

*nox clausas liberat umbras*: Propertius 4.7 and the Inversion of Paraclausithyron

The widespread cultural significance of the *limen* for Roman culture and Propertius' use of the imagery of boundaries in his Elegies has been long acknowledged (Warden 1980, Papanghelis 1987). I connect the *limen* with the threshold inherently expressed in a paraclausithyron scene, noted by Debrohun (2003), who finds the theme of dual-facing boundaries to enhance the use of paraclausithyron in poem 4.7. My analysis presses to further show the connection between the imagery of the boundary and the traditional elegiac paraclausithyron scene in Propertius' works, which is especially relevant in 4.7. A few scholars have argued that the theme is present in this poem (Debrohun 2003), but none have thoroughly analyzed the implications or extent of its use. I argue that in poem 4.7 the manipulation of the prominent Roman theme of the *limen* is used to invert the traditional associations of a paraclausithyron scene, adding to the distorted realities present in a poem about Cynthia's return from the dead. This idea of the *limen* pervades 4.7, combining the association of the underworld as a boundary with the elegiac *amator*'s characteristic experiences at the threshold of his mistress.

The dual nature of boundaries reveals a deeper level of understanding of a threshold as that which is both war and peace, both excludes and contains danger. In general, then, the underworld reflects this dual nature, as a place of both punishment and reward, and is additionally characterized by a sense of danger, fear, and mystery. The boundary between life and death is a pervasive image in the poem, with "threshold" imagery present for all the stages of Cynthia's death and resurrection. First Propertius fails to find a guard for her corpse and to follow her pyre "beyond the gates" (*portas ultra* 29). This presents an inverted idea because Propertius, as an elegiac lover, in a traditional paraclausithyron scene would remain outside of

his lover's house, unable rather than unwilling to cross the threshold. Another traditional representation of a boundary comes in line 87, wherein there is another reference to gates: "do not spurn dreams coming from the pious gates" (*nec tu sperne piis venientia somnia portis* 87). Yet this boundary too is reversed, for it controls what leaves, rather than what enters. The river travelled by Cynthia and the other women in the underworld is itself a boundary between the two abodes on either branch of the river, and separates the entrance to the underworld from them as well. The boatman is a guardian figure, controlling who gains access to the underworld. In addition, the boatman parallels the nurse, Parthenie, for they both control access past the threshold, whether the gates of Hades or the literal doors of Cynthia's home. The shades are called *clausas umbras* (89), which draws upon the use of *claudio* to form a linguistic as well as thematic connection to the lover confined outside the mistress' home (Anderson 1964).

The most pervasive and permanent boundary is that of Death. Yet in Cynthia's presentation of death, the boundary is fluid. While she remains a shade, she is still free to travel about the earth during the night, also the time of time of day when lovers are active. Even Cerberus, the guard of the entrance to the underworld, is permitted to leave: "even Cerberus himself wanders with the bolt cast aside" (*errat et abiecta Cerberus ipse sera* 90). Cynthia transgresses the seemingly most secure boundary, that between the living and the dead, thus undermining the firm and unmoving nature of the door in a traditional paraclausithyron scene, and casting into doubt the firmest conviction of all: the finality of death.

It is this final inversion, that of the role of death, which most emphasizes the surreal aspects of the poem as a whole. Furthermore, the presence of the paraclausithyron trope serves to connect 4.7 stylistically to the first three books, providing continuity and similarity despite the external thematic differences.

The boundaries in 4.7, however, are not all they appear to be. All are reversed, emphasizing the disconcerting changes to the nature of death and casting into doubt the reliability of the poem as a whole. Propertius turns the boundary of death into the threshold of Cynthia's house and then inverts the tradition by creating a boundary that releases rather than contains.

### Bibliography

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