THE DREAM MOTIF IN THE MIDDLE ENGLISH METRICAL ROMANCES AND CHAUCER

In Middle English literature the dream motif has been treated in two ways: first, as a framework for relating a certain story or incident (like the «Romance of the Rose» or «Pearl»), and second, as an element of the plot. It is this second aspect, the sources of the dream motif and their importance that will be examined in this article.

There are two conceptions of dreams: the Germanic and the Christian. The Germanic use and conception of dreams is a sombre, severe and rather pessimistic one, and corresponds to the fatalistic attitude of the Anglo-Saxon to life. So in poetry all dreams — whatever their consequences — come true in every detail. They tell us what is going to take place in the future, and nothing may be done to avert them («King Horn», 11. 670 ff.). For instance in «Octavian» (11.195 - 202) Empress Florence sees in a dream all the misfortunes which in fact befall her and her children later in life.

Before passing on to the Christian view of dreams we should remember that in most dreams the German and the Christian concept ions exist side by side. The essential characteristic of the Christian view is a softening attitude in the interpretation of dreams. Dreams of ominous portent of Germanic origin are replaced by less gloomy ones. They are no more harbingers of approaching disaster, but are sent to mankind by the Heavenly Father as a consolation or as a warning.

Angels are often used as bearers of the Divine messages [1]; also the

[1] Another example is the opening of **«The Sege off Melayne»**: the heathens have invaded Lombardy and sacked Milan. The heathen sultan promises to return everything to the lord of Milan provided he forsakes Christianity. That night angels appear to both the Duke and Charlemagne praising the former for his refusal and informing the other of the Duke's plight (11.92 — 111).

appearance of the Cross and other Christian symbols shows the origin of these dreams («Havelok the Dane», 1248 - 1272). In «Amis and Amiloun» an angel appears to Amis («An angel com from heuen bright») and tells him that he could heal his brother by washing him in his children's blood [2].

Dreams in this category do not show the rigid fatalism of dreams of Germanic origin: that is, when God's orders are carried out, when a new mode of life has been adopted, the threatening dreams remain only as warnings.

The sceptical attitude to dreams:

««You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fargment of an underdone potato», says Scrooge in «A Christmas Carol» to Marley's Ghost, in whose existence he does not want to believe. A similar scepticism and even ironical attitude toward dreams is not unknown in Middle English poetry.

In «Lancelot» the Queen is of the opinion that dreams cannot be trusted [3]. The most obvious kind of suspicion about the reality of dreams is shown when visible proofs are left behind to prevent any scepticism on the part of the dreamer [4].

In Middle English literature dreams are used in the following circumstances:

1. In earlier poems dreams are used for stylistic rather than poetic purposes. They create the right atmosphere for the coming event, and as such may be left out without doing any serious harm to the development of the plot [5].

2. Some dreams serve as a link between separate stories in the plot. The poet often lets his hero dream only when it becomes necessary

---

[2] **«Amis and Amiloun»** ed. by M. Leach, 11.2199 — 2226.

[3] «To dremis, Sir, shuld no man haue respect, For thei ben thingis weyn, of non effect» (11.382 — 383). Also a clerk questioned by Arthur the next day is of the same opinion (1.388).

[4] In **«The Sege off Melayne»** Charlemagne finds a sword by his bed when he awakes from his dream (1.113).

[5] **«King Horn»**, 1.670: **«Morte Arthure»**, 11.760 — 805; **«Roland»**, 1.93; **«Octavian»**, 11.195 — 200.

that he should. One of such occasions arises when two parallel stories in the poem get so remote from each other that they have to be linked by some artificial means, and for which a dream comes in very handy. Only a dream can unite Melior with the poor orphan in «William of Palerne» [6], only a dream can make Athelston — hard pressed by the Danes — ask the disguised Guy for help [7].

3. The dream as an element in the development of the plot.

Most of the dreams of the former group, which act as a link between separate stories, also serve in the development of the main plot. The dream as an element in the development of the plot often is a mechanical way of motivation and is used in place of a psychological one. These are, of course, dreams that suit the action in the poem, and are closely related to the psychology of the dreamer, but such cases are quite rare [8].

In «Sir Gawain and the Green Knight», the poet uses a dream with the purpose of exercising a restraining influence on Gawain [9]. Gawain has already been twice visited by the lovely chatelain, and for the third time she stands by his bed, more beautiful than ever. But he has just dreamt of the Green Chapel, something that acts as a reminder as to what lies in store for him that day and helps him to resist the temptation.

The Germanic tradition considered the dream as a divine gift which was given to aristocrats only. Only in «Roland and Vernagu» do we meet an instance when a commoner has a dream [10], otherwise the dreamer is at least a close friend or relative of the hero. In most cases it is the hero himself who has a dream, particularly Charlemagne and Arthur. Saracens practically never have any dreams, divine reevlation being denied to them.

Angels play quite an important part in dreams as God's

---

[6] 11.658 — 677.

[7] **«Guy of Warwick»**, 1.10076.

[8] **«Havelok the Dane»** (11.1280 — 1312) could be mentioned as an example. Also in **«Sir Orfeo»** it is the dream of Heurodis (11.55 — 80) that makes the whole story possible.

[9] **«Sir Gawain and the Green Knight»**, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, 11.1750 — 1752.

[10] **«Roland and Vernagu»**, ed. S. Herrtage, 1.392.

messengers [11], but the circumstances of their appearance are not always the same. In «Richard Coeur de Lion» [12]. for example, the dreamers awake but the angel does not disappear, and the dream — if we may call it so — continues.

As common peope don't dream, they cannot interpret dreams either. But this is different with women, which is not surprising when we remember that their inner life is controlled by emotions to a greater extent than men.

Only two comparatively small groups of men are able to explain dreams: the «philosophirs» who are well-versed in the seven liberal arts and are the councillors of Arthur; and also the priests [13].

It is difficult to say with certainty whether Chaucer believed in dreams. To what extent was Chaucer impressed by Chauntecleer's awe-inspiring list of authorities about the meaning of dreams? Can we, on the other hand, accept Pandarus as Chaucer's mouthpiece? [14] It would seem that here too Chaucer preferred to let his characters speak for themselves, that is he is not responsible for views expressed by them, and furthermore he liked to pile all the various conceptions about dreams together [15]. The same applies to various theories about the origin of dreams [16].

---

[11] **«Havelok the Dane»**, ed. W.W. Skeat, 1.1264; **«Amis and Amiloun»**, ed. M. Leach, 1.425.

[12] **«Richard Coeur de Lion»**, ed. K. Brunner, 1.285.

[13] **«William of Palerne»**, ed. W.W. Skeat, 1.2920: «That comlic queen hade a prest, a konyng man of lore», who could interpret dreams.

[14] **«Troilus and Criseyde»**, ed. W.W. Skeat, Book V, 11.358 — 364

«Thy swevnes eek and al swich fantasye
Dryf out, and lat hem faren to mischaunce;
For they procede of thy malencolye,
And doth thee fele in sleep al this penaunce.
A straw for all swevenes significaunce.
God helpe me so, I counte hem not a bene,
Ther voot no man aright what dremes mene».

Also book V, 11.1276 — 1281.

[15] **«The Romaunt of the Rose»**, ed. W.W. Skeat 11. 1—5

«Many men seyn that in sweveninges
Ther nis but fables and lesinges;
But men may somme swerens seen
Which hardely ne false been,
But afterward ben apparaunte.»

[16] **«The House of Fame»**, ed. W.W. Skeat, 11. 1—58.

The two opposing views are represented by Troilus and Chauntecleer on the one hand, and by Pandarus (with certain reservations) and Pertelote on the other. Pertelote scolds her husband («Have you no mennes herte...») [17], to which Chauntecleer replies with several stories illustrating his theory and concludes with his own case [18].

In the literature before Chaucer's time dreams played the part of a link between the two worlds and were considered as messages from the supernatural. Chaucer is familiar with this viewpoint, but he can give us half a dozen other explanations as well. Though his characters hold different sides on the question of the oirgin and significance of dreams, Chaucer's own view may be that expressed in the Parlement of Foules [19], that is, dreams are the continuation of the thoughts and impressions that have occupied the mind in daytime. This is the psychological part of his explanation, which is completed by the physiological one as expressed by Pertelote [20]. Whereas in earlier poetry the characters act according to dreams (or otherwise find much to regret), in Chaucer dreams are products of the imagnation, and not messengers of supernatural powers - a conception we might call modern.

Sencer Tonguç

---

17 **«The Nun's Priest's Tale»**, B. 4110 ff.
«No thing, got wot, but vanitee, in sweven is.
Swevenes engendren of replecciouns,
And ofte of fume, and of complecciouns,
When humours been to habundant in a wight».

18 **«The Nun's Priest's Tale»**, B. 4166—4342.
«. . . . dremes ben significaciouns,
As wel of joye as tribulaciouns
That folk enduren in this lyf present»..... ff.

19 **«The Parlement of Foules»**, 11. 99—103
«The wery hunter, sleping in his bed;
To wode ayein his minde goth anoon;
The juge dremeth how his plees ben sped;
The carter dremeth how his cartes goon;
The riche of gold; the knight fight with his foon».

20 Also in **«The Squires Tale»**, F. 11. 358 — 359
«Ful were his hedes of fumositee,
That causeth dreem, of which ther nis no charge».