

The *Apologia* of Propertius: Reading the Battle of Actium in *Elegy* 3.11

The Battle of Actium is a recurring trope in Propertius' *Elegies* that the poet commonly uses to contrast his own Elegiac lifestyle with the standard Roman one (DeBrohun 2003: 211). Scholars for the most part focus on *Elegy* 4.6 when discussing how Propertius utilizes the Battle of Actium (DeBrohun 2003, Miller 2009, and Gurval 1995), since that poem emphasizes Augustus' relationship with Apollo and the battle itself. This paper will instead focus on Propertius' *Elegy* 3.11, which offers a completely different characterization of this battle and the implications of Augustan propaganda concerning this war. In 3.11, Propertius deviates from the other poems in that he downplays the typical references to the Battle of Actium, such as Apollo's temple at that site and Apollo's role in aiding Augustus' victory at Actium. Propertius focuses rather on the reversed gender hierarchy (the dominating woman and the servile man) between multiple mythological and historical figures, including Cleopatra and Antonius. In doing so, Propertius displays how these figures support the poet's ideal Elegiac lifestyle, particularly his *servitium amoris* (the servitude of love), and how they defend it from hostile charges, such as the charges of effeminacy and passivity (Richardson 1977: 359).

This paper focuses in particular on Propertius' treatment of Cleopatra and the Egyptians in *Elegy* 3.11. By bringing Cleopatra and the Egyptians to the forefront of this poem, Propertius must wade through the precarious waters of Augustus' façade concerning the civil war that he had fought against the Egyptians. However, instead of attempting to combat this picture by revealing that Augustus' civil war was actually fought against fellow Romans, Propertius plays devil's advocate and displays to his readers the implications of Augustus' façade. The theme of fear is a prominent argument that Propertius uses in order to characterize Rome's attitude toward Egypt. By using words and images that demonstrate this fear of the Orient, Propertius attempts to

compare the supposed fear of the Egyptians to his own *servitium amoris*. In addition, Propertius also repeats vocabulary that describes his *servitium amoris* later in the elegy when discussing the Rome's fear of Egypt, such as the two usages of *addictus*, "indentured (men)" (3.11.2, 32).

By simultaneously conforming to Augustus' façade and revealing the implications of such a policy, Propertius is able to confront the perception of the Battle of Actium (and the civil war as a whole) that Augustus had created, without stepping out of line. In other words, Propertius is only asking why it would be wrong for him to undertake his *servitium amoris* if his fellow Romans feared a foreign queen. In my reading of Propertius, anyone who condemns him for his particular lifestyle would actually be undermining Augustus' façade of the civil war: any such criticism would bring into question the justification of the war against Cleopatra and Antonius if it is believed that the Romans did not fear the threat of Egypt against the Romans' way of life. Therefore, my exploration of the Battle of Actium in *Elegy 3.11* will provide further insight into how Propertius utilized the trope of this battle to support and promote his own Elegiac life of love.

Bibliography

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