

REPRESSION IN ANTIQUITY?

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In this paper I consider what we might mean when we assert that a particular person, or a whole society, is "repressed". Is repression a useful concept for historians? In this centenary year of the publication of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* I will use dreams as my angle for exploring the repression of desires and wishes in ancient societies.

When I mentioned the topic of this paper to an anthropologist friend his immediate retort was, "Repression! The ancients didn't have any of that, did they?" And I began to wonder if I were setting out to flog a dead horse. Freud also assumed that the ancients underwent little, if any, repression. That is why Sophocles could write *Oedipus the King*, and the drama of Oedipus killing his father and sleeping with his mother could be staged before large audiences. The ancients could contemplate the fulfilment of the "primeval wishes of our childhood" (Freud, 1900a: 296; Sissa, 1994: 31). Freud contended, furthermore, that since antiquity there had been a "secular advance of repression in the emotional life of mankind" (Freud, 1900a: 298). This was why childhood phantasy could be expressed in *Oedipus the King* whereas by the time of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* the same phantasy had to be repressed. Oedipus was tragic, whereas Hamlet was neurotic.

As an anthropologist I have learned to suspect any account of "unrepressed societies" for the simple reason that they usually turn out to be unreliable. Such reports can better be regarded as overstated examples of "ethnographic allegory" (Clifford, 1986). A case in point would be Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1961 [1928]) in which the author contended that because the Samoans led a life of sexual freedom they did not confront any "adolescent crisis" as American youth did. Samoan sexual arrangements, Mead argued, presented a lesson that American society would do well to heed. Some fifty years later, however, Derek Freeman (1983) pointed out that most of the girls Mead studied were, in fact, Christian and thus somewhat familiar with the concept of

guilt. At least half of them were virgins at marriage – female virginity was, apparently, a value – and furthermore, Freeman presented shocking stories of rape and manual defloration (*Ibid.*: 246). In another ethnography of an "unrepressed" people, Malinowski's *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* (1965: 89), the author wondered if the Trobrianders' lack of interest in dreams arose from their sexual freedom and consequent lack of neurosis.

Most pertinent for my theme here, are the writings of Kilton Stewart about the Senoi of Malaysia (see Domhoff, 1985). Stewart described a practice of dream cultivation, or lucid dreaming, by means of which the peaceful and sexually unrepressed Senoi actively controlled their dreams and steered them to fulfilling ends, erotic dreams included. Stewart's work resonated with ideas then developing in America in the areas of human potential and alternative therapy. It was such a timely ethnographic allegory, that a version of Senoi dream practice was soon being taught at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur and a Jungian-Senoi Institute was established in Berkeley. Subsequent visitors to the Senoi in Malaysia, however, have witnessed a people beset by the usual jealousies and outbursts of violence and not practising any organized form of dream sharing or cultivation. Stewart's idealized and fictionalized account of the Senoi was completely rejected (Domhoff, 1985). As a result of this debunking the Jungian-Senoi Institute changed its name to the Jungian Dreamwork Institute in 1984.

I adduce the above examples to show how stories of unrepressed, non-neurotic primitives are rooted more in modern Western romantic fantasy than in reality. As Torgovnick (1990: 246) puts it, "The West seems to need the primitive as a precondition and a supplement to its sense of self". This observation causes me to wonder if similar stories of non-repressed ancients perhaps also derive from the same motivation to locate a happier, utopia-dwelling "other" for use as a counterpoint to our own self perception as repressed. The "primitive" and the ancient potentially teach us the same lesson.

Freud's repression, repression and suppression

In this paper I am mainly concerned with the repression of desires, not the repression of traumatic events. This latter subject only emerged in Freud's writings after the First World War, adding to the unwieldiness and inconsistency of his very concept of repression. For the purposes of this study, the main criteria of Freud's concept of repression are as follows:

- Repression created and structured the unconscious; whatever is in the unconscious is there because it was repressed.
- Repression can be considered as a defence against unacceptable ideas.
- Repression (*Verdrängung*) occurred unconsciously by contrast with suppression (*Unterdrückung*), which occurred consciously and resulted in the material in question either being eliminated altogether or transferred to the preconscious.
- There are two types of repression: *primal repression* in which a mental representation of an instinctual desire is denied access to consciousness and *repression proper* in which already conscious material becomes repressed because of contact with repressed ideas/instincts.
- The repressed dynamically attempts to return. It makes itself apparent, if not always known or recognized, in the form of neuroses, behavioural slips (parapraxes), dreams and jokes.

There are many interesting ideas here, but accepting Freud's definition of repression, in my view, involves signing up for far too large a commitment to his baroque and often contradictory ideas about the unconscious, instinctual drives and phylogenetic inheritance. For many contemporary psychoanalysts Freud's idea of repression is either wrong or currently marginal to their thinking. According to one analyst, with whom I spoke in London, professional therapists resort much more to the idea of "splitting" where, earlier, repression might have been the operative concept. Alternative terms covering the conceptual area of repression have proliferated and include dissociation, fantasy, defence, abjection and scotomization.¹

Some writers in the psychoanalytic tradition, such as Reich and Marcuse, have tried to show the way to overcome repression and, in the wake of the 1960s sexual revolution, some people might assert that they are not repressed. Lucid dreamers in the United States as described by Garfield (1974) encourage the cultivation of erotic dreams, and the attainment of complete fulfilment through them (à la Senoi). This practice apparently meets with ambivalent reactions in the UK where one anthropologist (Edgar, 1994) has studied a dream-sharing group. Some members thought that to dream symbolic sexual dreams (e.g. involving a syringe) indicated a lamentable state of repression. Unrepressed people

1. During the fifty years in which he wrote, Freud himself used a vast array of terms to refer to repression. These are compiled by Erdelyi (1990: 9) who also disputes the usual distinction between repression and suppression that I employ in this paper (*ibid.*: 13). Anna Freud (1936) attempted to systematize the psychoanalytic vocabulary of terms for repression in her *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*. For a good recent treatment of the concept of repression in psychoanalysis see Billig (1999).

should dream literal sexual dreams, yet members occasionally found these too embarrassing to recount. If there is this much uncertainty regarding what repression is, and how it is expressed among ourselves today, is there any hope that we might recognize it among the ancients?

I suspect that only the most committed psychohistorians would want to adopt the full Freudian view of the term "repression". Yet many historians do probably employ the term as it is used in everyday language – that is in a sense verging on "suppression".² These historians might think of themselves, or be labelled by others, as applying a psychoanalytic concept.

The virtually synonymous terms suppression and repression, like the term "unconscious", were around long before Freud. Freud took these well-understood words and imbued them with new, specialized meanings within the theoretical system of psychoanalysis. The result is that ordinary people may think that in using a term like "repression", they are speaking from within a Freudian position when, in fact, they may only be talking pre- or non-Freudian common sense. Freud's uncanny effect has been to change the overtones of ordinary words thus making it seem that everyone is thinking within his very particular system of thought. A parallel example would be the use of the verb "deconstruct" to mean a close, analytical reading of a text. One appears to embrace Derrida, while actually engaging in a straightforward version of New Criticism that deconstructionists would find *passé* if not contradictory to their theoretical position.

So we need to begin to reformulate an understanding of repression, which may draw on Freud without accepting all of him. I would like to begin in the area of dreams. According to Freud's theory, dreams potentially communicated forbidden wishes and desires from the unconscious. The Oedipal wish would not, according to Freud's model, receive direct expression as such. One would not see oneself lying with one's mother, but rather certain displacements, condensations and symbols that could be interpreted as representing this.

In the middle of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (l. 980) Jocasta attempts to reassure Oedipus and defuse his mounting anxiety by pointing out that many men have dreamt of sleeping with their mothers. The dream is insignificant and he is best advised to ignore it. Freud (1900a: 297) cites this passage and accepts that people in his day also have the same dream, but that it causes revulsion. This concession seems to contradict his general position. The Oedipal dream should not be dreamable at all in

2. Freud distinguished suppression from repression in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900a: 645) and again in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927c: 70); see also Laplanche and Pontalis (1973: 438f).
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literal form, certainly not in latter day societies that had accumulated a heavy load of repression. The Greeks could have this manifest dream precisely because, in his view, they were relatively unrepressed. Yet even this position clashes with his subsequently developed contention that Oedipal desire and its repression were part of human phylogenetic history, a species memory arrived at through the prehistoric evolution of the earliest social rules as outlined in *Totem and Taboo* (Freud, 1912-1913). Such developments would have well pre-dated the Greeks who should not, therefore, have been exempt from this complex and its repression.³

Straightforward, manifest Oedipal dreams did, however, occur to the ancients and they frequently had auspicious meanings (Grottanelli 1999). Perhaps the earliest such dream we know comes from an Egyptian papyrus dating back to the second millennium BCE. A dream of sleeping with one's mother meant that the dreamer's clansmen would support him (Lewis 1976: 8). Numerous Oedipal dreams span Greco-Roman antiquity. One can begin with the Greek traitor, Hippias (Herodotus, *History*: 6.107) who interpreted his dream of sleeping with his mother as presaging his return to Athens and his recovery of power. Caesar reportedly had a similar dream of sex with his mother that foretold the success of his campaign across the Rubicon (Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*: 32.6). These dreams are capped by Artemidorus (*Oneirocritica*: 1.79), a second-century CE professional dream interpreter, who devoted considerable space to explicating dreams of sex with one's mother in every conceivable position. Artemidorus explained why this dream meant good fortune for public figures: "just as a man who follows the precepts of Aphrodite when he makes love completely governs the body of his obedient and willing partner, the dreamer will control all of the affairs of the city".⁴

The manifest occurrence and auspicious treatment of Oedipal dreams in antiquity tells us that such dreams were not repressed, but this observation does not necessarily vindicate Freud's theory of ancient innocence. Rather, the evidence prompts us to study how particular historical societies determined for themselves which desires were permissible, literally and/or symbolically, and how these views set up areas of repression, or suppression. What I think can reasonably be asked of the ancient material is how people thought about erotic dreams generally, and how they

3. As Freud wrote in a later footnote (1920) to his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905d: 149): "Every new arrival on this planet is faced by the task of mastering the Oedipus complex; anyone who fails to do so becomes a victim of neurosis".

4. In some cases the dream of sex with the mother was not auspicious. Artemidorus (*Oneirocritica*: 1.79) suggests that it could also lead to jealous conflict with the father, in cases where the father was still living.

managed erotic impulses still more generally. Krauss's (1881) original German translation of Artemidorus, which Freud read, excluded all of the passages on sexual dreams, including the one cited above, because they were deemed scandalous in his time. Many do not realize that Freud himself similarly avoided discussing erotic dreams anywhere in his compendious *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900a). Paradoxically, the volume that sensitized the world to the latent sexual content of dreams managed not to include analysis of a single manifest sexual dream.⁵ Clearly erotic dreams still provoke censorship as the British dream-sharing group also discovered. My question now is how the ancients conceptualized such dreams and attempted to manage them? What was the ancients' own theory of repression, if any?

Ancient desire and repression

The earliest erotic dreams from Mesopotamian and Egyptian sources give us very little more data than the dream motif and its interpretation. They exemplify a "dream key" approach. Each dream is reduced to certain symbols or motifs which have only one, or a few, determinate and usually prophetic meanings. One is free to wonder whether they were felt erotic dreams or just dreams of sex that symbolized more important considerations of prospective political or economic success.

Ancient Mesopotamia may prove to be one exception in this area as magical incantations and exorcisms possibly allow substantial insight into this society's attitudes toward bodily desires. I draw here on the research of Mark Geller (1997) who has applied Mesopotamian ideas about demonology to enlarge our understanding of how the Mesopotamians may have viewed their dreams. Mesopotamian demons were fundamentally bad; their actions and effects on humans frightening. The Ala-demon is described in one incantation as "the evil Ala who, on the couch at night, spills (semen) from a man in his sleep" (Geller, 1997: 1). Another text describes a maiden ghost (*ardat lilî*), the spirit of a virgin who died without ever experiencing sex, and who was thought to return at night to satisfy herself with men while they are sleeping (*Ibid.*: 3). The experience of having an erotic dream, or a wet dream, would thus appear to have been viewed negatively.

5. Wittgenstein (1982: 5) did not fail to see this censorship of sexual dreams. Freud (1900a: 645) lamely excused this omission in a footnote in the course of which he managed to criticize Krauss (for doing exactly what he had done).

Consider the following dream omen: "If a man has sex at night and in his dream he is smeared with his own semen, he will suffer a loss" (*Ibid.*: 6). Geller maintains that this scenario is "bad" because it is excessive to first have sex and then also have a nocturnal emission. The Mesopotamian dread of nocturnal emissions thus differed from the Hebrew fear that the demons could take semen released in sleep and use it to spawn offspring. I wonder, however, if the crux of the inauspiciousness was not pollution – the fact of being smeared with one's own semen rendering one socially or ritually impure. If so, then the Mesopotamian emphasis would fall where Hebrew emphasis also fell.⁶

Geller has argued that the Mesopotamian casting of demons as the motivators of erotic feelings could be an example of the projection or displacement of feelings that people could not face directly and which they wanted to disavow. The fear with which they were viewed, can be taken as a neurotic symptom arising from the power of the feelings and difficulty in keeping them under control. Nocturnal emissions and erotic dream imagery were a return of the repressed; a conversion of desire into symptom. In Geller's view, then, the Mesopotamians were no strangers to repression.

Our evidence is quite slender, but the appearance of evil demons to which sensuous impulses are attributed, does begin to make a plausible case for repression. The possibility remains, however, that the symbols and interpretations of dream books are purely arbitrary semiotic equations, rather than moral indicators. The omen cited above could be "inauspicious" solely within a divinatory code of symbols, and not "bad" morally, religiously, medically or on any other social grounds. One also wonders what the explanatory force of concepts such as "projection" or "displacement" might be for a society that did not suppose an integrated human subject ideally responsible for his/her own thoughts and actions. If a people normally deem desires and emotions to originate outside the body-mind, and not to be under the control of an integrated consciousness, then they can always potentially be judged neurotic or psychotic in the terms of contemporary western psychology. This would perhaps be less troubling if terms like "neurotic" and "repressed" were not diagnostic

6. According to Leviticus sexual intercourse rendered both the man and woman unclean until evening (Lev. 15:18) while an emission of semen by the man alone also rendered him impure till evening (Lev. 15:16). A soldier who suffered a nocturnal emission should leave the encampment until after he had washed and the sun had gone down (Deut. 23:11-12; Brakke, 1995: 422; Eilberg-Schwartz, 1990).

labels for pathological conditions that modern psychotherapies aim to remove.

Certainly a condition free of these symptoms would have been unimaginable in the Homeric world and well into the Greek classical period. The organs for thinking and feeling in early Greek society were distributed throughout the body – in the chest, liver, and heart as well as the head (Dodds, 1951). These organs could receive messages directly from the gods beyond the control of individual will or power of reason. What we would today call schizophrenia was the normal condition as the psychologist Julian Jaynes (1976: 405) has, in fact, contended. Dreams, in this period, were thought to be created and sent by the gods to be visualized in the sleeping minds of humans. From Homeric times up until the present-day the way to say "I had a dream" in the Greek language is "I saw a dream". Once a dream vision was seen, the primary task was to determine if the message was true. Were the gods urging one to act in a way that would be beneficial or catastrophic?

In the classical period opinions about the god-sent nature and predictive value of dreams began to divide as can be seen in Herodotus's (*History*: 7.12ff) account of a dream that repeatedly came to the Persian ruler Xerxes. This dream urged him to wage war against the Greeks even though he had resolved not to attack. His advisor, Artabanus, tells him not to pay attention to the dream. Dreams, he says, are just things that you have seen during the day and which float before your eyes at night. There's no need to take them seriously (*Ibid.*: 7.16).

This episode indicates the shift to a new sense of the person as the origin of emotions, thoughts and feelings (although in the end, Artabanus is made to recant his opinion and accept the independent, prophetic power of dreams). Dodds (1951) and others have termed this a transition from a shame to a guilt culture where one assumed more responsibility for one's actions. Changes in the Greek conception of the soul (*psykhe*), culminating with Plato, located it in the interior of the person thus grounding the sense of a deep, interior reality (Vernant, 1991: 190). Although dream interpreters continued to cater to the populace at large, which thought that dreams contained divinatory messages (perhaps sent by the gods), philosophers and doctors produced more physiological and psychological explanations of dreams.⁷

Where Aristotle supplied a resolutely physical account of dreams as a type of cognition his teacher, Plato, understood dreams as more closely

7. The most prominent examples would be Aristotle's tracts on *On Dreams* and *On Divination through Sleep* and the Hippocratic treatise *On Dreams (Regimen IV)*.

involved with individual character and ethics. He focused on dreams as a facet of his overall study of politics since he considered that the credentials to govern others were first developed and proved in relation to oneself. Success in business, politics or athletics was predicated on self-mastery (Plato, *Republic*: 443d). In Plato's view the *psykhe*, which we might today term the "self", was comprised of three parts: the rational mind (*nous*), high spirits (*thymos*, e.g. anger, joy, courage) and the appetitive desires (*epithymia*, for food, drink, sex) (*Ibid.*: 441a). Self-mastery involved regulating these three components and integrating them under the command of reason. One recommended technique involved forging a strategic alliance between reason and the high spirits so that the appetitive desires were double-teamed. The education of the young through dancing and verse recitation exemplified this approach by bringing the two higher parts of the soul together – "fostering the one [reason] with fair words and teachings and relaxing and soothing and making gentle the other [high spirits] by harmony and rhythm" (*Ibid.*: 441e).

Dreams were likewise produced by an interaction between the different parts of the soul, which were distributed hierarchically in the body (Plato, *Timaeus*: 71e): reason in the head, the spirits around the heart, and the appetites Plato conceptualized as a savage beast at its trough near the navel. Left to its own devices the appetitive part of the soul would pay no heed to reason, but instead spend its time "bewitched ... both day and night by images and phantasms" (*hypo de eidolon kai phantasmaton*) (*Ibid.*: 71a).⁸ In order to remedy this God set the liver in the region of the midriff so that it could relay messages from the intellect and occasionally whip the appetitive desires into line by releasing bitter bile until any debauchery ceased. Nothing like a bout with hepatitis for curtailing one's drinking proclivities. When suitably calmed the liver would then switch to exuding a pleasing sweetness and the appetitive soul could occupy itself with divining during sleep (*Ibid.*: 71d).

All humans, according to Plato, possessed the ability to control their appetites but not all of them exercised it. The happy and wise democratic man was such because of his success in living a moderate life whereas the tyrant was a slave to his appetites (Plato, *Republic*: 571aff). In any case, sleep presented a dangerous moment for all people. While reason

8. This thrall of *phantasmata* reminds one of Aristotle's description of dreaming, and causes one to wonder if Aristotle also considered dreaming to be a function executed exclusively by the lowest portion of the soul as in Plato's scheme (Vegléris, 1982: 63). Plato (*Timaeus*: 71e) contended that this power of divination is the appetitive part's saving grace.

slumbered the way was open for the savage part of the soul to break free and express itself, especially if the person had just indulged in excessive eating and drinking. "I'm sure you're aware of how in these circumstances nothing is too outrageous: a person acts as if he were totally lacking in moral principle and unhampered by intelligence. In his dreams, he doesn't stop at trying to have sex with his mother and with anyone or anything else – man, beast, or god" (*Ibid.*: 571c).

Plato's idea that basic desires, the products of instinctive drives, emerged and sought expression in dreams anticipated one of Freud's fundamental contentions. It is curious that despite his extensive knowledge of ancient theories of the dream Freud should have refrained from quoting this passage in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.⁹ Perhaps it was because Plato considered it manifestly possible to see yourself sleeping with your mother.

Plato considered "lawless desires" (*paranomoi/anomoi epithymiai*) to be basic to all, yet the wise man could bring them under control and even eliminate them entirely by moderation. Such a man would derive the prophetic benefits from dreams described in the *Timaeus*, but even this person would normally have to turn to a professional diviner, a quasi-holy man, whose intellect would be calm enough to decipher the messages of the frenzied lower soul. Only exceptional philosophers like Socrates were able to balance intellect and appetite so as successfully to interpret their own dreams. Such a philosopher occupied the extreme opposite social position to the tyrant who was entirely involved with his uncontrollable passions (Vegl ris, 1983: 65).

The two sexes were assumed to have very different structures of desire with attendant political, social and ethical consequences. Where men could overcome or at least moderate their responses to desires by internal mental effort, women were conceived to be fundamentally helpless victims of their insatiable sexual appetites (Dean-Jones, 1992). A man who failed to moderate himself was feminized; female gender offering a metaphor for incontinence, passivity and lack of self-control. According to ancient medical thought female physiology precluded reason being exercised by women in the same way as by men. This was because the

9. He did, however, twice refer to another idea expressed in the same Book of the *Republic* (576a) namely that the worst sort of person, the despot, does in normal life the things other men would only contemplate in dreams. This passage from Plato was well-known and developed by later authors. For example, the 1st/2nd CE writer Plutarch (*On Progress in Virtue*: 83b) contended that adequate training in virtue would enable one to repress (*piezein*) "images" (*phantasmata*) and "movements" (*kinemata*) even in sleep. Freud apparently made no reference to Plutarch in his *Interpretation of Dreams*.

womb, the seat of her sexual appetite, was not under a woman's conscious control. It could move around in her body, even up to the head where it could "stifle those organs in which consciousness was thought to lie" (*Ibid.*: 78). Thus women had no chance to succeed or fail in the fundamentally ethical arena of relating to one's own sexual desire. They were denied the possibility of acting as moral agents (*Ibid.*: 86).

I return now to a point raised earlier: sexuality was apparently easy for the Greeks to contemplate. A glance at any coffee-table book on Greek erotic art suggests as much. Evidently this attitude extended to the erotic dream, which itself could become the subject of monumental art. In one marble relief (dated somewhere between 2nd century BCE and 2nd century CE) (Boardman and La Rocca, 1978: 159) a sleeping shepherd, his staff and bagpipe cast down by his side, is straddled by a winged figure – the symbol of the dream or its content in Ancient Greek iconography. An anonymous classical Athenian observed that all humans were driven by three desires. The desire for food and drink he considered to be present from birth while the desire for sex arose only later, but it was "the fiercest desire and the most despotic, urging men most powerfully to all kinds of lunacy" (cited in Davidson, 1997: 160). To make the point that the need for sexual gratification was no less normal than that for food and drink, Diogenes the Cynic simply masturbated when the prostitute he had booked was late in arriving. He sent her away with the words, "My hand was faster than you in celebrating the bridal night" (Galen, *Affected Parts*: K419).

These sorts of stories indicate that sexual desire was conceived as a real and powerful force with which humans had to reckon. We may also note a difference in the ways that the Athenian's three main desires might be satisfied. Sexual desire might be assuaged by the contemplation of images alone – at least momentarily – while the imagination of food or water will not substitute for actually eating or drinking. As Diogenes put it: "If only one could satisfy one's hunger by rubbing one's stomach" (cited in Davidson, 1997: 180).¹⁰

Moderation

The recommended attitude to the desires in classical Greece can be characterized as one of moderation (*sophrosyne*), "nothing in excess"

10. Freud (1916-1917: 134) made the same observation: "Since it is characteristic of the sexual instinct to be a degree less dependent on its object than hunger and thirst, the satisfaction in dream emission can be a real one".

(*meden agan*). We have seen this idea referred to in Plato's picture of the democrat. The medical tradition and schools of philosophy such as Stoicism also elaborated and continued to develop this ideal. For those practising moderation, sex was not problematic so long as one kept the whole body in balance. Indulgence of the appetites was negotiable according to the age and gender of a person and the season of the year. Imbalances could be corrected by medically prescribed diet and exercise regimens. Sex was only problematic if it took uncontrollable forms such as satyriasis (a goading itch, as if one had ingested an aphrodisiac), priapism (unrelievable sexual tension), dorsal consumption, and even gonorrhoea.¹¹ Nocturnal emissions and unusual feelings of lust could be symptoms of the onset of epilepsy or madness (*mania*) both of which, like orgasm, were characterized by uncontrolled "shuddering spasms" (Caelius Aurelianus, *Chronic Diseases*: 5, 7.81; Pigeaud, 1981: 10).

For Soranus (*Gynaecology*: 3.45), nocturnal emissions were a variant of gonorrhoea and in a survey of acute and chronic diseases Caelius Aurelianus did, indeed, contrast the two.¹² Gonorrhoea could occur at any time, without imagery, while nocturnal emissions occurred only during sleep and as a consequence of imagining sexual intercourse through "unreal images" (*inanibus visis concubitum fingat*) (Caelius Aurelianus, *Chronic Diseases*: 5.7 1.82). Unlike gonorrhoea, nocturnal emissions did not necessarily constitute an illness according to Soranus. They simply resulted from desire, which could arise either through regular sexual practice or through prolonged continence.

The implication that people might be able to respond differently to unreal figments of the imagination resonates with Stoic ideas developed during the last three centuries BCE. Chrysippus emphasized the difference between impressions (*phantasiai*) resulting from the perception of real physical objects, and figments (*phantasmata*) produced by the imagination and occurring especially "in people who are melancholic and mad" (Chrysippus, in Aëtius: 4.12.1-5; Long and Sedley, 1987: 237). According to the Stoics, appetite, fear, distress and pleasure comprised primary passions – states not produced, but only suffered by the mind (Stobaeus:

11. On dorsal consumption (*phthisis notias*), a disease of the marrow causing involuntary loss of seed via nocturnal emissions and other outlets see Hippocrates (*On Diseases II*: 2.51; *On Seed*) where erotic dreams of the dorsal consumption sort are considered to prefigure insanity. On involuntary, pathological forms of sexuality generally, see Caelius Aurelianus (*Chronic Diseases*: 5.6ff).

12. The 5th century author Caelius Aurelianus' *On Acute Diseases* and *On Chronic Diseases* are thought largely to be Latin translations of Greek texts by the early 2nd century CE medical writer Soranus.

2.88,8-90,6; Long and Sedley, 1987: 411). The term *pathos* in Greek could mean "passion, emotion" as well as a passive "suffering". Active control or passive submission to the emotions was precisely the issue. The early Stoics held that all passions were the results of judgements, and thus could be modified, and their goal was to reach a state of *apatheia* (impassivity) in which one had eradicated uncontrolled emotional responses entirely, and thus eliminated passive suffering from one's life.¹³ This achieved, one could be happy, while those who neglected actively to confront the passions were literally pathetic.

Clearly the Stoics had moved one step beyond earlier Greek philosophical ideas of moderation. The kernel of Aristotle's (*On Dreams*: 461b29ff) idea that in dreams people received images that they were not able to judge is still discernible, but much elaborated. Now total extirpation of the passions was the appropriate goal for the wise man (Nussbaum, 1994: 390). Thus we can see that even before widespread conversion to Christianity control of bodily desires and impulses was problematic for some ancient thinkers, and erotic dreams formed one of the battle lines. The doctors and the philosophers concurred that nocturnal emissions and nightmares were potentially worrisome if the result of chronic submission to fantasy. A sign of spiritual progress and strength of the soul would be the ability to resist, or never incur, the assault of images that could cause erotic dreams.

Demonic dreams

The notion of "demon", initially synonymous with "god" in early Greek thought came, in the Hellenistic period, to mean a lesser kind of spirit occupying the middle atmosphere (*aer*) along with the souls of the deceased. From this intermediary cosmological position demons could transmit dreams sent by the gods, or even preside over the formation of dreams.¹⁴ Demons were not intrinsically evil, but they were biddable. The magical papyri of the last centuries BCE and first centuries CE reveal how

13. Seneca (*On Anger*: 2.1-3) (1st century CE) later modified the Stoic position to hold that there were certain "first movements" such as shuddering when splashed with cold water, or experiencing sexual arousal that could never be subject to mental control and thus were not passions, but just a physical "impulse of the body" (*corporis pulsus*). I thank Richard Sorabji for his observations drawn upon here (personal communication, also see Sorabji, 1997: 200).

14. Although Aristotle ruled out the possibility that dreams were produced or sent by gods, he paradoxically declared that they were "demonic" (Aristotle, *On Divination Through Sleep*: 463b.14). By this he apparently meant that they were "natural", that is, governed by rules of probability and chance. If one had enough "prophetic" dreams, some were bound to "foretell" subsequent events (Gallop, 1990: 39ff).

people sought, through ritual incantations, to command demons, or the souls of the dead, to carry dreams to others. In one particular example a man named Hermeias exhorts the demons to cause his unresponsive object of desire to lust for him even when she is: "drinking, working, conversing, sleeping, dreaming, having an orgasm in her dreams, until she is scourged by you and comes desiring me" (*Greek Magical Papyri: XVIIa*; Betz, 1986: 253).¹⁵

Early Christian preachers such as Justin Martyr assimilated all of the pagan gods to "demons" under the control of the Devil (Pagels, 1988: 42). Granted that demons were popularly thought to send dreams, Christians were counselled to distrust them as possibly satanic. Dreams came to be placed squarely on the negative side of a morally polarized universe and at the First Council of Ancyra (314 CE) the Church banned the practice of dream interpretation (Le Goff, 1988: 211).

Beginning with Tertullian (*On the Soul*: 47) the Church Fathers entertained a tripartite classification of dreams as coming variously from God, the Devil or the Soul. This tripartite scheme was apparently adapted from ancient medical and philosophical views such as that of Herophilus, who thought that dreams could come from one of three sources: god, the self, or, they could belong to a mixed category, "and arise spontaneously (*ek tou automatou*) according to the impact of the images, whenever we see what we wish, as happens in the case of those who in their sleep make love to the women they love" (von Staden, 1989: 386).

In so far as people see what they inwardly desire in these dreams, they seem identical to *enypnia* – the physical dreams that the dream interpreters regarded as insignificant because they only told about the state of the body-mind. Artemidorus (*Oneirocritica*: 1.1) indeed used the erotic dream to exemplify the *enypnion*.¹⁶ Yet, this identification cannot be correct since Herophilus pointedly differentiates them from the category of endogenous dreams produced exclusively by the soul. Mixed dreams have an exogenous element; they result from outside forces – the impact of images on the sleeper. These images happen to coincide with internal desires.

Exactly what Herophilus intended by this mixed category has been debated (Kessels, 1969; Schrijvers, 1977), but most scholars agree that the mixed dream, with its ready erotic exemplification, corresponded to the demonic dream in the Christian tripartite system (von Staden, 1989: 310).

15. For more on demons sending (erotic) dreams, see Eitrem (1991) and Faraone (1999).

16. Galen also considered erotic dreams as text-book examples of the category of dreams that reflected an individual's physical state: "men full of sperm will imagine that they are having sexual intercourse" (Oberhelman, 1983: 46).

Early ascetic theories of human nature and psychology reveal how monks understood demons to inspire erotic dreams. These theories, developed by writers such as Evagrius and Cassian, possibly illuminate what Herophilus intended by the mixed dream.

For Evagrius, who became a monk in Egypt around 382 CE, sinful passions could be instigated by the senses, memories or by demons – all of which were closely intertwined (Refoulé, 1961: 501). Monks constructed for themselves an environment of sensory deprivation designed to prevent the passions being stimulated by everyday perceptions of objects or people. As the demons could not easily make inroads through quotidian experiences in such an austere environment, they sought instead to coax the monks into thinking corrupting thoughts (*logismoi*).

Demons got purchase on monks by activating in them memories of their pre-monastic lives. On Evagrius' (*Praktikos*: 34; *On Evil Thoughts*: 2) view, memories – first registered by the physical senses, particularly sight and touch – remained connected to the emotional state in which they were initially received. Demons could manipulate an individual's previously acquired, emotionally charged representations to excite the passions, and set sinful thoughts in train. Thus evil thoughts were simultaneously exogenous and endogenous; a mixed dream where exterior demons activated what was already internally there. Evagrius' ascetic practice called for continuous, critical introspection in order to identify demon-inspired thoughts and prevent them from progressing. He conceded that disturbing thoughts would inevitably occur, even in the course of monastic life – such thoughts were part of the human condition. But sin set in only if one mentally entertained such a thought for too long. As Evagrius expressed it: "It is not up to us whether evil thoughts might trouble the soul or leave it in peace. What does depend on us is whether they linger or not, and whether they set the passions in motion or not" (*Praktikos*, 6). The goal was inner stillness, which Evagrius referred to by the familiar Stoic term, *apatheia* (Guillaumont, 1971: 98ff).

Like Plato, Evagrius (*Praktikos*: 89; Refoulé, 1961: 486) divided the person into three parts: the quasi-divine intellect (*logistikon*); the soul (*psykhe*), which was sub-divided into two parts, the high-spirited *thymikon*, and the sensual *epithymikon*; and the body. Evagrius named eight primary demons – the model for what would become the "seven deadly sins" in Western Christianity. Each of these demons normally attacked only one of the two vulnerable parts of the soul. Predictably the demon of fornication (*porneia*) attacked the sensual part of the soul. According to Evagrius (*Praktikos*: 8) it "compels one to desire

'remarkable' bodies; it violently attacks those living in abstinence in order to cause them to quit, convinced they will amount to nothing. And, soiling the soul, it inclines it to 'those acts' [obscene acts]. It causes monks to speak and hear things, as if some object were visible and present".

As these passages show, the battle with demons spilled over into the realm of dreams and delusion where the power of the will to resist demons was weakest. The cornerstone of Evagrius' system of ascetic practice was the continual internal monitoring of one's own thoughts – the "hermeneutics of the self" as Foucault (1999) put it. Spiritual progress rested on the ability to discern and avoid reacting to demonic thoughts or bodily stirrings. Eventually the verbal confession of one's inmost thoughts and feelings to a more experienced elder also became part of monastic practice. Within the monastic community spiritual progress hinged on fighting and winning these battles with erotic dreams and the prospect of this continuing struggle no doubt provoked a certain amount of anxiety, since failure could stymie one's progress as a monk.¹⁷

Within ascetic "anthropology" – as patristic theories of human nature and psychology are sometimes known – dreams were the ultimate diagnostic of the condition of the self. How much passion still lurked inside one? How strong or weak was one's will, even in sleep, to resist demonic incursions and manipulations? While some of the earliest Church Fathers held that it was possible to completely eradicate sensual thoughts through spiritual exercises, opinion increasingly held that certain bodily "movements", including sexual arousal, were not entirely controllable (Refoulé, 1961: 489ff). Nocturnal emissions might be pardonable, so long as they were merely that: simple seminal discharges unaccompanied by imagery or passion, and certainly not involving any pleasure or consent of the will (Brakke, 1995: 440; Elliott, 1999: 17). The distinction between nocturnal emission and erotic dream was crucially significant for the monks.

17. This ground has been well covered by the studies of Elliott (1999), Brakke (1995) and Eilberg-Schwartz (1990: 205). The ideas introduced by Evagrius, and developed by subsequent writers, still inform monastic practice today. A recent ethnographic study of a monastery on Mt. Athos (Sarris: 2000) reveals that the struggle with "images" (*parastaseis*), especially erotic representations, still very much threatens spiritual progress. Before the rite of tonsure representing transition to senior monk status, the candidate keeps an all-night vigil so as to protect against any erotic dream that would cancel the ritual. Monks refrain from daily communion after a nocturnal emission, an abstention apparent to the whole community of monks since they are all present in church and can see that one of their number is not taking communion. The formulaic phrase spoken by a monk to the Abbott to excuse himself from communion on account of a nocturnal emission is: "Last night I suffered (*epatha*)". This verb, closely related to the noun *pathos*, is clearly continuous with the Ancient and Early Christian vocabulary applied to these matters.

John Cassian, a disciple of Evagrius who brought monasticism from Egypt to Gaul, held that there were six steps on the way to spiritual purity: the monk does not give in to the assaults of the flesh while awake; his spirit does not entertain erotic thoughts; the sight of women stirs no response; on to the sixth step where "the seduction of feminine phantoms (*fantasmata feminarum*) cause no illusions, even in sleep ... this would be an indication of a cupidity still located in the marrow" (Cassian, *Conferences*: 12.7). Dreams potentially represented the last unruly part of the self and the goal of ascetic practice was to colonize even this dark recess with the force of the will. If the dream did not occur just as one wanted it, then it was necessary to proactively and preventively "re-make" it. As Freud (1933a: 112) put it: "Where *id* was, there *ego* shall be".

Conclusion

This has been a necessarily abbreviated tour of ancient ideas about desire and repression and their impact on dreams. One can readily see remarkable consistencies in the idea of judging and dismissing unwanted images, and in the three-part division of the person. These issues beg for lengthier discussion, but here I would like to concentrate on how this historical sketch might affect our thinking about repression.

Should we consider the Ancient Greeks repressed? Certainly even the free male citizens who had the luxurious choice of practising *sophrosyne* were not entirely free. Those who ate too greedily or engaged in sex insatiably came in for ridicule, if not scorn (Davidson, 1997). Presumably they tried to curb their appetites. The desires were conceived as formidably real impulses. One needed to be strong and active in resisting them. The basis of Greek ethics was this relationship to oneself. A certain amount of repression, at least in the sense of "suppression" would appear to have been in play.

Foucault (1985) famously reached a completely different conclusion in regard to this very corpus of evidence. He considered the Ancient Greeks' "aesthetics of existence", their practice of "care for the self", to be expressions of liberty and independence, rather than repression (Foucault, 1985: 253; 1987: 5). Guilt or discourses of sin and damnation may not have troubled them, but – and Foucault recognized this – they did have other concerns about becoming victims of their desires and not moderating themselves. They were concerned with an overall economy of desires and expenditures. The judgement of the Ancient Greeks as "unrepressed" is

contestable if we recognize that repression and its accompanying anxieties and neuroses may be produced by non-religious rules and guidelines.

A last comparison with one of those apparently "unrepressed" societies considered at the outset of this paper might be illuminating on precisely this point. Thomas Gregor's study of the Amazonian Mehinaku is, I think, more reliable than Mead's work on Samoa. He reports that the Mehinaku place no moral bar in the way of having sex and do, indeed, engage in lots of pre- and extra-marital sexual activity thus giving the appearance of being sexually "free" (Gregor, 1985: 7). Yet Gregor found that men exhibit considerable anxiety about sex because they think that it saps their strength; wrestlers, in particular, avoid sexual activity in preparation for their matches. The successful wrestler is said to crush his prey like an anaconda. At the same time many men view sexual intercourse as comparable to defeat in wrestling. In sex, the woman crushes her prey (*Ibid.*: 155).

Gregor also provides details about erotic dreams among the Mehinaku that might suggest something about erotic dreams among the Ancient Greeks in the absence of specific historical data. He found that 35% of his sample of men's dreams involved overt sexual activity and that fully half of these were perceived as disturbing.¹⁸ It might well be that the Ancient Greeks similarly had an incipient dread of erotic dreams arising from their concerns with physiological depletion, the disruption of moderation, the loss of self control, or some combination of the above. If so, these ideas were not converted into a discourse – at least not one that has survived in the historical record.

The early Christians, as we saw from the writings of Evagrius and Cassian, did develop a discourse that demonized erotic dreams on moral grounds. The monastics and their followers submitted to a generalized set of rules that took no account of differences in age, class or gender. They sought to extirpate or otherwise sublimate the desires into a worship of God that would give them salvation in the world to come. My point is that whether desire and sex were conceived of as moral or aesthetic issues they could still lead to anxiety and repression so long as there was some stricture against them. This observation extends Foucault's (1978: 73) critique of the "repressive hypothesis": rules create desires at the same time as they repress them.

The Ancient Greeks were not without rules although they seemed to have far fewer and less pressing strictures governing their desires than the

18. Hall and van de Castle (1966) come up with a similar percentage of overt sexual dreams in a much larger sample of American dreams. One wonders if this figure is standard cross-culturally.

Christians. Their activities were underdetermined while those of the Christians were overdetermined. Nonetheless both groups were engaging in techniques and practices (*askeseis*) of the self. Although Christian activity fundamentally involved renunciation, it was also, for many of its adherents, a practice of freedom, an act of self-making, as recent studies of the monastic movement are at pains to argue (Valantasis, 1995; Ware, 1995). All people make choices and at times it becomes indeterminable whether they are engaging in acts of repression or creative self-making leading to liberation or salvation. If I am sitting writing this paper now does that mean I am repressing a desire to be doing something else putatively more gratifying?

Where does all of this leave our thinking on repression? "Repression" as a category that anyone would want to isolate looks more and more like an ethnocentric value judgement, an anachronistic artefact of post-Freudian Western thought prompted, perhaps, by the nagging worry that we are ourselves repressed but shouldn't be. Be that as it may, the lineaments of what might constitute repression are definable (a mind/ego/psyche trying to dispel desires) and sometimes available to historical study. How do a given people conceive of the need and ability to regulate their appetitive desires? The answer to this question may be interesting if we can recover the terms in which people conceptualize repressive activity, the practices they engage in, and the goals they set themselves in attempting to master their passions. For the most part, in so far as the people involved are aware of and articulate what they are doing, we are studying something like suppression as opposed to Freudian repression.

Freud's idea that repression occurred unconsciously does, however, call for further historical study, rather than curt dismissal. It may not be the case, as Freud presumed, that repression necessarily accumulates in a linear fashion with the steady accretion of rules in the "civilization process". This cumulative, quantitative account of repression depends on a hierarchical view of the position of Western civilization in relation to other more "primitive" forms of non-civilized life. It is a Victorian evolutionary opinion that can safely be rejected. High and low amounts of repression should, in theory, be discoverable in all sorts of societies, Western or "other", ancient or modern, because repression is a situation that societies arrange for themselves according to internal rules and ideas. But it is not the rules alone, or their number, that give rise to Freudian repression, but rather their internalization through practice. Ancient Greek ideas about moderation have, for example, largely been superseded and forgotten, just as ancient medical ideas of dorsal consumption or

gonorrhoea no longer make sense. They have not contributed to a linear accumulation making for more repression today.

Often the premise of repression, the agencies and objects involved, begin as conscious practices. The earliest monks were entirely aware of what they were doing. They were proud of their *askeseis*, and they sought to elaborate and transmit their knowledge and skill. This level of conscious awareness can be spoken of more as suppressing than repressing desires. It is precisely when their ascetic practices and modes of suppression became routinized over the centuries, incorporated into unthinking actions and modes of response, that we might begin to see a fully embodied and hence more Freudian form of repression taking shape. This kind of repression is the product of diachrony and it is something that historians are particularly well-equipped to study.

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Summary

Repression in Antiquity?

Freud made the assumption that the ancients were not repressed and this view is widespread today. This paper subjects this idea to critical scrutiny beginning with a consideration of what is understood by the term "repression" itself. Dreams are privileged as a means of flushing out repression. Rather than trying to interpret particular dream motifs as evidence of repression, I study ancient psychological ideas of how desires could be controlled. Erotic dreams posed problems of self-control and responsibility. The ancient Greeks viewed erotic dreams as problematic on medical grounds only if they occurred excessively whereas the early Christians sought to eliminate them entirely. Although these two different historical societies worried about the control of desire in different ways, and to varying degrees, I contend that repression could potentially arise in either case. An ethnographic example from the Brazilian Mehinaku illustrates this contention. Much of this study is technically concerned with suppression since people were proceeding consciously, but over time suppressive strategies become unconscious and qualify as full-blown repression. It could be said that repression is quintessentially a historical product.

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Key words

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