The Elegiac Cityscape

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CHAPTER 5

Masculinity and Monuments in Elegy 4.9

Propertius 4.9, an elegiac version of Hercules’ visit in Rome, has enjoyed considerable scholarly attention in the past fifty years. Some critics read this poem in a political light. Since Augustus and his wife had revived ancient rituals and restored dilapidated shrines and temples, Propertius’ celebration of religious arcana was seen to endorse and to congratulate the Princeps.¹ Other interpreters read the poem as a generic tour de force, whose dazzling and recondite details broadcast the poet’s virtuosity and redefined elegiac poetry.² Recently many critics of this poem have focused on Hercules’ alterity—particularly his transvestism—and how it unsettles the hero’s place in the national canon.³ Whether Hercules’ transvestism confounds traditional gender categories (Janan 1998 and 2001) or reaffirms those categories (Cyrino 1998), whether it questions the very means for defining gender identity (Lindheim 1998), whether it calls into question Roman imperialism (Fox 1998) or historicism (Fox 1999), or whether it creates broader epistemological problems (Spencer 2001), these critics agree that Propertius’ Hercules makes an important contribution to Rome’s evolving sense of itself during the transition from Republic to Principate.

In this chapter I analyze Propertius’ use of Roman monuments associated with Hercules. I ask what it means that Propertius connects the story of Hercules’ transvestism and his re-emergent masculinity intimately with two of Rome’s most ancient and venerable sites: the Ara Maxima, for which his poem is an action, and the sanctuary of the Bona Dea, at which most of its action takes place. Hercules differs from the
feminized elegiac lover, whose ambiguous gender identity is ubiquitous. In this poem, by contrast, Propertius locates Hercules’ gender play in specific Roman locations—locations that resonate both with traditional gender roles and with the Augustan urban renovation.

Hercules, ridding Rome of the brutish thief Cacus, became a Roman model of a civilizing agent. This legend, associated with the founding of the Ara Maxima, proved a useful allegory for Augustus, who had restored peace to Rome after decades of violent civil war. On August 12, 29 BCE, Augustus celebrated Hercules’ rites at the Ara Maxima, or Greatest Altar, the ancient shrine founded upon the hero’s arrival at Rome and his victory over the bandit Cacus. The next day Augustus began a three-day triumphal celebration of his recent victories over
Dalmatia and Egypt and at Actium. The coincidence of rites and triumph forged a link between Augustus and the Ara Maxima, a bond that Vergil’s *Aeneid* celebrated and elaborated in the next decade.

In elegy 4.9 Propertius minimizes the hero’s dispatch of the local bandit, focusing instead on the aftermath of this heroic workout. Hercules seeks a drink at the sanctuary of the Bona Dea, tutelary goddess of Roman married women and a sanctuary that would become a favorite of Augustus’ wife, Livia, who styled herself as Rome’s “patron” of matrons. Propertius transforms Hercules from an epic-style hero to an elegiac-style lover, pleading for entry from a woman at her doorstep and abandoning traditional masculinity by boasting of his past experience as a cross-dresser. Likewise, this episode transforms the venerable priestess of the Bona Dea into a *lena* (the madam who controls access to elegiac girlfriends) and the goddess’s sanctuary into a lover’s bedroom. Refused entry to the all-female space, the elegist’s Hercules breaks into the sanctuary and helps himself to its forbidden sacred waters. His thirst slaked, he establishes the Ara Maxima and forbids women ever to take part in its rites. In the poet’s revised myth of the origins of the “Greatest Altar,” Hercules’ visit to Rome subverts the gender roles so important to Augustus and his wife, while the Ara Maxima itself commemorates a violent reassertion of those rigid roles.

**MONUMENTS AND MORALITY:**

*The Princeps, Hercules, and the Ara Maxima*

Elegy 4.9 is an *aetion* for the Ara Maxima, Hercules’ most venerable Roman shrine, located in the Forum Boarium on the banks of the Tiber (Figure 10). The association of Hercules and the Princeps was forged on August 12, 29 BCE. On that day, the anniversary of Hercules’ advent in Rome, Octavian celebrated Hercules’ rites at the Ara Maxima.4 The very next day Augustus began his triple triumph for his recent victories over the Damatians, the Egyptians, and over Antony’s forces at Actium.5 Hercules had long been a favorite of triumphators, and Octavian’s scheduling was deliberate and shrewd.6 Servius calls it εὐούμβολον (= feliciter, *ad. Aen.* 8.102), and Donatus tells us that Octavian delayed his entry into Rome by lingering for four days in Atella while Vergil read him the *Georgics.*7 The delay ensured that Octavian would repeat Hercules’ advent into Rome. According to the
prevailing tradition, the Ara Maxima commemorated Hercules’ defeat of the outlaw Cacus and so solidified not only the hero’s physical prowess but also his role as a civilizing agent in a time of lawlessness. This was a useful image for the Princeps, who had just restored peace to Rome after the civil wars. The association of triumphal Octavian with Hercules thus gave a veneer of legitimacy to Octavian’s defeat of Antony. It also invited into Octavian’s own personal pantheon of supporters the hero-god who had been Antony’s favorite. The gens Antonia enjoyed an ancestral relationship with Hercules through Anton his son. Antony had especially cultivated this relationship, both to win prestige in Rome in the years after Caesar’s death, and to develop his persona abroad. Hercules provided Antony with a linkage to Alexander, the East’s great divinized king, who had himself cultivated an association with the hero who became a god.8

After the victory over Antony at Actium, the Princeps sought to recuperate Hercules for the Roman cause and for his own. Though not the most common god in the imagery of the Principate, Hercules’ appearances are telling. He is featured prominently, for example, in the decorative program of the temple to Palatine Apollo, dedicated on October 9, 28 BCE, just a year after the triple triumph. The temple complex boasted representations of myths of vengeance mingled with notions of the dangerous foreigner—images that subtly reflected the Princeps’ Actian victory.9 Among them on the terracotta Campana-style plaques appears Hercules facing Apollo over the Delphic tripod (Figure 9, above). The calm posture of the two gods suggests not hostility but rather negotiation, the moment of reconciliation and resolution after the struggle for the tripod.10 The symbolism is clear: like Apollo reconciled with Hercules, the Princeps’ new order resolves the previous conflict between Roman forces.11

It should be noted also that while women seem to have worshiped Hercules freely elsewhere in Italy and even in Rome, his worship at the Ara Maxima was restricted to men only.12 The exclusion of women from the Ara Maxima may have been linked to the fact that the cult was celebrated ritu Graeco, in the Greek fashion, and it may have been linked with the cult’s original aristocratic flavor.13 Augustus’ activities at the Ara Maxima thus not only signal his new political role but also his participation in a club of elite Roman men. The coincidence of rites and triumphs in 29 BCE, celebrated in the public Fasti, marks a crux in imperial ideology. On the one hand, it looks back to the images of the civil wars and puts a symbolic end to the propaganda war against Antony. On the other hand, this event also looks forward to the tenor of
the new regime, in the way it links imperialism with the established
and traditional masculinity of Hercules’ worship at the Ara Maxima.
This connection between imperialism and masculinity would appear
broadly in the Augustan architectural program for the next thirty years,
culminating in the sculptural program of the Forum of Augustus.

However direct the Princeps was in cultivating a relationship with
Hercules, by 16 BCE, when Propertius’ poem was published, the asso-
ciation would have been clear thanks to Vergil’s Aeneid. In Aeneid
8.185–275, Evander tells Aeneas the story of Hercules and Cacus, and of
the subsequent foundation of the Ara Maxima. Vergil’s narrative con-
nects epic heroism, traditional masculinity, and Roman nationalism in
the figure of Hercules, locating this concentration of Roman virtue at
the Ara Maxima. Vergil also makes clear that Aeneas repeats Her-
cules’ advent into Rome, and that Augustus will be the next great hero
in the series of Rome’s founders. Vergil seems to have taken his cue
from the Princeps’ activities in 29 BCE, for in Book 8 Augustus-as-Her-
cules appears at the climax of the shield ekphrasis, celebrating his
triple triumph. Hercules’ victory and the Ara Maxima thus begin Book
8, and Augustus’ triumph ends it. Aeneas’ partnership with Evander
throughout the episode and the conspicuous lack of women who par-
ticipate in their encounter (the book’s featured woman is Cleopatra on
the shield) make Book 8 into its own men-only club that repeats and
reinforces the restrictions of the Ara Maxima.

The connection between Augustus and Hercules also appears in
Livy’s account of Rome’s origins in 1.7. Though Livy’s history does not
champion Augustus’ cause, it is clear that the historian’s national pride
lends emphasis to Rome’s many founders. Each founder of Rome adds
something in Livy’s account, and Rome is thus the product of com-
bined, rather than individual, efforts. Hercules’ defeat of Cacus and
his subsequent apotheosis make him a fitting model for Romulus, him-
self destined to be deified for his achievements. Augustus is subtly
included in this Herculean nexus of foundation by the simple adjective
Livy uses to describe the hero: formamque uiri aliquantum ampliorem
augustioremque humana intuens, (seeing that the physique of the hero
was somewhat grander and more august than the human physique,
1.7.9).

Horace, too, took inspiration from Octavian’s activities in 29 BCE;
the lyric poet’s association of Augustus and Hercules is prominent in
his work. Carmina 3.3 links Augustus with Hercules because they both
are reliable and righteous men (iustum et tenacem propositi uirum, 3.3.1),
who will enjoy the pleasures of eternal life (quos inter Augustus recum-
bens / purpureo bibet ore nectar, 3.3.9–12: reclining between them [Hercules and Pollux], Augustus will drink nectar with his purple-stained mouth). Again in *Carmina* 3.14 (*Herculis ritu . . .*) the poet explicitly compares Augustus’ triumphant return from Spain to Hercules’ arrival from Spain so long ago. Military conquest and victory over death align Horace’s hero and the Princeps. Such was the climate of the decade after Actium. Sparked by the Princeps’ own actions at the Ara Maxima, and fueled by the poets of the twenties, Propertius could rely on a firm and popular connection between Rome’s first founding hero and its latest, a connection linking triumph and traditional masculinity and focused at the Ara Maxima.

**MONUMENTS AND MORALITY**

*Livia, Womanhood, and the Bona Dea*

Also featured in Propertius’ elegy is the sanctuary of the Bona Dea at the foot of the Aventine (Figure 10, above), where Hercules takes his drink (*femineae loca clausa deae fontisque piandos, 4.9.25*). Though many shrines to the Bona Dea have been identified in Rome by clusters of inscriptions, the sanctuary on the Aventine remained her most important and was the locus of her official urban cult. The Bona Dea’s rites were celebrated twice annually in Rome. Calendars record a celebration to Bona Dea on May 1, the anniversary of Claudia Quinta’s dedication of her Aventine sanctuary. Little is known about this observance. More famous and better documented is the nocturnal celebration that took place each December at the home of the chief Roman magistrate or priest. These were state rites performed for the well-being of the Roman people as a whole, but they were done in secret by aristocratic women and were strictly forbidden to men. The nocturnal mysteries were hosted by the wife or mother of the magistrate or priest and involved music, dancing, drinking, and revelry. The infamous Clodius scandal late in 62 BCE is particularly telling in this context. Clodius had dressed as a woman harpist and sneaked into the rites when they were being hosted by Caesar’s wife Pompeia—an action that combined sacrilege, possible adultery, and sedition. Cicero’s repeated testimony against Clodius for his infiltration of the Bona Dea’s rites and the interpretation of Caesar’s resultant divorce of Pompeia reveal the ideological force of the Bona Dea’s cult at Rome:
that proper female—and male—behavior was required for the proper working of the state.  24

The sources for the cult of the Bona Dea are problematic; literary and material sources offer very different pictures about its appeal and practice. Inscriptions from all periods reveal that at Rome and elsewhere the Bona Dea welcomed celebrants of both sexes from all social classes.  25

The literary evidence for this goddess, however, reveals a strong ideological pull: she is a goddess for Roman aristocratic matronae of good standing in society and good morals. The discrepancy can be explained in a variety of ways: by a difference in her cult in Rome and outside,  26 the influence of Cicero’s bias on the literary sources,  27 or a transition in the way she was worshiped and conceptualized in the first century BCE.  28 I believe the tension in the evidence for this cult is to be explained by the shifting positions of morality and identity at the crux between Republic and Principate. Cicero’s invective against Clodius combines violation of gender roles with religious transgression and political insurrection. His comments betray deep and expanding fissures in Roman mores—especially those that govern gender roles.  29 The powerful feminine and aristocratic slant seen in Cicero’s words about the Bona Dea mark an attempt by the orator to examine and understand this rupture of values, even to contain it. As Rome fell further under the control of dynasts at the Republic’s end, Cicero’s emphasis on the Bona Dea’s required female probitas expands responsibility for the health of the state to the personal, not just the political, realm.  30

The Bona Dea sanctuary was similarly important to the imperial family. Confirmation is found in Ovid’s Fasti:

. . . interea Diua canenda Bona est.
est moles natuia, loco, res nomina facit,
    appellant Saxum, pars bona montis ea est.
huic Remus institerat frustra, quo tempore fratri
    prima Palatinae signa dedistis aves.
templa patres illic oculos exosa uiriles
    leniter adclini constituei iugo.
dedicat haec ueteris Clausorum nominis heres
    uirgineo nullum corpore passa uirum.
    Liuia restituit, ne non imitata maritum
    esset, et est omni parte secuta uirum.
Meanwhile I should sing about the Bona Dea. There is a natural rock formation; this feature generates the name for the place: they call it the Stone (Saxum), and it makes up the better part of the mountain. On it Remus stood in vain, when you birds of the Palatine gave your signs to his brother Romulus first. The founding fathers built a temple on the gently sloping cliff, a temple that is taboo to men’s eyes. The heir of the ancient family name of the Clausi dedicates this sanctuary, a girl who had never permitted the touch of any man on her virgin’s body. Livia restored it, lest she fail to imitate her husband, and she followed his lead in every way. (Ovid Fast. 5.148–58)

Ovid places Livia’s activity at this sanctuary within the context of the goals of Augustus’ program of moral and urban renewal: her civic activity supported the same goals, and by the same means, as his. Indeed, Livia actively sponsored places and rituals that supported traditional female morality: marriage, fidelity, and childbirth. In keeping with her other urban activities, Livia’s attention to the Bona Dea’s cult advertised her status as a matrona and a sponsor of matronae, the bulwark of female morality in Rome.32

Kleiner has recently argued that Livia’s urban activity may have served more complicated political goals. Not only did her building projects promote the importance of traditional female behavior in a successful Rome, but they also buttressed the importance of traditional social roles in that success. Her restoration of the Bona Dea sanctuary reinforced the moral code so important in the Princeps’ design for a new Rome. It placed Livia in a patrician context; she was, after all, of the gens Claudia and brought that higher status to her husband, by birth less noble than she. Her action, moreover, recalled the old-style religion that was featured so prominently in Augustus’ rule. Importantly, it imprinted all these ideas (nobility, feminine decorum, religious tradition) into an urban site meant for women only—attesting the importance to women of all these factors as well as the part they play in them. Finally, Livia’s activity in the cult of the Bona Dea was an attempt to stabilize Roman values after their upheaval in the final years of the Republic—a response to the same crisis of morality that prompted Cicero to such strong invective against Clodius. Livia’s intervention in the Bona Dea’s worship represents the imperial attempt to stabilize Rome’s shifting paradigms of morality.
Augustus and Livia, in their activity at the Ara Maxima and the sanctuary of the Bona Dea, thus encouraged fixed and conservative gender roles as a strategy to guarantee Rome's well-being. Even if her restoration postdates our elegy, the impact of the monument is clear: the Bona Dea's shrine, like the Ara Maxima, reinforces traditional Roman gender roles and their complicity with public success. In fact these two monuments support the same message as Augustus' moral legislation of 18 BCE, the sweeping set of laws that regulated families by encouraging marriage and penalizing adultery, and the boldest statement yet of the importance of proper gender roles to the health of the state. The message: appropriate roles for women and men in a successful Roman society are prescribed and discrete. In the new Roman state, mapped onto the monuments sponsored by the Princeps and his wife, gender was prescriptive: men should be men, and women should be women.37

MONUMENTS, MORALITY, AND ELEGIAIC HERCULES

Not so in Propertius' poetic city. The elegiac lover's refusal to conform to prescribed or rigid gender roles in his love poetry is well known; in Book 4 the elegist also refuses to succumb to such roles, encoded in the city around him. Combined or problematic gender roles pervade Book 4, often connected to urban places: Vertumnus's monument is both male and female (4.2); warrior Cynthia wagers battle in feminine fashion on the Esquiline (4.8); and feminine Tarpeia exposes the cruelty of masculine ideology and makes her monument a testament not to her shame, but to her resistance to that oppressive ideology (4.4). Elegy 4.9 likewise participates in the disruption of traditional gender roles.

This elegy explains the origins of the Ara Maxima and the sanctuary of the Bona Dea. In doing so the poet takes great liberties with the myth of Hercules' arrival, with the cults of Hercules and the Bona Dea, and with the cityscape. He therefore sports with all aspects of his chosen poetic topic in Book 4: sacra diesque canam et cognomina prisca locorum (“I shall sing of the rites and festivals of Rome and of the hallowed names of her places,” 4.1.69). Propertius' light treatment of places and myths of the Forum Boarium at once proves that he is the Roman Callimachus (4.1.64), author of refined and learned poetry. Propertius' landscape is a masterpiece of mannered sophistication, full of erudite
Indeed, the connection of Hercules to the sanctuary of the Bona Dea is drawn directly from Varro (apud Macrobius Sat. 1.12.27–28), and the spirit of the poet is Varronian. For example, in 4.9.1–6 he offers etymologies for the Palatine (from pecus, evoked in pecorosa, 4.9.3; see Varro Ling. 5.53) and Velabrum (velificabat, 4.9.6, and cf. Varro Ling. 5.44) as well as a possible action for the cult name of Hercules at the Ara Maxima (Hercules Invictus, evoked in inuictos montis, 4.9.3). Later in the poem Hercules himself voices a bookish gem, when he negates local legend and names the Forum Boarium after his cows (4.9.19–20: aruaque mugitu sancite Bouaria longo:/ nobile erit Romae pascua uestra Forum; cows, hallow with your long lowing the Boarian fields; your pasture will be the noble forum of Rome; cf. Ovid Fasti 1.582). This playful and nontraditional landscape continues with Hercules’ remarkable sensory feats: though he is a half a mile away or more, and though his cows are engaged in prolonged mooing, nevertheless the burly hero hears girls laughing behind the far-off closed doors of the Bona Dea sanctuary (4.9.19–23). Likewise the landscape is aquatically fickle: watery one moment (4.9.5–6), arid the next (4.9.22). It is clear that Propertius’ landscape is fanciful and contrived rather than austere and precise; what buildings existed at all, for example, when Hercules came to Rome? Certainly there was then no sanctuary of the Bona Dea on the Aventine; there would have been nothing on the Aventine, in fact. The very connection between the Ara Maxima and the Bona Dea sanctuary is also suspect; Varro’s mention of it is our first in extant sources (apud Macrobius Sat. 1.12.27–28), and it may have been a late invention to link conveniently the two gender-specific cults.

More important than historical accuracy, however, is the commentary Propertius’ poem and its places offer on the way the urban landscape contributes to Roman constructions of gender. Antiquarian inquiry of any sort was morally and politically charged in the late Republic and early Principate, an era when the past was used to valorize the present. The tradition of the Ara Maxima was especially complex. Hercules in the Forum Boarium endorses not only imperialism but also traditional masculinity. Consequently, “when the antiquarians, historians and poets of the late Republic and early empire speculated on the myth and ritual of this particular cult site at the Ara Maxima, more was involved than the simple physical location of the cult. In this case, ideas of place lead straight to ideas of demarcation of gender, that is, to rival claims about the religious place of women. Stories of Rome situated the Roman system of cultural norms and practices.”
The same can be said for late Republican/early imperial interest in the sanctuary of the Bona Dea. Through Hercules’ actions at the Bona Dea’s shrine and the manner of his foundation of the Ara Maxima, Propertius offers a serious social commentary that also touches on the ways Roman buildings and places encode certain ideological positions. As has long been recognized, Hercules’ speech at the threshold of the sanctuary is a paraklausithyron in the best tradition of the elegiac lover, feminized and unconcerned with the state. At the very least, Hercules’ appearance as an exclusus amator lightens the tone of the poem and, with it, the poem’s places:

et iacit ante fores uerba minora deo:
"vos precor, o luci sacro quae luditis antro,
pandite defessis hospita fana uiris."

And before the doors he flings words not worthy of a god: “I beg you, who play in the sacred hollow of this grove, open your sanctuary as a shelter for weary men.” (4.9.32–35)

This encounter at the doorstep undermines the solemnity of the hero’s advent into Rome. Hercules utters, after all, words that are inferior to his divine destiny (uerba minora deo), and he prays, moreover, to girls (precor, 4.9.33). More important for the present argument, his performance of the paraklausithyron transforms the hallowed sanctuary of the Bona Dea, locus of aristocratic feminine virtue, into an elegiac house, the realm of erotic sport (luditis and cf. ridere, 4.9.23) that is temporarily off-limits to the lover who waits at its doorstep. A typical erotic threshold, it is decorated with garlands of a sort (uittae, 4.9.27) and incense (odorato igne, 4.9.28). Likewise, Hercules’ words and actions transform the venerable priestess who guards the sanctuary doorway into the elegiac lena who guards access to the puellae within—a figure who promotes behavior antithetical to the goals of the Augustan moral program by fostering promiscuity among noble, unmarried women.

Indeed, Propertius conflates the May rites at the sanctuary of the Bona Dea with those held in December at the home of the chief magistrate in order to eroticize the city’s public landscape. By setting Hercules’ paraklausithyron in a public place, Propertius participates in one major ideological trend of the Principate: he blurs the distinction between private and public. The city of Rome had always served as the background for Propertius’ amatory activities. In elegy 2.31, the newly
opened temple of Palatine Apollo provides the poet with an excuse for being late to meet his mistress. In 4.8 Cynthia forbids Propertius to flirt in the theater of Pompey or the Forum (4.8.75). In 1.16, the Capitoline hill (not primarily a residential area), more specifically the temple to Fides, is the setting for a *paraklausithyron*. As in poem 4.9, the *paraklausithyron* of 1.16 presents a remarkable overlay of erotic concerns onto public and venerable space. The whole city is a playground for elegiac lovers.

The sanctuary of the Bona Dea, secluded and open to women only, lent itself especially to such amatory diversions, and other elegiac poets seized the opportunity to exploit the sanctuary’s erotic possibilities. For Tibullus, the Aventine shrine is associated with adultery when he warns Delia’s husband to beware a wife who goes to participate in the Bona Dea’s rites (1.6.21–24). It is a pretext, Tibullus explains: she is merely using participation in the rite as an excuse to meet up with a lover:

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exhibit quam saepe, time, seu uisere dicet
  sacra Bonae maribus non adeunda Deae.
at mihi si credas, illam sequar unus ad aras;
tunc mihi non oculis sit timuisse meis.
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As often as she goes out, beware, or if she says she is going to witness the rites of the Bona Dea that no man may attend. But if you trust me, let me go alone to follow her to the sanctuary; then I would not have to fear for my eyes. (1.6.21–24)

Tibullus, like Delia’s husband, is jealous of her current lover. In offering to accompany Delia to the sanctuary, Tibullus hopes to rekindle their affair. Ovid makes the connection between the Bona Dea’s Aventine sanctuary and adultery even more explicit. In a lesson on deceiving a husband, he urges women to use the city’s monuments. Theaters and circuses are crowded enough to allow for foul play, and the Bona Dea’s temple offers a sure-fire escape from a jealous husband:

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quid faciat custos, cum sint tot in urbe theatra,
cum spectet iunctos illa libenter equos,
cum sedeat Phariae sistris operata iuuenae
  quoque sui comites ire uetantur, eat
cum fugat a templis oculos Bona Diua uirorum.
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What is a guardian to do, when there are so many theaters in this city, and when she goes readily to the races, when she sits in devotion with the sistrum of the Pharian heifer, when she goes where her escorts are forbidden to go, since the Bona Dea puts to flight the eyes of men from her temples. (*Ars am. 3.633–37*)

The elegiac tradition prompts us to see in Propertius’ Bona Dea another allusion to elegiac—that is, adulterous—love. In Propertius’ urban landscape, Livia’s matronal decorum is incapacitated and Augustus, lurking behind Hercules, is put in the position of the excluded paramour.

Moreover, Hercules’ foundation of the Ara Maxima is not, in Propertius’ poem, the commemoration of victory over an enemy, as it had been in Vergil’s and Livy’s accounts and, indeed, in the Princeps’ own ‘reading’ of the monument. Rather, in the elegy the foundation of the Ara Maxima mimics the jealous act of a spurned lover.* Hercules and the priestess adopt elegiac roles, while Rome’s monuments, so important in buttressing moral and social roles, become the setting for an elegiac lovers’ dispute.

Given Hercules’ historic association with Antony, Propertius’ eroticization of the urban landscape is more than a playful elegiac trope. In elegy 4.9, the poet imbues Hercules with strong Antonian overtones that disrupt the “Augustan” meaning of the poem’s monuments. In elegy 4.9 Hercules argues that he should be admitted to the all-female sanctuary because he has experienced life as a woman, in submission to the Lydian queen Omphale:

> sin aliquem uultusque meus saetaeque leonis  
> terrent et Libyco sole perusta coma,  
> idem ego Sidonia feci seruilia palla  
> officia et Lydo pensa diurna colo,  
> mollis et hirsutum cepit mihi fascia pectus,  
> et manibus duris apta puella fui.

If my face and the mane of this lion and my hair burned with the Libyan sun frighten anyone, I have also performed the servant’s duties wearing a Sidonian dress and spun the daily wool with the Lydian distaff, and a soft strap has covered my hairy chest and I was a suitable girl for all my rough hands. (*4.9.45–50*)
As mentioned above, Antony had claimed descent from Hercules, through the hero’s little-known son Anton, and had used Hercules’ iconography—the lion-skin, the club—in his own self-promoting images. This ancestral relationship backfired in the later years of civil wars, when the story of Hercules and Omphale was used as anti-Antonian propaganda against Rome’s wayward general and his own foreign queen.48 Hercules and Omphale, each in the other’s clothes, appeared in Augustan art as an indirect way to criticize Antony and the luxury, corruption, and desire that threatened Rome and its moral foundations.49

Submissive Hercules brings Antony into this poem—all the more so because of the strong verbal resonance between Hercules’ cross-dressing episode in 4.9 and the same episode in 3.11, the Cleopatra elegy:50

\[
\textit{Omphale in tantum formae processit honorem,} \\
\textit{Lydia Gygaeo tincta puella lacu,} \\
\textit{ut, qui pacato statuisset in orbe columnas,} \\
\textit{tam dura traheret mollia pensa manu.}
\]

Omphale advanced to such a degree of honor for her beauty, a Lydian girl bathed in the lake of Gyges, that the man who had set up the Pillars of Hercules in the world he had tamed was working supple wool with his oh-so-hard hands. (3.11.17–20)

Elegy 3.11 draws an implicit parallel between Hercules and Antony.51 Yet in poem 3.11 Hercules’ servitude to Omphale and Cleopatra’s mastery over Antony are not examples of moral decay or of political decline. The elegist does not condemn Hercules and Antony, but acquits them for falling prey to a woman. Indeed, the warning in the poem’s opening (\textit{exemplo disce timere meo}, 3.11.7) offers not shame or censure for the man who succumbs to a woman, but rather acceptance of her inevitable power. Thus, far from condemning Antony, Propertius’ poetry shows some affinity for the defeated man whose public reputation of devotion to a woman at the expense of the state made him an attractive model for the elegiac lover. Propertius’ use of Antony as an example for his own situation does not, as some have suggested, imply that Propertius was Antony’s political partisan.52 The elegist, after all, focuses not on Antony’s political opposition to Octavian’s regime, but rather on the tension between Antony’s private affairs and Rome’s public goals.53
In elegy 4.9, Antonian, personal, luxurious Hercules arrives at Rome and founds the Ara Maxima, a monument Octavian linked to his own defeat of Antony at Actium. Hercules’ self-satisfied acceptance—even boast—of his Antonian past sneers at the Princeps by bringing to mind not only the Roman general vanquished in the battle of Actium, but also the incompatibility of Antony’s “elegiac” values with the new Roman cityscape. Indeed Hercules’ approach to the Bona Dea’s sacred spring—to drink it dry (exhausto flumine, 4.9.63)—hints of the Antonian; Caesar’s lieutenant was notorious for his excessive drinking. Antonian Hercules thus challenges and casts doubts on Augustan Hercules, and Octavian’s triumphal Ara Maxima becomes anything but triumphal: it turns into a monument that memorializes not the victor and his triumphant mores, but the victim and his suppressed mores. In many respects, Propertius’ Hercules is an embarrassment to both the memory of Antony and to Augustus’ fame, drawing attention to their similarities and irreconcilable differences.

The incompatibility of cross-dressed Hercules with the new Augustan city is set into high relief by the state’s recent attempt to regulate male-female relationships and the first family’s interest in urban sites as a way to order gender. The repeated use of forms of the word claudio in this poem (inclusas, 4.9.23; clausa, 4.9.25; clausisset, 4.9.43; clausa, 4.9.62) not only emphasizes Hercules’ status as exclusus amator, but it reminds the reader that this closed-off area is also a Claudian place associated with Livia’s gens Claudia. The Bona Dea’s Aventine sanctuary had been dedicated by a Vestal Virgin named Claudia Quinta. The root claud- simultaneously evokes Livia’s less upstanding Claudian relation Clodius, who also had something to do with the Bona Dea. Hercules, with his cross-dressing history, breaking into the Bona Dea sanctuary, certainly recalls the scandal of 62 BCE and brings Clodius anew into the respectable world of the Bona Dea’s rites—thus exacerbating rather than palliating the moral crisis indicated by Clodius’ sacrilege and addressed by Livia’s restoration of the temple. Of course, it is impossible to know when Livia restored the Bona Dea’s Aventine temple; rather than suggest that she responds to Propertius or vice-versa, I here posit only that the poet and the Princeps’ wife contribute conflicting thoughts to the ongoing ideological debate about gender and monuments. Likewise, whereas the Princeps used the Ara Maxima to define and encourage the sort of masculine behavior that would build the new state, Propertius sabotages the gendered message encoded into this site by temporarily transforming Hercules into a man-woman, unable to be defined by the cityscape and unclassifiable
in the Julian laws. Elegy’s systematic aporia, therefore, momentarily takes over the Roman landscape.

Yet the elegiac effect on the city does not last. The priestess reaffirms Augustan principles and forbids Hercules’ entry into the sanctuary because she denies his womanhood. Temporary feminization does not make Hercules a woman, and men are forbidden from the Bona Dea sanctuary: *interdicta uiris metuenda lege piatur / quae se summota uindicat ara casa* (this altar which protects itself in this remote shelter is forbidden to men and hallowed by a law not to be ignored, 4.9.55–56). She cites Tiresias as an example of the dangers of intruding into a sacred space:

*magno Tiresias aspexit Pallada uates,*

*fortia dum posita Gorgone membra lauat.*

*di tibi dent alios fontis: haec lympha puellis auia secreti limitis unda fluit.*

At great cost to himself the prophet Tiresias caught a glimpse of Pallas Athena while she was bathing her strong limbs, her aegis set aside. May the gods grant you other fountains: this liquid flows for girls only, this spring without access of a threshold set apart. (4.9.57–60)

The priestess here alludes to the subject of Callimachus’ fifth hymn, the so-called Bath of Pallas, in which Tiresias unwittingly stumbles upon the bath of the goddess and is blinded as his punishment. While the reference certainly serves to anchor this poem in the context of Alexandrian poetic techniques and to prove Propertius indeed to be the *Callimachus Romanus* (4.1.64), it also adds to the commentary on gender and space that the poem’s primary *aetia* generate. A variation on the topos of “intrusion into the goddess’s bath,” Callimachus’ hymn itself subverts expected gender roles. This topos, involving the unauthorized glimpse of a nude goddess, is much more suited to Artemis than to Athena. Callimachus’ innovation is in assigning a myth that highlights feminine chastity to the most masculine of goddesses. Yet in citing this version of the myth, the priestess is suppressing—and so also evoking—the more popular tradition about Tiresias: namely, that he was himself cross-gendered. In his intrusion, his indeterminate gender, and his Alexandrianism, Tiresias thus serves as an *exemplum* for Hercules at the doors of the forbidden sanctuary.

He is a topographical *exemplum* as well. At issue in both Propertius’ poem and Callimachus’ *Hymn to Athena* is access to forbidden spaces.
In both poems these spaces are remote, unurban. In Propertius’ poem the Bona Dea’s sacred space is far off (procul, 4.9.23), enclosed (inclusas, 4.9.23; clausa, 4.9.25), off the beaten path (deuia, 4.9.27), secluded (summota, 4.9.56), and hidden (secreti, 4.9.60). Propertius’ landscape is also undeveloped:

sed procul inclusas audit ridere puellas,  
lucus ubi umbroso fecerat orbe nemus,  
femineae loca clausa deae fontisque piandos,  
impune et nullis sacra retecta uiris.  
deuia puniceae uelabant limina uittae,  
putris odorato luxerat igne casa,  
populus et longis ornabat frondibus aedem.

But far off he hears girls laughing from within, where a grove had encircled a dell, the enclosed haunts of the women’s goddess and fountains that must be revered, and rites disclosed to no man without punishment. Purple garlands were draped over her remote threshold, the smoky house had gleamed with perfumed fire, and a poplar tree decorated the shrine with its long branches. (4.9.23–29)

The setting of Athena’s bath in the hymn is similarly untamed and remote. The goddess bathes at the spring of Hippocrene on Helikon, where the water flows beautifully (Ἐλικωνίδι καλὰ ρεόσα, Hymn 5.71–72). The hour is noon and quiet stills the remote landscape (μεσαμβρινάι δ’ ἔσαν ὤραι, πολλά δ’ ἁσυχία τήνο κατείχεν ὁρος), (Hymn 5.73–74). The natural locale is especially appropriate for the goddesses; not only are such wild places conducive to divine epiphanies, but more importantly, these parallel places are situated so as to protect the goddesses from the intrusion of profane visitors.

Hercules and Tiresias both approach these hidden and forbidden springs thirsty, but there the similarity ends. Tiresias stumbles innocently and unwittingly upon the forbidden sight:

Τειφρείας δ’ ἔτι μόνως ἀμᾶ κυσίν ἀρτί γένεια  
περκάζων ἱερόν χώρον ἁνεστρέφετο;  
διψάς δ’ ἀφατὸν τι ποτὶ ρόου ἠλθεὶ κράνας,  
σχέτλιος· οὐκ ἔθελον δ’ εἶδε τὰ μὴ θεμιτά.

Tiresias, as yet alone with only his dogs, with a beard just darkening his
cheeks, turned toward the sacred place. Feeling an unspeakable thirst, he came toward the trickle of the stream, wretch: unwillingly he saw what was unholy to see. (Hymn 5.75–78)

Hercules, on the other hand, seeks out the secluded sanctuary by choice: *huc ruit in siccam congesta puluere barbam* (he rushes to this place with dust matted into his dry beard, 4.9.31). What is more, Hercules enters the forbidden area deliberately, having been warned in advance of the place’s restrictions:

... ille umeris postis concussit opacos
dec tulit iratam ianua clausa sitim.
at postquam exhausto iam flumine uicerat aestum,
ponit uix siccis tristia iura labris.

... He shook the dark portal with his shoulders and the door, though closed, did not withstand his aroused thirst. But after he had conquered his burning heat and the river was dried up, he uttered these dread oaths with lips barely dry. (4.9.61–64)

His intrusion is laced with erotic nuance: *aestum* and perhaps *sitim* evoke sexual desire, desire that Hercules sates by draining the dregs of the river (*exhausto ian flumine uicerat aestum*, 4.9.63). Having stretched his role of *exclusus amator* to its literal bursting point, Hercules uses force to break into the sanctuary—an action akin to rape and dependent on strict gender difference. He petulantly commemorates his return to amorous proactivity by establishing his own monument to rigid gender roles, the Ara Maxima for men only.

While Hercules’ return to an active role may seem to reassert his more traditional, even excessive, masculinity, the hero nevertheless remains ridiculous. The elegiac Hercules misinterprets himself and his role in the world and in the Roman city. In breaking into the sanctuary, Hercules seeks to demonstrate what he has argued earlier in the poem—that he is master of all places, from the heavens to the underworld:

“audistisne aliquem, tergo qui sustulit orbem?
ille ego sum: Alciden terra recepta uocat.
quis facta Herculeae non audit fortia clauae
et numquam ad uastas irrita tela feras,
atque uniam Stygias homini luxisse tenebras?”
“Have you heard about the man who bore the world on his back? I am that man: the world that I supported calls me Hercules. Who has not heard the brave deeds Hercules did with his club, and about the arrows never shot in vain at huge beasts? Who has not heard about the one man for whom the shadows of Styx brightened?

“This corner of the world receives me as I drag out my destiny. This land scarcely welcomes me when I am weary. Let the Greatest Altar, which has been vowed upon recovery of my herd, the altar made greatest,” he said “through these hands, never be open to girls for worship, lest the thirst of Hercules remain ever unavenged.” (4.9.37–41, 65–70)

In controlling all places (orbem, terra, tenebras), Hercules styles the earth itself as beneficiary of his heroism (terra recepta, 4.9.38). His violent entry into the Bona Dea sanctuary reveals that he sees himself as master of both feminine and masculine places as well (4.9.69–70). Hercules also desires to control sacred as well as secular space. Though he is a self-styled mortal and treated like a man by the priestess (hominī, 4.9.41 and uiris, 4.9.55), he establishes an altar to himself (4.9.67–68), tacitly asserting himself to be a god. He thus attempts to write his own apotheosis into the landscape.

We can hardly take this boastful Hercules seriously. The poem ends ironically as the elegist’s voice reemerges and casts doubt on Hercules’ topographical pretensions:

hunc, quoniam manibus purgatum sanxerat orbem,
    sic Sanctum Tatiae composuere Cures.
Sancte pater salue, cui iam fauet aspera Iuno:
    Sancte, uelis libro dexter inesse meo.

This one, since he had sanctified the world that had been purified by his hands, the Romans of Tatius’ line style “Sanctus.” Hail, father Sanctus,
whom harsh Juno now favors. Sanctus, may you wish to enter my book favorably. (4.9.73–74, 71–72)

The mention of purification, linked with an etymology for Hercules’ Sabine name (4.9.73–74), flies in the face of his violation of the sanctuary of the Bona Dea. The verb *composuere* highlights the fact that this epithet is a subjective interpretation—one with which the elegist apparently disagrees. The poet stretches our trust further by saying that Juno herself now favors the god. To clinch the poem, Propertius prays for the god’s quiet and propitious entry into it. May Hercules not enter Propertius’ poem as he did the Bona Dea sanctuary.

Though Hercules’ final actions—his forced entry into the Bona Dea sanctuary and his establishment of his own exclusively male shrine—attempt to reinforce a traditionally masculine control over the Roman landscape, this poem will forever link the Ara Maxima with indecorous, transvestite behavior coupled with the excesses of passion and the unmanly petulance of the god. In the end Propertius has exerted more control over the interpretation of the Ara Maxima than has Hercules. The perfumed scent of the god’s feminine boudoir lingers in the Roman monument.

CONCLUSION

This poem, therefore, blends genre and gender with political innuendo and Roman monuments in a provocative response to the Princeps about the new Roman landscape. In the imperial city, the Ara Maxima and the sanctuary of the Bona Dea served to redefine Roman morality and, more importantly, Roman self-perception. By linking Roman tradition with gender roles, the Princeps redefined the successful Roman as one who acted like an old-style man. Elsner’s formulation of how art acts upon viewers helps clarify the dynamics of this poem: a work of art both relies on the viewer’s prior knowledge and experiences (reinforcing who he thinks he is), and adds something to his knowledge and experiences (redefining who he is by adding something new). The monuments of elegy 4.9 reorient the Roman viewer to the new Rome and to his place in it. The Ara Maxima had always encouraged traditional male values; Augustus inserted himself into that picture as a paragon of those virtues and their protector in the civil wars against Antony, who conspicuously had not maintained that traditional male
role. Augustus’ actions there are complemented by Livia’s restoration of the decorum of the matrona via her restoration of the Bona Dea shrine.

In paying attention to these urban sites, the Princeps and his wife tacitly acknowledge the power of place to define identity. In gaze theory, this phenomenon would be explained in a different way: that the viewer, rather than controlling what he sees and desires, is on the contrary transformed by the object of his gaze. Augustan monuments thus render the Roman viewer passive, enacting upon him a message that informs, or rather transforms, him. The power of images in this poem is enough to transform Hercules from an elegiac lover into a traditional Roman man.

Nevertheless, Propertius’ poem breaks the hold such monuments have over their viewer by reorienting the viewer’s perspective. One might say that Propertius thus returns the Roman viewer to a more active role in looking at Roman places, by providing alternative ways of interpreting Roman monuments. Playing with Hercules’ gender allows Propertius to redefine the evolving Augustan city and to interrogate the gender associations emphasized in certain places by the Princeps, by his wife, and by other literature of the day. As with all Propertius’ topographical poems, this elegy’s context within the book sets its themes in high relief. In this case, the poem’s movements of gender and morality—from flexibility and permissiveness to crushing, violent rigidity—are paralleled by the surrounding poems: elegy 4.8, on a sexual threesome, and elegy 4.10, a poem focused on men and masculine achievement and rife with violence.

The elegist’s poem on the origins of the Ara Maxima challenges traditional Roman mores as much as Propertius’ earlier love poetry had. What is more, in writing a new Rome, Propertius challenges Augustus’ authorship of the new urban landscape. The Ara Maxima stands as a monument not to the new regime but to the elegiac lifestyle. With his small voice, the poet answers back to the silent city.