The significance of the trope of the woman at the window in early modern culture and literature has been examined by literary critics, social and art historians, my indebtedness to whose scholarship will be evident throughout this essay.¹ My contribution to this discussion consists of two parts. Firstly, I view windows as constituting one aspect of the bigger category of the liminal. This concept, as Niall Allsopp observes, has been ‘much used and often abused’.² Like Allsopp, I want to focus on its specifically etymological meaning, its root in the Latin word ‘limen’, meaning threshold.³ As such, I consider windows alongside such other liminal domestic spaces as doors and gates, focusing on the way they represented ‘the weak points in a household’s spatial boundaries’, to borrow Elizabeth S. Cohen’s words, spaces that rendered the house permeable, open and thus vulnerable.⁴ In the early modern period, given the extensive building and rebuilding of houses across the country, famously described by W.G. Hoskins as ‘The Great Rebuilding’, houses were featuring more thresholds, porches, screen passages, doors, and

windows than ever before, a spatial development that brought anxieties in its train as I show below. Secondly, I explore the relationship of these liminal domestic spaces to two kinds of household members, mistresses and servants, rather than just one or the other. I argue that early modern anxieties surrounding women’s sexuality, managerial role in the household and access to the apertures of the house are not dramatised on the early modern stage in isolation from other anxieties about the domestic space, as most recent scholarship on the topic seems to suggest. Instead this anxiety is frequently linked spatially and thematically with anxieties about household servants as expressed in prescriptive literature as well as in contemporary plays. Anxieties about both household mistresses and their servants, I argue, are often given expression in early modern drama around, on, by and near the liminal spaces of the household. Showing how these anxieties work in concert in The Tragedy of Master Arden of Faversham (1592), The Merchant of Venice (1596), and Othello (1603), I argue that the plays evoke these threats at moments of crucial dramatic importance to heighten tension and dramatic effectiveness.

Anxieties about the Liminal Domestic Space

Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson’s research into the material culture of the early modern household reveals that tensions often attached themselves to the liminal spaces of the household, especially its windows. This is because windows were changing in this period. ‘One of the notable developments of the Elizabethan style of building’, Hamling and Richardson observe, ‘was an emphasis on comparatively large, expansive windows, especially on the street frontage’. Functioning to aurally and visually connect as well as spatially and physically separate the interior from the exterior, the household from the street, windows offered people on the street a view of the inside of neighbours’ households as well as offering those inside a view of what neighbours were up to outside. Contemporary evidence suggests that both activities could and did cause tensions. The

7 Isobel Armstrong’s description of glass in the 19th century as both ‘medium and barrier’ seems to apply equally to early modern windows. Bernhard Siegert writes that ‘Walls, doors, windows, and stairs initially subdivide living space in order to tie it point by point together again’. See ‘Doors: On the Materiality of the Symbolic’, trs. by John Durham Peters, Grey Room 47 (2012), 6-23 (p. 12).
8 Ibid. See Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination, 1830-1880 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 6. I am grateful to Emma Francis for bringing this work to my attention.
9 Amanda Flather, Gender and Space in Early Modern England (Rochester: Boydell and Brewer, 2007), 53.
window, as Hannah Shepherd observes, ‘was a boundary that could be penetrated both physically and visually’. This penetration must have been aural, too. Nehemiah Wallington, the seventeenth century wood turner, registers in his diary a disruption he experienced on 29 May, 1642, through one of his windows. On ‘the Lords day betwixt 3 and foure a clock in the morning’, he writes, ‘I did here on[e] cry Mackarell in the streete and it did so grive and trouble my heart to heare the Lords day brocke in such an open manner that I was glad to get up into my study out of the hearing of the breach of this royall law of God’. Conversely, the many petitions that Lena Cowen Orlin examines in connection with boundary disputes reveal anxieties surrounding the potential invasion of privacy that windows overlooking neighbours’ properties could cause. One such dispute involved William Lambkyn whose three windows overlooked the grounds of Peter Grene and who was ordered by the Viewers to affix boards to the windows to block his view of Grene’s property. Contemporary anxiety about the dangers the openings of the house could let in is evidenced in the practice of concealing garments near such places. Dina Eastop observes that ‘Common sites for concealment include near doorways, window openings, chimney and in voids’; ‘at points of entry or access’. Eastop suggests that the practice might be ‘linked to other apotropaic (evil averting) practices, such as marking of buildings, and the burial of “witch-bottles”, and animal bones, and the immurement of cats’, which aimed to ‘offer protection by disabling or diverting witches and other malevolent forces which might enter via doors, windows and chimneys’. Similar logic seems to have been behind the marking of doors, window mantles and chimneys with

The choice of spaces to conceal garments and incise protective biblical text suggests that the liminal spaces of the household were conceived of as being particularly capable of rendering the household vulnerable to potentially harmful forces and thus in need of protection.

In early modern drama, as critics have noted, liminal domestic spaces, windows in particular, seem to function as sources of anxiety. Windows were seen to threaten male control of female sexuality, since, as Cynthia Baker writes, ‘the woman’s precarious position […] neither inside nor outside [the house], but at the boundary between the two – mirrors topographically the implicit uncertainty of her moral footing’. Drama thus seems to subscribe to such condemnation of women at windows as Henry Smith’s, who describes the ‘harlot’ as one who ‘look[s] out of the windowes’. Thus, in Ben Jonson’s *Volpone*, Celia’s appearance at the window of her house to interact with the mountebank brings on a frenzied reaction from her husband, Corvino. Referring to the window of his own household as a ‘public window’ (2.5.3), thus privileging its function as connecting the household to the street over its role as barrier and separator, he immediately constructs Celia’s visibility at the window as a direct threat to his authority and ownership of her: ‘Well! You shall have him! [the disguised Volpone], yes. / He shall come home, and minister unto you / The fricace for the mother’ (2.5.15-17). Appearing at a window is the equivalent, it seems, of advertising sexual availability. The punishment Corvino threatens takes the form of spatial restraint, a distancing from the dangerous aperture that acts to advertise her availability like a bawd does her prostitutes and which she has offended by approaching. The window will be blocked (2.5.50), and Celia will have to be, from now on, as withdrawn into the interior of the house and as far away from its openings as possible: ‘I will keep thee backwards: / Thy lodging shall be backwards, thy

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19 All references to *Volpone* are to the New Mermaids edition edited by Robert N. Watson (London: Methuen, 2003). Act, scene and line numbers appear parenthetically after quotations.
20 As Orlin notes in ‘Women on the Threshold’, ‘The association of sexual display, enticement, and upper-level windows persists in the red-light district of modern-day Amsterdam’ (55).
walk backwards, / Thy prospect – all be backwards’ (2.5.58-60). Similarly, in Thomas Middleton’s *Women Beware Women*, Bianca’s appearance at the window of her husband’s house leads to her seduction by the Duke (1.3.73-113). Leantio, Bianca’s husband, also reveals that he has stolen her from her father’s house through a window (3.3.258-9), thus, as Orlin comments, ‘closing the circle of dangerous associations with the space’. Nor is Corvino’s reaction or Bianca’s sexual transgression surprising. The ‘surveillance of women’ in this period, as Peter Stallybrass has taught us, focused, among other areas on ‘the threshold of the house’, which was the spatial equivalent of the woman’s chastity and, in Gary Schneider’s words, an area of ‘potential transgression’.

**Porous Households: Mistresses**

Prominent among the anxieties surrounding household mistresses, as Natasha Korda’s research has shown, was the housewife’s managerial role, her ‘unsupervised supervision of the household’. Trusted with looking after domestic goods, of which she herself formed part, the household mistress wielded considerable power. A mistress’s authority.

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22 All references to *Women Beware Women* are to the Revels edition edited by J.R. Mulryne (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007). Act, scene and line numbers appear parenthetically after quotations. Ann C. Christensen reads this scene within the context of contemporary tensions between home dwelling and travel, with the window at which Bianca appears functioning as the site where Bianca’s ‘unpartnered’ status is marked (p. 169).


24 Peter Stallybrass, ‘Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed’, *Re-writing the Renaissance: The Discourse of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Margaret W. Ferguson et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986), pp. 123-42 (p. 127); Gary Schneider, ‘The Public, the Private, and The Taming of the Shrew’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 42.2 (2002), 235-58 (p. 246). Not incidentally, Corvino threatens to put a lock on his wife (glossed by J.R. Mulryne as a chastity belt [p. 60]) even as he threatens to lock up the house and have its ‘bawdy light dammed up’ (2.5.57). This identification of female sexuality with the liminal spaces of the house is captured in the early modern phenomenon that Elizabeth S. Cohen, in ‘Honor and Gender’, has named ‘house scorning’, a secular ritual that shamed women by attacking the windows and doors of their houses which ‘symbolically correspond to the orifices of the[ir] bod[ies]’ (598, 603, 618). Interestingly, the Virgin’s room in visual representations discussed by Wolfthal, in ‘The Woman in the Window’, ‘was often depicted shut tight, with small barred windows, enclosing walls or bolted doors’ (60).

found its most visible representation in the form of household keys, which contemporary discourses on domestic government, as Amanda Flather has shown, assigned to her. Keeping the household keys, Flather writes, ‘was recognized and accepted as part of her [the mistress’s] privilege and power’. Mistresses’ possession of household keys meant that they ‘exercised practical control over access to the house and use of its rooms’, over the thresholds of the household. The mistress’s right to keep domestic keys is captured in contemporary portraits of the prudent housewife that ‘represented housewifely authority and responsibility as well as chastity [in the form of the housewife] with her key’. One of these visual representations appears in a contemporary emblem included in Guillaume de la Perriere’s *The Theatre of Fine Devises* (1614) in which the good wife holds a large key in her right hand, and the moral accompanying the emblem explains that ‘The key doth note, she must haue care to guide, / The goods her husband doth with pain prouide’. The ‘security of the home,’ as Emma Whipday writes, was constructed in the conduct literature as ‘the responsibility of the wife’. Wives in Thomas Tusser’s *Five Hundred Points of Housewifery* are instructed to ‘see dore lockt faste’, to ‘make keyes to be keepers’ and to ‘kepe keyes as thy life’. This practice, however, enabled transgression and disorder as much as it ensured discipline and order. Mistresses, thus armed with keys, could let lovers into the household and even lock corpses of murdered husbands in closets as Mistress Arden does in *Arden of Faversham*. A prime example of the former form of transgression is found in Thomas Heywood’s *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1603) where Mistress Frankford’s access to the keys in her husband’s (supposed) absence gives her the opportunity to lock her lover in and shut her husband out. Nor was this form of transgression enabled by the housewife’s authority over domestic liminal spaces, the prerogative of literature. Contemporary depositions reveal that household mistresses were sometimes no less willing to make use of their control over domestic spaces to enable sexual transgression than their fictional counterparts. Isobel Collin, as her servants deposed, locked the door to her bedchamber when her lover joined her inside. ‘It was also alleged,’ as Flather writes, ‘that she locked the door to the “old parlour” and the “cheese house” to prevent her servants from spying on her adulterous liaisons with her lover.

26 Flather, *Gender and Space*, p. 47.
27 Ibid., p. 46.
28 Ibid.
29 The emblem is discussed in Georgianna Ziegler’s ‘My Lady’s Chamber: Female Space, Female Chastity in Shakespeare’, *Textual Practice* 1.4 (1990), 73-90 (p. 76).
31 Cited in ibid.
The danger becomes even more acute when the mistress works in concert with her servants as in *The Tragedy of Master Arden of Faversham*.

**Porous Households: Servants**

Household servants feature in early modern prescriptive literature as sources of a number of anxieties, most of which revolve around their uncertain status. Not attached to the family through blood or marriage, servants were however insiders in the sense of being resident co-inhabitants, sometimes even sharing the same bedchamber, if not bed, as their masters and mistresses. This liminal status of the household servant and the potential threat to order and especially privacy of the family were frequent topics in conduct literature. The servants’ mobility, in particular, their movement between the outside and the inside receives particular attention. William Gouge, for example, in his hugely influential treatise *Of Domesticall Duties* (1622), cautions that ‘servants which are vnder their masters [sic] roofe continually waiting on them, cannot chuse but espie many [secrets]: if herein seruants be not faithfull, masters were better be without seruants in their houses’ (sig. Ss2v). The spectre of the loquacious servant is raised again later in another treatise by Gouge. In the context of discussing servants’ common faults, he condemns the ‘blazing abroad secrets, as many seruants doe when they meet together, and as it comes to passe when seruants are changed’. Particularly disturbing, it seems, is the tendency on the part of servants, as he sees it, to reveal household secrets not exclusively when motivated by resentment. Sharing private knowledge, instead, seems to be a feature of everyday socialising with fellow servants. Identifying this danger, Robert Cleaver counsels husbands and wives to discuss matters ‘priuately betwene themselues, and not before […] seruants: for they will not sticke to carie tales […] and they will blaze abroad such matters to your discredit’ (sig. F4v).

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32 Flather, *Gender and Space*, p. 46.
34 In drawing attention to the servants’ uncertain status, I disagree with Lynda E. Booze’s idea that the daughter is the only member of the household occupying a liminal space. See ‘The Father’s House and the Daughter in It: The Structures of Western Culture’s Daughter-Father Relationship’, *Daughters and Fathers*, ed. by Lynda E. Booze and Betty S. Flowers (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 19-74 (p. 31).
The servant was also threatening because they could not only open household secrets to
the outside world, but also because they could bring the outside world in. At least one
contemporary murder case embodies this anxiety. The murder of Bowes’s maidservant,
Joane Wislon, in 1607 was enabled by the access she gave to the murderers one of whom
used to be employed as a servant in Bowes’s household and thus in a position to have
intimate knowledge of where the ‘treasure’ he was after lay. The pamphlet that reports
the murder, A True Report of the Horrible Murther, explains how ‘on the twentieth of
February, at high noone’,

The partie on whom this murther was committed, […] a woman servant, called
Joane Wilson […] for fellowship sometimes in service with one of them […] welcomed both into her Masters house […] Wilson with a cord presently put about
her necke, dragged her downe thorow an entrie, into a lowe Cellar, where they left
her lying, till they had gone up to the upper rooms of the house, and acted the
second part of the worke they came bout; to wit, with that iron, which served to
both turns, made themselves a way through doors and lockes, to the place where
they knew some treasure lay.37

Servants did not only let in guests and friends who sometimes turned out to be thieves
and murderers, but also more frequently brought letters from the outside world addressed
to their mistresses by (not always) welcome suitors. Alan Stewart, discussing Hamlet’s
letter to Ophelia, examines a number of Dutch genre paintings of the seventeenth century,
such as Gabriel Metsu’s A Young Woman Receiving A Letter (c. 1658), his Woman
Reading A Letter (1662–5), Johannes Vermeer’s The Love Letter (c. 1667–70) and his
Lady Writing A Lover Letter with her Maidservant (c. 1670). In these paintings, Stewart
observes, a mistress, a maid and a window appear side by side.38 Stewart notes that the
servant, frequently positioned between mistress and window, is to be understood as the
means through which the outside world beyond the window, metonymised in the letter,
got inside and into the mistress’s hands, or, conversely, the means through which the

36 Flather, Gender and Space, p. 51.
37 A True Report of the Horrible Murther, which was Committed in the House of Sir Jerome Bowes (London,
38 Alan Stewart, Shakespeare’s Letters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 243. For a reading of
these paintings that focuses on women’s literacy and the way it enables them, with the help of the servants
depicted in the same paintings, to negotiate their domestic enclosure, see Martine van Elk, Early Modern
Women’s Writing: Domesticity, Privacy, and the Public Sphere in England and the Dutch Republic
(Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). I am grateful to Robert W. Daniel for suggesting this work.
letter being written by the mistress will find its way out. This transgressive function of the servant as a go-between and an enabler of her mistress’s sexual transgression is captured in sixteenth-century illumination from northern France that depicts a woman combing her long hair before a mirror while a young man sits behind her admiring the view. The open rear door in the background just about reveals the back of the maidservant watching for any intrusion on the lovers’ (presumably) illicit privacy. As such, servants negotiate the enclosed woman’s seclusion and challenge the ability of walls to contain her.

Closely connected with these anxieties is the fact that servants were, like household mistresses, trusted to hold keys. Advising his son, for example, William Wentworth writes: ‘let the doors be surely shut up by some trusty ancient servant’. A servant’s, no less than that of a mistress’s, access to keys is frequently depicted on the early modern stage as potentially dangerous to the orderliness the house. Anxieties get heightened, of course, when servant and mistress worked together to undermine the authority of the household master and sometimes even to take his life. The servant who either works with his or her mistress to facilitate a lover’s access to the mistress or who is himself the lover with whom the mistress conspires to remove her husband is well represented in the pamphlet literature of early modern England. The early modern stage, as we will see, too, evokes these anxieties to different ends.

The Mistress, the Servant and the Liminal Domestic Space in Early Modern Drama

Anxieties about mistresses, servants and domestic liminal spaces are invoked simultaneously at points of intense dramatic tension in The Tragedy of Arden of Faversham, The Merchant of Venice and Othello. All three plays, in a way almost identical to the contemporary Dutch genre paintings, create a tableau of household mistress, servant and a liminal domestic space (window or door) at crucial dramatic moments to heighten tension and tap into cultural fears surrounding the domestic. In

39 Ibid. Stewart’s focus is on the meaning of the lady’s acceptance of the letter which ‘calls into question the boundaries of her household, chamber, and body’ (p. 246).
40 See the image and Wolfthal’s discussion of it in In and Out of the Marital Bed: Seeing Sex in Renaissance Europe (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 48.
41 Flather, Gender and Space, p. 47.
Arden of Faversham, the tableau is constructed at two dramatic points. The first, in scene 4, places one of the Ardens’ servants, Michael, on the inside of the door of a dwelling his master is staying at in London. Mistress Arden, not physically present on the stage at this point, is nonetheless a constant presence through her order to Michael to help her kill his master. The play early on taps into anxieties surrounding mistress’s intimacy with servants. In the opening scene, a pact concluded between mistress and servant is reiterated for the audience’s benefit: ‘Michael, see you keep your oath’, Mistress Arden instructs her servant, who dutifully promises: ‘I’ll see he shall not live above a week’ (1.144-5). The terms of the contract are clearly spelled out: ‘On that condition, Michael, here is my hand; / None shall have Mosby’s sister but thyself’ (1.147). Through this early exchange, the audience associates Michael’s later actions connected with the plot on his master’s life with his mistress’s influence. In fact, she is never absent from Michael’s tortured thoughts on the subject of his master’s murder. This is evident in scene 3, when Michael delivers his first anguished soliloquy. Reflecting on his participation in the murder plot, Michael lists his reasons for involvement, prominent among which is the fact that ‘So have I sworn to Mosby and my mistress’ (203). He evokes his mistress’s presence once again in his soliloquy delivered in the following scene against the tense background of immediate danger to his master’s life as two assassins hired by his mistress take position outside the door ready to come in and perform the murder: ‘My mistress she hath forced me with an oath’ (4.64-5). While the mistress is only present in this scene as an incentive to facilitate the murder, the other two elements of the tableau, the servant and the door, are present on the stage.

Arden of Faversham insistently places Michael next to the liminal space of the door. The tension the play stages turns on the door’s function in ‘establish[ing] a system that is made of the operations of opening and closing,’ in Bernhard Siegert’s words, and the servant’s ability to undermine this system. The ‘barrier between inside and outside’, manifested on stage by means of the doors at its rear, as Catherine Richardson writes, is rendered incapable of performing this function of separation by a servant who refuses to ‘keep the door’ and carry out his role in guarding the porous spaces of the household. Evoking the potential threat that servants’ familiarity with the domestic space and their access to keys could pose to their masters’ safety, the play positions Michael inside a door outside of which stand the two assassins. In scene 3, under threat, Michael agrees to let Black

44 All references to The Tragedy of Master Arden of Faversham are to the Revels edition edited by M. L. Wine (London: Methuen, 1973). Scene and line numbers appear parenthetically after quotations.
45 Siegert, 8.
46 Catherine Richardson, ‘Early Modern Plays and Domestic Spaces’, Home Cultures 2.3 (2005), 269-83 (p. 280).
Will and Shakebag into the house: ‘This night come to his house at Aldersgate’, he instructs,

The doors I’ll leave unlocked against you come.
No sooner shall ye enter through the latch,
Over the threshold to the inner court,
But on your left hand shall you see the stairs
That leads directly to my master’s chamber
There take him and dispose him as ye please (3.180-5).

Michael is not only physically positioned on the inside of the door, but he is rhetorically associated with liminal spaces: the ‘latch’, ‘threshold’, and ‘stairs’ he signposts to the assassins as landmarks are all spaces that serve a liminal function, being positioned in between other spaces, connecting outside and inside, outer court and inner court, downstairs and upstairs and marking them as connected yet separate spaces at the same time. The scene will later register Michael’s fear and conflicted conscience on the space of the door as his soliloquy ends in ‘a great cry’ that causes the master to check whether ‘the doors [are] fast locked’ and to lock them when he finds them otherwise (4.97-101). Michael excuses his shriek in terms of ‘falling asleep / Upon the threshold, leaning to the stairs’ and having ‘a fearful dream’ (4.90-2). It is significant that Michael draws attention to the threshold. Thresholds, as Allsopp writes, especially in the form of the Church porch, were spaces where ‘penitents and wrongdoers were sometimes sentenced to perform public acts of penance [and where] women who were “impure” after childbirth were greeted […] for their churching or purification’. In this scene, the threshold functions both to trope Michael’s transgression and condemn him as a moral offender.

Michael’s association with the liminal space of the door reaches its epitome in the murder scene which takes place in the Ardens’ own household. In this scene, he is relentlessly positioned by doors (whether front doors or counting house door where the assassins are hidden) and is visually associated with keys, locks and bolts. In a scene that assembles all elements of the tableau mistress-servant-door, Michael receives instructions that revolve around keeping the door of the household: ‘Michael’, instructs Mistress Arden in the midst of preparations for the dinner that will prove to be Master Arden’s last supper, ‘Fetch in the tables; and, when though hast done, stand before the countinghouse door’ for, she explains, ‘Black Will is locked within to do the deed’ (14.157-8). Having fetched the tables in, Michael receives further orders tellingly connected with the door: ‘When

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47 Allsopp, 412. Allsopp discusses the parallels between the liminal spaces of the Church porch and the domestic threshold within the context of early modern marriage rituals.
my husband is come in, lock the street door; / He shall be murdered or [before] the guests come in’ (14.167-8), an order Michael confirms carrying out later on (14.198). It is thus fitting that Michael turns his own legs into a door-like aperture through which the assassins are to emerge unseen by their victim just before the murder: responding to Black Will’s ‘fear[s]’ that Master Arden ‘will spy me as I am coming’, Michael suggests: ‘To prevent that, creep betwixt my legs’ (14.229). Nor is it surprising that, in the aftermath of the murder, Michael continues to be positioned by doors: ‘Michael’, the distressed Mistress Arden instructs, ‘bring them [the dinner guests] to the doors’ (14.322). Such an essential aspect of the servant’s role, keeping doors and accompanying departing guests, becomes at this fraught moment redolent of anxieties evoked by the combination of mistress, servant and liminal spaces.

*The Merchant of Venice*, written in the same decade as *Arden*, is similarly invested in the anxieties surrounding the triangle of household mistress, servant and liminal domestic space.48 Neglected in the scholarly literature on the play is its engagement with contemporary anxieties about the domestic in terms of both its physicality and dependent inhabitants. Jessica’s window has certainly not received the critical attention enjoyed by Juliet’s.49 In this section, I want to focus on the fraught scenes surrounding Jessica’s elopement with her Christian lover, Lorenzo, as they seem to me to embody the tableau I am tracing here. All the elements are present: a household mistress, a servant and a liminal domestic space (here, a window). Similar to *Arden*, *The Merchant of Venice* evokes these anxieties simultaneously in the highly tense dramatic moment of a daughter eloping with her lover away from the father who insists on keeping her enclosed within the domestic experienced as identical with the religious identity of Jew and away from the outside imagined as Christian.50

Jessica, unlike Mistress Arden, is not a wife, but a daughter. The play, however, suggests in ‘signals’ the original audience would have recognised and which, in Alan Stewart’s words, ‘we have lost the skills to read’, that she performs the role of household mistress.51

48 While *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* are not set in England, I consider them within the context of early modern English anxieties because, as Orlin writes, ‘the meanings of windows [and I add doors] in plays written for English audiences clearly obtained in England, nonetheless’ (55).

49 One of the few studies that takes Jessica’s window into account is Jill Colaco’s in which she reads the window encounter between the two lovers within the tradition of the Night Visit. See ‘The Window Scenes in *Romeo and Juliet* and Folk Songs of the Night Visit’, *Studies in Philology* 83.2 (1986), 138-57 (p. 149).

50 As Katz writes, Shylock ‘insists on the closure of doors and windows, for such architectural apertures place his interior (Jewish) world of paternity and pledges in ongoing contact with the exterior (Christian) world’ (p. 67).

51 Stewart, p. 231.
Her role as manager of her father’s house is troped in the movement of a set of keys from his hands to hers. In Act 2, scene 5, Shylock, ‘bid forth to supper’ with the Christian community, entrusts his keys to Jessica, announcing: ‘There are my keys’ to mark the gesture (12). Similar to household mistresses, Jessica is to preside over the household’s spaces, wielding control over access to it and shutting intrusion out as her father directs:

Jessica, my girl,
Look to my house […]
Lock up my doors […]
Stop my house’s ears – I mean my casements –
Let not the sound of shallow foppery enter
My sober house’ (2.5.15-35).

Sending his daughter further into the interior of the house, he repeats his instruction: ‘Well, Jessica, go in […] / Do as I bid you; shut doors after you’ (2.5.49-51). Put in charge of the keys of the house and instructed to practise surveillance over its weak points, the windows and the door imagined as ‘ears’ that admit the outside world in and thus enable intrusion, Jessica is, in effect, cast in the role of household mistress.

The Merchant of Venice evokes anxieties about the domestic in the fraught dramatic encounter between mistress, servant and window. In a tableau that exactly mirrors the scenes depicted in the Dutch genre paintings, the stage evokes contemporary associations between the potential danger associated with the liminal space of the window and the anxieties surrounding the figures of household mistress and servant. I want to focus on the scene immediately preceding Jessica’s elopement with Lorenzo and the elopement scene itself. In Act 2, scene 5, under Shylock’s nose, Lancelot Gobbo, Jessica and Shylock’s servant who has just decided to desert his master and join Bassanio’s Christian household, gives the woman, in an aside, a contrary instruction: ‘Mistress, look out at

52 All references to The Merchant of Venice are from the Arden edition edited by John Drakakis (London: Bloomsbury, 2010). Act, scene and line number appear parenthetically after quotations. In performance, this could be a charged moment which throws light on the father-daughter relationship. In the 1978 RSC production, Shylock (Patrick Stewart) slaps Jessica (Avril Carson) as he hands her the keys, giving Jessica a motive for rebellion, as Drakakis writes (‘Introduction’, pp. 77-8). It is also, I would argue, an assertion of his authority even as he performs an act whose ultimate meaning is a transformation of domestic authority to her through her control of the keys and a visual representation of the anxiety surrounding this transformation from household master to mistress.

53 Katz examines the way the play engages with anxieties about windows by making the window the space where ‘Jessica’s abandonment of her father and conversion to Christianity is [sic] marked’ (p. 68). Katz’s focus is on the gender and racial aspects of Jessica’s transgressive interactions at the window space and does not consider the servant’s presence and agency in this scene.
window for all this; / There will come a Christian by / Will be worth a Jewess’ eye’ (39-41). Despite the fact that Shylock is not the kind of character with whom men in the original audience would have easily identified given his Jewishness, Shylock’s reaction to the conversation between his daughter and servant clearly speaks to anxieties he shared with householders among the audience. Although not plotting murder, as Mistress Arden and Michael do, Jessica’s conversation with Lancelot draws her attention to the dangerous site of the window and encourages her rebellion against her father’s commands: ‘for all this’, says Lancelot, ‘look out at window’ (2.5.39), which, according to John Drakakis’s gloss on the line, suggests ‘in spite of all this, i.e. despite the warnings of your father’. At this point, then, Lancelot seems to play the role of messenger, literally delivering a message to his mistress from her lover and, similar to those women positioned in between writing or reading mistress and the window in the Dutch paintings, Lancelot is rhetorically, if not spatially, positioned between mistress and window. He has, of course, already played this role of go-between between mistress and lover in Act 2, scene 3, when Jessica asks him to deliver a letter to Lorenzo from inside her father’s enclosed house: ‘Lancelot, soon at supper shalt thou see / Lorenzo, […] / Give him this letter, do it secretly, / And so farewell’ (5-8). Nor is this scene the only one where a master experiences the private conferral between a household mistress and servant positioned in relation to a particular domestic space as a potential source of danger. In Act 3, scene 5, left in charge of Portia’s household, Lorenzo objects, however light-heartedly, to a similar instance of private conversation between Lancelot and Jessica. Surprising the mistress and servant as they confer, Lorenzo chides the servant: ‘I shall grow jealous of you shortly, Lancelet, if you thus get my wife into corners!’ (26-7). Corners, as Lena Cowen Orlin’s research reveals, were ‘associated with things that are illicit or shameful’. This is, Orlin explains, connected with ‘the material circumstance’ of the early modern household: ‘the corners of a room’, she writes, ‘were its secret parts, the areas where the light of a candle was least likely to reach, the places where wainscoting could be

54 Carol Leventen suggests that the men in the audience might have identified with Shylock’s ‘fears about women’s control of money and, in consequence, the means of controlling their own lives’. See ‘Patrimony and Patriarchy in The Merchant of Venice’, The Matter of Difference: Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare, ed. by Valerie Wayne (New York: Harvester Wheatshaft, 1981), pp. 59-80 (p. 73).
55 Drakakis, p. 253.
56 Interestingly, Plate 22 from John Boydell and Josiah Boydell’s Collection of Prints, from Pictures Painted for the Purpose of Illustrating the Dramatic Works of Shakespeare, by the Artists of Great Britain (London, 1803) depicts the trio of Jessica, Shylock and Lancelot in Act 2, scene 5, positioning Lancelot by a door which he holds onto, as Shylock prepares to entrust his set of keys to Jessica. No window is to be seen in this rendition. The image is reproduced in Janell Metzger, ‘“By My Hood, a Gentle and No Jew”: Jessica, The Merchant of Venice, and the Discourse of Early Modern English Identity’, PMLA, 113.1 Special Topic: Ethnicity (1998), 52-63 (p. 58).
mismatched because it would go unnoticed, the places where people were known to retire in order to cry, to play, to feel unobserved, to hide. The corner, moreover, was frequently associated with extramarital liaisons. As such, it seems to be the equivalent of the window in terms of the danger it could pose to the householder. It is instructive that Jessica describes Lorenzo’s reaction in terms of ‘fear’: ‘Nay, you need not fear us, Lorenzo’ (28), a description of the husband’s emotion that is perhaps clarified later on as being of the sexual kind (Lorenzo’s earlier threat to ‘grow jealous’ upon witnessing the encounter suggests as much, of course) when Lancelot’s sexual transgression is brought to the surface. The detail of the accusation Lorenzo levels at the servant, the latter’s ‘getting up of the negro’s belly’ (35) is significant. I think the choice of a black woman as Lancelot’s partner in this act of illicit sexual union plays upon Lorenzo’s anxieties about Jessica’s Otherness and the danger Lancelot poses to his exclusive access to her, for Jessica, like the Moor, is an Other in the white, Christian world of Belmont (and Venice). Nor is Lorenzo’s anxiety about servant and mistress entirely unfounded, for in the elopement scene, having been directed by the servant to ‘look out at window’, Jessica proceeds to pilfer the household of which she was mistress, mocking her role as guardian of its spaces and keeper of the keys by locking its doors behind her after she has stolen herself and her father’s ducats from his house. Using the space of the window, the upper level stage space, evoked initially by the servant, she first throws down a casket to Lorenzo (2.6.34), before she exits the upper level space imagined as the window (2.6.50-1). If Lorenzo is anything like Mistress Arden’s lover, Mosby, he too would be thinking that ‘‘Tis fearful sleeping in a serpent’s bed’ (8.42), but The Merchant of Venice, given what Lynda E. Boose describes as the ‘comic contract’ it shares with its audience, avoids this possibility, offering, instead a final movement where anxieties about women, servants and liminal domestic spaces are safely, though not unproblematically, assuaged, as I show later.

58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Jan Lawson Hinely links this uneasy tone in Lorenzo’s comment on Jessica and Lancelot’s private conversation with the couple’s later conversation when Belmont lists examples of lovers’ infidelity. See ‘Bond Priorities in The Merchant of Venice’, Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900, 20.2 (1980), 217-239 (p. 222).
61 For an insightful reading of the absent female Moor, see Kim F. Hall, ‘Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner? Colonization and Miscegenation in The Merchant of Venice’, Renaissance Drama 23 (1992), 87-111.
62 Stewart suggests that Jessica ‘escapes through the window’ (p. 248; my emphasis).
*Othello*, written latest among the plays I am considering here, follows the same strategy of evoking anxieties about the triangle of mistress-servant-liminal domestic space in one of its most dramatically intense scenes. Under the escalating force of Iago’s rhetoric, Othello questions Emilia in Act 4, scene 1, about the alleged infidelity of her mistress, Desdemona. It is not surprising, given the commonplace association between servants and the liminal spaces of the household, that Othello, incensed by Emilia’s adamant denial of knowledge of any dishonesty in her mistress, describes the servant first as a ‘bawd’ and later as a ‘closet, lock and key, of villainous secrets’ (4.2.21-2). In calling Emilia bawd, Othello seems to be tapping into these anxieties surrounding the servant’s role as a go-between while at the same time linking her with keys and locks, the mechanisms supposed to ensure vigilance, security and control which the servant, through possession of keys, can undermine. This anxiety is, of course, literalised in the ‘brothel scene’ where Othello positions Emilia by the door of the bedchamber in which he recasts his transaction with his own wife as one between a customer and a whore: ‘Leave procreants alone’, he addresses Emilia, ‘and shut the door’ (4.2.27-8). He further instructs the servant-cum-bawd to keep the door, exercise surveillance over its space and alert the occupants of the bedchamber of any impending intrusion: ‘Cough, or cry hem, if anybody come. / Your mystery, your mystery [i.e. profession as bawd]: nay, dispatch!’ (4. 2. 29-30), inverting, as Whipday writes, the figure of the guarding servant that conduct literature instructed servants to model themselves on. This instruction almost reproduces identically the French illuminated image discussed above, where a maidservant complicit in the sexual encounter about to take place in the foreground, is glimpsed in the background keeping the door. Having concluded the encounter with Desdemona, Othello asks the bawd Emilia to ‘turn the key and keep our council’ (4.2.96). Here then the servant’s customary possession of the keys of doors to carry out such functions as locking doors for the night is re-written as a form of danger to the household, for the servant’s control of the liminal space allows in outsiders (with whom Othello now identifies) and enables the sexual betrayal of the householder (imagined now as absent).

All three plays, having thus evoked the spectre of a dangerous alliance between the mistress, the servant and the liminal domestic space, proceed to render them safe. *Arden* stages a trial scene where the transgressive mistress and servant are sentenced to death: Mistress Arden is to ‘be burnt’ and Michael is to ‘suffer death’ (18.31-2). The liminal spaces that the mistress and servant used in the lead up to the murder are transformed into

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65 Whipday, p. 147.
safe spaces that are under the control of the forces of law, order and justice: with the entrance of the Mayor and the Watch in scene 14, the domestic liminal space of the door is reclaimed as a space that allows in order and justice (362-412). Similarly, The Merchant of Venice incorporates both Jessica and Lancelot into Christian households. In the new households, Jessica will be in her husband’s debt for saving her (3.5.17-18) in a re-subscription to the patriarchal authority that her elopement has undermined. Lancelot’s act of deserting his master, Shylock, in 2.2, would probably have been welcomed for similar reasons to Jessica’s desertion of the same man, but it would still have been problematic. Like Jessica, Lancelot too will learn obedience, for in the Christian household of Portia, over which Lorenzo presides as proxy to Lancelot’s master Bassanio, Lancelot is to learn to be responsible: he is to be questioned about his sexual transgressions. Shylock’s liminal spaces in the final movement of the play, fall, as in Arden, under the control of the state, for Nerissa, disguised as a lawyer’s clerk, is sent to Shylock’s house with a ‘deed of gift’ that will make Jessica and Lorenzo his heirs: ‘enquire the Jew’s house out’, instructs the disguised Portia, ‘give him this deed / And let him sign it’ (4.2.1-2). Nerissa, now the representative of state power and law, entering Shylock’s house or handing him the document through the door, signals the entry of the ordering forces through the liminal space, as they do in Arden. Othello, similarly, reworks the ‘brothel scene’ that literalised the notion of the servant as a bawd into a safer version where Emilia’s position behind the closed door while Othello kills his wife casts her in the role of champion of order, not the instigator of disorder: Emilia’s increasingly desperate knocks at the door locking her out and locking Othello and Desdemona in are attempts to come in and reveal the truth she has come to piece together (5.2.100-1). The play rehabilitates the liminal space-servant pairing into a safe one, where the servant works with the Venetian authority figures throughout the rest of this scene and up to her own murder to expose injustice, reveal Iago’s wickedness and ensure his punishment.

On the early modern stage, the combination of mistress, servant and liminal domestic space seems to have been particularly useful at moments of high dramatic intensity. It brought together cultural anxieties about all three of these categories while at the same time maintaining a reassuring stance that all of them are brought under control. These neat endings, however, might not have reached the audience in so neat a manner. The

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66 Jessica’s readiness for reincorporation into the patriarchal household is suggested as early as the moment of her transgression. The embarrassment she feels about her disguise as a boy (2.6.35, 38-9) has been variously interpreted. Marjorie Garber, in Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Identity (New York: Routledge, 1992), to cite one critic, has observed that Jessica’s disguise links her with sixteenth-century Venetian courtesans (p. 86). I think that, in addition, it distances her from unruly women precisely because, unlike them, she is capable of feeling shame over challenging social norms and customs relating to dress and gender.
Merchant of Venice, at least, leaves the fact that Portia, in order to travel to Venice disguised as a lawyer and eventually bring about the play’s happy ending (at least for its Christians), colludes with her household servants. She orders them to conceal from her husband the fact that she has just arrived back home: ‘Go in, Nerissa’, she instructs her waiting woman, ‘Give order to my servants, that they take / No note at all of our being absent hence’ (5.1.119-21). The fiction to be maintained by Portia’s servants is that she, during the absence of her husband, retired to the highly enclosed space of the ‘monastery’ where she ‘lived in prayer and contemplation’ (3.4.31, 28) until she herself, of course, decides to reveal the truth. The troubling combination of mistress, servant and the liminal space of the door which can let a mistress out and admit her back in without her husband’s knowledge seems, in The Merchant of Venice, to refuse containment.