
This is hardly a new book, having been published in 1994. It is, however, a work which raises important methodological questions for ancient historians, questions which remain pertinent. Its stated aim is modest: to provide 'a demonstration of the significance of dreams in the personal and cultural construction of meaning in late antiquity' (252). In fact, the project undertaken by Patricia Cox Miller (M) is more ambitious: to decipher the various dialects of the language of dreams and dreaming in late antiquity (116), and to demonstrate their effectiveness as 'expressions of transformations of self-identity and deepened self-consciousness' (151). As such, M has followed in the tradition of that most famous of ancient dream theorists, Artemidorus, and essayed a new *Oneirocritica*.

M's book, like that of her second-century predecessor, functions as 'a classification both of dreams, according to types of dreams, and by dreams, according to oneiric images' (80). It is divided into two sections. Part I concentrates on what Artemidorus called 'the value of the letters' (*Onir.* 3.66), and what M herself labels the semantic structure of dreams (80); that is, images and concepts of dreaming, including figurations (Chapter 1), theories (Chapter 2), interpretations (Chapter 3) and therapeutic applications (Chapter 4). She concentrates in particular on situating dreams and dreaming within the late antique thought world so evocatively painted by Dodds (*Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* [1970]), Brown (*The Making of Late Antiquity* [1978]) and Lane Fox (*Pagans and Christians* [1987]). To this end, M appropriates Brown's idea of an 'open frontier' between the physical and spiritual realms, places dreams imaginally within this frontier region, and identifies dreaming as a recognised technique for effecting communication between realms (51).

Part II consists of a series of essays on individual dreamers in late antiquity, namely Hermas (Chapter 5), Perpetua (Chapter 6), Aelius Aristides (Chapter 7), Jerome (Chapter 8), Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Nazianzen (Chapter 9). These essays are presented as concrete examples of how to 'use the letters together' (*Onir.* 3.66), how to decipher the semiotic codes of individual dream texts (80). These dreamers are united
by their active participation in the ‘figurative world of dreams’—a participation which, M suggests, transcends the divide between pagan and Christian (12). M uses their individual dream-texts as mechanisms for the exploration of a number of different, problematic elements of self-identity in late antiquity. Hermas’ dreams are interpreted as a means towards a more nuanced and insightful understanding of his place within his religious community and the wider world. Perpetua is identified as a Christian woman struggling to express her femininity both within and in opposition to the patriarchal metanarrative. Aristides’ tormented body and the tormenting cures he willingly undertook are reformulated as an internal struggle with the conventions of contemporary masculinity, and Jerome’s tormentingly erotic dreams are situated within his own erotic theory of asceticism. Finally, the dreams of the Gregories are portrayed as ‘salvific’ strategies for dealing with the pain of losing a loved one.

This is a highly stimulating book with a vast, wide-ranging and impressive bibliography. It stands at the intersection of post-modernism, semiotic theory, textual criticism and psychoanalysis—amongst other approaches. As a consequence, its significance for the practice of ancient history moves beyond its subject matter. The method is consciously interdisciplinary, and highlights the wide range of possible theoretical perspectives open to the scholar in such an undertaking. This, in turn, raises important questions of approach for the ancient historian.

One such question revolves around the relationship between text and context. How does one negotiate the distinct yet symbiotic relationships between dream experience, the written record of that experience and the various contexts of incorporation and interpretation to which that text is subjected? In particular, and with specific reference to the interdisciplinary nature of the work in question, what role do contemporary theoretical perspectives from disciplines outside ancient history play in that negotiation?

The dream text is a problematic source. M concludes her chapter on Jerome with the observation that ‘a written dream is a curious combination of the ephemeral (the dream) and the permanent (the text)’ (231). This ‘paradoxical construction’ of experience and text is not a straightforward case of the direct reportage of an event. Other factors intrude, including the purpose of the text within which the dream experience is incorporated:
one need only observe that none of the dreams examined in Part II occurs as an isolated, discrete text. It would be surprising if different contexts, together with an acknowledged tradition of interpretation and a corpus of associated literature, did not have a significant impact upon the ways in which the individual dream text itself was created. Texts cannot automatically be treated as equivalent to the experiences they relate. Dream experiences also present difficulties to the interpreter. M notes that there was in antiquity a belief that the context in which the dream occurred could affect the intended message, citing Artemidorus (Onir. 4.67; 4.27) on the relationship between a dreamer’s character or personal circumstances and the dream’s meaning (84; 91). The same dream can mean entirely different things when dreamed by different people, or even by the same person in different situations. For Artemidorus, then, it was encumbent on the interpreter to choose the correct meaning.

M, too, recognises the importance of the interpreter and the interpreter’s context. In each of her essays on individual dreamers, she clearly states both the perspectives offered by previous scholars on their dreams, and the different framework within which she plans to discuss the dreams. In this, she restates and reinforces the Graeco-Roman and rabbinic view that ‘a dream has sense only in the context of its interpretation’ (74). However, the existence of both primary and secondary texts creates more than one possible context for that interpretation. Does one focus on ancient or modern perspectives? Does one view the dream within or in spite of its culture? Or does one attempt to do both? M demonstrates the difficulty of making a consistent choice. She opts at one point to follow the lead of Winkler (The Constraints of Desire [1990], 126) and ‘to struggle against the tacit, conventional, and violent embrace in which we are held by the past’ (165), but in another context, she chooses to interpret Aristides’ struggles with his body within ‘his culture’s view of the body as a psychic text’ (200).

This work demonstrates the potential for tension between contemporary and ancient contexts of interpretation. This amounts to an uneasy marriage between (post-)modern theories of sexuality, eroticism, gender studies and semiotics on the one hand, and analysis of the ancient texts as expressions of the thought world of the period on the other. M quotes extensively from an eclectic collection of theoretical literature, interspersing these quotations with references to the primary sources. The
reader is invited to draw the conclusion that this juxtaposition of the two demonstrates their mutual applicability. Often, it is the ancient texts which are moulded to fit the perspectives offered by contemporary theorists. It would appear that M, like Artemidorus before her, has 'put more trust in the interpreter than in the dreams' (91)—but in this case, it is not second-century interpreters of dreams, but late-twentieth-century interpreters of social behaviour. Contemporary theoretical perspectives are privileged over the ancient evidence. Moreover, although this book provides an extremely useful and impressively eclectic collection of critical material, there is no underlying, unified theoretical position shaping and directing the selection of that material.

Nevertheless, this book demonstrates that it is possible for the study of dreams and dreaming in antiquity to move beyond the safely literary or historical perspectives of more conventional approaches (a point made by Price in a review of this book for JRS 86 [1996], 242). M's book represents a first step towards exploring the possibilities of interdisciplinary research for reconstructing the thought world of Late Antiquity. Future attempts can build on her work.

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