

Propertius' Hercules in poem 4.9 has recently attracted attention as an interesting case study illuminating Roman notions of gender, national identity, and Augustan ideology, as well as generic notions of elegiac poetry. In this paper, I argue that the role of geography, examined side by side with the religious and sexual framework, is a crucial factor in the poem's deployment of issues of identity and ideology. Even as Hercules seems to affirm binaries such as Roman/non-Roman, male/female, eastern/western, human/divine, his own complex and polyvalent identity defies easy categorizations. In Propertius' narrative, Hercules blurs these distinctions, calling into question the adoption of clear dichotomies that operate on the basis of separation and exclusion and presents instead the need for a new ideological model that advocates integration and inclusion.

Religion and geography are intricately connected with the problem of power, which is here predicated upon the interplay between the notions of inclusion and exclusion. Hercules can quench his thirst only within the bounds of the shrine; thus the sanctuary is cast as a seat of power that is controlled by women. Hercules violently imposes male control in a space of traditional female agency and authority, replacing it with another exclusionist monument, the Ara Maxima (69-70). Earlier, however, he has presented the priestesses with a religious model of inclusion, a model connected with the East: Hercules' experience at the court of Omphale offers the possibility of blurring gender boundaries and thus presents the native Roman cult with a more inclusionist practice, which appears inspired from the east. Eventually Hercules' foundation of Ara Maxima is linked to a rejection of this inclusive eastern femininity as it affirms exclusive Roman masculinity.

Yet Hercules problematizes the gender, religious, and geographical distinctions that the two monuments prescribe. Queen Omphale has been read as a figure of the powerful mother goddess (such as Cybele), whose union with Hercules represents a union of a fertility goddess with a male god. To be sure, the Romans had long recognized the importance of such divinities: for example, the eastern provenance of Cybele did not prevent the establishment of her temple on the Palatine. Hercules' reference to his time with Omphale, then, can be seen as presenting the native Roman cult with a model of religious inclusivity abandoned by the Augustan program of moral reformation. Hercules thus, on the one hand, may be seen as aligned with Augustan ideology and its privileging of Roman exclusion and gender demarcation. On the other, Hercules himself, poised between the categories of human and divine, male and female, east and west, belies the very dichotomies he appears to assert in favor of a more enlightened and inclusionist attitude toward religion and empire.