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The "tirocinium adulescentiae" and the carnival of Roman Elegy

A good deal of scholarly attention has been paid to the depiction and social construction of the *puella/domina* in the narratives of Roman elegy (Gold 1993; Greene 1998; Hallett 1973; Wyke 1987, 1989) but relatively little attention has been paid to the representation of the male narrator. This paper sets out to examine how the elegiac narrator is characterized as a male on the threshold of adulthood and to argue that this liminality is an essential ingredient of the effect of elegy.

Elegiac discourse represents its male lead at a time of erotic initiation. This is considered in Roman culture as a potentially perilous period of life that must be successfully negotiated for a youth to become a fully integrated and productive member of society. In the case of the elegiac narrator this is a tale of unsuccessful transition as erotic initiation leads into a protracted erotic entanglement that produces social stigma.

Youth and young adulthood seems to have been culturally sanctioned as a time period to which a degree of indulgence could be permitted. In a passage from one of Seneca's *Controversiae* a Roman *iuvenis* argues that his wild behavior is sanctioned by a *lex iuvenalis* that establishes a permissible and carnivalesque temporal space (the *tirocinium adulescentiae*) before the strictures of adult responsibility.

The *tirocinium adulescentiae* provides a likely cultural and historical space for the narratives of Roman elegy. Thus the poetic biography of Propertius 4.1B sets the elegiac narrator in a period immediately after the assumption of the *toga virilis*. In such a context the apparent aberrant and anti-social behavior of elegiac discourse can be seen as a youthful acting out during an approved period of liminal transgression.

In Propertius 3.25, in all likelihood the final poem of the original collection, the narrator declares that he was a slave for five years. This may well represent a conflation of time inside and outside the text: the time it took both to publish the poetry and the represented length of the narrator's erotic misadventures. It seems from our admittedly limited evidence that the age at which the elegists produced their work and the represented age of the internal narrator (bearing the same name as the external poet) were proximate and thus elegy was deliberately engaged in a concision of art and life.

In Propertius 3.25 the narrator also confesses to a change of heart that resigns his former erotic infatuation and lifestyle to the scrap heap of immaturity. This poem systematically echoes the first poem of the collection in a deliberate act of closure that finds the elegiac narrator now enlightened and ready to make a thanks offering to Good Sense. This act of ring composition is also an interpretive key to the collection. The stridently non-conformist voice of the elegiac narrator, his erotic obsession, his rejection of civic responsibility and personal respectability are ultimately all projected as a passing phase of youthful misdirection. In this manner elegiac narrative might be construed as not so much a subversive practice (an instance of "carnival" as construed by Bakhtin [1973]) but

rather a discourse that ultimately serves to bolster dominant ideological paradigms of social behavior.