Benjamin C. Parris. *Vital Strife: Sleep, Insomnia, and the Early Modern Ethics of Care.* **Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022. 300 pp. ISBN 9781501764509. $64.95 hardback.**

Vital Strife: Sleep, Insomnia, and the Early Modern Ethics of Care by Benjamin C. Parris invites readers to think anew about what Renaissance literature can teach us about the ethical, spiritual, and political dimensions of rest and restoration. Parris focuses on historically distant texts, but contemporary exhortations to "stay woke" or to remain constantly aware of systemic injustices and engaged in confronting them reveal the timeliness of his subject and its lasting influence in political discourse. Although early modern political theology and humanist discourses prized vigilance and often regarded sleep with suspicion, Parris ascribes to sleep a vital power that, he argues, writers from William Shakespeare to Edmund Spenser and John Milton represent in ways that reflect a deep and transformative engagement with classical philosophy, Stoicism above all. *Vital Strife* essentially functions as an apology for sleep, which might seem obvious on the surface since all human bodies share this basic physiological need in common, but Parris

succeeds in showing how early modern associations of sleep with virtue challenge dominant scholarly conceptions of the Neostoicism and Christian militancy of the period. By examining moments when sleep and other forms of dormancy including idleness, carelessness, and inaction accrue moral value and biopolitical significance, Parris rejects conceptions of sleep as a threat to the discipline required for just government of the self and of the city. In a late capitalist society characterized by chronic overwork and the instrumentalization of human labor, this critical engagement with pre-modern discourses of ethical care is most welcome.

Methodologically, the book blends work in early modern literary studies, classical reception, and contemporary theory. Drawing from the late work of Michel Foucault, Parris highlights the significance of Stoic philosophy on emerging conceptions of ethical care and frames sleep as an early modern form of biopower. In the introduction, he argues that "both sleep and sleeplessness undergo a significant and mutually affecting transformation during the early modern period: while sleep does not entirely shed its associations with spiritual peril and deathliness, it is increasingly valued for its restoration of the laboring body burdened with cares, while the debilitating threat of insomnia is seen as a vital concern in the care for physical life" (5). This concern for physical life also enables Parris to draw connections between sleep and the work of Giorgio Agamben on political sovereignty. Since Stoic cosmology asserts a continuity between living and non-living things, which is upheld by the ancient Greek concept of *pneuma*, or spirit, Parris regards sleep as an essential part of physical life that undoes the familiar dualism of mind and body. In the case of kings and others with political power, sleep restores rather than destroys a connection between the body of the king and the body politic. One of the most important facets of Renaissance Neostoicism that Parris succeeds in recovering is the notion that caring for oneself through attention to the physical body does not absolve the individual from a responsibility to care for others also. Parris employs the term "regenerative oikeiôsis" in the final chapter on Milton to describe a process whereby sleep helps the individual, in this case Eve, to orient herself toward the proper objects of care beginning but not ending with the self (218). Contending with early modern scholarship on inwardness and self-cultivation, Parris offers a conception of Stoic virtue that encompasses social roles and duties and that does not countenance a politics of withdrawal.

In early modern studies, *Vital Strife* joins a growing body of work exploring the significance of sleep and other liminal states. Garrett A. Sullivan's *Sleep, Romance and Human Embodiment: Vitality from Spenser to Milton* (Cambridge UP, 2012) is perhaps the closest precursor. Others include Sasha Handley's *Sleep in Early Modern England* (Yale UP, 2016), the volume *Forming Sleep: Representing Consciousness in the English Renaissance* edited by Nancy L. Simpson-Younger and Margaret Simon (Penn State UP, 2020), and Guilio J. Pertile's *Feeling Faint: Affect and Consciousness in the Renaissance* (Northwestern UP, 2019). Parris's focus on how depictions of sleep are influenced by Stoic ethics sets *Vital Strife* apart as does his engagement with Senecan drama and what he terms a "somnolent poetics of care" (24). At times, Parris's contention that early modern Stoicism is underappreciated or critically misunderstood seems overstated since this school is widely understood to be part of the dominant discourse of the period, largely because of its consonance with Christian theology. Stoic philosophy typically affirms, for example, a rational cosmos ruled by divine providence and associates virtue with mastery of the passions. Furthermore, scholarship on Epicurean philosophy and Lucretian atomism has flourished in Renaissance studies over the last ten years and the effect, intentional or otherwise, has been to reify some of the broad distortions that these rival Hellenistic schools often circulated about each other. Parris's claim that "we lack a sustained and coherent account of the place of Stoic physicalism" thus becomes more urgent once readers understand that "the doctrine of oikeiôsis likely emerged as a direct challenge to Epicurean moral psychology and its atomistic cosmology of the swerve" (8). This is to say that through sleep, the embodied soul aligns itself with a material universe where reason unites living and non-living things. Neostoicism thus enables early modern thinkers to ascribe value to physical life and to explore the limitations of a political theology that touts heroic self-mastery.

Vital Strife is comprised of an introduction and five main chapters. The first chapter offers an historic overview of sleep from Ancient Greece to Early Modern England, and each subsequent chapter focuses on a single author: Jasper Heywood, Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton. Only one half of an already brief coda engages with a woman writer. Here, Parris juxtaposes Margaret Cavendish's *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666) with René Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) since she represents sleep as a state where the body maintains sensation and

continuity with a rational cosmos. Although the work does not significantly challenge the English literary canon or attend to lived accounts of sleep and sleeplessness during the period, it does expand existing discourses in ways that are productive and valuable. Chapter 1 surveys representations of sleep and ethical care in foundational texts such as Desiderius Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly* (1511) which depicts Sound Sleep (*Negretos Hypnon*) as the companion of Folly. Parris also examines pre-Socratic philosophers alongside Plato and Aristotle as well as early church fathers who warn against excessive sleep as fleshly indulgence, and finally Richard Mulcaster who conceives of humanist pedagogy as a way to awaken sleeping children. The aim of this survey is to argue that Renaissance humanism and Pauline theology together upheld moral psychologies that associated constant wakefulness with the cultivation of virtue.

In Chapter 2, Parris develops the central concept of Stoic oikeôsis through analysis of Jasper Heywood's 1561 English translation of Seneca's *Hercules Furens*, a text which he argues significantly informs early modern understandings of Stoicism in Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton. The central moment in the play occurs when Hercules, having slaughtered his wife and children in a fit of madness, falls asleep. In this paradigmatic example, Parris argues that a foundational tension between body and spirit is unbroken in sleep because the hero continues to reach out for his club that protects him while awake. Although the tragedy ultimately renders impossible Hercules's restoration to his ethical circles of care, sleep relaxes the ruling principle of the hero's soul and has a therapeutic effect on his body. Rather than regarding Hercules as a symbol of Stoic fortitude, Parris suggests that the sleeping hero best represents the relation of the material body to a living cosmos. This ecological depiction of early modern Stoicism contrasts sharply with the model found in Gordon Braden's *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition* (Yale UP, 1985) and Robert Miola's *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy* (Oxford UP, 1992). Implicit in Parris's ecological reading of sleep is a rejection of "the image of an isolated sage who rests securely with no cares or sense whatsoever for the fluctuations of corporeal mixtures that sustain her own physical life," which he regards as "inconsistent with the school's foundational principles and ethical teachings (75). Stoic oikeiôsis calls instead for the cultivation of circles of care in which the embodied self becomes dear first to itself; once established, this sense of dearness extends to other bodies and finally out further to the cosmos.

Chapter 3 attempts to put Shakespeare into dialogue with Senecan drama by examining how the tragedies *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear* engage the biopolitical question of what happens to a kingdom when a king sleeps. This chapter's scope is broad and ambitious, and Parris's engagement with the doctrine of the King's Two Bodies enables him to frame insomnia as a greater threat to political stability than sleep. While *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* both illustrate the political mayhem that ensues following the violent death of a sleeping king, Parris's treatment of *King Lear* is the most consequential since here we see Shakespeare's direct engagement with Heywood's *Hercules Furens*. As in the case of Hercules, sleep has a restorative power for Lear and assuages the madness that follows from the exercise of sovereign care without an object. Although Foucault ultimately locates the emergence of biopolitics in the eighteenth century, Parris finds an important precursor in Shakespeare for whom the "king does not have two bodies, but rather two *lives* that are bound together by a single corpus" (139). Parris ultimately reads Lear's sleep as a way to challenge the idea put forward by Agamben and others that the king's two bodies represent the separation of sacred and bare life.

The chapter on *The Faerie Queene* is the longest of *Vital Strife* and central to Parris's larger argument that Stoic conceptions of sleep challenge Reformed political theology, especially the militant Christianity of the Apostle Paul. Focusing on Spenser's allegory of holiness in Book I and depiction of insomnia in the House of Care in Book IV, Parris shows that, despite associations with death, darkness, and sin, sleep poses little threat to Redcrosse's spiritual health and enables him to remove temporarily the armor modeled after the Christian soldier in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Far from a sign of virtue, Redcrosse's attempts to resist sleep are interpreted by Parris as a form of pathological vigilance that removes the hero from proper care for himself and for Una. Illuminating an allusion to Hercules at the scene of his death, Parris suggests that Spenser represents Redcrosse's Pauline armor as incompatible with Stoic oikeiôsis which is restored through sleep. In the fifth canto of Book IV, jealousy takes the form of an excessive watchfulness that deprives Scudamore of sleep and reveals the ethical crisis induced by a failure to care for the physical body.

In the chapter on *Paradise Lost*, Parris argues that this care for the physical body also translates into care for the corporeal soul. He writes that "Milton's shifting representations of sleep and care not only syncretize Stoic philosophical and Christian

perspectives but also ascribe a uniquely early modern biopolitial value to the vital processes of physical life and care" (181). As in the case of Spenser, sleeplessness poses a greater moral threat than sleep and Parris finds in Milton's text echoes of Heywood that require a revaluation of the contribution of Stoicism to Milton's materialism. Tellingly, Adam and Eve recount their first waking from sleep and Satan remains ever watchful even as Heaven sleeps. After the fall, the restorative and regenerative properties of sleep become all the more needed and prefigure, according to Parris, Milton's vision of God's grace to come. *Vital Sleep* covers impressive ground and draws new connections between ancient Stoic philosophy and sixteenth and seventeenth century drama and epic poetry. It is a well-researched and significant contribution to early modern studies.

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