The Elegiac Cityscape

Welch, Tara S.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Welch, Tara S.  
The Elegiac Cityscape: Propertius and the Meaning of Roman Monuments.  
The Ohio State University Press, 2005.  
Project MUSE.  muse.jhu.edu/book/28268.

For additional information about this book  
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/28268
AUDIENCES BOTH ancient and modern have been fascinated by the
dignity and grandeur of Roman remains. Though the ancient city grew
gradually, building by building, throughout its millennium-long hey-
day, the city experienced periodic growth spurts during which large-
scale building programs dramatically transformed the urban
landscape. Such sweeping changes in the urban fabric usually coin-
cided with political or social crises or periods of transition in Roman
identity. We see such building programs not only at obvious cruxes in
Rome’s history, e.g., between Republic and Empire, or between pagan
and Christian, but also in times of more subtle changes, such as the
transition from national to international power, or from the Julio-
Claudian principate to a more autocratic state under the Flavian
emperors of the late first century CE.

This book explores the interaction of Roman places and Roman
ideas in the Augustan age by examining the late poetry of the elegiac
poet Propertius, published soon after 16 BCE. For his fourth and final
book, Propertius sets out a new artistic program: aetiological poetry
celebrating Rome’s origins. Departing from the love elegies to his elu-
sive mistress Cynthia that characterized his earlier poetry—a program
defiant for its insistence on a life of love rather than public duty—he
turns his poetic voice to Roman institutions:

Roma, faue, tibi surgit opus, date candida ciues
omina, et inceptis dextera cantet ausis!
sacra diesque canam et cognomina prisca locorum:
has meus ad metas sudet oportet equus.
Rome, approve: this work rises for you. Grant favorable omens, o citizens, and may the bird of prophecy sing propitiously at what I have begun! I shall sing of the rites and festivals of Rome, and of the hallowed names of its places. My steed rightly pants toward this goal.' (4.1.67–70)

In the pages that follow, I focus on these places and situate them in the context of Augustus' extensive building program after his victory at Actium in 31 BCE. This last battle in the civil wars after Julius Caesar's assassination made Augustus sole master of the Roman world. Caesar's adopted son thus became the first Roman emperor, and a new social and political order was born, now called the Principate after its Princeps, or "first man." Augustus as Princeps set about repairing, literally and figuratively, a broken Rome. The fact that Propertius shifts his theme from love to the re-emerging city does not mean that he aligns himself with Rome's ruling power—far from it. Combining the approaches of archaeology and literary criticism, I examine how Propertius' poems on the origins of Roman places explore and comment on the ways Augustus used the city to solidify his position as first emperor of a new Rome. In this way the poet establishes himself as a rival to Augustus in the creation of Rome's urban identity.

BUILDING THE AUGUSTAN CITY

With his broad program of gradual urban renewal, Augustus eased the transition between Republic and Principate by blending old and new visual elements and architectural forms and by endorsing traditional Roman values in the structure and decoration of his monuments. The new emperor thus invited Romans of his day to consider themselves and their new state as the destined and deserving heirs of Rome's glorious legacy. Archaeologists and art historians of the Augustan age, such as Paul Zanker, Diane Favro, and Barbara Kellum have been concerned with understanding the monuments of Augustan Rome as a form of imperial propaganda. Zanker's *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (1988), now almost two decades old, makes a sustained and persuasive case that all forms of material culture—public and private—reflected the evolving ideologies of the Principate. Favro's *The Urban Image of Augustan Rome* (1996), a response to Zanker that employs modern urban theory to understand the topography of Rome, demonstrates how Augustus's building program created a more cohe-
sive cityscape that matched the new central locus of power. Kellum’s substantial body of work, in articles such as “Sculptural Programs and Propaganda in Augustan Rome: The Temple of Apollo on the Palatine” (1993 [1986]) and “Concealing/Revealing: Gender and the Play of Meaning in the Monuments of Augustan Rome” (1997), suggests some of the ways Rome’s new buildings and public works encoded values and behaviors conducive to the new state. Such approaches as these have vastly expanded our understanding of the Augustan age, moving us beyond Sir Ronald Syme’s chapter on “The Organization of Opinion” in his seminal The Roman Revolution, published in 1939, and demonstrating, among other things, how the forms and goals of the new system might have reached audiences across the political spectrum, even those unaffected by the constitutional reforms. An understanding of the Augustan cityscape as a form of imperial propaganda raises an important question: to what extent was the message received by its intended audience? Zanker’s study suggests one way to find out. Examining how patrons gradually adopted for the private sphere some themes and motifs of imperial works and ignored others, Zanker argues that the Augustan visual program was not a product but a process, not a revolution but an evolution of ideas and images.

There is another way to gauge the reception of imperial urban propaganda: through words about images. The Augustan age is uniquely rich in literature that engages Roman places, as Vergil, Vitruvius, Horace, Tibullus, Propertius, Dionysius, Strabo, Livy, and Ovid all include images of the city to a greater or lesser extent in their work. Propertius’ topographical poems offer insight into how one Roman adopted different voices and perspectives regarding the new city around him. His works reveal that he interpreted the new monuments as attempts to coerce morality, identity, and behavior into forms more in tune with the new state. The poems thus offer ways of looking at the monuments that perhaps differ from the ways Augustus intended them to be seen. Indeed, Propertius’ reactions to the monuments as coercive do much to shape our reception of them as propagandistic. By reading Propertius’ poems as multiple responses to the changing cityscape, we begin, like Zanker, to understand Augustan monuments not simply as one-way propagandistic statements by the emperor, but as part of a dialogue with Roman citizens about the unique development of their state and their collective identity, a dialogue made even more complex by the fact that it is conducted in both images and words, i.e., through both visual and verbal sign systems that encode experience and expectations. As Alessandro Barchiesi puts it, “...
most people would agree that ideology plays some part in this process of turning images into meanings. And once ideology is perceived in terms of a discourse, there is no way of keeping the discourse simple or monolithic.”

This book rests on the premise that Augustan literature—richly self-conscious, politically aware, and sensitive to the nuances of all forms of art—reads and responds to the emerging city. In one sense, this premise indicates that for Propertius, Vergil, and others, the cityscape is simply another sort of “text” in the densely woven fabric of Augustan poetry, or even that the city acts as a metaphor for something else, such as power, the state, the Golden Age or its decline. Diane Favro’s work poses a method of reading the city-as-text that rescues it from such oversimplification: by controlling access to monuments and urban nodes, Augustus effectively created a sequence of viewing, a “narrative” that structured people’s experience of the Roman cityscape.

Propertius’ responses to the new city demonstrate that he was keenly aware of the dynamics of the city-as-text, and of the differences between the visual and verbal arts. His topographical poems capitalize on that difference in two primary ways. On the one hand the elegiac poet draws attention to the physicality of the city and to its experientiality—i.e., that individuals experience the city by moving through it in space and time. The statue of Vertumnus, for example, is in Propertius’ elegy 4.2 venerated and decorated by its visitors as they bustle to and from the Forum along the Vicus Tuscus, and Hercules in elegy 4.9 approaches the sanctuary of the Bona Dea as a suppliant who can hear sounds beyond its closed door. This experiential dynamic goes beyond Propertius’ visual sensibility, a quality of Propertius’ poetry examined by scholars such as Jean-Paul Boucher, D. Thomas Benediktson, and Theodore Papanghelis. As these scholars have demonstrated, visual imagery pervades Propertian elegy, in part because the poet in Rome was always surrounded with works of public and private art. Propertius’ city is imbued with this visual sensibility, to be sure—but his poems on the city appeal not only to his readers’ eyes but to their ears, noses, and feet as well, and to their memories of places and their expectations of what will happen there. Propertius’ urban landscape is thus more than a text for his readers; it is a context.

On the other hand, the elegist also draws attention to the textuality of his own poetry and to the ability of words to suggest specific interpretations. By lingering on certain details and occluding others, by punning on the names that identify places, and by imposing narratives that explain their existence, Propertius invites his readers to view the
monuments he treats from certain perspectives—sometimes even from several perspectives within one poem. This presentation from a certain viewpoint is often called “focalization,” a critical term of narratological theory. As a visual metaphor borrowed from photography, “focalization” articulates the relationship between the one who sees (e.g., a character within a literary work) and the one who speaks (e.g., the author): the author who speaks focalizes the narrative through the lens of a character who sees. The combination of visual and verbal perspectives captures the spirit of the poems in Book 4.

However temporarily, Propertius’ techniques of focalization not only reframe Roman places in his audience’s imagination, but also suggest a hierarchy of semantic influence: words may have power over images, a case that Horace makes in a very general sense in Carm. 3.30 (exegi monumentum perennius aere). This relationship between words and images is similar to that which arises in instances of ekphrasis. While only one of the poems to be discussed in this book constitutes an ekphrasis per se (elegy 2.31 on the temple of Palatine Apollo), the other poems implicate both the poet and the reader in the interpretation of the places or monuments that are their subject. As Stephen Harrison points out in a discussion of ekphrasis in Greek and Latin poetry, the effectiveness of ekphrasis depends in large part on what the reader brings to the experience—namely, her knowledge of aspects both within the text and outside of it that interpret and are interpreted by the artwork being described.

Propertius’ topographical poems are instances of ekphrasis with a twist: the places he describes are real works, seen and experienced by his audience in Rome. Propertius’ poems and the monuments they interpret engage each other via the reader/viewer, since Propertius’ Roman readers also were the primary viewers of Roman monuments. These readers brought to Propertius’ poems their prior experiences with the Roman places at issue, and took from the poet’s works new ways of viewing Roman monuments. Don Fowler’s work on narratology and ekphrasis points the way to the importance of this dynamic for understanding Propertius’ poetry. Contrasting descriptions of works that are imagined by the poet or by a character within the poem with works that have existence outside the text, Fowler posits that ekphrasis (and indeed art criticism) is most effective when it describes a real work of art, available to many viewers and discutants: “Art and literature do not exist to be understood or appreciated, but to be discussed and argued over, to function as a focus for social dialogue . . . ekphrasis proves to be not a minor aspect of the relationship between
visual art and literature, but the central activity which gives all art meaning.” The underlying discourse about art and words that always operates in instances of ekphrasis thus also becomes, in the presence of Propertius’ real places, a discourse about lived reality and the cultural identity embedded in it.

**ELEGY, MONUMENTS, AND ROMAN IDENTITY**

After biographical readings of Propertius’ poetry from the mid-twentieth century gave way to readings of the poet-lover as a persona created and not necessarily real, criticism on Propertian elegy has focused on the ways the poet situates himself and his poetry vis-à-vis other discourses. This shift in focus from love poetry to love poetry has enabled exploration of Propertius and the discursive codes of gender, genre, and Augustan ideology, among others. In recent decades criticism influenced by poststructuralism, drawing renewed attention to discourse and representation as themselves problematic, has stressed elegy’s broad resistance to any consistent or stable discourse. The male lover in elegy, for example, does not conform to traditional gender roles, either normative or inverted. He is feminine in his passivity and his subservience to his mistress, but masculine in his control of the poem and of the representation of the mistress. Likewise, he cannot be easily defined by social category. He is nobly born, and his lifestyle depends upon the money and status that nobility provides, but he refuses to engage in the pursuits typical—indeed expected—of his class: military service and political office.

The incongruity of the elegiac lover and the dissolution of stable discourse that operate in Roman elegy are more than “part of the fun”; more importantly, they reflect the crisis of identity that pervaded Roman culture at the end of the first century BCE. With the gradual transition from Republic to Principate, Roman men could no longer define their masculinity through political activity. The accumulation of military honors such as the triumph and the ouatio within the imperial household (and their concomitant denial to outsiders) restricted access to another avenue for masculine self-definition. With the displacement of the nobility from traditional positions of authority came the ascent of freedmen and even slaves into positions of wealth, authority, and rank. It is striking that elegy’s short life span as a genre in Roman literature, from the issue of Catullus’ poems in the 50s BCE to Ovid’s
last publication in the genre in 17 CE, roughly coincides with the fall of the Republic and the birth of the Principate.

Equally striking is the dramatic renovation of Rome’s urban fabric at that time. Rome’s most vibrant and venerable civic area, the Forum Romanum, was transformed into a Julian monument through the rebuilding of existing structures and the creation of new ones. New imperial forum complexes likewise became monumental testaments to the transfer of power from the people to the imperial family. In this period Augustus decorated his own Forum Augustum with statues of the heroes of myth and history, including Rome’s founders Aeneas and Romulus. Romans and visitors to Rome were invited to consider themselves but a small part of something much grander, participants in a sweeping history of success and rebirth.

In his 1995 book *Art and the Roman Viewer*, Jas Elsner offers a framework for understanding the effect of art on Roman identity. To Elsner, a work of art acts upon a viewer by reinforcing previously held perceptions through familiar elements, and also changes those perceptions by adding something new. Augustus’ monuments and their decorative programs, by incorporating new details into traditional forms, bridged the gap between the old and new orders and helped redefine what it meant to be a Roman citizen. At the same time, the Augustan age saw a sharp rise in the number, length, and size of public inscriptions in the city; such inscriptions marked and sometimes interpreted Roman places and monuments, enabling them to “speak” more clearly to the viewing public. These changes in turn affected the processes of cognitive mapping—the ways in which people oriented themselves to and moved through Roman places. In this context, Propertius’ elegies on Rome’s monuments in Book 4 offer much to the scholar seeking to understand not only elegy’s evolution throughout these years but also Rome’s evolving civic identity.

While analyses of individual poems have addressed the interrelationship between text and place in Book 4, recent comprehensive studies of Propertius’ last book have focused on themes other than Propertius’ Roman places. Two notable exceptions are the parallel analyses of the pastoral landscape in Book 4 by Kenneth Rothwell and Elaine Fantham. Rothwell traces the lack of a romanticized Golden Age and the tenacity of the natural world as linked themes in the topographical elegies, concluding that for the poet, nature is a force that can—and will—overpower any of man’s achievements in the physical world, which were never laudable in the first place. Fantham offers a more optimistic view, arguing that Propertius’ depiction of Rome’s
untamed early landscape overshadows the city’s contemporary manufactured splendor and indicates the poet’s preference for the lost innocence of Rome’s distant past. I see Propertius’ portrait of early Rome as neither naturalist nor nostalgic; on the contrary, I argue that the elegist’s ancient landscape is already darkened by the shadow of what it will become—an emblem of a state that demands too many sacrifices from its citizens. Propertius’ elegiac discourse on Rome resists this presence of an intrusive state by reading its past pessimistically, thus resisting the invited perspective on Roman identity and behavior.

My approach is heavily influenced by two recent studies on the interaction between Roman texts and monuments. Ann Vasaly’s Representations, published in 1993, demonstrates how Cicero’s speeches employ space as a rhetorical device to aid persuasion, not only by exploiting the connotations of the monuments in view as Cicero delivered his speeches, but also by evoking preconceptions about places not immediately visible to the audience, places both inside and outside Rome. Cicero uses what Vasaly calls a “‘metaphysical topography’—that is, the meaning these places would have held for a Roman audience in Cicero’s time.” Catharine Edwards, in her 1996 volume Writing Rome, examines the conceptual city in Latin literature, and the ways Latin texts have informed the Romans’ and our own opinions about the great city, i.e., “these literary resonances of the city and also the city’s resonance in literature.” These approaches form a complementary pair: while Vasaly searches for the influence of monuments—or, better, of monuments’ metaphysical topography—on texts, Edwards focuses on the influence of texts on the metaphysical topography of monuments. Propertius’ poetic engagement with local monuments and places responds to and reshapes their “metaphysical topography,” making his poetry a unique and fruitful locus for understanding Roman identity in the Augustan age.

I should make it clear that by identity I do not mean the private, interior identity felt by individual Romans, much less any essential or natural Roman cultural identity. In this respect I follow Eve D’Ambra in her 1998 volume Art and Identity in the Roman World and Duncan Kennedy in his 1993 The Arts of Love: Five Studies in the Discourse of Roman Elegy. By identity I mean social identity—that is, various publicly sanctioned and performed roles that are encoded in, for example, behavior, dress, habit, and manner of speaking. Whatever an individual Roman’s private, interior identity might be, Lacanian approaches
demonstrate that it must always stand in relationship with social forces external to the self. Identity is the ever-changing product of this interaction. In recent years two scholars have teased out for elegiac poetry some of the implications of the Lacanian model of identity. Paul Allen Miller’s *Subjecting Verses* of 2003 explores how elegy as a generic discourse is enabled—even necessitated—by an increasing gap (called the Real) between the self (called the Imaginary) and the external world of shared codes and norms (called the Symbolic). Micaela Janan’s 2001 volume *The Politics of Desire* locates that gap at its widest in Propertius’ fourth book, which reframes the elegiac view of the external world. It is a primary argument of my project that Roman monuments constitute a crucial part of the external world that forms and informs identity in the Augustan era.

Likewise, by *Roman* I mean precisely “having to do with the city of Rome,” rather than ethnically Roman (whatever that is), or even under Rome’s broader political or geographic sway. Recent cultural studies have demonstrated the inability to label and contain Roman culture, focusing instead on the variety of ways people respond to and understand Rome and their own relationship to it. As W. R. Johnson argues, “what we need is a history of literature that searches for traces of such conflictedness, such indeterminate feelings, in all the Roman writers who are émigrés (which means, most of them).” To be sure, many of the monuments of Augustan Rome were known to outsiders through their appearance on coins and in descriptions, and even from hearsay. Yet Propertius’ poetry is quite sensitive to the distinction between local inhabitant and visitor, and the very first line of Book 4 introduces a guest, *hospes*, to a city not his own. What is more, we must always keep in mind—and Propertius frequently reminds us to do so—the fact that Propertius was himself a son of another land, Umbria’s Assisi some one hundred miles north of Rome. With one exception (the temple of Palatine Apollo), the places Propertius treats in Book 4 arose as the result of Rome’s conquest of the Italian peninsula. Their history is the history of Rome’s imperialist expansion, and in engaging that history Propertius necessarily engages the negotiation between Roman and non-Roman that pervades the urban landscape. With these understandings of the terms *identity* and *Roman* I aim to indicate that Propertius resists Roman identity as something natural, essential, or inevitable: Roman identity—whatever that is—is always under negotiation, and is available to anyone for adoption or rejection.
THE ELEGIAIC ACHIEVEMENT OF BOOK 4

A young Muse with young loves clustered around her
ascends with me into the aether, . . .
And there is no high road to the Muses. (Ezra Pound, *Homage to Propertius* 1)

Propertius’ earlier poetry is guided by twin stars: Cynthia, the mistress under whose sway the poet suffers and rejoices, and Callimachus, the great Alexandrian poet, master of delicate verse, and father of the poetic form—self-contained, first-person poems in elegiac meter—that gave voice to the poet’s feelings. Cynthia’s presence in his poetry allows Propertius to explore personal themes, such as the extent to which the male lover is master of his own feelings, actions, and relationships, or whether instead he is subject to another, lost in his desire. Related to this are questions about Cynthia herself—is she a flesh-and-blood lover? a metaphor for poetry? grist for the poet’s mill? Or is she a means for the poet to describe and negotiate his selfhood to the third parties who are his addressees? In all cases, the dominance of the first-person voice indicates that the poetry is focused more on Propertius than on Cynthia, and on his reaction to her, whoever or whatever she is. Cynthia is the presence around which Propertian elegy organizes questions of the self: she is a focal point for elegy’s personal themes.

Callimachus’ presence in Propertius’ poetry contextualizes these personal themes, this selfhood, within broader conversations about discourse. Callimachus’ poetry, highly self-conscious of its jewel-like style and confident of its privileged status vis-à-vis other poetic practitioners and genres, had become in the first century BCE a popular model for Roman poets who wished to distance themselves from the political and rhetorical discourses of traditional Republican literature. By introducing Callimachus and Callimachean literary style into his poetry, Propertius invites his readers to contemplate how various types of discourse, such as epic, epigram, or history, facilitate or inhibit the personal voice. Indeed, it is in Callimachus’ name that Propertius claims to be unable to write “high” epic poetry, as in elegy 2.1.39–42, glossed by Pound in the epigram above: “there is no high road to the Muses.”

Both Cynthia and Callimachus situate the poet as a nonconformist vis-à-vis Roman mores. Whatever the relative social station of the lover and his mistress, his love affair is not sanctioned by the hallowed traditions of Roman marriage. Regardless of this sanction, his conduct in the affair undermines the poet’s very masculine identity.
Under the spell of his mistress, the male poet as lover plays a passive role in the relationship, unable or unwilling to assert control over his beloved or even himself. His passivity and lack of self-control style him as effeminate, a self-characterization that is one of the hallmarks of Propertian elegy and that flies in the face of traditional Roman gender roles. Likewise, his choice of Callimachus as a poetic model excuses him from ennobling the Roman way. Looking to the great Greek poet as his model allows Propertius to claim a worthy poetic enterprise while keeping his eye focused on something other than Rome. Callimachean aesthetic values such as refinement and esotericism promote a scale of composition too small to do Rome justice, in any case.

Book 4 breaks sharply from this defiant stance and turns instead to Rome’s history and institutions. Scholars of Propertius’ last book, confronted with this break, have focused their attention on the renegotiation of the poet’s position vis-à-vis the dominant ideology. Do Propertius’ aetiological poems celebrate Roman institutions, as argued by such scholars as Luigi Alfonsi, Pierre Grimal, Jean-Paul Boucher, Salvatore d’Elia, and Jeri Blair DeBrohun? Or rather, despite the public themes he treats, does Propertius maintain a posture that is critical of the the dominant ideology? Hermann Tränkle, Hans-Peter Stahl, John Sullivan, Robert Gurval, and Micaela Janan have seen in Book 4 the same seeds of discontent with normative values that characterize Propertius’ earlier work.

However we are to interpret Book 4, it is important to recall (as do all the scholars mentioned above) that Propertius’ final work does not abandon the themes explored in his earlier books. In Book 4 Propertius has created the perfect end to his life’s work, throwing into high relief the attitudes and stances of the first three books by confronting head-on those mores that Cynthia and Callimachus had previously helped him avoid. “Rome, this work rises for you,” he asserts at 4.1.67 (Roma . . . tibi surgit opus). Yet Cynthia and Callimachus still linger: Book 4 contains one of the best, if the most perplexing, Cynthia poems in the whole collection (4.7) and a bold assertion that his new project is the work of the Roman Callimachus (Romani . . . Callimachi, 4.1.64). The book thus continues to engage the themes of selfhood and discourse that dominate his earlier work, while introducing new levels of complexity. Nearly half the poems in Book 4 are voiced by speaking subjects other than the poet himself (Horos in 4.1, Vertumnus in 4.2, Arethusa in 4.3, Cornelia in 4.11, and cf. the extended voices of Tarpeia in 4.4 and Cynthia in 4.7). To a much greater extent than in the earlier books, in which Propertius’ voice predominates, these many voices in Book 4 expand
the book’s horizons of subjectivity, interacting with the lover-poet and offering “external” ways of evaluating the personal voice of Propertius, his relationship with Cynthia, and his Callimachean aesthetic commitment. These different speakers are situated in the cultural, historical, and physical setting of Rome, with poems on Roman legends and places, mention of consuls and wars, and inclusion of marriage and death. By examining Rome as this setting, and more particularly the ways it confines or enables identities and discourses, we may come closer to understanding to what extent Book 4 aligns itself with the dominant ideology. Rome’s presence in Book 4 allows the poet a medium through which to discuss more overtly public themes, such as Rome’s imperialism and normative gender roles. More powerfully, Propertius’ poems also demonstrate that Rome is itself the means by which such themes are constituted as public. Propertius rejects the use of Rome as a tool for such service.

Propertius’ achievement of Book 4—its multivalence, its artistry, and its relevance to the self and to society—had never been seen before in Latin elegiac poetry and, arguably, would never be seen again. To be sure, Ovid would recombine and adapt the forms of his predecessor’s elegiac swan song, writing love elegies in the *Amores*, letters from abandoned women to their absent lovers in the *Heroides*, and aetiologicals in the *Fasti*. The topographical dynamics of the last poem have found new voice in recent critical treatments. Boyle’s map of Ovid’s festival city examines how political ideology meets literary and cultural aesthetics at the intersection of building/viewing and writing/reading in Augustan Rome. Ovid’s contribution to our understanding of this intersection is not to be underestimated, but neither is the achievement of his predecessor in the task. Ovid found his archetype in Propertius’ fourth book, a text that persistently voices the tension between the individual thinking subject and the subjectification enacted upon him by Rome. The elegies in Book 4 make audible the process of self-expression, individuation, and even defection all but drowned out by the overwhelming—and persuasively symphonic—legacy of Augustus’ city of marble. In this way, Propertius’ final book is more than Propertius’ own triumph: it is the acme of personal elegiac poetry.

**ORGANIZATION OF THE ELEGIAC CITYSCAPE**

In the chapters that follow I examine in turn each of Book 4’s poems on
Roman places. In each chapter I first orient the reader to the monument at hand, exploring what resonance that place might have held for a Roman audience in the first century BCE. With attention thus focused on the monument on the ground, I turn to the poem itself and explore the ways Propertius engages with that meaning—sometimes challenging it, sometimes endorsing it, always changing it. Though the structure of each chapter is thus consistent, the content is not: the variable and shifting ways Propertius incorporates these monuments into his different poems, and sometimes even the shifting perspectives on Roman places to be found within one poem, necessitate a variety of approaches to the poems themselves.

Likewise, Propertius’ treatment of Roman monuments often blends the actual (or the probable) with the fanciful, especially when he provides an ancient “history” for them. While Francis Cairns attributes this to his “lack of pure intellectual curiosity,” this gives Propertius too little credit. His reconstructions of Rome’s past are designed to indicate that monuments have no fixed, real, or zero-grade meaning, but rather that their meaning is always open to (re)interpretation. Indeed, this malleability is one of the keest lessons Propertius wanted to teach his readers with this collection of poems. Thus each of these chapters may stand alone as a thematic reading of the poem at hand, but the reader who engages The Elegiac Cityscape as a whole will, I hope, better realize the extent to which Propertius sustains his scrutiny of Rome’s urban identity throughout his final oeuvre.

In the first chapter I explore elegy 4.1, Propertius’ own introduction to his grand finale. This programmatic poem does not dwell on any one monument, but rather traces the outline of the city as a whole, introducing several ways of viewing it and of reading the poems that follow. Time, culture, genre, gender, and astrology are all interpretive lenses that color the Roman horizon in elegy 4.1, combining with each other in ways that magnify the possibilities and tensions inherent in defining the city. The proliferation of Romes that embellish this introductory elegy sets the tone for the multiple perspectives on specific Roman places that we see throughout the rest of the book.

In elegy 4.2, the focus of chapter 2, Propertius applies the interpretive lenses of elegy 4.1 to a particular monument: the talking statue of Vertumnus that stood close behind the Forum’s edge. Vertumnus revels in his flexibility in adapting to the needs and viewing habits of passers-by—man, woman, soldier, lover, farmer, statesman—resisting any one interpretation of his representation or even of his name. Likewise, Vertumnus asserts his own cultural plurality: he is at once Etruscan in
origin, Roman by current residence, Oscan in craftsmanship, and Sabine by historical coincidence (he arrived in Rome along with the Sabines). With this talking monument asserting that his meaning is not fixed, even to himself, Propertius challenges his reader to approach Roman monuments with an open mind, and to be wary of what predispositions she might bring to viewing and interpreting the cityscape.

Chapter 3 offers a reading of elegy 4.4, on the legendary traitoress Tarpeia and the tomb named after her. This poem lends voice to an individual at odds with the city around her. In Propertius’ poem, Tarpeia, confined to a small part of the city and surrounded on all sides by places resonant of Rome’s political and imperial power, enacts her disobedience not only toward the Roman state but toward its places as well, betraying the citadel to enemy forces. I argue that this elegy has as a subtext the use of Tarpeia’s myth as part of the urban landscape—her rock, her tomb, and the monumental relief sculpture of her punishment in the Basilica Aemilia. Tarpeia’s demise is not only set within but even caused by the urban structures that surround her; the whole city turns out to be Tarpeia’s tomb. Hers is a cautionary tale about how much influence is exerted by Rome’s places over the people who move among them.

The grand temple of Apollo on the Palatine hill inhabits elegy 4.6 and chapter 4. In this elegy, Propertius promises to discuss the Princeps’ magnificent new temple, dedicated in 28 BCE but, curiously, says nothing about it. Instead, his poem dwells on the battle of Actium as the victory that the temple commemorates, and on Apollo as Octavian’s helper and patron in that battle. The grim Apollo of elegy 4.6 who fought at the future Princeps’ side bears little resemblance to the elegant god of art displayed in the temple itself, as described by Propertius in an earlier elegy written at the temple’s dedication (2.31). The two elegies read together sever the cause (battle) from the urban effect (temple), unsettling the relationship between the Princeps’ authority earned in that victory and his patronage of the urban landscape, and posing a subtle criticism of the way monuments were used to endorse power in Rome. What is more, in both elegies 2.31 and 4.6, Propertius claims Apollo as his own patron god, who watches over and inspires his poetry. With this move Propertius appropriates the honor of the temple of Palatine Apollo for himself: it commemorates his poetic achievement rather than the Princeps’ victory in battle.

In chapter 5 I move with Propertius through the Forum Boarium and the Aventine hill, following the hero Hercules as he establishes the Ara Maxima (“Greatest Altar”) in elegy 4.9. This poem stretches Her-
cules’ elastic masculinity as he meets and is rejected by the women who stand in his way: the priestesses who guard the sanctuary of the Bona Dea’s sacred spring. Both the Ara Maxima and the sanctuary of the Bona Dea were dear to Augustus and his wife, Livia, whose associations with these monuments served to reinforce their status as models of traditional gender roles for Roman men and women, i.e., warriors and wives. Propertius’ feminized Hercules falls short of the Princeps’ model of manly virtue, as the cavorting devotees of the Bona Dea fall short of Livia’s matronal decorum. In the elegist’s city, therefore, the Ara Maxima and the sanctuary of the Bona Dea do not reinforce, but rather undermine, the traditional gender roles encoded into them.

The final chapter examines elegy 4.10, the poet’s unpacking of the temple of Jupiter Feretrius, since with this temple Propertius closes his poetic tour of Roman monuments. This small temple, perched atop the Capitoline hill, contained the rare relics of Rome’s highest military honor: the spolia opima, armor taken by a Roman commander from an enemy commander whom he defeated in hand-to-hand combat. These spoils were rare indeed: only three men in Roman history had achieved this honor. As Propertius tells their tales, he dwells on neither the spoils nor the honor of dedicating them, but rather on the violence of the combat itself. Where he does mention spoils, they are blood-soaked. His poem thus casts a shadow on the way martial valor is programmed into the Roman city. As in elegy 4.6, in elegy 4.10 Propertius simultaneously draws attention to an alternative way of earning glory: by writing poetry about the city. By beginning and ending the poem with a focus on the poet’s own achievement rather than on that of the military men who dedicated spolia opima or on that of Augustus, who had restored the temple, the poem makes a fitting finale for Propertius’ walk through Rome. It leaves in the poet’s hands both the power to shape the way we read the Roman cityscape and the glory of having built his own Rome.

I conclude the book by examining briefly some verbal correspondences between this final topographical poem (on the fall of Rome’s victims) and the introductory poem (on Rome’s rise to greatness). In elegy 4.1 Propertius introduces the contrast between Rome’s current splendor and its rustic beginnings. Elegy 4.10 reverses this technique, juxtaposing the former splendor of the great Etruscan city Veii, defeated by Rome, with its current, conquered obscurity. This reversal in elegy 4.10 of the trope of humble origins leaves the reader with the impression of the transience of the built environment and of the identity built into it and fostered by it. Like Veii’s, Rome’s monuments will
inevitably fall. Though unspoken, the complement to this notion inheres: unlike Rome’s monuments, Propertius’ poetry will remain.

Before beginning, I offer two notes on style and selection. The elegiac couplet lends itself perfectly to Book 4’s project. As a self-contained unit, the couplet offers to the poet the ability to shift perspective quickly. These shifts happen thus not just between poems, but within poems as well. In Books 1–3 the couplet both enables the rapid twists and turns in the poet’s feelings about Cynthia, and permits him to insert, without warning, statements about his aesthetic values and goals. Luigi Alfonsi has argued that the quicksilver nature of the couplet is one reason Propertius didn’t approach Book 4 as a comprehensive, sustained aetiological project like Vergil’s *Aeneid*; rather, each poem stands independently of the others. While his poems do not follow a single narrative thread, the couplet’s versatility, I believe, unifies Prop-
Propertius' city in an important way. Applied to Roman buildings and monuments in Book 4, the couplet facilitates movement through and around Roman places—not just physical movement and shifts in direction and visual perspective (such as Hercules' rapid movement from the Forum Boarium to the sanctuary of the Bona Dea in elegy 4.9), but also emotional, or conceptual perspective (as in the way the sanctuary of the Bona Dea is, in one moment, a doublet for the secluded bath of Pallas but, in the next, a haven for giggling girls). In this way, though the poems remain discrete, as Alfonsi argues, the poetic form itself enables the variety of approach to Roman monuments that characterizes the Propertian landscape. I do not pretend that the translations I offer for Propertius' couplets are poetry in any sense and have thus left them in prose format, but I have tried to recapture in their pacing and tone the movement and shape of the elegiac couplet.

Likewise, though I do not attempt to interpret the remaining, non-topographical elegies in Propertius' book, much can be learned by considering the movement of the book as a whole. A map of the places discussed in the topographical elegies (Figure 1) reveals an important feature of the fourth book: Propertius' aetiological poems focus on public places in the city's center.

In contrast, the places mentioned in the non-aetiological poems lie nearer the city's periphery, such as the Esquiline bedroom of elegy 4.8; on its very edge, as in the city gate that bears Arethusa's votive wishes in elegy 4.3; or even beyond its walls, such as Cornelia's and the lena's tombs from elegies 4.11 and 4.5. The contrast between private and public is strongly marked and suggests that Propertius' readers must always keep in mind that the city is made up of both sorts of places.

In this way, the questions I raise about the topographical poems can be fruitfully adapted to those more private poems as well: what is Roman identity, and how is it shaped and enforced? The presence in Book 4 of familiar elegiac themes, such as love outside of marriage (4.7, 4.8) helped or hindered by a lena (4.5) or magic (4.5, 4.7), and the introduction of new themes, such as marital fidelity (4.3 and 4.11) and the interrelationship of death and fides (4.7, 4.11), are intertwined with and around poems on Roman places, suggesting that all forms of human experience are implicated in the cityscape, and vice versa: the cityscape is implicated in all forms of human experience. Just as the individual feels, acts, and loves in the context of Rome's urban landscape, moving through it and being shaped by it, so too that landscape is formed of individual experiences and perceptions, lived and seen by people, not institutions. The relationship between the individual and
the city that unfolds in Book 4 is, indeed, as faithful and fickle, as rewarding and painful, as pure and as complex as the love Propertius once expressed for Cynthia. Cynthia might be first, as the poet says in his first published verse, elegy 1.1.1: *Cynthia prima* (1.1.1); but Rome, as he asserts at the beginning of his final book (4.1.1), is greatest: *maxima Roma est*. 
