Elegy 1.19 is a poem written by the Roman poet Propertius (c. 54-2 BC), as one in a collection of twenty-two poems called the Monobiblos. The Monobiblos, published around 28 BC, is a series of love poems centered on Cynthia, the narrator’s object of desire. In Elegy 1.19, the last one in which Cynthia is mentioned by name, the narrator asks her to love him even after he is dead, and relates her love as a means to conquer the grave. This poem drew me because of its beautiful style, philosophical complexity, and overall dark theme.

Propertius Elegy 1.19

Non ego nunc tristis vereor, mea Cynthia, Manes,
  nec moror extremo debita fata rogo;
  sed ne forte tuo careat mihi funus amore,
  hic timor est ipsis durior exsequiis.
non adeo leviter nostris puer haesit ocellis,
  ut meus oblito pulvis amore vacet.
illic Phylacides iucundae coniugis heros
  non potuit caecis immemor esse locis,
  sed cupidus falsis attingere gaudia palmis
  Thessalii antiquam venerat umbra domum.
illic quidquid ero, semper tua dicar imago:
  traict et fati litora Magnus amor.
illic formosae veniant chorus heroinae,
  quas dedit Argivis Dardana praeda viris:
quarum nulla tua fuerit mihi, Cynthia, forma
  gratior et (Tellus hoc ita iusta sinat)
quamvis te longae remorentur fata senectae,
  cara tamen lacrimis ossa futura mei.
quae tu viva mea possis sentire favilla!
tum mihi non ullo mors sit amara loco.
quam vereor, ne te contempto, Cynthia, busto
abstrahat a nostro pulvere iniquus Amor,
cogat et invitam lacrimas siccare cadentis!
flectitur assiduis certa puella minis.
quare, dum licet, inter nos laetemur amantes:
non satis est ullo tempore longus amor.

In *Elegy* 1.19 of Propertius we find a fascinating address from the Propertian narrator to his beloved Cynthia. Throughout the poem the narrator describes the terrible emptiness of an ignominious death, but then assures himself that the “likeness” (*imago*) of his lover, fostered by a “Great Love” (*Magnus Amor*, 1.19.12) will remove death’s sting. Despite these assurances, the narrator ultimately concludes that his situation is hopeless and that he ought to love for the present, because “no love is long enough in any time” (26). We see in this elegy that there is another force at work: “Discontented Love” (*Iniquus Amor*, 22), who works to remove the hope of immortal glory through poetry. In fact, it is the forces of these two Loves that drive the thought behind the entire elegy. This paper shall argue that there are two distinct Loves at work in *Elegy* 1.19: there is the ideal *Magnus Amor*, who fosters a relationship between the narrator and Cynthia which provides him immortal glory through poetry, and the realistic *Iniquus Amor*, who destroys this potential relationship and instead throws the couple into empty, bodily passion.

**I. Magnus Amor and Iniquus Amor**

I shall begin by defining the attributes of the two loves in *Elegy* 1.19. In the midst of the elegy, the narrator boldly proclaims that “Great Love crosses even the shores of death” (*traicit et fati litora magnus amor*, 12). This “Great Love”, which has the power to transcend death, becomes the drive behind the narrator’s desire for his relationship with Cynthia. In order to understand *Magnus Amor*’s role in this relationship, we must first understand why exactly he is called *magnus*.

Propertius’s use of *magnus* here suggests magnanimity. The definition of *magnus*, with respect to the mind or spirits, is “[b]old, confident, good, high; also, generous, lofty.” In this particular context the adjective *magnus* suggests a sort of love that is grand and lofty, and commands awe and respect. Shackleton Bailey
expands on the use of *magnus* here saying that “*magnus* has a special application to the wonderful or supernatural...Livy (1.16.5) writes of Romulus’s translation [into a god] as *magna res*, Ovid of the elements fire and water, *haec duo magna putant* (Fast. 4.792).”

Bailey’s comment and examples demonstrate that *magnus* has a lofty, noble quality (perhaps even to the point of divinity, as suggested by the reference to Romulus’s apotheosis). Whether or not *Magnus Amor* is divine or not is not essential to understanding that it commands great respect. It is this grand love which can transcend death, and which the narrator aspires towards in his relationship with Cynthia.

We see that the narrator desires that he and Cynthia share *Magnus Amor*. We also see that *Magnus Amor*, in addition to being magnanimous, has a non-physical purpose. The strongest evidence for these claims is the narrator’s statement that “if you [Cynthia], alive, are able to feel affection² for my ash, then death shall be bitter to me in no place” (*quae tu viva mea possis sentire favilla / tum mibi non ullo mors sit amara loco*, 19-20). This brings to mind line 12, in which *Magnus Amor* crosses over from death’s shores. Notice how the narrator’s stipulation for being saved is that she “feel affection” (*sentire*) for him. Given the context, it is not unreasonable that the affections she must feel are *Magnus Amor*, who conquers the grave. Notice also that there is no physical component to this affection. The stipulation is that she “feel” affection, which is an entirely non-physical exercise. Further, since the narrator is dead in this scenario, the “feeling” Cynthia does must be entirely non-physical. Therefore emotion, not physical sensation, becomes the narrator’s rescue from death. This is the ideal love, the *Magnus Amor*, to be pursued.

The mythological reference to Protesilaus and Laodamia exemplifies the desideratum of emotional *Magnus Amor*. In Propertius’s reference, the ghost of the Greek hero Protesilaus thinks fondly of his wife: “There in the blind places the hero Phylacides is unable to be unmindful of his delightful wife” (*illic Phylacides iucundae coniugis heros / non potuit caecis immemor esse locis*, 7-8). The description of the wife of Protesilaus as *iucunda* indicates an emotional sort of delight, and not a sensuous one. In his interpretation of this line, Theodore Papanghelis interprets *iucundae* to mean “a mot juste for the ripples of delicious sensation but not for the billows of deep emotion[,]” He cites in support of this the
third entry under *iucundus* in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, which gives the definition “[a]greeable to the senses, delicious, etc.” As that definition indicates, the entry refers to things such as smells, flavors, sounds, and the like. This hardly seems appropriate for the scene of a wretched husband coming back from death to visit his beloved wife. More appropriate for this context is the second entry, which defines *iucundus*, with respect to persons, as “[d]elightful to be with, congenial or sim.” The dictionary’s use of the descriptors *delightful* and *congenial* suggest that the word *iucundus* has a far more personal and emotional connotation with respect to people. Since Propertius is applying this adjective to the *coniunx* of Protesilaus, and not a sensation, this definition is far more applicable than the one offered by Papanghelis.

Further, *iucundus* is used in similar poetry to describe emotional pleasure, not physical pleasure. Catullus uses it in his epyllion *Carmen 64*, when Aegeus is saying farewell to his son: “My only son, more dear to me by far than life” (*gnate, mihi longe iucundior unice vita*, 64.215). In this context, Aegeus is clearly not referring to his son in a sensuous manner, but rather with great affection, paralleling nicely with the wife of Protesilaus in the Propertian example. Likewise, in *Carmen 50*, he uses the word in reference to his close friend Licinus, after composing a poem about his pain: “I made this poem for you, my delight, from which you would understand my pain” (*hoc, iucunde, tibi poema feci, / ex quo perspiceres meum dolorem*, 50.16-17). Again, the adjective is used to show a congenial relationship, for the narrator thoroughly enjoys spending time with Licinus. Also notice that the *iucunde* is being called on to “understand” (*perspiceres*, 17) the narrator’s pain, a function of the intellect, not the senses. These two Catullan examples demonstrate well that the adjective *iucundus*, when used with respect to persons, signifies not so much a sensuous joy but rather an emotional, even intellectual delight. Thus, it is not unreasonable that the *iunda coniunx* of Protesilaus provides a deep, loving joy, and not a sensuous one. This is the sort of love, the *Magnus Amor*, which the narrator desires for himself and Cynthia.

I have argued that *Magnus Amor* is a wondrous entity whose love fosters emotion. Now we turn to its counterpart in *Elegy 1.19*, *Iniquus Amor*. This love seems to be the opposite of *Magnus Amor*, in that it is both ignoble and physical. As the narrator describes what will happen to Cynthia’s fidelity over time,
he says that “how I fear lest discontented love, Cynthia, drags you away from my dust, my grave contemned, and forces you, unwilling, to dry your falling tears” (quam vero, ne te contempto, Cynthia, busto / abstrahat a nostro pulvere iniquus Amor, / cogat et invitam lacrimas siccare cadentis, 1.19.21-23). Resentful Love “drags” (abstrahat, 22) Cynthia away from the narrator’s grave, and “forces” (cogat, 23) her to “dry” (siccare, 23) her tears. This love is incredibly aggressive, and deals with Cynthia in a physical manner. This image contrasts sharply with the qualities of Magnus Amor, whose influence is to elicit emotions, such as making Cynthia feel affection for the narrator (in the narrator’s ideal). Iniquus Amor, rather, is associated with physical action, such as removing Cynthia from the tomb and making her to dry her eyes.

Furthermore, the different names applied to the two loves portray different essential qualities. When applied to the mind or to feelings, the adjective iniquus means “[n]ot equable, discontented, resentful.”8 Such a definition is contrary to the attributes of Magnus Amor, who is noble and sublime. In light of this contrast, it seems unlikely that Iniquus Amor and Magnus Amor are the same Amor, as Richardson considers.9 How could a love which is lofty and sublime also be unstable? How can the love which commands respect and is “something wonderful”10 also be jealous and discontented? The quality of these loves seems too disparate to form a whole. I propose that, instead, there are two loves in Elegy 1.19, one nobler and emotive, the other baser and sensuous.

II. The Poet’s Immortal Desire

I have proposed that there are two separate Amores in Elegy 1.19, each with different attributes and interactions with the characters. In this second portion of the paper, I shall primarily deal with Magnus Amor and how he fosters immortal glory for the narrator. I propose that, in the narrator’s ideal, Magnus Amor fosters a relation between the narrator and Cynthia conducent to the creation of great poetry. The renown of this poetry affords the narrator immortal glory, because he is forever remembered by his works.

Essential to this interpretation of Propertius is that Cynthia is both his lover and a symbol for Propertius’s literary production. Recent scholarship has interpreted Cynthia in such a
manner. For example, Barbara Flaschenriem argues that “Cynthia is so closely identified with Propertius’ project as a writer of elegy, she becomes a focus of literary as well as erotic unease.” As Flaschenriem points out, Cynthia affords two concerns for the Propertian narrator: their actual relationship and the poetry produced as a result of that relationship. Both of these concerns come to light in Elegy 1.19. The narrator says to Cynthia, concerning his legacy “Whatever I shall be there [in the afterlife], forever I shall be spoken of as your likeness” (illic quidquid ero, semper tua dicar imago, 11). The narrator’s concern is how he shall be remembered, or “spoken of” (dicar, 11) after his death. And to the narrator, whatever this recognition shall be, it is dependent upon his “likeness” (imago, 11) of Cynthia. The imago of Cynthia seems to be the poetic work which is inspired by the narrator’s love affair with her.

Next, we must establish the connection between Magnus Amor and the poet’s immortal glory. Note the relationship between lines 11 and 12 in his address to Cynthia: “Whatever I shall be there [in the underworld], forever shall I be spoken of as your likeness: Great Love is able to cross even the shores of death” (illic quidquid ero, semper tua dicar imago; traicit et fati litora magnus amor, 11-12). The juxtaposition of these two lines suggests a connection between the power of Magnus Amor and the imago of Cynthia. This proximity suggests that the narrator’s likeness in Cynthia is dependent upon Magnus Amor. I would suggest that it is the love which the narrator desires between himself and Cynthia that produces this “likeness.” The “likeness” is the narrator’s poetic production, what Flaschenriem calls Cynthia’s close identification with Propertius’s elegiac endeavors. The likeness of Cynthia is the poetry of the narrator. Finally, the fruit of this love is eternal: the narrator shall “forever” (semper, 11) be thought of by his production. Thus, when Magnus Amor conquers death through the likeness of Cynthia, he does so forever. The poet’s glory is immortal.

In fact, Propertius frequently writes of how Cynthia is a source of poetic inspiration for him. There is a potent example of this inspiration in Elegy 2.1, in which he boasts of Cynthia’s ability to inspire his works: “or if, naked, she struggles with me when the cloak has been torn off, then truly do we establish long Iliads; whatever she did or whatever she spoke, the greatest history is
born from nothing” (seu nuda erepto mecum luctatur amictu / tum vero longas condimus Iliadas; / seu quidquid fecit sive est quodcumque locuta, / maxima de nihilo nascitur historia, 2.1.13-16). We see here a clear example of my two propositions: an act of love between Cynthia and the Propertian narrator produces glorious poetic offspring. Note also the explicit dependence upon Cynthia for their production: they arise from “whatever she did or whatever she spoke” (seu quidquid fecit sive est quodcumque locuta, 15). The works are “born” (nascitur, 16) because of her. These productive images lend themselves to the idea of a “likeness” (imago, 1.19.11) of Cynthia.

I have thus argued for the attainment of eternal glory through love of Cynthia. Throughout Elegy 1.19, however, it seems that Propertius considers the possibility of failing to attain this glory as much as the possibility of attaining it. He meditates on failure. In keeping with the theme of the poet’s desire for glory, failure constitutes an eternal ignominy. Flaschenriem comments on the opening of the poem, which reflects the narrator’s preoccupation with nothingness: “even as he alludes to a moment of fulfillment and extends it in the narrative time of the poem, he also establishes the perilous nature of its existence. Each of the narrator’s assertions in lines 1-6 is introduced by a negative (non – nec – ne – non) and his vocabulary likewise suggests dispossession and lack (careat, oblito…amore, vacet).”  Note, however, that he explicitly states that love of Cynthia will be his deliverer from this nothingness: “let not my death be lacking your love” (sed ne forte tuo careat mihi funus amore, 3). The narrator ardently desires Cynthia’s love, implying that having such love would soften death’s sting. Her love is continually referred to as a means of deliverance from the emptiness of death.

The mythological example of Protesilaus furthers this understanding of hell (so to speak) as nothingness. The fate of Protesilaus, at being denied this joyous love, is one of nonexistence. The issue at hand, then, is not so much the corporeality of Protesilaus, but rather the ontology. In the underworld, Protesilaus is “unable to be unmindful [of his pleasing wife] in those blind places” (non potuit caecis immemor esse locis, 8). First notice how Propertius makes heavy use of negatives in these lines: non potuit, immemor, caecis. The use of negative language paints an image of nonexistence; rather than saying Protesilaus was mindful of Laodamia, Propertius chooses instead to describe him as
“unable to be unmindful.” This circumlocution, phrased in a negative manner, weakens the image of Protesilaus. Flaschenriem comments upon this depiction “Propertius…calls attention to the ways in which his mythic prototype cannot be wholly present to his wife…he longs vainly to caress Laodamia ‘with his substanceless hands’ (falsis…palmis, 9).” The translation of falsis as “substanceless” is particularly appropriate, for it indicates nonexistence with respect to the hands. Thus, it seems that the fate of Protesilaus is not so much a lack of sensation or corporeality, but rather a lack of existence.

Further, Propertius describes him as being in caecis…locis. The translation of caecis is somewhat difficult. While the temptation is to use the translation “blind”, most of the definitions offered pertain to qualities other than the sense of sight. Of particular interest is the definition used with respect to places: “Devoid of light, dark, black, gloomy.” It is likely that the description being used here refers not so much to Protesilaus’s lack of sight, but rather of the misery, despair, and darkness that awaits him in the afterlife. This is the sort of afterlife which comes from being denied the joyous love of Laodamia: nonexistent misery.

Another example expanding upon this is the narrator’s sentiment about being Cynthia’s likeness. Recall his opening words were “whatever I shall be there” (illic quidquid ero, 11). This line shows the narrator’s uncertainty about his state of existence in the afterlife. Propertius has thus far spent the elegy focusing mainly on the negative, with the preoccupied opening and the nihilistic death of Protesilaus. Then, out of this gloom and uncertainty (quidquid) about his future existence (ero), he then distinctly posits his potential salvation: his likeness in Cynthia. This first reference to the imago, after the preceding dreariness, truly highlights its hopeful aspect.

I have proposed here a theory as to what the desire of the narrator is: to achieve immortal glory through a love of Cynthia. By having a “Great Love” (Magnus Amor, 12) for Cynthia, the narrator is able to produce a poetic progeny with her, because Magnus Amor seeks not the pleasures of the body but pleasure of the soul. This progeny, the “likeness” (imago, 11) of Cynthia, its progenetrix, shall become the narrator’s likeness after his death. If that likeness is a literary production worthy of praise and honor, the poet shall attain immortal glory and be spared from the gloom
of an ignominious death. This is the ideal of the poet, the desideratum, achieved through the workings of Magnus Amor.

III. An Unfulfilled Desire

I have argued at length that the Propertian narrator has a great many desires – Magnus Amor from Cynthia, immortal poetic glory arising from his literary offspring, and the avoidance of an ignominious, empty death. The Propertian narrator puts forth a great many ideals and desiderata. Nevertheless, does the narrator in fact believe he can attain these ideals? It would seem that the narrator’s answer to this question would be no. The ideals he puts forth are merely ideals, and he seems to have no hope they can be fulfilled.

At the end of the poem, the narrator seems to abandon the hope of immortal glory. After his speech on Iniquus Amor, he laments: “Wherefore, while it is permitted, let us lovers rejoice between ourselves” (quare, dum licet, inter nos laetemur amantes, 25). The phrase “while it is permitted, let us rejoice” (dum licet...laetemur, 25) entirely contradicts the promise of immortal glory. With this sentiment, the narrator asserts that the only happiness to be found is “while it is permitted”, that is, during life. As the example of Laodamia showed, the ideal happiness is one achieved through lovers who can produce a progeny which conquers even death. The narrator takes a far more Epicurean view of the matter, and rejects the ideal.

The narrator seems to find that this ultimate failure is that his love is not able to attain this heavenly ideal. He finishes the elegy with the remarkable assertion that “in no time is love ever long enough” (non satis estullo tempore longus amor, 26). Of particular importance is the adjective longus. When applied to things such as hopes and desires, it indicates a durability of that desire. Horace, a contemporary of Propertius, uses the adjective in a similar context to describe the futility of human hope: “the brief tip of life forbids us to commence a long hope” (vitae summa brevis spem nos vetat incohare longam, Carmen 1.4.15). This lack of a longus amor, which supposedly could have furnished the love necessary for immortality, destroys the narrator’s hopes for immortal glory. Instead, the love is reduced to whatever love can be had in his
living years, and in no way resembles the Magnus Amor, which could remove the sting of death.

Perhaps the reason for this is that the narrator finds his love is only that of the lesser love, Iniquus Amor. The narrator fears “lest discontented love, Cynthia, drags you away from my dust, my grave contemned” (quam vereor, ne te contempto, Cynthia, busto / abstrabat a nostro pulvere iniquus Amor, 21-22). The narrator is afraid that Iniquus Amor will force her away from his “dust”, a symbol for his death, and that his grave will be defiled. This hearkens back to the beginning of the poem, where he prays that “my death not be lacking your love” (ne forte tuo careat mihi funus amore, 3). This, as I have argued, is a plea she have Magnus Amor for him, which would provide him immortal glory. However, if Iniquus Amor takes her away from his grave, his death will be lacking the nobler love, and he will be condemned to ignominy. It is this unhappy circumstance that the narrator believes to be more likely.

Flaschenriem seems to support such an idea, saying that Cynthia, as a literary construct fails to have stability necessary for an enduring memory: “if 1.19 marks Cynthia’s completion as the trademark of the Monobiblos, this completion is only provisional…Far from establishing Cynthia’s closure, Elegy 1.19 shows us the permeability of such fictive borders: it denies the possibility of closure.” This permeability seems due to the throws of Iniquus Amor, through whose influence “the faithful girl is bent by constant threats” (flectitur assiduis certa puella minis, 24). Perhaps, unable to transcend the physical preoccupations of this lower love, which does not foster virtue or an intellectual child, the narrator feels he is doomed to ignominy, and throws himself wholly into passions “between themselves” (inter nos, 25). This would be a characteristically Propertian twist: to set up a loft ideal only to throw it away at the end of the elegy. This seems to be what he has done here.

There seems to be a clear presence of two different loves in Elegy 1.19, each of which the narrator interacts with differently. I have argued that Propertius treats the Magnus Amor as an ideal to be aspired to, a love producing literary fruit with Cynthia which will attain for him everlasting glory, sparing him the trial of an empty death. I have also argued that he treats Iniquus Amor as the baser but more realistic outcome of his relationship with Cynthia, a
relationship producing no eternal offspring, but instead is driven by bodily passion. The interwoven themes, clever use of language, and surprising twist at the end are all classic attributes of Propertius’s style, and Elegy 1.19 is in no way lacking these characteristics. Nor indeed are we to assume that this is the last thing Propertius has to say on the subject of his own legacy, for he continues with this theme throughout the books of his elegies. Still, Elegy 1.19 provides a unique glimpse into the aspirations of Propertius, and we see displayed the ideal of his poetic desires. One wonders if he was truly dismissing that ideal, well-constructed as it was, and in fact retained a hope that his work would win him fame eternal. If this were the case, he would perhaps be pleased to know that his ideal was, to a limited extent, fulfilled.
Bibliography


Notes

1 The rubric which I have used to describe the two loves was inspired by Plato’s *Symposium*. In the speech of Pausianias, there are described two Erotes, a “Heavenly Eros”, which is noble and lofty (180d), and a “Pandemic Eros”, which is baser and more physical (181b). The similarities between the Erotes of Plato and the two *Amores* in 1.19 are significant, and suggest a possible Platonic influence in the composition of this poem.
2 OLD s.v. “magnus” 14.
3 Shackleton Bailey (1956) 55-6.
6 OLD s.v. “iucundus” 3.
7 OLD s.v. “iucundus” 2.
8 OLD s.v. “iniquus” 7.
9 Propertius (1977) 200.
10 Shackleton Bailey (1956) 55.
12 Ibid.
13 Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 209c-d. Diotima suggests that poets, having produced an intellectual offspring born of virtuous love, will gain them eternal renown and remembrance.
14 Although there is a clear sexual element in this scene, I do not believe it necessarily excludes the love being *Magnus Amor*, which I had proposed as non-physical. We see here that the purpose of the act of love is not pleasure in and of itself, but rather it was a means towards an end of literary production. The act’s purpose was consistent with the non-physical aspect of *Magnus Amor*. For a similar concept of sex as a means towards virtue, see Plato, *Symposium*, 185b.
15 Flaschenriem (1977) 262.
16 Ibid.
17 OLD s.v. “caecus” 2-12.
19 OLD s.v. “longus” 5.
20 For a very similar usage, see also Carmen 1.11.7.
21 Flaschenriem (1977) 265.