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Matthew Angelosanto
Union College - Schenectady, NY

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The Political Propertius:
Pro- and Anti-Augustan Readings of
Propertius Book Four

By

M. Angelosanto

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ABSTRACT

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Propertius was a Roman elegist writing during the early years of Augustus' reign as emperor. His fourth and final book of elegies has long confounded scholars due to its drastic shift in subject matter from love elegy to aetiology. So, too, did the poet's political stance seem to change: vehemently anti-Augustus in his earlier books, a number of poems in his fourth seem to extol both the sociopolitical climate of Augustan Rome as well as the emperor himself. But should we take the poet's words at face value? In light of his inexplicable change in political allegiance, this thesis examines whether Propertius' words are sincere or whether he is using them to subvert the emperor's authority right under his nose. A close analysis of the text and an understanding of the massive political and social upheaval of Augustus' early rule yield two competing readings, one decidedly anti-Augustan, the other sincerely pro-Augustan.

Introduction

After the death of Gaius Julius Caesar on the ides of March in 44 BC, Rome was thrown into chaos as both his allies and enemies vied for control of the empire. Ultimately, after years of civil war, the most unlikely of candidates would usurp sole power: Gaius Octavius Thurinus, later Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus, adopted by his great-uncle Caesar in his last will and testament. When Augustus conquered Marcus Antonius in the Battle of Actium in 31 BC, he essentially gained complete control over the whole of the Roman dominion. Gone, then, were the days of the Republic; the Roman Empire was born, with Augustus at its helm. He was a ruler unlike any other Rome had seen: those who commanded great power and respect in Rome were almost always great generals, and Augustus' military credentials pale in comparison to those who fought against him for power. But he was a shrewd and highly capable politician and propagandist with very deep pockets. His nearly 45-year rule over Rome was characterized by massive social and political upheaval and is cited as the city's Golden Age in all respects.

Augustus' *Res Gestae* is evidence enough of his importance to Rome's history: he is far and away the single greatest influence on the city's politics, laws, culture, topography and literature. His building program had the most immediately identifiable effect on the city, having beautified many of Rome's dilapidated buildings and erecting many more, often with his own money.¹ He found the moral state of the city upon his ascendancy to be deplorable, and thus enacted legislation to counteract this social ill.²

¹ Augustus, *Res Gestae* 19-21.

² Pliny, *Naturalis Historiae* 14.1.5-6.

The most famous of his legislation were the marriage laws, collectively known as the *leges Juliae*, which were intended to encourage marriage and childbirth to counteract Italy's steadily declining birth rate.

Augustus' rule also saw the Golden Age of Latin literature. The writing of both verse and prose flourished during this time: the major works of Livy, Varro, Horace, Ovid, Virgil and Catullus were all written and published during the rule of Augustus. The elegist Sextus Propertius, too, is among these famous authors, but his work was often overlooked until relatively recently. No biography of the poet was produced during his time, so we can only try to piece together the story of his life. What is known is that he was born sometime around 58-55 BC in Asisium, a town in the region of Umbria.³ It can be gathered that he came from a relatively important Umbrian family of wealthy landowners and politicians and was being groomed to enter public life with an elite education in rhetoric and law.⁴ How he wound up instead writing love elegy is anyone's best guess, but there is no doubt that it was his Cynthia, an older woman with whom Propertius carried on a long affair, who inspired him to express his poetic genius.⁵ His first book of elegies, with Cynthia as the main theme, was published around 29 or early 28 BC and came to be aptly known as the *Cynthia Monobiblos*.⁶ The book brought him instant fame and notoriety, as well as the attention of the famed patron of the arts Maecenas, a confidant of Augustus who could also count Virgil and Horace among his

³ F. Cairns. *Sextus Propertius: The Augustan Elegist*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. p. 6, 25.

⁴ Ibid. 25-28.

⁵ L. Richardson, Jr. *Propertius: Elegies I-IV*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977. p. 3-5.

⁶ Ibid. p. 8.

clients. Maecenas took Propertius under his wing as client and the poet's second book of elegies was published in roughly 25 BC, followed by his third sometime between 25 and 22 BC.⁷

Propertius' history becomes a bit harder to piece together from this point forward. His fourth book of poetry marks a drastic departure from his previous subject matter. Aetiological works more akin to those of Callimachus largely replaced the love elegy for which he became famous. The book is reputed to have been composed between 23 BC and 16 BC and was likely published in that same year.⁸ But from this point hence, history has left no record of Propertius; we only know from a reference in Ovid's *Remedia Amoris* that he was dead by 2 AD, and may even have died before he saw the publication of Book Four.⁹

Two dueling theories exist as to why Propertius' subject matter should shift so drastically in his fourth book. It may have been a purely personal decision on the part of the poet to try something new: indeed, Propertius had alluded to trying his hand at aetiology in earlier works in the corpus.¹⁰ He may simply have tired of writing love elegy and decided to use his talents to support the new princeps and the city he loved. Or it may not have been Propertius' decision at all: Francis Cairns asserts that after the publication of his third book, Propertius ceased to be a client of Maecenas and instead became patronized by Augustus himself (though he cites no references in support of such a

⁷ Ibid. p. 9-10.

⁸ Ibid. p. 11-2.

⁹ Ovid, *Remedia Amoris* 764; Richardson, 1977. p. 12-3.

¹⁰ Cf. Propertius 2.1, 3.9.

claim).¹¹ If this were truly the case, it could be that the emperor had induced this topical shift: evidence of direct requests for literary composition by Augustus does exist, though from what we can tell such requests were few and far between.¹² And even if Augustus made no specific request of Propertius, his power and influence were such that he could have easily controlled what his contemporaries were writing, especially if he saw it as a bad influence on the public or slanderous to himself or the state – which cases may have warranted punishment.¹³ Be that as it may, it appears that Augustus rarely enacted such powers, and there is also much evidence that Augustus went out of his way not to meddle in the creative processes of his clients.¹⁴

With so much evidence for both theories, it is truly difficult to reconcile exactly how and why Propertius came to write the poems that compose Book Four. In light of this, one could create a convincing argument either way based on historical fact and Propertius' text. That is exactly what this paper sets out to do: not to argue definitively for one case or the other, for reconciliation seems impossible, but to present a well rounded, objective and comprehensive assessment of both sides of the argument. In all likelihood, we will never know the truth about Propertius' fourth book. Ultimately, it is a subjective choice to view Propertius as either subversive or supportive of Augustus' program, and I invite you to make a well-informed choice on the matter based on the arguments herein.

¹¹ Cairns, 2006. p. 37, 279, 320.

¹² P. White. *Promised Verse: Poets in the Society of Augustan Rome*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993. p. 132, 138.

¹³ Ibid. p. 118, 142-3, 145, 150, 153.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 140-2.

Chapter One: An Anti-Augustan Reading of Book Four

Propertius begins his problematic and eclectic fourth book with a grand and wholly unexpected announcement: his intention to sing of Rome. There is a wealth of scholarship on this drastic shift from love elegy to aetiology, but the reasons behind it remain unclear. It is certainly possible that Propertius had made the switch of his own volition, but it seems unlikely. Alternatively, scholars have speculated that by this time (estimated to be between 23-16 BC) Propertius had ceased to be patronized by Maecenas and had come under the direct patronage of Augustus himself.¹⁵ Indeed, it could be that Propertius' new and considerably more powerful patron had induced this topical shift of the book's poems (several of which praise the princeps outright) due to the loyalty owed by the patron to his client. Francis Cairns writes:

As also with Horace and Virgil, [his patronage of Propertius] reflects Augustus' steadily growing confidence in the ability of Maecenas' protégés to eulogize him to contemporaries and posterity without risk of the unfortunate consequences suffered by Alexander the Great when he attempted to achieve immortality through poetry.¹⁶

It is impossible to imagine that Propertius would be content with this usurpation of his artistic freedoms, especially given that he had already outright rejected pushes to write of "loftier" subjects earlier in the corpus and had also vocally disapproved of Augustus' early marriage legislation.¹⁷ Thus, the reader would expect to see some bitterness on Propertius' part, a lapse in his usual sincerity, a leaning towards the sarcastic and satirical in response to this push. If the reader were to look, s/he would find Propertius' fourth book rife with anti-Augustan sentiments from its very beginning.

¹⁵ Q.v. note 11 *supra*.

¹⁶ Cairns, 2006. p. 320.

¹⁷ Cf. Propertius 2.1, 2.7.

In the first poem of his final book, Propertius juxtaposes his vision of a rustic Rome, before even the arrival of Aeneas, with the contemporary Rome in which he lives. The contemporary Rome that Propertius describes is clearly the Rome of Augustus, as indicated by the specific monuments and landmarks he mentions in the poem's opening lines.¹⁸ Not surprisingly, the first site he introduces is the Palatine Hill – no other landmark in the city is more strongly tied to Augustus. Propertius specifically mentions the Temple of Apollo Palatinus (4.1a.3), vowed after Augustus' victory over Sextus Pompeius in 36 BC and later consecrated in 28 BC.¹⁹ Propertius writes:

*fictilibus crevere deis haec aurea templa,
nec fuit opprobrio facta sine arte casa.*

These golden temples have grown up for gods of clay, who deemed it no shame that their huts were crudely built. (4.1a.5-6)²⁰

The poet seems to take a disapproving tone in these lines. Indeed, the temple was lavishly built using snowy white marble and adorned with doors inlaid with carved ivory.²¹ Furthermore, the poet justifies his disapproval with history: why should one consecrate such an ostentatious temple to a god who had previously been content with a significantly more humble edifice?

In addition to being the site of his patron god's temple, Augustus also made his home on the Palatine. A more significant spot the emperor could not have chosen – likewise, a more significant site the poet could not have chosen to introduce his contrast

¹⁸ T.S. Welch lists the Capitol, the Tiber, the Forum, and the Quirinal as particular examples in her discussion of the monuments of 4.1a in *The Elegiac Cityscape*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2005. p. 21.

¹⁹ Velleius Paterculus, 2.81.3.

²⁰ All Propertius translations are by G.P. Goold in *Propertius: Elegies*. Ed. & trans. G.P. Goold, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.

²¹ Cf. Propertius 2.31.9, 12-6.

between old and new. The Palatine was believed to have been the mythical site of the Lupercal and the hut of Romulus.²² The Lupercal, traditionally sited at the bottom of the Palatine's western slope, is the legendary cave in which Romulus and Remus were suckled by their she-wolf savior. Romulus' hut was located at the hill's crest. There is no doubt that Augustus chose the Palatine to make his home due to its mythical connections with Rome's foundation, but there also seems to be a more subtle motive. In setting his palatial residence next to the hut of Rome's founder, Augustus is proclaiming his founding of a new Rome. And in some ways, Augustus truly did found a new Rome. Suetonius wrote that Augustus once, when speaking of the city, "*sit gloriatus marmoream se relinquere, quam latericiam accepisset.*" (Boasted that he had found it built of brick and left it in marble)²³ Augustus undoubtedly lifted the city to new architectural and aesthetic heights.

Propertius, however, is less than thrilled with the new path Rome has taken. What follows the grandeur of the new Rome in his opening lines is an idyllic portrait of primitive Rome. He writes:

*Vesta coronatis pauper gaudebat asellis,
ducebant macrae vilia sacra boves.
parva saginati lustrabant compita porci,
pastor et ad calamos exta litabat ovis.
verbera pellitus saetosa movebat arator,
unde licens Fabius sacra Lupercus habet.*

Vesta was poor and rejoiced in garlanded mules, and it was lean cattle that led the procession for a paltry sacrifice. Humble were the crossroads that

²² Karl Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996. p. 213-4.

²³ Suetonius, *Aug.* 28.3. Translation by J.C. Rolfe in *Suetonius: Vol. 1*. Ed. G.P. Goold, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

fatted swine purified, and to the sound of the pipe the shepherd made acceptable offering of a sheep's entrails. (4.1a.21-6)

In contrast to the Augustan Rome that Propertius knew, this rustic Rome must have seemed simpler, more wholesome and appealing. The language Propertius uses to describe these scenes seems to suggest that he is nostalgic for this time. The people were content with far less then, as were the gods: he writes that even Vesta was poor (*Vesta... pauper*, line 21), that a paltry sacrifice of lean cattle was pleasing to her (*ducebant macrae vilis sacra boves*, line 22). He writes that Rome's roads, one of her most ambitious and famous engineering feats, were small at this time (*parva... compita*, line 23). The Curia, a landmark that all Romans most likely saw nearly every day in Propertius' time, had yet to exist. Even the iconic toga was nowhere in sight. The poet writes:

*Curia, praetexto quae nunc nitet alta senatu,
pellitos habuit, rustica corda, Patres.*

The Curia, which now stands high and resplendent with its hem-frocked senate, then housed a rustic company of Fathers clad in skins. (4.1a.11-2)

Furthermore, Propertius' choice of words throughout the entire poem also adds to the rustic image he creates. He uses several agricultural terms, especially terms for farm animals, placing further emphasis on these words by frequently placing them at the end of a line. He thrice invokes the image of cattle, placing the term at the end of the line two times (*boves*, lines 4, 22; *bubus*, line 8); five times the poet mentions horses, placing the term at the end of a line three times (*equo*, line 20; *equos*, line 32; *equi*, line 42; *equum*, line 53; *equus*, line 70); sheep are mentioned twice, both times ending the line (*ovis*, line 24; *oves*, line 30); the image of a swine is used once, placed last in the line (*porci*, line

23); and the mule is mentioned once, also placed at the end of the line (*asellis*, line 21).

Other agricultural imagery includes Propertius' use of *collis* (hill, line 2), *herba* (grass, line 2), *faeno* (hay, used at the end of line 19), *arator* (ploughman, occurring at the end of line 25), *lacte* (milk, line 56), and *vallibus* (vale or valley, line 65). In addition, the wolf is another recurring image, conjuring thoughts of both the wilderness that was once right on Rome's doorstep as well as the city's founding fathers: twice the poet invokes the she-wolf's image (*lupam*, line 38; *lupa*, line 55).

His words in this piece are wistful, even tinged with regret, as suggested when he writes:

*nec rudis infestis miles radiabat in armis:
miscebant usta proelia nuda sude.*

Nor gleamed their rude soldiery with threatening weapons: unprotected by armour they fought with stakes hardened by fire. (4.1a.27-8)

It is important to bear in mind Propertius' unease with, or perhaps distaste for, *arma* as an elegist. He has roundly rejected the life of the soldier in favor of actively pursuing love and poetry earlier in the corpus, as in 3.4:

*praeda sit haec illis, quorum meruere labores:
mi sat erit Sacra plaudere posse Via.*

Theirs be the booty whose toil has earned it: enough for me that I can cheer them on the sacred way. (3.4.21-2)

Later, he writes of being a soldier not of Rome, but of love: "*militiam Veneris blandis patiere sub armis*" (You will suffer active service in the tender warfare of Venus,

4.1b.137) and even goes so far as to say, "*laus in amore mori*" (To die in love is glory,

2.1.47). Later in Book Two, Propertius issues an outright attack on the measures of some

of Augustus' early marriage legislation, which encouraged the production of children, specifically males for military service. He asks:

*unde mihi patriis natos praebere triumphis?
nullus de nostro sanguine miles erit.*

How should I furnish sons for our country's triumphs? No soldier shall ever be born of my blood. (2.7.13-4)

As an elegist rather than a soldier in Augustan Rome, Propertius is of no practical use to the state. In fact, he is seemingly so emasculated that not even his children could have the capacity to bear *arma*.

There is obvious tension between the life that Propertius lives and extols as an elegist and the Augustan program: Augustus' legacy was built by means of *arma*, while Propertius' legacy was built by *amor*. The two notions are in direct opposition to each other, and they come to a head in 4.3, an elegy written in the form of a letter from a lovesick wife, Arethusa, to her husband long away at war, Lycotas. It opens:

*Haec Arethusa suo mittit mandata Lycotae,
cum totiens absis, si potes esse meus.
si qua tamen tibi lecturo pars oblita derit,
haec erit e lacrimis facta litura meis:
aut si qua incerto fallet te littera tractu,
signa meae dextrae iam morientis erunt.*

Arethusa to her Lycotas sends this letter, if in spite of your frequent absences you can count as mine. But if when you read it any portion is smudged and missing, such a blot will have been caused by my tears; or if the unclear outline of any letter baffles you, this will be a sign that death was even now upon my hand. (4.3.1-6)

The poet clearly sympathizes with Arethusa's condition, so lovesick that tears are liable to stream down her face and obscure her words (line 4). She goes so far as to write that she feels she will soon die from loneliness (line 6), a notion that recalls Propertius'

assertion that, “*laus in amore mori*,” (to die in love is glory, 2.1.47) in, “*militam Veneris*.” (the warfare of Venus, 4.1b.137) Her husband, on the other hand, will have died for Rome’s glory in one of her military campaigns, specifically the Parthian War, an overall disaster and an ultimately meaningless campaign.²⁴ Arethusa’s long and emotional letter shows that Rome’s wars cause nothing but pain for lovers.

Like Propertius, Lycotas is identified as one who is unfit for war. Arethusa makes this plain when she asks of him:

*dic mihi, num teneros urit lorica lacertos?
num gravis imbellis atterit hasta manus?*

Tell me, does not the breastplate blister your delicate shoulders, and the heavy spear chafe your unwarlike hands? (4.3.23-4)

Thus is his service in war made even more sympathetic to the reader. In serving the state, Lycotas has had to deny his own identity just as Propertius has had to deny his true identity as an elegist in order to serve Augustus. This is further highlighted when Arethusa writes:

*at mihi cum noctes induxit vesper amaras,
si qua relictæ iacent, osculor arma tua;
tum queror in toto non sidere pallia lecto,
lucis et auctores non dare carmen aves.*

As for me, when the evening star brings on the bitter nights, I kiss any arms of yours that lie left at home; then I complain that the blanket lies not smooth all over the bed, and that the dawn birds are slow to utter their song. (4.3.29-32)

Arethusa has seemingly reduced Lycotas as a man to *arma*, consoling herself by kissing them (line 30). His identity has been consumed by the needs of the state: he is nothing special, simply another soldier. Likewise is Propertius’ work of little importance outside

²⁴ Richardson, 1977. p. 429.

of literary circles at this time. It is not until he begins to write of Rome's history and especially her wars that he expects to gain any real recognition.

Thus it is with some irony that Propertius writes, "*Roma, fave, tibi surgit opus.*" (Rome, smile on me; my work rises for you, 4.1a.67) The poet seems to be suggesting that his body of work has been deemed insufficient due to its subject matter. He is expected to "lift" his work up, writing of loftier topics if he desires praise and recognition. It is interesting that Propertius here uses *surgit* (line 67), as the verb is usually used in reference to the raising of structures. This is a clear comment on the Augustan building program, which Propertius already alluded to in the beginning of the poem. Just as Augustus "raised" structures as enduring symbols of his legacy, so too has Propertius "raised" his words in hopes of cementing his legacy.

This need for Propertius to "raise" his work also calls into question his status in Augustan Rome and what is expected of Romans of that age. Traditionally, most Roman men either spent their lives in the army or pursued politics, obviously neither of which Propertius did. Even worse, Propertius wrote not of glorious battles, nor history, nor any "practical" matter; he instead wrote of love. Propertius was, in plain terms, an outsider in Roman society. It is no wonder that he felt threatened during this time of massive social and political upheaval. The poet was perhaps rightly concerned about his reputation in society and his future legacy.

Propertius comments on these concerns in the following poem of the fourth book, which is written as though it were a continuation of, and the conclusion to, the first.

While the poet himself addressed his readers in the first half of 4.1, the narration shifts in

the second half, taken up by the prophet Horos. The prophet thus addresses Propertius in the first lines:

*quo ruis imprudens? fuge discere fata, Properti!
non sunt a dextro condita fila colo.
accersis lacrimas: aversus cantat Apollo:
poscis ab invita verba pigenda lyra.*

Whither do you hurry so thoughtlessly? Seek not to learn your fate, Propertius! From no auspicious distaff have its threads been spun. You are bringing sorrow on yourself: unfavorable is the response of Apollo. You are asking a reluctant lyre for words it is loth to grant. (4.1b.71-4)

The prophet clearly disapproves of Propertius' shift in subject matter and uses the response of Apollo, the god of poetry, as justification for this opinion. His language is so strong, and his tone so stern, that it seems as though the prophet is attacking the quality of the poem, as "*poscis... lyra*" (line 74) suggests.

Of course, it is Propertius who ultimately disapproves of the poem's topic. This is a drastic about-face from the man who had so spiritedly proclaimed his intention to write aetiology just a few lines beforehand. Thus it is difficult not to see 4.1b as a response to 4.1a rather than as a continuation of it. I would posit that 4.1 was not composed as a whole piece, but rather that 4.1b was written well after the first half, perhaps even after the completion of the entire fourth book, as a self-critique. It is easy to see Propertius disappointed in himself as an artist for not staying true to himself and his craft, for bowing to the orders of his patron Augustus. The prophet tells Propertius:

*di mihi sunt testes non degenerasse propinquos,
inque meis libris nil prius esse fide.*

The gods are my witness that I have not disgraced my kin and that in my books nothing comes before truth. (4.1b.79-80)

He's become, in the parlance of our times, a sellout: rather than writing honestly (*fide*, line 80) from the heart, Propertius chose instead to attempt to draw his words from an empty well. In 4.1b, Propertius provides a more explicit commentary on contemporary Roman society and Augustan legislation as well as a bitter glimpse into his own past.

Propertius' prophet almost immediately begins commenting on the appalling ethical state in Rome. He tells the poet:

*nunc pretium fecere deos et fallimus auro
(Iuppiter!) obliquae signa iterata rotae.*

Nowadays men have made profit of the gods and (heavens!) we even falsify for gold the revolving signs of the tilted zodiac. (4.1b.81-2)

This is a far cry from the rustic Rome that Propertius described in the first half of 4.1, a time when, "*tremere patrio pendula turba sacro*," (the tense crowd thrilled at the ritual of their fathers, 4.1a.18) rather than focusing on turning a profit during such celebrations. Propertius is suggesting that Rome's newfound wealth under Augustus has corrupted her citizens, who were far more pious in earlier times, when they sacrificed what little they had to the gods rather than trying to procure something from them for their own gains.

It had always been a hallmark of Roman citizens that they were willing to subordinate their private desires and personal liberties to public needs and state authority.²⁵ But in the Augustan Rome of Propertius' time, this principle seems to have been oddly corrupted. Propertius goes so far as to say that:

*nil patrium nisi nomen habet Romanus alumnus:
sanguinis altricem non putet esse lupam.*

²⁵ Welch, 2005. p. 61.

The Roman of today has nothing from his ancestor but his name: he would never imagine that a she-wolf nurtured the blood from which he sprang. (4.1a.37-8)

This is an incredibly bold statement on a number of levels. For one, it implies that the Romans of Propertius' time are so used to the opulence of Augustan Rome that they have forgotten the humble simplicity of their roots. A hallmark characteristic of the ancient Romans, expounded at length in the *Aeneid* for example,²⁶ was their commitment to their own unique understandings of piety and virtue. The Romans believed themselves to be a divinely ordained race: it was their supposed moral and religious superiority that allowed them to triumph over and civilize their enemies, barbarians all, for centuries before the rise of Augustus. If the Roman of Augustus' age has nothing in common with his ancestors but name, then Propertius seems to be implying that this sense of virtue and piety that had been instilled in the Rome's people since her founding has somehow been lost in the decadence of the age.

Propertius again touches on this notion when the prophet Horos mentions the case of a mother who sends her two sons off to war against the wishes of the gods in 4.1b:

*Dixi ego, cum geminos produceret Arria natos
 (illa dabat natis arma vetante deo),
 non posse ad patrios sua pila referre Penates:
 nempe meam firmant nunc duo busta fidem.*
 ...
fatales pueri, duo funera matris avarae!

I said, when Arria was sending off her two sons (she was giving her sons arms against the advice of the god) that they would not bring back their weapons to the family hearth: and, sure enough, two graves now confirm my truthfulness... Ill-starred lads, both brought to death by a mother's greed! (4.1b.89-92, 97)

²⁶ Cf. Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.756-899; 8.362-5, 626-731; 12.830-40.

At first, it seems as though Arria is sending her sons to war to serve the needs of the state as any dutiful Roman matron would. So strong does this obeisance to the state seem that Arria directly disobeys the will of the gods. But a few lines later, Horos reveals that it was not out of respect for the state's needs that Arria sacrificed her sons but for her own greed (*matris... avarae*, line 97).

What exactly did she stand to gain by sending off her sons? The *image* of being an upstanding citizen, the respect of her peers and perhaps even superiors that such an image would procure, the possibility that her sons could become generals, heroes, preserving her name alongside theirs in the annals of Roman history. Thus, what had once been an act of respect for Rome, fulfilling one's duty as a citizen simply because it was the right thing to do, has become a vehicle for fulfilling one's own selfish desires. This would have been unthinkable in the pastoral Rome for which Propertius expresses enthusiastic admiration.

Horos later gives a brief overview of Propertius' life, in which we see what may perhaps be the root of his anti-Augustan stance. He writes:

*hactenus historiae: nunc ad tua devehar astra;
 incipe tu lacrimis aequus adesse novis.
 Umbria te notis antiqua Penatibus edit –
 mentior? An patriae tangitur ora tuae? –
 qua nebulosa cavo rorat Mevania campo,
 et lacus aestivis intepet Umber aquis,
 scandentisque Asis consurgit vertice murus,
 murus ab ingenio notior ille tuo.
 ossaque legisti non illa aetate legenda
 patris et in tenuis cogeris ipse lares:
 nam tua cum multi versarent rura iuvenci,
 abstulit excultas pertica tristis opes.*

Enough of these stories: now I shall come down to your horoscope; compose yourself for fresh sorrows. Ancient Umbria bore you in an

illustrious home – do I lie, or have I hit upon the borders of your native land? – where misty Mevania sheds its dew on the low-lying fields, and the waters of the Umbrian mere send forth their summer steam, where a wall rises on the peak of soaring Assisi, the wall made more famous by your genius. And you gathered, not to be gathered at that age, your father's bones, and were forced to move to a humble home: for whereas many a steer ploughed up your acres, the rod of the pitiless surveyor robbed you of well-tilled estates. (4.1b.119-30)

The robbery the prophet describes in lines 30-1 refers to the confiscation of suburban and provincial land for the settlement of Roman troops. After the battle of Philippi, Augustus had to make good on the promise he and the triumvirs had made to discharge their troops after the war. The tens of thousands of Roman citizens who had fought on the side of the defeated Brutus and Cassius would also be requiring settlement, lest they ally with a political opponent in retaliation. Augustus was forced to choose between alienating a significant number of Roman citizens by confiscating their land or alienating a significant number of Roman soldiers who could mount a considerable opposition against him if they organized; he chose the former.²⁷ This is arguably the most overt anti-Augustan statement in the whole of the fourth book. The words Propertius uses in his description reveal his disgust with the settlement act: he was forced to move (*cogeris*, line 28), his ancestral estates robbed (*abstulit*, line 30), his new home poor and mean (*tenuis*, line 28), the rod of the surveyor responsible harsh (*tristis*, line 30). It is a testament to how outraged the poet must have been that he had the gall to publish his sentiments for all to see, especially his patron.

Propertius' obvious and vocal disgust with the Augustan troop settlement program is typical of a suburbanite. Thus his remark draws attention to the fact that he is not a

²⁷ Appian, *Bellum Civile* 5.12, 13.

Roman by birth, but an Umbrian. The imagery Propertius uses in describing his ancestral homeland is nostalgic, and not unlike the pastoral image of Rome he presents in 4.1a. His words once again suggest a yearning for the rustic. He describes Umbria's misty, picturesque valleys (*nebulosa; cavo... campo*, line 123) and its steaming mere (*lacus aestivis intepet Umber aquis*, line 124). Looking up from the valleys, the poet adds another dimension to the prospect of the landscape by describing Assisi (*scandentisque... Asis*, line 125). This wistful description of his homeland is in sharp contrast to his description of the moral state of modern Rome, which Propertius criticized just a few lines before. The poet could very well have felt some sort of internal dissonance in singing the praises of the city that robbed him of the estate that was his birthright, which helps reinforce my notion that 4.1b is a response to 4.1a. To combat the feeling that he is selling out by forcing himself to write aetiology and extolling Roman virtue, Propertius reasserts his identity by presenting a picturesque view of his suburban homeland and the unfortunate circumstances that forced him to leave it, while at the same time painting an unflattering picture of Augustus and the Rome he's come to rule.

Another poem that addresses the theme of establishing one's identity as Roman, or non-Roman for that matter, is 4.4. In it, Propertius reworks the ancient myth of Tarpeia, the maiden who betrayed Rome to the Sabines for personal gain. Varro, Livy, Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Plutarch, among others, all present versions of this popular myth, each with their own variations.²⁸ The common thread that ties these versions together, however, is that Tarpeia is motivated to betray Rome to the Sabines by

²⁸ Cf. Varro, *L.L.* 5.41; Livy, *A.U.C.* 1.11; Plutarch, *Rom.* 17; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *R.A.* 2.38 ff.

greed for gold. Propertius appears to have taken more than a few liberties with the myth, choosing to make Tarpeia a Vestal Virgin for instance, but he makes one innovative variation that changes the tone of the myth entirely: Tarpeia's betrayal is motivated by her love for Titus Tatius, commander of the Sabine forces. Through his combination of particular variant details, Propertius presents a poem that questions what it means to be a Roman in Augustan times and how the changing political climate affects this meaning.

By varying the myth so that Tarpeia's betrayal is motivated by love, Propertius puts an elegiac twist on the tale that serves to humanize Tarpeia, granting her a subjectivity that is lacking in other versions of the myth.²⁹ At one point during her soliloquy in the middle of the poem, Tarpeia suggests that her love for Tatius, and their presumed marriage, would even put an end to the violence between the two tribes:

*'sic, hospes, spatioerne tua regina sub aula?
dos tibi non humilis prodita Roma venit.
si minus, ut raptae ne sint impune Sabinae,
me rape et alterna lege repende vices!
commissas acies ego possum solvere nupta:
vos medium palla foedus inite mea.
adde, Hymenaeae, modos; tubicen, fera murmura conde:
credite, vestra meus molliet arma torus.'*

'Do I thus, O stranger, parade as queen in your court? In my betrayal of Rome you have no mean dowry. If not that, then lest the Sabine rape go unavenged, rape me, and settle the score by the law of reprisal. As your bride I can part the armies locked in battle: make of my wedding-gown a treaty of reconciliation. Nuptial god, add your music! Trumpeter, silence your barbarous blasts! Trust me, warriors: my marriage-bed will put your strife to rest.' (4.4.55-62)

Tarpeia seems to be justifying her actions as some sort of misguided service for the state. While her end goal is eventually achieved, it does not work out as she had envisioned it.

²⁹ Welch, 2005. p. 63.

Love does not unite the two tribes: rather, violence does, by means of Tarpeia's murder. This is an interesting commentary on the Roman treatment of emoting individuals in, "a state that subsumes all to itself."³⁰ Just as Tarpeia's love is rejected, so does Propertius' love elegy seem to be rejected. Rather than continue writing it, Propertius is forced to try to cement his reputation through the writing of poems such as 4.4 and 4.6, placing more and more emphasis on history and violence than love.

It is clear from Augustus' marriage legislation of the early 10s BC that love has no place in Rome. As the birth rate in Italy declined, military enrollment numbers consequently suffered. In response, Augustus enacted legislation that provided benefits for marriage and the production of children, while making it almost economically ruinous not to do so.³¹ This group of laws is collectively known as the *leges Juliae*, early versions of which Propertius openly attacked in 2.7. Marriage was not the realization or fulfillment of love, but a means of state control and servitude. Propertius' lifestyle – an unmarried man carrying on a long affair with a possible courtesan who herself has other partners³² – did not mesh with the moral standards of Augustan Rome. His elegy is a bad example for Romans, just like Tarpeia. She allows love to cloud her reason, and in so doing she betrays the state. In the end, she pays the price for her love and deceit:

*at Tatiuss (neque enim sceleri dedit hostis honorem)
 'nube' ait 'et regni scande cubile mei!'
 dixit, et ingestis comitum super obruit armis.
 haec, virgo, officiis dos erat apta tuis.*

³⁰ Ibid. p. 57-8.

³¹ Cassius Dio, 53.13.2-3; 54.16.1-2; 55.2.5-6; 56.10.

³² Richardson, 1977. p. 3-5.

But Tatiüs (for the foe allowed no honor to treachery) answered: 'Wed, and thus mount my royal bed.' So saying he crushed her beneath the massed shields of his company. This, maiden, was a meet dowry for your services. (4.4.89-92)

Death awaits those who act on their emotions; to do so is tantamount to treason. In light of such revelations, Propertius' poetic topics have drastically changed – Cynthia is mentioned in but two poems of the fourth book – in order to be a better example to the Roman public.

Propertius again tries his hand at aetiology in 4.6, another work in which he discusses the dangers that love poses to the state. This time he draws on the love of Antonius and Cleopatra and its ultimate result, the Battle of Actium of 31 BC. Indeed, Antonius' defection to Egypt and the subsequent war nearly brought down the whole dominion of Rome, and it was the Battle of Actium in particular that established Augustus as the undisputed master of the Roman world. 4.6 has been cited by some scholars as a sincere attempt by the poet to stand behind the Augustan program, but more recent scholarship has identified the poem as a work of irony and intentional parody.³³ I would say that a close reading of the text yields the latter interpretation.

Much of Propertius' language throughout the poem is so hyperbolized that one cannot help but take it as parody. Consider the first mention of Augustus in the poem:

*Caesaris in nomen ducuntur carmina: Caesar
dum canitur, quaeso, Iuppiter, ipse vaces.*

My songs are sung for Caesar's glory: while Caesar is being sung, do even you pray attend, Jupiter! (4.6.13-4)

³³ W.R. Johnson. "The Emotions of Patriotism: Propertius 4.6." *California Studies in Classical Antiquity*, 6 (1973): 151-180; see also J.P. Sullivan. "Propertius: A Preliminary Essay." *Arion*, 5.1 (1966): 5-22.

These lines seem rather incongruous when compared to those that have preceded them, which seem to harbor more discreet and sincere sentiments; Propertius acts as a *vates* in the religious sense in the earlier lines, but as a *vates* in the poetic sense here. Johnson has asserted that in switching between these two identities Propertius may be commenting on the absurdity of the role that Augustus expects poets to play in their eulogizing of him: to produce “versified propaganda” that has become inextricably linked with ritual, religion and Augustus’ own divinity.³⁴ But on an even more rudimentary level, it seems hyperbolic to the point of mockery that Propertius declares that Jupiter, king of the gods, attends to any mention of Augustus.

This mocking tone continues throughout the rest of the poem. Apollo’s words to Augustus are rife with irony, as when he declares:

*mox ait: ‘o Longa mundi servator ab Alba,
Auguste, Hectoreis cognite maior avis,
vince mari.*

Anon he spoke: ‘O savior of the world who are sprung from Alba Longa, Augustus, proved greater than your ancestors who fought with Hector, now conquer at sea. (4.6.37-9)

It is clear that Propertius is invoking the memory of Aeneas when Apollo declares Augustus greater than his ancestors who fought with Hector. To say that Augustus is more skilled in arms than Aeneas is pure mockery. Augustus’ military weaknesses are well documented, as are his physical frailties.³⁵ This insult is repeated when Propertius writes, “*proxima post arcus Caesaris hasta fuit.*” (Second only to [Apollo’s] bow came

³⁴ Johnson, 1973. p. 157.

³⁵ On Augustus’ military incompetence, cf. Suetonius, *Aug.* 10, 13, 16, 20. On his physical infirmities, cf. Suetonius, *Aug.* 80-2.

Caesar's spear, 4.6.56) In fact, Apollo is given all the credit for the victory at Actium. In his monologue, he says:

*'tempus adest, committe ratis: ego temporis auctor
ducam laurigera Iulia rostra manu.'*

'The hour has come, let the fleet enter battle: I who have fixed the hour will with my laurelled hand guide the beaks of the Julian fleet.' (2.6.53-4)

Propertius gives Augustus no credit as commander of the fleet, as it is Apollo who has already in advance fixed the outcome of the battle. And interestingly, Apollo's appearance and speech to Augustus make up 29 lines of verse, while the description (if it can so be called) of the actual battle lasts but two. As Apollo dominated the battle, he too dominates the poem, even though it was intended to sing the praises of the emperor. To make matters even more insulting, it seems as though Apollo has to goad Augustus into battle, providing verbal support for the commander such as, "*nec te, quod classis centenis remigat alis, / terreat.*" (Nor let it frighten you that their armada sweeps the waters with many hundred oars, 4.6.47-8)

Much of Propertius' writing in Book Four may be read as a clear critique of Augustus' policies, specifically his troop settlements and his marriage legislation. He is discontent with his place in Augustan society as an emoting individual, as a man who writes not of war but of love. And he appears to be equally discontent with the fact that he cannot escape the expectation that this is the course that his writing must take if he is to uphold the conditions of his patron-client relationship with Augustus. The poet has undermined this contract with his fourth book, taking thinly veiled jabs at the princeps on several occasions. This may well explain why we have no work from Propertius that

outdates the elegies of Book Four: if indeed the poet was undermining the authority of his patron, indeed the authority Rome's sole master, he would never be published again.³⁶

³⁶ Cairns, 2006. p. 37-8.

Chapter Two: A Pro-Augustan Reading of Book Four

And yet despite how much more interesting and downright fun it is to read Propertius as a literary renegade subverting the established order right under the nose of its leader, the fact of the matter is that we ultimately have no choice but to take the poet at his word – and his word in Book Four is very clearly slanted in support of the Augustan regime. Perhaps time will tell whether Propertius ever truly did come under the patronage of Augustus, but this has yet to be proven beyond a reasonable doubt. And even if the emperor did decide to patronize the poet, who is to say that it was Augustus who induced the topical shift in Book Four? Indeed, it is clear in 3.9 that Maecenas, not Augustus, was prodding the poet to explore new topics and styles. In certain absence of any pressure from the emperor, Propertius writes:

*prosequar et currus utroque ab litore ostantis,
Parthorum astutae tela remissa fugae,
claustraque Pelusi Romano subruta ferro,
Antonique gravis in sua fata manus.*

I shall celebrate the chariots that triumph from East and from West, the shafts of the Parthian's crafty flight now laid aside, the bastions of Pelusium overthrown by Roman swords, and the heavy hand of Antony fatal to himself. (3.9.53-6)

Perhaps Propertius took Maecenas' suggestions to heart. Perhaps he simply wanted a change. And even if Augustus never took the poet under his wing, recall Propertius' position in Roman society, specifically in literary circles. If the poet were truly concerned about his status in society and his future legacy, a change in subject matter – from elegy to aetiology, love to epic – would have been a good move in his time if he were hoping for a boost up the social ladder. Of course, all this is merely speculation. But even in the

absence of such speculation, we are presented with a poet who seems wholly committed to singing the sincere and often overzealous praises of his emperor and his city.

Poem 4.1a is one of the book's most explicit in its praises of Rome and its ruler. The initial portion of the poem, from lines 1-38, contrasts an image of a primitive Rome with an image of the city in its early Augustan glory. It begins:

*Hoc quodcumque vides, hospes, qua maxima Romast,
ante Phrygem Aenean collis et herba fuit;
atque ubi Navali stant sacra Palatia Phoebo,
Euandri profugae procubuere boves.*

All that you see here, stranger, where mighty Rome now stands, was grass and hill before the coming of Phrygian Aeneas; and where stands the Palatine consecrated to Apollo of the Ships, the cattle of exiled Evander there lay down. (4.1a.1-4)

Rome grew up out of nothing, but it became the greatest and most powerful city of its time (*maxima*, line 1). And the first image of this now-mighty Rome that Propertius gives is that of the Temple of Apollo Palatinus. Presenting this image before all others is significant in two ways: a more opulent example of Rome's wealth and power there could not be; and no other building in the city was more significant to Augustus, who commissioned it.

Propertius' description of the temple in 2.31 reveals the lavishness of its decoration. It was built entirely of white marble (*claro surgebat marmore templum*, 2.31.9), a visually stunning and expensive medium. Marble was of course used in construction in Rome before the reign of Augustus, but never on such a large scale – and the Temple of Apollo was built entirely of it.³⁷ He also writes of a golden portico

³⁷ S.B. Platner. *A Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome*. Rev. T. Ashby, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929. p. 16-9.

(*aurea... portico*, 2.31.1-2), which is perhaps to what he is referring in 4.1a when he writes, “*fictilibus crevere deis haec aurea templa*.” (These golden temples have grown up for gods of clay, 4.1a.5) He continues his description in 2.31 of the temple’s doors, inlaid with African ivory (*valvae, Libyci nobile dentis opus*, 2.31.12), further highlighting the temple’s impressive and expensive decoration. It was impossible for any Roman of the day not to credit this grandeur to Augustus, not only because he commissioned the temple but also because of some of the more the blatant associations he made between himself and his patron god Apollo. For example, the temple housed a peculiar statue of Apollo. Though now lost, this image of the god is known from a relief base in Sorrento representing him as *kitharoidos*, wearing a cloak and singing with the *lyra*. Scholars have noted that the Palatine statue in fact seems to represent a new cult statue of Apollo, that of Apollo Palatinus, which more than likely bore a heavy resemblance to its commissioner Augustus.³⁸

Presenting the Temple of Apollo in 4.1a as the first, even singular symbol of a mature and powerful Rome is quite telling, especially given the temple’s obvious references to the emperor. Propertius is expressing his apparent approval of Augustus and his governance. He references the Temple of Apollo long before he mentions the Curia (4.1a.11), which he could have just as easily presented in the first lines as the singular symbol of Rome and especially of the Republic. In fact, Propertius even mentions the *Aedes Quirini* (4.1a.9) before the Curia, which just so happened to be restored by

³⁸ L.J. Roccas. “Apollo Palatinus: the Augustan Apollo on the Sorrento Base.” *American Journal of Archaeology*, 93.4 (1989): 571-88.

Augustus in 16 BC, shortly before 4.1 was written.³⁹ This has some serious implications of its own, given Augustus' penchant for drawing comparisons between himself and Romulus, as was previously discussed in Chapter One. Again, this signals support for the new Caesar and for the new Rome that he was in the process of establishing.

Propertius continues in support of Augustus and his regime. His language grows stronger as 4.1a progresses, describing a rustic, prehistoric Rome. The poet's word choice seems to be expressing some sympathy or even disdain for the people of this time, who could have had no idea what the future held for their homeland. Words such as *pauper* (poor, line 21), *macra* (lean or meager, line 22), *parva* (small, line 23), *vilis* (cheap, worthless, or even vile, line 22) and *rustica* (generally rustic or rural, but also coarse, awkward, or gross, line 12) contribute to this effect. This long description ultimately culminates in the poet concluding that:

*nil patrium nisi nomen habet Romanus alumnus:
sanguinis altricem non putet esse lupam.*

The Roman of today has nothing from his ancestor but his name: he would never imagine that a she-wolf nurtured the blood from which he sprang.
(4.1a.37-8)

This is an incredibly bold statement on a number of levels. Propertius is essentially saying that Romans of this time were not truly Roman – and during Propertius' time, if one was neither Roman nor Greek, one was a barbarian. And the image that Propertius presents of Romulus being suckled by the she-wolf is indeed barbaric. It was Caesar, with his grand building program and moral reforms, who lifted the people up from the darkness. For it was the Roman understanding of virtue, piety and morality that truly

³⁹ Goold, 1990. p. 309.

separated them from the barbarians in their minds, and it was Augustus who was at the head of moral reform.

As has previously been mentioned, such reforms included the *leges Juliae*, a series of laws enacted by Augustus meant to strengthen the morals of the upper classes and to increase population. To encourage this growth, the laws offered benefits to marriage and having children, while discriminating against celibacy, making adultery a public crime and imposing penalties on the unmarried.⁴⁰ The increasingly assertive and independent women of the late Republic and early Empire were foremost among those targeted by the laws. One such threateningly independent woman became particularly relevant during Augustus' early rule: Tarpeia, the mythical Vestal Virgin who betrayed Rome to the Sabine forces in the wake of the Sabine Rape. She became a propaganda symbol for Augustus: she was a constant presence in the Roman Forum, where she was sculpted on the Basilica Aemilia (restored by Augustus in 14 BC⁴¹) and began to appear on the reverse side of gold pieces with Augustus on the obverse. These associations between Tarpeia and Augustus served an important purpose: they connected the Princeps and his restoration of Rome with its early monarchy (Numa was also supposedly an ancestor of Julius Caesar), foundation, and the building of the original city.⁴² It was in this political climate that Propertius revived the myth of Tarpeia in 4.4.

Propertius immediately lays into Tarpeia from the very first line, presenting his opinion in no uncertain terms:

Tarpeium scelus et Tarpeiae turpe sepulcrum

⁴⁰ Q.v. note 31, *supra*.

⁴¹ Cassius Dio, 54.24.

⁴² Welch, 2005. p. 60.

favor et antiqui limina capta Iovis.

The crime of Tarpeia and her shameful grave will be my tale, and how the dwelling of ancient Jove was captured. (4.4.1-2)

Both *scelus* and *turpe* (line 1) are incredibly harsh, loaded terms to just throw around. He closes the poem with almost the exact same sentiments when he writes:

*a duce turpe Iovis mons est cognomen adeptus:
o vigil, iniuste praemia mortis habes.*

From the guide Jove's hill took its shameful name: O wakeful one, you do not deserve such a reward for your death. (4.4.93-4)

Note the use of *turpis* again in line 93. Propertius is here making a clear statement, standing firmly behind the Augustan propaganda that an independent, driven woman can be a serious threat to the well being of the state.

It is also important to note what it is that drives Tarpeia in 4.4 to commit such an act against the state. According to other accounts,⁴³ her motive for betraying Rome is greed for gold. But Propertius departs altogether from this tradition, changing Tarpeia's motive to love for the Sabine king, Titus Tatius. Nearly half the elegy (lines 29-66) consists of a long soliloquy in which Tarpeia bemoans her situation and attempts to justify her ultimate solution, which is to marry Tatius. She says:

*'commissas acies ego possum solvere nupta:
vos medium palla foedus inite mea
...
credite, vestra meus molliet arma torus.'*

As your bride I can part the armies locked in battle: make of my wedding gown a treaty of reconciliation... Trust me, warriors: my marriage-bed will put your strife to rest. (4.4.59-60, 62)

⁴³ Q.v. note 28, *supra*.

This is a naïve assumption on Tarpeia's part, evinced not only by her ultimate fate but by Roman history: not but a decade and a half before the composition of Book Four did the marriage alliance between Augustus and Marcus Antonius break down. An uneasy peace was struck between the two when Augustus gave his sister, Octavia Minor, in marriage to Antonius in October of 40 BC, but by 32 BC he had divorced her in an outward display of aggression.⁴⁴

Ultimately, however, it isn't the idea of a marriage alliance that is naïve per se, but Tarpeia's belief that somehow love could solve Rome's political issues. It is exactly this naïveté, this weakness that makes women so dangerous to the state it seems. Love is never the answer to anything in the ancient world. How often does love end in agony in the *Metamorphoses*? Was it not Paris' love for Helen that incited the Trojan War? And, most apt of all, what of that love which had very recently nearly brought down Rome – that of Antonius and Cleopatra? Tarpeia is yet another example: love is the sole cause of her treachery and her disloyalty to the state and to the gods. The two are inextricably intertwined for Tarpeia, a Vestal Virgin. Sworn to a life of celibacy, and to maintain the sacred fire of Vesta, she betrays both her city and her goddess. She says,

*'Romani montes, et montibus addita Roma,
et valeat probro Vesta pudenda meo!*

...

*quantum ego sum Ausoniis crimen factura puellis,
improba virgineo lecta ministra foco!'*

Farewell, ye hills of Rome, and Rome that crowns those hills, and farewell, Vesta, whom my sin must put to shame! ... What a reproach I shall bring upon the maidens of Italy, a sinful girl chosen to be the servant of the virgin hearth! (4.35-6, 43-4)

⁴⁴ Plutarch, *Ant.* 31, 57.

The use of the passive periphrastic with *pudenda* in line 36 indicates that Tarpeia no longer – if ever she did – has a choice in her actions. Love has made her both totally irrational and self-absorbed.

Love clearly has no place in Augustan Rome. Marriage existed not as a means of expressing and fully realizing love, but to selflessly fulfill the needs of the state by encouraging population growth and keeping women subordinated. Propertius actually provides a portrait of the life of the perfect Roman woman in 4.11, that of Cornelia Scipio, as an example of how Roman maidens ought to strive to live. It is especially significant that Propertius invokes her memory due to her ties to Augustus: she was half-sister to Augustus' daughter Julia the Elder, born of his second wife Scribonia. In the poem, Cornelia says, referring to the fact that Augustus attended her funeral:

*ille sua nata dignam vixisse sororem
increpat, et lacrimas vidimus ire deo.*

He [Augustus] grieves that in me died one worthy of being his daughter's sister, and we saw a god's tears flow. (4.11.59-60)

The description of her life that she presents in the poem certainly warrants these feelings on Augustus' part, and it is also important to note that Propertius chooses for Cornelia to refer to the emperor as a god (*deo*, line 60) well before his deification. True, she could be referring to his divinity by association with the elder Caesar, but this is a small detail that speaks volumes for the poet's support of the emperor: there is no real reason why he should choose to relate the emperor's divinity if he so disapproved of him and his policies.

The monologue that Cornelia delivers is her defense before the tribunal of the Underworld.⁴⁵ Nearly everything she relates about her virtue is relevant in the context of Augustus' desire to shore up Roman morality. She claims:

testor maiorum cineres tibi, Roma, colendos,
 ...
me neque censurae legem mollisse neque ulla
labe mea nostros erubuisse focos.
non fuit exuviis tantis Cornelia damnum:
quin et erat magnae pars imitanda domus.

I testify by the ashes of forebears who command Rome's reverence ... that I never caused the censor's law to be relaxed and that our hearth never blushed for any sin of mine. Upon the luster of such grand trophies Cornelia brought no tarnish: rather was she an example to be followed in that noble house. (4.11.37, 41-4)

Cornelia here invokes her adherence to the *mos maiorum*, the custom of the ancestors, a virtue which Augustus felt had begun to fade during his rise to power.⁴⁶ These were the time-honored principles, behavioral models and social practices that permeated all aspects of Roman life.⁴⁷ She asserts that she has never strayed from this path, never shamed her ancestors (who included the distinguished general Scipio Africanus, defeater of Hannibal, as well as the Gracchi) with any questionable acts (lines 42-3) and echoes Augustus' own sentiments when she claims that she is an example to be followed (line 44). The *labe* (shame, stain, sin, line 42) to which she refers seems to suggest extramarital infidelity. In this case, her avoidance of such an act is exactly what Augustus

⁴⁵ Richardson, 1977. p. 481.

⁴⁶ Q.v. note 2, *supra*.

⁴⁷ K-J. Hölkenskap. *Reconstructing the Roman Republic: An Ancient Political Culture and Modern Research*. Trans. Heitmann-Gordon, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010. p. 17-8, 33-5.

expects of all Roman women, as evinced by the terms of his marriage legislation, which treated adultery as a public crime.⁴⁸ This is reinforced when she says:

*haec est feminei merces extrema triumph
laudat ubi emeritum libera fama torum.*

This is the highest tribute in a woman's glory, when candid opinion praises the full course of her married life. (4.11.71-2)

Not only has popular opinion exonerated her from any suspicion of iniquitous acts, but it also praises her for holding fast to a single husband for all her life.

She also possesses other qualities prized by Augustus in Roman women. Keep in mind that Augustus instituted laws that rewarded the bearing of numerous children when Cornelia boasts:

*et tamen emerui generosae vestis honores,
nec mea de sterili facta rapina domo.
et bene habet: numquam mater lugubria sumpsit;
venit in exsequias tota caterva meas.*

Yet I lived long enough to earn the matron's robe of honour, nor was I snatched away from a childless house. So all is well: never as a mother did I put on mourning garb; all my children came to my funeral. (4.11.61-2, 97-8)

The *generosae vestis honores* (matron's robe of honor; line. 61) that she received was earned only by women who had borne three children, and was likely one of the benefits or rewards included in the provisions of the *leges Juliae* of 18 BC.⁴⁹ That this is an honor Propertius believes is worth mentioning in Cornelia's defense before the tribunal of the Underworld speaks volumes about the worth Augustus tried to place on the production of children for the state. Her honor is further fortified when she reveals that she bore two

⁴⁸ Q.v. note 31, *supra*.

⁴⁹ Richardson, 1977. p. 486.

sons (*tu Lepide, et tu Paulle*, 4.11.63), whose worth was greater to Rome since they were eligible for military service. All these qualities present Cornelia as a foil to Tarpeia, who, in the absence of any male influence and control in her life as a Vestal Virgin, selfishly acted out against the state in a desperate attempt to feel love. Cornelia's life, on the other hand, is an exemplar of Roman virtue, which Propertius uses to support and further the aims of Augustus' reforms.

It is significant that Propertius' writing begins to reflect such sentiments in his fourth book, clearly showing support for the Augustan program. Some of his earlier work was very obviously slanted in opposition to Augustus' marriage laws, as exemplified in 2.7, when he writes:

*Nos uxor numquam, numquam seducet amica:
semper amica mihi, semper et uxor eris.
gavisa's certe sublatam, Cynthia, legem,
qua quondam edicta flemus uterque diu,
ni nos divideret: quamvis diducere amantes
non queat invitos Iuppiter ipse duos.
'at magnus Caesar.' Sed magnus Caesar in armis:
devictae gentes nil in amore valent.*

*nam citius paterer caput hoc discedere collo
quam possem nuptae perdere more faces,
aut ego transirem tua limina clausa maritus,
respiciens udis prodita luminibus.*

...

*unde mihi patriis natos praebere triumphis?
nullus de nostro sanguine miles erit.*

Never shall wife, never shall mistress part us: you shall ever be mistress, ever be wife to me. How you must have rejoiced, Cynthia, at the repeal of that law, whose erstwhile issuance caused us to weep for many an hour in case it parted us! Still, not even Jove himself can part two lovers against their will. 'Yet Caesar is mighty.' True, but mighty in warfare: in love the defeat of nations counts for naught. For sooner should I let my head be severed from my neck than I could quench the torch of love to humour a bride's whim, or as a married man pass by your barred threshold, looking

back with tearful eyes at the house I had betrayed... How should I furnish sons for our country's triumphs? No soldier shall ever be born of my blood. (2.6.41-2; 2.7.1-10, 13-4)

The law to which the poet refers in 2.7.1 was short-lived, and is not to be confused with Augustus' later moral reforms that took place during or around the writing of Book Four. According to Suetonius, it was likely passed by the princeps in 28 BC, but repealed not long after due to public outcry over its excessive harshness.⁵⁰ The law was apparently a precursor to the later marriage legislation, providing benefits to the upper classes to marry and bear children while making it almost economically ruinous not to do so.

But as Augustus' stance changed, so did the poet's. The later marriage legislation of the early 10s BC brought refinements to this initial law, easing up on its harsh penalties and providing greater benefits. And Propertius has clearly relaxed his rhetoric. Such poetry as 2.7, which essentially sums up everything about pre-reform Roman relationships that Augustus disapproves of, was a poor influence on the society that the emperor was hoping to raise up. Propertius selflessly turns his talents to the aid of the Augustan program, as he so declares in 4.1a: "*Roma, fave, tibi surgit opus.*" (Rome, smile on me; my work rises for you, 4.1a.67) In so doing, he, like Cornelia, becomes a foil to a citizen like Tarpeia: while Tarpeia selfishly pursues her own goals at the expense of the state, Propertius selflessly rejects love elegy, and thus Cynthia, for the city's benefit.

There can be no doubt that 4.6 is Propertius' grandest and most refined piece of aetiology, and it is no accident that it also contains his most blatant praises of the emperor

⁵⁰ Suetonius, *Aug.* 34.

and his moral program. The poet actually alluded to someday writing such a piece earlier in the corpus in 2.1, the same poem in which he refuses Maecenas' requests that he try his hand at some important historical or epic theme. He writes:

*quod mihi si tantum, Maecenas, fata dedissent,
ut possem heroas ducere in arma manus,
non ego Titanas canerem, non Ossan Olympo
impositam, ut caeli Pelion esset iter...*

...

*bellaque resque tui memorarem Caesaris, et tu
Caesare sub magno cura secunda fores.*

But if only fate had so endowed me, Maecenas, that my Muse could lead a hero's hands to arms, I should not sing of Titans, or Ossa piled on Olympus that Pelion might become the path to heaven... I should tell of your Caesar's wars and policies, and after mighty Caesar you would be my second theme. (2.1.17-20, 25-6)

Indeed, Propertius had been a long time coming in his attempt. But he undoubtedly fulfilled Maecenas' request and made good on his own promise to sing of Caesar's conquests in writing on perhaps the single most important event in Augustan history: the Battle of Actium of 31 BC. This victory firmly established Augustus as the undisputed master of the Roman world, and Propertius treats the topic with all the grandiosity it demanded.

First, it is impossible not to notice his unabashed and almost excessive praise of the princeps. Propertius' first mention of Augustus comes in line 12, delayed by an introduction in which the poet is cast as priest, making a private sacrifice and invoking the Muse (4.6.1-11).⁵¹ This sets up the reader to expect an epic narrative, to expect a hero with all those qualities we have come to expect of such narratives. Thus Propertius hyperbolizes when Augustus' name is finally mentioned:

⁵¹ Richardson, 1977. p. 447.

*Caesaris in nomen ducuntur carmina: Caesar
dum canitur, quaeso, Iuppiter, ipse vaces.*

My songs are sung for Caesar's glory: while Caesar is being sung, do even you pray attend, Jupiter! (4.6.13-4)

Even Jupiter, the almighty king of the gods, pays full attention to the praises of Augustus.

Furthermore, this highlights the notion that Augustus' rule and the city of Rome itself were believed to have been divinely ordained, and by Jupiter no less: not by Venus, a supposed ancestor of the Julians, nor Apollo, the patron god of Augustus.

But the sun god may claim the credit for providing this particular victory for Augustus, as his monologue makes clear. And he has some kind words for the then-future emperor:

*mox ait 'o Longa mundi servator ab Alba,
Auguste, Hectoreis cognite maior avis,
vince mari: iam terra tuast: tibi militat arcus
et favet ex umeris hoc onus omne meis.
solve metu patriam, quae nunc te vindice freta
imposuit prorae publica vota tuae.
quam nisi defendes, murorum Romulus augur
ire Palatinas non bene vidit aves.*

Anon he spoke: 'O saviour of the world who are sprung from Alba Longa, Augustus, proved greater than your ancestors who fought with Hector, now conquer at sea: the land is already yours: my bow battles for you, and all this load of arrows on my shoulders is on your side. Free Rome from fear: relying on you as her champion, she now has freighted your ship with a nation's prayers. Unless you defend her, it was in an evil hour that Romulus, seeking omens for his walls, beheld the birds on the Palatine. (4.6.37-44)

Propertius loaded this passage with several important implications. For one thing, it is essential to keep in mind that these are the words of a greater deity to a mortal. This fact alone lumps Augustus with the greatest epic heroes of the Western tradition: Odysseus, Aeneas, Jason and Hercules, among others. It should be noted that both the narrator (in

lines 23 and 29) and Apollo (in line 38) prematurely refer to the soon-to-be emperor as Augustus, a title that wasn't granted him until 27 BC, four years after the Battle of Actium.⁵² Considering the title roughly translates to “the illustrious one” or “one to be held in awe,” this is not to be taken lightly when spoken from the lips of a god. Propertius even goes so far as to have Apollo declare that Augustus is greater than his ancestors who fought alongside Hector in the Trojan War (line 38). It is immediately understood that Aeneas is included among those ancestors, the mythical founder of Rome, son of Venus, master of arms, survivor of one of the greatest epic journeys in literary history.

This line cannot be ignored, for it makes some serious implications that are contrary to what we understand to be historical fact. Augustus has never been noted for his military expertise – in fact, this has been well documented as a weakness of the emperor's by his biographers. His physical infirmities and susceptibility to illness are also well known, which were perhaps the main reasons behind his inability to dedicate himself to military exploits.⁵³ What all this means to say is that Propertius is making an incredibly bold statement when Apollo proclaims Augustus, “*Hectoreis cognite maior avis*,” (proved greater than your ancestors who fought with Hector, 4.6.38) as well as Rome's *vindex* (defender, champion, line 41). Propertius even writes, “*proxima post arcus Caesaris hasta fuit*.” (Second only to [Apollo's] bow came Caesar's spear, 4.6.56) Perhaps what Propertius means to convey is that the emperor managed to achieve numerous military successes despite his physical ailments and lack of innate ability.⁵⁴ In this light, he has unquestionably been proven greater than Aeneas, who was not only half-

⁵² Augustus, *Res Gestae* 34.

⁵³ Q.v. note 35, *supra*.

⁵⁴ Augustus, *Res Gestae* 1-4.

divine, but whose entire life revolved around war. The significance of Propertius' praises of Augustus' military conquests, and the very fact that he wrote on the Battle of Actium at all, also cannot be ignored: being an elegist, he was not afraid to hide his distaste for the topic of arms.⁵⁵ The poet has apparently overcome this disdain in order to support his city and to praise his emperor.

The implications of line 38 reach beyond the realm of military exploits. Although according to myth it was Romulus who technically founded the city of Rome, Aeneas' role in the settling of Italy, specifically the founding of Alba Longa, cannot be understated. The story of Aeneas was especially relevant at this point in Roman history because the *Aeneid* had been recently completed (29-19 BC): there couldn't have been a Roman alive who was not especially apt to this foundation story and its epic hero. To proclaim Augustus greater than Aeneas is to assert that he has already in his short life (he was 32 at the time of the Battle of Actium) contributed more to the society and culture of Rome – indeed, to all of Italy – than did Aeneas, who essentially laid the foundation of the city and its principles. Propertius is declaring that Augustus has perfected what Aeneas had begun, has become a “founder” in his own right. Recall the very first lines of the book:

*Hoc quodcumque vides, hospes, qua masima Romast
ante Phrygem Aenean collis et herba fuit.*

All that you see here, stranger, where mighty Rome now stands, was grass
and hill before the coming of Phrygian Aeneas. (4.1a.1-2)

Augustus inarguably contributed more to the state than any Roman before or after him, a fact that Propertius predicted and proclaimed without reserve.

⁵⁵ Cf. Propertius 3.4.21-2.

The poem also revives a theme that Propertius had previously explored in 4.4, namely the view of women in Augustan Rome. Here, the focus is Cleopatra, that siren who had incited civil war by seducing and allying with the traitor Marcus Antonius. Propertius uses the ultimate result of this courtship, the Battle of Actium, as an example to reinforce the notion championed by Augustus that women with power and influence are a serious threat to the state if such influence is left unchecked by men.⁵⁶ They are a class of citizen who must be kept subordinate for the common good. He lays out an image of what can happen when an ambitious woman's influence grows too strong:

*altera classis erat Teucro damnata Quirino,
pilaque femineae turpiter apta manu:
hinc Augusta ratis plenis Iovis omine velis,
signaque iam patriae vincere docta suae.*

On the one side stood a fleet doomed by Trojan Quirinus, and Roman javelins shamefully grasped in a woman's hand; on this the flagship of Augustus, its sails swelling with Jove's auspicious breeze, and standards now skilled to conquer for their fatherland. 4.6.21-4

The *femina* in line 22 is obviously Cleopatra, though he never once refers to her by name in the poem (nor Antonius, for that matter). Her crime, using her charm and cunning to turn a once proud and faithful Roman against his own country, is so vile that she does not even deserve the courtesy of being mentioned by name.

Nor does she deserve the honor of holding a javelin, a spectacle that Propertius deems shameful (*turpiter*, line 22). Her honor and worth are again insulted when Propertius writes:

*illa petit Nilum cumba male nixa fugaci
occultum, iusso non moritura die.
di melius! quantus mulierforet una triumphus,*

⁵⁶ Cf. Tarpeia in 4.4, who as a Vestal Virgin is not subject to any male influence.

ductus erat per quas ante Iugurtha vias!

She, with misplaced faith in her fugitive sloop, makes for a hiding-place in the Nile, thereby avoiding death at a bidden hour. Heaven be praised! How paltry a triumph would one woman make in streets through which Jugurtha once was led! (4.6.63-6)

Her vessel is described as a *cumba* (raft, skiff, line 23), by no means fit for battle. And upon defeat, she flees and hides rather than meeting her fate at the hands of the Roman commander. But this is all just as well: to have led her through the streets of Rome in a triumph would have been a joke compared to the likes of those commanders who had walked them before her. Propertius invokes the memory of Jugurtha, the Numidian king whose legendary cavalry stalled a Roman victory for six years before finally being captured by Sulla. Propertius may here be attempting to defuse some lingering bitterness that Augustus was harboring over having not been able to capture the queen before her suicide. Evidence shows that Augustus had wanted to include Cleopatra in his triumphal parade,⁵⁷ so Propertius may be soothing the emperor's bruised ego by declaring that such a spectacle would have been trifling at best. Regardless, the emperor has still managed to send a message that parallels the message behind his reforms. Propertius illuminates it when he writes:

*vincit Roma fide Phoebi: dat femina poenas:
sceptra per Ionias fracta vehuntur aquas.*

Phoebus keeps faith and Rome conquers: the woman pays the penalty: her scepter, shattered, floats on the Ionian waves. (4.6.57-8)

This is a lesson that Roman women would do well to learn: they will always pay the penalty (*dat... poenas*, 4.6.57) for exerting their influence outside of established bounds.

⁵⁷ Plutarch, *Ant.* 85-6.

The text of 4.6, and indeed the text of a large portion of Book Four, is evidence enough that Propertius truly supports Augustus. But there is also an outside factor to 4.6 that lends its support to this argument. More than any other poem, 4.6 was intended to reach a huge audience: some have posited that it was composed for the anniversary of the foundation of the temple of Apollo Palatinus, celebrated yearly on October 9, and was conceived as a performance piece.⁵⁸ It is difficult, even impossible, to rationalize why the poet would stage something so grand and public as a choric hymn if he had any distaste for the emperor. Propertius very publicly threw his whole support behind the emperor and added his voice and talent to his causes. The effect of this poem's recitation – perhaps before carved or painted depictions of the epic battle inside the temple⁵⁹ – would have been profound. There could be none present at the first recitation of 4.6 who doubted the poet's sincerity.

⁵⁸ F. Cairns. "Propertius and the Battle of Actium (4.6)." *Poetry and politics in the age of Augustus*, ed. T. Woodman & D. West, Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 129-168. p. 149-154.

⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 153-4.

Conclusion

While these arguments bring us no closer to the truth behind Propertius' fourth book, it allows one to make an informed decision as to which theory seems more likely or, at the very least, more attractive on a subjective level. Is Propertius a snide, bitter, subversive citizen rebelling against the empire? Or is he as sincere in his praise of Rome and its leader as he is in his love for Cynthia? Historical evidence is weighted equally between both theories, and so too does scholarly opinion seem to be weighted evenly. It seems unlikely that Augustus would force a client to write propaganda for him, but evidence exists that it did happen, both before and during the emperor's time.⁶⁰ Perhaps it is really one's opinion of Augustus that determines the theory to which one subscribes. Was he a generous, good-intentioned, benevolent ruler? Or the emperor of an oppressive and violent state with very little transparency? Both have elements of truth, which brings us no closer to any definitive conclusion. All that can be said with absolute certainty is that he is far and away the most influential figure in Roman history. Thus it seems as though we will never understand the circumstances behind Propertius' stylistic and thematic shift, but this in no way detracts from an appreciation of his work. It is truly a testament to the poet's genius that it is even possible for the text of his fourth book to be interpreted in these two completely opposite ways. Even after more than a millennium, his work still causes controversy and incites debate among scholars – long may it be that way.

⁶⁰ Q.v. note 13, *supra*.

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