

Manipulating Cleopatra in Propertius 3.11

After the defeat of Cleopatra and Mark Antony at Actium in 31 BCE and their deaths the following year, the poets of Augustan Rome celebrated the defeat of the queen of the last Hellenistic kingdom in their poems. Horace, Vergil, and Propertius all wrote of Cleopatra and her defeat at the hands of the emperor Augustus. All three poets portray the queen as a transgressive female who usurped roles that, in Roman contexts, were typically reserved for men (Jonathan Wallis, 86-87). As such, they depict Augustus as the protector of Roman values. As Maria Wyke notes: “Confronting long-standing constructions of oriental tyranny with the Republican slogan of liberty, the poetic narratives of Actium construct an anomalous female despotism by which the *libertas* of the Roman male is dangerously imperiled...Octavian is thereby rendered the champion of male liberty, seeking to free the Antonian slave from a woman’s chains” (Maria Wyke, 108). By rewriting Cleopatra in such terms, the Augustan poets in a sense rewrite history. They create the Cleopatra whose defeat could be justified.

Of the three Augustan poets who explicitly treat Cleopatra, Propertius is by far the most hostile. Though none of the three poets ever deign to mention Cleopatra by name—something not uncommon for women in Roman literature (Joan Booth 2006, 49)—Propertius is particularly vicious in removing any and all personality from the queen. Rather than portray her as the powerful, independent queen she was, Propertius limits Cleopatra to certain stereotypes which seem to play off of Cleopatra’s own visual rhetoric. Cleopatra manipulated gendered elements in her own propaganda to great effect, often drawing on imagery that was sexual in nature: she became the embodiment of Isis and Aphrodite, a goddess of prosperity and fertility, a divine mother (Peek 2000). In Propertius, the reverse of this image comes out. In Propertius, Cleopatra is the *meretrix regina*, the whore-queen. She is not a divine mother goddess, but a promiscuous

whoremonger. Rather than a powerful monarch who could rule a nation in her own right, Propertius has her as a transgressive woman who usurps masculine authority, therefore becoming an abomination. He takes the elements of Cleopatra's own rhetoric that use gender in positive ways and rewrites them in terms that make them seem damning from a Roman point of view. Throughout, Propertius manipulates Cleopatra in terms of gender, and the manipulation serves to delegitimize her as ruler and justify Augustus' war against her as a fight to restore the natural order.

By doing this, Propertius creates a parallel between himself and his lover Cynthia on the one hand, and the Roman state and Cleopatra on the other. The poem "positions the Propertian lover's disgraced servility as an explanatory paradigm for the submission Rome nearly offered to the Egyptian queen Cleopatra, had it not been for the virile intervention of Octavian," (Wallis, 17). And if Augustus saved Rome from becoming enthralled to Cleopatra, then, as Stahl has observed, in the poem Rome becomes—or narrowly avoids becoming—to Cleopatra as Propertius has become to Cynthia, wholly subservient," (Hans-Peter Stahl 1985, 239). The whole work serves to rewrite Cleopatra in gendered terms—from a Roman perspective—to her detriment.

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