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Book Review

Nathan Kravis, *On the Couch: A Repressed History of the Analytic Couch from Plato to Freud*, MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, and London, 2017; xvi + 204pp.: 9780262036610, £24 (hbk)

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On the Couch by Nathan Kravis takes a social historical route to unravelling the enigma of the psychoanalytic couch and the reclining analysand. Underexplored and ‘undertheorized’ until now, due to constraints such as case sensitivity, this work searches well beyond Freud’s justification for the analysand’s supine state: his declared aversion to constantly meeting the patient’s gaze (p. 1). Here through a remarkably varied melange of sources, Kravis, a practising psychoanalyst and historian of psychiatry, sustains a cogent narrative of psychoanalysis’s distinct ‘choreography’, that is, ‘the “repressed” history of the analytic couch’ (p. xi).

As Kravis highlights in Chapter One, alongside this want of a substantial rationale for the use of the couch is its striking visibility in both the psychoanalytic community and widespread culture. Kravis’s methodological approach, set out here, is thus to contextualize this exemplary status through undertaking a ‘social history of recumbent posture’ (p. 8). The first chapters unearth the different meanings Europeans have inscribed onto the act of lying supine, starting with the Classical Age.

Diverse contexts of reclining are recovered in the chapters which follow. Chapter Two resurrects the ‘*ceremonial*’ importance of ‘recumbence’ (p. 28, original emphasis). Spotlighting the tradition of ‘reclining dining’, expressive of social standing and amusement (p. 11), at celebratory occasions such as the Greek ‘*symposion*’ and the Roman ‘*convivium*’ (p. 12, original emphasis), it then traces the adoption of supine states into sacred art (p. 28). Chapter Three views developments in ‘furniture fashion’ as an aperture onto changing models of home life and aesthetics (p. 43), exploring, for example, connections between the growing popularity of ‘reclining chairs’ suited to repose and dialogue, and the less solemn rule of Louis XV (p. 39). Chapter Four addresses how the theme of recumbent posture recurred in changing forms across ‘portraiture’ (p. 47), dwelling on mid-eighteenth-century representations of women, defiant and cerebral, in the act of reading (pp. 78–82).

Chapter Five moves the discussion on reclining posture into therapeutic contexts, addressing the increasing prevalence of mobile seating such as the ‘adjustable *chaise-longue*’ and ‘the *Schlafsofa* (sleep sofa or recliner couch)’ (p. 99, original emphasis) for the unwell and wealthy coastal vacationers from the start of the nineteenth century (p. 97). The particular nineteenth-century psychiatric culture in which Sigmund Freud was embedded is revived in Chapter Six; physiological and psychological therapeutics such as ‘hypnosis, hydrotherapy, cutaneous and electrotherapy, phototherapy, diet and rest cures’ necessitated lying down, thus entangling ‘recumbence and cure’ in medical and lay mindsets (p. 115). Unravelling its ‘romantic’ and ‘asylum’ derivations (p. 127), Chapter Seven locates Freud’s therapeutic

employment of the couch in his late-nineteenth-century use of ‘hypnosis’, frequently merged with ‘massage and cutaneous electrotherapy’, and thus before the advent of psychoanalysis (p. 128). Addressing the interior decoration of the consulting room as expressive of the analyst’s ethics, Chapter Eight contrasts the ‘archaeological’ preoccupation of Freud’s ‘antiquities’ filled room (p. 144) and the present-day analyst’s predilection for ‘self-erasure’ through sparse, self-abnegating furnishings (p. 151). The concluding chapter reflects on the intermingling of these recovered ‘traditions’ in the couch’s past (p. 163), while also contemplating its future. Identifying critical questions for ‘empirical’ investigation such as whether the couch is particularly effective in resolving some issues over others or whether the analyst’s location is important (p. 166), it ultimately signals the couch’s enduring singularity. Kravis recognizes ‘recumbent speech’ as eliciting an inimitably ‘powerful discourse of the self’ (p. 167), sagely endorsing the couch as a resolute safeguard of inwardness and intimacy in a time of ‘hypertransparency’ (p. 170).

Kravis’s book enriches the existing literature in manifold ways. It carves a novel visual route through the history of psychoanalysis, innovatively tilting the investigative focus towards psychoanalysis’s physical objects rather than its theories. This employment of visual imagery and interest in the meaning of material artefacts is methodologically original for both medical history and medical humanities, more generally. Furthermore, this work fits into the ongoing historiographic project of tracing the development of psychotherapy in different contexts (Marks, 2017). It recovers the different values which have accrued around reclining posture historically and geographically, and which have led to the apparently automatic acceptance of the couch among clinicians. For historians of the ‘psy-disciplines’ (p. xii), it thus resolves the longstanding lacuna surrounding the clinical omnipresence of the couch. Additionally, the author’s discussion of the ‘*moral interior*’ is particularly valuable (p. 139, original emphasis). This concept provides a productive framework for scholars and medical practitioners interested in space; it refers to the way in which the analyst’s principles pervade, decide and reveal themselves in the furnishings, arrangement and ambience of their respective consulting rooms (p. 139). Although Kravis’s collation of photographs of contemporary analysts’ rooms are quietly compelling in comparison with the striking portraiture and cartoons featured in earlier chapters, they invite further investigation into the connections between the design of therapeutic sites, and the psychotherapeutic ethos. This interest in the setting of the analyst/analysand alliance will appeal especially to historical geographers of healthcare.

On the Couch will register with a diverse readership. ‘[A]rt history, furniture history, fashion and clothing history, as well as, works on classical antiquity and modern art’ (p. xi), coalesce here into a genuinely ‘multidisciplinary’ account (p. xii). While Kravis spotlights further audiences as those interested in ‘furniture history and design, interior decoration, art and cultural studies’ (p. xii), its appeal stretches further to medical humanities scholars from a wide range of disciplines. This book is accessible to all levels of expertise and will ably hold the interest of undergraduates, postgraduates and more advanced scholars alike.

Reference

Marks S (2017) Psychotherapy in historical perspective. *History of the Human Sciences* 30(2): 3–16.