



---

*A Day at Home in Early Modern England: Material Culture and Domestic Life* by Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson [Review]

Author[s]: Natalia da Silva Perez

Source: *MoveableType*, Vol.10, 'Peripheries' (2018)

DOI: 10.14324/111.1755-4527.090

---

*MoveableType* is a Graduate, Peer-Reviewed Journal based in the Department of English at UCL.

© Natalia da Silva Perez 2018 COPYRIGHT. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



## THE 'MIDDLING SORT'

---

NATALIA DA SILVA PEREZ

*A Day at Home in Early Modern England: Material Culture and Domestic Life, 1500-1700*

Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson. 2017.

Yale University Press. 320p. £40. ISBN 9780300195019.

Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson have a history of collaboration, and *A Day at Home in Early Modern England* reflects their extensive and productive research partnership on the study of material culture. With its highly formal language and wealth of detailed historical evidence, *A Day at Home* was clearly written for an audience of specialists, and it is manifestly grounded at the intersection of Hamling's and Richardson's specializations: literary and cultural history, art history, and religious history. This elegantly edited publication contains pictures, lists of items appearing in probate inventories, schematic blueprints, and diagrams that accompany the authors' nuanced analysis of written and material historical evidence about the home.

The main goal of *A Day at Home* is to show the central importance of the home as a place where social performances, religious beliefs, and work activities all came together to shape status and identity for the middling level of society. The 'middling sort,' the authors explain, were financially affluent, but their social status was not elite; they were 'neither very rich nor very poor.'<sup>1</sup> Hence their preoccupation with outward demonstrations of moral behaviour, religious observance, and loyalty towards those ranking higher than themselves in society, something evidenced by the vast material culture analysed in the book. The authors warn the reader from the start that *A Day at Home* is not a book about family or private life, but instead about 'the way behaviours were located within the material environment of the household, shaping and being shaped by it. We use this most significant early modern space to explore the way identity was formed day by day, hour by hour.'<sup>2</sup>

The book is organized according to an imagined schedule of activities carried out during the day, following the shape of idealised early modern religious prescriptions about the day's structure. An introduction describes the authors' goals and methodologies, covering some important differences between already-existing

---

<sup>1</sup> Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson, *A Day at Home in Early Modern England: Material Culture and Domestic Life, 1500-1700* (London, UK: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Hamling and Richardson, p. 4.

scholarship and the book's interdisciplinary project. In *A Day at Home*, Hamling and Richardson use an interdisciplinary historical approach to connect four key aspects of domestic history that, according to them, have been studied only in isolation: the lives of the 'middling sort,' the urban households of this sector of the population, the extant physical evidence of their domestic culture, and their everyday circumstances and practices.

Chapter one covers getting up in the morning and the religious dimensions of preparations to start the day. Hamling and Richardson cross-reference, for example, extant buildings with probate inventories that describe the contents of middling houses, showing that different types of bedchamber can give a glimpse into the diversity of people's status. Sleeping arrangements, decoration choices, and location of chambers are all covered in the discussion, which also touches on some of the limitations in the evidence encountered: 'Very few early modern buildings at this level of society survive in anything like their original layout;' the buildings that still exist have been greatly modified, providing only suggestions of their original internal configurations. In chapter two, which discusses meal preparation, the authors discuss the domestic spaces that men and women shared for different purposes, providing the reader with a glimpse of how gender roles emerge in interpersonal relations. Here we grasp the diversity of 'the middling sort' through cases like that of the widow Joanna Crisp, or the affluent Loder family. Chapter three focuses on mealtimes. 'Following traditional manorial custom, the midday meal brought together the whole household for a ritualised display of patriarchy and hospitality in the central and communal space of the hall.'<sup>3</sup> In this chapter we have the opportunity to contrast evolving dining habits and configurations, by following, for example, the Loders and the Wallingtons. We see the multifunctional communal hall gradually lose its place as the most prestigious space in the home, and be replaced by the parlour in the ground floor or the great chamber in the first floor. This is accompanied by a tendency for the most important meal of the day to move from midday to later in the afternoon, something enabled by the wider availability of candles and lamps. Work at home is the subject of chapter four. Here, the shop is presented as a liminal space between the domestic and the public, where middling wealth was created through sales of goods. The shop was a place where shopkeepers and customers interacted and performed social negotiations, something that can be studied by analysing extant written evidence about the stock, working tools, and raw materials found, for example, in a

---

<sup>3</sup> Hamling and Richardson, p. 98.

shop like that of Henry Rowe of Sandwich.<sup>4</sup> Chapter five deals with evening leisure, and here the story of Thomas Arden of Faversham's murder at a game table at his parlour serves as the starting case study (a woodcut from 1633 illustrating the story appears on page 179). Through this and other examples, we learn that the parlour increasingly became a place for comfort and privacy, as well as a symbol of status, displayed through lavish decoration. A cross-referencing of probate inventories from Canterbury and Faversham suggests the social importance of the furniture in these areas: 'although only 16 per cent of named rooms were parlours, just under a third of the stools and cushions in the town were to be found within them.'<sup>5</sup> Finally, chapter six covers preparations for going to sleep, and discusses night-time religious duties. Sleeping and death were interconnected in early modern minds, something evidenced by the amount of *memento mori* artefacts encountered in the sleeping chambers studied in the book. At night, the house seemed not as safe as during the day: lurking in the dark was the threat of fire, violence, disease, cold.

With recourse to the diverse, multidisciplinary historical sources layered throughout the book, the concluding chapter reiterates the authors' main argument: the early modern middling household was a site of negotiations about 'authority, (re)production, education.' Hamling and Richardson invite fellow scholars to 'view the domestic space as a primary site for social interactions and experience, and explore their cultural and political implications.'<sup>6</sup> *A Day at Home* will particularly suit scholars with an interest in contrasting real quotidian behaviour with conduct manuals' prescriptions in the early modern period. A lay reader with enough interest in the minutiae of early modern English domestic life will also appreciate it, especially as an antidote against commonly held misconceptions about how daily routine was organized, how work at home was divided along gender lines, and how social status could and could not vary within the same social class.

*A Day at Home in Early Modern England* is a successful book, seamlessly weaving textual and physical evidence through careful analyses of everyday practices of 'the middling sort.' Hamling and Richardson effectively show us that those members of English society whose social status was just at the periphery of the elites were constantly preoccupied with their reputation. While their homes and the objects within were

---

<sup>4</sup> Hamling and Richardson, p. 161.

<sup>5</sup> Hamling and Richardson, p. 186.

<sup>6</sup> Hamling and Richardson, p. 264.

important instruments to boost social standing, proximity to people of lower ranking proved to be a constant source of downwards pressure.

Grounding their work in an innovative interdisciplinary perspective, Hamling and Richardson engage in a critical yet generous conversation with well-established historical knowledge about the period, all the while putting emphasis on the insights brought about by attending to evidence specific from material culture. In their analysis, the authors are able to account for dynamics of gender and class, for example, but refrain from reducing living beings' individual experiences to simple instances as members of an analytical category. The result is a refreshingly down-to-earth mental image of early modern English everyday life.

University of Copenhagen  
nsp@teol.ku.dk