



[Propertius, Elegies III.4](#)

Propertius forecasts Augustus's future conquests in the East and his triumph.

Name of the author: Propertius

Date: 25 BCE to 23 BCE

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Literary genre: Poetry

Title of work: Elegies

Reference: III.4

Commentary:

Living under the first decade of Augustus's principate, Propertius had been one of the protégé of Maecenas – an ally and political advisor of Octavian/Augustus until 23 BCE, who had the most prestigious literary circle in Rome as 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 contemporary political themes or events. Scholars still debate over the relations of Propertius with Augustus and the principate. 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. In the *Elegy* III.4, Propertius announces that Augustus is on the verge of waging a war against eastern peoples. He imagines all the positive outcomes of these future campaigns, in particular his triumph in Rome.

In verses 1 to 10, Propertius forecasts that Augustus's campaigns will reach the boundaries of the world and will lead to the submission of Rome's worse enemy. The elegy starts with the word *arma*, a process which announces the main theme of the poem and which also echoes the very first verse of the *Aeneid*, starting in a similar way (Fedeli, *Properzio*, p. 159). Then, the author refers to Augustus as *deus Caesar*, "Caesar the God". According to various commentators, Propertius does not put the same meaning behind the word *deus* – when he associates it with the ruling emperor – as Virgil or Horace. If, for Virgil or Horace, Augustus "was inevitably becoming divine" – as can be seen in [Virgil, Georgic 1.24-42](#) or Horace, *Odes* III.3.11-12 – Propertius might have used the word *deus* rather to refer to a remarkable being receiving honours (for the quotation see Heyworth and Morwood, *A Commentary*, p. 129; see also Fedeli, *Properzio*, p. 159-160). To support this thesis, these scholars recall that in *Elegy* III.9.45-46, Propertius forecasts that, as a poet, he will receive a cult similar to that of the great Greek poets and insists on the fact that he is potentially divine. They also mention that in [Elegy III.11.55](#) Augustus is compared to a *tantus civis* and that in *Elegy* III.1.9-12 it is Propertius himself who is depicted as a triumphant victor (the role which is that of the Caesar God). Even if it is obvious that Propertius may have had a wider use of the word *deus*, in particular to associate this word with the Greek conception of the inspired poet, there is another passage in *Elegy* IV.11.60, in which Propertius explicitly associates Augustus with a god (*deus*). Thus, it remains possible that when Propertius calls Augustus *Caesar deus* at the very beginning of *Elegy* III.4, he joins in the same Augustan ideology as Virgil or Horace developed (see Viarre, *Properce*, p. 203).

Afterwards, Propertius mentions that Augustus is thinking about attacking the rich Indians and leading an operation on the Indian Ocean (here presented as "pearl-bearing seas") (v. 1-2). India may symbolize here, in a quite general way, the eastern peoples. In addition, the reference to India clearly recalls the figure of Alexander the Great. Propertius continues his presentation of Augustus's projects with an optimistic statement: "The world's end offers Triumphs" (v. 3). This sentence fits in with the ideology of Rome's universal domination. This statement is clearly hyperbolic as it is the *ultima terra*, "the world's end," which will submit itself and recognize Rome's hegemony without any resistance. According to Propertius's provisions, the successes in the eastern world will rest upon the capacity of the emperor to defeat Rome's worst enemy: the Parthians. Propertius thus predicts that the Tigris and the Euphrates will be submitted to Roman laws (*tua iura*, v. 4), that the region between the two streams, that is Parthia, will become a Roman province (v. 5), and that the Parthian trophies will be hung on the walls of Jupiter's temple (v. 6). The last allusion to Parthian trophies is linked with one tremendous defeat for the Romans, the defeat of Crassus against the Parthians at Carrhae in 53 BCE which led to the loss of the Roman



standards. As Stephen Heyworth and James Morwood recall, this defeat remained a shameful one and a “powerful motive in Roman foreign policy,” especially when later expeditions led by Antony led to another failure (Heyworth and Morwood, *A Commentary*, p. 126). Verse 6 echoes Horace, *Odes* III.5.5-12, when Horace expresses his concern that Crassus’s defeat remains unavenged and that some Roman soldiers marry some Parthian women, serve Parthian kings and forget everything of their Roman past. Horace even ends the litany of his fears by saying that these disloyal behaviours may have occurred “while Jupiter’s temple and the city of Rome are still standing” (*incolumi love et urbe Roma*, III.5.12). In his *Elegy* III.4, Propertius takes the opposite view – in comparison with Horace’s –, and forecasts that it will be the Parthian trophies which will remain hung on Jupiter’s temple and which will be part of Rome’s everyday life (Heyworth, *Cynthia*, p. 293).

Then, Propertius calls up the soldiers and encourages them to avenge the disaster of Carrhae and to mark Rome’s history (v. 7-10). As Paolo Fedeli rightly remarks, in this passage Propertius moves from the position of the poet *vastes* (seer), forecasting the future thanks to a divine inspiration, to the position of a real augur. Actually, with the verb *piare* (v. 9), Propertius invests the religious domain: it was necessary to avenge the murder of Crassus and of his son, who was killed at Carrhae, through a kind of expiation with the blood of the enemies (Fedeli, *Properzio*, p. 165).

In the second part of the elegy, Propertius appeals to two protective divinities of Rome: Mars (the father of Romulus) and Vesta (the goddess protecting the sacred fire brought by Aeneas from Troy) (v. 11). He expresses his hope to witness the triumphal procession of Augustus on the *Via Sacra* in Rome, and thus gives a vivid depiction of the triumph’s proceedings (v. 11-18). The depiction of the triumph was a direct source of inspiration for [Ovid in *Tristia* IV.2.19-20](#) and [53-54](#), when he imagines the never achieved triumph of Tiberius to commemorate his victory over Germany (Heyworth and Morwood, *A Commentary*, p. 127-128). In a few lines, Propertius presents the main elements of a triumph: the chariots burdened with spoils (v. 13), the defeated generals exhibited with the weapons of the captured enemies (v. 18, 17), and the applauding crowd (v. 16). The depiction of the *capti duces*, “the captive leaders,” is interesting. They are actually depicted as seated on their weapons, a position which implies that they were also exhibited on chariots. This staging of the defeated foreign warriors is not specific of literary depictions: on many coins, the usual way of representing a defeated enemy is to represent him mourning, seated on his weapons. Another detail mentioned by Propertius shows the theatrical, even didactic, dimensions of the triumphs, as men were holding boards showing the name of the conquered cities (v. 16). This detail symbolizes how the Roman authorities wanted to broadcast to the inhabitants of the City the extant of Rome’s military successes and supremacy. The triumph was the perfect media to embody, through a theatrical procession, the integration of numerous remote regions of the world under Rome’s influence and control.

Propertius ends his elegy with an appeal to Venus (v. 19-20). He asks her for the protection of her descent (*tuam proles*), as well as for immortality for Augustus. According to Paolo Fedeli, *tuam proles* does not refer only to Augustus, as Aeneas’s descendant, but also to the *Romani* as they were also considered descendants of Aeneas (Fedeli, *Properzio*, p. 170). However, this interpretation seems exaggerated. In this final sentence, Propertius seems to focus his attention on Augustus. It is nevertheless interesting that Propertius recalls, in a very explicit way, the mythical filiation between Venus, Aeneas and Augustus, a filiation which was so central in Augustan ideology.

Keywords in the original language:

- [Aeneas](#)
- [aevum](#)
- [arcus](#)
- [arma](#)
- [Ausonia](#)
- [axis](#)
- [bellum](#)
- [bracatus](#)
- [Caesar](#)
- [captus](#)
- [caput](#)
- [clades](#)



- [Crassus](#)
- [deus](#)
- [dux](#)
- [equus](#)
- [Euphrates](#)
- [Indi](#)
- [Iupiter](#)
- [ius](#)
- [Mars](#)
- [oppidum](#)
- [Partha](#)
- [plausus](#)
- [proles](#)
- [provincia](#)
- [Romana historia](#)
- [spectare](#)
- [spolium](#)
- [telus](#)
- [Tigris](#)
- [titulus](#)
- [triumphus](#)
- [tropaeum](#)
- [ultima terra](#)
- [Venus](#)
- [Vesta](#)
- [Via Sacra](#)
- [virga](#)
- [vulgus](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [Aeneas](#)
- [Augustus](#)
- [Capitoline Temple](#)
- [captive](#)
- [conquered nations](#)
- [expiation](#)
- [immortality](#)
- [India](#)
- [Jupiter](#)
- [Parthia](#)
- [Roman expansion](#)
- [Roman hegemony](#)
- [Roman law](#)
- [Roman triumph](#)
- [Trojan descent](#)
- [trophy](#)
- [Venus](#)
- [victory](#)

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Other sources connected with this document: Text

[Ovid, *Tristia* IV.2.1-74](#)

Tiberius's triumph

- [Read more about Ovid, *Tristia* IV.2.1-74](#)

Text

[Propertius, *Elegies* III.11.29-64](#)

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

- [Read more about Propertius, *Elegies* III.11.29-64](#)

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