

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Handley, Sasha. Sleep in Early Modern England

Angela Ranson

Volume 41, Number 1, Winter 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1086049ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i1.29541>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Ranson, A. (2018). Review of [Handley, Sasha. Sleep in Early Modern England]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 41(1), 206–208.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i1.29541>

pastoral approach of the Jesuits also raised the suspicions of more legally and theoretically inclined moralists in the universities and monasteries.

The most significant contribution of this work is that it tells the story of the encounter between the Jesuits and Italian universities for the first time, setting the foundations for further research and scholarship. The fruits of the author's archival research are presented with great clarity and prudent scholarly judgment. The focus on the political and social forces at work is consistent throughout, lending solidity to the conclusions the author draws from his study of the documentary evidence. A greater awareness of the growing body of scholarship on the early Jesuits' spiritual and missionary concern for culture might have enhanced the account of Jesuit pedagogy, and allowed for a richer analysis of pedagogical, philosophical, and theological differences between the Society of Jesus and civic universities. This book will nevertheless be foundational for some time to come.

GILLES MONGEAU

Regis College at the University of Toronto

Handley, Sasha.

Sleep in Early Modern England.

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016. Pp. viii, 280. ISBN 978-0-300-22039-1 (hardcover) US\$65.

The basic argument of *Sleep in Early Modern England* is that early modern people were intensely "conscious of the unconscious," a thesis that is far more complex than at first appears. Author Sasha Handley uses the external trappings of sleep to demonstrate how social, cultural, and economic circumstances affected patterns of sleep and wakefulness between the mid-seventeenth and the mid-eighteenth centuries. She argues that people became more aware of the need for sleep during this time, and understood better the various reasons why it could be elusive.

In contrast with some studies that apply modern knowledge of sleep-inducing brain processes to early modern people, Handley aims to present a view of sleep culture grounded in its own time. She considers wider social and cultural factors as well as the preferences of individuals through the material

remnants of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Her main sources are probate inventories, traced over an extended period of time, and other written records such as household advice manuals, medical publications, and personal diaries.

This book is full of colourful details that make for an engrossing study. Handley describes to heart-rending effect how fond a woman was of her “scarlet bed,” and how fearful she was of losing it to creditors after her husband died. She includes photographs of early modern bedsteads and curtains, most notably a rare carex mattress that was meant to protect the bed during childbirth. Details such as a set of sheets that included a watch pocket, and the careful embroidery of a couple’s initials on a marital pillowcase, bring the time period to vivid life. It also effectively demonstrates Handley’s argument that people were aware of the importance of sleep on social, religious, and cultural levels as well as a physical one.

The disadvantage of Handley’s holistic approach is that such a broad purpose invites overlap. As the following will demonstrate, common topics and themes appear in various chapters, making it difficult to trace their significance. The only exception to this is the first chapter, which examines the medical advice provided to early modern people in a generally chronological order. Early advice focused on the stomach during sleep, specifically digestion, and later advice was far more concerned with how sleep aided and affected the brain. The chapter clearly shows how this aspect of sleep culture changed during Handley’s chosen time period.

Chapter 2 shifts focus to the household, starting with the recipes that were said to secure peaceful sleep. Quality sleep encouraged health and long life, and for that reason the household’s physical environment changed. Because the cleanliness, location, and comfort of bedsteads all affected the quality of sleep, they were carefully tended. This theme continues in chapter 4, “Sleeping at Home,” which furthers the discussion of household sleeping environments. It examines the design of sleeping chambers, the location of bedsteads, and the purchase of the right sort of bedding to ensure comfortable sleep. It also looks at the improvements in housing over this time period, which saw the decline of the hall, a common sleeping space for servants. Instead, parlours became the centre of family life, marked out as a distinct space that had many types of furniture but no longer included beds.

Between these two discussions on material bedtime culture, chapter 3 examines bedtime routines, which were often inspired by the vulnerability people felt during sleep. Devotions, prayers, and other routines were designed to secure people's physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing as they slid into sleep. People worried if they could not complete their devotions before bed, which might occur when travelling or when social events disrupted the routine. Once again, this topic recurs: chapter 5 examines the changes in sleep patterns that occurred due to the rise in evening social activities as the eighteenth century progressed. Specifically, it discusses how people felt guilty for allowing such activities to curb or disrupt their evening religious rituals. In this chapter, the troubles involved in being a guest in another household arise again, further complicated by the likelihood of having a bedfellow who may or may not be a good sleeping companion.

In chapter 6, Handley narrows the focus to a fascinating discussion of the self, and how non-conscious states of mind allowed people to explore personality. "Sensibility" was one sign of this developing connection between sleeping patterns and personal identity: sentiments and feelings were expressed through physical discomfort and sleeplessness. This connection made people of the time consider the interaction of body and mind while asleep. It also led to methodical study of the fashionable problem of sleepwalking. Many people thought that the activities undertaken while sleepwalking showed one's moral fibre—or, significantly, revealed a lack of refinement.

In the conclusion, Handley claims that her book demonstrates how lifestyles, life stages, and the prospect of an afterlife all affected sleep, during a time of unique socio-economic, cultural, and religious changes. Her claim is justified. *Sleep in Early Modern England* shows how choosing an actively social lifestyle affected sleep, and how both age and youth dealt with the vulnerability of the sleeping state. It effectively forges a connection between wholesome sleep and piety, and all in the context of changing views on evening leisure activities, social expectations, medical practice, and the self. Thus, it can be argued that despite its broad base, which occasionally dilutes the arguments, the book does demonstrate that early modern English people were "conscious of the unconscious" in ways that were far more complicated than one might expect.