
Katharine Hodgkin, Michelle O'Callaghan, and S. J. Wiseman, eds., *Reading the Early Modern Dream. The Terrors of the Night* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 176 pp.

Reviewed by **Lucia Nigri**

This collection of essays examines the meanings attached to dreams in Elizabethan and Jacobean culture. This is not a new topic, but it acquires originality here through the desire of the contributors to treat accounts of dreams as expressive of various crises, personal, political and religious, which typify the age.

Two essays look at the connections between descriptions of dreams and attitudes to ghosts in fictional and non-fictional works. In "Dreaming, Motion, Meaning: Oneiric Transport in Seventeenth-Century Europe", Mary Baine Campbell is particularly interested in exploring the cultural alterations which occurred in the hermeneutic of the dream and, to some extent, of ghosts. Alluding to the etymological history of the term 'dream', which is strongly correlated to the idea of the ghost, she notes a gradual decrease in the epistemological significance of these two phenomena since the Renaissance. Specific illustrations of this claim help her case, and she adds information about the ways dreams and ghosts were interpreted without which it would be hard to judge the seriousness with which they were taken.

In "Dreaming the Dead. Ghosts and History in the Early Seventeenth Century" Michelle O'Callaghan explores the association of dreams and ghosts in early-modern literature. This is a cogent study which is grounded not only on the premise that "ghosts and dreams frequently coalesce within the dream-vision poem, and share figurative and political vocabularies", but also on the claim that "the early modern political dream and the historical ghost [must be read] alongside one another as intimately related, if not identical tropes in early modern figurations of memory and history" (81). Some concepts are reiterated here, as when the author discusses aspects concerning both ghosts and dreams. Disturbing linear temporality, they are repositories of an enigmatic message that reflects the contradictoriness of contemporary ideas concerning both subjects. Opinions differed, for example, as to whether these phenomena were the result of supernatural agency (and if they were, whether they were divine or demonic) or of disordered states of mind. However, O'Callaghan provides a useful overview of the development of the figure of the ghost, in poetry, prose and drama, in the first twenty or so years of the reign of James I, making an important distinction between "the ghosts of the Elizabethan

dead [who] returned to lament the demise of a political ethos”, and “the political ghost [who] returns to mobilise the nation in the name of an embattled Protestant cause” (82). The persuasiveness of the speeches of these ghosts varies according to the historical moment in which they are uttered. The appearance of both types is always a response to political changes, but the first type triggers a lament for the present situation, while the second launches a real incitement to action. The latter type of ghost is much more aware of his political and social duties; unlike the Ghost in *Hamlet*, he does not represent “an object for nostalgia and meditation rather than a spur to present action” (85). Since these Jacobean ‘second generation ghosts’ urge people to act in the political sphere, they tend to focus less on the individuals to whom they appear than on the communication of their message, however obscure, to the whole community:

... the dead had now found a political body to talk to. Just as the ghost found a receptive audience in the House of Commons, Parliament gained Protestant champions in these saintly ghosts that, in turn, functioned to represent its interests within the national arena. Unlike the earlier Jacobean ghosts, who spoke to an isolated author standing in for a dispossessed and disempowered community of honour, the 1620’s ghosts assume a collective voice, and speak to and for a community that is not primarily aristocratic but popular. (91)

The final part of O’Callaghan’s essay, once again and quite consistently, links the idea of the ghost to that of the dream, bringing the topic back to the main subject of the book. O’Callaghan argues that the disturbing appearance of the ghost is always meaningful, performative and, as P. E. Dutton says of the political dream in his *The Politics of Dreaming in the Carolingian Empire* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), “politically purposeful” (94). Slightly redundant is the contributor’s remark on the fact that “These ghost narratives write their times as moments of crisis and fracture that require corrective histories. ... The ghost and the dream have an uncanny ability to make the past speak to the present in a way that is both intelligible and enigmatic” (94). Perhaps it would have been worth considering these last statements as assumptions, rather than as logical results of her thesis.

The discussion concerning the ghost is not relevant in the other essays, but one of the merits of this book is its original approach to considering the many ways in which early modern people used to participate, sometimes unconsciously, in contemporary social life. All the papers bring out the extent to which Elizabethan and Jacobean writers used ghosts and dreams to express views of authority which might otherwise have been censored. In “Dream-Visions of Elizabeth I” Helen Hackett notes the frequency with which such visions provide a means for authors to discuss some sensitive questions to do with the monarchy, such as the Queen’s

advancing age. Far from being merely a cue for sentimentality or whimsy, they quite regularly “deliver political admonition and critique” (58). The dream was, indeed, symptomatic of a more general and more exasperated condition experienced by the Elizabethans. Aristocratic dreamers, for example, tend to dwell on what they perceived as an unjust lack of advancement. Dreaming of Elizabeth was “a means of expressing the political aspirations and frustrations of Elizabeth’s courtiers” (45).

Stephen Clucas’s essay further clarifies Hackett’s assertions. His essay “Dreams, Prophecies and Politics: John Dee and the Elizabethan Court 1575-1585” perfectly fits in the general structure of the book, since he studies Dee’s dreams as prophetic messages – so interpreted by the dreamer – which suggested how to act in a society built on the fragile balance between favouritism and disfavour in the Court of the Queen. Similarly, in “‘Imaginarie in Manner: Reall in Matter’: Rachel Speght’s Dreame and the Female Scholar-Poet”, Kate Lilley reads a variety of Renaissance texts as indicative of their author’s desire to express the unspoken. In particular, she analyses Speght’s *Mortalities Memorandum with a Dreame Prefixed* (1621) and women’s use of the poetic dream vision: here the function of the dream is to show women the way to greater social power through intellectual and cultural achievement.

The above essays are mainly concerned with the study of a range of early-modern texts whose accounts of dreams are rarely without a subtext in which the dreamer (and the reader) is covertly advised on forms of political and social action. In three other essays the focus shifts to the subjectivity of the dreamer. In “‘Onely Proper unto Man’: Dreaming and Being Human”, the second essay of the book, Erica Fudge investigates how early modern people defined themselves through their own dreams, which seemed to concern more general questions about human existence. Far more convincing, however, is Katharine Hodgkin’s essay “Dreaming Meanings: Some Modern Dream Thoughts”. She insists that we should read accounts of dreams in “relation to the dreamers who record them”, since it is then possible “to see more than a purely conventional and depersonalised mobilisation of familiar elements” (124). In “‘I Saw No Angel’: Civil War Dreams and the History of Dreaming”, S. J. Wiseman investigates typical dreams of the Civil War period, and notes how they continued to influence day-time behaviour and late Restoration thought in a multifaceted way.

This book demonstrates that an awareness of early-modern attitudes to, and uses of, dreams and ghosts is indispensable to the understanding of a cultural system in which, as one of the editors remarks with reference to the dream, both were objects of “fascination, but also anxiety” (13). “Fascination”, because they could be interpreted in different ways; “anxiety”, because they needed to be interpreted in the right way in order to be

effective. The volume also proves that, far from testifying to the persistence of superstition and regressive modes of thought in the age of Shakespeare, Bacon and Locke, the treatment of these topics by early-modern writers consistently exhibits an ingenuity and independence of mind which we too often assume only became possible a century or more later.