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Dream in Shakespeare

From Metaphor to Metamorphosis

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With a New Prologue by the Author

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Borrowed Robes: An Introduction

Concepts of dream and the dream world in the English Renaissance derived from a number of significant sources: the literature and philosophy of classical Greece and Rome, the native heritage of English folklore, and the medieval tradition of the dream vision, which came to its culmination in England with the works of Chaucer. Shakespeare drew upon this extensive body of material selectively, transforming and refining structural devices to accord with his larger poetic purposes. It is difficult to say with assurance that he made use of the work of any particular author or school, because of the paucity of biographical information and the universal nature of the dream experience. What we can do, however, is to take note of the general context of belief within which he was working and to point out those similarities with previous theory and practice which seem most striking. For by briefly examining the materials of contemporary dream thought, we can better comprehend the singularity of Shakespeare's contribution; acknowledging those insights possessed by his predecessors, we may perhaps approach with a clearer understanding the remarkable nature of his own transfiguring use of dream.

Dreams in the works of early classical authors tended to be either objective and monitory or symbolic and allegorical, thus predicting by direct or indirect means the course of future action. Homeric dreams are largely of the former type and center about a dream figure in the form of a god, a ghost, a special heavenly messenger, or a human being, living or dead. In this way, for example, the ghost of Patroclus appears to Achilles and incites him to revenge (*Iliad* XXIII.62-107). Objective

dreams of this sort appear with frequency not only in the epics¹ but also in the works of the Greek dramatists.² Their primary function is clearly that of plot development, and for that reason they are always direct in their instructions, never gnomic or metaphorical. Similar figures are present in several of Shakespeare's plays, from the accusatory apparitions of *Richard III* through the ghosts of Caesar, old Hamlet, and Banquo; all of these are in the revenge tradition and derive therefore not only from Patroclus, the first revenge figure of Greek literary tradition, but also from the intervening dramatic conventions of Senecan tragedy. The most frequent dream figure in Homer, the descended god, appears transmuted both in the ceremonial masque figure of Hymen at the close of *As You Like It* and in the Olympian deities of the four last plays, where the relative primitivism of the monitory device is well suited to the deliberately "artificial" or nonnaturalistic dramatic context. The *Macbeth* witches, though clearly prophetic figures, are variants of this tradition; they speak in purposeful ambiguities rather than in open warning or prediction, and their riddling prophecies, in part echoing Macbeth's self-delusive consciousness, are more closely related to symbolic than to direct or objective dream.

The tradition of symbolic dream, which likewise has its roots in Greek epic and dramatic practice, is part of a larger realm of gnomic prediction which also includes riddles and oracles. The stress placed upon ambiguity of language and image links this kind of dreaming, and its interpretation, to an abiding concept of poetry and dream as repositories of secret wisdom. There is only one symbolic dream in Homer, Penelope's dream of the geese and the eagle (*Odyssey* XIX.509-81), but symbolic dreams are found with even greater frequency than are direct dreams in the works of the Greek and Latin dramatists,³ and

1. E.g. *Iliad* II.4ff.; *Odyssey* IV.787-841, VI.13-51.

2. E.g. Aeschylus *Persae* 176-99; Sophocles *Electra* 417-25; Euripides *Hecuba* 1-52.

3. John Barker Stearns, *Studies of the Dream as a Technical Device in Latin Epic and Drama* (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1924; Lancaster Pa.: Lancaster Press, 1927), p. 36.

appear in great numbers in Herodotus's *Histories*⁴ and in Virgil and other Latin authors.⁵ Shakespeare's use of this device places a primary emphasis on the potential ambiguity of interpretation: the symbolic dreams of Clarence and Calpurnia, for example, contain true predictions which are misunderstood by their interpreters, in the first case through error, and in the second, through guile. As in the case of the witches in *Macbeth*, a proper understanding of the dream's hidden meaning thus becomes an index of self-knowledge; symbolic dreams in the plays are therefore closely related to character development at the same time that they often contain clusters of images which have an important bearing on language and action.

Shakespearean dreams are always "true," when properly interpreted, since they reflect a state of affairs which is as much internal and psychological as it is external. The warning behind Homer's famous simile of the gates of horn and ivory, the one gate issuing true dreams, the other, false (*Odyssey* XIX.560ff.),⁶ thus becomes subjective in Shakespeare and has reference to the subconscious state of mind of the dreamer rather than to supernatural dream origins. The only false dreams in his plays are not really dreams at all, but rather inventions on the part of characters bent on manipulating others, as in the case of the prophecy about "G" in *Richard III*, or in Iago's narration of "Cassio's dream." These fictitious dreams, likewise, have precedents in classical literature, both in epic and in drama, where they are basically used to bring about a certain course of action.⁷ Shakespeare, in adapting the device to his own purposes, extends and transforms it by relating the supposed dream to the psychological nature of both

4. E.g. VII.16, the dream of Xerxes.

5. E.g. *Aeneid* IV.465, Dido's dream; Valerius Flaccus *Argonautica* VII.141-46; Silius Italicus *Punica* III.168-82; Statius *Thebaid* IX.570-84. Cf. Stearns, *Studies of the Dream*, pp. 31-43.

6. Cf. also *Aeneid* VI.893-96; Plato *Charmides* 173a; Horace *Odes* III.27, 41ff.; and other classical echoes of this popular figure.

7. E.g., *Aeneid* V.636-40; Plautus *Mostellaria* 486-505; *Miles gloriosus* 380-95.

its inventor and its hearer, so that it contains paradoxical "truths" of a wider significance for the play as a whole.

Perhaps more influential than any of these specific dream devices, however, is the interest shown by classical writers in the existence of a dream world, or at least a country and dwelling place of dreams. Descriptions of such places are included in the *Odyssey* (XXII.11-14), the *Aeneid* (VI.273), and the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid (XI.592-593) and are in each case directly connected with the idea of a journey. The journeys in both the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* are to the underworld, where the voyager converses with shades of the dead. Here the dreamer, reversing the pattern of the monitory apparition, has come to the dream figures, and enters for a moment the transforming world of dream, from which he will return greatly changed. The Ovidian instance is equally interesting: Iris enters the cave of Sleep to fetch a dream which will perform the metamorphosis of Alcyone. The Shakespearean pattern of the journey to the dream world follows the same triple movement, and its object, likewise, is regeneration. On balance it is this broader pattern which is for Shakespeare the most important heritage of classical literature: the intuition of the relation of dream to metamorphosis and transformation. The dream devices themselves tend in this direction, taking the dreamer momentarily out of time and leading him toward a moment of supernatural enlightenment, an accession of knowledge which is frequently self-knowledge. The pattern of the journey, so consistently related to the borderland of dream and the dream figure, is a larger structural form in which the same transformation occurs; the individual dream is transmuted by means of metaphor into an enduring dream state, the subjective condition of man in the world of dream. Increasingly, as Shakespeare's use of dream matures and develops with his art, this larger pattern is the one to which he most frequently returns.

Literary analogues to dream in the plays of Shakespeare are paralleled in importance by a developing line of psychological

inquiry which had, by this time, anticipated a number of aspects of modern dream theory. The principal transmitter of these insights was the second-century (A.D.) dream theorist Artemidorus of Daldis; however, several earlier thinkers also displayed a surprising understanding of the processes of dream.

Plato's attitude toward dream is conditioned by the initial recognition, fundamental to Shakespeare's own dream world, of the antinomy of dream and reason. In the *Republic* (572) he cautions against "the wild beast within us," which may leave us "the sport of fantastic and lawless visions," and suggests as a remedy the retention of reason even in sleep. In thus significantly noting the power of the irrational over the subconscious mind, he describes a mode of dream activity which most closely resembles the anarchic designs of Caliban or the nightmare opening scene of *Othello*. Elsewhere, however, Plato acknowledges a positive element in dreaming, the potential acquisition of higher knowledge. The *Timaeus* (244-57, 265) speaks of the soul's accession of wisdom in a condition of divine madness allied to prophecy, and this was popularly taken by Neoplatonic dream commentators as evidence for the doctrine of higher knowledge conveyed through dream.⁸ The conventional association of dream with madness is explicitly articulated in Shakespeare by Theseus (*MND* V.i.2ff.) and utilized with great dramatic relevance in a number of the plays, among them *Hamlet* and *King Lear*.

The concept of dream as an illuminative experience which leads to new knowledge, often divinely inspired, was countered in the classical period by a polar view attributing dreams to physiological and psychological causes. The effect of this skeptical view, as expressed by Aristotle in the essays *De Somniis* and *De Divinatione per Somnum*, was to depreciate the role of dream in the life of man. Yet in the course of his scientific exploration Aristotle makes the signal observation, basic to later

8. Francis X. Newman, *Somnium: Medieval Theories of Dreaming and the Form of Vision Poetry* (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1963; Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1963), pp. 60ff.

Freudian analysis, that the hallucinations of the insane, the illusions of the waking, and the fantasies of dreams all share a common origin.⁹ The world of dream was thus acknowledged to be considerably broader in scope than the nocturnal dream itself. This insight is of considerable importance to our investigation, because the part played by waking illusions in Shakespeare's plays is as great or greater than that played by literal dreams: it is the waking illusion, in fact, that provides the most salient test of the criteria of "reality"; and the exchange of the states of reality and illusion becomes in the plays the first transforming act of dream.

By far the most important single work in pre-Freudian dream analysis, however, was the *Oneirocritica* of Artemidorus of Daldis, a volume at once theoretical and practical and the model of the dream books which were to enjoy such popularity in sixteenth-century England. Artemidorus based his method upon the principle of association, a principle which dream interpretation shares with sympathetic magic and the occult. Association is also, manifestly, the fundamental principle of Freudian dream analysis, though with a critical difference noted by Freud himself: ¹⁰ Artemidorus concentrated his attention on the associations of the *interpreter*, whereas Freud was concerned with the associations in the mind of the *dreamer*. Shakespeare uses both methods in casting the symbolism of his dreams; the language of symbols in Clarence's dream or in Macbeth's vision of the dagger, for example, is particularly appropriate for the condition and state of mind of the dreamer and reflects the dreamer's own thoughts as elsewhere manifested in the play. In many cases, however, the dream possesses an extended metaphorical meaning in addition to a literal and specific one, and this extended meaning is often perceptible to the audience and not to the dreamer. Thus Hermia's dream of the serpent in *A Midsummer Night's*

9. *De Somniis* 458b 25-29; 460b 3-18.

10. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (Standard Edition, London: The Hogarth Press and the Institution of Psycho-analysis, 1953; rpt., New York, 1965), chap. 2, p. 130.

Dream functions locally in the plot as an intuition of bodily harm, but communicates at the same time a sense of the dark and irrational nature of dream vital to an understanding of the forest experience. This potential multiplicity in meaning is central to Shakespeare's use of dream in the plays and contributes to his enrichment and development of the dream form.

Artemidorus places particular stress on the ambiguity of individual dream symbols: they may mean one of a number of things, dependent upon the circumstances of the dream's occurrence and the relation of its contents to the dreamer's life, occupation, and name. The dream itself thus could be given no objective interpretation, but was rather a subjective construct which took on specific significance when applied to the dreamer. This theory controverted earlier assumptions about inherently good or evil dreams: the moral content of the dream now became a function of interpretation. Perhaps the clearest example of a parallel insight in Shakespeare is the prophetic dream of Calpurnia, which predicts the assassination of Caesar; the deliberate misinterpretation given it by Decius Brutus reverses the apparent meaning and thus paradoxically contributes to its fulfillment.

Of the many contributions of Artemidorus, however, the most interesting from our point of view is the emphasis he placed on the relationship of puns and wordplay to dream interpretation. He records a dream experience of Alexander the Great which nicely exhibits the importance of language to dream. According to his account, Alexander became uneasy at his lack of success in the continuing siege of Tyre, and dreamt one night of a satyr dancing on his shield. The interpreter deciphered this dream by taking the Greek word for satyr, *satyros*, and dividing it into two parts, *sa Tyros*, "Tyre is thine."¹¹ Verbal ambiguity here becomes the point of transference between what Freud called the manifest dream content (*satyros*) and the latent dream thoughts (*sa Tyros*) which lie behind it. The pun is a kind of dream condensation, contain-

11. *Ibid.*, chap. 2, p. 131n.

ing at once a literal and a metaphorical or hidden meaning. In Shakespearean dream utterances the same enriching ambiguity obtains: when Bottom says "Man is but an ass, if he go about to expound this dream" (*MND* IV.ii.207-08), the play on "ass" functions to remind the audience that the dream world brings together reality and illusion in language as well as in action. The language of dream in Shakespeare is the essential fabric of the dream state; it is the paradigm of all transformation, and transformation is at the heart of dream.

This conclusion was far beyond Artemidorus; he looked upon dreams as passive objects of scrutiny, capable of decipherment with the help of a chart of dream symbols. The idea of creating a dream, or of the Jungian association of dream and poetry, was completely outside the range of his thought. The importance of the *Oneirocritica*, as of the other examples of early dream theory, lies, once again, not in any conjectural influence it may have exerted upon Shakespeare, but rather in its availability to thinkers and writers of his age. Such ideas were in the air, and it is well to take note of them; they suggest an intellectual climate, but they do no more.

The remarkable degree to which dream lore and interpretation captured the popular mind in the sixteenth century is suggested by the great number of editions of Artemidorus which appeared throughout Europe in that period. A Greek edition was printed at Venice in 1518, a Latin edition at Basel in 1539, and a French edition at Lyons in 1546. The English version, which did not appear until 1644, had gone through a surprising twenty-four editions by 1740. Other dream books also enjoyed a considerable popularity: the anonymous Latin *Dream Book of Daniel*, for example, first appeared in Venice at the beginning of the century and was printed in English in 1542. Like others of its type it concentrated upon the distinction between divine and demonic dreams, for just as Hamlet doubts for a moment the origin of the ghost (*Ham.* II.ii.605-10), and Antigonus is reluctant to believe in the existence of walking spirits (*WT* III.iii.15-16), so Christian dream inter-

preters—and particularly those who espoused the Protestant view—were at this time preoccupied with the possibility of a devilish impersonation of the divine. The proliferation of dream lore was equally great among the less educated; coarsely printed chapbooks with such gaudy titles as *The Old Egyptian Fortune-Teller's Last Legacy*, *The Golden Dreamer*, and *A Groatworth of Wit for a Penny* circulated widely throughout the period.¹²

The enthusiasm of English readers was in part an outgrowth of a great medieval interest in dream, which manifested itself in both popular and learned forms—in the evolution of native folk traditions and in the development of a poetry of dream. The folk calendar included a number of seasonal holidays whose central rite was the active seeking of prophetic dreams: Saint Agnes' Eve, Halloween, All Saints' Night, and particularly Midsummer Eve, which by Shakespeare's time had also become popularly associated with the delusive "midsummer madness." It is out of this native tradition that the singular figures of Puck, Queen Mab, and Ariel emerge as inhabitants of Shakespearean dream worlds. Significantly, both Puck and Mab have undergone a number of changes at Shakespeare's hand. Puck, under the name of Robin Goodfellow, was popularly imagined to be the national practical joker, responsible for domestic upsets and inexplicable pranks; only with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* does he begin to be considered a fairy and a resident of a special fairy world.¹³ Likewise, Queen Mab, prior to her appearance in Mercutio's narrative, was associated with local superstition and such homely activities as the theft of dairy produce;¹⁴ Mercutio himself acknowledges that for all her fanciful attributes she remains "that very Mab / That plats the manes of horses in the night" (*Rom.* I.iv.88-89). Ariel, who is a more complex figure, nonetheless has in him elements of Puck and, as Frank Kermode has observed, "often behaves

12. Norman MacKenzie, *Dreams and Dreaming* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1965), pp. 53, 75f.

13. Minor White Latham, *The Elizabethan Fairies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1930), pp. 219-62.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

like an English fairy." ¹⁵ Neither Puck nor Mab is considered diminutive in size until their appearance in Shakespeare, nor, indeed, were many native English fairies so considered prior to that time.¹⁶

The transformation of these folk fairies into their Shakespearean counterparts is of interest because it is related to a motif we have already noted in Greek and Latin literature, that of the journey to the dream world. The dream world for Shakespeare is a place of metamorphosis, of transfiguration and renewal; moreover, as is consonant with the usual idea of dream, it functions below the level of consciousness, in the realm of the imagination. When this concept is adumbrated in *Romeo and Juliet*, the picture Shakespeare gives of Queen Mab in action is one that skillfully combines invisibility, seemingly irrational phenomena, and a prankishness which is often mischievous and occasionally sharpens toward the malign. These same elements are present in the much more fully developed figure of Puck, whose world is expanded to fill an entire drama, rather than a brief visionary monologue. When the dreamers, following the Shakespearean pattern, pass into the dream world of forest or island—in Mab's case, an early one, simply the world of sleep—they encounter dream and transformation figures which have been sufficiently removed from the human analogues of their folk originals to become themselves embodiments, as well as agents, of the transfiguring world of dream. The raw materials of folk belief, like that of classical dream thought, is here transformed by the poet so that it reflects a state of mind.

But medieval experience provided Shakespeare with learned as well as folk example. The development of superstitious dream belief and fairy lore was paralleled in England by an extensive intellectual and literary tradition which absorbed the ideas of the Neoplatonic dream theorists and culminated in the dream poems of Chaucer, the most significant explorations of

15. *The Tempest*, Arden edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 143.

16. Latham, *Elizabethan Fairies*, pp. 187-92.

dream in English literature before Shakespeare. The principal intellectual precursor of this literary development was the Neoplatonist Macrobius, author of the influential *Commentarius in Somnium Scipionis*, to which Chaucer refers in *The Book of the Duchess* (284), *The Parliament of Fowls* (31ff.), and the *Nun's Priest's Tale* (3123-24). Macrobius attempted to codify dreams and to place them in a hierarchy of values, giving the least emphasis to physiological dreams of the kind explained by Aristotle and the rationalists and reserving his most careful attention for those dreams which led to an access of higher knowledge, either directly or through a figurative and symbolic vision of the future. We may notice the extent to which this Neoplatonic tradition, later continued and expanded in the works of John of Salisbury and Alanus de Insulis, mirrors the speculations of classical writers and philosophers in confronting the question of truth and falsehood in dreams and in dividing fundamental dream forms into the direct and the symbolic. The contemporaneous investigations of the church fathers likewise concentrated upon the so-called higher dream, which conferred special insight; and the greatest religious dream poem of the period, the *Divina Commedia*, is structurally based upon the same threefold pattern of confusion, journey to the dream world, and harmonious regeneration which we noted in the great epics of the Greek and Roman classical period.¹⁷

The principal literary influence upon Chaucer's dream poetry, however, and the direct source of the vision form in English, is the French tradition of the dream or love vision, most clearly set forward in a poem which Chaucer tells us he had translated, the *Roman de la Rose* of Guillaume de Lorris. Many of the elements of the *Roman*—the god of love, the bemused and often sleepless narrator, the May morning, the garden with its allegorical or mythological inhabitants—recur in Chaucer's own dream poems—*The Book of the Duchess*; the *Prologue to The Legend of Good Women*; *The Parliament of Fowls*; and *The House of Fame*, which in part parodies and

17. Newman, *Somnium*, p. 74.