

Propertius 4.3: loeb translation

Arethusa to her Lycotas sends this letter, if in spite of your frequent absences you can count as mine. But if when you read it any portion is smudged and missing, such a blot will have been caused by my tears; or if the unclear outline of any letter baffles you, this will be a sign that death was even now upon my hand. Now you were seen by Bactra amid drawn bows, now by the Persian foe mounted on his mailed charger, by the northern Getans, by Britain with its painted chariots and the swarthy Indians pounded by orient waves.

Is this the husband's loyalty and are these the bridal gifts you pledged when all innocent I surrendered to your embraces? The torch which gave omen as it headed my wedding procession drew its murky light from a dying funeral pyre; I was sprinkled with water from the Styx, and the wreath was set awry on my hair: Hymen was absent when I wed.

On every gate hang my offerings that do naught, alas, but harm: this is now the fourth cloak I am weaving for your warfare. Perish he who from a guiltless tree plucked the soldier's stake and fashioned the trumpet to sound its mournful notes through screeching bone: he rather than Ocnus deserved to sit sideways twisting the rope and feed for ever the donkey's hunger!

Tell me, does not the breastplate blister your delicate shoulders, and the heavy spear chafe your unwarlike hands? Rather may this hurt you than that some girl should implant on your neck love-bites for me to lament. I hear too that your face is thin and wan: but I hope that this pallor of yours comes from missing me.

As for me, when the evening star brings on the bitter nights, I kiss any arms of yours that lie left at home; then I complain that the blanket lies not smooth all over the bed, and that the dawn birds are slow to utter their song. Even the fretful whimper of my puppy Yapper is pleasant to my ears: she claims for herself your side in our bed.

[33ff] On winter nights I work at camp garb for you, and I sew together lengths of Tyrian wool to make a military cloak; I learn where flows the Araxes that you are to conquer, how many miles a Parthian horse can cover without water; and I am constrained to find out from a map the countries painted on it and the manner of this arrangement by the wise creator, what lands are sluggish with frost, what crumbling with heat, what wind will bring sails safely back to Italy. Only my sister sits with me, and pale with anxiety my nurse swears falsely that your delay is due to the winter season. Happy Hippolyta! Bare-breasted she took up arms and savage-hearted hid her soft locks beneath a helmet. Would that camps admitted Roman girls! Then should I be the trusty packload of your service. Nor should I be daunted by Scythian peaks, when the Sky Father turns with the cold even deep waters into solid ice. [end line 48]

Ever a mighty power, Love is mightier still when one is bereft of one's spouse: such a passion is fanned into flame by Venus herself. For to what purpose now should I shine bright in crimson of Phoenician silks or rings of sparkling crystal adorn my hands?

The house is still and silent: at most, performing a familiar rite on occasional Kalends, a solitary girl unlocks the shrine of the Household Gods. I deck chapels with flowers, I heap crossroad altars with vervain, and scented marjoram crackles on ancient hearths. If, perched on a neighbour's roofbeam, an owl has hooted, or a sputtering lamp has signalled its need for some drops of wine, that day passes sentence of death on this year's lambs, and aproned acolytes bustle to win fresh profits [end line 62].

Let not the glory of scaling Bactra's walls, I pray, be worth too high a price, or the snatching of linen robes from some perfumed potentate, when leaden missiles are discharged from the whirling sling and the treacherous bow twangs from a horse that flees. Above all—so may the headless spear follow your triumphal chariot when the sons of Parthia have been vanquished—keep inviolate the pledge of my marriage-bed! Only on this condition should I desire you to return; and when I offer up your arms at the Capene Gate, I shall write below: from a grateful girl on her man's safe return.