Between Image and Reality: The *Puerilis Imago* in Propertius and Ovid

The phrase *puerilis imago* is used twice in Latin elegy, both times to refer to an image of the god Amor. Propertius uses the phrase in poem 2.12 to refer to the god’s boyish appearance in a painting, while Ovid uses the phrase at *Rem. Am.* 575 to refer to a dream-image of the god who has just visited his sleep. Many commentators have noted Ovid’s echo of Propertius’s phrase (Lucke, 1982; Pinotti, 1988), but none propose further links between the contexts in which the phrase is used.  By contrast, this paper posits a similarity between the two uses of the phrase that hinges upon the multiple resonances of the word *imago*, used in both poems to refer to an image that appears deceptively real to its viewer.

In elegy 2.12, an ekphrasis of a painting depicting the god Amor, Propertius uses the phrase *puerilis imago* at line 13, the midpoint of the poem, at the critical point when the narrator shifts from description of the god as an external representation to a characterization of the god as a physical manifestation of love’s torment.  Most commentators take the second part of line 13 (*manet et puerilis imago*)to refer simply to the god’s boyish appearance in the painting (previously mentioned in line 1), which “remains relevant for” the narrator in the sense that love, like a boy, has a playful attitude towards the lover or forces him to act irresponsibly (Shackleton Bailey, 1956: 87; Camps, 1966: 114). R. O. A. M. Lyne (1998: 170), however, suggests that Propertius’s use of the word *imago* has particular significance in the context of a poem about a painting, proposing that the poet is imagining his own painting of the god by picking select elements of his iconography that are relevant to the poet’s experience. Following upon Lyne’s suggestion, this paper argues that we read in the phrase *puerilis imago* not only a reference to the medium of painting, but an acknowledgment of the power of the painted image to appear real to its viewer, as the poet’s description of his own “painting” gives way to a quasi-epiphany of the animate god in lines 15 ff. By following his ekphrasis of the painting with a description of the relevance of the painting’s iconography for the viewer, Propertius comments not only upon the painter’s accuracy, but more generally, upon the viewer’s experience of looking at a work of art and becoming caught in a moment of confusion between image and reality.

           Ovid also uses the phrase *puerilis imago* (*Rem. Am.* 575) in a context that blurs image and reality. By questioning whether he was really asleep while the *puerilis imago* addressed him (lines 575-76), Ovid’s narrator reveals in this couplet his uncertainty about whether he has seen a dream-image or an epiphany of the god himself. At this pivotal moment, the narrator reinforces his confusion about the nature of his vision through the ambiguity inherent in the word *imago*, which suggests the realistic yet potentially deceptive appearance of a dream-image. We can appreciate an additional resonance of the word *imago* if we imagine that Ovid received this vision while engaged in incubation in the presence of the cult statue of Lethaeus Amor, as Peter Green (1982: 417) suggests. Thus the word *imago* at the end of the dream could refer simultaneously to the sculpted form of the god and an imagined dream-image of him, both of which appear sufficiently animated and realistic as to undermine the viewer’s understanding of what he has seen.

The viewer’s blurring of painted image(s) and animate god in Propertius 2.12 has a parallel in the narrator’s uncertainty about the nature of his vision in Ovid’s *Remedia Amoris*. Although the viewer’s experience in 2.12 is not a dream, this ekphrastic poem exhibits dream-like qualities, as it slips between descriptions of representation and reality and emphasizes the narrator’s experience as a viewer as he responds subjectively to a familiar objective image. I conclude my paper by arguing that Ovid’s use of the word *imago* at the moment that he wavers in his conviction about what he has seen can help us to understand the slippage between described object and subjective response in Propertius’s poem, which is also signaled by his use of the word *imago*.

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