

Holiness and Horror:

The Gendered Spectacle of Romantic Sleepwalking

Author: Emily Samson
Discipline: Drama

ABSTRACT: Approaching the turn of the nineteenth century, somnambulism took various forms on the European stage as a morbidly fascinating window into the subconscious. Franz Mesmer's somewhat divisive theory of animal magnetism, or "mesmerism," was nevertheless taking hold in medical circles, and its often-female subjects were mirrored through portrayals of vulnerable sleepwalking heroines on the stage. But where there was vulnerability, there was also sublimity—more elevated manifestations of sleepwalking also emerged here, such as in the allegedly subconscious composition of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan" (1797; 1816) and the divine, genderless power attributed to Joan of Arc in Friedrich Schiller's play *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* (1801). These and other portrayals of Romantic somnambulism provide a glimpse into the gendered subconscious as understood in the dramatic landscapes of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century Europe. Ultimately, this research seeks to uncover who is victimized and who is exalted by these somnambulistic states, and to unblur the lines between gendered presuppositions and medical realities.

KEYWORDS: Animal magnetism, Mesmerism, opera, pseudoscience, Romanticism, sleepwalking, somnambulism,

Sleepwalking generates fears over whether we are autonomous or determined, awake or asleep. But sleepwalking is also seductive, for it intimates scenes unconstrained by the will or morality: languorous tranquility and sexual lassitude. Eliciting these impulses—fear of coma, lust for lotus—sommambulism throbs between bewildered life and careless death.

– Eric G. Wilson (2006, 336)

Sommambulism possesses a deeply Romantic aesthetic quality. The boundaries between sleep and wakefulness become blurred, and the body is transformed. The body, which was once grounded by the rationality of consciousness, becomes a vehicle for the transmission of one's innermost desires; a vulnerable object which may be viewed, manipulated, and pursued. Despite the picture of passive erotic fantasy painted by Eric G. Wilson's description, sleepwalking can also be conceived of as the powerful and ecstatic sublime. By temporarily surrendering the autonomy of the body, control is given up and exercised elsewhere. But by whom or what, and for what purpose? For some, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the supernatural gifts bestowed by somnambulism could be akin to clairvoyance. Sleepwalking proved a fascinating concept in the medical and spiritual imagination of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century Europe, where Franz Mesmer's spiritually-oriented theories of animal magnetism (or mesmerism) held strange implications for the somnambulist (Hibberd 2004, 116). Responding to these ideas, Coleridge posited that the sleepwalker could engage in a kind of reverie external to the self, and that these dreams had the potential to exert unconscious poetic force upon the waking world (Ford 1997, 39). With these parameters in mind there arises two distinct Romantic perceptions of the somnambulist: the vulnerable and eroticised sleepwalker, and the sublime spiritual orator. These archetypes might primarily be traced to gendered understandings of somnambulism, hence the appearance of "sleepwalking heroines" in many ballets, comedic vaudevilles, and operas on the Parisian stage in 1827 (Hibberd 2004, 108). The voyeuristic potentiality of these heroines during the Bourbon Restoration, coupled with their unknowable degrees of personal and sexual autonomy, placed them in stark contrast to the Coleridgean ideal of the dreaming poet.

Overall, I want to discuss sleepwalking and its dichotomy of gender association in the literary, dramaturgical, and scientific spheres of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century Europe. Also explored here are the relationships between somnambulism and agency,

and the question of who is exalted and who is victimized through somnambulistic states. In my research, I suggest that the often-sensationalized depictions of sleepwalking in this period ultimately acted as vessels by which ideas about the unconscious human psyche were communicated. Two works of particular interest will serve as case studies for the analysis of these ideas: Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan" (written 1797; published 1816) and Vincenzo Bellini's opera *La sonnambula* (1831). In the interest of avoiding an overly binary impression of gendered somnambulism, I would like to consider additional examples which are less explicitly gendered, such as the many variable stage depictions of Joan of Arc. My work here will also examine links between somnambulism and topics of religion and the supernatural, voyeurism, madness, and pseudoscience. I seek to illuminate the ways in which gender and trancelike sleep states interacted during this period, and to explain how the vulnerability of Bellini's sleepwalking stage heroine differs from the masculine sublimity of Coleridge and his feverish, opium-induced reverie.

La sonnambula and Sleepwalking in the Romantic Imagination

By the turn of the nineteenth century, somnambulism—derived from the Latin *somnus* (to sleep) and *ambulare* (to walk)—was already a focus of medical curiosity and otherworldly speculation (Wilson 2006, 331). The more serious treatment of somnambulism by prominent physicians and natural philosophers such as Erasmus Darwin and John William Polidori began to break previous associations between somnambulism and devilish influence. This newer categorization, however, failed to completely shake its strange, supernatural aura (Finger et al 2015, 359), as the mysterious concept of a trancelike, semi-waking sleep held boundless potential for dramatized Romantic narratives. The Romantic notion of somnambulism extended well beyond the arena of just walking. Varying accounts of sleepwalking described those afflicted as having been able to read, write, maneuver around objects in space, and perform other actions which were generally understood to require use of the eyes (Finger et al 2015, 361). This representational versatility would become the ground-



work upon which the 1827 spectacle of the sleepwalking heroine was built, and that would eventually inspire Bellini's *La sonnambula*. When only considering works penned during this principal trend in Paris, one could draw conclusions about the sleepwalking heroine based on her proximity to other depictions of feminine madness or hysteria—Shakespeare's Ophelia and Lady Macbeth, for example. However, Sarah Hibberd as rightly denotes “violent, unhinged femme fatales of Italian opera of the 1830s and beyond” are a popular model by which to contextualize these entranced leading ladies (Hibberd 2004, 131). She goes on to explain that the heroines were more often sentimentalized than feared.

Both Bellini's *La sonnambula* and the ballet-pantomime from which it took inspiration, Ferdinand Hérold's *La somnambule, ou L'arrivée d'un nouveau seigneur* (1827), involve important scenes that depict the sleepwalking heroine as simultaneously seductive and sentimental. Hibberd's observational comparisons (2004) of *La somnambule* and François-Adrien Boieldieu's opéra comique *La Dame blanche* (1825) also apply to Bellini's work:

Both involve a private viewing of the ghost /sleepwalker, in which a young man is 'seduced' by her image, and then at the climax of each work there is a public viewing, in which the truth is revealed: the ghost's identity and the sleepwalker's condition—and thus innocence. Both are shown to be unthreatening. (130)

Felice Romani, librettist for *La sonnambula* and frequent collaborator with Bellini, evidently took inspiration from this tender and sympathetic Parisian style. Despite its 1831 premiere in Milan rather than Paris, *La sonnambula* similarly employs a more sensitive alternative to the prototypical operatic madwoman. This first private viewing of the sleepwalker manifests more darkly in *La sonnambula* than in Hérold's *La Somnambule*. Its heroine, Amina, the docile and virtuous adopted daughter of a milleress, sleepwalks into another man's room before her much-anticipated wedding to Elvino. The other man, Rodolfo, is initially captivated and amused by Amina's sleepwalking, but he arrives at an internal crisis as he considers sexually assaulting her. This frustration manifests in a duet; Rodolfo struggles with his impulses (O ciel, che tento / “God! What am I doing?”) while Amina happily dreams of being married to Elvino (Oh! come lieto è il popolo / “How happy all the people are [accompanying us to the church]”) (Bellini 2008). In the opera's climax, Amina sleepwalks

over a high and unstable mill bridge, singing a sorrowful lament after Elvino renounces their engagement on account of her perceived infidelity with Rodolfo. Amina's innocence and purity, made evident by her candid statements during her somnambulistic reverie, prevents Rodolfo from carrying out his desires and spares her from an untimely demise once Rodolfo proves her innocence to Elvino. The agency of the sleepwalking heroine is surrendered to those around her, and her exposed innermost thoughts become the ultimate test of her character. What might have happened if Amina's subconscious imaginings had not been so decent? It is an interesting hypothetical, one which connects to the larger function of the sleepwalking heroine as a narrative device. These heroines inspired a voyeuristic curiosity in their audiences, almost mirroring the involuntary seduction of Rodolfo by Amina. The dramatic aesthetic of the entranced, half-sleeping woman served as a corporeal representation of the supernatural that lies beyond, wandering among the mundane in her billowing white nightdress.

Mesmerist Implications of “Kubla Khan”

Conversely, masculine somnambulism had more to do with the contemplative sublime than with objectification. Coleridge's “Kubla Khan,” which he claimed to have written in the summer of 1797 in an anodyne-induced sleep state over the course of three hours, is perhaps one of the more famous examples of (allegedly) somnambulistic writing. Before evaluating the content of “Kubla Khan” itself, it helps to contextualize Coleridge's poetic reverie around the existent polemics of sleep, dreaming, and animal magnetism. In his theory of animal magnetism, Franz Mesmer proposed that every living organism has within itself a pervasive fluid which travels through the magnetic “poles” of the body, and must be balanced through the induction of trancelike states by a magnetiser in order to maintain good health (Wilson 2006, 331). Mesmerism attracted its fair share of skeptics, including an empiricist critique which alleged these so-called “professional magnetisers” were using their medical authority to prey upon young women (Wilson 2006, 332; Hibberd 2004, 116). Eric G. Wilson (2006) proposes a link between mesmerism and Romantic anxieties of the uncanny:

Those who embraced mesmerism and the clairvoyant possibilities of the trance generally exhibited the fervor of mystics. They saw in the vital flow God on earth. Those opposed to mesmeric practice and the sleepwalkers it produced often expressed terror over the improprieties of one person controlling another, frequently

a woman in dishabille. This suspicion over the erotic overtones of the magnetic sleep likely clothed more serious fears over the possibility that humans are secretly cogs and levers that walk and talk. (334–5)

There are also connections between these magnetised female subjects and the sleepwalking heroine; audiences may have drawn parallels between these supernatural conduits (often seen publicly in the company of their male magnetisers) and the vulnerable sleepwalking women they saw onstage, such as La sonnambula's Amina in Milan (Hibberd 2004, 118). Despite these unsavoury claims, which might have been enough to formally discredit animal magnetism altogether, Coleridge continued to entertain Mesmer's theories in his writings (Stanback 2016, 112). Coleridge was deeply preoccupied with topics of mysticism and altered states of consciousness—a preoccupation which Emily B. Stanback argues may have been correlated with his numerous ailments of the body (195). These altered states could not only provide temporary relief, but also provide access to an awakened, transcendent mind (125).

Given Coleridge's more positive associations of somnambulism, "Kubla Khan" reads much differently compared to the delicate sleepwalking of heroines like Amina. Coleridge claimed to have written this fragmentary poem after he had consumed opiates, which sent him into a deep, three-hour sleep of only the "external senses" (Wilson 2006, 339). During this trance-like sleep, he was shown visions of poetic verses which seemed to write themselves, requiring no intentional strain or effort on the part of Coleridge. He claimed to have written between two and three hundred lines of verse, before his stream-of-consciousness "composition" was interrupted by someone who came to visit him. He was able to recall as many lines of the poem as were published, before the rest "passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone had been cast" (339). Coleridge's account of this sublime, transcendent dreamscape seems a far cry from Amina's demure fantasies. The opening fragmented half-stanza, a phantasmagorical description of his visions of the Mongolian summer capital of Xanadu, reads as follows:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea. (lines 1–5)

Coleridge's supposed experience provides an important contrast between Romantic notions of masculine and feminine somnambulism. The Coleridgean somnambulistic event is something which is entered into consensually (or at least enthusiastically), and which elucidates sublime images for the contemplation of the dreamer. This connects to masculine concepts of mesmerism as well. For Coleridge, the charismatic power of a successful reciter or poet was akin to the authority of a professional magnetiser. Where the magnetised or sleepwalking woman is always assumed to be a conduit for the will of another, the realm of the masculine poet-orator might fall into two separate categories: 'eloquence as communion' and 'eloquence as mastery.' The poet therefore assumes the role of both magnetiser and magnetised (Wilson 2006, 339). The masculine reciter may borrow cosmic power, much like the sleepwalking heroine borrows her supernatural ability to move around as she sleeps. Wilson goes so far as to describe the role of the orator as "a clairvoyant somnambulist fallen into auto-hypnosis" (339). The magnetism of the poet is something achieved through mastery; a skill which ultimately belongs to him, and that he might use to entrance, hypnotize, or manipulate others. The masterwork poet becomes a channel for the sublime as penetration—"alternately elevating and undoing the male subject," as Matthew Head has observed in his work on the queer sublime (Head 2020, 58). Coleridge's measureless caverns become just one of many poetic sights that similarly overwhelm the listener.

Joan of Arc and a Genderless Sublime

Despite an insistence on the masculine sublime up to this point, heroines such as Joan of Arc have assumed the role of divine orator (although the preestablished concept of the sublime remains primarily a masculine one). In her work, "Dormez donc, mes chers amours": Hérol'd's *La Sonnambule* (1827) and *Dream Phenomena on the Parisian Lyric Stage*, Sarah Hibberd (2004) analyses the trend of the sleepwalking heroine not through the lens of a comedic protagonist, but through Joan of Arc (107). Glossing through varied depictions as "a sleepwalker, a madwoman, a religious fanatic and a witch," Hibberd uses Joan of Arc to illustrate the confluence of unexplainable reverie and feminine instability (107). Something equally intriguing to consider, however, is whether she is even explicitly feminized in the first place. In Annette Richards' chapter on Antoine Reicha's 1806 composition *Johannas Abschied von ihrer Heimat*, which he produced for the blind glass harmonica virtuosa Marianne Kirchgessner, Richards focuses on the otherworldly aspects of not only Joan of Arc, but also of Kirchgessner. Like Wilson's (2021)

concept of eloquence as communion, the extraordinary sounds of the glass harmonica under Kirchgessner's fingers led to associations between Kirchgessner and the holy spirit itself (72). This perception of Kirchgessner by audiences lends itself well to comparisons with the Coleridgean sublime—through this virtuosic power, Kirchgessner becomes a kind of conduit for both religious fantasy and technical wonder, bringing Reicha's image of Joan to the forefront through the spectral resonance of the glass harmonica. But was this power borrowed in the manner of eloquent, somnambulistic communion, or was it always hers to wield? One could form a plausible argument for both or either. Regardless of the conclusions we arrive at for Kirchgessner, there is still the matter of Joan of Arc, divine sublimity, and gender.

Johannes Abschied was composed as a musical setting of a famous monologue from Friedrich Schiller's play *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* (1801), which sees Joan of Arc leaving her homeland and ultimately falling in love with an enemy English prince, Lionel. Joan is portrayed as both vulnerable and authoritative; a godly instrument of raw power, who is simultaneously weakened by the temptations of earthly love. Richards (2021) asserts that the heavenly ideal of Kirchgessner could be viewed as "saintly, beyond physical presence, even beyond gender" (72) but I believe this gender transcendence (or perhaps ungendering) of Kirchgessner has to do with Joan herself, specifically in the context of Schiller's monologue. The following is a section of Joan's monologue, spoken while she slays a member of the forces attacking France, which is perhaps most arresting when considering the gendered sublime:

[Joan kills the Englishman Montgomery] in cold blood as she rejects his pleas for mercy. In her armour she has disavowed sex, distanced herself from gender, renounced feeling, become disembodied like a ghost: "Do not appeal to my gender! Do not call me Woman. Like the incorporeal ghosts, who do not [marry] in earthly ways, I identify myself with no human gender, and this armour protects no heart. (Richards 2021, 80)

For Joan to fully inhabit the world of the sublime and access her godlike strength, she must fully remove herself from that which makes her human, as well as that which would gender her as 'Woman.' Schiller's interpretation of Joan's martyrdom extends beyond the sphere of her life, as she also relinquishes identity. Where the prototypical sleepwalking heroine flirts with the idea of the supernatural, Joan occupies it fully. De-

spite the high cost she ends up paying, her embodiment of the sublime may be something else entirely from the masculine, Coleridgean ideal. Coleridge's idea of masterful elocution might be capable of reproducing the sublime, but that is also its limitation. What is awe-inspiring is not the dreaming Coleridge, but the "Kubla Khan"—the imperial pleasure-dome, the sacred river of Alph, the sunless sea—that which is nearly incomprehensible to man. In Schiller's depiction, however, Joan of Arc is the worldly avatar of the sublime. She surrenders the corporeal limiters of gender, sex, and humanity, and in doing so, becomes an object of God's divine wrath. The Englishman Montgomery's horror at her appearance just before he is killed certainly recalls the forceful penetration of the masculine sublime.

"There the terrible one appears," he exclaims, "Out of the flames of the conflagration she appears, shining darkly, like a phantom of the night out of the jaws of Hell" (Richards 2021, 80).

Conclusion

Having looked at a few diverse examples of how gender intersects with the Romantic concepts of sleepwalking, mesmerism, sublimity, and generally the realm of the subconscious, we can arrive at a clearer picture of how the dramatic fantasy of the unseen mingled with the physical world in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century Europe. Other manifestations of Romantic somnambulism fell outside the scope of my research, including the presence of somnambulistic characters and other experiments with altered sleep states in early Gothic fiction certainly contributed to these Romantic imaginaries of sleepwalking. But the interactions between the clairvoyance of Coleridge, the genderless spectacle of Joan of Arc, and the ignorant bliss of the sleepwalking heroine provide a few prominent angles by which to approach this fascination with dreamscapes bleeding into the world of the corporeal. The binary gender organization of both mesmerising practices and somnambulists, and the subsequent dismantling of them through Schiller's Joan of Arc, complicates the question of who exactly is empowered by somnambulism and who is victimized by it. Joan of Arc may have gained unfathomable strength through what she sacrificed to achieve ultimate sublimity, but is there any empowerment in martyrdom, or in Coleridge's tormented and aching sleep? There remains much to uncover about gendered understandings of sleep states, their evolution over time, and the morbid curiosities surrounding them, but these instances of Romantic fascination continue to provide a glimpse into the uniquely supernatural allure of maidens and magnetism.

Work Cited

Bellini, Vincenzo. *La sonnambula*, libretto by Felice Romani, translator unknown. With Maria Callas, soprano and the Coro e Orchestra della Piccola Scala di Milano, conducted by Antonino Votto, recorded Aug. 19, 1957, on *Bellini: La sonnambula*, Testament Records, 2008, compact disc.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. “Kubla Khan.” Poetry Foundation. Accessed December 10, 2021. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43991/kubla-khan>.

Finger, Stanley, Vittorio Alessandro Sironi, and Michele Augusto Riva. “Somnambulism in Verdi’s *Macbeth* and Bellini’s *La Sonnambula*: opera, sleepwalking, and medicine.” *Progress in Brain Research* 216 (2015): 357-388. <https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.pbr.2014.11.015>.

Ford, Jennifer. *Coleridge on Dreaming: Romanticism, Dreams and the Medical Imagination*. Cambridge Studies in Romanticism. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. <https://doi.org/10.7202/005912ar>

Head, Matthew. “A Pleasing Rape’: John Dennis, Music and the Queer Sublime.” In *Music and the Sonorous Sublime in European Culture, 1680-1880*, edited by Sarah Hibberd and Miranda Stanyon, 44-62. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108761253.003>.

Hibberd, Sarah. “Dormez donc, mes chers amours’: Hérol’s *La Somnambule* (1827) and Dream Phenomena on the Parisian Lyric Stage.” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 16, no. 2 (2004): 107–32. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586704001818>.

Richards, Annette. “Envoicing the Virgin Warrior: Reicha’s Glass Music for Marianne Kirchgessner.” In *Antoine Reicha and the Making of the Nineteenth-Century Composer*, edited by Fabio Morabito and Louise Bernard de Raymond, 71-89. Bologna: Ut Orpheus, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/gcab080>.

Stanback, Emily B. *The Wordsworth-Coleridge Circle and the Aesthetics of Disability*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007087418000845>.

Wilson, Eric G. “Matter and Spirit in the Age of Animal Magnetism.” *Philosophy and Literature* 30, no. 2 (2006): 329-345. <https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2006.0042>.