A Family Guide to
To Sleep, Perchance to Dream
February 19–May 30, 2009

Do you enjoy a cozy, good night’s sleep? Do you ever wake up, remember your dream from the night before, and wonder why you dreamt it? What do you think happens in your sleep? In Renaissance England, people were fascinated with the topics of sleeping and dreaming, and they were eager to understand the meanings of their dreams. This exhibition explores Elizabethan beliefs about sleep and dreams and gives us a window into a world that is very similar to and very different from our own.


Bed Sharing
Have you ever spent the night giggling in bed with a friend who was spending the night? Have you ever gotten scared and slept in the same bed as your mom, dad, brother, or sister? In Elizabethan times, people would often share their beds with family and friends. Kings sometimes even slept in the same bed as their bodyguards. Elizabethans mostly shared their beds with others for warmth and safety, but perhaps they sometimes stayed up late giggling in bed, too.

What to Wear?
Elizabethans wore white linen smocks for sleeping – men wore nightshirts and women wore nightgowns. Women often decorated these night clothes with embroidery.

FIND! Look at the replicas of Elizabethan nightclothes at the end of the Great Hall. How are these nightclothes like the ones you wear? How are they different?

PLAY! If this were your nightgown, how would you choose to decorate it?

FIND!

PLAY!
Sleep...

Problems Sleeping
Have you ever had trouble going to sleep at night? Elizabethans created many types of recipes to help them go to sleep. The ingredients in these recipes included items such as poppies (a type of flower), mandrakes (a type of plant), and lettuce.

FIND! Case 4 includes some Elizabethan recipes for sleep and four of the ingredients used in the recipes. Can you list the ingredients shown in the glass bottles?

Two Sleeps!
Can you imagine waking up at midnight, hanging out with your friends for an hour, and then going back to sleep again? For Elizabethans, night-time slumber was divided into “first” and “second” sleeps, separated by a time when people would wake up and take part in activities such as socializing, reading, or praying.

IMAGINE! If sleeping today was still divided into first and second sleeps, how would you spend your time awake at night?

PLAY! What would an Elizabethan doctor say about the way you sleep? Answer these questions, and then read the doctor’s analysis of your sleeping habits to the right.
1. How many hours do you sleep at night?
2. Do you take naps?
3. What side of your body do you sleep on (left, right, stomach, or back)?
4. Seven hours of sleep is enough if you have either a cheerful or an irritable disposition. If you are either sluggish or sad, you should sleep for nine hours. Sleeping for just the right amount of time strengthens the spirits, comforts the body, and takes away sorrow. Sleeping too much makes the brain giddy, weakens the body, and causes forgetfulness.
5. Napping at noon is very dangerous. But if you are going to nap, take off your shoes while you sleep. Also, you should sleep in a chair, and cover your head so that it does not get too hot or cold.
6. You should first sleep on your right side until all of your food has digested. Then switch to your left side and finally move to your stomach. Never sleep on your back, because it often breeds disease.

Adapted from Directions for Health, both Naturall and Artificiall by William Vaughan, 1612. Folger Shakespeare Library.
What do Dreams Mean?
Some Elizabethans were convinced that if they could unlock the meaning of dreams, they could know the future. Many books gave dream interpretations, and doctors would often interpret dreams for payment (although their interpretations varied widely). The interpreted meanings of dreams were based not only on the subject matter of the dream, but also on things like whether the dreamer was a male or female, what his or her status was in society, or what he or she did for a living.

FIND! Case 9 displays a number of books that were written to help people interpret their dreams. Can you list at least one of the titles of those books?

What is a Dream?
Elizabethans had many different ideas about what caused dreams. Some people believed dreams were simply pieces of the day retold or the result of something they had eaten or drunk. Others thought dreams were an expression of guilt for something they had done. Many people believed that dreams came directly from God, angels, or demons and that they exposed a person’s character as virtuous or wicked.

IMAGINE! Where do you think dreams come from?

PLAY! Have you ever wondered what your dreams might reveal? Think of a dream you had recently and write it down in the space below. Then ‘decode’ your dream using the list of Elizabethan beliefs about dreams to the right. For a longer list of Elizabethan beliefs about dreams, explore the “Dream Machine” in the Great Hall with an adult.

...and Dreams

Dog: To dream that you...play with a dog is a good sign.
Dragons: To dream that you see...dragons signifies gain.
Clear skies: They that dream they see the air clear and serene shall be beloved and esteemed by all persons and those that are their enemies...shall be reconciled [to] them.
Cloudy dark skies: If one dreams that the air is cloudy, dark, and troubled, that signifies sadness and sickness.
Apples: To dream you see apple trees, and eat apples, signifies joy, pleasure and recreation, especially to females.

Beans: To dream of eating beans signifies trouble and dissention.

Maid has a beard: If a maid dreams she has a beard, she will be speedily matched to her content.

Biting your nails: To dream that you...bite your nails signifies wrangling and vexation.

Gold: To dream that you...handle or chew gold signifies anger.

Tree: If one dreams that he climbs a great tree, he shall be promoted to some honor or dignity and have the command over other persons.

Adapted from Court of Curiositie by Marc de Vulson, 1669. Folger Shakespeare Library.
Controlling Dreams
Do you ever wish you could control what you dream about at night? Elizabethans did, too! Many Elizabethans believed that they could regulate their dreams through prayer or a healthy diet. Others had more elaborate ways to control them. These included strategies such as wearing certain kinds of gemstones or drinking potions with fanciful ingredients such as dragon’s tongue.

FIND! Look at the gemstones displayed in Case 10. Which type of stone were children advised to wear in order to prevent nightmares? Which stone was believed to cause exciting dreams?

IMAGINE! If you could control your dreams, what would you dream about tonight? Draw a picture of your dream here:

Sleep, Dreams, and Shakespeare
There are many times when Shakespeare uses sleeping and dreaming in his plays for dramatic effect.

PLAY! Can you match the event to the play in which it occurs? For help, look at the photos of past Folger Theatre productions on the walls of the Great Hall.

___ Eyes are anointed with a magical flower
___ A sleep looks so deep that the person is thought to be dead
___ A sleeping spell is cast on enemies
___ Sleepwalking

A. Macbeth
B. A Midsummer Night’s Dream
C. The Tempest
D. Romeo and Juliet