

## BOOKS

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### Dana Percec, Dan Negrescu, *Excerpte veninoase și onirice. Eșeu despre doi frați*, Timișoara, Editura Universității de Vest, 2018, 237 p.

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In 2018, Dana Percec and Dan Negrescu published the ambitious *Excerpte veninoase și onirice. Eșeu despre doi frați* [*Venomous and oneiric excerpts. An essay about two brothers*], an elaborate study on the cultural history of poison and dreams. This publication is a fine display of Percec's storytelling talent and analytic skills. The book contains excerpts from Pietro d'Abano's influential *De venenis eorumque remediis* (1472) and from Dionysius Lazarus' seminal *Tractatus de somniis* (1623), translated for the first time into Romanian by Dan Negrescu, who also added several annotations and explanatory notes to the selected fragments.

Starting from an ancient Greek proverb, according to which sleep and death are brothers, the authors set out to examine "another forbidden story" (13)<sup>1</sup> by reconstructing the cultural history of poisons and dreams in a European context.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2017 Dana Percec and Dan Negrescu published "Periplu prin malefic. Un eșeu lucrat pe surse", an eclectic and interdisciplinary book in which the authors explore the controversial topic of witchcraft. The present volume, as

The in-depth investigations incorporate perspectives from a variety of disciplines, including history, philosophy, medicine, psychology, botany, religion, criminology, sociology, pharmacology, toxicology, and literature. The book contains several illustrations, which not only serve to visually enrich the content matter, but enhance the overall reading experience.

In the introductory section, Percec applies the main idea of d'Abano's treatise—namely, that poisons are everywhere—to a variety of disciplines. This section also entails a brief account on the history of oneirology, laying emphasis on Lazarus' *Tractatus de*

*somniis* as a key reference in the development of dream studies. An important segment of this section engages in a transhistorical exercise concerning the ancient Egyptian belief in dreams as future omens, contrasted then with Freud's and Jung's approach to dream interpretation.

Percec mentions in the introductory part, is intended to be a sequel to their earlier published "forbidden story" (13).



The first part, *Hortus conclusus*, is an incursion into the medieval roots of modern horticulture and explores the symbolism of gardens and plants in European culture. Percec expands the critical spectrum of the study by including a religious dimension, and constructs a complex analogy between the history of poisons and the garden of Eden. The symbolic implications of the garden imagined as a feminine space, a gendered stereotype deeply embedded in the cultural imagination of medieval Europe, lies at the core of this section.

The next section of the book forays into the paradoxical nature of toxins. Starting from Paracelsus' remarks, Percec analyzes potentially lethal poisons, such as arsenic, digitalis, phosphorus, ricin, lead, chromium, Calabar, belladonna, mala mujer, and datura. The most interesting postulation appears at the end of the chapter, namely that a human being can become poisonous after consuming toxins.

The next part is a historical account on famous poisonings. Cleopatra's suicide by self-poisoning is the starting point of the investigation. By tracing the cultural history of poisonings back to ancient Egypt, Percec reveals how poisons have fascinated the human imagination since times immemorial. The detailed historical insights into the lives of (in)famous poisoners are enriched with literary representations and cultural myths. Special emphasis is put on the Borgia and the Medici families notorious for eliminating enemies by resorting to arsenic.

"From venoms to drugs" offers a plethora of perspectives on the cultural his-

tory of opium. Employing an interdisciplinary approach, Percec traces the origins of opium back to the ancient Sumerian culture and explains how opium consumption became a widely spread cultural phenomenon.

"Medicine and alchemy" is a comprehensive historical survey in which the author investigates how early alchemy texts influenced the evolution of modern medicine.

One of the most interesting parts of the books is a complex case study: the frequent use of poisons in the modern detective novel, particularly in Agatha Christie's fiction. The study opens with some general remarks on the detective novel and is an excellent introduction to Agatha Christie's biography and lifework with special focus on her expertise in poisons. Quotes from Agatha Christie's personal notes and poem offer an in-depth insight into the mind of one of the most celebrated detective fiction writers of all time. Percec enumerates a wide array of famous poisons used in Agatha Christie's novels and offers detailed descriptions of their effects on humans.

"Stepbrother" moves from the realm of poisons to the second major theme of the book. An extensive part is dedicated to the Freudian and the Jungian dream analysis. By contrasting the beliefs of ancient cultures on dreaming with the modern psychoanalytical perspectives, Percec exposes the historical shifts in the Western perception on oneirology. In order to illustrate the cultural aspects of dreaming and to engage the Romanian reader more deeply, Percec uses "The Romanian Book of Dreams. Traditional interpretations"<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Cartea românească de vise. Tălmăciri tradiționale. București, Editura Călin, 2008, edited by E. Mihăescu.

“Of the dead, [say] nothing but good” offers a deeper insight into d’Abano’s life, the circumstances of his untimely death and his famous treaty on venoms and poisons. Percec approaches the topic from a quantitative and qualitative perspective and she describes remedies which are still used in modern medicine.

The last part written by Percec investigates the oneiric imaginary of medieval Europe. Dedicated to Lazarus’ *Tractatus de somniis*, this chapter highlights Lazarus’ substantial contribution to oneirology. He is famous for his statement “dreaming is an act in us”<sup>3</sup> (133).

The next part contains excerpts from d’Abano’s *De venenis eorumque remediis* (1472), translated and annotated by Dan Negrescu. The on-point translations denote Negrescu’s familiarity with the terminology and his expertise in cultural history. The paratext helps us better understand d’Abano’s writing and the sociocultural circumstances of his life.

The last segment of the book contains fragments from Lazarus’ *Tractatus de somniis*. Negrescu’s notes offer extra

information on several names and substances that appear in the original text.

The book is not just a historical overview, but a complex interdisciplinary study. Of special interest to literature enthusiasts is the chapter on Agatha Christie’s murder mysteries, but literary references are scattered all over the book, converting the study into a valuable resource for scholars interested in the representation of poison and dreams in the European literary tradition.

Blending academic precision with easy-to-understand language, Percec forays into the cultural history of poison and oneirology to reveal how such practices have always shaped human imagination. Percec combines wit, humour and academic rigour. The book is not only a valuable contribution to the ever-expanding field of cultural studies, but a compelling reading for the Romanian readers interested in the fascinating, curious and colourful history of the “two brothers.”

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<sup>3</sup> “visul este un act în noi” (133).