



THE AMBIGUOUS APPEARANCE OF MERCURY: AENEID 4.554-580

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The Trojan flight from Carthage in Book IV of the *Aeneid* has a very odd catalyst: Aeneas dreams that a god resembling Mercury warns him of an impending Carthaginian attack. The unusual feature of this dream, and Aeneas' reaction to it, is the ambiguity that surrounds the identity of the messenger. Virgil does not state that it is Mercury who visits Aeneas, only that the dream-visitor is "similar to" Mercury in every respect. Moreover, Aeneas does not seem to believe that the dream-messenger, despite his resemblance to the god, was actually Mercury. Virgil crafts a highly ambiguous scene, entirely at odds with other dream-sequences in the *Aeneid*, and never provides a clear resolution to the uncertainty he creates. There has been little scholarly attention paid to this aspect of Aeneas' dream, and what has been written either ignores the ambiguity of the scene, or tries to explain it away. However, such treatments are superficial and unsatisfying, as they ignore Virgil's deliberate efforts to create ambiguity in this passage, and its importance in highlighting the profound change Aeneas goes through in Book IV.

Aeneas' dream sequence begins with a description of the messenger:

huic se forma dei vultu redeuntis eodem
obtulit in somnis rursusque ita visa monere est,
omnia Mercurio similis, vocemque coloremque
et crinis flavos et membra decora iuventa...

The form of the god, returning with the same face, set itself before him in sleep, and again in this way seemed to warn, similar to Mercury in every respect: both in his voice and coloring, and his blonde hair and the seemly, youthful limbs...¹

¹ *Aen.* 4.556-559. Translations in this paper are my own.

When this passage receives any scholarly attention at all, there is usually an uncritical assumption that the dream-visitor, despite Virgil's qualifications, is Mercury.² The relatively few attempts to resolve the ambiguity in this passage have left much to be desired. Sergio Casali, for example, assumes that it is Mercury who visits Aeneas because of this passage's intertextual connection to Hermes' visit to Priam in the *Iliad* (*Il.* 24.677-95).³ But Priam's dream-visitor is not described as having "the same face as" or "similar to" Hermes, and the intertextual similarities between the two passages do nothing to clarify the ambiguity surrounding Aeneas' dream-visitor. Denis Feeney resolves the ambiguity by asserting that Aeneas, having already mistaken his mother Venus for Diana⁴, is trying to avoid a similar mistake when he refuses to name the god of his dream, even though he is certain as any hero could be that it was Mercury.⁵ But Aeneas later sees the god Tiber in a dream,⁶ and upon waking prays to the god by name.⁷ Why would the hero behave so differently toward the two gods? Feeney's explanation is inconsistent. Lee Fratantuono acknowledges the ambiguity, but makes no attempt to explain it: "It serves no good purpose to speculate overmuch on whether or not the dream vision ... is a product of [Aeneas'] conscience/imagination/guilt, or an actual visitation of the god..."⁸ But simply acknowledging the ambiguity brings us no closer to understanding it. Charles Bennett says Aeneas is uncertain about the god's identity in this passage, and explains it on religious grounds: "Ancient feeling especially avoided the risk of addressing any deity by the wrong name."⁹ Recognizing a

² "Aeneas sees not one but two visitations from the god Mercury before he will leave Dido..." Meanwhile, Mercury visits Aeneas again and admonishes him to flee immediately" Marquis, 2013, p. 301; "However, by the time of Mercury's appearance to Aeneas, this time in a dream ..." Zanker, 2016, p. 591; "Mercury visits Aeneas twice in Book 4 of the *Aeneid*..." Biggs, 2019, pp. 2116.

³ Casali, 2019, pp. 186-88.

⁴ *Aen.* 1.325 ff.

⁵ Feeney, 1998, p. 121.

⁶ *Aen.* 8.26 ff.

⁷ *Aen.* 8.72.

⁸ Fratantuono, 2015, pp. 302-03.

⁹ Bennett, 1904, p. 209.

reluctance to misname a god, however, does not explain why Virgil should be ambiguous about the god's identity in the first place.

These assumptions and attempts to dispel any doubt about the identity of Aeneas' dream-visitor ignore the depth of ambiguity Virgil weaves into this passage. Indeed, Virgil is uniquely ambiguous about the identity of this dream-visitor. Nowhere else in the poem are figures in dreams described as the *forma ... vultu eodem* ("figure with the same face") of someone, nor as *similis omnia* ("similar in all respects"). Rather, Virgil's descriptions leave no question about their identity. For example, Virgil describes Dido's dream of Sychaeus thus: *Ipsa sed in somnis inhumati venit imago / coniugis...* ("but the very ghost of her husband came to her in sleep...").¹⁰ Virgil presents the ghost of Sychaeus without qualifiers such as *vultu eodem* or *similis*. He also describes Dido's dream of Aeneas with no ambiguity whatsoever: *agit ipse furem in somnis ferus Aeneas* ("Ferocious Aeneas himself drives her, raging, in her sleep...").¹¹ Again, when Latinus is visited in a dream by the voice of his father, the god Faunus, Virgil leaves no doubt about the identity of the dream-visitor: *haec responsa patris Fauni monitusque silent nocte datos non ipse suo premit ore Latinus* ("These replies of his father Faunus, and the warnings given in the silent night, Latinus himself does not keep in his mouth...").¹² In Book VIII, Aeneas, asleep on the banks of the Tiber, receives another divine visitor in a dream: *huic deus ipse loci fluvio Tiberinus amoeno / populeas inter senior se attollere fronds /visus* ("Elder Tiberinus himself, the god of this place, appeared to him, raising himself from the pleasant river...").¹³ Nowhere does Virgil so much as hint this could be anyone but Tiberinus himself. Even when he describes

¹⁰ *Aen.* 4.535-54.

¹¹ *Aen.* 4.465-66.

¹² *Aen.* 7.102-03.

¹³ *Aen.* 8.31-33.

Allecto, disguised as Calybe in Turnus' dream, her true identity is absolutely clear to the reader: *Allecto torvam faciem et furialia membra / exuit, in vultus sese transformat anilis ... / fit Calybe Iunonis anus templique sacerdos...* ("Allecto sheds her grim face and her fury's limbs, and transforms herself into the appearance of an old woman.... She becomes Calybe, the old priestess of the temple Juno...")¹⁴ When Turnus mocks the old woman for giving advice about war, Allecto sheds her disguise and explicitly declares herself to be a Fury: *respice ad haec: adsum dirarum ab sede sororum, / bella manu letumque gero!* ("Look upon these features: I am from the abode of the Dread Sisters! With my hand I bring war and death!")¹⁵ Virgil is unambiguous about the identity of each person or deity in every dream, with the lone exception of Aeneas' dream in Book IV.

Moreover, Virgil creates even greater uncertainty about the god's identity as he turns the focus from the dream to Aeneas' reaction. He writes:

...sic fatus nocti se immiscuit atrae.

Tum vero Aeneas subitis exterritus umbris

corripit e somno corpus...

So speaking he mixed himself into the black night. Then indeed, Aeneas, terrified by the sudden shadows, snatches his body from sleep...¹⁶

¹⁴ *Aen.* 7.415-16 and 419.

¹⁵ *Aen.* 7.454-55.

¹⁶ *Aen.* 4.570-72.

The use of *umbris* in line 571 is ambiguous: often in Virgil, an *umbra* means "shade," "shadow," or "darkness."¹⁷ In this passage, then, *umbris* could, as translated above, refer to the suddenly-appearing darkness left by the messenger's departure. However, the word *umbra* can also indicate an image or likeness. Though often used to mean "ghost" or "soul," it can also indicate an imitation of someone. For example, in Book X, Juno creates an *umbra* of Aeneas: *tum dea nube cava tenuem sine viribus umbram in faciem Aeneae...adsimulat...* ("Then the goddess made a tenuous image from hollow cloud, without strength, into the form of Aeneas...").¹⁸ This image of Aeneas, Virgil tells us, is similar both to a ghost, as well as the images that trick the mind in dreams, and so life-like that Turnus pursues and attempts to kill it.¹⁹ The *umbris* of Aeneas' dream, then, could refer not to "sudden darkness" but rather to a convincing apparition of Mercury. Indeed, numerous translators and commentators have rendered the word in this way.²⁰ If *umbris* is taken to mean an image of Mercury, then it raises the possibility that, like the *umbra* of Aeneas in Book X, it is not the god himself the hero sees in his dream. Virgil's use of the word *umbris* heightens the ambiguity in this passage.

Aeneas' reaction to this dream suggests he does not think his visitor was Mercury. First of all, this is the only occasion in the poem in which Aeneas does not clearly identify the person or god he saw while dreaming. Upon waking, Aeneas rouses his sleeping companions and tells them:

... 'vigilate, viri, et considite transtris;

¹⁷ Cf: *umentuemque Aurora polo dimoverat umbram* ("and Aurora pulled back dewy darkness from the sky..." *Aen.* 4.6), or: [Fama] *nocte volat caeli medio terraeque per umbram stridens* ("[Rumour] flies hissing by night through the darkness, midway between earth and sky..." *Aen.* 4.184-5).

¹⁸ *Aen.* 10.636-7 and 639.

¹⁹ *Aen.* 10.641 ff.

²⁰ Austin, 1988, p. 169, Bennet, 1904, p. 571, and Jackson Knight, 1958, p. 114 all translates *umbris* as "apparition"; Fairclough, 1916, p. 461 translates *umbris* as "vision."

solvite vela citi. deus aethere missus ab alto

festinare fugam tortosque incidere funis

ecce iterum instimulat. sequimur te, sancte deorum,

quisquis es, imperioque iterum paremus ovantes.

adsis o placidusque iuves et sidera caelo

dextra feras.'

"Be alert, men, and take your places at the rowing-benches! Swiftly loose the sails! A god sent from the high air compels us to hurry our flight, and, behold!, to cut the twisted cables again. We follow you, Hallowed among gods, whoever you are! Rejoicing, we again obey your command. May you be with us, O gentle one, and may you help us, and may you bring forth kindly stars in the sky!"²¹

Nowhere does he specify which god he saw in this dream, yet in every other dream passage, Aeneas identifies his visitor clearly. For example, when Aeneas relates his dream of Hector with these words: *in somnis, ecce, ante oculos maestissimus Hector / visus adesse mihi ...* ("In sleep, behold, saddest Hector appeared to be present before my eyes...").²² In the dream, he even addresses Hector by name: *quibus Hector ab oris exspectate venis?* ("from what shores, long looked-for Hector, do you come?").²³ Clearly, Aeneas does not doubt that this is Hector.

Likewise, Aeneas is certain about the Penates when he describes their visitation in a dream:

effigies sacrae divum Phrygiique Penates / ... visi ante oculos astare iacentis / in somnis, multo

²¹ *Aen.* 4.573-79

²² *Aen.* 2.270-273.

²³ *Aen.* 2.282-3.

manifesti lumine... ("the sacred images of the gods and the Phrygian penates ... seemed to stand before my eyes as I lay in slumber, perfectly clear in the light").²⁴ Aeneas is unambiguous: the gods in his dream are *multo manifesti* ("perfectly clear"). Similarly, when Dido confronts Aeneas about his departure from Carthage, he tells her that his father's ghost often appears in dreams to remind him of his duty: *me patris Anchisae ... admonet in somnis et turbida terret imago* ("the restless ghost of my father Anchises admonishes me in my sleep and terrifies me...").²⁵ Once again, Aeneas has no doubt about the figure he sees in his dream. The only time he does not clearly identify the figure he sees in a dream is the visitation from what appears to be Mercury.

Some scholars assert that Aeneas' ambiguous reference to the god does not indicate doubt about Mercury's identity, but rather shows a pious caution. R.G. Austin, for example, states: "[Aeneas] does not doubt that the god is Mercury, but adds *quisquis es* in the usual precautionary way." Austin then cites Turnus' words in Book IX, line 22 (*sequor omina tanta, quisquis in arma vocas*, "I obey all such commands, whoever calls me to arms"), as another example of a precautionary address to a deity.²⁶ Likewise, John Conington said of Aeneas' dream: "There is no reason to suppose that Aeneas had any doubt that it was Mercury whom he had seen..." and then cites the same passage in Book IX to support this position.²⁷ However, this argument is difficult to accept. In this passage from Book IX, Iris, sent by Juno, tells Turnus to attack the Trojans. But Turnus does not know who sent Iris, and this, not pious caution, is the reason he uses *quisquis* in his prayer. In fact, only a few lines earlier, Turnus not only explicitly states that he does not know who sent Iris, but openly addresses her by name: *Iri, decus caeli, quis te mihi nubibus*

²⁴ *Aen.* 3. 148 and 150-51.

²⁵ *Aen.* 4.351 and 353.

²⁶ Austin, 1988, p. 170.

²⁷ Conington, 1884, p. 575.

actam detulit in terras? ("Iris, glory of the sky, who sent you down through the clouds to me on earth?").²⁸ Thus, *quisquis* is not a reverential or cautionary form of address here; instead, it indicates that Turnus does not know which deity sent Iris to him. Therefore, this passage does not support Austin and Conington's argument that Aeneas refrained from naming Mercury out of pious precaution. Instead, the parallelism between the two passages demonstrates that Aeneas, like Turnus, did not know which deity was commanding him.

Austin and Conington are correct that Romans had precautionary forms of divine address. However, these forms of address did not replace a deity's name. In a polytheistic pantheon, worshippers had to identify the correct target for their prayers, and therefore addressed deities by name whenever possible. R.M. Ogilvie wryly notes: "Gods, like dogs, will only answer to their names."²⁹ Moreover, Roman gods and goddesses were polymorphic (i.e., a single deity could manifest power in multiple forms), and had various names and epithets, so worshipers also needed to specify the divine attributes that were relevant to their prayers.³⁰ For example, Catullus' hymn to Diana addresses the goddess not only as Diana, but also as Juno Lucina when she is a goddess of childbirth, Trivia when goddess of crossroads, and Luna when goddess of the moon.³¹ Omitting a name, or using the wrong name, might cause offence, and thus the failure of the worshiper's prayers.³² So, to encompass all of a deity's names and attributes, worshipers often added a precautionary formula, such as *sive quo alio nomine te appellari volueris* ("or by whatever other name you wish yourself to be called").³³ Catullus' hymn to Diana includes just

²⁸ *Aen.* 9.18-19.

²⁹ Ogilvie, 1969, p. 24.; see also Belayche, 2007, p. 280: "Saying the deity's name represented the slightest, first step in theological definition, for it defined the deity as a superior being and attributed to it a power within a circumscribed field."

³⁰ King, 2003, 292-93.

³¹ *Catull.* 34.13-16. King, 2003, p. 293 discusses the polymorphic aspects of this passage.

³² King, 2003, p. 295.

³³ Belayche, 2007, p. 280.

such a formula: after addressing her by the names already noted, he adds: *sis quocumque tibi placet / sancta nomine* ("may you be revered as holy by whatever name is pleasing to you").³⁴ Likewise, Macrobius records a similar formula in a prayer to Dis from the third Punic war: *Dis pater Veiovis Manes, sive vos quo alio nomine fas est nominare...* ("Father Dis, Veiovis, Manes, or by [any] other name it is right to name you...").³⁵ Clearly, these precautionary formulae were used in addition to, not in place of, a deity's name. When Aeneas eschews his dream-messenger's name in favour of *deus* and *quisquis es*, he cannot, as Austin and Conington claim, be using a precautionary formula.

Aeneas refrains from using the god's name because Romans considered it better not to name a deity than to address a god or goddess by the wrong name. For example, Aulus Gellius reports that, after experiencing earthquakes, Romans would dedicate festivals to placate the god responsible; but since they did not know which divinity caused earthquakes, the pontiffs would not invoke any god or goddess by name: *sed dei nomen, ita uti solet, cui servari ferias oporteret, statuere et edicere quiescebant, ne alium pro alio nominando falsa religione populum alligarent* ("...but they would refrain from declaring or setting forth the name of the god, as is common practice, for whom the festivals ought to be observed, lest they should implicate the people in a religious error by naming one god in place of another").³⁶ Aeneas, except for this one passage in Book IV, always addresses deities by name when he prays.³⁷ If Aeneas were certain that it was Mercury he saw in his dream, there would be no reason for him to refrain from addressing him

³⁴ *Catull.* 34.21-22.

³⁵ *Macrob.* 3.10.1.

³⁶ *Gell.* NA. II.28.2.

³⁷ EG. *Aen.* 3.85: he addresses Apollo by the epithet Thymbraee; *Aen.* 4.56., he prays to Pheobus; *Aen.* 8.71-72, he addresses the god Tiber.

by name. The fact that he did not use the god's name can only mean that Aeneas does not know which god he saw in his dream.

If this is not Mercury visiting Aeneas in the dream, then who is it? Virgil is ambiguous on this point, and no modern attempt to address it has been wholly successful. But the ambiguity of this passage is, in fact, its point. Aeneas might reasonably have disregarded this dream, since its warning of an impending attack goes against everything Aeneas knows about Dido. Never once did she threaten to attack him, not even when she angrily accused him of betraying her.³⁸ Moreover, this warning, coming in a dream and from an apparition Aeneas does not fully trust to be Mercury, could easily be doubted.³⁹ But Aeneas' response stands out starkly against the ambiguity of a dubious message from an uncertain messenger: he not only obeys, but does so rejoicing (*paremus ovantes*).⁴⁰ After staying too long in Carthage and neglecting his fated duty to settle in Italy and sow the seeds of a future empire, he has finally re-aligned himself with his fate. Aeneas does not need to know with certainty whether or not this was Mercury in his dream; he only needs to complete the transition from *Libycis teris otia terris* ("you waste time on Libyan lands")⁴¹ when Mercury first visited him, to *certus eundi* ("certain of going") when he dreams of him.⁴² His response to the dream shows that he has, as Graham Zanker aptly explains, "... engaged his will in his efforts to fit in with Fate."⁴³ The ambiguity of the divine messenger contrasts sharply with Aeneas' unambiguous response, and demonstrates his return to the dutifulness that allows Aeneas to call himself *pius*.

³⁸ *Aen.* 4.365-88.

³⁹ As important as dreams are in the *Aeneid*, false dreams are part of this world too—a point emphasized in Book VI by the ivory gate of the underworld which issues false dreams. *Aen.* 6.895-96. See also , 2003, p. 29.

⁴⁰ *Aen.* 4.577.

⁴¹ *Aen.* 4.271.

⁴² *Aen.* 4.271.

⁴³ Zanker, 2016, p. 591.

Aeneas' dream in Book IV of the *Aeneid* is unique in the poem: it is the only passage in which Virgil leaves room for doubt about the identity of the god appearing in a dream. Indeed, he even heightens that uncertainty with the word *umbris*, which could be taken in different ways. His crafting of Aeneas' reaction only furthers the doubt about the messenger's identity: Aeneas does not call him Mercury, even though he resembles the god in every respect; and the manner of his address to the god only further underscores that doubt. Virgil is, in fact, deliberately ambiguous in this passage, and it is unlikely we could ever be certain who appears in Aeneas' dream. The poet deftly weaves ambiguity into this scene as a counterpoint to Aeneas' renewed commitment to his (and ultimately, Rome's) destiny. Though he faces further hardship and uncertainty throughout the remainder of the poem, Aeneas never again so deeply neglects the duty that the gods have set before him. When he sails away from Carthage, Aeneas is, in a sense, leaving behind all uncertainty and ambiguity about his role in the plans of Fate.

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