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The Roman Elegist's Dead Lover *or* The Drama of the Desiring Subject

Ancient erotic poetry seems somehow to demand that we prioritize a desiring, intending subject, identified with the author, as an object of our interpretation. Such poetry, as well as our interpretation of it, might also be understood as cultural practice, as a communally-sponsored re-staging of familiar behavior, in spite of its intense focus on the individual subject and his/her intentions and desires. How do our desires as scholars-as interpreting subjects-blind us to such re-staging? Have we yet, can we ever overcome our wish to read Roman erotic elegy as fundamentally about the intentions and desires, conscious or unconscious, of the author/individual subject? I focus on these issues by considering the history of scholarly practice surrounding Propertius 4.7, "*Sunt aliquid Manes*," one of most forceful expressions of the durability of the subject, of his/her intentions, and of erotic desire in the ancient corpus. I argue that approaches ranging from the strictly biographical readings of the 19th century, to the intertextual, feminist, programmatic, and discursive interpretations of 20th-century critics, to the Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective offered still more recently all leave certain fundamental assumptions about individual intention and subjectivity unchallenged. All prioritize an idea of the poem as a drama illuminating the (divided) subject "Propertius'" position vis-à-vis his "love affair" or his poetry or the female or Augustan society and ideology, etc. What does it mean, I ask, to find such an idea "attractive" and, conversely, to find it "dissatisfying," which is to say, undesirable? What alternative, if any, is left to us?

Rather than simply advancing a new interpretation of Propertius 4.7, I consider the theoretical implications-and, in particular, the "desirability"-of understanding both Roman elegy and our interpretation of it as a different kind of ritual, initiatory event: in this case, a re-staging of the republican oratorical topos *mortuos ab inferis excitare*. By acknowledging, on the one hand, that the performance of this elegy bears striking resemblances to "calling up the dead" in a speech (such as Cicero's *Pro Caelio*) and that, on the other hand, we desire the ghost of Propertius 4.7 to be "the Roman elegist's dead lover," Cynthia, we open the door to understanding both the poem and our scholarly practice as such a ritual. We may thus defer an emphasis on the authority of an intending subject identified with ourselves or the author, and instead concentrate on pre-existing practices (both those of ancient orators and those of modern scholars) that dramatize not individual desire, but modes of communal access to the past. This is desirable in that it means allowing the Augustan elite a similar capacity to stage such rituals as we claim, usually implicitly, for ourselves.