Unnatural Urges: Sex-Dreams in the Ancient World
The Eighteenth Dorothy Buchan Memorial Lecture
PJT, 13/11/18

1. Dreams and social history

Brian Masters, *Dreams about H.M. the Queen and Other Members of the Royal Family* (1972), 34:

The Royal Family came to tea. It seemed I had nothing for them to eat, so having dyed an old blanket dark blue, I cut this up and made sandwiches with it, hoping they wouldn't notice it was a blanket. (Kate Hutchison: Wrington, Somerset)

2. Artemidorus of Daldis, *Oneirocritica* (‘The Interpretation of Dreams’) 


There is currently no satisfactory English translation (beware the very poor translation by Daniel Harris-McCoy, *Artemidorus’ Oneirocritica* [Oxford, 2012]); a new translation by Martin Hammond will appear in the Oxford World’s Classics series in 2019. [Please note that the translated section mentioned as being on the final pages of the handout by Dr Thonemann has not been reproduced. This is to avoid potential copyright issues.]

3. Dream-interpretation as a form of divination

In an Egyptian prison, a butler and a baker recount their dreams to a Canaanite fellow-prisoner (*Genesis* 40:8-13):

And they said unto him, We have dreamed a dream, and there is no interpreter of it. And Joseph said unto them, Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me them, I pray you. And the chief butler told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, In my dream, behold, a vine was before me; And in the vine were three branches: and it was as though it budded, and her blossoms shot forth; and the clusters thereof brought forth ripe grapes: And Pharaoh’s cup was in my hand: and I took the grapes, and I pressed them into Pharaoh’s cup, and I gave the cup into Pharaoh’s hand. And Joseph said unto him, This is the interpretation of it: The three branches are three days: Yet within three days shall Pharaoh lift up thine head, and restore thee unto thy place: and thou shalt deliver Pharaoh’s cup into his hand, after the former manner when thou wast his butler.

Precognitive dreams in the Graeco-Roman world: e.g. Homer, *Odyssey* 19.535–53 (Penelope’s goose-dream); Aeschylus, *Libation-Bearers* 532–50 (Clytemnestra gives birth to a snake); etc. Even Aristotle accepts that dreams can be pre-cognitive: see his *On Divination in Sleep*. For discussion, see Matthew Dillon, *Omens and Oracles: Divination in Ancient Greece* (2017); Peter Struck, *Divination and Human Nature: A Cognitive History of Intuition in Classical Antiquity* (2016)

If a woman imagines that she has given birth to an eagle, she will bear a son who, if poor, will serve in the army and be primus pilus in a legion, just as the eagle is the commander of the birds – and every legion has an eagle at its head. If the son has adequate means, he will be a prize athlete, and presented to the emperor; if he is rich, he will have wide rule or even become emperor himself. (Artemidorus 2.20.3)

4. Artemidorus on sex-dreams (*Oneirocritica 1.78-80*)


In the consideration of *sexual intercourse* the best analytical procedure one could adopt is to speak first of intercourse which accords with nature (*physis*), law (*nomos*), and custom (*ethos*); then intercourse which is contrary to law (*nomos*); and thirdly intercourse which is contrary to nature (*physis*). (Artemidorus 1.78.1)

(1) Sex-acts that accord with ‘nature, law and custom’:
(a) penetrating one’s wife or mistress (1.78.2);
(b) penetrating a prostitute (1.78.3);
(c) penetrating a woman one does not know (1.78.4);
(d) penetrating a female slave, and penetrating or being penetrated by a male slave (1.78.5);
(e) penetrating a female acquaintance (1.78.6);
(f) being penetrated by a male acquaintance (1.78.6);
(g) masturbating oneself, or (if one is a slave) masturbating one’s master (1.78.7).

(2) Sex-acts that are ‘contrary to law (*nomos*)’:
(a.i) penetrating or being penetrated by one’s son (1.78.8);
(a.ii) penetrating one’s daughter, a sister, brother, or friend (1.78.9);
(a.iii) penetrating one’s mother (1.79.1–6);
(b.i) being fellated by someone else, or
(b.ii) performing fellatio or cunnilingus on someone else (1.79.7).

(3) Sex-acts that are ‘contrary to nature (*physis*)’
(a) having sex with oneself, either auto-penetration or auto-fellatio (1.80.1; cf. 5.31);
(b) a woman penetrating another woman (1.80.2);
(c) penetrating a goddess, and penetrating or being penetrated by a male god (1.80.3);
(d) penetrating or being penetrated by a corpse (1.80.4);
(e) penetrating or being penetrated by a wild beast (1.80.5).

5. Deviancy: oral sex

Someone dreamt that he was practising cunnilingus on his own wife: and then again someone dreamt that he was being fellated by his wife. Even after a long time none of the outcomes signified by this sort of dream, and which usually result for other people, had happened to them. As there was no obvious reason for this, I was puzzled, and thought it strange that there should have been no outcome for them. But later on I learnt that both men made a habit of these practices and were not keeping their mouths clean. So it was not surprising that nothing happened to them: they were simply seeing in their dreams what regularly gave them arousal. (Artemidorus 4.59.1)

6. Sex and social status

To have sex with one’s own slave, female or male, is auspicious, because his slaves are the possessions of the dreamer: so they signify that the dreamer will take natural pleasure in his possessions as they increase in number and value. But to be penetrated by a household servant is not auspicious: it signifies that one will be held in contempt and harmed by that servant. (Artemidorus 1.78.5)
For a man it is auspicious to be penetrated by someone richer and older, as it is usual to receive benefits from such people: but penetration by someone younger and indigent is malign, as it is usual to confer benefits on such people. (Artemidorus 1.78.6)

7. Pleasure and consent

To dream of having sex with one’s wife, if she is willing, submissive, and not resistant to intercourse, is auspicious for all alike. A wife represents the dreamer’s craft or business, from which he derives his pleasure, or else whatever he manages and controls, as he does his wife. The dream signifies profits from these sources – sex gives pleasure, and so does profit. But if his wife resists or will not make herself available, the opposite is signified. (Artemidorus 1.78.2)

To be forcibly penetrated by one’s son signifies that the dreamer will have harm done to him by his son, harm which will also cause pain to the son. (Artemidorus 1.78.8)

A man whose son was sick dreamt that he penetrated his son and took pleasure in it: the boy lived, because when we speak of ‘possessing’ someone that can refer both to sexual intercourse and to continued ownership, and this outcome was understood as the result of the father’s pleasure. Someone else with a sick son dreamt that he penetrated his son, and was distressed that he did so: this boy died, because we use the term ‘corruption’ equally of both sexual violation and death, and this outcome was understood as the result of the father’s distress. (Artemidorus 4.4.2)

To dream of sex with a god or goddess, or of penetration by a god..., if they enjoy the intercourse it signifies benefits conferred by their superiors: but if they do not enjoy it, it signifies things which will alarm and upset them. (Artemidorus 1.80.3)

A man dreamt that he was sexually penetrated by Ares. He developed a condition in his anus and rectal passage which could not be cured by any other means, and he submitted to surgery to effect the cure. Ares signified the surgical knife, as we often refer metaphorically to a knife as an ‘Ares’, and the pleasure the man took in the intercourse indicated that the surgery would not be fatal. (Artemidorus 5.87)

8. ‘Natural’ and ‘unnatural’ sexual positions

Natural: So if someone dreams of penetrating his mother face-to-face, which some call the position according with nature (kata physin)... this dream is auspicious for every artisan and labourer. A man’s trade is commonly called his ‘mother’, so coupling with this ‘mother’ can only mean keeping busy and earning a living from one’s trade (technē). It is auspicious too for every politician and statesman, because a mother symbolizes one’s homeland (patris). So just as anyone having sex in accordance with the law of Aphrodite [i.e. consensual sex], with a compliant and willing partner, is given authority over every part of her body, so a politician or statesman having this dream will preside over all the affairs of his city (polis)...

The dream has a sick man back on his feet and signifies that he will regain the state which nature intended, as nature is the universal mother of all things, and ‘as nature intended’ is what we say of healthy people, not the sick. (Artemidorus 1.79.2-3)

Unnatural: To dream of penetrating one’s mother when she is presenting her backside is not auspicious. The dreamer will have backs turned on him either by his mother herself, or by his country, his trade, or whatever project he has in hand. It is malign also to dream of having intercourse with one’s mother standing up: it is only people who have no bed or blanket who adopt this position, and so this signifies pressures and constricting worries. Malign too is a dream of sex with one’s mother when she is positioned on her knees, and equally shameful is intercourse with her turned flat on her stomach. These signify complete destitution, because the mother is unable to move. (Artemidorus 1.79.5)
Justification: That men’s invention of all these other modes of sexual congress is down to abuse (hybris), unbridled lust (akolasia), and drunkenness (paroinia), when nature (physis) has taught them only the face-to-face position, can be seen from the behaviour of the other animals. All species have their one habitual method of copulation, and they do not deviate from it, because they are following the dictates of nature. So for example some mount from behind, like the horse, donkey, goat, bull, stag, and the other four-footed animals; some first join their mouths, like snakes, doves, and weasels; some do it gradually, like the ostrich; some, like all birds, get on top of the females and use their weight to force them down to the mating position; and some, like fish, have no contact at all, but the females gather up the sperm which the males have extruded. So it is reasonable to suppose that men also have a specific position, which is face-to-face, and that they have invented the others when giving rein to abuse and lust. (Artemidorus 1.79.6)

9. Male-male penetrative sex symbolically problematic

For someone living with his son and keeping company with him, a dream of having sex with his son is malign: the two will necessarily be separated, because intercourse between men usually involves one party turning his back on the other... If anyone dreams of penetrating his own father, he will be exiled from his own homeland or estranged from his father: either the father himself, or the people of his country (the equivalent of a father), will turn their back on him. (Artemidorus 1.78.8)

To penetrate a brother, whether older or younger, is auspicious for the dreamer: he will get on top of his brother and look down on him. And finally anyone dreaming of penetrating a friend will turn him into an enemy, for injuring him without previous cause. (Artemidorus 1.78.9)

Male-male sexual relations in Artemidorus’ waking world (as opposed to things one might dream about): only boy prostitutes (briefly) at 4.66, and three contemptuous mentions of men who enjoy being anally penetrated (the catamite or kinaidos: 2.12.14, 3.29, 5.65).

10. Against Foucault

In this world, sexual relations between men appear to be taken for granted – that is, provided that certain differences of age and status are respected. (Foucault, The History of Sexuality 3: The Care of the Self, 1986, 35)

In the present chapter, Artemidoros’ Dream Analysis is used to reveal the basic principles of meaning employed by Greek-speaking men around the Mediterranean basin in ancient times to interpret sexual acts... The value of his text for us depends on our confident realization that it represents not just one man’s opinion about the sexual protocols of ancient societies but an invaluable collection of evidence – a kind of ancient Kinsey report – based on interviews with thousands of clients. (John J. Winkler, The Constraints of Desire (1990), 20, 33).