

Propertian Sado-Masochism in Augustan Rome and Today: Salvaging Power

This presentation seeks to build on themes presented by Greene (1998) and by Williams (1999) among others by highlighting the striking similarity in the socio-political climates of Augustan Rome and the modern West that lead to a heightened sense of self-awareness. This issue of identity appears to be linked to sado-masochistic tendencies that have manifested themselves in the representations and perhaps in the practices of both cultures. Although the (male) speakers of Augustan love elegy often claim to be dominated by their mistresses, elegies such as Propertius 1.3 show a reversal of that purported power imbalance. This may reflect the struggle of the elite, Roman male to maintain his identity and masculinity in early imperial Rome. Conversely, an elegy such as Propertius 4.7 reveals the male narrator's desire to be dominated by his mistress and the pleasure derived therein. By no longer rebelling against the asymmetrical power balance of elegiac love, the speaker's behavior in Propertius 4.7 is reminiscent of the intentional relinquishing of control seen in present-day sexual and non-sexual sado-masochism.

In Propertius 1.3, the narrator fantasizes about mythological women being dominated in various, sometimes violent ways by men and imagines his mistress in such submission while she sleeps. Greene (1998) in reference to Propertius Book 1 points out that the narrator often imagines his mistress as helpless and in a state of captivity. He derives sexual gratification from her powerlessness. In Propertius 4.7, however, the ghost of the narrator's mistress is pictured in a dominant role as she scolds him and coerces him to do her bidding. Propertian scholarship thus far has not acknowledged that this scenario not only appears to evoke erotic desire and pleasure in the narrator but is also indicative of masochistic tendencies that can likewise be observed in Western culture today. Baumeister (1988) writes that research shows a correlation between the drastic move in Western culture towards autonomous individualism and the proliferation of sexual masochism. The suggested link between the increased focus on self and the sado-masochistic manifestations in Roman love elegy has yet to be explored.

The sabotaging of the alleged domination of the elegiac mistress through sexual control by the narrator and the sexual control currently seen in sado-masochistic behavior are both seen in part as attempts by men at reclaiming power that has been lost through comparable social and political circumstances.

Works Cited:

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Williams, C. A. 1999: *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity* (Oxford).