

Man's Talk about Woman's Lust in the Age of Augustus:
The Immoral Politics of Domination in *Propertius* 3.19 (LP)

Whereas existing scholarship on *Propertius* 3.19 is primarily concerned with the list of six mythological *exempla* of women's incurable libido (ll. 11-24), this paper will have a close look at the couplet (ll. 27-28) that concludes this passage as well as the poem. It will argue that the significance of Elegy 3.19 lies not in the provocation that the poem's proclamation of women's sexual immorality might have caused in the climate of Augustus' moral restoration (Lyne 1980, Fedeli 1985), but in the subtle questioning of a power structure that aims at harnessing a woman's sexuality in support of male domination – be it that of the elegiac poet-lover, be it that of the ruler of a nation.

The proposed interpretation of Elegy 3.19 is informed by a comparative and diachronic reading of other texts that list examples of women in Greek myth whose passion drove them to actions ranging from illicit love affairs to murder, in particular of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* 1.283-342. It furthermore considers the evaluation of the various myths of the Underworld in the time of Propertius (Cicero, Vergil, Ovid). In view of the literary context in which Elegy 3.19 is situated, this paper will argue that the Propertian speaker's comment on Minos' punishment of Scylla (ll. 27-28) can be interpreted as an ironic statement that casts doubt on the deservedness of Scylla's treatment.

In reading lines 27-28 as critique of Minos' 'fairness' (*aequus*, l. 28), the proposed paper offers a viable alternative to previous scholars' attempt to make sense of this couplet. While some suggested a transposition of these lines (Housman 1972, Butler and Barber 1933), others argued that the couplet constitutes a general reflection either on Minos' dealing with Megara (Williams 1968, Richardson 1977) or on the poem's introductory statement (Cairns 1971, Fedeli 1985). By contrast, when interpreted as an invitation to view both the poet-lover's "incessant attempt to control, to mold, and to construct the beloved" by means of his discourse (Kennedy 1993, 74) and Augustus' efforts to secure his one-man rule through the moral restoration of the Roman people in a new, critical light, then lines 27-28 not only receive a new dimension; they also introduce a new discourse that views *amor* and *Roma* as what they are – ambiguous, complex, and contradictory. Most notably Elegy 3.19 sets the precedent for *Propertius* 4.4, which offers a similarly ambiguous perspective on Tarpeia's actions (Janan 2001, 84).

Works Cited:

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