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HOW WOMEN (RE)ACT IN ROMAN LOVE POETRY: INHUMAN SHE-WOLVES AND UNHELPFUL MOTHERS IN PROPERTIUS' ELEGIES

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The Roman poet Propertius uses motherhood as one lens through which to explore the intersection of gender and ethical behaviour in first-century BCE Rome. Using familiar and traditional figures such as the Greek mythological heroides Thetis, Niobe and Medea as well as figures otherwise unknown to us such as a woman named Arria, he paints a different, more negative, picture of mothers than we receive in most other documents and texts from this period.[1] I will explore here the figure of the mother as it was constructed and presented by Propertius in the last two to three decades of the first century BCE when women seemed to be gaining a stronger foothold both in the Roman family and in Roman political life but did not enjoy a concomitantly positive role in much of the literature of the period, including the poems of Propertius.

Before I examine in their particulars some of Propertius's mother figures, I would like to lay the groundwork for understanding these figures, first by discussing a mythological bogey-figure, the child-killing demon, that seems to share and to prefigure many of the characteristics of the mother, and, second, by outlining the social context in the late first century BCE out of which Propertius and his figures arose.

In saying that the child-killing demon figures found in Greek myth, such as Empousa, Mormo, Gello and Lamia, prefigure characteristics of the mother as she is delineated in certain Roman texts, I do not mean that all mothers were constructed as child-killers. But many of these demonic figures are used to express the values of a society, negatively or positively, by reinforcing these values or deviating radically from them.[2] One scholar makes the following broad claim about how such demon figures work as social markers: 'Negative valence is attached to things which escape place (the chaotic, the rebellious, the distant) or things found just outside the place where they properly belong (the hybrid, the deviant, the adjacent) . . . Demons serve as classificatory markers which signal what is strong and weak, controlled and exaggerated in a given society in a given moment.'[3]

Such demons, then, are a reflection of how a society organises itself, what it values negatively and positively, what it fears and what it wishes to reinforce. Social categories of this sort are set up in a rigid way, with little room for ambiguity or fluidity. And anything or anyone that does not fit neatly into a category (and who thus cannot be controlled) is an object of fear and must be constrained by those who are perceived as the normal people of that society. When such liminal creatures as the werewolf are figured, they seem to be dreaded for their hybridity and their shape-shifting, characteristics that pose a danger to society because the creature is ever-shifting or the opposite of the norm.[4] And often this figure can pose a danger in more than one way. Thus it is by looking at what this creature is not that we can affirm to ourselves what the norm for society is.

Let us take as an example of such demons Empousa. Empousa is a shape-shifter and part of Hecate's entourage, a chthonic dweller, the child-eating monster who

frightens Xanthias and Dionysus in Aristophanes's *Frogs* (285–93):

Ξα. νὴ τὸν Δία καὶ μὴν αἰσθάνομαι ψόφου τινός.
Δι. ποῦ ποῦ 'στιν;
Ξα. ἐξόπισθεν.
Δι. ἐξόπισθ' ἴθι.
Ξα. ἀλλ' ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ πρόσθε.
Δι. πρόσθε νυν ἴθι.
Ξα. καὶ μὴν ὁρῶ νὴ τὸν Δία θηρίον μέγα.
Δι. ποῖόν τι;
Ξα. δεινόν· παντοδαπὸν γοῦν γίγνεται. τοτὲ μέν γε βοῦς, νυνὶ δ' ὀρεύς, τοτὲ δ' αὖ γυνη ... ὡραιοτάτη τις.
Δι. ποῦ 'στι; φέρ' ἐπ' αὐτὴν ἴω.
Ξα. ἀλλ' οὐκέτ' αὖ γυνή 'στιν, ἀλλ' ἤδη κύων.
Δι. Ἔμπουσα τοίνυν ἐστί. Ξα. πυρὶ γοῦν λά μπεται ἅπαν τὸ πρόσωπον.
Δι. καὶ σκέλος χαλκοῦν ἔχει;
Ξα. νὴ τὸν Ποσειδῶ, καὶ βολίτινον θάτερον, σάφ' ἴσθι.

(Xa. You know, I think I do hear something moving around.
Di. Wh-wh which direction?
Xa. Right behind us.
Di. Get behind.
Xa. No it's in front of us now. Di. You better stay in front.
Xa. I see it. It's an animal – an enormous thing.
Di. What does it look like?
Xa. Monster. It keeps changing shape. Now it's a cow. Now it's a mule. Oh, now it's a girl, whew-whew, what a beauty!
Di. Let me at her. Where'd she go?
Xa. Too late. No girl any longer. She turned into a bitch.
Di. It's Empousa. Xa. Whoever she is, she's caught fire. Her face is burning.
Di. Does she have one bronze leg?
Xa. She does, she does. The other one is made of dung. I'm not lying.[5])

Empousa appears again in a speech of Demosthenes 18, *De Corona*. Demosthenes claims, in order to highlight his charges, that his opponent Aeschines was marked by excess and intemperance and that Aeschines's mother was known not by her name Glaucothea but by the name Empousa because of the fact that she 'does and experiences everything' (πάντα ποιεῖν καὶ πάσχειν, 130).[6] Her nickname appears to be a reference to her sexual excess, versatility and voraciousness; this name was also one given to or taken by prostitutes.[7] Such a phrase associating her with 'doing everything' could also describe a profligate creature, lacking in any moral centre or fixed character.[8] Further, referring to his mother in this way marks Aeschines himself

as an inhuman creature and son of a chthonic monster, not a human mother.

Empousa is depicted differently in different texts – always as a shape-shifter and always evil and terrifying: sometimes as an erotic seductress who is said to make love to her victims before eating them; sometimes taking the form of a young girl to attract her victims; other times as a bereft mother who eats the children of others; sometimes slipping between the worlds of animals and humans. But in Aristophanes's *Frogs*, she is portrayed more as subhuman, inhuman or theriomorphic: with one foot of bronze and one of dung and changing in turn into a cow, then a mule, then a dog.[9]

We might say then that Empousa is a primordial creature who emblematises everything a proper woman, wife and mother should not be. She is characterised as: dangerously seductive; ominously and magically transformative, slippery and lacking in fixed character;[10] indiscriminately voracious and all-devouring; belonging to three different worlds (the underworld, the human world and the animal world); a bereft mother who takes vengeance for her bereavement by devouring the children of other mothers; and an example of a creature who needs to be kept under control so that she does not inflict any harm on them or escape her human body and revert to chthonic or animal form. Such a demon could easily have arisen from the fear of a mother or any woman who did not enact her proper roles: nurturing; being chaste, modest and dependable; performing in her prescribed social and moral capacities. All these qualities would be seen to ensure the protection and continuation of the family.

The figure of Empousa is an effective counterweight to the way that mothers and other women have often been constructed in the western philosophical tradition: as part of a set of fixed oppositions that underlie and support this tradition (e.g. male/female, culture/nature, mind/body, reason/emotion).[11] Within these hierarchies of opposition, motherhood is often assigned to the 'subordinate' poles: female, nature, body, emotion. But, as most scholars now recognise, these binaries are not fixed but are rather interdependent, only able to take their meaning from a connectedness with their opposite.[12] And, if we look closely at these kinds of oppositions in a cultural context, they are not seen to be natural but rather culturally constructed for a certain purpose. Such a sharply drawn figure as Empousa, who embodies nearly all the social, cultural and ideological concepts that we find in Greek and Roman texts about mothers, can help us to see the cultural ideologies at work and to move beyond them.

How would such figures of mythology as Empousa have achieved human form in the first century BCE and what were the social conditions that gave rise to the particular forms of such demons that we find in Propertius? It is generally agreed that elite women held a much stronger social and economic position in the Rome of the late republic than they had for the most part in the different city states of Greece: they quite often had power over their own finances when they entered into non-manus marriage and especially when they lacked direct male ascendants. As Gardner points out, Roman women in non-manus marriages held a somewhat liminal position,

being more closely tied to the natal household of their *paterfamilias*, who had both economic and legal control over his household, including married daughters, than to that of their husband's household.[13] Elite women in the late republic also had a strong connection to and power over their older children's intellectual and moral development, particularly male children who were being groomed for public life.[14] Roman mothers had important roles as disciplinarians, teachers and transmitters of Roman culture and morality;[15] they apparently often gave over the care of their infants and younger children to slaves (much to the disgust of many Roman philosophers and medical writers). Thus an important transformation was taking place, social change that would accelerate during the Roman empire, involving a greater emphasis on the moral and intellectual qualities that a mother passed on to her children and a value accorded to cognate female ancestors in addition to male ancestors.[16]

It should be cautioned that this rise in the social and cultural importance of women and women's roles, especially motherhood, was not necessarily accompanied by an increase in economic or political power. While elite women did have certain economic rights – the power to make wills, inherit, to perform acts of patronage and to invest in their sons' careers – there were many restrictions on their economic and political freedoms, which often rested on extralegal and fluid contingencies such as individual women's personalities and family relationships, or their particular status or stage of life.[17]

Thus, while elite Roman women of the late republic had many freedoms and rights not held by most women in Greece before them and arguably more power, these women were still contained and controlled by a variety of social mechanisms that worked to maintain the dominant patriarchal structure. This was especially true in regards to the prescribed female sexual roles in marriage and motherhood. The performance of women's sexual and familial roles as wives and mothers in accordance with social expectations symbolised proper (or improper) moral conduct outside of the household; mere perceptions of an uncontrolled and disordered female sexuality could both emblematise and cause civic disorder and mayhem in the public sector as well as in the private household.[18] Marriage and motherhood, social institutions crucial for the stability and continuation of Roman society, were thus strictly ordered by the controlling members of the society with the result that elite women were conspicuously positioned in Roman society yet also controlled and thus removed from any true independence or power. They were key figures for the transmission of culture but were also signs produced and carried in the discourse of that culture, signs that were manipulated to 'define male moral and political choices'.[19]

It should be no surprise that women, cast in such an ambiguous position, were represented by and conceptualised in the dominant discourse as occupying two opposing roles: roles contrasted in present-day scholarly analysis as 'same and other';[20] as simultaneously fecund child-bearer and vestal virgin (which enabled the notions of castitas, chastity and pudicitia, sexual virtue, to apply to both sexually inexperienced women and faithful, though sexually active, wives);[21] and as both demonised whore

and exalted goddess, two labels often used for the *domina*, mistress, in Roman love elegy.[22] Thus the figure of Cynthia in Propertius's elegies is often split into two polarised images: sometimes debased, sometimes idealised; sometimes seductress, sometimes the nurturing mother.[23] This point is crucial to our reading of the figure of the mother in Propertius's elegies.

One more point deserves mention: we should not try to map our modern stereotypes of the gentle and powerless, nurturing, tender mother (vs the strong authoritarian father) onto ancient mothers.[24] In fact, as stated above, Roman mothers were often formidable and strong creatures who had great power and moral authority over the private sector of their lives, centred on the household and frequently their children.[25] While the stereotype of the nurturing, lamenting or caring mother does sometimes lurk beneath the surface, that is not likely to be the figure that the Roman male reader had in his own early experience.

I'd like now to turn my attention to several of Propertius's memorable mothers and to view them in this context of Empousa and other demonic mother figures. Are these female monsters the paradigm that Propertius had in mind? And can we find one particular construction of mothers favoured over others by Propertius? Does Propertius borrow from the earlier constructions of mothers found in Greek literature and mythology and often found in other Roman authors such as Ovid, as the article on Ovid in this volume contends, or does he present a different kind of mother in his elegies? How close a connection can or should we draw between Propertius's construction/presentation of mothers and the social/political/cultural conditions of late first century BCE Rome?

Perhaps the most famous mother figure in Propertius is Cornelia in 4.11, who provides the swan song in Propertius's final book. Cornelia is clearly a figure Propertius means for us to reckon with and she, even in (or because of) her representation at the end of Propertius's last book of elegies, sets the bar for the ideal mother. In addition to being the final speaker in the last book of Propertius's poems and the only speaker in 4.11, she is the counterpoint in many ways to the ubiquitous Cynthia: she is a 'real' historical character about whom and whose family we know a fair amount and she is usually regarded as the paradigm of woman in Propertius on one end of the spectrum.[26] Cornelia comes from the same family as a well-known Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi and daughter of the famous Roman general, Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus Maior. This earlier Cornelia, related to the noble Aemilii Paulli on her mother's side,[27] was a highly educated member of the elite who spoke Greek and wrote good Latin.[28] Thus Propertius's Cornelia belonged to the highest Roman aristocracy and had important political connections, most significantly Augustus, her stepfather (who – according to Propertius – attended her funeral), as well as a wealthy husband, L. Aemilius Paullus Lepidus, cos. suff. 34 BCE She had also received the ius trium liberorum as the mother of three children, two sons and a daughter.[29] Propertius depicts her as, like her ancestor Cornelia, the very essence of the idealised Roman

wife and mother, devoted to her children and her husband, a univira, loving, selfless, unassuming and self-controlled, the preserver and transmitter of tradition, defined not by her own qualities but by those of her ancestors, husband and children.[30] Cornelia characterises herself – and the good Roman matron and mother – as strictly adhering to the traditionally assigned female values of loyalty, chastity and devotion. Her traits sharply contrast to those of the male lover and love poet in Books 1–4 and to those assigned to Cynthia, the paradigm of the woman on the other end of the spectrum and, in many ways, the anti-mother.

The Cornelia elegy is closely linked to a famous elegy about Propertius's mistress, Cynthia, 4.7, just four poems earlier, in which Cynthia also speaks from the dead, thus we have the *matrona*, Cornelia, balanced by the *meretrix* Cynthia.[31] From these labels, we would assume that each woman exemplifies an entirely different register of Roman traits and behaviours. But surprisingly there are many commonalities between them. Both poems are delivered by a woman from beyond the grave; both women declare loyalty to a man; both give instructions on preparations in their households after their deaths.[32]

There is further blurring of the boundaries between *matrona* and *meretrix*, ideal and anti-ideal, created by Propertius's very ambiguous portrayal of Cornelia. Poem 4.11, which at first reading presents a portrayal of an exemplary life and death of an aristocratic Roman matron and an unambiguous set of ideological traits by which such women should order their lives, turns out not to be a reliable touchstone after all. At the very least the poem in its ambiguities urges a 'deferral of judgement on Cornelia' that allows us to read her strict devotion to Roman maternal virtue in two very different ways (as 'sublime self-sacrifice or meaningless waste').[33] Johnson refers to Cornelia's 'chilly sublimities,' and Richardson calls poem 4.11 an 'indictment of the cruelty of the untimely death of a much admired woman . . . [that] amounts to an indictment of the life Rome required of the women of its nobility'. He also refers to the backdrop text, Euripides' *Alcestis*, which shows the 'horrors . . . imposed upon [Athenian] women, the hollowness of that society and the meanness and selfishness under its stylish manners'. Propertius, Richardson says, did 'the same for Rome'.[34] Cornelia, who supposedly represents the ideal matrona figure, in fact occupies a masculine space in her role as patronus at a trial and the purported ideal of the happy wife compares marriage with death in a way that casts a dark pall on her life and achievements.[35]

Thus, as so often, Propertius modifies and confuses the portraits of *matrona* and *meretrix* so that neither one conforms to the ideological mapping of traits assigned to each type of character.[36] Far from the official tendency in this period toward 'imposing a unity on the division and incoherence of Roman cultural identity',[37] Propertius takes received sets of idealised figures or characters and sets them into opposing pairs that make it possible for us both to accept and to question Roman norms and ideologies.[38]

What does all this mean for Propertius's representation of Roman mothers?

We cannot find or, even when we do think we find, rely on any uncomplicated pictures of Roman mothers in Propertius's elegies. There is not a 'good' and a 'bad' set of mothers, even in his catalogue listings where he seems to repeat such earlier groupings, divided into those who nurture and those who destroy. Each exemplum is complicated by a counter example. When Propertius does present a paradigmatic mother, it is often to undercut the image that she traditionally exemplifies.

Let us look at some examples of these perplexing *matres*. In 4.4, Tarpeia, who betrayed Rome for love (elsewhere it is for money),[39] addresses Titus Tatius, the leader of the Sabines, who were attacking Rome and the object of her affection, saying:

> Te toga picta decet, non quem sine matris honore
> Nutrit inhumanae dura papilla lupae. (53–54)
> ('It is you that the toga with its insignia suits, not the one whom the hard teat
> of a barbarous she-wolf nursed, without the dignity of a mother!'[40])

Tarpeia claims that it is Tatius who is worthy of the royal robe worn by early kings of Rome and not the founding father, Romulus, who was nourished by the hard teat (*dura papilla*) of a barbarous she-wolf (*inhumanae lupae*), 'without the dignity of a mother' (*sine matris honore*). The mothering *lupa* is a frequent and powerful figure in Roman foundational myths and is usually seen as emblematising the nurturing substitute maternal figure who saved the twins, Romulus and Remus, animal perhaps, but a kindly animal. Of course the wolf is, strictly speaking, *inhumana*, not human, but here the loaded adjective is used pejoratively, reinforced by the negativity of the *dura papilla*, to indicate what a poor and inadequate mother she was.[41]

Further, the mother, represented as a theriomorphic figure here, reminds us again of demon figures like Empousa, who were often presented as possessing wild animal traits and features. The wolf is one of the four main types of animal that the child killing demons were figured as in Greek and Roman myth and it is frequently an animal that is 'set in opposition to all that represented civilised culture'.[42]

The placement of *nutrit* next to *inhumanae* in 4.4.54 seems an oxymoron, as does *dura* with *papilla*; both phrases reinforce the beastiality of the *lupa*, no fit mother.[43] The phrase *sine matris honore* underscores that the *inhumana lupa* was not a mother in whom the Romans could take pride.

Other illusions to the she-wolf appear in 4.1, in the midst of Propertius's *laus Romae*. In lines 37–8, Propertius exclaims:

> Nil patrium nisi nomen habet Romanus alumnus:
> sanguinis altricem non putet esse lupam.
> ('A son of Rome possesses nothing from his ancestors except his name:
> he would not believe that a she-wolf nourished his line.')

The *lupa* here is an ambiguous figure, seeming to be both a symbol of pride in the Romans' distant past, a sort of Golden Age and also a barbarous symbol that shows how far the contemporary Romans have progressed. Nevertheless, the reference remains largely negative.[44] But after a short interlude, Propertius addresses the *lupa* Martia again, in a seemingly more positive way:

> Optima nutricum nostris lupa Martia rebus,
> qualia creverunt moenia lacte tuo! (4.1.55–56)
> ('She-wolf of Mars, best of nurses for our enterprises,
> what walls arose from your milk!')

But the fine mothering qualities of the *lupa* here are countered by her connection with Mars, the god of war whose violent associations cast doubt upon the walls that arise from the milk of the *lupa*. DeBrohun's book on *Roman Propertius and the Reinvention of Elegy* highlights this passage and the previous reference to the *lupa* in 4.1.38) as adding a 'sanguinary aspect' to the poem; she sees in this poem an emphasis on the literal and metaphorical values of *arma*, which serves to juxtapose the world of warfare with the metaphorical *arma* so prominent in the first three books of Propertius's elegies.[45] Whenever the figure of the *lupa* appears in Propertius, the focus is on the badges of her motherhood: her *papillae* and her *lac*, but both are usually *durus* (infertile, hard, unproductive).

The negative image of the mother at lines 53–4 of the Tarpeia elegy discussed earlier (4.4) is further underscored by the subtle reference to the infamous child-killing mother Medea just above in line 51: *o utinam magicae nossem cantamina Musae!* ('O would that I had knowledge of the spells of the sorceress Muse'). Tarpeia wishes that she knew how to cast magical spells as did that worst of all mothers, Medea. It is characteristic of Propertius to mention Medea, the epitome of the bad mother, in the context of bad motherhood but to focus on another detail of her biography, her expertise in magic that has nothing to do with her child murders.[46] The phrase *dura papilla* (4.4.54) and the lack of motherly attributes also serve to remind us that Tarpeia was a Vestal Virgin for whom marriage and children were forbidden.[47]

In this poem, then, Propertius presents a perverted picture of motherhood. The speaker, Tarpeia, if a vestal virgin,[48] does not speak from any authority on the subject since a vestal virgin had and would have no experience of motherhood herself. Tarpeia further undercuts her credentials as a speaker when she aspires to be a Medea, worst of all mothers, killer of her own children. She dishonours and degrades the major figures in Rome's foundational myth, Romulus and the she-wolf and thus deprives her own people of their claim to this legend. Romulus, in her eyes, is less a Roman than the barbarian king and invader, Titus Tatius. The *lupa*, elsewhere the nurturing mother of Rome's founder, is here inhuman, unable to produce milk from her teats and no mother substitute (*sine matris honore*, 53). Thus, both the speaker herself and her subjects are models of bad motherhood.

Another noteworthy mother in Propertius, Arria, also appears in Book 4 (4.1). Here Horos, an astrologer, is talking, giving his credentials as a seer and listing some of his references. Arria, who is otherwise unknown, is the first of his correct prophecies, albeit a prophecy made against his will. Horos claims that when Arria was sending off her twin sons (*geminos natos*, 4.1.89) to battle and arming them against the god's advice (*illa dabat natis arma vetante deo*, 90), he foretold that her sons, Lupercus and Gallus, would not return to the family hearth (*ad patrios Penatis*, 91).[49] Indeed Horos's prediction came true and both sons died. There follows a gruesome and detailed description of Lupercus dying beneath (or protecting) his horse[50] and Gallus staining with his blood the eagle standard that he carried. Horos then laments:

> Fatales pueri, duo funera matris avarae!
> vera, sed invito, contigit ista fides. (4.1.97–8)
> ('Ill-fated boys, both dead because of their mother's greed!
> My prophecy about you was fulfilled though I did not want it to be.')

So Arria, for the sake of greed – although Propertius does not specify whether for spoils or glory – sends her sons into battle, despite the fact that the omens were bad. The emphasis is on Arria's character and the lethal consequences of it for her ill fated children; it hardly matters what the object of her greed was. As Propertius says elsewhere, greed is a prime motivating factor in warmongering (3.5.2ff; 3.12.5), but it is especially shocking to find this as the motivating factor for a mother against her own children. Neither Arria nor her sons are known to us, as all commentators point out, but all three have Roman names and Lupercus is a well-known cognomen of several Roman families.[51]

The context in which Propertius 4.1 embeds the Arria story provides another example of Horos' prophetic powers that makes this story reverberate in different ways. Horos says that Lucina, the goddess of childbirth, was 'dragging out the labor pains of a woman named Cinara and the reluctant burden of her womb was causing delay' (. . . *cum Cinarae traheret Lucina dolores, / et facerent uteri pondera lenta moram*, 99–100). Horos then told Cinara to make a vow to Juno, which she did and the child was born. Despite this happy ending, the drawn-out and painful attempts of poor Cinara to become a mother casts the act of Arria sending her boys to their doom in an even more negative light. We might also consider that Cinara is a Greek name, normally given to *hetairai*:[52] how poignant that a Greek *hetaira* is portrayed as a better mother than a good Roman *matrona*, since she is willing to endure a painful labour to bring a child into the world while Arria throws the lives of her sons away. Later in the poem Propertius offers the exemplum of another daughter, Iphigeneia, so cruelly sent to her death to no avail, here by a father, not a mother.

There are also illustrative tales of usually helpful mothers who, in Propertius's versions of their stories, do not or cannot help their offspring. According to Propertius 2.9, Thetis, Achilles's famously protective mother, was not able to use her motherly and

divine resources to save her son from his death. While Propertius depicts Achilles's lover Briseis as mourning his body, he says that Thetis and Peleus were powerless to help him (13–16). Interestingly, this comment is embedded in a paean to faithful women such as Penelope and Briseis, presenting counter exempla to Cynthia, as women who did prevail in their roles as wives or concubines; they contrast to a woman like Thetis, who could not fulfill her motherly duty, divine though she was.

Thetis appears again in 3.7, an odd lament for the otherwise unknown Paetus, who died at sea. Paetus prays with his dying breath to the 'gods of the Aegean' (*di maris Aegaei*, 57) that his body might be carried to Italy and back to his mother for burial (*hoc de me sat erit si modo matris erit*, 64); Propertius had earlier commented that such prayers were in vain (. . . *quid cara natanti / mater in ore tibi est?*, 17–18).[53] At the end of the poem, Thetis is again apostrophised as a failed mother figure: Thetis, who should have come to this Paetus' aid, drawn by maternal feelings of grief (*et tu materno tracta dolore Theti*, 68).[54] In this line, Propertius seems to normalise *dolor* as a natural characteristic of motherhood, even directed toward a person who is not that mother's child or relative; thus any mater who does not act on the impulse driven by this grief is abnormal, departing from the societal norm (*decuit*, 69) and subject to public scorn. Again here Thetis is the paradigm of the usually nurturing mother, but she cannot or will not live up to her reputation.[55]

In another lament in Book 3, 3.18, this one for a historical figure, Augustus's nephew M Claudius Marcellus, Propertius mourns the death of this young rising star. Propertius asks 'what use to him was his stellar lineage, his manliness, or his *optima mater*?' (*quid genus aut virtus aut optima profuit illi / mater*, 11–12). And what good his adoption by Augustus (12) or the games produced by Marcellus in the theatre when he was an aedile and 'all the things his mother's care contrived' (*et per maternas omnia gesta manus*, 14)?[56] Even Octavia, an *optima*, devoted, affectionate mother, was not able to save her young son. Like Thetis, Octavia's worth is in her motherhood, but in Propertius's dismal view, holding the title or claiming the relationship of 'mother' does not authorise the person to be an effective claimant to that title. And once again there is a disconnect between the modifying adjective that describes the ideal of the mother and the actions of this mother, who does not live up to the expectations that Roman society had for her.

Propertius also includes in his corpus the paradigmatically terrible mothers, Althaea (3.22.31–2),[57] Cassiopeia (3.22.29), Medea (3.19.17–18) and Agave (or the Maenads, 3.17.24, 3.22.33), marked respectively by pride, anger, anger/lust and cruelty and each willing to cause the deaths of her children.[58] One mother, Niobe, is arguably good in the sense that she becomes a symbol of grief, but she is presented as a completely ambiguous figure since her pride is what caused her children's downfall:

> Nec tantum Niobe, bis sex ad busta superba,
> sollicito lacrimans defluit a Sipylo. (2.20.7–8)

('Not so bitterly does Niobe weep, whose pride caused twelve deaths,
as her tears coursed down from sorrowing Sipylus.')

Niobe's grief is highlighted less than the twelve deaths (*bis sex*) she caused. Her claim to be an admirable mother is further compromised by the context in 2.20: Niobe in her grief is sarcastically compared, unfavourably, to Propertius's mistress, who is weeping more bitterly (*gravius*, 1) than a whole host of sad women – Briseis, Andromache, Procne/Philomela and Niobe – for unknown reasons. Niobe appears right after a famous mother, here unnamed, the worst of mothers, Procne (or Philomela), *volucris funesta . . . Attica* (5–6), who killed her son Itys and served him to his father for dinner.[59] These women then, are of a different order than mothers like Thetis and Octavia, who are passive and powerless to help. Althaea, Medea and Procne/Philomela actively send their sons to their deaths.

Thus we have an *inhumana lupa* who spawned a whole tribe of difficult, negligent, obstructive and cruel mothers. Propertius shows us the bad mothers who are familiar figures to us. Yet, more surprising, mothers who are generally regarded as helpful and tender are, in Propertius's elegies, helpless to preserve and protect their children, whether because of their negligence, their aggressively harmful behaviour, or their passive inability to muster up support.

When we compare these mothers in Propertius to the tender and grieving mother of his contemporary Tibullus pictured both in Tibullus 1.3 and in Amores 3.9, Ovid's lament for the dead Tibullus, we find a much different, more conventional and less complex picture of the mother figure. In Tibullus 1.3, Tibullus is sick nearly to death on Corfu, or, as he claims, Phaeacia and he bids farewell to the departing Messalla, who leaves him behind and abandoned. Tibullus is bereft and alone with neither mistress nor family to tend to him. He laments:

Abstineas, Mors atra, precor: non hic mihi mater
Quae legat in maestos ossa perusta sinus (5–6)
('Stay away, I pray, black death: I have no mother here
to gather my burned bones into her grieving embrace')

Here Tibullus imagines his mother, along with his sister, performing the customary rituals at the grave of her son and gathering his remains into her sorrowing arms. Ovid, in his mournful elegy on Tibullus's death, picks up on Tibullus's words and fears, imagining that, if Tibullus had died of his illness on Corfu, Tibullus's mother would not have been able to perform the motherly duties that she did lavish on him upon his death at home: closing his eyes after death, giving last rites to his ashes and ritually tearing her hair (done in Tibullus's imagination by his sister, *effusis comis*, 1.3.8, not his mother). Tibullus's mother is figured in a conventional state of grief and is not castigated by either Tibullus or Ovid for her absence at her son's imagined deathbed; she has much in common with the grieving mothers in Statius' poetry, especially his

Silvae.[60] There are no such virtuous and well-meaning mothers anywhere in Propertius, who expresses little feeling for the close familial relations that we find in Tibullus.[61]

Propertius presents us with figures of mothers who diverge from the roles and attributes traditionally assigned to mothers by many Roman sources, particularly historians, orators, biographers and epistolographers,[62] but who do not remain easily in any one category. These figures at the same time both represent or remind us of the traits traditionally assigned to mothers – loyalty, constancy, devotion to blood relatives, nurturance, discipline – and yet react against such behaviour. There is often a conflict presented between what we might expect a conventional Roman mother to do and what she actually does in the Propertian text, whether she is acting out of some personal motive or no motive at all, just some unexplained helplessness or transgression. Propertius's figures are often multiply determined, like Cynthia,[63] who seems at times quite 'real' and whom Maria Wyke has called a 'reality effect'[64] in the immediacy of first-person elegy and at other times seems timeless, abstract, pure fiction. There is no singular perspective in Propertius, either of himself or of the other characters he constructs.[65] Propertius operates on the basis of traditional categories, but he then either mixes or erases them once he has implanted them in our minds, forcing us to focus on the terms of the construct but always denying or undercutting it.[66]

To return to the figure of Empousa, I see in the changeable figures of mothers and women in general, inheritors of the shape-shifting monsters of the earliest Greek imaginary: ancient figures like Empousa, Medea, Pandora and – to bring us down to contemporary times – Sigourney Weaver's character in the movie 'Ghostbusters', Dana Barrett, the beautiful cellist who turns into the Terror Dog of the Sumerian god Gozer.[67] Such figures are emblematic of the supposed characters and traits of women who can be either fecund or vestal virgins and who are represented as shifty, untrustworthy, permeable, inconstant, a 'trope for social and discursive instability'.[68] Women who appear to be seductively beautiful turn out to be bogey monsters who eat children or bring evil to any who encounter them. Behind Propertius's wicked or ineffectual mothers who bring harm to rather than helping or saving their children are the paradigms of perfect mothers, like Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi. Either is likely to shape-shift into the other. Such figures represent an anxiety about the frightening consequences of women's instability and this anxiety is often manifested in uncertainty about women's actions toward their families, actions that can have serious effects on the social order.

Adrienne Rich, in her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, makes a valuable distinction that can shed light on mothers as they are portrayed in Propertius.[69] Rich divides the concept of motherhood into two halves (that are superimposed): experience or 'the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at insuring that this potential – and all women – shall remain under male control' (italics in original).[70] So Rich attacks not mothering but rather mothering as it has been 'defined and

restricted under patriarchy' (14) and she tries to separate what women have suffered under patriarchy and what might be the experience of women in motherhood when it could be detached from and freed of the bondage imposed by male domination. The idea of woman as mother has, in some times and cultures, endowed women with respect, authority and admiration, but in others, has, as Rich says, 'ghettoized and degraded female potentialities' (13).

Rich's division of motherhood into experience and institution is a possible window into the Propertian representation of mothers, who are a sub-category of that always shifting, unpredictable and dangerous sex, woman.

By playing off the actions of his cruel, vindictive and self-absorbed mothers against the traditional and received stories of the same or similar figures who are presented in such a different light in previous Greek and Roman texts and contexts, Propertius could critique the role of women and mothers in his society and further, could betray the anxiety that he evidently felt about the more central and authoritarian role played by mothers in the late first century BCE We may also be seeing here the phenomenon of a weakening of the concept of motherhood in the light of falling birthrates, which had been the case for a long time and continued to be so (as the essay on Statius in this volume suggests was the case for the first century CE). The Cornelias were yielding to the Cynthias,[71] and Propertius's bad mothers like Arria, the *lupa*, Althaea, Cassiopeia and Medea were symbols of these changing values. These symbols depict this social transformation as a decline in traditional Roman mores, a decline easily and often attributable to Roman women.

Notes

[1] Propertius occasionally refers to his own mother as well but without identifying detail or irony: see 2.20.15–16; 4.1.131–32.

[2] On these Greek child-killing demons, see Johnston 361–87; Johnston also cites on the social significance of these demons, cf. Mary Douglas and Jonathan Smith.

[3] Smith 1978, quoted by Johnston 362.

[4] Johnston 363ff.

[5] Translation by Richmond Lattimore in Arrowsmith 27–28.

[6] Worman 20. I am reminded here of *Pan*dora, who gives or is given everything. See also the *Vita Aeschines*, where it is stated that Aeschines's mother was 'accustomed to rush out of dark places to frighten women and children and was nicknamed Empousa, therefore, because Empousa was a νυκτερινύν φᾶντασμα.' (See *Vita Aeschines*, vol. 3 Reisk p. 10; Johnston 365, n. 10; Brown 41–50.)

[7] See Yunis 187 ad sec. 130. Cf. Aristophanes, *Eccl.* 1056 for a lecherous old woman called an *empousa*.

[8] Worman 20 n. 50.

[9] For other sources on Empousa, see Johnston 374, nn. 29 and 31.

[10] This slipperiness of character and person is seen e.g. in Lamia, a demon who is said to be bisexual.

[11] The bibliography on this point is large. See e.g. Glenn et al. 13–14.

[12] For a discussion of how Propertius constructs women as a binary and/or polarised into virtuous or depraved, see Greene 64. But the situation is far more complex than this.

[13] Gardner 31–65, 67–80, 163–203. In fact, non-*manus* marriage may have given daughters more autonomy; see Varro *DLL* 7.71, on Roman fathers thinking that their married daughters were out of their control.

[14] See here Skinner 1997: 9–11; Dixon passim but esp. Chapters 2, 5, 6; Phillips 69–80, esp. 69.

[15] See Hemelrijk 7–16, esp. p. 10 and n. 14.

[16] Saller 336–55; Hallett 1989: 59–78, who makes a case for elite Roman women having a 'bipartite' role, being both similar to and other than men (their blood kin) and therefore in a very ambiguous position (both for their own view of themselves and as the objects of the views of others). On women and mothers in the Flavian age, see the essay on Statius in this volume.

[17] Dixon 41–70, 168–209; Hemelrijk 9–11: '. . . the position of a woman within her house and family was ambiguous: it was marked by both integration in the social life of the family and segregation as regards most tasks and activities' (quote on p. 11).

[18] See e.g. Joshel 221–54; Edwards.

[19] See Wyke 2002, esp. 140 and notes 54, 55. It should be noted that elite women were not unique; their sons, pre-patriarchal males, in their roles as heirs and future family leaders politically, were also signs that were produced and manipulated.

[20] Hallett 1989: 59–78.

[21] Rawson 25.

[22] Wyke 2002: 140, n. 54; see also Janan Chap. 4; Greene Chap. 3, esp. 65.

[23] Greene 65, where she cites Benjamin's work on erotic domination.

[24] See on this Dixon Preface; Phillips esp. p. 69; Hemelrijk 68 (who also points out the idealisation of ancient mothers in writers like Tacitus).

[25] Cf., e.g., Horace, *Carm*. 3.6.33–44; see Skinner 2005: 205, 230.

[26] See Hallett 1984 [1973], especially 254–58.

[27] Propertius's Cornelia married into the Aemilii Pauli.

[28] See Hemelrijk 64–67; Flower 172–79; Hallett 2002: 13–24.

[29] Under Augustus (and thereafter), the *ius liberorum* allowed free-born citizen women who had borne three or more children to be *sui iuris*, not subject to the formal control of a guardian and financially autonomous. See Dixon 72–73, 91; Treggiari 66–80, esp. 69; Hemelrijk 102, 112. Dixon points out that for women, the *ius liberorum* was a mark of honour (and many of the rights she accrued were gained simply by having one child); for a man, it meant a boost to a political career (84–97).

[30] On the family of Cornelia (and such women), see Hemelrijk 64–71, who points out that the picture created of Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi, later on was highly idealised and not as ambiguous as what we know to be her reputation at the time she lived (67); Wyke 2002: 108–14; Hallett 1984: 153–54; Janan 85–86, 162–63; Lange 335–42. Cornelia was the only woman who had a statue erected in her honour in Rome before Octavian so honored Octavia and Livia in 35 BCE, according to extant evidence; see on this Flory 287–308, esp. 287–92. Flory points out that Cornelia's statue commemorated 'her relationship to her famous male relatives' (291). For a discussion of ideal wives (and husbands) as they are described in epitaphs and other inscriptions, see Treggiari 243–49.

[31] The status of the elegiac beloved such as Cynthia is far from clear; see on this James 36–41, who says that Cynthia would be a member of a courtesan class which finds a precedent and commonality in certain courtesans of Plautine and Terentian comedy. As both James and Hemelrijk (79–81) point out, however, such *doctae puellae* did not exist as members of an actual social class but only as idealised figures in literature who were contrasted with the upper-class *matrona* figures such as Cornelia.

[32] See here Hallett 1984 [1973]: 257–58; Wyke 2002: 113–14.

[33] Wyke 2002: 114, n. 102; referring us to Janan 162–63: 'Propertius forever defers the ending to Cornelia's trial and thus suspends its meaning. By refusing closure, the poem denies even the semblance of consistency and coherence to the Law that has animated Cornelia's life' (163).

[34] Johnson 163–80 (quote on p. 180); Richardson 481. See also Curran 134–36, on the reminiscences of Alcestis in the description of Cornelia in Propertius 4.11; Dufallo 163–79, who, in a discussion of Propertius 4.7 and 4.11, says that Propertius's 'celebration of erotic bonds that connect the living to the dead may have been especially enticing to his audience because it represented a sly, witty *imitation* of Augustus, a counter-genealogy' (italics in original; quote on p. 166); Gold forthcoming.

[35] See on both these points, the masculine space occupied by Cornelia and the specter of death that hovers over the poem, Curran 135 and n. 8 and 136–39.

[36] See Janan 86–87, who discusses how Gutzwiller modifies in a similar way Propertius 4.5, the Acanthis elegy (Gutzwiller 105–15).

[37] Janan 4–6.

[38] See on this phenomenon in general Miller 1994 passim, esp. 1–8.

[39] See Livy 1.11.6–9.

[40] Modified translation of Janan 2001: 82.

[41] There may also be an allusion here to the slang meaning of *lupa*, prostitute. Livy (1.4.7) claimed that the real figure behind the mythical wolf-mother of Romulus and Remus was (Acca) Larentia, wife of the shepherd Faustulus and one-time prostitute. Other authors use *lupa* in a similar vein: Plautus, *Ep*. 3.3.22; *Truc*. 3.1.12; Cicero, *Mil.* 21.55; Juvenal 3.66. See also Dion. Hal. 2.37.2.

[42] Johnston 376; she cites Lykaon as an example. She also references Buxton 60–79.

[43] See also Propertius 2.6.19–20, where again the same image is used: . . . *tu criminis auctor, / nutritus duro, Romule, lacte lupae* ('you, Romulus, instigator of the crime, were nursed by the infertile milk of the she-wolf'). The epithet *duro*, which more fittingly modifies the wolf's teat in 4.4.54, here is transferred to the milk. Camps wants it to modify the *lupa* in both poems ('no doubt *duro*, though attached grammatically to *lacte*, goes in sense more closely with *lupae*; the point is the savagery of the beast, not the taste of the milk,' Camps ad loc.). But I think that the emphasis is not on the wolf herself but rather on her mothering qualities and therefore *durus* is used to indicate the quality of the teat (hard, without milk, unfertile) or milk (unnourishing).

[44] Some editors adopt the alternative reading *pudet* (from P) for *putet* in line 38, presumably in an attempt to make better sense of the ambiguous reference. See Camps ad 4.1.37–38. The reading *non pudet* allows the *Romanus alumnus* to feel pride in his bestial ancestral *nutrix*, even while creating a distance from her.

[45] See DeBrohun esp. 11, 58 (and n. 42), 67–68 (and n. 58). She uses this poem to bolster her central argument that Propertius in Book 4 is elevating his genre of elegy with the inclusion of *aetia* (but with some epic mixed in) and thus he emphasises *arma* and bloodshed early in the book.

[46] Note that line 55, immediately following the reference to the *inhumana lupa*, is a nearly impossible crux. Butler and Barber ad loc. mention the reading given by N: *sic . . . pariamne tua* ('shall I on these conditions bear children, a queen in your hall?'). But, Butler and Barber say, 'motherhood is irrelevant to the question and *pariam*, as Housman points out, is 'worse than premature' in the mouth of a Vestal' (348 ad 4.4.55). Such a reference to motherhood would, I contend, fit in very well here, but I do not believe that the text can support it. On this poem, see Janan 70–84, esp. 82–84; DeBrohun 192–96.

[47] We should also note that Tarpeia is compromised by her materialistic values and is an unreliable narrator.

[48] In other versions, Tarpeia is a vestal virgin. Although Propertius is not explicit about this, he alludes to Tarpeia drawing water in a grove for her *dea* (15–16), who could well be Vesta. Cf. Camps ad 4.4.15; he points out that this would be one of the regular duties of a vestal virgin.

[49] It is interesting to note that in nearly every story in which a mother is responsible for the deaths or endangerment of her children, the children are male. But there is evidence that, in the Roman republic, mothers had a strong emotional investment in and a close bond with their sons, who were often the sole male kin available to their mothers since older males in the family were often away from Rome or dead. Thus myths involving mothers sending their sons to die or killing them would be doubly antithetical to lived reality. See on this Hallett 1984: 243–57.

[50] The meaning of lines 93–94 is not clear; see Richardson, Camps ad loc.

[51] There are, of course, two famous Arrias, mother and daughter, symbols of wifely piety who committed suicide or tried to do so when their Stoic husbands were forced to kill themselves. Unfortunately they are later than our Propertian Arria and could not have inspired her. But one would like to imagine that a prescient Propertius ironically imagined for us an anti-Arria avant la letter!

[52] The name/figure of Cinara is also found in several poems of Horace: *Carm*. 4.1, 4.13; *Ep*. 1.7.28, 1.14.33. In Horace, Cinara is called *proterva* (*Ep*. 1.7), *rapax* (*Ep*. 1.14) and *bona* (*Carm*. 4.1) and she seems to embody a nostalgic view of Horace's bygone youth; Fraenkel remarks that 'she seems to be more real' than any of the other women mentioned in Horace's poetry (411).

[53] Many transpositions have been suggested for this poem by Housman and later commentators. So Richardson puts lines 17–18 (with reference to the *mater*) after line 62; Vivona puts them after line 64 and Gould in the Loeb after line 66. See Richardson ad loc.

[54] There are also textual problems with this line. Some manuscripts and editors read *tacta* for *tracta* and the main manuscript reading is *Thetis*, not *Theti*, although most editors emend to *Theti*. See Richardson ad loc.

[55] On Thetis as an immortal figure who is, in her maternal role, associated with her son's death, see Murnaghan 251–57, who refers to the 'deadly implications of maternity' (253). In such cases, the maternity of the female figure trumps her divinity.

[56] This is Camps's translation; see Camps ad loc. As Richardson points out, this could refer to the library that Octavia named for Marcellus but more likely refers to his 'whole education.'

[57] On the story of Althaea and her son Meleager, see Murnaghan 247–49.

[58] See Chiasson, who, in an article on the story of Cleobis and Biton in Herodotus, discusses the 'culturally potent mythical motif' found in early Greek hexameter poetry, which tends 'to associate mothers, the source of human life, with the death of their male offspring' (45); see also Murnaghan, on the close link between maternity and mortality (242–64).

[59] Niobe is mentioned briefly again in 3.10, Cynthia's birthday poem, here more as the standard measurement of grief (3.10.8).

[60] The mothers in Statius are figures of conjugal devotion and lament, but the article in this volume points out that they also have a new social and economic importance in this period. See also Loraux, *Mothers in Mourning*, esp. 29–34 on Roman women mourning (she compares here Greek mothers mourning). According to Loraux, the 'feminine element in the management of mourning' is 'always liable to become a public display by part of the city' and so is organised by its role as part of the *civitas* (whereas Greek women are more subject to the rules of the *oikos*).

[61] In 4.1, Horos does mention Propertius's mother in the context of Propertius's boyhood:

mox ubi bulla rudi dimissa est aurea collo,
matris et ante deos libera sumpta toga (4.1.131–32)

('Soon, when the golden amulet was released from your boyish neck
and you donned the toga of manhood before the gods of your mother')

Since Propertius had lost his father in the wars, Propertius's mother had to help usher Propertius into manhood. So his life was influenced, it would seem, more by a female than a male presence. See Welch on the connection between this feminine influence, Propertius's stress on female characters and concerns in 4.1 (e.g. Arria, Cinara, Iphigeneia, Cassandra) and his focus on 'multiple female perspectives' in the rest of Book 4 (n. 66, quoting Wyke 1987a). *Parentes* are also mentioned in Propertius 1.21, a poem about a certain Gallus, who was either a kinsman of Propertius or, more likely, a fictional character who has been mortally wounded at the battle of Perusia.

[62] See here Phillips, for some accounts of more traditional actions of mothers and daughters as presented by e.g. Tacitus, Pliny and Cicero. Cf. Janan's observation that one of the themes that links the poems of Propertius Book 4 is the 'uncanny appearance of truths about women that challenge received wisdom' (86); this is true, Janan says, only for the women who are dead (Acanthis in 4.5, Cynthia in 4.7, Cornelia in 4.11).

[63] Sharrock 263–84; Wyke 1987b: 47–61; 1989: 25–47.

[64] Wyke 1987b; 1989.

[65] On this see Gold 1993: 75–101.

[66] See Sharrock 271; Wyke 2002: 178–85; Miller 2001: 127–46 (who talks about Propertius's double voicing, a concept that Miller borrows from Bakhtin; see esp. pages 133–35).

[67] See Ormand 303–38. Ormand explores the role of shape-shifting, especially in regard to women's social roles in archaic Greece and, in particular, marriage.

[68] Ormand, p. 1, citing Bergren 69–95.

[69] Although Rich is writing about motherhood millennia after Propertius did, in many ways I feel that, as Irigaray said, '. . . with some additions and subtractions, our imaginary still functions according to patterns established through Greek mythologies and tragedies'. See Luce Irigaray, cited by Hirsch 28 (the original citation is not given).

[70] Rich 13. See also Eisenstein Chapters 7, 8 and 9 (pp. 69–95).

[71] Of course, as the essay on Statius points out (this volume), citing Flower, '. . . the figure of virtuous, austere Cornelia never did correspond to contemporary social reality' (see Flower 159–84). For evasion of marriage and children in (and by) Propertius, see e.g. Propertius 2.7.

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