

Lost at Sea: Interpreting the Dream in Propertius 2.26a

In Propertius 2.26a, the speaker writes of a dream he has had in which he sees his beloved shipwrecked, drowning and confessing all of her past lies and deception to him. Contemplating her possible demise, he considers how sailors might remember her after her death and prays to the sea-gods that she live. Suddenly, a dolphin rushes to her rescue. The speaker is about to jump off a cliff into the water when his fear ends the dream. Only after he finishes his dream narrative does he reveal in 2.26c that his beloved intends to go on a voyage, thus seeming to explain the dream's cause. In this paper, I argue that an uncanny resemblance between the dream in 2.26a and an earlier poem, Propertius 1.17, in which the speaker is shipwrecked, having intended to sail away from Cynthia, is crucial for our understanding of both the dream and the poem's larger engagement with the problem of interpretation.

Propertius 2.26 is enigmatic, both inviting and resisting interpretation. The speaker, in fact, interprets his dream as he describes it. Flaschenriem (2010) has argued that the speaker is torn between his desire to determine and fix the meaning of his relationship with Cynthia and the pleasure that he gets from their ongoing, tempestuous relationship, even though it causes him pain. Scholars are perplexed themselves as to the dream's relationship to the rest of the poem. Some have attempted to find some unity that joins its parts into a satisfying whole (Wiggers, 1980); others have focused on interpreting specific elements of the dream, such as the speaker's impending leap (Jacobson, 1984). Scholarship has not, however, discussed the striking parallels between 1.17 and 2.26a, which I believe should be brought to bear on an interpretation of the poem as a whole. Both 2.26 and 1.17 involve shipwrecks and male speakers distraught over their relationships with their beloveds. There are less evident similarities as well: in both poems the speakers pray for the aid of Castor and Pollux and the shipwrecked shout out for their

beloveds. Nowhere in poem 2.26, however, is any previous misfortune at sea referenced, especially one so similar. The reader, as a result, is left to determine the relationship between these two similar poems. What are, then, the implications for the speaker of 2.26, who seems not to recognize the echo of a previous poem in his own dream? Drawing upon psychoanalytic criticism, I argue that the speaker's dream, considered as an unconscious transformation of previous poetic material, reveals him to be deeply affected by and concerned over his previous abandonment of his beloved.

More specifically, I begin my analysis by noting that the speaker not only records but also interprets his own dream. His first words, *vidi te* (1), highlight his role as a spectator who watches his beloved and makes sense of his dream's events. When he sees the dolphin, he states that he supposes (*puto*, 18) it is the same one that saved the poet Arion's lyre, thereby explicitly interpreting his beloved's rescue in connection to that of the legendary poet's instrument. Second, I argue that the speaker's attempt at interpretation also urges the reader to interpret the relationship between the speaker's dream and his waking life. The first line is a clever pun: calling his beloved *mea vita* (1), the speaker's first words can be read literally as "I saw you, my life, in a dream," compelling the reader to seek out traces of the speaker's life in the dream. Freud argues that dreams are product of the unconscious mind's condensation and displacement of content from the dreamer's waking life into the content of the dream. I offer a psychoanalytic reading of 2.26a as such a transformation of poem 1.17. Finally, building on psychoanalytical readings of Roman poets by Janan (1994) and Oliensis (2009), I demonstrate how the reader can make sense of 2.26a's unspoken allusion to 1.17 by attributing it to a speaker whose abandonment of his beloved rests in his unconscious.

Works Cited:

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