

The Healing Power of Erotic Dreams in the Age of Humanism

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The article explores the perception of erotic dreams in the works of fifteenth to seventeenth century humanists. Erotic dreams were undoubtedly a delicate theme, which humanists attempted to treat scientifically, to naturalize them, chiefly in medical works. The appearance of erotic dreams (most often dreams about sexual acts) was supposed to indicate the imbalance of humor in the human body. In other words, humanists argued that they not be signs of the devil's work, tempting people to sin, but a symptom of a diagnosable and curable physiological process. Moreover, erotic dreams did not merely help in diagnosing the imbalance of humors but could also have healing power because they could restore the appropriate proportion of the bodily fluids. Through antique, medieval and fifteenth- to seventeenth-century medical treatises, the article outlines how erotic dreams were interpreted in history, connected as much to spirituality as to bodily and mental diseases – especially to melancholy – and to love frenzy.

Keywords: Antiquity / Middle ages / humanism / medical treatises / erotic dreams / physiological interpretation / mania / melancholy

The humanist approach to the erotic dreams preserved the practical attitude of the ancient scholars. An essential difference to approaches from antiquity was that the humanist scholars forbore oneiromancy, that is to say, interpreting dreams and divination based on them. In the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, erotic dreams were, on the one hand, interpreted as signs of different physiological processes with occasional references to evil spiritual beings. On the other hand, they were used for diagnosis and healing. This article will first summarize in chronological order the most important antique and medieval theories about the erotic dreams, then indicate some variations of the ways Renaissance scholars and doctors approached this kind of dreams.

Concerning erotic dreams, one of the crucial ancient authors was Hippocrates (c. 460–c. 370 BC) who first developed the medical-humoral theory. Although he did not go into details, he referred to the

nocturnal emissions caused by sexual visions and intercourse in dreams as precursors of insanity (Hippocrates 1.21–27).

His contemporary Plato (c. 427–347 BC) referred to erotic dreams as a result of different psychophysiological processes in his *Republic* (571c–d). According to his tripartite theory of the human soul, the gentle, rational part is slumbering while the lowest part gambols and endeavors to satisfy its instincts. Consequently, one has those shameless sexual dreams in which one performs a sexual act with any man, woman (even with one's mother), god, or beast. Based on his famous chariot allegory in *Phaedrus* (246–254),¹ it can be imagined as if the charioteer himself – that is, the intellectual part of the soul – fell asleep and the two horses, black and white, would break loose and race without any control. In these cases, awful erotic dreams can appear without any sense of shame. Of course, according to the allegory, this is not the dream of the charioteer but the dream of the “chariot.”

Plato's pupil Aristotle (384–322 BC) further developed the Hippocratic medical theory of the four humors. The *Corpus Aristotelicum* includes three books on dreams (“De divinatione per

¹ According to the allegory, the black horse represents the irrational, sensual nature of the human soul, while the white horse is the symbol of the rational and moral impulse of the soul. The charioteer represents reason, or the intellectual part of the soul which – controlling the two horses – should guide the entire soul toward the truth. To quote *Phaedrus* (246a–b, 253d–e) in the translation of Harold North Fowler: “We will liken the soul to the composite nature of a pair of winged horses and a charioteer. Now the horses and charioteers of the gods are all good and of good descent, but those of other races are mixed; and first the charioteer of the human soul drives a pair, and secondly one of the horses is noble and of noble breed, but the other quite the opposite in breed and character. Therefore in our case the driving is necessarily difficult and troublesome... Let us retain this division. Now of the horses we say one is good and the other bad; but we did not define what the goodness of the one and the badness of the other was. That we must now do. The horse that stands at the right hand is upright and has clean limbs; he carries his neck high, has an aquiline nose, is white in color, and has dark eyes; he is a friend of honor joined with temperance and modesty, and a follower of true glory; he needs no whip, but is guided only by the word of command and by reason. The other, however, is crooked, heavy, ill put together, his neck is short and thick, his nose flat, his color dark, his eyes grey and bloodshot; he is the friend of insolence and pride, is shaggy-eared and deaf, hardly obedient to whip and spurs. Now when the charioteer beholds the love-inspiring vision, and his whole soul is warmed by the sight, and is full of the tickling and prickings of yearning, the horse that is obedient the charioteer, constrained then as always by modesty, controls himself and does not leap upon the beloved; but the other no longer heeds the pricks or the whip of the charioteer, but springs wildly forward, causing all possible trouble to his mate and to the charioteer, and forcing them to approach the beloved and propose the joys of love.”

somnum,” “De insomniis,” “De somno et vigilia”). This theory has remained dominant for centuries and was adopted by scholars of the Renaissance as well. In these three books, the author detailed the psychophysiological aspects of the birth of dreams. Although he did not touch upon the theme of sexual dreams, his physiological explanations influenced later humanist medical interpretations (“De somno et vigilia” 457a–458a).

In *De rerum natura* 4.1030–1036, the Roman Epicurean poet Lucretius (99–c. 55 BC) described the seven fearful dreams (Lucretius 198). In his list, the last type of dreams are the erotic “pollution dreams,” which are frightful because of the physical symptoms that accompany them and are experienced by strangers to the sleeper’s dream world. These include shouts in the air, the rise of body temperature, as well as urine or semen on the sheets.

These material signs make the dream seem real, a sort of borderline between fantasy and tangible reality. Based on the optical emission theory, Lucretius thought that the external objects, people, and even the gods of the world emanate and send off their “εἰδῶλα” (*eidōla*), “simulacra” or idols out to the universe. There, these millions and millions of little particles would flit and travel through space and get stuck in the web of our senses. This happens not only when we are awake, but during our sleeping as well. These subtle miniature images penetrate our sleeping body, imprint on our senses and disturb our soul and body with the fantasies of dream.

The next classical author is Galen (129–c. 216). His further development of the humoral theory and his brief writing *On diagnosis from dreams* has been available in countless editions through the centuries. This is an Aristotelian work. It approached dreams with a physiological diagnostic view. Galen refers to instances of people having sexual intercourse in their dreams, which he believed was a symptom of the imbalanced humours because of the overabundance of semen in the body (834.9–12).

Galen’s contemporary Artemidorus’s *Oneirocritica* (*The Interpretation of Dreams*) is the only surviving dream book from antiquity. During the Middle Ages, it was only known in Greek and Arabic manuscripts. This book was meant for practical everyday use. The author ordered the dreams according to thematic categorization, into two main categories: ἐνύπνια (*enypnia*) and ὄνειροι (*oneiroi*) (1.3). The first type directly expressed the actual desires and the state of body, but the ὄνειροι were prophetic dreams. In this category, three chapters deal with erotic – or rather sexual – dreams and their interpretations (1.78–

80). Many of them include strong sexual material and would today fall into the category of sexual taboos. This can be the main reason, despite great interest, that nobody dared to write a commentary to this fundamental book for centuries.²

Christianity provided a new ingredient in the interpretation of dreams, especially of the erotic dreams. From the second century onwards – perhaps starting with Tertullian’s work on the soul – one can notice the age of the besieged soul. The emphasis shifted from signs of physical diseases and the problem of health towards the shameful stain of a lost spiritual strife. The pioneering author is Evagrius Ponticus (345–399). He listed and named eight demons which appeared in the form of thoughts and visions. Each demon lays siege to the soul (506–535). The second enemy on this list is the demon of fornication (δαίμων πορνείας). So the dream was transformed into the scene of a battle where the human soul had to resist attacks of these eight demons. The degree and success of this resistance in the space of erotic dreams is a kind of indicator of the spiritual development of the soul. Therefore, for example, the nocturnal emission is a sort of checkmate, a lost battle on the chess-board of this continuing spiritual war.

Evagrius’s follower John Cassian (c. 360–435) divided the temptations and set them up into six ascending gradations. According to him, the most dangerous and final stage is the sexual temptation during the unconscious dream. Ideally, a monk would be plagued by nocturnal emissions through erotic dreams maximum three times a year. Cassian offered remedies against this: a strict diet, covering the kidneys with lead, “but the best strategy against the pollution is to fall asleep while saying the Jesus Prayer” (260–289).

² Artemidorus’s divinations from sexual dreams were almost completely unknown in the west until 1518. The first edition was published in Greek (Venice, in aed. Aldi, and Andreae soceri). After this, the Saxon humanist Janus Cornarius made the Latin translation of the book which was published first in 1539 (*De somniorum interpretatione*, Basel, Frobenius). Next year, Walther Hermann Ryff published his German translation, republished several times with Melanchton’s proofreading (*Warhafftige*, Strasbourg 1540). The German version omits the “indecent content” of these chapters and merely refers to them. In 1542, Pietro Lauro translated the whole book into Italian, and republished it in 1547 (*Interpretatione de sogni*, Venice 1542). In 1546, Charles Fontaine had already partially translated it into French, but he also skipped the parts on sexual dreams (*Epitome des trois premiers livres de Artemidorus*, Lyon 1546). There was also an English translation by Thomas Hill: “The most pleasant art of the interpretation of dreams” (London 1576). Unfortunately, the humanists were not so brave that they would have ventured to interpret Artemidorus’s work publicly. Despite the number of editions, they remained silent.

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) fully adopted the Aristotelian theory of dream. He added that wet dreams are not sins because, during sleep, the unconscious sexual intercourses cannot be controlled by human free will and human intellect. Despite his humoral medical explanation, this phenomenon can be a sign of demonic activity when the succubus – under cover of polluted dreams – steals sperm to impregnate a distant sleeping woman, now in the form of an incubus (2.2.154.5).³

One of the precedents of this kind of dream demonology can be Macrobius's *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* from the fifth century. Macrobius classified all dreams under five types: *somnium*, *visio*, *oraculum*, *insomnium*, and *visum*. Strange creatures and spectres appear in the *visum* (or φάντασμα): “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.”⁴ Macrobius (1.3.1–20) called this phantom ἐπιάλτης (*epialtēs*).

As the humanists attempted to scientize the phenomenon of the erotic dreams, they avoided the theme of divination and the devil's temptation in this context. Sexual dreams mostly appeared in medical tractates as symptoms of physiological or psychological abnormalities. However, in his *Platonic theology*, Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) treated the dream as one type of the “seven emptinesses” which let the prophecies appear in mind (Ficino 13.2.24–30). He stated that the phantasy is the one who guides the way we live our life. Of course, the sexual dreams – as “vain dreams” – are the lowest form of human dreams, excluded from the noble company of prophetic emptinesses. “The people who are deluded by such dreams are usually those devoted to the life of pleasure and vehemently attracted to the things that move the sense.” The stimulating power of the vestiges of images in waking disturbs their phantasy in dreams, and this can lead to ejaculation of their generative seed because they think that they are having real sexual intercourse. Ficino also explains this with the effect of the intemperate surplus of melancholic humors and vapors which calls forth the most “hideous spectacles.”

Referring to Arabic sources, the Paduan physician Antonio Gazio (1461–1528) mentioned in his medical manual (*Corona florida*) that the *mania* or *furor* develops in the brain through the ascending vapors of the accumulated sperm which partially block the passages to the

³ The succubus is a demon in female form who seduces men, particularly in dreams. The incubus is a demon in male form who seduces or rapes women.

⁴ Translation by William Harris Stahl.

brain. This frequently generates erotic visions – not just in dreams, also in waking. The accumulated sperm is dangerous. Gazio – quoting from Ali ibn Ridwan’s (Hali Rodoan) commentary of Galen’s *Ars parva* – compared this to viper venom which poisons the body, especially the heart, the stomach and the brain, and – because of the increased portion of melancholic humors – can even cause epilepsy.⁵ Nevertheless, a positive outcome can be discovered in this concept. The nocturnal emissions due to the erotic dreams can be beneficial because by eliminating the cause, they can rebalance the proportions of the humors and heal certain diseases of the stomach and heart (Gazius 189r–v).

These thoughts were repeated almost word for word in *Rosa Gallica* by Symphorien Champier (1471–1539) who most likely knew and used Gazio’s book (Champier XVIv–XVIIr). In his health book, the Transylvanian Paulus Kyr (c. 1510–1588) drew attention to the beneficial effect of nightly erotic visions which can liberate the patient from melancholy and fury of love (Kyr D₂r–v).

According to the French physician Jean Aubery (1569–1622), the continuous ascending black vapours can bring forth shadows and phantasms in the eyes. Therefore the erotic visions can appear in the daytime before our eyes as well (Aubery 39–40, 139–140).

Another French physician, Jacques Ferrand (c. 1575–after 1623), wrote a famous book about the erotic melancholy. This was recalled and burned by the Inquisition in 1620. According to the classical motif, the erotic melancholy can often be born from the sluggishness of “homo otiosus.” Ferrand – based on Galen – explains this process with an abundance of blood which is not consumed by the work or active life. This abundance converts to sperm, the evaporation from which blocks the nerves toward the brain. In extreme cases, this can lead to priapism, when the penis remains in the erected state for a long time (Ferrand 48–49). He also writes about female erotic dreams. The process is the same as in men. Vapors of the melancholic humor block the channels to the brain. This can lead to a kind of nymphomania called “fureur utérine” by Ferrand (75–79). The French physician also gives examples for dreams of men plagued by love. Their brain, covered by the smoke of excessive melancholic humor, generates visions in their dreams. They often see themselves among a crowd of ladies, in balls, farcical comedies or masquerades. Ferrand makes an interesting

⁵ In addition, referring to the well-known second-century Greek physician Soranus and the Roman physician Caelius Aurelianus, he compared the orgasm to epilepsy. So these dangerous vapors can lead to an orgasm in dreams, even to an epileptic seizure.

metaphorical reflection about the incubus and succubus which like to bathe in melancholic humor. This sort of melancholic “bathtub” of the human body attracts the nightmares and erotic dreams. Ferrand knew two melancholic young women in Castelnaudary who – lying next to their husbands – were visited by this kind of demons at night until Ferrand healed them (140, 158–160).

The Portuguese Rodrigo de Castro (c. 1550–1627) – also known as David Namias – details the same theory. However, his psychophysiological explanation seems more acceptable. His work is fascinating because he focuses on women and mainly deals with the female erotic dreams. He declares that women do not have nocturnal pollution, but can also suffer from the absence of sexual acts. Because of this, the vapors of the increased amount of melancholic humors titillate their brain, and they see joyful erotic visions in their dreams (106–116).

One of the most exciting theories was developed by Dominicus Leonus, a medical professor at the University of Bologna.⁶ In his book about the human diseases, he explains the causes and signs of *mania* or *furor*. He writes similar things about the relations between the overabundance of sperm, unbalanced humours, melancholy and *mania* as Gazio, but Leonus details this with examples. According to him, the ascending vapors of retained sperm do not just move the imagination in sleeping or waking. Such people can see unknown visions from the past, or foresee the future. Sometimes they can speak different languages, not just Latin or Greek, but unknown languages as well. They have never learnt these languages (Leonus 201–205, 210). Leonus personally met a person who had this sort of *furor coitus* or *furor genitus*, as he calls it, in Giucano, his birthplace. He connects the prophetic frenzy – which Ficino called “*furor vaticinus*” – with the overabundance of sperm. His words have remarkable consequences, and his theory can explain inspiration, even the poetic frenzy, scientifically and medically related to the quantity of sperm.

Briefly, Ficino differentiated four types of inspiration or *furores*. The most important and strongest one is the frenzy of love, the *furor amatorius* which contains the other three – *furor poeticus*, *furor mysterialis*, and *furor vaticinus*. The human soul must have been prepared to receive the divine information or vision. As mentioned earlier, one of the seven kinds of emptinesses is a condition for the appearance of the divine vision through the *furor*. Based on Plato, Ficino describes inspired poets as unconscious mediums or a kind of vessel, filled by

⁶ Lunensis de Zuccano (now Giucano).

the divinity – for example by the muses – with celestial knowledge. It seems that the process is the same as described by Leonus. Somebody unconsciously speaks or sings something which reflects more knowledge than he possesses. In the Ficinian sense, Leonus's descriptions of the visionary *mania* can be perfect examples of the inspired poetical and prophetic frenzies. One of the conditions of the inspiration can be the vapors of the overabundant sperm as Leonus shows in his examples. It seems that this vapor – just like the melancholy or sleeping – can prepare the soul to get the divine messages.

The above summary tried to show the small differences in the approach to the erotic dreams from the ancient times until the age of humanism. In the antiquity, the emphasis was on practicality, and the erotic dreams were mainly used for diagnosis and prophecy. With Christianity, the approach to the sexual dreams shifted toward the sphere of spirituality. The illness of the body is nothing compared to the weakness of the soul for which the dreamer can even fall into damnation. So the erotic dreams became a temptation, a challenge, and a test. This kind of dream became a symptom of the spiritual weakness. The humanist interpretation of erotic dreams was practical and was primarily based on the Hippocratic-Aristotelian-Galenic medical theory of the four humors. The authors emphasized the physiological aspects and tried to keep a distance from spirituality. Every unusual phenomenon was considered a symptom of the imbalanced humors in the body. The main difference between the classical and the humanist view is what they thought to be abnormal. The classical authors just wanted to read from the erotic dreams which could be equally signs of normal and abnormal phenomena. Conversely, humanist authors examined the erotic dream as an a priori visible symptom of abnormality. The most exciting part of the humanist approach is the relation between the erotic dreams and the ascending vapors of the sperm as a kind of afflation (“*semine afflatur*”). On the one hand, balancing on the edge of insanity, they are understood as symptoms, related to the erotic melancholy, love and the amount of semen. This is compatible with the Renaissance theory of *furores* (including love poetry). On the other hand, the erotic dream can heal not just mental but also bodily diseases. In this sense, the incubi-succubi need not only be the phenomena of evil temptations but can also work as benevolent nocturnal angels who heal the body as well.

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Zdravilna moč erotičnih sanj v dobi humanizma

Ključne besede: antika / srednji vek / humanizem / medicinske razprave / erotične sanje / fiziološka interpretacija / manija / melanholija

Članek raziskuje dožemanje erotičnih sanj v delih od 15. do 17. stoletja. Erotične sanje so bile nedvomno občutljiva tema, ki so jo humanisti skušali obravnavati znanstveno, posebno v medicinskih delih. Pojav erotičnih sanj je najpogosteje zajemal sanje o spolnem občevanju. Veljalo je, da se erotične sanje pojavljajo zaradi neravnotežja tekočin v človeškem telesu. Z drugimi besedami, humanisti so trdili, da tovrstne sanje niso hudičevo delo, s katerim hudi duh zapeljuje ljudi v greh, temveč simptom ugotovljivega in ozdravljivega fiziološkega procesa. Še več, erotične sanje po njihovi razlagi niso samo pomagale pri odkrivanju neravnotežja telesnih tekočin, temveč so imele tudi zdravilno moč, ker so lahko pomagale obnoviti primerno razmerje med njimi. Na podlagi analize medicinskih razprav iz antike, srednjega veka in obdobja med 15. in 17. stoletjem članek orisuje zgodovinsko interpretacijo erotičnih sanj in povezovanje teh sanj z duhovnostjo, pa tudi s telesnimi in duševnimi boleznimi – zlasti z melanholijo in z ljubezensko pobesnelostjo.

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