

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Sandra Clark, *Shakespeare and Domestic Life: A Dictionary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018). Xvi+440pp. ISBN 9 781 4725 8180 8.**

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This contribution to the Arden Shakespeare Dictionary series will be useful for anyone who wishes to quickly get a sense of Shakespeare's vocabulary of the domestic. What is domestic is what might be in a house — an object or a person. A thing to eat or wear or a person resident or employed therein. Basically, this book is a reference guide to material objects that might be found in an Elizabethan/Stuart house and to the stereotypes of individuals who would people such a house. So, as well as predictable entries such as 'capon', 'garter', 'pancake' and 'sack' we get entries on early modern phenomena such as 'porter', 'prentice', 'tailor' and 'yeoman'. The prefatory material is interesting and a trifle quirky. There is list of 'Figures' (the five figures, ranging from a photograph of a preserved Jacobean bedroom to the famous hatless portrait of Elizabeth Vernon are well chosen, and more would have been welcome; this is not a cheap book to purchase). An unintentional laugh is provoked by Clark's brief 'Acknowledgements'. Clark thanks two associates who were 'kind enough to read and comment on parts of the text, almost always to good effect' (p. vii). It seems like Clark is inadvertently hinting that sometimes their comments did not have 'good effect'. This is followed by a brief 'Series Editor's Preface' — the series editor happens to be Clark herself. A handy list of abbreviations of Shakespeare's plays and poems follows that. We are then given five pages of headwords: I don't see the point of these five pages: in an A–Z, one-volume work surely one doesn't need a list of headwords when one can look for the entry alphabetically, manually, as it were?

The 'Introduction' is the last element before the entries proper. It is a well-written and helpful piece of prose, but I think that it is too brief at fewer than four pages. A number of questions are, I feel, evaded. For example, is Shakespeare's rendering of domestic materials and discourse different from that of other dramatists of the period?

Shakespeare matters to us commercially and pedagogically but is there no way that a book called *Jonson and Domestic Life: A Dictionary* could exist? Is the language of domesticity rendered differently in Shakespeare's poetry from in his plays? Does the dramatist take care to differentiate between, say, cutlery found in a regal dwelling of a Henry VI or a Richard III or in a middling-sort of house peopled by the likes of Mistress Ford and Mistress Quickly? Does Shakespeare make an effort to be realistic in his depiction of household items? Are household items in plays crucial as props? And is the metaphorical use of domestic life more or less important than the material items mentioned in the plays? To be fair, some of these questions have been addressed in many critical works of the past three decades, and one of this book's strengths is its excellent bibliography that accounts for much of this critical writing as well as primary sources cited in the entries.

The entries themselves are widely varied in both length and detail. We get just a couple of lines about the 'bombard' but we get some five pages about the 'dog'. I know more about dogs than I do about bombards so I personally would have preferred more prose about the bombard and less about the dog — but, rationally, of course, the dog is more materially and metaphorically significant than the bombard so there will be a natural emphasis on the animal. The longer entries are split into sections, labelled A, B and C. In these longer entries the A section defines the term and gives a sense of its meaning in Shakespearean England. The B section gives an overview of Shakespeare's use of the term. Wisely, there is no attempt to give a definitive account of every Shakespearean allusion to, say, plates or spices. For example, it is pointed out that there are over 350 allusions to beds in Shakespeare's corpus — listing those would take some doing. The C section draws our attention to relevant secondary work. I find this section to be very useful: in fact, this book's greatest legacy may be its very useful if fairly unintentional status as a sort of marker of critical work in this field.

This A, B and C organisation works very well. Take, for example, the entry on 'velvet'. Clark's A section, with admirable economy, defines what velvet material was/is, tells us about where the finest Elizabethan velvets were likely to have been imported from, then tells us about the sumptuary law restrictions on velvet adornment and accounts for the term's figurative use to signify softness and smoothness. That is a lot of knowledge packed into four readable sentences. The B section engages with some of Shakespeare's allusions to material and metaphorical velvet: it serves as a poignant signifier of memory in *The Winter's Tale*; as a marker of scandalous social-climbing in *The Taming of the Shrew*; and as a metaphor for soothing beauty in *Love's Labour's Lost*. Velvet is associated with syphilis too: the explanation of that is provided with panache and splendid detail. All of this comes within a few short paragraphs. The C section provides

a reference to a 1936 book that deals with the material history of fabric as well as two present-century books about sumptuary legislation and the place of velvet in well-off Elizabethan homes. Two important early modern references to figurative velvet (in a Greene pamphlet and in *The Revenger's Tragedy*) are also addressed. It is all both fascinating and useful — clothing is just one aspect of the domestic as defined in this book but I would now direct any clothes-focused, dissertation-writing student immediately to this book because of the high-quality information within but also because of the generous links to relevant scholarship that is either historically significant and/or bang up-to-date.

The vast majority of the entries are immediately, obviously relevant — I would suggest that any Shakespeare scholar would be happy with the vast majority of the entries chosen. There are a few gaps: for example, there is no mention of weaponry. *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet* would be different plays if the households depicted in those plays were not replete with daggers and swords. Some included entries, though, surprised me a little — I can't honestly see the relevance of 'burial' to domesticity. The three-page entry on 'burial' is fascinating but none of the practices described take place indoors. Sometimes — even if one remembers that this series is designed for students as well as reference book-using academics — the definitions seem a little bit too simplistic. Does anyone need to be told that a 'salad' was 'a cold dish of raw vegetables' (p. 298) or that a 'slut' is/was 'a woman who was dirty or untidy in her habits' and maybe even sexually loose (p. 338)? Genuine faults in this book are rare, virtually non-existent. A few blank pages are annoying — pages 14, 100, 129 and 190 are among the many blank pages that precede a new alphabetical run of entries. These blank pages seem economically and ecologically wasteful. But these are tiny complaints about a marvellous reference book, a well-organised cornucopia of well-presented information, a book packed with intriguing detail and full of useful signposts to significant primary texts and works in scholarly fields relevant to all things domestic.