Dreaming across Boundaries: The Interpretation of Dreams in Islamic Lands

Louise Marlow, ed.
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Edited by Louise Marlow, this anthology consists of twelve articles on the history of dreams and their interpretation in an array of historical Muslim settings. A number of well-known hadiths support the idea of Prophet Muhammad communicating with Muslims through dreams, and earlier books and articles have established the existence of "a dominant, if not entirely uncontested, tradition of [dream] interpretation" common to much of the premodern Islamic world (p. 3). The articles address variations on this core discourse specific to the cultural, sectarian, and disciplinary orienta-

tions of the original actors. Beyond this goal of discursive specificity, Marlow notes two themes as having guided her selection: "the complex process of translation whereby a personal visionary experience assumes the form of a literary, narrative account accessible to, and subject to interpretation by, an audience" (p. 9); and the "ways in which the leveling and potentially subversive effects of dreams were countered by their integration into hierarchical or normative systems" (p. 8). While the articles are arranged in a roughly chronological order, they are considered here according to their sociohistorical, literary, and intellectual-historical orientations.

The articles centered on socio-historical topics consider individual dream accounts, whether as elements in hagiographical, biographical or historiographical texts, or as recorded by the dreamers themselves. Working in the realm of politicized dream accounts, Sholeh Quinn focuses on the numerous renarrations of Shaykh Safi al-Din's dreams in late Safavid historiographical texts. Quinn's straightforward and convincing presentation reveals that these chroniclers sought to recast the Safavid dynasty's founders as practicing Twelver Shi`ites, thus contradicting representations found in earlier Safavid works. Also in a sociopolitical vein, Yehoshua Frenkel employs a self-described "functionalist" approach to analyzing dream accounts in Mamluk-era historiographical texts and asserts that Mamluk chroniclers, as social elites, utilized the dreams' otherworldly authority to create a sense of order in an otherwise chaotic sociopolitical environment. Despite the splendid variety of the source materials, his rather homogenizing thesis is ultimately unsatisfying.

Leah Kinberg examines the place of dream accounts featuring deceased scholars in early Islamic debates over the propriety of studying either the Qur'an or the hadiths to the near or total exclusion of the other. Drawing on a broad variety of sources, she reconstructs a fascinating debate and notes that dreams of the respected dead were an ideal venue through which living scholars could express exceptional views on sensitive matters while avoiding negative consequences. Focusing on a Twelver Shi`ite context, Khalid Sindawi examines reported appearances by Imam Ali in the dreams of visitors to his grave in Najaf. Drawing from a seventh/thirteenth-century collection of dream narrations, he demonstrates their importance to both inter-sectarian polemic and the disciplining and reaffirming of beliefs and practices within the Twelver community. Jonathan Katz deduces interpersonal power dynamics at work in twelfth/eighteenth-century Maghribi Sufi discourses on the ability of Sufi masters to interpret their disciples' dreams. Following a deft analysis of a complex Sufi treatise on spiritual and physiological factors

affecting the reception of dreams, Katz largely dismisses it as a solipsistic mystification of a master's authority over his disciples.

John Lamoreaux and Hagar Kahana-Smilansky turn their attention to the relatively rare genre of medieval autobiography. Lamoreaux's article examines a dream account in the autobiography of Abu Ja`far al-Qayini, a little-known fourth/tenth-century scholar, and concludes that the scholar employed dreams to espouse a controversial theological agenda. A full translation of the account is provided. Kahana-Smilansky cites dreams from the letters of Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi to argue that autobiographical dream accounts were sometimes genuine efforts to interpret inner experience. Her presentation is convincing, and the article is noteworthy for taking a well-articulated stance against the tendency to regard all dream accounts as ideologically driven rhetorical productions.

Olga Davidson's article is unique in this volume for its purely literary concerns. She stakes no claims in debates about the roles of dreams in religious or political discourses, but rather examines the purely intratextual role of dreams in the framing narrative of Ferdowsi's Shahnama. Other authors are primarily concerned with intellectual history and medieval Islamic theories about dreams' epistemological value. Eric Ormsby examines Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's views, noting the special relevance of dreams to his notion of "taste" (*dhawq*), the "direct knowledge" of truth attained through gnostic experience. He states that al-Ghazali considered dreams to be a universally accessible proof of another realm of existence, one beyond the realms of perception and intellect, and thus the proof of the possibility of prophecy. Ormsby detects in al-Ghazali the unacknowledged influence of al-Farabi, whose discussion of the human mental faculties allowed for the possibility of communication with the divine through dreams and the imagination. Mohammad Mahallati examines exegeses of Surat Yusuf by two Persian Sufi authors, Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Zayd Tusi (sixth/twelfth century) and Molla Meskin (d. 908/1502-3), displaying the influence of dream interpretation practices on their exegetical methods.

In a major contribution to intellectual history and manuscript studies, Rotraud Hansberger elucidates vital differences between the section on dreams in the Greek text of Aristotle's *Parva naturalia* and its Arabic translation, *Kitab al-Hiss wa al-Mahsus*. Working from a seventeenth-century manuscript of the latter rediscovered in 1985, Hansberger determines that the Arabic version contains a great deal of post-Aristotelian material and directly contradicts Aristotle's arguments against the divine origin of dreams. She then traces the influence of this Arabic version in important works by Ibn

Sina, Ibn Rushd, and others, thus attesting to the widespread influence of this alternative text. Also in the realm of manuscripts, Serpil Bagci's article focuses on two late-sixteenth or early seventeenth-century Falnames – image-based divination books – from the Topkapi Palace Library. While this final article is fascinating, it does not deal directly with dreams and seems a perhaps hasty addition to an otherwise strongly focused volume.

Many essays from this volume, including Marlow's introduction, could be used in a graduate or advanced undergraduate class on dream interpretation in Islamic and/or premodern cultures, or even in a graduate course on source criticism. Scholars encountering dream accounts in their own work for the first time could certainly benefit from seeing how these scholars contextualized such materials. Readers of past books and articles on dream interpretation in Muslim societies, especially those by Lamoreaux, Katz, and Kinberg, will find themselves in largely familiar territory. Aside from Kahana-Smilansky and Hansberger, who break some exciting new ground, many of the authors utilize familiar strategies of source criticism in approaching their texts, thereby approaching dream literature in much the same way that other forms of premodern Islamic literature have been approached in recent years. That said, the book certainly succeeds in extending and refining these approaches to suit materials from a variety of Muslim contexts.

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