

Abstract

This dissertation concerns the history of psychoanalytic thinking about dreams. It is about both the psychic function of dreams and their theoretical function, or the function that they have served within psychoanalytic discourse. It begins with a consideration of the significance of the dream in classical thinking, where it was conceptualized as a psychic emergence in the context of maternal absence. It traces the way in which the rise of object relational paradigms led to the reconceptualization of the dream in relation to the presence of the maternal mind rather than the absence of the maternal body. It describes how this reconceptualization led to the understanding of the analytic session as a waking dream and to the emphasis on reverie as a crucial component of analytic technique. It draws on contemporary feminist ideas to highlight the extent to which this theoretical trajectory reflects the influence of cultural fantasies and taboos, as a consequence of the link between dreams and what has been called the 'maternal imaginary.' It considers whether the dream has been recruited in the service of constructing the pre-oedipal mother as an object of nostalgia, and whether this nostalgia has fueled omnipotence and obscured the work of mourning. Finally, it explores the idea that psychoanalytic theories are vulnerable to collusion with sociocultural fantasies about mothers and motherhood when they do not preserve a space for theorizing maternal alterity. It considers the relationship between maternal and oneiric alterity, and calls for a return to a conceptualization of the dream as an encounter with alterity and limitation that precipitates the work of mourning.