Propertius, *Elegies* III.11.29-64

Cleopatra the symbol of women's domination who threatened Roman power.

**Name of the author:** Propertius  
**Date:** 25 BCE to 23 BCE  
**Language:** Latin  
**Category:** Roman  
**Literary genre:** Poetry

**Title of work:** Elegies  
**Reference:** III.11.29-64  
**Commentary:**Living under the first decade of Augustus's principate, Propertius had been one of the protégés of Maecenas – an ally and political advisor of Octavian/Augustus until 23 BCE, who managed the most prestigious literary circle in Rome (Virgil and Horace were among its members). Propertius stayed at the periphery of this literary circle until the late 20s BCE. The books 2 and 3 of his *Elegies* were thus composed when he was under Maecenas's protection (Lee, *Propertius*, p. xiv). Love and poetry are the two main themes of his *Elegies*, but the poet can also deal with some contemporary political themes or events. Scholars still debate over the relations of Propertius with Augustus and the principe. Some of them consider that some elegies of books 2 and 3 and many elegies of book 4 dealing with political issues, could be critical or ironic towards the emperor (for a presentation of the debate, see Viarre, *Properce*, p. xiii-xvi). The elegies of book 3 deal with a larger variety of themes, especially with political subjects like Augustus, the battle of Actium and other military or political matters. The passage *Elegy* III.11 starts with a typical elegiac theme, that of the *servitium amoris*, that is of the vulnerability of men to the desires and rules of the women they love. To confirm his claims, Propertius gives various examples of gods or heroes who did not resist women's desires (v. 9-20), and he highlights the extraordinary destiny of Semiramis, the legendary founder of Babylon (v. 21-26). Afterwards, Propertius deals with contemporary characters, Antony and Cleopatra. The last one is presented by the poet as the symbol of feminine ambition which represented a major threat to Rome's power during the civil wars.

Even if she is not named explicitly, but only through the words *femina* (v. 30), *regina* (v. 39) and *mulier* (v. 48), from the beginning of this passage, Cleopatra is presented as Rome's political enemy (v. 29). This point is immediately amplified by the idea that she was also the perfect embodiment of depravation, both because of her libidinous behaviour (her sexual intercourse with her slaves v. 30; her marriage for sale, v. 31; “the harlot queen of incestuous Canopus” is an expression referring to authorized marriage between brothers and sisters in Ptolemaic Egypt but also to the city of Canopus, located in the Nile delta and which was commonly presented as a place of ill fame, v. 39), or her fondness for intoxications (with alcohol v. 56; with poison when she committed suicide v. 53-54). Propertius presents Cleopatra's marriage with Antony – here named *obscenum coniugium* (v. 31), as it occurred in 37 BCE when Antony was already married to Octavia (Fedeli, *Properzio*, p. 372) – as a strategy used by the Egyptian queen to take over Rome (v. 31-32). Cleopatra's stratagems are also connected with a more general and common theme, that of Egyptian perfidy (here symbolized by the cities of Alexandria and Memphis, v. 33-34). To show how Egypt has always been a threat to Rome, Propertius recalls that during the civil war between Caesar and Pompey, after the battle of Pharsalus of 48 BCE, Pompey fled to Egypt and was murdered by some men of the Egyptian king Ptolemy XIII on the boat which brought him to the coast of Pelusium. The poet thus concludes that this civil war which prevented Pompey from celebrating his victory over Marius's partisans in Africa, over Sertorius in Spain and over Mitridate through three triumphs, remains a permanent stigma (nota) on Rome's history (v. 35-36; Fedeli, *Properzio*, p. 375). However, if Propertius attributes to Cleopatra, and through her to Egyptian kingship in general, a responsibility in Rome's civil wars of 40s and 30s, it is interesting to note that Propertius does not mention, nor criticize the relationship between Julius Caesar and Cleopatra, which led to the birth of a son, Caesarion, who lived in Rome until his murder in 30 BCE by Octavian. Propertius focuses his attention on Cleopatra, Marc Antony and even Pompey, probably because it was not a good idea to accuse the adoptive father of the ruling emperor, nor to allude to the murdered child.

Through Cleopatra's association with Egyptian vices, Propertius also wants to highlight the fact that she represented a real threat to Rome because she would have led a sort of orientalisation – or more precisely of "Egyptianisation" – of the Roman culture and institutions. In verses 41 to 46, Propertius lists all the elements that
Cleopatra would have changed if she had taken over Roman power. He starts with the religious competition: “even dared oppose our Jove with her yelping Anubis” (v. 41). Various scholars rightly remark that the allusion to Anubis recalls the shield of Aeneas, described in *Virgil, Aeneid VIII.689-699*, representing the battle of Actium as a fight between Anubis – that is the god of Cleopatra and Antony – and various Roman gods (Fedeli, *Properzio*, p. 379-380; Heyworth and Morwood, *A Commentary*, p. 213). In Propertius’s elegy, Cleopatra is thus presented as challenging the most important Roman god, Jupiter, and she is also depicted as threatening his temple, the Capitoline Temple, by putting some mosquito net on it (v. 45). As Paolo Fedeli recalls, the mosquito net appears as a symbol of eastern sluggishness in Horace, *Epodes* IX.15-16, a poem dealing with the battle of Actium. In addition, the motif of Cleopatra’s desire to attack the Capitoline Temple is also present in Horace, *Odes* I.37.6-8, and has been used later in Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XV.827-828; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* L.5.4. (Fedeli, *Properzio*, p. 380-381). Propertius adds other oppositions to reinforce the idea according to which Cleopatra may have wanted to orientalise Rome, claiming the superiority of the Nile over the Tiber, that of the sistrum, mainly used for the cult of Isis, over the Roman trumpet (v. 43), and finally that of the *baris*, that is a massive boat used by the Egyptians for the transport of goods, over the Liburnian ship that Romans borrowed from Illyrian pirates and that Augustus used massively during the battle of Actium (Fedeli, *Properzio*, p. 380; Heyworth and Morwood, *A Commentary*, p. 213). With such a presentation of Cleopatra as the woman who challenged Rome’s power and planned to orientalise it, Propertius fits in with the Augustan ideology, spread before and after the battle of Actium, which presents the confrontation between Octavian and Antony not as a civil war, but as a clash between West and East, between Rome and Egypt. Thus Propertius adopts the same position as Virgil in *Aeneid VIII.678-713* (Fedeli, *Properzio*, p. 357; Heyworth and Morwood, *A Commentary*, p. 16). Nevertheless, Propertius has not always considered Actium in such a way. For instance, in his *Elegy* II.15.44-46, he explicitly presents Actium as the result of a bloody civil strife (on this critical aspect, see Lee, *Propertius*, p. xiv). The necessity of discrediting Cleopatra’s figure probably encouraged Propertius to insist on this clash of civilizations and thus to match Augustan ideology.

Cleopatra is also presented as a subservient woman by Propertius because, in case of success, she would have transformed Rome into a tyranny. In verses 31-32, Propertius writes that, through her marriage with Antony, Cleopatra wanted both to take control over the city of Rome and to submit Rome’s senators to Antony’s royal power (*sua regna*). As Stephen Heyworth and James Morwood recall, this is not just a symbolic assessment, as hundreds of senators left Rome and joined Anthony’s party in 32 BCE (Heyworth and Morwood, *A Commentary*, p. 210).

Second, Propertius insists on the fact that Cleopatra embodies oriental tyranny (*sua regna; regina incesti Canopi*, “queen of incestuous Canopus,” v. 39). She is depicted as representing a threat to Rome’s liberty and political regime equivalent to that of the last and most tyrannical king of Rome, Tarquinius Superbus (v. 47-49).

Third, Cleopatra’s threat to Rome is presented by Propertius as all the more degrading and dangerous, as it could have led Rome to be governed by a woman. The ascendency of this woman on Rome’s rulers is criticized by Propertius, through the denunciation of her “foul marriage” (*obsceum coniugium*, v. 31) with Antony. Such a criticism is also present in Horace, *Epode* IX.11-16, when the poet despises Roman soldiers who are said to be the slaves of the Egyptian woman and of her eunuchs (Heyworth and Morwood, *A Commentary*, p. 17). In the entire passage, Propertius highlights Cleopatra’s womanliness, a fact which makes it all the more intolerable that she could have ruled a Roman province or, worst, the whole Empire (*femina*, v. 30; *sua regna*, v. 32; *regina*, v. 39; *mulier*, v. 48). Verses 47-49, “What was the use of breaking Tarquin’s axes (…) if now we had to endure a woman (mulier)?” goes in that direction. Actually, as Elaine Fantham suggests, through this sentence Propertius claims that “the escape from Tarquinius Superbus” – and thus the downfall of the kingship in Rome, here embodied by the break of the axes – would have been something futile and useless, “if we Romans had had to endure a woman’s rule” (Fantham, “The image,” p. 198).

The passage ends with the archetype of the ideal man and governor who is not enslaved by a woman, that is Augustus. In verses 49 to 66, Propertius recalls the last minutes of Cleopatra when she committed suicide. He inserts this depiction in the narrative of the triumphal procession organized by Augustus in Rome in 29 BCE to celebrate his victory over Egypt. The passage opens with an apostrophe to Rome which gives the impression that it is Roma who offers a triumph to Augustus. Then Propertius uses a common motive in Augustan poetry, that of wishing long life to the ruling emperor (v. 49-50; Fedeli, *Properzio*, p. 382). In the next sentence, Propertius apostrophes Cleopatra and depicts her last minutes in a quite unusual way, as she seems to observe “her own downfall,” a literary process also used in Horace, *Odes* I.37.25-29 (Heyworth and Morwood, *A Commentary*, p. 215). It is highly possible that, for the narrative of this dramatic scene, Propertius and Horace have been deeply influenced by the *imago* (probably a statue) of the queen represented lied on a couch, carried during the Augustan triumph, and by all the scenography organized around the statue – a snake had been artificially attached to its arm.
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(see Cassius Dio, Roman History LI.21.8; Plutarch, Life of Antony LXXXVI.5-6; Heyworth and Morwood, A Commentary, p. 215). In the final part of this passage, Propertius conforms to classical themes of Rome’s imperial ideology. First, Augustus is presented as the ideal citizen (v. 55). Second, Propertius recalls the universal domination of Rome who is said to govern (praesidere) the rest of the world (v. 57). Finally, Propertius reflects on the relation of the ruling emperor with the gods: “But Gods were founders of these walls and Gods protect them; while Caesar lives Rome hardly need fear Jove” (v. 65-66). In this sentence, Propertius comes back to a classic theme of Augustan ideology, namely that Augustus is the vice-regent of Jupiter on Earth. This final sentence ends the story of the confrontation between Cleopatra’s Egypt and Augustus’s Rome: Augustus is the final winner and his victory is also that of Jupiter over the Egyptian gods. Augustus’s victory over Cleopatra is meant to show that he is the equal of Jupiter on earth and that he is clearly superior to the heroes, gods or men quoted at the beginning of the elegy, as “he alone is capable of avoiding female domination” (Heyworth and Morwood, A Commentary, p. 217).

Keywords in the original language:

- Alexandria
- Anubis
- Augustus
- Caesar
- Canopus
- civis
- coluber
- coniugum
- famulus
- femina
- fracta
- incestus
- lupiter
- ius
- Liburna
- Marius
- Memphis
- meretrix
- moenia
- mulier
- Niles
- obscenus
- opprobium
- orbis
- patres (conscripti)
- Pompeius
- regina
- regnum
- Roma
- Romulus
- salus
- securis
- septem alta
- statua
- Tarpeius
- Tarquinius
- Tiberis
- triumphus
- urbs
- vinclum
Thematic keywords in English:

- Actium
- Augustus
- barbarisation
- Capitol
- Capitoline Temple
- Cleopatra
- depravation
- Egypt
- Egyptian gods
- imperial ideology
- incest
- Jupiter
- luxury
- Mark Antony
- marriage
- Octavian
- Pompey
- queen
- Roman hegemony
- Roman kings
- Roman state
- Roman triumph
- Rome (city)
- tyranny
- womanliness

Fedeli, Paolo, Properzio. Il Libro Terzo delle Elegie (introduction, text and commentary by Paolo Fedeli; Bari: Adriatica Editrice, 1985)

Other sources connected with this document:  Text

Virgil. Aeneid VIII.615-731

Aeneas receives his shield, made by Vulcan, from Venus

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