Propertius 2.31/32 – Finding Unity through Urban Topography

This presentation argues that the unity of elegy 2.31/32 is best shown through a careful examination of the urban topography alongside an analysis of the general themes, poetic balance, and parallelisms present.In poem 2.31/32, Propertius introduces a new manner of utilizing urban topography in elegiac poetry. Propertius undertakes ekphrases of the Palatine Temple of Apollo and Pompey’s Theater complex, alongside references to topographic locations beyond the city of Rome, within the context of consenting to illicit love affairs.

Prior scholars have attempted to split elegies 2.31 and 2.32 in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons. Most editors split 2.31/32 at the end of the Palatine ekphrases, arguing that the following couplets do not relate thematically to the Palatine ekphrasis. Yet these scholars avoid the question of the parallel ekphrasis of Pompey’s complex appearing later in 2.32. The most current argument by S.J. Heyworth breaks the poems after Pompey’s complex is described. This is based on the idea that since there is no mention of journeying or shrines after 2.32.18 and the *topos* changes to questions of chastity, then this shift in topics signals a change in poems. Heyworth, however, does not consider the thematic symmetry between topographic locations with an emphasis on vision and the precedence of open and hidden mythic love affairs, which Propertius proposes.

In this elegy, Propertius is highlighting the social and elegiac aspects of urban imagery. The two best urban centers for lovers, in Propertius’ poetic presentation, are the Palatine complex and Pompey’s complex; the Palatine offers a panoramic view for the anxious lover, a spot upon the hill where one can look out for one’s lover or present oneself openly before the crowds, whereas Pompey’s portico offers the lover concealment within a valley of the city, a place filled with the amenities of the countryside: trees, water, hidden areas for love affairs. Propertius thus is playing with the perspective pairing between hilltop:valley and seeing/being seen:hidden. These opposites are joined in the last part of the poem where Propertius announces that Cynthia is allowed to commit affairs without worry about whether she is seen or unseen; thus she could be at the Palatine temple or the portico of Pompey without fear from Propertius. Propertius also creates a correlation between the luxury cities outside of Rome and these two locations within Rome. The places within Rome receive more attention and demonstrate a greater expressed interest in creating the city of Rome as the location for elegiac events.

Elegy 2.31/32 is the first elegy to set its audience vividly in one specific, contemporary city. The elegiac analysis of vision and love-affairs goes beyond Alexandrian realism in narration and lays the groundwork for a new Roman realism in elegy which portrays realistic narrations in the acutely defined, real city of Rome, an aspect of reality never before so fully presented in poetry. Propertius not only associates the city with erotic elegy, but makes the urban fabric an active participant or viewer. This active participation of urban imagery creates a reciprocal relationship between monuments and Propertius’ poetry, namely they infuse each other with additional ways of interpreting one another. The Palatine Temple is not just a place to read Augustan projections, but now takes on elegiac notions of hidden trysts and considerations of the relationship between sight, topographic placement, and power. This poem presents a clear transition between the minor references to Rome, her streets, and her architecture seen in earlier Roman elegy and the fully formed elegiac *Roma* presented in Propertius’ and Ovid’s later elegies.

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