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Opening Extract from...

Sleep in Early Modern England

Written by Sasha Handley

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INTRODUCTION

On Thursday, 9 October 1712 a contributor to the fashionable daily periodical the *Spectator* styled himself as an interpreter of dreams named '*Titus Trophonius*'. He observed, 'There are many whose waking Thoughts are wholly employed on their sleeping ones.'[1] The satirical essay from which his comment was drawn was directed against people who put too great store on the portentous or prophetic qualities of their sleep and dream states. Titus's complaint may have been driven by the controversial appearance in London in 1706 of the millenarian group known as the French Prophets, whose dreamlike predictions of the world's end had been roundly censured in press and pulpit alike. The group's leaders stood trial at the Court of Queen's Bench in 1707, accused of publishing 'False and Scandalous Books', and of orchestrating 'Tumultuous' assemblies. The French Prophets certainly caused a stir, yet the sleepy visions of the Dutch seaman Nicholas Hart may have been even fresher in Titus's mind after they made a splash in the national press, and indeed in the *Spectator*. On 5 August 1711 Hart fell into a deep and continuous sleep for five days and five nights whilst being treated for kidney stones at the capital's St Bartholomew's Hospital. This slumberous trance was an annual event for Hart, who always succumbed on the same day each year (which also happened to be his birthday). It was Hart's custom upon waking to narrate colourful reports of his sleepy adventures in the other world, and to reveal the postmortem fates of named individuals, which captivated the crowds of people who gathered around his bedside.[2]

Whatever Titus's motivation was for satirising these events, his observation neatly illuminates the thesis of this book – that early modern people were acutely conscious of the unconscious. We can hardly blame them for this obsession. Alongside breathing and eating, sleep was an essential

support to human life that no man, woman or child could live without. Peaceful rest was a treasured respite from the day's labours and an unparalleled restorative of vital energy, health and happiness. Sleeping well, or poorly, touched on every aspect of life, determining physical strength and appetite and shaping distinct states of mind, mood and emotions. Sleep's importance to early modern life and culture can hardly be overstated and yet the history of this vital and ubiquitous human experience has barely been told. This book reveals how early modern English people tried to secure peaceful sleep on a daily basis, what methods and materials they used, and the powerful motivations that persuaded them to focus so much time and energy on this seemingly mundane practice.

This book uncovers a deep-seated link between daily practices of sleep and its cultural value. For early modern people, sleep was not a purely functional act since its quality was believed to shape their fortunes on both sides of the grave. The distinctive culture of sleep revealed in the following pages shows that the quality of an individual's nightly slumber was imbued with the power to give or to destroy life, to craft or to ruin reputations, and to smooth or to obstruct the path to heaven. People reflected on their own sleeping habits, and on those of others, as a means of acquiring self-knowledge and of locating themselves in the world around them. Sleep was the single most time-consuming activity within daily life and its quality helped to define an individual's life trajectory. The vast array of sleep-related practices and preparations that took place within the home underline the vital role that sleep played in everyday settings and open a new window onto the physical, spiritual and emotional lives of men, women and children in this period, whose deepest hopes and insecurities were laid bare as they prepared themselves for sleep's approach.

This book makes a case for the vital importance of cultural forces in shaping sleep's physical experience. At the same time, it argues that perceptions and practices of sleep underwent an extraordinary set of changes from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century in English society. People's nocturnal habits attracted unprecedented interest as sleep's meanings, timings and physical environments were transformed. Sleep's physical causes and effects were fiercely debated in these years as new connections were made between sleep quality and the operation of the brain and nerves. Sound and restorative sleep had always been prized as an essential support to life but it became more highly valued than ever before for safeguarding the faculties of human reason. Sleep's timing, duration and quality became a critical health concern for individuals and for wider society, sparking countless investigations, discussions and treatments that sought to

understand and to control its physical effects and defects. Early modern people clearly understood the benefits of a good night's sleep for the health of their bodies and minds and they went to great lengths to try and secure it. Their individual and collective efforts represent an early and neglected phase of sleep's medicalisation – a process that scholars have assumed began in the late nineteenth century and intensified in the twentieth century with the 'discovery' of REM sleep.[3] A good night's sleep was understood to enrich physical and mental well-being and its value as a guardian of the soul's health was strongly championed at the same time. The confessional divisions that had emerged within English religious culture in the wake of the Reformation were firmly cemented from the late seventeenth century, which gave a renewed spiritual vitality to sleeping habits and to sleeping environments within the homes of faithful Christians. Emerging social, economic and cultural forces such as sociability and sensibility also offered a different set of motivations and vocabularies that men and women could draw on to think about sleep's value in relation to their own bodies and minds, and to the progress of civil society more generally. This cluster of socio-economic, cultural and religious transformations was unique to English society in these years. The way that people responded to them offers a particularly compelling case study within sleep's broader history and indeed within the history of early modern England.

Sleep's unrivalled importance to the health of body, mind and soul in these years was manifested in its daily practice and material dimensions. Bedsteads, bedding textiles and sleeping environments occupied distinct spaces within many households, where they were understood as sites of physical and spiritual transformation, and as cherished sanctuaries that promised security and relief. People kept many of their most intimate and meaningful objects in and around their bedsteads and those with sufficient resources lavished time, money and energy on making, maintaining and personalising their sleeping environments to create a familiar, secure and comfortable set of associations and sensations that were uniquely designed to ease their bodies and minds into a peaceful state of relaxation. These changes fostered a vibrant and unique culture of sleep that aligned its successful practice with physical, mental and spiritual health to an unprecedented degree.

Being Asleep

At the heart of this book is an understanding of sleep as an embodied process with unique sensory dimensions and cultural meanings. Sleep is an organic physical state that renders the human body largely immobile. The

brain remains active, vital respiratory functions continue and some muscle and eye movements persist, but the heart rate slows, the muscles relax, and the sleeper's consciousness of the world around them gradually recedes.[4] These characteristics have persisted across time and space. No consensus yet exists, however, on sleep's principal biological cause or purpose, or on the origin and meaning of the ideas and sensations that pulse through body and mind in this state.[5] The desire to resolve this dilemma and to understand how and why sleep is so vital to human health and well-being has triggered numerous investigations of sleeping practices and bedtime behaviours that open windows onto the physical and emotional lives, cultural preoccupations and intimate thoughts of people in different periods and places.[6]

Sleep's physical effects played a central role in moulding early modern sleeping habits. The sleep physiology traced in this book involves three intersecting phases: falling asleep, being asleep, and waking up. All three are shaped by a mixture of biological, sensory, cultural and environmental cues that differ between individuals and across cultures. Distinctive rituals signal these differences and mark the unique thoughts and sensations associated with each sleep phase and the transitions between them.[7] Scholars from the natural sciences, neurosciences, social sciences and humanities acknowledge this heady mix of causes, but they differ markedly in the weight attached to each one.[8] Chronobiologists study the biological causes of sleep's timing and duration. Their work highlights important differences in sleep preferences that seem to be driven by the unique calibration of individual biological clocks. People may be genetically predisposed to sleep at different times, for variable lengths of time, and at different depths of consciousness.[9] Neuroscientists have identified two separate yet interlinked brain processes that are crucial to sleep's onset, duration and structure: the homeostatic process (physiological need for sleep) and the circadian process (internal biological clock). The homeostatic process helps promote sleep's onset and it is closely associated with the deep, slow-wave and restorative sleep that most people experience in the early hours of slumber. The specific time at which the homeostatic process kicks in is largely determined by the number of hours that a person has remained awake since they last slept – it may therefore perform a compensatory role by extending sleep's length to make up for a previous deficit. As the effects of the homeostatic process start to wear off, usually in the early hours of the morning, the circadian process takes over and keeps the sleeper at rest for another three to five hours. The circadian process drives sleeping and waking activity within the body according to a 24-hour cycle but its rhythms are also

sensitive to light and darkness, which helps to synchronise the circadian clock. The circadian process thus appears to play an important role in promoting waking.[10]

The operation of these neurological processes has been extensively documented in modern sleep research yet primarily according to a one-phase sleep cycle and often by modelling human sleep on animal behaviour. The influence of these internal bodily processes on early modern sleeping habits is of course much more difficult to trace. It is also methodologically fraught given the prevalence of biphasic sleeping patterns, which is to say that many early modern people appear to have slept in two separate phases during the night, rather than in one single consolidated phase of sleep, which they termed their 'first' and 'second' sleeps.[11] These historical and cultural variations question the seemingly 'natural' status of sleep preferences and patterns, which are in fact acutely sensitive to different cultural and physical environments. Sleep may appear to be an entirely natural activity but its boundaries are heavily shaped by time, place and culture.

This book is largely concerned with the third key ingredient that is believed to determine the nature and quality of human sleep, and whose influence modern sleep scientists have recently begun to acknowledge on a wider scale. This is the 'allostatic' process, defined as 'the mechanism by which sleep timing and duration can be controlled by external forces such as social and ecological cues'.[12] Early modern bodies and brains cannot be put under the microscope to view their inner biological functions, but it is possible to uncover the cultural, sensory and environmental cues – the habitual routines, familiar sounds, visions, smells and tactile sensations – that converged at bedtime, and which early modern people associated with the drowsy state that signalled sleep's approach. The expectations of 'sleep-hopeful bodies' – a modern phrase used to describe the thoughts, feelings and sensations that immediately precede sleep – thus form a critical focus in what follows.[13] I do not attempt to universalise early modern sleeping habits but instead to understand how the biological need for sleep was negotiated within a particular cultural and physical environment in which sleep's meanings and practices were being transformed.

Embodied Sleep

Early modern sleeping practices are plotted here through embodied experiences, which fuse nature and culture on a linked spectrum. By 'embodied experience' I mean something that embraces the entire person: body, mind, sensations, thoughts and emotions. These experiences were expressed in

verbal, textual and material form and they bear testimony to the way that sleep was perceived and practised on a daily basis.

Thoughts, feelings and sensations converge at sleep's onset.[14] We fall asleep because we are tired and because we expect sleep to come at certain times and in certain places. Whilst it may be tempting to believe the opposite, sleep isn't something that just happens – people prepare and plan for it in ways that involve their rational minds and memories, their bodily sensations and movements, and the objects with which they choose to surround themselves. Sleep's approach is intimately associated with particular vistas, smells, sounds, rituals and feelings, which may convey a sense of familiarity and relaxation.[15] Early modern people anticipated, summoned and reflected on their sleep in very particular ways, and this was a process over which they could and did exercise partial control. By focusing on the habitual sleeping environments of home I reconstruct how men, women and children understood the balance between nature, culture and environment in influencing their sleep routines. This book explains how and why they tried to take charge of sleep's timing and duration, the routines that surrounded it, and its material apparatus. These individual habits formed a microcosm of sleep's broader cultural meanings and they reveal the symbolic categories with which sleep was most closely associated – most notably with the need for safety, familiarity and refreshment, and the specific forms they took in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England.

Sleeping in Safety

Safeguarding the integrity of body, mind and soul was the chief ambition that shaped early modern sleeping practices. People sought first and foremost to protect themselves from potential dangers, which stemmed from the sense of fragility and anxiety that sleep's onset produced. Sleep evokes unique feelings of vulnerability that cut across cultures (and even across species) and these feelings are heavily shaped by the dulled consciousness imposed by this state of repose. Those on the verge of sleep become less aware of their sensory environments and anxious to defend themselves against threats that they cannot detect. The idea of sleep, and its physical practice, thus generates a unique set of human emotions that require explanation. Evidence of sleep-related anxiety has surfaced in clinical observations when the brain appears to remain partly aware of its environment and alert to potential threats in more superficial sleep states such as REM sleep.[16] Feelings of submersion, sinking and loss of control surface time and time

again in people's descriptions of falling asleep, which mark its distinctiveness from all other sensory experiences.[17]

Similar sensations and feelings of anxiety characterised early modern perceptions of falling asleep but the apparent sources of danger, and the methods chosen to repel them, were culturally distinct. Sleep was understood as a state of transition between day and night, between degrees of consciousness, between the earthly and spiritual realms, and between life and death. The forces of nature moulded its boundaries, as did supernatural agents and human action. All three of these forces presented potential dangers, which varied from the mundane to the transcendental. Sleep could endanger the household's security and the physical and spiritual lives of its occupants by exposing them to fires, floods, malicious intruders, bedbugs, disease, mental disorder, sexual assault, or even death and damnation.[18] The anxieties associated with sleep were reinforced by classical texts, Holy Scripture, didactic literature, cumulative household wisdom, conversation and by daily experience, which all furnished evidence of the unfortunate fates that could be met during the slumberous hours of darkness. This book traces the cultural roots of these fears and responses to them in four ways: through the creation of enclosed, comfortable and familiar sleeping environments; through the selection of trusted sleeping companions; through the careful observation of sleep regimens; and through the practice of protective bedtime rituals. These habits were underpinned by a common concern to sleep in 'safety' and 'security' – two concepts that stimulated efforts to attain physical, psychological and spiritual protection during the hours of sleep.

Sleep Comfort

Alongside 'safety' and 'security', many people also used the term 'comfort' to express their desire for pleasurable physical sensations and modes of relaxation at bedtime.[19] 'Comfort' is a term with particular resonance in the eighteenth-century world of goods that has sparked contentious debates about its meaning. The definition of 'sleep comfort' used here is, however, distinct, and I use it to refer to the feelings of physical and psychological ease that were keenly sought as part of the quest to secure sound sleep. My definition of 'sleep comfort' thus merges the well-established early modern meaning of 'comfort' as spiritual solace, or emotional relief, with the material definition advanced by John E. Crowley, who defined comfort in relation to bodily sensibilities and their material environments.[20] Bedsteads, bedding textiles and sleeping chambers could offer all of these things simultaneously

to their occupants. Spiritual consolation was sought by reading parts of Holy Scripture or devotional texts at bedtime, by looking at religious images that hung on the walls, that were carved onto the wooden frame of the bedstead or that were embroidered onto the bed's textiles. These materials were in turn believed to offer physical, spiritual and emotional satisfaction to the sleeper: a theme that is developed in Chapter 3. The desire to sleep well was a powerful motivation for filling sleeping chambers with pleasing, comfortable and clean furnishings, images and objects. These goods were less subject to the same criticisms of excessive consumption that applied to other parts of the early modern household – perhaps because they were understood as necessities rather than luxuries. The specific bodily needs that attended sleep thus circulated in a different register from other physical sensibilities. They must be considered independently from more generalised demands for physical comfort within the home, which acquired ideological support and a new vocabulary in these years.[21] A state of physical and psychological comfort, however it was achieved, was judged to be most conducive to procuring peaceful rest.

Early Modern Sleep

This book offers new insights into an essential yet neglected feature of early modern life and culture. At the same time, it intervenes in lively contemporary debates about sleep's nature, purpose and experience by revealing the importance of distinct historical ideas and environments in moulding sleep's daily practice. Despite sleep's ubiquity, its cultural meanings and daily practice have yet to receive sustained scrutiny in early modern societies and cultures. One important exception is the work of A. Roger Ekirch who reflected on sleeping habits as part of his influential analysis of pre-industrial night-time culture in Europe and America. The characteristic biphasic pattern of 'segmented sleep' that he identified involved the division of each night's sleep into two distinct cycles.[22] These cycles were interspersed by a short period of waking where a range of activities might take place – from household chores to meditative prayer, or even beer-brewing. These habits, and their eventual decline, have been largely explained by the importance of nature's rhythms in shaping bedtimes and especially by the availability of natural light to illuminate waking activities. These forces were diluted by the onset of industrialisation, urbanisation and by new lighting technologies that changed the timetables of daily life and transformed the material culture of ordinary households.[23] Neat as this story of change is, there are important questions that remain unanswered. Recent

research has, for example, questioned whether the linguistic meanings of 'first' and 'second' sleep do in fact correspond to a pattern of segmented slumber.[24] The patchy survival and inconsistencies of early modern source materials also caution against accepting a universal model of sleep's practice that covers a diverse range of individuals and communities over a long period of time. Early modern bedtimes, as far as they are recoverable, form a complex jigsaw that combines individual opportunities for determining sleep's timings with personal preferences and religious sensibilities. The contentious debates that emerged around bedtimes in early modern England underline their lack of uniformity. I do not offer an alternative 'system' of sleeping habits in the pages that follow but insist instead on a more flexible and multilayered understanding of sleep's timings that could vary on a daily basis, according to key transitions in the individual life cycle, and that took account of a diverse range of personal and religious sensibilities. Early modern scholars have described the variety of nocturnal leisure activities that impacted upon bedtimes and sleep quality in many urban centres. Craig Koslofsky has described how the 'nocturnalisation' of early modern culture – the widespread extension of waking activities into the hours of darkness – began to blur the accepted frontiers between day and night.[25] Much remains to be said however about the influence of nocturnal culture, and especially of night-time sociability, on everyday sleeping practices. Sleep thus has a history that is related to, yet distinct from, cultures of night-time activity, and this is traced in the pages that follow.

This book moves inside the household to examine the ideas, routines, objects and environments that shaped sleep's daily practice. The seasonal rhythms of nature were of course central to the timing and duration of sleep, as human geographers have shown, but these ecological factors were not the only forces that shaped bedtimes.[26] This book presents a more holistic vision of early modern sleep culture, which combines the forces of nature with cultures of healthcare, devotional practices, wider social and cultural influences, and with the sleeping environments of home. In taking this approach I draw inspiration from sociologists and anthropologists who have shown how sleep's practice shifted according to social status, gender, age, occupation, religious belief and socio-economic structures.[27] The phrase 'dormatology' has recently been coined to capture the outpouring of influential sleep research in the fields of human geography, sociology, medical anthropology and neuroscience.[28] Historians have much to add to this conversation by uncovering the material environments and cultural influences that moulded sleep behaviours and sleep quality in different historical contexts and by revealing the distinctive emotions that

accompanied sleep and shaped its everyday practice. Put simply, sleeping habits are as much a product of culture as they are of physiology.

Sleep's daily practice was a practical support to human life and an essential component of individual identity. Managing sleep's physical arrangements, and reflecting on its quality, helped early modern people to locate themselves in the world around them, and they drew on a variety of cultural resources to help them do this – from classical literature and medical philosophies, to the words of Holy Scripture. Garrett Sullivan and Bill MacLehose have investigated how sleep's cultural meanings were forged in relation to medieval and early modern literature, concepts of bodily function, emotional health and theories of cognition.[29] Anna Whitelock's fascinating study of Queen Elizabeth I's bedfellows also describes the unique feelings of insecurity and anxiety associated with sleep, which shaped demands for stable and familiar surroundings and trustworthy sleeping companions at bedtime.[30] I take note of these influences and explain how they defined the sleeping lives of less illustrious men and women in similar ways.

As well as tracing sleep's cultural significance, this book also asks a new set of questions about the content, arrangement and use of sleeping environments. The kinds of bedsteads that people slept in were determined in part by their socio-economic power, and increasingly by fashion, taste and commerce. We already know a lot about what early modern bedsteads and bedding textiles looked like, but much less about how they felt, why certain materials, textures and sensations were prioritised, and how they helped to trigger particular memories and to create unique feelings and states of mind linked to sleep. The practical and symbolic role of bedsteads in staging the emotional dramas of family life has also been well documented, which tied these objects to the most intimate moments of early modern life. The emphasis of scholarship to date has nevertheless been focused on conscious waking activities such as sex, marital relations and childbirth. My focus here is on the principal activity that ordered people's relationships with their bedsteads – namely, the needs and expectations associated with sleep. Sleep's multisensory dimensions and affective qualities structured the material dimensions of household life. Sleep-related objects, from pillowcases to bedsheets, played a particularly important role in structuring physical and emotional experiences of slumber. The sensations and thoughts sparked by these objects could offer soothing reassurance and it was psychologically important to surround oneself with meaningful and personal objects.[31] These feelings were especially prized at bedtime, which could be fraught with worldly and spiritual anxieties.