

Prop.4.3.33-48

Propertius writes this elegy as a letter from Arethusa to Lycotas, a soldier who is currently away on campaign and has yet to return¹. But as this gobblet will explore, Propertius makes it unclear if Arethusa is wife or concubine to Lycotas due to the engagement with his previous work. There is also the question of Arethusa's intelligence and if in fact she is meant to be Propertius or the personification of empire.

Firstly, the question of whether we should read Arethusa as a wife or a concubine. Lines 33-48 certainly give the impression that Arethusa is a dutiful wife missing her husband, made clear when she writes that love is greater 'when one's husband is there'². Lines 18 and 33-34 are about her spinning and weaving³, which formed the majority of domestic female life⁴ and is connected to the image of the ideal wife as far back as Homer's Penelope⁵. But, should we trust this? Cynthia, who was not a wife, also claims to spend her time weaving when her lover is away⁶. In fact, throughout the elegy Propertius has Arethusa talk about something that ordinarily would categorise her as a wife and an ideal wife at that. But through knowing his previous work it is contradicted through the actions of Cynthia. Arethusa promotes that the only visitors she has are her sister and nurse⁷ and takes religious precautions to ensure Lycotas' safety⁸. These are all events that happen to Cynthia too, she has visits from both her sister⁹ and a nurse¹⁰ and she goes to Vesta's temple to protect her lover from danger after having bad dreams¹¹. Therefore, is Propertius wanting the reader to recall the ideals of a wives like Penelope or *puellae* like Cynthia, which then causes questions to arise regarding Arethusa's faithfulness?

Also, like Cynthia believed Propertius to be the unfaithful one¹², Arethusa shares this fear wishing that Lycotas gets war wounds rather than marks from a rival lover¹³. James explains that prior to this there is no poetic wife who expresses this sexual anxiety¹⁴. The only comparison would be Catullus reassuring Junia that her husband will be faithful, but the difference is she is a bride not an established wife¹⁵. James' assessment that Arethusa is not a legitimate wife is convincing¹⁶ especially as stated by McGinn men in the military frequently took concubines as partners as they could not marry whilst on active duty¹⁷. But from that, argued here is that there is a self-awareness from Arethusa about her situation that adds humour. She uses the term *suo*¹⁸ which would be expected in

¹ Prop.4.42

² Prop.4.3.49

³ Prop.4.3.18 and 4.3.33-34

⁴ Dee 1974: 88

⁵ Hom.*Od.*2.89-110

⁶ Prop.1.3.41

⁷ Prop.4.3.41

⁸ Prop.4.3.57-62

⁹ Prop.2.6.11-12

¹⁰ Prop.4.7.73-4

¹¹ Prop.2.29.26-28

¹² Prop.1.3.36

¹³ Prop.4.3.23-26

¹⁴ James 2012: 437

¹⁵ Catull.61.97-105

¹⁶ James 2012: 462

¹⁷ McGinn 1991: 335

¹⁸ Prop.4.3.1

a letter from a wife to a husband¹⁹ but then she questions if that is appropriate²⁰. The letter ending with *puella* giving thanks to her husband²¹ is not only amusing but Dee explains there is pun in the concluding lines on the physical and amatory meanings of *salvo*²².

This humour we see from Arethusa certainly adds to her intellect, which is more obviously displayed as we see her move from elegiac vocabulary²³ to military and myth²⁴. But is this intellect apart of Arethusa's character or deliberate intrusion of Propertius, as Hutchinson explains that the geographical sections²⁵ is open to interpretation if this is Arethusa's knowledge or Propertius interjecting²⁶. The technical language is deemed to be surprising²⁷ and Dee argues that Propertius is including them at Arethusa's expense. This is because of the inclusion of *pictos mundos*²⁸ and *docti positura dei*²⁹ which are obscure phrases that Dee notes commentaries try to cite as having a Platonic or Lucretian precedent to give them any respectability, therefore leaving Arethusa being toyed with by Propertius³⁰. Yet, more plausibly Propertius is just showing off his learning and is not actively trying to make fun of Arethusa. The geographical sections are reminiscent of Catullus 11³¹ and the use of technical terms is something we see from Tibullus when, arguably also obscurely, he writes about cheese making³².

Perhaps this addition of technical terms, with the ambiguity of if it's Arethusa's own knowledge or an interjection, gives weight to the idea that Arethusa is Propertius or the very least takes on characteristics of the male poet lover. Arethusa has become the *exclusus amator* enduring 'nights of bitterness'³³ of separation caused by not being allowed in the camp³⁴ effectively shut out, Propertius also endured 'nights of bitterness'³⁵ because he is shut out by Cynthia. Arethusa's disdain for the inventor of war³⁶ recalls Tibullus' outburst when forced to leave his lover for war³⁷. This anti-war, anti-empire sentiment is consistent with Propertius³⁸, leaving Dee to convincingly believe that *vincendus Araxes*³⁹ is meant to be read as sarcasm⁴⁰.

That does make this argument perplexing but still, it is worth considering that Arethusa is the personification of the empire. Janan explains that maps during this time period point to grand, public affairs rather than the private sphere, with some scholars arguing if maps were even available for

¹⁹ Dee 1974: 81

²⁰ Prop.4.3.2

²¹ Prop.4.3.72

²² Dee 1974: 94

²³ Prop.4.3.29-32

²⁴ Prop.4.3.35-47

²⁵ Prop.4.3.7-10 and 4.3.36-40

²⁶ Hutchinson 2006: 110

²⁷ Hutchinson 2006: 109

²⁸ Prop.4.3.37

²⁹ Prop.4.3.38

³⁰ Dee 1974: 89

³¹ Catul.11.1-12

³² Tib.2.3.14-16

³³ Prop.4.3.29

³⁴ Prop.4.3.45

³⁵ Prop.1.1,33

³⁶ Prop.4.3.19-22

³⁷ Tib.1.10.1-6

³⁸ Prop.3.4.21-22

³⁹ Prop.4.3.35

⁴⁰ Dee 1974: 88

Arethusa to have in her home⁴¹. Yet we are told she has 'worlds painted on a board'⁴². Rome's supremacy was referred to as *domina orbis terrarum*⁴³, then is Arethusa being presented as a mistress of the world because she has these painted worlds in her possession. Like the empire expansion her letter also begins with talking about herself and her domestic sphere⁴⁴ and then she gradually pans out and claims areas that are far off in the distance⁴⁵.

Dee, again, states that the Hippolyta comparison is made at Arethusa's expense as Hippolyta is suited to war unlike Arethusa⁴⁶. Using the evidence that Arethusa wants to thaw the ice of the military world with the fire love of the domestic world⁴⁷. But, Arethusa knows military terms which may point to her comparison to Hippolyta as a closer one than Dee suggests, also the domestic sphere dominating and taking control of foreign land has a very empire-building tone to it. There is also the contrast of *barbara*⁴⁸ and *Romanis*⁴⁹, Arethusa has her letter so that Rome takes the place of barbarous in the next line so again there is the empire notion of Rome conquering barbarian spaces.

To conclude, Arethusa's character construction does not seem consistent and the reader is made to question what they are meant to think of her. She presents herself as an ideal wife whilst making us recall Cynthia who was far from that and making fun of her position as a wife. She is reminiscent of the male poet lovers shut out, intelligent and anti-war, yet she longs to join the Roman camps, talks wistfully of the far-off places and is presented as a mistress of the world. Perhaps this gives weight to James' argument that she was constructed to be a bridge between the '*puellae* of Books 1-3 and the range of women in Book 4'⁵⁰.

⁴¹ Janan 2001: 66

⁴² Prop.4.3.37

⁴³ Janan 2001: 66

⁴⁴ Prop.4.3.29-40

⁴⁵ Prop.4.3.34-47

⁴⁶ Dee 1974: 90

⁴⁷ Prop.4.3.47-50

⁴⁸ Prop.4.3.44

⁴⁹ Prop.4.3.45

⁵⁰ James 2012: 426

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