Cardano’s Dream Interpretation in Renaissance Medicine and Natural Philosophy

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Girolamo Cardano (1501–1576/7) of Milan was one of the most famous physicians of early modern Europe and a representative of the intellectual culture of the Italian Renaissance. A typical genius of the time, he wrote extensively in a wide range of fields, from medicine, natural philosophy and mathematics (via cosmology and astrology) to ethics. On some occasions, Cardano emerged as a rational scientist by criticizing the errors of medieval Scholastics and by arguing that the understanding of the natural world had to be established upon direct observations. On other occasions, he appeared totally irrational by declaring that he was gifted with the power to foretell the future. This striking coexistence of two opposing attitudes in an intellectual is a major reason Cardano continues to fascinate modern readers. One of the best ways to approach to his world is to study his claims of future-telling ability based on the interpretation of dreams.

Indeed Cardano repeatedly spoke of his dreams and tried to capture their meanings. For him dreams were also important for describing himself and reflecting on his life events. His interest revolved around the special type of dreams that he believed allowed him to predict the future. Dream interpretation was for Cardano something close to medical prognostication, which in turn had a common basis with divination and was intimately related to astrology and even prophecy. He firmly believed that a certain type of human being with the special capacity of premonition could exercise this art based on astral causality.

Upon his lifelong quest, Cardano published his work of dream interpretation, entitled *Four Books of Synesian Dreams* (*Somniorum Synesiorum libri Quatuor*) (Basel, 1562). Through an in-depth study of this treatise, I address the following questions: What was the historical and intellectual context which enabled Cardano to pursue the activity of dream interpretation? On which bases did Cardano devote his labor and energy to this activity? What was the real nature of his method? How firmly grounded was his activity in the medicine and natural philosophy of his time? How far does the collection and analysis of dream interpretations resemble those of medical cases and astrological horoscopes? To what extent was Cardano concerned with religious and theological issues of the time? What was his ultimate goal?

For this research Cardano’s posthumous autobiography, *On My Own Life* (*De propria vita*) (Paris, 1643), serves as a precious instrument since it also contains the striking reports of dreams, most of which revolved around the theme of his immortal fame. To Cardano’s eyes, dreams in sleep and mysterious events in daily life did not belong to different realms of illusion and reality. His life can be understood as a unified whole thanks to the interpretation of premonitory dreams. Thus a deeper analysis of Cardano’s *Synesian Dreams* also provides further insight into one of the major autobiographies from early modern Europe.