

2020

Pornography and Poetry: The Humanity of the Performer

Zachary Tympanick

College of the Holy Cross, zjtymp23@g.holycross.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/parnassus-j>



Part of the [Classical Literature and Philology Commons](#), and the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Tympanick, Zachary (2020) "Pornography and Poetry: The Humanity of the Performer," *Parnassus: Classical Journal*: Vol. 7 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/parnassus-j/vol7/iss1/11>

This Essays is brought to you for free and open access by CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Parnassus: Classical Journal by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.

Pornography and Poetry: The Humanity of The Performer

Zachary Tympaniak, '23

Mia Khalifa: a name that sparks controversy in the eyes of the public and incites lust in the hearts of men. Both an adult film actress who has incited controversy and has been objectified by men and society for her provocative performances, and a woman with human traits who undergoes day-to-day challenges like everyone else. As a result of people knowing her primarily for her adult film career, they translate her performance identity onto her personal identity. Thus, people dehumanize her by treating her as an object of sexual pleasure and desire. We can associate Mia Khalifa the performer with Cynthia, Propertius's *scripta puella* or "the written woman" because both are fictional constructs that men pursue in sexual ways. Through the dialogues and descriptions of Cynthia, Propertius fashions a *scripta puella* whose individual humanity is put into question by his poetry. By understanding the dehumanization of fictional women like Cynthia, we can learn how these ludicrous expectations negatively impact people with personal and performing identities.

For this argument, a *scripta puella* is one of the focuses of an elegiac lover's poetry where she only exists on the page like how a performer only exists in their medium. When it comes to this trope for women in the works of

Catullus, Ovid, Tibullus, and Propertius, scholars have debated if these beloved girls were based on historical figures or were fictionalized from the poet's mind. Although some scholars have denoted these written women to be pseudonyms for real people—for example, Clodia is to Lesbia as Hostia is to Cynthia—Maria Wyke combats this belief with the idea that “read[ing] [these women] as pseudonym[s] is to misread or disregard the narrative organization of the poems.”¹ In conjunction with this statement, many scholars have looked into the purpose of a *scripta puella*. Megan Drinkwater remarks that a “written woman” must keep the lover's interest by teasing him in romantic and sexual ways like foreplay.² Sharon James elaborates on the notion of this trope by exhibiting that a *scripta puella*'s words are generic and are meant to reflect what the poet wants out of her and that she must “destabilize [the speaker].”³ Finally, Ellen Greene takes the written woman to the limit, arguing that the subordination of this female character reveals the devaluing of women, thus turning them into objects of male fantasies of erotic

¹ Wyke (p. 49) argues that elegy has become such an integral part of Cynthia's identity to the point where associating her with a “real” woman would diminish the literary movements P. makes with respect to her.

² Drinkwater (p. 329) discusses how the lover controls the beloved in his poetry.

³ James (p. 316) talks about how female speech in elegy is generic and reflects what the lover wants out of the girl.

domination.⁴ My reading of the *scripta puella* aligns greatly with Greene's investigation into the misogyny of the poet and the speaker towards the mistress, but Greene omits how deep Propertius submerges his *puella* into the world of fantasy and myth. For this argument, I will first analyze poems 1.3, 1.11, and 1.15 for their descriptions of Cynthia with respect to various mythological women. Specific to 1.3, I will also look into how the author tries to bring Cynthia into the real world. These analyses in turn will explore the dehumanization employed by Propertius the poet. Then, I will connect the dehumanization of Cynthia to Mia Khalifa and other examples in order to highlight the persistence of such degradation in our modern society.

In poem 1.3, Propertius dehumanizes Cynthia by comparing her to sexualized mythological women in order to restrict her to a realm of fantasy and myth. To start out the poem, Propertius introduces three similes of mythological women, all of whom, according to Ellen Greene, provide some additional traits for Cynthia. The poet leads the poem with an allusion to the "weak Cnosian girl," Ariadne, who "lied on the deserted shores when the Thesian ship was withdrawing" (*Thesea...litoribus*, *Prop.1.3.1-2*). Greene mentions that Ariadne represents Cynthia in this simile, and

⁴ Greene (p.305) challenges the notion of poets empowering women in elegy by proposing that poets instead devalue those same women to objects of sex and desire.

Bacchus, who comes to take Ariadne with him later in their story, represents Propertius.⁵ We can confirm the link between the two sets of characters because in Cynthia's speech later in the poem, she describes herself as "having been deserted" by Propertius, just like Ariadne by Theseus (*deserta*, 1.3.43). Greene then goes on to say that Ariadne's description as *languida* illustrates her as a damsel in distress who lacks any sort of agency.⁶ Additionally, the poet places *Cnosia* towards the end of the simile after *Thesea*, which puts an emphasis on Theseus being the primary defining trait of this allusion even though Ariadne is the subject and thereby bases her characterization off of Theseus's departure. By connecting Cynthia to Ariadne, a mythological character, Propertius sets up his *scripta puella* to be unlike anyone real, which dehumanizes Cynthia in the process.

In the next simile, Propertius mentions the story of "the Cepheian child, Andromeda, [lying] now beside in her first sleep" (*accubuit...Andromede*, 1.3.3-4). Again, as stated by Greene, Andromeda equals Cynthia and Propertius equates to Perseus in this simile.⁷ We know this because Andromeda's *primo somno* connects with Cynthia's mention of "Sleep [having] pushed [her]... on friendly wings" (*iucundis...alis*, 1.3.45). Through this simile, Propertius paints Andromeda as

⁵ Greene, 307

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

restrained and helpless to any danger that comes her way.⁸ By equating Cynthia to Andromeda, Greene notes that the poet depicts Cynthia as a victim helpless to any impending monster.⁹ Although the speaker can be equated to the sea monster, Perseus is just as, if not more of a monster than the actual sea monster. In the story of Perseus, after he frees Andromeda from her chains, he then takes her as his wife for a reward (after petrifying her family's entire court). Although Perseus releases Andromeda from the physical chains of bodily restraint, Perseus then immediately ensnares her character to the role of wife. This restriction of character in turn limits Andromeda's traits as an individual. This situation then begs the question, "What is a worse fate: dying at the hands of a sea monster or living in the shadow of a hero?" With Cynthia, the latter fate is true where she cannot be thought of anyone other than Propertius's *scripta puella*. Like with Ariadne, the poet pushes *Andromede* towards the end of the couplet and her characterization as "the Cepheian child" does not aid her in the realm of individual description.

Another simile Propertius draws on is "the [Maenad] weary from continuous dances" in the next couplet (1.3.5). Here, Greene equates Cynthia to the Maenad and this time, there is no direct male associate.¹⁰ She also remarks that from

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

Ariadne to the Maenad, the image of a girl shifts from a static girl without any inherent impurities towards a girl whom the speaker associates with a more drunken and scandalous state of being.¹¹ In addition to that, the poet introduces the poem and each simile with *qualis*, which the Oxford Latin Dictionary cites as a word that “introduc[es] comparisons, examples, similes, etc.”¹² Through the connotation of introducing similes with mythological figures, the author denies Cynthia any reality by suggesting that the realm of fantasy and myth is very pivotal to her characterization. Thus, by equating Cynthia to mythological women, Cynthia’s personality is not only unrealistic but also not her own individual character. Later in the poem when the speaker shifts to “reality,” he notes how he looks at his beloved Cynthia just “as Argus was clinging to the unknown horns of Inachidos’s daughter” (*Argus...Inachidos*, 1.3.20). Here in this simile, Argus corresponds to the speaker and Io to Cynthia. This territorial and possessive dynamic between Argus and Io mimics that of a *custos*, which Propertius discusses later in poem 1.11. As the poet mentions, the *custos* serves as a guardian to keep his woman in line (*ut... meminisse*, 1.11.15-16). Although in the original myth, Argus had the intention of keeping Io safe from Jove, Propertius’s

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Oxford Latin Dictionary s.v. *qualis*

custos dynamic corrupts the myth to put blame on Io rather than on Jove. In this way, Propertius displays his misogyny in order to characterize a female into the role of a seductress rather than a rape victim. Also, since Io is in the form of an animal, or property, the poet in turn objectifies Cynthia to be inhuman and not deserving of human traits. Like with Ariadne and Andromeda, the patronymic, *Inachidos*, denies Io any characterization outside of her relationship with her father. As a result of the sexualization of these fictional women, Propertius confines Cynthia to a world of male fantasy and thus denying her any sort of individual character development. Although the poet leads with his beloved in the mythical world of *qualis*, he attempts to illustrate her in the real world.

Although Propertius attempts to introduce Cynthia into reality, the poet dehumanizes her by continuing to deny any sort of individual development for her. Once the poet introduces the audience to the “real” world, he uses imperfect tense verbs like *haerebam*, *solvebam*, *ponebamque*, *gaudebam*, and *dabam* as he documents his actions with the sleeping Cynthia (1.3.19, 21-24). By using the imperfect tense in rapid succession for a few lines, he presents the situation as ongoing and in the moment as opposed to a recollection of past events. In addition to that, the implementation of the first person adds a sense of personality to events that the audience

can visualize in their mind. In turn, Propertius creates a seemingly real setting where readers should take all that is said in this poem as the truth. Although the poet presents the situation to be occurring in reality, Maria Wyke reminds us that realism is still a literary construct.¹³ During all of these actions, the speaker goes out of his way to put a “garland... on [Cynthia’s] temples” as well as “fixing her disheveled hair” and “to give stolen fruits” to her (*corollas...dabam*, 1.3.21-24). Through this pantomime of the speaker’s actions, he decorates and readjusts Cynthia’s body as if she were a mannequin to him. As a result, Propertius objectifies Cynthia to be an object that he admires for the way he wants her to be. Looking into the “fixing [of] her disheveled hair,” Roman society has associated upkept hair with married women and purity. So, in contrast with the fantasy world where the poet builds Cynthia up to be a seductress, the real world has her as a socially accepted woman of marital chastity. Although the poet presents these two different places with opposing Cynthias, Wyke’s comment about realism puts these two *scriptae puellae* on the same plane of existence. Thus, Propertius hypocritically restricts his beloved to be both a seductress of impurity and a wife of purity, which also denies her any personal development for herself.

¹³ Wyke (p. 196) looks into the relations between P.’s grammar and Cynthia existence on the page and how the “written woman” can be related to living women in the Augustan Age.

However, Propertius now gives Cynthia the opportunity to speak. During her speech, Drinkwater notices that Cynthia employs vocabulary common to Propertius's elegy like *miseram, fallebam, fessa, deserta, and querebar* (1.3.40-43).¹⁴ Although the poet gives Cynthia a chance to speak for herself, she ends up mirroring his language and behavior, which James cites to be an aspect of a written woman.¹⁵ As a result, Cynthia has no meaningful vocabulary distinguishable from her lover, which makes her a reflection of what the poet wants out of her. As the beloved mimics her lover's metaphors and tactics, Propertius essentially creates the illusion of Cynthia's voice or an *imago vocis*. Even with this fake voice, Cynthia does not characterize herself as an individual human but as a parasite who "having been deserted complained with [herself] lightly [about] the long delays in external love" (*leviter...moras*, 1.3.43-44). This dependency on Propertius in turn dehumanizes her to a beloved who can only thrive with the characterization that Propertius gives her. Although the poet tries to convey a "real" Cynthia in the physical world, his attribution of stereotypes onto Cynthia prohibits such an idea to be plausible.

In Propertius 1.11, the speaker associates Cynthia with the characterizations of female stereotypes and of

¹⁴ Drinkwater, 332

¹⁵ James, 318

Aphrodite/Venus's epithets in order to confine her to a realm of male desire and myth. As the speaker fantasizes about a rival sweet-talking Cynthia on a beach in Baiae, he remarks that "a girl is accustomed to slip while her guard is away, nor to remember her treacheries" (*ut... meminisse*, 1.11.15-16). Here, *perfida* can be either taken as a substantive direct object or a nominative modifying *puella*. By associating *perfida* with *puella*, the speaker creates a deceitful girl who is considered to be a true form of a woman since her *custode* keeps her in line. Also, the separation of *puella* and *perfida* where each one is on opposing sides of different lines suggests an initial opposition between the two words, but when reading the Latin, the words are right next to each other. Just like the true nature of a woman, the word order and word association regarding the *puella* is downright deceitful, which illustrates Cynthia's characterization coming from Propertius's poetic devices and thus his desires. In conjunction with *labi* having a sexual connotation for "falling," this description of Cynthia aligns with Aphrodite *Pandemos*, the sexual and promiscuous epithet for the goddess, which attributes Cynthia to a mythical goddess sought after for sexual pleasure only.

Later in the poem, the speaker then goes on to equate the *puella* to a "dear mother" (*carae matris*, 1.11.21). Here, the use of *carae* instead of a word like *dulcis* to describe *matris* invokes the concept of *storge* (familial love) rather

than *eros* (sexual love). As Greene has noted, this association of Cynthia with a mother presents her as a source of dependency for Propertius with respect to his poetry.¹⁶ Thus, Propertius shifts his description of Cynthia from a treacherous mistress to a desexualized mother. Then, this keeps Cynthia constrained by another stereotype for women. This motherly association also connects Cynthia to Venus *Genetrix* because this epithet characterizes Venus in a motherly role as a founder of Rome just as Cynthia is the founder of Propertius's inspiration. Finally, when the speaker closes out the poem, he describes the shores of Baiae as "unfriendly to chaste girls" (*castis inimica puellis*, 1.11.29). Here, *castis* completely nullifies the inherent nature of the *puella* that the speaker laid out earlier in the poem, which contradicts the previous two descriptions of Cynthia and restricts her to even more stereotypes. This final characterization of Cynthia connects with Aphrodite *Urania*, the heavenly and pure Aphrodite born asexually from the testicles of Uranus. Through this tricolon crescens of starting out with an impure woman to a woman of sustainability and finally to a woman voided from sex, Propertius reveals his own hypocritical desire to have Cynthia be all of these women, but primarily the pure one. Additionally, having the stereotypes of women correlating to the various epithets of Aphrodite/Venus confines Cynthia to

¹⁶ Greene, 314

the world of poetry and imagination, denying her any humanity and individual characterization. Other than the stereotypes of women restricting Cynthia, attributing men to a woman's character restricts any individuality that a woman might have had.

In poem 1.15, Propertius's application of "The Male Gaze" portrays women as dependent on a man for substantial character development. When Propertius introduces Calypso, the poet defines her "having been moved by the Ithacian having departed" (*Ithaci digressu mota*, 1.15.8). The description of Calypso provided by Propertius before mentioning her actual name put emphasis on her relation to a man rather than her own name, which illustrates her lack of character without a man. Additionally, the emotional implication of *mota* gives reason to her grief as the result of a man. Next Propertius references Hypsipyle being distraught with the departure of Jason. However, in the *Argonautica*, Hypsipyle does not exhibit any sort of pain when Jason leaves her, but the poet gives her the attributes of an "anxious" woman "stand[ing] in an empty bedroom" (*anxia, vacuo... thalamo*, 1.15.17-18). Through the modification of Hypsipyle's story, Propertius gives her emotional development based on the absence of a man in her life. The poet also mentions the story of Alpheisiboea where the death of her husband incites her to "break the chains of blood and

family” (*sanguinis... rupit*, 1.15.16). The idea that her *amor* far surpasses her desire to uphold familial bonds, which Romans held with the utmost importance, illustrates the overwhelming influence *amor* has over family. However, this vendetta would not have transpired if it had not been for her husband’s death. After all of these descriptions of women, Propertius says that he would describe Cynthia as *nobilis historia* if she were to be like the fore-mentioned women (1.15.24). From what he has stated, in order to be considered *nobilis historia*, a woman must forfeit her independence. Despite the fact that Propertius wrote these poems over two millennia ago, the sexualization of individuals is still a prevalent issue in society.

One such individual that people sexualize is Mia Khalifa who can be equated to a *scripta puella*. As a result, this comparison illustrates the perpetuation of the dehumanization of women in society. For her brief four-month career as an adult film actress, she created an uproar in the Middle East for wearing a hijab during a sex scene. This controversy greatly increased her popularity on notable pornography website Pornhub to the top spot. On this site, her biography describes her as “small in size but not in sex appeal” and a “big brain to match those big boobs.”¹⁷ Just

¹⁷ Mia Khalifa’s Biography on pornhub.com gives a lengthy overview of her as a porn star, highlighting her physical appearance and skills with respect to sex.

from these descriptions alone, the writer sexually objectifies her. However, in a podcast interview between her and YouTuber Philip DeFranco, she discusses her love of sports, comments on her regret of doing adult film, and even talks about herself at subsequent jobs when the men would recognize her.¹⁸ Here, instead of a sexualized woman, we see a woman with interests, regrets, and human problems. So, how could there be two conflicting identities for the same person? Well, here we can see a clear divide between Khalifa “the performer” and Khalifa “the person”: the performer is a fictionalized role for sexual pleasure while the person is a human who has problems and wishes to move on from her past. Looking back at how scholars defined a *scripta puella*, Khalifa’s performing identity eerily aligns with their descriptions. Just like a “written woman,” Mia Khalifa the adult film actress sexually teases her partner with foreplay, arouses his desire with generic language and moans, and submits to any erotic fantasy that men enforce upon her. Through the similarities between Cynthia and Mia Khalifa, we can see how the oversexualization of women has persisted through the ages.

¹⁸ Philip DeFranco conducted an interview with Mia Khalifa titled “Mia Khalifa On Her Past, Shady People, Rejection, Shadowbans & More (Ep. 12 - A Conversation With)” where they discuss all of the fore-mentioned topics in detail.

However, women in the adult film industry are not the only ones oversexualized. In today's advertisements, we can see beer cans to be shaped like a woman's body, perfectly proportioned women on billboards, and faces caked with so much makeup that a woman appears bruised. However, men are just as sexualized as women in advertisements where they have shredded abs, bulging muscles, and cheek bones that can cut glass. Moving away from the static fantasy, corporations involved with any kind of performance harp on the oversexualization of individuals to gain a profit. This notion is most prevalent with actors, sex workers, and athletes where they all appeal in some way sexually (intentional or not) to an audience. As a result of confining people to sexualized roles, consumers then view that person as something to be used for sexual pleasure, which degrades the consumer's perception of the person behind the performer. In all of these situations, the oversexualization of a performer translates the audience's perception onto the person, which dehumanizes them in the process.

Throughout these poems, the poet chains Cynthia to a world of fiction and fantasy where she becomes a puppet of desire and sex. Despite the apparent differences between a fictional Cynthia and a real Cynthia, both characterizations stem from Propertius, who removes any independent development from her. By expecting conflicting stereotypes

to be true for Cynthia, Propertius exhibits his unrealistic expectations for a woman, which denies her the humanity of being real. Through the allusions to mythological women whose lives the poet defines with respect to men, he prohibits individual development for his beloved, which keeps her in a realm of fantasy and myth. And finally, although Cynthia comes from the distant past, her legacy of sexual degradation lives on in our modern society, which needs to be addressed so audiences do not dehumanize performers further. Overall, by separating the performer from the person and by understanding the ethical impact of dehumanizing the performer (even when they don't have a real person to relate back to), consumers can learn how to become empathetic to their friends and their fellow human beings.

Bibliography

- Drinkwater, Megan O. "The Woman's Part: The Speaking Beloved in Roman Elegy." *The Classical Quarterly*, vol. 63, no. 1, 2013, pp. 329–338., www.jstor.org/stable/23470088.
- DeFranco, Philip, and Mia Khalifa. "Mia Khalifa On Her Past, Shady People, Rejection, Shadowbans & More (EP. 12 - A Conversation With)." 16 Oct. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=JxDIPVCSPMc. Accessed 8 Dec. 2019.
- Glare, P. G. W., editor. "Oxford Latin Dictionary." *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, Oxford University Press Inc., 1982, p. 1536.
- Greene, Ellen. "Elegiac Women: Fantasy, Materia, and Male Desire in Propertius 1.3 and 1.11." *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 116, No. 2 (Summer, 1995), pp. 303-318
- James, Sharon L. "Ipsa dixerat: Women's Words in Roman Love Elegy." *Phoenix*, vol. 64, no. 3/4, 2010, pp. 314–344. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23074749.
- "Mia Khalifa Bio." *Pornhub*, www.pornhub.com/pornstar/mia-khalifa.
- Wyke, Maria. "Mistress and Metaphor in Augustan Elegy." *Wiley Online Library*, 1 Jan. 2002.
- Wyke, Maria. "Written Women: Propertius' Scripta Puella." *The Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 77, 1987, pp. 47–61., www.jstor.org/stable/300574.