

## Dreams, yesterday and today

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### Dreams, yesterday and today

**Dreams, yesterday and today: what dream symbols from the Middle Ages and Renaissance can teach us about our present reality.**

In this interview, *Humanities Watch* speaks with Valerio Cappozzo, who has recently edited and illuminated the first comprehensive version of the popular medieval and Renaissance Dream Dictionary (*Dizionario dei sogni nel Medioevo. Il Somniale Danielis in manoscritti letterari* [*The Medieval Dream Dictionary. The Somniale Danielis in Literary Manuscripts*], (Florence: Leo S. Olschki 2018). In addition to his work on medieval and Renaissance culture, Cappozzo has written extensively on the twentieth-century Italian authors Carlo Michelstaedter and Giorgio Bassani. He is Assistant

Professor of Italian and Director of the Italian Studies Program at the University of Mississippi and Secretary of the American Boccaccio Association.

**Humanities Watch:** What motivated you to write this book?

**Valerio Cappozzo:** I started to investigate the theme of dreams in the Middle Ages through the discipline of material philology, which focuses on the object of the manuscript as a whole.

**Analyzing the entire manuscript helps to reveal the practices and cultures of the society that made it. These are very general terms to frame my approach, and more precisely the theme on which I have been working now for more than a decade: dreams.**

I have been focusing on dreams through studying a text, the *Dream-book of Daniel the Prophet*, which is the most widely circulated and popular dream manual, and attributed to the Prophet Daniel. I observe how this text is bound with other collections in manuscripts produced in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance. Indeed, I have been reconstructing the *Somniale Danielis*' manuscript development with a specific focus on the Italian language tradition, which had been overlooked.

My work presents a dictionary of medieval dream symbols, and is based on editions of codices in Latin and Italian, going from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of 16<sup>th</sup> century, and it also includes the first Latin and vernacular printed versions of the Dictionary from 1475 to 1550. The form of the work has its origins in early 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Greek manuscripts, and thrived in the Middle Ages mainly in Arabic, Latin, and the European languages. **This dictionary of dream symbols contains around 650 different symbols, each of which has many variations, for a total of around 5000 possible interpretations. Such materials can help advance our knowledge of medieval and early modern creativity in relation to the interlinked worlds of imagination and reality.**

The *Dreambook* is a manual to dreams and their interpretations, the most popular of its kind in the Middle Ages. It consists of a list of dream symbols arranged in an alphabetical order, and interpreted as portending something good or evil for a dreamer.

**Like medieval bestiaries, dream-books constitute compelling tools to investigate the collective imagination of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.** These manuals were usually structured so that key terms in the text corresponded to the subject of the dream, while the key-words were arranged alphabetically with a concise interpretation of its symbol. The system established both quick and easy access to terms, symbols, and their meanings, and functioned as a convenient guide to the interpretation of dreams. It serves, too, as an important tool for understanding medieval literary as well as other dreams, and for identifying and describing traditional dream images.

I continued to be interested in dreams in the Middle Ages by reading Dante's *Purgatory*, in which dreams play a peculiar role: first of all, these dreams are part of a vision, creating a double layer of meaning; second they are a key moment in which the character has the intuition on how to proceed in his path towards Paradise. **The key role that dreams play in Dante's *Comedy*, and the role of intuition as a form of understanding, brought me to realize that dreams were an investigative tool for the reader.** Together with the character, Dante, the reader can anticipate and comprehend the narrative at a deeper level. If in reality dreams were thought as anticipation of the future, in

literature as well they can function pretty much in the same way: they reveal what will happen in the rest of the story, or at least they give to the reader those key elements that let you anticipate the narration.

As a result of my studies, I understood more about how dreams were deciphered by common people, and then, of course, how writers, such as Dante and Boccaccio, would use them in their works. Studying dreams helped me understand better the everyday reality of a time period like the Middle Ages.

**HW:** How does the Dream Dictionary show us life six hundred years ago, and life today?

**VC:** The most remarkable fact about this dream dictionary is that the red thread of dream interpretation remains pretty much unchanged from antiquity to today. Dreams and their understanding are timeless, so that the *Somniale Danielis* appears to gather into its sphere some traditional beliefs that may transcend social classes and specific moments in time. This is the reason why it persisted almost unchanged in its structure since the 4<sup>th</sup> century until today; and this is the very reason why it is used coherently by different poets and scientists in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance. In fact, dreams are common to every individual – rich or poor, learned or illiterate – and were important keys to interpreting the future of people of all classes.

The more evident change in the history of dream interpretation occurred at the beginning of twentieth century, when Sigmund Freud started working on dreams considered as a potential tool to investigate the deepest part of our personality and our past, and not as a possible prediction of the future thanks to the analysis of external elements. But even after the birth of psychoanalysis, popular dream-books continued to be considered the best way to interpret dreams. The last dream-books I found are in fact on my phone and not in a library! There are several smartphone applications for dream interpretation that are still inspired by the *Somniale Danielis*. This is a clear sign of continuity.

**HW:** The manuscripts you have studied combine different fields of knowledge, including literature, astronomy and astrology. How did the premodern world bring together symbols and the stars, the world within and the world above?

**VC:** The 13<sup>th</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries are, I believe, the time in which the personal interpretation of the holy text, of literature in general, as well as sciences such as astronomy, alchemy, medicine and divinatory techniques, become the key, the focal point of the philosophical and more generally human speculation before the Renaissance.

The Italian Middle Ages has this characteristic thanks to people like Joachim of Fiore, Saint Francis of Assisi, Emperor Frederick II, Thomas Aquinas, Albert the Great, The School of Santa Croce, and Dante, just to provide a quick timeline. In the second half of the century, the birth of the writing in everyday Italian had clearly a linguistic impact on the transmission of culture, which hastened the end of the feudal system and of church's cultural control.

**The concept of revelation and of interpretation of the scriptures and holy messages is of primary importance in Mediterranean religions. The secularization of this concept becomes the**



**interpretation of one's own nocturnal revelations, as well as the personal interpretation of literary texts. In the *Bible*, dreams were deciphered by prophets exclusively; a manual like the *Somniale Danielis* is a do-it-yourself interpretation of dreams and need mediators no more.**

**HW:** Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio and Leonardo da Vinci knew and used this dictionary. How might it have influenced their thinking?

**VC:** Another important aspect of my research is the connection of the dream books with early Italian literature that I was able to observe materially in all the manuscripts I used for my edition. **In addition, my research analyzes the overlooked connections between the popular culture of the 'scientific' genre of dream-books and medieval Italian poetry from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries.** These manuscripts associate in fact the *Dreambook* with complex, elegant literary texts such as the *Vita Nova*, the *Decameron*, the *Acerba*, that all contain dreams. This literature used dreams as a narrative expedient because it was an element that could be perceived and understood easily and widely.

While the manuscripts I used for the Dictionary are representative of different readers, the trend shared by all is the linkage between the popular form of the dream-book, now combined into a manual, and the development of a new philosophical poetics in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Many famous poets – Brunetto Latini, Dante, Cavalcanti, Cecco D'Ascoli, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Antonio Pucci – are particularly well represented in these manuscripts, and it is not a mere coincidence. The reason for the integration of the popular-scientific genre of the *Somniale Danielis* in these authors' works can perhaps be explained by the fact that they considered, more than others, the dream tradition from Artemidorus Daldianus (second century A.D.) to the mystical theories of the thirteenth and fourteenth century.

I have identified in one manuscript (MS Riccardiano 1258) the version that will be later published in Florence as the printed *Somniale*. **This Italian version of the *Somniale* constitutes its most accurate and richest form as far as entries are concerned (a total of 446 dreams). It was published by Lorenzo Morgiani in 1496 and became the most widely circulated dream manual during the Florentine Renaissance. Leonardo da Vinci owned this edition of medieval dream manual and he used it exactly as the medieval poets we just talked about. Leonardo used the *Somniale* also to interpret his own dreams, as Freud pointed out in his work *Leonardo da Vinci and A Memory of His Childhood*. Moreover, he maintained the same dream symbology that we find in the *Somniale* to write his apocalyptic prophecies.**

**The *Dream Dictionaries* are useful tools not only to investigate the imaginary and abstract reality of the Middle Ages, but also to understand better that the reality needed a fantastic element to be better understood, as Leonardo himself wrote: "The eye sees a thing more clearly in dreams than the imagination awake."**

**HW:** What can the dictionary teach us about ways of understanding the humanities and the sciences today?

**VC:** For us today, the most important lesson coming from ancient dream interpretation is how fields of knowledge were interconnected, while today they are separated and we are often unable to bridge those boundaries. The dream dictionary may also tell us about how people in the past were

**connected with their natural world as a whole, listening to it, and reading into it as in a book: something that our post-modernity very often completely ignores, unfortunately. Lastly, the dream dictionary also reminds us, through the practice of dream interpretation, to use our human imagination to decipher and perhaps solve clues that our irrational world offers.**

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