

Metapoetic Pseudonyms in Horace, Propertius and Ovid*

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ABSTRACT

Two poets addressed by Propertius in his first book are in fact pseudonyms. Ponticus was formed on the model of Horace's Alpinus to designate someone who embodies the antithesis of the poet's Callimachean sensibilities. Bassus is none other than Horace himself, who was then in the course of writing iambics. In the eleventh epode, Horace responded in kind by creating the pseudonyms Pettius, Lyciscus and Inachia, all of which derive from aspects of Propertius' first book. This exchange between Horace and Propertius has echoes in their later work. We conclude by examining why Ovid seems to treat Ponticus and Bassus as real poets in the Tristia.

Two impostors lurk in the ranks of the Latin poets: fictional names invented for the purposes of polemic, which are routinely treated as genuine. In his first book, Propertius addresses three different individuals who can themselves be identified as poets. Ponticus is explicitly hailed as a writer of epic in 1.7 and 9; Propertius does not call Bassus a writer at all in 1.4, but Ovid provides the information that he was an iambographer; and then there is Gallus. Notoriously, it seems at some points in the book that Propertius must be referring to the elegiac poet Cornelius Gallus, but at other points that the name must belong to someone else.¹ I will argue that the names Ponticus and Bassus are every bit as slippery in their referents as Gallus and should not be taken at face value.² Rather, they should be understood as self-evidently made-up pseudonyms, *redende Namen*, which are designed to embody a humorous poetic stereotype. Some scholars have expressed surprise that Propertius' friend Ponticus should be in possession of a name which just happens to fit his function in Propertius' programatics with

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¹ For a detailed survey of the evidence and a starting-point into the enormous bibliography, see F. Cairns, *Sextus Propertius: the Augustan Elegist* (2006), 70–145. On Propertius' deliberate problematization of the relationship of the name of Gallus to an individual in the real world, see N. Nicholson, 'Bodies without names, names without bodies: Propertius 1.21–22', *Classical Journal* 94 (1998–1999), 143–61, M. W. Janan, *The Politics of Desire: Propertius IV* (2001), 34–6 and S. Hinds, 'Between formalism and historicism', in A. Barchiesi and W. Scheidel (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Studies* (2010), 369–85, at 372–7. In his next book, Propertius went on to introduce another pseudonymous poet, Lynceus, as the addressee of 2.34.

² On the seductive nature of the 'reality effect' produced by the names of the male addressees in the first book of Propertius, see M. Wyke, 'Written women: Propertius' *scripta puella*', *Journal of Roman Studies* 77 (1987), 47–61, at 47–9 and A. Sharrock, 'Constructing characters in Propertius', *Arethusa* 33 (2000), 263–84, at 263–72.

exquisite precision.³ Despite this suspicious coincidence, the historicity of Ponticus and Bassus has never been questioned seriously, for the simple reason that Ovid seems to provide independent confirmation of their existence.⁴ As we will see, however, Ovid was participating, with all the enthusiasm we would expect from him, in an elaborate poetic game on the nature of truth and fiction that Propertius had started long before.

This effort to identify the real characters lurking behind the pseudonyms in Latin poetry and thence to infer the details of quarrels between the Augustan poets might seem like a methodologically retrograde step, a return to a naive, biographical mode of criticism. But the picture that will emerge is much more subtle and complex: these names were not fixed to specific persons, but were masks designed to represent a particular style of poetry, which could be inhabited by or imputed to various individuals as the circumstances demanded. Indeed, one of the most interesting aspects of this investigation will be the case of a pseudonymous identity forged by Propertius as a way to poke fun at Horace, but which was then re-appropriated by the latter as a badge of honour. We will defer discussion of Ovid's evidence to the end, after elucidating the rules of this fascinating game by exploring the meaning of a series of interrelated invented names in Horace and Propertius: Alpinus, Ponticus, Bassus, Pettius, Lyciscus and Inachia. We begin with the immediate model for Propertius' Ponticus, Horace's pseudonymous nemesis Alpinus.

I FROM MOUNTAIN TO SEA

In the final poem of the first book of his *Satires*, published in the mid-30s and thus before the first book of Propertius, Horace reviews the contemporary literary scene and picks out the discerning readers he hopes to please. In pointed contrast to this happy milieu of brilliant writers and readers, Horace insults a bad poet under the cover of an unkind pseudonym (1.10.36–7):⁵

turgidus Alpinus iugulat dum Memnona dumque
diffingit Rheni luteum caput, haec ego ludo,

While bloated Alpinus butchers Memnon and deforms the muddy source of the Rhine, I fiddle with these little poems ...

A more definitive indication of the identity of this Alpinus is given by Horace himself. In the next book of *Satires*, he returns to the theme and parodies an alpine line written by a poet named Furius, apparently now giving the poet's real name (2.5.40–1):⁶

³ A. S. Hollis (ed.), *Fragments of Roman Poetry: 60 BC–AD 20* (2007), 426 classifies Ponticus as a real name, but not without a measure of incredulity: 'apparently his real name, not a pseudonym'; elsewhere he allows that Ponticus' *Thebaid* may be a fiction (A. S. Hollis, 'Propertius and Hellenistic poetry', in H.-C. Günther (ed.), *Brill's Companion to Propertius* (2006), 97–125, at 102, n. 22).

⁴ For continuing treatment of these figures as real, see *Brill's New Pauly*, ss.vv. 'Ponticus' and 'Bassus'. J.-P. Boucher, *Études sur Propercé: Problèmes d'inspiration et d'art* (2nd edn, 1980), 271 and D. W. T. C. Vessey, 'Nescio quid maius', *Proceedings of the Virgil Society* 9 (1969–70), 53–76, at 54 took it as self-evident that Ponticus was a pseudonym, but neither of them took the slightest account of Ovid's evidence, so their views have rightly carried little weight.

⁵ On the difficulties in construing line 37, see E. Courtney, *The Fragmentary Latin Poets* (1993), 197–8. The best solution is offered by R. G. M. Nisbet in S. J. Harrison (ed.), *Collected Papers on Latin Literature* (1995), 394–5, who plausibly sees a reference to Lake Constance, which would make *luteum caput* a deliberately paradoxical reference to the second source of the river.

⁶ On the imagery of these lines, see J. Bramble, *Persius and the Programmatic Satire: a Study in Form and Imagery* (2007), 64–6.

seu pingui tentus omaso
Furius hibernas cana nive conspuet Alpis.

Or if Furius, distended with fatty tripe, spatters the wintry Alps with hoary snow ...

Quintilian (8.6.17) quotes, as an example of bad metaphor, the original line of Furius that Horace has parodied here by substituting *Furius* for the poet's *Iuppiter*. Nearly all scholars accept that Alpinus in *Satires* 1, who is otherwise unattested, is a pseudonym for a poet who is called by his real name of Furius in *Satires* 2.⁷ It is generally agreed that Alpinus is Furius. But which Furius? Hollis has recently re-examined the evidence, and has constructed an entirely plausible portrait of the iambic poet Furius Bibaculus as the model for Alpinus.⁸ This identification is not crucial for us, however; what is important is the way in which Horace invents a geographical pseudonym to embody an anti-Callimachean poetics.

If Alpinus was Bibaculus, some aspects of the insult may have been personal. The jibe may refer to the content of Furius' epic on Caesar's war in Gaul, in which descriptions of the Alps and the Rhine must have featured. It may also hint at Furius Bibaculus' northern place of origin, in Cremona.⁹ Another aspect of the insult might relate to Furius' physical appearance. In the passage in which Furius is given his real name, Horace calls him an obese glutton. So the nickname Alpinus may also have alluded to Furius' mountainous girth.¹⁰ Along with these personal insults came a poetological rebuke, for ever since Callimachus fatness was a cardinal defect in poetry. The reference to the mud of the Rhine in Alpinus' epic activates the context of Callimachean aesthetics by recalling the silt of his Euphrates at the end of the Hymn to Apollo.¹¹ In that light, the grandiosity of the name Alpinus must bring to mind a host of other un-Callimachean defects: massive size, endless length, bombastic diction, grandiloquent pomposity. In short, the pseudonym invites us to imagine a reader attempting to traverse Furius' Gallic epic as struggling mightily through a brutal, impassible and endless obstacle, like Hannibal bringing his elephants across the Alps.¹²

In at least two poems of Book 1, Propertius addresses a poet called Ponticus, who is said to be in the midst of composing an epic on the subject of the Seven against Thebes. Strangely, Ponticus' *Thebaid* has left no other mark in Latin literary history. This long and ambitious work by a writer whom Ovid seems to include in *Tristia* 4.10 in the exclusive company of Rome's immortal poets is never mentioned or quoted by any scholiast, grammarian or compiler. Neither does the unusual name Ponticus lead

⁷ See P. M. Brown (ed.), *Horace: Satires I* (1993), 187 and F. Muecke (ed.), *Horace: Satires II* (1993), 185. There are exceptions; for the claim that Alpinus is a real name, see A. Wissowa, 'Ueber die den dichter Furius betreffende Stelle in Horaz: Sat. 2.5.39-41', *Jahres-Bericht des Koeniglichen katholischen Gymnasiums zu Breslau* (1867), 3-10, at 10. On Horace's use of pseudonyms in the *Satires* in general, see N. Rudd, *The Satires of Horace: a Study* (1966), 147-9.

⁸ Hollis, op. cit. (n. 3, 2007), 118-45, revives an old identification, anticipated in many particulars by Skutsch in *RE* ss.vv. 'Furius (32) Alpinus' (7.318.59-319.66) and 'M. Furius (37) Bibaculus' (320.34-322.36).

⁹ Thus Skutsch, op. cit. (n. 8), 319.64, who refers this observation in part back to Bentley (319.22); see also Hollis, op. cit. (n. 3, 2007), 125.

¹⁰ The link from this passage back to the name Alpinus is strengthened by the observation that *omasum* is a Gallic word for tripe; see Skutsch, op. cit. (n. 8), 319.51, Bramble, op. cit. (n. 6), 64, n. 4 and Hollis, op. cit. (n. 3, 2007), 124.

¹¹ A few lines later in the same satire, Horace applies this image of the silty, muddy river explicitly to Lucilius: *Sat.* 1.10.50-1. On the parallel in the relationship between Horace and Lucilius and between Callimachus and Antimachus, see N. Krevans, 'Fighting against Antimachus: the *Lyde* and the *Aetia* reconsidered', in *Callimachus (Hellenistica Groningana 1)* (1993), 149-60, at 159.

¹² A. Barchiesi, 'Quando Virgilio era un moderno: una delle più antiche recite delle Georgiche, e il contesto di una spiritosaggine', *Materiali e discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici* (2004), 21-8, at 28 further suggests that the name Alpinus suggests the frigid reception which will greet his poetry.

anywhere useful in the historical record; as Syme says, ‘identification is baffled’.¹³ If there is no trace of Ponticus’ epic, there was a well-known *Thebaid* in Greek. Whatever the merits of Antimachus of Colophon’s epic might have been, and whatever attitude toward it Callimachus might have held, it became at Rome, rightly or wrongly, the archetype of bad poetry, the quintessence of anti-Callimacheanism. This is clearly evident in Catullus 95, where the *Zmyrna* of his friend Cinna is praised as a Callimachean ‘parua ... monumenta’ (9) in contrast to the slack, bloated work of poets like Volusius and Antimachus. Even if it is true that we have no proof that Callimachus disliked the *Thebaid*, and that his attitude toward Antimachus was more nuanced than what Catullus will allow, it is equally true, as Barchiesi has pointed out, that the Roman poets were under no obligation to replicate faithfully the parameters of Ptolemaic polemic; they were fighting different battles.¹⁴ On this view, the reputation of Antimachus’ *Thebaid* at Rome was the victim of an encounter between Callimachus’ criticism of the elegiac *Lyde* and late Republican hostility to Rome’s own epic tradition in general and Ennian annalistic epic in particular.¹⁵

So it was certainly convenient that Propertius, the Latin poet who is most closely associated with Callimachus and who would go on to call himself the *Callimachus Romanus* (4.1.64), should have such a perfectly apt foil available against whom to define his own career as an elegist: Ponticus, a poet making his own bid to become the Latin epic Antimachus, who had become, rightly or wrongly, the polar opposite of Callimachus in Roman poetic discourse.¹⁶ When that poet happens to sport a name that loudly proclaims its bearer to be the anti-Callimachus, credibility must give way to scepticism. At the end of the Hymn to Apollo, malignant Envy famously withholds praise for any poet who does not sing like the *pontos* (106). That is to say, Envy only approves poets who aspire to epic-scale bombast, sea-like, *ponticus*. Of course, Ponticus was a real name as well as an adjective, but that is part of the elegance of the pseudonym. One particular bearer of that name, Hericlides Ponticus, is particularly relevant here, as he was the man who had collected and edited Antimachus’ work at the behest of Plato.¹⁷

Like so many Augustan writers influenced by Callimachus, Propertius regularly uses the sea as a metaphor for epic.¹⁸ At one point, in one of the elegies addressed to Ponticus, Propertius makes a particularly notable pun on the wateriness of his name (1.9.15–16):

nunc tu
insanus medio flumine quaeris aquam.

Now, like a madman, you are hunting for water while in the middle of a river.

¹³ R. Syme, *History in Ovid* (1978), 98: “Ponticus” is rare, it invites inspection — but cannot repay it ...’

¹⁴ See A. Cameron, *Callimachus and his Critics* (1995), 454–83 with the important reservations of A. Barchiesi, ‘Roman Callimachus’, in B. Acosta-Hughes, L. Lehnus and S. Stephens (eds), *Brill’s Companion to Callimachus* (forthcoming): ‘at times he [Cameron] seems to claim that the Roman poets must have had the intellectual honesty to read Callimachus the way that he, Alan Cameron, does, and that their *recusationes* do not need the epic tradition, not even as a straw genre. This argument does not provide any extra mileage for the interpretation of Callimachus in a Ptolemaic context, and it severely distorts the agenda of the Roman poets.’

¹⁵ The scholia which identify as Antimachus the (possibly hypothetical) prolix epic poet whom Horace refers to in the *Ars Poetica* (146) may well be useless as evidence for reconstructing his *Thebaid*, but they do attest to the reputation for verbosity and bombast it had developed. See V. J. Matthews (ed.), *Antimachus of Colophon: Text and Commentary* (1996), 73 and D. W. T. C. Vessey, ‘The reputation of Antimachus of Colophon’, *Hermes* 99 (1971), 1–10, at 9.

¹⁶ On the way the names of Callimachus and Antimachus predestined them to become antithetical, see Krevans, op. cit. (n. 11), 149–50. Propertius only ever names Antimachus at 2.34.45, where he is yoked with Homer as joint representatives of epic.

¹⁷ See Matthews, op. cit. (n. 15), 17–18, 33–4.

¹⁸ See, for example, A. R. Sharrock, ‘*Alternae voces* – again’, *Classical Quarterly* 40 (1990), 570–1, at 571.

Ponticus, creature of the sea, stands in mid-stream, thus combining both of the useless bodies of water that at the end of the Hymn to Apollo stand for bad poetry: the *pontos* and the Assyrian river. Like Tantalus, Ponticus thirsts amid apparent plenty: water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink.¹⁹ The epic poet may have hexameters by the yard, but the brackish sea and filthy river cannot slake his thirst. Only the pure water of poetic inspiration that wells up in small rivulets from mountain springs can inspire worthwhile poetry, the kind a pretty girl would like to hear ('quod quaevis nosse puella velit', 1.9.14).²⁰

The name Ponticus fits his genre, epic, so well, and his subject, the *Thebaid*, so perfectly that the reader must immediately suspect such tidiness. As to whether there really was such a poet writing a *Thebaid* who has been given a made-up name, or whether Ponticus and his epic are entirely fictitious, we cannot know. Unlike Horace, who later gave us the name Furius as a clue to the real identity of his earlier target, Propertius never refers to Ponticus after this book. Again unlike Horace, Propertius refers to Ponticus in 1.7 and 1.9 as a friend who has followed a different path rather than an incompetent buffoon: the gentler tone reflects the change from satire to love elegy. Propertius' project is also more elaborate than Horace's incidental references to Alpinus/Furius. He constructs a drama that plays out over the course of two linked poems and which permits him to illustrate the advantages and disadvantages of epic and elegy respectively. This required something more substantial than a throw-away insult; but the resulting poet and poem are so fit for this purpose that one suspects they are the product at least of a great deal of tendentious distortion if they were not fabricated out of whole cloth.

II A LOW-BORN MIDGET WRITING IN A BASE GENRE

In elegy 1.4, Propertius rebukes Bassus for praising the beauty of girls other than Cynthia to him and warns him that she will take her revenge by cursing him before all the girls of Rome so that he will have no more luck in love. Even though Propertius never says that Bassus was a poet, we know from the testimony of Ovid considered below that he was an iambographer. The importance of this fact for our understanding of the poem was demonstrated by Suits, who pointed out the wonderfully ironic reversal whereby the writer of iambic poetry dispenses praise to women instead of abuse, and the woman is the dispenser of vitriol toward the iambographer rather than its target.²¹ If, as scholars agree, Bassus' genre is so important for a proper understanding of the poem, why does Propertius never mention it? One might say that it was because 'Bassus' was so well known as an iambographer that it was superfluous. But if that is true, why do none of

¹⁹ On the allusion to Tantalus, see W. R. Smyth, 'Interpretationes Propertianae', *Classical Quarterly* 43 (1949), 118–25, at 119, 123 and D. R. Shackleton Bailey, *Propertiana* (1956), 27.

²⁰ There is an interesting parallel for Ponticus in mid-stream, which, curiously enough, also occurs in a poem involving a literary name-game. In support of the claim that Virgil's Codrus is a pseudonym, one commentary quotes a poem of Valgius Rufus which also addresses a poet (probably Messala Corvinus) under the name Codrus: Hollis, *op. cit.* (n. 3, 2007), 293–6. The final couplet reads: 'falleris insanus quantum si gurgite nauta / Crisaeae quaerat flumina Castaliae.' Here we have similar vocabulary to Propertius (*insanus, quaerat*) in the context of Callimachean polemic. Just as the useless water of Ponticus' *flumen* implies a contrast with the pure spring of poetic inspiration, here we have an explicit contrast between undrinkable sea water and the undeniably metapoetic spring of Castalia. It is not clear which of these two passages influenced the other.

²¹ See T. A. Suits, 'The iambic character of Propertius 1.4', *Philologus* 120 (1976), 86–91, amplified in important ways by P. Fedeli, 'Elegy and literary polemic in Propertius' *Monobiblos*', *Papers of the Liverpool Latin Seminar* 3 (1981), 227–42, at 233–4, F. Cairns, 'Propertius 1.4 and 1.5 and the "Gallus" of the *Monobiblos*', *Papers of the Liverpool Latin Seminar* 4 (1984), 61–103, and A. Barchiesi, 'Alcune difficoltà nella carriera di un poeta giambico: giambo ed elegia nell' epodo 11', in R. C. Tovar and J. C. F. Corte (eds), *Bimilenario de Horacio* (1994), 127–38.

the catalogues of Latin iambographers mention this name?²² My solution is to posit that ‘Bassus’ was indeed sufficiently well known as a writer of iambic poetry, not because that was his real name, but because the name caricatured the physical appearance and social standing of the poet so well that the joke needed no tedious elaboration: Bassus was none other than Horace, author of the forthcoming *Epodes*.

The adjectival meaning of Ponticus is perfectly clear and so is the way it embodies the vastness and excess of anti-Callimachean epic. But Bassus is trickier, for although it was a very common cognomen, it is not attested as an adjective in the Classical period. As is well known, most Latin cognomina originally had meanings as adjectives which were often physically descriptive, frequently in a pejorative or unflattering sense.²³ Kajanto declines to discuss Bassus, however, under the heading of ‘small, short’ among the cognomina relating to ‘defects in the body as a whole’, because ‘the word is not Latin’.²⁴ Not good Latin of the Classical period, certainly, but quite possibly good Oscan and certainly late Latin, where the word begins to appear in the early medieval period in collections of glosses in the sense of ‘low’ or ‘short’.²⁵ The cognomen seems to have originated in Campania; the earliest attested bearer is Herennius Bassus, the Nolan senator during the Second Punic War whom we will discuss in detail below.²⁶ It has therefore been suggested that the adjective may also have had an origin in Oscan-speaking Campania.²⁷ What is certain is that it crossed over into sub-literary Latin at some point: its impact is attested by the way western Romance languages from Portuguese (*baixo*) and Spanish (*bajo*), to French (*bas*) and Italian (*basso*), formed words for ‘low’ from *bassus*. It is unclear at what point in time the word came into vulgar Latin usage. The wide geographical spread of its reflexes and the probability that it migrated from Oscan during the period in which that language was still widely spoken in the towns of Italy both point to an early migration into sub-literary Latin.²⁸ The derivation of Romance vocabulary from Latin words which are rare or unattested in the classical language is of course a routine phenomenon; the usual explanation is that the Latin word must have been used in the everyday spoken language of the less educated classes, but was excluded from the literary language of the élite. As Elcock says: ‘adjectives so rich in Romance progeny as “bassus” and “grossus” certainly had no place in elegant Latin’.²⁹ In this way, sub-literary Latin provided much of the vocabulary for the Romance languages. One can imagine that the ascendancy of *bassus* may have owed something to the loss of distinctiveness in the short classical word *imus*.³⁰ It is possible that the adjective might have had a very long life in Latin, though hidden from view; compare the phenomenon known as the ‘classical gap’: words appear in archaic Latin, are banned from the classical language,

²² Quintilian (10.1.96) lists Catullus, Furius Bibaculus and Horace; Diomedes the grammarian lists Lucilius, Catullus, Horace and Bibaculus (H. Keil (ed.), *Grammatici latini* (1857), 1.485).

²³ For the Roman habit of making jokes out of these unflattering cognomina, see A. Corbeill, *Controlling Laughter* (1996), 57–98.

²⁴ I. Kajanto, *The Latin Cognomina* (1982), 243–4.

²⁵ See *TLL* s.v. ‘1. bassus’.

²⁶ Jacobsohn (in *TLL* s.v. ‘Bassus’): ‘fort. orig. oscae.’ In this period Herennius was used both as an Oscan first name and as a Latin *gentilicium*, so that cannot tell us whether Bassus was functioning here already as a Roman cognomen; see Münzer in *RE* ss. vv. ‘Herennius’ (661.67–662.33) and ‘Herennius (19)’ (666.5–16). On the uneven process of Romanization, see M. Lejeune, *L’anthroponymie osque* (1976), 125–6.

²⁷ Thus A. Ernout and A. Meillet, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine* (1939), s.v. ‘bassus, -a, -um’: ‘Adj. bas latin, peut-être d’origine osque’.

²⁸ The nature of the chronological relationship between classical Latin, vulgar Latin and Romance is disputed. For an overview of the problems, see V. Väänänen, ‘Introduction au latin vulgaire’ (1981), 3–26 and A. Tovar, ‘A research report on vulgar Latin and its local variations’, *Kratylos* 9 (1964), 113–34.

²⁹ W. D. Elcock, *The Romance Languages* (1960), 154.

³⁰ For similar examples, see Väänänen, *op. cit.* (n. 28), 75–81.

but their derivatives later resurface in Romance.³¹ For our argument, however, it does not matter very much whether Propertius and his contemporary audience would have thought the word *'bassus'* a purely Oscan word, or a low Latin word or some intermediate mixture.

Horace himself may provide an example of a Latin author expecting his audience to catch a joke that depends on them understanding the underlying meaning of an Oscan name. Horace did not, of course, identify himself as an Oscan speaker; quite the opposite. Ennius may have prided himself that this was one of the three hearts that beat in his chest, but Horace was a bit more selective in reporting the nature of his own South Italian multicultural milieu:³²

sequor hunc, Lucanus an Apulus anceps;
nam Venusinus arat finem sub utrumque colonus,
missus ad hoc pulsus, vetus est ut fama, Sabellis,
quo ne per vacuum Romano incurreret hostis,
sive quod Apula gens seu quod Lucania bellum
incuteret violenta.

I follow this man (Lucilius), though uncertain whether I do so as a Lucanian or an Apulian. For the colonist at Venusia plows near the borders of both, having been sent here, as the old story goes, after the Samnites were driven out, to prevent Rome's enemies from driving through the uninhabited region, in case the violent people of either Apulia or Lucania should threaten war.

Horace's attitude here toward the Oscan-speaking Samnites is curious. He is happy to identify his ancestry either with the Roman colonists of Venusia or with their exotic neighbours from Lucania and Apulian Daunia or some combination of both.³³ His only reference to the Samnites, however, denies them any place in his world, relegating them to the far distant past (*vetus fama*). It is true that the Samnite city of Venusia was re-founded as a Roman colony at the end of the Samnite Wars, but the local Oscan-speaking population were not driven away entirely, as Horace insinuates.³⁴ Though Oscan was in decline, it must certainly have been spoken in the countryside around Venusia.³⁵ Strabo, Horace's contemporary, acknowledges that Venusia is on the borders of Samnium and Lucania (6.3.7), but ultimately considers it a city in Samnite territory (6.1.3).³⁶ The reason Horace preferred not to emphasize this Samnite aspect of his home region is illustrated by an insult he had dished out in the first book of *Satires*. On the voyage to Brundisium, there occurs a mock Homeric duel between the *scurra* Sarmentus and a local named Messius Cicirrus, whose Oscan lineage is made fun of: 'Messi clarum genus Osci'.³⁷ Sarmentus bears a name whose meaning ('Twiggy' in Skutsch's droll translation) is made the butt of a joke during this exchange (68–9), and

³¹ See F. Marx, 'Die Beziehungen des Altlateins zum Spätlatein', *Neue Jahrbücher für antike und deutsche Bildung* 23 (1909), 434–48; for the expression 'classical gap', see L. R. Palmer, *The Latin Language* (1988), 171. For a sceptical view, see W. Mańczak, 'Latin vulgaire et latin archaïque', in C. A. Abellán (ed.), *Actes du VIIIème Colloque international sur le latin vulgaire et tardif* (2006), 443–8.

³² *Sat.* 2.1.34–9

³³ On Horace's self-affiliation in this passage, see Muecke, *op. cit.* (n. 7), 107.

³⁴ cf. the phrases *pulsus Sabellis* and *per vacuum*; the latter is a notably extreme and unlikely claim. On the probable intermingling of Roman colonists and the local population around Venusia, see E. T. Salmon, *Samnium and the Samnites* (1967), 316, n. 3.

³⁵ cf. Radke in *RE* s.v. 'Venusia' (894.22–5): '... überhaupt das Griechische bis in die Zeit des Horaz neben dem Lateinischen (und Oskischen) gesprochen sein wird.'

³⁶ This information is doubted by Mommsen (*CIL*, vol. 9, sect. 23 'Venusia', intro.), but the later writers he prefers (e.g. Pliny, *NH* 3.104) are less convincing witnesses, as they will have been influenced by the testimony of the town's most famous son.

³⁷ *Sat.* 1.5.54.

Messius' name must have had similarly humorous connotations.³⁸ Cicirrus is clear onomatopoeia for the cry of the cock in any language, but what of Messius?³⁹ Skutsch has argued that it is derived from an Oscan word for horse, which would make good sense of the first joke Sarmenius makes, calling him a wild horse.⁴⁰ If these ideas are right, then Propertius, proud Umbrian that he was, has noted the irony of Horace looking down his nose at a jumped-up Oscan and has taken this aspect of Horace's own poetic practice and turned it against him, punning on the meaning of another Oscan name.

So it is likely that Propertius and his readers would have been familiar with the sense of *bassus* in its sub-literary Latin or Oscan meaning of 'low' or 'short' and would thus have been aware that the cognomen had its origin as a physical designation of a person short in stature. We are now in a position to understand why Propertius might have chosen this particular pseudonym to convey a metapoetic message. The first part of the answer lies in the nature of iambic poetry, which was thought of in antiquity as the quintessentially low genre, written by low people. Aristotle articulates this very clearly in his discussion of the origins of poetry and its different kinds:⁴¹

διεσπίασθη δὲ κατὰ τὰ οἰκεῖα ἦθη ἢ ποίησις: οἱ μὲν γὰρ σεμνότεροι τὰς καλὰς ἐμμοῦντο πράξεις καὶ τὰς τῶν τοιούτων, οἱ δὲ εὐτελέστεροι τὰς τῶν φαύλων, πρῶτον ψόγους ποιοῦντες, ὡσπερ ἔτεροι ὕμνους καὶ ἐγκώμια. ... ἐν οἷς κατὰ τὸ ἀρμόττον καὶ τὸ ἱαμβεῖον ἦλθε μέτρον – διὸ καὶ ἱαμβεῖον καλεῖται νῦν, ὅτι ἐν τῷ μέτρῳ τούτῳ ἰάμβιζον ἀλλήλους.

Poetry split up according to the authors' divergent characters: the more dignified represented noble actions and those of noble men, the less serious those of low-class people; the one group produced at first invectives, the others songs praising gods and men. ... These introduced the metre that suited them, still called 'iambic', because it was the metre of their lampoons on each other.

Thus Bassus is a name for an iambographer that speaks every bit as clearly as Ponticus does for an anti-Callimachus. Furthermore, this aspect of the iambic persona was particularly suited to Horace, who, like Archilochus, advertised his own servile origin. As he had already confessed in the first book of *Satires*, his father was a freedman.⁴² Propertius has no need to spell out the connection between name and genre, as he did when identifying Ponticus as a writer of epic, because the appearance and social status of Horace did that for him.

Perhaps the most cutting edge to the insult conveyed by 'Bassus' was its physical aspect. Just as Horace himself had used the name Alpinus to ridicule his enemy simultaneously for his bombastic poetry and for his gluttonous appetite, Propertius' insult has an important physical dimension. Horace was himself not slender, but on top of that he was very

³⁸ See O. Skutsch, 'Messius Cicirrus', in J. H. Betts, J. T. Hooker and J. R. Green (eds), *Studies in Honour of T. B. L. Webster*, Vol. 1 (1986), 223–4.

³⁹ For Cicirrus, see Brown, op. cit. (n. 7), 145 and Skutsch, op. cit. (n. 38), 223 on Hesychius s.v. 'κίκιρρος'.

⁴⁰ Skutsch, op. cit. (n. 38). Another theory is that Messius alludes to the Oscan name for a character in the *fabulae Atellanae*: Salmon, op. cit. (n. 34), 119, n. 3; for a similar suggestion regarding Cicirrus, see Skutsch, op. cit. (n. 38), 224, n. 3. J. J. H. Savage, 'The cyclops, the sibyl and the poet', *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 93 (1962), 410–42 is misled by the belief that the name should be explained with reference to the Latin word *messis*.

⁴¹ *Poetics* 1448b.

⁴² 'libertino patre natus' (*Sat.* 1.6.6). For another Archilochean moment in Horatian autobiography, see 'relicta non bene parmula' (*Odes* 2.7.9) with R. G. M. Nisbet and M. Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace: Odes, Book I* (1970), 113 and E. Fraenkel, *Horace* (1957), 11–12. On the biographical tradition around Archilochus' supposedly self-confessed faults, see A. Rotstein, 'Critias' invective against Archilochus', *Classical Philology* 102 (2007), 139–54, at 143–6.

short, as attested by the transmitted biography of the poet, the substance of which goes back to Suetonius:

Habitu corporis fuit brevis atque obesus, qualis et a semet ipso in satiris describitur ...

In bodily appearance he was short and fat, as he describes himself in his *Satires*.

As the biographer notes, Horace advertised his appearance in his own poetry. In the first book of *Epistles*, he describes his physical appearance as ‘short of stature, prematurely grey and dark-skinned’.⁴³ In the second book of *Satires*, he has Damasippus chastise him for building himself a grand house, despite standing only two feet tall from head to toe, or so he says.⁴⁴ Therefore, when Propertius uses the name Bassus to imply that his addressee is a low-born midget writing in a base genre, the reader will have recognized Horace from his own self-portrait. Horace himself was fond of this sort of play. In both of the places where Horace mentions his own cognomen, Flaccus, he puns on its potential sense of ‘unerec’.⁴⁵ The example of Alpinus showed that Horace was capable of inventing abusive pseudonyms for other poets. The example of Messius showed him punning on an Oscan name. It is only fair play that Propertius turned these tropes around to the disadvantage of their author. He also turned the model of Alpinus upside-down in an elegant inversion, for Alpinus connotes towering height while Bassus means the opposite. In another way Propertius improves on Horace, for Bassus is the metrical equivalent of Horace’s real and equally unheroic cognomen, Flaccus. In the years before Actium, the late 30s, when Propertius must have been composing and reciting his first elegies, Horace would have been composing and reciting his *Epodes* contemporaneously.⁴⁶ His reader would therefore have had a number of clues to the identity of ‘Bassus’ and would therefore have been able to appreciate the ironies that Suits demonstrated arise from the presence of an iambographer in this elegy.

A few more points arise from this argument. In order to highlight the general irony of an iambographer praising women, Suits refers to a range of iambic writers who abused women, mentioning among them ‘Horace in his eighth and twelfth epodes’.⁴⁷ If Bassus is Horace, then his praise of womanly beauty in Propertius 1.4 takes special point in the light of the unique prominence, even by the standards of iambic, which abuse of women occupies in the *Epodes*: not only 8 and 12, but also 5 and 17. Indeed, the ugliness of Canidia has almost as prominent a rôle to play in Horace’s early work as the beauty of Cynthia has in Propertius; they might even be considered mirror-images.⁴⁸ Another point worth making is that Propertius’ imputation that iambic poetry is the polar opposite of his Callimachean elegy is every bit as tendentious as his casting of Antimachean epic as its antithesis along a different axis. Just as Callimachus may have been more similar than different to Antimachus, he was also a notable writer of iambic himself. Perhaps Propertius acknowledges this when he shows us Bassus the iambographer in such a conciliatory mood. The first of Callimachus’ *Iambi* opens with Hipponax rising from the dead to instruct the assembled crowd of scholars to stop quarrelling. Peacemaker is as unexpected a rôle for an iambographer to take as eulogist of women; thus Propertius follows Callimachus in subverting the generic expectations of iambic. But the real purpose of Bassus’ praise of other women is to diminish the

⁴³ ‘corporis exigui, praecanum, solibus aptum’ (1.20.24).

⁴⁴ ‘ab imo ad summum totus moduli bipedalis’ (2.3.308–9); see also *Sat.* 1.4.15.

⁴⁵ *Epodes* 15.12 and *Satires* 2.1.18–19. See L. Watson (ed.), *A Commentary on Horace’s Epodes* (2003), 472–3 against the overstated objections of H. N. Parker, ‘Flaccus’, *Classical Quarterly* 50 (2000), 455–62.

⁴⁶ See below for the relative chronology.

⁴⁷ Suits, *op. cit.* (n. 21), 88.

⁴⁸ One of the *Journal’s* readers points out the relevance of a passage in *Epode* 17, where Horace praises the beauty and purity of Canidia with frank insincerity (39–41), and of its Catullan model (poem 42), where the poet likewise swivels suddenly from abusing a woman to feigned praise.

uniqueness of Cynthia's beauty, so just like Callimachus' Hipponax, the conciliatory posture of the fictionalized iambographer self-destructs instantly.

Inasmuch as Cynthia is frequently capable of representing Propertius' own elegy, it is appropriate that this attempt to tempt the elegist away from his girlfriend/poetics should come from a poet who works in an assortment of very different genres. Bassus' remarks on the advantages of non-exclusivity of erotic attachment can thus be read as applying on a metaphorical level to the advantages of writing poetry in another genre, and indeed of writing promiscuously in a large variety of genres and metres, like Horace. In this, Propertius was using Horace's turn from satire to iambic as a foil for his own assertion of never-ending loyalty to elegy: 'Cynthia prima fuit, Cynthia finis erit' (1.12.20).⁴⁹ As a satirist, Horace had mocked the epic pretension of Alpinus, who, if he was indeed Furius Bibaculus, was much better known as an iambographer. Following his erstwhile victim into the genre of iambic, Horace becomes an appropriate target of the same kind of abusive pseudonym. As we will now see, Horace did not take this shot lying down, but responded very promptly with his own riposte.

III PETTIUS THE OBSCURE

We will discover that Horace's response to Propertius is found in the *Epodes* themselves, which may seem a chronological impossibility, given our argument that Propertius already knew Horace as an iambographer. The simplest answer to this objection is that both poets were working on the poems that went into their respective books in the years leading up to Actium: even if Propertius was not yet a member of Maecenas' circle at this point, there were doubtless plenty of opportunities for them to know about each other and hear about their work in progress. Horace makes it clear in *Satires* 1.10 that he was writing for wider circles than just the poets gathered around Maecenas, including Messala and Asinius Pollio, who had their own networks of patronage. What we have is the end product of an extended process in which each poet defined himself against the other. It is certain that the pre-publication circulation of poetry in Rome at this time was an extremely important vehicle for publicity. Public recitation, private recitation to literary circles, private circulation of written drafts through the facilitation of patrons, all probably preceded the offering of a completed book of poetry to a wider public.⁵⁰

That is plausible enough as a general explanation, but we may be able to pin down the chronology with a bit more detail. It is straightforward to claim Horace's Alpinus as the inspiration for Propertius' play with metapoetic pseudonyms in his first book, for the first book of satires is usually considered Horace's first work, perhaps published in the mid-30s. The *Epodes* were published later, not long after Actium, an event which occupies an important place in that book. There are fewer datable references in Propertius 1, which is usually given a publication date soon after Actium, and thus more or less contemporary with the *Epodes*. But if my recent assertion of a new date for the publication of the first book of Propertius in 33/32 B.C. is correct, then it was already out well before Horace released the *Epodes*.⁵¹ On that argument, when

⁴⁹ See S. J. Heyworth, *Cynthia: a Companion to the Text of Propertius* (2009), 60 for this as a statement of allegiance to elegy.

⁵⁰ On the importance of recitation as a form of publication in the Augustan age, see K. Quinn, 'The poet and his audience in the Augustan age', *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 2.30.1 (1982), 75–180, at 76–93 and 140–67 and F. Dupont, 'Recitatio and the reorganization of the space of public discourse', in A. Wallace-Hadrill (ed.), *The Roman Cultural Revolution* (1997), 44–59.

⁵¹ See P. Heslin, 'Virgil's *Georgics* and the dating of Propertius' first book', *Journal of Roman Studies* 100 (2010), 54–68.

Propertius created the figure of Bassus, he relied on some measure of pre-publication public knowledge that the famously diminutive poet of low birth had turned his hand to the low genre of iambic. He may also have had access to some sort of idea of the rôle that spectacular female ugliness was going to play in the *Epodes* beyond the portrait of Canidia that had already appeared in *Satires* 1.8. In the argument that follows, we will see that *Epode* 11 depends closely on Propertius 1.4 as we have it. Furthermore, Horace seems to know the first four lines of Propertius 1.1 and to understand the programmatic function they serve there, which suggests that he was acquainted with Propertius' first book in its final form. The general picture is thus that Horace and Propertius were aware of each other's work in progress in the late 30s, but that Propertius' first book was probably published as a unit before the book of *Epodes*.

The inverse of Propertius 1.4, in which the elegist appropriates elements of and engages polemically with the iambic genre in general and Horace's epodes in particular, is Horace's *Epode* 11, in which the iambicist does likewise to the elegiac genre in general and Propertius in particular. Some consequences of this symmetry have already been outlined by Barchiesi.⁵² We may press this case considerably further once we see that Bassus is in fact a thinly disguised pseudonym for Flaccus. In this epode Horace ostensibly recalls how his own infatuation with a woman named Inachia had made him the talk of the town. Scholarship has long recognized that the suffering and humiliation enumerated here is a pastiche of the plight of the elegiac lover.⁵³ We will see, however, that the details of this epode are better explained as a particular response to Propertius 1.4 than as a general reaction against Gallus or elegy *tout court*. The key signal is the presence of yet another metapoetic pseudonym: the name of the addressee, Pettius.

Horace's Pettius has left no other impression upon the historical record. Unlike Alpinus, Ponticus and Bassus, the name Pettius does not seem to have an adjectival connotation which one can connect to the associations of a poetic genre or the physical appearance of a person. On the other hand, there is one curious coincidence that ought to cause the reader to raise an eyebrow at Pettius. As Syme said, apart from a few local instances known from inscriptions and a senator named in a Pergamene decree recorded by Josephus, 'the only Pettii known to name or fame' are the Pettius who is the addressee of this epode and Herius Pettius, a senator from Nola during the Second Punic War, whose story is relevant here.⁵⁴ Roman fortunes were at their lowest ebb after the Battle of Cannae; Capua had defected to Hannibal, who needed only to take possession of Nola in order to control all of Campania. He besieged it three times in successive years and failed each time to take the city, which remained steadfastly loyal to Rome in its darkest hour. Though a small victory, this was the first object Hannibal failed to attain in his campaign in Italy and it offered a glimmer of hope that he was not invincible. When Hanno approached the Nolans to offer them terms of surrender, the embassy that went to refuse him comprised two distinguished local senators: Herius Pettius and Herennius Bassus.⁵⁵ Livy's narrative of the embassy is not very eventful; Bassus does all of the talking, refusing the Carthaginian offer and reasserting the Nolans' faithfulness to their alliance with Rome. Nothing else of note happens and the name Pettius disappears once again from history. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the coincidence that the only two times the Oscan name Pettius makes a significant appearance in Roman history it is

⁵² See Barchiesi, *op. cit.* (n. 21), 133–4.

⁵³ See F. Leo, 'De Horatio et Archilocho', in *Ausgewählte kleine Schriften II* (1960), 139–57 and G. Luck, 'An interpretation of Horace's eleventh epode', *Illinois Classical Studies* 1 (1976), 122–6. Horace winks at the importation of elegiac content into an iambic context by punning on the metrical sense of *pes* in the phrase *incerto pede* (11.20), as discussed by Barchiesi, *op. cit.* (n. 21), 134–5. Since the poem is set in the month of December (11.5), there may also be a hint of Saturnalian rôle-reversal.

⁵⁴ R. Syme, 'Missing senators', *Historia* 4 (1955), 52–71, at 66.

⁵⁵ Livy 23.43–4.

as one half of a partnership with someone called Bassus. It is true that Bassus is not an uncommon cognomen, being found in a half-dozen families, so accident cannot be ruled out. But when put together with the unusual and distinctive names Ponticus and Pettius, the multiplication of coincidence is hard to credit. It can never be proved beyond any doubt that these are pseudonyms; it is possible, howsoever unlikely, that these three names just happened to belong to real men in such a way as to describe their precise rôles in a poetical polemic, but the series of coincidence upon coincidence must at some point defy belief.

So what precisely did it mean for Horace to address his epode to Pettius? The siege of Nola was a turning-point and the Roman commander there, Claudius Marcellus, was a man to whom anecdotes attached themselves. It is not improbable that the names of Bassus and Pettius became proverbial for the steadfast loyalty displayed by the Nolans. One thing is clear: the historical Herennius Bassus and Herius Pettius are joined at the hip, comrades and allies against a common foe, rather than representing the opposite sides of a disagreement. This suits the rôle Pettius plays as an addressee in the epode, where, unlike Propertius' Bassus and Ponticus, he serves as a sympathetic friend rather than as a foil for disagreement. A simple way of interpreting Pettius, then, would be as a pseudonymous peace offering to Propertius: if Propertius is addressed as Pettius, then Horace is treating him as a friend. Does he really offer this tale of his own experience with elegiac love in the spirit of friendship and fellow-feeling? Not only would this be a weak and surprising response to Propertius' unkind caricature, it is not true to the narrative of the poem, in which elegiac love is overthrown by something more powerful.

A better way to interpret the meaning of Pettius is to start from its significance as 'friend of Bassus'. By addressing as a friend a person whose only meaning is to be a friend of Bassus, Horace indicates in the cleverest way that in this epode and this epode alone he is speaking in the persona of Bassus. Accordingly, he adopts precisely the identity Propertius had created for him; he puts on the mask of Bassus, which belongs to the character of an iambic poet who has become the would-be victim of elegiac womanhood. By claiming friendship with a person bearing the unmistakably Oscan name Pettius, Horace belatedly acknowledges that aspect of his own background. Ultimately, however, the butt of the pseudonymous game is Propertius. The Nolan senators Bassus and Pettius represent steadfast courage and faithfulness in the face of an overwhelming barbarian force, so in this epic battle of genres, Propertius is cast in the rôle of Hannibal, which is not a bad joke at all.

That the voice of *Epode* 11 is meant to be understood as Horace speaking in the persona of Bassus is confirmed by the way Horace reiterates very nearly the same argument that Propertius had put in Bassus' mouth. This becomes evident after the elegiac section of the epode, when Horace pivots from past to present with the word *nunc* (11.23–8):

nunc gloriantis quamlibet mulierculam
 vincere mollitia amor Lycisci me tenet;
 unde expedire non amicorum queant
 libera consilia nec contumeliae graves,
 sed alius ardor aut puellae candidae
 aut teretis pueri longam renodantis comam.

Now love for Lyciscus holds me fast, who boasts that he can best any little woman you like for softness; to free me from him neither the generous advice of my friends nor their bitter reproaches suffice, but only another passion for a pretty girl or a shapely boy tying back his long hair.

Horace has replaced the earlier elegiac passion for Inachia described in the preceding lines with an attachment for the boy Lyciscus which is described as an equally passionate relationship. The final two lines, however, make clear the real disjunction between Horace's persona and the elegiac situation. Howsoever the drama of his present passion

for Lyciscus may play out, he knows that there is always another gorgeous boy or girl around the corner. Although Horace frames the argument very differently, in the end this is identical to the stance against the ideology of elegy taken by Propertius' Bassus, which is that there are plenty of beautiful fish in the sea: it is foolish to torture yourself over a lover who rejects you.

There is one important difference, however, between the rhetoric of Bassus and Horace, and this is the most significant and puzzling aspect of the poem. Why does Horace introduce a happy homosexual love affair as a foil for his previous heterosexual, elegiac misery? Horace's bisexuality is emphasized near the beginning of the poem ('mollibus in pueris aut in puellis urere', 4) and again at the end ('aut puellae candidae/aut teretis pueri', 27–8), so it clearly a matter of significance. Scholars have explained this as an aspect of Horace's general rejection of Latin love elegy, whose surviving works are predominantly, though not exclusively, heterosexual. But this requires us to assume that Gallan elegy excluded homosexual love, which is contra-indicated by the frank bisexuality of Virgil's Gallus: 'certe siue mihi Phyllis siue esset Amyntas' (*Ecl.* 10.37). While it is true that the bisexual ambiance of Greek pastoral is exerting an influence on the fictionalized portrait of the elegist astray in a foreign genre, it would be most indelicate of Virgil to foist upon his patron a taste entirely alien to him. One could make a similar argument regarding the Gallus to whom Propertius 1.20 is addressed, who has a passion for a boy very like Hercules' Hylas. Even if the elegist Cornelius Gallus were to be one of several possible identities for this addressee, it would have been indelicate of Propertius to make such a suggestion without any warrant. This interpretation of *Epode* 11 further requires us to quarantine the homosexual elegies that Tibullus addresses to Marathus as being somehow foreign to the true nature of elegy; but that amounts to circularity and special pleading.⁵⁶ Even though Ovid tells us in the *Ars Amatoria* that his own personal taste runs to girls, in the programmatic first poem of the *Amores* he nevertheless defines the proper *materia* of love elegy as either *puer* or *puella*.⁵⁷ In the light of the deep roots Latin love elegy has in both Hellenistic erotic epigram and the poetry of Catullus, we should fully expect its love objects to include boys as well as girls. There is only one kind of Latin love elegy which is explicitly, absolutely and programmatically heterosexual, and that is Propertian elegy. Propertius makes this clear from the first lines of his first elegy, in which he takes an image of triumph from a pederastic erotic epigram of Meleager and transforms it to describe his subjection to Cynthia.⁵⁸ Propertius knows where the roots of his genre lie and he knows which parts he will keep and which he will transform. So when Horace rejects the elegiac situation by appealing to the Greek tradition of bisexuality as it featured in epigram, lyric, bucolic and so on, he was not rejecting Latin elegy as a whole, but rather rejecting Propertius' idiosyncratically, militantly heterosexual conception of that tradition.

If we look more closely at the way sexuality is deployed in this epode as a rhetorical device, we find that Horace is developing a contrast with Propertius which is more pointed than a general opposition between his bisexuality and the elegist's heterosexuality and between his own serial experiments with very different lovers and

⁵⁶ Thus Barchiesi, *op. cit.* (n. 21), 132–3, n. 13, who cites M. Labate for the view that the Marathus elegies 'sono un'anticipazione della "distruzione dell'elegia dall'interno" che verrà intrapresa da Ovidio *praeceptor amoris*'. It might be better to say that the particular conception of elegiac love that Ovid chooses to undermine and subvert owes more to Propertius than Tibullus.

⁵⁷ *Am.* 1.1.19–20, where he is clearly speaking of his own potential *materia* ('nec mihi materia est') rather than that of a heterosexual female elegist like Sulpicia. Cf. *Ars Am.* 2.684 with C. A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality* (1999), 27–8. See also J. C. McKeown (ed.), *Ovid, Amores: Text, Prolegomena and Commentary* (1987–), vol. 2, 23.

⁵⁸ On the programmatic significance of the switch from homosexual to heterosexual love, see P. A. Miller, *Subjecting Verses: Latin Love Elegy and the Emergence of the Real* (2004), 85–7.

genres and Propertius' exclusivity of attachment. Again, we must start from the way Propertius represents the defeat of Bassus in elegy 1.4. The fictional iambist had urged the elegist to remember that there are many beautiful women beside Cynthia, but Propertius warns him that as a response she will turn the tables on him and her invective will make him such a figure of derision and loathing among the women of Rome that he will never find another lover (1.4.21–2):

et te circum omnis alias irata puellas
differet: heu nullo limine carus eris.

and in her wrath she will vilify you among all the other girls; at no threshold, alas, will you be welcome.

This cleverly turns the tables on Bassus, who faces the prospect that the infinite supply of women he had pointed out to Propertius is about to dry up for himself. In *Epode* 11, Horace turns the tables once again. He does not back away from Bassus' position that there are more fish in the sea, but doubles down on the assertion Propertius had foisted upon him. He points out that the sea includes fish of both sexes, so Cynthia's powers, even if we allow them to be as universal as Propertius claims, are impotent over half of the population. Essentially, Horace demonstrates a logical non-sequitur in the lines quoted above: all of the *puellae* in Rome may hate the iambicist, but this does not mean that every *limen* will shut him out: boys will still open the door to his knock. We see this most clearly in the lines in which Horace pivots from his past elegiac relationship with Inachia to his present relationship with Lyciscus (11.20–4):

... ferebar incerto pede
ad non amicos heu mihi postis et heu
 limina dura, quibus lumbos et infregi latus.
nunc glorientis quamlibet mulierculam
 vincere mollitia amor Lycisci me tenet;

I was borne on unsteady feet to doorposts, alas, unfriendly to me and, alas, a hard threshold, against which I smashed my groin and side. Now love for Lyciscus holds me fast, who boasts that he can best any little woman you like for softness ...

The hostile *limen* which Propertius mentions in 1.4 and which Horace ridicules in his exaggerated description here both have their roots in the association of elegy with the *paraclausithyron*. But the parody gains added point if Horace is responding not just to the situation of the elegiac lover in general but specifically picking up the portrait of the iambist as a frustrated and locked-out lover which was the last glimpse we had of him in Propertius 1.4. Having milked Bassus' predicament for comic effect, Horace then immediately introduces us to the instrument of the iambicist's escape from Cynthia's curse in the person of Lyciscus, whose *mollitia*, a key elegiac value, exceeds any woman's. The mock-triumph of this boy over mere womanhood (not just Inachia, but *quamlibet mulierculam*) can be read in a general sense as an inversion of the power of the elegiac *domina*, but once again it gains particular point if viewed in the context of the end of Propertius 1.4. There, in contrast to Bassus the locked-out lover, Cynthia is omnipotent, not merely Propertius' *domina*, but capable of manipulating half of Rome's population on her behalf. Lyciscus, however, who is neither a woman nor himself interested in women, is entirely free from her power and is able to scorn it.

Furthermore, the name Lyciscus is itself a meaningful pseudonym, which like Pettius was coined in response to Propertius. The image of a boy boasting (*glorientis*) over his conquest (*vincere*) alludes to the programmatically heterosexual beginning of Propertius' first book. Meleager had compared his helplessness at the hands of a mere boy,

Myiscus, to the conquest of Zeus by Eros. Propertius substituted Cynthia for the boy, retaining the idea of the weaker subduing the stronger, but recasting it in heterosexual terms. Horace corrects Propertius' distortion of Meleager, restoring the boy-lover to his position of triumph and switching the elegiac *domina* into the position of victim of his unexpected power. This is made quite clear by the name of Horace's triumphant boy, for Lyciscus is a metrically equivalent remodelling of Meleager's triumphant Myiscus. Horace has pointedly removed the mouse in the prefix (*my-iscus*) and replaced it with an wolf (*lyc-iscus*), while leaving the diminutive suffix the same.⁵⁹ Whereas Meleager's name had emphasized the unprepossessing appearance of the boy, Horace emphasizes his fearsomeness despite his small size.⁶⁰ The size of the mouse suited the diminutive genre of epigram, but the savagery of the wolf suits the boy's new iambic identity.⁶¹ Horace's quarrel, though, is not with Meleager, but with Propertius, who had entirely elided the ferocious boy from the scene of the poet's subjection.

Finally, the third pseudonym in the poem, Inachia, may also be a rebuke to Propertius. Scholars have attempted several explanations of the meaning of this name, none of which are fully satisfying.⁶² Since the other two pseudonyms in that poem, Pettius and Lyciscus, are both consequences of Horace's engagement with the first book of Propertius, it might be worth considering the possibility that Inachia has a similar origin. In elegy 1.13, Propertius addresses Gallus, praising the beauty of his new girlfriend:⁶³

nec mirum, cum sit Iove digna et proxima Ladae
et Ladae partu gratior, una tribus;
illa sit Inachiis et blandior heroinis,
illa suis verbis cogat amare Iovem.

No wonder, when she is worthy of Jupiter and next thing to Leda and more pleasing than the offspring of Leda: one greater than three. She would be even more seductive than the heroines of Argos; she would make Jupiter love her with her words.

There should be little doubt as to the identity of Propertius' Inachian heroines, despite the disagreement of commentators. Whosoever the ladies of myth in the prior couplet may be,

⁵⁹ Meleager may hint at a derivation from *μύια* rather than *μύς* in a Myiscus epigram in which a fly makes an appearance as a contrast to the eagle of Zeus (*Anth. Gr.* 12.70.4), though metre and sound favour *μύς*. In another epigram Meleager seems to link the name instead perhaps with *μύρον*: Ἡδὺς ὁ παῖς, καὶ τοῦνομ' ἐμοὶ γλυκύς ἐστί Μυῖσκος καὶ χαρίεις (*Anth. Gr.* 12.154.1–2). On the other hand, the tiny sea-mussel called *μύσκος* (*myiscus* in Latin; Pliny, *NH* 32.149) was clearly the diminutive of *μύς*. The obvious meaning of the name was therefore 'little mouse', but we should allow that Meleager was fond of playing with other possibilities.

⁶⁰ Barchiesi, *op. cit.* (n. 21), 132 notes the additional irony that this boy shares the lupine part of his name with the 'domina elegiaca per eccellenza, LYCoris'.

⁶¹ The most notable wolf-like name in iambic poetry is Archilochus' Lycambes, which has often been thought a pointed pseudonym; see G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (1979), 243–52. G. Davis, 'Carmina/Lambi: the literary-generic dimension of Horace's *Integer vitae* (C. 1.22)', *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 27 (1987), 67–78 argues that Horace in the *Odes* characterizes his earlier iambic ferocity via the figure of the wolf.

⁶² cf. Watson, *op. cit.* (n. 45), 366–7: 'Her name establishes Inachia's profession: Italian prostitutes typically bore Greek names ... sometimes as here ones with mythological associations.' That is true as far as it goes, but it does not explain why Horace would invent this particular name, in contrast to the other Horatian courtesans whose Greek names are elsewhere attested for freedwomen and courtesans and have meanings very obviously pertinent to their profession. The claim by D. Mankin (ed.), *Horace Epodes* (1995), 196 that Inachia should make us think of the 'bovine' Io sits uneasily with the account of Horace's passion for her. Barchiesi, *op. cit.* (n. 21), 132, n. 12 offers the most interesting alternative explanation, suggesting that we are to think of Danae of Argos, whose greed for gold in the allegorical reading of the myth reflects Inachia's preference for the *dives amator*. The main difficulty is the obscurity of skipping directly to the rationalization of the Danae myth (on which see R. G. M. Nisbet and N. Rudd, *A Commentary on Horace: Odes, Book III* (2004), 203) without a clear indication that this particular Argive heroine out of the many is meant.

⁶³ Prop 1.13.29–32. For simplicity the text is Barber's; controversy over the text of the first couplet is not relevant here.

the ultimate point is that Gallus' girl is more beautiful than three of them put together. If the next couplet is going to continue onwards to a climax, the numbers need to increase and increase dramatically. Accordingly, we find that she is more pleasing than all fifty of the Danaids. They are the only Argive heroines who are sufficiently numerous and who make any sense with *blandior*; and they are called *Inachides* by Ovid (*Her.* 14.23).⁶⁴ For an elegist, his chosen girl is worth fifty others; for the iambic Horace, one lover is as good as the next. Hence Horace's joke in naming his eminently replaceable girlfriend Inachia. She is not a special and unique lover, but *quamlibet mulierculam*: one of the fifty interchangeable Danaids, as identical to one another as the statues in the portico of the temple of Palatine Apollo, which was then under construction.

IV ECHOES OF BATTLE

We cannot be sure how much real antipathy might have lurked behind the joking exchange between Horace and Propertius, but it has long been suspected that there was no love lost between them, because of the fact that they never refer to each other overtly.⁶⁵ If we accept that Horace's elegy-writing friend Albius was our Tibullus, the omission of Propertius from Horace's addressees is the more striking, given that they were both members of Maecenas' circle, which Tibullus was not. Many scholars furthermore accept that the Postumus to whom Horace addressed one of his most famous odes (2.14) is the Propertius Postumus whose existence is attested epigraphically and who is presumably also the Postumus to whom Propertius addressed an elegy (3.12) which seems to be in part a response to Horace's poem.⁶⁶ If so, it is hardly possible that Horace was friendly with a relative of Propertius but unacquainted with his fellow poet and client of Maecenas. Of course, common acquaintance and patronage is no guarantee that the poets liked each other. There is one passage from the epistle to Florus in Horace's second book that has often been taken as a coded reference to Propertius. Horace is describing a public recitation of poetry in which he squares off against a writer of elegies (2.2.91–101):

carmina compono, hic elegos: mirabile visu
caelatumque novem Musis opus. adspice primum,
quanto cum fastu, quanto molimine circum-
spectemus vacuum Romanis vatibus aedem;
mox etiam, si forte vacas, sequere et procul audi,
quid ferat et qua re sibi nectat uterque coronam:
caedimur et totidem plagis consumimus hostem
lento Samnites ad lumina prima duello;
discedo Alcaeus puncto illius; ille meo quis?

⁶⁴ Thus M. Rothstein (ed.), *Elegien, Propertius Sextus* (1966), 145, who pointed out that they coaxed their new husbands into bed despite their murderous intentions. If Clytemnestra is one of the *tribus* in the previous couplet, then danger and husband-murder is not at all foreign to the context. Other commentators have preferred to see a generic reference to Greek mythological heroines, but that would be bland for the specificity of the previous couplet. More recently, J. Booth, 'Amazing grace: reading between the lines in Propertius 1.13.29–32', *Classical Quarterly* 56 (2006), 528–37, at 536–7 takes the phrase as a poetic plural, referring to Io. But the plurality of the sisters is precisely what makes them a fitting climax after *una tribus*; this suggestion also turns *blandior* into an absurdity, for when we think of Io after her encounter with Jupiter we think of her bitterly lamenting (as in *Prometheus Bound* 561–886) or mooing inarticulately (as later in Ovid, *Met.* 1.635–57, 729–46).

⁶⁵ For a good overview of the extensive bibliography on the question of the relationship of Horace and Propertius, see R. Dimundo, 'Properzio e gli augustei', in G. Catanzaro and F. Santucci (eds), *Properzio alle soglie del 2000: un bilancio di fine secolo* (2002), 295–318, at 295–303.

⁶⁶ See R. G. M. Nisbet and M. Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace: Odes, Book II* (1978), 223–4 and Cairns, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 16–23.

quis nisi Callimachus? si plus adposcere visus,
fit Mimnermus et optivo cognomine crescit.

I compose lyrics, he elegies: ah, how brilliant! — a work embellished by the nine Muses. First, look at the arrogance and gravity with which we look around us to inspect the temple just waiting for Roman poets. Now, if you are at leisure, follow me and attend closely to hear what each of us brings to bear and how each weaves a crown for himself. Each of us is hammered and pummels the enemy with equal blows, like Samnites in weary battle until first light. I become Alcaeus at his vote. He at mine becomes whom? Callimachus, of course. Or, if the situation demands something extra, he becomes Mimnermus and is puffed up with that adoptive name.

In the lines before and after this passage, Horace ridicules the logrolling and the mutual admiration that poets were required to express, whether they meant it or not. Hence the image of gladiatorial combat, in which the combatants exchange patently insincere compliments instead of blows. An earlier generation of scholars took for granted that Horace's counterpart in this mock engagement between the Roman Alcaeus and the Roman Callimachus/Mimnermus must have been Propertius: *Quis nisi?*⁶⁷ In a reaction against the excesses of biographical criticism and in the apparent absence of any other evidence that Horace knew Propertius, this position has become unfashionable.⁶⁸ The Roman Alcaeus is Horace, so the Roman Callimachus/Mimnermus needs to be a specific poet for balance, who could scarcely be anyone but Propertius.⁶⁹ Does the allusion to Samnite gladiators recall the rôle of Oscan personae in their earlier quarrel? The phrase 'optivo cognomine' would be a reference to the less flattering cognomina traded in their earlier combat. If Horace and Propertius were less than friends, they will nevertheless have been obliged to put on a show of civility, at least in front of Maecenas. It would make sense for Horace to be referring to someone to whom Horace is routinely obliged to be gracious and even complimentary, but with whom there is a history of unpleasantness that makes the kind words exchanged patently insincere to all in attendance. Propertius is a perfect fit.⁷⁰

In the *Odes*, Horace uses the name Bassus without reference to this episode; it is a very common name and so, like Gallus, it was capable of being used with or without a special connection to a particular literary figure.⁷¹ So it seems as though the episode with Propertius has passed into literary history. We can, however, trace a further echo of this

⁶⁷ See J. P. Postgate (ed.), *Select Elegies of Propertius* (1958), xxxii–xxxiv; A. Palmer (ed.), *The Satires of Horace* (1964), 219 attributes the original observation to Passerat, while D. Flach, *Das literarische Verhältnis von Horaz und Propertius* (1967), 92 cites Lieven van der Beke.

⁶⁸ For a negative view, see C. O. Brink (ed.), *Horace on Poetry* (1963–1982), vol. 3, 316, 325, who seems to have changed his mind in the nearly twenty years between the publication of volumes 1 and 3: cf. vol. 1, 186, n. 1. N. Rudd (ed.), *Horace, Epistles Book II and Epistle to the Pisones* (1989), 15 is mildly sceptical; on the other hand, see Quinn, op. cit. (n. 50), 149 ('almost certainly Propertius').

⁶⁹ For Mimnermus as a declared model, see Prop. 1.9.11; for Callimachus, see 2.1.40, 2.34.32, 3.1.1, 3.9.43, and above all 4.1.64.

⁷⁰ Some have inferred a bitter feud between Horace and Propertius; see Dimundo, op. cit. (n. 65), 295–303 for bibliography. An extreme view is taken by J. P. Sullivan, *Propertius* (1976), 12–31 and J. P. Sullivan, 'Horace and Propertius: another literary feud?', *Studia Classica* 18 (1979), 81–92; more nuanced is R. G. M. Nisbet, 'Review: Horace and Propertius', *Classical Review* 21 (1971), 57–9, at 57: 'There were differences of social background and literary principle, perhaps also profounder discordances of temperament: the one may have seemed a Philistine, the other a poseur. Hence perhaps the unfriendly reference in the *Epistles* to the imitator of Callimachus and Mimnermus (2.2.100–1).'

⁷¹ A Bassus appears in *Odes* 1.36.14, where the name may connote a heavy drinker, due to its resemblance to Bassareus: thus Nisbet and Hubbard, op. cit. (n. 42), 405. It was a nice coincidence that the next major writer of Latin lyric was named Caesius Bassus (Quint. 10.1.96). When Persius implicitly likens him to Horace (*Sat.* 6.1–6), was the name a bonus? Martial often pins the name Bassus or Bassa on the targets of his abuse; perhaps the sense of 'low' is active in those contexts.

conflict in Propertius' later poetry. On the one occasion when Propertius does discuss homosexual love, he damns it with faint praise, recommending it to anyone who wants a peaceful life (2.4.17–22):

hostis si quis erit nobis, amet ille puellas:
gaudeat in puero, si quis amicus erit.
tranquillo tuta descendis flumine cumba:
quid tibi tam parvi limitis unda nocet?
alter saepe uno mutat praecordia verbo,
altera vix ipso sanguine mollis erit.

If anyone is an enemy to me, let him love girls; if a friend, let him delight in boys. Your little raft travels safely down a gentle stream: what harm could waves do in so small a puddle? He often changes his heart at a single word from you, while she can scarcely be mollified with the shedding of your blood.

In the light of the earlier disagreement with Horace it is particularly interesting that Propertius uses the term *hostis* here, though on the surface the enemy is purely hypothetical. The irony of Propertius recommending boys to his friends and girls to his enemies is compounded if we remember that Horace, his erstwhile *hostis*, had refused to take precisely this ill-intentioned advice. The real meaning of the rhetoric here is of course that those who content themselves with the love of mere boys may live a tranquil life, but will never know true passion.⁷² This is in fact a substantive rebuttal to Horace's position in *Epode* 11, where he claims the *ardor* for boys and girls to be equivalent and interchangeable. The *mollitia* of which Lyciscus boasts is here allowed, but the game Horace chose to play with him is so lacking in danger as to carry no interest for the elegist. Propertius thus refuses to accept Horace's argument in *Epode* 11 that interesting options would still be available to the passionate lover in the absence of women.

V OVIDIUS PONTICUS

We have long deferred discussion of the crucial passage in Ovid's *Tristia* that has usually been taken to guarantee the existence of Ponticus and Bassus as real names of real poets. Now that we have fully explored the intricate play between Horace and Propertius we are in a position to understand what would motivate Ovid to breathe new life into the joke after a gap of so many years. In the autobiography he presents in *Tristia* 4.10, Ovid gives an account of his early associations with eminent poets who had already established their reputations, including Propertius: (4.10.45–8):

saepe suos solitus recitare Propertius ignes
iure sodalicii, quo mihi iunctus erat.
Ponticus heroo, Bassus quoque clarus iambis
dulcia convictus membra fuere mei.

Propertius used often to recite the flames of his passion by the right of fellowship that bound him to me. Ponticus, famous for heroic verse, and Bassus for iambics were the delightful members of my circle.

⁷² The *praecordia* that the boy so easily changes is perhaps a reminiscence from the symptoms of Horace's indignation in *Epode* 11: 'quodsi meis inaestuēt praecordiis libera bilis' (15–16). Likewise the inability of the boy to do real harm may respond to the catalogue of physical insults and wounds Horace complains about there ('fomenta volnus nil malum levantia' (17), 'lumbos et infregi latus' (22)).

The appearance of Ponticus and Bassus as part of this short and exclusive list of eminent poets of the past ought to strike us as very odd. All the other names are extremely well known from a variety of other sources to have been literary figures of the highest importance: Macer, Propertius, Horace, Virgil, Tibullus and Gallus. This passage is not at all like the catalogue of contemporary literary figures in *ex Ponto* 4.16 which includes a large number of minor poets about whom little is known. Here Ovid positions himself with respect to the great, bygone names of the early Augustan age. Enough time had gone by for Ovid to have a clear sense of whose poetry from that time would continue to be read. Was Ovid so bad a judge of quality to think that minor figures, which is what Ponticus and Bassus must be if they are to be real names, belonged in this company?

It is evident that these two poets appear exactly as they do in Propertius' first book: members of the circle of friends established by the addressees of the poems. The phrase 'dulcia convictus membra' accords completely with the impression given by Propertius' friendly banter with his addressees. But there are grave problems with this picture and the chronological implications of this claim in the light of Ovid's own autobiography ought to give us serious pause. Ovid is a very unlikely member of the circle of friends and lovers embodied by Propertius' first book, pre-pubescent as he was at the time of its writing. The conventional date for the publication of that book is around 30/29 B.C., which would mean that Ovid was about thirteen or fourteen years old when it came out, based on the birth-date he gives us earlier in this poem; the revised date of 33/32 B.C. for Propertius 1 would make Ovid around ten years old when it was published.⁷³ Thus Ovid wants us to imagine himself as a mere boy not yet wearing the *toga virilis* when he was supposedly listening to Propertius pour out the intimate fires of his passion in a form that eventually became the elegies of Book 1. It is a patently absurd picture and knowledgeable readers were expected to laugh. If Ovid came to know Propertius personally, as seems likely, it will surely have happened later. The reason Ovid chooses to evoke the unmistakable atmosphere of Propertius' first book is not biographical verisimilitude but to evoke his naive, boyish thrill at reading that work and imagining himself within that world. What he is really saying is that, as a mere boy, he learnt about love and love poetry by reading the first book of Propertius, and he was so naive that he thought Ponticus and Bassus were real. This collapsing of distinctions between the real world and the imagined world of literature will turn out to be a key theme in Ovid's poetic autobiography.

The tension between Ovid's real age and the picture he gives us of his associations with the earlier generation of poets fits with a theme that runs through this part of the poem, for Ovid insistently directs our attention to the fact that he was a generation younger than the other great poets of the Augustan age. Aemilius Macer was so much older ('mihi grandior aevo', 43), Virgil and Tibullus died before Ovid could know them well (51–2), and Ovid was very much the last of the elegists (53–4). He stood apart from that generation of older poets, just as he did from the next generation ('utque ego maiores, sic me coluere minores', 55). One effect of this passage is therefore to position Ovid as chronologically marginal within the canon of Augustan poets just as he is now geographically marginal.⁷⁴ The integration into the canon of Latin poets, which he foresees at the end of the poem, is thus a correction not only to his exile, but also to the youth that denied him a place at the centre of what we call the poets of the Augustan age.⁷⁵ The tongue-in-cheek discussion of Ponticus and Bassus as if they were real poets highlights the fact that,

⁷³ For the revised date, see Heslin, *op. cit.* (n. 51). Ovid gives his year of birth as 43 B.C. at *Trist.* 4.10.5–6.

⁷⁴ For the insistently temporal emphasis of this passage, see B. R. Fredericks, 'Tristia 4.10: poet's autobiography and poetic autobiography', *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 106 (1976), 139–54, at 153.

⁷⁵ For a reading of this poem that similarly sees Ovid as moving in death from a geographically marginal to a poetically central position, see E. Oliensis, 'The power of image-makers: representation and revenge in Ovid *Metamorphoses* 6 and *Tristia* 4', *Classical Antiquity* 23 (2004), 285–321, at 305–6.

when Propertius was writing those poems, Ovid was too young to have really known any of the poets of that generation and so to know who was real and who was not. Ovid's apparent gesture of self-inclusion among Propertius' circle is in fact a restatement of his position as youngster with respect to that generation, which is precisely the same impression given by the manner in which he refers to Virgil, Tibullus and the other elder poets.

In the next couplet Ovid makes it clear to the reader that he knows full well the game that Propertius was playing. He would not want us to think that he truly had been duped for long, so he adds a knowing twist in the couplet immediately following (4.10.49–50):

et tenuit nostras numerosus Horatius aures,
dum ferit Ausonia carmina culta lyra.

And metrical Horace held my attention while he struck his elegant odes on the Italian lyre.

At first sight this couplet might seem to contradict the claim that Ovid knew that Bassus was a pseudonym. If Ovid refers to Bassus in the preceding couplet and he knows that this was really Horace, how can he immediately go on to refer to Horace by his own name as if he were another poet? But Ovid clearly identifies Bassus as a poet famous for his iambic poetry; indeed this is the only piece of information he gives us which does not derive from the text of Propertius 1. In this succeeding couplet, by contrast, he clearly presents us with Horace *qua* lyric poet, the poet of the *Odes* who transferred the Greek lyric metres into Latin. So Ovid carefully separates the two poets by genre, and this accords with Propertius' (and Horace's) own use of Bassus strictly to refer to Horace as an iambographer. The word that brings the joke to the surface, for those in the know, is *numerosus*. In the context of Horace's facility with lyric poetry, this means 'harmonious' and 'full of *numeri* or metres', but the basic meaning of the word is 'multiple'. The reader who knows that Horace also appeared under a different name in the previous couplet will instantly get the additional joke about the 'multiple' Horace, whose many metres were matched by the many genres in which he worked and the personae he adopted. Bassus was merely the iambic version of the multifariously *numerosus* Horace.

It is entirely in keeping with Ovid's playful spirit that he continued Propertius' game, and the interest he manifests here in the phenomenon of a literary fiction becoming real in the minds of readers is no different from his fascination with the emerging reality of the fictional creations of love elegy, his own included: 'multi, quae sit nostra Corinna, rogant'.⁷⁶ It is no coincidence that a few lines later Ovid boasts of the success of his Corinna, and mentions the false name she bore: 'nomine non vero dicta Corinna mihi' (*Trist.* 4.10.60). The question still remains, however, of why Ovid would tell such a blatant lie about Ponticus and Bassus in this particular poem. Why would a poet writing his autobiography venture a fabrication, no matter how good the resulting joke? Would this not prejudice the reader against the truth of the rest of Ovid's account of his life? For readers who knew the truth about Propertius' first book, Ovid's lines will have provoked momentary puzzlement; but to a purpose. If we examine Ovid's joke more

⁷⁶ *Ars Am.* 3.538. The way this poem plays with the gap between reality and earnest autobiographical narrative in precisely the manner of Latin love elegy can go a long way to explaining why Ovid puts so much emphasis on his career as a love elegist in this poem. For puzzlement on that score, see J. Fairweather, 'Ovid's autobiographical poem: *Tristia* 4.10', *Classical Quarterly* 37 (1987), 181–96, at 183, n. 15 and Fredericks, *op. cit.* (n. 74), 144, n. 16. This is why he describes himself from the first line of this autobiographical poem as a player of games ('teneratorum lusor amorum', 1).

closely, we see that he is actually making a very serious point about the nature of poetic immortality, a point that goes to the heart of the argument of this autobiographical poem.

One can easily understand why the poet to whom Propertius gave the name Ponticus would become a subject of fascination for the poet exiled to the shores of the Black Sea. Ovid's own aesthetics were the antithesis of the plodding, heavy, serious stuff Propertius attributed to Ponticus, and yet Ovid is the one to whom fate seems to have given a better claim on the name.⁷⁷ Already when Ovid was writing there probably were a fair number of Roman readers of Propertius who assumed that Ponticus and Bassus were real names of since-forgotten men, as the boyish Ovid perhaps had done. Ovid's evocation of them as 'real' people in the midst of his ostensibly non-fictional autobiography is more than just a prank on such readers. It is a subtle comment on the power of literary fiction: the fictional Ponticus is in Ovid's day already becoming no less real than Propertius, the now-dead poet who created him: both have become nothing more than characters in the same text. The mediocre poets of Propertius' day had gradually been forgotten, their work perishing with their bodies, but as the decades went by, Ovid could see Ponticus becoming more and more alive to Roman readers as the original context faded from memory and more and more readers assumed that he was a real poet. It would not have surprised Ovid one bit to discover that Ponticus and Bassus have ended up in our day as historical figures populating the major reference works on the Classical world.

The presence of these two quasi-fictional characters in the midst of the Rome's greatest poets is therefore a comment on the nature of literary immortality, which is the dominant theme of this autobiographical poem. It is the genius of Propertius that survives the decay of the years and that matters far more than whether or not Ponticus was ever once 'real'. Poets are immortal insofar as they are identical with the self-created personae who come to life in the minds of their readers. The constructed *ego* who is the voice of Ovid's autobiographical poem is more alive now than the man who lived that life. There is no difference in kind between the survival enjoyed by a Ponticus who may or may not have existed at all and the Propertius who created him: both survive as textual side-effects. Ovid conjures up a vivid image of the living Propertius reciting the poems of his imminent passion, but the elegist recites now only in our minds; the passion that Ovid refers to is purely the result of the poet's vivid self-characterization. Even stranger, after Horace turns to dust and ashes, he splits in two, living on in two separate identities, one of Propertian construction and one of his own, neither of the two having a greater claim to reality.

Ovid on the shores of the Black Sea felt his life slipping away from his grasp, or so he says, and he consoles himself with the thought that in his absence from Rome he has already begun the transition from man into a textual artifact. The autobiography he lays out for us is both a symbol and an instrument of the transformation of his life into a text. In faraway exile Ovidius Ponticus was becoming what Propertius' Ponticus had always been, a fiction, an unreal poet whose only meaningful existence for Romans was virtual, a construct in the minds of contemporary readers. When Ovid contemplated those Roman readers who mistook Ponticus and Bassus for real poets he saw his own future. But this is also how Ovid transcends his exile, becoming a virtual presence for readers everywhere rather than a real presence in a particular, detested place: 'in toto plurimus orbe legor' (128). At the end of the poem, Ovid is on the verge of joining the canon of great writers; the great poets whom Ovid was too young to do any more than encounter fleetingly in the flesh will be the intimate company his texts will keep forever after his own death. The presence of fictional poets in that list humorously undercuts

⁷⁷ On the 'detachability of names' and Ovid's exilic identification with the Pontus, see P. Hardie, *Ovid's Poetics of Illusion* (2002), 295.

Ovid's extravagant boasts, and serves to remind us that the poetic immortality Ovid so grandly claims for himself only extends as far as the textual self-representation of his voice or persona, which may be every bit as contrived as any third-person fictional character. Ovid's confident claim that this autobiographical poem shows the real man ('ille ego qui fuerim', 1) behind the Ovidian literary persona ('quem legis', 2) is of course impossible, for Ovid knows that this autobiographical poem inevitably becomes part of the persona, too.⁷⁸ It is that Ovidian voice which is immortal, contrived or not, and this is why Ovid turns to us, his posthumous readers, and thanks us in the last line of the poem.⁷⁹ That same power of a reader's imagination exercised in response to vivid writing which can turn Ponticus and Bassus into real poets is what will keep Ovid alive through the ages.

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⁷⁸ On the funerary overtones of these phrases, see Fairweather, *op. cit.* (n. 76), 186–8.

⁷⁹ The poem is addressed at the start to *posteritas*, 2; it concludes: 'tibi grates, candide lector, ago', 132.