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REACHING THE RIGHT HARBOUR:
NEGOTIATING THE DOUBLE ENTENDRES
IN *CARMINA BURANA* 128.

Carmina Burana 128

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|---|--|
| 1. Remigabat naufragus
olim sine portu,
ferebatur pelagus
Aquilonis ortu.
Dum navis ab aequore 5
diu quassaretur,
non fuit in littore
qui compateretur. | 2. Once there was a shipwrecked sailor. He
rowed and rowed, but no harbour hove
in sight. On swept the sea--the North
wind had got up. For a long time the
craft was pounded by the deep. There
was no-one onshore to take pity on him. |
| 2. Tandem duo pueri
portum innuere, 10
fatigato pauperi
vitam reddidere.
Iuvenum discretio
signat ei portum.
Cedit huic compendio 15
quicquid est distortum. | 3. Finally, two young men
gestured, signaling a harbour.
They restored the poor
exhausted man to life. The
young men's discernment
revealed the harbour to him.
Whatever had gone awry, was
put right by this assistance. |

10 innuere *scripsi* : inuere *B, Völlumann* : invenere *Schumann*

All scholars are agreed that this poem has some allegorical significance beyond the surface meaning given above. Ship-sea metaphors were

common in ancient poetry. The ship could symbolize the state, an individual's life or, more particularly, his love life, or the poem on which the poet was embarking¹. Here the inclusion of the poem in the section of the *Carmina Burana* devoted to love poems strongly suggests that we should understand the ship-sea metaphor in the erotic sense. In the standard edition of the poem, however, Schumann found the language so enigmatic that he could offer no overall interpretation and wondered if the poem was complete². In his review of the standard edition, Spanke suggested a homosexual theme³. In the Fischer-Bernt edition, Bernt maintains that the poem is clearly allegorical but cannot decide whether the real-life difficulty behind the allegory is to be thought of as an economic, spiritual or moral crisis⁴. Vollmann rejects Spanke's interpretation, arguing that for a homoerotic encounter there should be only one *puer*, not two⁵. He sees the *naufragus* as one who has strayed from the straight and narrow on to a morally twisted path. The *duo pueri*, he suggests, are a pair of Christian saints—such as Cosmas and Damian or Stephen and Laurence—who point out to him the safe harbour (the monastic life?), where his endangered soul can find salvation. In this interpretation he is followed by Wolff⁶. Blodgett and Swanson suggest two levels of interpretation: «Figuratively, the two boys are (1) the Gemini, a constellation that is particularly helpful to mariners, and (2) a pederastic solution to the problem of a man's sexual torment»⁷.

The major difficulties of the poem lie in the last four lines. These have been variously translated. Fischer renders: «Dank der beiden klugem Tun / er den Hafen findet; / und dem graden Weg weicht nun / jener, der sich windet». Vollmann: «Die Klugheit der jungen Menschen zeigt ihm

1. For a good discussion of the various types of ship-metaphors, see W.S. ANDERSON, *Horace, Carm. 1.14: What kind of Ship?*, «Classical Philology» 61 (1966), pp. 84-98. On the popularity of the poem-ship metaphor in the medieval period, see E.R. CURTIUS, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, New York 1953, pp. 128-30.

2. *Carmina Burana*, ed. A. HILKA - O. SCHUMANN, vol. 1.2, Heidelberg 1941, p. 213.

3. H. SPANKE, *Literaturblatt für germanische und romanische Philologie*, 1943, p. 44.

4. *Carmina Burana*, ed. G. BERNT, tr. C. FISCHER, Zurich/ Munich 1974, p. 932.

5. *Carmina Burana*, ed. B.K. VOLLMANN, Frankfurt 1987, pp. 1115-16.

6. *Carmina Burana*, ed. E. WOLFF, Paris 1995, pp. 302 and 515-16.

7. *The Love Poems of the Carmina Burana*, tr. E.D. BLODGETT - R.A. SWANSON, New York 1987, p. 331.

den Weg zum Hafen, an die Stelle des Verkehrten tritt so der gerade Weg». Etienne Wolff: «La sagesse des jeunes lui signale le port;/ on peut malgré des travers trouver le droit chemin». Blodgett and Swanson suggest: «The discernment of the youngsters / reveals the port to him: whatever is tortuous is / inferior to this short cut»⁸.

Discretio can mean «discernment» or, more generally, «prudence»⁹. Accordingly, «the discernment of the young men indicated the harbor to him» is an inevitable and legitimate rendering of lines 13–14. On this interpretation, however, the lines seem to add little to *duo pueri / portum innuere*. Since the poem elsewhere shows economy in its use of language, the redundancy is probably a signal that we need to look for a second meaning.

Discretio was also used in the sense «separation», as in *honesta utriusque sexus discretione*¹⁰. Thus *iuvenum discretio* could mean «the separation of the young men». This would answer Vollmann's objection that the presence of two *pueri* rules out a homoerotic encounter. Alternatively, *discretio* could be taken in the sense of «the act of discriminating». Compare, for instance, Hebrews 5.14: *qui pro consuetudine exercitos habent sensus ad discretionem boni ac mali* («those who, through long use, have their perceptions trained to distinguish between good and evil»)¹¹. Thus we could reasonably render lines 13–14 as follows: «His discriminating assessment of the young men indicated a harbour to him». This interpretation would also be compatible with a homoerotic theme.

The last two lines are particularly complex, for *compendio*, *distortum* and *cedit* all lend themselves to various interpretations. *Compendium* is often used in the sense of «shortcut» and the implied contrast with *quidquid est distortum* accounts for Fischer's rendering of *huic compendio* as «dem graden Weg»¹². Vollmann, however, has gone a step further. He takes *quidquid est distortum* as referring to what is morally crooked and *huic compendio* as therefore implying the morally straight path. The main difficulty with this

8. It is hard to see how Blodgett and Swanson's translation is compatible with the pederastic interpretation they propose.

9. *ThLL* 5, 1350, 72 – 1351, 4; *DMBS*. s.v. 5.

10. Aug. *De civ. Dei* 2.28; for further examples, see *ThLL* 5, 1350, 7–29.

11. See further examples in *ThLL* 5, 1350, 72–77.

12. For the meaning «shortcut», see *ThLL* 3, 2040, 19–78 and *MLWB* s.v. II.A.1.

interpretation is that there seems to be no parallel for *compendium* meaning or implying the morally straight path. On the contrary, though the word has many shades of meaning, most of them imply a way out of some difficulty. The most characteristic feature of the morally straight path, however, is its difficulty. Hence its famous description as «narrow» in Matthew¹³. The morally straight path, I would suggest, can no more be implied by *compendium* than by the English word «shortcut».

Compendium can also mean «assistance» and since the young men have clearly been helpful in pointing out the harbour, it is natural to interpret *huic compendio* as referring to this assistance¹⁴. If *est distortum* is taken as the perfect passive of *distorqueo*, then line 16 can mean «all his wanderings off course» or, more generally, «whatever had gone awry». The translation offered with the Latin text above is based on these interpretations of *huic compendio* and *est distortum*.

In medical contexts *compendium* can mean «treatment» or «remedy», as in *aliud compendium nullum est nisi sanguinis detractio*¹⁵. Its juxtaposition with a form of *cedere*, which is used in medical contexts in the sense of «yield, respond to (treatment)», suggests that *compendium* might well be used in a medical sense here. *Distortus* too has medical connotations, for its basic meaning is «deformed, misshapen». Here, however, it is probably most naturally taken as a perfect passive form of the verb *distorqueo* («to torture, torment»). Thus the «medical interpretation» of lines 15–16 would be: «All the torment he had suffered yielded to this treatment». Clearly, this interpretation would also be compatible with a homoerotic subtext.

There is yet another way in which the last two lines can be understood. *Compendium* often means «summary» or «abbreviated account» and *distortus* can have the moral sense of «perverted»¹⁶. The combination of these meanings yields the following translation: «Whatever is perverted

13. Matt. 7.14: «Quam angusta porta et arcta via est quae ducit ad vitam, et pauci sunt qui inveniunt eam!»

14. For *compendium* in the sense of «assistance», see *MLWB* s.v. I.B.2 and *ThLL* 3, 2039, 72–2040, 13.

15. Chiron 4. For other examples, see *ThLL* 3, 2040, 14–18.

16. For examples of *compendium* in this sense, see *MLWB* s.v. II.A.1.c and *ThLL* 3, 2042, 3–2043, 78; for *distortus* = «perverted», see *ThLL*, 5, 1539, 67–84.

yields to (i.e. is suppressed in) this shortened version». In other words, the lines can be seen as a rendering of the «modesty formula», whereby the poet, after describing the preliminary stages of an erotic encounter, coyly refrains from referring to the act of sexual intercourse itself¹⁷.

Who are the two *pueri*? In the first place, they are sufficiently old to be referred to as *iuvenes*; so they are best understood as young men, rather than boys. Readers familiar with classical literature would naturally think of the Dioscuri and this may well be what is intended. However, I tend to agree with Vollmann's view that medieval readers would have been more likely to think of a pair of Christian saints. As we have seen, there is a strong emphasis on medical language in connection with the two young men. Even the rescue itself is described in terms of a medical miracle (*fatigato pauperi vitam reddidere*). Cosmas and Damian were famous since late antiquity for providing medical assistance to the poor (compare *pauperi*). They did not charge for their services; hence their epithet *anagyroi*. Though the earliest legends focus almost exclusively on their miraculous cures, later, through syncretism with the Dioscuri, they appear as heavenly rescuers to ships in distress¹⁸.

It is futile to ask which of the above interpretations of the last two lines is the correct one. Clearly, the whole point of the poem is to lead up to the witty, polysemous close. There can, I think, be no doubt that a homoerotic encounter is one of the intended meanings. One might reasonably ask, however, when the reader might have been expected to spot this subtext. Line 10 seems to be the critical point. Though *innuere* in medieval Latin developed the general sense of «show, point out», in classical Latin it retained the more physical sense of «make signs, beckon»¹⁹. The verb was not used by Vergil. It was used only twice by Ovid (both times in the *Ars Amatoria*). It can be no accident that in both these pas-

17. Cf. *CB* 77.30.1: «quis ignorat, ammodo cuncta que secuntur?» and *CB* 87.4.4: «que secuntur, mentio».

18. The entries in most standard reference works, such as *Acta Sanctorum* 46 (= September, vol. 7), 430–77 and *Bibliotheca Sanctorum* 4, 223–37, are silent on their role as rescuers at sea. For this aspect, see L. DEUBNER, *Kosmas und Damian*, Leipzig 1907, pp. 55 and 202–203 (Wunder 44 and 45); and A. WITTMANN, *Kosmas und Damian: Kulturausbreitung und Volksdevotion*, Berlin 1967, pp. 28–29 and 259 n. 59.

19. For the meaning «show, demonstrate», see *DMLBS* s.v. 3b.

sages, it has the sense of «indicate sexual interest by means of a gesture»²⁰. Lines 13-14, whose apparent redundancy signals a double entendre, confirm, on closer inspection, the risqué tone set by *innuere*. Given the sheer ingenuity of the double entendres and the concomitant «punch-line» quality of the last two lines, there can be little doubt that the poem is complete as we have it.

20. Ovid, *AA* 3, 514: «innuet: acceptas tu redde notas». Cf. *AA* 2, 543.