

TRAVEL, DESIRE, AND RETURN IN PROPERTIUS 4.3

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This paper investigates the descriptions of travel that permeate and organize Propertius 4.3. I suggest that this poem uses travel as a metaphor for depicting the elegiac themes of desire, absence, and the separation of lovers. Propertius presents 4.3 as a letter written by a woman, Arethusa, to her husband who is away serving in the army. Propertius juxtaposes Arethusa's amatory desire to be united with her husband with the imperial desire for military conquest. These contrasting impulses result in a unique geographical perspective that shapes Propertius' representations of travel throughout the poem by emphasizing borders and boundaries.

For example, rather than attempting to describe actual campaigns in which a soldier might have taken part, early in the poem Propertius has Arethusa imagine in quick succession her husband fighting on the eastern, northern, and southern boundaries of the empire. Likewise, when Arethusa looks at a graphic depiction of the world in order to learn where he husband is, she scrutinizes the extreme north and south. Arethusa's focus on far-off places reflects her experience of her husband's absence, and emphasizes her desire for him to return. Additionally, the one aspect of traveling which she mentions that does not have to do with the edges of the empire are the winds that bring boats back to Italy. This navigational information reflects the logic of desire, as her wish to be reunited with her husband drives her interest in learning about travel.

In the conclusion of this paper I consider the poem's representations of travel in connection with recent scholarship on the perception and organization of space in the Roman world. Further, I compare 4.3 to other poems about travel in Propertius, e.g., 1.6 and 1.12.

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