

## Dreams, Stress, and Interpretation in Chaucer and His Contemporaries

by

David G. Hale

State University of New York—Brockport

As is well known, dreams are important components of many works of medieval literature. One or more dreams can be the subject of most of a poem, as in the *Roman de la Rose*, *Pearl*, *Piers Plowman*, the *Book of the Duchess*, and the *House of Fame*. Or one or more dreams can be a relatively small yet important part of a work; Dante's *Vita nuova* and *Purgatorio* are familiar examples, as are Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*, *Knight's Tale*, and *Troilus and Criseyde*. In many cases the transitions into or out of these dreams are narrative stress points. Narrators, who are often the dreamers, exhibit tension or anxiety about the dream—uncertainty about the nature of dreams, the sources of dreams, the truth (if any) of dreams, the possibility of interpretation or application of dreams, the appropriateness of writing down dreams, and so on. Their comments exhibit a special justificatory form of literary self-consciousness that appeared in England in the late fourteenth century.<sup>1</sup> In some cases the difficulties are clearly and explicitly resolved. More commonly the author evades them through a rhetorical tactic: appeals to authorities and analysis by classification are among the most frequent. This essay discusses a few English examples of these dreamers' narrative difficulties, relates the coping strategies of the poets to those in nonliterary medieval sources, and proposes an additional instance of these strategies in the early fourteenth-century biblical commentary of Nicholas of Lyra.

A relatively simple situation occurs in the *Book of the Duchess*; the dreamer-narrator falls asleep

and therwith even  
Me mette so ynly swete a sweven,  
So wonderful that never yit

Y trowe no man had the wyt  
To konne wel my sweven rede.

(275-79)<sup>2</sup>

No man can interpret this dream, not even the patriarch Joseph, who successfully interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh in Genesis 41, or Macrobius, who wrote about the dream of Scipio. Joseph and Macrobius, two of the most frequently cited "auctoritees" in discussions of dreams, are usually quoted to affirm the knowable truth of dreams. In spite of the uninterpretability of his dream, the narrator proceeds to recount it for us and concludes his poem with a brief statement of his waking up and resolving "to put this sweven in ryme" (1332), the poem we are about to finish reading. By asserting the uninterpretability of his dream, the narrator effectively questions the truth or authority of his text, yet he provides no suggestion as to how it is desirable or possible to turn his dream into poetry. A somewhat analogous situation—one would not want to call it a source—occurs in Dante's *Vita nuova*, in which the first dream is described in the first sonnet, which evokes a variety of interpretations from others.<sup>3</sup> Variety of interpretation is in effect no interpretation, here applied to the poem rather than the dream.

A different but still simple form of anxiety appears in the proem to the first book of the *House of Fame*. The narrator begins and concludes with a prayer that "God turne us every drem to goode!" (58) and explains the necessity for such a prayer by running in exasperation through some of the types, causes, and significances of dreams proposed by "grete clerkys" (53).<sup>4</sup> None of these classifications apply to his dream; its telling is justified only because it is "so wonderful" (62), a judgment reenforced by a later comparison to the dreams of six predecessors including Scipio, Pharaoh, and another recurrent "ensample," "kyng Nabugodonosor" from the book of Daniel (514-16).

More complicated situations abound. Three examples will illustrate something of the range. Early in book 5 of *Troilus and Criseyde*, just after Criseyde's departure from Troy, Troilus has an unspecified number of dreams of dreadful things: he is alone in a horrible place or captured by his enemies (5.246-52). Walter C. Curry suggests that this a meaningless *phantasma* and quotes the Pseudo-Augustinian comment on Macrobius's term.<sup>5</sup> It could as well be labeled a *somnium*, a prophetic yet enigmatic dream lacking an interpreter. Hearing of these dreams, Pandarus delivers a four-stanza attack on them. They proceed from Troilus's melancholy and have no meaning:

"A straw for alle swevenes signifaunce!  
God helpe me so, I counte hem nought a bene!  
Ther woot no man aright what dremes mene."

(5.362-64)

He reenforces this view by skeptically tabulating some of the generally available theories of the sources of dreams. Priests say “that dremes ben the revelaciouns / Of goddes” and that “‘they ben infernals illusiouns’” (5.366–68). Physicians say that—take your choice—dreams come from “complexiouns” (5.369), or fasting, or overeating. Others attribute dreams to impressions in the mind; still others say that dreams have something to do with the time of year or phase of the moon (5.372–77). To Pandarus the most appropriate response to the bewildering alternatives in fourteenth-century oneirology is partying at Sarpedon’s palace.

The distraction is at best temporary, for later in book 5 Troilus is beset by “malencolye” while awaiting Criseyde’s promised return. Immediately after a long scene (5.771–1099) in which she gives her heart to Diomedes, Troilus dreams of

a bor with tuskes grete,  
That slepte ayeyn the bryghte sonnes hete.  
And by this bor, faste in his armes folde,  
Lay, kyssyng ay, his lady bryght, Criseyde.  
(5.1238–41)

Reporting his dream to Pandarus, Troilus concludes that “my lady bryght, Criseyde, hath me bytrayed” (5.1247), a fact that “the blysfyl goddes, thorgh here grete myght / Han in my drem yshewed it ful right” (5.1250–51). Boccaccio’s Troilo similarly has no trouble interpreting his dream.<sup>6</sup> However, Chaucer complicates matters by having Pandarus, not at all interested in this line of thought, counter that

“Have I nat seyde er this,  
That dremes many a maner man bigle?  
And whi? For folk expounden hem amys.”  
(5.1276–78)

He proposes an alternative interpretation, that the amorous boar may signify Criseyde’s father “‘which that old is and ek hoor’” and that she is kissing him because he is about to die (5.1284, 1287).

Although Pandarus manages to distract Troilus into writing a long letter to Criseyde, her evasive answer brings Troilus back to his melancholy and what he continues to regard as his divinely sent dream of the boar. He turns to his sister Cassandra, who is known as a “Sibille.” At some length she traces the boar from the Calydonian boar killed by Meleager, summarizing Statius’s *Thebaid*. Diomedes himself had earlier devoted a stanza to part of this history (5.932–38).<sup>7</sup> She concludes,

“This ilke boor bitokneth Diomedes,  
Tideus sone, that down descended is

Fro Meleagre, that made the boor to blede;  
 And thy lady, wherso she be, ywis,  
 This Diomedé hire herte hath, and she his.  
 Wep if thou wolt, or lef, for out of doute,  
 This Diomedé is inne, and thou are oute."

(5.1513-19)

Her interpretation, one of the bluntest lines in English literature, is quite true, as any reader who can remember what happened five hundred lines previously must recognize. Troilus, however, cannot stand the plain truth of his dream plainly stated and explodes: " 'thow sorceresse, / With al thy false goost of prophecy!' " (5.1520-21). The question of Troilus's understanding the truth of his dream and its possibly divine source is thereby evaded. The short-term result is the therapeutic effect of Troilus's anger—he forgets his "wo," gets out of bed, and carries on with his life. The narrator, incidentally, lets the characters do the talking about Troilus's dream and its interpretability and worries instead about our interpretation of Criseyde's behavior.

In *Piers Plowman*, the dreamer-narrator has frequent opportunities to reflect on his disturbing dreams and dreams within dreams. He also says several times that he writes down his dreams soon after awakening: "And I awakned therwith and wroot as me mette" (19.481),<sup>8</sup> a typically concise statement that offers little about just how or why dreams become poetry. A more substantial discussion occurs after the dreamer is awakened by the argument between Piers and the Priest over the pardon that Piers has (7.119) or has not (C text) pulled asunder. The dreamer reflects on this dream at length, wondering if it might be true (7.148-56), allowing that he has no taste for "songewarie [interpretation of dreams] for I se it ofte faille" (7.154) and citing the much-quoted distich of Cato, *somnia ne cures* (do not heed dreams). He then reflects on the biblical precedents of Daniel and Joseph. Langland retells the second of Joseph's two prophetic—and provocative—dreams in Genesis 37:

And Ioseph mette merueillously how the moone  
 and the sonne  
 And the eleuene sterres hailed hym alle.  
 Thanne Iacob iugged Iosephes sweuene:  
 "Beau fitz," quod his fader, "for defaute we  
 shullen,  
 I myself and my sones, seche thee for nede."  
 It bifel as his fader seide in Pharaoes tyme  
 That Ioseph was Iustice Egipte to loke;  
 It bifel as his fader tolde, hise frendes there hym  
 sought.

(7.165-72)

A minor point about this passage is that although a subservient role of Joseph's mother, "his dame," is included in Jacob's interpretation of the dream in Genesis 37.10, Rachel's death-giving birth to Benjamin had already been reported in Genesis 35.19, so Jacob's comment presented quite a little puzzle to commentators: since Rachel was obviously not able to seek Joseph in Egypt (Gen. 42), the dream was not completely fulfilled. Nevertheless, these precedents lead Langland's dreamer to take his dream seriously, to comment upon it at some length, and to seek Dowel, a quest that becomes the action of his next dream. The validity or appropriateness of his reasoning by analogy in this case remains unexplored.

These statements from the end of passus 7 are among the materials from *Piers Plowman* which, as editors have noted, reappear in *Mum and the Sothsegger* (ca. 1400).<sup>9</sup> After an extended survey of the corruptions of society and the role of Mum, the silence that says nothing about them, the narrator falls asleep. His dream, something over four hundred lines, is primarily a dialogue with a gardener who discourses extensively on bees, especially the useless drones. Although this clearly refers to the idle courtiers of the recently deposed Richard II, the narrator says that this "wise tale . . . is to mistike for me" (1087-89). The gardener, in response to a question, admonishes the narrator to follow the truth-teller and encourages him in the "blessid bisynes of thy boke-making" (1281). The narrator frames his dream with statements about the validity of dreams. At the beginning he briefly sets the experience of Daniel against the objection of Cato (874-75). At the end he again cites Daniel briefly (1311-12) and the example of Joseph's dream of the sun, moon, and eleven stars at greater length (1313-30). He concludes that some dreams are true and determines to obey the gardener and to tell the truth of how the land is governed. Affirming the truth of dreams leads the narrator to a major decision about his life, particularly its literary aspect. His metaphor for telling the truth to the new king is opening a bag of books "in balade-wise made, / Of vice and of vertue fulle to the margin" (1345-46), which extends to the end of the poem. True dreams lead to true poems that lead to true politics.

The best-known dream in Middle English literature is, of course, in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, in which Chauntecleer has a terrifying dream of "a beest . . . lyk an hound" who "wolde han maad areest / Upon my body, and wolde han had me deed" (B 4088-91). His terror touches off a long and hilarious "disputacioun" between Chauntecleer and Pertelote about the sources and significance of dreams. Classifications and citations of "auctoritees" proliferate. Dame Pertelote, appalled by her heartless husband's apparent cowardice, asserts that "swevenes engendren of replecciouns, / And ofte of fume and of complecciouns" (B 4113-14). She takes the line of analysis preferred by physicians. Too much red choler has caused Chauntecleer to dream of a red beast, as too much melancholy might cause a dream of a black bear or a black devil. After quoting Cato, she prescribes a laxative:



“Dredeth no dreem, / I kan sey yow namoore” (B 4159). Chauntecleer responds that we may read in old books of men of more authority than Cato,

“That dremes been significaciouns  
As wel of joye as of tribulaciouns  
That folk enduren in this lif present.”

(B 4169-71)

He launches into a series of “ensamples,” including a section that juxtaposes Macrobius, Daniel, and Joseph:

“Reed eek of Joseph, and ther shul ye see  
Wher dremes be somtyme—I sey nat alle—  
Warnynge of thynges that shul after falle.  
Looke of Egipte the kyng, daun Pharao,  
His bakere and his butiller also,  
Wher they ne felte noon effect in dremes.”

(B 4320-25)

This most impressive rooster makes a most impressive argument; but, distracted by his appetites for corn and sex, he ignores it, and barely escapes from the mouth of the fox. That Chauntecleer was warned by his dreams leads the Nun’s Priest into an inconclusive discussion of free will and divine foreknowledge and the provocative challenge to take the fruit of this tale and let the chaff be still, without much guidance as to how the reader is to tell one from the other.

There are, of course, other types of narrative stress associated with dreams in Middle English poetry. For instance, in *Pearl* we have the dreamer-narrator’s difficulties in accepting the identity and authority of the Pearl maiden. He treats what Macrobius would call an *oraculum* as a *somnium*, an enigmatic dream, with the additional twist that authoritative dreams rarely have children as speakers. By the end of the poem, after he has awakened, he affirms “this veray avysoun”—not necessarily a redundant construction—but immediately qualifies his conclusion: “If hit be veray and soth sermoun” (1184-85).<sup>10</sup> In the *Knight’s Tale* we have the opposite situation as Arcite accepts as authoritative Mercury’s admonition to return to Athens. Subsequent events point to the ambiguous nature of his dream; “‘of thy wo an ende’” (A 1392) turns out to mean his death, not his marriage to Emelye. In the Miller’s quitting of this tale, Absolon dreams “‘I was at a feeste,’” which he takes as “‘a signe of kysyng atte leeste’” (A 3684, 3683). This interpretation, and his itching mouth, encourage him to a quite unanticipated form of kissing. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Criseyde’s dream (2.925-31) of hearts and a white eagle is conspicuous for its one-line introduction and the complete lack of any reaction to it by either Criseyde or the narrator, who shifts the

narrative abruptly to Troilus. As Allan Frantzen has recently noted, the exchange of hearts in the dream is anticipated by the reference to hearts growing in each other in Antigone's song (2.871-73).<sup>11</sup> We can see a reversal of the usual situation in which dream becomes poetry, but the narrator takes us no further.

In general, dreams in medieval literature can provoke anxiety or greater distress in the dreamer, who turns to discussion at greater or lesser length to assert some sort of control over the experience. The narrator, often but not always the dreamer, is also regularly concerned with an analogous control over the narration at points of stress. Here, of course, is where things become complicated.

As has appeared from my quick survey of a few passages, two of the most common medieval responses to the stress and anxiety of literary dreams are classification and the citation of authorities. These responses are efforts to assert intellectual control over obviously uncontrollable, irrational experiences. They are also attempts to counter a tradition of classical and biblical texts that flatly deny validity of any sort to dreams. Classification and the citation of authorities might be the initial steps of interpretation although in some cases, such as those of Pertelote and Pandarus, they justify denying interpretation. And the two responses overlap, as authorities are invoked as part of the presentation and validation of schemes of classification. These situations do not become occasions for making special claims for the truth either of dreams or the poems that recount them. Neither experience nor literary texts are explicitly privileged. As several scholars have observed, medieval poetry generally avoids making special claims for itself.<sup>12</sup> Poetic practice parallels and in some cases explicitly derives from treatments of dreams in nonliterary sources—philosophical, medical, psychological, or exegetical.

By the end of the fourteenth century there was a fair number of classificatory schemes available, varying in complexity and using a less-than-stable vocabulary. (It would be asking too much for words like *somnium* and *visio* not to change their meanings from the time of Macrobius and Augustine to the time of Langland and Chaucer.) Generally these classificatory systems are concerned with two points—the variety of causes of dreams and the use or truth (including the accessibility of truth through interpretation) of dreams. Macrobius, for instance, has three types of predictive dreams, the *somnium* (enigmatic dream), the *visio* (prophetic dream), and the *oraculum* (oracular dream); and two with no significance, the *insomnium* (nightmare) and the *visum* or *phantasma*.<sup>13</sup> The *somnium* is divided into five types—personal, alien, social, public, and universal. Also widespread was Gregory the Great's six-part division:

For sometimes dreams are engendered of fulness  
or emptiness of the belly, sometimes of illusion

[from the devil], sometimes of illusions and thought combined [our daily worries], sometimes of revelation [Old and New Testament Josephs], while sometimes they are engendered of imagination, thought and revelation together [Daniel].<sup>14</sup>

Gregory's scheme reappears, for example, in William of Waddingham's Anglo-Norman *Manuel des Pechiez* and its translation in 1303 in Robert of Brunne's *Handlyng Synne*.<sup>15</sup>

From Chaucer and the *Roman de la Rose*, one might gather that the five-part division proposed by Macrobius was extremely popular in the late fourteenth century. He appears to be Chaucer's favorite authority on dreams, and a number of scholars have inferred from this a more general popularity.<sup>16</sup> A recent article by Alison Peden, however, suggests that this inference is quite incorrect for English literature of the fourteenth century. Considering the dates of the production of Macrobius's manuscripts, she suggests that the eleventh and twelfth centuries were the period of Macrobius's greatest popularity and influence and that very few manuscripts were produced thereafter. Peden concludes, "But Macrobius' *Commentary* does not appear to have been a source he [Chaucer] made much use of: he was more up to date."<sup>17</sup>

"Up to date" refers to several things that replaced Macrobius's influence after the twelfth century. At a relatively sophisticated level is the introduction of Aristotelian psychology and physiology. As good an example as any of this is book 26 of Vincent of Beauvais's thirteenth-century encyclopedia, *Speculum naturale*.<sup>18</sup> Among much else, Vincent provides a definition of dreams attributed to Aristotle (ch. 2), six causes of dreams (chs. 12–24), other causes from writers such as Avicenna (ch. 25), seven Aristotelian questions about dreams, the fifth of which is whether one can foresee the future in dreams (chs. 53–55). After this Vincent makes an abrupt transition to biblical examples of significant dreams—those of Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel (ch. 56)—and to discussions of dreams by authors explicitly in the Christian tradition, such as Jerome, Augustine, Gregory, Bede, and Thomas Aquinas.

In the fourteenth century one influential body of material is Robert Holkot's commentary on Wisdom, which a decade ago Robert A. Pratt analyzed as a major source of the dream lore in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*.<sup>19</sup> As a further example of the discussion of dreams in the early fourteenth century (slightly earlier than Holkot), I would like to propose a passage in Nicholas of Lyra's *Postilla literalis*, the most widely available commentary on the whole Bible from this period.<sup>20</sup> Nicholas uses Joseph's interpretation of the dreams of Pharaoh's butler and the baker (Gen. 40.23) as a springboard into a six-hundred-word essay on dreams in general. These comments exemplify concisely many of the rhetorical and interpretive concerns of medieval poets,



and for this reason I have included and translated Nicholas's essay in its entirety in the Appendix to this article. After quoting Deuteronomy 18.10 ("Neither let there be found among you any one . . . that observeth dreams and omens") and mentioning other texts, Nicholas contrasts the predictive interpretation of dreams by Joseph and Daniel (Dan. 2, 4) and sets out to classify dreams according to their causes, thereby assessing their predictive value. Just how dreams may be significant is explained by a bit of medieval sign theory: "somnia est signum naturaliter representans effectum futurum" (a dream is a sign naturally representing a future effect).

A series of two-part divisions yields six types of dreams. There are two kinds of internally caused dreams. The first is the phantasy (which has no predictive value at all), which Nicholas links to Ecclesiastes 5.3 ("ubi multa sunt somnia, ibi plurimae vanitates"; where there are many dreams, there is much vanity) echoed by Pertelote's "Nothyng . . . but vanitee in sweven is" (B 2922) and Chauntecleer (B 3129). Nicholas then quotes the tag from Cato also used by Chaucer and Langland. The second internal dream is caused by the state of the body. A person who is cold might dream of ice or snow, or a person with too much black choler in his system might dream of having black pitch on his chest, an example supported by a reference to Aristotle's *Physics*. Such dreams are medically predictive, as Pertelote also noted; *choleram nigram*, the "humour of melancholie" may evoke certain figures in dreams. There are two types of externally caused dreams, bodily and spiritual. The bodily is linked to the state of heavenly bodies; as the stars and planets have predictive value, so do dreams caused by them. Dreams with external spiritual causes can be good, sent by God or an angel to advance some divine purpose. Again there are two types. The fanciful vision that is not understood by the dreamer includes those of Pharaoh, the butler, and the baker. Others are intellectually known or knowable, such as those of Joseph and Daniel. The final category, spiritual dreams sent by the devil, is not lawful for interpreting or predicting. The devil cannot send true dreams, according to Nicholas. If Hamlet had extrapolated from this to ghosts, he might have saved himself a good deal of bother.

A final observation is that Nicholas's little essay offers no clue about the relative frequency of the six types of dreams and not much about how one would distinguish them in practice. As a result, arguing by analogy from biblical precedent to present experience is not facilitated. Moreover, Nicholas avoids allegorical readings of any of the six dreams associated with Joseph, although they had been extensively interpreted allegorically, especially typologically, in earlier centuries. At the least this does not reinforce allegorical readings by modern critics of fourteenth-century dream poetry.

Generally, fourteenth-century English poets use the materials and strategies of nonliterary discussions of dreams with great flexibility and wit; Chaucer could and did turn biblical commentary into the stuff of mock heroic. But the English poets did not transcend their contemporaries to claim

special or alternative truth for dreams and the poetry in which dreams can be communicated.

## NOTES

A version of this article was read at The Sixth Citadel Conference on Literature in March 1988 in Charleston, SC.

1. A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 5.

2. All Chaucer quotations are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3 ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987).

3. Dante Alighieri, *Vita nuova*, ed. Fredi Chiappelli (Milan: Mursia, 1971), 23: "A questo sonetto fue risposto da molti e di diverse sentenzie."

4. B. G. Koonce, *Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame: Symbolism in "The House of Fame"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), esp. 46-57.

5. Walter C. Curry, *Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 209, citing *Patrologia latina* 40:798.

6. Elizabeth R. Hatcher, "Chaucer and the Psychology of Fear: Troilus in Book V," *ELH* 40 (1973): 319.

7. Winthrop Weatherbee, *Chaucer and the Poets: An Essay on "Troilus and Criseyde"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 128-34.

8. "*Piers Plowman*": *The B Version*, ed. George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson (London: Athlone Press, 1975). See John M. Bowers, *The Crisis of Will in "Piers Plowman"* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 26-30.

9. *Mum and the Sothsegger*, ed. Mabel Day and Robert Steele, Early English Text Society 199 (London: Oxford University Press, 1936). While affirming the truth of some dreams, the poet rejects attempts to interpret old prophecies, such as those of Merlin (lines 1723-33).

10. *Pearl*, ed. E. V. Gordon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953).

11. Allen J. Frantzen, "The 'Joie and Tene' of Dreams in *Troilus and Criseyde*," in *Chaucer in the Eighties*, ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Robert J. Branch (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 108-10.

12. Judson B. Allen, *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A Decorum of Convenient Distinction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 181, 205; Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 105-6.

13. Ambrosius Theodosius Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. William H. Stahl, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 87-90. See the general survey of medieval dream interpretation by Constance B. Hieatt, *The Realism of Dream Visions: The Poetic Exploitation of the Dream-Experience in Chaucer and His Contemporaries* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), 23-33.

14. *Morals on the Book of Job* (Oxford, 1844-50), 1:448-49. Bk. 8.24.

15. *Robert of Brunne's "Handlyng Synne"*, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, Early English Text Society 119 (London: Kegan Paul, 1901), lines 387-416. The tag from Cato is quoted in lines 421-23.

16. Spearing, 8-11; James Winny, *Chaucer's Dream-Poems* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), 19-30; cf. Curry, 195-203.

17. Alison M. Peden, "Macrobius and Mediaeval Dream Literature," *Medium aevum* 54 (1985): 69.
18. Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum naturale* (1624; reprint, Graz: Akademische Druck, 1964).
19. Robert A. Pratt, "Some Latin Sources of the Nonnes Preest on Dreams," *Speculum* 52 (1977): 538–70.
20. Nicholas of Lyra, *Postilla litteralis, Biblia sacra* (Venice, 1588), 1:8v; see Douglas Wurtele, "Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Nicholas of Lyre's *Postillae litteralis et moralis super totam Bibliam*," in *Chaucer and Scriptural Tradition*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1984), 89–107.

## APPENDIX

*Biblia sacra cum glossis interlineari, et ordinaria, Nicolai Lyrani postilla . . .* (Venice, 1588), 1:8v.

Genesis 40.23. *Oblitus est. . .* Dicunt hebraei, quod hoc fuit, quia nimis confisus fuerat Ioseph de auxilio humano. Ad maiorem intellectum eorum quae dicta sunt in hoc ca. & eorum quae dicuntur in se, hic queritur, utrum interpretatio somniorum per ea iudicando de futuris sit licita, et videtur quod non, quia dicitur Deut. (Deut. 18) Non inveniatur in te qui observet somnia, et similes auctoritates inveniuntur in pluribus locis in sacra scriptura. In contrarium est, quod Ioseph hic interpretatus est somnia modo praedicto, et Daniel interpretatus est somnia Nabuchodonosor, ut habetur Dan. (Dan. 2 & 4). Dicendum ad hoc, quod causae rerum sunt latentes, & effectus earum magis noti: & ideo ducunt in cognitionem causarum, sicut signa naturaliter eas representantia.

Videmus enim quod fumus exterius prorumpens est effectus ignis intra caminum latentis: & ducit in cognitionem eius, sicut signum ipsum naturaliter representans. Contingit enim aliquando quod una causa producit duos effectus, ordinate tamen unum post alium, sicut in febricitante vigoratio naturae est causa digestionis urinae primo, et consequenta postea sanitatis, et tunc primus effectus non solum est signum ducens in cognitionem causae, sed etiam cum hoc in cognitionem secundi effectus, sicut digestio urinae non est solum signum vigorationis naturae, sed etiam sanitatis futurae. Quando igitur una et eadem est causa somnii & effectus alterius consequentis, tunc illud somnium est signum naturaliter representans effectum futurum, & ideo per tale somnium licite potest praegnosticari de effectu futuro, sicut medicus licite praegnosticat per conditionem urinae de sanitate vel morte futura.

(*Somniorum causa*) Propter quod ulterius videndum est de causam somniorum, quorum duplex est causa in generali, sicut intrinseca & extrinseca: intrinseca vero duplex est, una est motus casualis fantasmatum in dormiendo: et talis causa non est causa alicuius effectus alterius sequentis, et ideo per talia somnia nihil potest praegnosticari de futuris: et quia somnia, ut plurimum hoc modo contingunt, ideo dicitur Ecclesiastes (Eccles. 5.c [5.3]) Ubi multa sunt somnia, ibi plurimae vanitates. Et Cato dicit, Somnia ne cures. Alia causa somniorum intrinseca, est dispositio corporis, sicut homines frigidi frequenter somniant, quod sint in glacie vel in nive: quia fantasmata formantur conformia tali dispositioni. Propter quod dicit Phil. (*Phil de som. et. vig.*) quod medicorum gratiosi dicunt valde attendendum ad somnia: et commentator Alb[ertus Magnus] super librum illum dicit, quod quidam somniavit, quod pix nigra fundebatur super pectus suum: et postea in vigilia sequenti evomuit, choleram nigram in magna quantitate. Et ideo ex talibus somniis potest praegnosticari de futura sanitate vel infirmitate ipsius somniantis.

Causa autem extrinseca somniorum duplex est, una corporalis, alia spiritualis: corporalis est corpus coeleste, et aer continens. Sicut enim per eorum influentiam producuntur formae diversae in materia corporali: ut plantarum, et mineralium et huiusmodi, ita et per eorum influentiam in virtute fantastica quae est organica causantur forme, sive fantasmata conformia dispositioni coelesti ad causandum effectum aliquem futurum, et per consequens per talia somnia potest de futuris praegnoticari. Advertendum etiam, quod istae causae somniorum, scilicet dispositiones corporis somniantis et influentiae corporis coelestis et continentis, magis habent effectum in virtute fantastica dormientis, quam vigilantis, quia in vigilia propter occupationem circa exteriora non percipiuntur: sed magis effectus eorum impediuntur, quia motus maiores expellunt minores.

Causa autem spiritualis extrinseca somniorum duplex est: una bona, scilicet Deus per se vel per ministerium angelorum immittens alicui imaginarias dispositiones ad significandum aliqua futura. Et hoc fit dupliciter. Uno modo sic, quod uni soli sit imaginaria visio, alteri autem datur intellectus talis visionis, quod fuit in proposito: quia Pharo et ministri eius haberunt solam visionem imaginariam, sed Ioseph de his habuit cognitionem intellectivam: et ideo ipse habuit in hoc donum prophetiae, non autem illi: quia illustratio intellectus requiritur ad prophetiam, secundum quod dicitur Dan. (Dan. 10) Intelligentia opus est in visione. Aliquando autem eisdem fit imaginaria visio, et cognitio intellectiva eiusdem visionis, sicut Danieli factum est: Dan. (Dan. 10) et hoc etiam pertinet ad prophetiam.

Alia est causa spiritualis extrinseca somniorum mala, scilicet quando a daemonibus immittuntur visiones aliquae imaginariae in dormiando, et talibus utuntur artes magicae, sicut dicitur Phisic. de illis qui dormiebant in Sardis, et in historia Britonum de sacrificantibus idolis. His dictis dicendum est ad questionem, quod praegnoticare de futuris per somnia quae sunt signa alicuius futuri eventus, inquantum causantur ex dispositione corporis somniantis, vel impressione corporis coelestis, non est illicitum cum istud possit fieri via naturalia, nisi aliquis in talibus excedat limites virtutis naturae, magis afferendo quam natura rei patiatur: quia tales effectus futuri designati per somnium possunt impediri: sicut sanitas aegrotantis praegnotica per urinam aliquando impeditur. Per somnia vero a Deo praedictis modis immissa ad significationem alicuius futuri potest aliquid futurum certitudinaliter praedici. Ab eo tamen qui illustratur a Deo ad talia cognoscendum, et ei licitum est talia exponere et praedicere. Per somnia vero a demonibus immissa aliquid futurum predicere superstitioseum est et illicitum, et sic patet quod dicendum est de questione. Patent etiam argumenta facta ad utramque partem, quia procedunt viis suis.



## TRANSLATION

Genesis 40.23. *He forgot...* The Hebrews say this was because Joseph had trusted too much in human assistance. To the greater understanding of the things which have been mentioned in this chapter and of those which will be mentioned in it, the question here is whether the interpretation of dreams for discerning the future is lawful. It seems that it is not, for in Deuteronomy (Deut. 18) it is said, "Let no one be found among you who takes notice of dreams," and similar proofs are found in many passages in the sacred scriptures. On the contrary, Joseph himself interpreted dreams in the manner spoken of, and Daniel interpreted the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar, as is found in Daniel (Dan. 2 & 4). In support of this, one must add that causes are hidden, and their effects are more obvious; and, therefore, they [effects] reveal causes as signs that naturally represent them [the causes].

For we see that when smoke billows out of a chimney, it is the effect of a fire hidden within the fireplace: the smoke leads to a recognition of the fire, being a sign naturally representing it. Sometimes it happens that one cause produces two effects—in order, however, one after another. Such is the case with a feverish man when the return of his vitality is first of all the cause of the dissolving of his urine and consequently the cause of later health. Then, the first effect is a sign revealing not only the first cause, but even the second effect as well, just as the dissolving of the urine is a sign not only of the return of vitality but also of future health. When, therefore, the cause of a dream and the cause of the second consequent effect are one and the same, then that dream is a sign naturally representing a future effect; therefore, one may lawfully predict a future event through such a dream, as a doctor lawfully predicts future health or death through the condition of the urine.

(*The cause of dreams*) Wherefore, we must look further into the cause of dreams, whose cause in general is twofold, namely, internal and external. Indeed, the internal cause is twofold: one is the chance movement of phantasies in sleep: and such a cause is not the cause of any consequent second effect. Therefore, through such dreams one can predict nothing about the future. And since dreams are such, for most of them happen in this fashion, it is said in Ecclesiastes (Eccles. 5.c [5.3]), "Where there are many dreams, there is much vanity." And Cato says, "Do not heed dreams." The second internal cause of dreams is the state of the body, just as men who are cold often dream that they are in ice or snow: for phantasies are formed similar to such a state. Wherefore the Philosopher [Aristotle] says (*On Dreams and Vigils*) that influential doctors say that dreams must be given great heed. And Albertus Magnus the commentator says concerning this book that a certain man dreamt that black pitch was poured onto his breast, and afterwards, when he awoke, he vomited black choler in great quantity. Therefore, through such dreams one may predict the future health or illness of the dreamer.

Moreover, the external cause of dreams is twofold: the one bodily, the other spiritual. The bodily is a heavenly body, which contains aether. For just as different shapes are brought forth through their [the heavenly bodies'] influence into bodily matter such as plants, minerals, and things of this kind, so through their influence by the dream-producing faculty, which is organic, phantasies are formed, or phantasies similar to the heavenly state capable of producing some future effect, and consequently through such dreams one may predict the future. We must note that these causes of dreams, that is, the state of the sleeping body and the influences of a heavenly body containing aether, have greater effect on the dream-producing faculty of the dreamer, than of one who is awake, for when one is awake they are not perceived because of distractions all around: but their effects are diminished even more because greater movements drive lesser movements away.

Moreover, the external spiritual cause of dreams is twofold: the one is good, namely God by himself or through the ministry of angels instills in someone fanciful dispositions capable of signifying future events. And this comes about doubly. Thus, in one manner, an imaginary vision is seen only by one man, while to another is given the interpretation of such a dream, that is, what it represented: for Pharoah and his ministers had only fanciful visions, but Joseph had intellectual knowledge concerning them. And thus he had in this the gift of prophecy, while they did not. For the enlightenment of the mind is required for prophecy, according to what is said in Daniel (Dan. 10.1), "There is need of understanding in a vision." Sometimes, however, He sends a fanciful vision, as happened to Daniel (Dan. 10), and this also pertains to prophecy.

The external spiritual cause of bad dreams is different, namely, when fanciful visions are sent in sleep by demons (the magic arts employ them as well) as is said in the *Physics* of those who slept in Sardis, and in the history of the Britons concerning those who sacrificed to idols. Now that this has been said, we must address the question: to predict the future through dreams which are signs of some future event, provided they are caused by the sleeping body's state or by the influence of heavenly bodies, is not unlawful, provided that this occurs in a natural manner, unless in so doing someone exceeds the limits of natural faculty by asserting more than the nature of the thing allows. For by such effects the future events heralded by a dream can be misinterpreted: as a sick man's health predicted by his urine is sometimes misinterpreted. Through a dream sent by God to signify a future event in the manner spoken of, a future event can be predicted with certainty by him who is enlightened by God that he might understand; and for him it is lawful to expound and predict such matters. It is unlawful, however, and superstitious to predict the future through dreams sent by demons. Thus all that needs to be said about the question is evident. And even the arguments made for each part are evident, for they follow their own paths.