On the Explanation of Dreams (Somniale Ioseph) | Ad explanandum sompnium

Text Information
Author | Anonymous
Language | Latin
Period | 13th Century
Genre | Handbooks and manuals
Source | Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, MS Ham. 390 f.49v
URL | https://sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/explanation_dreams/

Translation by Danny Smith.

Introduction to the Text
This short text is one of many so-called "dreambooks" - personal guides to dream interpretation - that flourished across Europe and Byzantium in the late Middle Ages. This particular example is a mantic alphabet known as a Somniale Ioseph, named for Joseph, the Old Testament dream interpreter. Like a similar mantic alphabet contained in the same manuscript and also published on the GMS, it is designed to be used alongside another text. A dreamer opens a book, often a psalter or prayer book, at random and stops at the first letter that they see. Turning back to the Somniale Ioseph, then, the dreamer reads the entry corresponding to that letter.

This text differs from other kinds of alphabetical dreambooks, such as the tradition known as Somniale Danielis, which listed themes and images from dreams alongside interpretations. This text instead introduces a note of chance, drawing on the long history of bibliomancy (fortune-telling with books) in the Middle Ages.

Dream interpretation was a popular pastime in the Middle Ages and hundreds of manuscript copies of dreambooks, drawn from Arabic, Byzantine, Greek, and Hebrew sources, survive alongside those written in Latin and vernacular European languages.

Introduction to the Source
Eighty-eight similar *Somniale Ioseph* texts survive in manuscript editions, most from the fifteenth century. This particular copy was written in the thirteenth century in Venice or the Veneto and is preserved in Berlin in Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, MS Ham. 390 f.49v alongside another the mantic alphabet published on the *GMS* as well as other divinatory and oracular texts.

Below the alphabet on the page an illustrator has included a kind of diagram of how the dreambook functions. A small figure is shown asleep and dreaming (labeled *iste dormit*) and then is shown sitting awake before a group of friends as he excitedly explains his dream with the help of a book open on his lap (labeled *hic splanat somnia*).

Further Reading

Chardonnens, László Sándor. "Dream Divination in Manuscripts and Early Printed Books: Patterns of Transmission." *Aspects of Knowledge: Preserving and Reinventing Traditions of Learning in the Middle Ages*, edited by Marilina Cesario and Hugh Magennis, Manchester Medieval Literature and Culture, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 23–52.
  • *The most recent study of transmission and translation of Somniale Ioseph and Somnia Danielis texts in the West.*

Chardonnens, László Sándor. "Handlist of Dream Divination and Lunar Prognostication in Western Manuscripts and Early Printed Books up to 1550." Accessed July 22, 2020, https://www.academia.edu/29720263/Handlist_of_Dream_Divination_and_Lunar_Prognostication_in_Western_Manuscripts_and_Early_Printed_Books_up_to_1550.
  • *A continuously updated list of surviving manuscript and print witnesses.*

Kruger, Steven F.. *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
  • *Particular Chapter 1 - "Dreambooks and the Audiences"*

Thorndike, Lynn. *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. 2, New York: Macmillan, 1923, pp 290-302.
  • *The earliest modern survey in English of dreambook texts.*

On the Explanation of Dreams (Somniale Ioseph) | Ad explanandum sompnium

¶ In .A. significat adiutorium domini.

¶ In .B. significat aliquod bonum.

¶ In .C. significat sanguinem.

¶ In .D. significat inimicum.

¶ In .E. significat noua uidere uel audire.

¶ In .F. significat malum prope esse.

¶ In .G. significat gaudium.

¶ In .H. significat ad esse gaudium.

¶ In .I. significat alibi ire.

¶ In .K. significat in eodem loco stare.

¶ In .L. significat leticiam ed esse.

¶ In .M. significat aliquod magnum.

¶ In .N. significat aloquod contrarium.

¶ In .O. significat elemosinam facere.

¶ In .P. significat pietatem exercere.

¶ In .Q. significat ad deum curere.

¶ In .R. significat fossa mortis.

¶ In .S. significat salutem domini.

¶ In .T. significat tristiciam ad esse.

¶ In .V. Significat uenire adorare.

¶ In .X. significat saluatorem ad esse.

¶ In .Y. significat id adiuuare.

¶ In .Ç. significat mortem adesse.

¶ An .A. signifies the help of the Lord.

¶ A .B. signifies something good.

¶ A .C. signifes blood.

¶ A .D. signifies an enemy.

5 ¶ An .E. signifies hearing or seeing strange things.

¶ An .F. signifies that evil is near.

¶ A .G. signifies delight.

¶ An .H. signifies a coming delighted.

¶ An .I. signifies going somewhere.

10 ¶ A .K. signifies staying put.

¶ An .L. signifies being happy.

¶ An .M. signifies something large.

¶ An .N. signifies something conflicting.

¶ An .O. signifies giving alms.

15 ¶ A .P. signifies working dutifully.

¶ A .Q. signifies attending to God.

¶ An .R. signifies grave peril.

¶ An .S. signifies deliverance by the Lord.

¶ A .T. signifies being sad.

20 ¶ A .V. signifies coming to worship.

¶ An .X. signifies the coming of the savior.

¶ A .Y. signifies His aid.

¶ A .Ç. Signifies a coming death.

Critical Notes

Translation

Line 22   This refers to divine aid.