

Inverted Inversions and New Normals: Propertius 4.8 and Tacitus *Annals* 11.26–38

In Tacitus' *Annals* (11.26–38), the emperor Claudius' wife, Messalina, takes advantage of her husband's absence to commit a spectacular act of adultery. While the emperor attends to religious matters at Ostia, Messalina 'marries' the consul-designate C. Silius with all the solemnities of a real wedding, and the couple host a lavish banquet. When notified of his 'divorce,' Claudius flies into a rage. He returns suddenly, breaking up the party. Panic ensues. The partygoers flee. Silius hides in plain sight, while Messalina tries to assuage her husband's rage. In the end, the adulterous pair are punished, and the episode ends with Claudius holding a dinner party in his usual way. Proper order has been restored, or so it would seem.

Tacitus' account is remarkable in its similarity to Propertius 4.8. Cynthia, Propertius' lover, leaves Rome to attend to religious matters at Lanuvium. Propertius takes advantage of the occasion to host a lavish banquet and seduce two women. Cynthia returns unexpectedly, breaking up the party. Panic ensues. Propertius is punished. After an elaborate set of purificatory rites, Cynthia and Propertius make love in their usual way. Proper order has been restored, or so it would seem.

The similar plot points might easily be explained away if we consider the possibility of a common intertext. I propose the adultery mime. Arguing that mime appears to have exerted significant influence on Augustan elegy, James McKeown (1979: 74) points out that Propertius 4.8 is an inversion of a typical adultery mime plot, with Cynthia playing the role of the enraged husband, and Propertius, the unfaithful lover. That Tacitus' account of Messalina and Silius' affair invites comparison with the adultery mime has been remarked upon by several scholars, most recently by Malloch (2013: 393–394). The similarities, however, go beyond the plot to

include specific thematic similarities and lexical echoes. It would appear that Tacitus is alluding to Propertius 4.8, and not merely a performance genre.

It is my contention that although Tacitus seems to invite his readers to think of the Messalina and Silius episode in terms of an adultery mime, he nevertheless mediates it through Propertius' poem. The reason, I suggest, lies in Propertius' clever use of inversion. In the world of Propertius' poem, Cynthia, not the poem's male speaker, holds all the power. This alone is not all that uncommon in elegy. However, Propertius stretches the inversion, first making Cynthia the victim of her lover's deceit, then giving her just recompense by restoring her to power over him. In the world of Tacitus' *Annals*, Claudius is subject to the whims of his wife and freedmen. What the poet invents to comic effect, the historian merely reports as real life. But by putting Claudius in the role of the enraged husband, Tacitus is not merely 'correcting' Propertius' reading of an adultery mime, he is turning Propertius' topsy-turvy world upside-down. That is, he inverts the inversion, and what he is left with is a distorted picture of not just the original subject material—the adultery mime—but also any sense of what his readers might perceive as what is supposed to be normal.

Propertius' inverted world, where a Roman man is subject to the command of a woman, ends not with a restoration of the proper order of things, but a new normal characterized by an uneasy peace. Cynthia celebrates the imposition of her *imperium* (82) as the two embrace on the well-known couch, having set aside their arms (88). Tacitus similarly ends his account of Messalina and Silius' affair, not with a return to the kind of reality his readers ought to expect, where the princeps is once again firmly in command, but with a new, almost worse normal. The faithless wife has been punished, but the emperor hardly notices. Told of her demise, Claudius calls for his cup and celebrates the dinner party in his usual way (*solita convivio celebravit*,

11.38.1). But all is not well. With Messalina out of the way, Claudius can stop not punishing the wrong woman. Now he can burn for an incestuous marriage (*ut deinde ardesceret in nuptias incestas*, 11.25.5), one that will end in disaster for him, and the empire. Everything is as it should be.

Bibliography

McKeown, James. 1979. "Augustan Elegy and Mime," *PCPS* 25: 71–84.

Malloch, S. J. V. 2013. *The Annals of Tacitus: Book 11*. New York: Cambridge University Press.