



Sleeping Beauties in Victorian Britain

Cultural, Literary and Artistic Explorations of a Myth

Béatrice Laurent (ed.)

Peter Lang

Cultural Interactions: Studies in the Relationship between the Arts

Artists, scientists and the wider public of the Victorian era all seem to have shared a common interest in the myth of the Briar Rose and its contemporary implications, from the Pre-Raphaelites and late Victorian aesthetes to the fascinated crowds who visited Ellen Sadler, the real-life ‘Sleeping Maid’ who is reported to have slept from 1871 to 1880.

The figure of the beautiful reclining female sleeper is a recurring theme in the Victorian imagination, invoking visual, literary and erotic connotations that contribute to a complex range of readings involving aesthetics, gender definitions and contemporary medical opinion. This book compiles and examines a corpus of Sleeping Beauties drawn from Victorian medical reports, literature and the arts and explores the significance of the enduring revival of the myth.

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Sleeping Beauties in Victorian Britain

CULTURAL INTERACTIONS
Studies in the Relationship between the Arts

Edited by J.B. Bullen

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The authors of this volume sympathize with Cristina Pascu-Tulbure who wishes to dedicate her article to her late husband Petre.

BÉATRICE LAURENT

Introduction

This book contains a series of ten papers that explore the relationships between medical assumptions, literary renderings and pictorial presentations of a single theme: the sleeping woman in Victorian Britain. Most result from a fruitful seminar on that topic that was held at the European Society for the Study of English conference in Istanbul in September 2012. Using an interdisciplinary approach, this two-day event brought together academics specializing in Victorian studies but with varied research interests ranging from literature and the arts to cultural history.

A web search of Victorian periodicals with the keywords 'Sleeping Beauty' through the six decades 1840 to 1900 returns an impressively high, although irregular, number of entries, the lowest being five for 1845, the highest 424 for 1891. Although some of these entries come from the sport section, with news concerning the racehorse called Sleeping Beauty, most belong to the news or entertainment categories and advertise or report various performances of cantatas, pantomimes, musicals or extravaganzas. Occasional papers deal with paintings by Daniel Maclise or Edward Burne-Jones. The web survey shows a progression in the popularity of the legend from an average of 55 entries per year in the mid-Victorian period, a sharp rise to 98 entries per year in the 1870s, a towering average of 163 throughout the 1880s and a modest decline in the last decade of the century with 146 entries on average per year. These results confirm that the mid- and even more the late Victorian public were familiar with the fairy tale and enjoyed the representations of beautiful female sleepers. Some Sleeping Beauty shows targeted a juvenile audience, especially during the holiday season, but many addressed adults. Such was the case of the 'Sleeping Beauty in the Wood' at the Polytechnic Institution in London, in which 'Mr George Buckland recites the "argument" which deals very freely in

allusions to topics of the day and sings several songs with good effect'.¹ This show was so popular that it ran for over five years, from 1872 till 1877. A more scholarly approach to folktales was being pursued by 'storiologists' who sought to discover remains of a primeval common Aryan culture. For instance, William Ralston Shedden-Ralston, a noted scholar and translator of Russian tales, wrote that

No loftier origin, no more venerable parentage, can be assigned to any form of literature than that which is ascribed to folk-tales by scholars who recognise in them 'heirlooms of the Aryan family'; who consider that they have been independently developed by the various branches of the family, from mythological germs which existed in the minds of our primaeval ancestors, while they still inhabited their ancient home in the highlands of Central Asia. Viewed in this light, such a story as that of the Sleeping Beauty may well inspire a respect bordering upon veneration. In the world's morning-time, before the religious instincts of our ancestors had taken distinct shape or found articulate utterance, the idea may well have occurred to some of the more poetic among them that the revival of the earth in Spring resembled an awakening from sleep. And from this simile may have sprung a legend of a maiden who slept through a space of time corresponding with or typical of the length of the winter season, and who then awoke to active life and enjoyment.²

This interpretation of tales as nature narratives was shared by John Ruskin in his 1868 introduction to the Grimms' tales, and Ralston was popular enough both as a story-teller and as a scholar to be invited to Marlborough House to entertain the little princes and princesses and to deliver public lectures on 'The Mythology of Fairy Tales'.

While the success of the 'Sleeping Beauty' as a tale can be ascribed to the renewed interest in folk culture and that of its staged adaptations can be attributed to the visual opportunities it offered to display scores of reclining female bodies, the enduring success of the eponymous character as a subject in art and literature has yet to be fully analysed. The following chapters will examine it in the framework of medical, gender and psychoanalytical theories. This book will focus mostly on how, when

1 *Daily News* (2 April 1872).

2 William Ralston Shedden-Ralston, *Notes on Folk-tales* (Scotland: s.n., 1878), 3–4.

and why the Sleeping Beauty became so popular in the second half of the nineteenth century. Some of the questions we address are the following: why was there such a proliferation of 'Sleeping Beauties' in late Victorian art? How were the emerging neurosciences involved in the gendering and interpretation of prolonged sleep? What was the impact of the fairy tale on the Victorian imagination?

The essays in this volume have been arranged in three broad sections – culture, literature and art – each impinging on the other two. The first two chapters offer a general cultural overview of sleeping in Victorian times. Muriel Adrien studies the effect of biphasic sleep and speculates on how the progressive shift to the consolidated eight-hour sleep affected the experience of this natural function. By transforming a natural, personal and variable experience – a space of freedom – into a standardized process, did the Victorians not invent pathological sleep? Indeed, in her paper, Béatrice Laurent shows that non-standard sleep was the object of great medical attention and heated debates. Protracted sleepers who in earlier times would have been worshipped as living miracles were now suspected of fraud and subjected to various treatments including bleedings, galvanism and hypnotherapy.

Obviously, medical literature was permeable to other forms of literature, as is attested by the Pickwickian syndrome which was named after the character of Joe, the Fat Boy who pops up and keeps falling asleep at odd times and in odd places in Dickens's *Pickwick Papers*. Conversely, science impacted on fiction, as it will be demonstrated in the chapter by Laurence Talairach-Vielmas on Dickens's Miss Havisham, which shows how the author of *Great Expectations* was influenced by medical theories and their visual illustrations in the form of anatomical wax displays. The two following chapters are literary explorations of feminine writings. In her essay on Anne Thackeray Ritchie, Manuela D'Amore shows how this understudied author used old fairy tales to tackle present-day social and gender issues, even though her stance was a rather consensual one. According to Stefania Arcara, however, female sleepers should not be equated with submissive victims of Victorian patriarchy. In a stimulating new reading of the famous poet and artist Elizabeth Siddal, for instance, Arcara suggests that Siddal's invalidism and reliance on narcotics and her use of sleep and death imagery

can be understood as silent forms of rebellion which ultimately opened to her the doors of freedom.

The third and last section of this book is concerned with artistic interpretations of the myth, and Elizabeth Siddal will be discussed again as a muse and model to her husband, the painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti. In her contribution, Laurence Roussillon-Constanty shows how the 'Sleeping Beauty' trope runs through Rossetti's work and resonates with issues such as female sexuality, insomnia, drug addiction and spiritualism. Moving from the Rossettis to a wider Pre-Raphaelite circle, the next chapter deals with John Ruskin and Edward Burne-Jones. With subtle psychological insight, Cristina Pascu-Tulbure suggests that both men were confronted in different ways by the loss of a loved one and 'aestheticized' their grief as well as more obscure desires by crystallizing them in the acceptable form of the mythical sleeping princess. The Pre-Raphaelites' influence was immense in Victorian Britain, and Marie Cordié-Levy meticulously analyses it in the photographic work of Julia Margaret Cameron. This impact is perceived in terms of subjects and compositions that contributed to create a new femininity. In art, the figure of the sleeper offered the advantage of long and relatively tireless sitting sessions. That was particularly important for the first photographers who had to keep their models perfectly still, without even the beat of an eyelash, for several minutes. Various interpretations as a proof of innocence or a suspicious withdrawal in an inner world, feminine sleep has been an object of fascination and enquiry since antiquity. It is therefore unsurprising that the subject appears in the Neoclassical and Aesthetic artistic movements of the second half of the nineteenth century. Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada explores late Victorian paintings in the light of anthropological and psychological research to trace the impact of the contemporary interest in the mechanisms of dreams and of the subconscious by identifying within specific paintings notions such as archaic pulses, erotic fantasies, fears of degeneracy or the return of the repressed.

What concerns this volume is feminine sleep, and the way in which the innocent sleeper from the fairy tale became a desirable model of femininity to both male and female public. It was popularized by the translation into English of the Grimm and Andersen collections of folk tales, the spectacles of *tableaux vivants*, and paintings from major artists. The sleeping girl

became fashionable because she connoted innocence as well as leisure. As a prerogative of the affluent classes, sleep became, like ornamental women, an ostentatious sign of success. No wonder then that these signs coalesced into the figure of the Sleeping Beauty to signify financial security. But there were other, perhaps less easily identifiable reasons for the fashion. Drawing on stage performances and painting, artistically staged photographs of beautiful sleepers – occasionally representing dead bodies – nourished the viewers' memories, desires and fantasies. Because sleep is connected with the invisible, the representation of an apparently sleeping subject elevates the artwork from a mere anatomical or portrait study and invites the viewer to ponder the unexpressed interior life of dreams and psyche or the afterlife. Sometimes, the dreamer and her dreams are represented in a single work. This simultaneous inspection of the visible and invisible is all the more possible as the sleeping model is unaware of the spectator's gaze, therefore giving him or her the freedom to project erotic fantasies upon her painted or photographed figure. In a *mise en abyme* process, the painted sleeper becomes herself the object of the artist's and the viewer's dreams.

While the papers assembled in this book do not cover the whole spectrum of possible analyses of the subject, I do hope that the hermeneutic investigations they propose will encourage readers, scholars and art connoisseurs to view differently a familiar Victorian trope.

MURIEL ADRIEN

What Did Victorian Sleeping Beauties Dream of? About the Great Number of Representations of Sleep in the Late Nineteenth Century

The purpose of this article is to try to understand why there were so many paintings that dealt with the theme of sleep in the late nineteenth century, what preoccupations of the time they reflected and what this trend anticipated in terms of the evolution of painting. One of the contextual reasons accounting for such an interest was the gradual shift from the dominant pattern of segmented sleep to our contemporary pattern of sleep. Since time immemorial and until the nineteenth century, biphasic sleep prevailed (meaning two four-hour blocks with an interlude in between) and it was replaced during the Industrial Revolution by contemporary seamless, continuous eight-hour sleep routine. Meanwhile, the successive medical theories on dreams, each probing deeper into various states of consciousness and bringing to the fore new understanding about man's inner self, are also keys to the dreams that haunt these paintings. Moreover, as they were motionless, the depicted sleeping women were reminiscent of bodies under perusal for medical research, and as such, reified into new objects of study.

The fact that the portrayed sleepers were mostly women of course induces gendered readings on women as objects of contemplation and desire, fantasized by the Victorian mind as idealized mute and yet potentially threatening sexualized beings. When represented sleeping, they were reassuringly reduced to passive bodies lying still. These unmoving bodies went hand in hand with other pictures that flourished in the Victorian age: last portraits. Sleep was akin to lifelessness, according to many medical hypotheses, and the photographs of the deceased influenced or were influenced by representations of sleepers.

Lastly, sleeping bodies with shut eyes resonate with metapictorial issues, that of the blind artist, that of images as inert matter in need to be awakened, that of their foreshadowing power like that of dreams. Significantly, this interest in sleep – which is contemporary with the development of photography – is also concomitant with the decline of figurative painting.

The Interest in Sleep

The former biphasic sleep pattern

According to the sleep historian Roger Ekirch, author of *At Day's Close: Night in Times Past*,¹ the consolidated, compressed sleep we experience nowadays was not common practice in the nineteenth century and in pre-industrial times, before electricity and gaslight. Humans slept in two four-hour blocks, which were separated by a period of wakefulness in the middle of the night, which lasted an hour or more. In the past, and especially during winter, darkness spanned up to fourteen hours each night. Except for those affluent enough to burn candles for hours, people were left with little to do but crawl into bed early, and this gave a great deal of flexibility to their nightly sleep requirements.

Ekirch has found more than 500 archival documents – court statements, diaries and letters, in English, French, and Italian from before the thirteenth century through the nineteenth century – that refer to a ‘first sleep’ that was followed by what was called the ‘watch’, before a ‘second sleep’, another few hours of slumber until daybreak. In between the two, in the dark of night, there was an extraordinary level of activity. People routinely rose to urinate, smoke, read, chat, and even visit close neighbours. They tended to their animals, checked on their livestock, brought in the cows or did housekeeping, stoked the fire, prepared the next day’s meal. They might

1 Roger Ekirch, *At Day's Close: Night in Times Past* (New York: Norton, 2005).

pilfer, rob the nearby orchard or slip out to poach. The interval was also a haven for prayer, reflection, and meditation. Fragmentation of sleep made people more responsive to the subconscious, as they mulled over and pondered on dreams, a significant source of inspiration and self-awareness.

This relatively quiet intermission, this creative window closed gradually during the nineteenth century. As gas lamps and inexpensive artificial light became common, people stayed awake long after sundown, and were productive late into the night, but were so chronically sleep-deprived that they usually slept for seven uninterrupted hours nightly. Industrial times therefore shifted sleeping habits from two sleeping episodes to a consolidated eight hours.

Ekirch's findings match those of scientists at the National Institute of Mental Health in Washington, DC in the 1990s, who found that, with light mimicking the duration of day and night during winter and without the interference of artificial light, many people naturally slept in two phases. The sleep scientist Thomas Wehr concluded that biphasic sleeping is the most natural sleep pattern, and not a form of insomnia with abnormal nocturnal awakenings. Many of today's sleeping disorders are essentially due to these former primal habits.²

Many nineteenth-century paintings may reflect a new interest brought up by this change in sleeping patterns, which, incidentally, is contemporary with pastoral nostalgia, or at least with the apprehensions linked to the transformations generated by industrialization. Moreover, the very electricity that induced the new sleeping pattern and upset the circadian cycle was that which could act on the nervous system. At any rate, sleepers could now be seen and therefore depicted, since electric light allowed people to see at night.

- 2 People with particularly strong circadian rhythms continue to wake up in the night, according to Ekirch, because this biological pattern is still operating. As observed by anthropologists, many people in parts of the world where artificial light has not arrived sleep in segmented periods, such as the Tiv group in Central Nigeria.

The medico-scientific context

Sleep was the subject of much attention in the nineteenth-century scientific world. True, obstructive sleep apnoea was first described not by a clinical doctor, but by Charles Dickens in 1836 in *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*.³ But although Locke had written that dreams were the result of brain malfunction and did not deserve to be studied, in the nineteenth century, dreams – more so even than sleep – were credited by hypnologists for being active and purposeful processes related to memory, somatic and mental activity; and hypnosis was all the rage.⁴ *Sleep and Dreams* by Alfred Maury,⁵ *The Life of Dreams* by Karl Scherner,⁶ both published in 1861, followed by Hervey de Saint-Denys's book, *Les Rêves et les moyens de les diriger, observations pratiques* in 1867,⁷ culminated with Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) which linked dreams with repressed sexual impulses.

Man, an object of study

As human beings became objects of study, under observation, they were reified, as exemplified by the body prints made by Charcot and his assistants at the end of the nineteenth century. In *The Rose Bower*,⁸ the geometric lay-out – with the graphic play on triangles, rectangles and orthogonal axes

- 3 Dickens depicted an excessively sleepy, overweight boy named Joe who snored and may have had right-sided heart failure. Obstructive sleep apnoea was thereafter called the 'Pickwickian syndrome.' However, OSA was not recognized as a clinical disorder until nearly a hundred years later.
- 4 It was resorted to by Charcot, for instance, to cure hysterical women at the Salpêtrière.
- 5 His experiments bore out that dreams resulted from acoustic, optical and somatic stimulations, and he put forward the idea that dreams last only a very short time.
- 6 As forerunner of Freud, he stressed the sexual and somatic dimension of dreams.
- 7 In *Les Rêves et les moyens de les diriger, observations pratiques* (1867), Hervey de Saint-Denys declared that mental activity went on during sleep and could even be influenced with a little bit of practice.
- 8 Edward Burne-Jones (1833–98). *The Rose Bower* (1890). Oil on canvas. Buscot Park, Oxfordshire.

placed according to the golden rule – frames the woman who is placed centrally as if under perusal for lab study by anatomists, phrenologists or morphopsychologists.

A testimony of this interest was the widely reported experience of Ellen Sadler (1859 – after 1901), sometimes called ‘The Sleeping Girl of Turville’, who slept during nine years, from 1871 until 1880, after a series of seizures and periods of drowsiness. When Ellen awoke at the age of twenty-one, soon after her mother’s death, she professed to remember nothing of the previous nine years. The cause of Ellen’s illness caused much ink to flow. No clear explanation has ever been given for Ellen’s condition.⁹ A similar case had arisen a few years earlier: according to her parents, Sarah Jacobs, a girl from Wales, was miraculously able to fast for very lengthy periods of time. When Sarah died of starvation in 1869, her parents were convicted of manslaughter.

Gendered Readings

In the paintings where the protagonist is overmastered and subjugated by sleep, the beauties are women, and this of course is conducive to readings along gendered lines.

9 The situation drew considerable attention from newspapers, medical professionals and the public. The Sadler family home, known as ‘Sleepy Cottage’, became a tourist attraction. As the years passed by without Ellen waking, it was believed that her illness was caused by her mother’s deliberate drugging or was a hoax, especially as her situation brought in substantial money from visitors’ donations. Another hypothesis has been that she might have suffered from narcolepsy. Apart for slightly stunted growth and a ‘weak eye’, she fully recovered, married and had at least five children.

On women as objects of contemplation, desire and fear

As objects of erotic fantasies,¹⁰ sleeping women are a way to minimize the domineering sense of sight and enhance the other usually more subdued senses, sparking the very *à la mode* synaesthesia. Waterhouse's *St Cecilia*,¹¹ the sleeping blind patroness of musicians, conveys the sense of smell through the flowers, the sense of touch through the texture of her dress, and of course the sense of hearing with the violin and mandolin, the lapping of the sea, the lyrical tempo of the lines drawn by the cypresses and masts.

Of course, more than just sensorial impressions, languishing sleeping women magnetized all sorts of erotic fantasies for would-be Pygmalion artists and a primarily male audience. Private individual bedrooms developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and the bed then became a locus for sexual activity. Victorian prudish morality issued warnings and advice of all sorts. Nevertheless, gazing at sleeping women was the opportunity of piercing the secret of boudoirs' alcoves.

In spite of its stable and assertive geometric composition and its restful, peaceful, idyllic context, *The Rose Bower* by Edward Burne-Jones slips in

- 10 A literary example of the relationship between sleep and eroticism is the poem 'Love and Sleep' (1866), by Algernon Charles Swinburne:

Lying asleep between the strokes of night
I saw my love lean over my sad bed,
Pale as the duskiest lily's leaf or head,
Smooth-skinned and dark, with bare throat made to bite,
Too wan for blushing and too warm for white,
But perfect-coloured without white or red.
And her lips opened amorously, and said—
I wist not what, saving one word—Delight
And all her face was honey to my mouth,
And all her body pasture to mine eyes;
The long lithe arms and hotter hands than fire,
The quivering flanks, hair smelling of the south,
The bright light feet, the splendid supple thighs
And glittering eyelids of my soul's desire.

- 11 John William Waterhouse (1849–1917). *St Cecilia* (1895). Oil on canvas, 196 × 117 cm. Private collection.

the quicksand of Victorian ambivalence. The unaffected, idealized, remote, celestial woman tallies with the Victorian cliché of the unattainable, quasi divine icon, underscored by her upper and haloed position. The virginal white of her dress refers to her essential virtue, whose intimacy the spectator cannot but guess at – hence the voyeuristic dimension of the painting. Indeed, the enthralling *jeune fille en fleur* seems as fresh as if she had just got into bed, and the dark curtain highlights the clear, milky and pearly tones of flesh, that we imagine warm and velvety, as well as her russet lusty-coloured hair mane. The texture of the dress enables the viewers to make out her body's shape, somewhat unveiling her nudity. The thick and rampant rosebush is just as erotically suggestive, and the precious woods, heavy cloths and elegant draperies stir and gratify the viewers' senses.

In a similar vein, the magnum opus of Leighton, *Flaming June*,¹² is a tribute to the slumbering voluptuous and opulent women of Giorgione and Titian, meant to excite and arouse the senses. Under the horizontal multi-layered composition (the horizon, the ledge of the parapet, the seatback), the serpentine lines of the convoluted female body and of her long and flowing hair fuse with the curves of the draperies. The mesmerizing woman is lascivious and alluring like a sunny mature fruit. The lavish flamboyant bright orange fabric set against its complementary soft band of blue in the background makes her glow from the inside. She looks on fire, with a burning sensuality, as is suggested by her Rapunzel-like untangled hair under the shining sea. The carnal-coloured objects around her are like extensions of her limbs and blood. The whole environment partakes of this sensual atmosphere: the softly rounded wooden frame of the sofa bed looks like skin, and the flowers are blood-red. The pose and the semi-nudity of the woman – with her transparent gown, the folds of her see-through dress, and her bare feet – reveal more than they conceal. The seeming need for contact – the head rests on her shoulder and her right hand is on her left arm – suggests a very flexible animal feline grace and compels the viewer

12 Frederic Leighton (1830–96). *Flaming June* (c.1895). Oil on poplar wood, 120.6 × 120.6 cm. Ponce Museum of Art, Puerto Rico.

to gaze in wonder at the rapturous and gorgeous beauty.¹³ The exotic foreignness of her bewitching allure is also meant to evince the threat posed by the female species.

As a way to defuse the threat posed by women, *Titania Sleeping*¹⁴ by Richard Dadd (1841) illustrates Act II, scene ii of Shakespeare's play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where Titania is lulled to sleep by her fairy attendants. Oberon, her jealous husband, whose figure is almost hidden in the shadows of the cave, is concocting a magic flower juice, which, when poured on Titania's eyelids, will make her fall in love with the first creature she will come upon, a donkey-man called Bottom. Titania recalls a Madonna in a niche amongst swirling figures in a spiral snail's shell shape. The tightness of the structure and the complete integration of the figures framed within a proscenium arch create the feeling of a self-contained microcosm in a recess, existing entirely on its own terms and in its own context, as in a dream. Oberon strategically intends to defuse the threats that a dreaming woman represents, by taking control of her fantasies and directing her erotic yearnings towards an ass-headed creature. Having women sleep neutralizes the potential dangers of hidden female forces ready to burst forth.

Sleeping women that are associated with transgressive forms of sexuality existed in the art of every European country. In Italy, for instance, *The Punishment of Lust* by Segantini¹⁵ shows women floating against a snowy background, as if they were sleeping in the air. The spirits of the women are punished for having committed the sin of abortion consciously or by neglect. In France, *Sleep*¹⁶ by Courbet, commissioned by the Turkish diplomat Khalil-Bey for his very private collection which included *The Origin of*

13 For an analysis of this painting, see Béatrice Laurent, *La Peinture anglaise* (Nantes: Editions du Temps, 2006), 146–51.

14 Richard Dadd (1817–86). *Titania Sleeping* (1841). Oil on canvas, 64.8 × 77.5 cm.

15 Giovanni Segantini (1858–99). *The Punishment of Lust* (1891). Oil on canvas, 97.5 × 171 cm. Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.

16 *Sleep* (1866). Oil on canvas, 135 × 200 cm. Belongs to the Musée du Petit Palais, on loan in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris.