
Introduction: modern and medieval dreams

Ours is the century of the private dream. In the wake of Sigmund Freud's *Die Traumdeutung* (1900), we have learned to read our night-time experiences psychologically, as expressions of our intimate thoughts and desires.¹ Even though Freud's theories have been extensively modified and deeply challenged, and various post-Freudian schools now argue vehemently over the "proper" way to read dreams,² we have largely followed Freud in his suggestion that the dream is the "royal road to . . . the unconscious."³

Recently, researchers working on the physiology of sleep and dreams have challenged the dominant psychological, and particularly psychoanalytic, theories of dreaming – but in such a way as to confine the dream even more strictly to a realm governed by internal human process. In 1977, in an influential and controversial paper, J. Allan Hobson and Robert W. McCarley proposed that "*the primary motivating force for dreaming is not psychological but physiological,*" and that "the dream process" has "its origin in sensorimotor systems, with little or no primary ideational, volitional, or emotional content."⁴ While careful not to deny dreams meaning,⁵ Hobson and McCarley *do* seriously delimit the scope of the dream's significance. Dreaming becomes for them not Freud's "royal road," but a much reduced "royal road to the mind and brain in a behavioral state, with different rules and principles than during waking."⁶

Following on from such physiological work as Hobson and McCarley's, other researchers have denied that dreams can, or should, be interpreted. Perhaps most radically, Francis Crick and Graeme Mitchison have suggested that dreaming serves as a kind of "reverse learning' or 'unlearning,'" by which "unwanted or 'parasitic' modes of behaviour" in "the cortical system" can be erased:⁷

In this model, attempting to remember one's dreams should perhaps not be encouraged, because such remembering may help to retain patterns of thought which are better forgotten. These are the very patterns the organism was attempting to damp down.⁸

The dream's neurobiological function becomes paramount, and its content not worthy of consideration.

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The confinement of dreaming to a psychological or physiological realm is, of course, relatively recent. For most of its long history, the dream has been treated not merely as an internally-motivated phenomenon (although, as we shall see, such explanations of dreaming have their own ancient roots),⁹ but as an experience strongly linked to the realm of divinity: dreams were often thought to foretell the future because they allowed the human soul access to a transcendent, spiritual reality.

In our own century, Freud and the physiologists have worked vigorously to remove such a “superstitious” view from official dream theory. Indeed, the most visible manifestation of this belief in transcendent, revelatory dreams is provided by books to which we give (or claim to give) only amused attention: dream-guides for games of chance, often sold in drugstores alongside lottery tickets;¹⁰ and popular keys to the interpretation of dreams, relegated, along with other “pseudo-science,” to the “Occult” section of the bookstore.¹¹ Such handbooks often recognize, and even proclaim, their own exotic and marginal status:

This is a unique dream dictionary. It represents the very ancient and mysterious Far Eastern interpretations for the very first time in book form. Long-lost secrets on the value of the psychic warnings in various dreams are given. They are carefully gleaned from a variety of ancient manuscripts found at a secluded monastery located deep in the mountains of Tibet.¹²

At the same time, however, that these books are made marginal, they continue to be popular, and can be found in almost any bookstore. And the dreambooks claim authority not only from the “mysterious” East, but also from the mainstream of Western thought: they quote the Bible, Aristotle, and Cicero; report the creative dreams of Goethe, Bunyan, and Coleridge; and even take upon themselves the authority of psychoanalytic dream theorists such as Karen Horney, Alfred Adler, Erich Fromm, and even Freud himself.¹³ Often the dreambooks’ authenticating claims are exaggerated or invented. Aristotle’s deep skepticism about the meaning of dreams is ignored, his thinking on dream divination represented only by his least skeptical statement: “There is a divination concerning some things in dreams not incredible.”¹⁴ But despite the distortions, the dreambooks are legitimate heirs to Western tradition. Not only are they often actual descendants of ancient and medieval works (see chapter 1 below, esp. n. 12), but their assertion of the dream’s predictive status and of its access to a transcendent realm binds them to major philosophical, theological, and scientific traditions.

The continued popularity of the dreambooks thus points to a conclusion that the “scientific” student of dreaming may find disturbing: despite all

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attempts at its suppression, the tradition of the transcendent dream still grasps our imagination. Indeed, at least at moments, it escapes from its marginal realm to influence (or invade) mainstream treatments of the dream.

Thus Freud, in the last paragraph of his *Interpretation of Dreams*, cannot resist raising an ancient question that his own relentlessly psychological explanations of dream phenomena would already seem to have put to rest: “And the value of dreams for giving us knowledge of the future?”¹⁵ His answer, predictably enough, is that dreams have no such value; but in that answer, and thus in the last words of his *Interpretation*, Freud surprisingly moves to accept, if only partially, “the ancient belief that dreams foretell the future”:

There is of course no question of that [Daran ist natürlich nicht zu denken]. It would be truer to say instead that they give us knowledge of the past. For dreams are derived from the past in every sense. Nevertheless the ancient belief that dreams foretell the future is not wholly devoid of truth. By picturing our wishes as fulfilled, dreams are after all leading us into the future. But this future, which the dreamer pictures as the present, has been moulded by his indestructible wish into a perfect likeness of the past.¹⁶

Freud’s move, in this final passage, to merge past, present, and future calls to mind – though weakly – mystical modes of thought, and mysticism shows its face even more boldly elsewhere in twentieth-century dream theory. Carl Jung, in his attempts to revivify “the mythic side of man,”¹⁷ writes:

In the majority of cases the question of immortality is so urgent, so immediate, and also so ineradicable that we must make an effort to form some sort of view about it. But how?

My hypothesis is that we can do so with the aid of hints sent to us from the unconscious – in dreams, for example.¹⁸

Since the unconscious, as the result of its spatio-temporal relativity, possesses better sources of information than the conscious mind – which has only sense perceptions available to it – we are dependent for our myth of life after death upon the meager hints of dreams and similar spontaneous revelations from the unconscious.¹⁹

For Jung, the unconscious and the dreams it manifests may provide revelatory access to a reality beyond mere “sense perceptions.” And even in work that has followed on directly from physiological research into the dream-state, where we might expect to find only the most fully sense-bound theories, we again discover associations between dreaming and the transcendent. Stephen LaBerge of the Stanford University Sleep Research Center, in describing dream experiences (lucid dreams) in which we “learn

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to recognize that we are dreaming while the dream is still happening,”²⁰ suggests:

The fully lucid dreams we have been describing are instances of transcendental experiences, experiences in which you go beyond your current level of consciousness. Lucid dreamers (at least during the dream) have gone beyond their former views of themselves and have entered a higher state of consciousness. They have left behind their former way of being in dreams, no longer identifying with the dream characters they play or thinking that the dream world is reality. In this way, fully lucid dreams are transcendental experiences.²¹

If we were to undertake a study of our own culture’s largest treatment of dreaming, we would be faced with a massive, perhaps an impossible, project. Freudian and post-Freudian dream theory in all its complexity; the sometimes controversial findings of physiological research; popular, “superstitious” attitudes toward dreaming; popular skepticism about oneiric significance; the treatment of dreams in literature, film, and television – all inform our “view” of the dream. To complicate matters further, these different realms of dream thought are, as I have begun to suggest, by no means distinct: they interpenetrate and interact in sometimes surprising ways.

Given the complexity and difficulty of treating twentieth-century attitudes toward the dream, it may seem foolhardy to undertake a similar project with respect to *medieval* dreaming. After all, we have easy and essentially complete access to texts for a study of contemporary dreams, and, perhaps more importantly, we are surrounded by living people and their dreams. We can survey populations to determine prevalent beliefs about dreaming; and we can compile accounts of actual dreams and ask questions of actual dreamers.

None of this is true for the Middle Ages. Important texts have undoubtedly been lost, and others remain unedited. Most disturbingly, we have irremediably lost touch with the everyday fabric of medieval dream life. We do not know if “average” people dreamt differently than we do now, whether they discussed their dreams over breakfast, or how they responded to particularly portentous dream images.

Yet we can, however tentatively, begin to draw a picture of the medieval dream. A vast assortment of dream texts *does* survive. They include erudite works of theory, usually in Latin; vernacular popularizations of the theoretical material; and keys to various systems of dream interpretation. In the medieval poetic corpus dreams are set within longer narratives, and we find a separate, extremely popular, literary genre, the dream vision. Also available are accounts of “real-life” dreams in historical works, bio-

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ographies, and autobiographies. From this last kind of material especially, we can begin to understand everyday attitudes toward dreaming and the sorts of roles dreams played in people's lives.²²

We must be cautious, though, in interpreting the material that has come down to us. Dream theory and practical responses to dreams are not necessarily commensurate. Literary depictions of dreams, even when directly invoking theoretical material, also depend upon literary traditions and "real-life" experience. Historical and (auto)biographical accounts may be distorted in a variety of ways, their form shaped by literary *topoi*, their content determined by political, didactic, and religious motives.²³ Furthermore, the surviving accounts of "real-life" dreams are undoubtedly atypical: we would expect dreams perceived as especially significant to be preserved with greater care than those judged vain or misleading. Indeed, the accounts we have of actual dreams are most often contained within religious and mystical texts.

Our distance from the Middle Ages magnifies the difficulties we encounter in considering medieval dreaming. In studying contemporary dreams we can, with some ease, identify a dream that is extraordinarily striking, a dream theory that is particularly eccentric, a literary dream that is highly stylized or, on the other hand, essentially "life-like." Looking six or seven centuries into the past, however, it becomes extremely difficult to make such judgments; the material that survives often points not to definitive answers, but to intriguing and ultimately unanswerable questions. How common were dreams and visions like those reported by Margery Kempe? Our answer can only be based on the internal evidence of Kempe's *Book* (the sometimes outraged responses Kempe receives), and on the existence of accounts of dreams like Kempe's in other works. Were popular keys to dream divination used on a day-to-day basis? Some of them come complete with instructions for use, and writers sometimes forbid consulting them as if this were a common practice; still, any answer we arrive at finally remains speculative.

In the work that follows I try to define, as closely and clearly as possible, a late-medieval "view" of dreaming. I examine at greatest length the rich and complex literature of medieval dream theory. Doing so requires looking at the late-antique and early Christian writings of Macrobius, Calcidius, Augustine, and Gregory the Great, since these remained strong influences throughout the Middle Ages. Having defined, in chapters 2 and 3, what might be called the late-antique Christian Neoplatonic construction of the dream, I go on to suggest, in chapters 4 and 5, the ways in which theorists of the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries – encyclopedists like

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Vincent of Beauvais, philosophers and theologians like Hildegard of Bingen and Albertus Magnus, “psychologists” like Jean de la Rochelle, exegetes like Richard of St. Victor and Robert Holkot – used and modified that construction.

In my consideration of dream theory, I try not to become enmeshed in minutiae, but instead to excavate the larger structures inherent in the material – the most general and characteristic ways in which authors attempt to encompass the dream. In so doing, I wish to point toward the attitudes that underlie explanations and categorizations of dream experience, to define a common ground linking theories that are in many ways disparate. As a result, my treatment at times de-emphasizes the peculiarities of individual dream theories – and there are many such peculiarities. There is also, however, a remarkable unity of opinion about the essential, fundamentally complex and ambiguous, nature of the dream. It is that unity that I am most concerned to explore.

In defining the assumptions and beliefs that underpin medieval dream theory I hope to begin delineating the larger cultural “view” of the dream, and to flesh out that “view” I have also examined various non-theoretical materials. In autobiographical accounts like Hermann of Cologne’s *Opusculum de conversione sua* (see chapter 7), and in the medieval treatment of handbooks of dream divination like the *Somniale Danielis* (see chapter 1), we find ambivalent attitudes toward dreaming strikingly similar to those that underlie dream theory. “Real-life” dreams are treated as both precious and dangerous; handbooks of dream divination are enormously popular, and yet their use is often expressly forbidden.

The habit of mind that allows for such double treatments of the dream expresses itself quite generally in the Middle Ages, and in chapter 6 I consider briefly how such an attitude is reflected in, and affects, the shape of literary dreams. I focus attention especially on one fascinating but rarely studied dream vision, the conclusion of Nicole Oresme’s *Tractatus de commensurabilitate vel incommensurabilitate motuum celi*. Dream visions like Oresme’s provide the late Middle Ages with its most flexible and complex instrument for exploring the ambiguous possibilities of dreaming, and they provide us with an extraordinarily rich ground for examining medieval attitudes toward a complicated and perpetually interesting human experience.

I

Dreambooks and their audiences

DREAM DIVINATION

Writers of the high and late Middle Ages treated the experience of dreaming with simultaneous anxiety and fascination. On the one hand, they saw dreams as dangerous, associated with pagan practices and demonic seduction. On the other, they claimed that dreams could be divinely inspired and foretell the future. After all, saints' lives were filled with revelatory dreams, and the Fathers of the church recounted veridical dreams that they themselves experienced.¹ The Bible itself – in the Old Testament stories of Joseph and Daniel (Genesis, chapters 37, 40, 41; Daniel, chapters 2, 4, 7–8, 10–12) and in the appearances of God's angel to the New Testament Joseph (Matthew 1:20–24, 2:13, 2:19–22) – validates the use of dreams as predictive tools.² But the Bible also lends its authority to a distrust of the dream, at certain points strongly condemning the practice of dream divination:

Quando ingressus fueris terram quam Dominus Deus tuus dabit tibi cave ne imitari velis abominaciones illarum gentium / nec inveniatur in te . . . qui arioles sciscitetur *et observet somnia* atque auguria ne sit maleficus / ne incantator ne pythones consulat ne divinos et quaerat a mortuis veritatem / omnia enim haec abominatur Dominus.³ (Deuteronomy 18:9–12; my emphasis)

When thou art come into the land which the Lord thy God shall give thee, beware lest thou have a mind to imitate the abominations of those nations. Neither let there be found among you any one . . . that consulteth soothsayers, *or observeth dreams* and omens, neither let there be any wizard, Nor charmer, nor any one that consulteth pythonic spirits, or fortune-tellers, or that seeketh the truth from the dead. For the Lord abhorreth all these things.

The tension thus implicit in biblical treatments of dreaming survived and was intensified in the Middle Ages as the idea that dreams might be used to divine future events came to be treated with both approbation and suspicion.

Medieval approval of dream divination was expressed in the existence and popularity of manuals designed to reveal the future significance of

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dreams. Three distinct kinds of medieval dreambook survive.⁴ The first of these, the “dream alphabet” or “chancebook,” consists of a list of potential dream significations keyed to the letters of the alphabet. The future is divined by means of a random process, unconnected to the dream’s specific content:

Si quis aliquid sompniauerit, querat librum quemcunq;e uoluerit et dicat “in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti. amen,” et per primam literam quam scriptam inueniet in prima pagina quando liber aperitur significationem sompni inueniet. *A* significat prosperum iter et uiam felicem. *B* dominacionem in plebe.⁵

If someone has dreamed something, let him seek out whatever book he wants and say, “In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.” And he will find the meaning of his dream by means of the first letter that he finds written on the first page when the book is opened. *A* signifies a fortunate journey and a successful way. *B* [signifies] lordship among the people.⁶

The second kind of dreambook, the “dreamlunar,” similarly disregards content in disclosing the meaning of dreams. Here, the only key to a dream’s significance is the phase of the moon during which it occurs; thus on any given night, all dreams predict the same outcome:

Luna prima quicquid uideris, in gaudium erit; *et* si uideris te uinci, tu tamen uinces omnes inimicos tuos annuente deo. Luna .ii.^{da} si uideris somnium, nullum effectum habet; nec in animo ponas siue bonum siue malum.⁷

Whatever you may have seen on the first moon [of the month], will [have its outcome] in joy; even if you have seen yourself conquered, nevertheless you will conquer all your enemies, with God willing. If you have seen a dream on the second moon, it will have no effect; nor should you reckon in [your] mind on either a good or bad [effect].

Each of these two manuals is closely related to a wider range of prognostic material – the dream alphabet to other divinatory practices involving the random opening of books,⁸ the dreamlunar to works (the *lunaris de nativitate*, *lunaris de aegris*, *lunaris ad sanguinem minuendam*) using the phase of the moon to predict the outcome of events.⁹ Dreamlunars were, in fact, often combined with these other specialized *lunaria* to make up *lunaria collectiva*, handbooks concerned simultaneously with a variety of mantic practices, including dream interpretation;¹⁰ and both the dreamlunar and dream alphabet are frequently associated, in manuscripts, with other “superstitious” works such as horoscopes, lists of lucky and unlucky days, and predictions based on the day of the week on which New Year falls.¹¹

From a Christian perspective, the two kinds of dreambook must be viewed with suspicion. Both are closely affiliated to prognostic works that

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have no official sanction; and both claim to give access to hidden knowledge about the world through an essentially random process, the randomness of their operation implying a certain randomness in the way the world works. Indeed, these dreambooks implicitly deny the importance of any human influence on the future, and fail to make clear God's controlling role in the ordering of events.

Like the dream alphabet and lunar, the third kind of medieval divinatory manual, the "dreambook proper," is often found associated with other "superstitious" prognostic texts. Although this kind of dream manual differs from the others in basing its interpretations on the dream's content, its method of arriving at a knowledge of the future is as rigid and mechanical as theirs. Like modern popular dreambooks – some of which are descended more or less directly from medieval models¹² – the dreambook proper simply provides a list of the consequences that will follow from a variety of possible dream contents:

Aves in somnis qui viderit et cum ipsis pugnaverit: lite[m] aliquam significat . . .
 Cum sorore concumbere: damnum significat. Cum matre: securitatem significat . . .
 Dentes sibi cadere viderit: de parentibus suis aliquis morietur.¹³

For one who may have seen birds in [his] sleep and may have fought with them, [the dream] signifies a certain strife . . . To sleep with [one's] sister [in a dream] signifies loss; with [one's] mother, it signifies security . . . [For one who] may have seen his teeth fall out: some one of his kinsmen will die.

Such a method of dream interpretation again leaves itself open to the charge of arbitrariness. Can the dream of losing one's teeth, under all circumstances, for all dreamers, predict the same event? The dreambook claims that in fact it can, and in so doing, ascribes to a fatalism that leaves little room for efficacious human action or the just and merciful governance of God.

But medieval dreambooks do not leave themselves wholly vulnerable to such criticisms: they attempt to avoid disapprobation by affiliating themselves in a variety of ways with orthodox Christianity. In some *lunaria collectiva*, each stage of the moon is associated with a biblical event: "Luna prima. Adam natus fuit. . . Luna secunda. facta fuit Eua" [On the first moon, Adam was born. . . On the second moon, Eve was made].¹⁴ The dream alphabet includes Christian prayer ("in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti") as part of its divinatory ritual. Furthermore, in some versions, the instructions for using the dream alphabet specify that the "librum quemcunque" consulted should be a book of Holy Scripture, usually the psalter.¹⁵ And in an even more direct way, both the dream alphabet and the dreambook proper claim for themselves biblical authority. The dream alphabet calls itself, in some manuscripts, the *Sompnile*

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Joseph, claiming one of the two most famous Old Testament dream interpreters as its author. One version begins: “Somprile Joseph, quod composuit, quando captus fuit a Pharaone” [The dreambook of Joseph, which he composed while he was held captive by Pharaoh].¹⁶ In a similar way the dreambook proper claims Daniel as its author, calling itself the *Somniale Danielis*. In an elaborate introductory passage found in one of the two main manuscript groups, it invents for itself a direct connection with Nebuchadnezzar’s divinely-inspired dreams and Daniel’s divinely-inspired interpretation of them:

Incipit Somniale Danielis prophetae, quod vidit in Babilonia in diebus Nabuchodonosor regis. Quando petebatur a principibus civitatis et ab omni populo ut eis somnia quae videbant iudicaret, tunc Daniel propheta haec omnia scripsit, et eis ad legendum tradidit, dicens: “Ego sum Daniel propheta, unus de filiis Israel, qui captivi ducti sumus de Hierusalem, civitate sancta. Haec omnia a Deo facta sunt; nihil tamen per memetipsum dixi vel sustuli, sed ea a Domino accepi.” Quicumque legerint, Danielem intellegant.¹⁷

Here begins the dreambook of Daniel the prophet, which he saw in Babylon in the days of Nebuchadnezzar the king. When he was sought out by the nobles of the city and by all the people so that he might judge for them the dreams that they saw, then Daniel the prophet wrote down all these things and handed them over to them to be read, saying: “I am Daniel the prophet, one of the sons of Israel who were led captive from Jerusalem, the holy city. All the things [written here] were brought about by God; I have indeed said or affirmed nothing by myself, but have received these things from the Lord.” All those who may have read [this], may understand Daniel.

The medieval dreambooks thus call to their aid the most striking of biblical sanctions for the prognostic use of dreams, attempting to bolster their credibility by strong appeals to divinely-approved precedent.¹⁸

Indeed, the three types of dream interpretation manual were successful in gaining widespread credibility, to judge by the number of surviving manuscripts. At least thirteen manuscript copies and three early printed editions of the dream alphabet exist, and the Latin text was widely translated – into Old and Middle English, as well as into Middle High German, Old French, Italian, Old Romanian, and Welsh.¹⁹ The dream-lunar similarly survives in many Latin and vernacular versions. Max Förster, and Lynn Thorndike and Pearl Kibre list a total of over twenty Latin manuscripts of the specialized dreamlunar, the earliest dating from the ninth and tenth centuries.²⁰ This work was translated into the vernacular as early as the eleventh century: Förster has edited three distinct Old English versions existing in five separate copies.²¹ In the later Middle Ages, specialized dreamlunars and *lunaria collectiva* containing dream