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## Amor the Great in Propertius 1.19.12

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### Recommended Citation

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Source: *Classical Philology*, Vol. 103, No. 2 (April 2008), pp. 184-188

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/591614>

Accessed: 01/10/2014 11:13

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depart at glory's height (Thuc. 2.42.4)—no “minor feature” of the situation, then, but a truly pivotal one.

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## AMOR THE GREAT IN PROPERTIUS 1.19.12

In Propertius 1.19.12, the modifier *magnus* is applied to *amor* in a pentameter asserting that love survives beyond the grave. There has been disagreement concerning the interpretation of *magnus* in this line, the text of which, including the preceding hexameter, is as follows:

illic quidquid ero, semper tua dicar imago:  
traicit et fati litora magnus amor.

There, whatever I shall be, I'll always be called your shade:  
a great love crosses even the shores of death.

Does love survive death because it is potent, or only when it is so? This note will propose a quite specific interpretation of *magnus* from which it will follow that this modifier denotes a quality intrinsic to love or, rather, to the god of love. Amor will be found to overcome death because he is inherently mighty.

What D. R. Shackleton Bailey deems the usual view, reflected in the translation above, is *magnus* taken to denote an intense love as opposed to a feeble one.<sup>1</sup> As examples of this usage, Volker Eckert cites Propertius 2.34.30, 2.34.34, and Virgil

1. Shackleton Bailey 1956, 55–56. This interpretation of *magnus* was in fact put forward over fifty years earlier in Ramsay 1900, 208, where *magnus* is said to be “either specific, ‘A potent love’ or general, ‘The mighty power of Love’ [with upper-case el].”

*Aeneid* 1.675, 1.716, and 4.395.<sup>2</sup> Shackleton Bailey, however, proposes understanding *magnus* as equivalent to δεινὸς ἔρωζ, that is, as “the strange power of love.”

Even if Shackleton Bailey’s proposal is rejected,<sup>3</sup> the usual interpretation of *magnus* is itself not entirely satisfactory. When ancient writers assert that love conquers all, the gods themselves included, this claim is not confined to intense love alone. Rather, love is represented as constantly powerful, not just occasionally so; and irresistible always, not just at its most extreme. When Virgil has a love poet declare, *omnia vincit amor*, neither *omnia* nor *amor* is qualified. Some years later, in 4.3.49, Propertius’ Arethusa proclaims, *omnis amor magnus*. Thus, when love conquers even death in Propertius 1.19.12, this happens because love is inherently mighty.

The expression *traicit et fati litora* suggests a further reason why *magnus* is applied to *amor* in this line. Indeed, while this expression is obviously a highly picturesque periphrasis for *mortem superat*, little attention has been paid to the connotation that attaches to it. In crediting *amor* with a catabasis, *traicit et fati litora* personifies it and implicitly assimilates it to one of the heroes who achieved the same feat. These would be Hercules, Odysseus, Orpheus, Theseus, and, perhaps, Aeneas. What makes it possible to single out Hercules in particular is the epithet *magnus* that Propertius applies to *amor*.

The digital concordance created under the auspices of the Packard Humanities Institute reveals that whether he is named Hercules, Alcides, Amphitryoniades, or Tiryntius, no epithet applied to Hercules is even remotely so common as *magnus*. This word occurs at least twenty-four times as a modifier of one of Hercules’ names.<sup>4</sup> All of these instances, moreover, are confined to verse and concentrated in epic and tragedy.<sup>5</sup> Thus, there is overwhelming statistical evidence to support the conclusion that for the Hercules of Latin epic and tragedy, *magnus* is the standing epithet par excellence.<sup>6</sup>

Statistics aside, the status of *magnus* as a standing epithet for the Hercules of epic and tragedy is also likely to be reflected in a semantic quibble in Martial 9.64 that is worth quoting in full:

Herculis in magni vultus descendere Caesar  
dignatus Latiae dat nova templa viae,

2. Eckert 1985, 338. To his citations may be added Cic. *Fam.* 12.29.1. The same sense is assigned to *magnus* (“the limits of any passion, even a ‘great’ one”) in Flaschenriem 1997, 263; also in Whitaker 1983, 129 (“a great love crosses the shores of death”), in Georg 2001, 27 (“eine große Liebe, so heißt es hier, überquere sogar die Gestade des Todes”), in Edwards 2002, 118 (“*magnus amor*, ‘a great love,’ is what crosses death’s boundary”), and in Syndikus 2006, 300 (“death is no barrier to a great love”).

3. As it is in, for example, Eckert 1985, 338; Enk 1946, 2: 42; La Penna 1977, 42, 159; Fedeli 1980, 447. On the other hand, it meets with approval in Williams 1968, 770; Komp 1988, 67; Baker 1990, 169; Goold 1990, 103.

4. Verg. *Aen.* 5.414, 8.103; Hor. *Carm.* 4.5.36; Ov. *Met.* 9.134–35, 9.293, *Ib.* 293; Sen. *Agamemnon* 814, *Hercules furens* 439, 829, *Hercules Oetaeus* 771, 1823, 1887, *Med.* 648; Luc. 6.391; Sil. *Pun.* 3.514; Mart. 9.64.1; Stat. *Theb.* 5.441–42, 6.346, 7.601–2, 7.668, 10.296, *Silv.* 3.1.83; *Iliad Latina* 523; *Anth. Lat.* 881.133. The citations in Carter (1902, 42) are incomplete.

5. In two examples in lyric (Hor. *Carm.* 4.5.36) and in epigram (Mart. 9.64.1), the context is panegyric, making these exceptions that prove the rule. Stat. *Silv.* 3.1.83 employs elevated diction.

6. This is assumed a priori by, for example, Bömer 1969–86, 4: 315, and Henriksen 1998–99, 2: 66. As a cult title of Hercules in the state religion, *magnus* was restricted to Hercules Magnus Custos. In Greek verse, μέγας is rare and relatively late as an epithet of Hercules: see Bömer 1969–86, 4: 314–15.

qua, Triviae nemorosa petit dum regna, viator  
 octavum domina marmor ab urbe legit.  
 ante colebatur votis et sanguine largo,  
 maiorem Alciden nunc minor ipse colit.

Deigning to lower himself to the features of Hercules the great, Caesar  
 gives a new temple to the Latin Way,  
 where the wayfarer, as he makes for the woody realms of the Goddess of Three Ways,  
 reads the eighth marble from the queen city.  
 Before, he used to be worshiped with vows and copious blood,  
 but now he himself, a lesser god, worships a greater Alcides.

This epigram raises the issue of nomenclature. To paraphrase its argument, if Hercules is known as *magnus* (line 1), it follows that his superior epigone will be called *maior*, and he himself demoted from *magnus* to *minor* (line 6). If *magnus* lacked the status of a standing epithet and were simply one of a number of modifiers any one of which would suit Hercules equally well, the epigram would lose much of its point. It is piquant precisely because *magnus* applied to Hercules is a familiar and conventional epithet. Thus, even if Martial 9.64 does not quite prove that *magnus* used of Hercules had the status of a standing epithet, it lends this supposition some considerable support.

Taken by themselves, neither a standing epithet of Hercules nor the exploit of his catabasis would be sufficient to bring him to a reader's mind. The epithet *magnus* is hardly unique to Hercules, nor is a catabasis. When a single pentameter, however, attributes a canonical labor of Hercules to an *amor* that carries Hercules' commonest epithet, the consequent assimilation of *amor* to Hercules comes close to being unmistakable. Further, if it is Hercules in Propertius 1.19.12 whose exploit and epithet are appropriated by *amor*, the parallelism between *amor* and a flesh-and-blood hero strongly suggests that *amor* is the god rather than the emotion he inspires. If the parallelism between *amor* and Hercules is to be exact, the analogue of Hercules must be, like Hercules, animate, not abstract.

A wry assimilation of the child Amor to the hero Hercules would be entirely consistent with the tendency of elegy to aggrandize the poet/lover's demimonde and its trifling verse even as it diminishes mighty deeds and the elitist poetry that deals with them. This inversion of the worlds of love and achievement, and of the poetic genres belonging to each, is a familiar elegiac ploy.<sup>7</sup> In the *Monobiblos*, for example, the elegist endures the physical rigors of a soldier (1.6.30, 1.16.23–24), while his friend Tullus, pursuing a military career *proprement dit*, imbibes the luxuries of Rome and Asia (1.6.31–32, 1.14.1–6).<sup>8</sup> In the realm of poetry, the elegist is enrolled among the major talents of the city (1.7.21–24), while lovers deem Homer inferior to Mimmermus (1.9.11), and the epic of Ponticus is fated to remain unread even by the poet himself (1.7.17–18). In later books, Homer's Circe is a mere *puella* (3.12.31), and the anger of Achilles over an insult to his honor is reduced to a lover's pain over the loss of

7. For recent discussions, see Greene 2000 and Gale 1997. To Gale's citations may be added Benediktson 1985. Like the assimilation of Amor to Hercules claimed here for Prop. 1.19.12, the mythology of Prop. 1.15 is found to be "comically malapropos" in Otis 1965, 17.

8. For Prop. 1.14.1–6 and its inverted application to Tullus of language usually reserved for the realm of love and love poetry, see King 1981–82, 331.

Briseis (2.8.35–36). Conversely, in 2.1.14, the elegist promises “long Iliads” whenever he has shared a bed with his girlfriend.<sup>9</sup>

Not even the mighty Hercules is spared when, in Propertius 4.9.31–54, he is cast in the role of an *exclusus amator* manqué.<sup>10</sup> A complete reversal of roles in both directions is found in Senecan tragedy, where Amor receives Hercules’ cult title *Invictus* (*Hercules Oetaeus* 539), while Hercules himself is vanquished (*vince*, 562), at least prospectively, by an invincible Amor wielding his heavy weapons (545–47). As in Propertius 1.19.12, Amor here appropriates both the nomenclature and the might of Hercules.<sup>11</sup>

In conclusion, as Shackleton Bailey suggests, the modifier *magnus* in Propertius 1.19.12 does indeed denote an attribute that is intrinsic rather than adventitious. The subject of the line is the god Amor, who, though only a child (*puer*) in line 5, is here dubbed *magnus*.<sup>12</sup> Those who, like Propertius’ Amor, achieve a Herculean catabasis also deserve a Herculean honorific. Incongruous though it surely is to confer on the tender god of love an epithet routinely applied in epic and tragedy to the invincible warrior Hercules, incongruity is not unknown in Propertian elegy.<sup>13</sup>

The preceding discussion casts some doubt on Hermann Tränkle’s assertion, followed by Eckard Lefèvre, that parody of epic is “vollkommen fremd” in the earlier books of Propertius.<sup>14</sup> Even if it is allowed to be a matter of opinion whether portraying Amor in the guise of Hercules constitutes parody, several aspects of Propertius 1.19.12 fall squarely within the realm of epic. Hercules himself is a fixture of the epic tradition, and *magnus* as his standing epithet is concentrated in epic and tragedy. Even if *traicit et fati litora* cannot be traced to an extant epic text, this grandiloquent periphrasis for *mortem superat* is very much in the epic manner. Indeed, the sole parallel for line-initial *traicit et* is found in epic, in Virgil *Aeneid* 11.685. Finally, the catabasis that crossing the shores of death signifies is a familiar topic in the epic tradition. The question of parody aside, it is not easy to imagine how a single pentameter of six words could incorporate more reminiscences of epic than does Propertius 1.19.12.<sup>15</sup>

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9. For the “elegiacization” of Homer, see Dalzell 1980, esp. 30 (“This [Prop. 2.8.29–38] is an elegiac *Iliad*, brought down to human level, where the characters are motivated by the emotions which move the elegiac lover”); Benediktson 1985; and Gale 1997, 83.

10. See Anderson 1964.

11. This parallel between Propertius and Seneca is not included among the many adduced in Marioni 1995, 39–46. On p. 11, she finds the theme of Prop. 1.19.12 reflected in Sen. *Troades* 802–3.

12. In their commentary on Prop. 1.19.12, Hodge and Buttimore (1977, 197) write of “the power of love,” but then of Love with uppercase el “cross[ing] into the world of the dead.” Ovid’s portrayal of the child Amor in the role of *triumphator* (*Ov. Am.* 1.2) embodies the same incongruity as Amor assimilated to Hercules.

13. “He is master of . . . cultivated incongruity” (Lyne 1980, 148). For an appreciation of this aspect of Propertian elegy as it applies to content, see Papanghelis 1987, 146–47, 190–98. For incongruity in levels of style, see *ibid.*, 195; Tränkle 1960, 172–83, 1986, 171–72. Propertius’ conflation of conflicting themes and language belonging to the opposing worlds of love and of Roman glory (*amor* vs. *Roma*) is a central feature of Book 4 for DeBrohun (2003); yet she finds this anticipated in the earlier books. Finally, elegant form may conflict with brutal content, as in Prop. 2.9.10 and 3.15.14, cited in Lyne 1980, 146–47. The particular case of the god Amor incongruously conceived as a child endowed with overwhelming power originates in Hellenistic literature (see citations in Walde 1992, 151 n. 92).

14. Tränkle 1960, 180; Lefèvre 1966, 124.

15. The elevated tone of Prop. 1.19.12 is acknowledged in Sellar 1892, 308; La Penna 1977, 43; in Lyne 1980, 143; and in Papanghelis 1987, 10, contra Boyle 1974, 902.

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