for Adonis, 7-8), and the frequent refrain, "I cry for Adonis. The Loves mourn again" (αἰάζω τὸν Ἄδωνιν. Ἐπαιάζουσιν Ἔρωτες; Bion, 6). The first quote represents both the source of Adonis' death and the symbolic wound he receives that represents his own lost virility. Because Aphrodite is immortal, she cannot throw herself to death in the same way Nisus did, and she even expresses this, "But I live suffering because I am a goddess and am not able to pursue you [to Hades]" (ἀ δὲ τάλαινα/ζῶω καὶ θεὸς ἐμμι καὶ οὐ δύναμαί σε διώκειν; Bion, 52-53). All she can do at his death is "embrace [him] and mix her lips with his" (σε περιπτύζω καὶ χεῖλεα χεῖλεσι μίζω; Bion, 44). The mixture of Aphrodite's embrace and kisses together with the wound in his groin illustrate the fatal inability of a mortal to live up to the everlasting sexual lust of the immortal goddess of sex and love. For the purposes of types of eroticized death, Aphrodite's lament for Adonis provides a second model whereby the beloved still dies, but where the lover embraces the dead beloved with eroticized imagery without joining the beloved in common death.

Dido's suicide in Book 4 of the *Aeneid* exemplifies the third category, the suicide of the beloved at the abandonment of the lover. The whole scene leading up to the death is filled with eroticized imagery mixed with Dido's impending death.<sup>28</sup> For instance, the word *thalamus* (bedroom/marriage) is used three times throughout this episode (*Aen.*, 4.133, 392, 495).<sup>29</sup> As Dido prepares her suicide Virgil describes her as "pressing her mouth to the bed" (*os impressa*

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<sup>28</sup> Edwards, 183-84.

<sup>29</sup> Kenneth Quinn, *Latin Explorations: Critical Studies in Roman Literature* (New York: Humanities Press, 1963), 56.

*toro*; *Aen.*, 4.659). Daneil Gillis notes, “Dido kisses the place where she often kissed Aeneas’ body; all of it.”<sup>30</sup> But the best place to help us categorize the erotics of this death is how Virgil describes the scene of wounding:

*dixerat, atque illam media inter talia ferro  
conlapsam aspiciunt comites, ensemque cruore  
spumantem sparsasque manus.*

She spoke and in the midst of such speech her slaves saw her fallen in death by the sword. They saw the sword frothing and her hands spattered with her blood. (*Aen.*, 4.663-65)

With Aeneas’ abandonment, Dido chooses to reenact intercourse with Aeneas’ sword as she brings their marriage to a climatic end with the only phallus left to her.<sup>31</sup> Once again, the sword, which belongs to Aeneas, and blood represent the aftermath of sexual penetration, yet here the thrust and fluid are fatal. The difference to notice in this type of scene is that the lover survives the beloved, as in type two, but the lover willingly abandons the beloved. In fact, it is the abandonment itself, which is the catalyst for the beloved’s death. Antigone herself enacts this by her own hand. In her abandonment, the power of *Eros* remains so potent that she must end the raging passion inside her through an act of self-violence that bears many parallels to the lost unions performed on the marriage bed.

While the third type of eroticized death turns betrayal into an act of violence upon the self, the fourth type, the intentional murder of the lover by the beloved because of betrayal, turns the violence outward. To typify this scene, I will use Clytemnestra’s murder of Agamemnon in

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<sup>30</sup> Daniel Gillis, *Eros and Death in the Aeneid* (Rome: L'erma di Bretschneider, 1983), 48.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

Aeschylus. One aspect that makes this scene unique is that we are told the details of the murder by Clytemnestra herself. After she is finished with her murder, she comes and recites to the chorus the manner of Agamemnon's death which recalls eroticized imagery we have seen already, "As he was breathing out a sharp slaughter of blood he hit me with a dark rain of bloody dew" (κάκφυσιδῶν ὄξειαν<sup>32</sup> αἵματος σφαγῆν/βάλλει μ' ἐρεμνῆ ψακάδι φοινίας δρόσου; Aesch., *Ag.*, 1389-90). This scene is eroticized not only because it involves a married couple where the husband is disrobed, but the climatic event involves the husband ejaculating a stream of liquid at his wife in a moment of her climatic ecstasy. But, the scene of marital union is perverted by the liquid being blood which is thrown because of a fatal wound imposed by a vengeful wife.<sup>33</sup> This type of scene is unique because the erotic elements of the death come about by the hand of the beloved, whose cultural perversion into the dominant role produces a fatal climax for the lover.

These examples outline the possibilities for participation in eroticized death within mythological narratives. There seem to be many situations that can bring about death for either the lover or the beloved—both the lover and the beloved find themselves in various roles within the death sequence—but none of them quite fit how Propertius' lover-poet wants to manufacture his suicide and Cynthia's murder. None of these *exempla* contain a murder that is followed by a suicide, not even Sophocles' writing of Antigone and Haemon. Propertius' fatal fantasy is therefore unique within the mythological/poetic corpus. I will show that this unparalleled moment condenses within this poetic moment because of the conventions of elegiac narrative and Propertius' unique approach to the elegiac genre.

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<sup>32</sup> ὄξειαν is also the same term used to describe Haemon's blood in the quotation above.

<sup>33</sup> In this instance, the female/beloved becomes penetrator. Clytemnestra is also frequently described as a woman like a man. Cf. Aesch., *Ag.*, 10-13.

### Propertius' Antigone: Innovating Mythological Eroticized Death

In Propertius' elegiac world, the lover-poet's role as poet—simultaneously poetic creator and elegiac lover—affects how he becomes murderous in his appropriation of the Antigone myth. The interwoven relationship between Propertius, his poetic character as lover-poet, and the lover-poet's relationship with Cynthia creates unique literary tensions. Propertius paints Cynthia as a *domina* (mistress) who has complete amatory control over his life. Her dominance, however, is an illusion. It is Propertius who wields complete control of Cynthia since he is “the poet who makes her yield in certain poems and refuse in others...who endows her with beauty, and takes it away, and or even kills her off...thereby begetting a poetic corpus forever associated with her name,” and thereby with his own literary immortality.<sup>34</sup> But, Cynthia is not the only character in Propertius' poetry. An erotic relationship requires two parties, and Propertius himself becomes yet another character within his poems while simultaneously acting the role of the poet. James puts it this way: “The male speakers of elegy are just as fictional as the women created in the poems.”<sup>35</sup> Because of this, elegy's insistence on Propertius' eponymous role both within and outside the poem places him in a position where any tragic event within his poetry reveals his authorship. The interwoven roles of author and character betray the lover-poet in his choice to manufacture Antigone's death himself if he wants to assume Sophocles' tragic pathos. While Antigone and Haemon are pushed towards death by circumstances that are much larger than themselves (the curse of the Labdacids, Oedipus' incest/pollution of the city, his curse upon his descendants, a civil war, Creon's decree, and the will of the gods) there is no apparent circumstance in Cynthia's situation that would lead to her hanging herself. For this reason,

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<sup>34</sup> Ellen Oliensis, “The Erotics of *Amicitia*,” in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. Judith Hallett and Marilyn Skinner, (Princeton University Press, 1997), 153.

<sup>35</sup> James, 6.

Propertius' use of the myth does not fit well into any of the four categories above—in none of them is the lover the author of both the beloved's and his own death. Since the lover-poet desires to experience mythological parallels to his own amatory pursuits, he must produce an Antigone himself through Cynthia's murder. He wants to die with his lover like Haemon, but he can only become Haemon after he first creates Antigone. The lover-poet's role as self-revealed author combined with the generic tropes of elegy cause him to move the Antigone myth towards murder.

The Roman elegists present their choice of poetry as a choice of genre that represents a counter-cultural movement away from the common masculine pursuit of military life and politics. This *recusatio* and the theme of *nequitia* (idleness) are introduced by Propertius in 1.6, "Allow me, whom fortune has always wished to lie down, deliver this soul to eternal idleness" (*me sine, quem semper voluit fortuna iacere/hanc animam aeternae reddere nequitiae*; Prop. 1.6.25-26). The poet's choice of a life devoted to *nequitia* and amatory pursuits is closely associated with his choice of elegy over epic.<sup>36</sup> Epic functioned as the literary symbol for construction of masculinity in politics and military action.<sup>37</sup> The lover-poet writes to compete with the conventions of epic and assert his poetic superiority. In this endeavor, one byproduct is the devaluation of rival lovers who occupy military or political occupations. He often does this, however, by appropriating instead of rejecting altogether epic poetic conventions. In this way, "Cynthia stands not only for erotic fulfillment...but also for the genre of elegiac poetry *per se* and its intertextual relation with the competing genres of iambic and epic, the later being

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<sup>36</sup> Alison Sharrock, "The *Poeta-Amator*, *Nequitia*, and *Recusatio*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Latin Love Elegy*, ed. Thea Thorsen (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 155.

<sup>37</sup> David Fredrick, "Reading Broken Skin: Violence in Roman Elegy," in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. Judith Hallett and Marilyn Skinner (Princeton University Press, 1997), 179.

associated with narratives of political legitimacy and social recognition.”<sup>38</sup> In seeking social recognition through elegy instead of epic, Propertius’ removal from the political and military realm causes him to enact violence upon Cynthia himself in a way that is foreign to lovers of mythological literature. Propertius fantasizes of an mythological death where larger than life situations involving gods, wars, and kings give sexual relationships a sense of grandeur. Antigone’s death, for example, is intimately intertwined with her duty to follow the gods, her devotion to bury a brother on the losing side of a civil war, and her rebellious protestations against the decrees of a newly crowned king. When Haemon kills himself at her suicide, their fatal union represents more than just a ruined erotic passion. It symbolizes the fracturing of a city-state where a king dishonors the gods in a way that threatens both his kingdom and his family. As Douglas Cairns notes, “Creon, as representative of the *polis*...seeks to control two inter-related institutions, of the *oikos* (household) and of marriage, whose regulation is integral to the health of a well-functioning *polis*.”<sup>39</sup> These matters, however, are foreign to Propertius who has entirely removed himself from both political and family life and instead pursues banquets, symposia, nights in front of a shut door, and on occasion nights with Cynthia herself. Therefore, his removal from these political pursuits forces him to have to produce Cynthia’s and his own death himself to compete with the epic deaths of Antigone and Haemon. This decision, instead of departing from masculine violence, engages in the mythological theme of violence against women who are caught between tyrants and war-captains settling their disputes.<sup>40</sup> Cynthia, on

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<sup>38</sup> Paul Miller, "The *Puella*: Accept no Substitutions," in *The Cambridge Companion to Latin Love Elegy*, ed. Thea Thorsen (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 173.

<sup>39</sup> Douglas Cairns, *Sophocles: Antigone* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 103.

<sup>40</sup> James, 194. “Though it is exaggerated and not serious even on a superficial level, the death threat in this poem demonstrates the lover-poet’s rage at the *puella*, and it speaks particularly to his anger at not enjoying his usual position of mastery relative to women, particularly women of a lower class, a position ordinarily guaranteed him by his gender and status, an elite Roman male, but forbidden him by the rules of elegy. Since violence is forbidden, poetry is, as usual, his tool, this time for revenge. But in the case of his resentment and anger toward the *puella*, it is

the other hand, would struggle to find herself in a situation like Antigone or Briseis (who appears later in the poem) since as an elegiac courtesan she remains aloof from male ownership.<sup>41</sup> As a non-Roman and non-citizen woman she likely avoided situations of political importance. Her only encounter with military or political events would be with a soldier or politician willing to purchase her company.<sup>42</sup> Propertius longs for his relationship with Cynthia to mean more than a sexual agreement based on gifts. This causes him to project the elegiac world into the epic, where his *recusatio* of politics and military forces him compose the grandiose death himself.

The Antigone myth allows Propertius to innovate upon the conventions of elegiac violence in addition to the violence of mythological literature. Two types of violence in elegiac poetry are identified by James:

Elegiac violence comes in two types: the *rixa*, or quarrel, a form of sexual play between lover-poet and *puella*, and *the lover-poet's assault on the puella's house and person*.

Male lovers like the *rixa*, as they can interpret it as a sign of the *puella's* passion, but they both want and fear the physical quarrel—it is shameful because there is no honor in striking a woman but desired because of the lover-poet's constantly seething resentment against his beloved.<sup>43</sup>

James also goes on to point out that the elegiac injury that results in the enactment of *assault on*

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a poor substitute.”

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 41. “The elegiac woman controls her own life, engages in occupational extramarital sex, occasionally takes a contract with a man but continues to pursue her profession behind his back, fears old age, and perpetually needs gifts and money. She is learned enough to appreciate (and even write; cf. Prop. 2.3) complex, allusive poetry, and while she may wish to indulge her impoverished lover-poets, she can afford to do so only rarely—hence the intense sexual persuasion of those demented lovers. In other words, the *docta puella* engenders elegy precisely through her status as a courtesan.”

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 104. “Thus poems about and to the *vir* often focus on his stupidity and the general inconvenience of his existence, but poems on the rival go to surprising lengths to avoid discussing him in any kind of even semirealistic detail, treating him instead simply as Soldier, Praetor, Ex-slave.”

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 185. Italics added.

*the puella's house and person* is always infidelity.<sup>44</sup> The question might be asked, then, why a poem about infidelity uses a myth where no infidelity is implied. Why does Propertius not use a character like Clytemnestra or Dido instead? The most likely reason is that, in the advertised gender dynamics of the elegiac world, the male lover is the one abandoned as opposed to the traditional female beloved.<sup>45</sup> Once Haemon is selected as the appropriate mythic lover, Propertius uses him to explore one of the most extreme examples of elegiac violence.

Propertius is filled with anger at Cynthia's rejection of his poetry by accepting a man into her bed who can give her more substantial financial gifts, and this is the lens through which he reinterprets the Antigone myth in his elegiac world. "The girl must always be on the lookout for money; she must not care what kind of man offers it."<sup>46</sup> He uses pathos to engender sympathy for the many gifts he gave to Cynthia, which he then admits were merely poems, "How many gifts I gave or excellent poems I composed" (*munera quanta dedi vel qualia carmina feci*; Prop. 2.8.11). However many or excellent Propertius' poems are, it seems ludicrous for a poet to terrorize his *puella* with death-threats merely for accepting a paying man into her bed. Cynthia has "material needs, which force her to require payment from her lovers."<sup>47</sup> This is where Propertius uses Haemon to perform sleight of hand on his readers. He disorients their perspective by shifting his addressees, from talking to a friend in l. 11 about his rejected poetry to soliloquizing in l. 17, "Will you die so in your first youth, Propertius?" (*sic igitur prima moriere aetate, Properti?*; Prop. 2.8.17). As he soliloquizes, he begins to ponder upon Haemon and Antigone's fatal marriage in ll. 21-24. By the end of his mythical description, the scene has

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>45</sup> For the theme of abandoned female beloveds in mythology, one need look more further than the abundant material in Ovid's *Heroides*.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 52.

shifted from Propertius' trivial chagrin to the larger than life circumstances of ancient Thebes. Within this dark inner dialogue, the addressee of the poem shifts again from himself to Cynthia. Within less than twenty lines Propertius has addressed three different characters, like a magician's misdirection, and has tried to fool his audience into acceptance of an otherwise inappropriate threat, death as punishment for rejection of poetry as payment for fidelity.

Let me explore further Propertius' desire for Cynthia to accept poetry as a suitable reason for fidelity and its connection to Antigone/Haemon. As Cynthia accepts a rival lover, we should note that he likely provides economic remuneration for her through wealth earned by means of political/military occupations,<sup>48</sup> the very life and payment that Propertius rejects as an elegiac poet. Therefore, when Propertius laments, "But die, let her rejoice at your ruin" (*sed morere; interitu gaudeat illa tuo*; Prop. 2.8.18), he mourns the undermining of his poetic *recusatio* against typical male Roman occupations. Cynthia's infidelity, then, is existential for the lover-poet. This may illuminate why Propertius chooses Haemon and later in the poem Achilles as his mythic *exempla* for handling rejection. Haemon neglects his political duty as the son of Creon in exchange for his devotion to Antigone. This is an important theme for Propertius' poetry that is found throughout Sophocles' play, giving further evidence that Propertius is drawing upon a Sophoclean source. For instance, Creon lambasts Haemon in stichomythia that he "is an ally with a woman" (τῆ γυναικὶ συμμαχεῖ; Soph., *Ant.*, 740). Creon's use of the verb συμμαχεῖ—in one sense a battle ally—parallels the commitment of the elegiac lover to the campaigns of *militia amoris* (the campaign of love). Lyne's note on the imagery of *militia amoris* recalls Haemon in addition to the lover-poet, "*militia* was symptomatic of conventional life; by professing their own

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<sup>48</sup> See note 42 from James on the elegiac *vir* above.

*militia* [to Love] the Elegists might neatly declare their dissociation.”<sup>49</sup> Haemon’s dissociation with his father’s leadership, however, is much less “neatly declare[d]” than Lyne suggests it was for the Augustan Elegists. Paralleled to Haemon in the poem is Achilles, who also rejects *militia* as he withdraws himself from the Trojan War. Propertius interprets Achilles’ inaction as elegiac love, since Achilles abandons the Greeks “on account of beautiful Briseis” (*formosam propter Briseida*; 2.8.35). Propertius admits that, “Since I am very inferior [to Achilles] either in parentage or arms, is it a wonder, if Love rightly triumphs over me?” (*inferior multo cum sim vel matre vel armis, mirum, si de me iure triumphat Amor?*; Prop. 2.8.39-40). Propertius’ reasoning is clear. Given his inferiority to mythical heroes who abandoned their senses in rage over a girl, Propertius is likewise justified in being carried away by rage in his sexual frustration. Mythology justifies the lover-poet, or at least he wants his readers to think so. Although Haemon and Achilles are prestigious, they both reject their duties at crucial points in the plots of their mythology for a *puella*. Cynthia, by turning down the lover-poet’s poetry, rejects the idealism Propertius creates by citing mythological heroes who spurn politics/military for *Amor* as opposed to the rival who uses politics/military wages to purchase Cynthia’s company.

In addition to Propertius’ refusal to pay for entrance into Cynthia’s bed with anything but poetry, his insistence on Cynthia’s downfall comes from his obsessive attachment to her as his only beloved. Unlike Ovid and Tibullus, who engage in sexual relationships with multiple women, Propertius submits his passions loyally to Cynthia alone, “You alone please me. May I alone please you, Cynthia” (*tu mihi sola places: placeam tibi, Cynthia, solus*; Prop. 2.7.19). The polyptoton of *sola...solus* in the same line with *tu...tibi...Cynthia* shows the lover-poet’s laser-focused devotion to his *puella*. With this goal in mind, the Antigone myth is well suited for his

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<sup>49</sup> Lyne, 73.

double death, even if the lover has to produce it himself.<sup>50</sup> Part of this comes from elegy's propensity for mimicking marital language in relationships that clearly do not represent legitimate Roman marriages.<sup>51</sup> But *Antigone* also provides three main elements that fit Propertius' calamitous betrayal that other mythic fatalities do not: 1) Haemon and Antigone are a heterosexual couple, 2) their union would have been one of marital fidelity, and 3) both Haemon and Antigone end up in death together, the ultimate goal of Propertius' threat, "It is right that you die with me" (*mecum moriaris oportet*; Prop. 2.8.25).

In addition to these parallels, Antigone herself mirrors Cynthia's attitude toward Propertius by largely ignoring Haemon for her political responsibilities in a similar way that Cynthia ignores Propertius' poetic gifts for more economically viable favors from a rival lover. In Sophocles, Antigone never says anything about her betrothal to Haemon. Although she laments that she is going to her death unmarried, she does not mention Haemon. Ismene is the one who brings up the marriage to Creon. Thus, when we read *Antigone* through the lens of Propertius, her decision to bury her brother becomes a conscious rejection of her engagement to Haemon. By creating this reading, Propertius emphasizes Haemon's victimhood as opposed to Antigone's. By identifying himself with Haemon, he displays the injustice of his rejected fidelity and his right to take avenging countermeasures.

We have also seen that the language of ruin in Sophocles' *Antigone* fits well with the lover-poet's fear of assault upon the *puella* because killing a woman is *inhonesta* (shameful). As mentioned above, Servinou-Inwood makes the case that Haemon would have been viewed as a

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<sup>50</sup> Gordon Williams, *Figures of Thought in Roman Poetry* (Yale University Press, 1980), 86. "The poet...realizes that Antigone was dead when Haemon killed himself. So he adjusts his own situation to complete the similarity by resolving to murder Cynthia first. That process of thought has to be extrapolated from the myth."

<sup>51</sup> James, 47. "Though the lexicon of marriage here is not to be taken at face value, it merits articulation, if only to demonstrate that elegy uses the legal and social terminology of marriage to describe aspects of extramarital sexual relationships."

particularly shameful character within the context of 5<sup>th</sup> century Athenian family customs. As a Roman complement, Hunter Gardner thoroughly examines the ways in which elegiac poets seek to use the *puella* as an alternative foundation for their ancestral house.<sup>52</sup> There are two main ways Propertius uses Haemon's death to explore the shame inherent in his elegiac identity. The first is rejection of patriarchal inheritance. The second is the manner of his suicide. Regarding the first, Propertius seeks to establish his patriarchal *domus* on Cynthia alone. Gardner notes, "In denying himself paternal inheritance and lofty ancestry (2.34.55-58), the lover-poet assumes a title as lord of *convivia*."<sup>53</sup> Propertius betrays as much in the poem immediately preceding his violent outburst when he writes to Cynthia, "You alone please me, may I alone please you, Cynthia. This love will be more than the name of father" (*tu mihi sola places: placeam tibi, Cynthia, solus/hic erit et patrio nomine pluris amor*; Prop. 2.7.19-20). Propertius' rejection of his patriarchal duties in 2.7 accords well with Haemon in the following poem, who also fatally spurns his father for a woman. Gardner also notes that "The eradication of paternal authority...lays the groundwork for the furtherance of the elegiac project as well as the (often emasculating) strategies for self-representation contained therein."<sup>54</sup> Propertius anticipates the humiliating response to his double suicide after fantasizing about it, "Although this death will be shameful for me, since death is shameful, nevertheless you will die" (*quamvis ista mihi mors est inhonesta futura/ mors inhonesta quidem, tu moriere tamen*; Prop. 2.8.27-28). Sophocles' messenger in the correlated passage calls Haimon's death "the greatest evil placed on a man" (*μέγιστον ἀνδρὶ πρόσκειται κακόν*; Soph., *Ant.*, 1243). Propertius seems to draw upon Haemon's

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<sup>52</sup> Hunter Gardner, "The Elegiac *Domus*" in the Early Augustan Principate," *The American Journal of Philology* 131, no. 3 (2010): 453-493.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 471.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 484.

mythology, especially in Sophocles, because of its articulated shameful nature. Haemon's scorn for Creon and loss of his bride leads to an ignominious death, while the lover-poet imagines the rejection of his paternal *domus* and Cynthia excluding him as her sole lover to lead to a similar outcome. Haemon is an apt *exemplum* for Propertius because his priorities match the lover-poet's, and he likewise feels the maddening pain of unrequited love.

Haemon's suicide also allows Propertius to explore how shame (*inhonesta*) is intrinsic to the elegiac persona. From a Roman perspective, the context surrounding the lover-poet's suicide is especially shameful compared to the exemplary masculine suicide that was a hallmark of Roman culture. Catherine Edwards explores the unique Roman penchant for "virtuous" suicides as well as the motivations and meanings in their depictions. Although she focuses on the rise of politically motivated suicides especially in the reign of Nero through analysis the works of Tacitus and Seneca, she points out an older Roman tradition of suicide ranging back to Lucretia and Cato the Younger.<sup>55</sup> Cato's death would afterwards set the benchmark for meaningful and brave suicides, at least in the eyes of later Romans. His extreme manner of defying Julius Caesar's rise to tyranny was praised even by Augustus,<sup>56</sup> and for many writers afterwards seemed the most appropriate end to his life of austere virtue. "For many Romans the way an individual died could serve to validate—or undermine—the life he or she had lived."<sup>57</sup> If Cato's departure represents the ideal Roman suicide, it is no wonder that the lover-poet repeats twice that his own suicide will be *inhonesta* (shameful). Instead of the epic motive of a despotic leader to motivate suicide like Caesar and Creon for Cato and Antigone, the lover-poet seeks death

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<sup>55</sup> For a discussion see especially chapters 4 and 7 in Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*. See also Timothy Hill, *Ambitiosa Mors* (Routledge, 2004).

<sup>56</sup> Edwards, 156. "Augustus himself (adoptive son of Julius Caesar though he was) is alleged to have praised Cato."

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

merely because his *puella* is sleeping with another man. Cynthia, while a literary fiction, is a generic representation of the courtesan who did not have the status of a female Roman citizen.<sup>58</sup> There could not be a wider gap between the lover-poet's suicide, if carried out, and the ideal *virtus* (manliness) displayed by suicides that dotted Roman historical literature.<sup>59</sup> The lover-poet destroys himself for something not only unpolitical but also unmanly. If, as Edwards argues above, suicide represents the agent fully embodying their truest character, then dying like Haemon is quite appropriate for the lover-poet. We expect his death to be *inhonesta*, as he consistently characterizes himself as an atypical Roman male and as depraved by his slavery to *Amor*. Haemon's characterization as effeminate by Creon in Sophocles maps neatly onto Roman expectations for manliness (*virtus*) as essential for a meaningful suicide; this unmanly nature can be sensed more acutely when comparing the lover-poet's suicide to those in the tradition of Cato.

### **Reader Response to Elegiac Violence**

I have focused primarily on the literary conditions of Propertius' fantasized double-death, examining closely what it is about this moment of *poesis* that leads Propertius to create a murder-suicide that is atypical for eroticized death in mythology. I would also like to make a few remarks on the social implications of Propertius' threat. I want to explore how readers can respond to this scene, especially if we assume the poem is fictional and not biographical. David Fredrick points out the difficulty in dealing with elegiac violence while still maintaining a metaphorical reading, "Elegy consistently textualizes its violence by presenting it as mock epic, a transgression of Callimacheanism that is nevertheless not 'real' violence (i.e., violence offered

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<sup>58</sup> James, 37. "A woman of this description—educated, intelligent, elegant, charming, independent, sexually active independent of marriage, and perpetually demanding expensive gifts—can reliably be accounted for, given Rome's class structures, only as a member of the courtesan class."

<sup>59</sup> For the relationship of death and *virtus*, see Edwards, 91-98.

for straightforward identification)...its violence...was only a surface effect. This does not remove the aggression, but it does complicate its meaning.”<sup>60</sup> I want to explore the implications of this violence that is “not ‘real’ violence,” including Cynthia’s connection to Callimachean poetics and balancing the “surface effect” of the poem with its more “complicated meaning.”

As a poet who writes about the capricious nature of *Amor*, the lover-poet’s emotional outburst evokes a familiar yet innovative pathos for many who have felt the sting of a betrayed lover. Propertius adapts the Haemon/Antigone mythology to explore extreme emotions familiar to many who have felt frustrated by *Amor*. One could easily imagine a modern lover lamenting their pain by exclaiming dramatically (whether seriously or as a hyperbole of their pain), “What is the point anymore? I just want her to die, then I’ll kill myself!” In this way, the poem seems to speak to a ubiquitous human experience, the suffering that comes from betrayal in love. This is, a Papanghelis states, “Murder as one of the Fine Arts.”<sup>61</sup> The dynamics of violence in the ancient poem are, however, more nuanced than present-day cry of romantic despair. As James states,

I see no biographical or individual historical truth value in elegy, but I do see generic and class truths: men have financial and political power over women; the erotic power of women over men is limited by time and controlled by absolutely biological factors (youth, beauty, sexual attractiveness); the wealthy and elite have resources of time and money not available to others; personal relationships are always more complex than social ideologies would have them be.<sup>62</sup>

A complication in addressing Propertius’ fulmination is that the violence in the poem resides

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<sup>60</sup> David Fredrick, “Reading Broken Skin: Violence in Roman Elegy,” in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. Judith Hallett and Marilyn Skinner, (Princeton University Press, 1997), 189.

<sup>61</sup> Papanghelis, 125.

<sup>62</sup> James, 29.

within the text and most certainly failed historically to penetrate Propertius' actual life. Scholars have articulated this in the last several decades, building upon the persuasive arguments of Wyke, Sharrock, and Veyne that the *puella* is not a historical woman given a poetic pseudonym but is instead a textual construct.<sup>63</sup> But, these scholars do not argue that violence in elegy is therefore meaningless because the *puellae* are not historical; Miller is, therefore, correct to swing the pendulum towards materiality in suggesting that the elegiac *puella* is a literary construct that reflect "material notions of erotic, social, and moral assumptions that could be read on the bodies of real women."<sup>64</sup> James parallels Miller by stating, "Elegy is a literary game, but within the genre its games can have serious, even lethal consequences for women, consequences that elegy reveals as extratextual as well."<sup>65</sup> So, how does a reader react to this death threat? Is it merely a "literary game" that artfully draws upon mythology to evoke intense pathos from its readers, or is there something material and therefore disquieting for the ancient *puella*? I suggest that, despite the *puella*'s nature as symbolic of poetry, she can still contribute to legitimate discussions of domestic violence.

One aspect to consider when thinking through these questions regards how Propertius' treatment of the Antigone myth and its projection onto his literary portrayal of Cynthia undermines his *recusatio* of the violent lifestyle expected of Roman males, especially at the

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<sup>63</sup> See Maria Wyke, "Written Women: Propertius' Scripta Puella," *Journal of Roman Studies* 77 (1987): 47-61; Alison Sharrock, "Womanfracture," *Journal of Roman Studies* 81 (1991): 36-49; Paul Veyne, *Roman Erotic Elegy: Love, Poetry, and the West* (University of Chicago Press, 1988).

<sup>64</sup> Miller, 167. "On the one hand, the *puellae* are beyond doubt textual. They are the pretexts around which are constructed elaborate poetic collections. These women, at least as we know them, do not exist outside this written world. They are the organizing elements around which the basic scenario of elegiac love is constructed—the genre does not exist without them. But the texts and languages out of which they are made are not mere abstract systems. They are deeply embedded tools that exist only in so far as they are intelligible, useful and/or enjoyable by the inhabitants of their world."

<sup>65</sup> James, 222.

opening of Book Two.<sup>66</sup> The elegiac genre presents itself as an alternative to Roman military violence in exchange for a life dedicated to the pursuits of amatory love. Elegiac poets have no aspirations to become the Roman male elite, who use their virility to conquer women and barbarians alike. Elegiac poets instead embody the debased *servitium amoris* (slavery of love), while the *puella* is often named his *domina* (female-slave-master).<sup>67</sup> As a flesh and blood counterpart to the elegiac *puella*, the courtesans of the Late Republic/Early Principate embody this shift in power dynamics. Elegy emerges in a historical moment where women increasingly had more control over the time, place, and even partners of sexual rendezvous.<sup>68</sup> Yet, instead of exorcizing male violence from the *mollis* (effeminate) poet, Propertius imports the violence from the battlefield into the bedroom. David Fredrick notes this as a general trend within elegiac violence, “Elegy consistently portrays sex not only as violent penetration, but also as the violation of its own poetic values.”<sup>69</sup> As he loses control over Cynthia’s availability—she rejects his poetry for the material gifts of a rival—he violates his vow against militance and seeks to control Cynthia in an un-elegiac but very Roman manner, violent physical control.<sup>70</sup>

Before diving into a reader response predicated on a literal/material reading of Propertius’ threat, I want to explore a possible aesthetic reading of this suicide/murder. If Cynthia is not a woman but a book of poetry, then how do we read Propertius’ desire for her

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<sup>66</sup> cf. Prop. 2.1.

<sup>67</sup> Laurel Fulkerson, “*Servitium Amoris*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Latin Love Elegy*, ed. Thea S. Thorsen, 181. The *puellae*] will inevitably have had some say in whom they spent their time with...the paranoid persona of the elegiac lover magnifies the possibility of refusal, however limited or implausible, into a situation in which the *domina* has all the power.”

<sup>68</sup> For a discussion on Roman attitudes towards Love, especially in the Late Republic and Augustan Age, see Lyne 1-18.

<sup>69</sup> Fredrick, 189.

<sup>70</sup> For an exploration of the “poetics of manhood,” see David Wray, *Catullus and the Poetics of Roman Manhood* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

death and his suicide? And is this the only way to read the poem? Keith notes that Propertius' second collection,

...exhibits a narrative progression from the poet-lover's literary and amatory success to an increasing disillusionment with the elegiac mistress/book, 'Cynthia.' For with the diffusion of Propertius' literary fame comes the promiscuity of his girlfriend. No longer incomparable and exquisite, she can be represented as sullied by contact with his readers, who are her admirers as much as his.<sup>71</sup>

She notes as well that the reason the lover-poet detests Cynthia's circulation arises because of "the tension between our poet's profession of Callimachean poetic principle and the promiscuity of his mistress/book," who/which is being circulated among the "vulgar crowd."<sup>72</sup> While Keith does not offer a specific reading of Propertius' *Antigone*, we can use her reading of the entire second collection to explore how he uses the *Antigone* mythology. When Propertius exclaims "but let her die" (*sed morere*), he reveals the lover-poet's frustration with his elegiac corpus and a desire to rid himself of its labor. We can then read the lover-poet's mention of *Antigone* and *Haemon* as elegy's inability to produce the Callimachean exclusiveness of refined poetry. Just as *Antigone* abandoned her private commitment to *Haemon* for a public protest against the *polis*, *Cynthia*'s circulation within the vulgar Roman population abandons the exclusive learnedness from a select group of skilled poets and patrons. "Cynthia" the text, then becomes a common *meretrix*, a cheap prostitute had by many. The lover-poet likening himself to *Haemon*, who was "bloody in his side by his own sword" (*ipse suo saucius ense latus*), and threatening a double wound, "let both of our blood drip from this same sword" (*hoc eodem ferro stillet uterque cruor*)

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<sup>71</sup> Keith, 110.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

uses the imagery of seminal fluid as the representation of the male-poet's creative logos imbued in the ink of the stylus which brings Cynthia to life. Greene notes, "The blood of both drips from the same sword, the same *ferrea materia* ('iron matter') the poet uses for his art."<sup>73</sup> As we read of Haemon "mix[ing] his bones with the wretched girl" (*sua cum miserae permiscuit ossa puellae*) we can imagine the lover-poet collapsed near the disheveled ruins of his writing tools, not dead, but frustrated at the pedestrian quality of his poetry. Haemon and the lover-poet's *puellae* have betrayed both lovers to the public. Therefore, Propertius' temptation to give up writing elegy maps nicely onto Haemon's shameful suicide. It is right that he exclaims to his *puella*/book "since death is shameful for me, nevertheless you will die" (*mors inhonesta quidem, tu moriere tamen*). Propertius' abandonment of elegy and 'Cynthia' would bring shame like Haemon's suicide at Antigone's tomb. The eroticized nature of Antigone's death and the lover-poet's violent threat represents, then, not domestic violence but a threat to abandon a certain poetic genre.

Propertius' murder threat, as noted above, should not be taken literally outside of his desire to elicit literary pathos from his readers, and there is a good case to be made for this metaphorical reading. But, James has illustrated that elegiac poetry functions, in the world of the poem, as art intended to persuade the *docta puella*—the courtesan derived from New Comedy—to allow the lover-poet into her bed without having to furnish expensive gifts.<sup>74</sup> Although the *puella* is literary and therefore generic, she nonetheless represents general attitudes from ancient men towards women, especially non-elite women considered sex workers. These women relied economically (and therefore existentially) on offering sexual services to men in exchange for

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<sup>73</sup> Greene, 382.

<sup>74</sup> For a discussion see James, 184-97.

their material needs. Within the elegiac world, the *puella* was no lower-class prostitute, as her services often extended beyond merely sex but included extended companionship to her various clients. Part of her allure was her sophistication. She was not merely beautiful, but also cultured, hence the epithet *docta* (learned).<sup>75</sup> Therefore, while it is unlikely that Propertius' Cynthia was more than a generic simulacrum of real courtesans, one can easily imagine a flesh and blood *docta puella* reading Propertius' poetry, since the poems are directed towards a woman like herself. Keith demonstrates that Propertius himself anticipates female readership as she comments on 3.3: "The god of poetry specifies Propertius' readership as female and select."<sup>76</sup> While the elegiac *puella* assumed a role with more sexual self-determination than either the Roman female elite or the common prostitute, the lover-poet's rage in Propertius' poem is likely indicative of the basic threat of violence that loomed over ancient women when providing sex for Roman men.

Understanding the material reality behind the generic and literary *puella* can help the reader better consider how to respond to Propertius' threat of murder and suicide. On the one hand, Propertius is quite inventive in his reception of Greek mythology to probe the dark emotions one feels when they are betrayed in *Amor*. Since, as I have shown above, Propertius is doing something new with both Antigone/Haemon and the entire tradition of eroticized death in mythology, the poem represents an artful articulation of the common trope of romantic betrayal. Because Cynthia is a fictitious invention, the threat is as well. No harm done; even in the world of Propertius poetry Cynthia lives on and the threat is never actualized. But the fact that the poem is fiction does not stop the reader from feeling legitimate concern about its ominous

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<sup>75</sup> Keith, 61-2. "Our elegist [Propertius] repeatedly celebrates his mistress' learning in Greek music and erotic arts at the same time that he insists upon the social illegitimacy of their relationship."

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

overtones. While a threat of death and suicide might be extreme compared to real-life violence experienced by flesh and blood courtesans, the prevalence of violent outbursts both in this poem and in other areas of elegiac poetry could mirror actual violence for women in a precarious occupation. Keith—who’s framework I used above for a metaphorical reading of Propertius—suggests the following, “Unlike many traditional philologists and social historians, neither am I willing to dismiss the crucial insights that contemporary critical theory can offer concerning the textual representation of women’s lives, whether lived...or idealized...[Cynthia’s] representation in his elegiac poetry is so shaped by socio-cultural codes.”<sup>77</sup> Cynthia is symbolic of elegiac poetry, but for the symbols to make sense they must be written on female body that accurately represents the “socio-cultural codes” familiar to Propertius’ readers. To make it straightforward, the lover-poet’s threat against Cynthia is a literary occasion to discuss the prevalence of violence within the systems of Roman power, including private relationships. If the poem is properly contextualized as fictitious but culturally relevant, it can—in addition to exploring how it helps characterize the literary persona of the elegiac lover—help readers process their own feelings of betrayal by witnessing an example of an extreme reaction. In this way it aptly uses the tragic precedence of *Antigone* to create a sense of catharsis for the reader.

While I am not the first to point out a tendency for violent threats in a genre that claims to reject such posturing, my examination of the poem adds the nuance of how the intended unthreatening tone of elegiac poetry contains violence that increases the brutality found in its epic and militaristic counterparts, since neither contain murder-suicide of lovers. It seems odd that a genre that rejects the ethos of epic poetry would contain not only violence, but violence that is destructive both to the “enemy” and to the self. While eroticized bloodshed can be found

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 114.

throughout Hellenistic and Roman poetry, Propertius' demand to position himself as a poet with complete mastery over his elegiac world is a rampage that displays a great deal of intentional outward and self-violence equal to that of his poetic contemporaries and forbearers. As I have explored, the threat of murder and suicide, especially in eroticized contexts, is found nowhere else in the mythological tradition. Hinted at here and more fully explored later in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, eroticized violence reveals *Amor* as one of the deadliest gods of the ancient world. By properly contextualizing the violent consequences precipitated by *Amor* throughout ancient mythology, modern readers possess texts like Propertius' *Elegies* that can create discussion about appropriate responses to sexual frustration. When approaching the problem of identity for the elegiac *puella*, Duncan Kennedy notes, "Any reading, any act of interpretation of a text...is analyzable in terms of on the one hand hermeneutics, which seeks out an originary meaning for a text, and on the other the appropriation of the text by, and its accommodation to, the matrix of practices and beliefs out of which the reading is produced."<sup>78</sup> It is within this space between hermeneutics and appropriation of practices and beliefs that Cynthia can best be understood as embodying simultaneously attitudes towards poetry and ancient women.

## Conclusion

This examination has explored how the combination of various approaches—textual and source analysis, literary tropes, reception studies, gender and genre, and reader response—can inform the meanings we create when engaging with elegiac poetry. This becomes complex in the case of the elegiac *puella* because her identity has caused readers since antiquity to question who she is and what her pseudonym may conceal. While on the surface a poetic character like Virgil's Dido belongs in the fictional world of mythology while his Augustus belongs in the

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<sup>78</sup> Duncan Kennedy, *The Arts of Love* (Cambridge University Press: 1993), 10.

material world of history, the *puella* has eluded a clear residence in either realm because of the biographical veneer that structures the elegiac world. In this way, the *puella* functions as a mirror for the experiences, questions, and biases that her readers carry as they encounter her. We are left with a character whose ambivalent identity—fictional, historical, or an embodiment of historical attitudes—allows a number of questions about poetry, sexuality, and selfhood to be deconstructed and reinstated.

In Propertius' use of Sophocles' Antigone, we see the poet thinking with the Antigone mythology in a way that invents a new form of eroticized death. This moment of mythological reception reveals some of the unique functions of elegiac discourse, one of these being that both the historical poet and the poetic speaker (the poet-lover/the elegiac lover) share the same name. While some may wish to keep the identities of the historical poet and the lover-poet separate, Propertius' threatened self-harm in recreating the Antigone myth through Haemon complicates the reader's ability to separate "real" from "literary."

Another consequence of this analysis is a more nuanced response to eroticized violence towards the *puella*. Propertius' death threat is implicitly tied to the metapoetic discourse that operates around and within the character of Cynthia. When Propertius threatens murder and suicide, a discerning reader should detect insights into the frustrating nature of poetic composition and publication. Yet, despite this metapoetic reality, the elegiac poet has chosen to embody his poetry within the body of a literary woman. Furthermore, while an informed reader can identify artistic insights into poetic discourse, not every reader is so equipped and is likely to read the violence against the *puella* as seriously as they would in any other literature. For both informed and casual readers of this scene, the violence can still be disquieting. One reason for concern to all readers is that any violence done to a woman, even fictional, even metapoetic,

must make sense within the gendered framework that circulated around Propertius' most immediate audience. While the lover-poets reaction to Cynthia may be extreme—he admits as much in the poet—it apparently was not hard for his readers to imagine. For both an ancient and modern audience, it is not hard to imagine male frustration at female intractability, even if the woman is a corpus of poetry.

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