5. What surprises sleep?

To state the obvious: Sleep as a form of rest is a recurrent episode of life; it is "something invincible", as La Fontaine wrote, an inescapable part of the daily cycle. It is universal, shared by people everywhere, and being common to us all, we are all more or less equal before it. It is even, of the states of our physiological architecture, among the most stable, the least likely to modify its foundation. If soothsayers make it, through dreams, the arbiter of their clairvoyance and formulations, art exposes, not without a certain ostentation, its many silent acts.

As Jean Cocteau wrote in one of his poems, "Sleep is not a safe place"; indeed, it renders one vulnerable. It can be overrun with pathologies specific to it, but it can also prevent malevolent acts and facilitate healing (see chapter 2, fig. 6, Asclepius Healing a Sleeping Patient). Let us open the secret closet of imagistic memory and see what incidents—ordinary, extraordinary, or edifying—we find, be they charming, embarrassing or upsetting.

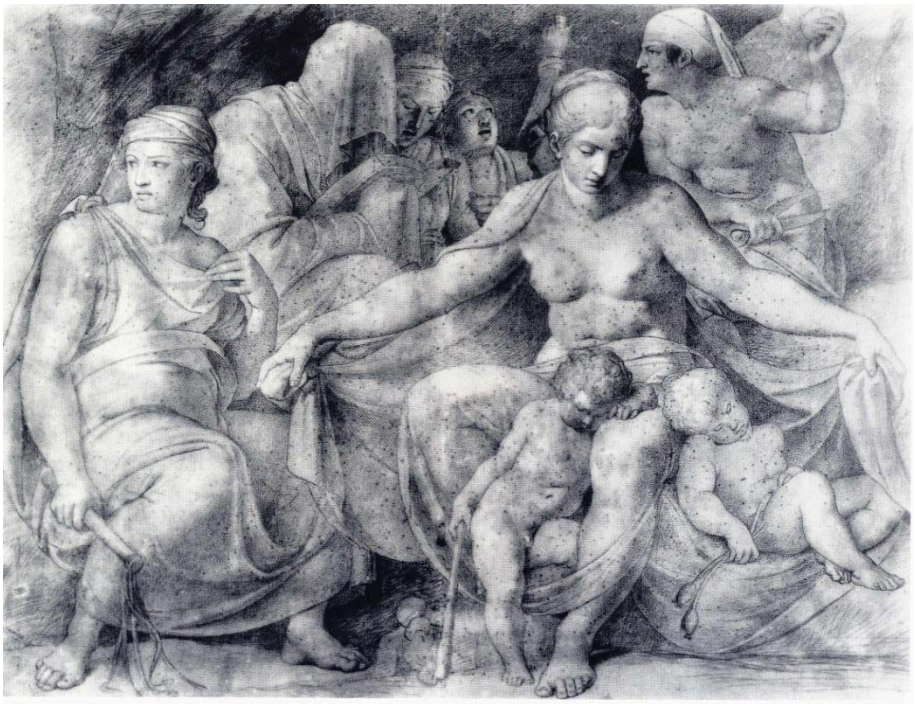

Figure 68. Asmus Jacob Carstens (German, 1754-1798). Night and her two children, Sleep and Death, 1795. Black chalk and white highlights, two sheets of brown paper assembled on board, 74.5 x 98.5 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Weimar - Germany.

What threatens sleep is well seen in the Night and its Two Children, Sleep and Death (fig. 68) by Asmus Jacob Carstens (1754-1798). Using the technique of scumbled black chalk on paper, the artist confers on Night, depicted as powerful protector whose face is filled with a Raphaelesque tenderness, the gift of a Janus figure: Life and death resemble each other; ambiguous shadows bring them together under one wing. This coalescence is seen in perspective, with Night positioned off-center in a triangular space. Worry and potential violence characterize the attitudes of the background characters. Heightened in white, the shaded black chalk lends volume to the forms and vivacity to the expressions.

Manifold subterfuges have been used to watch over sleep and ward off the dangers that threaten it. As we have already seen, headrests used as pillows, bearing protective images, were the preferred device of the ancient Egyptians (chapter 1, fig. 1), while the mother leaning over her sleeping child is an image that has recurred in multiple variations since earliest times (chapter 3, fig. 16, 22-34, 40-41, 43).

Elsewhere, a wide variety of dramatic devices are employed. Simeon Solomon (1840-1905), in The Moon and Sleep (fig. 69), opts for a spiritual rendering of the theme, rich in interiority and trance-like contemplation. Against a dark-blue night sky and ground, a sisterly moon is attributed the power to tenderly watch over the human figure of sleep. Some interpret this image differently, seeing in it transposed homoerotic overtones and a version of the Endymion myth, but the ambiguity of the painting lends itself to still other interpretations: reciprocal recognition, an act of hypnosis in a pagan celebration, or an encounter to talk about love. No one-dimensional reduction, however, can dissipate the work's ambiguity, whether grounded in a symbolic tête-à-tête or a naïve lullaby for chaste children.

Figure 69.- Simeon Solomon (Great Britain, 1840-1905). The Moon and Sleep. Oil on canvas, 51.4 x 76.2 cm. Tate Gallery, London - G.B.

That sleep conceals dangers is shown in Jacob van Campen's (1595-1657) Mercury, Argus and Io (Fig. 70). The subject of the painting is taken from Ovid's Metamorphoses.

Briefly, the fable goes like this: Io, beautiful daughter of the river god Inachus, earned Hera's hatred by attracting the attention of Juno's (Hera's) husband, Jupiter (Zeus). To protect Io from his wife's vengeance and at the same time to continue to plot to have his way with her, Jupiter transformed Io into a beautiful white cow. Juno, ever-vigilant in her jealousy, was not dupe to what Jupiter had done; she persuaded him to give her the lovely cow, and she had Argus, the many-eyed monster, guard it. Jupiter then commanded his messenger Mercury (Hermes) to slay Argus. Mercury approached the meadows where Argus and Io were resting, played songs on his pipe to lull the guard to sleep, then grabbed his sword and beheaded him.

The painting depicts the scene before the murder, giving it a bucolic, even idyllic, dimension. Argus, naked, is slumped in guilty sleep, having fallen under the spell of Mercury's lullabies. The two dogs flanking Argus will not save him: Io will finally be delivered, turned back into a woman by Jupiter. In this painting, Argus, Mercury and the animals inhabit the golden light they breathe; the mood is peaceful, everything seems to be made from the same transmuted matter.

Figure 70.
Jacob van Campen
(Netherlands, 1595-1657).
Mercury, Argus and Io, circa 1630.
Oil on canvas.
Mauritshuis, The Hague - Holland

Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806), in his *Mercury and Argus* (fig. 71), offers his interpretation of the mythical scene. As a brigand sure of his impunity, Jupiter's messenger intently observes the hoary shepherd's sleep: It won't be long before the moment to slit his throat arrives. The scene is presented as a benign pastoral, with the cows and sheep brought up close in their semi-sleep. The reddish tint to the flesh tones of hands and face, the sky laden with clouds, are the only dramatic elements Fragonard brings into play.

Figure 71.
Jean-Honore Fragonard
(France, 1732-1806).
Mercury and Argus,
circa 1761-1762.
Canvas, 59 x 73 cm.
The Louvre,
Paris - France.

From the Hebrew Bible, Anton van Dyck (1599-1641) drew the inspiration for a painting of great power and beauty, *Samson and Delilah* (fig. 72).

From the Hebrew Bible, Anton van Dyck (1599-1641) drew the inspiration for a painting of great power and beauty, Samson and Delilah (fig. 72). At a time when God was punishing the Israelites by exposing them to their enemies the Philistines, Samson, a Jewish hero of supernatural strength, was in love with Delilah a woman from the Valley of Sorek. Philistine lords offer Delilah eleven hundred pieces of silver if she can discover the secret of Samson's strength. After several unsuccessful attempts, she succeeds in extracting the truth: In fulfillment of a vow to God, Samson never cuts his hair, for that is the source of his strength. Van Dyck portrays Samson asleep, resting his head on Delilah's lap. Her accomplice, shears in hand, prepares to cut off the hero's hair, while in the background Philistine soldiers stand ready to capture him and put out his eyes as soon as he is stripped of his strength. Behind Delilah, a matronly woman is gripped by curiosity; next to her, a younger woman stands with bated breath, fearing Samson may awake before the deed be done.

Figure 72.- Anton van Dyck (Flemish, 1599-1641). Samson and Delilah, 1618-1620. Oil on canvas, 149 x 229.5 cm. The Trustees of Dulwich Picture Gallery, London - G.-B.

Van Dyke, through his mastery of all the elements of the painting, gives the drama an intense emotional pitch. Contrasting with Delilah's pale flesh, the copper-toned body of the bearded hero harmonizes with the blue-tinged moiré of her dress; in the background, in the gaps where the sky shows through, smoky grey blends with pale blue.

A sequence from *The Assemblies of al-Hariri* by the Arabic poet al-Hariri of Basra (1054-1122) evokes the following story, written in calligraphic script on an illumination (fig. 73):

> *In a caravanserai in a city on the Tigris, Al-Hârith makes the acquaintance of Abû Zayd. He offers to act as a go-between and facilitate the marriage of Abû Zayd to a nabob's daughter in town. The wedding, following upon the go-between's success, is a crowded affair. Al-Hârith and his son pour a sleeping potion into the food. As soon as it takes effect, they proceed to rob the guests. In red and ochre tones and precise filiform lines, the painter Al-Wâsiti Yahyä ibn Mahmud portrays episodes of this story and assembles them into a miniature volume.*

The drape of the clothes reminds one of the ellipsoidal, broken folds found in the drapery of Byzantine icons.

Figure 73.
Al-Wasit, Yahya ibn Mahmud
(Iraq, 13th century).
Illumination, illustration of the mischievous News (Maqamat), 1237, Al-Hariri, Abu Muhammad al-Qasim (1054-1122).
Institute of Oriental Studies, St. Petersburg - Russia

Sleep can also contribute to overcoming injustice. Greco-Roman mythology contains a multitude of such stories. Figure 56 (chapter 4), which shows the Furies transformed in their sleep into the Kindly Ones, the Eumenedes, is one such example. Another is that of Hercules' victory over the Giant Alyconeus, represented on a black-figure Attic vase painting from the sixth century BCE (fig. 74).

> *Heracles (Hercules), the most famous of all the Greek heroes, is shown wearing the skin of the Nemean lion, the monstrous beast he had strangled to death in the first of the ten Labours imposed upon him by Eurystheus on Hera's behalf. Sword at the ready, he is preceded by the winged Hypnos, the kindly god of sleep. Alcyoneus, the most powerful of the Giants, was immortal, but only within his homeland: Heracles shot him with a poisoned arrow and dragged him off to die outside its bounds. Hypnos participated in the exploit by making Alcyoneus incapable of defending himself.*

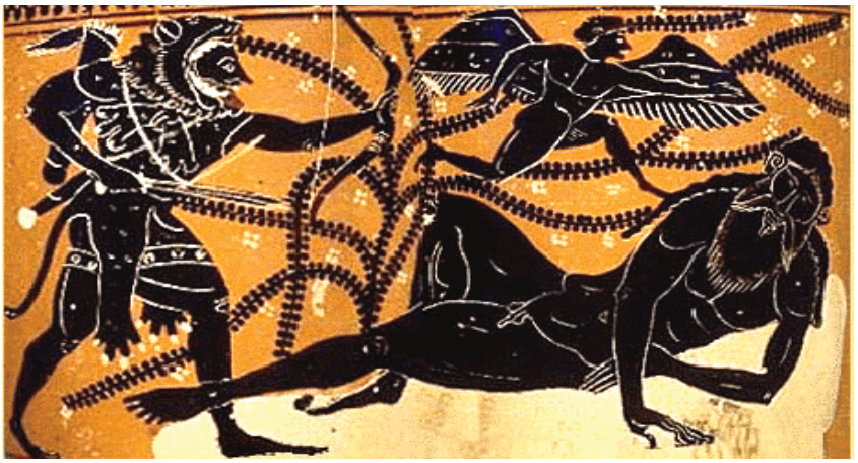

Figure 74. . *Anonymous (Greece, 6th century BCE). Heracles, Alcyoneus, Hypnos. Black-figure Attic vase painting. Toledo Art Museum, Toledo - USA*

The New Testament story of the resurrected Christ escaping from his tomb while the soldiers guarding it are asleep, represented in two works examined earlier (chapter 4, fig. 54-55), is, of course, another instance of the sleep-facilitating-a-happy-outcome theme.

Another version of this theme, also drawn from the New Testament, is The Liberation of *St. Peter* (fig. 75) by Filippino Lippi (1457-1504). Imprisoned by Herod, King of Judea, the chained-up apostle is visited at night in his cell by an angel (Acts 12:3–19). When the angel tells Peter to leave, his chains fall off, the prison doors open of their own accord and—under the nose of the guards—he walks out. Lippi's painting depicts a compressed space made up of three distinct sequences. The angel, his adolescent face open, holds Saint Peter's hand; a halo floats behind each figure's head. Rosy light bathes the scene as they stand conversing peacefully at the entrance to the cell. On one side sits the sleeping sentinel, gripping a tall stick to support himself; on the other side, separated by a fluted column, two patricians appear to be unaware of what's going on. The composition, beautiful in its sobriety, combines vertical planes with perspective lines. These planes and lines give the painting the clean look of a piece of theater scenery, or of a box opened on one side. Thus the world is conceived in miniature, and thus figures, architecture and objects can be made to obey the canons of proportion defined by generations of Renaissance artists, the architect Alberti foremost among them.

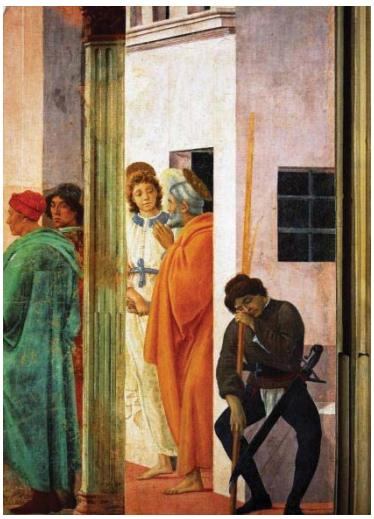

Figure 75.
Filippino Lippi (Italian, c. 1457-1504).
The Angel freeing St. Peter from prison,
from 1481 to 1485.
Fresco.
Church of the Carmine, Florence - Italy.

An amusing popular print from 1862 caricatures the notorious Ogre from Charles Perrault's fairy tales (fig. 76).

Worn out with fatigue, this pursuer of runaway children and eater of raw flesh slouches at the base of a tree, sleeping the sleep of a giant. Nimble and resourceful, Tom Thumb strives to pull off one of the Ogre's seven-league boots and thereby neutralize him. It is when sleep is so deep that it can become a terrain favorable to transgression. Here, sleep is Tom Thumb's accomplice, and he takes full advantage of it by running away with his brothers. The woodcutter's family will be reunited; happy days will return.

Craftiness and guile thus bring compensation and reward; with a little common sense, the puny whipping boy can overcome the bully. Sleep is the interlude that enables justice to win the day.

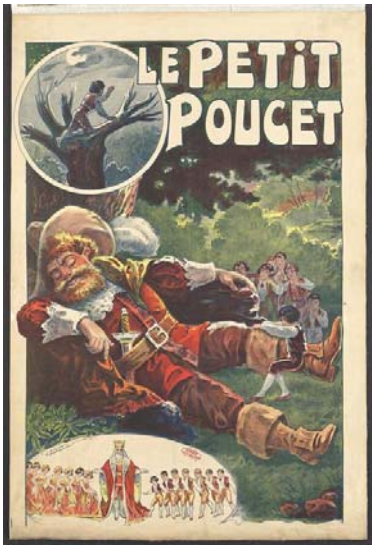

Figure 76.
Anonymous
(France, 19th century folk art).
Poster Tom Thumb (Le Petit Poucet, after the tale by Charles Perrault), 1862.
Print, lithograph, 120 x 65.5 cm.
National Museum of Art and Folk Traditions, Paris - France

If the external dangers lurking around our sleep have been an inexhaustible subject of art, the dangers lodged in the heart of sleep itself have rarely been represented. Today we know that sleepers suffering from obstructive sleep apnea, especially those who are overweight, may experience moments of asphyxia during their sleep. Artists have long recognized the relationship between obesity and sleepiness; in *The Land of Cockaigne* (fig. 77) by Pieter Brueghel the Elder (1525/1530-1569), one can see the risk latent in over-indulgence. Sleep that may turn out to be dangerous is the state the three corpulent figures—a clerk, a peasant and a soldier—find themselves in. Around a tree on top of a hillock, they sleep in radial formation on the ground. One can almost hear them snoring.

Figure 77.
Pieter Bruegel, called Bruegel the Elder
(Flemish, 1525/30- 1569).
In the land of Cockaigne, 1567.
Oil on oak, 52 x 78 cm.
Alte Pinakothek, Munich – Germany.

Around the tree, the axis of the painting, a table laden with food and drink is attached. The source for this work is a tale published in 1546 in Antwerp after a farce by Hans Sachs; it chastises man's idleness, gluttony and laziness. The painting can also be seen as a pagan hymn to abundance and feasting, a representation of ritual excess. The farcical dimension is seen in the half-eaten egg running between the peasant and the clerk, the roasted fowl laying itself upon a silver platter, and the pig equipped with a carving knife running along the edge of the hillock. Compulsive over-indulgence can damn these obese sinners, playthings of their greed. One can easily imagine that their breathing may lose its regularity. If that happens, they would then sit up, puppet-like, and desperately clear their throats to combat their choking. Gluttony and sloth, two of the seven deadly sins, have nefarious consequences, but if one opts for the pagan-hymn interpretation, over-indulgence in this fantasy-land-of-plenty can perhaps be forgiven, especially since in reality epidemics and scarcity of food were almost endemic.

In *The Drunkenness of Noah* (fig. 78), Giovanni Bellini (1430-1516) painted a rarely-treated theme from the Old Testament: Noah is discovered drunk, lying naked amidst his vines, by his son Ham; Ham, together with his brothers, Shem and Japheth, look away as they put a robe on their sleeping father. Bellini composes an elliptical space, diaphanous and rich in colour effects; his chromatic fantasy plays out within the refined sobriety of the drawing.

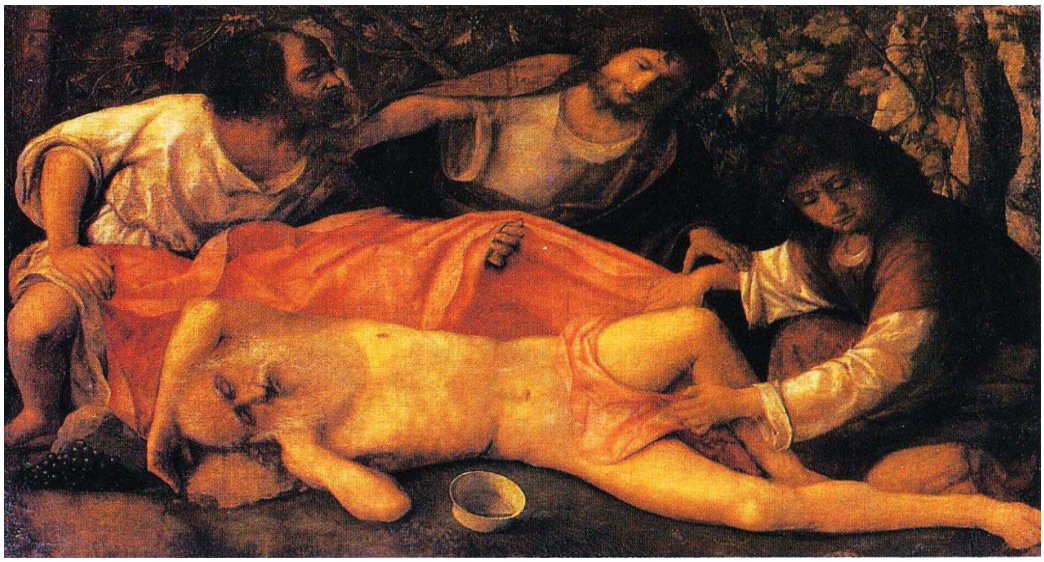

Figure 78.- Giovanni Bellini (Italian, 1433-1516). The Drunkenness of Noah. Oil on canvas, 103 x 157 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Besançon - France.

Sleep is a favourite theme of a contemporary artist, Fernando Botero, who takes a mischievous pleasure in depicting it. Indeed, his massive characters, at once inexpressive and dignified, are often shown sleeping in broad daylight. In *The Siesta* (fig. 79), he shows a man dozing at table, a “fat boy” figure like Joe in Dickens’ *Pickwick Papers.* (The medical term “Pickwickian syndrome” refers, in obese people, to obstructive sleep apnea and daytime somnolence.) Wearing a hat, he sits holding an empty glass, an array of yellow fruit on the table before him. In the background, a bare light bulb, a mirror, and a portrait on the wall are disturbed only by the flies buzzing around. One may believe that the insistent passivity in the

work of Botero, found in most of his figures, is the representation of a pathological listlessness, but Botero himself has been quoted as saying, “An artist is attracted to certain kinds of form without knowing why. You adopt a position intuitively; only later do you attempt to rationalize or even justify it.”

Figure 79.
Fernando Botero
(Colombia, 1932).
The Siesta, 1986.
Oil on canvas, 144 x 127 cm..
©Fernando Botero

It is also to Botero that we owe one of the rare representations of an age-old malady, though one perhaps more acute today: *Insomnia* (fig. 80), a bronze sculpture, shows two corpulent nudes lying on their backs, their eyes wide open. Are they troubled by some thought or do they fear, should they fall asleep, their excess weight will cause obstructive apnea? To each viewer his own obsessions, obsessions which no doubt condition his imagination before the work of art.

Figure 80.
Fernando Botero
(Colombia, 1932).
Insomnia, 1990.
Bronze, 73 x 125 x 145 cm.
©Fernando Botero

Francis Bacon (1909-1992) turns the spectator into a witness in *Sleeping Figure* (fig. 81), his depiction of troubled sleep. Painted after a photograph taken by the artist, the male figure, his sex circled in black, lies with his legs folded under him on a bed. The consistency of the flesh seems doubtful; hanging over the edge of the bed, it appears ready to fall. The figure is seen as if through a window; lost in the immateriality of sleep, it floats in a foreign space. Concerned to capture the presence of death in the subject's outward appearance, Bacon, by distorting the figure and smudging the face, refuses illustration. The artist, whose own face came to take on a mask-like quality, is the unavowed double rendered intelligible by the mirror of the painting. One may see in his work suffering made strident, a humanity stripped of the mask of civilization, returned to the magma from which it came; this "inhumanity", however, is suffused with a totemic essence that somehow makes it more fully human.

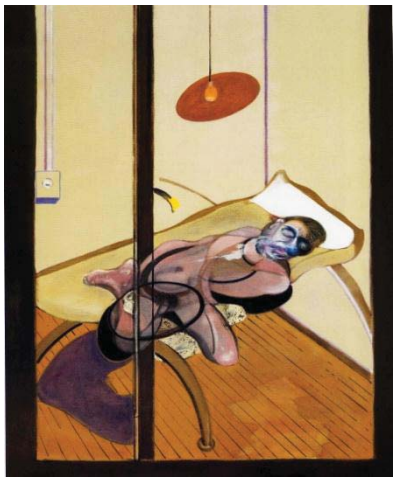

Figure 81.
Francis Bacon (British, 1909-1992).
Sleeping figure, 1974.
Oil on canvas, 198 x 147.5 cm.
Private Collection,
New York - USA
©The estate of Francis Bacon/All rights reserved/ADAGP, Paris, 2012

In *The Siesta* (fig. 82), Jean Rustin (b. 1928), addresses the theme of the artist suddenly troubled by sex, incarnated in this case by a woman sleeping uneasily in a deck chair, her legs open to view. The man sitting on the floor before her, his back to the wall, is evidently not indifferent: Perhaps he had hoped for this moment to arrive, and now that it has, his face vibrates with the excitement of a voyeur. Experiencing this extraordinary instant with a certain terror, he is both outside and within the scene. The artist, craving something through painting, seeks it in the model. The work that reflects himself is resistant to speed: Only through patience can he be revealed to himself.

Figure 82.
Jean Rustin (France, b. 1928).
The Siesta,. 1972.
Private collection.
©ADAGP, Paris, 2012

It may happen that out of the alluvium of sleep furred and feathered creatures suddenly emerge, as in Goya's (1746-1828) *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (fig. 83), one of eighty etchings that make up the series *Los Caprichos*. Owls of folly and bats of ignorance appear to attack the dreamer, his head buried in his arms: This is the stuff of nightmare.

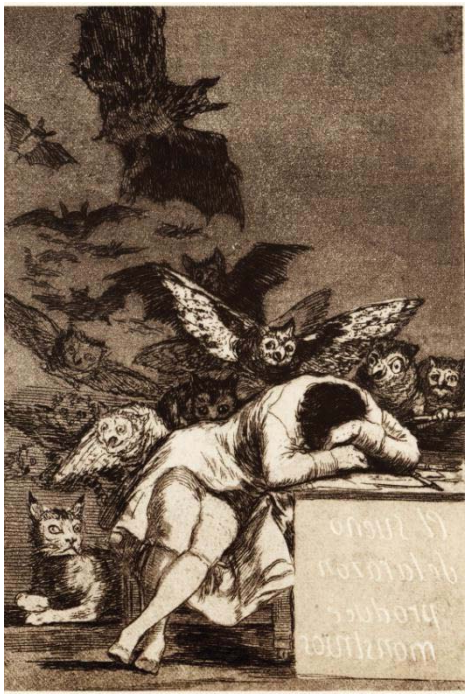

Figure 83.
Francisco de Goya (Spanish, 1746-1828).
The sleep of reason produces monsters.
Los Caprichos etching.
Royal Library Albert I,
Brussels - Belgium

Like the Scottish pre-Romantic writer James Macpherson, translator/author of *The Works of Ossian* (1765), Henry Fuseli (Johann Heinrich Füssli, 1741-1825) created intriguing atmospheres blending reality and fiction. In *The Nightmare* (fig. 84), a highly-charged dream image/image of a dream, a sleeping woman in a clinging nightgown lies supine on a bed, exposed, vulnerable, her head hanging down. An incubus, a demon with simian features, sits on her upper body; behind her, a horse's head parts the red velvet curtains. The painting is at once a fantasy and a literal representation of a "night-mare". In this mixture of darkness and light, evil and innocence, the night reveals what the day conceals.

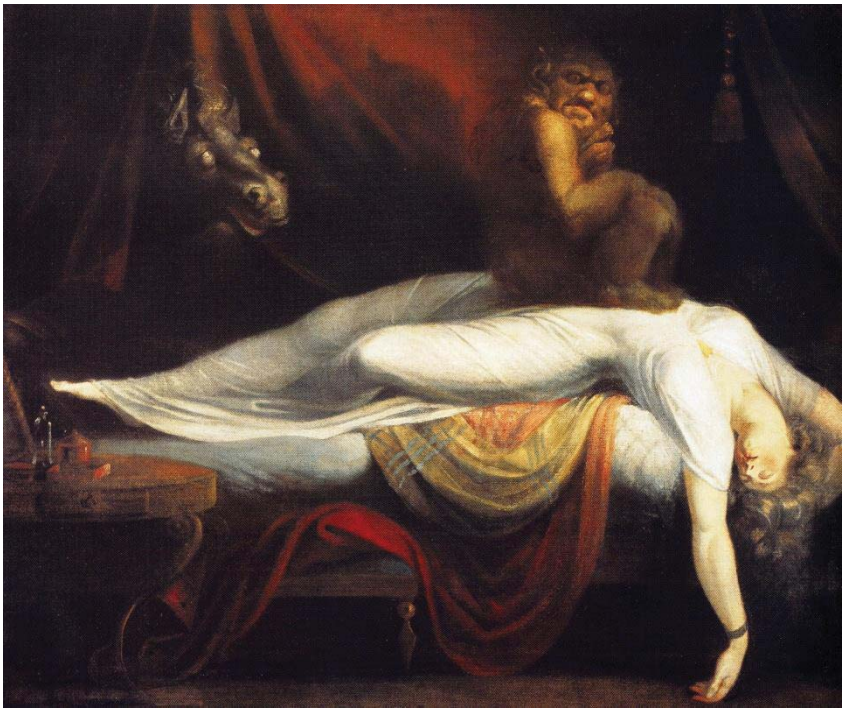

Figure 84.
Johann Heinrich Fuseli
(Switzerland, 1741 – G.B.1825).
The Nightmare, 1781.
Oil on canvas, 101.6 x 127cm.
Institute of Arts, Detroit - USA

In his *Lady Macbeth Sleepwalking* (fig. 85), Fuseli does not focus, as in *The Nightmare* (fig. 84), on an eerie sensualism, but rather on the fantastic. Indeed, in this painting, he bores into the darkness of madness and crime and the trance-like state they induce. Through the darkness of the castle, Lady Macbeth carries the firebrand of her guilty conscience; in a corner, a shadowy doctor and a fascinated woman cringe. The work shows Fuseli's adoption of Edmund Burke's concept of the Sublime: What is dark, uncertain and confused moves the imagination to awe. Indeed, in his staging of Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking, Fuseli allows us not only to imagine the monsters that breed in the darkness of her unconscious, but also to feel in our bones the permeability between normality and madness.

Figure 85.
Johann Heinrich Fuseli,
(Switzerland, 1741 – G.B., 1825).
Lady Macbeth sleepwalking
(Shakespeare, Macbeth,
Act V, Scene I).
Painting, 221 x 160 cm.
The Louvre, Paris - France.

We close this chapter with a legend concerning hypersomnia (excessive sleepiness).

The legend: During the persecution of Decius (250 CE), seven Christians (perhaps brothers) took refuge in a cave after having courageously resisted the governor of Ephesus' attempts to force them to renounce their faith. The governor had the cave walled up; the Christians were presumed dead. The martyrs, however, had only fallen asleep. Many years later (158 or 197), in the year 408 or 447, during the reign of the very Christian Theodosius II, they woke up, believing that they had simply slept over a single night. One of them was sent out of the cave, miraculously opened, to buy provisions; in town, he was amazed to see the sign of the cross on the doors. He also astounded the merchants by presenting them with coins from the time of Decius.

Figure 86.
Anonyme (Turquie, 16e siècle).
The sevent sleepers,
In The important people in history,
1583.
Miniature. Topkapi Museum,
Istanbul - Turkey

An article in Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique* is devoted to this legend. With variations, this story is also told in the Islamic world. According to the Quran, the miraculous sleep lasted 309 years. At Ephesus, as in other Muslim countries, the seven sleepers continue to be honored. Every year, tens of thousands of pilgrims, both Muslim and Christian, pray and meditate at the House of the Virgin Mary and at the Cave of Ephesus. The miniature image, *The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus* (fig. 86), is a perfect example of the rich colours and luminous tones typical of the Ottoman painters of the 16th century.