

## The 'Moral Restoration' of the Propertian Mistress: Paradox and Parody in Elegy 2.32

By convention, the balance of powers that characterizes elegiac love is portrayed in terms of a *domina* who is in control of her (sexual) *seruus*. Yet, despite the stability that these clear-cut roles ought to give to the lovers' interaction with one another, the actual role-play is rather precarious. In the Propertian *oeuvre*, the *amator* indicates already in Elegy 1.3 his desire to subvert the hierarchy, by turning his sleeping mistress into an "object of male fantasies of erotic domination" (Greene 1998, 53).

This paper will argue that Elegy 2.32 offers a similar attempt at putting the mistress 'in her (i.e., the subordinate) place,' but that this time the balance of powers is tipped by means of a disciplining, moralist discourse. Used as a tool of power in a setting that revolves around an unfaithful, dominant mistress, this disciplining, moralist discourse creates a paradox that can be interpreted as a parody of the subjugating element that the senatorial élite may have sensed in Augustus' ideas of a moral restoration of the Roman people. Contextualized with Horace's *C.* 3.24 and 3.6, which, like Elegy 2.32, are dated in the years 28/27, it is possible to regard Propertius' implementation of a disciplining, moralist discourse in this poem as a contribution to contemporary Roman literature's resonances to these ideas, which the Emperor may have introduced as early as 27 B.C. by his unofficial *auctoritas*.

Past and recent scholarship has preferred to interpret Elegy 2.32 in the 'elegiac vein,' i.e., as a more or less coherent speech that ultimately exculpates Cynthia's sexual immorality (*e.g.*, Lefèvre 1966; Papanghelis 1987; Batinski 2003, Heyworth 2007). By contrast, this paper looks at the poem from the socio-historical angle and focuses in particular on the relation between morality and politics in the early Empire (*e.g.*, Edwards 1993; Galinsky 1996; Bowditch 2009). Elegy 2.32 is thus re-contextualized both in the elegiac discourse and the early Empire.

The paper's argumentation will focus on the observation that, concerned about Cynthia's *fama pudica* (21), the Propertian speaker adopts the moralist rhetoric of the Late Republic and implements it as a means of control – in both the traditional and the 'Augustan' way, so to speak. Most obviously, he re-negotiates the power relations between himself and his *puella* in view of his moral superiority – just as a member of the senatorial élite would have re-negotiated over and over again his position in his own class. His new status in his relationship with Cynthia finds its expression most notably in the dominating role that the Propertian speaker assumes and parades throughout the entire poem. It is even possible to argue that he transposes his relationship into the realm of marriage and thus assigns Cynthia the subordinate role of a matron who has to guard her good name. The new goal, however, that the Propertian speaker attributes to moralist rhetoric, is the literal, i.e., visual control of Cynthia and her sexuality. His wish to subject her to the gaze of the public eye dominates the poem's first 18 lines; the subsequent echoes of Cicero's *Pro Caelio* evoke the sarcasm and wit with which he shames Clodia (25-62).

This proposed re-reading of Elegy 2.32 strongly suggests that, in this poem, the controlling people's sexual morality is not only viewed but even recognized as a new source of power. More specifically, the paradox of applying a disciplining, moralist discourse to an inappropriate setting, such as elegiac love, suggests that this poem offers an ironic comment to Augustus' ideas of a moral restoration of the Roman people.

## Works Cited

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