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Kendall Swanson

College of the Holy Cross, kswan22@g.holycross.edu

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Why Does Love Always Feel Like a Battlefield in Actium?
An Investigation of Battle Influences in Propertius

Kendall Swanson, '22

Propertius creates a persona of a man in love when writing his *Elegies*. His character as the narrator grows increasingly more complex as he includes strategic diction and allusions. This essay seeks to investigate the impact of specific military terms and allusions Propertius utilizes in his poetry. The existence of military language is quite strange at first, since he wrote love poetry. However, as one continues to see the historical context of his writing, the military terms seem to actually enhance his condition as a man who fights for his love. Propertius' use of military language, a product of the contemporary emphasis on war, is used to emphasize the masculine nature of himself and his work. In the wake of Actium, Propertius and his contemporaries were writing in a time where war and masculinity were directly related. Thus, writers found a habit in relating war to daily life. This is seen when Propertius applies military themes to both his love and his friendships, driving the point home that only a true man could be happy in a warlike love. Next, there is a heavy emphasis on emptiness, which has significance in the critical end to the Battle of Actium. Therefore, Propertius channels his feelings into yet another war motif: desertion. Finally, Propertius falls into the habit of comparing himself to other

men and his writing to other works. Notably, these references circulate around war or some form of domination. Thus, Propertius uses this allusion to show how his writing can be reflective of masculine ideals, while being love poetry.

Actium was a naval battle fought in 31 BC. Its end came from the decisive surrender of Marcus Antonius when the vast majority of his men deserted and he was left with few resources. As a result, Augustus Caesar, then Octavian, won the battle and Rome acquired Egypt.¹ This battle is especially significant for Propertius, because authors speculate that he may have fallen victim to the land seizures during this war.² Because of this, he may have a distaste for the civil war. Stephen Harrison explains a specific reference that Propertius makes to Actium: “Civil war continues to play a role: one of Propertius’ first allusions to Actium is not encomiastic, but rather an ironic observation that if everyone led the life of love and luxury there would be no civil wars and consequent grief.”³ The very nature of his poetry circulates around Actium, given that it was the relevant event to write about at the time. His indirect reference to this shows how his poetry is influenced by what is current, as it contributes to the subject

¹ W. Murray. (2012). Actium. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*: Oxford University Press. Retrieved 19 Dec. 2019.

² Stephen Harrison. “Time, Place and Political Background” in *The Cambridge Companion to Latin Love Elegy*. ed. Thea Seliass Thorsen. (Cambridge University Press: 2013.), 133-150.

³ Ibid.

matter. Thus, he proves to be more of a man by showing his knowledge of what is popular.

In addition, he makes more direct references to Actium, especially in Elegy 2.1. After listing off, quite thoroughly, the topics which he refuses to write about, Propertius goes into detail about his desired writing topics. Instead of writing about Remus's kingdoms and the high spirit of Carthage, Propertius would choose to write epic poetry about,

eversosque focos antiquae gentis Etruscae [...]

regum auratis circumdata colla catenis,

Actiaque in Sacra currere rostra Via,

“The overturned hearths of the ancient Etruscan race
[...] The king's necks circled by golden chains, and
Actian beaks (of ships) running the Sacred Way,”

(2.1.29-34)

He would rather write about the tragedy behind war, speaking first in the context of the Perusine War. While it was ten years earlier than Actium, he juxtaposes this tragedy with his perceived tragedy of Actium. It is clear that the Perusine War resulted in many deaths, which shows how cruel Octavian needed to be in order to win. Actium is a little more murky, because the victory was fairly beneficial to Rome. However, Caesar places overturning the Etruscan race right next to Actian ships running the Sacred Way, and it makes Actium

appear as cruel as Perusine. Propertius shows his manhood in this set of lines by giving his opinion on a matter that is relevant. Whether his thoughts are supported or not, Propertius takes a risk in publishing his political opinions. He gives his audience an opportunity to criticize him for writing an opinion that they do not agree with. Thus, his bravery in publishing about Actium shows how it was popular at the time, and how Propertius is masculine.

Propertius utilizes several military terms in lieu of a term that is more applicable to daily life. As a *militia amor*, he treats several elements to their love as if they are war actions. Whether they are having sexual intercourse, or he is spending time with his friends, there appears to be a significant use of military language in his daily life. In the fifteenth poem of his second book of elegies, released sometime after 29 BC, he utilizes military language. He relates his pursuit of Cynthia to Endymion and Phoebus:

Nudus et Endymion Phoebi cepisse sororem

Dicitur et nuda concubisse deae.

“And Naked Endymion is said to have snatched the sister of Apollo [Selene]

and to have lain with the naked goddess.” (2.15.15-16)

His use of the word *cepisse* shows how he views the actions of Endymion: he hunted Selene, the woman that he was

pursuing. Rather than describing his actions in a more romantic tone, Propertius chose to use a military term. This makes the conquest of Endymion appear more manly, since his language makes it seem that he was able to win a spoil of war, rather than win the affections of a woman. This places a woman's love in a more masculine context, because a true man would rather win a battle than a woman's hand. This analogy also has an interesting fallacy, because according to the myth itself, Selene was the one in pursuit of Endymion, not the other way around. This reversal of roles in comparison to Propertius' romantic efforts again makes him appear more manly because he "captured" his girl, and was not captured by her. Had Propertius maintained the true actions in the myth, his Endymion would not appear as manly, because he would have surrendered to Selene. This way, Propertius asserts that the man holds the control in these relationships, and that the woman is viewed as something that can be won.

From battlefield to bedroom, Propertius makes frequent use of his military skills. When Propertius and his girl find themselves alone, his description of their bedroom times become warlike. According to Megan O. Drinkwater, "The poem opens with the poet's delight at having finally spent the night with his girl, when they engaged in a great conflict (*rixa*, Prop 2.15.8), and his girlfriend fought with him [...] but threatens his *puella* [girl] with violence for coming to

bed clothed.”⁴ Propertius calls his bedroom activities a *rixa*, or quarrel. Considering that he rejoices in this *rixa*, one could imagine that he would call his sleepover something more joyful than a quarrel. Rather, he asserts his dominance as the male, as Drinkwater states, by threatening his girl. Again, he returns to his default manly descriptors: relating all things to war demonstrates how he views his own manhood. By making it known that he enjoys fighting in the bedroom, he shows that it requires a true man to love a battle-like girl.

Combat continues to show its connection to love in Propertian Elegy. On a smaller scale, he relates his bedroom time to naked wrestling. He refers to his time with his girl as fighting in the opening few lines of poem fifteen in book two by saying,

Nam modo nudatis mecum est luctata papillis,

Interdum tunica duxit operta moram.

“For she wrestled with me sometimes, with nipples
having been laid bare,

she, having been covered with a tunic, lead delays.”

(2.15.5-6)

As they are together, he wrestles with her, naked. While this is not quite as warlike as a capture or a quarrel, Propertius still reinforces the idea of combat. In this scenario, he joys in

⁴ Megan O Drinkwater. “*Militia Amoris*” in *The Cambridge Companion to Latin Love Elegy*. ed. Thea Selliaas Thorsen. (Cambridge University Press: 2013.), 195-206.

surrendering to her for a night, for she is the one who leads. In this context, the surrender appears to be purposeful, as he surrenders to the delays she leads. These delays are the “pillow talk” that they share after having wrestled in the bed. In this, his surrender is benefitting him because it means that he gets to spend more time with his girl. Thus, Propertius explores the fascinating of relinquishing power and maintaining masculinity. From an initial reading, he appears to be controlled, or “whipped” by his woman. It is only after seeing the context of their bedroom times that he shows that he is still in charge in his relationship. Thus, manhood is defined as selective submission in Propertian standards. This is seen how he controls who has the physical power in the relationship, by letting Cynthia lead the delays.

Finally, his role as a soldier extends beyond the bedroom. In the eighth elegy of book three, Propertius describes how he is proud of his violent girl. In fact, he wants everyone to see the love bites on his neck that indicate his status as a taken man. He declares,

Hostibus eveniat lenta puella meis!

In morso aequales videant mea vulnera collo:

Me doceat livor mecum habuisse meam.

“The slow girl comes out to my enemies!

let my comrades see my neck wounded in bites:

the bruise shows that I have my [girl] with me.”

(3.8.20-22)

He wants his audience to be varied: both his enemies (*hostibus*) and his comrades (*aequales*) should see his girl and her love bites. His word choice is peculiar in this context: rather than calling his “enemies” *inimicae* and his “comrades” *amicae*, he employs language that conjure up military themes. Describing his sexual actions in a battle context was fairly relevant, both Ovid and Catullus had been employing that method,⁵ but his choice to extend the battle motif to a platonic context shows how strongly he relates war with masculinity. His self-image has changed so drastically that he views his friends as comrades, and the people he does not like as his enemies. Thus, Propertius makes a clear effort to maintain his masculinity, as he relates quite a few aspects of his life to war.

An important military term that Propertius utilizes is the concept of desertion. A large influence that decided the fate of the Battle of Actium was the mass desertion of Marcus Antonius’ men. As a result, Antonius was viewed as a woman by the Roman people, and he surrendered to Augustus. In Propertius’ *Elegies*, Cynthia threatens his manhood by deserting him. This desertion is seen in how often he utilizes words to characterize emptiness. In fact, Propertius applies emptiness to his surroundings in order to reflect how he feels.

⁵ Ibid.

David O Ross writes that in the eighteenth elegy of book one, “The setting of the poem (lines 1-4) is an empty grove (*vacuum nemus*), deserted and silent (*Haec certe deserta loca et taciturna quarenti*), where the desolation corresponds to the lover’s abandoned solitude (*hic licet occultos proferre impune dolores /si modo sola queant saxa tenere fidem*).”⁶ Propertius would rather conceal his feelings than outwardly describe them. Thus, he presents a contrast between manhood and emotions. While his poetry does include plenty of emotion, found in the several times he refers to himself as *misera*, the emotion tends to be shrouded in violence. Thus, one can decipher Propertius’ true emotions through how he describes his surroundings, he is lonely. This shows his manliness in how he does not truly describe his emotions; he would rather put up a front and describe his surroundings as deserted. This makes the reader empathize with the woods rather than Propertius. Furthermore, he conceals his emotions by complaining about his love in complete solitude. Thus, Propertius shows his manhood in the way that he handles his emotions.

Cynthia, by deserting Propertius, threatens his manhood. This is evident because he consistently calls her a *perfida* or *periura*, both meaning oath-breaker, when

⁶ David O Ross. *Backgrounds to Augustan Poetry: Gallus, Elegy, and Rome*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.

discussing her potential new man. In the eighth elegy of the *Monobiblos*, Propertius says,

*Sed quocumque modo de me, periura, mereris,
Sit Galtea tuae non aliena viae:
Utere felici praevecta Cerauina remo,
Accipiat placidis Oricos aequoribus.*

“But in whatever earned way of me, oath breaker, may Galatea be not hostile to your way: use a lucky oar as you sail past the Ceraunian rocks, may the placid sea of the Oricos accept you.” (1.8.17-20)

His use of this insult among the calm words of the sea only highlight the harm he intends. As she is sailing away, he gives her a backhanded wish of safe travels, punctuated by this term of broken oath. In battle, the concept of *fides*, loyalty, is very important to soldiers. Therefore, as Cynthia sails away from Propertius to her new man, she commits treason by deserting him. This acts a threat to Propertius’ beloved manhood, as he becomes more like Marcus Antonius when he is deserted. In Actium, his reputation as a strong male figure became disparaged as the Roman public begin to refer to him as a woman. In this scenario, Propertius’ manhood is also threatened. In this case, Propertius is Antonius, and this new unnamed man is Octavian. As previously stated, the concept of a strong Roman army lies in manhood. In fact, the Latin word meaning virtue, *virtus*, finds its root in the Latin word

vir, meaning man.⁷ Historically, armies that did not perform their duties correctly were seen as confused in gender. Thus, relating Propertius back to a soldier, he is seen as confused in gender when his fellow soldier, Cynthia, deserts him. As a result, Propertius treats his woman with casual violence in order to try to keep his manhood intact.

Finally, Propertius asserts his manhood through constant comparison. As a poet, he wishes to attract a learned audience. He does so by referencing obscure *exempla*, examples, from myth and history. His references, like his language, are selected very carefully. For example, he relates himself to a friend of his, Gallus. In his writing, he makes it clear that Gallus is a womanizer. According to W.R. Johnson, “His suggestions center on Gallus’ need to learn to be tactful, considerate, submissive, loyal—to be more like Propertius himself.”⁸ These adjectives are reminiscent of a certain set of behaviors required from a soldier. By comparing his “loyal” self to a womanizer like Gallus, Propertius highlights his nature as an ideal, masculine Roman soldier. Also, his need to advise Gallus on the way to behave emphasizes how he is the more manly one of these two men: he is compelled to teach Gallus the ways of manhood. Thus, he selectively wrote his

⁷ Megan O Drinkwater. “*Militia Amoris*” in *The Cambridge Companion to Latin Love Elegy*. ed. Thea Selliaas Thorsen. (Cambridge University Press: 2013.), 195-206.

⁸ Walter Ralph Johnson. *A Latin Lover in Ancient Rome: Readings in Propertius and His Genre*. Ohio State University Press, 2009.

friend Gallus in such a way that he can compare himself to his friend. Again, his manhood shows in the way he acts like a true Roman man, and he has mastered this ability to an extent that he can teach others the way of true manhood.

Following this theme of submission, Propertius uses this feeling to distinguish his work from other poetry. By doing this, he shows the unique nature of his poetry and how it can be compared to other notable works. In his work, Clarence Mendell writes, “These elegies of Propertius breathe a wholly different atmosphere from that of the *Odes*, the *Georgics*, or the *Aeneid*. In the first place, the poet admits and seems to glory in his surrender to carnal love.”⁹ Mendell juxtaposes the *Elegies* with other notable works by Horace and Vergil. Therefore, scholarship shows that Propertius’ talent is on a similar plane to famed works that are contemporary to him. This literary glory further emphasizes his masculinity by giving him power in knowledge, as well as power outside of the bedroom. Also, it shows that his work is comparable to epic poetry, which is the peak of manly poetry.

Not only is his work compared to epic by scholars, Propertius himself takes the liberty of comparing his poetry to the *Iliad*, several times. In the first poem of his second book, he writes,

⁹ Clarence W Mendell. *Latin Poetry: The New Poets and the Augustans*. University Microfilms International, 1980.

Tum vero longas condimus Iliadas;

“Then in truth we build long Iliads;” (2.1.14)

As well as,

Si memini, solet illa leves culpare puellas,

Et totam ex Helena non probat Iliada.

“If I remember, that girl was accustomed to blame light girls, and she did not approve of the whole Iliad from Helen.” (2.1.49-50)

This poem that he writes to Maecenas includes two occurrences of Homer’s Iliad, yet another example of famous epic poetry. In this, it is clear that he is trying to win the favor of Maecenas, who was a famed patron of the arts. In this, he shows off his masculinity as a means to increase in status. This time, he uses this method of comparison to show that his poetry is quite similar to the Iliad, despite the difference in subject matter. Furthermore, his reference to the Iliad specifically connects his work to warfare: the Iliad mostly concerns war. Therefore, Propertius again reminds his readers that he is masculine, and he does so by planting images of warfare into the mind of his reader. From this reference, one now has a consistent connotation between Propertius’ *Elegies* and war. Thus, Propertius re-establishes his manhood which was once threatened.

Propertius wrote his *Elegies* with more than one intention in mind. While he wants to show his creativity and

knowledge as an author, he also wants to exhibit how he can be a masculine Roman man while writing love poetry. He does so through his constant use of military terms and references. Roman masculinity was deeply connected to warfare, as seen in the way soldiers behaved, and in the definition of virtue. In his poetry, it is evident that he was impacted by the Battle of Actium. This is visible in his constant references to this battle, both directly and indirectly. Again, he makes it clear that war is constantly on his mind by utilizing military terms in lieu of a more commonplace word. When one's friends turn into their comrades, it is clear that they view themselves as a soldier. The most striking of these terms that appears is the presence of desertion. Desertion devastated Marcus Antonius' army in Actium, and Propertius returns to this idea of devastation by desertion when talking about his love. The issue he has with Cynthia's departure for another man is that his manhood may be threatened, like that of Antonius in Actium. Finally, Propertius uses comparison to show his masculine work, and his own masculine nature. Both Gallus and the *Iliad* work as a means to emphasize Propertius' virtue, the former is a contrast, and the latter is a comparison. Thus, Propertius build a strong yet varied case for his own masculinity, both as a writer and as a lover.

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