

Female Agency and Consequence: A Classic(s) Case of Toxic Masculinity

Latin erotic elegy has long spurred a fierce debate over whether its female subjects are lifted up or further subjugated in the famed literature that portrays them.¹ Elegy as a genre largely consists of male writers doting, pining, and ranting over their beloveds, as well as sprawling, romantic descriptions of mythological figures. The elegists, namely Propertius, Tibullus, and Ovid, were brutally honest and emotionally raw in their love poetry; they described the tribulations they experienced with their *dominae* in excruciating detail, creating a sense of relatability and intimacy that few readers could resist. I find Propertius' relationship to his *domina*, Cynthia, particularly interesting: the elegist casts himself as a man captured in *servitium amoris*, the slavery of love.² He claims to be subject to the whims of his mistress, who controls his entire life according to her tempestuous moods. Scholars like Ellen Greene have suggested the existence of two disparate Cynthias – the “ideal” and the “real.”³ Greene, in conversation with Luce Irigaray's theory of male specularization,⁴ argues that the ‘ideal’ Cynthia is merely a construct of Propertius' imagination, a projection of his thoughts and desires. R.O.A.M.

¹ Compare Ellen Greene, “Elegiac Women: Fantasy, Materia, and Male Desire in Propertius 1.3 and 1.11.” *AJP* 116, no. 2 (1995): 303-18 with Judith P. Hallett, “The Role of Women in Roman Elegy: Counter-Cultural Feminism.” *Arethusa* 6, no. 1 (1973): 103-24.

² R.O.A.M. Lyne. “Servitium Amoris.” *CQ* 29, no. 1 (1979): 117-30.

³ Greene, “Elegiac Women,” 303.

⁴ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 350-2 (as cited in Greene.)

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Lyne states that the 'real' Cynthia, the one of substance and individuality, "breaks in upon the eggshell world of dreams," ruining Propertius' hopes for his lover.⁵ Along the same vein, there is debate over whether Cynthia is based upon a real Roman woman or whether, as Maria Wyke states, she is simply a literary figure for Propertius to manipulate and mold to his liking, a *scripta puella*.⁶ Much traditional scholarship, such as Judith P. Hallett's musings on elegiac "counter-cultural feminism," has attributed a sort of abstract proto-feminism to Propertius, as well as the other elegists, due to the apparent power reversal between man and woman in their poetry.⁷

In contrast, I believe that even if the elegists were depicting real-life lovers in their text, they sculpted them into their own *scriptae puellae*. These "written women" sent a subtle message of encouragement regarding traditional power dynamics, which codified the subordination of the feminine, and a clear message of warning against women who wished to break free of these constraints. Through analysis of poems 1.3, 1.11, and 4.4, this essay will show that the elegiac woman who takes agency suffers because of it, sometimes fatally. Elegy thus serves as a warning to Roman women: "do not take agency in regards to your lover (or, if we are to generalize, at all), lest something terrible happen to you as a result." This cause-and-effect relationship between female agency and negative consequence reflects the Roman elegist's desire for a controllable, passive woman. In putting forth this theory, I will

⁵ R.O.A.M. Lyne, "Propertius and Cynthia: Elegy 1.3." *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 16, no. 196 (1970): 61.

⁶ Maria Wyke, "Written Women: Propertius' *Scripta Puella*." *JRS* 77 (1987): 49.

⁷ Hallett, "Role of Women," 105.

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build upon the ideas of female subordination in current scholarship and attempt to dismantle certain claims of feminism within the Propertian corpus. I will first turn to Propertius' *Monobiblos* writings on his lover, Cynthia, and his desire to project his own views and emotions onto a passive lover.

The ideal woman: simile and suggestion

Propertius makes clear in his poems about Cynthia that his ideal woman is a passive one upon whom, as Ellen Greene states, he can project his own desires and fears.⁸ Poem 1.3 describes the poet's tipsy return from a night out; drunkenly admiring the sleeping Cynthia, he compares her to a series of mythological females: *Qualis Thesea iacuit cedente carina / languida desertis Cnosia litoribus* (1-2).⁹ Propertius uses simile to equate Cynthia to Ariadne, the princess of Crete, abandoned on a deserted island by her lover Theseus. Propertius mirrors Cynthia with Ariadne as she *iacuit*, lay, on the Cnosian shores watching her beloved Theseus sail away. The use of the word *qualis*, "such as," places Cynthia in direct comparison to the abandoned, helpless Ariadne, who is *languida*, worn-out or used-up. The language paints a picture of a woman unable or unwilling to do anything on her own, waiting for a man to come and rescue her. In fact, she is able only to watch as the lover who has abandoned her in favor of heroism takes traditionally "masculine" agency by chasing adventure. Propertius first transposes Ariadne's passivity onto Cynthia and then idealises it via its description; in fact, the first time he describes Cynthia in detail is as this "ideal" version.

⁸ Greene, "Elegiac Women," 304.

⁹ Propertius, 1.3.1-2: "Just as the worn-out girl lay on the deserted Cnosian shores, with the Thesean ship departing."

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In lines 17 and 18, Propertius comments as he watches his mistress sleep: *Non tamen ausus eram dominae turbare quietem, / expertae metuens iurgia saevitiae* (17-18).¹⁰ Propertius will not *turbare quietem*, disturb the quiet, of his mistress, fearing (*metuens*) that she will be cruel to him (*expertae...iurgia saevitiae*) upon waking. We are introduced to the word *dominae* for the first time in the poem here, which itself holds elegiac significance: *domina* is directly translated as "mistress of the house," but in Latin love poetry it has come to represent the powerful, often cruel mistress of the elegist's heart.¹¹ The image of Cynthia as *domina*, filled with *iurgia saevitiae*, is, of course, completely incompatible with that of Cynthia as *languida*, like the passive Ariadne. It is here, then, that we are first introduced to the 'real' Cynthia: she who hurls abuses at her loyal lover, who treats him cruelly and unfairly, who instills fear in the heart of Propertius and, the author hopes, disdain in the heart of the reader. *Saevitiae*, savagery, connotes a sense of not only wildness, but of a malicious sort, whose lack of civilization goes hand-in-hand with its explicit cruelty. Furthermore, if "real" Cynthia's *saevitiae* are *expertae*, she must employ them frequently and with effective force; Propertius' language suggests he is accustomed to these insults. A dichotomy thus emerges: Cynthia can either be the 'ideal' version of herself, by which she must remain mute and passive, unable to communicate her own thoughts and feelings; or the 'real' version, where she is unkind, uncivilized, and frenetic. Recent scholarship reflects similar ideas about how a woman ought to behave in such a situation. Lyne, for instance,

¹⁰ Propertius 1.3.17-18: "However, I did not dare disturb the quiet of my mistress, fearing the abuse of her expert savagery."

¹¹ Paul Allen Miller, *Latin Erotic Elegy* (London: Routledge, 2002), 109.

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interpreted that the 'real' Cynthia had employed "tenuous feminine logic" in her impassioned complaints.¹² The elegiac woman is relegated either to being voiceless (the ideal), or to having the sort of voice which the reader is meant to antagonize (the real). Female agency, demonstrated in the poem as a conscious Cynthia who is expressing her own emotions, concerns, and thoughts, is framed as a negative phenomenon. As Megan Drinkwater deftly explains, the elegiac female remains trapped within Roman power structures and as such must stand in gendered opposition to her male lover.¹³ Speech disrupts the 'ideal' Cynthia whom Propertius adores, removing her from the romanticized mythical women described earlier in the poem and placing her squarely in the less rosy world of reality. Neither the 'real' nor the 'ideal' Cynthia is the true version of any woman, as both are constructs of Propertius' imagination. As Greene points out, Propertius' text is the very reason for Cynthia's existence.¹⁴ Even the 'real' Cynthia is real only to the extent that Propertius will allow her to be, and she exists only as long as she is useful to him.

Propertius' poem 4.4 describes the tragedy of Tarpeia, who deserts her responsibilities as a Vestal Virgin after she falls in love with the Sabine prince Tattius, an enemy of the Roman state. Tarpeia suffers an unfortunate fate at the end of the poem, when she dies beneath Tattius's sword. Propertius portrays Tarpeia to be at her best as the Vestal Virgin, a 'pure' female role in Roman society. A trend beginning far before Augustan Rome and extending well beyond it is the relegation

¹² Lyne, "Propertius and Cynthia: Elegy 1.3," 76.

¹³ Megan O. Drinkwater, "The Woman's Part: The Speaking Beloved in Roman Elegy." *CQ* 63, no 1 (2013): 329.

¹⁴ Greene, "Elegiac Women," 315.

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of women to specific roles within society, and their allowance only to have the desires and take the actions determined by these roles. The Vestal Virgin is the epitome of this relegation: each must remain chaste and is rewarded high status within Roman society because of her 'purity'.¹⁵ The concept of feminine 'purity' itself exists as a product of the binaries imposed on the female; the ideal woman, again, is the controllable woman, the passive woman, the woman who will not do anything so daring that she might be deemed 'impure'. The woman who takes agency, then, will never be able to be as 'pure' as the passive woman of elegiac fantasy.

The scourge of female agency: a Propertian warning

In the poems of Propertius, a trend emerges in which female agency is often equated to infidelity and wickedness. When Cynthia gives the slightest sign of activity in poem 1.3, Propertius is racked with fear over what insidious thoughts she might be indulging as she sleeps:

*Et quotiens raro duxti suspiria motu,
obstupui vano credulus auspicio,
ne qua tibi insolitos portarent visa timores,
neve quis invitam cogeret esse suam (27-30)*¹⁶

Propertius sees a sort of micro-agency in Cynthia's dream in the form of a sigh, *duxti suspiria motu*. This minute action, being separate from him and his own body, immediately causes him to fear that Cynthia might be dreaming of having an affair. However, not even Cynthia's own infidelity can be her doing:

¹⁵ Holt N. Parker, "Why Were the Vestals Virgins? Or the Chastity of Women and the Safety of the Roman State." *AJP* 125, no. 4 (2004): 567-8.

¹⁶ Propertius 1.3.27-30: "And as often as you, stirring, gave a rare sigh, I stood in awe, believing a false omen, that visions carried you strange fears, or that another forced you, unwilling, to be his."

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she must be unwilling (*invitam*) with her new lover forcing (*cogeret*) her to be unfaithful. The verb *cogo*, *cogere* means to force, to drive, or to encourage. For Propertius, the ideal Cynthia is indeed something to be driven this way and that, rather than a real woman with a life separate from his desires toward her. She is not in control of herself; even in his affair fantasy, some external force must be causing Cynthia to be unfaithful. Moreover, in Propertius' fantasy, Cynthia is forced *esse suam*, to belong to her other lover. In her new relationship, she is forced to give up any semblance of independence or self-determination. No singular element of Cynthia's infidelity leaves her in control; she is unwillingly forced to cheat on Propertius. She then belongs to her new *amator*, who, we may assume, is also male. Even Propertius' worst fears are contained within gender binaries, which place the masculine in a position of power. If Cynthia does not belong to him, she must at least belong to *some* man. This caveat is not to undermine the importance that Cynthia's agency plays in Propertius' fears: her actions are so horrifying to Propertius because he cannot control them, and thus, he cannot control her. Cynthia's agency is first vilified by the Propertius' assumption that any action of hers away from his watchful eye must involve disloyalty, vilifies Cynthia's agency. It invalidates it by the assurance that her male partner in crime will be in the dominant position, and she in the subordinate.

In poem 1.11, Propertius frets over his lover's vacation to the island of Baiae, a popular party destination and his reason for again linking Cynthia to disloyalty. After exhorting her to return to him from Baiae and wishing that she were instead on the secluded island of Teuthras, far from other men, Propertius turns to generalizing about women's behavior: *Ut solet amoto*

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labi custode puella, / perfida communis nec meminisse deos (15-16).¹⁷ Propertius claims that when apart from their *custode* (keeper) women are *solet...labi...perfida*, accustomed to slip into unfaithfulness. A *custos*, then, is required to prevent female *perfida*. Women cannot be trusted to remain chaste without intervention. The word *custos* can also denote a warden, guard, or jailer.¹⁸ Thus, the implicit meaning of Propertius' statement is that women must be 'jailed' or 'guarded', lest they act disloyally. Without their *custos*, perhaps their lover himself, women might have agency, suggesting here that this agency is synonymous with infidelity. Propertius also inserts religion (*communis nec meminisse deos*) into his anecdote to intensify the sense of immorality with which he shackles women. Male guardianship is required to ensure the upholding of the forgotten morals, which, as is made clear in other poems of Propertius (4.8, for example), are only enforced on the Roman woman. This troubling realization paints a couplet in poem 1.3 in a new light: *sed sic intentis haerebam fixus ocellis, / Argus ut ignotis cornibus Inachidos* (19-20).¹⁹ Propertius claims to be watching Cynthia as Argus watched Io, *intentis ... fixus ocellis*. Io is described as having *ignotis cornibus*, strange horns, inciting a sense of wonder in the observer that carries over into Propertius' awe at Cynthia's beauty. Let us not forget, however, why Argus was watching Io: Juno turned Io into a cow to punish her for her illicit relationship with Jupiter. The queen of the goddesses then enlisted the hundred-eyed hero to watch over her husband's

¹⁷ Propertius 1.11.15-16: "A girl, separated from her keeper, is accustomed to slip into faithlessness, having forgotten the communal gods."

¹⁸ OLD, s.v. *custos*, 2c.

¹⁹ Propertius 1.3.19-20: "But thus I was clinging, stuck with fixed eyes, as Argus saw Io with foreign horns."

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bovine lover. In essence, Argus was Io's *custos*, guarding her to prevent any infidelity. A reading of 1.3, which takes Propertius' warning about women in 1.11 into account, thus suggests we blame Io for being unfaithful instead of Jupiter, the real perpetrator of the adulterous act. Io had no *custos* at the time of her affair with Jupiter – guardianship on Argus's part was required to prevent her from violating female morality once more. Using this intertextual thread within his corpus, Propertius subtly introduces the idea that the woman is always to blame in cases of infidelity, and that she must be controlled to keep such deeds from occurring. If a woman has control over her own actions, she will be adulterous, undesirable, "real." The only solution, then, is to limit female agency and bring women back to the "ideal" status, which Propertius has created for them. This way, any man might have his very own *languida* Ariadne, rather than fearing adultery as Propertius does with Cynthia.

Propertius' musings on female sexuality are by no means limited to his first book. In poem 4.4, mentioned above (p. 5-6), he represents the Vestal Virgin Tarpeia's sexuality with the urn of water she carries atop her head. When Tarpeia sees Tatius for the first time, she is immediately struck by his beauty and strength--so much so that she drops her urn: *Obstipuit regis facie et regalibus armis,/ interque oblitas excidit urna manus* (21-22).²⁰ Tarpeia *obstipuit* at Tatius's impressive weaponry and regality, and the *urna ... excidit ... interque oblitas ... manus*. As Micaela Janan states in part of a larger investigation into Propertius 4.4, the dropping of the *urna*

²⁰ Propertius 4.4.21-22: "She stood in awe of the face of the king and of his royal weaponry, and the urn fell from between her forgetful hands."

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signals the beginning of Tarpeia's descent into immorality, leading her down a path on which she abandons her Vestal Virgin duties and eventually dies by Tatius's sword.²¹ The *urna* is Tarpeia's female sexuality; a precious and delicate thing, it is ruined by her tradition-breaking romantic desires at the very moment when she strays from the kind of thought acceptable by Vestal standards. The verb *excidit* is particularly suggestive here: coming from *excido*, *excidunt*, in this context it can mean either "to fall out" or "to slip from memory, to be forgotten." As the physical urn falls from Tarpeia's hands, the proper thoughts of her own fragile sexuality slip from her mind. This sexual self-awareness, the tempering of and control over female desire, soon proves to be something Tarpeia will sorely miss. Propertius ensures that Tarpeia's new lack of sexual self-control, in the way she writes her own speech, will shock his reader. In her fruitless entreaty that Tatius love her back, Tarpeia exclaims, *Me rape et alterna lege repende uices!* (58).²² *Me rape* means, quite literally, "rape me." There is minimal room for interpretation; *rapio*, *rapere* can mean to snatch or to abduct. However, Tarpeia's request that *alterna lege repende uices* brings the rape of the Sabine women into the narrative as a point of comparison, and confirms her violent language. These words show Tarpeia as unhinged, immoral, and confused: how can one *ask* to be raped, an action so explicitly defined by its lack of consent? Her very sanity is called into question, not to mention the sharp departure she has made from the language and conduct expected of a Vestal Virgin. Propertius has deftly inserted into

²¹ Micaela Janan. "'Beyond Good and Evil': Tarpeia and the Philosophy in the Feminine." *CW* 92, no. 5 (1999): 435.

²² Propertius 4.4.58: "Rape me, and choosing one after the others pay in kind!"

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4.4 a certain progression thus far: Tarpeia has abandoned her sexual self-control and her societal role, and decided instead to pursue the man she loves. This choice, if painted as acceptable, would seem to signal elegiac support of the idea of the ambitious, self-sufficient, independent woman. So, naturally, Tarpeia's newfound self-determination and freedom from societal norms must be accompanied by a loss of morals and of sanity. In this intricate manner, Propertius can use elegiac myth to spread a message, which dissuades women from being autonomous and, in doing so, promotes their subordination to their societally-assigned roles. Indeed, the Propertian reader asks, if Tarpeia had remained bound to her Vestal duties, would she not have survived?

A death deserved: actions and consequences

In poem 4.4, Propertius' subtle messages about women's role in society come to a dramatic conclusion: when a female such as Tarpeia takes such blatant agency, especially towards the man she loves, she deserves nothing less than death itself. In the last lines of the poem, this implicit suggestion becomes evident:

*Prodiderat portaeque fidem patriamque iacentem,
nubendique petit, quem velit, ipsa diem.
at Tatius (neque enim sceleri dedit hostis honorem)
"nube" ait "et regni scande cubile mei!"
dixit, et ingestis comitum super obruit armis.
haec, virgo, officiis dos erat apta tuis.
a duce Tarpeia mons est cognomen adeptus:
o vigil, iniustae praemia sortis habes. (87-94)²³*

²³ Propertius 4.4.87-94 "She had betrayed the faith of the gate and the dormant country, and she sought to marry, as she wished, on that day. But Tatius (for the enemy did not honor her wickedness), "marry" he said "and climb into my royal bed!" He said this, and buried her under the heaped-up shields of his comrades. This, maiden, was a dowry

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Tarpeia *prodiderat*, betrayed, her country by wishing to marry the enemy Tattius, *nubendi ... quem velit*. For doing so, she is labeled *sceleri*, wicked. Tarpeia's death by Tattius' hand is presented as her *dos*, dowry. The Roman *dos* was a gift given by the bride's family to the groom's in order to successfully lay the foundations of their new household;²⁴ with this definition of the word, Tarpeia's death becomes transactional. If we are to extrapolate, then, this transaction consists of the exchange of her chastity and sexual self-control for her life. The confirmation that this *dos* is *apta*, proper, for Tarpeia's *officiis*, services, drives Propertius' point home: that Tarpeia's break from the female status quo justifies her death, and, in fact, that death is an apt consequence, a dowry, for this type of behavior. Propertius even goes so far as to claim that Tarpeia does not deserve the hill named after her, the *iniustae praemia sortis* (93-4) — Tarpeia has not earned a dignified death made sweeter with dedication and mourning, one a hero would enjoy. Rather, her demise is a shameful one, one that does not even warrant the commemoration it has already received. It is important to mention that part of Tarpeia's shame is that she has betrayed her country by falling for a Sabine prince, as the Sabines were Roman enemies. However, the fact that the betrayal itself consisted of her falling in love and acting upon it (by attempting to assist Tattius in his efforts to conquer Rome) is consistent with the idea that the true shame lies in Tarpeia's agency towards her lover, not in the identity of the lover himself. Her doom was

suited to your deeds. The mountain obtained its name from the guide Tarpeia: o watcher, you have that prize from unjust fate."

²⁴ Bruce W. Frier. "Roman Dowry: Some Economic Questions." Law and Economics Workshop (2013). Michigan Law. Lecture.

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sealed when she saw Tatius and dropped the urn, thus abandoning her Vestal duties. However, Tatius' suggestion that Tarpeia *scande cubile mei*, climb into his bed, and the description of her death as her *dos*, imply that her evils were in her sexual and marital efforts toward Tatius. Tarpeia's desertion of her country would not have occurred if she had not acted on her romantic desire, and as such, her wrongdoing lies in her attempts at taking sexual agency toward Tatius. This agency is the root of her sin and the reason she deserved to die.

Let us not forget, too, that Propertius has woven the idea of Tarpeia's deserved death into the entirety of poem 4.4, not just its climactic conclusion. Directly after introducing Tarpeia's character, Propertius cements her status as a disgrace to Rome: *et satis una malae potuit mors esse puellae, / quae uoluit flammis fallere, Vesta, tuas?* (17-18).²⁵ One death (*una mors*) is not sufficient (*satis*) for Tarpeia, as she has betrayed her position as the perfect woman, the Vestal Virgin. Tarpeia has switched from the "ideal" to the "real," and to Propertius, this shift is intolerable. Female imperfection in a sexual and moral sense has made it impossible for Propertius to idealize women in the way he tries to with Cynthia. The "real" woman is not acceptable because she is not flawless — and here, once more, feminine perfection is defined by virtuousness, passivity, and docility.

This description of Tarpeia's disgrace, I posit, is an integral element of Propertius' efforts to dissuade female agency in his elegy. The cause-and-effect relationship between the two plot-points becomes blatant: Tarpeia's agency, her *officiis*,

²⁵ Propertius 4.4.17-18: "And could one death be enough for this wicked girl, who wished to betray your flames, Vesta?"

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warrants her scandalous death. What respectable Augustan woman would wish this upon herself? The only course of action, then, is to avoid taking control over one's life in this way; if agency leads to a shameful demise, it is fair to say that lack thereof must merit the opposite. In this sense, Propertian elegy becomes a fear tactic of sorts to keep the female Roman population under control: if a woman's very life is on the line, she will remain passive and governable. She becomes, in Propertius' eyes, the "ideal" version of herself.

The world between the words: Propertius' impact

Erotic elegy's impact on literature and society in both the ancient and modern world has been profound, and in reading classical literature it is imperative that we consider the messages being propagated within these enthralling tales of love and loss. Moreover, to label this genre or any of its authors within any sort of 'feminist' nomenclature as Hallett attempts to do, or to place them in direct opposition to those titles, is to enclose it within a concept that did not exist at the time and could not possibly describe it correctly. Hallett's writing still holds validity in its argument that elegy's inclusion of women as protagonists in literature was momentous enough in and of itself and that within the genre their roles varied greatly from author to author and even from poem to poem.²⁶ However, it is also important to consider the ways in which the elegists used their female characters to their own advantage. Propertius, I believe, had an agenda far beyond the expression of his romantic woes and the reframing of mythological events. Propertius' leading

²⁶ Hallett, "The Role of Women in Roman Elegy."

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ladies reflected both his hopes for the 'ideal' and his balking at the existence of the 'real' woman; within his corpus, he creates a subtle set of guidelines for what a Roman woman should and should not be. Furthermore, as Wyke reminds us, Propertius wrote part of his corpus with the expectation that it would be read by Augustus (an unlikely addition to the elegiac boys club), who in the first century B.C.E. was in the process of instituting a set of moral reforms on the Roman population.²⁷

It is reasonable to suggest that Propertius might have used his elegy to remind Roman men, if not the emperor himself, of women's place in society, as well as to put in place a clear code of conduct for his female audience. Moreover, it is relevant to remember that these works are still read and lauded widely. As modern readers, we must approach the Propertian corpus with the awareness that Cynthia, the *scripta puella*, allows Propertius to idealize feminine passivity while painting female agency as harsh, cruel, and unfaithful. Without a *custos*, who knows what any woman might do? Tarpeia becomes a shining example of the real dangers Propertius associates with feminine power, and her shameful death serves as a haunting reminder to any Roman woman to remain docile. Propertius' women do not exist unless he writes them into being; he possesses ultimate control over their words and actions. The reader must be mindful of this disconnect between the elegiac female and her voice--her agency has been stripped from her in the most essential of ways, handed over entirely to Propertius to manipulate so that it might serve him best. The elegiac woman was a tool for the elegists to propagate their own ideas

²⁷ Wyke. "Written Women".

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of the gendered power dynamic, and their message is clear:
ladies, (any) actions have consequences.

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