



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

Tiberius's triumph

Name of the author: Ovid

Date: 10 CE to 11 CE

Place: Tomis

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Literary genre: Poetry

Title of work: *Tristia*

Reference:

IV.2.1-74

Commentary:

In the fourth book of Ovid's *Tristia*, the homesick poet, still in exile in Tomis on the shores of the Black Sea, laments his missing of the celebrations of Rome's triumph. At this point, Augustus has died, and his heir, Tiberius, is in power. As Gareth Williams discusses, Ovid is starved of contact with Latin and Greek speakers in his exile, and so his written word is both his catharsis and his only real link back to Rome (Gareth Williams, "Worlds Apart," p. 361-362). Ovid is able to make his presence felt in Rome through his writings, if not physically (Matthew McGowan, *Ovid in Exile*, p. 137). Ovid's misery in Tomis is of course one of the most prominent themes of his exilic works, but here we see it particularly prominently, and specifically in relation to his feeling left out of the joy of Rome's military success, particularly the city-wide celebration that accompanies it. The poet recreates for his own imagination the triumphal festivities following Tiberius's victory in Germany (7 BCE), including communal reading and singing (20), and the army chanting the victory formula *io triumphe* (51-52). Ellen Oliensis argues that the defeated Germans, one of whom is described with his hair streaming down his face, hiding his cheeks, mirrors Ovid's bedraggled appearance in *Tristia* I.2.12. The triumph of Tiberius is a harsh reminder of the poet's debasement, which he seems to compare to the enslavement of the German prisoners of war, with only his *mind* being free to travel to Rome (59) (Ellen Oliensis, "The Power of Image-Makers," p. 310).

More than simply a lament on his own situation, however, this passage enables Ovid to serve another purpose – in the words of Oliensis, to act as an "image-maker" for the emperor (Ellen Oliensis, "The Power of Image-Makers," p. 311). As Fergus Millar identifies, Ovid aids the emperor here in building up a picture of the imperial *domus* that is strong and long lasting (Fergus Millar, "Ovid and the *Domus Augusta*"). At the opening of this poem two Caesars are addressed – Augustus and Tiberius. The description of both Caesars as victors highlights the line of succession and promotes the achievement of the imperial family. Continuing with this ideology, Tiberius's natural and adopted sons are brought into the equation. Their victory over Germany will confirm the imperial line as governors of the whole world, which confirms that the expansion of the empire under their rulership knows no bounds.

There is another interpretation, however, which Philip Hardie hints at, whereby the triumph that the passage is truly celebrating is not the military success of Tiberius, but the triumph of Ovid as a poet (see Philip Hardie, "Questions of Authority," p. 193), effectively making the emperor a "deficient image of Ovid," whose military accomplishments are second to the artistic achievements of the poet (Ellen Oliensis, "The Power of Image-Makers," p. 311). The passage opens with an image of a unified world in which Rome, with its loyal citizens (*plebs pia*, verse 15) is the centre, yet Ovid emphasises that Rome's fame has far to travel in order to reach Tomis, which to him surely felt like the edges of the earth (68-70). In one sense this is testimony to the grandeur of the empire, but in another sense it weakens the imperial *fama* through the suggestion that the centre of the empire – Rome – is not in complete control of what happens at its edges (Ellen Oliensis, "The Power of Image-Makers," p. 313).

Keywords in the original language:



- [currus](#)
- [deus](#)
- [domus](#)
- [Drusus](#)
- [dux](#)
- [eques](#)
- [expulsus](#)
- [Germania](#)
- [invictus](#)
- [mater](#)
- [patria](#)
- [plebs](#)
- [populus](#)
- [progenies](#)
- [purpureus](#)
- [Rhenus](#)
- [senatus](#)
- [templum](#)
- [triumphus](#)
- [urbs](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [celebration](#)
- [exile](#)
- [Roman superiority](#)
- [Rome \(city\)](#)
- [sacrifice](#)
- [temple](#)
- [Tiberius](#)
- [triumph](#)
- [victory](#)
- [war](#)

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