Sleep We Have Lost: Pre-industrial Slumber in the British Isles

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Our entire history is only the history of waking men.

Georg Christoph Lichtenberg

DURING THE FIRST DAYS OF AUTUMN IN 1878, Robert Louis Stevenson, at age twenty-seven, spent twelve days trudging through the Cévennes, France’s southern highlands, despite having suffered from frail health during much of his youth. His sole companion was a donkey named Modestine. With Treasure Island and literary fame five years off, Stevenson’s trek bore scant resemblance to the grand tours of young Victorian gentlemen. Midway through the journey, having scaled one of the highest ranges, he encamped at a small clearing shrouded by pine trees. Fortified for a night’s hibernation by a supper of bread and sausage, chocolate, water, and brandy, he reclined within his “sleeping sack,” with a cap over his eyes, just as the sun had run its course. But rather than resting until dawn, Stevenson awoke shortly past midnight. Only after lazily smoking a cigarette and enjoying an hour’s contemplation did he fall back to sleep. “There is one stirring hour,” he later recorded in his journal, “unknown to those who dwell in houses, when a wakeful influence goes abroad over the sleeping hemisphere, and all the outdoor world are on their feet,” men and beasts alike. Never before had Stevenson savored a “more perfect hour”—free, he delighted, from the “bastille of civilization.” “It seemed to me as if life had begun again afresh, and I knew no one in all the universe but the almighty maker.”

Aside from spending the night outdoors, no explanation sufficed for the wistful hour of consciousness that Stevenson experienced in the early morning darkness. “At what inaudible summons,” he wondered, “are all these sleepers thus recalled in the same hour to life?” Were the stars responsible or some “thrill of mother earth below our resting bodies? Even shepherds and old country-folk, who are the

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deepest read in these arcana,” he marveled, “have not a guess as to the means or purpose of this nightly resurrection. Towards two in the morning they declare the thing takes place; and neither know or inquire further.” Unknown to Stevenson, his experience that fall evening was remarkably reminiscent of a form of sleep that was once commonplace. Until the modern era, up to an hour or more of quiet wakefulness midway through the night interrupted the rest of most Western Europeans, not just napping shepherds and slumbering woodsmen. Families rose from their beds to urinate, smoke tobacco, and even visit close neighbors. Remaining abed, many persons also made love, prayed, and, most important, reflected on the dreams that typically preceded waking from their “first sleep.” Not only were these visions unusually vivid, but their images would have intruded far less on conscious thought had sleepers not stirred until dawn. The historical implications of this traditional mode of repose are enormous, especially in light of the significance European households once attached to dreams for their explanatory and predictive powers. In addition to suggesting that consolidated sleep, such as we today experience, is unnatural, segmented slumber afforded the unconscious an expanded avenue to the waking world that has remained closed for most of the Industrial Age.

This article seeks to explore the elusive realm of sleep in early modern British society, with the aid of occasional illustrations from elsewhere in Europe and British North America. Although England forms the heart of my inquiry, I have focused on facets of slumber common to most Western societies, including, most significantly, the predominant pattern of sleep before the Industrial Revolution. Few characteristics of sleep in past ages, much less the “arcana” of “old country-folk,” have received examination since Samuel Johnson complained that “so liberal and impartial a benefactor” should “meet with so few historians.” Apart from fleeting references in scholarly monographs to the prolonged sleeping habits of pre-industrial communities, only the subject of dreams has drawn sustained scrutiny. Early modern scholars have neglected such topics as bedtime rituals, sleep deprivation, and variations in slumber between different social ranks.  

portion of this article, I explore these and other features, not only to map sleep’s principal contours but also to underscore its manifold importance in everyday life. More significantly, this section lays the foundation for a detailed investigation of segmented sleep and, ultimately, its relationship to early modern dreams. If the overall subject of slumber for historians has remained cloaked in obscurity, the age-old pattern of “first” and “second sleep” has been wholly ignored. Central to the entire article is the profound role pre-industrial sleep played in the lives of ordinary men and women, which by no means included the assurance of sound slumber.

Historical indifference to sleep stems partly from a seeming shortage of sources, in particular our misguided notion that contemporaries rarely reflected on a state of existence at once common yet hidden from the waking world. But within such disparate evidence as diaries, medical books, imaginative literature, and legal depositions, there are regular references to sleep, often lamentably terse but nonetheless revealing. Far from being ignored, the subject frequently absorbed people’s thoughts, with most sharing the opinion of the character “Grave” in a late seventeenth-century comedy that “we must desire it should be as sedate, and quiet as may be.” Then, too, social historians have normally displayed less interest in the mundane exigencies of human behavior than in broader issues relating to class, religion, race, and gender. Only recently have scholars systematically begun to address how individuals genuinely lived, with fresh attention to such basic aspects of pre-industrial existence as hygiene, dress, and diet. Sleep has remained among the most neglected topics primarily because the relative tranquility of modern slumber has dulled our perceptions of its past importance. Much like the Scottish cleric Robert Wodrow, we seem to have concluded that “sleep can scarce be justly reckoned part of our life.” Whereas our waking hours are animated, volatile, and highly differentiated, sleep appears, by contrast, passive, monotonous, and uneventful—qualities scarcely designed to spark the interest of a scholarly discipline dedicated to charting change across time, the faster-paced the better.

Grist for our prejudices lies strewn throughout English literature. With the explosive expansion during the sixteenth century in imaginative writing, the


peacefulness of sleep became a favorite topic for all forms of literary adulation, especially verse drama and poetry. Johnson later claimed that because poets required “respite from thought,” they were naturally “well affected to sleep,” which “not only” bestowed “rest, but frequently” led “them to happier regions.” No doubt, life’s daily miseries made beds appear all the more oases of serenity. Typically, when not likening slumber to the gentle embrace of death (“No diffrence,” wrote the London poet Francis Quarles, “but a little Breath”?), writers celebrated sleep as a sanctuary that locked “Sences from their Cares.” In “balmy Sleep,” people “forgot the Labours of the Day” and “in Oblivion buried all their Toils,” opined the author of Night Thoughts among the Tombs. Nor were its blessings reserved just for persons of privilege. At a time when distinction, rank, and preferment ordinarily reigned, slumber alone made “the Wretched equal with the Blest.” Sir Philip Sidney called sleep “the poor man’s wealth, the prisoner’s release, the indifferent judge between the high and low.” A corollary to this assumption, rooted in the medieval concept of the “sleep of the just,” was the belief that the soundest slumber, in fact, belonged to those with simple minds and calloused hands, society’s toiling classes. “Whilst the Peasant takes his sweet repose,” wrote John Taylor the Water-Poet, “the peere is round behem’d with cares and woes.”


7 The Complete Works in Prose and Verse of Francis Quarles, Alexander B. Grosart, ed., 3 vols. (New York, 1967), 2: 206. See also, for example, Thomas Cheesman, Death Compared to Sleep in a Sermon Preacht upon the Occasion of the Funeral of Mrs. Mary Alien . . . (London, 1695); William Jones, A Disquisition Concerning the Metaphorical Usage and Application of Sleep in the Scriptures (London, 1772).


9 Burton E. Stevenson, The Home Book of Proverbs, Maxims and Familiar Phrases (New York, 1948), 2134; Sir Philip Sidney, Astrophel and Stella (London, 1591). Sancho Panza reflected, “While I sleep I have no fear, nor hope, nor trouble, nor glory. God bless the inventor of sleep, the cloak that covers all man’s thoughts, the food that cures all hunger, the water that quenches all thirst, the fire that warms the cold, the cold that cools the heart; the common coin, in short, that can purchase all things, the balancing weight that levels the shepherd with the king, and the simple with the wise.” Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, The Adventures of Don Quixote, J. M. Cohen, trans. (1950; rpt. edn., Baltimore, 1965), 906. See also Another Collection of Philosophical Conferences of the French Virtuosi . . ., G. Havers and J. Davies, trans. (London, 1665), 3; Elkanah Settlee, Iriham the Illustrious Bassa (London, 1677), 51; Jean-François Senault, Man Become Guilty: or, The Corruption of Nature by Sinne, Henry, Earle of Monmouth, trans. (London, 1650), 247; Abraham Cowley, “Sleep,” in Minor English Poets, 1660–1780: A Selection from Alexander Chalmers’ The English Poets, David P. French, comp., 10 vols. (New York, 1967), 2: 115; Mr. A., “To Sleep,” The Diverting-Post, Made Up into a Packet for the Entertainment of the Court, City, and Country (January 1706); Christopher Jones, “Midnight Thoughts,” St. James Chronicle (London), March 22, 1774.

Sleep, to be sure, granted weary men and women of all ranks some measure of relief from daily cares as well as an interval of hard-won rest from their labors. Rare was the early modern family that did not shoulder its share of petty tribulations, much less endure disease, violence, or poverty. Even for those of upper-class birth like Dame Sarah Cowper, “The greatest part of our time is spent in pain, trouble and vexation . . . we being continuously liable to Accidents, Infirmities, Crosses, and Afflictions.” Sleep’s principal contribution was not merely physiological but psychological. Thus, according to London street slang, falling asleep was to “forget oneself.” If only because “its pleasures are purely negative,” surmised Cowper, “Sleep may be reckon’d one of the Blessings of Life.”

11 Also possible is that the solace persons derived varied in inverse proportion to their quality of life, with those farther down the social scale most looking forward to slumber. Affirmed a Jamaican slave proverb, “Sleep hab no Massa.”

12 Set against the drudgery of their waking hours, retiring to bed for most laborers, if only on a thin mattress of straw, must have been welcome indeed, all the more since few claimed furniture of any greater comfort.

But did sleep routinely offer individuals a genuine asylum? Did most, in an era before sleeping pills, body pillows, and earplugs, enjoy the reasonable expectation of undisturbed rest? In her diary, Cowper further noted that “even sleep it self” was “not altogether free from uneasiness,” and the Elizabethan Thomas Nashe wrote of “our thoughts troubled and vexed when they are retired from labor to ease.”

13 Moreover, did all social classes enjoy sleep equally? If the lower orders had reason to anticipate bedtime most eagerly, how, if at all, did the nature of their slumber compare to that of privileged classes? Did the commonalty rest more soundly, as widely depicted in early modern literature, or were sleeping conditions no better than the quality of their waking lives? And finally, of no less importance, what benefits might sleep have conferred, apart from providing people with a reprieve from daily life? Was its value strictly “negative,” or did men and women have more compelling reasons for embracing their exhaustion?

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11 “When our spirits are Exhausted,” Cowper noted, “we wish for sleep as old men for Death, only because we are tired with our present condition.” She also complained that her own husband, Sir William, commonly went to bed early in order to avoid her presence. February 13, July 22, 1712, Diary of Dame Sarah Cowper, Hertfordshire County Record Office, England; Statement of Elizabeth Israel, The Proceedings on the King’s Commissions of the Peace, Oyer and Terminer, and Gaol Delivery for the City of London; and also Gaol Delivery for the County of Middlesex, held at Justice-Hall in the Old Bailey (hereafter, Old Bailey Sessions Papers), June 7–11, 1764.


enigma. The hour at which most individuals went to bed, when they awakened the following morning, and whether the duration of their sleep varied from one night to the next have never received serious analysis, except for the occasional suggestion that people fled to their beds soon after sunset to cope with the onset of darkness. Because the light afforded by candles was available chiefly to the wealthiest families, the members of most households, presumably, were unable or too fearful, once enveloped by darkness, to work or socialize. "No occupation but sleepe, feed, and fart," to paraphrase the Stuart poet Thomas Middleton, might best express this view of what transpired after sunset.  

Among learned authorities, a night's sound slumber was thought critical not only for withered spirits but also for bodily health. Most medical opinion by the late Middle Ages still embraced the Aristotelian belief that the impetus for sleep originated in the abdomen by means of a process called "concoction." Once "meate" and other foods have been digested in the stomach, explained Thomas Cogan in The Haven of Health, fumes ascend to the head "where through coldnesse of the braine, they being congealed, doe stop the conduites and waies of the senses, and so procure sleepe." Not only did nighttime invite sleep "by its moisture, silence and darkness," but those properties were thought enormously well suited to concoction. Virtually all writers credited sleep with physical vitality, lively spirits, and increased longevity. Declared an Italian proverb, "Bed is a medicine." A parallel belief was that retiring early could best reap the full benefits of sleep. "By going early to asleep and early from it, we rise refreshed, lively and active," claimed the author of An Easy Way to Prolong Life.  

Less clear, in retrospect, was the time of night intended by the expression "early to bed," a judgment, perhaps, that truly rested in the heavy lidded eyes of the beholder. Did popular convention favor sunset as a time for repose or some later hour? Another proverb claimed, "One hour's sleep before midnight is worth three after," suggesting that going to bed "early" may have borne an altogether different

17 John Trusler, An Easy Way to Prolong Life, By a Little Attention to Our Manner of Living ... (London, 1775), 11. How widespread this notion was may be seen in such proverbs as "go to Bed with the lamb and rise with the lark" and "would you have a settled head, You must early go to bed." Morris Palmer Tilley, A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries (1950; rpt. edn., Ann Arbor, Mich., 1966), 36.
meaning from retiring at the onset of darkness. Moreover, while contemporaries routinely lauded sleep and its manifest contributions to personal health, they also, even more frequently, scorned slumber that appeared excessive. Puritans in England and America often railed against what Richard Baxter called “unnecessary sluggishness,” but so, too, did myriad others who were increasingly time conscious by the sixteenth century. So what, in the eyes of contemporary moralists, was the proper amount of sleep? Several authorities like the Tudor physician Andrew Boorde believed that sleep needed to be taken as the “complexyon of man” required. Some prescribed seasonal adjustments, such as sleeping eight hours in the summer and nine hours during long winter evenings, whereas Jeremy Taylor, one-time chaplain to Charles I (1625–49), prescribed a nightly regimen of only three hours! More commonly, writers, not just in Britain but throughout the Continent, urged from six to eight hours in bed, unless special circumstances such as illness or melancholy mandated more. Whether these opinions shaped popular mores or instead reflected them, as seems likely, common aphorisms expressed similar attitudes toward the proper length of sleep, including “Nature requires five, Custom takes seven, Laziness nine, And wickedness eleven.”

Of course, some laborers must have collapsed soon after returning home, barely able from numbing fatigue to take an evening meal, especially in rural regions during the summer when fieldwork grew most strenuous. In southern Wiltshire, complained John Aubrey, workers, “being weary after hard labour,” lacked “leisure to read and contemplate of religion, but goe to bed to their rest.” In truth, however, few adults beneath the upper ranks enjoyed the opportunity to sleep more than seven or eight hours, much less the entire night. Despite the biblical injunction to rest at nighttime, “when no man can work,” pre-industrial subsistence pressures

20 Boorde, Compendious Regiment. See also Cogan, Haven of Health, 237; Tobias Venner, Via recta ad vitam longam . . . (London, 1637), 279–80; Lemnious, Touchstone of Complexions, 57; Whole Duty of Man, 189.
22 Bullein, Newe Boke of Phisicke, 91; Boorde, Compendious Regiment; Venner, Via recta, 279–80; Directions and Observations relative to Food, Exercise and Sleep (London, 1772), 22; Dannenfeldt, “Sleep,” 430.
and demands of the workplace kept many from slumber. Nighttime, too, afforded households precious opportunities for sociability and leisure, which frequently accompanied spinning, mending, and other “evening works” by the hearth. In villages, men frequented taverns, and neighbors gathered within homes to enjoy the resonant talents of storytellers. Large towns and cities featured a growing array of nighttime diversions ranging from masquerades and assemblies to brothels and nighthouses.

Darkness, naturally, proved a menacing deterrent to nocturnal activity. “The night is no man’s friend,” attested a proverb. Yet many residents of urban and rural communities, when navigating the dark, learned to rely on local lore, magic, and their knowledge of the natural universe. Time, place, and weather became critical concerns while treading abroad. The quality of moonlight (called by some the “parish-lantern”) varied greatly, as did the nocturnal landscape, which children learned to negotiate early on “as a rabbit knows his burrow.” Most people, robbed of their vision in a world of face-to-face relationships and hence their ability to discern gestures, dress, and facial expressions, depended heavily on hearing, smell, and touch (feet as well as hands). They also resorted to charms to ward off evil spirits. And although the cost of candles—tallow as well as beeswax—remained prohibitively high for most households, early modern folk relied on a broad range of more primitive illuminants, including rushlights and candlewood, for small measures of light.

Diaries, though heavily weighted toward Britain’s upper classes, suggest not only that adults typically slept for periods of from six to eight hours but that the standard time for retiring to bed fell between nine and ten o’clock. “This family goes to Bed between 9 and 10,” noted Sarah Cowper, a rule with occasional exceptions that


27 B. Stevenson, Home Book of Proverbs, 1686; Robert Morgan, My Lamp Still Burns (Llandysul, Wales, 1981), 64; Glossary of Northamptonshire Words and Phrases . . . , Anne Elizabeth Baker, comp. (London, 1854), 95; Ekirch, At Day’s Close.

seems to have applied to less fortunate households. Advised Thomas Tusser, “In winter at nine, and in summer at ten,” whereas an inscription over the parlor of a Danish pastor read: “Stay til nine you are my friend / Til ten, that is alright / but if you stay til 11, you are my enemy.” Although the Sussex shopkeeper Thomas Turner tried to allow himself between seven and eight hours of slumber, either his duties as a parish officer or his thirst for drink, among other “emer gent” occasions, sometimes delayed his normal ten o’clock bedtime. One December evening after a vestry meeting, he stumbled “home about 3:20 [a.m.] not very sober. Oh, liquor,” he bemoaned, “what extravagances does it make us commit!”

HAD PRE-INDUSTRIAL FAMILIES, in fact, retreated to their beds soon after sunset, able to rest for as much as twelve hours rather than just seven or eight, sleep might have seemed less important. Instead, the subject provoked widespread interest. Whether Macbeth, Henry V, or Julius Caesar, many of William Shakespeare’s plays patently appealed to that preoccupation. And not just dreams, long a source of fascination in their own right, but other mysteries, including instances of narcolepsy and sleepwalking, were explored at length in newspapers as well as literary works. For the most part, however, these curiosities represented aberrations born in the shadowlands separating sleep from wakefulness. Vastly more relevant to most people was the quality of their own repose and the ways in which it could be improved. After all, explained a French writer, “Sleep and waking being the hinges on which all the others of our life do hang, if there be any irregularity in these, confusion and disorder must needs be expected in all the rest.” Such was its importance that sleep inspired a typology more nuanced than that routinely employed today. In the environs of Northumberland alone, two terms, “dover” and “slum,” signified light sleep, whereas the widely used expressions “dog,” “cat,” or “hare” sleep referred to slumber that was not only light but anxious. “Ye sleep like


a dog in a mill,” declared a Scottish proverb. More desirable was “dead” or “deep” sleep, what James Boswell described as “absolute, unfeeling, and unconscious.” Attested a Welsh aphorism, “Men thrive by sleep, not long but deep,” an observation supported by modern research emphasizing that whether or not individuals feel rested in the morning chiefly depends on the number of times they awaken during the night.

Families went to great lengths to ensure the tranquility of their slumber. Of particular importance were a household’s beds, typically the most expensive articles of family furniture. Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, English beds evolved from straw pallets on bare floors to wooden frames complete with pillows, sheets, blankets, coverlets, and “flock mattresses,” which were typically filled with rags and straw pieces of wool. Affluent homes boasted elevated bedsteads, feather mattresses, and heavy curtains to ward off dangerous drafts and inquisitive eyes. Recalled William Harrison in 1557 of his youth, “Our fathers, yea, and we ourselves also, have lien full oft upon straw pallets, on rough mats covered only with a sheett, under coverlets made of dagswain or hapharlots . . . and a good round log under their heads, instead of a bolster.” “Pillows,” he noted, “were thought meet only for women in childbed.” But already families were investing heavily in superior beds not only as a mark of social prestige but also for their greater comfort. “Because nothing,” remarked the sixteenth-century Dutch physician Levinus Lemnius, “is holesomer than sound and quiet Sleepe,” a person needed “to take his full ease and sleepe in a soft bedde.” Such was their importance that beds were among the first possessions purchased by newlyweds as well as the first items bequeathed in wills to favored heirs. In modest homes, beds often represented over one-quarter of the value of all domestic assets, while for more humble families, the bed was the piece of furniture first acquired upon entering the “world of goods.” Only half in jest, Carole Shammas has quipped that the early modern era might be rechristened “The Age of the Bed.”


As bedtime neared, households followed painstaking rituals. Such habitual if not compulsive behavior no doubt helped alleviate anxieties many people felt when surrendering themselves to sleep, a condition of unparalleled vulnerability in pre-industrial times. Threats to body and soul as well as to sound slumber seemingly lurked everywhere. Even a cosmopolitan figure of the Enlightenment like Boswell wrote of “gloomy” nights when he was “frightened to lie down and sink into helplessness and forgetfulness.” “We lie in the shadow of death at Night, our dangers are so great,” affirmed a country vicar.\(^{34}\) To forestall thieves, propertied households prepared for bed as if girding for an impending siege. “Barricaded,” “bolted,” and “barred,” as a Georgian playwright described an English home—“backside and foreside, top and bottom.” Nighttime saw quarters made fast, with doors and shutters locked once dogs had been loosed outdoors. Nor could the working poor rest easily. As one who earned her bread by washing, Anne Towers had “a great charge of linen” besides her own belongings in her London quarters on Artichoke Lane—“I always go round every night to see that all is fast.”\(^{35}\) Not only did domestic arsenals contain swords and firearms, or cudgels, sticks, and bed staves in less affluent homes,\(^ {36}\) but on especially foreboding nights friends and relations remained together, sleeping under the same roof if not the same covers, to allay common fears.\(^ {37}\)

Then also, as portrayed in Gerrit van Honthorst’s painting *The Flea Hunt*, domestic pests necessitated nightly removal (see Figure 1), sometimes resulting in

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Figure 1: Gerrit van Honthorst, The Flea Hunt, 1621. Courtesy of the Dayton Art Institute. Museum Purchase with Funds Provided in Part by the 1980 Art Ball.
“bug hunts” of furniture and bedding for both fleas (pulex irritans) and bedbugs (cimex lectularius) after their arrival in Britain by the sixteenth century. To keep gnats at bay, families in the fen country of East Anglia hung lumps of cow dung at the foot of their beds. Sheets could never be damp from washing (“dirt is better than death,” observed John Byng), and in winter weather, beds required warming with pans of hot coals or, in modest dwellings, with hot stones wrapped in rags. Temperatures dipped all the more quickly once hearths were banked and most lights snuffed to prevent the threat of fire, an even greater peril than crime in densely packed cities and towns. If windows boasted curtains, they needed to be drawn to forestall the harmful consequences of sleeping in moonlight and the dreaded properties of evening drafts. Samuel Pepys even tried to tie his hands inside his bed to keep from catching a cold. To shield heads from the cool air, nightcaps were worn. While nightdress for middle and upper-class families, introduced at least by the sixteenth century, included chemises and smocks, the lower classes wore coarse “night-gear,” slept unclad in “naked” beds, or remained in “day-clothes,” either to save the expense of blankets or to rise quickly in the morning.


39 July 16, 1784, John Byng, 5th Viscount Torrington, The Torrington Diaries, C. Cruyn Andrews, ed., 4 vols. (New York, 1934–38), 1: 174. Remarked William Cole while in France, “Certainly the French are a more humble People than we are: they never air their Linnen, but constantly go to Bed in damp, or rather wet Sheets . . . whereas the same practice would give an Englishman, if not his Death, at least the Rheumatism.” November 28, 1765, Rev. William Cole, A Journal of My Journey to Paris in the Year 1765, Francis Griffin Stokes, ed. (London, 1931), 344. For the prevalence of warming pans, see Horn, Adapting to a New World, 318–19. For their preparation by chambermaids, see Domestic Management: or, The Art of Conducting a Family; With Instructions to Servants in General (London, 1740), 56.


Within well-to-do households, feet might be washed before bed, hair cut and combed, beds beaten and stirred, and chamber pots set, all by servants. Laurence Sterne referred to these and other servile duties as "ordinances of the bed-chamber." Of a young lad in training, Pepys wrote, "I had the boy up tonight for his sister to teach him to put me to bed," which included singing or reading to his master with the aid of a "watch-candle" or "night-light," commonly a squat candle in a perforated holder not easily overturned. To calm attacks of anxiety, brandy or medicine was swallowed, with laudanum, a solution made from opium and an especially popular potion among the propertied classes. For much the same purpose, alcohol may have been imbibed at bedtime by the lower orders, though also intended, no doubt, to embalm the flesh on frigid nights. For John Gordon, newly arrived in the capital from Bristol, a half-pint of wine was guarantee enough, he hoped, "in order to sleep all night." On the other hand, to avoid upset stomachs, common wisdom discouraged late night suppers and counseled that sleep first be taken on the right side of the body to facilitate digestion.

Finally, the family patriarch bore a responsibility for setting minds at rest, normally by conducting household prayers, the fabled "lock" of every night. "Discompose yourselves as little as may be before Bed-time," urged the writer Humphrey Brooke, "the Master of the Family prudently animating and encouraging his Wife, Children and Servants against Fear and Disorder." By the sixteenth century, evening devotions had grown habitual among families readying for bed. Whether voiced spontaneously or recited by rote, prayer each night brought many

households much comfort, with some families, including servants, praying together. Protestant and Catholic verses shared distinctive features. Along with giving thanks for heavenly guidance, requesting peaceful sleep, and asking forgiveness for moral failings, most prayers appealed directly for divine protection from nocturnal harm, including “sudden Death, Fears and Affrightsments, Casualties by Fire, Water, or Tempestuous Weather, [and] Disturbance by Thieves.” In addition, less affluent households, in preparing for sleep, routinely invoked magic, an important dimension of pre-industrial life that gained added resonance at bedtime. Besides potions to prevent bedwetting and spur sleep on, nightspells were employed to shield households from fire, thieves, and evil spirits. To keep demons from descending down chimneys, suspending the heart of a bullock or pig over the hearth was a common ritual in western England, whereas early modern families hung amulets and recited charms to avert nightmares, widely thought to be imps seeking to suffocate their prey. “Whosoe’er these words aright Three times o’er shall say each night, No ill dreams shall vex his bed, Hell’s dark land he ne’er shall tread,” comforted an early Welsh verse.

**Implicit in modern conceptions of sleep** before the Industrial Revolution remains the wistful belief that our forebears enjoyed tranquil slumber, if only little else, in their meager lives. Notwithstanding the everyday woes of pre-industrial existence, most families at least rested contentedly from dusk to dawn, we like to think.

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Evening silence coupled with overpowering darkness contributed to unusually peaceful repose, as did the fatigue ordinary men and women suffered from their labors. Upon reliving this “more primitive pattern” when camping outdoors, a leading authority on sleep recently rhapsodized, “With the stars as our only night-light, we are rocked in the welcoming arms of Mother Nature back to the dreamy sleep of the ancients. It’s little wonder we wake the next morning feeling so refreshed and alive.”

If one defining characteristic of sleep is the barrier it erects between the conscious mind and the outside world, another is that sleep’s defenses are easily breached. Unlike sleep-like states resulting from anesthesia, coma, or hibernation, sleep itself is interrupted with ease. Indeed, notwithstanding idyllic stereotypes of repose in simpler times, early modern slumber remained highly vulnerable to intermittent disruption, much more so, in all likelihood, than does sleep today. Despite elaborate precautions taken by households, many early references to sleep contain such adjectives as “restless,” “troubled,” and “frightened.” A seventeenth-century religious devotion spoke of “terrors, sights, noises, dreams and pains, which afflict manie men” at rest. Exactly the greatest toll were physical maladies, all the more severe after sunset, ranging from angina, gastric ulcers, and rheumatoid arthritis to such respiratory tract illnesses as asthma, influenza, and consumption (pulmonary tuberculosis). Making sleep all the more onerous, whatever the strain of sickness, is that sensitivity to pain intensifies at night. An early painting by William Hogarth unabashedly portrays an anguished gentleman, perched


50 Despite his idealized view of sleep in past ages, Dement himself notes the ease with which slumber can be broken. *Promise of Sleep*, 17.


halfway out of bed, vomiting into a basin (see Figure 2). Illness only magnified anxiety and depression, insidious sources of disturbed slumber in their own right, especially when aggravated by fears of fire and crime. No social class was spared, but those having the fewest resources to cope with life’s problems were most subject to insomnia. Of the urban poor, a contemporary remarked, “They feel their sleep interrupted by the cold, the filth, the screams and infants’ cries, and by a thousand other anxieties.”

In most respects, the sleep of the working poor and the destitute remained acutely vulnerable to the vexations of everyday existence. Certainly, their quarters lay more exposed to unwelcome intrusions, including frigid temperatures, annoying noises, voracious insects, and the stench of nightsoil. In Paris, due to the high cost of obtaining quiet quarters, Nicolas Boileau remarked, “Sleep like other Things is sold. And you must purchase your Repose with Gold.”


54 The Works of Monsieur Boileau, 2 vols. (London, 1712), 1: 201. See also The True Narrative of the
beneath the middling orders still suffered from tattered blankets and coarse mattresses, with many families scarcely able to afford even those essentials. In an engraving by Hogarth, a bed shared by the “Idle Prentice” and a prostitute features sheets and a blanket, but the wooden bedstead has collapsed amid the squalor of their rat-infested garret. Notably, “Idle” has just been abruptly awakened by the noise of a cat, probably in pursuit of the rat in the foreground (see Figure 3). Without “fire” or “place,” the urban poor often slept in public streets or, if lucky, atop or beneath wooden platforms protruding from shop windows—“bulkers” these unfortunates were widely called. Hayracks, stables, and barns afforded “nests” for rural vagabonds, such as the “thirty persons, men, women and children” found “naked in straw” in a barn near Tewkesbury in 1636. In Coventry and Nottingham, many of the “poorer sort” took refuge at night within caves.55

Inadequate bedding meant that families in the lower ranks routinely slept two,
three, or more to a mattress, with overnight visitors included. Sharing not only the same room but also the same covers conserved resources and generated welcome warmth. Advised an Italian proverb, “In a narrow bed, get thee in the middle,” whereas “to pig” was a common English expression for sleeping with one or more bedfellows. Probably most parents slept apart from children other than infants, although occasionally entire households of European peasants shared the same beds.56 So, too, some families throughout the British Isles brought farm animals within sleeping quarters at night. Besides protecting cows, sheep, and other livestock from predators and thieves, boarding with beasts allowed greater warmth, notwithstanding the “naustiness of their excrements.”57

Perhaps for the laboring population, as poets so often claimed, fatigue alleviated such hardships. The Virginia tutor Philip Fithian studied during many evenings to the point of exhaustion in order to render his sleep “sound & unbroken” and immune to “cursed Bugs.”58 But probably more realistic than most pieces of verse, if less well-known, was a passage from The Complaints of Poverty by Nicholas James:

And when, to gather strength and still his woes,
He seeks his last redress in soft repose,
The tattered blanket, erst the fleas’ retreat,
Denies his shiv’ring limbs sufficient heat;
Teased with the squalling babes’ nocturnal cries,
He restless on the dusty pillow lies.

Similarly, the author of L’état de servitude bemoaned, “In an attic with no door and no lock / Open to cold air all winter long / In a filthy and vile sort of garret / A Rotten mattress is laid out on the ground.”59

Sleep, the poor man’s wealth, the husbandman’s delight? Not in any conventional


sense, except for allowing a sometimes troubled respite from what was likely an even more onerous day. “The Gods have bestowed Sleep upon us that we might take Rest for our Cares and forget our Sorrows,” noted a contemporary, “not to make it a continual Tormentor.” “Especially,” he added, “since the Soul has no other Sleep to fly to.”60 Not that most people regularly faced prolonged bouts of wakefulness when in bed, for almost certainly they did not. It would be easy to exaggerate the toll taken by nightly annoyances. On the other hand, merely a series of brief disturbances of at most several minutes apiece, unknown even to the sleeper, can impose an enormous burden on the mind and body in terms of quality of rest and physical repair. Far from consistently enjoying blissful repose, ordinary men and women likely suffered some degree of sleep deprivation, feeling more fatigued upon awakening at dawn than when retiring at bedtime. All the more arduous as a consequence were their waking hours, especially when sleep debts were allowed to accumulate from one day to the next and superiors remained unsympathetic. Upon returning to his London quarters the next evening to find his “man” asleep, Virginia’s William Byrd II delivered a prompt beating, as did the Yorkshire yeoman Adam Eyre to a maidservant for her “slothfulness.”61 If complaints are to be believed, the work of laborers was erratic and their behavior lethargic—“deadened slowness” was one description of rural labor. “At noon he must have his sleeping time,” groused Bishop James Pilkington in the late 1500s of the typical laborer. Previous historians have explained such behavior as the product of a pre-industrial work ethic, but allowance must also be made for the chronic fatigue that probably afflicted much of the early modern population, as depicted in Thomas Rowlandson’s drawing, Haymakers at Rest (see Figure 4). Indeed, napping during the day appears to have been common, with sleep less confined to nocturnal hours than it is in Western societies today.62 We can only wonder whether

exhaustion occasioned other common symptoms of sleep deprivation, including losses in motivation and physical well-being as well as increases in irritability and social friction. “Whether due to sleeping on a bed fouler than a rubbish heap, or not being able to cover oneself,” observed a Bolognese curate about insomnia among the poor, “who can explain how much harm is done?”

“I AM AWAKE, but ’tis not time to rise, neither have I yet slept enough . . . I am awake, yet not in paine, anguish or feare, as thousands are.” So went a seventeenth-century religious meditation intended for the dead of night. As if illness, inclement weather, and fleas were not enough, there was yet another, even more familiar, source of broken sleep, though few contemporaries regarded it in that light. So routine was this nightly interruption that it provoked little comment at the time. Neither has it ever attracted scrutiny from historians, much less systematic investigation. But Robert Louis Stevenson shared the experience when hiking in the Cévennes; and because it had been a vital commonplace of an earlier age, “old

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63 Canali quoted in Camporesi, Bread of Dreams, 68–69; Coren, Sleep Thieves, passim.

64 Herbert’s Devotions, 236.
country-folk" knew about it in the late nineteenth century. Some probably still do today.

Until the close of the early modern era, Western Europeans on most evenings experienced two major intervals of sleep bridged by up to an hour or more of quiet wakefulness. In the absence of fuller descriptions, fragments in several languages that I have surveyed survive in sources ranging from depositions and diaries to imaginative literature. From these shards of information, we can piece together the essential features of this puzzling pattern of repose. The initial interval of slumber was usually referred to as "first sleep," or, less often, "first nap" or "dead sleep." In French, the term was "premier sommeil" or "premier somme," in Italian, "primo sonno" or "primo sonno," and in Latin, "primo somno" or "concubia nocte." The intervening period of consciousness—what Stevenson poetically

For the term "first sleep," I have discovered sixty-three references within a total of fifty-eight different sources from the period 1300–1800. See below in the text for examples. "First nap" appears in Colley Cibber, The Lady's Last Stake: or, The Wife's Resentment (London, 1708), 48; Tobias George Smollett, The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom, 2 vols. (London, 1753), 1: 73; Emily Bronte, Wuthering Heights, Ian Jack, ed. (Oxford, 1981), 97. For "dead sleep," see Geoffrey Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales (Avon, Conn., 1974), 93; Henry Roberts, Honours Conquest (London, 1598), 134; Rowley, All's Lost by Lust; Thomas Randolph, Poems with the Muses Looking-glasse . . . (Oxford, 1638); Shirley James, The Constant Maid (London, 1640); Robert Dixon, Camidia: or, The Witches . . . (London, 1683), 6. The fewer references to segmented sleep I have found in early American sources suggests that this pattern, though present in North America, may have been less widespread than in Europe, for reasons ranging from differences in day/night ratios to the wider availability of candles and other forms of artificial illumination in the colonies. Two sources—Benjamin Franklin, "Letter of the Drum," Pennsylvania Gazette (Philadelphia), April 23, 1730, and Hudson Muse to Thomas Muse, April 19, 1771, in "Original Letters," William and Mary Quarterly 2 (April 1894): 240—contain the expression "first nap." I have also found references to segmented sleep in twelve works of American fiction published during the first half of the nineteenth century. All the stories take place either in America or in Europe, with nearly half set before 1800. See, for example, Washington Irving, The Beauties of Washington Irving . . . (Philadelphia, 1835), 152; Irving, A Book of the Hudson . . . (New York, 1849), 51; Irving, Bracebridge Hall, Tales of a Traveller, The Alhambra (New York, 1991), 398, 813; Richard Penn Smith, The Forsaken: A Tale, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1831), 2: 211; James Fenimore Cooper, The Ways of the Hour (New York, 1850), 276; Nathaniel Hawthorne, Tales and Sketches: A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys, Tanglewood Tales for Girls and Boys, Roy Harvey Pearson, ed. (New York, 1982), 293. While visiting London one winter, Hawthorne, in fact, noted a difference in the nature of English nights and sleep from his own experience in New England: "At this season, how long the nights are—from the first gathering gloom of twilight, when the grate in my office begins to grow ruddier, all through dinner time, and the putting to bed of the children, and the lengthened evening, with its books or its drowsiness,—our own getting to bed, the brief awakenings through the many dark hours, and then the creeping on to the morning. It seems an age between light and light." January 6, 1854, Hawthorne, The English Notebooks (New York, 1962), 44.

I have found twenty-one references to these terms within a total of nineteen sources from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including Pierre de Deimer, L'académie de l'art poétique (Paris, 1610), 260; Honoré d'Urfé, L'astrée, M. Hughes Vaghanay, ed., 5 vols. (Geneva, 1966), 2: 267, 3: 442; Madame de Sévigné, Correspondance, 2 vols. (Paris, 1972), 1: 598; [Claude-Phillipe de Tobières, Comte de Caylus], Féesrées nouvelles, 2 vols. ([Paris], 1741), 1: 298, 2: 48; and both the tales and fables of Jean de La Fontaine.

For "primo sonno" and "primo sonno," the opera del Vocabolario Italiano database of early Italian literature, furnished by the ItalNet consortium (on the World Wide Web at www.lib.uchicago.edu/efs/ARTFL/projects/OV1/), contains fifty-seven references within a total of thirty-two texts from just the fourteenth century. See, for example, Giovanni Boccaccio, Decameron, V. Branca, ed. (Florence, 1976), 229, 270, 353, 542, 543, 568, 591, 592; Franco Sacchetti, Trecentonovelle, V. Pernicone, ed. (Florence, 1946), 433, 536.

For "primo sonno" or some slight variation like "primus somnus" or "primi somni," for which I have discovered nineteen references within sixteen texts, half of the latter before the thirteenth century, see, for example, Henricus Petraeus and Abraham Vechnner, Agonismata . . . (Marburg, 1618), 172; Ugo Benzi, Scriptum de somno et vigilia, Gianfranco Fioravanti and Antonella Idato, eds. (Siena, 1991), 4;
labeled a “nightly resurrecion”—bore no name, other than the generic term “watch” or “watching” to indicate a period of wakefulness that stemmed, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, “from disinclination or incapacity for sleep.” Two contrasting texts refer to the time of “first waking.” The succeeding interval of slumber was called “second” or “morning” sleep. Both phases lasted roughly the same length of time, with individuals waking sometime after midnight before ultimately falling back to sleep. Not all people, of course, including most who retired early enough to experience two intervals of slumber, slept according to the same timetable. The later at night that individuals went to bed, the later they stirred after their initial sleep; or, if they retired past midnight, they would likely not have awakened at all until dawn. Thus in “The Squire’s Tale,” “Canacee” slept “soon after evening fell” and subsequently awakened in the early morning following “her first sleep”; whereas her companions, staying up much later, “lay asleep till it was fully prime” (daylight). Similarly, William Baldwin’s sixteenth-century satire Beware the Cat recounts a quarrel between the protagonist, “newly come unto bed,” and two roommates who “had already slept” their “first sleep.”

Western Europeans of varying backgrounds referred to both intervals as if the prospect of awakening in the middle of the night was utterly familiar to contemporaries and thus required no elaboration. “At mid-night when thou wak’st from sleepe . . .,” wrote the Stuart poet George Wither; while in the view of John Locke, “That all men sleep by intervals” was a common feature of life, extending as well to much of brute creation, as Stevenson would later discern. Although details of this pattern are scarce, for the thirteenth-century Catalan philosopher Ramón Lull, “primo somno” stretched from mid-evening to early morning, whereas William Harrison in his mid-sixteenth-century Description of England referred to the “dull or


71 Chaucer, Canterbury Tales, 403; William Baldwin, Beware the Cat: The First English Novel, William A. Ringler, Jr., and Michael Flachmann, eds. (San Marino, Calif., 1988), 5.

dead of the night, which is midnight, when men be in their first or dead sleep.”

Customary usage confirms that “first sleep” constituted a distinct period of time followed by an interval of wakefulness. Typically, descriptions recounted how an aroused individual had “had,” “taken,” or “gotten” his or her “first sleep.” “I am more watchful,” asserted “Rampino” in Sir William D’Avenant’s The Unfortunate Lovers, “than a sick constable after his first sleep on a cold bench.” An early seventeenth-century Scottish legal deposition referred to Jon Cokburne, a weaver, “having gottin his first sleip and awaikiing furth thairof,” while Noël Tailleped’s A Treatise of Ghosts alluded even more directly to “about midnight when a man wakes from his first sleep.” Although in some descriptions a neighbor’s quarrel or a barking dog woke people prematurely from their initial sleep, the vast weight of surviving evidence indicates that awakening naturally was routine, not the consequence of disturbed or fitful slumber. Medical books, in fact, from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries frequently advised sleepers, for better digestion and more tranquil repose, to lie on their right side during “the fyrste slepe” and “after the fyrste slepe turne on the lefte syde.” And even though Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie investigated no further, his study of fourteenth-century Montaillou notes that “the hour of the first sleep” was a customary division of night, as was “the hour half-way through the first sleep.”

At first glance, it is tempting to view this pattern of broken sleep as a cultural relic rooted in early Christian experience. Ever since St. Benedict in the sixth century required that monks rise after midnight for the recital of verses and psalms, this like other regulations of the Benedictine order had spread to growing numbers of Frankish and German monasteries. By the High Middle Ages, the Catholic Church actively encouraged early morning prayer among Christians as a means of appealing to God during the still hours of darkness. But while Christian teachings un-

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77 “Night vigils,” declared the twelfth-century scholar Alan of Lille, “were not instituted without reason, for by them it is signified that we must rise in the middle of the night to sing the night office, so that the night may not pass without divine praise.” Best known for advocating this regimen was the Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross, author of The Dark Night of the Soul, although in England voices within both the Catholic and Anglican churches still prescribed late night vigils in the eighteenth
doubtlessly popularized the regimen of early morning prayer, the church itself was not responsible for introducing segmented sleep. However much it colonized the period of wakefulness between intervals of slumber, references to “first sleep” antedate Christianity’s early years of growth. Not only did such figures outside the church as Pausanias and Plutarch invoke the term in their writings, so, too, did early classical writers, including Livy in his history of Rome, Virgil in the Aeneid, both composed in the first century BC, and Homer in the Odyssey, written in either the late eighth or early seventh century BC. Conversely, in the twentieth century, some non-Western cultures with religious beliefs other than Christianity have long exhibited a segmented pattern of sleep remarkably similar to that of pre-industrial Europeans. Anthropologists have found villages of the Tiv, Chagga, and G/wi, for example, in Africa to be surprisingly alive after midnight with newly roused adults and children. Of the Tiv in central Nigeria, a study in 1969 recorded, “At night, they wake when they will and talk with anyone else awake in the hut.” The Tiv even employ the terms “first sleep” and “second sleep” as traditional intervals of time.

Thus the basic puzzle remains—how to explain this curious anomaly or, in truth, the more genuine mystery of consolidated sleep that we experience today. For there is every reason to believe that segmented sleep, such as many wild animals still exhibit, had long been the natural pattern of our slumber before the modern age, with a provenance as old as humankind. Contrary to Stevenson’s suspicions, the key to this enigma has little to do with sleeping outdoors, although shepherds and hunters were beneficiaries. Instead, the answer appears to lie in what these individuals shared with most other people at night during the early modern era. As suggested by recent experiments at the National Institute of Mental Health in Bethesda, Maryland, the explanation likely rests in the darkness that enveloped most pre-industrial families. In attempting to recreate conditions of “prehistoric” sleep, Dr. Thomas Wehr and his colleagues at NIMH found that human subjects, deprived at night of artificial light over a span of several weeks, eventually exhibited a pattern of broken slumber—astonishingly, one practically identical to that of pre-industrial households. Without artificial light for up to fourteen hours each night, Wehr’s subjects first lay awake in bed for two hours, slept for four, awakened

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again for two to three hours of quiet rest and reflection, then fell back asleep for four more hours before finally awakening for good. Significantly, the intervening period of "non-anxious wakefulness" possessed "an endocrinology all its own," with visibly heightened levels of prolactin, a pituitary hormone best known for permitting chickens to brood contentedly atop eggs for long stretches of time. In fact, Wehr has likened this period of wakefulness to something approaching an altered state of consciousness not unlike meditation.80

On the enormous physiological impact of modern lighting—or, in turn, its absence—on sleep, there is wide scientific agreement. "Every time we turn on a light," remarks the chronobiologist Charles A. Czeisler, "we are inadvertently taking a drug that affects how we will sleep," with changes in levels of the brain hormone melatonin and in body temperature being among the most apparent consequences. Even so, Wehr, to his credit, has speculated that other conditions in his experiments, apart from darkness, might have produced a bimodal pattern of sleep—such as boredom or the enforced rest of his subjects. "Further research will be necessary," he has written, "to determine whether, and to what extent, darkness per se or factors associated with the dark condition" were "responsible for the differences that we observed in the subjects' sleep."81 But plainly, such factors did not normally exist in the voluminous number of pre-industrial allusions to first and second sleep. Rest in those instances was neither involuntary nor the consequence of monotonous surroundings. The more obvious commonality linking pre-industrial peoples to the subjects in Wehr's experiments, shared too by non-Western cultures still experiencing broken slumber, was a severe shortage of artificial lighting, which in the early modern world fell hardest on the lower and middle classes. Interestingly, allusions to segmented sleep are most conspicuous in materials written or dictated by all but the wealthiest segments of society. References are sparse among the vast mounds of personal papers left by the upper classes. Their relative absence becomes increasingly evident by the late seventeenth century, when both artificial lighting and the vogue of "late hours" grew more prevalent among affluent households. It may be more than coincidental that the prolific diarists Samuel Pepys and James Boswell, by their own admission, seldom woke in the middle of the night. If not conspicuously wealthy themselves, both men circulated within the upper echelons of London society, patronizing genteel nightspots and homes, amply lit in all likelihood by candlelight, well into the night. Of late night entertainments,


Richard Steele observed in 1710, “Our grandmothers, though they were wont to sit up the last in the family, were all of them fast asleep at the same hours that their daughters are busy at crimp and basset [a card game] . . . Who would not wonder at this perverted relish of those who are reckoned the most polite part of mankind, that prefer sea-coals and candles to the sun, and exchange so many cheerful morning hours for the pleasures of midnight revels and debauches?”

A particularly intriguing reference to segmented sleep lies in an unpolished manuscript scrawled by an anonymous Irishman in October 1761 describing his journey home to Dublin. Upon leaving London between midnight and one a.m. by coach “in the midst of thick darkness,” “twas nigh an hour” before he “cleared the [northern] suburbs, where the people had not yet [all?] gone to bed as their Lights were not yet put out. Nay we discovered some faint glimmerings Here & there as we drove thru Highgate.” Between one and two a.m., the coach and its passengers passed through Barnet, six miles to the north of Highgate. In this Hertfordshire town, noted the traveler, the “Good Folks seemed to be in their first sleep.”

A wild guess, in view of the advanced hour? Or was the traveler’s inference based on an apparent absence of activity, normally visible perhaps in communities after “first sleep” due to the dim glow of scattered candles, rushlights, and oil lamps? Although early modern families stirring after midnight probably fell back to sleep well before the full period of wakefulness experienced by the NIMH subjects, some individuals arose from their beds upon awakening. Many of these, of course, merely needed to urinate. Advised Andrew Boorde, “Whan you do wake of your fyrste slepe make water if you fele your bladder charged.”

Others, however, after arising, took the opportunity to smoke tobacco, check the time, or tend a fire. Counseled an early English ballad, “Old Robin of Portingale,” “And at the wakening of your first sleepe You shall have a hott drinke made, And at the wakening of your next sleepe Your sorrowes will have a slake.”

Yet for others, work awaited, no matter how wearisome the tasks. The Bath physician Tobias Venner advised, “Students that must of necessity watch and study by night, that they do it not till after their first sleep,” when they would be “in some measure refreshed.” A seventeenth-century farmer, Henry Best of Elmswell, made a point to rise “sometimes att midnight” to

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82 [Richard Steele], December 14, 1710, The Tatler, George Aitken, ed., 4 vols. (1899; rpt. edn., New York, 1970), 4: 337, 339; April 9, 1664, Pepys Diary, 5: 118; March 19, 1776, Boswell: The Ominous Years, 1774–1776, Charles Ryskamp and Frederick A. Pottle, eds. (New York, 1963), 276. Of the Navy Board, where Pepys, when not socializing, frequently labored at night in a series of official capacities, it was said in 1700, “There are very few nights, even in summer, that we do not burn candles at this office”—according to one estimate, well over one hundred per night during the preceding decade. O’Dea, Social History of Lighting, 114–15. Boswell observed in defense of his late hours, “My avidity to put as much as possible into a day makes me fill it till it is like to burst.” April 2, 1775, Boswell: The Ominous Years, 118. See also T. Burke, English Night-Life, 23–70.

83 October 9, 1761, “Journeys from Dublin to London, 1761, 1773,” Additional Manuscripts 27951, British Library, fol. 66; A Description of the Towns and Villages, &c. on and Adjoining the Great North Road, From London to Bawtry (London, 1782), 4, 5.

84 Boorde, Compendious Regiment. See also Dunton, Teague Land, 25; Statement of Samuel Whitehouse, Old Bailey Sessions Papers, May 21–23, 1760.

prevent the destruction of his fields by roving cattle. In addition to tending their children, women left their beds to perform myriad chores, including doing the wash to avoid disrupting the daily household. The servant Jane Allison got up one night between midnight and two a.m. to “brew a Load of Malt in the Back Kitchen” of her Westmorland master. “Often at Midnight, from our Bed we rise,” bewailed Mary Collier in _The Woman’s Labour_. Some hardy souls, after rising in the early morning, remained awake if sufficiently rested or if pressing work intruded. Thomas Ken, the bishop of Bath and Wells, reputedly “rose generally very early, and never took a second sleep.”

For the poor, awakening in the dead of night presented opportunities of a different sort. Never during the day was there such a secluded interval in which to commit acts of petty crime: filching from shops, dockyards, and other urban workplaces, or, in the countryside, pilfering firewood, poaching, and robbing orchards. The religious scholar George Herbert hardly exaggerated in claiming that “some wake to plot or act mischief,” for an undercurrent of illegal activity reverberated through the early morning hours, occasionally involving more serious offenses. Thomas Liggins, alleged to have received stolen beans in his London home, admitted to leaving his bed between one and two a.m. to accept the merchandise. Of Luke Atkinson, charged with an early morning murder in the North Riding of Yorkshire, his wife admitted “that it was not the first time he had got up at Nights and left her in bed to go to other Folks Houses.” And in 1697, young Jane Rowth’s mother, “after shee had gott her first sleep . . . was gotten up out of bedd, And [was] smoaking a pipe at the fire side” when two male companions “called on her mother at the little window, and bad her make ready & come away” according to plans all three had hatched the preceding morning. Although nine-year-old Jane was told by her mother to “lye still, And shee would come againe in the morning,” her mother’s dead body was found a day or two later. None were more familiar than the church with the dangers and temptations lurking in the dead of night. “Can Men break their sleep to mind the works of Darkness, and shall we not break ours,” asked Reverend Anthony Horneck, “for doing things, which

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88 _Herbert’s Devotions_, 237; Statement of Thomas Liggins, _Old Bailey Sessions Papers_, January 15–18, 1748; Deposition of Mary Atkinson, March 9, 1771, Assi 45/30/1/3; Deposition of Jane Rowth, April 11, 1697, Assi 45/17/2/93. Reverend Anthony Horneck condemned “how High-way-men and Thieves can rise at midnight to Rob and Murder Men!” Horneck, _Happy Ascetic_, 414. See also M. Lopes de Almeida, _Díalogos de D. Frei Amador Arrais_ (Pórito, 1974), 19; Deposition of Jane Newham, December 3, 1770, Assi 45/30/1/16; Statement of Lord Justice General Deputy, August 29, 1722, in Imrie, _Justiciary Records of Argyll and the Isles_, 2: 376; Deposition of Thomas Nicholson, June 2, 1727, Assi 45/18/4/39–40.
become the Children of Light?"89 Certainly, there was no shortage of prayers intended to be recited "when you awake in the Night" or "at our first waking," a time not to be confused with either dawn or "our uprising," for which wholly separate prayers were prescribed. A parent instructed his daughter that "the most profitable hour for you and us might be in the middle of the night after going to sleep, after digesting the meat, when the labors of the world are cast off . . . and no one will look at you except for God."90

Most people, upon awakening, probably never left their beds unless to relieve their bladders, if then. Besides praying, they conversed with a bedfellow or inquired after the well-being of a child or spouse. A drawing by Jan Saenredam (see Figure 5) depicts a wakened wife from the far side of a bed adjusting the covers atop her slumbering husband; also asleep are an infant and her nurse. According to one wife, it was her husband's "custom when he waketh to feele after me & than he layeth hym to slepe againe." Lying with her daughter Sara and "a little childe," Mary Sykes, "after theire first sleepe," upon "heareing" Sara "quakinge and holding her hands together" asked her daughter "what she ailed."91 Sexual intimacy seems often to have ensued among couples. Joked Louis Sebastien Mercier of the midnight clatter of Parisian carriages, "The tradesman wakes out of his first sleep at the sound of them, and turns to his wife, by no means unwilling." Significantly for our understanding of early modern demography, segmented sleep may have enhanced a couple's ability to conceive children, since fertility might have benefited from an interlude of rest. In fact, the sixteenth-century French physician Laurent Joubert concluded that early morning intercourse enabled plowmen, artisans, and other laborers to beget numerous children. Because exhaustion prevented workers from copulating upon first going to bed, intercourse occurred "after the first sleep" when "they have more enjoyment" and "do it better." "Immediately thereafter," Joubert counseled those eager to conceive, "get back to sleep again, if possible, or if not, at least to remain in bed and relax while talking together joyfully." The physician Thomas Cogan similarly advised that intercourse occur not "before sleepe, but after the meate is digested, a little before morning, and afterwaarde to sleepe a while."92

Perhaps even more commonly, however, people used this shrouded interval of

89 Horneck, Happy Asceticke, 415. See also Almeida, Diálogos de Amador, 19.
91 The Deceyte of Women . . . (n.p., 1568); Deposition of Dorothy Rodes, March 18, 1650, in Depositions from the Castle of York, Relating to Offences Committed in the Northern Counties in the Seventeenth Century (London, 1861), 28. See also Geoffroy de La Tour-Landry, Book of the Knight of La Tour Landry (London, 1906), fol. 3b; January 4, 1728, Sanderson Diary.
solitude to immerse themselves in contemplation—to ponder events of the preceding day and to prepare for the arrival of dawn. At no other time, during the day or night, were distractions so few and privacy so great. “The night,” asserted
James Pilkington, “is the quietest time to devise things in”; the “eyes are not troubled with looking at many things,” and the “senses are not drawn away.” Naturally, midnight reflections sometimes proved painful. A character in the Jacobean comedy *Evere Woman in Her Humor* “everie night after his first sleepe” wrote “lovesick sonnets, rayling against left handed fortune his foe.” Little wonder that, for better or worse, nighttime enjoyed a far-flung reputation as the “mother of thoughtes,” many of them born while minds were conscious. “The night brings counsel,” echoed a popular proverb. The seventeenth-century merchant James Bovey reputedly from age fourteen kept a “Candle burning by him all night, with pen, inke, and paper, to write downe thoughts as they came into his head.” Indeed, by the mid-eighteenth century, in order to better preserve midnight ruminations, methods were devised to “write in the dark, as straight as by day or candle-light,” according to a report in 1748. Twenty years later, after first obtaining a patent, a London tradesman, Christopher Pinchbeck, Jr., advertised his “Nocturnal Remembrancer,” an enclosed tablet of parchment with a horizontal aperture for a guideline whereby “philosophers, statesmen, poets, divines, and every person of genius, business or reflection, may secure all those happy, often much regretted, and never to be recovered flights or thoughts, which so frequently occur in the course of a meditating, wakeful night.”

But we run on too quickly. Georgian ingenuity should not mislead us. For every active intellect following first sleep, there were two others initially neither asleep nor awake. The French called this ambiguous interval of semi-consciousness “dorville,” while the English termed it “twixt sleepe and wake.” Unless preceded by an unsettling dream, the moments immediately following “first sleep” were often characterized by two features: confused thoughts that wandered “at will” coupled with pronounced feelings of contentment. As senses sharpened, contentedness frequently lingered. Whether this was the “altered state of consciousness” researchers have detected in clinical experiments, I cannot say with certainty, but common discomforts of the night, such as illness and pests, do not appear to have disturbed powers of concentration during this interval. In his evocative description of awakening from “midnight slumber” in “The Haunted Mind,” Nathaniel

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Hawthorne insisted, “If you could choose an hour of wakefulness out of the whole night, it would be this . . . You have found an intermediate space, where the business of life does not intrude; where the passing moment lingers, and becomes truly the present.” And in what might have been a reference to the tranquility associated with heightened levels of the hormone prolactin, Hawthorne reflected, “You speculate on the luxury of wearing out a whole existence in bed, like an oyster in its shell, content with the sluggish ecstasy of inaction.” The early morning could be a time of great personal sovereignty. Thus Stevenson, after awakening in the Cévennes, wrote of being freed from the “bastille of civilization.” Less sanguine about “our solitary Hours” when “waking in the Night or early in the Morning” was the Hammersmith minister John Wade, who complained in 1692 of men’s “unsettled independent Thoughts,” “vain unprofitable Musing,” and “devising Mischief upon their Beds.”

OFTEN, PEOPLE STIRRED FROM THEIR FIRST SLEEP to ponder a kaleidoscope of partially crystallized images, slightly blurred but otherwise vivid tableaus born of their dreams. So in the “Squire’s Tale,” “Canacee,” after she “slept her first sleep,” awakened in the warm glow of a dream—“for on her heart so great a gladness broke”; and “Club,” when awakened from his “first sleep” in Love and a Bottle, recalled the “pleasantest Dream” in which “his Master’s great black Stone-horse, had broke loose among the Mares.” Less happily, Reverend Oliver Heywood—“at my first sleep”—had a “terrible dream” in which his son “was fallen to the study of magick or the black art.” And in Ram Alley, “Sir Oliver” spoke of the hours before cockcrow “when maids awak’d from their first sleep, Deceiv’d with dreams begin to weep.”

As in previous eras, dreams played a profound role in early modern life, every bit as revealing, according to popular sentiment, of prospects ahead as of times past. Some visions, many believed, merely reprised the previous day, reflecting nothing more than a sour stomach from a recent meal. Other dreams, by communicating divine prophecies, foreshadowed the future. To be sure, well before the literate classes in the late eighteenth century ridiculed dream interpretation among “the vulgar,” critics like Sir Thomas Brown, though conceding that dreams could enable people to “more sensibly understand” themselves, condemned the “fictions and

falshoods” born at night. Even skeptics, however, acknowledged a widespread fascination with visions. Thomas Tryon, for example, wrote in 1689 of how an “abundance of ignorant People (foolish Women, and Men as weak) have in all Times, and do frequently at this day make many ridiculous & superstititious Observations from their Dreams.”

So, too, *The Weekly Register* in 1732 observed, “There is a certain Set of People in the World, who place the greatest Faith imaginable in their Dreams.” That “the English Nation has ever been famous for Dreaming,” as “Sommifer” remarked, was reflected in the surging sales of dream books (chapbooks, sections of fortune books, or entire compendiums) devoted to translating different types of visions, often with great specificity.

The general public valued not only the oracular quality of dreams but also the deeper understanding they permitted of one’s body and soul. Some dreams lay rooted in physical health, as Aristotle and Hippocrates once claimed, while others threw a rare shaft of light on the inner core of a person’s character. Well before the Romantic philosophers of the nineteenth century and, later, Sigmund Freud, Europeans prized dreams for their personal insights, including what they revealed of one’s relationship with God. “The wise man,” the essayist Owen Feltham wrote in 1628, “learnes to know himselfe as well by the nights blacke mantle, as the searching beames of day.” Between the two, night was the superior instructor, for “in sleepe, wee have the naked and naturall thoughts of our soules.”

“Let the Night teach us what we are,” conceded Tryon, “and the Day what we should be.”

Although some revelations were unwelcome, oppressive rules that made daily life arduous no longer always applied in the boundless freedom of dreams. “The Dogge dreameth of bread, of raunging in the Fields, & of hunting,” affirmed a proverb. Those forced to adopt a foreign language by day could dream in their native tongue at night; others in their visions freely swore oaths and enjoyed erotic fantasies, as portrayed in *The Dream* by Jacob Jordens (see Figure 6).

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102 Polydori Ripa, *Tractatus de nocturno tempore . . .* (Venice, 1602), chap. 9, no. 27; Lemnius, *Touchstone of Complexions*, 113–14; Parey, *Workes*, 27. For renewed interest in the link between dreaming and illness, see Robert L. Van De Castle, *Our Dreaming Mind* (New York, 1994), 361–70.


105 Lemnius, *Touchstone of Complexions*, 114; Tobias George Smollett, *The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom*, Damian Grant, ed. (London, 1971), 109; “A Dreamer,” *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, October 21, 1767; Morison, *Itinerary Containing His Ten Yeeres Travell*, 1: 27. Not surprisingly, talking in one’s sleep was thought more revealing of a person’s thoughts than were one’s
Leering husbands, spouses suspected, committed adultery without once leaving their sides. Such visions Pepys cherished all the more dearly during the height of London’s Great Plague in 1665. After dreaming of a liaison with Lady Castlemaine (“the best that ever was dreamed”—“all the dalliance I desired with her”), he reflected: “What a happy thing it would be, if when we are in our graves... we could dream, and dream but such dreams as this.” “Then,” he added, “We should not need to be so fearful of death as we are this plague-time.” So suspicious of his visions was Pepys’s wife that she took to feeling his penis while he slept for signs of an erection.\footnote{August 15, 1665, February 7, 1669, Pepys Diary, 6: 191, 9: 439. The penis routinely becomes erect during a dream, regardless of its content; in fact, men on average experience “four to five erections a night (when they are asleep), each lasting from five to ten minutes.” Rose, Body in Time, 54, 95.}

If, as playwrights and poets romanticized, sleep soothed the weary and oppressed,
their principal relief may have been drawn from dreams. The mere act of dreaming was alone testament to the independence of souls. For the lower classes, dreams represented not only a road to self-awareness but also a well-traveled route of escape from daily suffering. A character in one of Jean de La Fontaine’s fables averred, “Fate’s woven me no life of golden thread / nor are there sumptuous hangings by my bed: / my nights are worth no less, their dreams as deep: / felicities still glorify my sleep.” The allure of dreams may have grown for large numbers of people after the Middle Ages when for many years the Catholic Church held fast to a doctrine that only monarchs and ecclesiastics likely experienced meaningful somnia. No doubt for some indigent people, as the satirist William King remarked, “Night repeats the labors of the day.”106 But others derived welcome solace from their visions. Hence the proverb: “All that’s pleasant in the World is a short dream.” If the sick sometimes dreamed of health, so, too, did unrequited lovers of wedded bliss and the poor of sudden wealth. “The Bed generally produces Dreams, and so gives that happiness,” wrote a newspaper correspondent, “which nothing else could procure.”107 Moreover, just as New World slaves returned to “the wilderness” in their sleep, so did Western Europeans visit dead or distant loved ones. The author of Mid-night Thoughts wrote of “frequent conversations with dead friends when we Sleep,” no small comfort in times of high mortality. Much later, Patrick MacGill, when tramping through Britain, would revisit his native Donegal while asleep: “Often and often I went home to my own people in my nightly dreams.”108 Less frequently, dreams afforded humble men and women opportunities for combating evil and avenging past wrongs, if only rarely on the scale of the “night


battles” fought by Carlo Ginzburg’s Friulian *benandanti* or the resistance waged against the French by the Camerounese during the 1950s. As George Steiner has remarked of indigenous opposition to the Nazis, dreams “can be the last refuge of freedom and the hearth of resistance.” The angry English ballad “The Poore Man Payes for All” recounted a dream depicting, among other incendiary scenes, “how wealthy men Did grind the poore men’s faces.” And while the dreamer, upon waking from his sleep to ponder the vision, remained pessimistic about the poor’s plight, he nonetheless hoped that the dream represented an encouraging premonition. Another ballad, “The Poet’s Dream,” complained of how laws “burthen’d the Poor till they made them groan.” “When I awakened from my Dream,” describes the ballad, “Methoughts the World turn’d upside down.” So trusted the Digger visionary, William Everard, who in 1649 cited divine inspiration in support of his own radicalism.

The impact of dreams in pre-industrial Britain never became as enduring as it has long been in non-Western societies. Not only do dreams in some African cultures still provide a critical source of guidance, they also constitute alternate realms of reality with distinctive social structures. Among the Alorese in the East Indies, entire households are awakened once or several times each night by family members anxious to communicate fresh visions. Still, British communities attached great weight to dreams. Whether by reading before bed, avoiding heavy meals, or by placing a piece of cake beneath one’s pillow, numerous people practiced the “art of procuring pleasant dreams.” Country maidens reportedly resorted to charms in order to dream of their future husbands. One sixteenth-century spell, reprinted in a chapbook, required a girl to place an onion beneath her pillow before reciting a short verse, whereupon “in your first sleep you shall dream

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of him.”112 Such was their currency that the contents of dreams often bore repeating within households, between neighbors, and in letters and diaries. Henry Fuseli’s painting Midnight (see Figure 7) depicts two men conversing in their beds (perhaps after their first sleep), with one plainly startled, probably from a dream or nightmare. “There are still many who are frequently tormenting themselves and their neighbours with their ridiculous dreams,” voiced a critic in 1776.113

From this distance, the influence dreams had on individuals and their personal relationships is difficult to imagine. Reverberations could last from fleeting minutes to, in rare instances, entire lifetimes. In the wake of dreams, diarists wrote of feeling “stured up,” “perplex’d,” and “much afflicted.” “There are many whose waking Thoughts are wholly employed on their sleeping ones,” observed a contributor to the Spectator in 1712. Friendships might be severed, romances kindled, and spirits either lifted or depressed as a consequence.114 Others, by drawing religious inspiration from dreams, found the entire direction of their lives enhanced. A Lancashire doctor opined that it was “below a Christian to be too superstitious and inquisitive” about dreams, but he also believed in “extraordinary Dreams in extraordinary Cases.” “I have dreamed Dreams that when I have awoke out of them they have even in the Dark and Silent Night brought me upon my Knees and deeply humbled me.”115 So influential were these visions, so vast was the “prerogative of

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115 August 20, 1737, The Diary of Richard Kay, 1716–51 of Baldingstone, Neary Bury: A Lancashire
Sleep,” that frontiers sometimes grew blurred between the waking and invisible worlds. Such confusion, naturally, was a common reaction among those just awakening. “Is this a dream now, after my first sleep?” asked “Lovel!” in Ben Jonson’s New Inn. But events depicted in visions occasionally appeared genuine long afterward. An Aberdeen minister, after viewing an unusual spectacle outside his window, days later could not remember “whether he dreamed it or seemed to see it in reality.” Among the lower and middling orders, the popular pastime of storytelling may have compounded the confusion, since one technique lay in constructing a “jumble” whereby tales were conveyed in such a disjointed fashion as if to suggest the familiar “quality of a dream,” perhaps to heighten a tale’s authenticity.

Had pre-industrial families not stirred until dawn, remaining instead asleep in their beds, many of these visions of self-revelation, solace, and spirituality would have perished by the bedside—some lost in the throes of sleep, others dissipated by the distractions of a new day—“flitting with returning light,” described the poet John Whaley. “Like a morning dream,” affirmed the tragedy Oedipus, “vanish’d in the business of the day.” Just as a flood of fresh images each morning made it difficult for the newly awakened to remember their visions, so did the physical act of rising from bed. Rare was the opportunity enjoyed by Johann Wolfgang Goethe, who traveled mornings while in Italy half-asleep in a carriage “letting dream images do what they like.” That sensation usually occurred instead to those waking well


116 William Philips, The Revengeful Queen (London, 1698), 39; The Works of Ben Jonson (London, 1692), 743; January 1723, Wodrow, Analecta, 3: 374; Fungaroli, “Landscapes of Life,” 92, passim. Claimed a correspondent to the Sussex Weekly Advertiser in 1770, “How many dreams do we daily hear related, and with such consequence and plausibility, that the relater himself believes he was awake.” “To the Printer,” Sussex Weekly Advertiser: or, Lewes Journal, September 3, 1770. See also “Of Superstitious Fears,” American Magazine (1744): 374; The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury, Sir William Molesworth, ed., 11 vols. (1839; rpt. edn., Darmstadt, Germany, 1966), 4: 13–14; Charles Hopkins, Boodicea Queen of Britain (London, 1697), 18; Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, Aphorisms, R. J. Hollingdale, trans. (New York, 1990), 94. Some contemporaries wondered whether dreams represented another realm nearly as real as one’s waking life. “Dreams are as living nights; life as a dreaming day,” opined Phineas Fletcher. “No one,” remarked Blaise Pascal, “can be sure whether he sleeps or wakes, seeing that during sleep we believe so firmly that we are awake,” a sentiment echoed by others. A contributor to The Spectator queried, “Were a man a King in his Dreams, and a Beggar awake, . . . whether he would be in reality a King or a Beggar, or rather he wou’d not be both?” It was left, however, to Sarah Cowper best to capture the ambiguous reality of dreams by reflecting, “It would content me if you did but dream of me, or if I could dream that you did so.” Giles and Phineas Fletcher, Poetical Works, Frederick S. Boas, ed. (Cambridge, 1908), 280; Pascal’s Pensees, H. F. Stewart, trans. (New York, 1965), 149; “O,” September 18, 1712, Spectator, 5: 228–29; Cowper commonplace Book, 322, Hertfordshire County Record Office, England.


before dawn, immediately after the interval of their first sleep during the dead of night. Many had likely been immersed in a dream just moments before, thereby affording fresh visions to absorb before returning to unconsciousness. Unless distracted by noise, sickness, or some other discomfort, their mood was probably relaxed and their concentration complete. In fact, the force of some visions—their impact intensified by elevated levels of the hormone prolactin—might have kept nighttime vexations at bay. After the moment of awakening, there also would have been ample time for a dream to “acquire its structure” from the initial “chaos of disjointed images.” It is probably not coincidental that Boswell, whose sleep was rarely broken, just as rarely “had a recollection” of dreams when he finally woke in the morning.119

Nearly two hundred years ago, a European psychologist, Sigismund Ehrenreich Graf von Redern, deduced that persons “rudely awakened” from their “first sleep” had the “same feeling” as if they had been “interrupted at a very serious task.” That supposition has been confirmed by clinical experiments at the National Institute of Mental Health. In addition to exhibiting a bimodal pattern of slumber, subjects experienced rapid eye movement sleep as they awakened around midnight, with REM being the stage of sleep directly connected to dreaming. What’s more, Thomas Wehr has found, “transitions to wakefulness are most likely to occur from REM periods that are especially intense,” typically accompanied by “particularly vivid dreams” distinguished by their “narrative quality,” which many of the subjects in the experiment contemplated in the darkness. Thus, in the drama Gallathea before an audience that included Queen Elizabeth on New Year’s night in 1592, the character “Eurota” remarked, “My sleeps broken and full of dreams.” Affirmed Nicholas Breton, around one o’clock the “spirits of the studious start out of their dreames,” whereas the poet Thomas Jordan recalled of an early morning dream:

For here I wak’d, and glad I was to see
’Twas but a Dream; yet Lord, so gracious be
To my request, that this Night’s Dream may stay
Still in my thoughts, then shall I Watch and Pray.120

119 Marcel Foucault, Le rêve: Etudes et observations (Paris, 1906), 169–70; January 16, 1780, Boswell: Laird of Auchinleck, 169. See also January 4, 1788, Boswell: The English Experiment, 1785–1789, Irma S. Lustig and Frederick Albert Pottle, eds. (New York, 1986), 179. To remember one’s dreams, advises Robert L. Van De Castle, it is important upon awakening “during the night or in the morning” not to “open your eyes immediately. Lie very still and try gently to recall any imagery that may have been present as you awoke.” Our Dreaming Mind, 466.

So it was for hundreds, probably thousands of years. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, divided sleep, with its interval of wakefulness, would grow less common with the passage of time, first among the propertied classes in better-lit urban neighborhoods, then slowly among other social strata in all but the most cloistered communities. A servant’s query in *The Successful Straingers*, produced in 1690—“Why People are not so Religious of late, To break their Sleep to serve Heav’n”—reflected the early decline of segmented slumber generally, not just the infrequency of midnight devotions. Five years later, the “directions for midnight” in a prayer manual for scholars at Winchester College warned against “idle and unclean” thoughts “if you chance to wake in the night.”

The passing of segmented sleep did not take place overnight. Not until the early nineteenth century would darkness be eroded in larger English localities by industrialization and the continued growth of leisureed affluence among urban middle and upper classes. “Life awake at all hours of the night,” a person observed of London in 1801. Professional policing, nocturnal trade, evening employment for workers, and, most important, improvements in both domestic lighting and the illumination of public streets increasingly rendered night less obscure. Light from a lone gas mantle proved twelve times as strong as that from a candle or oil lamp, while light from a single electric bulb by the close of the nineteenth century was one hundred times more powerful. Hours once dominated by darkness grew more familiar, with the space men and women shared considerably enlarged. Likely, however, those least able to afford artificial lighting within their homes still experienced segmented slumber, particularly if forced to retire early in order to arise before dawn. The working-class author of *The Great Unwashed* in 1868 remarked that laborers who had “to turn out early in the morning” were “already in their first sleep” at night when the streets of his town were “still in a state of comparative bustle.” In other cases, rural communities, such as George Sturt’s hamlet of Farnham in Surrey, may have afforded an unmarked grave for this among so many other vestiges of traditional life by World War I. A wheelwright by trade, Sturt recalled in his small classic, *Change in the Village* (1912), how “braying” motor cars, road lamps, and “light-up villa windows” had only recently breached the “quiet depths of darkness.” At least for the time being, he also wrote of his “first sleep,” although that too would pass.

Today, we inhabit a nonstop culture characterized by widespread electric lighting both within and outside homes and businesses. Besides boasting all-night television and radio, twenty-four-hour service stations and supermarkets, evening has become the primary time of employment for a growing portion of the Western work force. Thomas Edison’s dictum, “Put an undeveloped human being into an environment where there is artificial light and he will improve,” has carried the night as well as the day. The Russian government has even made attempts (so far unsuccessful) to

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launch an experimental "space mirror" designed to transform night into twilight in selected locations with the aid of reflected light from the sun. Not only has widespread lighting created a hostile environment for segmented sleep, but sleep itself has come under increasing assault from the hurried pace and busy schedules of modern life. In the United States today, perhaps 30 percent of adults average six or fewer hours of sleep a night, with that number rising as more persons stretch their waking hours. Many teenagers, reportedly, now disdain sleep as a "waste of time" or, worse still, "boring." Not that segmented sleep suddenly passed beyond all modern memory. As late as the first half of the twentieth century, references to "first sleep" still appeared in random works of literature. Whether, however, contemporary devotees of such novelists as James Joyce, Willa Cather, and Paul Nizan or poets like Charles Montagu Doughty and Robert Laurence Binyon ever grasped the expression's significance is doubtful, for, by then, segmented sleep had already become a curious echo from times past. Even modern linguists have been misled by this cultural remnant. Often, when the term "first sleep" has been converted from other European languages into English, translators have substituted such expressions as "beauty sleep," "early slumber," or "first moments of sleep." Virtually every twentieth-century translation of the Odyssey has similarly misconstrued, in the fourth book, Homer's description of the "first sleep" of Poseidon's servant, Proteus. Historians have fared no better, either misinterpreting the meaning of first sleep or ignoring the term altogether after stumbling across it in documents.


123 Patricia Edmonds, "In Jam-Packed Days, Sleep Time Is the First to Go," USA Today, April 10, 1995. See also Avi Sadeh, et al., "Sleep Patterns and Sleep Disruptions in School-Age Children," Developmental Psychology 36 (May 2000): 291–301. Ironically, we might be less willing to shortchange our time in bed were the quality of modern sleep worse. Despite periodic complaints of insomnia, our sleep today far excels the fitful slumber characteristic of past centuries. At least in the Western world, no longer does the sleep of such large numbers of people fall prey to periodic pain, frigid temperatures, and voracious pests, among other early modern maladies. But if not the quality, then the quantity of our sleep continues to diminish.


126 Compare the Odyssey's reference to "first sleep" in Greek, either classical or modern, and the correct early seventeenth-century English translation by George Chapman (Nicol, Chapman's Homer, 73) with twentieth-century translations, either in verse or prose, by A. T. Murray, T. E. Lawrence, E. V. Rieu, Ennis Rees, Albert Cook, Walter Shewring, Robert Fitzgerald, Allen Mandelbaum, and Robert Fagles.

127 In addition to Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (see above, p. 366), see, for example, Silvia Mantini,
One remarkable implication of segmented sleep is that our pattern of seamless slumber for the past two hundred years has been a surprisingly recent phenomenon, the product of modern culture, not the primeval past. From the standpoint of scientists on the front lines of research, this discovery may lead to a better understanding of common “sleep disorders,” a misnomer, perhaps, arising from the “natural pattern of human sleep . . . breaking through” into today’s “artificial world.” Of greater historical relevance is whether, as Thomas Wehr speculates, “this arrangement provided a channel of communication between dreams and waking life that has gradually been closed off as humans have compressed and consolidated their sleep.” But rather than originating after “prehistoric times,” this transition, the pre-industrial experience of England and other Western societies strongly suggests, occurred very recently. Ever since the eighteenth century, notwithstanding the Herculean efforts of the nineteenth-century Romanticists and Freud, we have continued to lose touch with our dreams, due in part to scientific and cultural transformations in fields ranging from anthropology to aesthetics. Attested Joseph Lawson, author in 1887 of Progress in Pudsey, “Society is now influenced more by facts of art and science than dreams” and superstition. Although a current estimate posits that 10 percent of our lives are devoted to dreaming, with the average person experiencing between 100,000 and 200,000 dreams in a lifetime, the overwhelming majority of these are forever lost. Unlike the experience of non-Western cultures that have institutionalized their dreams, our assimilation of nocturnal visions has gradually waned, and with it, a better understanding of our deepest drives and emotions. If not the “royal road” to the unconscious posited by Freud, dreams nonetheless afforded innumerable generations a well-traveled if winding path to self-awareness. It is no small irony that, by turning night into day, modern technology, while capable of exploring the inner sanctums of the brain, has also helped obstruct our oldest avenue to the human psyche. That, very likely, is the greatest loss, to paraphrase Thomas Middleton, of having been “disanulled of our first sleep, and cheated of our dreams and fantasies.”

129 Wehr, “Impact of Changes in Nightlength,” 283; Wehr, “Clock for All Seasons,” 339; Joseph Lawson, Letters to the Young on Progress in Pudsey during the Last Sixty Years (Stanningley, Eng., 1887), 73; Thomas Middleton, “The Black Book,” in The Works of Thomas Middleton, A. H. Bullen, ed., 8 vols. (1885; rpt. edn., New York, 1964), 8: 14; Dotto, Losing Sleep, 36. Roger Bastide has written, “In our Western civilization, however, the bridges between the diurnal and nocturnal halves of man have been cut. Of course, people can always be found—and not only in the lower classes of society—who consult dream books, or who at least examine their dreams and assign to them a role in their lives. But such vital functions of the dream remain personal and never become institutionalized. On the contrary, far from constituting regularized norms of conduct they are considered aberrant; they are classed as ‘superstitions’; sometimes it is even suggested that people who look for significance or direction in dreams are not entirely all there.” Bastide, “The Sociology of the Dream,” in Gustave Von Grunebaum, ed., The Dream and Human Societies (Berkeley, Calif., 1966), 200–01.
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