

Exempla of Motherhood: Reading Cornelia Africana behind Cornelia in Propertius 4.11

In 4.11, Propertius's Cornelia evokes the *exempla* of her ancestor Cornelia, daughter of Scipio Africanus and mother of the Gracchi, through the absence of any direct reference as a way to explore the tensions between Republican values and those of the emerging Principate. The role of women in Propertian elegy has focused on female figures as literary constructs (Wyke 1987); how women are representatives of praise or blame (Fantham 2006); silent or silenced, or when they do speak, destabilizing (Gold 2007; Racette-Campbell 2016). While McAuley (2016) argues that motherhood becomes a site of contention for competing Roman views in the early Principate, she does not address mothers in Propertius. While Gold (2006) notes that Propertius's paradigm of motherhood is related to the earlier Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi (170), her focus is the negative examples of motherhood in Propertius's corpus.

Propertius 4.11, while having thematic resonances with other poems in book 4, poses intriguing questions, not the least of which is why Propertius writes in the voice of a dead, elite woman. However, despite Cornelia being an identifiable historical female figure, she becomes the site of the changing political landscape: on the one hand, the speaker, Cornelia, espouses the idealized feminine virtues of a Roman *matrona*, including chastity and concern for her children; on the other hand, she questions the function of such ideals, asking *quid mihi coniugium Paulli, quid currus auorum / profuit, aut famae pignora tanta meae?* (What advantage was there for me as the wife of Paullus, what advantage was the chariot of my ancestors, or such pledges of my reputation? 11-12) (Hutchinson 2006). Scholars, such as Gold (2016: 171-172), have noted how this question undermines the virtues Cornelia lists in her defense, leaving us with the question of how exactly we should interpret this poem.

The question of interpretation hangs over Propertian Cornelia's use of Republic rhetoric, particularly the trope of *mortuos excitare*, a way for the eulogizing women to invoke *imitatio maiorum*, the imitation of ancestors (Dufallo 2007). The imitation of ancestors is an important *topos* for Propertian Cornelia as she invokes ancestors from the Scipiones, Libones, and Pauli (Lowerie 2008; Hallett 2019). Propertian Cornelia even mentions two female ancestors (51-54), but not Cornelia Africana. However, Propertian Cornelia evokes her in two ways: first, with third-person references to Cornelia (13-14, 43-44), and second, through Scipionic ancestry (29-32, 37-40). The third-person references to Cornelia highlight the political tensions of Republican values and the values enforced through the legislation of Augustus. Ultimately, it seems that Propertian Cornelia, like Republican Cornelia, serves her purpose through her establishment as an *exemplum*.

Works Cited

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