THE POWER OF PUNS: DREAM INTERPRETATION IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

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The prognostic dream that features in Tablet I of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* sets the scene for an example of dream-interpretive practices in the ancient Near East. Upon waking from his dream, Gilgamesh consults his mother, asking her to interpret the meaning of his dreams. He relates his dreams in full, yet she focuses upon only a few select elements. She reveals to him that the meteors he saw represent the strength of the man he will soon meet, and the axe he saw represents the competition he will have with another man[1]. This scene plays a critical role in the epic's plot, since the interpretation of these dreams helps introduce one of the main characters, Enkidu. The interaction between mother and son in this tale is an example of one of many ways dream interpretation played a role in life for those in the ancient Near East.

Oneiromancy, the interpretation of dreams, was an integral part of magical practices in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East. Not only was its use widespread across time periods and cultures, but it also played an influential role in peoples' lives, such as in the life of Gilgamesh. The earliest examples of dream-interpretive practices in the Mediterranean come from the Old Babylonian Period (c. 2003-1595 BCE)[2]. However, the most comprehensive dream text from Mesopotamia dates to c. 669-627 BCE, first found in the archive of Assurbanipal[3]. Comparable texts from Egypt date similarly to their Mesopotamian counterparts. There are two notable Egyptian dream

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[1] *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Tablet 1

[2] Noegel in Skpakowska 96

[3] Ibid., Oppenheim 222

manuals: one from the New Kingdom, 13th century BCE, during the rule of Ramesses II and another from the Late Period (ca. 700 BCE-400 BCE)[4].

The written word has a rich relationship with the practice of oneiromancy in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East. Dreams were most often viewed as omens, both positive and negative, and one needed to consult a magical dream text to find out whether the dream was a good or bad portent. The use of punning as a rhetorical device is consistent among the recovered Akkadian and Egyptian dream manuals. In his *Nocturnal Ciphers*, Scott B. Noegel identifies written puns as the most prevalent form of written wordplay in Egyptian dream interpretations, as well as in that of other ancient Mediterranean cultures.

This paper will address whether or not the use of written punning in ancient Akkadian and Egyptian oneirocritic texts renders dreams as riddles for the dreamer to solve. This is by necessity an interdisciplinary study. It requires a combination of philological, anthropological, and philosophical methodologies. In order to understand the dream texts, it is necessary to place them in their anthropological contexts, but the issues raised in this paper requires the application of philological techniques. The questions that arise from this study are philosophical in nature, and are answered with the help of Ludwig Wittgenstein's concepts of primary and secondary meanings of words.

The primary text from Mesopotamia is the *Zaqīqu*. The name *Zaqīqu* refers to the Akkadian dream deity, translated into English as "*Light Breath*"[5]. This word can also refer in general to blowing winds, storms, or a breeze[6]. This compendium likely included 11 tablets in total, with tablets three through 10 pertaining exclusively to dream interpretation (the first two tablets and the last tablet were about exorcism)[7]. Each tablet included approximately 400 to 500 dream interpretations, totaling up to 4,000 total interpretations. However, only about one-fifth of this number has survived to the present[8]. The

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[4] Noegel 93

[5] Bottéro 108

[6] Oppenheim 233

[7] Bottéro 114

[8] Ibid.

texts are arranged according to the dream topics. Each dream is constructed as an *if…then* conditional statement. The protases are linked with their respective apodoses by a written or auditory pun. Specific examples of these puns are included below.

The format of the Egyptian dream manuals is nearly identical to the Akkadian *Zaqīqu*. Both cultures viewed dreams as messages conveyed by the gods which needed a professional interpretation[9]. Noegel adds that both cultures "refer to enigmatic dreams as 'knots' or 'performative spells,' that one must 'untie' or loosen' (Akkadian *kisru*, Egyptian *ts.t*)."[10] The primary difference between Akkadian and Egyptian dream texts is that many Egyptian dream manuals include qualifiers (i.e. "good" or "bad") between the protasis and apodosis of a dream entry.

In both cultures, the dream manuals were tools of "rhetorical, hermeneutic, and illocutionary… ritual power."[11] Firstly, dream manuals were considered rhetorical tools because they had an impact upon the individual seeking an interpretation. One would have to visit a trained specialist, known as the *šâ'ilu* in Akkadian. Gilgamesh's mother is an example of such a specialist. Since these manuals are rhetorical, persuasion is necessary to convince the individuals consulting the manuals. The likelihood that an individual would accept the interpretation of the dream manual depended upon the authority of the interpreter and their rhetorical ability. Rhetorical and literary devices such as punning are a necessary element in a dream manual to convince the reader of its authority. After all, these texts were written by humans, and even if priests were believed to have contact with the divine, they are still only intermediaries reporting messages[12].

The use of rhetorical devices pairs with the hermeneutic, or interpretive, function of the dream manuals. The ambiguity of dreams compounded the fear in an individual whose future hung in the balance based upon their dream's meaning. By consulting a dream manual, an individual could find answers that were not immediately

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[9] Noegel in Szpakowska 96
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid. 196
[12] Bottéro 111

clear to them upon waking up from a dream. An individual could trust in the interpretation an authoritative source provided.

The description of dream manuals as an illocutionary (speech act) tool is related to their use in oneiromancy. An illocutionary act conveys meaning: when one utters something significant, one is conveying sense and reference. The person speaking/writing intends for the listener/reader to grasp the speaker's/writer's intention in making the speech. This is the relationship between the *šâ'ilu* and the individual seeking a dream interpretation.

This is an example of an interpretation that a *šâ'ilu* might have read aloud: "If a man dreams that he is eating a raven (*arbu*); he will have income (*irbu*).[13] The pun in this example occurs between the words in parentheses, and is known as an auditory pun. *Arbu* and *irbu* both sound alike when spoken aloud, an example of a punning device known as paronomasia. This device is important because the similar sounds of the words emphasize what is significant in this interpretation. The pun is drawing attention to what elements in this dream are most important.

Another common auditory punning device in the *Zaqīqu* is antanaclasis, an extrapolation of paronomasia. Rather than relying solely upon homonyms for connecting the protasis to the apodosis, antanaclasis plays upon the sound of a single word in two separate contexts. For example,

> [If] one gives him the head (*SAG*) of a pick-axe; his head (*SAG.DU*) [will be cut off].[14]

In this case, the singular sound (SAG) in the protasis is duplicated in another phrase in the apodosis (SAG.DU.) The word "SAG" could have a variety of meanings depending upon the context. It can mean "head," as it does in the protasis, but it can also mean "corpse," which lends itself to the interpretation of the head being cut off. That the word "SAG" can represent two separate ideas is similar to how in English the word "foot" can mean both a literal foot and also a unit of metrical measurement. One can only know which sort of foot is at issue by the context in which the word is used.

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[13] Noegel 20.

[14] Ibid.

The punning devices in the *Zaqīqu* also encompass strictly written puns, which require the interpreter to have a keen knowledge of the written language (this strand is known as "visual puns"). Written puns are particularly intriguing due to the fact that they play on the relationship between cuneiform characters and the syllables they could likewise represent. For example, the cuneiform syllable "ID" could likewise be read as "Á." This dual relationship is used to connect the protasis and apodosis in the following dream interpretation:

> If a man dreams that he is traveling to Idran *(id-ra-an= Á-ra-an)*; he will free himself from a crime *(aran.)*[15]

Because the cuneiform sign "ID" also represents the syllable "Á," it is possible to reinterpret *Idran* in someone's dream as *Áraan*, leading towards one last lexical leap of combining the double "*a*" in *Áraan* into a single syllable, which leaves one with *aran*. This lexical hop-scotch is only possible using the written word, because when spoken aloud, "ID" and "Á" do not sound alike. However, since they are both represented by a single cuneiform syllable, it is possible to work one's way from *Idran* to *aran*. The two words are not at all related, but by playing upon their similar orthography, one can extrapolate to a totally unrelated word in order to interpret the dream. Noegel argues that "the apodosis thus illustrates the high level of erudition that informed such interpretation,"[16] which is what makes visual puns so much more difficult to interpret.

At face value, a pun is simply a play on words. However, there are many possible explanations for their inclusion in the dream manuals. One explanation is that the puns were meant to "shock" the reader into a new awareness. For example, when an individual hears a pun for the first time, there is a moment where the pun's meaning "clicks." But shock factor alone does not indicate a compelling reason for the inclusion of puns in oneirocritic texts.

The variety of punning devices could provide a more satisfying answer for puns' presence in dream manuals. However, examining puns alone does not provide a complete answer as to *why*

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[15] Noegel 20

[16] ibid. 22

the Mesopotamians or Egyptians would have decided upon punning as the appropriate literary device for oneirocriticism. As tools of rhetorical, hermeneutic, and illocutionary power, puns have the ability to refer, to mean, to suggest, to stir up emotions, to call up images, or to serve ritual purposes. In the case of oneiromancy, any combination of these powers can be called upon for the purpose of interpreting omens. Since puns are powerful devices, their employment in dream manuals perhaps provides boundaries for the interpretation of dreams. As Noegel states, the use of a pun in Mesopotamian oneirocriticism means that "the dream cannot now mean anything, but only one thing. The employment of puns… constitutes an act of power."[17] To be specific, this power is held in the hands of the priests who have access to the dream texts. Not only do puns help limit the meaning of dreams, but they also serve as a porous barrier between the lay person and priests who held the special knowledge of language that allowed for interpretation of dreams.

As previously mentioned, Egyptian dream texts provided more than just an interpretation, they also included a qualifier stating whether a dream was good or bad. For example, a line of interpretation from an Egyptian dream manual would read,

> If a man sees himself in a dream losing his teeth: Bad omen. It means one will die by means of his dependents.[18]

As is evident in the above example, the Egyptian oneirocritical texts offer no hints as to why exactly losing teeth is a bad omen, and why it means one will die by his descendants. Here, the protasis and apodosis are not clearly connected with puns, but the conditional phrase is split apart by a qualifier. However, defining a dream as simply good or bad cannot answer all the questions one may have about a dream. Most questions one may ask about a dream cannot be categorized as questions expecting a yes or no answer. Further explanation and interpretation are necessary to provide a satisfying answer.

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[17] ibid. 40-41

[18] ibid. 94

Accepting that puns are a means of interpretation does not answer all the questions remaining about their significance in dream manuals. Dreams do not contain simple answers to their meanings, and the dreamer has no knowledge of what kinds of questions to ask. For example, a man who dreamt that he has eaten a raven does not automatically realize that this is an omen signifying he will have an increase in income, as a dream manual may well tell him. What in his dream would have indicated to him that he would even need to attend to the raven? Without the explanation from the dream journal, perhaps the man would have only focused upon the fact that he was eating in his dream, and try to find significance in that action. Or there could have been other elements present in the dream besides eating the raven that he could question. It is not until he has consulted the dream manual that he realizes that the eating of the raven was the matter of interest.

In many ways, dreams are like personal riddles about one's own life. Just as with dreams, riddles are elusive and it is difficult to know what questions to ask to determine a riddle's meaning. Imagine if the dream of eating a raven were a riddle. Without settling on an answer to the riddle, how would one know to focus in upon the raven as particularly salient? There is nothing in particular about the dream as riddle that leads one to the conclusion that the answer must focus on the raven. Even if this riddle were posed in its original language and the listener could hear the pronunciation of income (irbu,) how would they know the answer must be a word that rhymes with it in particular (such as arbu, raven)? Even if the individual did realize that they needed to use rhyming to figure out the answer, how should they know to find a word rhyming with *irbu* and not some other word in the sentence?

Cora Diamond, in her work on Wittgenstein, discusses the nature of riddles and how we are (un)able to conceive of them. She states, "it is only when one has the solution [to a riddle] that one knows how to take the question, what it is for it to have an answer."[19] Diamond's explanation is easily applicable to the example of the raven (i.e. not knowing to question the raven's significance until already having the interpretation presented,) and to the other examples from dream manuals above. When an individual consulted

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[19] Diamond 269

a dream manual, they were provided with an interpretation for their dream they would not have known to look for otherwise. The interpretation of dreams in these manuals is analogous to the solving of riddles. One cannot understand the sense of the question posed in riddles, and it is not until one has the answer that they can interpret the question with certainty. Diamond explains further that riddles are "a linguistic expression put together by continuing familiar patterns, so the question or request looks like those we know how to use."[20] Riddles appear identical to ordinary questions that one encounters, like math word problems. Despite their unassuming appearance, riddles are not at all like ordinary questions, because one cannot use standardized formulae to come upon a specific answer.

Even though dream interpretation is similar to riddle solving, it appears that it required more erudition than is required to solve a riddle. In some ways, dream interpretation is also similar to the process for solving a math word problem. A common formula employed is:

> Read problem > Identify Variables > Write Equation > Solve for the answer

This is a straightforward formula which applies to nearly every math word problem. Once one has learned this formula, they are able to apply it successfully to different word problems. The word-problem formula is relevant because math problems have a single specific answer. As anyone who has taken a math class knows, one must correctly solve a problem and calculate the same answer as all of their peers. One may receive partial credit for correctly solving parts of the problem, but unless one comes upon the exact answer, their work is incorrect. In this way, solving a math problem is like dream interpretation. In the dream manuals, there is only one interpretation for a dream. As evidenced in the Egyptian dream texts, a dream is either "good" or "bad." There is no interpretation in between these two qualifiers.

However, this does not mean that dream interpretation is exactly the same as a math word problem. Unlike a math assignment, dream interpretation does not offer partial credit for an individual

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[20] ibid. 273-274

who is partly correct in their interpretation. As mentioned, a correct interpretation of a dream was a potentially life and death matter for some ancient peoples. Misinterpreting the portents in a dream could possibly have dire consequences. While oneiromancy does share some qualities of mathematical problem solving, it is not completely analogous. Riddles do not employ algorithms to produce an answer. There is no way to know what interpretive procedure to follow to solve a riddle until one has settled on a satisfying answer. That is not to say that there do not exist some riddles which do have definite answers (e.g. "Four cars are at a four-way stop. They all move at the same time, but no cars collide. What happened?")[21]

This is not the case for all riddles. Some riddles do not have a single answer which an individual may quickly puzzle out. Take for example Lewis Carroll's famous riddle, "How is a raven like a writing desk?" Carroll later conceded that this riddle has no answer, the unsuspecting reader assumed there was in fact an answer, and had no way to intuitively understand just exactly how a raven is like a writing desk. It was never Carroll's job to come up with a satisfying answer, but rather it was up to the reader to interpret the question and find meaning in it. Diamond explains this through the example of a fairytale about the king who told a princess to come to him neither naked nor dressed. The princess had no clue what he wanted, and even the king did not know how the girl should arrive while meeting these requirements. When she showed up to him in a net, he was satisfied by her interpretation of his request.[22] Even though he was the one who posed the riddle, he did not know the answer to it until he saw the princess' interpretation of the riddling question.

Another famous example is the Sphinx's riddle in *Oedipus Rex*: "What walks on four feet in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three at night?"[23] Without knowing the answer to this riddle, there is no obvious clue that the Sphinx is looking for "a human" as an answer. There could potentially be more than one correct answer. In the mind of the Sphinx, it is unclear if there was a specific answer the traveler was supposed to get. If there was a definitive answer,

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[21] Answer: all four cars turned right, so no cars crossed paths as they moved.

[22] Diamond 267

[23] Answer: a human.

there was no procedure for solving the riddle. Once one finds a satisfying answer to this riddle, the Sphinx's enigmatic phrasing makes much more sense. None of these examples of riddles could use novel or mathematical interpretation alone to come up with an answer, because it is not clear what the riddle-question's meaning is until a satisfying answer is found. The same is the case for oneiromancy, because there are many possible interpretations for a dream, but the dream manuals are trying to find the sort of answer that would satisfy the dreamer.

Without a formula to depend on, a dreamer had a number of options. They could potentially just make up nonsense answers to every imaginable dream and offer those as solutions to dreams' meanings. If that were the case, then dream manuals would likely not be written as they were with such attention to detail. Rather, the dream interpreters used puns as a way to solve the riddle of individuals' dreams. In all of the examples of dream interpretation from the oneirocritic texts mentioned above, punning is used as a way to demystify the language of a dream's events to provide a concrete answer to the dream's meanings. In this way, dreams are like riddles because one cannot form a pun connecting a protasis to an apodosis without knowing the answer provided in the apodosis.

In his work on the philosophy of language, Wittgenstein touches upon the concept of the secondary uses of words. This concept is much like a riddle. As quoted in Stephen Mulhall's work *The Great Riddle: Wittgenstein and Nonsense, Theology and Philosophy*, Wittgenstein uses the words "fat" and "lean" as examples of secondary words. In the example, Wittgenstein states that these words can be used to describe the days of the week Tuesday and Wednesday. When an individual calls Tuesday fat and Wednesday lean, the person they are speaking with understands the secondary application of the words in this context. The use of the words "fat" and "lean" are true to their meaning, but their use is different in this case. As Wittgenstein states, "[when] asked 'What do you mean by "fat" and "lean?" I could only explain the meanings in the usual way. I could *not* point them out by using Tuesday and Wednesday as examples.'"[24] Instead, Tuesday is only called fat and Wednesday is only called lean due to the condition of the human body being

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[24] Qtd. in Mulhall 98-99.

transferred to the days of the week. "Fat" and "lean" retain their literal meanings, and it is not a figurative description of the days. This example is related to riddles in that the usage of the language in the oneirocritic texts depend upon word association through a number of semantic principles, as evidenced in the above example.

This concept applies to the dream in which the head of a pick-axe predicts the death of an individual (see page 6.) The pun in this interpretation relies upon the primary meaning of a word, head (SAG) in the protasis, and uses a semantically different form of the same word in the apodosis (SAG.DU.) In each part of the conditional statement, the word for "head" remains the same (SAG.) This is like Wittgenstein's example of the uses of "fat" and "lean" in different semantic contexts. The primary meaning of the word for head is easy to understand, but its secondary meaning as a metaphor for corpse is not so clear unless one has the context provided by the interpretation.

While the primary-secondary associations of words do not explain the uses of all the puns in Near Eastern oneirocritic texts, it is a helpful model for dreams whose interpretations rely upon semantic and metaphorical properties of words. Having a model for understanding at least some entries in oneirocritic texts helps modern readers to understand the thought processes of ancient individuals with regards to their dreams.

The manuals represent a quotidian aspect of life for many people. As Bottéro explains, this method of interpretation "was valid for everybody. There was no longer a question about the extraordinary dreams and explicitly supernatural messages… but of ordinary, current, daily dreams of 'the man on the street.'"[25] The dream manuals provided a mediated connection to the divine for the ancient people of all classes who consulted them. While there is an abundance of evidence for the daily practices of communities in the ancient Near East, the puns in these dreams texts provide a tantalizing look at an intimate part of their lives.

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[25] Bottéro 113.

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