

Voices of Lovers and Losers:  
The Anti-Epic Depiction of Romulus in Propertius Book IV

Propertius' fourth book takes an unexpected turn away from love elegy, as the book begins with a long mythological excursus and then continues to alternate among legendary aetiologies, love poetry, and modern military exploits. The book has inspired general speculation about its disunity with the previous books and internal confusion of themes, some of which do not even seem to lie within the traditional purview of elegy. Gunther's introduction to the fourth book in the *Brill Companion to Propertius* recognizes that this book is not only a mix of love elegy and historical/aetiological poems, but that "in almost all poems of the book...amatory and Roman themes are fused" (Gunther 2006). In fact, the conjunction is not as neutral as the verb "fuse" might imply; in this paper, I argue that Propertius' epic figures and aetiologies are actually narrated in a way that places them subtly but strongly at odds with the patriotic sentiments they are supposedly echoing.

The story of Hercules, one of the major founding heroes who appears in Propertius' fourth book, has already been extensively analyzed as an example of Propertius playing with the dominant narrative of Hercules as a highly physical, powerful and hyper-masculine hero. I argue that Romulus' appearances in the fourth book of Propertius should be seen through the same lenses that a number of authors have productively employed to understand the oddities in Hercules' appearance (see Anderson 1964, Warden 1982, and others). Based upon their arguments about the Hercules episode, this paper argues for a reading of all of Romulus' appearances in the book (4.1, 4.4, and 4.10) as focusing the reader's attention on elegiac rather than epic aspects of the existing narrative of Romulus' life. Propertius does not create any new stories about Romulus as he appears to have done about Hercules, but works within the existing

popular legendary tradition and shifts the focus through altered details and subtle narrative choices.

Ultimately, I argue that the references to Romulus and Remus engage with and question the Augustan-era image of Romulus as a state founder. The depiction of Romulus in Book 4 (in the same mold as the depiction of Hercules as an elegiac lover outside a woman's door in 4.9) constructs Romulus as an anti-epic character by calling attention to the elegiac voices within his legend. Propertius' Romulus, in being made an elegiac rather than epic character, appears in opposition to the dominant contemporary image of Romulus and therefore problematizes an interpretation of Propertius' final book that characterizes his new topics as "patriotic" and supports the reading of the text as questioning the epic characterization of Romulus as a founding hero.

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