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Latin V

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### Dressing Within the Bounds:

#### Clothing and Conformity in Elegiac Poetry

Many scholars write about elegiac poets as people who challenged societal norms by depicting themselves as men focused on love rather than on more traditional concerns, such as politics. Rather than placing value on business, the military, and law, they chose the pursuit of love and the writing of poetry as their career.<sup>1</sup> However, there has been some disagreement as to whether these poets depicted revolutionary roles for women. While some scholars say that elegy pointed to socially liberated women in control of men and of their own sexuality, others say that these women were just passive tools for elegists. My paper engages with the issue of the extent to which elegists were revolutionary through the lens of clothing.

In the Augustan era, the emperor Augustus attempted to restore morality to Ancient Rome through legislation that emphasized the value of tradition and modesty. Using the image of himself and of his wife as models for how Roman citizens should dress, he stressed that men should wear the toga to demonstrate their allegiance to the state. This toga was expected to be unassuming as a way to show righteousness, since it covered the entire body, and it was white in color, typically made from light, untreated wool.<sup>2</sup> Women were supposed to prove their chastity

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<sup>1</sup> Hallett, Judith P. "The Role of Women in Roman Elegy: Countercultural Feminism." *Latin Erotic Elegy: An Anthology and Reader*, edited by Paul Allen Miller, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 330.

<sup>2</sup> Bowyer The, Heather E. "The Augustan Ideal and the Pompeian Reality: Clothing Choice in Judo-Claudian Pompeii." *Anistor*, [www.anistor.gr/english/enback/](http://www.anistor.gr/english/enback/)

through their clothing, as married females were expected to wear a white *stola*, which fell to the ground, over a white *tunica*, which also fell to the ground. She also wore a *palla*, or cloak, over her head. Augustus was horrified by women of the Late Republic's lack of interest in traditional Roman ways and their focus on their own "selfish desires" instead of the needs of their family. Thus, he used the clothing of his wife to demonstrate the way women should dress in order to show their dedication to serving their families and being model wives.<sup>3</sup> Romans also displayed their rank through their clothing, as there were multiple sartorial symbols worn by specific classes. For example, wearing a long complex toga was a signal of elite status.<sup>4</sup>

The way that elegists wrote about clothing shows that they did not subvert gender roles or the traditional Roman *mos maiorum*. They presented appearance in line with the traditional value of modesty and also used clothing to assert social standing, just as other Romans did. Male elegists also seemed to empower women, in a sense, by talking about the strength of their beauty. However, clothing was not used as a source of women's empowerment, but as a way for them to better serve their lover, in keeping with Augustus's valuing of obedient wives. Taken as a whole, elegists' depiction of clothing and appearance shows their adherence to Augustan era societal expectations. I agree with Maria Wyke, who claims that erotic elegy did not seek to change the role of women, as their basic societal position was not questioned.<sup>5</sup> However, I will attempt to show through my paper how my reading of elegy also diverges from hers. She writes about how

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<sup>3</sup>Bowyer The, Heather E. "The Augustan Ideal and the Pompeian Reality: Clothing Choice in Judo-Claudian Pompeii." *Anistor*, pp. 3-5 [www.anistor.gr/english/enback/2012\\_3a\\_Anistoriton.pdf](http://www.anistor.gr/english/enback/2012_3a_Anistoriton.pdf),

<sup>4</sup>Rothfus, Melissa A. "The 'Gens Togata': Changing Styles and Changing Identities." *The American Journal of Philology*, vol. 131, no. 3, 2010, pp. 436 - 437. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/40983354](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40983354)

<sup>5</sup>Wyke, Maria. "Mistress and Metaphor in Augustan Elegy." *Latin Erotic Elegy: An Anthology and Reader*, edited by Paul Allen Miller, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 404.

elegists portrayed themselves as different from more conventional males who subscribed to society's norms, but this is not entirely true. Even though elegists did not go into battle or seek political careers, they still engaged with traditional notions of rank and gender, as I will demonstrate. Paul Allen Miller writes that "Not only do elegiac love affairs focus on love outside of marriage; they call into question the basic power relations that lay at the heart of traditional Roman life. The defining characteristic of the focus on an exclusive or dominant love affair as the genre's thematic center of gravity already casts it outside the mainstream of Roman cultural life."<sup>6</sup> Judith P. Hallet expresses similar sentiments through her assertion that elegists constituted a type of counter-culture, which she defines as "a movement which seeks to discover new types of community, new family patterns, new sexual *mores*, new kinds of livelihood, new esthetic forms, new personal identities on the far side of power politics."<sup>7</sup> Through my paper, I will attempt to disprove their assertions that elegists called basic power relations into question and created their own guidelines outside of mainstream culture. Regardless of the revolutionary nature of the emphasis poets placed on love, the role of women was still to serve men, modesty was still valued, men were still expected to not be too ostentatious in appearance, and social status was still important. Through examining excerpts of poetry by Sulpicia, Ovid, Tibullus, and Propertius, I will show how each poet used clothing or appearance to present themselves as someone who adheres to these traditional values, thus leaving the basic power relations at the heart of traditional Roman life intact.

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<sup>6</sup> Miller, Paul Allen. Introduction. *Latin Erotic Elegy: An Anthology and Reader*, edited by Miller, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Hallett, Judith P. "The Role of Women in Roman Elegy: Countercultural Feminism." *Latin Erotic Elegy: An Anthology and Reader*, edited by Paul Allen Miller, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 334.

In poem five from book one of *Amores*, Ovid details going to his lover Corinna's house.

He describes how she is wearing a small tunic and writes:

deripui tunicam; nec multum rara nocebat,  
pugnabat tunica sed tamen illa tegi;  
quae cum ita pugnaret, tamquam quae vincere nollet,  
victa est non aegre proditione sua.

I tore off her tunic; nor was the thin thing impairing much,  
but nevertheless she was fighting to be covered by that tunic;  
since she was thus fighting just as one who does not want to win,  
she was conquered not with difficulty by her own betrayal. (13-16)

Ovid's description of Corinna's tunic through the substantive adjective *rara*, or thin, presents Corinna as not following the guidelines of modesty expected of women, since the tunic is not substantial enough to prevent Ovid from taking it off easily. Ovid uses the comparative conjunction *tamquam* in order to make a comparison between Corinna and a soldier. Corinna is fighting just as someone who *vincere nollet*, or does not desire to win. This use of military language likens Corinna's attempt to keep her clothes on to a battle, framing Ovid's effort to remove them as a type of violence. Ovid also uses an ablative of means, *proditione*, or betrayal, which characterizes Corinna's decision to wear a revealing tunic as a type of betrayal of her own interests, suggesting that Corinna's decision to wear a small tunic was what allowed Ovid to "win" and take her tunic off. Ovid's description of Corinna as someone who does not want to win also suggests that she wants her tunic to be taken off, and thus wants to be taken advantage of. However, her seeming promiscuity is negatively portrayed through his use of *proditione*. Ovid also uses the passive voice (*victa est*) to explain how he conquered Corinna, framing her as a passive figure who cannot act in opposition to him. Thus, Corinna's tunic is depicted as a way for her to submit to Ovid's commands, not as a way for her to assert her own sexuality. Ovid's

military language suggests that Corinna has somehow “lost” in their interaction while he has won. Maria Wyke demonstrates that elegists do not liberate their female subjects. She writes that “The heterodoxy of the elegiac portrayal of love, therefore, lies in the absence of a political or social role for the male narrator, not in any attempt to provide or demand a political role for the female subject... The elegiac poets exploit the traditional methods of ordering female sexuality which locate the sexually unrestrained and therefore socially ineffective female on the margins of society.”<sup>8</sup> This marginalization is precisely what Ovid does here, as he uses Corinna’s immodest attire as a way to demonstrate her disloyalty to her own interests. Ovid maintains the traditional Roman belief in the submissive nature of a woman, as demonstrated by other literary works of the time,<sup>9</sup> since Corinna submits to his desires despite what he depicts as what is good for her. He also simultaneously shames Corinna for what she wore (since by wearing her outfit, she has betrayed herself), framing himself as someone who believes that modest attire is what is best for women.

In Amores 2.19, Ovid writes:

“si numquam Danaen habuisset aenea turris,  
non esset Danae de Iove facta parens;  
dum servat Iuno mutatam cornibus Io,  
facta est, quam fuerat, gratior illa Iovi.

If a bronze tower had never kept Danae,  
Danae would never have been made a parent by Jupiter:  
while Juno protects Io having been changed with horns,  
that woman was made more pleasing to Jupiter than she had been. (27-30)

At the beginning of these lines, Ovid is referencing the woman Danae, the mother of Perseus,

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<sup>8</sup>Wyke, Maria. "Mistress and Metaphor in Augustan Elegy." *Latin Erotic Elegy: An Anthology and Reader*, edited by Paul Allen Miller, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 404.

<sup>9</sup>Hallett, Judith P. "The Role of Women in Roman Elegy: Countercultural Feminism." *Latin Erotic Elegy: An Anthology and Reader*, edited by Paul Allen Miller, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 330

who was imprisoned in a bronze tower by her father. Jupiter changed forms to enter the tower, and he impregnated her.<sup>10</sup> Ovid uses a past contrary to fact conditional in order to emphasize how a different course of events (Danae being easily available to Jupiter) would have produced a completely different outcome. Thus, her attractiveness to Jupiter is entirely based on how “hard to get” she is. His use of a passive verb to describe how Danae became desirable to Jupiter (*facta esset*) suggests that she had no role in attracting Jupiter or having a child with him, as this was entirely his decision.

He then references Io, a girl that Jupiter turned into a cow so that Juno would not discover him with her.<sup>11</sup> Ovid uses *gratior*, a comparative meaning “more pleasing,” which contrasts how pleasing Io is when she is easily available versus when she is not. Through his references to Danae and Io, Ovid emphasizes that a woman’s beauty is predicated on how hidden she is. Following this logic, women who dress immodestly would not be desirable, since their bodies would not be “shut” to potential suitors as Danae was shut off from Jupiter in the tower. The women presented by Ovid are pleasing to men because they are hidden from view, but they do not make the decision to be hidden themselves. Ovid’s use of the passive verb *facta est* again later to describe how Io “was made” pleasing to Jupiter shows that she does not even have a role in her own ability to please. Therefore, she has no agency in deciding how she looks, but being not easily accessible (and thus being covered up) is what makes her desirable.

Ovid’s description of how women become more attractive when they are unavailable is an extension of the Roman emphasis on female modesty, as women who are covered up are the ones who make good wives and mothers. He also does not frame the way a woman presents

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<sup>10</sup>*Latin Erotic Elegy: An Anthology and Reader*, edited by Miller, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 263

<sup>11</sup>*Latin Erotic Elegy: An Anthology and Reader*, edited by Miller, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 172

herself as her own choice, using the examples of Danae, someone who was forced to stay in a tower, and Io, someone who was turned into a cow against her will, as stand-ins for all women. Thus, the will of other people determines how a woman presents herself; they are the agents of a woman's beauty as defined by the male gaze. Ovid depicts himself as one who upholds the societal structure that keeps women powerless, since he holds two women who are made to conform to someone else's desires as exemplars for other women's attractiveness. Their beauty only matters in terms of how they fulfill men's desires. He also asserts the value of female modesty by depicting women who are not easily available as somehow more alluring than those who are.

In Poem 4.4, Propertius describes Tarpeia's decision to betray Rome to the Sabines due to her love for the Sabine commander. Propertius writes:

Nam Vesta, Iliacae felix tutela favillae,  
 culpam alit et plures condit in ossa faces.  
 Illa ruit, qualis celerem prope Thermodonta  
 Strymonis abscisso pectus aperta sinu.

For Vesta, the happy guardian of the Trojan ash,  
 supported her crime and concealed more flames in her bones.  
 that one hurried, just like the Strymonis one, near swift Thermodon  
 with the fold of the toga having been torn off, open with respect to her chest. (69-72)

Since Tarpeia betrays Rome due to love, it is no coincidence her toga is open *sinu* (with respect to her chest). This description of her chest could be completely taken out without losing the meaning of the sentence, but Propertius still calls specific attention to Tarpeia's bare chest. This state of undress corresponds to the dangerous sexuality described through the characterization of Tarpeia's action as *culpam* (crime) and the ablative of place where *in ossa* (in her bones). This use of ablative suggests that flames are actually contained within Tarpeia, so her

passion is an inseparable part of her. Propertius compares Tarpeia to a Strymonis, a female worshipper of Bacchus. Since Bacchus was the god of wine, these worshippers were thought of as loud and unruly. He also compares her to another group of violent women, since the river she is running near, Thermodon, was a river in the home of the Amazons, who were female warriors.

<sup>12</sup> Thus, his description of Tarpeia as bare chested is part of a section that highlights her destructiveness and violence in many ways. As Maria Wyke states, “the narrator of 4.4 makes it clear right from the start that his elegiac version of the Tarpeia legend still makes her a detestable traitress. This particular elegiac lover, we are told, is an evil girl.”<sup>13</sup> Propertius describes Tarpeia’s naked chest as part of his overall effort to underline Tarpeia’s overall “evil” nature. It is especially important to note that it is her breasts that are uncovered, since breasts are often associated with sexuality. Propertius himself used the word *sinu* in several of his poems in descriptions of his *domina*, demonstrating the word’s connection to the world of love and sex. The fact that Tarpeia’s chest is uncovered is used to assert the danger of her desire and to show how she is committing an action that will harm Rome, since she has just decided to let the Sabines into the city. Propertius does not depict Tarpeia as a strong woman but rather aligns himself with norms that would be against a woman dressing immodestly or showing her sexuality. The clear negative value judgment Propertius places on Tarpeia’s uncovered chest, as shown through the many ways that he indicates her unruly behavior, demonstrates that he agrees with, or at least is presenting himself as someone who agrees with, these norms.

In poem 1.2, Tibullus describes what he wants people who see him and his lover to do.

He writes:

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<sup>12</sup> *Latin Erotic Elegy: An Anthology and Reader*, edited by Miller, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 220

<sup>13</sup> Wyke, Maria. “The Elegiac Woman at Rome.” *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, no. 33 (213), 1987, p. 162. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/44696960](http://www.jstor.org/stable/44696960).



Parcite luminibus, seu vir seu femina fiat  
 obvia: celari vult sua furta Venus ...  
 Si quis et imprudens asperexit, occulat ille  
 perque deos omnes se meminisse neget

Spare eyes, man or woman it should happen having been met.  
 Venus wants her deceptions to be hidden ...  
 and if anyone ignorant will have looked at us, let that man hide it  
 and let him deny through all the gods that he remembers. (33-38)

Tibullus's use of the imperative (*parcite*) as well the jussive subjunctive (*occulat* and *neget*) emphasizes the force of what he is saying. He is literally demanding onlookers to look away from him and his lover and to deny what they have seen, showing that he very much does not want other people to know about his love affairs. He says that anyone who sees them should deny it through all the gods that he remembers (*per deos omnes se meminisse*). That Tibullus uses *omnes* to modify gods also underlines the strength of his conviction, since someone who sees them should swear by not one or two gods, but every single god that they saw nothing. Tibullus even uses two synonyms for hide (*occulat* and *celari*), repeating himself to further emphasize how much he wants his trysts to not be public knowledge. He not only personally wants to hide his love affairs but seems to think that doing so is the only reasonable course of action, as he makes Venus the subject of the sentence, claiming that she herself wants these love affairs to be hidden. Tibullus's firm insistence that his rendezvous must remain secret shows that he cares about Augustan society's disapproval of love affairs at least to some degree, since he does not want to seem to be actively opposing Augustus. In these lines, Tibullus is writing about himself as someone who does not want to call attention to his scandalous love affair, showing that he wishes to maintain a favorable appearance in the eyes of the general public. Thus, Tibullus presents himself as someone who conforms to expectations of respectability.

In poem 1.2, Tibullus contrasts himself with a potential lover of Delia, who is his *domina*. He writes:

Totus et argento contextus, totus et auro,  
 insideat celeri conspiciendus equo;  
 ipse boves mea si tecum modo Delia possim  
 iungere et in solito pascere monte pecus

And entirely woven with silver and entirely woven with gold,  
 let him sit upon a swift horse in order to be seen,  
 if only I myself could join with you, my Delia,  
 to graze the cows and herd on the usual mountain. (69-72)

Tibullus employs the gerundive (*conspiciendus*) to suggest a connection between the elaborate gold and silver this lover wears and his desire to be seen. Thus, he claims that this man's ostentatious appearance was chosen as a way to get attention from others. Tibullus contrasts the concerns of this man for his appearance with his own complete dedication to Delia. Tibullus uses the verb *iungere*, meaning to join, which demonstrates his desire to become closely linked to Delia, since he suggests that they will literally join together as one unit. Tibullus is making the comparison between him and this other lover in the context of pleading with Delia to be with him, thus framing his lack of desire to be noticed in the same way as his competition as a positive attribute. Tibullus's correlation of his competition's elaborate clothing with his lack of suitability as a lover is in no way a coincidence. As Melissa A. Rothfus writes, "In essence, the Romans were keenly and consciously aware that adornment was an inextricable element of identity, and it was furthermore an important way in which an individual indicated his attitude to the dominant culture and his place in Roman society."<sup>14</sup> In a time when men were expected to demonstrate their rank through clothing in a way that still subscribed to Augustus's emphasis on

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<sup>14</sup>Rothfus, Melissa A. "The 'Gens Togata': Changing Styles and Changing Identities." *The American Journal of Philology*, vol. 131, no. 3, 2010, p. 428. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/40983354](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40983354)

modest dress, Tibullus is using this man's entirely immodest appearance as a way to demonstrate his own worth over this rival. It is also important to note that Augustus expected Roman men to wear togas that were white.<sup>15</sup> The man that Tibullus describes is pointedly not wearing all white, since Tibullus uses the word *totus* (entirely) twice to modify both the words *argento* (silver) and *auro* (gold). This repetition creates an image of a man dressed in blinding metallic colors, hardly the white toga that Augustus said citizens should wear. Tibullus's slight to another man through reference to his ostentatious clothing that is in defiance of Augustus's edicts shows that he characterizes himself in contrast as aligned with Roman ideals. He uses his comparative lack of extravagance as an argument in his own favor.

In poem 4.7, when Propertius's domina Cynthia has come back from the dead to talk to him, she says:

‘Quae modo per vilis inspecta est publica noctes,  
haec nunc aurata cyclade signat humum.

‘She who was recently called out as a public woman through the worthless nights,  
this woman now marks the ground with a golden skirt.’ (39-40)

In this section, Cynthia is insulting Propertius's new lover as a *publica*, or public woman, suggesting that she is a prostitute. According to Paul Allen Miller, skirts with gold embroidery were often worn by wealthy women of fashion.<sup>16</sup> As Miller states, the image of this woman's dress marking the ground suggests that she is weighed down by her dress. This depiction creates the sense that the skirt does not belong on her, since it is depicted as too heavy and thus

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<sup>15</sup> Bowyer The, Heather E. "The Augustan Ideal and the Pompeian Reality: Clothing Choice in Judo-Claudian Pompeii." *Anistor*, p. 11 [www.anistor.gr/english/enback/2012\\_3a\\_Anistoriton.pdf](http://www.anistor.gr/english/enback/2012_3a_Anistoriton.pdf),

<sup>16</sup>*Latin Erotic Elegy: An Anthology and Reader*, edited by Miller, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 231

pointedly effortful for her to wear. Cynthia uses an ablative of means to underscore this point, as the woman is weighed down *aurata cylade* (by means of the golden skirt), suggesting that it is this new lover's use of the clothes of a high class woman that makes her uncomfortable.

Cynthia's use of *modo* (recently) further demonstrates how the woman is unfit to wear the skirt, since the word shows how recently she was a prostitute, not a woman of high renown who would wear such an item of clothing. Cynthia also uses an accusative of time, *per noctes*, which emphasizes the extent to which this woman was disgraceful, since she was called out as a public woman continually through time. Jasper Griffins writes that "The more frankly luxury garments were of unambiguously Eastern origin: 'the best clothing, especially for women, seems to have been imported', and in poetry the favorite stuffs of Cynthia and her sisters were linen, silk, Tyrian purple, and the see-through."<sup>17</sup> The elegists depict their lovers as wearing clothing that was indicative of the upper class, thus being careful to portray them as upper class women and using clothing as an indicator of societal position. This is the same thing that Cynthia does in this moment, as she suggests that Propertius's new lover is not refined enough to wear the skirt she now has on. Her contrast of this new lover's old way of life with her new garment creates the sense that she is unworthy of her new position. Cynthia also shows that she is insulting the woman's low-class status using her new clothing through her decision to refer to this woman through the relative pronoun *quae*. Later in the poem, it is revealed that her actual name is Chloris, but the refusal of Cynthia to actually name her demonstrates her scorn.<sup>18</sup> Although Cynthia is part of the world of elegy as a *domina*, Propertius still writes about her as someone who is very much concerned with status.

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<sup>17</sup>Griffin, Jasper. "Augustan Poetry and the Life of Luxury." *The Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 66, 1976, p. 92. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/299782](http://www.jstor.org/stable/299782).

<sup>18</sup>Richardson, L., Jr., editor. *Propertius, Elegies I-IV*. U of Oklahoma P, 1977, p. 458

In the fourth poem by Sulpicia, the only known female elegist, she writes about the new lover of her beloved, Cerinthus. She writes:

Sit tibi cura togae potior pressumque quasillo  
Scortum quam Servi filia Sulpicia

Let Sulpicia, the daughter of Servius, be a greater concern for you  
than the one having pressed on the wool basket and the prostitute of the toga. (3-4).

In these lines, Sulpicia describes Cerinthus's new lover as a *scortum*, or prostitute. She uses a genitive of possession (*togae*) to describe this prostitute as belonging to the toga. This use of the possessive suggests that the toga that the prostitute wears is an inseparable part of her, as she literally belongs to it. In this moment, Sulpicia is using a comparative adjective, *potior*, to describe herself as more important than this other woman, placing them in direct comparison. That she also mentions this woman's toga in order to make this comparison suggests that Sulpicia values clothing as a way to indicate one's position. In Ancient Rome, prostitutes were typically the only women who wore togas, as they were a way to demonstrate their flouting of the behavior expected of women.<sup>19</sup> Since the toga was a symbol of masculinity, the prostitute's wearing of a toga showed her masculine behavior in the form of an active sex life.<sup>20</sup> Unlike the meek women that Augustus favored, she would publicly seek sex and then profit from it. The toga on a woman was thus not only a symbol of low status but also of sexuality that was unacceptable in a woman. By firmly connecting Cerinthus's new lover to the toga through the use of the possessive, Sulpicia is attempting to further her argument that she is a *cura potior*, or greater concern, for Cerinthus than this new woman. She uses this woman's location outside of

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<sup>19</sup>*Latin Erotic Elegy: An Anthology and Reader*, edited by Miller, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 163

<sup>20</sup> Ackerman, Neil C. "The Female Prostitute in Ancient Rome: An Identity."

*ResearchGate*, [www.researchgate.net/publication/288826973\\_The\\_female\\_prostitute\\_in\\_ancient\\_Rome\\_An\\_Identity](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/288826973_The_female_prostitute_in_ancient_Rome_An_Identity).

society's guidelines to support her point. She further emphasizes the inferiority of this other woman through her characterization of her as *pressumque quasillo* (the one having pressed on the wool basket). The use of *quasillo* here associates the woman with low class female wool spinners.<sup>21</sup>

Sulpicia uses a three word epithet to describe both herself and this other woman, but while the woman is described in ways that make her inferior status very clear, Sulpicia is described as *Servi filia Sulpicia* (Sulpicia the daughter of Servius). In this line, Sulpicia uses a genitive of possession again (*Servi*). Instead of belonging to a shameless toga, Sulpicia belongs to Servius, her father, who was a wealthy patrician. As Paul Allen Miller points out, this is also the only pentameter in Sulpicia's work that does not end in a disyllabic word. This choice calls attention to the last word of the line, Sulpicia's name.<sup>22</sup> Thus, Sulpicia emphasizes her own status as a high class woman of a respectable father in order to show her superiority to a low-class toga wearing woman. Sulpicia's use of clothing to assert her dominance over another woman shows that she engages with societal rank and shares in the Roman concern for status.

In poem 4.8, when Propertius is talking about Cynthia's new lover, he says:

Serica nam taceo vulsi carpenta nepotis  
 atque armillatos colla Molossa canis,  
 qui dabit immundae venalia fata saginae,  
 vincet ubi erasas barba pudenda genas.

For I won't mention the silk carriages of the plucked ne'er do-well  
 and also the Molossian hounds ornamented with collars  
 who will give his destiny for sale for grubby gladiatorial fare,  
 where a shameless beard will get the better of the shaved cheeks. (23-26).

Propertius's use of a passive participle *vulsi*, meaning "having been plucked," suggests that this

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<sup>21</sup> *Latin Erotic Elegy: An Anthology and Reader*, edited by Miller, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 163

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163

man is taking time on his appearance. He uses *vulsi* to modify *nepotis* (which L. Richardson translates as “ne'er do well”<sup>23</sup>), emphasizing the connection between these two words by linking them together in the sentence. Since someone who is a ne'er do well is lazy and irresponsible, Propertius is singling this man out as frivolous through calling attention to the care he places on his appearance. Jasper Griffins writes, “All readers of the Augustan poets are struck by the attention they pay to the hair of the beloved and to its *cultus*; the smart lover also takes great trouble with his own hair. He too must look to his *cultus*- though he should not use cosmetics nor dye his hair, as the girls do.”<sup>24</sup> This proviso shows that although elegists pay some attention to their appearance, it would be unacceptable for them to wear makeup or dye their hair. They thus maintain allegiance to Augustus's edict that men dress modestly. Propertius demonstrates his adherence to this refusal to depict men as too flamboyant through insulting Cynthia's new lover by calling attention to how groomed he is. It is important to note that characteristics of effeminacy, such as a groomed appearance, were often attached to men who had extremely active sex lives, as shown through many examples in the literature of the time, including elegiac poetry by the likes of Ovid and Tibullus.<sup>25</sup> As an elegiac poet, Propertius would have doubtlessly been aware of this motif, so by calling attention to this man's groomed appearance, he is also calling attention to what a large sex life this man has. That he uses this observation in connection to his slight shows that he is insulting a man for being too promiscuous, a sentiment in line with Augustus's anti-adultery legislation.

According to Ingo Gildenhard, “the ultimate degradation of the passive partner lies in

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<sup>23</sup> Richardson, L., Jr., editor. *Propertius, Elegies I-IV*. U of Oklahoma P, 1977, p. 465

<sup>24</sup> Griffin, Jasper. “Augustan Poetry and the Life of Luxury.” *The Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 66, 1976, p. 93. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/299782](http://www.jstor.org/stable/299782).

<sup>25</sup> Olson, Kelly. *Masculinity and Dress in Roman Antiquity*. Routledge, 2017, p. 147

equating not only his behavior but also his sex to that of a woman.”<sup>26</sup> The only other time the form *vulsi* is used in all of Propertius’s poetry is in poem 3.15 in reference to the hair of the beautiful woman Antiope. Thus, Propertius use of *vulsi* to describe this man makes him seem more effeminate. That this man’s effeminacy is used as an insult demonstrates how Propertius uses traditional thinking used by men such as Cicero, a Roman statesman who was an influential political figure. His rival’s lack of “manliness” is employed as a way to degrade him in the eyes of Cynthia, very much in line with Augustan thought that put forward clearly defined roles for men and women. Although Propertius is an elegiac lover who clearly has sex outside of marriage, in this moment, he depicts himself as someone who follows the traditional respect for modest behavior more than his rival, fulfilling his role as a man in Augustan society.

Propertius also says that this man will soon *dabit venalia fata* (“give his destiny for sale”), which suggests that he will run out of his fortune and become a gladiator, where he will have a *barba* (beard). In Ancient Rome, gladiators, men who would have been of low status, had short beards. Growing a beard would demonstrate that this man had been removed from his position of privilege.<sup>27</sup> Augustus uses the word *pudenda* (shameless) to modify the word beard. The only other time Propertius ever used this word was in poem 4.4 in connection to Tarpeia, a woman who, as already explained, he portrays as destructive. Therefore, Propertius is placing a clear negative value judgement on this man’s beard, which would have signified his lower class status as a gladiator. Propertius thus is maintaining his own belief in rank, since he describes this other man’s potential gladiator beard as somehow indecorous. There is a connection between how respectful this man is and how well his face lines up with what is expected of Roman

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<sup>26</sup> Ingo Gildenhard, *Cicero: Philippic 2.44–50, 78–92, 100–119*. Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Dickinson College Commentaries, 2020. <http://dcc.dickinson.edu/cicero-philippic-2/intro/fashion-and-fornication-late-republican-rome>

<sup>27</sup> Richardson, L., Jr., editor. *Propertius, Elegies I-IV*. U of Oklahoma P, 1977, p. 465



gentlemen.

In order to separate himself from Cynthia's new lover and insult him, Propertius emphasizes both his lack of masculinity as shown through the care he takes with his appearance and his susceptibility to a beard that would indicate his lower rank. Thus, in these lines Propertius shows his allegiance to societal restrictions in several ways. He reinforces gender roles, as he doubles down on the idea that men should present themselves in a certain manner. He reinforces the importance of modest behavior, as he derides a man with a presumably active sex life. He also reinforces rank, since he uses the image of a beard that would be worn by a low class man as an insult.

In all of these passages, elegists used clothing and appearance to show themselves and the world they live in as firmly within Roman society, not outside it. Different elegists demonstrate that they care about their societal position and how others perceive it. Sulpicia denigrates another woman through her low status toga, Propertius depicts Cynthia as disparaging a rival for wearing a skirt for women above her rank, Tibullus is concerned with how others might perceive his flouting of Roman values, and Propertius insults a man's working class beard. Their works also show how they valued female modesty and submissiveness. Ovid sees Corinna's skimpy tunic as bad for her and asserts the attractiveness of concealment while Propertius conflates undress and danger. Propertius even seems to denigrate promiscuity through his description of a rival, thus distinguishing between the affairs that he engages in and the licentiousness of another man. They also disparage men whose appearance is too flamboyant. Propertius disparages a man for being too groomed while Tibullus insults a man for concerning himself with his appearance. Through all these examples, these poets maintained traditional

gender roles by demonstrating the value placed on subservient, unassuming women and unshowy men. In contrast to scholars who see elegists as revolutionaries of their time, my paper has aimed to show that these elegists really were not stepping far outside the bounds of tradition. Although writing about extramarital affairs certainly was not standard, the manner in which they described the appearance of themselves, of different women, and of potential rivals all show that they are influenced by the same notions of rank and gender that other Romans would have been influenced by. In the world that these elegists construct, one's rank as shown through clothing is not to be dismissed, women should be modest, and men should not be too preoccupied with their appearance. These are all values held by Roman society at large as decreed by Augustus, demonstrating that elegists did not present themselves as outcasts of this society.