

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Introduction: Domestic Afterlives

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Some blame the drink, some an enforced marriage, and others the devil. The bare facts are that on 23 April 1605, Walter Calverley stabbed his two eldest sons to death, before attempting to murder his wife and youngest son. The sensational story was immediately published as a pamphlet, the anonymous author warning their readers:

There hath happened of late within the Countie of Yorke, not farre from Wakefield, a murther so detestable, that were it not it desires record for example sake, Humanitie could wish it rather utterly forgot, then any Christian heart shuld tremble with the remembrance of it.¹

The warning contains some interesting features that are common to the presentation of domestic tragedy; first, the murder is located in a specific space, proving the veracity of the event. Secondly, the promise that the events will make the reader ‘tremble’, perhaps a genuine warning and perhaps a promise of the thrilling tale contained within the pamphlet. Later the same year the Calverley murders were dramatised (with thin aliases for the characters) by George Wilikins, becoming the domestic tragedy *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage*. Near the close of 1605, Thomas Pavyer published the story in ballad form. It is astonishing how quickly and how often the story was retold immediately after the event; more than ‘example sake’ can possibly account for. In 1608, the tale was taken up once again: Pavyer’s ballad was rewritten and published as a

¹ Anon, *The most unnaturall and bloodie murthers the one by Maister Calverley, a Yorkshire gentleman, practised upon his wife, and committed upon his two children, the three and twentie of Aprill 1605. The other, by Mistris Browne, and her servant Peter, upon her husband, who were executed in Lent last past at Bury in Suffolke* (London, 1605), sig. A2r.

second domestic tragedy: *A Yorkshire Tragedie: not so New as Lamentable and True, Written by W. Shakspeare.*²

Intense interest in the story of Walter Calverley did not end in the seventeenth century: youths in the nineteenth century reported creating a magic circle, strewn with breadcrumbs and pins, and chanting ‘Old Calverley, old Calverley, I have thee by ‘th ears, / I’ll cut thee in collops unless thou appears’, in an attempt to resurrect the ghost of the long-dead murderer.³ According to the writer, the chant worked: ‘At this culminating point the figure used to come forth ghostly and pale’.⁴ Riding a headless horse, his ghost persecuted the inhabitants of Calverley up to at least the mid twentieth century, riding forth (according to one 1966 newspaper) every Boxing night.⁵

With many omissions, this is a history of over four hundred years of retellings of the Calverley murders. But at what point in this process of acting, telling and retelling, does fact become fiction? As soon as adjectives like ‘detestable’ are interwoven with the narrative? When the story is transformed into a play? Do we stray into the fictional only when the ghost of the murderer is resurrected in a consciously performative group act? Alternatively, are all of these constructed narratives kinds of truth, mingled with kinds of fiction? How can we begin to make a distinction?

As we are increasingly concerned, today, with the interpretation, truthfulness, and manufacture of current events, exploring the production and re-writing of events in domestic tragedies like *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage* and *A Yorkshire Tragedy* is particularly timely. The partial fictionalisation of current events, as murders were retold for stage audiences and readers/listeners, questions the boundary between ‘real’ and ‘false’, ‘emotionally-fuelled’ and ‘fact-based’. Re-reading the domestic tragedies highlights the mediation of current events through authors, publishers and editors of various kinds. As Foucault suggests in *Discipline and Punish*, accounts of the criminal’s life could be entirely fictional, or the criminal’s confession a tale manufactured by the state to maintain its own power, which the criminal repeated in order to protect their

² J. Andreas Löwe, ‘Calverley, Walter (d. 1605), murderer’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press:

<<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-4411>> [accessed 19 July 2018].

³ ‘Calverley, Forty Years Ago’, *Bradford Observer*, 28 March 1874.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Pudsey News*, 5 January 1966. Quoted in A.C. Crawley and Barry Gaines (eds.), *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p. 114.

living families from being dispossessed.⁶ The English judicial system seems to have created the reverse situation. Walter Calverley, we know, did not submit a legal plea to the court, meaning that his estate eventually went to his heir Henry Calverley (his only surviving son) rather than being forfeited to the state. Walter experienced the ‘strong and hard pain’ of being pressed to death; stripped almost naked, iron and stone ‘of as much as he may bear, or more’ was laid upon the prisoner until he either pleaded or died.⁷ Walter Calverley chose to die. There was therefore no trial of the murderer, no ‘guilty’ or ‘not-guilty’ verdict with which to conclude the story, Calverley’s voice lost in trying to exhort a confession either of guilt or innocence.

The real-life source of *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage* and *A Yorkshire Tragedy* is paralleled by most of the texts we now identify as domestic tragedies (Heywood’s *A Woman Killed With Kindness* being a notable exception). Based on contemporary murder cases, they can mostly be traced to one or two source texts. The close of the play generally features a ‘repentance’ or ‘scaffold speech’ in which the sinners recant and express a moral message. These are invested with the power of last words, something Gordon McMullan has described during this period as having ‘prophetic qualities as the expression of a human being on the verge of the afterlife, beginning to acquire a vision of heaven or the future unavailable to those in the midst of life’.⁸ Despite these commonalities, defining the genre with more than a few broad brushstrokes has often proved difficult. Although Andrew Clark has identified seven plays widely accepted as domestic tragedies, there is no universally accepted canon. Articles in this special issue will seek to interrogate this notion of canon, engaging in particular with Shakespeare’s *Othello* (1603), *Henry IV* (c. 1597) and *Edward IV* (1599).⁹ There is evidence that dramatists were commissioned to write several of the plays, collaborating perhaps to more quickly produce a piece that would resonate with a much-discussed real-life event, the popular talk about the crime essentially providing free publicity. However, this is not the case for every domestic tragedy.¹⁰

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1977; repr. 1991), pp. 65-9.

⁷ John Cowell, *The interpreter* (London, 1658), sig. Z2r.

⁸ Gordon McMullan, *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing: Authorship in the Proximity of Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 215.

⁹ He has also identified 26 lost plays, which would bring this canon up to 33. However, Clark’s list is by no means comprehensive of plays often included in the canon, *The English Traveller* being a notable exception. See Andrew Clark, *Domestic Drama: A Survey of the Origins, Antecedents, and Nature of the Domestic Play in England, 1500-1640* (Salzburg: Salzburg Studies in English Literature, 1975), p. 417.

¹⁰ Sean Benson, *Shakespeare, ‘Othello’ and Domestic Tragedy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 13.

To make defining the genre more confusing, the term ‘domestic tragedy’ has been used almost interchangeably with Chilton Powell’s 1917 phrase ‘domestic drama’.¹¹ However, as Powell included any play dealing with familial relationships in this category, almost every play ever written would have a claim to the name ‘domestic drama’. We must look, it seems, for a more specific definition in order to establish what we mean by ‘domestic tragedy’. Feminist criticism has been critical in advancing our understanding of the genre,¹² with Dympna Callaghan pointing to its potentially loaded definition.¹³ Insightfully summarising the problems extant in readings of the ‘domestic’ she writes, ‘all tragedies are, to some degree, domestic’, battling against ‘a persistent refusal to register that sexual politics are central to tragedy’.¹⁴ Reading the domestic tragedies as fundamentally connected to a long historical trajectory of sexual politics, Ann Christensen proposes the definition ‘something like absent-husband or separate-sphere dramas’, arguing that the genre as a whole resists ‘the emerging ideology of the separate spheres’.¹⁵ The articles in this special issue seek to engage with and continue the development of this critical strand in particular.

However, Christensen’s definition of the genre remains problematic, assuming a consensus around the emerging early modern ideology of the separate spheres. Domestic tragedies have also been read outside of this material perspective, both psychologically, in terms of character or group motivation, and as an expression of early modern medical understanding of the mind-body paradigm.¹⁶ Diana E. Henderson’s

¹¹ As Emma Whipday points out, the term ‘domestic tragedy’ was first used in English by George Lillo, who termed his play *The London Merchant* (1731) a ‘sentimental domestic tragedy’. However, this is far outside the remit of the late Elizabethan/Jacobean group of plays currently canonised as ‘domestic tragedy’. See Emma Whipday, *Shakespeare’s Domestic Tragedies*, unpublished thesis, University College London (London, 2014), p. 19.

¹² See in particular Frances Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550-1700* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994); Wendy Wall, *Staging Domesticity: Household Work and English Identity in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Ariane M. Balizet, *Blood and Home in Early Modern Drama: Domestic Identity on the Renaissance Stage* (New York: Routledge, 2014); and Ann C. Christensen, *Separation Scenes: Domestic Drama in Early Modern England* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017).

¹³ Dympna Callaghan, *Women and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy: A Study of ‘King Lear’, ‘Othello’, ‘The Duchess of Malfi’ and ‘The White Devil’* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. 36.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Christensen, *Separation Scenes*, pp. 212, 4.

¹⁶ See Kathleen McLuskie, *Renaissance Dramatists* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), Catherine Belsey, ‘Desire’s Excess and the English Renaissance Theatre’ in *Erotic Politics: Desire on the Renaissance Stage*, ed. by Susan Zimmerman (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 65-79, and Margaret Healy, ‘Bodily Regimen and Fear of the Beast: “Plausability” in Renaissance Domestic Tragedy’ in *At the*

definition of this wide-ranging genre – and which perhaps comes closest to the current critical consensus – is, ‘tragedies involving characters within a family of less than royal birth whose downfall does not directly imperil the kingdom’.¹⁷ Of course, being ‘property owners’ means that the protagonists, while not being royal, are still falling from a certain height; at least in legal terms they have more to lose than the unpropertied. It is interesting to compare Henderson’s definition of domestic tragedy with Peter Burke’s definition of popular culture, which he terms ‘the culture of the non-elite’.¹⁸ The social status of the protagonists, like the source material for this genre of plays, is non-elite, and over the centuries this has profoundly influenced their reception. Lena Cowen Orlin and Catherine Richardson agree that the plays as a genre concern ‘property owners’, Orlin changing the terms of critical debate in 1994 when she argued that early modern England ‘locates the private in property, both real and moveable’.¹⁹ This property-based reading emphasises the bourgeois nature of the drama and gives their criticism a materialist slant, with Richardson using household inventories to draw rich ethnographic pictures of the house as a lived space in domestic tragedy. Wendy Wall has influentially used a similar ethnographic method to comprehend domestic tragedies’ place in a wider culture of bloody housewifery, in which every woman carried a knife, and participated in butchery, sewing, cleaning, medicine and dairying. Reading the plays alongside domestic conduct manuals, Wall argues for the importance of the domestic and matriarchal in national identity-formation.²⁰

It is perhaps their close attention to ‘non-literary’ source texts and their uncomfortable associations with both the bourgeois subject and ‘the bourgeois reader’ that has led to a certain amount of nose-wrinkling by critics writing on the genre.²¹ Keith Sturges has influentially described the genre as proto-journalism, and so lacking ‘the noble

Borders of the Human: Beasts, Bodies and Natural Philosophy in the Early Modern Period, ed. by Erica Fudge, Ruth Gilbert and Susan Wiseman (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 51-73.

¹⁷ Diana E. Henderson, ‘The Theater and Domestic Culture’ in *A New History of Early English Drama*, ed. by John D. Cox, David Scott Kastan and Stephen J. Greenblatt (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 173-194 (p. 173).

¹⁸ Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1800* (1978; Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), p. iv.

¹⁹ Catherine Richardson, *Domestic Life and Domestic Tragedy in Early Modern England: The Material Life of the Household* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 1. Lena Cowen Orlin, *Private Matters and Public Culture in Post-Reformation England* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 1.

²⁰ See Wendy Wall, *Staging Domesticity*.

²¹ Keith Sturges, ‘Introduction’, *Three Elizabethan Domestic Tragedies*, ed. by Keith Sturges (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969; reissued 1985), pp. 7-47 (p. 11).

intentions of high tragedy or the durability of serious art'.²² In fact, it is partly the domestic tragedies' interconnectedness with proto-journalism that renders these plays so fascinating. Henry Hitch Adams, similarly, has seen the plays as an artistically deficient descendant of the medieval morality play, mapping developing notions of mercy and penance onto 'the morality plays and their descendants, the domestic tragedies'.²³ Although much has been done to reevaluate the play texts, particularly by feminist scholars, their status as cultural artefact rather than literary creation lingers. Sean Benson, while acknowledging the 'poignancy' inherent in many of the plays, assumes cavalierly that Ben Jonson purposefully suppressed his role in collaborating on the now-lost *Page of Plymouth* (1599) as unworthy of his reputation.²⁴ Jonson, of course, did not include collaborative plays in his published folios. Domestic tragedies were certainly forms of popular culture, but it does not follow that they are shallow or lower than other plays (at least in a pejorative sense).

Indeed, there is no contemporary evidence that the plays were seen as artistically or intellectually inferior to any other genre staged in the early modern playhouses. In fact, Thomas Heywood's prologue to one of his own domestic tragedies *The English Traveller* (c. 1627), in which young love is thwarted by mistimed travels and an unfortunate marriage, compares his play's 'bare Lines' to the 'bumbaste' of other plays, relying on such padding as 'Drum... Trumpet... Dumbe show... Combate... Marriage... Song, Dance, Masque'.²⁵ The eloquent simplicity of *The English Traveller*, Heywood suggests, is superior to artificial spectacle. In his introductory poem to the *Apology for Actors* (1579), Heywood also seems to defend the genre, listing 'This, covets marriage love, that, nuptial strife', as different types of theatre that are essential parts of the varied medley of plays in the early modern playhouse.²⁶ 'Citizens' are also listed as one of a number of types of character that make up the world parading across the stage.²⁷ His poem concludes 'He that denyes then Theaters should be, / He may as well deny a world to me'.²⁸ The stage, in Heywood's conception, is a microcosmic window into life, and in its representative function, should not privilege one version social class or type of event over another.

²² Sturgess, p. 9.

²³ Henry Hitch Adams, *English Domestic or, Homiletic Tragedy 1575 to 1642* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), p. 54.

²⁴ Even while Benson acknowledges that Jonson did not publish/take pride in plays he had collaborated on with another author, he argues that 'Jonson apparently considered *Page [of Plymouth]* a bit of hackwork because he was in financial straits'. See *Shakespeare, 'Othello' and Domestic Tragedy*, p. 13.

²⁵ Thomas Heywood, *The English Traveller* (London, 1633), sig. A3v.

²⁶ Thomas Heywood, *Apologie for Actors* (London, 1579), sig. A4v.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Regarding the domestic tragedies' real-life source material, John Taylor in his pamphlet, *The unnaturall father*, which seeks to understand as well as narrate 'one John Rowse' and the murder of two of his children, lists '*Arden of Feversham*, and *Page of Plimmouth*... and the fearfull ends of their Wives and Ayders' among a medley of Biblical and royal murderers who have paid the price for their crimes.²⁹ Both '*Arden of Feversham*' and '*Page of Plimmouth*' became not only the subjects of popular domestic tragedies, but also their names to their respective plays. Within Taylor's amalgamation of sources, there is no sense that the domestic crimes are inferior to the Biblical and Royal ones; they are merely a different category, and form a body of proof that climaxes in Taylor's argument, namely vice does not pay. While the tragedies' sources have perhaps contributed to their status not as literary texts but as popular cultural artefacts, this division between the popular and the literary seems to be a later one. Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poetry* (c. 1579), only divides literature into three kinds of poets: the religious, philosophical and 'the third, indeed right poets', who 'do imitate to teach and delight'.³⁰ While Sidney's examples in the *Defence* tend to be classical, he does explicitly defend plays dealing in 'private and domestical matters' on the early modern stage.³¹ Influenced of course by Sidney's *Defence*, and especially the notion of literature as a more perfectly moral re-writing of history, in Heywood's *Apologie*, the crucial element of any tragedy is 'the fatall and abortive ends of such as commit notorious murders'.³² The mimetic relationship between the domestic tragedies and their sources, imitating real events and structured so that the criminals are always identified and punished, would locate them within Sidney and Heywood's versions of ideal drama. Domestic, for Sidney and Heywood, was not a dirty word, but part of a world of experience.

The way in which the domestic can reverberate across space, through the wider community, will be a recurring theme of this special issue. Returning to the subject of afterlives, one of the more unusual afterlives of *Arden of Feversham* is Alexander Goehr's 1967 opera *Arden Must Die*. Erich Fried's libretto is broadly faithful to the plot of the domestic tragedy, the crucial difference being that the characters Reede and Greene are present at the scene of the murder. When questioned, they implicate the Mayor and the dead man's well-to-do friend Franklin (who were not present at Arden's murder), claiming:

²⁹ John Taylor, *The unnaturall father* (London, 1621), sig. A2r, C1r.

³⁰ Philip Sidney, *An apologie for poetrie* (London, 1595), sig. C3v.

³¹ *Ibid*, sig. F3v.

³² Thomas Heywood, *Apologie*, sig. F3v.

What Arden did was always highly praised;
For us and ours not a voice was raised.
You, Mister Mayor, you have long since known
How Arden tricked us out of house and home.
His end was brutal; and yet you and he
points to Mayor and Franklin
Are no less guilty of his death than we.³³

Challenging a narrative in which the punishment for a crime can be easily assigned, the opera asks: when there is a societal power imbalance, who is responsible for murder? When interviewed, audience members found this a particularly resonant message in post-Nazi Germany, concerned with implicit collusion and the nature of blame.³⁴ This special issue seeks to continue this process of meaning-making, traversing new areas of scholarly interest and reassessing debate on the household, crime, fact and fiction, attesting to this genre's dynamic and valuable place on the early modern stage and beyond.

³³ Erich Fried, *Arden Must Die: An opera on the death of the wealthy Arden of Faversham in two acts (seven scenes)*, trans. by Geoffrey Skelton (London: Schott & Co., 1967), 2.7.69-4.

³⁴ *Arden Must Die*, BBC Documentary, from

<<http://www.fcqv.org/Goehr/Arden%20Must%20Die/Arden%20Must%20Die.html>> [accessed 13/10/2018]