

Stuprum matri intulisse: Caesar's Incest Dream as Characterization (Suet. *Iul.* 7.2)

The dream accounts in Suetonius' imperial biographies differ in both form and function from dream accounts found in other genres. Their form tends to be succinct and bereft of the traditional features which define dream scripts in other genres (Oppenheim 1956; Dodson 2009); their function serves to characterize the biographical subject rather than advance the plot. This sets their literary function apart from that of most dreams in Greek and Roman texts (e.g., Kessels 1978; Walde 2001). By approaching the dream reports in Suetonius as a tool for characterization, it becomes clear that the primary importance of these dreams stems from their *type* rather than their *content*. In Herodotus, the dreamer's reaction to the content of a dream is of pivotal importance. Herodotean dreams play a narrative long-game by laying the groundwork for tragic outcomes (e.g. Cambyses at 3.30). The primary role that Suetonius attaches to dreams derives from their *type*. The type of dream (divine message, symbolic, truly predictive, incubation) acts as a shorthand for characterizing both the dreamer and imperial power. As Weber (2000) has noted, dreams of rulers play an important role in "*Herrschaftssoziologie*." Expanding on this notion, I propose that the typology of dreams discloses a hierarchical discourse of power: divine message dreams and truly predictive dreams signify a higher status of power than symbolic dreams. Such a power-paradigm of dreams was already established in the ancient Near Eastern literary tradition (Oppenheim 1956), and its adaptation by the Romans—and by Suetonius in particular—is of special interest.

This paper examines Julius Caesar's incest dream as a case study for this argument. Using the criteria of Artemidorus Daldianus in *Oneirocritica* (1.79), I categorize Caesar's incest dream as a specific type of symbolic dream; namely, a positive predictor of future rule. Some have argued that the incest-type dream functions negatively to characterize Caesar's tyrannical

ambitions (Grottanelli 1999), citing the example of Athenian tyrant Hippias and his dream before Marathon (Hdt. 6.107), along with other examples (Diog. Laert. 1.96; Pl. R. 9.571c–d; Holt 1998). Others, following Artemidorus, see the incest-type as a predictor of future rule (Wardle 2009).

These interpretations present conflicting characterizations of Caesar—is Suetonius painting him as a tyrant, or as “divinely destined for power and conscious of his destiny” (Wardle 2009)? Situating the incest dream as a *type* within the literary tradition seems to support Caesar’s characterization as a tyrant, and subsequent uses of the term *stuprum* further strengthen its connection to tyrannical characterization (*Cal.* 12.2.3; 24.1.1). However, if we consider the narrative context of Caesar’s dream, it becomes clear that Suetonius presents it as “symbolic” rather than “incestuous,” affording the reader a more nuanced interpretative viewpoint. For example, Caesar’s incest dream legitimizes dreams as acceptable anecdotes for characterizing Rome’s rulers, a practice that was disapproved in the Republican period (Kragelund 2001), and highlights the role dreams played in the propaganda of power.

However, the force that symbolic dreams carry in terms of commenting on power is weaker than divine message dreams, especially in view of the fact that women traditionally experienced symbolic dreams while divine message dreams appeared explicitly to men (Messer 1918). In the final part of my talk, I address how Caesar endows his dream with divine authority by consulting professional interpreters (*coniectores*, 7.2), and how Suetonius ties the function and use of the dream to political authority by associating the dream with Alexander the Great and its symbolism with Caesar’s ascendancy.

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