

Enlightenment's Dark Dreams: Two Fictions of Henry Mackenzie and Charles Brockden Brown.

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Eighteenth-Century Life

Duke University Press

Volume 21, Number 3, November 1997

pp. 39-56

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Brown**

Susan L. Manning

The German surgeon and mystic J. G. von Herder (1744–1803), whose writing is pervasively influenced by Scottish Enlightenment thought, wrote:

The world of dreams gives us the most serious hints about ourselves.... If a man could sketch the deepest, most personal roots of his abstractions and feelings, of his dreams and the paths taken by his thoughts, what a novel that would make! As it is this comes about only in illnesses and moments of passion: and what a frightful sight and sheer marvel is often disclosed!¹

In the course of the eighteenth century, the current of Scottish thinking about the nature and provenance of dreams moved away from a demonological proclivity that explained them as the creations of spirits acting externally on the sleeping mind, toward the expanding compass of sense-based psychology and physiology. Besides naturalizing the phenomenon, and reducing its mystery to the scale of human explanation, this new empirical approach tended to pathologize dreams to account for their disturbing and unpalatable aspects, and thereby to reintroduce notions of inexplicability, located this time in the area of personal integrity. This essay is less concerned with eighteenth-century dream theory as such than with ways in which its developments could be appropriated for fictional purposes. Taking therefore as a starting point some structural developments in Scottish Common Sense thinking about dreams, I shall consider how its evolution from the medical to the belles-lettistic sphere made new aspects of dreaming available to Scottish and American Enlightenment writers of fiction as an area in which to explore uncertainties about their own literary practice.

I shall develop these considerations in detailed discussions of single works by two exemplary writers—one Scottish and one American—each brought up in the atmosphere and the teaching of Scottish Common Sense thought and each thoroughly persuaded of its enlightened principles of rational optimism. Henry Mackenzie and Charles Brockden Brown were personally and professionally fascinated by theories of

dreaming and oneiromancy; their fiction is imbued with the terms of current debate on their nature and provenance, which evolved in the medical and philosophical context of Edinburgh and were transmitted to Philadelphia. Through focused discussion of Mackenzie's *Julia de Roubigné* (1777) and Brown's *Wieland* (1798), I shall suggest some ways in which, as it developed away from the physiological to the psychological, dream theory became available for fictional explorations of the consequences of cultural division for individual integrity. Dreams do not always bring good news. Nor do they speak unequivocally of progress. Ambiguous elisions between the demonological and pathological accounts open up crucial areas of responsibility and representation in late eighteenth-century fiction. **[End Page 39]**

Beginning from an inquiry into what “frightful sights and sheer marvels” (in Herder’s words) lie “sleeping within” Mackenzie and Brown’s literary dreams, this essay will suggest that such an exploration takes us beyond the personal idiosyncrasies of two writers—or even of two novels—to contribute to the debate on the relationship between the literatures of Scotland and America in the late eighteenth century, as the one moved out of its phase of enlightened independence and toward literary provincialism and the other began to search for a literary voice in which to articulate the principles of political independence. Through the writings of Mackenzie and Brown we may, I believe, get some purchase on the bad dreams—the dark shadow voices—which haunt the literature of the Brave New Worlds of enlightened Scotland and America. I shall suggest that Mackenzie’s and Brown’s literary use of dreams (broadly understood to include fantasies, daydreams, and voices of uncertain provenance within the self) reveals the sophisticated sensitivity of a Scot and an American to the ambiguities inherent in combining within a cultural framework of enlightenment complex literary idioms inherited from, on the one hand, a broadly English literary tradition, and, on the other, a Calvinist theological structure.

The changing terms and continuing preoccupations of Scottish Enlightenment thinking on dreams may be traced first to Andrew Baxter

(1686/7–1750), a graduate of King’s College, Aberdeen, who published in 1733...



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