

The (Un)attainable Object in Meleager *AP* 12.84

Although the Hellenistic epigrammatist Meleager has received renewed scholarly attention (e.g. Gutzwiller 2003, 2006, 2010; Hörschele 2010), commentators on Mel. *AP* 12.84 still find themselves at a loss to explain the penultimate couplet in the epigram (5-6), in which the speaker walks in a beloved boy's footprints and kisses an image of him left in the air: "I walk, my footprint in his footprint, and grasping the sweet image formed in the air, I kiss it sweetly with my lips." (βαίνω δ' ἵχνος ἐπ' ἵχνος, ἐν ἀέρι δ' ἠδὲ τυπωθὲν/ εἶδος ἀφαρπάζων χεῖλεσιν ἠδὲ φιλῶ). In this paper, I argue that Meleager's representation of this peculiar image in the air is a combination of two literary motifs that invoke an absent beloved. The first motif is an attempt to "make present" in some capacity the beloved with a more physical imitation, such as a portrait or a statue; the second is that of the deceitful dream or ghost image that appears to the lover either awake or asleep. I suggest that Meleager's conflation of these motifs is a self-conscious examination of the way in which, in literature, desire for an absent beloved blurs the distinction between subject and object. Since to desire what is absent a lover must conjure up an image of the beloved, the object is simply an imagined projection of the lover's own desires and, by extension, is him.

Meleager's use of the word εἶδος (6) to describe the image of the boy shaped in the air suggests the motif of a lover seeing a dream image of the absent beloved, exemplified by Achilles' vain attempt to embrace the shade of Patroclus (*Il.* 23. 99-100). This is the only instance in the extant poems attributed to Meleager that this word appears. Although it is unique, it closely resembles the word εἶδωλα, which occurs twice elsewhere in Meleager to describe frustrating dream images of an absent beloved (*AP* 12.125; *AP* 12.127). In direct contrast to this literary *topos*, however, the speaker actually grasps and kisses the image. With the verb τυπωθὲν

(“to form, mould, or model”), which often concerns the actual construction of art, Meleager also connects the image to the motif of representing an absent beloved with a physical likeness. In addition to the physical quality of verb *τυπωθέν*, the image is thematically parallel to another Meleager poem, *AP* 5.166, in which the narrator expresses his hope that his beloved, Heliodora, in his absence, will kiss both his picture next to her bed and a dream image of him. Thus, Meleager cleverly conflates the two literary motifs; with a statue or portrait, the absent beloved has a tangible, physical presence, but not a mental one. With a dream image, the absent beloved is mentally but not physically present.

The image’s “present absentness” in the air is complemented by the footprints in which Meleager steps, since footprints are physical impressions that a physical body makes, but, by definition, can only be perceived when the physical body is absent. When the speaker steps in his footprints, he interacts with his beloved in a tangible way and, after a fashion, takes his place. It is by emphasizing the absence of his beloved with two different motifs and by playing with the idea of an almost-tangible, (un)obtainable image, that Meleager self-consciously suggests the resemblance between subject and object. This is further promoted by the repetition of the word *ἦδὺ* (line 5 and 6), which is applied to both the speaker and the image, and the fact that the speaker himself leaves a footprint in the first couplet. This interpretation of the poem nuances the discussion of this image in scholarship as an insubstantial illusion (Gow and Page 1965, Clack 1992), and further demonstrates Meleager’s participation in the characteristically Hellenistic literary self-consciousness.

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