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In the Flesh: Embodied Identities in Roman Elegy

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In the Flesh

Embodied Identities in Roman Elegy

Erika Zimmermann Damer

The University of Wisconsin Press

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Introduction

Embodied Selves and the Body in Elegy

Écrire touche au corps, par essence.

Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*

The study of antiquity is perform a study of the body.

James Porter, *Constructions of the Classical Body*

Roman love elegy focuses on the love affairs of the upper-class male poet and his beautiful beloved, the elegiac *puella*. The interactions of this central pair focus the loosely narrative structure of the genre's cyclical love relationships of rejection, union, and dissolution across the nine books of elegies by Propertius, Tibullus, and Ovid, published in the first decades of Augustus' Principate, between approximately 28 BCE and 2 BCE. This poetic woman is not merely beautiful: she is also educated, *docta*, and therefore able to appreciate the erudite poetry written in her praise. Despite all her learning, it is her beauty that inspires her poet-lover's art, as Propertius puts it in the first poem of book 2. Indeed, scholars in recent decades have demonstrated that the idealized form of the elegiac mistress is a literary construction whose beauty is a metaphor for Callimachean poetics, and metapoetic readings of elegy have flourished.¹ As much as it is well crafted, polished, and Callimachean Roman verse, this is poetry about beautiful people and their embodied sexual relationships. Elegy therefore often articulates the subjective physical experiences of the love-sick elegiac speaker.

All around the representations of the love-sick speaker and his *scripta puella*, in the term of Maria Wyke (1987a), however, are a surprisingly high number of other characters who, far from being beautiful or inspiring, are presented as

disgusting, repugnant, or even horrifying. These marginalized characters—slaves, bawds, soldier-rivals, or the *puella*'s family members—have often been overlooked or characterized simply as blocking figures to the lover's pursuit. This book places them, along with other nonidealized characters, at the center of elegy's political and intellectual project: I argue that identity in Roman elegy is inescapably embodied, and that this embodiment is fluid and contingent just as much as it is grounded in the external social, legal, and historical practices and contexts of Rome during the first decades of the Principate.

Although the roles for these secondary characters are inherited from Roman comedy, their appearance in love elegy is distinctive and provocative.² Tibullus in particular seems to have been an innovator in broadening the cast of elegiac characters beyond the speaker, *puella*, and the speaker's friends and addressees of Propertius' *Monobiblos*, the first surviving book of Roman elegy.³ Whereas Propertius' speaker addresses witches as potential helpers in love at 1.1.19–24, Tibullus more fully develops the image of the *saga*, associated with the *callida lena*, in his first book.⁴ The appearance of the *callida lena* in Tibullus 1.5 is one of the strangest moments in Roman love elegy. A clever bawd has come to the ruin of the speaker, and he curses her violently:

sanguineas edat illa dapes atque ore cruento
 tristia cum multo pocula felle bibit.
 hanc volitent animae circum sua fata querentes
 semper et e tectis strix violenta canat.
 ipsa fame stimulante furens herbasque sepulcris
 quaerat et a saevis ossa relictas lupis,
 currat et inguinibus nudis ululetque per urbes,
 (1.5.49–55)⁵

Let her dine on bloody feasts and with her gory mouth
 let her drink cups bitter with much gall;
 around her let souls flit always lamenting their fates,
 and let the violent screech owl sing from her rooftops.
 With starvation goading her, mad let her seek grasses from graves
 and bones left behind by savage wolves,
 and let her run howling through the cities with her groin naked⁶

The speaker associates the *lena* with blood, corpses, madness, and putrefying, sacrilegious foodstuffs. Like a wolf, she runs and howls through the city, ravages the bones of the dead, and bares her groin. Tibullus' language is both hyperbolic

and vitriolic, and the speaker's elegant pastoral fantasy, of Delia and life in the country with Messalla, evaporates as he returns to Rome, locked outside the mistress's door by a richer rival (*dives amator*, 1.5.47). The curse links the elegiac *lena* to rejected bodily products, a complex of associations that Julia Kristeva calls corporeal abjection.⁷ As bizarre as this passage appears to be, its emphasis on the vulnerability of the human body as a gendered site that bleeds, ails, ages, dies, makes love, or becomes pregnant (among other physical experiences) is a distinguishing quality of the human body as Roman elegy represents it.

Propertius and Ovid also draw on the aesthetic of corporeal imperfection, often associating the body with blood, other bodily fluids, and corporeal disintegration. Perhaps no example is more well known than the macabre appearance of Cynthia's partly skeletal ghost in poem 4.7. She still wears her customary hair, dress, and ring (7–9), though Lethe has washed away part of her mouth (10), the pyre has charred her adornments (8), and her bones crackle (12). As for Ovid, few scenes of abject bodies are more striking than the *amator's* histrionic disgust at the soldier's scars in *Amores* 3.8.9–11, as he imagines the *puella* in bed with his rival.

ecce recens dives parto per vulnera censu
 praefertur nobis sanguine pastus eques. 10
 hunc potes amplecti formosis, vita, lacertis?

Look, a nouveau riche, with status obtained through his wounds,
 a knight fed on blood, is preferred to us!
 Are you able to embrace a man like this, my life, in your lovely arms?

The *amator* suggests that this newly promoted equestrian has grown rich through his wounds and that he has grazed or feasted on (*pastus*) blood. When Ovid blurs human and animal forms of eating, he creates an image reminiscent of the bestial, blood-feasting *lena* of Tibullus 1.5. Moreover, this soldier has the only scar in all of Roman love elegy (*cerne cicatrices*, 3.8.19). In contrast with other late Republican genres of Roman literature, which praise the soldier's scars as signs of masculine virtue (*Cic. Rab. Perd.* 36; *Livy passim*),⁸ Ovid's elegiac *amator* reacts with disgust and links the soldier's use of his body for profit with the activities of a prostitute (*quaesitum est illi corpore, quicquid habet*, whatever he has, it was earned by his body, 20). The *amator* locates and figures his ethical, social, and political disgust in his recently promoted rival's body and suggests that his physical disgust should prevent the *puella's* sensory enjoyment of the acts in her bedroom.