

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



## Afterword

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Pursuing the spatial turn through an exploration of domestic thresholds, the contributors to this stimulating collection display a wide range of disciplinary approaches. They draw on a similarly broad range of source types, historical, literary, and architectural. Their essays address issues of authority, gender, and the life-cycle, as well as interactions between early settlers in the New World and Native Americans. They confirm that such an exercise is both fruitful and suggestive, and it will, I hope, encourage further explorations. In this Afterword I want to pick up some of the themes raised in this special issue, and offer an overview that draws on some of my own past and current research.

Liminal sites played an important role in everyday life and, as several contributors describe, they assumed particular significance in times of domestic strife. The ability to cross a liminal site rested on three basic variables, physical, cultural, and what we might label political: the location and exercise of authority within the household. The first of these is the most straightforward. The sick, frail and elderly, like women in childbed, might be unable to leave the bedchamber, or the bed itself. For the dying, the significant liminal site became the threshold between this world and the next, a situation reflected in the popular phrase, still current today, of being ‘at death’s door’.<sup>1</sup> Hannah Newton’s essay charts the stages of a patient’s recovery through their restored ability to move once more beyond the bedchamber, and eventually descend the stairs into the parlour, study or garden. Physical (in)capacity is an obvious and simple variable, but it had a wider significance, for any master or mistress unable to pass outside the bedchamber faced major problems in maintaining their authority within the household.

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<sup>1</sup> *OED*, ‘death’s door, *n.* c.1.’, provides citations from the mediaeval period onwards.

<[www.oed.com/view/Entry/47766](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/47766)>. Accessed 12 August 2019. For demotic and figurative usage of the phrase see e.g. *The Gossips Brawl* (London: 1653), p. 1.

Two examples may serve to illustrate the point. Elizabeth Cannon, a Somerset farmer's wife, was confined to her bed for a whole year in 1680 after a badly botched delivery, through the 'unskilfulness' of the midwives, and was thus unable to watch over her maidservant, or indeed her husband. That allowed an illicit liaison to develop between the pair, and when the maid gave birth to their illegitimate child, the fallout almost destroyed the Cannons' marriage.<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Freke, a wealthy Norfolk widow, was also confined to her bedchamber and bed for lengthy periods, in her case through age and failing health. Again, this had disastrous consequences, for her maidservants exploited her immobility to pilfer with impunity. When she finally discovered what was happening, Freke resorted to desperate measure to reassert her authority: she arranged to have the two main culprits whipped in the yard 'till the blood spun, for example sake'. Too frail to go out to supervise, she looked on through the window with grim satisfaction.<sup>3</sup>

The cultural constraints on mobility within the household are less self-evident. Some applied mainly to men, especially husbands, and helped protect the gendered spaces of wives and women. A male householder had the right to enter every room, but the kitchen was regarded as the mistress's domain and a man would be unwise to spend much time there. If he meddled in his wife's or even the maidservants' domestic management, and invaded their space, he could find himself ridiculed as a 'cotquean'. In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Capulet, the head of an elite and powerful household, directs the nurse to 'Look to the bak'd meats', but his meddling draws merely the dismissive retort, 'Go, go, you cot-quean, go' (4.4.5-6).<sup>4</sup> The author of a humorous Restoration proto-novel depicted a similar situation, with a resentful wife pushing back against her interfering husband. Her resolve is stiffened by subtle pressure from her maidservants, who, 'behind his back, that their Mistris may more then over-hear it, dare call him, a Tom *Peep in the pot*, or *Goodman busie-body*'.<sup>5</sup>

The third and 'political' variable is centred on the issue of domestic authority: who authorised whom to cross which thresholds? Servants would know they were not permitted to enter certain rooms, such as a private closet, and any room containing money

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<sup>2</sup> *The Chronicles of John Cannon, Excise Officer and Writing Master*, ed. by John Money (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), I. p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> *The Remembrances of Elizabeth Freke, 1671-1714*, ed. by Raymond A. Anselment, Camden Society, 5th series, 18 (2001), pp. 194, 284. Also see Bernard Capp, *The Ties that Bind. Siblings, Family and Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 73-76.

<sup>4</sup> For other citations see *OED*, '† cotquean, n.' <[www.oed.com/view/Entry/42446](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/42446)>. Accessed 12 August 2019.

<sup>5</sup> A. Marsh, *The Ten Pleasures of Marriage* (London: 1682), pp. 69-70.

or valuables would be kept locked. Control of the keys was a central factor in the government of any household. The ability to cross a liminal site took on particular significance in circumstances of domestic conflict, especially marital breakdown. One egregious Sussex villager locked his wife out of the house while he had sex with the maid, and then made his wife sleep in a spare room.<sup>6</sup> In times of domestic crisis, a room might become a place of confinement, banishment, or refuge, and divorce cases offer examples of all these. Liminal sites featured prominently in the remarkable suit brought in 1632 by Lady Mary Grenville, against her husband, Sir Richard, heard before the Court of High Commission. Lady Mary's counsel described how Sir Richard had directed his servants to burn horse-hair, wool, feathers and horseshoe-shavings and 'cause the smoke to goe into the ladyes chamber through an hole made in the plaisterring out of the kitchin'. He had also broken into his wife's bedchamber at night, brandishing a sword, and had 'confined her to a corner in the house', depriving her of the management of the household. Sir Richard's counsel countered that the holes in the kitchen had been made by Lady Mary herself, and that he had directed them to be 'stopped up that she might not harken what the servantes said in the kitchen' (which raises more intriguing issues). Far from being confined to a corner, she still had access to ten rooms, and it was she who had confined her husband, not vice-versa: she 'locked him into his closet and tooke away the key'. They were an incorrigibly combative couple, and the court came to the sensible conclusion that their marriage was beyond repair.<sup>7</sup> In another, far less high-profile case, we hear of a frightened woman seeking safety by sitting up in the maid's chamber at night until she was certain her violent husband was asleep. Did the chamber have a bolt, or was this another instance of cultural constraint, with the two women trusting he would not presume to invade a maidservant's space by night?<sup>8</sup>

Liminal sites could assume equal significance in clashes between parents and children. A striking example here is the rift between Walter Ellwood, an Oxfordshire gentleman, and his son Thomas in 1659-60. Thomas's wish to join the Quakers appalled his father, who responded by turning the house into a prison, keeping the external doors locked by day and night to prevent his son attending Quaker meetings. Thomas tried to slip out one day through the kitchen and back door, while his father was distracted by a visitor, but the attempt failed, and he remained effectively a prisoner for months. He was also banished from the parlour, where the family dined, for refusing to doff his hat in his father's

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<sup>6</sup> Bernard Capp, *When Gossips Meet. Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 92.

<sup>7</sup> *Reports of Cases in the Courts of Star Chamber and High Commission*, ed. by S.R. Gardiner, Camden Society, new series, 39 (1886), pp. 265-68.

<sup>8</sup> Capp, *Gossips*, p. 157.

presence, and took to eating in the kitchen with the servants. One Sunday evening, Thomas and the servants were summoned from the kitchen to the parlour for family prayers. Fearing trouble, they came slowly and reluctantly, which so enraged Walter that he proceeded to beat his son around the head with a cane. Eventually his daughter, terrified that her brother would be killed, burst out, 'Indeed, sir, if you strike him any more, I will throw open the casement and cry out murder'. The window symbolised the threshold between private and public worlds, and though they lived in a relatively isolated manor-house, her threat to broadcast the domestic turmoil had the desired effect, and 'stopped his hand'. Thomas adds that 'after some threatening speeches he commanded me to get to my chamber, which I did, as I always did whenever he bid me'. His chamber served as a place of both banishment and refuge. After another beating, Thomas recalled, his father had ordered him to his chamber and 'followed me to the bottom of the stairs. Being come hither, he gave me a parting blow', and more angry words. But he appears never to have followed Thomas into the chamber itself.<sup>9</sup>

As Helena Kaznowska's essay reminds us, stairs and storeys had particular significance in the context of a household with service-rooms on a lower floor, and in lodging houses. In many larger households, the service rooms allowed space for servants to create their own very different domestic world, a world of which their employers might remain almost wholly unaware. The diaries of Gertrude Savile, a spinster with her own household in early Hanoverian London, provide striking examples of such a situation. In 1729 she dismissed her footman Frank Durham for 'negligence and sauciness', but only after he had gone did the other servants inform her that he was 'one of the vilest fellows that ever breath'd'. Even then they concealed the fact that for months he had been conducting an affair with her favourite and trusted maidservant, Mary Stancliff. And only when it became obvious that Mary was pregnant, and she too had left, did they reveal that the couple had 'made no secret of their Amour below stairs, confiding in the honour of those they intrusted; [and] that she had taken things to make her Miscary.' 'I was stun'd with the Storrays', Savile confided to her diary, dismayed that the maid she had called 'a jewell' was really 'a vile Whore', and mortified to have been so easily deceived. She called herself a fool.<sup>10</sup> It was common for servants to enjoy some degree of freedom in the evenings, when most of the day's chores were finished. If the house had a side or rear entrance, they might even be able to slip out or let in a friend or a lover, without their employers' knowledge. Samuel and Elizabeth Pepys were furious to discover that their

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<sup>9</sup> *The History of the Life of Thomas Ellwood*, ed. by C.G. Crump (London: Methuen and Co., 1900), pp. 36-40, 49-50.

<sup>10</sup> *Secret Comment. The Diaries of Gertrude Savile 1721-1757*, ed. by Alan Savile, Thoroton Society, 41 (1997), p. 195.

cookmaid Susan slipped out several times a day to the alehouse, which only came to light after she made another servant 'rise in his shirt to let her out to the alehouse' before 5 o'clock one morning, 'she said to warm herself'. Pepys was angry again when he learned that the maids were letting casual acquaintances, 'watermen and I know not who', into the kitchen.<sup>11</sup> As Iman Sheeha's essay explains, such behaviour did more than breach domestic discipline; it threatened the security of the household. Numerous Old Bailey reports and crime pamphlets described instances of theft, burglary and even murder that were the consequence of gullible or treacherous servants letting thieves into the house at night, while the owners were asleep, or supplying information about easy means of entry.<sup>12</sup>

Stairs played a different role in the lodging house. As one commentator reminded those thinking of taking in a lodger, 'you are deprived of the whole freedom of your house and table'. Lodgers had rights of access, and control over their own room(s), they might have numerous unwelcome visitors, and gentleman lodgers would expect to have household servants at their own beck and call.<sup>13</sup> In a less respectable milieu the drawbacks could be more serious. I have described elsewhere how the stormy marriages of Mehetabell Jones and her sister Rebecca Pigeon, both determined to be rid of unwanted husbands, led to several violent staircase confrontations. On one occasion, when a Baptist minister presented Edward Jones with a bill of divorce of his own devising, at an inn, Jones threatened to kick him down the stairs. Shortly afterwards, John Pigeon found the women and their friends celebrating this bogus divorce in his lodgings, and 'was faine with some blowes to correct their folly, and thrust them all down staires headlong'.<sup>14</sup> As such phrases remind us, thresholds were also liminal sites of exclusion and expulsion, a fact echoed in parallel expressions, such as an unwanted stepchild or visitor being 'thrown into the street'. Simon Forman's autobiography provides us with an instance of expulsion within the household itself. He was an apprentice, and having reached the age of 17 he refused to submit any longer to the beatings frequently administered by his hot-tempered mistress. One day he wrested the stick from her hands, 'thrust her up behind a door and put the

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<sup>11</sup> *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. by Robert Latham and William Matthews (London: HarperCollins, 1995), IV, p. 154 and VIII, p. 202; Capp, *Gossips*, pp. 336-7.

<sup>12</sup> For examples visit, <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/>.

<sup>13</sup> A. Marsh, *The Confession of the New Married Couple* (London: 1683), pp. 142-3.

<sup>14</sup> (Samuel Vernon), *A Brief Relation of the Strange and Unnatural Practices of Wessel Goodwin, Mehetabell Jones [and others]* (London: 1654), pp. 6-9, 17-18. See also Bernard Capp, 'Domestic Exclusions. The Politics of the Household in Early Modern England', in *Negotiating Exclusion in Early Modern England 1550-1800*, ed. by Naomi Pullin and Kathryn Woods (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming 2020).

door upon her', that is, shut her out. Such an act of overt resistance, as he quickly realised, made it impossible for him to remain in the household.<sup>15</sup>

Political authority in every household was naturally subject to change over time, as its circumstances altered. Ann Christensen's essay provides a graphic example in the story of Matthew and Jane Shore, as represented by Heywood on the Renaissance stage. A failing marriage, or a master or mistress absent or incapacitated by age or sickness, had a major impact on the spatial politics of the home. This was a lesson that Simon Forman had also learned early in life. He was his father's favourite, and was allowed to sleep in a little truckle-bed in his parents' bedchamber, something his siblings resented. But his father died suddenly in 1573, when Simon was eleven, and this privilege was promptly withdrawn, for his mother, as he always remembered, 'never loved him'. He found himself now the least favoured child, and left home a year later, at the first opportunity.<sup>16</sup> Freedom to cross a domestic threshold might thus serve as a favour to be granted, withheld or withdrawn at the whim of whoever wielded authority within the household.

Several essays in this issue address the theme of surveillance. Employers watched closely over their servants, and householders scrutinized the behaviour of their neighbours. Court records often show witnesses describing what they had seen or heard through a door left ajar, or through a hole or a gap. Prying was not merely universal, it was expected and approved, and contemporaries would have considered 'prying' an inappropriate term. This was a surveillance society, a nationwide system of 'neighbourhood watch', and essential in the absence of a police force. A less familiar dimension of universal surveillance is that while employers watched their servants, they also found it hard to hide their own secrets. A master or mistress who engaged in an illicit sexual affair in or close to the house would find it difficult to conceal this for very long from the servants. Would they then remain silent, or would moral outrage or loyalty to the injured spouse lead them to speak out? Or, a third possibility, would they use their knowledge as leverage, a bargaining chip to be deployed at an appropriate moment? We can find examples of all three responses.<sup>17</sup> Employers generally wanted their servants to be honest and discreet, but they sometimes found these qualities inconvenient, especially in combination. Though Pepys longed to seduce his young maid Jane Birch, in 1662, he admitted that he 'dare not, for fear she should prove honest and refuse and then tell my wife'.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> A.L. Rowse, *The Case Books of Simon Forman* (London: Pan Books, 1976), pp. 280-1.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 273, 275-6.

<sup>17</sup> For examples see Capp, *Gossips*, pp. 170-74.

<sup>18</sup> Pepys, III, p. 152.

One problem that faces all scholars of the period is that most sources tell us about behaviour that was out of the ordinary. Diaries, court records, news pamphlets and play-texts all share this characteristic, for there was, of course, no reason to record the commonplace. One valuable source that does throw light on the quotidian dimensions of domestic liminality can be found in the opening remarks of witnesses in ecclesiastical court cases.<sup>19</sup> There, for example, we repeatedly find a deponent testifying that she – almost invariably ‘she’ – had been ‘sitting at her door’ when she overheard the words or saw the incident in question. Sitting in the doorway would give her better light to spin or knit, she could watch over her small children playing in the street, and she could chat to passers-by and close neighbours, helping to relieve the monotony of her day. A doorway was thus not only a liminal space to be passed through; it could also be a favoured site to occupy. The threshold between house and street offers further scope for exploration of the mundane. A shopkeeper’s servant might be stationed in the doorway, to draw in prospective customers, and a Restoration satirist remarked that the urban maidservant’s morning routine would see her ‘either at the opening of the Shop, or sweeping of the street,’ exchanging gossip with neighbouring maids.<sup>20</sup> We also hear of new-born infants deposited anonymously at a doorstep, and though this was far from an everyday occurrence, it provides yet another example of the significance of domestic liminal sites.<sup>21</sup> Goods and books were bartered and sold, messages sent, received or read, and topical issues debated and discussed between neighbours, all from the doorstep.<sup>22</sup> Though doors (like windows and gates) marked the circumference points of the home, they were, in some ways, its social centre. This special issue invites us to reflect further on the significance of the liminal in all these, and many other contexts.

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<sup>19</sup> These sources underpin the valuable work on gender by Laura Gowing, Martin Ingram, Amanda Flather, Elizabeth Foyster and many others.

<sup>20</sup> Marsh, *Confession*, p. 64. For similar accounts see Sandra Clark, *Women and Crime in the Street Literature of Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 46-7.

<sup>21</sup> Valerie Fildes, ‘Maternal feelings re-assessed: child abandonment and neglect in London and Westminster, 1550-1800’, in *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England*, ed. by Valerie Fildes (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 139-78.

<sup>22</sup> For examples see Thomas Dekker, *Jests to make you merie* (London: 1607), pp. 33-34; Richard Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, ed. by Matthew Sylvester (London: 1696), pp. 2, 4; John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding* (London: 1666), p. 9.