Perceptions of the sexual and social roles of women have changed radically in Western cultures over the last forty years, and with them the nature of our interest in women in ancient literature and life. In 1965 Lilja’s monograph on the elegists’ attitudes toward women was a useful first step, but it disappointed by attempting too much, and by dissipating its energies on attitudes not toward women or a woman, but toward the alternative relationships of free love and marriage. In Propertius’ case Cynthia was still treated as reality; or at least fictionalized reality; hence the useful formulation of Lieberg (1963): inspiration, subject and intended addressee, “zugleich Quelle, Gegenstand und Ziel” of Propertius’ elegiac poetry, and the vivid recreation of the poet’s mistress in the climactic twelfth chapter of Boucher (1965).

Then came a critical move to separate literature from life, with concentration on the poet’s processes: Veyne (1983) reinterpreted the loved woman as a mere reflection of the poet lover’s self-image, followed by Wyke (1987a, b; 1989) for whom Cynthia passed from being the poet’s subject to a “form of literary language,” or “of poetic production,” (1987a, 53) on which the elegist could exercise his Callimachean stylistic ambitions. Dispute over the fictionality or instrumentality of “Cynthia” distracted from the primary study of how she was represented and how she was treated as representative of her sex. The elegist’s attitude is important because Propertius himself shows so much interest in his contradictory reactions. As the shrewd slave told young Phaedria in Terence Eunuchus, “you can’t control [Love] by reasoning, since it knows no reason or restraint.”

But where comedy could correct the prejudiced views of the distressed lover on his woman, or on women, through the wiser judgments of

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1 Eun. 57–8 Quae res in se neque consilium neque modum / habet ullam, eam consilio regere non potes.
unaffected characters, elegy speaks only through the elegist and can only fully represent the woman by also representing the poet’s own emotions: Lilja saw that “Propertius emphasizes the irrational nature of love” (1965, 115), he “underlines his own... feelings of inferiority,... is suspicious... over-sensitive,... jealous” (159). He expects his public to assess his statements for themselves.

The purpose of this essay is to go beyond the poet’s complex portrait of Cynthia to isolate his views of her sex: that is, of sexually active women, whose behavior he generalizes either by extending Cynthia’s faults to reproach her contemporaries, or by invoking the idealized women of other, mythical or bucolic worlds as parallels to her beauty or foils to her offenses. But one must start, as Propertius did, with Cynthia herself.

The first book of elegies opens with the name of Cynthia, and with his own relationship of longing and submission to her: she is the woman desired, cruel and unyielding, like Atalanta (1.1.10 saevitiam durae... Iasidos), because she imposes demands on the man who seeks to be her lover. The lover-poet defines women in terms of their desirability and response to his desire, and for most of the Monobiblos we learn little about Cynthia and her circumstances, except in terms of her physical charms (defined in 1.2 as needing no unnatural enhancement) and the poet’s frustration from gratifying his passion. This book confines itself within a tight male circle (Tullus, Gallus, Bassus, Ponticus)—themselves introduced in terms of their misguided indifference to love (Ponticus, 1.7, reversed in 1.9), their criticism of Cynthia (Bassus 1.4), or jealous attempts to seduce her (Gallus 1.5). Praise of Cynthia is combined with the exaltation of sexual delight, as Venus is treated with awe for her power to humble mighty heroes and cause pain to unyielding hearts (1.14.17–18: illa potest magnas heroum infringere vires, / illa etiam duris mentibus esse dolor).

Apart from varying Cynthia’s circumstances, such as her plan to travel away from Propertius to Illyricum or her escape to Baiae (1.8; 1.11), Propertius depicts her only in terms of the pangs of desire she causes. Indeed the last poem to focus upon her (1.19) does so through the poet’s protests of love beyond death: he claims for himself the

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2 Propertius’ use of myth explored by Boucher (1965) will be discussed below. For the bucolic alternative, compare 2.34.67–76 (Virgil’s Eclogues) and 3.13.25–40.

3 The text will normally be cited from Fedeli (1984), with reference where there is significant divergence to Barber (1960) and Goold (1990).