

his astonishment he asked the reason for this shocking conduct, they angrily replied that he had driven them from their sanctuary of modesty and had prostituted them to every passer-by. [20] In truth, divinities have always preferred to be known and worshipped in the fashion assigned to them by ancient popular tradition, which made images of beings that had no physical form, represented them as of different ages, though they were subject neither to growth nor decay, and gave them clothes and ornaments, though they had no bodies. [21] In this way Pythagoras himself, and Empedocles, Parmenides, and Heraclitus spoke of the gods, and Timaeus, their disciple, continued the tradition that had come down to him.

NOTES

1. *Fabula* is derived from Latin *feri*, "to tell," "to sing (as a poet)." See Varro, *De lingua Latina*, VI, 55; Isidore, *Etymologiae*, I, xl, 1-2.
2. Menander (342-291 B.C.) wrote over one hundred comedies, none of which survives intact. Both Plautus (c. 254-184 B.C.) and Terence (c. 190-150 B.C.) wrote close imitations of his work in Latin. Petronius Arbiter (d. 66 A.D.), reputed author of the *Satyricon*, was identified with a public official under the Emperor Nero, noted for his voluptuary excesses. Apuleius (fl. 2nd century A.D.), on the other hand, was a leading philosopher of the Platonic school. Macrobius is here thinking of *The Golden Ass*, a work which he feels is unbefitting the author of the *De deo Socratis*.

[On Dreams]

Macrobius, Commentary on the
Dream of Scipio

CHAPTER iii

[1] After these prefatory remarks, there remains another matter to be considered. . . . We must first describe the many varieties of dreams recorded by the ancients, who have classified and defined the various types that have appeared to men in their sleep, wherever they might be. Then we shall be able to decide to which type the dream we are discussing belongs.

[2] All dreams may be classified under five main types: there is the enigmatic dream, in Greek *oneiros*, in Latin *somnium*; second, there is the prophetic vision, in Greek *horama*, in Latin *visio*; third, there is the oracular dream, in Greek *chrematizmos*, in Latin *oraculum*; fourth, there is the nightmare, in Greek *enypnion*, in Latin *insomnium*; and last, the apparition, in Greek *phantasma*, which Cicero, when he has occasion to use the word, calls *visum*.¹

[3] The last two, the nightmare and the apparition are not worth interpreting since they have no prophetic significance. [4] Nightmares may be caused by mental or physical distress, or anxiety about the future: the patient experiences in dreams vexations similar to those that disturb him during the day. As examples of the mental variety, we might mention the lover who dreams of possessing his sweetheart or of losing her, or the man who fears the plots or might of an enemy and is confronted with him in his dream or seems to be fleeing him.² The physical variety might be illustrated by one who has overindulged in eating or drinking³ and dreams that he is either choking with food or unburdening himself, or by one who has been suffering from hunger or thirst and dreams that he is craving and searching for food or drink or has found it. Anxiety about the future would cause a man to dream that he is gaining a prominent position or office as he hoped or that he is being deprived of it as he feared.⁴

[5] Since these dreams and others like them arise from some condition or circumstance that irritates a man during the day and consequently disturbs him when he falls asleep, they flee when he awakes and vanish into thin air. Thus the name *insomnium* was given, not because such dreams occur "in sleep" [i.e., in *somnio*]-in this respect nightmares are like other types-but because they are noteworthy only during their course and afterwards have no importance or meaning.

[6] Virgil, too, considers nightmares deceitful: "False are the dreams

(*insomnia*) sent by departed spirits to their sky."⁶ He used the word "sky" with reference to our mortal realm because the earth bears the same relation to the regions of the dead as the heavens bear to the earth. Again, in describing the passion of love, whose concerns are always accompanied by nightmares, he says: "Oft to her heart rushes back the chief's valor, oft his glorious stock; his looks and words cling fast within her bosom, and the pang withholds calm rest from her limbs."⁷ And a moment later: "Anna, my sister, what dreams (*insomnia*) thrill me with fears?"⁷

[7] The apparition (*phantasma* or *visum*) comes upon one in the moment between wakefulness and slumber, in the so-called "first cloud of sleep." In this drowsy condition he thinks he is still fully awake and imagines he sees specters rushing at him or wandering vaguely about, differing from natural creatures in size and shape, and hosts of diverse things, either delightful or disturbing. To this class belongs the incubus, which, according to popular belief, rushes upon people in sleep and presses them with a weight which they can feel.⁸ [8] The two types just described are of no assistance in foretelling the future; but by means of the other three we are gifted with the powers of divination.

We call a dream oracular (*oraculum*) in which a parent, or a pious or revered man, or a priest, or even a god clearly reveals what will or will not transpire, and what action to take or to avoid. [9] We call a dream a prophetic vision (*visio*) if it actually comes true. For example, a man dreams of the return of a friend who has been staying in a foreign land, thoughts of whom never enter his mind. He goes out and presently meets his friend and embraces him. Or in his dream he agrees to accept a deposit, and early the next day a man runs anxiously to him, charging him with the safekeeping of his money and committing secrets to his trust. [10] By an enigmatic dream (*somnium*) we mean one that conceals with strange shapes and veils with ambiguity the true meaning of the information being offered, and requires an interpretation for its understanding.⁹ We need not explain further the nature of this dream since everyone knows from experience what it is. There are five varieties of it: personal, alien, social, public, and universal. [11] It is personal when one dreams that he himself is doing or experiencing something; alien, when he dreams this about someone else; social, when his dream involves others and himself; public, when he dreams that some misfortune or benefit has befallen the city, forum, theater, public walls, or other public enterprise; universal, when he dreams that some change has taken place in the sun, moon, planets, sky, or regions of the earth.¹⁰

[12] The dream which Scipio reports that he saw embraces the three

reliable types mentioned above, and also has to do with all five varieties of the enigmatic dream. It is oracular since the two men who appeared before him and revealed his future, Aemilius Paulus and Scipio the Elder, were both his father, both were pious and revered men, and both were affiliated with the priesthood. It is a prophetic vision since Scipio saw the regions of his abode after death and his future condition. It is an enigmatic dream because the truths revealed to him were couched in words that hid their profound meaning and could not be comprehended without skillful interpretation.

It also embraces the five varieties of the last type. [13] It is personal since Scipio himself was conducted to the regions above and learned of his future. It is alien since he observed the estates to which the souls of others were destined. It is social since he learned that for men with merits similar to his the same places were being prepared as for himself. It is public since he foresaw the victory of Rome and the destruction of Carthage, his triumph on the Capitoline, and the coming civil strife. And it is universal since by gazing up and down he was initiated into the wonders of the heavens, the great celestial circles, and the harmony of the revolving spheres, things strange and unknown to mortals before this; in addition he witnessed the movements of the stars and planets and was able to survey the whole earth.

NOTES

1. Macrobius' classification of dreams derives in most part from the *Onirocriticon* of Artemidorus (fl. 2nd century A.D.), a work which has been called "a main source of the leading dream books of the Middle Ages." Macrobius' Commentary, however, was the chief means of its transmission to European Latinists. See, for example, John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, II, xv; Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum naturae*, XXVI, 32 ff.; Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De proprietatibus rerum*, VI, 24-27 (*De somno*); Robert Holkot, *Liber Sapientiae*, Lectio cclii.
2. See Troilus and Criseyde, V, 246-52, for example, and Pandarus' analysis of dreams in V, 358-85. Chaucer playfully suggests that his dream in the Parliament of Fowls is an *insomnium* (99-105). The actual dream, however, obviously shares characteristics with "significant" dreams. Compare *Roman de la rose*, 18,366-410; *Romeo and Juliet*, I, iv, 70-88. If it is read as sheer autobiography, equating the author with the Lover, the *Roman de la rose* would also amount to no more than an *insomnium*; the poet's invitation to read the poem in this way is clearly a French joke.
3. See Cicero, *De divinatione*, I, 60. Chanticleer calls him "Oon of the gretteste auctour that men rede" (*Nun's Priest's Tale*, 2934), and draws his stories of prophetic dreams from *De divinatione*, I, 27. The nature of the *insomnium* may explain why lovers sleep "namoote than dooth a nyghtyngale" (*General Prologue*, 98). Pertelote seeks to interpret Chanticleer's *visio* as an *insomnium* (*Nun's Priest's Tale*, 2921 ff.).
4. See John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, II, xv.