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Propertius and the Pleasures of Empire: A Reading of 2.16

Despite its surface oppositions between love and war, poetry and politics, the scripta puella and the geography of Roman expansion, Propertian elegy invests the concept of empire with a desirability grounded in the pleasures of erotic imagery and its associations. Propertius 2.16 has attracted interest for the parallel it establishes between Propertius' shameful love for Cynthia and Antony's destructive passion for Cleopatra. However, the six-line interlude (37-42) on recent civil conflict has not been fully interpreted in the context of the rivalry between the jealous speaker and the wealthy Praetor: the rivalry for Cynthia's favors in the private realm is paralleled by the rivalry for supremacy over Rome between Octavian and Antony in the public sphere. By identifying with Antony, the "loser" who turns a deaf ear to the cries of his men, the speaker undermines his negative construction of Cynthia as a figure for Rome and her attitude to the Praetor as symbolic of Roman imperial greed. Despite the poet-lover's condemnation of the wealth that seduces Cynthia in the person of the Praetor, it is this very wealth that allows for erotic pleasure and fulfillment - both within the narrative situation and in the imagery of the text's surface. Just as the courtesan or beloved often depends on gifts and the exotica of foreign trade in order to attract customers, so, too, does the text with which she is so often identified become "tricked out" with the dazzle and allure of material wealth, military booty, and the glitter of the city. Moreover, the speaker's Juvenalian anxiety over Cynthia's materialism and his rival's implied foreign origins discredits his censure, justifying his exclusion from his mistress and lending a certain legitimacy to her affair with the Praetor, a pragmatic liaison that figures Rome's relation with the provinces--a pax Romana made possible by Octavian's victory. The poem pits the power of rhetoric exercised by the speaker against the persuasions of material goods: by undermining its own arguments and sustaining desire through the Praetor's wealth, the poem unwittingly reinforces the pleasures of empire. Despite the speaker's efforts to transform the Praetor's successful ship of commerce into the doomed ship of love, the poet is left alone in his solipsistic cosmos of romantic tropes, while the door to Cynthia's remains open for others (5-6), a figure for Rome's increasingly successful trade in the aftermath of Actium.